Overview

The state of African American education

Given the available data on achievement, graduation rates, dropout rates, condition of urban schools, and evidence from scholarly literature, the notion that African-American students are “shortchanged” by the institution of education are not far fetched (Murrell, 2002). Data from federal datasets such as the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) and findings from educational research continue to paint the picture of a system of education at odds with the culture of African Americans. The result of this disconnect is that African Americans experience one of the highest dropout rates in the country (Chapman, Laird, & KewelRamani, 2010), achieve academically at a consistently lower rate than their white peers (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009, 2010), have lower educational attainment levels that their white peers (Ogunwole, 2006), are more likely to engage in deviant behavior (Bolland et al., 2007), and are disproportionately represented in communities and schools with a high poverty status (Aud et al., 2010; Hemmings, 2007; Kim & Sunderman, 2005; McCarty, 2009; McGee, 2004; Murnane, 2007; Poplin & Soto-Hinma, 2005; Saporito & Sohoni, 2007; Slavin & Madden, 2006; Smith, 2005; Somers, Owens, & Piliawsky, 2008).

Many African American students attend schools that can be described as urban and high poverty (Aud et al., 2010). These schools tend to be characterized by weak leadership and less qualified teachers (Aud et al., 2010; Carter, 2000; Fall, 2010; Slavin & Madden, 2006), low morale among staff (Byrd-Blake et al., 2010), poor and
culturally inconsistent instruction (Murnane, 2007; Slavin & Madden, 2006), sub-par quality of the curriculum (Bell, 2001), poor working conditions (Fall, 2010), poor organizational health (Brown, Anfara, & Roney, 2004) and a lack of school resources, including social, cultural and financial capital (Brown et al., 2004; Hemmings, 2007; Machtinger, 2007; Miles & Darling-Hammond, 1998; Slavin & Madden, 2006; Somers et al., 2008). Given the above findings and the increasing population of African-Americans in this country (Mackum & Wilson, 2011), it is critical to identify methods conducive to African American academic success.

An historical interpretation

It is appropriate to say that education in American is plagued by inequity (Harris, 2007; Murnane, 2007; Smith, 2005; van der Klaauw, 2008). The genesis of the educational equality rhetoric can arguably be traced to Brown v. Board of Education, but received federal assistance beginning with the “War on Poverty” of the 1960s and its educational component: The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA) (Aud et al., 2010; Borman, 2005; Murnane, 2007; Poplin & Soto-Hinma, 2005; van der Klaauw, 2008). Specifically, Title I of the ESEA created a fiduciary relationship between the federal government and local educational agencies (LEA), working towards increasing the opportunities for economically disadvantaged to achieve at or above the rate of their economically advantaged peers.

Title I is best described as an approach to funding allowing for greater flexibility in the design and implementation of programs to boost achievement of low-income students in reading and mathematics (Borman, 2005; van der Klaauw,
Schools received supplemental federal funds to meet the needs of economically disadvantaged students, allowing for greater variation in instructional practices suited to economically disadvantaged students (Murnane, 2007). While Brown was instrumental in de-segregating the Nation’s public schools, the persistent gap in socioeconomic status (SES) perpetuated segregation (Niles & Peck, 2008). A consequence of educational equality is a narrowing of the curriculum (Fusarelli, 2004), which tend to exclude the cultural nuances inherent in a pluralistic society and devalue the cultural capital of minority students (Hess, 2004). Valuing the cultural capital of African-American students is integral in not only closing the achievement gap, but for advocating for the flexibility of equitable educational policy that can meet the unique needs of African American students.

Sources of inspiration

According to Aristotle, we can demonstrate the possible by studying the actual (Carter, 2000, p. 1). Failing to acknowledge the stories of success embedded in the history of African Americans would essentially devalue their extraordinary efforts. An understanding of their success could be the bedrock from which positive educational change can emerge (Steele, 2010). For example, these stories are found in narratives of the Great Migration (Wilkerson, 2010), and in current schools who overcame and beat the odds (Cunningham, 2007; Izumi, 2002). I believe that African Americans personify resilience, and that resilience should be respected and integrated in the curriculum.

Strand & Peacock (2002) conceptualize resilience as a quality possessed by successful youth who do not give way to school failure, despite being subjected to
undue stress and adversity (p. 2). Resilience is a positive adaptation to adversity, requiring a proactive navigation through life (Fleming & Ledogar, 2008; HeavyRunner & Marshall, 2003). I believe that resiliency is a quality inherent in anyone or any school that is faced with adversity and remains on a trajectory toward a positive transformation, including cultural autonomy, academic and professional success. An excellent source for highlighting the resiliency of African Americans is in how they seeped into nearly every realm of American culture (Wilkerson, 2010). Specifically, integrating African-American culture into the curriculum can include their influence on popular culture through music. The words of cultural icons from Langston Hughes to Tupac Shakur embody the resiliency needed to become a shaper of American identity and culture.

