Yvette Jackson

Unlocking the Potential of African American Students: Keys to Reversing Underachievement

The potential of many African American students is undetected due to misperceptions about their intellectual ability and achievement. These misperceptions cause inadequate instructional responses, which in turn perpetuate the cycle of underachievement. This article analyzes the bases for many of these misperceptions, explores the impact of culture on learning, and provides guidelines for eliciting and nurturing the potential of African American students for whom race is a factor in school.

I suppose that it is a truth too well attested to you, to need a proof here, that we are a race of beings ... who have long been looked upon ... as scarcely capable of mental endowments ... I apprehend you will embrace every opportunity to eradicate that train of absurd and false ideas and opinions, which so generally prevail with respect to us; and that

Yvette Jackson is the Executive Director of the National Urban Alliance for Effective Education.

Requests for reprints can be sent to Yvette Jackson, National Urban Alliance for Effective Education, One Hollow Lane, Suite 100, Lake Success, NY 10042. E-mail: drjnua@aol.com

your sentiments are concurrent with mine ... that we were all afforded, without partiality, the same sensations and endowed with the same facilities. (Zinn, 1980, p. 89)

THIS QUOTE FROM BENJAMIN BANNEKER (a freed slave who taught himself mathematics, predicted a solar eclipse, and was appointed to plan the new city of Washington) in a letter to Thomas Jefferson, disappointingly reflects misperceptions about race and the ability of African Americans that prevail to this day. This is illustrated in schools, where many African American students with the capacity for high intellectual performance are underachievers. They sit in classrooms waiting for the opportunities that can elicit their attention, creativity, and potential. They wait to excel to levels beyond the expectations their teachers and society have for them. But misperceptions about race and a lack of teacher knowledge on how to elicit and nurture their potential keeps them waiting. And for many, while they wait, the skills they have the potential to develop actually atrophy to the point of low performance, perpetuating the serious issue of African American students' underachievement.

Dispelling Misperceptions

Renzulli (Barbe & Renzulli, 1975) has identified three traits of people who exhibit high performance: task commitment, above average achievement, and creativity. The development of these traits is contingent on motivation and competence. This is particularly relevant to African American students, who crave experiences that build confidence in their ability, challenge them, and build relationships that activate their desire to learn. Four critical factors limit the application of these types of nurturing experiences needed to develop the traits described by Renzulli (Barbe & Renzulli, 1975):

1. Lack of focus in schools on the learning process and the strategies that motivate and accelerate learning;
2. The distance many teachers feel from African American students because of their cultural differences;
3. Misperceptions educators have about the impact of race on the ability of African Americans; and
4. The impact of culture (connecting to the students by making instruction meaningful and relevant) on learning and achievement.

These critical factors have resulted in teacher and student behaviors misinterpreted as not caring. However, this interpretation is typically very far from reality. Most teachers and students care very much. What many teachers share with me as I work through the National Urban Alliance is that they actually feel that they do not know how to help their culturally different students learn (Archer, 1999). This lack of understanding of the learning process and the impact of culture on learning and achievement has a limiting affect on the pedagogy or instructional choices teachers make, minimizing effectiveness in eliciting and nurturing the potential of not just African American students, but all students whose achievement is less than their potential. Understanding learning and the interrelationship of culture and learning strengthens teachers' abilities to have a positive impact on student achievement.

The Impact of Culture and Race on Learning

Research about the learning process and how it happens can be illustrated through a symbolic formula that we use in the work of the National Urban Alliance to clarify the optimal targets to address in instruction. By analyzing learning through this formula and illustrating the impact that culture and race have on each element of the formula, educators develop a better appreciation of the hurdles African American students face in the learning process. An examination of each of the elements in the formula reveals their importance and the interrelationships among the elements.

$$L: (U + M)(C1 + C2)$$
Learning: (Understanding + Motivation) (Competence + Confidence)

Understanding

Academic knowledge is learned when students grasp the concepts underlying that knowledge. The brain achieves understanding as it naturally constructs understanding from what it identifies as relevant and meaningful. Constructing meaning is the major requisite to learning and the core of intellectual processing. Cultural experience is what makes something relevant and meaningful to an individual, so that understanding and learning are directly impacted by culture.

Motivation

Another equally significant catalyst for learning is motivation. Understanding and motivation are affected by what Jensen (1998) described as brain realization of relevance and meaningfulness, both of which rely on being able to make personal cultural associations. When teachers are unable to make links to cultural referents of students, an "affective filter" develops (Draschen, 1982). When this occurs, students do not make connections, become unmotivated, and do not identify with the teacher. Often they are over-anxious about their performance, which causes stress on a biological

level. The stress often manifests itself in self-defeating behaviors that appear as inattentiveness, resistance, and not caring. This stress also prevents input from reaching those parts of the brain responsible for language acquisition, restricting language development and construction of meaning (Delpit, 1995).

