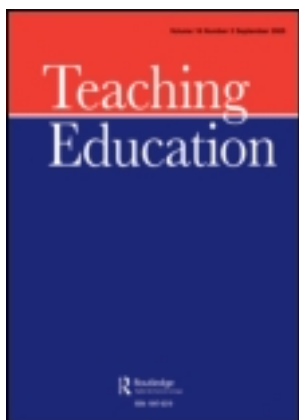October 19, 2011

Culturally-responsive Pedagogy for African American Students: Promising Programs and Practices for Enhanced Academic Performance

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Culturally responsive pedagogy for African American students: promising programs and practices for enhanced academic performance

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The academic outcomes for African American students continue to lag behind their White, Latino, and Asian American counterparts. Culturally responsive pedagogy has been purported to be an intervention that may help to reverse the persistent under performance for African American students. This article high-lights findings from a three-year study of an intervention program designed to increase college going rates for African American students. The authors document the manner in which overall student outcomes, graduation rates, and col-lege going rates increased when culturally responsive pedagogical practices were used. Finally, this work calls for academic rigor to be a more germane characteristic of the culturally responsive pedagogical framework.

Keywords: theories of teaching; teacher thinking and knowledge

Introduction

Despite a plethora of school reform efforts, standards-based education movements, legislative interventions (NCLB), increased testing, and an unprecedented surge in charter schools across the country, African American students continue to under-achieve in comparison to their counterparts from different racial and ethnic back-grounds. The achievement gap between African American students and their White, Asian, and Latino counterparts has been well-documented over the past two decades (Braun, Wang, Jenkins, & Weinbaum, 2006; Campbell, Hombo, & Mazzeo, 2000). Some contend that issues around performance disparities are due to a combination of various factors, such as low teacher expectations, lack of parental involvement, lack of student motivation, racist schooling practices, and structural inequities, and call for a radical distribution of resources and renewed ideologies of diverse people and culture (Spring, 2006). Despite these calls for societal transformation and resource redistribution, educational practitioners and researchers alike continue to seek meaningful, day-to-day interventions that may reverse the academic underper-formance of African American students in US schools.

This article will examine culturally responsive pedagogy as a potential set of instructional strategies and teaching ideologies that may offer important results for the academic outcomes of African American students. This stance on culturally

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responsive pedagogy is offered because of a growing body of literature that makes the link between culture, teaching, and learning (Lee, 2007; Lee, Spencer, & Harpalani, 2003). In this article, we attempt to achieve three primary goals: we will document the theoretical underpinnings which conceptualize culturally responsive pedagogy; we examine some of the conceptual and empirical works that have been concerned with culturally responsive pedagogy; and we document findings from a school program that was successful in improving outcomes for African American students, and did so incorporating some elements of culturally responsive teaching. We then discuss some of the implications that these findings have for teacher education as a field, teacher educators in particular, and future consideration for educating African American students.

Culturally responsive pedagogy: definitions and directions

The concept of culturally responsive pedagogy has gained increased attention over the past decade as a way to rethink instructional practices in an effort to improve the educational performances of African American, Latino, Native American and various Asian American students (Gay, 2000). The merging of culture and pedagogy represents a complex and intricate set of processes that many practitioners and researchers have suggested may improve student learning, and continue to evaluate its effectiveness for helping culturally diverse students improve academically. Moreover, the nexus of culture and pedagogy rests upon a comprehensive and informed set of knowledge and skills that many practitioners fail to possess in their attempts to engage diverse students in the teaching and learning process.

Culturally responsive pedagogy is more than just a way of teaching, or a simple set of practices embedded in curriculum lessons and units. Practitioners who seek to reduce culturally responsive teaching to a simple act (and who make the claim as one pre-service teacher once posed in a class: "Can you just show me how to do it?") fail to recognize the intricacies of the concept. Culturally responsive pedagogy embodies a set of professional, political, cultural, ethical, and ideological disposition that supersedes mundane teaching acts, but is centered in fundamental beliefs about teaching, learning, students, their families, their communities, and an unyielding commitment to see student success become less rhetorical and more of a reality. Culturally responsive pedagogy is situated in a framework that recognizes the rich and varied cultural wealth, knowledge, and skills that diverse students bring to schools, and seeks to develop dynamic teaching practices, multicultural content, multiple means of assessment, and a philosophical view of teaching that is dedicated to nurturing students' academic, social, emotional, cultural, psychological, and physiological well-being.

One of the more troubling explanations for disparate educational outcomes that culturally responsive teaching attempts to disrupt is the deficit-based explanations of poor students, students of color in general, and African American students in particular. These explanations are usually centered on students lacking or being devoid of culture, coming from a culture of poverty which is not suited for academic success, possessing an oppositional culture, having a disdain for academic achievement, or having parents who lack concern for their children's academic aspirations (McWhorter, 2000; Ogbu, 1987; Steele, 1990; Valencia, 1997). These deficit-based accounts of students have also derided students' language as being deficient because of its variation from Standard English. Others have maintained that academic

achievement outcomes are a direct result of innate differences in intelligence between racial groups (Hernstein & Murray, 1994), a belief that is not as prevalent as it was half a century ago, but still present nonetheless. In short, deficit theorists have advocated seeking ways to change student knowledge, language, culture, and behavior in ways that are more consistent with mainstream ways of being. These efforts have typically been met with student resistance, disengagement, and ultimately educational disenfranchisement for millions of poor and culturally diverse students (Kohl, 1994; Solórzano & Bernal, 2001).

