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## Advocating for African American Students: Cultural Perspectives on Best Practices

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# *Advocating for African American Students: Cultural Perspectives on Best Practices*

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*"We are in revolutionary situation, no matter how unpopular that word may be. You must understand that in the attempt to correct so many generations of bad faith and cruelty, when it is operating not only in the classroom but in society, you will meet the most fantastic, the most brutal, and the most determined resistance."*

*James Baldwin, A Talk to Teachers*

The words of James Baldwin, though written over 40 years ago, prophetically and cogently convey the "revolutionary," critical, and vital need to address the educational needs of African American students by teachers and educational researchers alike. Moreover, Baldwin's imperative call to action is tempered in contemporary schooling contexts by the shifting demographics of public schooling, where African American students are overwhelmingly likely to attend racially re-segregated, under-funded, highly tracked and tested, poor performing schools. In light of these well-known and disparaging factors, our research on African American women teachers provides insights on how teachers have historically and currently make valuable contributions to students' lives while offering significant insights on how best to reach African American children. The voices of African Americans are at best, rarely heard in the teacher education and best practices literature, and thus, commonly marginalized in larger conversations of improving the academic performance of African American and other children of color. For example, Dixon (2003) researched how the intersection of teachers' race, class and gender identities influenced their pedagogical philosophies and practice. Dingus (2003) examined the influence of race, family, and cultural perspectives on the teaching philosophies and conceptualizations of African American teachers' roles. Both studies describe African American students' responses to teachers based on not only race, but also cultural knowledge employed to engage students.

While the intent is not to approach best practices as easily remedied with prescribed, recipe-like approaches, this special edition is intended to instead expand examples of best practices articulated through racial/ethnic, cultural, and familial frameworks. As such, the articles in this special issue of *MWERJ* provide an examination of both pedagogical practices and educational policies that take culture into consideration as a way to engage African American students and ensure their success in school.

Two of the articles in this volume examine the policies and programs that can affect the engagement and success of African American students. First, James Moore, Donna Y. Ford, Delila Owens and their colleagues suggest that colleges and universities have worked beyond just recruitment of African American students, but looked at retaining them as well. They argue that we can look to the retention efforts of higher education to recruit and retain African American students into gifted education. Given that college admission

is in large part premised on scholastic performance coupled with the increasing expectations and the inflation of grade point averages, the work presented in this article can positively impact college-going among African American students if they can access a significant and primary entry to college—gifted education. Similarly, Thandeka Chapman and Nikola Hobbel discuss a pre-college program at the University of Wisconsin-Madison aimed at the recruitment and retention of under-served youth. The program uses a culturally relevant pedagogical approach to draw on students' strengths and attend to building on their academic needs. Ultimately, the goal of the program is to make the students college-ready and admissible to the University of Wisconsin-Madison as part of the University's diversity plan called, "Plan 2008." Chapman and Hobbel provide a closer examination of the program's first class of high school graduates who are now matriculating at UW-Madison.

The next two articles in this special issue examine more closely the pedagogical practices that teachers use or can use to engage African American students in the learning process. The first paper to look at specific pedagogical practices is by Kenneth J. Fasching-Varner, a doctoral candidate at The Ohio State University and a former classroom teacher. Fasching-Varner provides an interesting reflective analysis of the pedagogical practices of three of his teachers who he believes significantly informed his pedagogy as a classroom teacher. He describes three Black women teachers and what he calls their "pedagogy of respect" that he draws from Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot's work on respect and education. As the editors of this special issue, we offer an article that examines the challenges of and strategies we employ as professors of color to engage a mostly White and female, pre-service teaching student body. In the article, we focus on our own practice and the activities we use to engage our students in discussions of their positionality recognizing that it serves as the foundation for culturally relevant and responsive pedagogical practices with African American students.

## References

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