

Leadership as Praxis: Empowering At-risk Students of Color and Their Families

Linda C. Tillman

University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill

Abstract

This curriculum model focuses on the salience of race, ethnicity, culture, social class and disability for at-risk students of color and provides current and future school leaders with opportunities to develop strategies to meet the needs of these students and their families. Students of color often experience schooling differently than their White peers (Joyner, et al., 2004; Norwood, et al., 1997; Tillman, 2003). This reality may be exacerbated when students of color are placed at-risk by various external (outside of the school) and internal (inside of the school) risk factors, and because of their socio-economic status and/or disability. Families (parents, caretakers, guardians, etc.) may also be at-risk. Thus, various types of at-risk factors can negatively impact opportunities for student achievement as well as family access to and participation in the educational process.

Dryfoos (1996) reported that all students can be placed in high risk, medium risk, and low or no risk categories and that all adolescents are at risk due to risky environments. That is, every student, particularly by adolescence, participates in some type of risky behavior or is placed at-risk by circumstances beyond their control. Dryfoos, identified several factors that can place students at risk: school dropout, substance abuse, involvement in the court system, sexual activity, weapons, truancy, and suicidal thoughts and attempts. Today, students are exposed to additional risk factors that include poverty/low SES, community and school violence, disability (special education placement, mental, physical), lack of cultural capital, lack nourishment and adequate health care, language barriers, and negative perceptions of school personnel. The variables of race and poverty are often significant factors with respect to students of color and their families and may contribute in varying degrees to levels of at-riskness.

This module provides current and future leaders opportunities to review the literature and to discuss and reflect on the impact of race, ethnicity, culture, social class and disability on students of color in the school and the larger society. Activities in this module are designed to encourage participants to think about leadership from a praxis-oriented perspective that will allow them to combine critical leadership theory with action (Foster, 1986) in their work with teachers, students, parents, and the community. Future school leaders will be encouraged to critically reflect on their assumptions about leadership relative to working with at-risk students of color and their families. Additionally, participants will investigate and make recommendations about strategies that enhance the participation of families of color in the education of their children.