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# WORKING WITH COMMUNITIES TO EXPLORE AND PERSONALIZE CULTURALLY RELEVANT PEDAGOGIES

## “PUSH, DOUBLE IMAGES, AND RACED TALK”

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*Within this article I describe, with the help of my masters in education (MEd) students who are also my coresearchers, the results of a year-long, cooperative inquiry aimed at exploring and making concrete the ways in which cultural and political knowledge can be explored, understood, and personalized as prospective teachers begin to develop culturally relevant approaches. This work is not intended to describe a model or define a single style, nor do we make any claims that what is described can be linked to improved achievement. What we do attempt to communicate is how a group of prospective teachers, as participants and students of a particular African American community context, begin to develop bicultural competency and personalize cultural and political knowledge in an effort to develop culturally relevant pedagogies.*

**Keywords:** *culturally relevant pedagogies; diversity; multicultural teacher education*

### BACKGROUND

Teachers in the United States are predominantly White, female, and middle class, from suburban or rural areas (Zeichner et al., 1998) and have lived, for the most part, monocultural lives (Garcia & Pugh, 1992; Sleeter, 1997). In addition, for many middle-class White people, relationships with people of color often occur within a context where there are few people of color in number and, thus, White people may experience no discernible alternative cultural presence. Such experiences confirm prominent social ideologies that erase cultural, political, and class differences in favor of similarities, allowing many Whites to believe that everyone is the same (Roman, 1997) or, in reality, “they are just like me.” These experiences make it

challenging for White teachers to consider what it means to create education that is relevant for children who are not White and/or middle class. On the other hand, though many prospective teachers of color may have experienced diverse cultural contexts, most have been educated within public school systems where they experienced a Eurocentric approach to education and have been provided with few opportunities to consider culturally relevant practices or a multicultural curriculum.

### CULTURALLY RELEVANT APPROACHES AND TEACHING AFRICAN AMERICAN CHILDREN

Although schools have an extensive history of failing to connect with the sociopolitical and

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Author’s Note: In Memory of Dr. Gloria Friend. This research would not have been possible without my coresearchers: Tara Richard, Jennifer Zelei, Ghirima Woldemariam, Tom Rexroad, Courtney Williams, Chris Jasinski, Erica Latham, Chris Smith, Rebecca Mehling, Melinda Saving, Molly Steinlage, and Allison Volz.

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cultural worlds of students of color and of poor students, exemplary teachers of these children weave together curriculum from the content of their children's lives. These teachers utilize pedagogies that are congruent with their children's culture and class-based patterns of living on the way to helping them become biculturally, or biclass competent (Foster, 1997; Heath, 1983; Irvine, 1989, 1992; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Noordhoff & Kleinfeld, 1993). Evolving bodies of literature profile the work of exemplary teachers for African American children (e.g., Ladson-Billings, 1994) and identify different political or cultural principles involved in developing culturally relevant teaching and curriculum (Gay, 2000; Hale, 2001; G. P. Smith, 1998; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). This scholarship, however, is not always readily applied to the development of personal teaching pedagogies and may be often misinterpreted. For example, even though scholars in this area highlight the principals behind the teaching, culturally relevant teaching may often be misunderstood as the need to replicate the styles and behaviors of exemplary teachers of color or may be reduced to creating activities on what often amounts to stereotypical, trivialized, or overgeneralized beliefs on culture. In addition, though caring relationships with students often surface as critical to culturally supportive teaching (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Dixon, 2003; Gay, 2000; Howard, 2001), the characteristics of these relationships may differ markedly from caring as defined by many prospective teachers. Finally, there is evidence that even experienced teachers who have participated in professional development programs focused on culturally relevant information may find it difficult to use this knowledge in constructing more supportive experiences (Foster & Peele, 1999).

Overall, in education it is still far easier to talk about cultural differences than to act on that understanding. As a White teacher educator I have watched prospective and practicing teachers struggle to understand what this might mean. Often, what I find to be exciting in the scholarship in this area remains, for many, too abstract and theoretical to make concrete and real. "What characteristics of African

American culture make it distinct from European American culture?" they ask. And "How can race, racism, and skin color become appropriate targets of conversation for children?" Elements of African American culture and language as identified by Black scholars (Boykin, 1982; Delpit, 2002; Hale-Benson, 1986; Hilliard, 1992; McAdoo, 2002; Nobles, 1979, 1987; Smitherman, 1977) are unverifiable by most White teachers who have led monocultural lives and have little or no experience within an African American cultural milieu. Thus, they see the behaviors of their African American children disconnected from the community context in which they are appropriate and healthy—their homes, their churches, and their local communities.

African American students and other students of color, as well as White students, comment on the styles of teachers that they read about (Foster, 1992; Ladson-Billings, 1994). "She's great, but I don't think I could do that. It's not me." Or, "I wish I could do that, but it's just not my style." In addition, research necessarily essentializes in an effort to develop frameworks that can be shared, thus, there are all too many specific and particular cultural contexts in which there are important distinctions and differences (Cazden & Mehan, 1989) making it hard to decide how to use this information. Finally, though many of the African American prospective and practicing teachers that I have worked with resonate with descriptions of culture and of culturally relevant teachers, few of them have experienced teaching that incorporates that knowledge and, therefore, lack models and support for developing their own practice.

