School Snapshot: Focus on African-American Culture

At Victor Berger Elementary School, the curriculum is infused with African-American content and the children are infused with pride.

MARGE SCHERER

A is for Armstrong, B is for Banneker, C is for Carver. For children at Victor Berger Elementary School, African-American culture is the foundation of all instruction.

The 1st graders are learning to count from 1-10 in Swahili as well as in English. They know that the colors of the African-American flag are red, black, and green just as surely as they know the American flag is red, white, and blue. And at art time, the children identify the pipe-cleaner spiders they are making not as the itsy-bitsy spider in the well-known song but as the clever Anansi of African folktales.

When this inner-city school in Milwaukee opened its 100-year-old doors last September, 562 preK-grade 5 children entered a new kind of school, an African-American Immersion School. One of two in the area—the other is Parkman Middle School—the school's mission is to bring quality education to a de facto segregated student population. In addition to improving test scores in math and language arts, its goals are to develop basic and critical thinking skills, foster positive self-images and social competencies, and inculcate the skills needed by students for self-determination.

The foremost way of accomplishing these goals is to infuse the curriculum with African-American content. "It's an outstanding motivational factor," says principal Josephine Mosely. "It's a chance for students to see themselves in the curricular mainstream."

An integrated curriculum. First grade teacher Myron Fry, who designed the black history alphabet for his students, explains that the immersion approach helps teachers integrate subjects and skills and at the same time enlighten children about their heritage. When his students learn about Louis Armstrong, they play Armstrong's music. When they study George Washington Carver, they find out about peanuts: where they originated, why they were important in the South. The culminating activity is baking peanut butter cookies—and learning about recipes and measurement.

The school philosophy endorses varied instructional approaches to accommodate learning differences, with an emphasis on active learning. For instance, Cassandra Brown's 3rd graders write to pen pals in Africa, memorize poetry, and practice "no-pencil math" (to learn estimation skills). Younger children regularly cook, use computers, and perform skits.

The nontraditional school day begins with a period of learning readiness whose purpose is to build self-esteem and motivation, and to teach children how to resolve conflicts. Children then are engaged in two two-hour blocks of academic time: reading and language arts in the morning; and math, science, and social studies in the afternoon.

All teachers require students to do a great deal of reciting and memorization, tying in with the oral tradition of *griot* (African storytelling). Every morning Willene Wallace's 2nd graders recite "The Pledge of Allegiance," sing "The Black National Anthem," and repeat aloud poems by black American authors. In class, teachers tell stories, and then often ask children to improvise a variation of the story, possibly with an African or African-American motif if the story didn't originally have one.

To provide a showcase for students and to create a nurturing environment, all children belong to a "school family" composed of three to four multi-grade classes. Family Meetings occur every two weeks, and the programs, planned by a team of teachers, often feature student performances and peer teaching.

High expectations for staff. Because the African-American curriculum is still evolving, teachers must spend time learning new content and accumulating materials for their students. One teacher, for instance, spent his summer compiling information about modern day Libya to use in the classroom.

All teachers are expected to complete 18 college / inservice credits of coursework on topics like "Educating the Black American Male," "Culture and Racism in America," and "Black American History." Staff members must also be skilled in

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"group participation techniques, and the art of problem solving, in addition to "being open-minded, avoiding premature conclusions, and being able to confront conflicts, including those generated by racial differences."

Teachers plan in teams during the school day (having full-time specialists in art, music, and physical education enables them to do so). They are also required to make 36 home visits a year. Usually, teachers travel to homes in pairs and by the family's invitation only. They report on the progress of the child and are alert to the needs of the family. "We are guests in their homes," explains Fry. "We go because it's helpful for us to see the home environment and to be in touch with our students' families. Quite a few parents thank us for coming and mention that no teacher has ever come before."

With high unemployment and much impoverishment in the area (24 out of 25 children in one class are eligible for free lunch), teachers find that their knowledge about how to use social services can be valuable to parents.

Newfound pride. While it is too soon to tell whether Victor Berger Elementary School will achieve all its goals as an African-American Immersion school, teachers report enthusiasm in students. "Where I taught last year, there were fights about kids' shoes, about who looked better, a lot of emphasis on looks. This year there have been no fights so far in the 2nd grade," says Wallace. She attributes this to the fact that children at Berger wear uniforms (navy pants or skirts and white or yellow shirts) and to a newfound pride in students, who thrive in the nurturing climate of the school. So far the best moment in her class has been when her 2nd graders, realizing that to their surprise they knew their class motto by heart, shouted it out in unison:

I know I am.
I know I can.
I know I will.
If it's to be,
It's up to me. □

Marge Scherer is Managing Editor of *Educational Leadership*.

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