



Cognitive Dissonance: Can Culturally Relevant Teaching Create Harmony between African-American Students and Standards Based Content in the English Language Arts Classroom?

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Abstract

There is brevity in the learning window to ensure that instruction creates students that are intrinsically motivated to uphold their education. However, to even aspire to achieve that motivation, there must be awareness that cognitively, there is a dissonance that exists between the content of instruction and the student reception. Understanding how students learn, as opposed to simply generating what they learn, is a concept that for many teachers does not seamlessly fall into the art of creating the viable lesson plan. Delpit (1998) said that, "the dilemma is not really in the debate over instruction, but rather in communicating across cultures and in addressing the more fundamental issue of power".[1] Best practices must become geared towards student attainment techniques, which is more than just knowledge of classroom management techniques or even the best lesson plans to master the content. This research may show that African American students' acquisition of knowledge, and eventually their academic success, can become more plausible in its real world application by incorporating this thought process of culturally relevant teaching in the classroom. The aspects explored in this research should lead to a concept of creating a more dynamic, student led, lesson plan, thereby training teachers to become adept in their culturally resonant pedagogical approach. This proves difficult, as Whitfield maintained that a teachers' knowledge is normally created from cultural frameworks that they have experienced which makes it personal to them and norm-based. [2] The outcomes will be garnered from data analysis focused on surveys of the self-perceptions of teachers in the District of Columbia, their principal perceptions of the teachers teaching, surveys of student measured thoughts on their respective teacher's teaching choices, teacher effectiveness ratings and student achievement data taken from their most recent DC-BAS interim assessment. Evaluation of all of these factors may maintain that it is essential to understand and ultimately grasp the role that culture plays within a multi-cultural school setting thereby ensuring that equitable education can transcend from concept to reality. As we have begun to implement the Common Core Standards as a means of certifying student success, these standards should be coupled with the culturally relevant curriculum. This will ensure that there can be equity in the classrooms in Washington, DC and, in turn, nationally, which should tangibly bridge the ever-widening education gap.

1. Introduction

Dr. Ladson- Billings is one of the premiere authorities on teaching teachers to teach African-American children. This research will support her research as the focus will be to reach African American children; we need to be able to reach them where they are and build from there. Ladson-Billings resolved that perceived as the most direct avenue to the realization of the dream, education and access to schooling have been cherished privileges among African Americans.[3] Correlating that mindset, the trend has been if a student studies hard and applies themselves as best they can, then s/he should be able to be successful. However, there are students that come to the table on multiple levels of cognition. To address this, grade level standards are created that are implemented per grade level, per district and now with Common Core, nationally. Streamlining of standards have been viewed as the answer to creating equitable education when the reality is that students should be encouraged to be able to achieve scholastically by tailoring the content to the manner in which they will learn it best. It is a task better placed in the hands of culturally relevant teaching as opposed to more streamlining attempts. This study will evaluate whether there is a relationship between African-American student achievement in English Language Arts classrooms due to teacher implementation of culturally relevant curriculum. The outcomes of this study will impress upon the policy creators the importance of not just implementing common core standards, but rather common core standards interlaced with culturally relevant pedagogy. This will be done by collecting data in the form of surveys with teachers, principals and students and using the data of student scores from interim assessments.



The data will be examined with a standard multiple regression and used to explore incorporating culturally relevant curriculum in classrooms, acknowledge methodologies conflict, if any, based upon prior studies and will investigate future teaching methods using culturally relevant literature. The use of English/Language Arts teachers in the classroom for this study will examine the effects of the use of culturally relevant curriculum specifically within a current common core standard classroom

2. Root causes of the problem

Sleeter said that teachers often teach based upon the experiences that have impacted them the most [4]. Only schools in tune with the pulse of this problem have addressed the issue by creating program schemes that adhere to fixing the situation. Most simply have students engage in activities outside of their comfort zone, but more must be done to ensure that teachers, especially those entering teaching in a locale where the cultural differences between the teacher and the students is quite substantial, are equipped with the tools that they need. Schools have traditionally looked at changing teachers' credos regarding special education, but this falls under the same auspices as teachers must be just as well versed, if not more when it comes to culturally investing their students.

