Building on Cultural Strengths: A Route to Academic Achievement

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Students will learn basic skills if schools recognize their cultural strengths and build programs in harmony with them.

In their efforts to improve basic skills, most school districts have concentrated on structural and program changes. These structural changes are important, but we believe that school programs must be developed within a context that gives long term meaning to daily activities. A perspective of cultural/educational continuity (Holliday, 1977) provides such a framework.

The Theme: Building on Cultural Strengths

The basic tradition in the education of minority children in this country has been grounded in the "compensatory" approach on the assumption that black, latin, and other minority groups have special deficiencies that must be "made up" in the educational effort.

The overwhelming opinion has been that blacks were educationally deficient and thus culturally inferior. Even those who believed in racial equality denied the legitimacy of an African world culture. Moynihan and Glazer (1965), for example, said:

It was not possible for Negroes to view themselves as other ethnic groups viewed themselves because—and this is the key to much in the world—the Negro is only an American, nothing else. He has no values and culture to guard and protect.

We disagree. The concept of "building on cultural strengths" is grounded in the assumption that black children, in fact, bring many cultural strengths to the altar of learning.

Wade Nobles is representative of an emer-

gent group of black scholars who assert the existence of a basic cultural unity among people of African descent; a cultural unity that defies time and circumstance, and that is manifested today in unique interpersonal, institutional, and artistic expressions. Nobles (1955) asserts that the nature of black culture is based on particular forms of African philosophical principles. He says the core concepts of the African cultural world view (1976) are

. . ."survival of the tribe," and "one with nature." The values indicative of this cultural orientation are reflected in the regard for cooperation, interpersonal connectedness, and collective responsibility. The behavioral and mental dispositions, accordingly, emphasize "commonality," "synthesis," "sameness," and "similarity."

Given this conceptual framework, one can examine some of the characteristics of black behaviors and attitudes that grow out of African philosophical principles. The "extended family" structure is one such characteristic.

We propose that the principles that undergird the "extended family" concept outside the classroom can and should be used to support the educational program inside the classroom. Moreover, the connection should be celebrated. In the context of the extended family, one can see examples of cooperation, collective responsibility, creativity, faith, interdependence, and commonality, all of which are a part of black life-style. Thus

we see older children caring for their younger brothers and sisters. We see both men and women performing tasks generally relegated to a particular sex among non-blacks, with no loss of identity. We see the elders in the household, along with the young, in important decision-making roles. We see cousins, aunts, uncles, and "home" boys and girls who, though not brother and sister by blood, have acknowledged a kinship and perpetuate a tradition of people helping each other. It is within this understanding of building on these kinds of patterns that the Center for New Schools' activities in District 21 were designed. Even more, this work was designed to replace the idea of "deficiencies" with a framework emphasizing the strengths and continuity that come from a long and venerable tradition.

The Development Of The Peer-Tutoring Program

Because of the interdependence that exists both among the members of primary groups (extended black families) and among members of the community, it was felt that peer-tutoring programs would provide a natural and comfortable environment, conducive to learning for many black children. It was out of this concept that a peer-group/cross-age tutoring program was developed at the William G. Beale School. The project used the concept of the extended black family

and the interdependence that exists within that relationship to develop a peer-group/cross-age tutoring program as a strategy for teaching and/or reinforcing reading skills.

Project Design

The project design was based on one important characteristic of the extended black family: the older children share in the responsibility of training the younger ones. That contributes to their self-image and their ability to function in the total community.

That principle was the basis for our selection of tutors. The tutor groups included Group A—eight sixth-grade pupils functioning at Continuous Progress level K (5.0); and Group B—eight fourth-grade pupils at Continuous Progress level H-J (3.5 to 4.0). The group being tutored consisted of eight third-grade pupils reading one to two years below expected grade level. They were tutored twice weekly, one-on-one, once each week by each tutor group for 45-minute periods.

Initial Preparation

At the beginning of the program, the tutors met in a round-table discussion to talk about responsibilities they had for their younger brothers

and sisters. Almost without exception, that included helping with homework. From their home experiences, they were able to speculate about various problems that might arise during the tutoring session and how these problems could be managed. They developed their own lists of tutor and tutee expected behaviors. At later sessions, they learned about methods and materials.

Tutor-Tutee Response and Interaction

Generally, the fourth-grade students were very eager to become tutors because this allowed them to assume the role their older brothers and sisters enjoyed at home. There were frequent references to how older siblings responded to them in given situations. When they became tutors, those who functioned most responsibly and appropriately began to behave the same way in their own classrooms.

The sixth-grade tutors were just as enthusiastic and responsible, but they added another dimension: a system of rewards and punishments. Not only were appropriate behaviors rewarded, but inappropriate behaviors were dealt with rationally. Tutors tried to help tutees consider what the appropriate behaviors or responses should have been. Punishment was a final course of action. The tutors were not unnecessarily punitive.

range of 14 to 36 months, an average of 23 months.

Another project, which used an individual approach to teaching reading, also resulted in significant gains for the group as a whole, but the rate was not uniform throughout the group. All of the pupils who participated in the peer group sessions showed significant gains.

We believe these pupils functioned well in peer-tutoring because the program was consistent with the extended family structure of black culture. We maintain that the planning, implementation, and management of programs intended to improve achievement in basic skills must find specific ways to embody and reinforce the cultural strengths children bring to the learning experience. $\mathcal{EL}$

References

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Interestingly enough, they used one another as a resource when problems arose. The tutor supervisor was asked for assistance in the use of instructional materials, but almost never in cases of interpersonal conflict. One could conclude that the tutors functioned this way naturally since most of them shared responsibilities for younger children at home.

The tutees enjoyed the one-on-one relationship with the tutors and always expressed disappointment when tutors were not available. It was interesting to note that the tutees would bring treats to the tutors, which we believe is a reflection of the loving and sharing behavior that exists in black families.

Project Outcomes

The tutees received this auxiliary service for seven months out of the ten-month school year. After six months of peer-tutoring, the tutees were given the Iowa Test of Basic Skills to measure their growth in vocabulary and reading comprehension. According to the Bureau of Research and Evaluation in our district, any amount of achievement that exceeds ten months growth in eight months of instruction is considered exceptional. The tutees showed a range of 15 to 23 months growth in reading comprehension, the average being 16 months. Vocabulary growth reflected a

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