

Closing the Achievement Gap

Will an Ethnocentric Curriculum close the Gap?

By
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Action Research Report

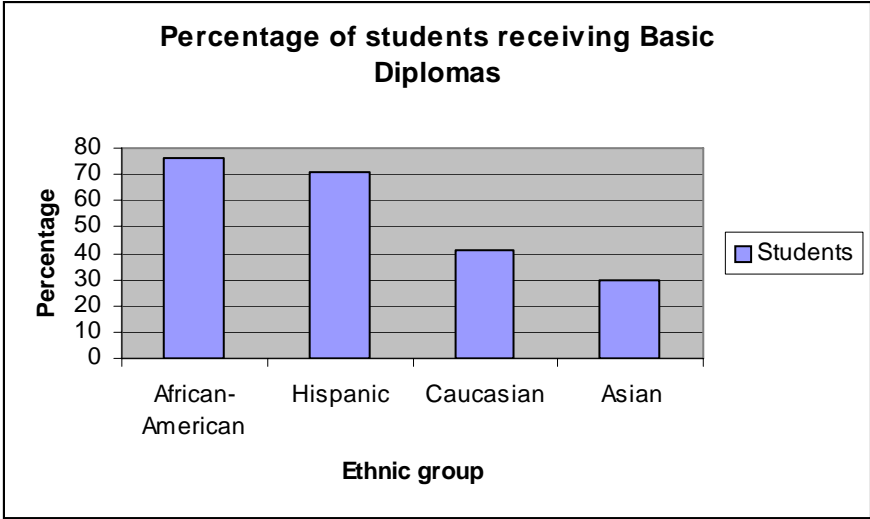
Question

When analyzing the achievement of my students over the past three years I began to wonder if some of my minority students would do better academically if they were learning about people who looked like them or about issues that affected their culture. The question that I posed is: would an ethnocentric curriculum raise the achievement levels of my struggling minority students?

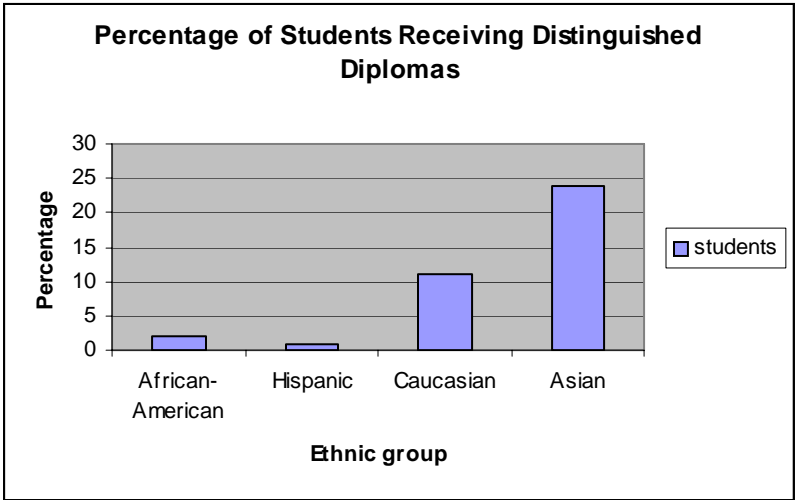
Rational

Across the United States educators, district personnel and policy makers are faced with the challenge of trying to narrow the achievement gap between Caucasian and minority students. In order to “leave no child behind,” this questions must be answered. Is there one magic solution or are there a number of solutions to this problem. Minority students around the United States are scoring lower on standardized test and graduating at a lower percentage then Caucasians.

In Delaware, students graduate with a basic, standard or distinguished diploma. In 2004 76% of African-Americans graduating in Delaware received the lowest form of diploma, a basic diploma, compared to 71 percent of Hispanics and 41 percent Caucasians. Standard diploma, 22 percent of the African American graduates received the standard diploma, compared to 28 percent Hispanics and 48 percent Caucasians.



Only 2 percent of the graduating African Americans achieved the distinguished diploma compared to 1 percent of the Hispanic graduates and 11 percent of the Caucasian graduates. Overall, Asian students fared the best having the lowest percentage receiving Basic diplomas at 30 percent and the highest percentage achieving distinguished diplomas at 24 percent.



These figures show across the state Hispanics and African-Americans are well behind their peers when it comes to academic achievement. Something must be done to narrow this gap and enable Hispanics and African-Americans to achieve at comparable levels to their Caucasian peers.

