

## Learning to Develop Culturally Relevant Pedagogy: A Lesson About Cornrowed Lives

**Bena R. Hefflin**

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This article describes the process of using African American children's literature through culturally relevant pedagogy. It chronicles how two teachers carefully plan a lesson using the literature, and then describes how one of the teachers enacts the lesson using pedagogy relevant to her students' cultural background. A framework that focused on the cultural patterns of the students' lives was used to help guide the planning process. The components of the lesson include a prereading activity, read aloud, group discussion, journal writing, and a follow-up activity. In the end, the teachers found that tailoring instruction to fit the textual, social, cultural, and personal lives of their students is largely about seeing pedagogy through the norms and practices of their students' lives.

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**KEY WORDS:** culturally relevant pedagogy; African American children's literature; literacy.

"How can I integrate multicultural literature into my lessons, keep students interested, and still cover the required curriculum?" Her question reminded me of a time when I wondered the same thing. I was a new teacher trying to use multicultural literature with my fourth-graders to teach concepts, skills, and strategies central to our district's language arts curriculum. I was frustrated. I wasn't finding ready-made answers.

As a new third-grade teacher, Pam was asking a decades old question: "How do you use a full range of literary works, teach the mandated core curriculum, and still connect to children's lives in deeply personal ways?"

In my teacher preparation courses the answer had been, "Use multicultural literature the same way you use traditional mainstream literature in the curriculum." Pam must have heard these same words in her methods courses. The answer, however, never satisfied me, and apparently, it didn't satisfy Pam.

Eventually, I learned that the reasons for using multicultural literature differ, in part, because of the goals and objectives of those who use it. Among the

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many uses possible, multicultural children's literature is used best when culturally diverse students see clear, authentic representations of their culture throughout the curriculum and experience a strong sense of affirmation (Au, 1997; Hefflin, 1996).

This article describes the process that my colleague Pam and I went through to develop the best use of African-American children's literature in her classroom, though the process can be applied to all multicultural children's literature. I begin with the background that affected the starting of our work together. Then, I detail the planning of a lesson where Pam melds the use of African-American children's literature with pedagogy that is relevant to her students' cultural background. Next, I present Pam's teaching of that lesson. I conclude by reflecting on our experience of planning and teaching with a culturally relevant pedagogy in mind.

## STARTING

Pam and I taught in a large urban city located in the eastern part of the United States. Our school had over 300 students in Grades K–8, all of whom were African-American. Within this context, we brought different approaches to the start of our work together.

### *My Approach*

When I first started teaching in the district, I planned to use multicultural children's literature. I asked students questions to encourage higher-order thinking. I thought such prompts would produce thoughtful, reflective discussions, but I was wrong. I was not reaching my students. They did not respond to the questions and literature in the ways I had anticipated or the way methods textbooks and articles indicated they would. They gave short, sometimes one-word, responses during discussions; absent were the descriptions of how they personally connected to the lives of literary characters.

Deeply concerned, I searched to find an approach to draw students into the literature. I learned three key theoretical principles: (1) The literature must tap into the content of students' lives by representing accurately and authentically the culture, cultural knowledge, and background they know and live (Bullivant, 1989); (2) the methods—or pedagogy—must tap into the home and community interaction patterns that are central to students' learning and relationships outside school (Au and Mason, 1983); and (3) the way to bring the methods and materials together is to develop a "culturally relevant pedagogy" (Foster, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995; Osborne, 1996). The third principle is achieved by use of materials that are imbued with cultural patterns of students' everyday

lives (Armento, 2001). The goal of such pedagogy is to heighten students' academic performance by providing materials that encourage students to use what they know to acquire new knowledge, skills, and dispositions. With this theoretical focus in mind, I developed a framework to guide my planning and searching for culturally relevant methods and materials.

