

Designing Effective Library Services for African American Youth

Article

President Obama signed the *White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for African Americans* on July 26, 2012. This executive order recognizes that many “African Americans lack equal access to highly effective teachers and principals, safe schools, and challenging college preparatory classes, and disproportionately experience school discipline and referrals to special education” (Obama 2012). It challenges the education community to improve the educational achievement and life outcomes of African American youth through the implementation of rigorous academic curriculum and the provision of equitable and responsive support services.

THE SCHOOL LIBRARY ROLE

School libraries can play an instrumental role in achieving the goals outlined in President Obama’s executive order. Preparing students for college, a career, and a lifetime of learning are fundamental responsibilities of the school library community. A report, funded by the Institute of Museum and Library Services and distributed by the School of Information & Library Science at the University of North Carolina, argues that designing effective library programs and services for African American youth requires five elements:

- School administrators who provide the necessary infrastructure for developing and delivering library services
- Culturally competent and caring school librarians who interact with African American youth as individuals, set high expectations for them, and help them develop their sense of agency
- Library programs that connect literacy to the real world and enable African American youth to act in their own communities
- Library resources that nurture the resolve of African American youth
- Library spaces that are welcoming places for African American youth and enable them to increase and express their literacy (Hughes-Hassell et al. 2012). A brief description of each element is provided below.

SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS

As Jonathan Kozol indicated in the School Library (blog) and others also pointed out, many African American youth live in communities where school libraries are underfunded, collections are minimal, and full-time librarians are scarce (Celano and Neuman n.d.; Edwards et al. 2010). Kozol further notes in a comment posted to the School Library Journal (blog) in August 2012, “Few forms of theft are quite as damaging... as the denial of a well-endowed school library.”

Effective school administrators make meeting the needs of African American youth a priority. They provide adequate and equitable funding and employ dedicated school librarians who know how to develop, implement, and evaluate research-based programs and services aimed at meeting the needs of African American youth. They support ongoing professional development in areas such as best practice in advancing the literacy of African American youth, cultural competence, social justice, collaboration, and evidence-based practice.

Effective school administrators also examine library policies to ensure that they are responsive to the lived experiences of African American youth. Many of the schools where African American youth attend

...have become places where everybody is surveillanced, where they are frisked before they walk onto campus... They have become places where youth are expected to sit still and be quiet despite the fact that moving, [is a] natural part of being an eight-year-old or ten-year old boy” (Hughes-Hassell et al. 2012, 12).

Effective administrators know this kind of atmosphere is unwelcoming and that it inhibits literacy development. They support library policies that respect the needs of African American youth and allow them to feel included and connected to the library and its staff.

SCHOOL LIBRARIANS

In order to provide responsive library services to African American youth, effective school librarians:

- Move beyond the racial and socioeconomic biases that pervade the popular culture and view African American youth as individuals, not members of a stereotyped group;

- Reject the deficit-oriented lens that represents the race, culture, language, and other characteristics of African American youth as limitations; and
- Focus on understanding the lived experiences of African American youth, both inside and outside of school.

Effective school librarians recognize that they cannot be half-hearted in their efforts to close the education gap for African American youth. They know they must be committed to working with these young people, to developing relationships with them, and to advocating for equitable educational opportunities. Their work is characterized by cultural competency, caring, commitment, and affirmation. They hold themselves and their libraries accountable; engage in ongoing evaluation of resources, services, and programs; and use data both to develop responsive services and to advocate for equitable resources.

LIBRARY PROGRAMMING

Much current literacy education focuses on teaching isolated skills that seem only to apply in reading class. Effective library programs move beyond this to enable African American youth to see the value of literacy skills in the real world. Such programs give young people the tools they need so that they can act in their own lives and communities to effect positive change. To do this, effective library programs honor and promote the voices of African American youth; give them tools for self-expression; and introduce them to multiple outlets for such expression, including blogging, video and music production, and participating in spoken word performances. By honoring and promoting their voices, library programs help African American youth develop a sense of agency and empower them to enact positive change in their lives and in their communities.

Effective programming is also collaborative. It provides young people with opportunities to provide input regarding library programs, resources, policies, and space, and to learn from each other. It includes setting high expectations and communicating the expectation that they will be successful. Ernest Morrell explains, “If you do not expect success, they will not be motivated. Expect excellence, and excellence is what you will receive in return” (Hughes-Hassell et al. 2012, 16).

Finally, effective literacy programming focuses on families. Parent/caregiver involvement is crucial and has been shown to be directly related to African American youth’s success in school (Irvine 1990). While some parents/caregivers are aware of how to support literacy development, others are not. This is particularly true for parents who struggle with their own literacy or who have had negative experiences with schools. Intergenerational programs such as father/son or mother/son book clubs are especially beneficial and help to build textual lineages and providing a bridge between the home and the library.

