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Using an African Centered Educational Model and Technology to Improve African American Children's Performance in School

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Using an African Centered Educational Model and Technology to Improve African American Children's Performance in School

Abstract

A literature review was performed to understand the ways that African Centered Education can be incorporated into technology integration for the improvement of African American children. With the five components of the Murrell model of African Centered Education, which are identity development process, community integrity practices, practices of inquiry and reappropriation, making meaning practices, and engagement and participation practices, technology integration can become an integral part of improving the education of African American children. Within the model, the focus of building on prior knowledge, reaffirming the positive aspects of African and African American history, and applying knowledge learned to real life situations is discussed often, and is a major component of success. It is concluded that the Murrell model and technology integration could be an asset in a school that educates large numbers of African American children.

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USING AN AFRICAN CENTERED EDUCATIONAL MODEL AND
TECHNOLOGY TO IMPROVE AFRICAN AMERICAN CHILDREN'S
PERFORMANCE IN SCHOOL

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By
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ABSTRACT

A literature review was performed to understand the ways that African Centered Education can be incorporated into technology integration for the improvement of African American children. With the five components of the Murrell model of African Centered Education, which are identity development process, community integrity practices, practices of inquiry and reappropriation, making meaning practices, and engagement and participation practices, technology integration can become an integral part of improving the education of African American children. Within the model, the focus of building on prior knowledge, reaffirming the positive aspects of African and African American history, and applying knowledge learned to real life situations is discussed often, and is a major component of success. It is concluded that the Murrell model and technology integration could be an asset in a school that educates large numbers of African American children.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
<i>Analysis of existing information</i>	2
<i>Importance of problem</i>	3
<i>Research Question</i>	5
METHODOLOGY	5
ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION	6
<i>Effectively Teaching African American Students using the Murrell Model African Centered Education</i>	6
<i>Murrell Model of African Centered Education</i>	8
<i>Identity Development Process</i>	9
<i>Practices of Inquiry and Reappropriation</i>	10
<i>Meaning Making Practices</i>	14
<i>Engagement and Participation Practices</i>	15
<i>Community Integrity Practices</i>	16
<i>How to Integrate Technology into High African American Populated Schools</i>	18
CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS	21
REFERENCES	24

FIGURES

Figure 1. Murrell Model of African Centered Education

8

INTRODUCTION

There is much concern about the declining academic success of African American students. Coupled with this concern is the issue of how to reach this generation of “failing” children and how to motivate them, once they are reached. The question then becomes, in this world of advanced technology, how can technology increase the desire to succeed in the African American community? What will it take for children to go back to their roots and reclaim their heritage? This story is played, and replayed everyday in the media, and in the classroom. On many news channel that is broadcast on cable television, there is a story about African American students, and their failing schools. Anyon (1995) states the structural basis for failure in inner-city schools is political, economic, and cultural, and must be changed before meaningful school improvement projects can be successfully implemented.

For the most part, there is nothing wrong with the academics of these African American students; it comes down to do these children see themselves in the educational environment? Do the students have access to technology, access to the information made available by that technology, and access to educators trained in integrating technology and information into the educational experience? Once the educational process of how African American children are evaluated, then there can be a change to bring about a better end to this story.

As the relentless advances of technology become an integral part of all aspects of daily life, the issues of access and usage become primary concerns for educators, parents, students, and the community as a whole. "Most research on the subject has uncovered what has come to be known as the 'digital divide' or the separation between those who have access to and can effectively use technology and those who do not and cannot" (Pearson, 2002, p. 15). The digital divide has shown up in different forms in the past, such as location of schools, building inadequacies, and segregation. To prevent repeating history, a change has to take place. Technology needs to be in every classroom, and used by all students. "Data documenting the use of technology in our society shows a Digital Divide: African Americans and Hispanics are behind other racial groups in their usage of the Internet, especially at home" (Moore, Laffey, Espinosa, & Lodree 2002 p. 5). In this paper, issues of African Centered Education and how integrating technology into this education, using constructivism, to improve African American children's performance will be discussed.

