Making Connections with the Past:

(Un)Masking African American History at a Neighborhood Community Center

Gary Stiler & Lisa Allen

Introduction

As educators, we generally focus on promising practices that emerge from traditional classroom settings. Remediation, derived from scientifically-based research, is typically viewed as a treatment to be applied in public school settings in order to improve academic achievement.

But are we overlooking other sources of creative and compelling curricula, forms of data, and inspirational pedagogy? Are we ignoring community-based initiatives and successful strategies used in non-traditional settings? Do community centers and neighborhood day care programs have anything to teach us about improving the academic achievement of all students?

This article describes one such setting and program that has much to offer. Our work at the Carver Community Center demonstrates that non-traditional community organizations also ascribe to high academic standards and use curricula in ways that enhance self esteem and promote academic achievement.

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Overview

The Carver Community Center in Evansville, Indiana, uses an academic enrichment program to support neighborhood students. The curriculum involves children in learning about African-American literary traditions and folk art. The Center's work is based on the premise that African-American children need to encounter the reality of history as in integral part of the curriculum; not as a superficial add-on.

During the after-school program described here, students constructed replicas of indigenous art from inexpensive and commonly found materials. The ecology of learning during this 3-month activity was rich in music, storytelling, and creativity. Elementary students participated in informal pre- and post-activity discussions that indicated an increased level of awareness about African-American history.

It is our intent to describe the setting in which this project occurred, an overview of supporting literature, the method and materials used to engage K-6 students in the process of discovery, and an illustration of the effects of this project on participant learning.

The Setting

The Carver Center is located in an African-American neighborhood in downtown Evansville. It has a 30 year tradition of serving a segregated, low income, intergenerational community. The Center provides an early childhood program, a K-12 after-school enrichment program, and serves a vibrant senior citizen component.

The after-school program serves approximately 60 neighborhood children each day, primarily as an after-school alternative. Ninety percent of the families served fall below the 30th percentile in income. Ninety-two percent of the children served at the Center come from single parent households.

While programs stress academic enrichment activities, the Center also offers an afternoon meal, content-area tutoring, homework assistance, and drug, alcohol, and tobacco awareness programs. The staff works with elementary, middle school, and high school students on music, science, computer, and art projects. Enrichment activities generally focus on language arts, social studies, and math and science, but in the fall of each year an Afrocentric curriculum involves students in the construction of exhibits for the Children's African-American History Museum.

The Children's Museum began 5 years ago as an alternative to the more traditional, and adult-oriented African-American Museum several blocks away. Since then, the after-school program has involved children in the design and construction of exhibits. The annual process begins as staff chooses an annual theme, and the children begin learning about and working on exhibits.

These activities begin early in the fall semester prior to the opening of the Museum in February during Black History

Month. Past themes have included African Americans in Sports, Music, Art and Literature. The 2004 Museum theme was "A Timeline of African-American History."

In subsequent sections of this article we describe how K-6 children, in the after-school enrichment program, designed and constructed exhibit materials for the 2004 edition of the Museum. Our intent is to illustrate one example of an Afrocentric curriculum and describe its effect on participant awareness of African-American history. The objective here is to describe an example of our work at the Carver Center, and to illustrate the challenges and successes associated with teaching about American History from a perspective that has been neglected and marginalized in mainstream curricula.

The Case for Afrocentric Curricula

The effects of traditional instructional materials and the media have served to increase awareness among educators about the need for a discerning, Afrocentric curriculum that acknowledges racial identity and the interplay of historical perspectives. Banks (2001) laid the foundation for transformative curriculum change. He described four approaches to the creation of multicultural curricula. Bank's model ranges from the standard contributions and additive approaches, to those seeking to truly transformative curricula.

The development of racial identity among young African-American children has much to do with how minorities are depicted in the media. In this regard, Hooks (1996), Bogle (2001) and Entman and Rojecki (2001) describe the effects of media misrepresentation upon society and upon the perceptions of individuals. Tatum (2003) and Beachum and McCray (2004) discuss the negative effects of popular media on racial identity.

