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**USER JOURNAL TITLE:** Journal of Negro Education  
**BOS CATALOG TITLE:** The Journal of Negro education  
**ARTICLE TITLE:** Making African American culture and history central to teaching and learning of young children  
**ARTICLE AUTHOR:** Boutte, Gloria and Strickland, Jennifer  
**VOLUME:** 77  
**ISSUE:** X 2  
**MONTH:**  
**YEAR:** 2008  
**PAGES:** 131-142  
**ISSN:** 0022-2984  
**OCLC #:**  
**CROSS REFERENCE ID:** 758770  
**VERIFIED:**

**BORROWER:** SUC :: Main Library  
**PATRON:** boutte, gloria

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## ***Making African American Culture and History Central to Early Childhood Teaching and Learning***

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**Jennifer Strickland**      **Benedict College**

*This article provides a conceptualization for including African and African American history in early childhood classrooms. An example of a kindergarten teacher's efforts to counter negative depictions and frequently omitted information in her classroom is shared. While many early childhood educators avoid discussions of history because the content is considered to be too abstract, this article suggests that the children's backgrounds, the context, and teaching strategies used affect children's understanding of the information.*

While most early childhood teachers respect and honor all children, it is rare to find educators who express a strong and sustained commitment to children of color. Not negating the fact that all children should be valued, far too many educators still view children of color through the lens of European American children, and thereby, fail to see the strengths and beauty that they bring, or build on this largely untapped source of power (Boutte & Hill, 2006; Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003).

For a number of complex reasons, not inherent to the children, families, and communities themselves (but beyond the scope of this article), African American children are arguably the ethnic group with the greatest and most consistent need in U. S. schools (Hammond, Hoover, & McPhail, 2005). They rank last behind every other ethnic group and, as noted by the Secretary of Education, Margaret Spelling, ". . . too many African American students have been shortchanged by our nation's schools" ("How *No Child Left Behind* Benefits," 2005, p. 1). A primary factor in the continued existence of such inequities is a pervasive and rarely examined deficit perspective used to judge children of color (Boutte, 2002; Volk & Long, 2005). It is refreshing to find teachers, and in this case a European American, who view African American children through Africentric lenses. This article showcases one such teacher who uses promising practices in her classroom and who is likely to inspire others to do the same. It is jointly written by the teacher, Jennifer, and university professor, Gloria, who have collaborated on culturally relevant teaching for several years. This article begins with a few comments about Jennifer's background and her fascination with African American culture. Next, several aspects of her classroom techniques are shared followed by providing concrete examples of culturally relevant activities and strategies that Jennifer has used.

Why, some may ask, is a European American early childhood teacher so committed to teaching about African American history and culture? As a child reared in the Southeast, Jennifer notes that she was taught to critically analyze every situation. However, her parents had completely opposite visions of what the world was like or how to address individuals who crossed their paths. Jennifer reminisces that her mother, also a teacher, instilled in her a respect for diversity. Her father, on the other hand, was not tolerant of differences. Both of her parents encouraged her honesty and genuineness and to treat every experience—whether positive or negative—as a learning experience. Leaning more toward her mother's perspectives, Jennifer has tried to keep an open mind and understand that everyone and everything has a purpose.

Jennifer read studies on equity and education, and was moved by Jonathan Kozol's books, *Savage Inequalities* and *Amazing Grace*. In conjunction with her mother's influence, concepts addressed in these books laid the foundation for her commitment to her life's work of liberation through education. During her first few years of teaching in schools with populations that were

98% African American, Jennifer witnessed firsthand the educational inequities about which Kozol had so poignantly written. Her reflections led her to realize that her African American peers whom she had grown up with faced the same type of inequalities. At this point, Jennifer began to research the work of other scholars who had written about the dualities in schools and vowed to make a difference in her own classroom.

For the past nine years, Jennifer has taught preschool or kindergarten in predominantly African American public schools. A few years ago, after enrolling in a graduate course, "Educating African American Students," offered by the Center of Excellence for the Education and Equity of African American Students (CEEEAAS), Jennifer became a model teacher who implements culturally relevant pedagogy in her classroom.