Why an Analysis of Existing Information is Appropriate

Examining the information that has been researched on the topics of constructivism and African Centered education with technology has not before been incorporated together. If an analysis of each issue is composed and a focus solely on African American children is included, this may help African American children nationwide. Madhabuti (1994) declares, "too many of our children are trapped in urban school systems that have been "programmed" for

failure (p. 1).” It is time to liberate African American students from the hold of educational oppression.

Importance of the Problem

African American children are not fitting into the equation to improve public schooling. Nieto (2004) states institutional racism is still one of the largest problems in school reform. Madhabuti (1994) articulated “we now understand that there is a profound difference between going to school and being educated” (p.5). Many African Americans nationwide have settled for sending their children to mediocre schools expecting them to be educated, but that is not always the case. When parents realize that their children are not learning much, they advocate for reform. School reform does not always have to equate to improved test scores.

Although there have been many years of “school reform,” most schools serving African American students and families still fail to provide them with a high-quality educational experience, as evidenced by reports from some urban school systems of dropout rates of up to 50 percent for the African American students. (Denbo & Beaulieu, 2002 p. xiv).

School reform can direct who children are learning about, what they are learning in class, as well as how they can apply the lessons learned at school to real life situations. Large efforts would not have to take place,

small acknowledgements with consistency throughout the curriculum could make thing happen.

Educational reform movements beginning with *A Nation at Risk* and currently with *No Child Left Behind* have helped uncover the contradictions between our desire to improve the overall quality of public education and our ability to do so for all groups of students (Denbo & Beaulieu, 2002). African American children and the schools they attend are being left out of school reform. The teachers who teach at the schools, as well as the parents of the children at these schools are given the bare minimum, and expected to perform at the same standards as the higher performing schools. Many of the underlying issues at these schools could possibly be eliminated if the curriculum included Afrocentric education, rather than just Eurocentric perspectives on education since African American children are being taught. Effective educational programs for African American students require a great deal more than celebrating Black History Month, having African American role models, or incorporating the historical contributions of people from diverse ethnic, cultural, and language backgrounds into the curriculum. (Denbo & Beaulieu, 2002 p. xv). They require African American students to learn about themselves, their culture, and their history through the books, hands on lessons, and be able to utilize their knowledge in the community. Many lessons taught about Africans or African Americans have a derogatory connotation to them, which enables students to take pride in their history. That negative thinking of teachers can in turn defeat the purpose of

teaching a lesson on African or African American history because children will not want to take ownership in the negative lesson learned. High stakes scores are on the line, and African American children will continue to stay stagnant with progress unless they receive lessons with application and a positive claim on their history and culture.

Research question. How can an African-Centered Educational model be incorporated into a classroom, along with technology, to impact African American childrens' academics?

METHODOLOGY

Sources for this literature review were located at The University of Northern Iowa and University of Nebraska libraries, google.com, the Association for Educational Communications and Technology (AECT), Association for the Advancement of Computing in Education (AACE) and the Independent Black Schools (IBS) websites. Additional websites were found at the Department of Education website and the Preparing Tomorrow's Teachers to Teach Technology (PT³) website. Descriptors that were used when conducting the search were African Centered education, Afrocentrism, constructivism, multiculturalism, digital divide, achievement gap, technology, and African American.

The sources that were used were either books written by authors known in the area of Multicultural Education, African Centered Education, Technology integration, refereed journals, and websites that are supported by governmental agencies or organizations that are supported by the focus area. In the instances

where there were organizations that were sponsoring information, the background resources that those organizations used were cross-referenced.