When analyzing the data for the United States as a whole at different grade levels, gaps still exist. Across the nation only 12 percent of African American students in the fourth grade achieved proficiency or were above average in reading. In addition, only seven percent of African American students in the eighth grade achieved proficiency or were above average in math. This data demonstrates a national issue that needs to be placed near the top of issues educators and policy members must attempt to solve.

This research report focuses on trying to narrow this gap down by infusing an ethnocentric curriculum into classrooms to attempt to boost interest and achievement for these struggling minority learners.

Context

My school's student population is 650 and 52 percent of these students are minorities: African-American 34 percent, Hispanics 19 percent. On the Delaware State Testing Program (DSTP), minority students have not fared well as compared to Caucasian students, African Americans being the lowest group and Hispanics coming in second. In 2004, on the reading portion of the state test 31 percent of African American students met or exceeded the standard as compared to 42 percent of Hispanic students and 57 percent of Caucasian students. In addition, on the math portion of the test, 23 percent of the African-American students met or exceeded the standard as compared to

22 percent for Hispanic students and 51 percent of Caucasian students. My schools data is comparable to that of the United States schools and districts across the nation are reporting the same types of gaps in achievement.

When analyzing these numbers, the question is why? Why is there a gap among these different groups? To try and solve this question, I wanted to see whether or not an ethnocentric curriculum would make a difference. Are these minority groups struggling because they cannot relate to what they are learning? Or is it a case of interest, would these minority groups be more interested in topics similar to their own culture assuming an interest in what they are learning would cause achievement to rise.

Research

My research began in 2004 after I attended an Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) conference in New Orleans where I attended a session entitled Addressing the Crisis of African American Underachievement. The speaker presented statistics regarding the achievement gap for African American students in New Jersey and the United States. The speaker then moved on to discuss some of the attempts that have and are currently being made to close the achievement gap. However, he felt they were not successful. He then offered his solution, one he felt is more useful and valuable than what is typically being done. He argued for an Afro-centric curriculum. By doing this it will allow these students to know about their ancestors, motivate and empower them; they will be able to internalize what they are learning, and help them to know their role in society today (Kafele).

After hearing this presentation I became interested in the notion of an Afro-centric curriculum and whether or not it had any merit. One of the books the speaker mentioned was *The Miseducation of the Negro* by Carter G. Woodson. Dr. Woodson argued the same point in this book written in the 1930's, which is still a best seller today. Dr. Woodson believed in order to uplift African Americans they need education and that education is in the hands of those who have mistreated the race, causing them to be "miseducated". (Woodson, pg22) Woodson didn't want African-Americans to try to imitate others but focus on what their own has been successful in the past and build on that on use it to encourage others to do the same.

Tools

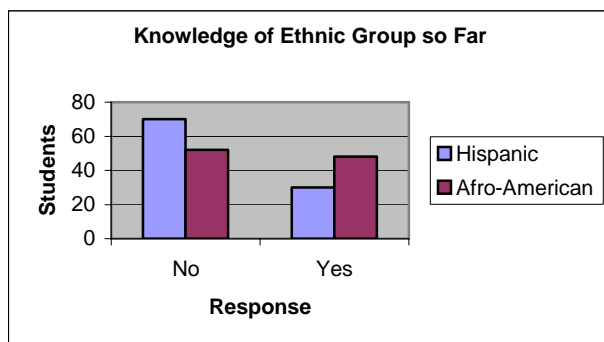
I decided to use three tools to complete research at my school regarding an Afro-centric curriculum: survey, students work and students grades. The survey was given to African-American and Hispanic 6th and 8th graders at my school. The survey asked about the student's educational background and their interests in and out of school. I thought it would be interesting to see if the students felt like their schooling so far has provided them with information about their ethnicity. If the students answer no ask if they felt like there is a need for more or if they would even be interested in learning more about their ethnicity. Through the survey I was also interested in finding out if the students during their free time out of school liked to do activities focusing on their ethnicity. Usually students do activities outside of school that are intrinsically motivating so most likely if they do it outside of school they are demonstrating some interest in the topic. This information is important to the research to first establish the students are interested in this