CEEEAAS is a statewide center in South Carolina that works with teachers and teacher educators on the effective education of African American students. Although African American students comprise nearly half of the state's enrollment and conventional instructional methods and curricula have proven to be largely ineffective with non-mainstream populations as substantiated by decades of negative performance trends (National Collaborative on Diversity, 2004), many schools are reluctant to use promising culturally relevant instructional methods. Therefore, CEEEAAS focuses on helping teachers develop instruction which uses students' cultures and strengths (cultural capital) as a bridge to success in school achievement (Pritch Smith, 1998). Although there are certain tenets that teachers follow, culturally relevant pedagogy is not prescriptive and there is "not a series of steps that teachers can follow or a recipe for being effective with African American students" or any other ethnic or cultural group (Ladson-Billings, 1994a, p. 26). Whereas CEEEAAS model teachers' instructional styles vary widely from conventional, to progressive, and somewhere in between, typically culturally relevant teachers follow a three-prong framework: (a) start by building on students' strengths or cultural backgrounds; (b) teach the necessary skills or standards in an engaging manner; and (c) expand the lesson beyond students' current worldviews to a global level. Essentially, educators become familiar with cultural knowledge bases on African Americans (or other cultural groups) and modify their instruction and curriculum (King, 1994).

When Jennifer formally began as a CEEEAAS model teacher three years ago, she had been engaged in culturally relevant teaching and had grounded herself in the knowledge base by becoming familiar with a wide variety of academic literature on the topic. Even during Jennifer's studies in her initial teacher preparation program at the master's degree level, she remained interested in issues of social justice and diversity. Although Gloria was one of Jennifer's professors during her initial certification program, the authors did not develop a professional relationship until Jennifer enrolled in the graduate course that Gloria was teaching some years later. A testament to Jennifer's interest in African American children even early in her career is that she actually recalled and applied concepts that she learned in an initial teacher education course that was taught by her mentor. Retrospectively, Jennifer conveyed to Gloria that she always remembered what was taught about the cultural significance and educational implications of African American female's hair and had included children's books on Black hair in her classroom.

As a teacher, Jennifer is reflective and conscientious. She regularly participated in roundtable discussions of readings (professional articles and books) that were sponsored by CEEEAAS for teachers and teacher educators and presented her classroom experiences at the CEEEAAS conferences. Continuously seeking additional information and advice on effective education of African American students, Jennifer, an avid reader, is often sharing new readings with Gloria and others. Importantly, she consults and applies the body of literature on educating African American children.

#### **A GLIMPSE OF JENNIFER'S CLASSROOM**

What manner of education will provide African-Americans the voice to sing the sacred liturgy of their own culture? What manner of education will mold the African personality to thrive in a culture that has historically demeaned its character, denied its existence, and coordinated its destruction? How shall we sing our sacred song in a strange land?

This is the fundamental contradiction that stands before African-centered pedagogy in the United States. (Lee, Lomotey, & Shujaa, 1990, p. 45)

Although significant evidence that African American cultural knowledge can contribute positively to school learning exists, it is glaringly absent from the knowledgebase of teacher education and in classroom practices (Boutte & Hill, 2006; Delpit, 1997; Hopkins, 1997; King, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1994a). Refreshingly, Jennifer's classroom is inundated with Africentric imagery, perspectives, activities, and resources. There are numerous positive images of African Americans in her classroom which greet children and parents each day. Imagery is thoughtfully selected, affirming, and far-reaching. Examples include a college promotion brochure from Tuskegee University with photographs of graduates and other students, pictures from a university in the Virgin Islands, and a photograph of an African American businesswoman who started her own wedding magazine. Implicit in these images is the belief that students can and should reach far and wide.

