



## **Narratives on Culturally Relevant Pedagogy: Personal Responses to the Standardized Curriculum**

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As curriculum objectives become more “standardized,” pedagogical strategies that reach diverse populations become more important, not less as some practitioners might be prone to believe. Through the use of narratives, we have found that students achieve greater understandings of curriculum as well as find culturally relevant ways of applying curriculum to previous knowledge. Using the same line of thinking, stories of successful pedagogical practice help to reinforce the ideas behind culturally relevant pedagogy as it translates from theory into practice. Classroom narratives from students and teachers where culturally relevant pedagogical practices have been implemented are the focus of this article.

Efforts to implement standardization in education have increased over the years. This return to “a single standard of achievement and a one-dimensional definition of the common will...result in severe injustices to the children ...” (Greene, 1995, p. 173). In schools today, the phrase “high standards” implies that every student is expected to reach a predetermined bar. The inevitable consequence becomes failure when teachers are forced to implement these standards without regards to the needs and experiences of the students. Teachers and administrators blame the state standards and assessments for the decline of multicultural education (Bohn & Sleeter, 2001). “Standards can...make explicit what students will be tested on, a detail that may help parents and community leaders at least know what the ‘game’ is and what the students will be judged on” (Bohn & Sleeter, 2001, p. 2). Many students’ educations are in jeopardy because they are

oblivious to this game or “culture of power” (Delpit, 1995). Standardized approaches to curricula and pedagogy are inadequate when considering the needs of culturally diverse classrooms. Delpit (1995) argues that “children who may be gifted in real-life settings are often at a loss when asked to exhibit knowledge solely through decontextualized paper-and-pencil exercises” (p.173). In order to provide a culturally relevant environment for teaching, no one pedagogy should control the classroom by excluding all others.

We have been involved in conversations with our peers in different school districts and find that many teachers are supposed to be on specific lessons on specific days – that the lessons are fairly scripted and that deviation from the timeline is not permitted. No room is allowed for individuality or creativity in presenting lessons; only the officially sanctioned timeline of lessons is to be seen if an

administrator walks into the classroom. Delpit (2003) goes into details of excellent teachers who have been reprimanded for not following standardized curriculum, including one who was “ordered to give up his thoughtful, imaginative, and effective practice in order to conform to following the script of the mandated *Open Court (SRA/McGraw Hill, 2002)* literacy program. Although he protested that his students were already achieving beyond the district’s expectations, he was told he had to fall in line” (p.15). We concur with Delpit that this practice is dangerous, treating students as products on an assembly line, with no thought as to the emotional and intellectual growth, only the results on a standardized test.

While we find the experiences the teachers in these districts are having to be appalling, the missing factor for us in all the talk about standards is the student. Where does the student fit into this assembly line model of education? What experiences does the student bring with her when she enters the classroom? What are the cultural expectations and mores that the student encounters at home? What kinds of biases are inherent in the curriculum that prevent student learning? We believe that through responsive teachers, schools can make a difference and begin to address these questions and the impact of education on the lives of students (Banks, Cookson, Gay, et al., 2001). As educators, we understand that there is more to education than “covering” the objectives that are issued to us from our state departments of education; there is also the need to cultivate relations with our students, to allow students the opportunity to be free to express their ideas without fear of reprisal or humiliation in our classrooms, to make the curriculum relevant to all. By making teaching culturally relevant, strategies such as constructing multicultural representations in the classrooms will help bridge the gap between students, their diverse experiences, and what the school curriculum requires (Banks, Cookson, Gay, et al., 2001).

In an effort to find ways to build bridges between the home and school as well as academic and lived experiences of students, we performed a literature review on cultural biases in education and pedagogical practices to help in our exploration to find strategies that will counteract or eliminate these biases. In order to make the literature come alive for us, we began to look for examples within our own classrooms that represented culturally responsive pedagogy in action. In this article you will find some understandings we culled from our literature review, followed by anecdotes that represent for us theory in practice. The anecdotes you find here represent just the beginning of this exercise, as we have also begun

collecting real world examples from our peers. We hope to illustrate how theory can be moved into practice, with narratives where culturally responsive pedagogical practices have been implemented in our classrooms.

