Culturally Responsive Teaching Though a Historical Lens: Will History Repeat Itself?

Deborah A. Harmon
Eastern Michigan University
Ann Arbor, Michigan

One of the greatest outcomes of experiencing culturally responsive teaching is a sense of empowerment. In teaching a graduate course on culturally responsive teaching, I wanted my students to experience that power. To accomplish this, I decided to provide students with a comprehensive understanding of culturally responsive pedagogy and a holistic perspective, but this could not be accomplished by simply sharing exemplars and current research. So, I endeavored to investigate culturally responsive teaching looking through a historical lens at African American education. I became empowered preparing for the class and was anxious to transfer the knowledge, experience, and insight I gained from this hidden treasure to my students. This article gives an overview of culturally responsive education through a historical lens, explaining why it needs to become a part of teacher preparation.

Keywords: culturally responsive teaching, culturally responsive pedagogy, culturally responsive education, multicultural education, teacher preparation, African American schools

What is Culturally Responsive Education?

Culturally responsive pedagogy has been referred to by many names: culturally responsible, culture compatible, culturally appropriate, culturally congruent, culturally relevant, and multicultural education (Irvine & Armento, 2001). Gay (2000, 2010) describes cultural responsive teaching as multidimensional, empowering, and transformative. She refers to culturally relevant pedagogy as the use of "… cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frame of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning more relevant to an effective… It teaches to and through strengths of the students. It is culturally validating and affirming" (Gay, 2000, p. 29).

Culturally responsive education is one of the most effective means of meeting the learning needs of culturally different students (Gay, 2000, 2010; Ford, 2010; Harmon, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 2010). Qualitative and observational studies confirm that African American students often learn best in an environment that is relational and personal, has high expectations, has accountability for self and others, and is similar to what is present in an extended family (Boykin et al., 2005, Perry & Delpit, 1998; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 2001, 2010; Willis, 2003. For example, Willis (2003) observed faculty and students at elementary schools where African-American students performed higher-than-expected on standardized tests. He found the school climate was one where teachers held positive attitudes about students, high expectations of students, and

positive extended family relations. Teachers felt responsible for themselves but also for others. An effort was made among faculty and staff to form strong relationships with students and their families. In all instances, teachers used culturally responsive teaching (Love & Kruger, 2005).

In 1989, Irvine wrote about the lack of cultural synchronization between teachers and African American students and the negative impact on academic achievement Eleven years later, she described culturally responsive teaching as student-centered, having the power to transform the curriculum, fostering critical problem solving, and focusing on building relationships with students, families, and communities (Irvine & Armento, 2001). Irvine (2002) further explained that the curriculum is transformed with culturally responsive teaching because the subject matter is viewed from multiple perspectives, including the lens of oppressed and disenfranchised groups.

Studies and researchers assert that successful teachers of African American children use culturally responsive instruction and engage in the following: (a) draw on African and African American culture and history, (b) locate 'self' in a historical and cultural context, (c) enable students to create new knowledge based upon life experiences, and (d) view knowledge as reciprocal. Teachers create a community of learners much like an extended family, perceive teaching as a part of their calling, and have high expectations for the success of all students (Ladson-Billings, 1994, 2001, 2010).

To teach using culturally responsive instruction, teachers must incorporate elements of the students' culture in their teaching. They listen to their students and allow students to share their personal stories. They spend considerable time in the classroom as well as outside of the classroom developing personal relationships with their students and families (Irvine & Armento, 2001).

Irvine (2002) interviewed African American teachers who engaged in culturally responsive teaching. These teachers identified the following beliefs about culturally responsive teaching:

1. Teaching is caring for the whole student, providing honest feedback to students about their performance, maintaining authority in the classroom, and using culturally specific instruction.

2. Teaching requires educators to engage in 'other mothering' or a feeling of kinship toward their students.

3. Teaching is believing in one's own teaching and ability to influence the achievement of students. That is, teachers must have multicultural self-efficacy.