This stress is compounded by perceptions that students feel their teachers have about them. These perceptions are constructed from marginalizing terms or jargon some educators may use to describe African American students, including:

- minority (instead of African American or students of color);
- disadvantaged (instead of students put at a disadvantage); and
- low achiever (instead of underachiever).

Such marginalizing terms are indicators and perpetuators of the low expectations that influence the choices of under-challenging instruction many teachers tend to make for these students. The under-challenging instruction and the perceptions the marginalizing terms represent are translated by students into direct messages about a lack of belief teachers have in their potential, causing students to lack confidence in their ability. These misperceptions and marginalizing beliefs about intelligence on the part of both teachers and students is compounded by data from standardized tests, which indicate that there is an achievement gap between African American and European American students. This achievement gap is erroneously used to judge potential, in spite of the plethora of court cases in which the validity and use of standardized tests and I.Q. measures have been found to be flawed. In the landmark Larry P. v. Riles (1979) case, the court concurred with expert witnesses that there are no measures of innate capacity. All ability tests (whether intelligence, aptitude, or achievement tests) measure a student's current performance on skills introduced. The major difference lies in their specificity and the functions they serve. Success on these tests depends on a student's exposure to particular knowl-

edge, information, habits, and approaches which compose these tests.

Competence and Confidence

Significant factors in stimulating motivation are competence and confidence. At this time in education, competence and confidence for all students are contingent on the academic proficiencies identified in state standards and their correlated assessments. The many standards and assessments that have to be addressed can be categorized or compacted to three areas of expected competence. These are: (a) fluency in the language (including language of specific disciplines or areas of learning in the secondary levels); (b) the ability to construct meaning from text; and (c) the ability to communicate the meaning constructed from the text.

These three areas of competence are all language dependent. Culture molds language, and language is a way of thinking. Disconnects with content by students who are culturally different from their teachers, and misjudgments their teachers make about their potential, are often affected by language differences. Many African American students use the language of their culture. Some people refer to their language as a dialect. Regardless of the label, their language is different from the language of instruction, and this difference is a barrier to constructing meaning.

Beyond the language barriers there are psychological factors related to race and culture that impair the competence and confidence of African America students. Research studies on race illustrate that attitudes regarding the relationship between race and social status develop at a very early age (Clark & Clark, 1939; Comer & Poussaint, 1992; Hilliard, 1996). The struggle for racial identity and status, coupled with the effects of misperceptions about their ability, perpetuate a lack of confidence that afflicts many African American students.

The way the brain makes learning happen does not differ from one culture to another. The brain, unlike the mind, is a biological entity, not a social, cultural product (Eisner, 1994). When teachers understand intelligence and learning—and the

powerful effect of culture, language, and cognition on these processes—they can make better choices of effective learning strategies that do not depend on race or ethnicity but rather build on the cultural frame of references of their students (Feuerstein, 1982; Mahiri, 1998). This recognition diminishes teachers' fears, and enables them to appreciate the positive impact of recognizing and building on the cultural experiences of students.

Pedagogy of Confidence: Unlocking Student Potential

Students' responses of either resistance or acceptance are at least in part predicated on the specific nature of the pedagogy and curriculum they are exposed to. (Mahiri, 1998, p. 3)

Pedagogy is the art or method of teaching. It is an art that is developed and refined when teachers are confident in their ability to successfully impact their students' learning. This sense of confidence results from knowing what to do and believing you have the skills and abilities to meet those expectations. The confidence of African American students is nurtured when teachers assure them that there is no doubt about their potential. The focus of instruction shifts from what has to be taught to mediating learning (Feuerstein, 1982) and motivating exceptional performance. Connecting to the culture of students to build relationships is key to what I describe as a *Pedagogy of Confidence.*

Pedagogy of Confidence is based on the fearless expectation that all students will learn. When teachers practice this pedagogy, they do not doubt the potential of their culturally different students. They transmit the expectation that their students will be productive contributors to society, and they provide what Delpit (1995) called the codes of power that will enable them to achieve this expectation. Codes of power are usable knowledge and skills that enable students to communicate effectively in standard literary forms. This relates to linguistic forms, critical and creative thinking, communicative strategies, and presentation of self (ways of talking, writing, dressing, and interacting). Teachers who demonstrate a Pedagogy of

Confidence use the interconnectedness of culture, language, and cognition as a frame for an instructional model that guides the development of their teaching methods, the selection of learning strategies, and the design of assessments, which in turn accelerates and enriches the learning of urban students (Jackson, 2001). Teachers make choices for instruction by using a lens that focuses on:

- identifying strategies that motivate and support learning;
- creating bridges between the cultural experience of the student and the skills and content to be mastered;
- teaching for understanding across disciplines;
- guiding student self-discovery; and
- designing performance tasks to demonstrate and assess student learning.

