EDF 5543: Philosophical Foundations of Education

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Authentic Research Problem: Literacy Achievement Among African-American Students

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Introduction to the Problem

In the United States, literacy has been recognized as a “critical problem in education, as growing numbers of adolescent students are transitioning to middle and high school without sufficient literacy skills” (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006). This challenging dilemma seems to be more concentrated and prevalent among African-American elementary and secondary students. In 2009, the National Assessment of Educational Programs (NAEP) reported alarming reading achievement levels for African-American students: 43% of African-American students in both grades eight and twelve read below the national basic reading level, while 52% of African-American fourth graders reading level ranked lower than the national basic reading level (National Assessment of Education Progress, 2009). Even more disturbing, at the collegiate level, some African-American students demonstrated a struggle with “literacy tasks that require text analysis, active problem solving, and critical thinking” (Banks, 2005). I believe that these low literacy skills contribute to the negative disparities of the achievement gap between African-Americans and other students.

Likewise, reading proficiency affects more than academic achievement. Studies (Anderson, Howard, Graham, 2007; Geliert & Elbro, 1999; Kowaleski-Jones & Duncan, 1999) have proven that literacy levels correlate to future achievement, student behavioral issues, and delinquency. Furthermore, according to the Florida Department of Education (FLDOE), “the lack of literacy skills weakens the economy, contributes significantly to the crime rate, and increases the need for higher taxes to sustain social services for the chronically unemployed” (Florida Department of Education, 2009). These statistics substantiate the need to improve literacy, and especially within the African-American community where poverty, crime, and unemployment pervade.
Moreover, in my opinion, history has proven the health of the economy to be one of the leading proponents of educational reform; advancements in technology shift industry needs, and education aims shift to produce workers who can satisfy those needs. For instance, my grandmother, who was born in 1919, participated in a workforce where she could perform reasonably on the job with only an eighth-grade reading level and education; however, in the workforce of today, subpar literacy skills and education will not suffice. Thus, as employers demand “more than basic and functional literacy skills for most jobs,” (Florida Department of Education, 2009) reading proficiency and literacy rates will remain a constant priority in education.

**Philosophical Framework**

In my opinion, philosophy is the framework by which educational pedagogy is constructed. Conversely, if there is an educational problem, philosophical tenets should undergird the manner in which the problem is addressed. In my examination of literacy among African-American students, I must take into account and analyze any underlying philosophical assumptions that validate the need for and methodology of a response to this problem. Personally, there is one major philosophical view that I believe would support the structure of any response to this problem: Pragmatism.

I believe a pragmatic approach to resolving this problem would be very practical, specific, and achievement-driven. Pragmatists advocate “problem-centered learning and action-oriented education; therefore they would suggest an activity-oriented approach so students would learn not only that they can relate various kinds of knowledge and use them to attack a problem but also that they can act on them” (Ozmon & Craver, 2003). One opinion (Delpit & Dowdy, 2002) suggests that African-American students’ low literacy proficiency is due to an educational
environment that does not provide meaningful, cultural representation and a lack of general appreciation for diversity within many schools, which fosters an “attitude of resistance and alienation toward the curriculum” (Delpit, 1995). A study conducted by the Putnam County School District (n.d.) reported that “mainstream materials do not adequately reflect the lived literacy experiences of many African-American students. Thus, students lack the prior knowledge needed to relate to the literature commonly used for instruction.” These assertions are grounded in a pragmatic perspective as “pragmatists reject separating knowledge from human experience, an important ingredient of pragmatist philosophy” (Ozmon & Craver, 2003).

Moreover, pragmatism provides a theoretical perspective of literacy as a social practice. “Public discourse often equates literacy learning with decoding or reading a text to extract items of literal meaning, but pragmatic literacy, in which reading is used in a range of situations, is necessary if the learner is to operate with any degree of autonomy in the world” (Initial Teacher Education, n.d.). Thus, literacy is essential for a healthy, democratic society. Those who hold fast to the philosophical convictions of pragmatism assert that students should be educated as social beings, where “education helps people direct, control, and guide personal and social experience for a more democratic way of life” (Ozmon & Craver, 2003).

**Mode of Engagement**

“African-American high school students are notably falling behind their white counterparts in graduation rates, dropout rates, literacy rates, and college preparedness rates” (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2007). This statistic, along with the literacy achievement levels reported in the national report card findings, really opened my eyes to the degree and severity of the problem. As a current African-American, graduate education student and a future educator, I believe that reading proficiency is one of the most necessary tools for success in life.
Moreover, as I approach graduation and begin my process to become a certified professional teacher, my personal educational philosophy is gradually developing. I am becoming more aware of the implications of the profession and what I will need to do to succeed. I want to be an effective educator who helps to improve problems like literacy among African-American students. I do understand that while I may not do anything in practice to have a macro effect on education, I can certainly have a positive impact on my students on a more localized level.

Moreover, with Career and Technical Education (CTE) being my area of concentration, literacy promotion is a federally- and state-mandated objective of the program. Initiatives have been implemented to “foster literacy development, lifelong learning, and community involvement and development” (Florida Department of Education, 2009). As stated in the introduction, reading aptitude affects the workplace. Thus, as a future CTE educator, I have an obligation to support and teach literacy competence with employability skills.

Lastly, I have a personal stake in researching an important educational problem as such because education advocacy has always been a priority in my family. I was raised around educators and educational policy makers and administrators. My step-father was a mathematics teacher, and my step-mother is a special education teacher with an endorsement in reading. Currently, my mother serves on the education committee of a grassroots organization called Faith and Action for Strength Together (FAST). They “engage people of diverse faiths in a process of listening, education, action, and reflection in order to powerfully address community issues in Pinellas County” (Direct Action and Training Center, n.d.). Presently, they are in the preliminary stages of researching literacy rates among low-income students across the county. I am eager to see the findings their study will produce, especially because I plan to make my permanent residence in Pinellas County after graduation. That being the case, I think that I have
a great responsibility as a prospective educator to see what I can do to address this problem before I actually begin teaching there.

