

Telling Their Side of the Story: African-American Students' Perceptions of Culturally Relevant Teaching

Tyrone C. Howard

An increasing amount of scholarship has documented the salience of culturally relevant teaching practices for ethnically and linguistically diverse students. However, research examining these students' perceptions and interpretations of these learning environments has been minimal at best. In this article, the author details the findings from a study that sought to assess African-American elementary students' interpretations of culturally relevant teachers within urban contexts. Student responses indicated that culturally relevant teaching strategies had a positive affect on student effort and engagement in class content and were consistent with the theoretical principles of culturally relevant pedagogy. The qualitative data revealed three key findings that students preferred in their learning environments (1) teachers who displayed caring bonds and attitudes toward them, (2) teachers who established community- and family-type classroom environments, and (3) teachers who made learning an entertaining and fun process.

KEY WORDS: African-American students; culture; pedagogy.

The research on African-American elementary students' perspectives of their learning environments is limited yet increasing. A number of studies have examined student perspectives of effective teaching and classroom climates within urban contexts (Labonty and Danielson, 1988; Miron and Lauria, 1998). Coinciding with these studies has been the emergence of scholarship on culturally responsive instructional strategies for African-American and other culturally diverse students (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Lee, 1995; Lipman, 1995; Shade, Kelly, and Oberg, 1997). Unfortunately, little of the research on culturally responsive teaching practices has examined students' perceptions and interpretations of these pedagogical practices. An analysis of student perceptions in this study emerged from the need to examine viewpoints from a source that is rarely heard in the discussion of school reform for marginalized students: the students themselves. This investigation warrants examination due to the per-

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ceived invisibility and silencing that many culturally diverse students have of themselves in the discourse on school reform (Nieto, 1992; Fine, 1987; Weiss & Fine, 1993).

The discussion on school reform for academically and socially marginalized students has included perspectives from countless vantagepoints. Teachers, school administrators, university researchers, policymakers, and politicians have all contributed to the myriad of "what these students need," "best practices," or "effective solutions" conversations on school reform. While the discussions continue, increasing numbers of students continue to fall through the academic cracks, most of them from culturally and linguistically diverse and low-income backgrounds. The shortcomings of numerous interventions and misguided practices merit the creation of a space for students to offer potential solutions for what they believe works best for them in schools. As an African-American second-grader in this study stated, "We never get to tell our side of the story." It is critical that pleas such as these be given greater attention by educators if more viable solutions are to be identified. The scant attention paid to students' voice is inexcusable given their role as the primary clientele in K-12 schools. If the programs, practices, and policies rendered within the framework of the places called schools are delivered with students' best interest in mind, we must ask why their voices and viewpoints are so blatantly omitted. In the medical profession, before prescriptions or other potential interventions are proposed, patients are asked basic, yet vital questions such as "What is the ailment?" and "Can you think of anything that may have caused the sickness?" Once the patient is allowed the opportunity to convey the problem and how or why it came to be, the medical expert devises an intervention plan. Perhaps, educators can take a cue from the medical profession and begin to ask our patients these same questions: "What is the ailment?" and "Can you think of anything that may have caused the sickness?" It is becoming increasingly apparent that within education, many of our clientele are academically ill; however, we must cease developing strategies to rectify various illnesses without asking the patient simple questions. Thus, this study attempts to add to other efforts to put students' viewpoints, perceptions, and interpretations of their schooling experiences at the center of the discussion on school reform.

In this article, I describe the findings from a case study of elementary students in four inner-city elementary schools located in the northwestern United States. These findings were part of a larger study (Howard, 1998), in which four elementary teachers who were identified as culturally responsive teachers for African-American students were participants in a study on effective teaching. The purpose of the smaller component of the study was to uncover African-American students' perceptions of their teachers' pedagogical practices.

STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES OF SCHOOL EXPERIENCES

A number of scholars have made the call for greater inclusion of students' viewpoints in the discussion on school reform. In a review of the research on instructional practices of teachers of African-American students, Waxman and Huang (1997) make the call for greater student voice in educational research. They hypothesize that understanding how students perceive and react to their learning environments may be more useful than the analysis of the quality by outsiders. In a related study, Waxman (1989) recommended that researchers analyze student perspectives of classroom instruction and learning environments since what students experience in learning may be quite different from observed or intended pedagogy. Nieto (1994) extends the call for more students' perspectives on their learning environments by stating that "student voices sometimes reveal the great challenges and even the deep pain young people feel when schools are unresponsive, cold places." Moreover she states that "those who spend the most time in schools and classrooms are often given the least opportunity to talk . . . students have important lessons to teach educators and we need to begin to listen to them more carefully" (p. 420).