A number of works respond to cultural deficit theory by stating that students from diverse backgrounds are not deficient in their ways of being, but merely different (Ford, 1996; Irvine, 2003; Lee, 2007; Moll, 2000). These works pose different ways of thinking about students, their families, and communities, and thus would offer different ways of how to think about closing the achievement gap.

A growing number of scholars have posited that teacher thought and practice be constructed in a manner that recognizes and respects the intricacies and complexities of culture, and the differences that come with it, and structure pedagogical practices and ideological stances in ways that are culturally recognizable and socially meaningful (Foster, 1989, 1993; Howard, 2001a; Lee, 2007; Nasir, 2000). The past decade has seen a significant increase in the professional literature on works concerned with culturally responsive teaching. The premise behind culturally responsive pedagogy has been linked to the idea that if teachers are able to make connections between the cultural knowledge, beliefs, and practices that students bring from home, as well as the content and pedagogy that they use in their respective classrooms, this combination may have the potential to enhance the academic performance and overall schooling experiences of culturally diverse learners (Gay, 2000; Hollie, 2001; Howard, 2001a; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Lee, 1995, 1998; Lipman, 1995; Lynn, 2006; Parsons, 2005; Pierce, 2005; Sheets, 1995; Tate, 1995; Terry, 2010; Wortham, 2002).

Seeking clarity in culture and pedagogy

A perusal of the works concerned with culturally responsive pedagogy reveals that it continues to grow as both scholars and practitioners seem to recognize the potential in the rethinking of pedagogy in a manner that belies traditional approaches to content, instruction, and assessment (Gay, 2000; Howard, 2001a, 2001b; Lee, 2007; Parsons, 2005). Given that there are at least three decades of theoretical and empirical work on culturally responsive teaching, it is important to evaluate what we know about the concept, identify gaps that exist in the knowledge base, and, most importantly, assess if there is sufficient evidence to show that it contributes to students' overall performance in schools. It is also critical to examine where we have observed success, as this knowledge will help to inform future research, theory, and practice, and inform areas that may need to be re-examined and reconceptualized. Gay (2000) asserts that culturally responsive teaching is a "very different pedagogical paradigm" (p. 24). An examination of the works concerned with culturally responsive pedagogy reveals that part of this different paradigm entails recognizing the idea that the concept is built on at least five key principles:

- the eradication of deficit-based ideologies of culturally diverse students;
- disrupting the idea that Eurocentric or middle class forms of discourse, knowledge, language, culture, and historical interpretations are normative;

- a critical consciousness and sociopolitical awareness that reflects an ongoing commitment to challenging injustice, and disrupting inequities and oppression of any groups of people;
- an authentic and culturally informed notion of *care* for students, wherein their academic, social, emotional, psychological, and cultural well-being are promoted; and
- recognition of the complexity of culture, in which educators allow students' personal culture to be used as an enhancement in their quest for educational excellence.

The principles are informed by the growing body of research that examines the utility and the complexity of culturally responsive pedagogy, and serve as the critical blueprint upon which all students can be educated, particularly in multicultural schools.

Varying questions and objections have been raised about the appropriateness of culturally responsive pedagogy. Some have suggested that culturally based teaching approaches are lacking in depth and rigor, while some have claimed that the emphasis on culture denies students access to core academic skills such as reading, writing, and math, which are purported to be culturally neutral (Hirsch, 1987; Ravitch, 2003). Another one of the commonly cited critiques is that culturally responsive pedagogy seems suited only for students of color. Irvine and Armento (2000) respond to this critique by stating that culturally responsive teaching is not a novel or transformative approach to teaching. In fact, they maintain that culturally responsive teaching has been a staple in US schools for centuries, but it has been most in line with one group of students – the cultural knowledge and history of US-born middle-class, English-speaking, White students. In essence, they claim that pedagogy is culturally situated in a framework that is foreign, and at times dismissive, to students of color. Irvine and Armento (2000) ascertain that this is one of the primary reasons why, historically, White middle-class students have performed better than all other student groups. Namely because the epistemological origin of school knowledge, values, culture, and practices are heavily steeped in a Eurocentric worldview and ideology, and thus omit the experiences, history, contributions, and culture of people of color, the poor, and women. Gay (2000) reaffirms this contention by suggesting that "the fundamental aim of culturally responsive pedagogy is to empower ethnically diverse students through academic success, cultural affiliation, and personal efficacy" (p. 111).

Empirical and conceptual support of culturally responsive pedagogy

Culturally responsive pedagogy is becoming more comprehensive and concrete as it shifts from conceptual theory to grounded practice. Gay (2000) suggests that culturally responsive pedagogy recognizes the uniqueness of student culture by using "the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning more relevant to and effective for them. It teaches *to and through* strengths of these students. It is culturally *validating and affirming*" (p. 29). Ladson-Billings (1995) describes this teaching, which she calls "culturally relevant", one that "empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes" (p. 18).

