



Unmasking the Truth: Teaching Diverse Student Populations

As middle schools become more diverse, principals must ensure that their teachers use proper strategies to help all their students—regardless of race—succeed.

 **Middle Matters** » February 2006, Vol. 14, No. 3

by Cynthia “Mama J” Johnson

As our cultures blend and change, educators must find effective ways to instruct the students of our multicultural society to higher levels of achievement. Minority students of our multiethnic culture often come to school with fewer skills and more risk factors than those of other cultural groups. Although there are no easy answers or quick fixes to ensuring minority students achieve at the same level of other students, it is attainable with the right conditions.

Laying all excuses and disparities aside, adolescents of minority groups are capable of achieving high expectations and standards. But what is the bridge that closes the great divide between low achievement of minority children and the high achievement of white children?

The answer lies in excellent educators, high expectations, and practices that are dedicated to meeting minority adolescents where they are and elevating them to where they can compete with predominant cultures. Effective educators confront and dismiss myths and falsehoods that surround educating minority adolescents. In order to effectively educate minority youths and teach diverse student populations, educators must shift the paradigm to incorporate effective practices that lead to higher student achievement and increased student success.

Reaching Diverse Student Populations

Understanding the students who walk within the hallways of middle schools is as important as the level of skills each one brings with him or her. Building positive relationships can be linked to increased student achievement (Sather and Henze 2001). According to the Leading for Diversity study (Sather and Henze 2001), schools can improve racial relations between principals, teachers, parents, students, and the community by building bridges across the great racial gap, thus implying the importance of “reaching” and developing strong interpersonal relationships before “teaching.”

The concept of caring has long played a key role in making connections and reaching minority youths. It allows educators time to gain insights into the background and lives of the students they serve. This form of individual and cultural examinations leads to stronger ties to improve human relationships and increase student achievement.

Although caring is a vital component to building positive interactions with minority children, it nevertheless can be argued that caring alone is no longer enough to instruct these youths. To effectively reach diverse student populations, educators must move from caring to believing, a concept that is rarely mentioned or considered when discussing effectively educating minority adolescents. Caring about minority adolescents and believing these same students can perform at high levels are two different things. Caring is nurturing; believing is strengthening. Caring is validating; believing is promising. Caring is responding; believing is empowering.

Facilitating Learning of Minority Students

As a conductor orchestrates the melodious sounds of each instrument, so too must educators facilitate the learning of all students. Facilitating learning means creating and directing learning situations and environments where all ethnicities are accepted. When teaching minority youths, Ladson-Billings (1994) notes the importance of recognizing the difference in color and culture, but not letting these characteristics interfere with instructing these youths. Being colorblind is not a feasible solution to educating minority youths of today, she says.

Ladson-Billings goes on to say, “If teachers pretend not to see students’ racial and ethnic differences, they really do not see the students at all and are limited in their ability to meet their educational needs.” Embracing these attributes and infusing them into the everyday curriculum are indicators of success and high achievement, especially among minority children.

Infusion of cultural aspects requires subject matter be taught through the diverse perspectives of each child. Children can and will learn important concepts while incorporating cultural diversity into daily lessons and the overall curriculum. In fact, when educating minority children, the likelihood of higher achievement is greater. Effective educators take these things into account and masterfully create lessons that address ethnicities, differentiate instruction, and assess student learning in multiple ways.

Making Instruction Culturally Relevant and Responsive

Minority youths must be exposed to instructional strategies that increase their understanding (Kuykendall 2004). Such strategies as understanding how culture impacts the way a student learns, understanding the importance of learning styles, and understanding the role of differentiating instruction for minority youths can lead to increased student achievement. By incorporating a variety of culturally relevant strategies, educators can effectively respond to and instruct minority youths.