Giroux (1988) has contributed to the literature on students' perspectives by contending that students' viewpoints on their classroom environments provide two important perspectives. He argues that student perspectives provide (1) insights into important components of the teaching and learning process, otherwise unrevealed, and (2) "an important starting point for enabling those who have been silenced or marginalized by the schools . . . to reclaim the authorship of their own lives" (p. 63).

In a study conducted by Hollins and Spencer (1990) in which African-American elementary and secondary students talked about their views of school, three key themes emerged. The students stated that positive relationships between teachers and students affected academic achievement; that teachers' responsiveness to students personal lives generated positive feelings that led to increased effort in school; and that they preferred for teachers who enabled them to actualize their own ideas in completing assignments and becoming engaged in class discussions.

In their research which examined African-American and Latino first- and third-grade student perceptions of school climate, Slaughter-Defoe and Carlson (1996) revealed the important roles that teachers play in student growth. Their findings revealed that interactive teacher-child relationships are the most important dimension of school climate for African-American students. The students stated that teachers who cared for them, made themselves available to comfort them, and were concerned with helping them deal their school and personal problems made a difference in the schooling experience.

More recent studies have revealed students' understanding of more complex factors influencing their learning environments. Lee's (1999) ethnographic study with low-achieving urban high school students identified three specific structures and practices that contributed to their underachievement. The African-American and Latino students contended that (1) teacher-centered classrooms, (2) perceived racism and discrimination toward students in interactional patterns and expectations, and (3) lack of personal teacher-student relationships as reflected in lack of caring and overall teacher apathy were contributing factors to their school failure.

Other scholars have documented students' accounts of the increasing role that racism plays in their school achievement. Miron and Lauria (1998) discovered in their research that for many African-American students, resistance as a form of disapproval of white hegemony was a common practice. Quoting from an African-American student in the study, "They [teachers] expect more from Vietnamese kids that always [are] smarter and stuff . . . they never expect a black student to be smarter than a Vietnamese, you know. They always automatically think that we're dumber" (p. 200). The students mentioned teachers' lack of caring, negative "gossip" about African-American students, and failure to show concern for student academic success as factors contributing to their poor performance.

Phelan, Yu, and Davidson (1994) examined the pressures and problems that students perceive to have an impact on their school and learning endeavors. In a two-year study with ethnically and academically diverse high school students, the findings revealed students having difficulty with course content when teaching styles were boring and did not take advantage of students' strengths. Moreover, the students stated that they felt as though they were often singled out or "picked on" solely because of their ethnic background or cultural norms and beliefs. For many students, their ways of responding to these noncaring environments were to refer to alternative means of coping, such as copying other students' work, creating disruptions in class, or withdrawing quietly from the class. Conversely, the students stated that teachers that had a positive impact on their learning frequently encouraged them and provided personalized attention when they began experiencing academic difficulties.

CULTURAL CONGRUENCE IN INSTRUCTION

Culturally relevant pedagogy recognizes the cogent role that cultural socialization plays in how students receive, analyze, and interpret information and structure instruction accordingly (Au and Jordan, 1981; Allen and Boykin, 1992; Cazden and Leggett, 1981). The call for culturally sensitive teaching strategies is partly a response to theorists who have suggested that the infusion of ethnic content alone in school curriculum is not enough to meet

the academic needs of nonmainstream students (Cuban, 1972). Ladson-Billings (1994) uses the phrase "culturally relevant teaching" to describe the pedagogy of successful teachers of African-American students. She describes this approach to teaching as one "that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes" (p.18). Ladson-Billings's work builds on earlier work done by a number of researchers who have called for more culturally sensitive teaching practices. Mohatt and Erickson (1981) described teachers employing "culturally congruent" pedagogy, as using various directives, monitoring, interactional styles, and participation structures within the classroom that were congruent with the interaction and learning situations commonly found in the students' homes. Their findings support those of Phillips (1972), who conducted extensive research on the Warm Springs Indian Reservation in Central Oregon. Phillips found cultural incongruity in the interactional patterns and participation structures at home and school between Native American children and their teachers. These incongruencies often resulted in conflict, discomfort, and school failure for many Native American children in traditional classroom settings. The studies described above are valuable contributions to the body of research on transformative pedagogical practices for culturally diverse students. Yet only a few of them examined how students perceived their learning environments.