Ladson-Billings (1995) explained how teachers influence literacy development through the incorporation of culturally recognizable content. She provides evidence for how and why teachers' conception of self, their ethic of care, and their clear and deliberate instructional focus are important components of instructional success with diverse students. One of the areas where culturally responsive teaching has been critiqued is the lack of studies that looked at the concept in the area of mathematics. Over the past decade a number of studies have begun to address this void. For example, Tate (1995) examined culturally relevant teaching within the context of mathematics and discovered teachers who used community issues as a framework for improving math proficiency. Other scholars have examined culturally relevant approaches to mathematics (Gutstein, Lipman, Hernandez, & de los Reyes, 1997; Nelson-Barber & Estrin, 1995). Nasir's (2000) research looked at the construction of identity, culture, and learning. In her work she found the relationship between identity and schooling to be an integral one in the area of mathematics proficiency for African American adolescents. Building on the students' knowledge of dominoes, Nasir's qualitative and quantitative findings found that, in practices such as dominoes, mathematical goals were reached in the context of activity when math concepts became a normalized and mandatory part of a particular activity.

Civil and Khan (2001) investigated teachers who used students' home experiences with the planting of gardens to develop important math concepts. Ensign (2003) studied how one teacher used students' experiences within their local stores and price comparisons as a conduit to build a better comprehension of math concepts. Martin (2000) evaluated the mathematical proficiency of African American students and suggested that history and context of the African American experiences are crucial for improved mathematical proficiency and reasoning in algebra and geometry, and calls for educators to develop an awareness of socio-economic issues that influence African American students' educational experiences.

Brown's (2008) study of a mathematics intervention course for African American male students at a predominantly African American middle school highlights the ways in which a teacher's use of cultural artifacts must be thoughtful and measured. In one aspect of this study, the researcher integrated cultural referents from African history (such as the Ishango Bone and Yoruba number system) into math activities, with varying success. While students were able to work within these cultural frames with some facility, his findings push math educators to think more critically about cultural relevance among Black students. While Brown hypothesized that the inclusion of these culture-based elements would nurture identification and motivation among the students mathematically, he discovered that these cultural artifacts carried little *personal* relevance to the African American males in the class, and therefore did not necessarily facilitate the kind of student engagement he anticipated. Though the use of such elements helped students develop new understandings about the mathematics of the African continent, and could therefore serve as a source of pride, he found these connections would clearly be dependent upon the degree to which African culture holds personal relevance for African American students. Brown (2008) offers important suggestions for how to more thoughtfully scaffold and integrate such cultural artifacts into typical math instruction.

In his critical ethnographic study of African American male youth in South Los Angeles, Terry (2010) explored the role of community-based knowledge, interests, and inquiry in the re-orientation of students to mathematics. In their participatory

action research project, the use of mathematical concepts, knowledge, and skill were largely directed by what the students *themselves* wanted to research and know more about. Rather than textbook-determined busywork, then, mathematics became an exciting critical cultural activity that was propelled by students' inherent interests in the research questions. The student-centered nature of this kind of mathematical activity represents an extension of the notion of 'care', discussed in this article, beyond teacher–student interaction into the nature of the curriculum itself. His findings suggest that the instrumental role African American students played in determining the cultural contexts in which mathematics were studied directly impacted students' sense of the usefulness of mathematics as a tool that they too can own. Terry argues that this is a crucial step towards reversing low-performance in mathematics; but also, perhaps more importantly, towards helping students develop a vision of themselves as mathematicians. This is an important foundation from which students can begin to seek out careers in STEM disciplines.

A fourth element that was crucial to the studies on culturally responsive teaching is the importance of care. Gay (2000) explicitly elaborates on the importance of care to culturally responsive teaching when she states:

> Caring is one of the major pillars of culturally responsive pedagogy for ethnically diverse students. It is manifested in the form of teacher attitudes, expectations, and behaviors about students' human value, intellectual capability, and performance responsibilities [...] This is expressed for their psycho-emotional well-being and academic success; personal morality and social actions, obligations and celebrations; community and individuality; and unique cultural connections and universal human bonds. (Gay, 2000, pp. 45–46)

Finally, these studies reveal a direct acknowledgement of the political nature of teaching. Drawing from Freire's (1970) notion of reading the *word* and the *world*, these studies each highlight teachers who view their works as not just a job but as a specialized craft, a unique calling, a moral endeavor, embedded in a cultural context that seeks to defy conventional thinking about culturally diverse and low income students. These works seemed to be informed by an authentic desire to empower students, enhance their learning opportunities, and to help students view themselves as transformation agents.