### **THE MT. OLIVET CHURCH AND THE OHIO STATE ELEMENTARY MASTERS IN EDUCATION PROGRAM**

For 7 years the Elementary Masters in Education (MEd) Program at The Ohio State University (OSU) has been involved in a partnership with Mt. Olivet Baptist Church, an African American church, in Columbus, Ohio. African American churches have a long history of providing critical support for families and

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for raising and educating children (Billingsly & Caldwell, 1991; Brown & Gary, 1991), and this commitment has been extended to the preparation of teachers by the Mt. Olivet community. Although the partnership has a number of different goals (see Seidl & Friend, 2002a), a primary purpose of the partnership is to provide prospective teachers with the experiences they need to begin to develop bicultural competency and culturally relevant pedagogies. MEd students from OSU participate in an equal-status, cross-cultural internship (Seidl & Friend, 2002b) at the church where they spend 2 to 3 hrs a week across the entire academic year working in programs created for children from the community and surrounding area, including after-school tutoring programs, the Christian Academy located within the church, and latchkey programs. Mediation of their experiences occurs in regularly scheduled weekly meetings with faculty from the University and with members of the church community. Coursework and outside readings are used to begin to develop a knowledge base on issues of racism, privilege, and culture, in general, and African American history and culture, in particular. Students participate in the internship on a voluntary basis and are asked to engage in extended cooperative inquiry into their own growth and development.

Over the years we have drawn heavily on the scholarship within culturally relevant or culturally responsive teaching (e.g., Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994), and several important beliefs frame our use of this work. First, we believe that the development of culturally relevant pedagogies is dependent on the individual beginning to become biculturally competent. Although some students who are not African American bring cross-cultural experiences, it is usually the case that most are just beginning to learn to negotiate and understand the cultural and political goals within the Mt. Olivet community and are beginning to develop competency in moving across diverse cultural contexts. Our African American MEd students bring a range of histories and experiences to the setting. Thus, though some African American students may be developing competence within this particular setting, others may

be quite competent and move quickly into discussing and identifying salient aspects of culture that may be important to consider when constructing educational opportunities for children.

Second, we believe that prospective teachers must learn what it means to become students of a particular context. They must learn about the range of cultural experiences and norms within a specific community and begin to situate education within an understanding of the goals and expectations the community has for children and for education. This is important because culture is never universal and stable but always particular, pliable, and bound to a specific geographical and historical context. This understanding moves culture down from a theoretical and abstract level, bringing it closer to the concrete, verifiable, and particular dimensions that make it useable for our prospective teachers. Culture within this understanding is not something one reads about but something that can be witnessed, lived, and learned.

Finally, we believe that prospective teachers need to personalize cultural and political knowledge within a pedagogical framework. They cannot mimic the styles and behaviors of the teachers described within the literature nor even mimic the personalities or styles of the church community. In fact, what is obvious from the literature is that culturally relevant teachers do not have a single "style" or pedagogy but have developed, over time, personal styles that take into account children's cultural, political, and emotional worlds.

### **COOPERATIVE, NARRATIVE INQUIRY: ANALYZING, INTERPRETING, AND NAMING STORIES OF CULTURE AND PEDAGOGY**

During the 2001-2002 academic year we engaged in a cooperative, narrative inquiry that involved the author, a White instructor and primary facilitator of the internship, and 12 elementary MEd students. Four of the MEd students were African American women, two were White males, and six were White females. In the past, the work of the partnership had been guided by a cofacilitator who was African

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American and a minister within the church. She was called home during the year; however, her spirit and wisdom over the many years she worked with the project have greatly influenced the thinking behind it.

Within cooperative inquiry (Heron, 1996; Reason, 1988, 1994) "all those involved in the research are both coresearchers, whose thinking and decision making contribute to generating ideas, designing and managing the project, and drawing conclusions from the experience, and also co-subjects, participating in the activity being researched" (Reason, 1994, p. 326). Thus, at the beginning of the year-long experience the group agreed that our inquiry would focus on becoming students of a cultural context to: (a) begin to develop bicultural competency, (b) learn about and use cultural and political knowledge, and (c) begin to personalize culturally relevant pedagogies.

Narrative, cooperative inquiry was especially suited to our purposes as we believe like Connelly and Clandinin (1990) that, "the narrative inquiries of today are the chronological events of tomorrow" (p. 9). We were most interested in growth and transformation through the telling and retelling of our stories and the creation of new ways of thinking about culture and teaching. We drew on narrative as method and data (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994; Hankins, 2003) as across the year we collected, talked about, and wrote stories of our experiences at Mt. Olivet. As it became clear that issues of culture, race, racism, privilege, and cross-cultural awareness were not limited to the Mt. Olivet context, we also began to share stories of experiences within our personal histories, families, communities, schools, and teaching internships.

As with many approaches to narrative inquiry, collection and analysis of the storied data occurred within a recursive, public process (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994; Grumet, 1988; Reason, 1988; Witherell & Noddings, 1991). Each participant brought a written story of experience to share with the group during each weekly meeting. Early stories focused on a range of issues pertaining to participation in the Mt. Olivet cultural context, some of those being: recognition and suspension of one's

personal, cultural, or class-based beliefs; experiences that seemed to represent a distinct cultural or class-based way of being; the ways adults in the community worked with children; moments where there was confusion or misunderstanding about what was happening or why it was happening; or experiences thought to be related to race or racism.

Stories were first shared and discussed in small groups at the weekly meetings, and then stories thought most interesting or those that represented new issues, concepts, or questions became the point of large-group discussion at the meeting. Discussions focused on interpreting and reinterpreting the story from multiple perspectives, including the lens of our readings about culture, race, class, racism, African American history, and language as the scholarship in these areas provided a distinctive and critical backdrop against which this process unfolded. In addition to sharing stories during weekly meetings, all written stories were read by the OSU instructor and author of this article who responded in written form and encouraged elaboration through questioning and through encouraging students to make connections to the literature. Stories were then reinterpreted, rewritten, and reshared.