These indications promote a need to pre-empt the effects of media driven imagery with media literacy education. Such approaches would stress the interpretation of media messages rather than passive reception. Entman and Rojecki (2004) assert the need for educators to promote the development of racial identity and positive values. One approach to this recommendation is to use an Afrocentric curriculum that raises important questions about American history that are unlikely to be discussed at any depth in a traditional classroom setting.

Much of the support for Afrocentric curricula lies in research relating to identity development. Dubois (1903) first articulated the dual nature of Blacks in America and the inherent psychological confusion caused by conflicting identities. Cross and Fhagen-Smith (2001), and Tatum (2003) suggested that the emerging self-images of African-American children are saturated with racial stereotypes and media images that promote negative self-esteem. Asante (1991) asserted that the frame of reference inherent in standard curricula needs to be shifted, in order to more fully represent other perspectives. According to Asante, such a shift will promote self-esteem and the development of positive identities among African American children.

Gay (2000) stressed the power of culturally responsive curricula. She identified the essential characteristics of curricula as validating, comprehensive, multidimensional, empowering, transformative, and emancipatory. Smith, Atkins, and Connell (2003) suggested that increased levels of academic achievement may be indicated by enhanced racial-ethnic pride in the context of a supportive family, school, and community environment. In terms of application, Hudson, Stratton, Thomas, and Vukson (2004) cited examples of culturally responsive Afrocentric curricula. These curricula have had a positive effect on students in those critical areas of self-esteem and academic performance (Pollard & Ajirotutu, 2000; Potts, 2003; Watson & Smitherman, 1997).

Learning about African-American History at the Carver Center

As an early childhood specialist at the Carver Center, Lisa Allen understands what the literature implies, and recognized that her students needed to know more about their heritage. She has a strong belief that theory needs to be applied in the classroom in order to achieve desirable and measurable outcomes.

Lisa explains that she can see the effects of greater awareness about origins and culture in her students. She says that she knows that it is beneficial for them to explore their African traditions and to talk about slavery, life as a slave, and escape. She also relates that, "in knowing about their ancestry, my students can better understand prejudice and the Civil Rights Movement." She believes that teaching about African-American history is a very important part of her job.

In an effort to promote this form of culturally responsive pedagogy, Ms. Allen and her staff developed an annual curriculum on African-American history. Each year, they select a different theme for the fall semester. The curriculum unit lasts for approximately three months and annually involves from 20 to 50, kindergarten through 6th grade students. Their goal is to prepare students for Black History Month and to involve them in the design and assembly of exhibits and displays for the Children's African-American History Museum at the Carver Center.

As After-School Program Leader, Ms. Allen's intent is to offer opportunities through which her students can explore the deeper connections between past and present. She utilizes an interdisciplinary strategy that integrates history, art, mathematics, language arts, and science.

Her intent during the 2004 project cycle was to make connections among the artistic traditions of Africa—from the deep south of the eighteenth century, through the eras of reconstruction and segregation.

Lisa Allen telling a story about African-American history.

She used storytelling, music, and multimedia art as her medium of instruction. Her planned outcome was to engage her K-6 students in the reconstruction of indigenous African and African-American artifacts. These included masks, necklaces, effigies, dwellings, quilts, and printed fabrics.

Storytelling and Dialogue

Beginning with the premise that a deeper appreciation of cultural artifacts may be discovered through dialogue, Ms. Allen lead her students through daily discussions about African-American history and the artistic, symbolic, and religious nature of artifacts that the students would make. The beginning of each session would be prompted by Ms. Allen as she assumed her role as storyteller. The students would gather around Ms. Allen as she began her story. She used selections from *The River Jordan* (Burke & Croy, 1999), *Hidden in Plain View* (Tobin & Dobard, 2000), *The Watsons go to Birmingham* (Curtis, 1995), *Sojourner Truth* (McKissack & McKissack, 1992), *One More River to Cross* (Haskins, 1992), *Underground Railroad* (National Park Service, 1998), *Escape to Freedom* (Davis, 1989), *Lyle Station, Indiana: Yesterday and Today* (Evansville Office of Development, 1984), *Lest We Forget* (Maia, 1997), and stories from *The Riverside Anthology of the African American Literary Tradition* (Hill, 1997).