From the outset, I viewed the framework as a "work in progress" to help organize my thinking. In Table 1, I list across the top a number of cultural patterns that scholars characterize as central to the everyday lives of many African-Americans (Foster, 1995; Ladson-Billings and Henry, 1990). The patterns I found most relevant to the students I worked with were (1) using textual

**TABLE 1.**  
**Culturally Relevant Pedagogy Framework**

		Cultural patterns			
		<i>Textual:</i> Culturally conscious	<i>Social:</i> Call and response	<i>Cultural:</i> Communal connection	<i>Personal:</i> Individual linkage
Pedagogical tools	Methods	How can the methods I use tap into the culturally conscious themes of the literature?	How can the methods I use integrate <i>call-and-response</i> interaction patterns? How can my reading aloud the story prompt <i>call and response</i> interactions?	How can the methods I use draw on my student's community, home, culture, and history?	How can the methods I use create opportunities for students to link their personal lives to the literature?
	Materials	What children's literature reflects the best elements of culturally conscious literature?	What children's literature invites call-and-response interaction during read-alouds? What children's literature includes call-and-response interaction patterns in its dialogue and/or narration?	What children's literature describes an accurate, appropriate, and realistic account of the African-American community, home, culture, and history?	What children's literature invites students to make strong personal connections between the literature and their personal lives?

material (i.e., literature) that consciously reflects the best elements of a cultural group's identity and practice; (2) using familiar communicative social patterns such as "call and response"; (3) connecting to my students' cultural context, that is, their community, home, culture, and history; and (4) linking the literature to students' personal lives.

Down the left side of the framework I listed the two pedagogical tools central to literacy teaching and learning: methods and materials. Where the rows and columns intersect, I posed questions to help me think about the implications of particular cultural patterns for selecting and using the methods and materials for a lesson. For example, one key theme of African-American social interaction is the call-and-response vocal communication pattern—similar to that heard during an African-American church service (Smith, 1995). The teacher says a word or phrase, then the students respond verbally in unison or individually to the teacher's utterance or request. This pattern may continue throughout an entire reading of a story or during specified sections of the text. In the cells below the call-and-response theme, I sketched in several questions that helped me think anew about the methods and materials I used with my students.

Over my 10 years of teaching, I have consciously used this framework to think about the areas of my teaching that I wanted to modify in order to establish a culturally congruent match between my students' lives and the literacy methods and materials I used. I learned that the key to using this framework was to look within myself and examine my own values, attitudes, and belief systems in relation to my students' culture (Abt-Perkins and Gomez, 1993; Strickland, 1994). I took Delpit's (1988) challenge to heart:

To put our beliefs on hold is to see ourselves in another's gaze so that we can learn to be vulnerable enough to allow our world to turn upside down in order to allow the realities of others to edge themselves into our consciousness. (p. 297)

With this in mind, Pam and I talked later that day in the hallway, wondering if we could meet to talk about how the two of us could better assist students in making personal connections during literary encounters.

### ***Pam's Approach***

We agreed that before any changes were made, I should visit her classroom and watch her teach a series of lessons during the language arts block. We thought this information would help us make appropriate decisions about how to develop culturally relevant pedagogy while taking advantage of her own teaching style—so that it positively highlighted and accentuated the lives of the children in her classroom.

*Prereading Activity*

I showed up the next day a few minutes before the lesson. Pam handed me a copy of the basal series that she would use as a guide during her literacy instruction. “I’ll start by introducing vocabulary words from the teachers’ edition,” she said. Walking toward the front of the room, Pam wrote the vocabulary words on the board along with the definition. Students were required to write the words and definitions in their learning logs. Next, Pam said the words aloud; then, students repeated the words. A brief discussion of the meanings followed. I could see that she was faithfully following the scripted suggestions in the basal’s teacher edition. This activity lasted 30 minutes.

*Read Aloud*

Pam immediately moved into reading the basal story (*Home Place*, Dragonwagon, 1990). She randomly called on students to orally read a paragraph or two. This activity took approximately 20 minutes.

*Group Discussion*

At strategic stopping points, Pam asked students questions. For example, after the first several paragraphs, she asked:

Teacher: Where does this story take place?

Ralph: It takes place in a forest and at their house.

Tia: First, they were in the forest; then, it showed the other people in a bedroom and a living room.