Ladson-Billings said that we should provide teachers with content and curricular knowledge in a multicultural format and allow them to be able to really work with those students to ensure success. [5] Although slow to come to the forefront, those eminent professors and scholars continue to conduct research that showcases the importance of inundating all programs with this content. Multicultural education scholars continue to highlight the importance of the need for teacher education programs because without these tools, students will be less likely to make the gains that the policymakers expect. In all of these pivotal timeline inserts, there is no mandate focused upon *how* students learn; rather the emphasis has historically been on *what* students learn. Ogbu agrees that having a strong engagement base among the multiculturalism of students demands an approach that encompasses the *what*, *why* and *how* of the education process.[6] Due to the fact that there is still a large achievement gap, it is fair to assume that it would be most timely to begin looking at the *how* students learn as this is the issue that is not being upheld. In this regard, enabling culturally relevant curriculum as a policy mandate could act as the means in which there is finally tangible gains in closing the achievement gap. In this concurrent mixed methods quasi-experiment, the study will identify whether students are better able to learn when they have a connection with their curriculum thereby asserting that it is the *how* a student is taught as opposed to *what* they are taught. The purpose of this research is that if the data shows positive gains, then the data can and should be used to create policies to make textbooks, post-service trainings and professional developments on the Common Core Standards mandated to include *how* to immerse it within a culturally relevant curriculum. This will take the place of all antiquated prescriptive learning modules nationwide. To the means of becoming proactive in the creation of educators, it should also serve to create policy that all teachers are given pre-service training on creating culturally relevant curriculum; this way teachers are being taught *how* to accurately differentiate. In both of these ways, African American students' acquisition of knowledge becomes more plausible in its real world application.

Will culturally relevant instruction improve student outcomes? It is shockingly apparent that there is a severe education gap found between socio-economic statuses [7]. According to Education Week, in 2005, only 55 percent of all black students graduated from high school on time with a regular diploma, compared to 78 percent of whites and that the on-time graduation rate for black males was 48 percent nationally; for white males it was 74 percent [8]. The implications of not using the tools of which this country is in possession is to not yearn to ensure that all students are given the greatest opportunity to meet with their own success. These actions are fearsome and unnecessary, especially for a country such as the United States. Supplemented or inherent success is the goal for our students. Culturally relevant teaching is a methodology that is being taught and implemented nationwide although it has not seen the policy push towards conjoining with common core standards. Eradication of the pedestal style of teaching, which puts choice students at an advantage, both in the classroom and beyond, will be an antiquated notion; ALL students will be held to standards that are rigorous and effective for their given learning level.

3. Theories and research questions

The research will be based upon the following theoretical frameworks, which lay the basis for the research questions. This research will generally allude to critical race theory, and specifically will include culturally relevant pedagogy theory, social cognitive theory and racial identity development theory.



3.1 Theories

Critical Race Theory

This theory is used as the crux of the research, as the issue stems from one of a race nature. According to Banks, African American students represent 12% of the national population, however, in 21 out of 22 urban school districts, they are the majority. [9] The word urban has come to mean black, which perpetuates that urban schools service black students and lack the status and reputation of suburban (white) schools [10]. This pushes students into realms that inadvertently will not breed success, based solely upon their school's perception. African American students have historically been poorly served by the school system; they have been unable to top off scholastically but their suspension, expulsion and dropout rates continue to lead all race categories [10] This is without being represented as the majority. Without authentic voices of people of color (as teachers, parents, administrators, students and community members) it is doubtful that we can say or know anything useful about education in their communities [10]

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

It is only possible to truly consider that we are truly teaching students when we allow them every opportunity to learn; this is not only true in ability, but also in culture. We should provide teachers with content and curricular knowledge in a multicultural format and allow them to be able to really work with those students to ensure success [3] Emphasis must be placed on creating a connection between curriculum, unit plans and lesson plans and teachers should not focus on the universal or relative learning acquisition of the child [11]. The importance of creating culturally relevant curriculum for the success of all children is a true method that can ensure student success. It will require every member of the education community to really think about what was most important [12]

Racial identity development

This theory seems to explain African American student disengagement with success. Academic engagement requires linking one's personal identity to the roles of the student and learner; these are found in the classroom and school building environ [13]. Student identification with having a black identity largely meant that they had to showcase a mindset of rejecting achievement; this is inclusive of the attitudes and behaviors needed to be successful in school [14]. For African American students to be successful they must disengage from their racial identity; this has been coined as becoming race-less. [15] Within the student questionnaire, some questions will refer to this mindset as well as their teacher intervention.

Social Cognitive Theory

Similar to culturally relevant pedagogy theory, the intent here is to look at how students learn best. A classroom intervention designed to improve student learning through a series of key concepts and focuses on the ideas that teachers should use a myriad of instructional tools to engage students in the classroom; modeling, incentives, multiple opportunities to learn, differentiate, and provide feedback [16] Students will pay closer attention when the instructional tools and the content are made personally relevant to them [16] Again, this supports the mindset of being able to meeting students where they are and then moving them forward.