### **Educational Importance for Culturally Relevant/Responsive Teaching**

The 2000 census shows a growing Hispanic and African American population in the United States, and figures show that non-White population in the United States is approximating 25% (Grieco & Cassidy, 2001). Meanwhile, a recent study in our state, Georgia, shows that the teaching force in Georgia remains over 80% White, with a trend of higher turnover for White teachers at schools that serve predominantly minority students (Freeman, Scafidi, & Sjoquist, 2002). As “No Child Left Behind” reforms and the consequential “Adequate Yearly Progress” reports that specifically track performance of ethnic groups emerge, the focus for teachers ought to move away from what curriculum will be tested to how to engage both teachers and students in appropriate pedagogical practices for diverse populations. The importance of multicultural education as well as culturally appropriate pedagogical practices becomes even clearer.

Literature has been devoted to the empowerment of the majority culture and the consequent disabling of minority students (e.g. Bowman, 1994; Cotton, 1991; Cummins, 1985; Dimitriadis, 2001; Hale, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Lipka, 2002; Perry & Delpit, 1998; Salzer, 1998; Steele, 1992). “Many of the...marginalized are made to feel distrustful of their own voices...yet they are not provided alternatives that allow them to their stories or shape their narratives or ground new learning in what they already know” (Greene, 1995). In order for students to “buy into” education, they must be able to find a personal connection with education and the learning process. As teachers we ought to become fluid in our curricula presentation so as to allow students opportunities to connect. Using Gloria Ladson-Billings term, culturally relevant teaching, we ought to initiate actions to integrate the students’ cultural backgrounds into the classroom (1994, 1995). The objective of a culturally relevant classroom is to use this connection between culture and curriculum, home and school to promote academic achievement.

Ladson-Billings (1994) and others (e.g. Gay, 2000; Howard, 2003; Klug & Whitfield, 2002; Townsend, 2002) have taken the research a step further with the development of culturally relevant/responsive pedagogy, a theoretical framework for education “that attempts to integrate the culture of different racial and ethnic groups into

the overall academic program” (<http://www.emstac.org/registered/topics/disproportionality/models.htm>). By involving students in a culturally responsive classroom, they learn different ways of knowing, understanding, and presenting information. Because diverse views are allowed, students are introduced to new and diverse interpretations and perspectives. The different views challenge and broaden the students’ boundaries. In the classrooms students are allowed to use their strengths which in turn facilitates the development of new skills. Moreover, associations are made between the school culture and home culture.

What exactly is meant when we say culturally relevant pedagogy? Gay (2000) actually prefers the term culturally responsive as opposed to relevant, and one will find that we use the terms interchangeably. From Gay, we find that “Culturally responsive teaching can be defined as using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant and effective for them” (p. 29). Gay notes that improving academic achievement is far from the only goal, as a culturally responsive approach to teaching helps students of color “maintain identity and connection with their ethnic groups and communities; develop a sense of community, camaraderie, and shared responsibility; and acquire an ethic of success” (p. 30). Further, culturally responsive/relevant teaching can be described as multidimensional. While it does address curriculum content, culturally relevant teaching also includes “learning context, classroom climate, student-teacher relationships, instructional techniques, and performance assessments” (p. 31). An important understanding of this multidimensionality is to realize that

To do this kind of teaching well requires tapping into a wide range of cultural knowledge, experiences, contributions, and perspectives. Emotions, beliefs, values, ethos, opinions, and feelings are scrutinized along with factual information to make curriculum and instruction more reflective of and responsive to ethnic diversity. However, every conceivable aspect of an ethnic group’s culture is not replicated in the classroom. Nor are the cultures included in the curriculum used only with students from that ethnic group. Cultural responsive pedagogy focuses on those elements of cultural socialization that most directly affect learning. (Gay, 2000, pp. 31-32)