There have been a number of other significant studies that have contributed to the concept of culturally sensitive pedagogy. Heath's (1983) nine-year ethnographic research in a working-class African-American community she termed "Trackton" highlights the family and community language socialization process that African-American children experienced. Heath found that questions were used in different ways in the home and at school, varied in proportion to other types of dialogue. Au and Jordan (1981) conducted a case study of the Kamehameha Early Education Program (KEEP), a language arts development project, to examine how a team of teachers, psychologists, anthropologists, and linguists devised methods to teach native Hawaiian children to read. Au and Jordan found KEEP's method of reading instruction to be successful because greater emphasis was placed on comprehension than on sound-symbol relationships. They attributed the majority of KEEP's success to the similarities between how the reading lessons were conducted and the linguistic patterns frequently found in native Hawaiian culture, namely, "talk story." They found that "KEEP reading lessons [were] successful partly because they share with talk story and story telling the features of socially relevant, receptive adult, mutual participation and co-narration" (p. 149). As a result, they labeled this type of instruction "culturally congruent." Au and Jordan state that this culturally congruent method of instruction proved effective because many Hawaiian children "do not recognize ordinary reading lessons as situations which call for the ap-

plication of a full range of cognitive and linguistic abilities,” (p. 151) and view reading as more of a story-telling or social interaction.

In short, the concept of culturally relevant teaching is an attempt to create a schooling experience that enables students to pursue academic excellence without abandoning their cultural integrity. Thus, the ways of communicating, conceptions of knowledge, methods of learning, and the overall context of the educative process are situated within a framework that is consistent with the students’ cultural background.

METHODOLOGY

This study examined students’ perceptions and interpretations of instructional practices used by four elementary-school teachers who were identified as culturally responsive teachers for African-American students. Data were collected through observations and interviews with the students. The purpose of interviewing students was twofold. The first reason was to gain insight into viewpoints that are rarely revealed in the research about teaching ethnically and culturally diverse students. A second reason for querying students was to understand their interpretation of the teaching practices and the extent to which the viewpoints were consistent with those of an outside observer and the teachers’ intended goals and objectives.

The study was conducted across four urban elementary schools located in a large city in the northwestern area of the United States during the 1997–1998 school year. A purposeful sample of 17 students was used for the study, 10 girls and 7 boys. An equal number of boys and girls were sought; however, 3 girls were not given consent from their parents to participate in the study. A cross-selection of students based on academic achievement according to their teachers’ assessment was identified to serve as participants for the study. Those selected were grouped into low-, medium-, and high-achievement categories. This choice of selection was also done to reduce the likelihood that students would give glowing testimonials about their teachers. Each student was interviewed once individually and subsequently in a focus group with classmates. All student interviews took place on the school premises. Data were analyzed using standard qualitative measures. Emerging patterns and responses from the interview data led to the establishment of codes that led to the identification and creation of thematic categories that highlight the key findings (Bogdan and Bilken, 1992; Miles and Huberman, 1994). In addition, interview data for each participant’s interview were carefully coded. To double-check the accuracy and reliability of the coding, an outside rater was used to recode the data. Three central themes emerged from the interview data with students: (1) the importance of caring teachers, (2) the establishment of a community/family-type classroom environment, and (3) education as entertainment. I will describe each

of the themes and provide student data to illustrate students' perceptions of their teachers' instructional practices and classroom environment.

CARING TEACHERS

The attribute most frequently mentioned by the students about what created an optimal learning environment was their teachers' willingness to care about them and their ability to bond with them. Noddings (1992) describes this form of caring as a "way of being in relation" to students. Deiro (1994) calls this form of teacher caring and openness "effective connection" with students. In my observations of a fourth-grade class, teacher caring was displayed by giving students warm pats on the back to encourage their best effort; verbally expressing high expectations for performance; and direct statements about how she felt about the students. Gregory, a fourth-grade student in one of the observed classrooms, commented about his teacher's willingness to show concern for her students:

She is a good teacher because she cares so much about us. She tells us every day [that] she cares, and she puts a lot more effort into the kids who don't want to do it [learn]. She tries to help everybody. She tries to make sure kids get the right idea of what they should be learning. Because a teacher who cares makes sure that the kids learn instead of going to school to play, and school is supposed to be about learning.