4. Teaching is demanding the best of students holding them to high expectations.

5. Teaching is a calling and has a special purpose.

Ladson-Billing's (1994) seminal work (and updated in 2010) on effective teachers introduced the idea of culturally relevant teaching as critical pedagogy aimed at empowering students of color. The use of students' cultural referents in teaching empowers students intellectually, socially,

emotionally, and politically, thereby enabling them to engage in the meaningful learning of knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Culturally relevant pedagogy demands that students experience academic success, develop and/or maintain cultural competence, and develop a critical consciousness, which empowers them to challenge the status quo. Ideally, culturally relevant pedagogy can prepare students to change society – not just merely to fit into society.

James Banks – Multicultural Education

James Banks' **(**1999) integration of multicultural content model moves teachers to transformative teaching and social action. Culturally responsive curriculum provides opportunities for students to view issues from multiple lenses. In addition, students can think about issues from a critical lens, engage in authentic problem-solving, and address issues of social justice. This model is not only for students in K-12 settings, it can and must be used in teacher preparation programs so that educators know how to develop curriculum that is multicultural (Ford, 2010).

Banks' (1999) multicultural content model has four approaches that move toward high quality multicultural curriculum: Contributions, Additive, Transformation, and Social Action. The Contributions Approach is the least effective and involves focusing on cultural aspects such as holidays, traditions, food, heroes, and heroines such as Martin Luther King, Jr. and Kwanzaa. Heroes and events that are chosen are compared to White heroes, support dominant culture's ideologies and values and often give a distorted and incomplete account of history. Cultural traditions and practices are presented without the benefit of a discussion about the meaning and significance to students of color. The traditional curriculum remains unchanged and stereotypical views are often reinforced.

With the Additive Approach, books and materials are added to the existing curriculum in an attempt to add multicultural content, but the concepts and objectives of lessons are unchanged and do not include the lens or perspectives of students of color. For example, *The Autobiography of Malcom X* may be added to the reading list but the discussion that follows does not include the historical context that influenced his thoughts and actions and its impact on African Americans.

The Transformation Approach enables students to view issues from multiple perspectives and to be more empathetic. The curriculum, concepts, and objectives are changed to include voices that have previously been distorted or excluded. Students are often moved to examine and challenge their own values and beliefs. The Social Action Approach is a natural progression as students are able to further their investigation and engage in authentic problem-solving as they explore ways to affect change. At the core of social action is social justice -- making a difference and addressing inequities.

Boykin's Cultural Asset-Based Instruction

The Talent Development Model and the subsequent creation of the Talent Quest Model (TQM) came out of examining effective school reforms in urban communities (Boykin et al., 2005). Boykin developed the concept of asset-based instruction, which uses cultural assets as the foundation for instruction. The cultural assets refer to cultural behaviors African American students bring into the classroom that can often be problematic to teachers who are not culturally

competent or who subscribe to a deficit thinking approach toward students (Ford, Harris, Tyson, & Trotman, 2002). Cultural assets include: spirituality; harmony; expressive individualism; affective; oral communication; communalism; movement; verve; and social time perspective.

Boykin et al. (2005) assert that the cultural behaviors of African American (and other) students must not be viewed as deficits but as assets. Viewing cultural behaviors as assets leads teachers to culturally responsive teaching -- teaching in ways that are more congruent to students' learning styles and needs. Culturally responsive teaching, utilizing asset-based instruction, and incorporating asset-based instruction into the curriculum, is a direct pathway to student engagement, which is required for learning to occur.

Literacy

Culturally responsive teaching is clearly situated within the discipline of literacy. Language is the symbolic representation of culture. The ideological approach to literacy acknowledges that literacy is "inherently entwined with culture and heritage" (Lazar, 2011, p. 8).

> … literacy practices serve legitimate communicative purposes for all families, but their value is determined by the power that specific communities hold in society…. power relations exist in society and determine how different literacies are valued. It is often assumed that the literacy of nondominant or underrepresented groups are nonexistent or inferior to those of middle-class white Western societies…." (Lazar, 2011, p. 9).

Lazar (2011) states that literacy is a set of cultural practices that can be used to create meaningful classroom instruction. Students bring funds of knowledge and experiences with them into the classroom and teachers access students' funds of knowledge to motivate students and lead to student engagement.