UCLA–Sunnyside/GEAR UP

To illustrate how the concept of culturally responsive teaching is a complex commitment and ideas that can aid in improving the achievement of students at the high school level, and how it can help to reduce the achievement gap between African American students and their White and Asian counterparts, we will highlight work within the UCLA Sunnyside GEAR UP (Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs). We wanted to evaluate to what degree the academic performance of the entire school may have been assisted with the intervention of the GEAR UP services. Working in conjunction with the UCLA Graduate School of Education and Information Studies, the GEAR UP program provided intensive academic support (e.g., in-class and after-school tutoring, study skills preparation, California High School Exit Exam preparation, SAT and ACT test prep, and CAT-6 test preparation) for any student at Sunnyside High School. UCLA/GEAR UP also coordinated school activities that informed parents about advocacy, and teachers

and students about college requirements, the college admissions process, and financial aid workshops.

During the 2006–2007, our final year of the study, Sunnyside High School was made up of approximately 2100 students: 48% Latino, 50% African American, and 2% White, Pacific Islander, Filipino, and/or Asian. Sunnyside High School is a Title I school with a 24.6% English Language Learner population. Approximately 450 students participated regularly in GEAR UP after-school tutoring activities (2–4 times a week), over the four-year period, with approximately 85% of these students being African American. The program was situated to assist as many students as possible, and made repeated efforts to reach out to all students. Daily announcements were made about GEAR UP tutorial services. Some teachers offered incentives to their students for participating in the college preparation, or tutoring sessions. On repeated occasions, GEAR UP staff frequented the campus grounds, encouraging students to participate in programs. On several occasions, students who attended GEAR UP programs were regularly asked to bring friends to the various GEAR UP programs. One of the limitations of this work is that not all students were recipients of GEAR UP services directly, but all were indirectly influenced by the professional development that all teachers received from the GEAR UP program. The directors of the program sought to disrupt the idea that students from low-income urban areas, where resources and access to information for academic success is frequently limited, lack the ability to succeed academically; the project demonstrated that this success is possible, given that students have access to adequate resources, academic support, and personnel working toward the same goal.

The manner in which culturally responsive pedagogy manifested at Sunnyside High School was multifaceted. It was exhibited through instructional practices, it was evident in teacher–student relationships, and it was also obvious through the type of care and academic rigor that was displayed by GEAR UP and school staff as they worked with the students at Sunnyside High School. The commitment to students' academic success, coupled with an ongoing commitment to rigorous, high quality, individualized and small group tutoring, and academic support for students, was crucial to improving students' outcomes. Care was one of the fundamental aspects of the program, and played an instrumental role in the way student performance was enhanced for the students at Sunnyside High School. Howard (2010) operationalizes care in a way that is consistent with Gay's (2000) conceptualization
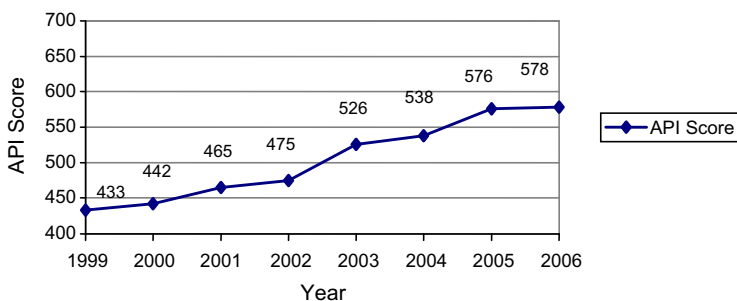

Figure 1. Annual Performance Index (API) scores for Sunnyside High School. Source: California Department of Education.

of the concept, when she states that "caring is one of the major pillar[s] of cultur-
ally responsive pedagogy for ethnically diverse students. It is manifested in the
form of teacher attitudes, expectations, and behaviors about students' human value,
intellectual capability, and performance responsibilities" (p. 45). This definition of
care is also informed by Valenzuela (1999), when she describes it as "a founda-
tional cultural construct that provides instructions on how one should live in the
world. With its emphasis on respect, responsibility, and sociality, it provides a
benchmark against which all humans are to be judged, formally educated or not"
(p. 21). It is crucial to note the contextual and cultural context of care and how it
manifests itself in schools, teachers, and student learning. The misinterpretation of
care frequently manifests itself in teachers lowering expectations, not holding stu-
dents accountable, and not challenging students, based on a warped understanding
of "care". The culturally informed version of care that was evident at Sunnyside
was tied to expecting excellence from students, demanding accountability, and
showing a degree of concern that was tied to nothing short of students' personal
best, and being taken to task if anything less was given without a plausible explana-
tion. Based on observations of the GEAR UP staff, and a cluster of teachers and
administrators at Sunnyside, it was clear that there were pockets of committed
adults working toward improving the education outcomes of African American stu-
dents, who were the lowest performers at Sunnyside. Despite Sunnyside's reputation
as a school which has historically had low-performing students, it should be noted
that during the three-year period (2004–2007) that GEAR UP was at the school,
student outcomes did improve, which we will document later.