African-Americans in popular culture

From the blues to hip-hop, African Americans have played a major role in defining the musical traditions of America (George, 1998). This evolution occurred throughout decades of social change and can be interpreted as its narrative (Werner, 1998). When Billy Holiday sang of Strange Fruit, she invoked the imagery of the horrors of lynching (Davis, 1998). The freedoms afforded by the Great Migration can be represented in the emerging style of jazz, with its improvisation a symbol of disrupting the status quo. When the status quo remained repressive in the 1980s, Public Enemy advocated for Black unity, and above all, rebellion (George, 1998). In between these musical movements, there consisted of small victories of African Americans redefining their role in American culture. Importantly, what musicians like Jimi Hendrix accomplished was essentially blurring the lines between
white and black, between what was considered socially acceptable, and pushing the boundary of music (Murray, 1989).

Through music, American history is given a narrative. Specifically, the struggles and resilience of African Americans can be communicated through the musical genres of blues, jazz, soul, R&B, disco, hip-hop, and rock and roll. History can be told through the lens of music, but the language it used, and its style of delivery can be used to teach themes embedded in the classics. The classics can indeed be relevant again.

Implementation

Standards provide the framework for what content is to be taught and how competence is to be defined (Hoy & Tarter, 2008). Standards do not take into account what various communities would like to see their children learn, as the same standards are implemented across the board. Because of cultural variation, there is a need to make education more personal (Wolk, 2010). The following activities are grounded in the personalization of a standards-based high school language arts curriculum.

This rationale for this unit has been presented against the backdrop of the need to improve the education of African Americans. Drawing from information from federal datasets, scholarly literature, and historical pieces, it was argued that the current state of education for African Americans is dire. Considering the importance of standards based assessment and instruction, it is important to be able to integrate sources of African American culture into a standards-based curriculum. Just as schools are evaluated based on student performance on achievement tests,
teachers can be evaluated based on how well and often they include African American Heritage and Culture in their instruction. This method is termed Appraisal of Practice. It is an appropriate method to increase the accountability of instruction's diversity, even under the umbrella of a system that turns its back on such cultural differentiation (Murrell, 2002, p. 88). The following activities can be used by teachers of African American students to:

1. Highlight the resiliency of African Americans to overcome adversity and help shape American identity and culture.
2. Provide culturally relevant instruction.
3. Value the contributions of African Americans.
4. Use culturally appropriate material to deliver standards-based instruction.
5. Increase the intrinsic motivation of African American students; connect students to material.
**Hip-Hop as a language art**

**Objective:** To make the academic study of poetry accessible, relevant, comprehensible and enjoyable to students in our contemporary, multicultural classrooms.

**Methodology:** To analyze Hip-Hop as a source of poetry and to compare its motifs, themes and common devices used in poetry to classic pieces of poetic literature found in most language arts textbooks in order to teach the core elements of poetry in a manner that appeals to our contemporary, multicultural students to increase the accessibility of standards based education.

**Aims:** The aim of this unit is to dispel the duality of dismissal inherent in the teacher/student dynamic. Poetry will no longer be thought of as irrelevant and Hip-Hop will no longer be thought of as a way to further endorse the gangster lifestyle or subjugate women.

**Activities:** The following activities take a poetic device (imagery in this case) and compare its use to a classic piece of poetry. By interacting with the poetic device on a level of accessibility, students will understand its application in a myriad of methods.
Unit: Illuminating imagery

Comparing Langston Hughes’s “A Dream Deferred” to “Juicy” by Notorious B.I.G.

4 activities are embedded in this brief unit on imagery.

Begin with a warm up activity to get students’ creative juices flowing and prepare them with the necessary background knowledge to immediately engage in the poetry.

Use the two poems in separate activities to understand their respective uses of imagery.

Conclude the unit with a theme on pursuing dreams and follow with an in-depth essay prompt to encourage self-reflection.

Materials:

- Copy of Langston Hughes’s “A Dream Deferred”
- Audio copy of Notorious B.I.G.’s “Juicy”
- Boombox, Ghetto Blaster or Stereo
- Handouts (examples/templates provided)

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Activity One: Warm-up

1. Have students list out the five senses with space in between each.

   Example:

   Touch:__________________________________________________________
   ______________________________________________________________

   Taste:__________________________________________________________
   ______________________________________________________________

   Smell:__________________________________________________________
   ______________________________________________________________

   Sight:__________________________________________________________
   ______________________________________________________________

   Sound:__________________________________________________________
   ______________________________________________________________

2. Give each student a piece of paper with different objects written on it
   a. Have each student write down their perceptions if this object by filling
      in the blanks for their five senses. Encourage them to be vivid,
      abstract, colorful, literal.

