

African American Communities: Implications for Culturally Relevant Teaching

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We suggest that there is a powerful and affirming socialization taking place in African American communities that could be instructive to schools. This article illustrates how educators can build on the strengths found in the black community to effectively teach African American students. Relating the ethos of the barbershop to tenets of culturally relevant pedagogy, aspects of the barbershop that empower black males are made explicit. Absent in many teacher education programs is the emphasis on developing an inside understanding of students' communities and recognizing and illuminating existing best practices that differ from mainstream conceptions.

Rarely is wisdom from African American communities sought and used when seeking *best practices* for educating students of color. Paradoxically, while schools consistently rank black students on the lower tiers of education, these same students often experience success in their homes and communities. This article suggests that educators may be informed by a close examination of some of the structural aspects of institutions within the black community such as the barbershop, which views black and male culture as a strength rather than as a deficit.

One of the authors (Edward Hill), who was a third-grade teacher at the time this was written, decided to engage his all-African American male students in extended study of one of the oldest and most prevalent male-dominated institutions in black communities—the barbershop. While Mr. Hill's

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students had been intimately familiar with the black barbershop experience since their first haircuts at age one, he wanted his students to also understand and respect the vast sources of knowledge, resources, and guidance that exist among African American males from many walks of life. He explains,

I see the present and the future, the old and the young, bound together in one place—the barbershop. As I look into little boys' eyes, I wonder to myself if they realize the importance of the assembled men in front of them. These various men of the community are who they could become—respected and valued members of the community. In spite of the harshness black men face outside the barbershop walls, little boys sit in the presence of potential hope.

RATIONALE FOR EXAMINING BLACK BARBERSHOPS

The African American barbershop has a long and distinctive heritage in the United States, as old as the history of the Africans in America. Its history reveals a fascinating social institution that has played a significant role in the lives of black men. For most of the 20th century within racially segregated African American communities, this fundamental social institution was a central location for meaningful association and dialogue and learning among men (Wilkinson, 2002). Historically, this intriguing male-dominated territory has served as a “classroom,” a recreational center, and a social setting for exchanging viewpoints and debating about local and national events. Topics of conversation have ranged from community issues to economic and political realities and the “troubles of the world.”

The African American barbershop is a sample of a cultural institution—its survival tells a strong story of the history of men in a land that has not always treated them kindly. The interaction among men—fathers, sons, uncles, and friends—has constituted an important foundation for manhood, friendship, community building, and intelligentsia (Wilkinson, 2002).

Within the hallowed walls of the barbershop, men's jobs, roles, and responsibilities serve as an elevator that transports many men above their menial Monday through Friday routines. Men both young and old look forward to the “barbershop” experience, the lessons learned, the exchanges made, and the empowerment received. The barbershop is a place where many young African American males have real pride and joy. This is a place where their talents, opinions, and skills are recognized and appreciated. They are seated in a place where men can discuss and exchange the best and worst of their professional and personal selves. In the barbershop a young African American male is not viewed as a “boy,” but rather as a young man. This important distinction is typically overlooked in most classrooms.

To sit and observe this quiet, overwhelming presence of men is astonishing. Week after week, young African American males share the experiences of membership of brotherhood, a community, and engaging inquiry-based classroom. The African American barbershop is a classroom overflowing with lessons of academia and life. The barbershop serves as an alternative to the traditional school classrooms by offering important lessons, information, guidance, and values.

What is most instructive is how black males who are considered “slow” in school can interact with extreme skill, analysis, and quick-wittedness in the barbershop. In many cases, the same males who are considered lacking self-esteem or hyperactive in classrooms are regarded as smart and respectful in the barbershop. In the midst of the voluminous body of literature and statistics that convey that black males are not experiencing success in schools, we question why males who are labeled “at risk” in school are transformed in barbershops. What underlying structures and assumptions empower the same males who are pervasively labeled negatively in schools?

While Mr. Hill could have just as easily chosen to focus on the black church—another longstanding and powerful institution from which schools could learn from and one in which Mr. Hill is intimately involved—he decided to focus on a place where the source of power centers around black males. Since black males are often excluded in schools, devalued, and not seen as sources of wisdom (Hopkins, 1997), it was important for Mr. Hill’s all-male students to explicitly observe black men’s performance in a setting where they felt empowered. He wanted to document strategies used in barbershops that facilitated the maintenance of men’s dignity and confidence. Importantly, the men and boys were respected and understood by the barber and other customers. Not surprisingly, Mr. Hill found that implicit aspects of black culture are embedded in the very nature of many black barbershops. A brief review of some of these aspects will be discussed before expounding on Mr. Hill’s findings.

