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# Let's Get It Started: Teaching Teachers How to Implement a Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

by Jamal A. Cooks

In today's American schools, many teachers are faced with the problem of keeping African-American students engaged in the lessons taught in pre-K-12 classrooms, a problem which at times leads to low academic performance. According to data presented in the 1994 National Assessment of Educational Progress, 48% and 66% of African-American students scored below the basic competency level in reading and mathematics respectively.<sup>1</sup> With many African-American students being labelled "not proficient" in some academic content areas, a growing achievement gap exists between African-American and European-American students. This gap contributes to fewer African-Americans 1) gaining access to institutions of higher education; 2) taking longer to complete their degree courses; and 3) having access to employment opportunities. In view of the fact that some African-American students obtain low test scores in pre-K-12 education, and the continuing decline of African-Americans being admitted into institutions of higher learning, two basic questions emerge: 1) What type of teaching instruction can provide students with a more holistic learning experience in pre-K-12 as well as in institutions of higher learning, and, 2) What role can institutions of higher education play in improving the teaching and learning of all students?

The ebonics debate in Oakland, California, raised a major issue concerning culture and the teaching of African-American students. With a changing student population, educators must begin to provide students with a reason to attend school by creating a culturally relevant pedagogy, constructing it specifically for the students population of the area as a means to increase student enrollment and improve student engagement and academic achievement. In this essay I first introduce three existing principles of an instructional methodology called *culturally relevant pedagogy* and then I expand the current definition of culturally relevant pedagogy in order to create a stronger rationale for using it to explicitly improve the academic performance of African-American students at all educational levels. Next, I provide the implications of an expanded definition of culturally relevant pedagogy for pre-K-12 classroom instruction. Finally, the discussion turns to strategies for implementing culturally relevant pedagogy in any classroom, and to the role that teacher education programs must play in the teaching of African-American students.

## Existing Principles of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Culturally relevant pedagogy is the "kind of teaching that uses the students' culture to help them achieve success."<sup>2</sup> Within this definition there are three main principles: 1) "culturally sensitive instruction," 2) "cultural scaffolding," and 3) "culturally responsive instruction."

First, in culturally sensitive instruction, one must provide students with a foundation of the history, heroes/heroines, values, customs, and traditions of their ancestors. The culturally sensitive strand is an instructional tool used to inform students about the contributions, culture and ancient lives of African descendants, while simultaneously empowering people of African-American descent.<sup>3</sup> With a heightened level of understanding of the African-American experience, teachers will be able to engage the students at the outset as well as motivate them to learn. The second principle, cultural scaffolding, builds upon the culturally sensitive instruction by using culturally based materials to engage the student but differs by focusing on the cognitive development of the student. For the purpose of this paper, cultural scaffolding is defined as the process of building upon prior cultural experiences and knowledge as a means to construct new knowledge that can be associated with school type knowledge. Teachers could apply the cultural scaffolding model by utilizing a cultural discourse tradition, such as signifying as a scaffold, to assist in the construction of new knowledge for the students scaffold, based on their prior language experiences.<sup>4</sup> Through the practices of "cultural scaffolding" teachers can draw upon the students' existing knowledge which is based on their own cultural exposure as a means to improve the teaching and learning of all students.

Building further upon the argument that students' construction of knowledge influences academic performance, the third principle, culturally responsive instruction, involves recognizing the distinct cultural differences and preferences and how some students are penalized for their failure to assimilate to the norms of the classroom culture or expectations.<sup>5</sup> For instance, in some literacy instruction, the expectations and preferences of some literacy—reading, writing, and oral communication practices—of students may differ from that of their teacher. As a means to improve instruction, teachers may begin to construct enriching learning activities in classrooms for students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Since discrepancies may develop between the desires of the student and the expectations of the teacher, with the student often being academically penalized for deviation from the standard, a culturally responsive instruction presents the necessary balance between the cultural preferences of the student and the academic expectations of the teacher.

