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# **Teaching with Love and Commitment: The Instructional Practices of African American Facilitators Engaged in Prevention Science Programs**

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**Abstract:** This paper reports the finding and conclusions of a study on how culture impacts the instructional practices of facilitators in nonformal settings.

## **Introduction**

Prevention science is a growing area of study in the United States as it promises to provide a way that adult educators can positively change and affect many American social ills. Currently, Americans are facing disturbing social issues such as increased crime, violence in schools and institutions of higher learning, poverty, drug abuse, gang activity, teenage pregnancy, and illiteracy. On the health front, obesity is becoming increasingly problematic, which in turn contributes to other chronic diseases such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes, stroke and hypertension (Ogden, Carroll, McDowell & Flegal, 2007). Rates of HIV and AIDS continue to be high; over a million individuals are infected with HIV (as of 2003) and nearly 37,000 individuals with full-blown AIDS (as of 2006) (McQuillan & Kruszon-Moran, 2008). While some of these areas of crises involve national (i.e., governmental) intervention, the social and health issues are beginning to be addressed through the growing arena of prevention science. These issues are address through educational programs that are developed and tested through prevention science research. The inclusion of educational programs opens the door to an exploration of prevention science through the lens of adult education in a variety of ways (e.g., curriculum development, program planning, program delivery). This paper describes a study that explores program delivery, focusing specifically on the individuals who teach the programs.

## **Review of the Literature**

Prevention science is a field of study devoted to developing and testing preventive intervention programs designed to address a variety of health, behavioral and social issues. The value of prevention science is summarized in the work of Kumpfer and Alvarado (2003) who posit that prevention science research and the resulting programs can be powerful and cost-effective tools for reducing social and behavioral problems when implemented properly with the right populations.

Although the “right” population may depend on the issue at hand, African Americans in general are an ideal population to target in prevention science research efforts. The history of African Americans in the United States has been riddled with violence, oppression, discrimination and inequality at all levels which has contributed to the well-documented disparities between African Americans and other ethnic groups, particularly Whites. These racial disparities are widely publicized in a variety of areas, including health, crime/punishment, economics, and education.

While these health and social disparities may make African Americans an ideal population to target for prevention science research, researchers know that African Americans are less likely to participate in research than their White counterparts (Murry et al., 2004; Washington, 2006). African Americans may be reluctant to participate in research because of an

overall distrust of the research process, structural and contextual factors, and a lack of understanding of the cultural relevance of the research and potential benefits for their community (Murry et al., 2004). Despite these barriers, researchers are finding ways to successfully implement prevention research in African American communities. This success is dependent upon involvement from the target population and community stakeholders, as well as collaboration with community agencies and institutions throughout the research (Dittus, Miller, Kotchick & Forehand, 2004; Murry et al., 2004). One strategy for incorporating community stakeholders in prevention science efforts with African Americans is recruiting stakeholders to serve as program facilitators. These teachers of the educational programs can be instrumental in determining any adaptations needed to ensure sustainability in their communities.

Facilitators are particularly important to prevention science research studies because effective implementation of the program is crucial to the overall research, the “test” of the curriculum. In fact, as empirically tested programs increase, scholars have begun to identify characteristics of model programs, one of which is effective implementation and includes the selection and training of program facilitators. Despite this recognition, the prevention science literature has not thoroughly addressed issues related to how the similarities or differences of the facilitators as compared to the program participants influence the facilitator’s teaching practice, or the facilitator/participant relationship. The education literature contains significantly more research on the impact of professional educators’ positionality on their practices and classroom dynamics. Tisdell (2000) asserts that the positionality of teachers and students always affect how classroom dynamics unfold. She goes on to intimate the importance of group identity and worldview, explaining that when teachers enter the classroom, they bring their personality, thought patterns, knowledge, feelings and an entire set of values formed by the communities in which they grew up, including religion, social status and ethnic background. An individual’s worldview is influenced by both their positionality and their group identity and is manifested through expressions of their personality and thought patterns (Shkedi & Nisan, 2006). Because all of these variables influence the teaching process, it is important to consider how group identity, positionality, and worldview of the facilitator affect program success.