The procedures for analyzing the sources in this literature review were to use resources that were used in previous courses, authors that have presented at conferences, or have credentials in their specific area. The criteria used for evaluating the information was based on the supported documents, authors, and organizations that supported the area of Educational Technology. Journals that have been issued by the organizations that support teacher education, technology, multiculturalism, and African Centered Education were also used and evaluated.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Effectively Teaching African American Students Using African Centered Education

African centered education is needed in this day and age. There are many years of research supporting that the quality African American's education is not proportionate to European American's education. Pollard & Ajirotutu (2000) announce "The crisis was based both on the general belief that education in the United States was in need of major reform and on the overwhelming evidence that existing school models and programs had failed miserably to educate African American children (p. 15)." The thought of African Centered Education came about during the 1950's and 1960's when the civil rights era and activism were strong. Many African American parents were not satisfied with the

separate but equal laws and took education into their own hands with the establishment of Independent, public and private Black schools. The foundation of the African Centered Education is not to deny children the perspective of the European American's educational system, it is needed in conjunction with the mainstream education to teach African American children about themselves.

Madhabuti (1994) states:

An educated Black person must not only be aware of the core curriculum of his or her schools, but must also have a core of understanding of his/her own peoples' contributions to local, national, and world civilization. When we push for an African Centered education, it is not at the expense or exclusion of an enlightened Western Education; rather it is an important addition to this knowledge base (p. 7).

Including basic lessons during February for Black history month is not enough for African American students to see themselves as a value in the school system. There has to be more integration across the curriculum for African American students. Hale (1982) summarized that "black children therefore need an educational system that recognizes their strengths, their abilities, and their culture and that incorporates them in the learning process (p.4)."

The Murrell model of African Centered Education (Figure 1) is an effective resource that can be used to support the education of African American children. The Murrell model consists of five basic components of the African centered

education. The components are: (a) identity development practices, (b) practices of inquiry and reappropriation, (c) making meaning practices, engagement and participation practices, and (d) community integrity practices. Pollard & Arijotutu (2000) state within the five components, there is an activity setting which is a unit of analysis triangulating teacher practice, learning activity, and student performance (p. 98).

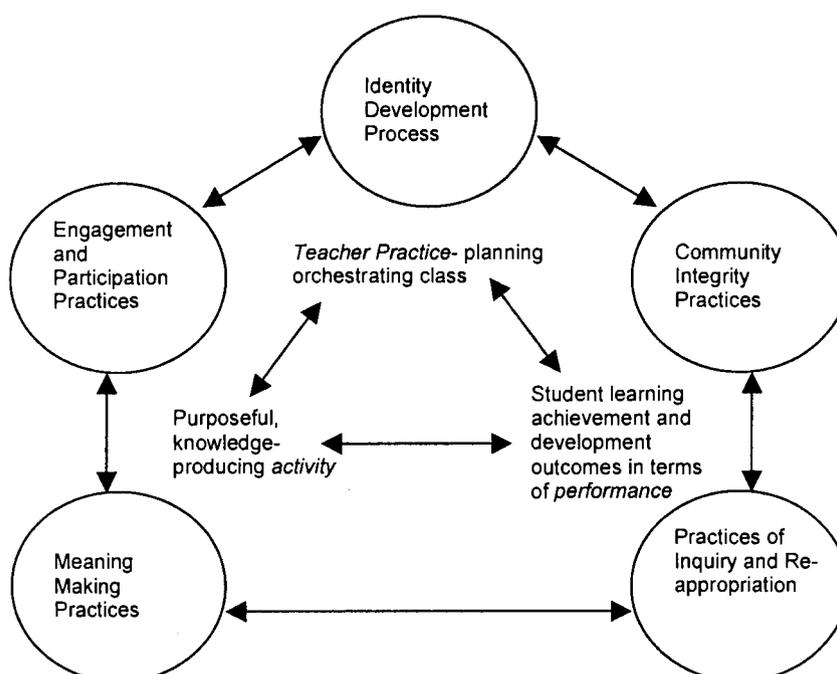


Figure 1. The Murrell Model of African Centered Education

Pollard, D. & Ajirotutu, C. (2000). *African Centered Schooling in Theory and Practice*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group.

Under this model, the five components each activate the African American student's thirst for learning since the focus is now on them. There are many more instances of the children seeing themselves in the schooling process. The

Murrell model can accomplish great things with African American children. The inclusion of technology integration and constructivist based learning can enhance the Murrell model to ensure even greater levels of achievement in African American children.

