Identifying, Assessing, and Mobilizing African American Students for their Collective Benefit

By Nantambu Kohlbatz

"I believe Woodson knew almost a century ago, what many of us are just beginning to understand – schools have two purposes for African American children – either destroy or indoctrinate. ... For those that survive destruction and acquire skills, they graduate believing Greece preceded Egypt, ... and are more committed to the Fortune 500 than the Black community." (Woodson, 2000, p. viii)

Rationale

Far too often students of color with untapped abilities never actualize their talents for a myriad of reasons. As an educator, it is excruciating to watch this process play out. The system fails many students of color. Students of color are often very social, vocal, and tend to prioritize peer norms and approval over parental or societal demands. With the advent of learning from home, it has become apparent that many students of color strive toward and consequently achieve better academic results when they have positive peer interactions. Today's students are engulfed in a sea of '*likes'* and '*follows'* on social media, that often have dire implications. Now more than ever, students compulsively seek validation, approval, and acceptance outside the hierarchal structure of school. Students need a positive, proactive, and programmatic peer group that is both able and willing to collaborate beyond academic performance tasks. The goal is sustained self-actualization. Therefore, the research question is: ***How can we restructure the competitive, individualist aspects of education into a collaborative, mutually beneficial experience that could empower every child involved?***

Literature Review

Na'im Akbar, a clinical psychologist with an Afrocentric approach, takes a multi-tiered approach to unveil, qualify, and counter the psychology of the Negro. His work offers a clinical perspective of the purpose and a perpetuation of the Negro's transgenerational ideologies. Akbar illuminates the solutions that could counter the self-destructive paradigms that were and are intentionally taught to African Americans.

"African people throughout the world have a worldview that is conceived as a universal oneness" (Akbar, 2003). The premise is that African American students are naturally inclined to socialize. Akbar delineates how communalism is not systemically encouraged nor utilized for African American students' empowerment.

In addition, Carter G. Woodson's *The Mis-Education of the Negro,* written almost 100 years ago, unapologetically examined, exposed, and convicted the educational system of purposefully and profitably miseducating and exploiting the Negro. In 2000, Kunjufu revisited Woodson's work to add a foreword exploring how little has changed in the approach to educating the Negro. Kunjufu questions what education is and what it has produced. Ultimately, Kunjufu ended with a similar conclusion that the educational system can be a tool for empowerment or exploitation for the Negro.

Lastly, W.E.B. DuBois in his controversial work *The Talented Tenth* sought to offer a solution to Negro empowerment. DuBois takes a systemic look at how the Negro might change the collective Negro experience. DuBois recognizes there will be those who not only possess but apply talents toward a specific end. If those individuals, who we identify as extraordinary were contractually obligated to each other, they would be able to uplift an entire people. Such a collective group could form a synergy that would perpetually propel the African Americans into a new paradigm and hence lifestyle.

Data/Tools/Process/Methodology

The data was gathered from six DCPS professional from the same high-performing high school with a demographic of African American students over 80%. Of the six respondents, four identified as general educators, one school psychologist and one school-based social worker. The anonymous online

survey was administered from March 2021 through April 2021. The questionnaire included multiple choice and open-ended questions. The survey posed questions to high school educators that would allow each to reflect on experiences with students of color who have achieved academic success.

Data Analysis

The data collected supported and contradicted some of my personal expectations and experiences. As a lifelong educator I've witnessed fleeting moments and spans of excellence teaching students of color. Some of these students demonstrated a level of capacity, yet still missed opportunities for growth and academic achievement. Recognizing a need for a more systemic solution, my lifework sought to find possible solutions. The questions posed to the educators in the survey are about students' intrinsic motivation, self-advocacy, organization and social skills.

The data unanimously concluded that soft skills such as a students' *sense of ownership, personal connection to outcomes and/or people* are more important than tangible skills such as *modeled practices and practical steps*. These responses confirm the idea that intrinsic motivation transcends specific methodologies. Hence the need to establish and leverage buy-ins for students who need an opportunity to decisively evaluate themselves, their purpose, priorities, and resources, more than learning specific practices and routines.

The data also reported a split in what may be deemed effective strategies for student growth. Fifty percent of respondents believe motivation and organization are more important that creativity, impact or contribution. This reporting contradicted my initial premise. It leaves the door open to explore what other catalysts might motivate students other than self-expression or meaningful impact, and contribution. Although not conclusive, the data does offer a rationale that peer pressure could be a motivation for high achievement.

Lastly, there is a direct contradiction to my present stance. Only 33% of my professional peers reported the ability to assess and reassess return on investment based on a long-standing personal compass. The other 67% believe the ability to apply theoretical hypothesizes in practical ways would lead to better student advocacy and achievement for students of color.

Policy Recommendations

DCPS does not currently have a gifted and talented program. If properly employed systemic cohorts could be universally applicable and immediately impactful. More so there is little opportunity for systemic vertical planning and implementation. Lastly, DCPS does not currently have data nor incentives for effective purpose-based learning cohorts. Based on my brief survey of educators, my recommendations are as follows:

- Create dynamic purpose-driven cohorts for students of color that utilize pragmatic ideologies and processes rooted in the African American experience. The rubric for success would be student experience as well as student performance.
- Evaluate and reconstruct research and data collection tools to best examine, classify and qualify skills utilized by high performers for students of color.

References

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