One of the ways that care was shown was through the program's mission and
commitment to helping increase the numbers of African American students who
would be competitively eligible for admission to the country's top universities. The
staff, who played a significant role in supporting students, was comprised of tutors,
an administrative staff, graduate student researchers, a project director, and a project
manager. All of the GEAR UP tutors were UCLA undergraduate students who had
grown up in working-class communities, and were hired based on their subject mat-
ter expertise and understanding of living and attending schools in an urban commu-
nity. It was also critical to hire tutors who believed that students attending
Sunnyside High School could be academically successful. One of the components
of culturally responsive teaching is that educators have a sincere belief in the ability
of students to succeed (Ladson-Billings, 1995). The tutors were a vital part of the
students' success, because most of them had overcome various challenges in order
to go to college, and therefore they were tangible examples to the students of what
was possible, and they also knew what was required to assist students to become
college bound. Tutors were thoroughly vetted during the interview process about
the content that they would be tutoring, in addition to being queried about their
thoughts and beliefs about students attending inner city schools and their prospects
for becoming successful. Many of the tutors devoted countless hours in counseling,
tutoring, and mentoring a plethora of students, in a multitude of ways.

Historically, Sunnyside High School has been one of the more understaffed and
underperforming schools in Los Angeles County. One indicator of this perennial
underperformance is the fact that less than 10% of its graduating seniors had gone
on to four-year universities prior to our work at the school. The GEAR UP office
became the unofficial source of information for college preparation, academic
counseling, and tutoring. GEAR UP staff conveyed an authentic and culturally

informed notion of care with Sunnyside students, by going out of their way to visit students' homes and meet parents, siblings, and legal guardians, providing financial assistance on occasion for students, providing unpaid tutorial assistance for students on occasion, and providing transportation for students to get home in certain instances. Care, rigor, and accountability became the hallmarks of the work that GEAR UP staff provided to Sunnyside High students. Care was manifested through a deep seated concern for students' academic, social, and emotional well being. On more than several occasions, students had been put out of their homes, and GEAR UP staff collected money to help students buy food and find shelter. In another example, a student lost her brother to a gang shooting, and the GEAR UP staff helped to raise money to support the family with burial expenses. Rigor was apparent in the intense tutoring sessions that occurred every day between students and tutors in class, and after school, with work from subjects such as AP chemistry, history, calculus, algebra, English, and Spanish. The rigor was also evident in the fact that tutors expected students to come to sessions with specific questions to discuss, how students were expected to explain and show their work on various problems, and how students were expected to generate a list of questions that they would pose to teachers in class the following day. Accountability was prevalent in that students understood that if they were to benefit from the GEAR UP program, being in good academic standing and behavior in all of their courses was a pre-requisite. GEAR UP staff engaged in regular dialogue with classroom teachers about students' performance, and specific recommendations were frequently offered by classroom teachers on ways to assist students in tutoring sessions. Students were required to go over test preparation in tutoring sessions, complete enrichment work with tutors, and be accountable to tutors in addition to classroom teachers.

Day tutoring and instructional strategies

To provide more specifics on the work that was done by GEAR UP staff with African American students, and how it was tied to tenets of culturally responsive pedagogy and improved educational outcomes, we highlight two critical features of the program; Day Tutoring and the College Preparation Program. One of the unique features of the GEAR UP program was the fact that tutors spent considerable time in classrooms with students, assisting teachers with lessons and daily instruction. This program assigned tutors to teachers during the day, to help students who needed extra assistance with material the teacher would go over in class. As a result, students were more likely to leave the classroom understanding the material and were able to complete their homework on their own. Particularly helpful was the fact that day tutors were also available during after-school tutoring if any students needed further assistance. This was especially important, as students knew that many of the tutors understood exactly what the teacher wanted to convey, and that tutors were available after school. In fact, in 2007, tutors were in 46% of all classrooms at Sunnyside and gained a reputation from teachers and administrators as being reliable and effective in the classrooms. In the last few years of GEAR UP, teachers relied heavily on the tutors to assist students during class or to work with struggling students.

In some instances, tutors were similar to teacher's aides, providing support and assistance to the teacher, coordinating small groups, or providing one-on-one assistance with struggling students. This approach to tutoring was essential, because

it enabled tutors to get a first-hand account of what content students were being taught during classroom instruction. The ability to see classroom content afforded tutors the opportunity to think about approaches that they could use with students to assist them during tutoring sessions. Many of the tutors were able to take the information from class, and explain it in various formats, use pertinent examples, or offer different ways of presenting information that made it more recognizable for the students. This is a vital aspect of culturally responsive teaching: the ability to take course content and situate within a culturally recognizable context to improve student comprehension. This was evident in several of the English 11 courses. In each of these courses, students were being exposed to various types of literature across different genres. Students were required to analyze texts, deduce themes and plots, and then required to develop their own pieces of literary text, or short stories.

A number of the students who were in the English 11 classes were regular GEAR UP attendees, and discussed with the tutors the difficulty they were having with the assignment on literary analysis, and the challenges they were having comprehending British literature poems and short stories. To assist students with this particular assignment, they were encouraged to participate in the GEAR UP Spoken Word class that was offered on Friday afternoons after school. The purpose of the Spoken Word class was to allow students who had an interest in poetry, writing, public performance, and self expression to have a space to develop their repertoires of language and creative writing. The students who participated in the poetry/spoken word class had generally become disengaged with school, yet once students started participating in the class, they were some of the most dedicated students, and started performing better in school. The Spoken Word class was critical in providing the much needed social support, whilst helping students develop a skill (writing and performance).

