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Merging and Creating Culturally Relevant Pedagogy in Public Schools

Sunni Ali and Ryan Murphy

ABSTRACT

During the last fifty years, numerous individuals have sought new strategies for students, such as African Americans, whom the public schools have historically underserved. Not only are some parents of these students seeking change, but also researchers, politicians, and local groups. Nevertheless, it is clear that these efforts have posed several dilemmas, which (a) limit the voice and personal choice of learners, (b) standardize the value of learning, and (c) connote a hegemonic discourse. Therefore, this Best Practices essay is based on the theory that a culturally value-driven framework (CVD) of learning will allow African Americans and other students of color to receive an education that promotes personal interest, meaning, and value to their communities.

Keywords: cultural relevant, pedagogy, African American students, curriculum, inquiry methods

Introduction

The history of African Americans in the U.S. public education system has been an arduous journey that has included attending segregated, underfunded schools, and having poor graduation rates from high schools and colleges. Traditionally in many communities, excuses were rarely accepted to justify poor academic performance, despite documented obstacles associated with racism. In fact, in spite of Jim Crow restrictions, disenfranchisement, broken legislative promises, and a biased criminal justice system, many African Americans have still been able to rise above these challenges.

Today more than ever, many African American youth are not aware of their powerful history and many accept the negative notion that failure is an option. According to Ladson-Billings (2009), many urban students refuse to live up to the ancestral legacy that paved the way for their successes, and they tend to embrace failure rather than success. This is especially alarming when the dropout rate for African American students in many urban public schools across the nation is at 50%, which is linked to a greater likelihood of negative outcomes. Therefore, recognizing the important impact of culture, and bridging the gap between where the student is academically

and where educators want the student to be is essential.

The reality of African American students' everyday life experiences are factors that should not be overlooked by educators. For many African American students, these factors include: (a) mass media stereotypical imagery, (b) poor parenting skills, (c) fatherless homes, (d) economic inequities, (e) institutional racism, and (f) normalization of ghetto culture. Without question, these variables are affecting many American households, and curtailing pathways to excellence for a substantial number of youth. Consequently, the traditional value system that emphasized hard work, diligence, family responsibility, moral accountability, and respect are absent from many of these households. However, despite similar problematic issues, other most other racial groups are not experiencing a 50% dropout rate from the nation's high schools. Although some communities do provide economic resources and social support systems that deter youth from embracing options of failure and high dropout rates, these alone do not resolve the dilemmas. Perhaps helping students connect to their individual cultures and values, learning can eliminate the cycle of failure.

A culturally value-driven framework (CVD) of learning will make the traditional educational system more meaningful and valuable to African Americans and other students of color. The design of a CVD model strengthens students' connection to school. This will not only allow them to determine their own individual needs and opportunities, but redefine how school is constructed so that schools will better serve their needs. This is not to say that CVD is the salvation model that will eliminate some of the major dilemmas encountered by many African Americans. Nevertheless, it

is a noteworthy instructional framework that can facilitate students' ability to connect to education. Right now, far too many African American learners "hate" school and do not connect to its purpose. To help these learners, it is imperative that schools are redesigned. When African American students discover through the curriculum that "there is a way out of no way" via education, this will empower students academically.

Efficacy

In many educational circles, black learners are often perceived as failing to understand the "true" meaning of education (Ogbu, 1992). Quite often, some educators blame students' family upbringing, dysfunctional communities, or poverty as the causes of their academic problems. Also, some scholars assert that biology and genetics are reasons why some blacks continue to fail academically (Herrnstein & Murray, 1994). To challenge or offset this notion, it is important to identify and implement new learning models that improve African American student achievement. Although it is certain that variables such as, poverty, family, and societal dilemmas affect African American students' learning outcomes, these factors are not the only reasons why "failure has become an option" for some students. When students no longer value school or believe it is relevant or necessary, they perceive that education as unimportant.

Today's education is constructed to test or assess students, rather than providing them with an enriched curriculum that offers value and meaning to their learning experience. In contrast, CVD works as a deconstruction model because education is valued, identity achievement is developed, and instruction becomes impactful. Learning becomes connected to students' self-esteem and confidence, which allows them to find

meaning, value, and relevancy in their schoolwork. More important, students find their “voice” in the classroom and within the school culture, and believe their identity is constructed around the ability to achieve.