Our analytic process was inductive and deductive. During the first two quarters of the academic year, stories capturing similar kinds of ideas, issues, or themes were identified by the group. Over time we began to name these themes in ways that allowed us to "hold on" to the constellation of understandings or dimensions that we were building and exploring within each of them. For instance, "push" and "raced talk" were themes that emerged in many different stories within the first two quarters. These themes became the target of further storied investigation as, in a deductive process, participants attempted to collect examples of each and explore and define the ways in which they could be understood and personalized. After different themes were named, the group began to identify critical dimensions within each. For example, the theme *push* had a political, historical dimension, dimensions of caring and community,

and several other dimensions the reader will find in quotation marks throughout the discussion of "push." The final written product of the inquiry was a collection of seven stories by each member focused on the themes they felt important to their own growth. Each story included a narrative of experience, an interpretation of that experience, and a description of the ways in which they had begun to personalize that knowledge. This collection of stories became the final master's project for each MEd student.

The construction of this particular article was primarily the responsibility of the author who, given the limited space available, took the final steps of choosing the themes to be presented and of selecting examples from student participants' final papers to provide evidence, exploration of, and rich detail on the dimensions of each theme. In addition, a final level of analysis was done by the author who read, reread, and coded the stories to identify additional critical dimensions within each theme. Similarly, the final selection of language and literature through which to portray the interpretive dimensions on each theme was also the author's responsibility.

In the end, then, this particular article is like much narrative research in teacher education; it is one particular story of a storied process. It represents a blending and layering of interpretation that is the result of collaboration but is also dependent on a writer or several writers taking the primary responsibility for disseminating the work and for crafting a helpful teaching story (Clandenin & Connelly, 1994).

As this work is shared with others, it is important to make clear that the ways in which we have named and described cultural and political knowledge represents our attempts to personalize that knowledge—it is not meant to be an anthropological description of African American culture, and it is certainly not a comprehensive accounting of culture. Rather, the themes presented below are intended to demonstrate the ways in which this group of prospective teachers, through participation in the life of the Mt. Olivet community and through participation in this inquiry began: (a) to recognize and name cultural, political,

and communicative patterns and structures, interrogating their own cultural beliefs and behaviors in the process; (b) to understand and interpret, or reinterpret, the behaviors of their African American students; and, as a result, (c) to imagine how this information could be used to influence their teaching pedagogies. We hope that other people engaged in similar efforts will react in resonance to this story, "that is to say, with a narrative of one's own" (Conle, 2000, p. 53).

### **PUSHING: FAILURE IS NOT AN OPTION!**

One of the most frequently discussed topics in stories within the group's experience at Mt. Olivet was the manner in which adults continually held and enforced high expectations for children's behavior and achievement. Hard work and improvement were at the center of many interactions between children and adults. "Pushing" toward high standards was manifested in diverse ways; however, the message was consistent, "While the outside world may set you up to fail, may actually expect little from you, here you will not be allowed to do anything but your best." Thus the principle that we came to term *pushing* had a very political context. "Pushing is a way of working against institutional and cultural racisms" that present a continual barrage of low expectations and negative messages regarding ability and achievement to many students of color.

Tara, an African American student, expressed this concept within her own life:

High expectations were typically demonstrated in my home. . . . I think my family, my friends, my church and a select number of teachers have faith in my ability . . . which is why they expect nothing less than 150%. . . . It is important for teachers to set high expectations for their African American students because they will need to surpass all of the expectations made of them in society. Although, in general, society's expectations of African Americans are low, teachers . . . can put faith in their students abilities by setting high expectations, thus encouraging students to strive for high levels of success.

Several of the members of our group described teachers who did not use the concept of push within their own teaching. Consider Tom's experience:

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What does it take for students to succeed? This is the question I asked myself . . . as I observed in an urban eighth grade math class. The teacher . . . honestly cared for her students, and day after day I watched her attempt to teach her lessons. But, . . . I'm not sure there was a lot of learning going on. . . . Students were out of their seats a great deal, fights were almost daily, notes were being thrown across the room, and swearing was prevalent and unpunished. I talked with the teacher. . . . She was quick to point out the many difficult home situations that her students were coming from, and that with these kinds of worries, learning was often the last thing that these students cared about. I remember thinking to myself how much that made sense.

Over time, Tom came to a different conclusion about what was important for children:

It was not until we began reading and talking about the concept of "push," that I found inspiration once again. I am referring to the need to push for academic achievement, and high expectations of behavior. I realized that [this] was lacking in the eighth grade classroom. . . . I have learned through this capstone that "push" must often be a combined effort. . . . "Push" may not only come from a caring teacher but can also come from students, parents, grandparents, friends, and church members. Thus, a teacher's job would be to seek out these caring people and work together in "pushing" their child to excellence.

Caring for students may be often used as an excuse for expecting less from certain groups of students. Many teachers, like the one Tom describes, feel that conditions in their students' lives make it impossible for them to learn. As Tom concluded: "Although the teacher did care for her students, she was not effective in implementing these two standards. In fact, her reasons for not implementing these standards were because of the fact that she cared."

Tom came to understand "pushing as a necessary quality within caring." This idea is described frequently within the literature (Foster, 1997; Howard, 2001; Irvine, 1989; Ladson-Billings, 1994) where exemplary teachers for African American students are described as "maintaining high expectations but remaining sensitive to students' academic self-concepts and fragile egos" (Mitchell, 1998, p. 115).