Identity Development Practices

The first component of the Murrell model is the identity development practice. This component supports the identity of African American children. The practices should be used across the curriculum, not just in history and social studies.

Culture has an enormous role in the behaviors and understandings of students. "Although acknowledged as an important aspect of communication, culture is a variable in the design and implementation of technology" (Mazyck, 2002 p. 35). Strategies are those that meet the student's individual learning needs. Hence, they are child-centered and build on the child's strengths. "Culturally responsive teaching connects learning to the child's real-life experiences and is compatible with the cultural background of learners and their community" (Chisolm, 1998 p. 251). For the most part, research shows that different races have different learning styles. If the teachers who are teaching these children do not know about learning styles, and only teach to one learning style, the child is already at a disadvantage. "Given that cultural relevance relates instruction to the learners' knowledge, experiences, and interests, the learner develops a sense of ownership of the instructional content and activity"

(Chisolm, 1998 p. 254). Getting to know children in the classroom on a cultural level will benefit all that are involved.

Practices of Inquiry and Reappropriation

The second component of the Murrell model is practices of inquiry and reappropriation. Inquiry for the teachers is just as important and appropriate for them as it is for the students. Before instruction can begin, teachers need to have the same understanding, and some of the mentalities that teachers have about African American students need to be addressed. Deficit learning is a major handicap in schools around the nation. Getting out of the mindset that because students are African American, they are automatically deficient educationally, needs to be eliminated. Jackson (2001) discussed that most frequently, research and observations conclude that the public schooling of African American children systematically requires them to forfeit their cultural ties, demeans their self esteem, and has them relinquish their diverse forms of expressions. Deculturation has no place in the classroom. Embracing the differences of African American children and applying it into a classroom would be more acceptable, in comparison to trying to change them into what the teachers want them to be. Each child is different, and they have different things to bring to the classroom environment.

To effectively teach African American students, there are issues that students have to deal with before they even begin the first lesson of the day. Children bring to the classroom complex combinations of circumstances and

personal characteristics that are the starting point for learning each day (Knapp, 1995). A child's culture has to be validated for him/her to feel apart of the learning process.

Schools that house poor and African American students face challenges such as insufficient funding, under trained teachers, students with low academic performance, and outdated curriculum materials. If students are not growing up in a community where education is not always valued, applying the skills learned in the classroom to demonstrate to the community is treasured. Given these factors, there are also teachers who feel that African American, Latino and poor children come from deprived home environments and that they are not academically as smart as other students. "These deficit perceptions lead to the miseducation of these children" (Young, 2002 p. 46). This stems from schools teaching a Eurocentric point of view beginning from the 1600's. Madhabuti (1994) African Americans have always had a negative stigma attached to them, and due to stereotypes and teachers not taking the time to get to know students, the stigma becomes permanent and progresses each year that a teacher teaches. Teachers are stunting the mental growth and abilities of these children due to ignorance of culture. How can we prevent this so all children can succeed?

The teacher's perception of the student's behavior can influence the academic rating of students and mask the true academic performance with behavior problems. Because the child may not conform to normed classroom

behavior, does not mean that he/she cannot learn. Teachers have to get to the root of the behavior and understand why the behavior is there and obstructing achievement. The more teachers acknowledge, demonstrate respect for, and build on the skills, knowledge, language and behavior patterns that students bring to school, the more likely students will be to become engaged in academic learning and benefit from it (Knapp, 1995).