Teacher: You both are absolutely right. Let’s move on. Who are the main characters in the story?

John: The characters are—well, it doesn’t give their names, but there was a little girl, her mother, her father, and for the other people, there was a little girl, her parents, and uncles and aunts, I think that’s who they are.

Teacher: You’re right. It doesn’t say. But you assume that’s who they are because they’re all sitting down at the table together.

After a series of these read-question-answer-evaluate interactions (15 minutes), Pam engaged in three extension activities with her students.

*Journal Writing*

Students first wrote a response about the story in their reading logs. Pam prompted, “Describe how you feel about this story. Include any questions or thoughts that came to your mind while we read it.”

In response to *Home Place* (Dragonwagon, 1990), students wrote:

Mary: I like this story because it is very nice.

Bobby: I like the way the girl imagines everything in the story.

Tia: At first I did not understand the story but now I do. Like I did not understand why they had two families. Where did the family go?

Ralph: This story is like the one we read before.

Pam collected the students' reading logs after every entry. She analyzed the mechanics of their writing and the overall quality of the written response. Occasionally she wrote comments like "Nice response," "Good job," and "WOW! I didn't know you felt that way."

#### *Follow-Up Activity*

After students completed their reading logs, they worked on three worksheet activities. The first activity required them to fill in vocabulary words from the story in the appropriate sentence. The second activity required them to complete phonics activities by filling in words that begin with consonant blends such as */bl/*. The third activity required students to complete comprehension questions related to the story.

Following the worksheet activities, students reread the story—sometimes on the next day. They either read the story alone at their desks or read with a partner on the floor in the classroom library.

## **PLANNING**

After I observed Pam teaching a series of lessons, we blocked off time in our schedules to meet and discuss the first steps in our planning process. Of special interest to us was how the four cultural patterns across the top of Table 1 could lend themselves to adapting Pam's instruction so it would be more culturally relevant. We began by discussing the textual pattern.

### ***Textual***

We agreed that the story *Home Place* (Dragonwagon, 1990) did not tap into the personal and cultural knowledge that her students brought from home. It did not, in other words, closely match the lived experiences of the students. Since Sims Bishop (1993) defines culturally conscious literature as that which illuminates the experience of growing up in a nonwhite group by portraying African-American perspectives and lifestyles, we asked ourselves, given the community and school demographics of our work, is the literature we use culturally conscious?

We agreed that the story did not directly tap into anything in Pam's students' lives. It was a good story, but it did not speak how their lives were outside of school.

I explained that some scholars think that the best culturally conscious children's literature is written for and by people of color (Sims Bishop, 1997). If this is true, we agreed, then we wanted to know something about the author and illustrator.

As we talked further, Pam wanted to know more about the guidelines I had used for selecting quality multicultural children's literature. Based on my students' needs and district goals, I had put together five working guidelines from the work of Banks (1991), Hefflin and Barksdale-Ladd (2001), Sims Bishop (1997), and Yokota (1993):

1. Select literature from authors and illustrators who have established reputations for publishing culturally sensitive material, and look at material that highlights the works of new and up- and coming authors and illustrators.
2. Analyze how the characters are portrayed in the story.
3. Analyze the author's use of language.
4. Examine the illustrations for appeal, ethnic sensitivity, and authenticity.
5. Evaluate factual information for accuracy.

The scholarship that supports these guidelines is straightforward. Culturally diverse students learn best when appropriate and authentic materials relate to the students' culture (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Culturally diverse students are much more interested in literature that has characters who live the same cultural experiences as they do (Goetz and Sadoski, 1995). And culturally diverse students are better able to extend and apply their learning when literature and themes that relate to their own lives are used (Schallert and Reed, 1997).

Pam agreed that these guidelines were a good starting point, so we searched through several libraries and bookstores to find books that would fit the guidelines well. In the end, she decided to begin with the book *Cornrows* (Yarbrough, 1979), which is about two young children who get their hair cornrowed (or braided) while their mother and great-grandmother tell stories about their African heritage. She found the match between the book and the guidelines to be a good one, as indicated by her worksheet in Table 2.