Like Tom, Melinda came to understand *pushing* as necessary for good teaching. When several children in her seventh-grade class used her teaching to define the word *encourage*

as in, "Ms. Saving encourages us to do our best," she reflects on what this might mean and how it is different from what they experience with other teachers:

I'm only a student teacher, therefore when Darrell and the others made their statements about encouragement, I knew it wasn't my expert teaching skill that made them feel this way. I encourage them through our interactions together. I set high goals, and expect the best. I won't give them 4th and 5th grade work and, in turn, I don't expect it either. By pushing them I send the message that they're important, brilliant, and only deserve the best.

Melinda's beliefs that high expectations produce improved achievement and also send messages regarding self-worth are closely linked to the ideas expressed by Allison in regards to "push as a source of positive identity development":

The danger of a self-fulfilling prophecy lives within many of the students we see in our classrooms today. . . . The negativity fed to a student by the adults around them can build a barrier around them and becomes the material of their identity. After all, we become what we are fed, and the messages we are sent and the views of other people become sources for our identity.

As can be seen, the principle of push was critical to our group's understanding of what it would mean to develop a culturally relevant teaching pedagogy. Push requires that teachers address the political and historical context of racism and education and becomes a necessary condition within a politically relevant definition of caring. When teachers push they communicate their belief in their children's competencies and abilities. These messages become an important source for positive academic identity development.

"Push," however, is not just about having high expectations but necessarily "requires the additional support that children may need to succeed." For instance, the members of our group worked with an after-school tutoring program for middle and high school students. Many of the students were at risk of failing the state-mandated proficiency test. Although the children spent all day in school, they came to the church afterwards for a 3-hr tutoring

program where they received help with their homework and also worked on improving basic math and language art skills. Although initially many participants in our group speculated about the lack of opportunity to relax or socialize, they came to see the academic expectations within the tutoring at Mt. Olivet as an example of pushing—or, as Melinda stated, of providing “more rather than less.” Tom’s comments capture the way in which “push is a community responsibility and effort”:

One of the students I tutor benefits greatly from a combined push. For her failure is not an option. I cannot speak for her teachers, but I have seen her parents, grandparents, brothers and sisters, and pastor all push her toward academic achievement.

Allison asks the question, as did many in our group, “So exactly how do you push?” Although we came to a certain level of shared understanding about the role of pushing and were able to identify different examples, push, in the end, is something that requires personalization and commitment over time. Allison frames this commitment:

Pushing can come from a personal relationship but can also take the form of a teacher being honest with a student . . . telling a student that you know that there are people . . . working against them, but you will not let them fail, can help build a situation where it is possible for a teacher to push a student. Maybe it takes some years in the classroom to understand the many ways to push.

## DOUBLE IMAGES

Many years ago DuBois (1903/1989) described a double consciousness within the African American community as a sense of always looking at the self through the eyes of another’s judgment and a sense of permanent twoness related to this consciousness. The African Americans within our group could identify and place this sense of a “double image” within their lives. Erica, an African American student, describes this well:

I believe that most African Americans that are living and working among Whites have two personas. While many African Americans strive to be the best

at what they are, they know that they are often perceived as the Black mayor, Black executive . . . by Whites and Blacks. African Americans work hard to show White America that they are qualified, respectful, and deserving of their position in society. . . . I think when Whites see Blacks they see acceptable or unacceptable. If you don’t have the proper speech pattern or proper look you are unacceptable. . . . I’ve found that within our race most successful African Americans are tested to see if they “act White” or if they’re “down with the people.” Most successful bicultural African Americans are well versed in both cultures. They know they are perceived in a certain way by Whites and a certain way by Blacks. They are aware of how this system works and adjust accordingly.

None of the White members of the group had perceived of themselves as “raced” or experienced being judged by others based on a raced position. Jennifer relates an experience where she became aware of herself as raced and of other people’s perceptions:

We finished [tutoring] early and a bunch of the girls asked if they could go to McDonalds and Donatos. . . . [We] walked the girls to Donatos and McDonald’s to get some food. While we were walking down the street, I realized that I was the only White person in the group. When we walked into the restaurants, I noticed that some people were looking at our group. I was not sure if they were looking at the group because there were a number of young adults walking alone or for some other reason. I became very self-conscious about being the only White person in the group. There was no other White person in either of the restaurants. . . . This was the first time that I had been aware of the implications that race has for people I had always tried to view myself from the perspective of others but I never had to address the race issue. I was uncomfortable being the only White person at the restaurants. I tried not to let anyone perceive that I was uncomfortable because I thought that my discomfort might be a sign of racism.

An awareness that “race plays a critical role in how others perceive you” and that you might be prejudged based on your race is a common experience for many people of color. It is far less common for Whites. Tom struggled with this initially. He described his discomfort in experiencing a double image while attending a church service at Mt. Olivet:

It seemed as if everyone’s eyes were on me, and that they were all asking themselves, “I wonder

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what he is doing here?" On reflection of our readings and experiences during capstone, I realized that the feeling I had during church service was legitimate. People were staring and wondering about my colleagues and I. Furthermore, I reflected that this act was absolutely what I should have expected. After all, I was a stranger to their community because it was my first time attending and because I am White. Seeing myself as others may see me is not an easy thing to do. It's hard because I don't really want to be judged until I have had a chance to talk with or prove myself to the person doing the judging.

