

Michigan Department of Education Achievement Gap Culturally Relevant Literature Intervention: Evidence-based Implementation Brief

Studies documenting the poor performance and achievement deficits of African American males throughout their school years saturate the field of education. “National reading achievement data continue to indicate that as a group, African American males - particularly adolescents in middle and high school classrooms - are not performing well” (Tatum, 2006, p. 44). What can we do to change this pattern and improve achievement for African American males? One of the solutions to raising achievement must be to “show teachers how to encourage African American males to connect with reading by defining who they are through text” (Tatum, 2009, p. xvi).

A Discussion of the Problem or Need

Researchers have examined internal factors, including self-concept and identity issues that serve as barriers to achievement for African American males. Black males often exhibit cultural-specific coping mechanisms - such behaviors as acting tough, failing to retreat from violence, avoiding self-disclosure, and dissociating from school. These behaviors often subject students to disproportionate and sometimes unfounded detentions, suspensions, and even grade retentions, thereby reducing their opportunities to learn, because teachers and administrators misinterpret these behaviors and find them offensive. External factors that serve as barriers to achievement for Black males include structural racism, community patterns, parents’ education attainment and socio-economic status (Tatum, 2006).

Culturally embedded literacy practices are often overlooked or misunderstood by school personnel throughout the school years. For example, young, poor African American students are often thought to have difficulty mastering early school literacy skills (especially reading) because their homes are not print-rich and they receive little if any reading stimulation or academically useful literacy socialization prior to coming to school as kindergartners. Lee (2005, p. 61) challenges those assumptions by saying that “it is very unlikely in the media-rich era in which we live that these students do not have meaningful emergent literacy constructs that are useful resources for learning to read.”

During middle and high school, Tatum (2006) and Thompson (2007) suggest that educators are failing to engage Black male adolescents with texts that reflect their interests and backgrounds and would lead to an overall increase in their reading achievement. “In fact, a very common criticism from African American high school students is that with the exception of books about slavery, they don’t get many reading assignments that pertain to their culture” (Thompson, 2007, p. 187).

Educators need to take a proactive position with regard to the literacy development of African American males. “Neither effective reading strategies nor comprehensive literacy reform efforts will close the achievement gap in a race- and class-based society unless meaningful texts are at the core of the curriculum” (Tatum, 2006, p. 47).

A Description of the Intervention

It is engaging literature, responsive to African American males’ interests and backgrounds, that enables them to feel connected to the text and increases the likelihood that they will be intrinsically motivated to read because the text is more relevant to them. Therefore, an effective initial intervention is for schools to incorporate culturally relevant literature into English Language Arts and Social Studies curricula.

Then multiethnic literature that focuses on African Americans should be paired with culturally responsive literacy instruction to effectively bridge the gap between the world of the students and the school in a way that affirms the cultural identity of Black males. Research suggests that providing culturally responsive literacy instruction promotes high achievement among African American students (Gay, 2000; Hale, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1994).

Actions for Implementation of the Intervention

Actions for implementation of the culturally relevant literature intervention follow:

- Organize a study group for instructional staff using one or more respected publications such as: Alfred Tatum's *Reading for Their Life* (2009); *Improving the Reading Skills of African American Secondary Students: What Teachers Can Do* by Gail Thompson (2009); *Culturally Responsive Literacy Instruction*, a Practitioner Brief from NCCREST.
- Build culturally relevant literature into Literature Circles or Book Clubs and the ELA curriculum. Use book or author lists from the Michigan State Library, Tatum, Thompson, Coretta Scott King Awards, NCCREST Practitioner Brief, or other trusted sources.
- Use professional learning communities or other instructional teams to review the incorporation of culturally relevant literature into the curriculum and the use of culturally responsive instructional strategies.
- Evaluate implementation of this intervention by selecting tools for measuring and analyzing the results. Assessment tools might include: student and staff surveys comparing pre- and post-perceptions and responses; graphing reading lists and logs; and examining student assessment data to determine student achievement growth.

Other examples of Tatum's successful implementations of cultural relevant literature can be found at <http://education.uic.edu/news-uic/590-tatum-takes-his-literacy-work-with-adolescent-african-american-boys-to-districts-across-the-country>

Citations

- Callins, T. (2006). *Culturally responsive literacy instruction*. University of Arizona: NCCREST.
- Gay, G. (2000). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research and practice*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Hale, J.E. (2001). *Learning while black*. Baltimore, MD: The John Hopkins University Press.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1994). *The dreamkeepers: Successful teachers of African American children*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Lee, C.D. (2005). *Black education: Transformative research and action agenda for the new century*, 73-114.
- Tatum, A. (2009). *Reading for their life: (Re) building the textual lineages of African American adolescent male's life*: Heinemann.
- Tatum, A. (2006). Helping struggling students. *Educational Leadership*, Volume 63, Number 5, 44-49.
- Tatum, A. (2008). Toward a more anatomically complete model of literacy instruction: A focus on African American male adolescents and texts. *Harvard Educational Review*. Vol.78, Number 1.
- Thompson, G. (2009). *Improving the reading skills of African American secondary students: What teachers can do*. Adolescent Literacy: Field Tested Effective Solutions for Every Classroom, 180-188.
- Weinstein, C., Curran, M., and Tomlinson-Clarke, S. (2003). Culturally responsive classroom management: Awareness into action. *Theory into Practice*, 42(4), 269-276.