A Proposed Response

Pragmatists believe that “when fundamental changes occur in our social life, people should reconstruct their thinking and their educational programs to meet these challenges” (Ozmon & Craver, 2003). I believe that literacy proficiency is a grave educational and social issue that plagues all students in the nation, but especially African-American students, so much that it warrants an immediate yet practical response. Thus, I am proposing a two-fold strategy to this educational dilemma that would provide help to students, both inside and out of the classroom. First, I plan to motivate students to read by incorporating culturally relevant literature into my lesson plans, through a differentiated curriculum with an emphasis on real-world application. Second, I plan to establish, organize, and facilitate an after-school reading and tutoring program. While many educators and researchers have recommendations for addressing the problem, I want to ensure that these remedies are within the scope of my ability.

I believe that motivation is essential to improving literacy levels among African-American students. Moreover, research (Cianciolo 1989; DeLeón 2002; Heflin ft Barksdale-Ladd, 2001 ; McCollin ft O'Shea 2005) suggests that students have a tendency to prefer and are more predisposed to connect with literature if it reflects their personal experiences. Therefore, I believe African-American students can be motivated to read and improve literacy skills through purposeful integration of authentic or real-world experiences that are relevant to their everyday life. For instance, if I were teaching a CTE Career Development class, I would have students research and read information about possible careers they may be interested in pursuing, and well-known or affluent African-Americans who currently work in those respective fields. This
would foster a personal, real-life application of and provide a cultural relationship to the material they are reading. Additionally, combining culturally relevant literature with an emphasis on real-world application in the curriculum is supported by the pragmatic assumption that “real-life situations encourage problem solving ability in a practical setting” (Ozmon & Carver, 2003). Although I believe this will help to significantly remedy the problem, my plan does not stop here.

Studies (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2007; Delpit, 1995; Delpit & Dowdy, 2002) have shown that African-American students experience more learning disadvantages in the classroom in comparison to their peers. Thus, I believe a resolution to the literacy problem among Africa-American students must extend beyond the help they receive in the classroom. As a certified educator, I would organize and facilitate an after-school reading and tutoring program where students could receive specialized assistance to improve reading skills. Moreover, the program would be designed to help students identify an interest and use it to help them improve their literacy aptitude.

Through the program, students would undergo an initial screening to determine their literacy level. Along with the reading level assessment, students would also be evaluated for reading disabilities. After the screening, a reading coach would be assigned to the student and a customized, detailed literacy improvement plan would be constructed. This plan would outline the ultimate reading goal, with activities and a timeline of expected milestones needed to achieve the goal. It would also include the student’s expressed interest and a list that the student and reading coach would create to outline activities that could be incorporated to help accomplish the overall reading achievement level. A conference schedule would be established between the reading coach and the parent to discuss the progress of the student’s improvement and address
any concerns. In addition, at the culmination of the program, I think it would be good for students to participate in a ceremony of some sort to celebrate their literacy achievements and motivate them to continue in their reading goals. Like the first, this response is also supported by the philosophical framework because “pragmatic educators advocate meeting the needs and interests” of the students (Ozmon & Craver, 2003). In the proposal, the student’s personal interest is used to provide a motivational rationale by which a basic area of study, like reading, is associated.

Reflection on the Efficacy and Limitations of the Proposed Response

“According to a national survey of students’ after-school experiences and parents’ perceptions of after-school programs, African-American youth are more likely to participate in after-school programs than are youth from other racial and ethnic groups (Afterschool Alliance, 2004; Carver & Iruka, 2006). That being the case, these students could receive individualized, thorough help with reading and any homework that challenges their literacy skills during an after-school program. In this setting, instead of waiting to do their homework assignments at home, students would benefit from having one-on-one assistance while actually doing the work. Since students would not necessarily receive this type of attention in the classroom, an accelerated and comprehensive approach would be taken to identify and resolve problematic literacy challenges.

With these benefits, there are a few potential problems that I did not foresee while constructing my proposal. First, if my aim is to incorporate culturally relevant literature into my lesson plan, I have to take into account the diverse population of students in my class. While the proposed focus is on improving reading achievement skills in African-American students, as an effective, professional educator, I cannot have a biased approach that may discriminate against
other cultures and ethnicities. Another drawback in my proposal affects the institution of the after-school reading and tutoring program. I am not quite certain as to where the resources would come from to fund the after-school program. Unfortunately, my proposal fails to address that matter. So, if the program was not free for the students, who again would more than likely be from low-income homes, they would not be able to participate and take advantage of the after-school assistance. However, to combat this, I could propose another solution to collaborate with an organization, like FAST, who already has the necessary resources it would take to establish a reading program as such; thus, eliminating a financial obligation for the students and their parents.

In my opinion, these proposed endeavors are quite feasible and very practical. They are not too extensive that they reach past the scope of what I can do individually. Thus, they are very realistic because I think that they actually have a high probability of materializing in my educational practice within the next one to three years.

**Conclusion**

A vast majority of “researchers, policymakers, and educational stakeholders that reading achievement among African-American students is an important issue” (Strickland, 1994). It is a vital factor in the vast disproportion of the achievement gap between African-American students and their counterparts. Moreover, the consequences of weak literacy proficiency among African-Americans is compounded when one considers the correlation between literacy rates and employment opportunities, advanced educational goals, and the ability to become a socially democratic and autonomous citizen. Thus, there must be a permanent priority to provide a constant, practical, attainable resolution to improving the literacy achievement level among African-American students.
Bibliography