At least a dozen students brought their English 11 assignments to the Spoken Word class and developed, enhanced, and produced powerful prose and poetry. Each of these pieces of work dealt with topics students dealt with in their own personal lives or in their local communities. Some of the titles of the written pieces that were produced included "Drug & Alcohol Abuse in My Community", "Cultural Elimination", "A Walk in the History of my People", "Growing up in the Ghetto", "Living in an Imperfect World", and "Hurt, Sorrow, Anger & Pain". The poignancy, conviction, and quality of these works were most impressive. After writing the poems, students were required to read them aloud to the rest of the class, explain their meaning, talk about the motivation behind their poems, and why these topics were important to them. Upon completing their texts, students were then required to analyze excerpts from the texts in their English class, and to compare and contrast between the texts they produced and the works that they were reading in class. Some of the works included *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* by Homer, *The Great Gatsby*, and *Cyrano* to name a few. Engaging in this activity seemed to increase the students' understanding of course content, based on grades that students reported after participating in the Spoken Word Class.

The Day Tutoring was crucial to students' overall academic success, because the tutors served as mediators between course content and topics that the students knew and understood. A group of students who were working on cell formation in biology had their tutors assist them in utilizing parts of the cell, and comparing them to parts of their own family structures (e.g., the cell wall is the structure of the house, and contains all elements or family inside; the mitochondria represent

the parents who work in order to provide for their children, much like it produces energy when food is broken down; the endoplasmic reticulum, which is the transportation system in the cell, is similar to the family car that helps to transport parents to work and students to school, etc.). In another instance, a dozen students used an assignment from their history course to present a final project on school desegregation and school funding, and reconstructed the district's School Accountability Report Card (SARC), which is a state-mandated assessment document. The students were able to recreate SARCs with a particular focus on what schools need to provide more of (better books, materials, technology, and bigger classrooms), and offer alternative means of how students performed (improvement versus meeting state standards).

The chance for students to have college students work with them, who had read literature on culturally responsive pedagogy theory and many of whom also had teaching aspirations of their own, was a core feature in assisting students' academic development, while affirming their own personal cultural knowledge. As one GEAR UP student reported, "the tutors make the same information in class seem a lot more real when they help us". There were a number of comments from students about the value of the tutors being in the classes, where they heard lessons, were able to see where students struggled with information, and, in some instances, to verify the type of apathetic instruction that students received from seemingly non-caring teachers. Another student from the GEAR UP program commented that "the only reason I go to my chemistry class is because Ruben [a tutor] will be there [...] he should be teaching the class, because he makes it more interesting than Mr Swanson [teacher for the course] does". As noted earlier, a critical aspect of culturally responsive teaching is the ability for teachers to support the emotional and cognitive development of the students. The students in the program made continual references to the role that tutors played in helping them academically.

Specifically, after-school and day tutoring focused on assisting students in completing their homework assignments and worked on a set academic skills curriculum. Because of GEAR UP's tutorial programs, teachers found that students who regularly attended GEAR UP were more likely to understand academic concepts they learned in class. As a result, teachers and counselors became increasingly enthusiastic to advertise GEAR UP in their classrooms. In 2007, tutors were in 90% of all math classrooms at Sunnyside, and gained a reputation from teachers and administrators as being reliable and effective in the classrooms. During our last year, at the request of administration, the day tutoring program was strengthened to include a caseload component, in which tutors worked with students in small group settings to identify individual skill levels and build students' academic competency.

What the GEAR UP program also succeeded in doing was getting buy-in from the school administration to provide a series of professional development sessions with school personnel. Most of the sessions were conducted by university faculty and were focused on a variety of ways to improve student learning. The four themes that guided the sessions were: the social and emotional aspects of human development; cognitively guided instruction; culturally responsive teaching; and literacy, learning, and culture. The goal of these sessions was to provide classroom teachers with theoretical frameworks and useful instructional strategies, which could be incorporated in their classrooms to enhance students' performance. It should be noted that not all teachers bought into the themes, concepts, and interventions that were shared in these sessions, but there were a number of teachers

who did. Most of the teachers who did buy in tended to be teachers with less experience, all of whom seemed to be open to new ways of informing and improving their instruction. One of the challenges and tensions that were ongoing was the resistance of most of the veteran teachers to fully embrace much of the professional development.

There were a number of cogent examples which were observed by teachers who used exemplary instructional strategies. Mrs Okwinaka, who taught a chemistry course, opened up each day's lesson by explicitly listing the day's objectives and goals, and then incorporating a feature called "making it relevant", which she described as a way to link every lesson, concept, theme, and topic to something that students viewed as being pertinent to their own knowledge base. For example, students organized the elements of the periodic table to actual materials, chemicals, and substances that they could locate in the classroom; in one particular instance the student discussed water molecules in a way that required them to think about the taste, feel, and smell of water without one of its elements. In one class, the "making it relevant" introduction led to students comparing hydrogen bonds and their positive and negative charges to certain types of personalities of students in the class, making a list of students and the personalities that would fall into negative and positive charges.