Under the backdrop of traditional African music, Ms. Allen read to her students, asked them questions, and recorded their answers on poster paper. The posters were retained and used to help students recall important discussions during the course of the project. As a storyteller, Ms. Allen made a conscious attempt to integrate themes that stressed the importance of community, scholarship, and continuity.

Reconstructing African-American Artifacts

The children worked to assemble artifacts connected to the stories they heard and talked about. They made paper maché masks, yarn effigies, fiber dwellings, glass necklaces, or cotton quilts. As the children prepared to begin assembling artifacts, they were assigned to groups and given instructions on how to design and assemble a specific artifact. They were permitted to visit other groups to learn what each was making, but returned to their own work group to complete the assigned artifact.

Children were guided through the construction phase of the project by adult leaders. Photographs and drawings were used as examples of finished artifacts, but variations were permitted and encouraged. Adults intervened, as needed, when construction tasks exceeded the abilities of the children.

Assessment: Building Artifacts and Building Knowledge

Ms. Allen often referred to the project's overarching objectives in discussions with students. During the three-month project period, she used formal question and answer sessions to consolidate learning and to answer emerging questions. Ms. Allen reiterated key objectives and probed for deeper awareness among the children about the following overarching questions:

Why is it important to know Black history?

What can we do to learn more about Black history?

How can the study of Black history be extended beyond Black History Month?

Eighteen (18) students participated in the initial discussion regarding the meaning of African-American history. Children's' responses to these questions varied. However, they generally indicated limited awareness about African-American history and a lack of fluency regarding specific details. Answers also included higher level responses from several children that indicated varying degrees of prior knowledge.

Ms. Allen explained that the students who responded with more knowledgeable answers, were children who had been at the center for several years and who had previously participated in the project. The newcomers, she said, generally knew very little about African American history.

As the project ended, 14 students of the original 18 participated in the post-exposure question and answer session. Students were asked the question that began their project orientation early in the fall semester—*What is Black History?* Their responses indicated an increased awareness about the nature of African-American history and a greater fluency with regard to details and context. Table 1 illustrates a comparison of children's conceptions about African-American history before and after participating in the three-month project.

During the post-exposure debriefing session, students were able to name key figures and engage in peer-to-peer discussions about the meaning of the masks, effigies, fabric design, and jewelry. Student responses illustrated an awareness of and familiarity with individuals involved in the civil rights movement. They also offered more knowledgeable descriptions about civil rights and African-American history. Examples of student responses during the final discussion include the following responses to the question "What is Black History?":

> People like Martin Luther King Jr. and Harriet Tubman who try to help people get out of slavery and they couldn't do anything about it. (Taryn , 4th grade)

> Black History Month is…when Black

Masks constructed by Carver Center children for the African-American History Museum.

people start to think about African Americans and what they did for us in the past. (Jwan, 5th grade)

Black history was a point in time when millions of people were taken from their families and put into a ship and stacked on top of each other. The people sailed on a ship for a long time until they reached America. Dead bodies were thrown into the ocean and sharks would swim by the ship. No one knows how many people were thrown overboard. The slaves were sold for money in the new world on plantations and worked really hard. Harriett Tubman and others escaped on the underground railway. (Joi, 4th grade)

Throughout the unit, student ideas and their emerging opinions were noted with affirmation by the staff of the Carver Center. The children's imaginative ideas and adaptations to the artifacts were welcomed. The children made up stories about African families and how they lived as they constructed models of dwellings from raffia and styrofoam bowls. While assembling the artifacts, they speculated about what it was like to be captured and transported across the ocean in ships.

They also talked about the South, what it was like to be a slave, and the conditions that slaves lived in. They generated ideas about how to escape from slavery and what it must have been like to cross the Ohio River. They talked about how to locate safe-houses for escaped slaves from messages that were woven into quilts.