Culturally relevant teaching is second-nature to Jennifer and high expectations are paramount. Jennifer's Africentric approach takes some educators by surprise, but it also encourages other teachers from many ethnic backgrounds—including some African Americans—who have shied away from affirming aspects of African and African American culture. From her diverse collection of children's books, to the candid and multiple-perspective lessons that she teaches about Africa, slavery, and contemporary life, Jennifer's approach represents the epitome of culturally relevant and emancipatory teaching. She believes in engaging her students in critical thinking—even preschool and kindergarten children. She is a complex thinker and a visionary who is informed on global and world issues; therefore, this ideology pervades her classroom. Based on extensive reading and experience working with African American students and families, Jennifer has developed her own model of teaching that goes beyond surface-level efforts toward addressing Black students' culture.

During the past year, for instance, Jennifer's kindergarteners engaged in a discussion of the disproportionate number of Black males in the prison system out of observations from her students' conversations and life experiences. She and the students perused magazines and analyzed photographs of men and boys and discussed how African American males were portrayed in different magazines. Students began to notice negative depictions of Black males and females in some of the magazines, but also noticed the positive roles that they saw in others. In the process, the dialogue about how people are portrayed led students to observe how clothing affects the images that people have about others.

Familiar with the literature that 80 to 90 percent of African American students speak "Ebonics" and benefit from specific strategies for learning Standard English (Linguistic Society of America, 1997; Perry & Delpit, 1998; Smitherman, 2001), Jennifer teaches children about Ebonics and applies strategies learned from the Academic English Mastery Program led by Dr. Noma Lemoine who directs the Los Angeles Unified School District (Lemoine, 1999). Children also take turns leading or being "teacher" during the morning activities to work on their presentation skills, while Jennifer sits with the rest of the children.

Jennifer and all of the CEEEAAS model teachers ensure that students learn academic skills that are supposed to be taught using culturally relevant instruction that connects the content of the lessons to the children. Students should exit classrooms and school with some sociopolitical awareness as well as cultural knowledge about themselves (Ladson-Billings, 1994a). Jennifer has been able to accomplish this monumental task each day and is committed to the long-term success of each child.

### **TEACHING ABOUT HISTORY AND CULTURE TO YOUNG CHILDREN?**

Conventional wisdom regarding what young children are capable of processing makes some early childhood teachers understandably leery about venturing into historical topics. Many teachers of young children in U.S. schools focus on the here and now. Ironically, some early childhood

teachers feel comfortable with children routinely acting out historical themes in fantasy play (e.g., Cinderella) or being fascinated with dinosaurs, but have difficulty conceptualizing that children can do the same with real events. Two main points should be considered when teaching historical information to young children. Firstly, although there are those early childhood educators who abhor the mention of learning information that is not concrete and present-day, young children all over the world and the U.S. defy these notions (Cowhey, 2007; Mallory & New, 1994). Secondly, the presentation and the context as well as the type of knowledge being learned should be considered, rather than globally asserting that young children are incapable and disinterested in concepts that may be beyond the immediate realms of their lives. Educators must be careful not to negate or overlook experiences and knowledge bases that children bring from their homes and communities.

While the authors argue that young children should certainly be involved in relevant and concrete experiences, narrow definitions of children's cognitive capabilities should be dismissed. Although the explicit teaching of unfamiliar skills and concepts (Delpit, 1995; Hoover, 2005) has been met with some contention by teachers from mainstream backgrounds, mainstream parents routinely teach their preschool children information that many early childhood educators would deem developmentally inappropriate. For example, in many mainstream families, instructional time at home is often spent formally teaching school skills such as the alphabets, numbers, and historical facts. "School-type" questions and the naming and labeling of things are common (Heath, 1982/1992). Informally, social knowledge (knowledge which must be conveyed by others as opposed to being discovered) is taught while commuting from one place to the other and in venues (e.g., grocery stores) and through children's songs, memory cards, board games, music, DVDs, and television. While the intent of this discussion is not to validate or invalidate any particular cultural way of knowing and learning, the purpose is to frame different ways of thinking about teaching history to young children. Additionally, the authors acknowledge that children will construct and deepen their own understandings once concepts have been introduced in a relevant context (Delpit, 1995), but young children are also interested in topics that some may label abstract.