In Mr Graystone's English composition class, his repertoire of instructional strategies included him incorporating an approach he termed "re-teach it". This approach entailed students being randomly selected to re-teach a theme or idea that had been taught in course. Students re-taught concepts such as protagonist and antagonist, direct narration and characterization, satire, irony, and hyperbole. Students provided engaging, and at times humorous, examples when re-teaching and explaining their understanding of the lessons for the day. Another approach that was noted occurred in Ms Sampson's algebra class, where she incorporated a range of instructional strategies, including having students identify similarities and differences in core concepts, frequent cooperative learning groups, generating and testing hypotheses, and reinforcing efforts and providing recognition. It was clear that her command of content and instructional diversity fell in line with Ladson-Billings' (1995) contention that teachers who use culturally relevant teaching approaches have a clear instructional focus in order to improve students' learning. Teachers are transparent in their instructional approaches, meaning that they explicitly tell students what they are teaching, why, and articulate the path they will travel to have students learn content. Teachers with a clear instructional focus also have a good sense of the big idea they want students to learn, are constantly evaluating students' understanding, formally and informally, and are constantly checking for understanding.

What was also evident in several of the classrooms was the manner in which teachers seemed to have a command of, and incorporated, issues that were specific to the African American experience, historically and contemporarily, in their classes. Mrs Jenkins, an English teacher, made a point of having African American themed literature in her course. Students read excerpts from *Black boy*, *Native son*, *Our America*, *The autobiography of Malcolm X*, and Tupac Shakur's *The rose that grew from concrete*. She frequently talked about how important it was for her Black students to have access to classic literature about the "Black experience in America". In Mr Johnson's biology class, he required students to do a biographical report on a famous Black or Latino scientist. The students produced reports on Benjamin Banneker, Ernest Everett Just, Granville Woods, Dr Rebecca Cole, and Dr Mae Jemison.

In conversations with Mr Johnson about why he gave his students this type of assignment, he explained that "our students need to know that their people have made important contributions to the country [...] and to the world, and they [students] need to know that. They really get into that assignment [...] and I think it is because they see people who look like them". Consistent with Gay's (2000) ideas that "students [...] should become scholars of ethnic and cultural diversity, and generate their own curriculum content" (p. 144), these examples offer some insight into teachers' mindfulness of ethnic specific content as a means of incorporating culturally responsive content.

During the 2006–2007 school year, the number of African American students enrolled in Advanced Placement (AP) courses increased in Algebra I and II, Geometry, Pre-Calculus, Calculus, Chemistry, and Physics. For example, the percentage of tenth graders taking geometry increased from 23% during the 2004–2005 school year to 65% during the 2005–2006 academic school year. In addition, of the juniors at Sunnyside, 35% enrolled in Algebra II and 40% were enrolled in Chemistry during the 2005–2006 school year. So much of this work was also centered on helping students to develop the skill set and knowledge base that would enable them to compete in more academically rigorous courses.

Even with limited funding, GEAR UP continued to provide a high level of service and intensified programs that met the needs of those who were served. As the program drew to a close after the 2006–2007 academic year, we celebrated many measures of success over our final year, such as seeing 85% of the African American seniors who took the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE) tutoring program pass the exam. In addition, we celebrated the largest graduating (385) class from Sunnyside High School in close to a decade, nearly a 25% increase in the number of graduates from the previous year (291) in 2006. Moreover, of the graduating class, 60 African American students were accepted to four-year colleges. This number doubled the previous year's numbers. Furthermore, nine African American students (six of whom were males) were accepted to UCLA – typically one of the more difficult colleges to gain admission – compared to only four students in 2006. This more than doubled the number of students accepted to UCLA from Sunnyside High School.

Culturally responsive pedagogy: a look forward

The knowledge base on culturally responsive teaching continues to emerge. Although this knowledge base has been critical to informing the larger educational community, there is a need to ask more questions that will assist scholars and practitioners alike to expand the concept and refine its tenets, if it is to be successful in improving the academic performance of African American and other culturally diverse students. Despite arguments to the contrary, there is growing evidence which shows that culturally responsive teaching approaches are having an influence on student outcomes, improving student learning, and engaging students who are often disengaged from teaching and learning (Gay, 2000; Nasir, McLaughlin, & Jones, 2009). What is obvious is that this process, like much of teaching, is a multifaceted, dynamic, and intellectually intense endeavor. Moreover, this approach to teaching has to be undergirded by a deep-seated commitment to the holistic development and well-being of students, their families, and their communities. For researchers and practitioners moving forward to further fortify the concept, we

would offer three additional areas, to be understood in more depth, to be included as part of the culturally responsive framework, and to be utilized for teacher educators engaged in their work with pre-service teachers: rigor; the salience of relevance; and drawing on the experience of successful programs.