Inquiry practice not only includes learning about the children that will be taught, but also the information that will be taught. Technology can take a lead in educational settings when teachers know how to use technology. Inquiry practices include technology training for teachers. Although teachers are being trained in technology, there needs to be an ongoing process of training because many teachers are not using it effectively. It seems that many of the teachers view the computer as a reward for good behavior rather than as integral tool to support learning. The punishment and reward structure currently in place in many classrooms inappropriately keeps students from participating in active learning on the computer. Withholding educational computer privileges is comparable to withholding the use of a pencil to complete an assignment. A possible way to punish inappropriate behavior is to restrict the use of games or of recreational Internet use but not to take away instructional activities that can be used on the computer. Taking away opportunities for students to learn on the computer is not a behavior that teachers should participate in often. The goal is to get students comfortable around the computer, not to punish them with the

computer. Generating a conducive learning environment is key. The classroom is a home away from home, therefore the environment should be nourishing:

The classroom teacher can begin by creating a culturally responsive learning environment that supports and validates the child and their community. Second, educate students with the language used in the technology industry. A third tool is to provide contexts where students can comfortably interact with the technology. Fourth, minority students need continued opportunities to engage technology and continuous learning opportunities with technology. Show minority students how they can be producers of technology. Without these tools minority students run the risk of total exclusion from the technological revolution (Young, 2002).

With the inclusion of these steps, creating a culturally competent classroom can happen. The culture of the classroom can welcome ethnicities as well the computer culture. Reconceptualizing how the classroom will serve the students that are in the classroom, how to teach specific students, and use technology to assist in teaching and learning can assist in creating a learning environment. Once the classroom is welcoming, more instruction can take place, such as making meaning for students and continued inquiry practice for teachers.

Meaning Making Practices

Making meanings of information learned in a lesson with practical applications is key to any child's success. The first step in bridging the gap is to admit that technology has not benefited everyone equally, and begin to work on ways to level the playing field. "One possible solution is to expose students to innovative projects, which allow them to expand their views on how computers fit into their lives now and in the future" (Pearson, 2002 p. 19).

The best way to provide quality learning is to have teachers who understand teaching, learning, and technology and how they coincide in the learning process. "The most professionally engaged teachers- teachers who are leaders in their communities- are exploiting computers in a constructivist manner" (Solomon, Allen, & Resta, 2003 p. xxiii). Healy (1998) describes constructivism as "the "learner centered" approach, in which the teacher acts as more of a "coach" and students are expected to ask questions and actively pursue learning (p. 25)." Constructivism is a student-based theory of learning where "students are becoming active learners, gathering and analyzing data" (Solomon, et al. 2003 p. xxiii). Examples of constructivism in the classroom would be "students working collaboratively to research a topic and create learning materials. . . . exploring ideas together and explain and defend their reasoning" (Solomon, et al. 2003 p. xxiii). Students then must understand the topic at a much deeper level compared to reading a textbook passage about a given subject. With the

marriage of constructivism, African Centered Education, and technology, students can make meanings of what they are learning.

Constructivism strongly supports application of what students learn. As they become an expert on a certain subject, they will learn it in their own way, and in return apply either the knowledge or the process of acquiring the knowledge to their lives. "The long-term result is that students who are exposed to such challenging learning experiences are better prepared for our information-based world" (Solomon et al. 2003 p. xxi). Waxman (1992) articulated, "if the learner does not have the knowledge necessary to make such contributions, or if the teacher and student do not share the necessary knowledge, comprehension and learning will be impaired" (p. 94). With African American students, teachers must connect their pedagogy to something that the students can relate to within their world. It is important to show African American students that their language, ethnic identity, communities, and history is valued; that equates to progress within itself.

Engagement and Participation Practices

Although African American children may be exposed to computers on a regular basis in some schools, the types of activities students are engaged in often times deal only with lower-level thinking skills. Students use computers for drill and practice and practicing standardized tests. "Economically disadvantaged students, who often use the computer for remediation and basic skills, learn to do what the computer tells them, while more affluent students, who

learn programming and tool applications, learn to tell the computer what to do” (Chisholm, 1998 p. 249). Lower level thinking skills stifle other thought processes and ideas African American students have to apply to their lives. How can we effectively teach these students to be more active in their learning process? A balance of equality, equity, and quality has to occur.