3.2 Proposed research questions

Gay (2000) stated that African American children are more likely to succeed if they are able to receive culturally relevant curriculum, which is associated with their home life, their family, and their cultural history. This means that they are more likely to perform better academically, and successfully connect with their school experience; on these very notions lies the base for this study. The key research questions are as follows:

1. Will there be a significant difference in achievement between students who are taught concepts using culturally relevant instruction and those who are taught from a prescriptive pedagogical approach?
2. Is there a significant correlation between student achievement data and teacher/student/administrator positive/negative accordant about teacher cultural competency?
3. How are teachers' culturally relevant beliefs, values, and biases related to student achievement?
4. Are culturally proficient educators better equipped to improve academic achievement?



4. Methodology

The intent of this pragmatic research will be to explore the theory of culturally relevant teaching in an English Language Arts classroom by collecting a series of survey responses amassed from researcher, teachers, administrators, and students. This data will be categorized as perception data and utilizing this perception data as independent variables in a standard multiple regression analysis will explore the effects upon the dependent variable and will answer the research questions. The dependent variable will be defined as student attainment within the content area of English Language Arts (ELA). The author and researcher will be one and the same, and the research will take place in English Language Arts environs in classrooms of the same grade level in multiple school buildings in Washington, DC.

Teachers will be selected based upon a district wide survey that will be disseminated to all schools in the District of Columbia Public School System by early August, or the beginning of summer institutes. Based upon the interest response for English Language Arts teachers in multiple grades, the grade level that will produce 10-15 teachers within the same grade level will be used. Once teachers are vetted for interest, teachers will be given pseudonyms for the sake of anonymity. Each school will then be visited and a conversation with the principal will ensue. This is in addition to an agreement for participation from an administrator who will observe the teacher. The teachers will then have an initial conference at the very beginning of the school year where they will complete a self-assessment survey. Within this survey, they will disclose their level of comfort ability within a multicultural classroom and self report as an effective or struggling teacher. Additionally, prior to the school year beginning, classroom lists will be scanned and 2 students per teacher will be selected based upon the similarities found within all of the chosen students. These will include gender, with an even divide between male and female, family income, parent education levels, and free and reduced meal assignment and will act as additional independent variables.

Within the first two weeks, administrators will be requested to observe teachers and complete a survey reporting as to the cultural efficacy of the teacher. The researcher will also request the formal effectiveness rating of the teacher. By the third week, the researcher will have been in the classroom observing teacher cultural competency to bring an additional layer of validity to the research. During the fourth week, the students will be given surveys to gauge their perception of their teacher's cultural competency in the classroom. The last piece of data to be collected will be interim assessment data in which all students participating will be administered on the same day, around roughly the same time period. All of the collected data will then be analyzed by multiple methods of analysis. There will be a review of student scores on the assessment at each independent variable that could affect the outcome. Next, there will be a review of the mean scores and standard deviation of each of the independent variables. Lastly, the multiple regressions will be used to show the strength of all of the independent variables as they pertain to the dependent variable. There will be control variables of varying classroom demeanors and intervening variables, of teacher preparation, either by self or team approach, and external motivations for students, are factors of reliability in conducting the research. In order to properly document the outcomes of the study, the design of this study will be a concurrent triangulated non-experimental survey method.

The research will quantify the relationships between the philosophy behind the common core standards, disseminating the standards in a culturally relevant fashion to African American youth and teaching teachers how to do so in an effective manner. All of the aforementioned are to be placed in conjunction in the hopes that there will be more scholastic gains from African American students, thereby creating a compensatory education model and equalizing education in Washington, DC.

5. Discussion, preliminary findings and significance

Currently, there are no preliminary findings to report, as this research will be conducted in the fall of 2013. The comparative analysis of all of the data will be analyzed to find whether there is a clear correlation between utilizing culturally relevant teaching and ensuring student success, which will reveal the full purpose of this research. It will explore the potential of a relationship between culturally relevant pedagogy as a means to show whether culturally relevant pedagogy can be denoted as a positive and economic means for bridging the gap between classes and races. The mixing of words, phrases, sentences and text from any distinct grammatical subsystems across sentence boundaries within the same speech event and inserted into curriculum specifically may show itself as a multi-purposed tool, available to any dialect. A major function of this tool is to give its user the ability to adapt to the situation at hand in the best communicative methods possible, namely between teacher and student, and especially to show teaching technique mastery when working with students and



teachers from different cultural backgrounds. My hope is that the study will make a startling contribution to the area of student achievement and success. It is apparent that we have issues with African American student attainment and so the hope would be that we would do all that we can to eradicate this deficiency. It is clear that real world application and using a language that is familiar to a student will assist in great strides with student achievement. As more comes out about the relationship between culturally relevant curriculum and student learning, it will be possible to more clearly understand the meaning of equitable education. My proposed research study should be viewed as a piece of this solution.

Lastly, this study is the first attempt to utilize a specific type of instructional style with the newly rolled out common core standards and implement it with a sample of random students. So often, these cadres of the student population are underlooked as nonpotential learners. The study should contribute toward a better understanding of this group.

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