Lorenzo, a fifth-grader, stated that his teacher showed how much she cared about her students by the range of emotions she displayed. He repeatedly stated that he could tell whether or not a teacher cared based on how emotional he or she was about education and noneducation topics. He recalled when his teacher's father passed away during the school year and how sad it made him feel seeing his teacher grieving over a loved one. He remembered:

When her [the teacher's] father died, she was real sad, and I felt sad too. And she would cry whenever she thought about him. . . . I wanted to do everything right that day so that she would feel better. A lot of the other kids were real good, too. I think we all wanted to make her feel better by being good and doing our best.

Several other students recalled this incident and spoke about the importance of showing care and empathy for a teacher who had consistently shown a great deal of care and concern toward them. When students were probed to discuss their feelings during this grieving time the students mentioned "doing our best work" and "acting the way we are supposed to" as actions to show support for their teacher. Several of the students talked about how surprised they were to see a teacher who was willing to show such emotion and how that made them care more for her, because they could remember when they had lost loved ones

and how it made them feel. They contended that these episodes helped them to see their teacher as a human being who had emotions just like their own.

Care, as an ethic in teaching, includes explicitly showing affective and nurturing behavior toward students, which can have a positive influence on student desire to learn. Noddings (1988) writes, "It is obvious the children will work harder and do things—even odd things like adding fractions—for people they love and trust" (p. 10). According to several students in this study, care is also sometimes shown in what could be perceived in nonendearing ways. Several students equated their teachers' concern and care with certain interactions that could be interpreted as harsh or extreme by those unfamiliar with the cultural context in which they occur. For example, Jazmine, a fifth-grade student, commented about what teachers should do to demonstrate caring for their students, stating that they

need to be strict about having work done. You need to have them [the students] study and write down notes and stuff for tests. If she [the teacher] hollers, it just means she cares about us.

Jaylah, a fourth-grade student in a different classroom, made a similar comment when she described her teacher. She stated:

If you [a teacher] holler, it just means you care. But you can't holler for no reason at all. If we did something bad and she didn't holler, I would think that something's wrong, and maybe she [doesn't] care [any]more.

These accounts may suggest that students are able to recognize teachers' desire for wanting their students to perform well academically and socially. More important, the students responses seemed to convey a belief that teachers who were not as emotionally and passionately concerned with their learning were teachers who "don't even care about us." In addition, a critical feature of the students' responses was their ability to interpret their teacher's behavior in ways that had a positive manifestation on their academic performance. During a classroom observation, one of the fourth-grade teachers became upset with one of her students because of her failure to complete a task. The teacher angrily expressed her dissatisfaction with the student and told her that she was capable of better work. The student humbly received the chastising without a response. To an outsider, the exchange may have appeared harsh and severe for a fourth-grade student. However, shortly after the teacher expressed her disappointment with the student, she approached the girl, placed her arm around her, and had a private exchange of words. The following morning, the teacher shared a note with me that she found on her desk from the student that read, "Thank you for being a terrific teacher. Thank you for your toughness. It [the toughness] really

got me back on track.” Once again, the student’s perception of her teacher’s interactions might suggest an awareness of the concern and care for her.

Most of the students interviewed stated that they were able to understand why their teachers used stern approaches with them and felt as if these approaches were for their own good. One fourth-grader noted, “Sometimes it makes me mad when she [the teacher] yells and I just don’t care. Then when I think about it, I know that she is only doing it because she wants me to learn and she is helping me out.” Many of the students interviewed stated that yelling or strictness can be an indicator of a caring teacher, yet several of them believed that caring teachers do not make yelling an overly used part of their teaching. As one fifth-grader noted, “My teacher last year yelled at us all the time, but I don’t think he cared about us, because all he did was yell, and he never said the good things that we did, only the bad things. I don’t think he liked us.” Responses such as these indicate that teachers who show a great deal of caring with their pedagogical practices must make certain that they maintain a healthy balance of being firm and supportive. These findings are consistent with the early research done by Kleinfeld (1975) that classified teachers who used this type of balance in their teaching practices as warm demanders, wherein they are able to shift back and forth between stern and nurturing teaching styles.