### ***Social***

At our next meeting we started by discussing whether the way Pam's interactions with her students were congruent with the way they interacted with adults and texts at home, at church, or in the community.

Pam did not really know, saying she had not thought about it before. My impression was that her way of interacting was not congruent, so we went on to

**TABLE 2.**  
**Pam's Worksheet for Selecting Quality Culturally Conscious African-American Children's Literature: "Cornrows"**

Guideline	Rating	Pam's notes
Author/illustrator reputation	1 2 3 4 ⑤	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Read reviews from <i>Black Authors and Illustrators of Books for Children and Young Adults</i> (Murphy, 1999).</li> <li>• Author and illustrator of <i>Cornrows</i> received favorable reviews for publishing culturally sensitive material.</li> </ul>
Character portrayal	1 2 3 4 ⑤	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Characters celebrate the strength and beauty of cornrows in positive and affirming ways.</li> <li>• Example: The characters are viewed as having positive self-images exemplified in               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. each character's enthusiasm in sharing and listening to stories about African-American history and</li> <li>2. the characters' positive response in knowing that cornrows originated in Africa.</li> </ol> </li> </ul>
Language use	1 2 3 4 ⑤	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• African-American discourse is used as ongoing dialogue in the story as characters talk to one another in natural, authentic, and appropriate ways.</li> <li>• Example: One section reads:  <i>I asked Mama, "What will you put in the basket, Mama?" And she said, "I think I'll put love." Then ol knock-kneed MeToo asked Great-Grammaw, "What will you put in my basket, Great-Grammaw?" And Great-Grammaw said, I think I'll put love."</i> (p. 7)</li> </ul>
Illustration authenticity	1 2 3 4 ⑤	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The artist beautifully and lovingly illustrates scenes of children getting their hair cornrowed by their great-grandmother and of the mother and great-grandmother singing joyfully about their African heritage.</li> <li>• The illustrations also capture authentic and creative portraits of slavery, and pictures of famous African-Americans such as Langston Hughes, Rosa Parks, and Josephine Baker.</li> </ul>



TABLE 2.  
(Continued)

Guideline	Rating	Pam's notes
Information accuracy	1 2 3 4 ⑤	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The story is contemporary, realistic fiction; however, the message in the story rings true: <i>Cornrows originated in Africa, and when the Africans were captured, enslaved, and brought to America against their will, they also brought with them a tradition that was passed down from generation to generation and will transcend time.</i></li> </ul>

look at several examples. For instance, when Pam had students read the story, she randomly called on individuals to read snippets of the literature aloud. But at church, children and their parents interact to the reading of scripture in a “call-and-response” pattern—where the reader “calls” out to the group from the text, followed by a “response” back to the lead reader, and so on. This back-and-forth dialogue is a customary form of social interaction that signals certain behaviors, attitudes, and expectations of those calling and responding. Pam’s approach was more like monologue reading than dialogue reading—students performed their bit, and the spotlight shifted to the next reader to perform. We agreed to have students read the literature through the call-and-response pattern that draws on the cultural storytelling experiences of their home, church, and community—so that they would be motivated to participate and feel a part of the learning (Smith, 1995).

As a second example, we reviewed the group discussion; it was clear to us immediately that it could have drawn on the call-and-response interaction pattern but did not. Pam’s questions were along the lines of a right-and-wrong-answer format. We extended her words by having her initiate a question, elicit a student response, then evaluate the correctness of that response. This pattern, referred to as “initiate, respond, and evaluate” (I-R-E) (Cazden, 1986), is a narrow form of calling and responding, but allows only for brief, “right” answers that fit the teacher’s conception of correctness. It is far removed from the more extended, personal forms of calling and responding that her students knew and used.

We then asked ourselves what her group discussions would look like if the students took seriously the call-and-response pattern of social interaction. We decided to revisit our perspectives on that question later. I could see that Pam was understanding how to use the themes and questions in Table 1 to rethink parts of her teaching, so we posed one final thought: Does the journal writing draw on the call-and-response pattern of interaction?