To experience oneself first as an individual and second within affiliate memberships is an opportunity limited to White people within this society. In fact, many may experience a somewhat ironic sense of unfairness when perceived as being judged based on group membership or something other than their individual merit (Bell, 1997). For example, in discussing the dynamics of trust and relationships within a mixed raced class Lawrence and Tatum (1997) explained that,

many white participants were unprepared to acknowledge the legacy of racism that followed them into the room. This lack of acknowledgement, and the belief that one could be seen only as an individual, was, in itself, a vestige of their white privilege. While white participants were troubled by the mistrust between themselves and people of color, participants of color understood it to be business as usual in a white dominated, race-conscious society. (p. 341)

Acknowledging the role and history of race and racism in our society and the ways in which this history affects relationships between communities is critical in cross-cultural work. "Acquiring a double image means understanding how we are situated politically according to race" and the ways in which we may be initially seen and prejudged according to this history. As Allison explains, far from being problematic, this double image allows us to work knowingly and deliberately to build and participate in productive relationships across raced lines:

Think[ing] about how others may view me has forced me to view interactions I have with others as weighted by their view of me as a White person.

Many questions have been raised for me; such as does this perception affect parent-teacher conferences and interactions? Or teacher-student interactions? Or instruction? Does my view of my students affect my relationship with them? And vice versa? Each of these will be affected, but now I know and will not continue to work in ignorance of this perception. Instead I can work with my knowledge and understanding.

A history of racism means that we may have to earn trust through consistency in our actions if we are to be effective teachers. Jennifer describes this understanding well:

I have decided that there are people who will see me as a White female who is trying to help African American children. These people will be able to see past the color of my skin and see that I truly care about children. But I also realize that there will be people who will perceive me as a White female who is working with African American children because I have a hidden agenda. Some people may think that I am working with the children out of pity. I can offer many good reasons as to why I want to work with African American children, but if I cannot back them up with my actions then no one will believe me.

## **RACED TALK: THE COLOR LINE AND THE POLITICS OF RACE**

"You just sayin' that because I'm black," claimed Jamar, "You don't pick on any of the white kids."

As Jamar's statement demonstrates, race and racism continue to play major roles in the distribution of opportunity, and race is a critical component of one's identity. To deny that this is true is like denying an elephant sitting in the middle of the living room; yet, Whites are often socialized to do just that. White people often become uneasy when race enters the conversation. They are uncertain how to talk about race, socialized to believe that it is impolite, and because they believe that discussions centered on Blackness might somehow demean African Americans, discussions of race and racism are side stepped, hushed, or ignored. Thus, race and racism come to occupy a deafening silence in many spaces, including classrooms. African American teachers may not be

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socialized into the same agreed-on silence as White teachers but must also learn to handle issues on race, in particular, discussing race and racism within racially mixed contexts where they may be perceived as biased or angry by White students and parents.

Teachers who refuse to discuss, validate, or teach on issues of race and racism may invalidate themselves with their students, who so clearly see and understand its presence within their lives. Race is an open and salient topic within the Mt. Olivet community. Children within the programs at the church displayed a comfort in talking about issues of race, skin color, and discrimination that far exceeded the comfort for most of the White MEd students. African American MEd students, though perhaps more accustomed to such conversations, were learning how to negotiate those conversations in the presence of Whites. Learning to “remain within the tension of raced talk” to learn how to support productive conversation was critical within our work.

Allison, when faced with Jamar’s accusations, had this to say about how she was personalizing this understanding:

Interactions with Jamar often ended in conversations about race and how he believes that each and every one of his teachers picks on him because he’s Black. At the beginning of the school year I may not have allowed the conversation to happen, afraid of what may result from the conversation. I believe that is the case for many teachers. Race is often a topic that is not easily spoken about among adults. However, many adults could learn a lesson or two by watching the interactions of these eighth-grade students. There was not one student in the room who seemed uncomfortable talking about race openly with another. . . . There is no reason to avoid talking about it, after all, race plays a big role in the way the educational system, as well as society, is set up, run, and organized. How can so-called educators leave such an important topic outside the classroom doors?

Erica, who is African American, discussed the way in which she came to personalize her commitments to dealing with issues of race and racism in the classroom:

I will not dismiss the fact that my race and culture can serve as a tool to connect with my students and

their families. I also understand that my race and class may be used by some to disconnect me from my students and their families. I will not act like racism does not exist. If I am the teacher of 18 African Americans and 2 Latino students I will be cognizant and respectful of their differences while creating a community of learners. I will establish meaningful relationships with White teachers who acknowledge and are respectful of their self-definition. One way to foster this relationship is through being open to discourse concerning race.

Erica is able to identify the ways in which discussions on race and racism will be influenced by who she is, in positive ways and in ways that might, if not understood, limit her work. Although teaching others about race and racism is difficult and demanding work, Erica sees this as a necessary aspect of an antiracist pedagogy. As she maintains, “Anti-racist behavior means challenging, interrupting, modifying, and eliminating any and all manifestations of racism within one’s own spheres of influence.”

Skin color and prejudice is not just a Black and White issue. Raced talk needs to be sensitive to and encompass the “politics of skin color within the African American community” and the historical conditions influencing that prejudice. Several of the African American students discussed their personal experiences with issues of skin color. Erica related the way in which skin color prejudice entered her experience:

Despite my mother instilling pride in my race, I, like many brown skin African American girls went through a phase where I thought that light-skinned Black girls thought they were “cute” and better. I did not truly realize how ridiculous and inappropriate that thinking was until I was 20 years old and gave birth to a beautiful light-skinned baby girl. My daughter is smart and beautiful. I don’t want anyone, especially within her race, to judge her by her skin color.