The two core processes of Pedagogy of Confidence are mediated learning and literacy enrichment. The rest of this article focuses on specific instructional techniques and strategies that address the issues explored and illustrate the Pedagogy of Confidence. The examples are geared to adolescents, but can be adapted for elementary or high school grades. I have chosen adolescents for two reasons. First, adolescence is a critical juncture in the physiological, emotional, and cognitive development of students. It is a defining point for building both students' identity and confidence in their ability. Second (and directly related), adolescence is a critical juncture educationally. For many, this is the last opportunity for educators to exert the will to make the instructional choices that will determine the rest of their lives. That is, teachers can allow the continuing spiral of underachievement that relegates these students to failure, or they can capitalize on the potential that exists for high achievement.

Mediated Learning

A key contributing factor to underachievement of African American students is language. Language development and fluency are very reliant on deep, meaningful discussions for vocabulary building. These deep discussions are developed

through what Feuerstein (1982) called *mediated learning experiences*, an interactive process that bonds the teacher and student in a nurturing relationship so culturally important to African American students. The goal of mediated learning is to elicit from the students a personal motivation for learning. The teacher engages students around purposely selected activities that build their confidence by guiding them in discussion to critically analyze tasks and identify relevant connections and applications to their personal experiences. Through this discussion, the teacher builds background in the understandings of the discipline or text to be studied, and facilitates acquisition of the relationships, verbal tools, and cognitive skills necessary to master a task (Jackson, 2001).

African American students excel in discussion when teachers recognize, appreciate, and address key African cultural themes that permeate their lives. Teachers use these themes by making bridges to the concepts or themes to be taught for guiding and engaging students in deep, meaningful discussions that elicit their experiences and opinions. These African cultural themes include:

1. *Spirituality*—Spirituality is based on the belief that all elements in the universe are of one substance (Spirit) and that all forms of matter, animate or inanimate, are merely different manifestations of the Godforce (Spirit).

2. *Resilience*—Resilience is the conscious need to bounce back from disappointment and disaster, and to have the tools of humor and joy to renew life's energy.

3. *Humanism*—Humanism describes the African view of the whole world as vitalistic (alive), and this vitalism is grounded in a sense of goodness.

4. *Communalism*—Communalism denotes awareness of the interdependence of people.

5. *Orality and Verbal Expressiveness*—Orality and verbal expression refers to the special importance attached to knowledge that is passed on through word of mouth and the cultivation of oral virtuosity.

6. *Realness*—Realness refers to the need to face life the way it is, without pretense.

7. *Personal Style and Uniqueness*—Personal style and uniqueness refers to the cultivation of a

unique or distinctive personality or essence, and putting one's own brand on an activity.

8. *Emotional Vitality*—Emotional vitality expresses a sense of aliveness, animation, and openness conveyed in the language, oral literature, song, dance, body language, folk poetry, and expressive thought.

9. *Musicality/Rhythm*—Musicality or rhythm demonstrates the connectedness of movement, music, dance, percussiveness, and rhythm, personified through the musical beat (Center for Applied Cultural Studies and Educational Achievement, 1999).

One English teacher I mentored engaged students in discussions using themes or topics from the literature they were studying and had the students connect these themes or topics to personal (African) cultural themes (99% of her students were African American). After the discussions, she had the students use writing (particularly poetry, similes, and metaphors) as a vehicle for expressing their understandings of the themes, concepts, or topics. Following is an example of one of the poems created after analysis and discussion of the topic oxymoron. It illustrates the African cultural themes of realness, orality and verbal expressiveness, and emotional vitality.

