Chapter 11

Teaching in an Anti–Deficit Pedagogical Mindset

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ABSTRACT

Anti-deficit pedagogy is an innovative and practical concept that aids in closing the cultural gap minority students face in education. Minority students often bare an undue burden in regards to accessing standard content under current pedagogical approaches. They are faced with unrealistic expectations of simultaneously learning content, the context of the content, and the skills and tools needed to access and unpack the content. Those expectations are in addition to minority students being discouraged and disconnected from a system of education that seemingly devalues them by either ignoring contributions made by individuals that they share commonalities with or that offers minimal acknowledgement of events with any significant relevancy. Anti-deficit pedagogy addresses many of the critical issues responsible for the expanding cultural gap between students and educators who are content knowledgeable, but lack cultural proficiency. This chapter highlights the development and implementation of a course for a group of African American male students.

INTRODUCTION

African American male student success has perplexed researchers for many years, as this group of students has not performed at the rates that their peers have succeeded. Some researchers have highlighted the almost exclusive focus on the ways in which this group of students has not been successful in terms of their persistence and graduation rates (Dallmann-Jones, 2002; Gordon, Gordon, and Nembhard, 1994; Martin, Martin, Gibson, & Wilkins, 2007; Strayhorn, 2008). Nichols and Evans-Bell (2017) in The
Education Trust report noted the gap between Black and White student success rates, which is defined as completion of a bachelor’s degree. The report indicates that only about 4 in 10 (41 percent) Black students who begin their matriculation as first-time freshmen will earn their bachelor’s degree within six years of starting their matriculation at that institution. This number is 22 percentage points below their White peers.

Harper (2012) chose to approach the analysis of African American male student phenomenon in a different way. By focusing on African American male students who were successful, and analyzing what impacted their success, the concept of an anti-deficit achievement framework was developed. More specifically, instead of concentrating on the shortcomings and failings of this group of students, this framework “pursues insights into strategies these [successful Black male] students employ to resist the internalization of discouraging misconceptions about members of their racial groups and how they manage to respond productively to stereotypes” (Harper, 2010, p. 69). The result is that anti-deficit scholarship considers the fact that structural and institutional inequities exist, and reframes research questions to ensure that it considers this group of students in this context.

Anti-deficit achievement pedagogy (Harper, 2012) for African American male students in the college setting, requires the integration of nontraditional content that can serve as an aid to the closure of cultural gaps. African American male students devalue traditional pedagogy, in part, due to its lack of relevancy (Emdin, 2010). Bartholomae (2002) notes that instructors initially assess student ability to engage in productive writing based upon a standardized set of foundational skills. These foundational skills do not allow students to utilize critical thinking or to use their lifelong learning experiences for learning, which is a detriment to them being able to be successful considering the lack of context (Lamont Hill, 2009; Emdin, 2010). These theorists note that reading and writing are not the only ways of identifying literacy. Literacy can be identified through many complex social and cultural practices. As students are becoming more demographically diverse, it is important to realize that their ways of conceptualizing thoughts and experiences are going to be equally complex. These students possess many different communal, economic, political, and ideological beliefs, and consequently, their perceptions of the world are going to be different. For this reason, the system of education continues to fail African American male students offering little in the way of professional staff, instructors, content, and environmental stimuli that offer a strong immediate connection (Forrell, 2006). The modern American education system is not inherently bad, nor is it intentionally geared toward displacing African American male students, but intentions do not change the results. African American male students often receive the least amount of direct instruction due to higher rates of in- and out-of-school suspensions and a myriad of other systemic challenges. African American male students are often already behind due to socio-economic factors that contribute to single parent households, mass incarceration, and underfunded Title III schools (Jackson & Moore, 2008). Even in higher education, they find that there is lack of plurality in terms of their heritage, beliefs, and values, and for that reason, they remove themselves because there is not a fit (Scott, 2001; Sparks, 2002).

Researchers have highlighted the challenges of intercultural communication in higher education that impact students from underserved (first generation, low income, racial/ethnic minority) backgrounds (Martin, Nakayama, and Flores, 2002; Orbe, 2008). Relational dialectics theory implies that students from underserved backgrounds enter into higher educational academic settings with limited context of what to expect, and they encounter environments where their cultural identities are unlike the ones that exist in their new collegiate community. This research indicates that there should be some “give and take” in these relationships to decrease the tension that arises in any relationship, not to mention situa-
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