Reggio Emilia (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1993) and other programs have demonstrated that early childhood educators may underestimate children's cognitive, social, and emotional abilities and often forget that children's sociocultural contexts mediate their learning (Cannella, 1997; Jipson, 1991; Lubeck, 1998; Mallory & New, 1994). Recognizing the ethnocentric bias and assumptions of universality in conventional thought regarding child development and learning (New, 1994; Phillips, 1994), Jennifer attempted to teach her kindergartners something about their history that was atypical among early childhood education teachers. Both Gloria and Jennifer agreed that "the belief that there is only one valid behavioral manifestation of developmental adequacy creates an impediment to understanding young children and teaching them" (Bowman & Stott, 1994, p. 126). Notwithstanding the controversial nature of teaching historical information to young children, Jennifer felt compelled to introduce the topic and follow-up on themes that interested the children. As she explained to a White father who complained about her teaching African and African American history, "most African American children will probably never learn anything about their history in school." Therefore, finding a way to teach about African and African American history became a compelling ethical quest.

Jennifer realized that she would have challenges making the topic relevant to the children and explaining what she was doing to the other kindergarten teachers. To present information to the children, she built on the African American oral tradition of storytelling (Boykin, 1994; Hilliard, 2005) to relay stories about kings and queens in Africa and to teach about slavery. She also integrated dramatic play, concrete artifacts, and books. A professor who had been to Africa several times also visited the class as a resource person.

## JENNIFER'S UNITS ON AFRICAN KINGS AND QUEENS AND SLAVERY

Jennifer spent several weeks teaching students about Africa in an effort to deconstruct some of the common misconceptions and to provide children with information about a continent that is seldom examined beyond the surface level in most schools. For example, some early childhood educators may read children's books which have African themes (e.g., *Mojo Means One* or *Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters*), but seldom go beyond a tourist approach to discussing in-depth information about African culture and history. This task becomes more difficult when trying to teach kindergartners about worlds which are geographically and historically away from their own. To make the lessons more concrete, Jennifer presented the class with a large map of Africa and created a song to teach them the names of African countries. Her kindergartners quickly and eagerly learned the song and later presented it during an assembly. She introduced several picture books to demonstrate and discuss historical and contemporary concepts. After reading a book about real African princesses, the children could readily name the princesses. Following one child's suggestion, Jennifer copied pictures of the princesses and posted them on the map so that the students could remember each princess's native African country. A sample of the text set that was used in class is as follows:

- *The Amazing Lives of Africa's Royal Women* by Joyce Hansen
- *Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters: An African Tale* by John Steptoe
- *Aida* told by Leontyne Price
- *At Her Majesty's Request: An African Princess in Victorian England* by Walter Dean Myers

African princes were also discussed and children enjoyed role playing. Jennifer wanted "our children" (as she frequently refers to African American children) to know that their history did not begin with slavery and provided a counter-narrative to the prevailing images of only White kings and queens. The students became quite involved with the idea of being kings and queens. Jennifer provided different styles of Kente cloth for the students to use during dramatic play. Learning that African kings and queens had great dominion over their land stimulated the children to develop their own interpretations of what life was like in ancient Africa.

Overall, an important goal for Jennifer is to present powerful counter narratives to pervasive messages which do not value and build on the wisdom and values found in Black communities. Counter narratives are continuous and planned actions to counter the predominant ideology regarding the capacities of African Americans (Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003). Since published works are considered to be "legitimate and official knowledge" in society (Apple, 1992), Jennifer's literature selections served as a formal way of validating different aspects of Black culture. The typical invisibility of Black perspectives and storylines in school literature collections undermines the importance and centrality of Black worldviews (Boutte, 2002; Boutte & Hill, 2006). Counter narratives are crucial because of the prevailing ideologies and negative stereotypes about African Americans in society in general, in the media, and in the curriculum.