> Ask Me
>
> Ask me why a sour smell surrounds the sweet smell of summer.
>
> Ask me why our bodies are made to live forever, but some die at forty.
>
> Ask me why I get a lump in my throat when I talk to a beautiful flower.
>
> Ask me why the brain is far more powerful than a computer, but we are limited to what we use. (student, Arlington High School, Indianapolis, IN)

The discussions that guided students to explore their cultural themes while learning a key academic concept created a deep, bonding relationship between the teacher and students so crucial to the learning process. The dynamic interaction between teacher and student is the most important aspect of the mediation process for it allows as-

sessment of understanding and learning to be part of the instructional process (Jackson, Lewis, Feuerstein, & Samuda, 1998). Mediated learning develops the cognitive functions that are the foundations of literacy and are necessary for achievement throughout life. These include: focusing on problems or issues; inferring connections; organizing information; sorting relevant and irrelevant information; and labeling. Mediated learning facilitates a balance between relationship building, competence, and confidence.

Literacy Enrichment

Underachievement among African American students is most evident in literacy skills, specifically in inferential thinking, vocabulary development, and standard language use (Levine, Cooper, & Hilliard, 2000). Literacy is the key to empowering students. It is the primary focus of mediated learning and the context in which the codes of power are developed. Eisner (1994) described literacy as an individual's ability to construct, create, and communicate meaning in many forms (written text, drawing, mathematical symbols, dance, etc.). It is the engagement of both receptive and expressive capabilities in a student. Five critical experiences enrich literacy instruction: responding to a variety of texts and experiences; composing (oral and written); studying and mastering language patterns; sustained reading of a variety of self-selected books; and learning how to learn (Nessel, 1999).

When teachers subscribe to a Pedagogy of Confidence, they mediate literacy enrichment by providing lessons that foster social interaction for language development and guide the application of cognitive skills that help students construct and communicate meaning. Literacy for African American students is deepened and accelerated when teachers recognize, address, and build on the extensive practices and literacy skills these students use with expertise in their everyday lives (Mahiri, 2004). An emerging field of instruction that capitalizes on the literacy of African Ameri-

can and urban students is the field of New Literacy Studies.

New Literacy Studies go beyond Eisner's (1994) definition of literacy by integrating a variety of disciplines (e.g., linguistics, social theory, anthropology) to look at cognition, language, and literacy as not just "mental phenomena," but as social, cultural, historical, and political practices through which young people's identities (and literacy) are formed. Through New Literacy Studies, the literacy skills of African American youth are built up by providing opportunities to elicit and engage the multiple identities of the students, the many forms of representations they use (i.e., poetry), and voluntary uses of literacy students engage in beyond the classroom (Mahiri, 2004).

Wonderful examples of the use of critical experiences for literacy enrichment developed through New Literacies Studies of secondary students can be found in the work of Mahiri (2004). Mahiri (2004) and contributing authors illustrated how to motivate underachieving students to explore and demonstrate their potential through voluntary writings or writing for the students' own purposes. The authors utilize structures and patterns that become vehicles that enable students to analyze and express what is relevant and meaningful to them. These vehicles include documentaries, video essays, screenplays, rap, and poetry. Ernest Morrell, in Mahari (2004), described a curricular intervention that incorporates hip-hop texts along with canonical poetry texts to help students develop vocabulary and analytical skills to facilitate a more critical consciousness. Such strategies develop competence and confidence in the students by using critical literary analysis and interpretation to demonstrate to them how their skills as writers reflect masterful literacy practices.

Thinking Maps for Comprehension and Language Development

Another powerful set of strategies for literacy enrichment that addresses culture, language, and cognition are Thinking Maps. Thinking Maps are eight visual-verbal organizers developed by Hyerle

(1995) to support the brain's natural learning process, by helping students identify patterns and relationships in their thinking, as well as in textual material. They are based on the eight fundamental cognitive processes that form the core of cognition and learning: defining a concept, describing qualities or attributes, comparing and contrasting, sequencing, classifying, part-whole relationships, cause and effect, and seeing analogies. Thinking Maps provide a common language about thinking that allows teachers and students to communicate with precision, bridging the cultural gap. When students use Thinking Maps, teachers can quickly assess their thinking and identify specific comprehension issues. Equally important is that they provide students with the tools for building competence in learning and communicating that learning with confidence. Thinking Maps are tools for unlocking the codes of power (Jackson, 2004).

African American underachievers harbor the potential for high intellectual performance and the desire to realize this potential. Unlocking the key to this potential requires an ardent belief in this potential, the desire to try all means to tap this potential, and the confidence to connect to these students through what we all value most: personal identity. When our perceptions expand to recognize the power that addressing students' culture and language has on the learning process, we design opportunities for their strengths to blossom, confidence to build, and achievement to soar. Benjamin Banneker's plea to Thomas Jefferson resonates in a quote from Wayne Dyer (2004), "When we change the way we look at things, the things we look at change." The time for this change to happen is now.

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