Another way that the students described caring by their teachers was through the ways that teachers showed them respect. Ms. Russell, a fifth-grade teacher whose students were interviewed, and a self-described authoritarian, never became disrespectful with any of her pedagogical practices. Her statements were always followed with an explanation of why she chose to take various actions. In addition, she usually addressed her students as “Mr.,” “Ms.,” “Sir,” or “Ma’am.” While many of her students took exception to her domineering ways of communicating and teaching, they believed the benefits were worth the experience. As one student explained:

She’s mean and she hollers a lot, but you learn. I know that I have learned a lot this year, especially in reading and math. And if you look at all of the kids who make the honor roll or honor society, they’re mostly in her class, so I guess it’s worth it [being in Ms. Russell’s class].

The student’s comments would appear to reflect a teacher practice that is essential to culturally responsive teaching, which is creating a learning environment that helps students to reach their highest levels of academic achievement. Though teaching is structured within a framework that seeks to establish cultural continuity between home and school, one of the primary goals of culturally responsive teaching is for students to experience academic success (Ladson-Billings, 1994).

A student in Mrs. Logan's second-grade class shared a similar view about his teacher making a positive difference in his academic achievement when asked what he liked and disliked about the way she teaches. He explained:

What I don't like is that she's mean. She's mean because she yells, yells, and yells. She yells about real tiny stuff, but I guess she cares because she says we come to school to get a education and stuff. . . . But she's a good teacher and it's good to be in her class. . . . And she helped me to learn how to read a lot. So I like her for that.

The students' responses to their teachers' methods of addressing or interacting with them revealed their ability to look beyond situations in which their teachers were "mean" or "yelling at us" to see the purpose of why teachers took such actions. In my observations of the students in these classrooms, it rarely appeared as though a student took a teacher's reprimand personally or held a grudge for an extended period. Most of the students seemed to accept these messages from their teachers and used them as a motivation to do what was expected. The familiarity with these modes of interaction may suggest that some of the students may experience them at home or in other contexts. Many African-American students experience authoritarian parenting styles at home, wherein parents believe in strict adherence to rules and place a strong emphasis on discipline. Yet they take place within nurturing, loving, and supporting frameworks (Baumrind, 1971; Hill, 1995).

Many of the students seemed to understand that when their teachers used strict approaches with them, it was because they wanted them to do their best. Each of the teachers in the study held high expectations for their students, which is a core element of culturally responsive pedagogy. In turn, the students seemed to respond positively to teacher practices that helped to fulfill their expectations. However, it is worth noting that African-American students' perceptions of teacher-student interactions are not monolithic. While demanding modes of communication may be appropriate for some students, they may not be effective for others. Several of the students stated how difficult it is to remember their teachers' concern and care for them, as they demand their best work. Three of the students were not too fond of such approaches. Sherri, a fifth-grade young girl from Mrs. Russell's classroom, discussed this while talking about her teacher:

I don't like how she yells at people if they get a question wrong. She can ask a question we [the students] don't understand; then she yells and says, "Listen to the question, listen to the question!" Then she'll get mad. It's okay to forget, but she says we should already know the answer if we're paying attention. I can understand that, but does she have to yell? . . . Sometimes I know the answer, but I'm afraid to say it because she's going to scream at me [if the answer is wrong]. So I don't say anything.

It is apparent that responses such as Sherri's highlight the complexity involved in developing instructional strategies for students from similar back-

grounds. Sherri's disapproval of her teacher's demanding ways suggest that teachers cannot adopt a "one size fits all" approach to teaching African-American students, by assuming that what works for one is suitable for all. Student culture and its manifestations are critical in the teaching and learning process for African-American students, just as it is with all students. It is important for teachers to note that culture is a complex, multidimensional, and multifaceted construct that is continually being transformed by a number of variables (Gay, 2000). Though certain cultural characteristics are common across members in the same ethnic group, certain members may not exhibit certain characteristics that appear to be common in the group. The students who expressed disdain for certain teaching practice highlight this point. Thus, while it is critical to note certain preferences within certain groups, each student still should have his or her own tendencies and preferences acknowledged and respected. The responses from students reveal the importance of caring relationships between teachers and students. Although it would seem as though caring is a concept that all teachers use in their daily practices, the student data seem to suggest that it is not a common practice used by all teachers. However, when used, caring seems to go a long way in student effort and achievement.

