



## Tier 1 Educational Coaching and Consulting Services

Copyright © 2013 by Dwayne D. Williams, MA., Ed.S.

[www.tier1education.com](http://www.tier1education.com)

There is a relationship between academic engagement and high performance in the classroom. But an important question is, What does academic engagement look like when demonstrated by children who come from Afrocentric cultural backgrounds? To measure the extent to which children of color are academically engaged, evaluators must not only observe these students' behaviors in class, but also understand why they may engage in particular behaviors. Evaluators must also understand what the students' behaviors might mean from the students' cultural background.

### **We Interpret Behaviors Through Cultural Lenses**

I was involved in a problem-solving meeting in which the teacher's main concern was that her student, an African-American male, was very disruptive and disrespectful. According to the teacher referral, this student would interrupt her during instructional time to ask a question, would often talk without raising his hand, talk to his peers about things unrelated to the assignment, and would blurt out answers. Prior to this meeting, the grade level team implemented interventions with the hope to reduce his inappropriate behaviors. Their goal was to use behavior modification to reduce disruptive and blurting out behaviors to a manageable level. Their intervention proved ineffective. The more they implemented behavior management interventions, the more this student blurted out and disrupted the classroom.

### **Was the Student Disruptive or Academically Engaged?**

Because the teacher did not know what to do with his disruptive behaviors, she would send him to the office, provide timeouts, and according to her, "ignore him when he wanted to answer a question." Now the question is, was this student disruptive or academically engaged? Well, the answer depends on the cultural lens you use to analyze the student's behaviors. From a Eurocentric model, a model that values silence when someone else is speaking, raising one's hand prior to speaking, and strict adherence to rules and regulations, the student would benefit best from a self-contained classroom. But from an Afrocentric model, a model that values communal relations, emotional expressiveness, and call-response dialogues—communicative interactions between two or more persons whereby if one person is silent, he or she is considered

bored and uninterested in the conversation—the student would be identified as on-task, motivated, and intrinsically driven.

### **How Do You Define Academic Engagement?**

Educators who desire to engage children of color academically must look beyond their own definitions of engagement. Blurting out an answer is actually an emotional response to the teacher's question; it is a response to some stimulus. And because some children who come from Afrocentric backgrounds are encouraged to express their emotions, often their expressiveness is habitual.

Why is this information significant? The purpose of reviewing this information is to allow teachers to take a closer look at what they might call disruptive behaviors and to consider behaviors demonstrated by many children of color in light of Afrocentric cultural characteristics. Blurting out answers in class will no doubt become disruptive at some point, especially if a classroom full of children decided to talk at once. But in the midst of “blurting-out behaviors,” it's important for educators to identify their students' motivation and desire to engage with the discussion at hand.

### **Reference**

Williams, D., D. (2012). *An rti guide to improving performance of African-American students: What every teacher should know about culture and academic engagement*. Aurora, IL: Tier Educational Coaching and Consulting Firm.