Consequently, culturally responsive teaching can be considered transformative, as “it recognizes the existing strengths and accomplishments of these students and then enhances them further in the

instructional process” (Gay, 2000, p. 33) and emancipatory, “in that it releases the intellect of students of color from the constraining manacles of mainstream canons of knowledge and ways of knowing” (Gay, 2000, p. 35). Finally, “cooperation, community, and connectedness are also central features of culturally responsive teaching. Students are expected to work together and are held accountable for one another’s success” (Gay, 2000, p. 36).

Even with the aforementioned research, as educators we still find an ever-growing divide between theory and practice. While there is a movement within teacher education programs to include more instruction about multicultural education, and even a “bold proposal” to certify new teachers in culturally responsive pedagogy (Townsend, Nov.2002), there remains a large segment of the practicing teaching population who are unexposed and unaware of the philosophy behind the movement, or for that matter, unaware of the need for culturally relevant teaching practices in the face of the standards movement.

#### **The Need for Visualization: Translating Theory into Practice**

While appreciating the literature on culturally relevant pedagogy, we felt a need to visualize the practices in classrooms that are very culturally diverse as well as classrooms that are predominantly White. This visualization is important for several reasons. One author is an African American woman who teaches in a culturally diverse middle school, while the other author is a White woman who taught in a predominantly White elementary school. Our experiences are vastly different, but we both believe that every child in our classroom has the right to be successful, and the right to be affirmed as an important human being regardless of the ethnic makeup of our classes – culturally responsive pedagogy is one way to accomplish this task. The conversations we have had about what culturally responsive pedagogy looks like in our classrooms have been invaluable in helping each other make deeper connections. Another reason why we have become engrossed in this visualization is in an effort to make the practice more accessible to our colleagues and present our students with opportunities for academic success while guiding them to become more caring, concerned, and humane individuals.

In both of our personal experiences as teachers in a K-12 setting, we have learned from experience that the use of narratives in the classroom not only helps students to achieve a greater understanding of curriculum, but also allows our students to find culturally relevant ways of applying

the curriculum to previous knowledge. Theoretically and methodically we took a narrative approach as we monitored our own classrooms. This study began as a project for our doctoral class; however, we quickly realized the impact culturally relevant pedagogy had on our students and the classroom environment. Narrative inquiry encouraged us to examine our roles as practitioners as we listened to and learned from the stories of our students. Through the storytelling we were allowed to understand perspectives of others and develop rich connections as we gained knowledge academically and socially. Using the same line of thinking, we as teachers achieve a greater understanding of culturally relevant practice by listening to one another. Our own experiences of listening to each other about events in our classrooms have solidified this belief for us. Stories of successful pedagogical practice with diverse populations help to reinforce the ideas behind culturally relevant pedagogy as it translates from theory into practice.

#### **Narratives from Our Classrooms**

Our scripts are based on life experiences, students' needs, and required curriculum. Through narratives, we have attempted to move the curriculum from the noun to verb form by restoring the fluidity to curriculum. By utilizing a concept of fluidity the curriculum becomes reflexive instead of linear. Students are able to accept diversity and develop and enhance critical thinking skills, where as those in a linear environment settle for dichotomous understanding. Worded differently, the inability to make connections through teachable moments when the interpretation of standards is a curriculum that insists upon specific objectives and pages covered reduces the fluid nature of dialogue within the classroom, and the understandings that can emerge about one another and the curriculum. As teachers we need to realize that narratives are powerful tools that can positively or negatively affect our students. Through narratives we are presented with a safe environment to experience, explore, and understand with a different openness. The following narratives represent some of our own personal explorations with culturally responsive pedagogy in classrooms that are the most familiar to us – our own.