BLACK CULTURE

In order to ensure that African American students achieve educationally and socially to their fullest potential, educators need sufficient, in-depth understanding of students’ cultural backgrounds if learning is to be meaningful and transformative (King, 1994). Mainstream ways of acquiring school competencies do not offer universally applicable models of development (Heath, 1982; King, 1994). Part of the difficulty in teaching African American students is that many educators: 1) do not understand/respect black culture; 2) do not view black students’ behaviors as cultural despite the existence of a substantial knowledge base; 3) erroneously define black culture narrowly

(e.g., limited to hip hop culture or people living in poverty); and 4) believe that content taught in school is neutral or culture-free.

When teaching students of color, it is important to study and consult the knowledge base on respective cultural groups. Additionally, understanding how one's own cultural perspectives, experiences, and preferences influence teaching and learning is essential. The complexity of simultaneously understanding that culture is too important to be overlooked while at the same time being careful about overgeneralizing cultural information must be realized by educators (Boutte & DeFlorimonte, 1998). Educators need to recognize and understand that the curriculums and standards are not neutral or culture-free. Typically, they are *culturally relevant* to white, mainstream students since most of the content is Eurocentric in nature (Banks, 2006; Boutte, 2002). Hence, it is not surprising that performance trends favor students from mainstream and/or white ethnic groups and disadvantage students of color and students of poverty.

In this article *culture* is broadly defined as "the sum total of who we are" (Boutte & De Florimonte, 1998). We focus specifically on aspects of black culture that have been documented by research. Notwithstanding the caveat regarding overgeneralizations about cultural groups, a significant body of research has demonstrated general cultural strengths and legacies among people of the African diaspora (Boykin, 1983, 1994; Hale, 2001; Hale-Benson, 1986; Hilliard, 1992; Shade et al., 1997). Instead of adopting the common deficit-based practice of "what's wrong with the students, they don't know anything" and/or "how can we *fix* them," educators can use these cultural dimensions as starting points for instruction (see Table 1). Ultimately, the vision is for schools to integrate these cultural strengths as part of the nucleus of curriculum and instruction instead of merely using them as a bridge to learning Eurocentric content. A detailed discussion of the deconstruction of current school culture, curriculum, instruction, and values, however, is beyond the scope of the present article so we will proceed to sharing instructional examples that place black culture and the community at the center.

CULTURALLY RELEVANT PEDAGOGY—THREE EXAMPLES

Culturally relevant pedagogy is instruction that uses students' cultures and strengths (cultural capital) as a bridge to success in school achievement (Pritchey-Smith, 1998). It 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" (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 26) or any other group. Once educators become familiar with cultural knowledge bases, they can then modify their instruction and curriculum (King, 1994). Mr. Hill's teaching and search for wisdom from the black community is an example of culturally relevant

TABLE 1. Dimensions of African American Culture.

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- Spirituality—an approach to life as being essentially vitalistic rather than mechanistic, with the conviction that nonmaterial forces influence people's everyday lives
 - Harmony—the notion that one's fare is interrelated with other elements in the scheme of things, so that humankind and nature are harmonically conjoined
 - Movement—an emphasis on the interweaving of movement, rhythm, percussiveness, music, and dance, all of which are taken as central to psychological health
 - Verve—a propensity for relatively high levels of stimulation and for action that is energetic and lively
 - Affect—an emphasis on emotions and feelings, together with a specific sensitivity to emotional cues and a tendency to be emotionally expressive
 - Communalism—a commitment to social connectedness, which includes an awareness that social bonds and responsibilities transcend individual privilege
 - Expressive individualism—the cultivation of a distinctive personality and proclivity for spontaneous, genuine personal expression
 - Oral tradition—a preference for oral/aural modes of communication, in which both speaking and listening are treated as performances, and cultivation of oral virtuosity—the ability to use alliterative, metaphorically colorful, graphic forms of spoken language
 - Social time perspective—an orientation in which time is treated as passing through a social space rather than a material one, and in which time can be recurring, personal, and phenomenological
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(Boykin, 1983, 1994; Hale, 2001; Hale-Benson, 1986; Hilliard, 1992; Shade et al., 1997)

pedagogy. The remainder of the article profiles Mr. Hill and two other teachers who utilize their knowledge of students' cultures and communities to effectively teach them. All three teachers are African American with varied years of teaching experience. The teachers are among a cadre of model teachers (black and white) in South Carolina with the Center of Excellence for the Education and Equity of African American Students (CEEEAAS) who seek to normalize high achievement among African American students through the use of culturally relevant pedagogy. Teachers from various disciplines are represented (science, social studies, mathematics, special education, art) as well as all school levels (elementary, middle, and high school).