Community Integrity Practices

African heritage is well known in the area of involved community. From the communal perspective, preparing teachers to teach African American children is vital and often lacking in teacher education programs. Inadequate teacher professional development is clearly a barrier to advancement of technological change. Preservice teachers are not learning how to educate students of color in most schools. Healy (1998 p. 86) stated “education is the most critical component and also one of the most neglected.” Bolt and Crawford (2000 p. 28) expressed “it’s access to trained teachers that makes the most difference in the lives of kids.” Unless new teachers enter the classroom ready to teach with technology, education will never catch up. If teacher education programs do not address the issue head on, we will lose the opportunity to get it right with a whole generation of new teachers and the students they teach (Solomon, et al. 2003). A conclusion can be made that teacher education programs are doing an unsatisfactory job of educating preservice teachers about how to teach African American children, or any child of color.

Once new and effective trends arrive, teachers should be trained in them and continue training until mastery has occurred. Workshops should include remediation and enrichment for teachers, the same way that a teacher would provide remediation and enrichment for their student. "Teacher education and professional development programs are not addressing the realities found in today's classrooms...one shot workshops...carry little relevance to teachers' work in the classroom" (Bolt & Crawford 2002 p. 29). A key phrase used in workshops is "use it or lose it," which means if the workshop information is not used after it is learned, participants will lose the information learned. Teachers are expected to learn a component of technology in one session and implement in their classroom, which is not realistic. Garland and Wotton (2001 p. 117) suggest that "teachers need to be trained in the most effective uses of new technologies." The only way to do it is to get trainers in the training sessions that know about the technology that is used in classrooms.

To be a participant in the 21st century of technology, African American students must have the tools to enable them to be consumers and producers of technology. If teachers do not have the skills to inform the students of what technology is, then who will do it? Teachers are one of the main sources of information for children. Technology is here to stay in the world of education, so teachers need to be that catalyst to get children interested in and using technology.

Moore et al. (2002) addresses improvements that tie into the Murrell model:

Teachers need to receive professional development training that addresses the following: (a) cultural and social needs of the diverse student population, (b) the specific concerns of students and families in poverty, and (c) successful strategies for incorporating teaching styles that match the high-context learning style of the majority of the students (p. 6).

Once teachers have created classrooms that are warm and welcoming, students can understand that they are respected in their classroom, and what they do and learn makes a difference to the teacher that is instructing them.

Teachers of today and tomorrow no longer find curriculum in a textbook or classroom activities manual (Healy, 1998). Teachers are looking on the Internet, or working with preservice teachers who are learning the most cutting-edge teaching strategies. Professional development should always be ongoing, and programs should be set up to assist them in using technology as a learning tool. Forming partnerships with school districts and colleges could be a simple way to keep the teachers practicing the technology they are learning.

How to Integrate Technology into High African American Populated Schools

The Educational Testing Service found that the more students a school has belonging to a minority or low socioeconomic group, the higher the ratio of students to computers, peaking 32 to 1. This is

more than 7 times the recommended ratio implying that poor minority students lacking access to computers at home are also not being given equitable access at school (Pearson, 2002).

With statistics like these, there are changes that need to be made with some urgency. There are many people in the university community as well as in the civic community that could assist in diminishing sad ratios that take place in many school districts.

Partnerships with schools, university professors, and preservice and inservice teachers would benefit all who participated. Gimbert & Zembal-Saul (2002) announce that "school-university partnerships foster contexts in which school wide and classroom based environments offer prospective teachers meaningful opportunities to develop abilities and understandings to effectively use instructional technology" (p.2). While college students are learning the theory of constructivist based teaching and African Centered Education or multiculturalism, they should be learning technology components, and how the two can be used in conjunction with each other. There is little in the formal training and early years of a teacher's career that nurtures the use of the newer forms of technology (Cuban, 1982). This is not true for every preservice teacher program in the United States, but it is happening. As preservice students are matriculating through their college, this should be a prime opportunity for inservice teachers and preservice teachers to develop a teaching-learning relationship.