#### **Narrative I:**

*Recently my literature classes read a short story about two pre-teens (boy and girl) that are in conflict with their family, cultural tradition, and community. The children were preparing to endure a cultural ritual that takes place when the boy child becomes a warrior and the girl becomes a woman. In the introductory discussion the students and I talked about traditions. In each class, I had at least one student per class to express that*

*the traditions of the featured culture was "stupid."*

*I asked my students two questions that took our discussion to a new level. The questions: Why do you think this tradition is stupid? How would you feel if someone called your family tradition stupid? I could realize these students were in some instances speaking from learned stereotypes. They honestly did not know why they spoke so negatively about differences.*

*After our class discussions, I could tell some of the students realized the pain their closed mindedness and negative words could cause. I believe this storytelling also allowed the students to see the conflict from the "other" point of view. The students were able to understand how it feels to be torn between following family tradition and how others perceive your difference.*

*In one class a student shared a narrative that served as the perfect bridge into our literature story. This student began with her feelings of fear of an Indian woman in her neighborhood that wore clothing that covered all but her eyes. She thought this woman was deformed. Her mother was friends with this lady and arranged for the Indian woman to tell her daughter of her culture and beliefs. The student was even allowed to try on one of the woman's garments. Quickly she clarified that she did not try on a garment but a Jhumm (head and body covering) and a Ghago (dress). She eventually completed a social studies project on the culture of her neighbor and got an A. This student was beaming with excitement as she told this story to the class. While she talked, her peers stared and clung to every part of her story. By gaining exposure to a different culture, history, and literature the students gained experience, learned respect for difference, and developed empathy and a greater understanding of self and others.*

In reflecting upon the above narrative there is displayed an instance in which the traditional curriculum has stepped apart from the rigid steps and rules process of teaching. The students had the opportunity to experience "otherness" and use that unique experience to see the literature story from a different lens. The lessons that incorporate narratives, like the above, encourage students to be autonomous, find a connection, and allow for personal reflection on diversity. "The purpose of critical reflection is not to indict teachers...but to improve practice, rethinking, philosophies, and become more effective

for today's ever-changing population" (Howard, 2003).

### **Reflection through Critically Relevant Pedagogy Enhances Education**

One component of narrative teaching is the opportunity for self-reflection. The value of reflection in education has been documented in history through the era of John Dewey. Dewey (1933) viewed reflection as a form of problem solving developed in the framework of using experiences as a deliberate cognitive process. This philosophical process is interwoven with many contemporary approaches to education. In order for this process to be beneficial in a diverse society, we should be cognizant of moral, political, and ethical concepts presented.

Ladson-Billings (1994) argues on the same lines of Dewey that a reflective approach provides students with an authentic belief that culturally diverse students are capable learners. She argues that if students are treated as morally and ethically competent, they will demonstrate these expectations through actions. To become culturally relevant, we as teachers need to engage in honest, critical reflection and discourse that challenges our colleagues and students into reevaluating their positionality. "Good intentions and awareness are not enough to bring about the changes needed in educational programs and procedures to prevent academic inequities among diverse students" (Gay, 2000, p. 13). This discourse will explore the areas of race, culture, social class, and gender and how these characteristics shape our learning, thinking, and understanding of our curriculum, society, and the world.

#### **Narrative II:**

*Poetry is another unit placed within the Literature curriculum for K-12 student. Within the thematic unit and standardized curriculum, students are required to read and explain from a literary canon to which they cannot connect. As with most topics, students come alive when they are able to read, learn, and write about something that is of interest to them. Ladson-Billings (1995) asserts, "if the students' home language is incorporated into the classroom, students are more likely to experience academic success" (p. 159). In many instances musicians speak the home language of our students. Many required poetry units feature traditional works that are considered foreign to students that live in the popular culture era. Narratives by those outside the school environment can be used to find that connection so that students are capable of relating to the unit of study.*