An important goal in each classroom is to provide powerful counternarratives to pervasive messages that do not value and build on the wisdom and value found in black communities. *Counternarratives* are continuous and planned actions to counter the dominant ideology regarding the intellectual capacities of African Americans (Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003). Since published works are considered to be "legitimate and official knowledge" in society (Apple, 1992), the literature used by the teachers served as a formal way of validating 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). Counternarratives are crucial because of the prevailing ideologies and negative stereotypes about African Americans in society in general, in the media, and in the curriculum.

AFROS, WAVES, AND RAZORBLADES: IF SCHOOLS
WERE LIKE BARBERSHOPS . . .
—MR. EDWARD HILL, CEEEAAS THIRD GRADE TEACHER

Mr. Hill is an energetic, thirty-something (but younger looking) teacher. Enter Mr. Hill's all-male class and images of African American males command your attention. However, visitors are quickly diverted by Mr. Hill's commanding presence (over six feet tall) and expectations that are taller than his height. Students begin the day by reading the newspaper as Mr. Hill explains that an educated man is an informed man. The professional countenance of the third graders is apparent and visitors are greeted by students with a handshake and a welcome. Students are addressed as Mister and parents flock into the classroom that their sons enjoy and talk about so much. Interestingly, Mr. Hill is a graduate of an all-male historically black college (Morehouse) that has a long tradition of addressing young men with the respectful title "Mister"—the term itself is a counternarrative.

The fact that Mr. Hill is also a thespian outside the classroom is evident by how he effectively uses his voice to engage students and by the verve generated as he weaves stories to convey the content to students. Mr. Hill is also very involved in his church and fraternity and spends much time outside of the classroom "giving back" to the community. This value is, in turn, conveyed to students. Students are taught to work together for the betterment of all.

Mr. Hill's class has 15 male students. Eight of the 15 children live in single-parent homes; three, with both parents; and the remaining four live with grandparents. Always reflecting on his students' reality (most of the students are from low-income backgrounds), Mr. Hill realized that if his students followed the typical projected trajectory, many of them would eventually internalize the negative and limited stereotypes about black males. Concerned that his students may not be aware of the many strengths of the black community, he decided to immerse them into the study of barbershops. He noted that all of his students were familiar with barbershops, which made the topic one that they could be experts on. So, they delved into their inquiry about barbershops. Enlisting the assistance of four Education majors at Benedict College who were part of the "Call Me Mister" program designed to increase the number of black male teachers, the class set out to study the barbershop beyond what students already knew. Incidentally, the term "Mister" in the Benedict College program connotes the respect and honor of the teaching profession in the black community.

Mr. Hill carefully selected barbershops that were well-respected by the community, well-utilized, and known for their rules of conduct, which did not tolerate lewd language or behavior. Over a four-week period, students visited ten barbershops (during and outside regular class time). They researched the history of the businesses, conducted interviews with barbers

and customers, administered questionnaires, did extensive observations, kept copious notes, and learned the inside beauty and value of barbershops. Going beyond narrowly defined state standards, his students also learned about running a business, self-presentation, research and technological skill (see Appendix A for state standards taught for this unit).

Observational and anecdotal notes were taken from the barbershops visited throughout the city. Additionally, the students administered questionnaires to all males in the third, fourth, and fifth grade at their school. Table 2 shows the interview questions that students developed and then asked barbers and customers. Students enthusiastically videotaped and photographed customers, barbers, and community members to find out as much as possible about barbershops (see Figure 1). They explored literature on the topic as well (see Table 3).

Table 4 summarizes Mr. Hill's findings and compares and contrasts barbershops with school settings. Readers should note inherent aspects of black culture in the barbershop setting. Table 5 presents some of the elements of a typical barbershop greeting, which is affirming to the young man and demonstrates community expectations of doing well in school.