Multicultural literacy is grounded in the social constructivist view of literacy learning (Au, 2006). Literacy is taught through the use of language tools and multicultural literature. Language tools are curricula and instructional practices that are culturally based and enable students to understand and learn mainstream literacy through their own cultural literacy. Since African American students are considered to be multilingual and may speak African American Vernacular English (Standard Black English, Ebonics) and Standard English, it is essential they have culturally responsive literacy teachers (O'Gilvie, Turner, & Hughes, 2011; Schmidt & Lazar, 2011; Smitherman, 1998).

Culturally responsive literacy teachers are able to use African American students' languages in meaningful and purposeful ways. They teach students how to code-switch (to switch from one language to another) based upon the audience and context (O'Gilvie, et al., 2011). Additional tools used in multicultural literacy include community discourses or linguistic forms that occur within the African-American community. Perry and Delpit (1998) identified four discourses: (1) call and response; (2) proverbializing; (3) narrativizing; and (4) signifying. Call and response encourages the audience to talk back with the appropriate responses. Proverbializing involves teaching ideals and values through brief statements. Narrativizing is telling stories based on

personal or historical lived experiences. Signifying is the use of exaggeration, irony, and humor to say something or communicate on two different levels at once. Culturally responsive literacy teachers use these language tools in tandem with multicultural literature in their classrooms to promote and support the learning and development of literacy in African American students. In order to accomplish this, teachers must become culturally competent and learn how to use or implement culturally responsive teaching.

Critical Race Theory

As with the above topics, a discussion of culturally responsive teaching is incomplete without a discussion of Critical Race Theory. This theory has several tenets. The first tenant states that racism is normalized and embedded in the practices and policies of all institutions (Ladson-Billings, 1998). It is essential to question what appears to be the norm and to examine these norms to uncover racial inequalities. The second tenant states that racism can be understood by listening to the voices of those who experience it. Through the use of narratives of people of color, teachers become aware of the existence and the harmful impact of racism – psychologically, emotionally, socially, professionally, academically, and fiscally. The third tenant states that liberalism is a belief that is based upon freedom and equality and (unfortunately) justice cannot always be served through the legal system. The fourth tenant of critical race theory states that those who are privileged will work for racial justice if it benefits them. To reiterate, Critical Race Theory in the context of education requires us to examine the curriculum through the lens of people of color. Culturally responsive teaching supports critical race theory and visa versa.

As the overview above indicates, many scholars have contributed to the development of culturally responsive teaching, recognizing that it benefits not just students but educators as well. With this context, I now turn attention to the historical roots of culturally responsive teaching. I begin with the history of multicultural education and the appearance of culturally responsive teaching in modern times.

History of Multicultural Education

Even though Carter Woodson's book *The Miseducation of the Negro* published in 1933, clearly spoke to the need for a multicultural curriculum, multicultural education emerged in the 1960s during the Civil Right Movement. The Civil Rights Movement began to change its focus during the mid-1960s. Previously, most of the Civil Rights activities occurred within the courtrooms with civil rights leaders relying on the courts for social justice through changing or enforcing the laws of the land. With the addition of high school and college-age young adults, Civil Rights activities moved out of the courtrooms into the streets of northern and southern states and the campuses of colleges and universities (Gay, 2000, 2010).

Strategies shifted as well from a focus on passive peaceful protesting to self-determination, cultural consciousness, and political power. The evolution of the Black Power Movement ignited a cultural renaissance that now included all minority groups and poets, writers, musicians, politicians and philosophers. The college campus was now the center of Civil Rights activities (Gay, 2000, 2010). Noteworthy, the belief that minority students' lack of achievement was due to

dysfunctional families and cultural deprivation was replaced with theories about the negative impact of devaluing minority groups' cultures and the conflicting expectations between school and the home. Civil Rights activists demanded educational institutions to cease their racist and oppressive practices and distorting their cultural heritage and cultural contributions to society. They also demanded the establishment of ethnic studies courses and departments on college campuses so students could learn their true history.