The three principles of culturally relevant pedagogy—culturally sensitive instruction, cultural scaffolding, and culturally responsive instruction—each has distinct pedagogical application for the teaching of African-American students. Culturally sensitive instruction focuses

on using the cultural interests of the students while cultural scaffolding extends the notion by identifying the prior knowledge students have in a certain content area context, and builds upon their previous experiences to construct new knowledge. However, cultural responsive instruction implies that the assessment tools in classrooms need to compensate for the different types of information being presented in the classroom. Although these three principles are very useful, two other perspectives should be included in a culturally relevant pedagogy in order to provide African-American students with a more holistic learning experience. These additional suggestions may lead to increased student enrollment and improved student engagement and achievement.

### **Additional Suggestions for Culturally Relevant Pedagogy**

In an effort to create a more holistic definition of a culturally relevant pedagogy, two other strands of culturally relevant pedagogy need to be combined with the existing perspectives: 1) culturally sensitive linguistic teaching, and 2) socio-cultural teaching. Although work has been done on the oral practices of African-Americans in their usage of African-American English vernacular, culturally sensitive linguistic teaching would be sensitive to both the oral and writing practices within the African-American community. In light of the ebonics debate in Oakland, California in December 1996, more attention must be paid to the language practices and writing preferences African-American students bring into the classroom. The writing skills level of students is an important issue because adolescents are called upon to complete a writing portion on standardized tests on high school proficiency tests. Institutions of higher learning are also increasingly requiring that students demonstrate higher levels of literacy skills for admission. These programs need to be further developed to include the pragmatics of African-American language in the discussion of improving the teaching and learning of all students.<sup>6</sup>

Another perspective that should be included in the definition of culturally relevant pedagogy is socio-cultural teaching. This type of culturally relevant pedagogy has been defined as “a theoretical model that not only addresses student achievement but also helps students accept and affirm their cultural identity while developing critical perspectives that challenge inequalities that schools (and other institutions) perpetuate.”<sup>7</sup> In all, the socio-cultural perspective is often ignored in the wider context of culturally relevant pedagogy. With the inclusion of these two other perspectives, coupled with the previous three perspectives, a more holistic, broader definition of culturally relevant pedagogy emerges as a significant instructional tool. Using the new definition, combining all of the perspectives, culturally relevant pedagogy possesses implications for higher education.

### **Implications for Higher Education**

Culturally relevant pedagogy can influence higher education in two distinct ways. First, when a culturally

relevant pedagogy is implemented at the pre-K-12 level, more students are likely to view higher education as a viable goal because of their success at the lower level. Potentially, it can: 1) increase student engagement; 2) utilize prior knowledge as learning experiences; 3) improve student academic performance 4) increase African-Americans' college graduation rates. As we move into the next millennium, students are increasingly being required to possess technology competence, critical thinking skills, and academic excellence. In addition, it is increasingly more pivotal to not only provide students with the necessary reading, writing, and arithmetic tools needed to gain admittance into universities, but to equip them with mechanisms to assist in their retention and success rate in college. Since culturally relevant pedagogy places the student at the center of instruction, curriculum teachers in teacher education programs must receive the necessary training to effectively teach African-American students.

Second, teacher preparation programs must address issues pertaining to culture more seriously to ensure that a positive learning experience is provided to all students. With the changing student teacher ratios in the public schools, where 83.3% of the students are “minority,” and many African-American, and 45.3% of the teachers are non-minority, pre-service teachers must be better prepared to teach all students particularly African-American and other students of color. The key to training pre-service teachers lies in more schools of higher education focussing on indoctrinating teachers with the concept that a holistic culturally relevant pedagogy must be implemented in academic settings at the pre-K-12 level in order to get more African-Americans to the university level. In addition, teachers will learn that implicit in the meaning of a culturally relevant pedagogy is the requirement that they act as counselor, nurse, friend, disciplinarian, and often times surrogate parent in conjunction with being the “teacher” of content knowledge in the classroom. As a means to better understand how to deal with these issues, pre-service teachers must be exposed to different strategies of providing students in their classrooms with a holistic culturally relevant pedagogy.