In the final analyses, Mr. Hill found that the young men in his class learned more than he initially envisioned. The elements of collaborative learning became real when they worked together to write interview questions. His students engaged in critical thinking to create rather than duplicate prefabricated questions. Students' understanding of economics, entrepreneurship, and investments became more than meaningless words that they looked up in the glossary, but rather inspirational principles that they can now incorporate into their thinking and lives. Mr. Hill observed as the young men, who were programmed by the doctrines of education to compete against each other, began to gain a mutual respect for each other

TABLE 2. Interview Questions Devised and Asked By Students.

Questions For Barbers

- How long have you been a barber?
- What academic skills do you need to be a barber?
- Since you, the barber, set the rules, how do you maintain a positive environment?
- What types of rules do you have in the shop? Are they written or unwritten?
- What would you tell teachers to help them be successful in teaching African American males?
- How can a teacher create a learning community?

Questions For Customers

- What is the significance of the barbershop to the African American community?
 - How can a classroom teacher create the same type of environment that the barbershop embodies?
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FIGURE 1. André Wilson and Tordrey Price interview barber, Tracey Edwards.

TABLE 3. Text Set for Study of Black Barbershops.

Books About Black Barbershops: To Affirm Experiences of Black Males and Legitimize Black Barbershops

- *A Novel For Boys*, Walter Mosley
 - *The Barber's Cutting Edge*, Gwendolyn Battle-Lavert
 - *Bippity Bop Barbershop*, Natasha Anastasia Tarplay
 - *No Bad News*, Kenneth Cole
 - *Uncle Jed's Barbershop*, Margaree King Mitchell
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intellectually and began to “pour into each other’s cup of knowledge.” Observing this has led us to believe that the use of accountable talk and debate that occurs so naturally in the barbershop should be recreated in classrooms. As Otis, a regular customer in Jacobs’ Barbershop since he was four years old reminds us, “(If) we can’t talk straight in the barbershop—where can we talk straight? There’s a lot of chewing in here. You have to be sharp!”

Mr. Hill collaborated with the music teacher at his school. She had the young men research barbershop quartets and the concept of harmony—a

TABLE 4. Comparison of Barbershops and Schools.

Barbershop	School
Hardy greetings—barber is familiar with regular customers (see sample dialogue in Table 5)	Students are encouraged to be quiet most of the day—even in the cafeteria.
Social Club—The barbershop serves as a haven for social learning and interactions with others.	Working independently is encouraged for most of the day.
Individualized attention when sitting in barber's chair and during group dialogue.	Most of the day is spent doing large group work with little attention to individual students' needs.
Wide range of relevant topics is discussed.	Many irrelevant topics are discussed and presented in a decontextualized manner.
Customers are treated like family—barber knows and discusses information about family members.	Many teachers are unfamiliar with students' family.
Barber typically has a long-term relationships with customers—beginning with first haircut at age one.	Most teachers have short term relationships with students—9 months.
Customers typically do not entrust their haircuts to new barbers with whom they do not have a relationship	Many students of color and students of poverty resist learning from teachers if they do not have a relationship with them.
Customers can let barbers know when they are dissatisfied with haircut.	Students' perspectives are often not solicited or heard.
A visit to the barbershop is empowering and transformative—customers feel good when leaving. Serves as psychotherapy.	Schools often disempower and denigrate students of color and poor students. By fourth grade, many students of color have emotionally "checked-out" of school.
The barbershop has established and relevant rules for conduct (e.g., first come, first served; respect for elders).	Rules are often contrived and focus on getting students to be quiet and walk in lines.
Every one is invited to participate in the dialogue.	Preference is given to some students (Boutte, 1999; Hale, 2001; Irvine, 1991)
Captures and builds on aspects of black culture such as communalism, oral tradition, verve, and movement (i.e., call and response; co-narration; dramatic storytelling).	Rewards Eurocentric ways of knowing and communicating (Delpit, 1995)—e.g., sequential speaking, "canned responses."
Debate skills are practiced. Broad range of topics are debated and each person tries to present convincing arguments.	Usually encourage "canned" responses and dialogues versus critical thinking and questioning.
Culturally relevant literature—(signs; magazines: <i>Ebony</i> ; <i>Sports Illustrated</i> ; local newspaper).	Predominant literature is Eurocentric (Banks & Banks, 2001; Boutte, 2002).
Culturally relevant music and sounds is played—e.g., local radio station, rhythm and blues.	Most classrooms are sterile and absent of music or limited to "classical" or children's music.

concept that complements the communal dimension of black culture. Through this unit these young men learned that harmony is two or more distinctly different notes that blend together. In African American barber-shops, males work in harmony rather than unison—the same note made at

TABLE 5. Example of Dialogue.