LIBRARY RESOURCES

Effective library collections include “mirror” and “window” resources (Gangi 2008). Mirror resources allow African American youth to see themselves reflected in meaningful, relevant ways and give them the opportunity to explore different aspects of their identities. The resources reflect the variety of individual experiences, interests, and personalities inherent in a group of people rather than focusing on narrow, stereotypical representations. Window resources allow African American youth to share in experiences beyond those in their everyday lives. Such resources provide them with access to ideas and situations beyond their own experience, allow them to identify and pursue their interests, motivate them to read and learn, and help them define their place in the world (Edwards et al. 2010).

Effective library resources include enabling texts—texts that are developmentally appropriate to both the reading level and the physical and social developmental level of African American youth. Alfred Tatum describes enabling texts as writings that: promote a healthy psyche, reflect an awareness of the real world, focus on the collective struggle of African Americans, and serve as a road map for being, doing, thinking, and acting (2009, 76). Tatum argues that enabling texts must be given to African American youth at every opportunity and must be mediated by a teacher, parent, librarian, or other trusted adult.

Technology for consuming and producing information is also a central component of an effective library for African American youth. Two African American teens explain,

- There should be technology for everyone. Touch screen computers and televisions, iPads, iPods, Nooks, Kindles, cameras, and Wi-Fi.
- There should be iPads with games on them and TVs with video games, netbooks, and tablets (Hughes-Hassell et al. 2012, 15).

LIBRARY SPACES

Currently, many African American youth see libraries as hostile and unwelcoming spaces. They “feel like outsiders in library spaces and deem the . . . library as the sole ‘property’ of the librarian” (Kumasi 2012, 36). Effective libraries are places where African American youth feel welcome and included. They are places where they can move about, talk, collaborate, explore, innovate, and socialize. They are places where they see their cultural heritage represented, respected and celebrated in the books on recommended reading lists, showcased in displays and selected for book discussions, in the images on the walls, and in the staff who work in the library (Kumasi 2012).

Effective library spaces extend beyond the four walls of the library to provide both physical and virtual access to resources, services, and programs. Physical library spaces are bright and comfortable, and accommodate activities requiring differing levels of noise from group discussion, to playing video games with friends, to quiet, independent reading. They provide a variety of spaces including reading and study areas, media labs and recording studios, and space for socialization. They support collaboration by including furnishings that are movable and technologies that support interaction.

The virtual library is also welcoming, engaging, and interactive. It provides an opportunity for African American youth not only to access information, but also to cultivate voice and agency. It allows for personalization and customization and contains features such as book lists, access to electronic resources, homework help, fun and games, help with issues related to life, links to community agencies, and resources for parents. Communication with librarians is encouraged and facilitated through social media.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Building a Bridge to Literacy. <http://bridgetolit.web.unc.edu/>; Celano, Donna, and Susan B. Neuman. *How to Close the Digital Divide for Low-Income Children? Fund Public Libraries*. n.d. <http://www-personal.umich.edu/~sbneuman/pdf/LibrariesDigitalDivide-opEd.pdf> (accessed November 25, 2012).; Edwards, Patricia E., Gwendolyn T. McMillon, and Jennifer D. Turner. *Change is Gonna Come: Transforming Literacy Education for African American Students*. Teachers College Press, 2010.; Gangi, Jane M. "The Unbearable Whiteness of Literacy Instruction: Realizing the Implications of the Proficient Reader Research." *MultiCultural Review* 17, no. 2 (2008): 30-35.; Hughes-Hassell, Sandra, Kafi Kumasi, Casey H. Rawson, and Amanda Hitson. *Building a Bridge to Literacy for African American Male Youth: A Call to Action for the Library Community*. The School of Information & Library Science, 2012. <http://bridgetolit.web.unc.edu/files/2012/09/Building-A-Bridge-to-Literacy-for-African-American-Males.pdf> (accessed December 27, 2012).; Irvine, Jacqueline J. *Black Students and School Failure: Policies, Practices, and Prescriptions*. Greenwood Press, 1990.; Kumasi, Kafi D. "Roses in the Concrete: A Critical Race Perspective on Urban Youth and School Libraries." *Knowledge Quest* 40, no. 4 (March/April 2012): 32-37.; Obama, Barack. *White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for African Americans*. Washington, D.C., July 26, 2012. <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/07/26/executive-order-white-house-initiative-educational-excellence-african-am> (accessed December 5, 2012).; School Library Journal (blog). <http://www.slj.com/2012/08/literacy/the-other-america-giving-our-poorest-children-the-same-opportunities-as-our-richest/> (accessed November 25, 2012).; Tatum, Alfred W. *Reading for Their Life: (Re) Building the Textual Lineages of African American Adolescent Males*. Heinemann, 2009.

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