type of material and then later on we can analyze how they did, but if the students aren't interested in the first place, you can't expect achievement to rise. The next tool I used was the student's work. The 8th grade students were given a choice on three projects to complete; I wanted to see if the students chose the projects related to their ethnic group and if they did better on those projects compared to other projects. The first project was a book project. To go along with the different units the curriculum covers in my American History class they have a choice of five nonfiction books to read. The unit on colonial life had two books that pertained to African Americans in the colonies. The first choice was a book on slavery and it followed a young girl trying to find her family after being separated. The second book was about the formation of the black community in Philadelphia. The other three books dealt with disease in the colonies. I wanted to see which books students would choose and why they choose the books they did. To determine this I gave a second survey. The second project came with our unit on the Constitution. The students had to pick a project that dealt with the Constitution. Their first choice was to take a look at some historic Supreme Court cases of the past. They had a choice of topics for the cases, cases that dealt with education, cases that dealt with minorities or another topic of their choice. The students could also choose to do a project on the three branches of government or the Amendments. Here again I wanted to see how many of my students chose to do Supreme Court cases dealing with minorities. The third project came after our unit on the American Revolutionary war. To conclude the unit students did a research project where they had to pick a topic, either woman's role during the war, African Americans role during the war or the types of Weapons used during the war? I wanted to give the students choice for all three projects to see if they

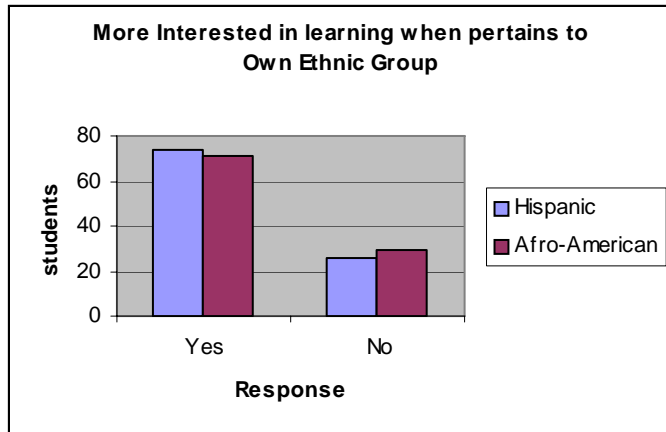
were interested in the topics in first place. The last tool I used was the student's grades; I wanted to see for the students who did chose topics dealing with their ethnic group were their grades different then on other projects. This is the main area we I hope to see the improvement, it is nice that the students may say they are interested in certain topics and then even chose that topic to work on but in the end are they actually achieving more. Are the students receiving higher grades and learning more when they are focusing on information pertaining to their ethnic group. Grades don't always determine if a person is learning but it can show the amount of effort a person is putting in which can be related to achievement.

Data

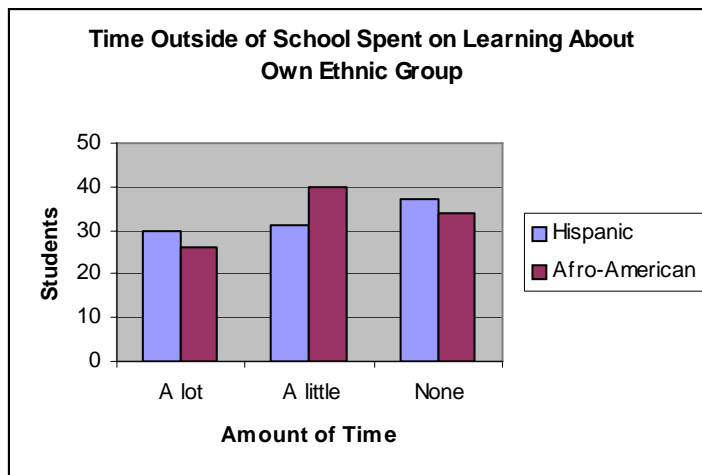
The data from the first tool, surveys, I broke down between Hispanic and African American students to see if there was a difference in responses between the two groups. The first question on whether they feel their education has provided them with knowledge about their own ethnic group so far, 70 percent of the Hispanic students said no and 52 percent of the African American students said no.



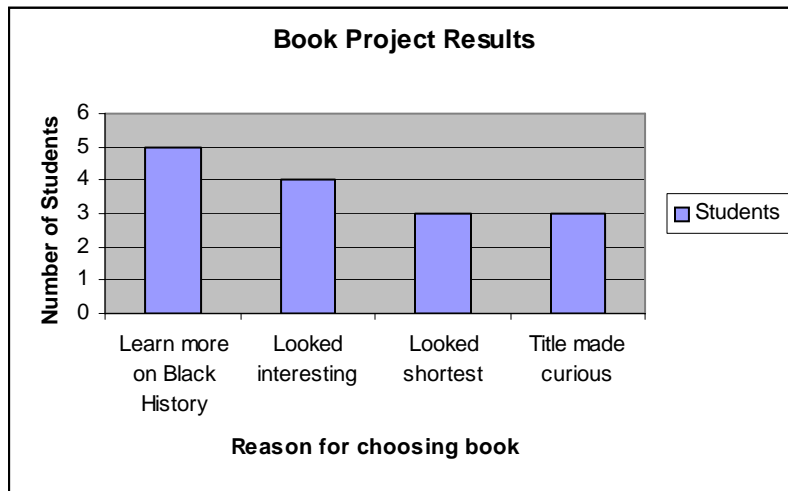
When asked if they find themselves more interested in what they learn when it pertains to their own ethnic group or culture, 74 percent of the Hispanic kids said yes and 71 percent of the African American students said yes.