Rigor

We call for academic rigor to become a foundational element of culturally responsive teaching. Academic rigor was most evident in a number of the classrooms that were studied at Sunnyside High School. The term "academic rigor" is often thought to mean the difficulty of a class. The harder a class is, the more rigorous it is considered. A course is rigorous when it has high expectations and the teacher/tutor sets high personal standards for their students. A rigorous teacher also has high expectations of him or herself. He or she comes to class prepared, treats students fairly, conducts class respectfully and professionally, and always exemplifies honesty and integrity with student performance and effort. Rigorous learning goes hand in hand with rigorous teaching. We want to make a strong call for the inclusion of rigorous teaching as a vital component of culturally responsive teaching because rigorous instruction has been shown to improve student outcomes (Barton, 2004; National Center for Education Statistics, 2001), which is what culturally responsive pedagogy is primarily concerned with. Rigorous teaching challenges students in acquiring authentic depth and breadth of content. It also can include students going beyond surface levels of comprehension, however, more like Bloom's taxonomy suggests, it entails students synthesizing different types of knowledge to form new understandings, to evaluate and re-evaluate information for its validity, applying knowledge in new contexts to test its usefulness, and analyzing knowledge from different perspectives. Academic rigor does not mean harshness, severity, or busy-work for students. Rigor should result in students becoming critical thinkers, life long learners, and, essentially, quasi-scientists, which is predicated on the following four points.

- **Depth and integrity of inquiry:** where there is sufficient time given to a topic or unit of study, enabling students with the opportunity to explore a topic in depth, developing questions as they go along. This process can and should lead to students asking probing and thought-provoking questions at increasingly high levels, to pique student interest.
- **Sustained focus:** some students may need assistance and training to persevere on a given subject so that there would be the opportunity to study a topic in depth. The sustained focus allows students to develop a depth of knowledge for deeper understanding.
- **Suspension of premature conclusions:** one of the things that researchers have to fight against is the propensity to reach quick conclusions and confirm hunches without adequate evidence, and this tendency often limits our possible findings and new knowledge. Academic rigor suggests that we educate students in a manner that allows their individual work and research to continue to search ways of knowing, understanding, and testing a given hypothesis.
- **Continuous testing of hypotheses:** even after being certain that our hypotheses are supported by sufficient evidence, we need to have students continue

to test, and re-test, their conclusions in different situations and under different circumstances, in order to assure their reliability.

Ford (1996) offers an important blueprint, wherein she contends that rigorous content does not have to be at the exclusion of culturally responsive content, and she offers an important framework of how multicultural content, situated within an academically rigorous instructional and evaluative framework, is not only possible, but can and should be a staple in classrooms. Teacher educators, who seek to prepare pre-service teachers in a manner that allows them to work effectively with culturally diverse students, must adhere to an instructional philosophy that challenges students academically, and does not view the inclusion or recognition of culture to be a compromise of academic integrity and rigor.

The salience of relevance

Any effort to deepen the knowledge base on culturally responsive teaching must be informed by a working knowledge of what matters, and what is relevant to students. Many students assert that school content is grossly disconnected from their interests, passions, and day-to-day lives (Wigfield, Lutz, & Wagner, 2005). As a result, many educators work tirelessly to find ways to engage students in content that they frequently view as disconnected, dated, irrelevant, and not worthy of learning. Relevance can be observed when students gain personal meaning from the content by making connections with prior knowledge or by working out how it "fits" into their world. Content material is relevant when:

- **Students have a prior intellectual or emotional connection:** such connections may be identified by the student or mediated by the teacher, and can serve as a "hook" into new concepts, issues, and knowledge to be learned. An emotional or intellectual connection is mediated when students arrive with their pre-existing interests in a topic, and do not have to abandon that knowledge as they learn about new content.
- **It is connected to real life:** students want to know how what they are learning "fits" into the real world, as well as how it fits into their own frame of reference. One of the students from this study asked a critical, yet powerful, question in his US Government class at Sunnyside, while students were studying the three branches of government: "What does this have to do with me?" If educators are unable to provide a logical explanation to such questions, it becomes obvious that relevance is lacking, and student engagement and effort may drop off considerably. When this occurs, the likelihood for learning is severely diminished.
- **It actively engages or involves students:** even if a topic or task is not immediately relevant to students, active engagement can act as a catalyst to develop personal interest. Among the most revealing journal entries are those written by students who have been involved in some sort of community service over an extended period of time. Frequently, students cite how they could not at first understand the relevance of a community service requirement in their high school program, but how, after some time, these same students recognized a deep connection and responsibility for others, which had been generated by their service project.

- **Someone else has a contagious passion or enthusiasm:** it is easier to become interested in a subject of study when the teacher or another member of the group already has an enthusiasm for it and who can share that passion with others.

Another manner in which culturally responsive teaching can also be enhanced is by examining policies and large-scale programs which have been implemented in a manner that have proven success of helping underachieving students. While individual accounts of teachers who possess the knowledge, skills, and cultural competence to assist African American learners are valuable, there are far too many teachers who still lack the viable knowledge that can be important in transformative approaches to teaching and learning. Identifying and replicating promising practices and programs will be fundamental in closing the stubborn achievement gap that continues to result in countless numbers of African American learners falling short of reaching their academic potential. In addition to identifying these programs and practices, researchers and practitioners must engage in information exchanges, where such interventions are having success, to seek their replication.

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