*The first day of the poetry unit the students entered my room with sad faces and despair. The question on many of their mind was how long we had to study poetry. I waited until I got everyone's attention and began to name the poets that would introduce our unit. I told the students that I would hope they recognized some of the names and began to call names of the rap artists and singers they recognize from radio and television. Within two minutes my class was electric. The students understand and listen intently to popular rap songs, and this was the needed connection to re-ignite the spark for poetry. Rap music is a global phenomenon that my students understand. I decided to use the genre of the hip-hop culture to introduce poetry and get my students excited about poetry. The idea behind rap as poetry is to encourage the students to remove the melody of a song they know and like and realize that once the words are spoken, there is a poem. Once the excitement developed, it was an easy transition from rap to the required poetry for the curriculum.*

One important feature of culturally relevant pedagogy is that the teacher does not teach as if the student has deficits of knowledge (Howard, 2003, p. 14). In this above instance, the students were affirmed and their knowledge of popular culture was treated as worth knowing. In addition, this introduction to poetry further helped to explicitly make a "connection between culture and learning" (Howard, 2003, p. 15) as well as "incorporate a wider range of dynamic and fluid teaching practices" (Howard, 2003, p. 15), both of which are important understandings of what culturally relevant pedagogy entails.

#### **Choosing Excellence**

"Culturally relevant teaching requires that teachers attend to students' academic needs, not merely make them 'feel good.' The trick of culturally relevant teaching is to get students to 'choose' academic excellence" (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 160).

#### **Narrative III:**

*Just this week I witnessed one of those moments where students chose academic excellence. The students had been working diligently as we studied the elements of mythology. To keep the excitement high, I decided to incorporate an art activity. The students chose partners or small groups. The objective was to create a mythic cartoon that had characterization, foreshadowing, a mythic hero, and a moral. While meeting the*

*students' needs in academics, I saw culturally relevant teaching pay off as a bond develops between two of my most 'unlikely' students.*

*J is an African American male student that was recently mainstreamed into the regular classroom from the Behavior Disorder class. He is opinionated, loud, and very independent. A is a White male student that comes from a very conservative environment. He is the typical child with the need to please. A is independent (when he believes the teacher wishes it). I assume from A's mannerisms and reactions to the other students and to me that he has limited interactions with minorities outside the school environment.*

*Both boys love sports and wanted to use that love as the framework for their Mythic Cartoon. They had the same idea and very reluctantly decided to work together. A is an excellent writer with a keen sense of creativity. J is an excellent artist with a flair for drawing what others request. The boys worked diligently and actually produced the best product of all the classes that completed the assignment. Their classmates were in awe of the final project. Three days later, I noticed them talking in the hall and sitting together during lunch. J (the behavior problem) is much calmer and contributes positively to the class. I watched A have an opinion in a discussion, and he did not back down when other students disagreed. What an amazing transformation for both boys. I am almost certain that these two students would have been in the same class for the entire year and never talk. However, their love for football and art created an unlikely friendship and connection.*

The above narrative is an interesting example of choosing excellence. Not only did the assignment allow the students to succeed while using their strengths, but it also created a bridge between cultures – showing each student that the other has strengths to bring to the table, focusing on positive interaction rather than negative interaction.

### **Culturally Responsive Pedagogy in Majority White Schools**

Through narratives, teachers are able to look inward. This allows teachers to know themselves and their students. Palmer (1998) asserts that “we teach who we are.” Hard questions are then asked: Are the students that fail unlike us?

We feel that culturally responsive pedagogy is not only important for schools who have a large representation of diverse populations, but also important in schools that do not have a large diverse population. Ladson-Billings (1994) states, “Culturally relevant teaching is about questioning (and preparing students to question) the structural inequality, the racism, and the injustice that exist in society” (p. 128). Nieto (2000) elaborates on this point further:

Racism is seldom mentioned in school (it is bad, a dirty word) and therefore is not dealt with. Unfortunately, many teachers think that simply having lessons in getting along or celebrating Human Relations Week will make students nonracist or nondiscriminatory in general. But it is impossible to be untouched by racism, sexism, linguisticism, heterosexism, ageism, anti-Semitism, classism, and ethnocentrism in a society characterized by all of them....Therefore, part of the mission of the school becomes creating the space and encouragement that legitimates talk about racism and discrimination and makes it a source of dialogue. (p. 307)

This element is why we include stories that show the importance of examining and affirming cultures in the classroom when the majority of the faces are White. Not only do these teachers have a responsibility to the students in their rooms who are not part of the dominant culture, they also have a responsibility to all of their students to learn to accept and appreciate one another. “We must cultivate in ourselves a capacity for sympathetic imagination that will enable us to comprehend the motives and choices of people different from ourselves, seeing them not only as forbiddingly alien...but as sharing many problems and possibilities with us” (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 85). There are so many differences in society that it makes acceptance of different people, diverse cultural beliefs, or various points of view harder. Through the development of understanding and sympathy we can hopefully learn to collaborate across cultural boundaries.

#### **Narrative A:**

*In one of my classes recently, I had a class discussion based on something that I found that was entitled “If the world were a village of 100 people” (Some of this information, found below, can be found at <http://www.pratyeka.org/library/text/100people.html>). The following represents some of the information that we discussed:*

- 70 would be nonwhite, 30 would be white
- 61 would be Asian, 13 African, 13 from North and South America, 12

*Europeans, and the remaining one from the South Pacific.*

- *33 would be Christians, 19 believers in Islam, 13 would be Hindus, and 6 would follow Buddhist teachings. 5 would believe that there are spirits in the trees and rocks and in all of nature. 24 would believe in other religions, or would believe in no religion.*
- *17 would speak Chinese, 9 English, 8 Hindi and Urdu, 6 Spanish, 6 Russian, and 4 would speak Arabic. That would account for half the village. The other half would speak Bengal, Portuguese, Indonesian, Japanese, German, French, or some other language.*
- *In such a village with so many sorts of folks, it would be very important to learn to understand people different from yourself and to accept others as they are. But consider this. Of the 100 people in this village,*
  - *20 are undernourished, 1 is dying of starvation, while 15 are overweight.*
  - *Of the wealth in this village, 6 people own 59% (all of them from the United States), 74 people own 39%, and 20 people share the remaining 2%.*
  - *Of the energy of this village, 20 people consume 80%, and 80 people share the remaining 20%.*
  - *75 people have some supply of food and a place to shelter them from the wind and the rain, but 25 do not. 17 have no clean, safe water to drink.*
  - *If you have money in the bank, money in your wallet and spare change somewhere around the house, then you are among the richest 8.*
  - *If you have a car, you are among the richest 7.*
  - *Among the villages, 1 has a college education. 2*

*have computers. 14 cannot read.*

*I decided that for this activity I would present this information by writing it on the board, but that I wanted my students to copy it. Groans of how “mean” I am followed from some students, but I believe that by having the students copy the information, the possibility of them absorbing what was presented was greater. It certainly allowed for more introspection.*

*After the students had finished copying most of the information, I asked them how this relates to perspective, our focus of discussion. One child said that we are very fortunate. Many of them had never thought that a college education could be considered rare – after all, most of their parents have college educations. Somehow in the conversation, someone said that this is a reminder to treat others the way that you want to be treated, and I asked in return “Is it really?” This brought us into a discussion of how different cultures have different social mores, and the way that people within that culture want to be treated may be very different from the way that “I” want to be treated. As I reflected back on how the conversation progressed in both classes, I thought to myself that more students need to be engaged in conversations like this one, and how good it felt to be engaged in dialogue that was on such a high level with nine and ten year olds. Moments like this one are one of the reasons that I teach.*

One of the reasons we include this particular narrative is that this activity shows a White teacher who is becoming more comfortable with discussing race, class, gender, and other differences in her classroom. This step is important, as Howard (2003) notes:

As the teaching profession becomes increasingly homogeneous, given the task of educating an increasingly heterogeneous student population, reflections on racial and cultural differences are essential. In order to become a culturally relevant pedagogue, teachers must be prepared to engage in a rigorous and oftentimes painful reflection process about what it means to teach students who come from different racial and cultural backgrounds than their own (p. 18).