We laughed, knowing right away that the writing was not very dialogue-oriented at all. We talked about how I learned to use dialogue journal conversations between students and myself to be more effective in tapping into the conversational call-and-response aspects of students' lives. My students often included their personal feelings, knowledge, experiences, opinions, associations, and interpretations because they were interested in reading my friendly, supportive, and affirming responses to their writing (Moss, 1996). As we headed out of the door, we agreed that dialogue journals, not learning logs, seemed more congruent with the social patterns of her students.

### ***Cultural***

We met several times over the next few weeks to talk about the last two patterns in Table 1. Two questions framed our conversations. One was: Are we drawing on students' cultural background with the questions asked before and after reading? We talked at length about how best to orchestrate questions that evoke student responses from a cultural frame of reference. For instance, we agreed that the prereading question "Have you ever had your hair cornrowed by someone?" elicits a quite different response from "Have you ever had your hair fixed by someone?"

My own background with Rosenblatt's (1983) theory of reader response led me to talk about the need for taking into account culturally diverse students' backgrounds while preparing for and reflecting on literature. Blake (1998) suggests the primary way of taking this background into account is to encourage students to formulate their own cultural texts before and after encountering a literary work, thereby opening up the options to respond aesthetically. These cultural texts, built on lived experiences and discourses (Knupfer, 1995), embody shared values, traditions, social relationships, and worldviews known by a larger body of people bound together by a common history (Nieto, 2000).

The overall effect is that these cultural texts encourage students to use their own knowledge to understand and name their world (Fairbanks, 1998). But in order for this interaction to occur between the students and the teacher, we have to ask questions that prompt students to see value in the funds of knowledge they know and use outside of school (Moll and Greenberg, 1990), and we have to bring them to bear on the thinking, talking, reading, and writing done in school during a literacy lesson (Au, 1997).

I understood Pam's frustration about the short, unelaborated responses students were giving to discussion questions. The images of grand conversations always seemed to fall short (Eeds and Wells, 1989). I suggested that we think about beginning discussions by asking students to respond to the literature first and then asking questions that require literal interpretation. From my own experience and professional reading, I found that using the personalized questions

up front opened the door for more aesthetic responses (Sims Bishop, 1987) and helped students make connections to literature by stimulating further inquiry (Moss, 1996). Grice and Vaughn's (1992), and Sims Bishop's (1987) work on developing questions for culturally conscious African-American children's literature points out that questions should center on the content of the story that encourages students to offer their personal experiences, interpretations, and associations to the literature. In the end, we decided to work at modifying questioning practices to increase heightened levels of affirmation of African-American culture.

### ***Personal***

The other question that framed our time together was: Are we linking students' personal lives to the literature through questions and follow-up activities? Pam's prereading activities elicited very little of students' personal knowledge of the story to be read. Looking up vocabulary and writing definitions drew little on their experiences. We agreed that she should ask questions that activated relevant background information and invited students to make predictions about the story before they read. By doing so, they could link and think not only about how their personal lives related to the literature, but about how the full set of cultural, home, and community funds of knowledge related as well.

We also thought the worksheet activities did little, if anything, to bridge students' personal experiences with the literary work. In fact, several of the activities did not lend themselves to extending the literature encounter at all. We wondered whether art portraits could be used as a better way to extend literature experiences. After some searching in the professional literature, we found that they serve a dual purpose—indicating how students connect their personal experiences with the lives of the characters in the literature artistically and how the students link the literature to their personal experiences (Hefflin, 1996). Our interest, though, was in seeing her students seize the artistic opportunity to illustrate their personal and cultural conceptions of the literature.