Although the school in which Jennifer teaches is 96 percent African American, half-way through the unit a parent of the only European American child in her classroom expressed concern about what he considered to be an over-emphasis on Black history. He wanted to know when Jennifer would teach about White history. Diplomatically noting that the core of elementary, middle, and high school curriculum was White culture, Jennifer explained that his daughter and the other students were learning information that would not likely be taught for the rest of their school careers. She pointed out that his daughter was very interested in the topic and had been the one who recommended that they add pictures of the princesses on the map next to their countries of origin. Elaborating further, Jennifer added that his daughter and the rest of the students were learning about cultures other than their own (e.g., African cultures). She invited the parent to visit the class at any time (which he did) and he later became an ally. While Jennifer admitted to being

a bit nervous about the encounter, her conviction to extend the current curriculum beyond the mere illusion of inclusion of African peoples and perspectives outweighed her anxiety.

As part of the study of African kings and queens, the children brought up the fact that Blacks were slaves. Following, their lead, Jennifer ventured into the study of slavery, a complex and provocative topic. Notifying parents and administrators of her intent, Jennifer wanted the students to leave with a balanced view of the topic. While conceptualizing her unit on slavery, Jennifer consulted guidelines for teaching about slavery and historical events (see Table 1) from a lecture in the *Educating African American Students* course. Books and resources used for the unit on slavery are

- *Moses: When Harriet Tubman Led Her People to Freedom* by Carole Boston Weatherford
- *Circle Unbroken* by Margot Theis Raven
- *A Kid's Guide to African American History* by Nancy I. Sanders
- *Aida* told by Leontyne Price
- *African Beginnings* by James Haskins and Kathleen Benson
- *Amistad: The Story of a Slave Ship* by Patricia C. McKissack
- *Almost to Freedom* by Vaunda Micheaux Nelson
- *Sweet Clara and the Freedom Quilt* by Deborah Hopkins
- *Her Stories* told by Virginia Hamilton
- *African-American Read-Aloud Stories Edited* by Susan Kantor

Sometimes physical or tangible illustrations are more meaningful to children therefore they role played the travel across the Atlantic during the middle passage by huddling close together and being bound with string around them. Additionally, they set up an African museum with artifacts from Africa. The most astounding aspect of the unit was that the students did not want the study to end although it had already gone on for several weeks. Learning about Africa and African history had impacted their lives to the point that they were willing and able to teach others (including their parents) about kings and queens who were not in their bedtime stories but in history books. When Jennifer asked the students to tell her one new fact that they learned about Africa that they thought was important for others to know, a Hispanic male stated, "I learned that Europeans brought Africans to America" and an African American female said, "I learned that African women sometimes cut their hair to keep bugs out." Their words are infectious but their illustrations are resonating. To see five year olds drawing pictures of Africans chained together on a ship headed for America is breathtaking, but to know that it was tempered with knowledge of African kingdoms before and accomplishments of African Americans afterwards was satisfying. Children developed a rudimentary understanding of injustices that occurred during slavery. Jennifer was successful in reinforcing the understanding and pride of African and African American cultures. Educators can only hope that her responsive teaching will help to buffer the children throughout their school experiences as other early childhood teachers have done (Paley, 2000; Pedersen, Faucher, & Eaton, 1978).

#### **HOW CAN TEACHERS BEGIN TO TEACH ABOUT CHILDREN'S HISTORY AND CULTURE?**

Jennifer and her teaching assistants began with the children. Recognizing the culture that they bring into their classrooms will help guide many of the teaching choices that are made. In this case, African American culture was purposely considered while, at the same time, recognizing variations within culture. The notion that schools are neutral places was rejected with a realization that if educators were not countering the status quo, including invisibility and/or negative messages and imagery about people of the African Diaspora, then they were likely reinforcing it (Freire, 1970/1999). The educators must reflect on the sociocultural realities of being African American in the U.S. and likely school and societal trajectories for the children who were primarily from low-income environments. Nevertheless, based on what is known about the children in their classrooms, teachers will decide which aspects of history are most interesting and relevant to the children. Building early relationships with the families and their children is

extremely important, as well. Incidentally, in South Carolina, the *Education Improvement Act of 1984* mandated instruction on the history and culture of Africa and African Americans as an integrated part of existing K-12 social studies curriculum. However, the law has not been enforced and few schools and teachers are aware of it and, therefore, continue to omit this content.