**Narrative B:**

*I was leading my fifth-graders in a discussion of current events, which is a daily practice in my classroom. One of our first events was a discussion of Shirin Ebadi, who*



*is the recent recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize, and the first Muslim woman to receive this prestigious award. One of my students, M, immediately raised his hand and said, "WHY in the WORLD would they give the Nobel Peace Prize to a MUSLIM?" Another student, T, immediately erupted from his chair and said, "Excuse me, Ms. H., but I really need to deal with this." He faced the students and entered into a heartfelt speech on prejudice and racism. He told M that he still liked him very much as a person, but was deeply offended by what M had said. He said, "How dare you judge an entire group of people based on what a few people from one religion have done?"*

*What ensued was a class debate—totally unplanned! The students explored racism, prejudice, and the many factors that shape our perspectives. When one student stated that the world would be boring if we were all alike, I asked him to look around our classroom. There were actually gasps when they realized that we were sitting in a class with no diversity whatsoever. This led into a discussion of how it can be detrimental to assume that we are the "norm." The students also discussed how sometimes people do judge an entire group of individuals because they are different from themselves or because of what a few of those individuals have done.*

*At the end of this profound debate, the original student who had made the comment about the Nobel Peace Prize asked to make a statement. He told the class that his perspective had totally changed and that he now fully understood the merit of this amazing Muslim woman. He actually thanked the student who had helped to open his eyes.*

*When I later shared this event with colleagues, I stated that this was one of the most amazing teaching moments of my career. When students are given the freedom and the forum to discuss relevant issues in our world, we are ALL enriched. (K. Harrell, personal communication, November 12, 2003)*

Activities such as these in a predominantly White setting also shows culturally relevant pedagogy. Ladson-Billings (1995) states that in order to have culturally relevant teaching as pedagogy, three criteria must be in place: "(a) Students must experience academic success, (b) Students must develop and/or maintain cultural competence, and (c)

Students must develop a critical consciousness where they challenge the status quo of the current social order" (p. 160). In an environment where the students are exposed to monoculture instead of multicultural, students need to develop a broader sense of sociopolitical consciousness to realize the cultural norms, values, and mores of others. These students need to know that race matters (West, 1994). It always has, and it always will. It matters in whose version of history is presented, what canon is adopted, and in who is seen as invisible.

### **Perspectives Presented through Narratives Enhance Inquiries**

Just as the use of narratives in a classroom (and narratives about classrooms) can enhance learning and help make important connections for our students, the use of narratives have not been lost upon educational researchers. Educational researchers are utilizing a variety of different approaches that include the use of narratives: personal narrative and narrative inquiry (e.g. Josselson, 1996; Connelly and Clandinin, 1990), narrative multiculturalism (e.g. Phillion, 2002; He, 2002), reflexive ethnography (Pink in Mullen, 2001); portraiture (e.g. Garcia, 1999); fiction as inquiry (Morrison, 1970); and cultural inquiry (e.g. Gee, 1999), just to name a few. Many of these approaches have common characteristics. The above-mentioned researchers each seek to discover cultural roots to encourage participation from students of diverse cultures in the classroom. The importance of culturally relevant teaching is immeasurable. Ethically speaking, all students should receive equal educational opportunities and enrichment experiences. One thread that runs through each of these inquiries is the attempt to connect the researchers with personal and cultural experiences of a diverse population. This knowledge allows the researchers to develop an understanding of complications, concerns, and cultural issues that affect the diverse student population. The emphasis on "narrative," or story telling, in each of these modes of inquiry is important when translating theory into practice. "We see; we hear; we make connections; (Greene, 1995, p. 186).