### **TEACHING**

After discussing and planning at length, Pam and I decided it was time to implement a revised form of teaching using the book *Cornrows* (Yarbrough, 1979). The components of the lesson remained the same, but the order of journal writing and group discussion switched so that the sequence of her lesson was now (1) prereading activity, (2) read aloud, (3) journal writing, (4) group discussion, and (5) follow-up activity. Staying with these components made sense for three reasons: (1) Pam was familiar with the components, (2) she saw

them as a consistent means toward accomplishing her and the districts' goals, and (3) she could adapt her teaching within each component so that it aligned better with the cultural patterns in Table 1. Over a two-day period, Pam's revised instructional plan was carried out as follows:

### **Day 1**

#### *Prereading Activity*

During the five-minute prereading activity, Pam focused the students' attention on a language experience chart with the book title, *Cornrows*, in the center. She then added story element headings—characters, setting, plot, and events—around the title. Pam asked students to predict and analyze what the story was going to be about based on the story title and cover. (For more information on using language experience charts, see Yopp and Yopp, 2001). To make the prereading activity culturally sensitive and highlight the cultural and personal patterns noted in Table 1, Pam centered the questions on story content that related to the students' knowledge about African-American heritage, and she asked for personal associations with this knowledge. The overall effect of this revised prereading activity was a more socially interactive sharing of cultural and personal knowledge of the story they were about to read:

Teacher: Have you heard the word *cornrows* before?

Students: Yeah . . . (in unison)

Teacher: How have you heard it used?

Keith: My mom cornrows my hair, so I think this story is about getting your hair cornrowed.

John: My mom cornrowed my hair, but I took them out.

Mia: I get my hair cornrowed.

Amy: I get my hair cornrowed, too.

Ada: My brother gets his hair cornrowed, too.

Teacher: It sounds as if you're pretty familiar with cornrows.

Students: Yeah . . . (in unison)

Teacher: How many of you have had your hair cornrowed?

Students: (most of class raises hands)

Teacher: Do you like to get your hair cornrowed?

Students: Yes/No. (said simultaneously)

Mia: It hurts.

Teacher: Do you like the way it looks?

Students: Yes. (in unison)

Teacher: Looking at the cover of this book, how do you think this story will connect to your personal experience?

Ann: Well, I think this story will be about black people who get their hair cornrowed. I think cornrows is related to black people because . . . I don't see white people wearing cornrows that much . . . I see a lot of black people.

Teacher: Well, it appears that many of you, as well as family members and African-Americans in general—as Ann has stated—have had the same experience of getting your hair cornrowed. So, because many of you get your hair cornrowed, you think the story is about cornrowed hair. How many of you agree with Ann: You think this story will be about black people who get their hair cornrowed?

Students: (all raise their hands)

Teacher: Look at these three people on the cover of the book. How are you like them? How are you different from them?

Tye: They look like me because we're the same color. I think this story is about black people, too. I like reading about my heritage and I like stories about black people. I would like to read, see more, you know, black people in stories.

Keith: Me, too.

Tiffany: I agree with you, Tye, 'cause it's not that I don't like white people or nothing . . . 'cause you don't see a lot of books that have black people in them. And, again, it's not to be rude to white people, but you can imagine what black people are thinking of 'cause it might give you a better idea.

### *Read Aloud*

Next, Pam spent about 15 minutes reading the story to her students. This time, her intent was to emphasize the textual, social, and cultural patterns in Table 1. (For more information on call and response, see Smith, 1994, 1995.) She read sections of the story, stopping at designated points to prompt student responses. She sometimes called on all the students to respond in short approving or disapproving ways by inflecting the tone of her voice or raising an eyebrow. At other times, she called on students individually to share information about what they would name their cornrows and how their hair can be styled; students added names to the list of famous names provided in the story. The overall effect of this more socially interactive oral reading was to call on the students to participate in and respond to the telling of the story while it was read aloud. As illustrated below, Pam and the students played a hair name game. Pam asked, "What will you name your hairstyle?" Before each student responded, Pam repeated the word *hairstyle* as a "call" prompt for them to respond to:

Teacher: What will you name your hairstyle?  
 Tye: My style.  
 Teacher: Hairstyle?  
 Tina: Tina.  
 Teacher: Hairstyle?  
 Ada: Flippsie.  
 John: Why?  
 Ada: 'Cause I would have it curled under.  
 Teacher: Hairstyle?  
 Keith: Reggie.  
 Lea: Reggie, why?  
 Keith: 'Cause that's my baby brother's name.  
 Teacher: Hairstyle?  
 Tye: Queen.  
 Teacher: Hairstyle?  
 Tiffany: Love.  
 Teacher: Hairstyle?  
 Bobby: Michael Jordan.  
 Students: (all laugh)

