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# Bridging The Academic Gap: Effective After-School Program Curricula

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**T**he conversation that focuses on the apparent gap between the academic competencies of minority and non-minority students continues. Many attempts are being made to assist students who fall within this gap. Educators continue to investigate school curriculum and instruction in an effort to contribute to the resolution of this issue. The most recent discussion that focuses on interventions to assist students who often fall within this gap of academic competencies has focused on the development of alternative school programs. Some of the programs that have been considered include an extended school day, extended school year and year-round programs, mandatory summer school programs, and out-of-school or after-school programs. While many of these programs certainly have the potential to assist students in the improvement of their academic status, there is little definitive information that suggests that many of these attempts have been extremely successful in bridging the academic gap that continues to exist between populations of minority and non-minority students.

As educators, we all agree that any attempt to assist students in improving their academic status depends least upon the duration of the program but more upon the development of a curriculum based on theories of best practice and effective instructional delivery. In most alternative programs, curriculum that is designed to assist students in improving their academic status typically includes instruction that is closely aligned to skills practice in isolation. It is my opinion that this type of instruction is, at best, effective only when the students have some understanding of the concepts involved. Students selected for these programs need instruction that will allow them to not only develop an in-depth understanding of concepts but also the ability to apply the new information effectively. Consequently, this knowledge will increase students' proficiency and independence across all areas of learning. It is with this thought in mind that

I have given serious consideration to ideas for effective curricula for after-school programs.

There are few after school programs that provide instruction to ensure more than isolated skills practice. We need to develop curricula that will bridge the gap in academic competencies between minority and non-minority students. In that way we will also improve students' academic status.

As a literacy instructor with experiences that range from working with emergent readers to providing instruction for pre-service teachers, I have given serious consideration to current research and practice relative to literacy curricula and instruction that would provide effective literacy and content knowledge for students in an after-school setting. I have sought to develop an instructional framework that is responsive to this important need. The curriculum



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design I favor is an integrated model that provides instruction to students within context; utilizes developmentally appropriate content, strategies, and methodology; and is supported by the national and state standards and current educational research.

As a model, I propose the content integration of literacy, math, science, and technology. This model would be organized and taught in cycles in order to provide effective structure to the instructional component and effective concept development, while at the same time allowing for flexibility in the integration of program components and instructional concepts. Concepts and strategies in literacy and technology will be based on the content presented in math and science. This integration approach or framework has been designed to promote transfer of knowledge across content areas and clarity of concept relationships to assist students in utilizing concept knowledge effectively and independently in their learning.

The purpose of the math and science component is to expose students to content knowledge and experiences that will develop students' knowledge and increase interest. Additionally, it is expected that based on the integration approach utilized in the instructional model and the specific use of national and state standards, students will improve their academic status related to class participation and their assessment profile.

The purpose of the technology component is to support the students' learning in the core content areas (literacy, math, science). The technology component is not intended to teach students to simply use software

or hardware, but to enable them to enhance their understanding of concepts and demonstrate competency through the use of technology in an effective, meaningful, and logical manner.

The literacy component will endeavor to focus on improving literacy skills as students are engaged in developing math and science concept knowledge with the appropriate support of technology. Areas of development include reading, comprehension, and vocabulary strategy development; writing to learn; and research and independent study skills.

The strengths of this proposed model include

- effective classroom instruction,
- content and concept knowledge that is consistent with assessed educational requirements, and most importantly
- cyclical instruction focusing on math or science concepts and experiences that provide instruction based on students' interests or required concept extension/reinforcement.

This model may, as other models, lack the ability to close the academic gap that exists between minority and non-minority students. But an after-school program that focuses on an effective curriculum design has the potential to provide opportunities for students to concentrate on developing concept knowledge and literacy competencies. This, in turn, offers the possibility of an improvement in academic status. Improvement in academic status for any student will have a positive impact on others as well and will lead us closer to bridging the academic gap that exists between minority and non-minority students.