COMMUNITY AND FAMILY ENVIRONMENTS

The second most frequently mentioned practice by the students was the teachers' ability to structure their classrooms in a manner that valued home and community or, in one student's words, to "make school seem like home." A number of the students commented on various aspects of their classroom environment that made the classroom environment feel like a family-type atmosphere. Promoting bonding through building a community-type atmosphere among students is a useful strategy for developing effective connections (Corey and Corey, 1987; Deiro, 1994; Peck, 1987). By reflecting upon common interests, histories, backgrounds, and experiences, students are able to come together because of their similarities, which is the basis upon which social relationships develop (Heller, 1989).

One of the methods used to build community was through the use of daily rituals and classroom traditions. In one of the fourth-grade classrooms, the students participated in "morning circle" each morning, wherein they were able to share events, issues, and people in their lives with their classmates. A student in Mrs. Logan's fourth-grade classroom talked about why morning circle was important to her:

I like it [morning circle] because it's the only time you get to sit and talk with your friends besides lunch and recess. . . . It's the beginning of the day and we're all really excited and we want to start a whole new day and explore things. It's just a good way to begin a new day with people you care and like a lot.

Another student in Mrs. Logan's class stated that she enjoyed the poems that were recited at the end of the morning circle. She commented:

It's like a beginning of a new day when we have morning circle and when we say [the poem] "Welcome to Success." [To me] it means we are in a place to do our best. It's saying we'll all do our best in class and succeed . . . and I feel that we all will be learning something today.

Providing rituals and traditions has been a common strategy used to form bonds between individuals to their families, communities, and institutions (Deiro, 1994). These activities provide students with a common basis and familiar routine. Ms. Triggs tried to build family and community in her classroom by drawing from the cultural values she practiced during her upbringing in Haiti, particularly with the ideas of "shaming." Each of the students interviewed from Ms. Triggs's class emphasized the importance of not "shaming" themselves or their teacher. They talked about how important it was to leave a good impression with others. One of the students felt shaming his teacher was the worst thing the class could do. In making his point, he said:

I remember one day we had a sub [substitute teacher] and we were acting real bad and she left Ms. Triggs a note telling her how we acted. . . . [The next day] Ms. Triggs was mad, and the first thing she said was, "You all have shamed me," and I knew we were in trouble. It's almost like messing up your family name.

According to her students, Ms. Triggs taught them how to be accountable for their actions. She told them how their actions, bad or good, could be perceived by others as a reflection of their teacher, classmates, school, family, or racial group. As one student said, "It'll make her [Ms. Triggs] look bad, whenever we act up, so we better not shame her." Another student talked about the importance of students being on their best behavior: "We have a reputation being in Room 7, and all of the other teachers know that we're in Ms. Triggs's class, and if we do something wrong, Ms. Triggs will be upset with us for shaming her."

Several of the students commented that they were fond of their teachers because of the ways they resembled mothers or other family members. The students talked about how certain mannerisms, modes of interactions, and phrases were similar to the types of interactions and communication styles they experienced at home. The interactions between African-American children and adults can be unique encounters, which can include a range of exchanges from sarcasm, anger, and resentment to joking, support, and encouragement.

In many instances, sarcasm or approval was replaced with anger and disappointment when students did not complete assignments, return homework, or address the teacher in a respectful manner. At times, the verbal exchanges ap-

peared to be abrasive and harsh for elementary students. However, the students in these classrooms seem to know the parameters and purposes of the exchanges and the messages they carried.

According to several students, Hazel's method of interaction is reminiscent of how their parents or other family members address them. Because of the familiarity with such interactions, most of the students appeared to be quite comfortable with these types of interactions with their teachers. Some of the students' comments illustrate their comfort levels. One fifth-grader explained:

She's (Hazel) just like my mom. I can't even say anything without her telling me "don't argue," "don't lie to me." My mom, she's just like that. Somebody asks her a question and she's gonna make a long lecture that's about 20 times as long, and nobody wants to hear it. But I'm used to it, so I don't let it bother me.

Another student noted the same type of similarities between her teacher and a family member she lives with. She explained:

She (Hazel) reminds me of my Aunt Toni with the lecture thingy, yeah . . . you know, get good grades, do good in school, and all that kinda stuff. Sometimes I think, "Just leave, or do something." Man, she gets on my nerves. It's funny how two people can be so much alike.

The students' responses provide important insight into how many young people attempt to negotiate the desires and demands placed upon them by adults. What becomes telling about the students' responses is that when the interactions take place within a familiar cultural context, the likelihood of receiving desired behaviors tends to improve significantly. Even when students appeared to be bothered by the requests being placed upon them, they stated that compliance was still the outcome because displays of respect toward adults was a characteristic that was mandatory in their home environments.