Discovering Words and Interpreting Meanings

During the course of the project the staff discovered that their use of terminology warranted examination. Ms. Allen and her staff discussed their unconscious acceptance of words used to describe items that the children learned about and assembled. Specifically, the words *hut* and *doll* were examined with regard to their denigrating connotations.

In reconstructing traditional West African dwellings, it became apparent that traditional structures were much more than mere grass huts. They exemplified a type of architecture that perfectly suited the unique environmental conditions of sub-Sahara Africa.

The use of the word *doll* was also examined. The yarn figures that children made had important symbolic and religious meanings that were trivialized by referring to them as ordinary dolls. Consequently, Ms. Allen used the word *effigies* to describe these important figures; her staff decided that the terms *dwellings* or *houses* appropriately describes traditional architecture.

These discussions and realizations had a transformative effect upon the adult participants. Conversations indicated they realized a need to more closely examine the words they used for hidden connotations about subordination and stereotypes. Through their discussions they gained insight into how value-laden words can be used to trivialize the accomplishments of oppressed minorities.

Ms. Allen related that she had not previously thought about the impact certain words have upon children's images of African American history. As a result of this heightened awareness, she said that she now selects stories and words with a higher degree of sensitivity.

TABLE 1. Comparison of Student Responses to "What is Black History?" Pre-Exposure and Post-Exposure to an African-American History Unit

Pre-Exposure (n=18)		**Post-Exposure** (n=14)	
Charles - K	Black forest	Charles - K	When Black people get to think what they didn't think before
Jadrain – K	Black people	Jadrain - K	Slavery
Jonathan -1st grade	Black animals	Jonathan -1st grade	When Black people celebrate Black history
Issiah – 1st grade	When white people got into the apartments and buildings and black people had to stay off buses and all that kind of stuff like Martin Luther King changed all the rules	Issiah – 1st grade	The other Black people visited other people
Malik - 2nd grade	Black cat	Malik – 2nd grade	Black enemies
Corliss – 4th grade	When people get to celebrate the people that died, like slaves	Corliss – 4th grade	When we talk about slavery in the past and thankful we don't have slavery anymore
Marcus – 5th grade	When Black history came like all the Black people come together and celebrate	Marcus – 5th grade	Martin Luther King and Harriet Tubman thought of the underground railway and Rosa Parks didn't give up her seat – King tried to let freedom ring

Implications and Conclusions

The use of Afrocentric traditions as classroom exercises has implications beyond the commonplace foods, fun and festivals approach described by Ladson-Billings (1994). This project gave both participants and staff insight into elements of African American history that they had not previously encountered. It served to move curricula used at the Carver Center beyond what Banks (1999) described as the additive or contributions approach to multicultural education. In effect, the dialogue, storytelling and construction of artifacts had a transformative effect upon both staff and K-6 participants.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that the curriculum had academic impacts beyond the Carver Center. Program Director Lisa Allen related conversations with several parents, as well as with teachers from neighborhood elementary schools. She related conversations with parents where they described their child's increased interest and ability to talk about African-American traditions at home. She also reported that several teachers related incidents where students from the Carver Center were able to enhance classroom discussions with their knowledge about Africa and African-American traditions and history.

The study of African-American traditions and artifacts at the Carver Center was embedded in context. The curriculum exposed children to academic instruction in the form of multimedia presentations that incorporated traditional African stories, music, African-American storytelling, and hands-on assembly for an extended period of time. In effect, students were immersed in an Afrocentric curriculum at the Carver Center, rather than merely being exposed to one.

The former experience, as described by Banks (1999), is characterized by the study of ethnic contributions as an extension of the standard curriculum and does not immerse students in the same intensity of study. In the case presented here, evidence of the effect of immersion over an extended period of time indicates that K - 6 participants were able to interpret events and artifacts in a way that engendered a deeper level of respect for and understanding of their cultural heritage

Ms. Allen relates that she believes that her students see themselves in the stories that she tells them. She relates that they see the many choices that they now have, as compared to those few choices that their ancestors had. She says that they now listen to traditional African music and know much more about what was happening as the drums beat.

Boy with yarn figure he made for the Children's African-American History Museum.

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Yarn figures made by Carver Center children for the African-American History Museum.