Gay (2000) contends that “culturally responsive teaching makes academic success a non-negotiable mandate for all students and an accessible goal.” It reveals the truth of how minority adolescents best learn in educational settings. Gay further comments that teachers, not students, are lacking in truly understanding or valuing diversity in the classroom. In making instruction culturally responsive and relevant, Gay states: “Culturally responsive teaching can be defined as using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them. It teaches to and through the strengths of these students. It is culturally validating and affirming.” Culturally responsive teaching:

- Acknowledges the legitimacy of the cultural heritages of different ethnic groups...that affect students’ dispositions, attitudes, and approaches to learning and as worthy content to be taught in the formal curriculum;
- Builds bridges of meaningfulness between home and school experiences...and lived sociocultural realities;
- Uses a wide variety of instructional strategies that are connected to different learning styles;
- Encourages students to know and praise their own and each others’ cultural heritages; and
- Incorporates multicultural information, resources, and materials in all the subjects and skills routinely taught in schools (Gay 2000).

Educators can evaluate students’ frames of reference and cultural knowledge by administering a Student Data-Gathering Instrument. Hollins (1996) developed this instrument to assess background data and how culture impacts student learning.

Tearing Down the Barriers to Effective Instruction

According to Cole (1995), good instruction is good instruction, regardless of students’ racial, ethnic, or socioeconomic backgrounds. Unfortunately, numerous barriers can prevent poor and minority students from receiving good instruction. Barriers literally and figuratively exist when ensuring minority children are properly educated. These obstructions to effective instructional practices take the form of institutional programming, such as tracking, and as personal opinions, such as lack of cultural understanding. Research supports the belief that the effectiveness of a teacher, the attitude of a teacher, and the verbal and nonverbal expectations of a teacher are instrumental in tearing down barriers that interfere with effective instruction.

Identifying and addressing ineffective practices (barriers) that limit or encumber student achievement is crucial in successfully educating minority youths. According to the ASCD

Advisory Panel on Improving Student Achievement (Cole 1995), examples of barriers include:

- Tracking;
- Low expectations;
- Inappropriate instruction;
- Differential access;
- Lack of consequences;
- Disciplinary practices;
- Involvement of parents or guardians;
- Masking the problem;
- Unequal access to resources;
- The negative impact of testing; and
- Lack of bilingual instruction.

Once identified, barriers to effective instruction must be addressed by analyzing the school culture and individual beliefs that hinder achievement as they relate to instruction. Both types of barriers can be eradicated if those involved can candidly and courageously take a hard look at doing whatever is necessary to ensure effective teaching and learning takes place.

Accepting the Truth

The truth is revealed. The achievement of diverse populations improves when educators incorporate and expand the knowledge base about these types of multifaceted learners. Regardless of the circumstances, minority adolescents will rise to the occasion and reach higher levels of achievement if valued, accepted, celebrated, instructed, and lifted in the right direction. The most effective teachers of diverse populations accept the truth and become “facilitators and directors of the learning process, rather than information givers” (Shade 1994). Successful educators of diverse populations must be willing to lay aside the mask, to embrace minority children, to reconstruct and redesign curriculum, to modernize beliefs and practices, and to expect no less than the best from these adolescents.

References

- Cole, R. W., ed. *Educating Everybody's Children: Diverse Teaching Strategies for Diverse Learners: What Research and Practice Say About Improving Student Achievement*. Alexandria, Va.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1995.
- Gay, G. *Culturally Responsive Teaching*. New York: Teachers College Press, 2000.
- Hollins, E. R. *Culture in School Learning*. Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1996.
- Kuykendall, C. *From Rage to Hope: Strategies for Reclaiming Black and Hispanic Students*. 2nd ed. Bloomington, Ind.: National Educational Service, 2004.
- Ladson-Billings, G. *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1994.
- Sather, S. and R. Henze. “Building Relationships.” *Journal of Staff Development*, 22 (2001): 28-31.
- Shade, B. “Understanding the African American Learner.” In *Teaching Diverse Populations: Formulating a Knowledge Base*, edited by W. C. Hayman, E. R. Hollins and J. E. King. Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1994.

Cynthia “Mama J” Johnson is principal of Grandview Middle School in South Kansas City, Missouri. Her e-mail address is kh.ck.johnson@sbcglobal.net