With the *Lau v. Nichols* (1974) decision requiring students to be taught in their primary language and the Bilingual Education Act, federal funds became available to research and design curriculum for bilingual programs and ethnic studies. The development of multiethnic education programs eventually trickled down to K-12 school curriculum. It was in part through this effort that multicultural education was born with the emphasis on content, process, curriculum, and pedagogy. Three ideologies emerged, including teaching racially different students differently, using insights into ethnic or cultural pluralism to improve all educational decision-making, and teaching content about ethnic groups to all students (Gay, 2000, 2010). These ideologies provided the foundation for culturally responsive pedagogy.

To explore the ancestral roots of culturally responsive pedagogy, we must look at the diaries, stories, and school documents of the 1800s, when African Americans were slaves the first half of a century and became American citizens the latter half.

The Emergence of African American Schools

Before the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation in 1861, African American slaves were forbidden to read and write. In fact, if they were caught reading or writing, they were cruelly punished, tortured, or even killed. Yet, slaves continued to learn how to read in secret. In the North, there were a few schools available for African Americans that were run by freed African Americans and European Americans. At the end of the Civil War, the South faced one of its greatest challenges -- educating African Americans. Many White Southerners did not believe that African Americans could be educated the same way that White southern children were educated (Anderson, 1988), hence such legislation as *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896). Even though freed slaves flocked to newly formed schools, White Southerners believed that the desire for education would soon pass. When forced to provide schools and curriculum, it was a commonly held belief that African Americans did not deserve and need the same kind of curriculum that was available to White students (Butchart, 2010).

Newly freed African Americans had a great desire for learning how to read and write, which did not dissipate as time went on. Literacy was extremely important as it brought the assurance of emancipation. Emancipation was and is the freedom to think for oneself. Literacy brought protection from being enslaved again. Literacy led to self-respect and independence (Anderson, 1988; Siddle Walker, 2001).

Former slave owners viewed the idea of literate African Americans with fear. The notion of educated African Americans went against beliefs of racial inferiority. They were afraid of former slaves encountering ideas opposed to human bondage and the potential of written communication between conspirators from the North (Butchart, 2010; Siddle Walker, 2001).

The first teachers of southern schools consisted of African American teachers from the North, freed African Americans, African American Union soldiers, people from the Freedman Association, and northern white teachers often associated with aid organizations or churches. Teachers wrote many accounts of how students filled the classrooms. Many school facilities contained one or a few large rooms. Students ranged in age from the very young to the very old. The first book older students and adults wanted to read was the Bible. When students were provided with a recess, they often remained working in the classroom. Students even demanded having year-round schools (Butchart, 2010).

African American teachers ran most of the schools in the South. There are numerous documents and records from these early teachers describing the hundreds of students that came to attend school, the facilities, curriculum and materials (Butchart, 2010). So many schools were established in New Orleans that a public school system was quickly created. Since it was illegal to have a public school system at that time, schools were promptly closed down. An alternative plan was put into action—establishing private schools.

It is important to understand that during Reconstruction, the African American public school system was developing. In addition to African American churches and other organizations establishing schools, some White Southerners were establishing schools. Many of these schools were created out of the perception that there was a need to keep African Americans 'in their place'. Missionaries with the intent to recruit church members ran some of these schools. Many were established to provide a quality education.

In 1872, Samuel Chapman Armstrong wrote, " the colored student does not come to us bred in the atmosphere of a Christian home and community; but too often with the inheritance of a debased nature, and with all his wrong tendencies unchecked either by innate moral sense or by a good domestic influence" (Butchart, 2010, p. 120). Armstrong had concerns with how African Americans were taught and what they were being taught. He became active in a regional and national education association to critique the curriculum and instruction within African American owned schools and initiated a report on African American schools with recommendations. The report stated that African Americans do not need math in their curriculum but, instead, needed practical life skills. He also asserted that the African American schools were not teaching math, suggesting that there was no need for content areas that required abstract thinking because African Americans could not retain the information.

Other supporters of Armstrong developed a curriculum that they believed was better suited for African Americans. This curriculum did not contain math and science or much of the literature of that time. The instructional strategies were basically traditional, relying solely on lecturers. Textbooks were created, written in vernacular that contained inaccurate and disparaging illustrations of African Americans and other minorities. The curriculum was totally free of charge and was marketed as the official state curriculum and distributed to all schools in the district (Butchart, 2010). Remnants of this thinking continues as African Americans fight to receive an education promised in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954).