“Experienced colleagues may help informally and, in doing so, continually expose newcomers to the norms and expectations of the school and what it takes to survive” (Cuban, 1982 p. 60). If there is a formal relationship between students and teachers, then some of the issues could be eliminated. In low performing schools that have been previously discussed, students need to experience the application of what they have learned in the classroom. Students learning with an African Centered and constructivist-based focus, with technology as a tool, would assist the students in retaining and applying information. Teachers with years of experience could share with the preservice teachers their knowledge, and in return, the preservice teachers could also assist the older teachers in the technology aspect of teaching. Attempts to infuse technology into teacher preparation shift from teaching about technology to teaching with technology, professional development can serve as powerful contexts for facilitating teacher learning (Gimbert & Zembal-Saul, 2002 p. 9). Experienced teachers offer advice to non-experienced teachers on what is effective and what is not. With the information non-experienced teachers have synthesized, they would be that much more closer to becoming a successful teacher that teaches with technology.

Cuban (1982) declares “the experienced teacher chooses a strategy that fits the demands of a particular situation, tailoring instructional tactics to match the situation’s inevitable uniqueness” (p.93). While teachers are learning how to use each student’s culture as an asset, rather than a hindrance, their classroom

could be more efficient. All of this learning is taking place in staff development workshops, as well as individualized meetings with their preservice, coordinating, and supervising teacher. "It is difficult, or almost impossible, to integrate the use of the computers into the curriculum because too many teachers have limited strategies for delivering instruction and managing frequent behavior problems" (Moore, et al. 2002 p. 7). Here is a time to evaluate teacher education programs as well as district staff development programs. With a program that would combine the learning styles learned and computer knowledge of the preservice teacher and the experience (with culture, behavior, curriculum, and other areas) of an inservice teacher, there could be great strides made to diminish the digital divide.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Research and development is needed from the learning technology community that directly addresses the needs of African American children and their communities. Incorporating a model such as the Murrell model would assist African American children worldwide in creating more conducive learning environments. Included in the model are the five major areas of identity development process, engagement and participation practices, meaning making practices, community integrity practices, and practices of inquiry and reappropriation. Within the model, certain areas of improvement can be addressed:

Schools need improved software, better teaching methods, new models of classroom management that integrate technology, affordable new technology and programs that support low income parents participation in their children's education, and systematic research to build new knowledge of how technology can best serve at-risk children and the teachers who teach them (Moore, 2002 p. 9).

The improvements can be catalysts for the continuation of improved educational experience for children. Once the level of education has improved, it can expand to other areas of the Murrell model.

Another area of improvement that is included in the model is community involvement. Involving all stakeholders in the educational process of children is critical. Teachers envision an urban learning community where technology opens the schoolhouse door so that parents are informed and involved with their child's academic development (Moore, 2002). There are numerous steps that can be taken to effectively integrate technology. Awareness of students' culture and making lessons applicable to the student's life, include all stakeholders (teachers, parents, community members, business members, and students), and more educational development for the teachers would greatly improve the technology integration in low performing schools and indeed minimize the digital divide.

Computers give people access to more information than at any other time in our history. A large part of the population, however, is being left behind. No matter how data is viewed, African American students are at a disadvantage concerning access and application to new technologies. A tool is only as good as the user's ability to use it to the benefit of all students and leave no student behind. Darling-Hammond (2001) states so eloquently in regards to educating African American children:

“The bottom like question for students, especially students of color, is whether investments in better teaching, curriculum, and schooling will follow the press for new standards, or whether standards built upon a foundation of continued inequality in education will simply certify student failure with greater certainty and reduce access to future education and employment (p. 264).”

All students can learn. Because of the schools that African American students are attending are considered to be low performing, they are being forgotten. Time, money, and person power would be the largest restraints to make these changes evolve. Using the Murrell model with the incorporation of programs such as the inservice and preservice teacher partnerships, technology training, and how to teach in culturally competent classroom, a major reform could take place- school by school. When society expects more out of these children, then they will see results. The relationship of technology in education and African Centered Educational models is almost non-existent. It is up to the next

generation of educators to make this a reality so this chapter of the story can be closed.

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