The teacher-student exchanges in Hazel's class were built upon student accountability, respect, and direct responses to questions that are asked. Students were given expectations and were required to follow through on various tasks. Establishing a home and community-like atmosphere was an explicit teaching strategy used to build relationships among the students. What also became apparent during my conversations with the students around consistency between home and school was a certain level of trust that was established between teacher and student. Several fifth-grade girls stated that they felt close to their teachers in ways that they felt toward their mothers because of the numerous similarities. As a result, the students stated that they were just as willing to share confidential information, seek advice, and attempt to gain approval from their teachers in ways they would from their own parents.

EDUCATION AND ENTERTAINMENT

The third attribute the students described about their teachers was their ability to make learning a fun and exciting process. Several of the students became increasingly animated as they elaborated on the differences they noticed being in their current classrooms and previous classrooms. General wisdom suggests that given the pervasiveness of computer and video games, interactive television, and other forms of contemporary stimulation, unless kids are being entertained by teachers, learning suffers (Vail, 1998). In Nieto's (1994) research on ethnically diverse student's perceptions of their learning environments, she found that the students had more to say more about pedagogy than about any other issue in their learning environment. In particular, teacher pedagogy that lacked imagination and excitement was described as "boring." Allyse, a second-grade student, discussed how her teacher's pedagogy contributed to her learning:

It's funny, because she makes us laugh by telling funny stories and telling funny jokes when she is teaching us. Even when we are doing hard stuff like math, she still finds a way to make that fun. Sometimes, I am having so much fun that I forget I am learning.

Several students in Ms. Triggs's classroom talked about how she made learning fun by using emotion in how she talked and in her performances. A number of her students stated that they looked forward to her exciting theatrical performances when she would "jump up and down all around the room" and "do a lot of crazy and silly stuff." These students talked about how much fun they had, particularly during reading. One fifth-grade student mentioned that she "never had a teacher who would hop all around the classroom, raise her voice, act out the characters, just so we would understand a story . . . but it would work, because we would all get into it."

Students from Mrs. Logan's class mentioned how she used students' names to create the setting for such stories. Several students mentioned how they understood stories better and developed stronger grasp of the characters, sequence, and plot of the story when it seemed as if they were "living through the story." One student explained her satisfaction with these types of character portrayals and Mrs. Logan's teaching style:

I like her because she's not a regular teacher. She's funny, and she entertains us, and I like when she uses our names in the story. It makes it seem like we're the people in the story.

Several students reiterated the importance of not being bored in class. A number of the fifth-grade students discussed how previous teachers would have

students do “the same stuff over and over again” without offering much variation. Thus, the students’ accounts underscore the importance of intellectually stimulating and engaging learning environments wherein students are actively connected to what is being taught. The students who spoke to the importance of an engaging or entertaining form of pedagogy were somewhat small in number compared to the other themes. Nonetheless, the students who mentioned this attribute were firm in their contention that this form of pedagogy made a significant difference in their levels of interest, engagement, and overall achievement. Thus, the data from this study were less clear about the role of engaged pedagogy. Future research must focus on the role that entertaining forms of pedagogy have in the interest and achievement levels of African-American students.

CONCLUSION

The students’ perceptions and interpretations of their teachers’ pedagogy reveal critical insights into the dynamics of young African-American learners. The teachers that the students described were identified as culturally relevant teachers for African-American students because of their ability to incorporate features of the students’ cultural capital into their pedagogical practices. However, absent from the students’ constructions were explicit mentions of practices or norms that they considered part of African-American culture or direct reference to their ethnic group experience. More important, the students’ characterizations of their teachers’ practices were consistent with several of the key principles of culturally relevant pedagogy. Most notable were the students’ references to making “school seem like home.” One of the vital elements of culturally relevant pedagogy is to create a schooling environment that is not in conflict with the student’s cultural background. The students made several references to being more comfortable with their teachers through their methods of communication, modes of interaction, and overall cultural knowledge. The fluidity that the students described in their relations with their teachers represents tangible ways that cultural discontinuity can be alleviated for low-income and culturally diverse students. Alleviating this form of critical discontinuity is important for these students because they frequently find themselves in classrooms where their cultural, racial, and linguistic identities are under constant attack. Moreover, misunderstandings and misinterpretations of students’ cultural characteristics are more likely to manifest themselves in a multitude of punitive actions in schools such as suspension, expulsion, and other disciplinary actions.