### *Journal Writing*

Pam directed her students to write in dialogue journals for about five minutes. (For more information on using dialogue journals, see Cramer, 2001.) She posed a question that focused on the content of the story as it related to the students' personal cultural experiences: "What memories or thoughts about cornrows did you think of during the story?" Pam collected the journals and responded to each student's entry that evening, extending (i.e., asking why they thought/felt as they did, asking them to tell more, or asking them if they had read similar books) or noting (i.e., stating an observation about the content of the student's writing or rephrasing it with an empathetic note). The next day (see below), the students responded to Pam's response. The overall effect was an integration of the textual, social, cultural, and personal "cultural patterns."

Paul: The story tells me that cornrows came from Africa and it's nice to know where it came from. You should know about your heritage so you can pass it on to your kids.  
 Teacher: You had a strong reaction to learning about your heritage, Paul. Why was your reaction so strong?  
 Paul: I think it's important to know about your heritage.  
 Tia: This book is special. It reminds me of my mom because every summer she'll give me cornrows.

Teacher: I never had cornrows in my hair. Can you tell me what it's like getting your hair cornrowed?

Tia: I just sit for hours and hours. My head hurts me a lot.

### *Group Discussion*

Pam engaged students in a discussion of the literature that lasted approximately 45 minutes. (For more information on using response-oriented discussion formats, see Roser and Martinez, 1995). Her aim was to have the students respond first, then to draw on these responses to put together a fuller understanding of the book's story. The overall effect of this revised discussion approach was to frame the discussion with the textual, social, cultural, and personal "cultural patterns" in Table 1.

Teacher: Could this story be real, and could you be in the story?

Paul: Yes, it could be real, and I could be in the story because . . . well, I'm black, and I should know about my heritage so I can pass it on to my kids. I think it's nice to know where you came from. You might want to write a book to tell your kids that you know your heritage. You can say my great-great grandmother or -grandfather was a king or queen.

Mary: I agree with him because that could come true 'cause I know some people who get their hair cornrowed.

Keith: Yes, because it's a true story. People could name their braids, and if I was to get my hair braided, I could name it myself. So, I think it could be true.

Teacher: So, many of you feel that the story could be true because you and family members have actually experienced what the characters experienced—getting your hair cornrowed. And that's why you feel that you can be in the story. What do you think about the illustrations of the characters?

Ann: I think the illustrations are special because if you read that book you may be able to learn something that happened long ago.

Keith: I think the illustrations are very good because they show mostly black people.

Amy: Yeah. You can tell it happened long, long ago because the pictures are black and white.

Teacher: So, the story and illustrations seem real to you. Why, then, do you suppose the main characters reacted the way they did when they were getting their hair braided?

Tye: They were excited to know that cornrows came from Africa. And now I know where cornrows came from.

Kara: When they grow up, if they have children, they can pass it on about how this style started and where it came from. It's important to know where this hairstyle came from so you can learn about your heritage.

Jay: I think it's nice to know where you came from. Everybody needs to know where they come from 'cause they'll wonder—ok, I was born, but where did I come from?

### Day 2

#### Follow-Up Activity

The next day, Pam returned the students' dialogue journals and gave them 10 minutes to respond to her questions and comments. As students finished their written dialogue responses, they moved on to the next task. "Draw a picture of the person, object, or event that you were most reminded of during the reading of *Cornrows*. Be prepared to describe your illustration." (For more information on using portraiture as response, see Kiefer, 1995). See Figure 1 for an example of Davina's pictorial response.