Conversely, the curriculum in the African American schools contained all of the required subject areas, including math and science. Teachers understood the culture of their students and

incorporated it into their curriculum and their instruction. The curriculum was enhanced with the history and contributions of African Americans. Teachers used students' experiences in teaching the content. They differentiated the content and allowed students to work in small groups. Students were encouraged to question what they read and to engage in problem solving (Anderson, 1988).

Textbooks and materials were designed for the curriculum that contained accurate illustrations. In 1865, Lydia Maria Child developed a series called the *Freedman's Book,* which contained biographies of African-American leaders (Butchart, 2010). Another publication, the *Freedman's Torch*, was a collection of lessons that instilled African American pride in students and spoke of the need to control the education of African American schools. These curricula and materials were available to all schools, but at a cost.

These early African American schools were using culturally responsive teaching, a multicultural curriculum, differentiation, and critical thinking, among other instructional practices that are culturally congruent for African American students. Documents and records indicate that attendance was high and students moved quickly and successfully through the curriculum. A good number of the graduates of these schools became teachers and leaders as well (Anderson, 1988; Butchart, 2010); Siddle Walker, 2001).

Eventually, the Union soldiers left the South. What transpired resulted in the decline of the established African American schools and a take-over by the White schools. Without the protection of the soldiers, African American schools were vandalized. Teachers were warned not to continue to teach at the schools. Eventually, the Klu Klux Klan became involved, resulting in violence. Some African American teachers attempting to fight for their schools were lynched (Butchart, 2010). Many of the African American teachers moved North and found teaching positions. The schools that remained used the curriculum and materials that were developed by Whites for African Americans.

Teachers who migrated to the Northern states ended up in schools within segregated African American communities (Siddle Walker, 2001). While most schools had adopted curricula, African American teachers continued to practice culturally responsive teaching and what they believed to be the best practices for their students. The curriculum continued to be enhanced with multicultural content. Teachers focused on developing meaningful relationships with students, families, and the community. Schools became the center-point of many African American communities. Families were involved in school and schools had the support of the churches as well. Not surprising, however, the funding of schools continued to be inequitable (Anderson, 1988; Siddle Walker, 2001).

In 1954, the United States Supreme Court ruled against *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) and the desegregation of schools began initiating the migration of African American students to predominantly White schools, the closing of a substantial number of African American schools, and the displacement of hundreds of African American teachers, and the repercussions continue to be felt today, as witnessed by the under-representation of African Americans in the teaching force.

Final Thoughts

The history of African American education is a story of resilience - the resilience of people who value education and continue to struggle to achieve educational equity. Today, African American students are attending 'drop-out factories' and are continuing to experience the achievement gap. School reforms are created that promise success but are often removed before they even begin to deliver. Many teachers are not prepared or qualified to teach African American students. Best practices are often not congruent with the needs of African American students. Yet, culturally responsive pedagogy has proven its worth and effectiveness over history. Below, I present a few suggestions for change.

1. Teacher preparation programs must prepare teachers to be culturally responsive – have the knowledge, disposition, and skills to effectively teach African American students.

2. Teacher preparation programs must have professors that are culturally competent and knowledgeable about cultural responsive pedagogy to effectively prepare teachers and principals to teach African American students.

3. Professional development is needed in all schools to further prepare teachers to be culturally competent.

4. Schools must work diligently to increase the number of African Americans in the teaching force.

AUTHOR NOTES

Deborah A. Harmon, Ph.D., is a Professor of Curriculum and Instruction, and Director of the Office of Urban Education and Educational Equity at Eastern Michigan University, Ypsilanti Michigan. Her research interests include the achievement of culturally diverse students, urban teacher preparation, recruitment and retention of culturally diverse students and teachers, developing cultural competency, and gifted and talented culturally diverse students.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to: Deborah A. Harmon, 450 Dunnington Drive, Ann Arbor, MI 48103; E-mail: deborah.harmon@emich.edu

References

Anderson, J. D. (1988). *The education of Blacks in the south, 1860-1935*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina.