In 1994, Gloria Ladson-Billings’ *The Dream Keepers* . . . discussed the impact a culturally relevant framework has on African American student learning and achievement. She stated that students become more engaged and empowered learners when the content is relevant and connected to their culture. When students visualize themselves in the curriculum, they value what they learn and their academic skills improve. This not only constructs meaning for students, but also enhances their self-image.

Kunjufu’s research in 2002 supported and advanced Ladson-Billings’ message of how a CVD model delivers important identity affirmation to learners. From his perspective, students’ self-esteem improves as a result of a culturally relevant pedagogy. First, learners are armed or equipped with the notion that learning offers some rewards. Besides the goal of earning a grade, students view knowledge and information as a tool to advance in society. Secondly, students believe they can achieve and make great academic strides. This helps them discover learning as a part of their heritage and not some distorted or disconnected experience. In addition, students embrace the belief that achievement is connected to their identity. The incredible value of CVD is that it allows students to discover without exception the value of academic excellence and achievement.

Some researchers have noted that too many African American learners believe that being smart is synonymous with acting “White” or acting in a conceited or condescending manner

(Kunjufu, 1987). Nothing can be further from the truth when students are connected to their learning. They receive an education that affirms their identity and connections to their family, school, and community. Achievement is shaped and built around how the learner values himself or herself in this educational model.

The CVD model allows for more options in learning to increase students’ level of achievement. This is especially important in regards to the increasing dropout rate African Americans experience in urban education, which some scholars attribute to their limited connection to school (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Kozol, 2006; Shujja, 1996). This is why many experts maintain that a culturally relevant and value-driven paradigm can help such students build a connector bridge or relationship to school. According to researchers, a culturally relevant education model allows students to personalize their learning experiences while improving their skills. When students view themselves in the curriculum as important and valuable, they accept the learning model or pedagogy being taught. Consequently, it is by no accident that in schools where a culturally relevant paradigm is used, students are more likely to be engaged and their academic performance improves (Ogbu, 1978; Shujja, 1994).

As a best practice strategy, schools in urban areas need to adopt or embrace a culturally pedagogy to psychologically “win over” students who are not connected to school. To begin this process, students should be allowed to make decisions about what they need to learn. In other words, if a student wants to become an engineer, he or she should be permitted to take more math or science courses, and maybe even serve as an

intern in a community-based engineering business.

This would socially and emotionally support students' choice and greatly impact student engagement in the curriculum. Rather than teaching students a standardized curriculum dictated by self-serving intangible entities, learners would decide through their own interests, the facts they need to learn to achieve their goals. Such a strategy would further allow learners to add value and meaning to instruction, rather than being passive students. Critical constructivism and meaningful instructional practices could emerge from this sort of educational model while helping students apply meaning to their learning.

To derive new or amended educational results, the CVD model should become infused into the learning environments to radically empower and direct students to new pathways. Otherwise, minority students will continue to fail and suffer from a traditional pedagogy that has not proven effective. This failure, if not corrected, will continue into secondary school and thus impact students' lives during adulthood.

How a Culturally Relevant Model Adds Educational Value

The value of a culturally relevant education relies upon how one responds to the question: "Is it the journey or the destination?" Both schools of thought are important. Suppose you are planning a trip, if someone or something is waiting for you, you may only desire the destination. Your focus will be on getting there as directly and, perhaps, as efficiently as possible. Under these circumstances, the distance alone may seem unattainable in a satisfactory amount of time. Therefore, a person may become more willing to take as many shortcuts as possible to get to his or her goal as fast as possible. Any deviation from the planned

route would be considered an inconvenience, maybe even an annoyance.

However, if a person values the journey, the distance no longer becomes an obstacle, no matter how much travel is required. The focus, instead, is on how meaningful each passing milestone becomes. Landmarks, such as the Statue of Liberty, the Grand Canyon, or the Taj Mahal will enrich the journey, not distract from the destination. Even setbacks, such as lost luggage or a misread map will allow for a "teachable" moment on how to regroup or handle a crisis.

