

## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this study is to identify the pedagogical practices and learning conditions that African American graduate students describe as most beneficial to their learning. This study is important because of the mounting evidence suggests that the traditional pedagogical practices employed in higher education do not serve today's racially diverse student body (Adams, 1992; Banks, 1991; Gandara and Maxell-Jolly, 2000).

In search of best practices, this thesis builds upon the work of scholars who advocate a new approach to teaching that includes the whole student in the learning process. In particular, the heart and soul of this thesis emerges out of the wisdom and experiences of several African American graduate students at the Harvard Graduate School of Education (HGSE) who participated in this study. These students provide insights into what it means to teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of African American graduate students.

In this study, I argue that professors can create optimal teaching and learning environments if they build relationships with students in and outside of the classroom, design instruction that positions students at the center of the learning process, and enter the learning environment as transparent and conscious intellectuals. Most important, I argue that race matters, both in terms of the perceptions some African American graduate students bring to the learning environment, and in terms of the interactions they have with professors in the classroom. Professors need to be aware of this reality as they engage with students in the teaching and learning process.

Realizing that it is important to understand the broader context in which this thesis is situated, I argue that a number of students believe that some faculty members are unwilling to engage students of color around diversity issues in the classroom. Moreover, this lack of engagement is reinforced by traditional instructional design practices that maintain some professors' domination and authority over the learning process.

Overall, the results of this study show that a dialogical professor-student relationship emerges as an essential component of a productive learning environment. Furthermore, when instructional designs are transparent, structured, inclusive, and utilize multiple modes of instruction, African American graduate students believe that their chances for success improve. Finally, this study demonstrates that faculty members reduce the impact that perceptual barriers can have on the teaching and learning process by utilizing pedagogical practices that increase students visibility in the learning process.