Understanding the context of skin color within the African American community was important to all of the MEd students. Molly, a White student, describes a conversation with a young African American girl who had chosen Black astronaut Frederick Gregory for her language arts biography assignment. When Shanika decided that Gregory was not “Black enough”

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Molly found herself involved in a conversation about being light skinned within the African American community:

During my discussion with Shanika, I also tried to ask her about how the color of Frederick Gregory's skin may have affected his role as the first African American commander of a space mission. I wanted her opinion and viewpoint of how his being light-skinned played a part in his role as an astronaut. . . . Earlier in the year, I was uncomfortable with any discussion of race. If ever I was confronted with cultural differences then, I would not discuss it; I just changed the subject. I wanted my students to feel that I did not see them as different and would not treat them any differently. I have learned, however, that it is important to acknowledge our differences. After all, the differences between my African American students and me are obvious. The politics of these differences are deep and complex. They need to be acknowledged so we can discuss them, and we can all learn about and challenge how race is constructed.

Allison, a White student, provides an example of the need to understand the historical influences of race and racism on relationships among people across and within different cultural communities as she reflects upon the political context of interracial relationships. She shares her thoughts about a negative comment directed at her by an African American woman while Allison was with her boyfriend who is African American:

Having close African-American female friends, I knew this term to refer to a White girl who is dating a Black man. This personal experience with prejudice was not necessarily my first but was definitely the most cruel, hurtful, and offensive experience with prejudice. . . . However, I have come to realize that there is a long, complicated history between Black and White women.

As we read about and discussed the ways in which White female privilege was built at the cost of Black women's exploitation and of White women's complicity in this arrangement (hooks, 1994), as well as how social status and desirability were and continue to be constructed around White, European images and privilege, Allison began to build a more sophisticated understanding of the impact of racism on relationships between Black and White

women. She also began to understand the ways in which relationships between Black women and Black men have been affected and began to interpret differently the way her relationship was experienced by Black women:

While having this knowledge does not mean that I accept being referred to as a {slur}, I do have a respect for where that girl was coming from and the reasons that she may feel that a relationship between Mike and I was not acceptable.

In conclusion, the ability to enter into conversations on race and supporting raced talk demanded acquiring a more sophisticated understanding regarding the history of racism and race relations and its impact and influence on our current relationships and in our teaching lives. All of those within the group, African American and White, would need to decide how to incorporate these complex issues within a framework of teaching in proactive and reactive ways.

## **BILINGUAL EDUCATION: LOVE ME, LOVE MY LANGUAGE**

A growing body of literature points to the need to "embrace and honor a student's first language while explicitly teaching the dominant discourse" (Delpit, 2002; Heath, 1983; Perry & Delpit, 1998). Children at Mt. Olivet and in the MEd students' school placements regularly used what many scholars term *Ebonics* or *Black English* (Perry & Delpit, 1998; Smitherman, 1977). Many interesting conversations focused on the ways in which the members of our group initially experienced the concept of honoring Ebonics. Erica, a Black student, wrote about the way she initially understood the resolution regarding Ebonics in the Oakland School District in California: "Like many I listened to the news reports that stated that Ebonics would be taught in Oakland schools. I thought here is another attempt to hold our children back." As our group learned more about the nature of the efforts in Oakland, she came to appreciate the support that the resolution, as intended, offered students who did not have access to the dominant discourse and

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who needed support in learning to code switch. She realized that this was something that she had experienced in the context of her home and community and that she, herself, code switched depending upon whom she was with.

After reading several chapters from the book *The Real Ebonics Debate* (Perry & Delpit, 1998) she had this to say:

Now I have clarification. The view is "We are teaching you a second language, not fixing the home language you bring to school." I love this concept. This approach instills pride in the African American culture and the language of that culture. We don't have "bad English," we have our own language. It's about understanding that and working the system to your advantage.

As Erica began to understand the power of teaching explicitly a second language and helping children translate or code switch explicitly, she reflected on how this approach would have worked with students at Mt. Olivet:

At Mt. Olivet, my third-grade African American female student wrote a story in her journal. I believe it started like "Once upon a time," and also said "the girl be." I praised her for the great story she was telling . . . I also said something to the effect that I know sometimes we say "be" but we need to correct "be." It should be "is." I thought I was being quite kind and trying not to offend her but help her understand her mistakes and how to correct them. While my intentions were good, I think the translation approach would've been more effective and long lasting. First of all my student did not make a MISTAKE, she was exhibiting an Ebonic speech pattern, which she will more than likely exhibit again in her discourse and writing. I think that by being explicit about the use of Ebonics our children can understand the translation process and will be more cognizant of it when writing, speaking, and listening.

Because "language is intimately linked to our community affiliations and self-definition" criticizing or correcting a child's language sends powerful messages regarding self-worth and respect (E. Smith, 2002). As Delpit (2002) wrote, a first language is learned at the mother's knee, and when we criticize or devalue the language of an individual we are

essentially devaluing that individual's mother and family. As is the case with many aspects of life, though we may easily complain about or criticize our family and communities, outsiders who do so are experienced very differently. Thus, as teachers we need to "account for the way our raced and classed positions are read by those children with whom we work." For instance, because Black teachers have a shared political and raced affiliation, they may more easily correct the language of Black children without being experienced as disrespectful. Tara, one of the African American MED students shares this understanding when she writes about her experience with one of her tutees:

I have seen the effect that my correcting has had on John's attitude on me. The other day I corrected his spelling and he said to me, "You always have to have things perfect." Even though I have been trying to curb his behavior, unconsciously I have been correcting him instead of focusing on the bigger picture. The students that I tutor often smile at me when I correct them because I think they know I am doing it out of love and they appreciate this.