In our classrooms, we realize that each person has a story to tell. Some of these stories may actually show the prejudices that our students have developed. Many times we would not have the opportunities to act as multicultural educators if we did not have opportunities to discuss such prejudices, just as illustrated in the story about the Muslim woman winning the Nobel Peace Prize. As one reviewer of this article commented, "The stories many students will tell draw from racist, sexist and misinformed accounts which dominate popular



culture. These are easier for students to find the words to speak...narratives show how unplanned pedagogical interventions can give students access to subjugated stories – and enable other stories to be told and heard.” We encourage the use of personal narratives in our classes for this reason, as well as to help students make connections with the curriculum just as we encourage the telling of personal narratives so we can better understand the cultural backgrounds and heritage that our students bring to the classroom. “Cultural background...plays a part in shaping identity; but it does not determine identity” (Greene, 1995, p. 163). These stories remain dormant if the focus is on curriculum, not on culturally relevant pedagogical practices. Relationships that are fostered through the use of narrative, then, become important for both the student and the teacher in maneuvering through the curriculum.

### Conclusion

Ohanian (1999) makes numerous cases against the use of education standards. She asserts with much research that current educational reform is from a business framework and excludes the voices of teachers and students. Schools would benefit when the curriculum expands as to provide options so that the diverse student population may become aware of the knowledge presented and find opportunities for self-reflection. Ohanian (1999) believes there is a need for more accountability, but standardization without inclusion of diversification is not the answer.

Ignoring cultural differences may also lead to unfair testing practices. For example, the illustrations, wording, and contextual information given on standardized tests may reflect the experiences and languages of a particular group. This privilege will benefit some students while penalizing many that are not aware of the cultural differences. Through narratives, students gain exposure and perception of diverse cultures. For students who are not a “participant in the culture of power, being told explicitly the rules of that culture makes acquiring power (understanding) easier” (Delpit, 1995, p. 24).

The proliferation of standardized testing and standardized curriculum ignores the beauty of diverse cultures and divergent thinking that can be fostered in our classrooms. It ignores the power of the teachable moment that occurs when we stop and listen to each other’s stories, focusing instead on a measurable product. Delpit (2003) well sums up the difference between a focus on standardization and culturally responsive teaching:

...we *can* educate all children if we truly want to. To do so, we must first stop attempting to determine their capacity. We must be convinced of their inherent intellectual capability, humanity, and

spiritual character. We must fight the foolishness proliferated by those who believe that one number can measure the worth and drive the education of human beings, or that predetermined scripts can make for good teaching. Finally, we must learn *who* our children are – their lived culture, their interests, and their intellectual, political and historical legacies. (p. 20)

Every class will have a unique cultural make-up. Whatever commonalities exist, it is important to realize that no two schools, classrooms, or students will be exactly alike. Therefore, examinations of the impact of narratives as well as the narratives themselves will be a continual and ever changing process.

A superior academic education is dialogical in nature – it is not standardized. It initiates all students in the art of participating in a creative interplay between different cultural perspectives. A dialogue between cultures through narratives alerts them to personal biases - a gain in itself - and enables them to reduce such biases in a non-threatening way.

Culturally relevant pedagogy is an empty phrase without action, and transformation of the standardized educational system can not happen without action. In order for success, we must include action and reflection without new pedagogy. One element needed to begin this transformation is dialogue of teachers with their colleagues, teachers with students, and teachers with parents and community representatives. Dialogue adds awareness and perspective as teachers and students begin to broaden their view. From the dialogue will come the stories from teachers on how culturally relevant pedagogy emerged in their classrooms. Thus we have developed an appropriate step for bridging theory into practice. As our population becomes more diverse, and teachers of all races and genders are seeking ways of meeting the challenge of increased standardization, successful practices need to be chronicled and shared with others, in turn reducing more biases that are inherent in the standardized curriculum. The narratives presented here from classrooms familiar to us represent only the beginning of our endeavor to chronicle these stories.

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