

GETTING IT RIGHT: BUILDING A BRIDGE TO LITERACY FOR ADOLESCENT AFRICAN-AMERICAN MALES

(Hughes-Hassell, Sandra & Kumasi, Kafi & Rawson, Casey & Hitson, Amanda. (2012). Building a Bridge to Literacy for African American Male Youth: A Call to Action for the Library Community. School Library Monthly, 2010)

One of the teaching for learning guidelines from *Empowering Learners* is the promotion of reading as a "foundational skill for learning, personal growth, and enjoyment" (AASL 2009, 21-23). While school librarians have actively embraced this role, many of the reading texts written for teachers do not specifically outline a role for the school librarian. Rather than waiting for others to define this role, I challenge my students in the Information and Library Science program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill to identify and take personal steps to move the literacy process forward in their schools and districts. To prepare them for this role, I have developed an assignment that requires them to create an appendix for school librarians for the literacy text *Reading for Their Life: (Re)building the Textual Lineages of African American Adolescent Males* by Alfred W Tatum (2009). In the appendix they must:

- Discuss the recurring themes and key messages found in the text,
- Identify the key questions the text raises for school librarians, and
- Specify strategies that school librarians can use to promote and support reading.

"Getting It Right: Building a Bridge to Literacy for Adolescent African-American Males" is the result of this assignment. I believe it demonstrates the power of school librarians to be proactive, to play a central role in literacy instruction, and to transform school library media programs to ensure that all children succeed.

—Sandra Hughes Hassell, Ph.D. associate professor
for the School of Information and Library Science

at The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, NC

THE IMPORTANCE OF LITERACY

Literacy is not only a matter of performing well in school or acing a standardized test. According to researcher and author Alfred W. Tatum, literacy can define a person's path through life. This is particularly true for African American adolescent males (grades 6-12) for whom "underexposure to texts... contributes to a life in which [they] experience greater economic, judicial, and social strife and disappointment" (Tatum 2009, xii). For this population especially, failure to become literate too often leads to a rapid downward spiral of poverty, incarceration, and drug abuse. National data show just how dire this situation is: according to 2009 NAEP data, only 14% of African American 8th graders reached proficiency on national reading tests. Circumstances for these students do not improve in high school; studies reveal that fewer than half of African American males receive their high school diplomas (National Summary: Diplomas Count 2008). Nor is the outlook brighter beyond the classroom:

- African Americans between the ages of 15 and 24 are roughly eight times more likely to be the victim of homicide than whites in the same age group (Health, United States 2009);
- The unemployment rate for African American males is nearly twice that of white males (The Employment Situation 2010); and
- African American men comprise over 40% of the prison population in the United States, despite making up only 14% of the national population (Prison Inmates at Midyear 2009).

"Though unaware of these statistics," Tatum states, "[African American boys] are living them" (2009, 6). But numbers like these need not signal a death knell for these students; rather, they should serve as a wake-up call for educators. Tatum, in the book *Reading for Their Life*, outlines a new paradigm in literacy instruction for African American adolescent males—one that places meaningful, powerful texts at its center. By focusing on such texts, educators help students construct a textual lineage—a collection of written works "that are instrumental in one's human development" (Tatum 2009, xiv).

STOP THE CYCLE OF FAILURE

Tatum puts forth an action plan for educators to stop the cycle of failure among African American males; the appendix extends those ideas and suggests specific strategies that school librarians can implement to improve literacy instruction within their schools. The appendix, which can be found online, contains four parts

(<http://sites.google.com/site/rftlappendix>):

- "Recurring Themes and Key Messages" providing school librarians with a general overview of Tatum's book.
- "Key Questions for School Librarians" listing essential questions for school librarians as they set out to implement the strategies suggested in *Reading for Their Life*.
- "Specific Strategies to Promote and Support Reading" detailing suggestions for putting Tatum's ideas into practice.
- A "Pathfinder" directing school librarians to additional resources related to the themes and issues presented in Tatum's book.

SPECIFIC STRATEGIES TO PROMOTE AND SUPPORT READING

The following strategies, inspired by *Reading for Their Life*, are designed specifically for school librarians as they work with students in grades 6-12 and their teachers. They fall into three main categories: addressing underlying issues, choosing and using specific texts, and teaching techniques. An extended list of strategies can be found on the appendix Web site.

ADDRESSING UNDERLYING ISSUES

Merely introducing struggling African American male readers to texts about and by African Americans isn't enough. It is important to address underlying issues that stand in the way of their learning. School librarians must:

- View the academic success of these males as a possibility. Expect it of them. Make sure they know YOU think they can do it. Don't "dumb down" their texts; instead, scaffold the introduction of relevant texts with discussions and creative workshops so that the literacy process is not so overwhelming that it becomes negative.
- Be aware of and reconcile personal perceptions of, misconceptions of, and differences from African American males. Confront and contradict stereotypes in yourself, others, and in the students themselves.
- Develop "literacy collaboratives" in which small groups of students work together to understand difficult texts, discuss provocative or meaningful passages, and write texts of their own. This emphasizes literacy as a collaborative act providing for their complete emotional/social development as well as their educational development.
- Allow the students to select materials that interest them and group themselves according to those interests.

- Provide professional development for teachers and administrators about the academic needs of African American males.