3. Have students create an additional line of description adding the sixth
   component of emotion.
   a. How do they feel about the object? What does it remind them of?

4. Have the students use their work (above) as a resource to write a poem
   about their object.
a. Allow them the freedom to make it as long or as short as they wish, but stresses the importance of using all of the material above in their work.

5. Have students give their poem a title.

a. For example: Light Bulb

   Just give me the light
   Smooth is my bulb
   Tastes like hot electricity
   Ruler of light
   Gives my home sight
   Sounds like a buzz
   We shut off every night
Activity Two: Langston Hughes, “A Dream Deferred.”

Have students read Langston Hughes’s “A Dream Deferred.”

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun
Or fester like a sore-
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over-
Like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

1. Identify how Hughes uses imagery for all five senses in his poem.
   b. Have student locate specific lines that relate to each sense

2. Pose the following short answer questions:
   c. How does the sum total of all of the imagery add up to answering the question put forth by the speaker in the first line, “What happens to a dream deferred?”
   d. What is the unspoken message the speaker is telling the reader about going after their own dreams?
Activity Three: Notorious B.I.G., “Juicy”

Play “Juicy” by Notorious B.I.G. (Clean version)

Have students follow with a few sections transcribed, see below

It was all a dream
I used to read Word Up magazine
Salt n’ Peppa and Heavy D up in the limousine
Hangin’ pictures on my wall
Every Saturday Rap Attack, Mr. Magic, Marley Larl...

Now homies play me close like butter played toast
From the Mississippi down to the east coast...
Sold out seats to hear Biggie Smalls speak
Livin life without fear
Puttin’ 5 Karats in my baby girl’s ears
Lunches, brunches, interviews by the pool
Considered a fool ’cause I dropped out of high school
Stereotypes of a black male misunderstood...

We used to fuss when the landlord dissed us
No heat, wonder why Christmas missed us
Birthdays was the worst days
Now we sip champagne when we thirsty
Uh, damn right I like the life I live
Cause I went from negative to positive
And it’s all good...

Use the sections above for the following questions:

1. The poet claims that “Birthdays were the worst days.” Why do you think he felt this way? Use examples from the song to support your answer.

2. What images from the verse does the poet use to evoke images of the poverty he endured prior to achieving Hip-Hop fame?

3. What images from the verse does the poet use to evoke images of the rewards of wealth and Hip-Hop fame in the reader’s mind?
Activity Four: Poetic Theme: Reach for your Dreams

Explain that “Juicy” has been an anthem to the Hip-Hop community, much like “Harlem: A Dream Deferred” was to the Harlem Renaissance.

Conclude the unit with an essay prompt that allows the student to engage in a deeper understanding of the poetic theme and relate the message of reaching for your dreams to their own lives.

Essay Prompt

In “Juicy,” the poet boasts that he turned a negative situation into a positive one. How can you do the same? What is the current negative situation? What might you do to change it? What steps do you need to take to accomplish this? What dream do you have of yourself in this positive light? What might be the consequences of leaving the situation unchanged, or deferring the dream?
References


Reproduction Service Number ED 440170). Retrieved from ERIC (Education Resources Information Center) database.


**Popular Culture References (in Overview):**


**Music for language arts:**

**Imagery:**


**Meaning:**


**Metaphor:**

Onomatopoeia:


**Additional Books and Articles:**


Hip-Hop Lesson Plan Resources (URLs)


http://www.flocabulary.com/teachers.html

http://www.lessonplanspage.com/LAMusicHipHopSimilesAndMetaphors712.htm

http://www.edutopia.org/hip-hop-high

http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/classroom/hiphop.html


http://www.flocabulary.com/historylessonplans.html

http://www.vh1.com/partners/vh1_music_studio/supplies/specials/hip_hop-lesson5.html


http://www.yale.edu/ynhti/curriculum/units/1993/4/93.04.04.x.html#b

http://www.breakingnewsenglish.com/0603/060302-hip-hop-e.html
http://www.pbs.org/jazz/classroom/transcend.htm


http://rockhall.com/education/resources/lesson-plans/

http://www.daveyd.com/raptitle.html


http://hiphopclassroom.com/?cat=1

http://online.sfsu.edu/~jcooks/hiphopcircuit/teachersup.htm

http://cantstopwontstop.com/

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WjxjZe3Rhlo

http://www.hiphoparchive.org/prepare-yourself/women-hiphop

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r2q5zlGkKas

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h7gUu4DYZO0&feature=related

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xtoanes_L_g&feature=related


http://www.pbs.org/jazz/classroom/transcend.htm