Tara came to understand that the way in which she interacted with students on language had a lot to do with her own history. She talked about how her "home training," which consisted of having her language constantly corrected by her mother as a child, contributed toward making her shy and reluctant to speak in school. Yet she found herself "doing the same thing to students I interact with." Her thinking evolved over time as a result of our reading, discussions, and her work with children:

The best thing is not to force a child to choose between languages or between cultures but instead to show them that their language and culture is valued, and in the classroom they will learn to use another language. They will also learn when and where to use it, and they will be challenged to use this language so that they can become successful people in their society. If anything they should be taught to feel great about what they are learning because when they leave the class, they will be able to use language in two different styles.

Although constant correcting may not be pedagogically as supportive as explicit teaching,

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Black teachers may be able to do so without compromising their relationships with their students. White teachers, however, who persistently correct a child's speech may be experienced as uncaring, racist, or classist. Molly writes about an experience with one of her students who was writing an essay to be submitted to the local paper:

When Raymond was typing his paper he was having problems with the spell check function. He was very angry because the program did not recognize a word he wanted to write in his paper, "I'ma gonna tell her. . . ." The word *I'ma* was not recognized by the spell check function. When Ray raised his hand and asked me about it, I just told him that it wasn't a word. I, at first, did not think about it being a word for him in his home context with his family and friends. He got mad at me and insisted it was a word. He even used it in several different sentences to prove to me that he was correct in his word choice. I told Ray that he needed to keep his audience in mind while writing and because that word is not a standard English word, it is not appropriate to include in a paper. He reluctantly changed the word . . . and continued to write the rest of his paper.

When Molly later went back to Raymond's paper, she saw that he had changed back to the original "I'ma" he had started with. Because Molly did not situate her correction within an approach that honors different language use, or within a demonstration of the different ways we use language and the contexts in which we use them, she was not able to engage Raymond in a valuable lesson on code switching.

Developing an understanding of language diversity and the "discourse of power" (Delpit, 1996; Gee, 1999; Heath, 1983) was critical in our work together. Personalizing this understanding within a pedagogy would need to account for the way our raced and classed positions are read by those children with whom we work. Developing a more comprehensive and positive approach to teaching the dominant discourse would be necessary if we were to step outside a "correcting" and deficit mentality regarding language diversity and into a deliberate teaching orientation that would honor the primary language of children while teaching a second language.

## LOOKING FOR CULTURE: ALIVE AND UP CLOSE

The tension between stereotyped, overgeneralized cultural knowledge and the belief that significant cultural and political characteristics can and should influence the way we construct educational opportunities for children can lead to a kind of schizophrenic "search for culture." Where is it? Will we know it when we see it? Should we be looking for it? Are there cultural behaviors, beliefs, patterns, habits, values, likes, and dislikes that would be helpful in our understanding of children and their education, or are we feeding into stereotypes? Given that culture is influenced by and shifts across contexts such as socioeconomic class, geography, and age, it is problematic to talk about culture as though it is monolithic and static. It is equally problematic to negate the existence of culture at all. Thus, we must understand culture as shared and particular. To do so the MEd students were encouraged to "look for culture: alive and up close." The more experiences within different African American cultural contexts, such as tutoring programs, church service, family and school contexts, the more opportunities they were provided to begin to see the particular and individual permutations of shared cultural characteristics and political commitments as well as to recognize important distinctions.

One of the experiences that most dramatically influenced the MEd students' understandings of culture, language, and the politics of race was attending church at Mt. Olivet. The group had been reading about and discussing many of the stylistic features found in Black English or Ebonics (Smitherman, 1977) including oral traditions, call-response communicative patterns, topic-associative narrative structures (Michaels, 1981, 1986), and creative language use. In addition, spirituality, musicality (Hale, 2001; Smitherman, 1977), the politics of race and racism, and culturally and politically relevant patterns of caring (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Gay, 2000) had also been topics of conversations. Although these cultural and political dimensions are a part of everyday life for many people at Mt.

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Olivet, they are not always easy for the MEd students to identify, leaving many to wonder if they really exist or what they might look like. "Attending a church service breathed life into many of these theoretical categories" making them recognizable, explicit, and concrete. As Erica puts it:

So much about the culture can be learned from the church. Through one church service you can see what respect is in the African American community, where dreams, hopes, and faith are derived, the importance of storytelling, and the spirit of music, to name a few. . . . Children are expected to respect and do whatever any adult asks . . . because the children know that everyone cares about them.

She also recognized the organization of an episodic or topic-centered narrative structure (Michael, 1981) within the pastor's sermon in her comments: "The Pastor may begin with a scripture, discuss life experiences and then come back to the scripture and put the whole meaning of the service together." Verve, or frequent change in pace, volume, and energy, is written all over the service at Mt. Olivet from the highly stylized performance of the sermon by the pastor, which continually builds, crescendos, and releases, to the constant musical, rhythmic, and verbal participation of the congregation. Attending a church service where there is high energy, frequent participation, rhythmic and musical forms of expression, and many of the other cultural forms described in the literature allowed the students to begin to understand how these cultural forms might influence their children's behaviors as indicated by the final words in Erica's story:

Through such understanding of these African American tradition that are not just limited to church folk, we, as teachers can better serve our students and understand what matters to them and their families. By seeing, honoring, and affirming cultural traditions teachers can develop the proper approach and strategies for teaching African American students and serving their families.