### **Background and Methods**

The purpose of the study was to examine the relationship and cultural commitments of African American facilitators of prevention science programs to their African American participants. The study focused specifically on issues of group identity, positionality and worldview and was guided by the following research questions: (1) What is the impact of the facilitator’s group identity on their instructional practices? (2) What is the impact of the facilitator’s positionality on their instructional practices? And (3) What is the impact of the facilitator’s worldview on their instructional practices? The sample included 24 African American facilitators who taught one of two preventive intervention programs. Four facilitators taught an HIV risk prevention program that targeted sexually active African American girls and young women, aged 14-21, who sought care at one of three urban sexual health clinics. The facilitators from this program were all female, aged 28 – 35, with master’s level education and working in professional positions earning \$40 - \$69,999 annually. The other 20 facilitators taught a program that targeted African American families with a child in the 11<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> grade, living in one of eight specific rural counties. The program primarily addressed the future orientation of teens, familial relations and how families and communities can work together to prepare this older teen for the transition into adulthood. This group of facilitators was more

diverse: 15 females and 5 males; age range of 26 – 67; educational attainment with ranges from high school graduate to doctorate; and income ranges from less than \$20 - \$49,999.

The primary method of data collection involved face to face interviews using a standard semi-structured interview approach. The interview questions addressed topics such as the facilitators' background (education, occupation, community involvement) and their experiences with implementing their assigned preventive intervention program. The secondary method of data collection was an observation of each facilitator teaching a session of their assigned program. Data organization and analysis was based on LeCompte's (2000) five-step plan: tidying up, finding items, creating stable sets of items, creating patterns and assembling structures. These steps included reviewing the data to identify items that were relevant to the research questions; organizing the items into groups or categories; combining the categories into related patterns; and assembling the patterns to build an overall description of the data.

### **Findings**

The research questions center on three specific types of influence: group identity, positionality and worldview. The data show that these three influences are interwoven in the ways in which they influence the facilitators' instructional practices. The influence of group identity and worldview are bolstered by positionality. The study showed that the various group identities increased the facilitators' ability to build and maintain rapport with participants who were members of their racial group, but who also shared membership in other groups (gender, familial role, religion). These shared identities allowed facilitators and participants to relate more easily because there were associated shared understandings about events, words, symbols, and experiences (e.g., local politics and church). Furthermore, the facilitators assessed their participants' understanding and made necessary adaptations by using culturally grounded communication. These communication patterns included call-response, story telling and group sharing. The use of these methods allowed for active participation by the participants and aided in the creation of community among participants and between facilitator and participant.

In reference to positionality, the study showed that the shared experience of being African American was a powerful influence on how the facilitators approached the teaching context. The facilitators entered their classrooms armed with high racial regard which was manifested in their teaching through confidence and self-awareness. They realized that they embodied these traits because of the care and love of other African Americans in their own lives and saw it as their responsibility to continue this tradition to their participants. The way in which they taught their classes was a reflection of this value. As the facilitators taught their respective curricula, they did so in a way that edified and celebrated the participants. The facilitators worked towards creating a protected and insulated community in their classrooms – a place where the participants could be honest, share their experiences, questions and frustrations without the fear of judgment, condemnation, or ridicule.

Although the classroom was an insulated and relatively "safe" community, the facilitators and the participants entered with experiences associated with being Black in America. The shared history of discrimination and oppression that has been, and continues to be experienced by African Americans, served as another point of unity for the facilitators and their participants. Specific experiences might have differed, but the ability to relate and understand the anger, fear, pain and humiliation was universal. The facilitators and participants were able to share these experiences and in turn receive validation and support to move forward with hope. Finally, with regard to worldview, the study showed that the facilitators entered their teaching contexts with a

sincere concern for the well-being of the individuals in their groups. This concern was instrumental in the facilitators' ability to build rapport and gain the trust of their participants.

### **Discussion**

The study resulted in three major conclusions (1) the facilitators considered the act of implementing their assigned preventive intervention programs as another way to demonstrate their commitment to serving and improving their communities; (2) the facilitators' teaching demonstrated a sense of resiliency born of their lived experiences as African Americans raised in insulated and protective communities; and (3) the facilitators used their cultural identities to adapt their assigned curricula so that the programs would be more relevant to their African American participants. First, prior to the opportunity to implement preventive intervention programs, the facilitators were already demonstrating this commitment by the career paths they chose and their active involvement in the community. Twenty-two of the facilitators were employed in, or retired from, agencies and institutions that provide services to the community, and all of the facilitators were involved in formal or informal groups that participated in community service events (e.g., fraternal organizations, church groups, civic and political groups).