When it came to how much time outside of school do they spend learning about their ethnic group, 30 percent of the Hispanic students said a lot, 31 percent said a little and 37 percent said none. When the African American students were asked the same question, 26 percent said a lot, 40 percent said a little and 34 percent said none at all.



On the book project 56 percent of the minority students chose the book on slavery; however, they didn't all chose the book for academic reasons. Five students said they chose the book to learn more on Black History, four students chose the book because it looked interesting. The other six students chose the book for other reasons, three saying because it was the shortest and three because the title made them curious. The other 12 minority students chose books that dealt with disease in the colonies and they picked those books for similar reasons: either they thought that booked looked shorter or they were interested in diseases.



Out of those 15 students who did choose to read the book on slavery, 5 scored better on that book project compared to two other separate reading projects that they had to complete during the year. Two students ended up scoring lower and the rest stayed about equal. None of the students chose the second book dealing with the formation of the black community in Philadelphia, when asked all groups of students said the book looked to big to read.

The next class assignment, dealing with the Constitution, only 14 percent of my minority students chose to look at Supreme Court cases of the past that dealt with minorities. When questioned as to why they chose the topic that they did, the majority of the students chose topics on what they felt would be the easiest choice to complete. Out of that 14 percent, 30 percent of them did better on that project than on other projects where they weren't given a choice.

The third and final project on the Revolutionary War, only 3 students chose to research African American roles during the Revolutionary War. Two of those students stated they chose the topic because it was interesting; one student chose the topic because they thought it would be easy. Two of those students did better on that project than on previous project and one student never turned one in. One interesting point is almost 90 percent of the minority females in my class chose to do the Women of the Revolutionary War. One student made an interesting comment on why she picked women over slavery, she responded by saying I already know enough about slaves.

Analysis

After analyzing the data from the surveys over half of the African American and Hispanic students feel their education has not provided them with knowledge of their own ethnic group. The Hispanics had a greater number who felt that way than the African American students. Both groups overwhelmingly claim to have more interest in what they are doing when what they are learning pertains to their own ethnic group. Both groups of students expressed their want for this type of education and their interest in this type of education; however, the data from work done in the classroom seems to

contradict this interest. It appears at the Eighth grade level the majority of the students are more concerned about which project is the easiest rather than what the topic is about. When asked why students chose the book they did to read a number of students said it looked the easiest or shortest. What may be causing that is the students are performance driven instead of learning driven. What that means is the majority of the students may be more concerned about just getting a passing grade instead of learning the material. If they just want to get a passing grade they mostly likely will chose the easiest assignment. The majority of the students say yes we are interested but when it comes down to actually doing the work they want to know what they can finish the fastest with the least amount of effort. In the case of the students who did choose the option related to minorities there wasn't an overwhelming increase in the student achievement. The majority of the students stayed consist with how they usually perform. However, one interesting note when analyzing the students who stayed the same, the majority of these students were already high achieving students and their achievement stayed high.

Policy Recommendations

I believe more research needs to be conducted in this area. I feel the question of would the results differ in higher grades should also be explored. Is this just an age issue where eighth graders just want the easiest work possible and high school or college student's results could differ? If this is the case what causes that, is it the older we get the more we try to group ourselves by similar characteristics or features? Or does our learning change, as we get older, do we change from a performance base approach to a learning based approach, as we get older. Another area to be explored on this topic is why are Asian students able to achieve now, even though they don't receive an ethno-

centric curriculum? Why is it that Hispanic and African American students would need an ethnocentric curriculum to achieve but the majority of the Asian students don't?

There is also a need for more studies to be done on the Achievement gap is it a cultural problem? Does the gap exist because some students don't value education and if so why don't they value education? Should the emphasis be placed on changing cultural views on education instead of what is actually being taught.

My recommendation for dealing with Middle School level kids is to make sure educators acknowledge different ethnic groups and encourage interest as much as one can and by giving the students choice. I believe students should have the option to learn more about their own ethnic group as well as learn about other ethnic groups. If students have the ability to choose it is more likely it will be of interest to him/her and more likely it will be a better product.

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