Although some instructors of pre-service teachers at the university level may believe cultural relevant pedagogy is a necessary methodology for teacher preparation, some may wonder how to actually implement such a program in their pre-K-12 grade level. The following are suggestions for potential higher education teacher preparation programs, of concepts that might be used in a classroom with a student population of African-American students while implementing a holistic approach to teaching a culturally relevant pedagogy:

1. provide students with interesting prompts that deal with sociopolitical issues,
2. use alternative, non-standard writing in constructing a culturally relevant pedagogy,
3. use culturally relevant pedagogy to address the issue of difference,

4. use materials for and about the dominant student population in the class.

Although these instructional strategies are only examples of how to implement a culturally relevant pedagogy, in a pre-K-12 classroom, pre-service teachers must be exposed to the different cultural needs in African-American student's learning process and need to be trained to deal with varying issues which may influence the academic performance of their students.

### Conclusion

With this expanded definition of culturally relevant pedagogy—which includes using cultural history, prior knowledge, and cultural preferences, as well as language and sociopolitical issues—I believe that a holistic approach to a culturally relevant pedagogy will improve the teaching and learning of all students, particularly those from diverse populations. Teacher educators must prepare pre-service teachers to better understand the importance and complexities of culture and its influence on the educational outcomes of African-American students. The instructors in institutions of higher learning must better prepare teachers to instruct a variety of students from various cultural and social backgrounds as well as become all around effective educators. Teachers leaving teacher preparation programs must understand that the important point of teaching is to effectively teach the students in the classroom a worthwhile lesson on a daily basis. Culturally relevant pedagogy is only one suggestion of how to improve the teaching and learning of all students. Teachers must not only be concerned with meeting the academic standards required by the state or district but also preparing the student for life outside of school as well. As more teachers become informed about how to implement a culturally relevant pedagogy, more African-Americans will graduate from high school, be admitted to colleges, and obtain a degree that may eventually provide access to an abundance of opportunities in the future. Based on the current status of the educational experience

of many African-American students, it is clear that the traditional methods are isolating and do not work. The pedagogical philosophy of teaching African-American students must therefore adjust to the needs of this continually shifting student population. I believe that this holistic approach to culturally relevant pedagogy can improve the teaching of African-American students at the pre K-12 level, and it is an investment to train teachers to build upon the existing skills students bring with them into classrooms across the country. The time is now to get it started; let's start teaching teachers how to implement a holistic and culturally relevant pedagogy that will improve the learning experience for African-Americans, increase academic performance, and lead more African-Americans to college, to graduate school, and to successful lives in our society.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>U.S. Department of Education, *National Assessment of Educational Progress*, 1994.

<sup>2</sup>Gloria Ladson-Billings, "Culturally Relevant Teaching: Effective Instruction For Black Students," *The College Board Review* 155 (1990), 20-5. See also Arnetha Ball, "Cultural Preference And The Expository Writing Of African American Adolescents," *Written Communications* 9 (1992), 501-532; Geneva Smitherman, *Talkin And Testifyin: The Language Of Black America* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State Press, 1997); William Labov, *Language In The Inner-City* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1972).

<sup>3</sup>Molefi Asante, *Kemet, Afrocentricity, And Knowledge* (Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press, 1990).

<sup>4</sup>Carol Lee, *Signifying As a Scaffold For Literacy Interpretations: The Pedagogical Implications of An African American Discourse Genre* (Urbana, IL: National Council Of Teachers Of English, 1993).

<sup>5</sup>Sarah Michaels, "'Sharing Time': Children's Narrative Styles And Differential Access To Literacy," *Language In Society* 10 (1981), 423-442.

<sup>6</sup>Arnetha Ball, Jilo Williams, and Jamal Cooks, "An Electronics-Based Curriculum: The Educational Valve," *Thought Action*, 13 (1997), 39-50.

<sup>7</sup>Gloria Ladson-Billings, "Toward A Theory Of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy" *American Educational Research Journal* 32 (1995), 465-491.

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