Another area where students’ accounts of their teachers’ practices were congruent with the concept of culturally relevant teaching was in their belief that academic growth was an important goal in their classrooms. Central to the idea of culturally relevant instruction is the facilitation of academic success without compromising cultural integrity (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Nieto, 1999). As the

students discussed different scenarios that occurred in their classrooms, they would frequently allude to how much they learned or how their teachers helped them “get smarter.” In addition, the students’ sentiments conveyed the fact that their teachers had belief in their abilities that previous teachers had not expressed. One of the central themes that the students reiterated throughout the study was the myriad of ways in which their academic achievement improved based on their teachers’ pedagogy. While culturally responsive pedagogy seeks to enhance continuity between home and school for culturally diverse students, the concept should serve as a precursor to improving students’ school performance. Culturally responsive pedagogy must include a genuine belief by teachers in students’ abilities and a commitment to structure content, instruction, and assessment in a manner that refuses to accept anything less than students’ absolute highest potential.

The data from student interviews offer suggestions for classroom practice and future research. Listed below are specific strategies that teachers can use based on the findings in this study:

1. *Caring.* Explicit and implicit showing of the concern and care that teachers have for their students is vital. Teachers can demonstrate care in numerous ways, through positive reinforcement, expression of high expectations, giving praise to student accomplishments, and taking time to find out about students’ lives outside of the classroom. A sincere commitment to student academic and social development may be the most important expression of concern and care.

2. *Establishing community.* The students mentioned on repeated occasions their fondness of the family- and community-like environment in their classrooms. Strategies that can be used to encourage kindred relationships among students would be more cooperative learning situations, the elimination of homogeneous ability grouping, establishment of democratic principles, and the promotion of interdependence.

3. *Engaging classroom environments.* Creating stimulating and exciting classroom environments can go a long way in generating student interest and enthusiasm about learning. Teachers might consider telling personal anecdotes, using relevant course content, and modifying their interaction styles in ways that are more interactive, engaging, and entertaining for students.

Listening to students’ voices and hearing their experiences means teachers must be willing to rethink many of their pedagogical practices. In order to effectively revise instructional strategies, teachers must be willing to create what Kohl (1999) refers to as “open education,” where marginalized voices assume a significant role in the dialogue on how to create better educational opportunities for all students. Listening to students’ voices may reward educators with insights into issues that may have been overlooked in previous discussions on school reform. Soo-Hoo (1993) states, “We listen to outside experts to

inform us, and consequently we overlook the treasure in our very own backyards: our students" (p. 390). The findings from this study suggest that all teachers, regardless of their ethnic or cultural background, can meet the academic and social needs of African-American students. The characteristics that were described by the students are not race-specific, nor do they require teachers to be members of the same racial group as their students. The data from the students in this study should inform us that effective teaching of African-American students is not exclusive only to African-American teachers. Though the teachers that the students described in this study were all African-American, there was not a single mention by the students of teacher race or ethnicity. The data suggest that one of the primary keys to helping African-American students have an equitable opportunity for school success is teachers' understanding of various cultural and learning characteristics they bring to the classroom. Teachers who want to acquire an authentic understanding of the cultural capital that students possess need, among other things, to abandon of the deficit-based thinking about the cognitive capacity, sociocultural backgrounds, and overall learning potential of African-American students. Second, there must be a willingness on behalf of teachers to make modifications in their teaching styles to align them more closely with students' ways of knowing, communicating, and being. Far too often, African-American students are expected to disconnect from their cultural identities and characteristics and conform to their teachers' ways of thinking, learning, behaving, and communicating, which often are diametric opposites. Finally, teachers must have the will and the courage to learn about the culture, life, and history of African-American people. The acquisition of this knowledge requires more than reading various literature about the African-American experience. It entails talking to parents, students, and community members and immersing oneself in various facets of the day-to-day environment that students experience.

The descriptions provided by the students in this study are only a small sample of what African-American students consider effective teaching. Studies such as this one need to be replicated for us to gain better insights into the role that teachers can play in helping students from diverse cultural groups contribute to the discussion on school reform. More important, it is critical that we create sacred spaces for students to have a voice on the people, places, and practices that enrich their schooling experience.

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