When everyone was nearly completed, Pam asked her students to share their portraits with one another, which allowed them to see how others had inter-



FIG. 1. Davina's pictorial response to *Cornrows* (Yarbrough, 1979).



preted the material (Alvermann and Phelps, 1994). The overall effect was to highlight the “cultural patterns” noted in Table 1. This excerpt illustrates the type of sharing that occurred:

- Teacher: Who would like to share their art portrait?  
 Davina: This is a picture of my mommy cornrowing my hair, and this is a mirror. It always hurts. That’s why I wrote the word *ouch*.  
 Mary: This is a picture of me and my family. We all just got our hair cornrowed by my mom.  
 Kara: I drew a picture of me and my mother. She always cornrows my hair.  
 Tye: My picture is me with my whole family. This is my father; I’m sitting on his lap, and these are my sisters.  
 Tia: I drew a picture of myself with Martin Luther King.  
 Dan: I drew a picture of my sister getting her hair braided.

## REFLECTING

Irvine (2001) asserts that “teacher knowledge and reflection are important considerations when designing and implementing a culturally responsive lesson” (p. 6). With this in mind, we began our next meeting with the question that started us down this path some weeks earlier; So, how do you integrate multicultural literature into your lessons, keep your students interested, and still cover the required curriculum?

We agreed that it works best when we think about pedagogy in light of culture. The questions in Table 1 helped us to see where the two intersect. From there, we worked out the details for making culturally relevant pedagogy happen.

Our experience had taught us the same. Tailoring instruction to fit the textual, social, cultural, and personal lives of students so that curricular goals can be realized is largely about seeing the materials and methods of our work through the norms and practices of our students’ lives.

To the extent Pam enacted this theoretical “way of seeing,” we were both pleased about her initial move toward a culturally relevant pedagogy. More noticeably, Pam’s students were pleased. Compared to the response to her original approach, students’ verbal and written performance indicated that they engaged and performed more fully with the culturally relevant approach. Changes occurred in how the students took an active role in the prereading activity by responding in more detail within a cultural frame of reference, how they became more responsive during the read aloud, how they wrote more elaborate responses in their dialogue journals about themselves and their families, and how they engaged in longer, richer discussions about African-American heritage and traditions.

As we thought about our next move, we looked back at the revisions Pam

had made. Her prereading activity had moved from looking up definitions to the use of a language experience chart. The cultural patterns that mediated this change were the social, cultural, and personal norms and practices of the larger African-American community. We could also see how other lesson components were shaped by various cultural patterns described in Table 1.

According to Armento (2001), there are a number of beliefs central to the development of culturally relevant pedagogy. Those that helped to nurture and guide our inquiry were the beliefs that culturally relevant pedagogy encourages teachers to (1) provide and use relevant and meaningful learning materials; (2) create learning environments inclusive of cultures, customs, and traditions that are different from their own; and (3) include lessons that assist students in making meaningful connections between their lives and school-related experiences. We decided to explore the remaining beliefs, such as promoting individual empowerment and nurturing learning-support communities for each child, in greater detail, in the near future.

When it came to our immediate next steps, we discussed several possibilities. Pam wanted to explore pedagogical tools in greater detail. She asked me to videotape her so she could view her teaching from a distance to fine-tune her role as a call-and-response discussion leader, making use of better transitions among group and individual talk. She also wanted to think about how the tools for thought and action we had used could be applied to other multicultural children's literature and subject areas.

I wanted to explore the cultural patterns of Table 1 by reading books and articles that touched on the norms and practices other people have seen and experienced in African-American communities. I suggested a few starter titles: *Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory, Research, and Practice* (Gay, 2000); *Literacy in African American Communities* (Harris, Kamhi, and Pollock, 2001); *Ways with Words: Language, Life, and Work in Communities and Classrooms* (Heath, 1983); and *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children* (Ladson-Billings, 1994).

To this end, we realized that to reconceptualize our approach to teaching and be more inclusive of diverse cultures, we needed a broader instructional lens through which to view the world—and the students in our classrooms. We needed a pedagogy that was relevant to our students' culture. The effect of this pedagogy not only created a milieu for greater participation, understanding, and tolerance, but it also signaled to students that we were not a segregated community of learners, but one that was integrated into and reaching beyond the lives they know and live.

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