**Table 1**

*Guidelines for Teaching About Slavery and Historical Events*

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**Teaching About Slavery**

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Include information about the impact of African culture on African American culture.  
Discuss the impact of African culture on the development of America  
Slavery chronology should include life prior to the trans-Atlantic slave trade.  
Slavery discussion needs to include a deconstruction of typical historical accounts and also address the moral issues of slavery.  
Neither Whites nor Blacks should be portrayed as being monolithic.  
Slavery could be discussed within the context of other migration patterns so that Black children do not feel singled out.  
Slavery among other ethnic groups can also be discussed.  
African American history should not center on slavery, but should focus on other issues as well.  
Use primary and secondary documents to make it relevant.  
Role play, when possible.  
Relate to students by relating events to similar issues today.  
Invite resource people (e.g., African griots, historians, and grandparents).  
Use videotapes, books, and other resources (e.g., Web sites).  
Adapt topics and depth depending on children's ages and experiences.  
Share information with parents and administrators prior to discussion.

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***Establish the Environment***

The classroom must be designed to draw children's interest. Books that African American children can relate to must be displayed throughout the room. Photographs of families (your student's families, your family, and other positive images found in magazines) should surround the area. A non-threatening environment is most effective, particularly with concrete connections to homes and communities (e.g., music and art).

***Pulling in Artifacts from Africa***

With the assistance of a university professor who was widely traveled, an African museum was begun in the class. The co-teacher brought in some of her personal artifacts and the parent liaison allowed the use of some of her personal artifacts, as well. The students were allowed to look at the display before any discussion was done about the artifacts. Most of the artifacts were identified with a label by their country of origin.

***Integrating Literature***

Since books play a pivotal role in the socialization and literacy development of young children, the representations of Africans and African Americans were of particular concern to Jennifer. A major limitation of many commonly read children's books is the negative or absent representation of people of color (Apol, 1998; Boutte, 1999; Sims Bishop, 1991). The effects of such books are rarely immediate and the cumulative effect of repeated exposure over long periods of time is not

readily apparent or easy to discern. Additionally, when children's literature is not read critically, there is always the possibility of the formation of stereotypes and attitudes which carry over to adulthood (Kohl, 1995). Hence, Jennifer used extensive text sets which included African literature and extended to contemporary African and African American literature. Careful attention was given to avoiding stereotypes and helping children develop critical literacy skills.

***Looking Beyond Our Own World***

Jennifer and the students frequently looked at the world map or globe and reviewed the information that had already been covered but then went on to explore new aspects of African culture and the cultures that surrounded them. While early childhood educators typically think of maps as too abstract for young children; however, if it is done in isolation, the context and relevance of the surrounding activities make all of the difference. For example, the author recounts her experience visiting a classroom in a remote Ghanaian village. Although there were few materials (e.g., pictures, books, maps) in the classroom, she asked the children if they knew where the U.S. was.

A six-year old volunteered to draw a map of the U.S. and Africa, which the author was able to use to show from where she had traveled. Using a conventional Piagetian framework, this type of knowledge should have been difficult to understand for a six-year old, but all of the children had somehow learned about world geography (Cannella, 1997; Lubeck, 1998). Again it is not the authors' intention to suggest that early childhood educators start teaching world geography, but at the same time, do not negate the possibilities when one finds concrete ways of helping children mediate the new information. As a child reared in the segregated South, conversations about African American history was a regular part of the first author's education and the intimation of respect for African culture resonate in her mind and spirit. Regrettably, as Jennifer so aptly noted, most African American children do not see their culture or African worldviews represented in the curriculum (Shockley, 2007). Teachers must find ways to sustain and introduce African American history and culture—even to the young student.

Table 2 reflects the standards that were addressed during the activities presented in this article. The fact that the standards were post hoc versus narrowly leading the work reiterates the notion that teachers who teach broadly and with depth will exceed the standards. More importantly, children will learn and be engaged.