Au, K. (2006). *Multicultural issues and literacy achievement*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Banks, J. A. (1999). *An introduction to multicultural education* (2nd Ed.). Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Boykin, A. W., Albury, A., Tyler, K. M., Hurley, E. A., Bailey, C. T., & Miller, O. A. (2005). In search of cultural themes and their expressions in the dynamic life. *Urban Education*, *40,* 521-549.

Brown v. Board of Education, 347 U.S. 483 (1954).

Butchart, R. E. (2010). *Schooling a freed people: Teaching, learning, and the struggle for Black freedom, 1861-1876*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Ford, D. Y. (2010). *Reversing underachievement among gifted black students* (2nd ed). Waco, Texas: Prufrock.

Ford, D. Y., Harris, J. J., III, Tyson, C. A. & Trotman, M. (2002). Beyond deficit thinking: Providing access for gifted African American students. *Roeper Review, 24*, 52-58.

Gay, G. (2000). Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice. New York: Teachers College Press.

Gay, G. (2010). Acting on beliefs in teacher education for cultural diversity. *Journal of Teacher Education, 61*, 143-152.

Harmon, D. (2002). They won't teach me!: The voices of gifted African American inner-city students. *Roeper Review, 24*, 68-75.

Irvine, J. J. (1989). Beyond role models: An examination of cultural influences on the pedagogical perspectives of Black teachers. *Peabody Journal of Education*, *66*(4), 51-63.

Irvine, J. J. (2002). *In search of wholeness: African American teachers and their culturally specific classroom practices*. (Ed). New York: Palgrave.

Irvine, J. J., & Armento, B. J. (2001). *Culturally responsive teaching: Lesson planning for elementary and middle grades*. New York: McGraw Hill.

Ladson-Billings, G. (1994). *The dreamkeepers: Successful teachers of African American children*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Ladson-Billings, G. (1998). Just what is critical race theory and what's it doing in a nice field like education? *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, 11*(1), 7-24.

Ladson-Billings, G. (2001). *Crossing over to Canaan: The journey of new teachers in diverse classrooms*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Ladson-Billings, G. (2010). Making the book talk: Literacy in successful urban classrooms and communities. In K. Dunsmore & D. Fisher (Eds.), *Bringing Literacy Home* (pp. 226-244). Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

Lau v. *Nichols*, 414 U.S. 563 (1974).

Lazar, A. M. (2011). Access to excellence: Serving today's students through culturally responsive literacy teaching. In P. R. Schmidt & A. M. Lazar (Eds.), *Practicing what we teach: How culturally responsive literacy classrooms make a difference* (pp. 3-26). New York: Teachers College Press.

Love, A., & Kruger, A. C. (2005). Teacher beliefs and student achievement in urban schools serving African American students. *The Journal of Educational Research*, *99*(2), 87-98.

O'Gilvie, H. O., Turner, J. D., & Hughes, H. (2011). Teaching through language: Using multilingual tools to promote literacy achievement among African American elementary students. In P. R. Schmidt & A. M. Lazar (Eds.), *Practice what we teach: How culturally responsive literacy classrooms make a difference* (pp. 141-155). New York: Teachers College Press.

Perry, T., & Delpit, L. (Eds.) (1998). *The real ebonics debate: Power, language, and the education of African American children*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Plessy v. Ferguson, 163 U.S. 537, 539 (1896).

Schmidt, P. R., & Lazar, A. M. (2011). *Practicing what we teach: How culturally responsive literacy classrooms make a difference* (Eds.). New York: Teachers College Press.

Siddle Walker, V. (2001). African American teaching in the South: 1940-1960. *American Educational Research Journal*, *38*(4), 751-779.

Smitherman, G. (1998). Black English/Ebonics: what it be like? In T. Perry & L. Delpit (Eds.), *The real Ebonics debate: Power, language, and the education of African American children,* (pp. 29-37). Boston: Beacon Press.

Willis, A. I. (2003) Parallax: Addressing race in preservice literacy education. In S. Greene & D. Abt-Perkins (Eds.), *Making race visible: Literacy research for cultural understanding* (pp. 51-70). New York: Teachers College Press.