Many scholars throughout time, including ancient Greece, believed in the journey rather than the destination in regards to an educated life. It was Socrates who stated that "an unexamined life is not worth living." The related theory of education is called "paideia." Overly simplified, paideia is the use of the mind and body working in accordance to achieve an appreciation for learning that relies heavily on cultural development. This development of the mind does not end merely because the student receives the equivalent of a diploma; in fact, the students of this school of thought are actually motivated to continue learning indefinitely. Learning, therefore, becomes something they take pride in for their own self-worth, their community and their culture.

In direct contrast to the Ancient Greeks, in many American public schools, especially those in urban settings, high school graduation is the only option given to students as an ultimate destination. The only thing that matters is standardized test performance. Many educators will teach to the test and then test and retest students up to five times a year to gauge their progress. The students' actual grades, grade point averages and whether they are able to effectively read and write or perform on a college or professional level.

Gauging student success solely on the basis of successful completion of the 12th grade or even how well students performed on a test, despite whether or not they have truly learned and retained lessons and content is one of the main reasons why many schools have such a high number of students who give up on the education system and drop out of school.

While it is far too easy for curriculum creators to blame outside factors impacting student performance, the fact remains that the dropout rate is so high that social factors alone can no longer be solely blamed for student underachievement. If half of the student population is failing, it stands to reason that there is an issue with the curriculum or pedagogy. In many of the largest school districts in the country, more than 60% of the students are performing below grade level. This is not merely an issue that needs to be addressed, but an actual epidemic-level crisis (Ravitch, 2010). How are schools addressing this epidemic? Numerous schools in failing districts are becoming more stringent in their policies regarding student behavior, resulting in these students being recommended in higher numbers to special education classes. However, any physician will tell you that you cannot treat the patient while at the same time ignoring his or her symptoms.

Using CVD pedagogy allows the educator to listen to students' needs, address those needs, and this pedagogy connects the educator with the students, the parents, and the community in a more impactful way. This model of teaching allows the educator to learn who the students are and relate the curriculum to the student.

Conversely, the deficit model emphasizes to minority students who they are and where they come from is less

valuable than their future admirations. This model also stresses the need to test well in order to have a more meaningful life. That is a judgment call the school system is making and it comes from an extremely patronizing point of view. Demeaning someone's identity while simultaneously saying that you love them and wanting to help them is counterproductive. In other words, educators are implying that "Who you are now is not valuable, but I will make you into an individual who will perhaps, someday, be someone of worth." For this reason, it is surprising that under this model, many students have yet to become motivated or engaged in their learning, perhaps because this deficit model is less about teaching and more about reprogramming students' identities.

This blanket denial of students' culture and community negates their voices. Any sign of a student's frustration is silenced behind terms like "special needs" or "emotional immaturity." Therefore, it is essential to connect students to a curriculum that addresses their cultural needs and motivates them to learn for learning's sake with a supportive theme of overall graduation, instead of setting students up for failure. In some cases at least 50% of minority students are not graduating from secondary schools (Jackson, 2010). However, much worse is the fact that even those who do graduate from high school and attend college may drop out of college or be kicked out due to poor academic performance and lack of preparedness.

When educators focus on high school graduation as the sole destination for students, students may graduate high school only to still be left behind in college, graduate school, and in life. This not only means that students are ill prepared to compete on a national or global level, but are also recycled back

into generational cycles of poverty, and are forced to subject their children to the same failing educational system that failed their parents.

Conclusion

Educators must use a curriculum that consists of a more holistic approach to students' needs, employ strategies that are able to address more than the end result of graduation, and empower students to embrace the educational process. A CVD model can address these needs by offering students more options. Educators also need to look beyond the concept of "passing the torch of knowledge" to students, and instead, adopt the concept of "enabling students to light their own torch," based on the social constructs of their *own* lives. Learning is a social process that occurs throughout the day through extracurricular activities, mass media, advertisements, interactions with family and peers, etc. Students need appropriate lenses to critically assess these interactions and make meaning of their educational process. By understanding their own world, students will be able to utilize skills taught within the classroom. For example, examining historical events such as the "Chicago fire" will allow students to begin to ask deeper questions, apply the events to the real world in which they live, and at the same time utilize various academic skills. In the end, the culturally relevant pedagogy will help both educators and students.

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