**Table 2**

*Standards Addressed During the Classroom Activities*

**Standards During Classroom Activities**

*South Carolina Social Studies*

The students will compare the daily lives of children and their families in the U.S. in the past and today.

The students will demonstrate an understanding of key American figures and symbols.

The students will demonstrate an understanding of his/her surroundings.

The students will demonstrate an understanding of different businesses in the community and the idea of work.

*Science*

Students addressed all of the inquiry process skills required of kindergarten students. Those skills are the following: 1) Observation, 2) Classification, 3) Measurement, and 4) Communication.

*Table 2 continues*

Table 2 continued

Language Arts

Every Reading Goal: The student will draw upon a variety of strategies to comprehend, interpret, analyze, and evaluate what he or she reads.

Every Writing Goal: The student will write for different audiences and purposes.

Every Communication Goal: The student will recognize, demonstrate, and analyze the qualities of effective communication.

Every Research Goal: The student will access and use information from a variety of appropriately selected sources to extend his or her knowledge.

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## CONCLUSION

There are few educators who disagree with the ideals of "leaving no child behind" and "all children can learn." However, close examination of many teacher education programs and pre-K – 12 classrooms reveal that this may be superficial and not supported by attitudes, practices, instruction, curriculum, and policies (Boutte, 1999; Boutte, 2005; Darling-Hammond, 2000; King, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1994b). Many educational settings support, teach, and affirm students whose culture mirrors the majority of teachers and teacher educators who are White and middle class (Banks, 2006; Delpit & Dowdy, 2002). While some teachers feel comfortable teaching about the roles in American history of such figures as Abraham Lincoln and George Washington, they tend to shy away from discussing slavery which took place during the same time period. In fact, it could be argued that some teachers do not know what to say about the topic. A caveat is that teachers need to research the topic and work to present a balanced view which can be challenging.

While there are educators who conceptually express appreciation of cultural differences, their attitudes and beliefs about the abilities of students from marginalized and non-mainstream groups often implicate the students, their families, and communities (Boutte, 2005). Glaringly missing in national and local reforms is the understanding that culture is *central* to teaching and learning (American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE), 2003; Center on Education Policy, 2001; National Collaborative on Diversity 2004).

The knowledgebase on culture, diversity, and equity issues is voluminous and has existed for decades (Banks, 2006; Pak, 2005; Woodson, 1933/1990). Educators, such as Jennifer, who are serious about reversing the negative trends of children of color, can consult the existing knowledgebase on effective strategies and programs or schools which model best practices. There are numerous examples or studies demonstrating how to adapt and extend the curriculum to make it more inclusive and accurate (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Irvine & Armento, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1994a; Pritchey-Smith, 1998; Villegas, & Lucas, 2002).

Colombian ethnolinguist, Mario Edgar Hoyos, makes an important distinction between curriculum and curricula (M. E. Hoyos, personal communication, September 24, 2007). He defines curriculum as the typical Eurocentric course of study and content that is thinly disguised as universal and classic. It is a one-size-fits-all model. Contrastingly, curricula are described as powerful and multiple possibilities, adaptations, modifications, and deconstructions of the former which allow for a broader, comprehensive, and more varied version of the former curriculum. In the case of Jennifer's classroom, venturing into African and African American cultures moves the narrowly defined curriculum to the status of curricula where it is more inclusive.

While attitudes cannot be mandated, policies can be put in place to facilitate and support necessary systemic reforms which give consideration to the centrality of culture in teaching and learning. Without these policies, the knowledgebase and thousands of innovative school practices amounts to little more than "preaching to the choir."

This article invites educators to claim the positive image of African American children's history and culture. Educators are encouraged to continuously counter the dominant and pervasive

negative images of Africans and African Americans in lieu of more positive images that can be used as a source of inspiration for teaching and learning.

“African-American children are not tabula rasas and they certainly are not simply inadequate dark skinned white children.” (A. Wade Boykin, 1994, p. 250)

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