SPECIFIC TEXTS

It is essential to select texts consciously and purposefully. The haphazard choosing of books that only have surface-level connections to students can thwart these efforts.

- Choose texts that are available in the school library and used in the classroom to enable, that is, they should act as guides for African American males. Enabling texts include those that:
 - Teach students to be, do, think, and act, e.g., *My Grandfather's Son: A Memoir* by Clarence Thomas;
 - Show students who they are, where they come from, and who they want to be (a sense of identity), e.g., *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* by Frederick Douglass; and
 - Contain elements or characters that students can identify with and relate to, e.g., *Handbook for Boys* by Walter Dean Myers
(see <http://sites.google.com/site/rftlappendix/pathfinder/enablingtexts> for an annotation of each of these titles).
- Develop expert strategies for selecting enabling texts for the school library. Recognize that this skill is not an innate one. Acquire and maintain the knowledge and training this requires.
- Avoid caricatures (like the gangster who escapes his impoverished community) of African American males (or any group) when selecting texts.
- Select and use texts that pay attention to the "four literacy platforms:" define self, become resilient, engage others, build capacity. One example of a text that meets these platforms is *The Contender* by Robert Lipsyte, in which an African American adolescent male struggles with his sense of identity in the midst of challenges and builds character through boxing.
- Design templates for students to create their own textual lineages and list the enabling texts that have had an influence on their lives. Highlight these books in the library.

TEACHING TECHNIQUES

Instruction is an essential role for a school librarian in supporting the development of textual lineages. The following techniques suggest a few ways a librarian can support teachers:

- Use the inquiry-based approach to discuss relevant texts in a fun and engaging way.
- Have students take an active role in their reading by reflecting on the texts through writing, drawing, acting, or other creative pursuits to express how the texts make them feel, putting reading into a social and emotional context.
- Provide a framework to guide students in their reading and writing—a systematic and consistent instructional and assessment routine that students can practice and master without confusion.
- Teach comprehension skills in mini-lessons with meaningful texts, even if the overall reading level of the text is significantly higher than students' current abilities.
- Lead a professional development with teachers to work through an enabling text with them.

IDEAS FOR OUTREACH

Like most efforts in a school library, supporting the literacy development of students must be a multi-pronged effort. This approach can be broadened with the following techniques:

- Question disharmony. If problems are persisting for any group of students, something is being missed. Keep examining the process to ensure all students have the chance to succeed.
- Present an attention-grabbing excerpt with the book in displays.
- Get students exposed to engaging texts in unexpected places. Put poems or excerpts in email signatures, overdue book notices, morning announcements, and messages to parents.
- Provide a forum for both teachers and students to share their work, such as bulletin boards, literary magazines, blogs like *Teen Ink*, writing contests, coffee houses, and writing circles.
- Collect the best student writing pieces of the year as voted by the students and make a bound copy that will stay in the school library.

BOOKS SIMILAR TO *READING FOR THEIR LIFE*

Interested in learning about more approaches to supporting literacy development in adolescent African-American males? These books, similar to Tatum's *Reading for Their Life*, deal with literacy issues related to African American adolescents. For a more extensive list, visit <http://sites.google.com/site/rftlappendix/pathfinder/similarbooks>.

Edwards, Patricia A., Gwendolyn Thompson McMillon, and Jennifer D. Turner. *Change Is Gonna Come: Transforming Literacy Education for African American Students*. Teachers College Press, 2010.

Kinloch, Valerie. *Harlem on Our Minds: Place, Race, and the Literacies of Urban Youth*. Teacher College Press, 2010.

Tatum, Alfred W. *Teaching Reading to Black Adolescent Males: Closing the Achievement Gap*. Stenhouse Publishers, 2005.

REFERENCES:

American Association of School Librarians. *Empowering Learners: Guidelines for School Library Media Programs*. American Library Association, 2009.

The Employment Situation: June 2010.

<http://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/empsit.pdf> (accessed August 12, 2010).

Health, United States 2009: With Special Feature on Medical Technology.

<http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/hus/hus09.pdf> (accessed August 12, 2010).

National Summary: Diplomas Count 2008. School to College: Can State P-16 Councils Ease the Transition? <http://www.edweek.org/media/ew/dc/2008/40sgb.us.h27.pdf> (accessed August 12, 2010).

The Nation's Report Card: Reading 2009. Grade 8 National

Results. http://nationsreportcard.gov/reading_2009/nat_g8.asp (accessed August 12, 2010).

Prison Inmates at Midyear 2009–Statistical Tables. <http://bjs.ojp.usdoj.gov/content/pub/pdf/pim09st.pdf>(accessed August 12, 2010).

Tatum, Alfred W. *Reading for Their Life: (Re)building the Textual Lineages of African American Adolescent Males.* Heinemann, 2009.

CHECK OUT THIS WIKI

The school librarians in the Durham, North Carolina, public schools are using "Reading for Their Life" as the centerpiece of a year-long professional development effort focused on closing the achievement gap of adolescent African American males. Dr. Hughes-Hassell and her students (the authors of this article) are facilitating the professional development and have formed a project wiki that serves as a forum for the school librarians to share their work (<http://rftldurhamcounty.pbworks.com/FrontPage>).