This commitment to community is an indication that the facilitators identified closely with the general communities in which they live. Within this larger community, facilitators also identified closely with their familial groups, their racial group, and their religious group. These group identities influenced the facilitators' instructional practices by increasing their ability to build and maintain rapport with participants who were members of their racial group, but who also shared membership in other groups (gender, familial role, religion). The facilitators had a worldview that demonstrated a commitment to the greater good, a desire to serve and help members of their community, and a sense of commitment and empathy. They demonstrated a commitment to working for the greater good of the community and expressed a desire to serve and help members of their community.

Secondly, the facilitator's sense of resiliency was evident from the stories the facilitators shared about their childhood, family, schooling and work experiences. These stories included economic hardship, experiences with racism and discrimination, struggles with single parenthood, teenage pregnancy, deaths of significant loved ones, and family experiences with alcohol and drug abuse. Despite these various obstacles, the facilitators were able to overcome with the personal determination and support from their family and community. Personal determination was instilled in the facilitators during their childhood – a sense confidence in self and racial pride. Many of the facilitators recollected memories of the words of wisdom passed on to them from their parents, grandparents and other significant individuals in their lives. These family and community members also provided other types of support that included financial support, housing and other resources, words of encouragement, and help in caring for children. Although the facilitators' stories included adversity, hardships and heartbreak, there were no hints of bitterness.

The facilitators also recognized that some of life's difficulties would be related to their status as a "minority" in this country, particularly the nine facilitators who lived through the Civil Rights Movement. These older facilitators were raised in tight-knit communities that provided a place of safety and refuge during those turbulent times. The younger facilitators, a generation removed from the Civil Rights Movement, benefited from this value as their parents and grandparents continued to ensure a place of safety and refuge for subsequent generations. The facilitators were part of the classroom community as well, contributing to the collective by sharing their own experiences. All of the facilitators expressed that their lives had been positively impacted by their experience as a member of their classroom community. Finally, facilitators

were able to draw on their understanding of culturally based communication to assess whether their learners were grasping the curricula content and to make necessary adaptations using culturally grounded methods to bring about understanding (e.g., reciprocal talk/call and response, story telling, and group sharing).

### **Conclusion**

The intent of preventive intervention programs is to use educational methods to positively impact a specific issue in the lives of the program participants. The facilitators' interviews revealed that in addition to forming a connection with their participants, they also felt connected to the curriculum content. This combination led to a unique way of delivering the overall program. Participants received the intended content of the curriculum, but also received real life lessons from "teachers" who opened their own lives to the participants. In this sense, facilitators in this study gave of themselves to their participants in such a way that their lives and experiences were also part of the delivered curriculum. This reciprocal relationship between facilitator and participant is an example of how the facilitators approached their participants with honor and respect. Ultimately, this kind of teaching – teaching with honor and respect - is teaching with love. This finding is reminiscent of hooks (2003), who summarizes her thoughts regarding this way of teaching, "Love in the classroom prepares teachers and students to open our minds and hearts. It is the foundation on which every learning community can be created" (p. 137).

This study has implications for the field of adult education as well as prevention science. The findings inform the approach to working in ethnic minority communities. The study confirmed that positionality (race in particular) shaped the facilitator's worldview (Tisdell, 2000). As has been suggested, the facilitators did not seem to consciously recognize that their worldview and positionality affected their practice, but these factors, along with their various group identities had a strong influence on how they delivered their educational programs (Sheared, 1999; Shkedi & Nisan, 2006). In terms of community-based education a cultural match is indeed important and beneficial to the participant. Although the facilitators in the study taught programs designed specifically for African American participants, they still found it necessary to use culturally grounded forms of delivery. This need for adaptation during the delivery speaks to the importance of employing facilitators who understand the cultural background of the participants if a cultural match is not possible.

The literature regarding the role of instructors provides suggestions on how to teach in a culturally sensitive manner. Several authors suggest that instructors be aware of and recognize different ways of knowing and expressing, re-evaluate educational norms, and creating classroom spaces that reflect the learner's educational needs (Alfred, 2002; Guy, 1999; Johnson-Bailey, 2002; Sheared, 1999). As part of the cultural community, the facilitators in this study instinctively incorporated these methods of culturally sensitive teaching. Adult education has a wide variety of literature on multicultural education, culturally competent instruction and positionality and power. This study contributes to this body of literature. Additionally, in a field that focuses primarily on formal types of community education, the study also validates the passion and ability of lay or nonprofessional adult educators as important contributors to the field.

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