For many White students in the group, learning about culture also meant "moving

beyond an idiosyncratic, Eurocentered experience" in other ways. Melinda discovers this in planning a lesson that she thought would easily engage her class:

We were discussing . . . all the different propaganda techniques advertisers use to sell their products. I thumbed through a few magazines to find advertisements that used testimonials to sell their products. I presented to the class a Cover Girl ad that used Jennifer Love Hewitt to sell Cover Girl foundation. As another example I used a Neutrogena advertisement that featured Sarah Michelle Gellar endorsing sunless tanning lotion . . . because they featured two young actresses that I knew my students were familiar with . . . I asked the question, "Jennifer and Sarah use these products don't you want to use them too?" Gina, a young African American female, raised her hand and stated, "Ms. Saving, not *everyone* wears make-up or uses tanning lotion!" I felt humiliated and ashamed.

Melinda experienced a wake-up call as she was challenged to consider how her perceptions have been influenced by a White, monocultural experience. She reflects on this learning and moves forward in a way that demonstrates an understanding of institutional and cultural racism:

I knew we were going to use magazine advertisements again so I looked through about 30 magazines trying to find culturally relevant ads. It was like looking for a needle in a haystack. I ended up buying some magazines that were geared more toward the African American culture. . . . As a society, most of what we learn, we learn from the media. No wonder many of us aren't aware of minority cultures—they simply just aren't represented in the media that we tune in to and we aren't aware of and familiar with what does exist. African Americans are always exposed to the mainstream culture—they can't escape it.

She also begins to see that she is simply unaware of the "spaces and places that do represent and cater to African American experience and culture" and that it will be her responsibility to seek this new world out:

I'm not aware of the African American hair products and makeup line because I don't look for it. For me to teach in a culturally relevant way, I must *seek and find* information to gain knowledge about the African American representation in the media. . . .

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I realize that there is still so much out there for me to learn about culturally relevant teaching.

Another easy way for Melinda to demonstrate respect for her students and their community is in recognizing the Eurocentric context of many published curriculum materials that can easily alienate or fail to engage students through overemphasis of White, middle-class lives and experiences. Although it may sound trivial, something as easy as changing names to “create curriculum materials that reflect the culture and community” of her students helps her demonstrate recognition and respect:

When students are able to relate to the problems or issues being posed . . . it allows for a deeper and more meaningful understanding. I try to use this idea in my class on a regular basis. When I am writing lesson plans or making up worksheets I always make it a point to use the names of the students in my seventh-grade classroom. If I’m using a pre-made worksheet I will change the names from *Billy*, *Bobby*, and *Susie* to *Tywon*, *Jerome*, and *Shaquetta*. In doing this I try to demonstrate respect for the students and get them excited and ready to learn.

Melinda also demonstrates the importance of “attention to youth culture as it is influenced by the broader culture”:

My mentor teacher gave me a worksheet that had some examples of want ads and newspaper articles. One of the ads was selling a 1979 Chevy Chevette. My students could care less about a Chevy Chevette. Therefore, I simply changed the make, model, and year of the car to a 2000 Lincoln Navigator (they talk about how cool Navigators are all of the time). When we went over the classifieds part of the lesson they got so excited. I couldn’t believe how much they perked up; they thought it was the coolest thing.

In any context, finding out about your students particular youth culture—what they think is cool, what motivates them, and what has status in their lives—is important. As Melinda learned, with middle-school students, this includes cars as well as music:

Another way I try to more actively engage the students is to set the current course of study in a familiar context. . . . In one lesson I was teaching about main ideas and supporting details. I was explaining that passages on the proficiency test aren’t the only things that have main ideas and

supporting details. . . . We talked about movies and books that they enjoyed and how each one of them has a main idea and supporting details. We talked about some of their favorite songs and examined them to find a main idea and details. I played a song by Destiny’s Child (one of my students’ favorite groups). . . . When I started asking them questions about the main idea and details found in the song, I swear every hand in the class was raised and waving (this usually happens only on rare occasions). We finished the lesson by talking about newspaper articles that involved the Buckeyes and the WNBA.

Melinda sums up what it means to get to know your students as cultural individuals and the way she attempts to incorporate this within her teaching pedagogies and curriculum:

I have a group of students that have struggled a lot throughout their school career, and many times it is very difficult to get them involved. However, by doing something as simple as changing a few names and putting the lessons in a context that my students are familiar with, it made a world of difference. I try to change around my district-issued curriculum just a little so that it’s not just totally geared toward the Eurocentric culture. I attempt to tailor it to my own individual classroom and make it relevant to the lives of my own students.

## CONCLUSION

We end this article with a number of different thoughts. First, it can be said that a number of themes presented in this article may be relevant to good teaching for all children as outlined in descriptions of authentic instruction (Newman & Wehlage, 1993), and we do not argue this point. For example, pushing represents the maintenance of high expectations for children and looking for culture speaks to the ways in which teachers need to learn about their children if they are to construct meaningful curriculum. These are certainly expectations we have for working with all children. However, concepts such as high expectations and learning about a child’s background can remain trapped within Eurocentric and middle-class assumptions. Teachers who are White or who are middle class are not called on to do the same kind of learning and stretching to enact these principles in helpful ways for White, middle-class children. Push, learning

about culture, and other themes within our work take on distinct cultural and political dimensions and make distinct and critical demands of teachers.

Finally, a major goal of this article has been to describe a process of learning about culture, not to produce a model of culture or a model of culturally relevant teaching. Within it there has been an attempt to explore the process of understanding, making concrete, and naming cultural and political information to begin to personalize this information within a culturally relevant approach. This kind of process can be attempted across many cultural contexts and the ways in which significant cultural and political information is understood and named will depend on the particular cultural context, the people involved, and the ways in which they utilize experience and literature in the process. We do hope, however, that the stories told to explore the themes that were powerful for us will resonate in ways that support others as they approach what it means to learn and teach across cultures.

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