Nine-year-old Jonathan enters the crowded barbershop. He has been going to Jacobs' Barber Shop since he was a year old.

Mr. Jacobs: (*big smile—stops cutting customer's hair and shakes Jonathan's hand*) How you doin' man?

Jonathan: (*smiling—shakes Mr. Jacobs' hand*) Fine.

Jonathan finds a seat. Several men acknowledge his entry with a head nod and continue the conversation. Someone asks, "How are you doing in school, man?"

Jonathan: Good.

Mr. Jacobs: He's a smart young man. Gets all A's.

Jonathan beams proudly and several men give make approving comments and nods.

the same time. The barbershop inquiry reiterated Mr. Hill's tacit thoughts that learning for African American males has to include a connection with spirituality. One Saturday, the shop seemed almost like church. A customer began talking about God. Before anyone knew it, sermons were flying. "The only thing that was missing was the passing of the plate," remarked Barber Chris.

The barbershop experience did not culminate with the standard multiple choice test where there is always a chance to guess some of the answers, or at least look for clues that would jar the memory. The inquiry process provided students with a more comprehensive assessment than essay tests, which provide an opportunity for students to camouflage their uncertainty in complex phrases, sentences, or sufficient regurgitation of teacher's words. Importantly, students learned that there is a wealth of information and wisdom in their communities.

At the beginning of the year, all students were at the 50th percentile in regard to required tests. In terms of tangible results of Mr. Hill's culturally relevant teaching, at the end of the year all 15 of the students exceeded all of the district's benchmark standards. Additionally, when students took the mandated state test, the Palmetto Achievement Challenge Test (PACT), which is required for the first time during the third grade-year, all students met or exceeded the state standard. The PACT has four categories: 1) below basic (standard not met); 2) basic; 3) proficient; and 4) advanced. Eight of Mr. Hill's students scored advanced; five, proficient; and two, basic. At the beginning of the year, six of the students qualified for the academically gifted program. By the end of the year, 11 of them qualified—three scored high enough to be identified at the state level. Lastly, Mr. Hill also received a promotion of sorts. He looped up with his students and now teaches fourth grade. While the test results of the students are impressive, Mr. Hill aims to normalize high achievement for his students and to ward off the typical fourth-grade decline that has been noted among African American male students.

NO BAD HAIR DAYS

—CASSANDRA TYLER, CEEEAAS MIDDLE SCHOOL ART TEACHER

Mrs. Tyler's class is a stark contrast to Mr. Hill's in a number of ways. Her art class is smaller than most and Mrs. Tyler teaches several classes of middle school students each day. While Mr. Hill can make his voice boom like thunder, Mrs. Tyler is soft-spoken, although she has no problem commanding the attention of her students. Mr. Hill is tall; Mrs. Tyler is short-to-average in stature. Mrs. Tyler's teaching career spans over 30 years, although she looks to be in her mid-thirties. Her respect for black culture is reflected in her in-depth study of and continuing quest for literature on the topic. Her collection of black dolls is extensive and also echoes her appreciation of black culture.

While the budget for art is limited, Mrs. Tyler's excellence in teaching is not deterred. She is an avid reader and is familiar with literature on African American students and is an astute observer of their interests. In order to teach the standards and integrate art across the curriculum, Mrs. Tyler begins her work with students with relevant topics that they find engaging. One example is hairstyles. Mrs. Tyler notes, "Our hairstyle reflects our culture and style. After observing my students' and others' hairstyles, I started taking photographs to document their changing patterns."

Table 6 demonstrates the process used by Mrs. Tyler to teach about hairstyles. Instead of framing students' preoccupation with hair as a problem, Mrs. Tyler figured out how to capitalize on students' interests. Figure 2 shows one of the hairstyles that inspired Mrs. Tyler's study of hair. Mrs. Tyler, who has an extensive collection of Black dolls with various hairstyles, was also able to build on her passion as well. By the end of the unit, Mrs. Tyler had addressed several art standards as well as content in other subjects. Additionally, students were introduced to artists and artworks that probably would not have captured their interest without a familiar context.

Much of Mrs. Tyler's instruction starts with observation and knowledge of her students as well as her belief in their potential. In the study of hair, student interest encouraged her to venture in-depth with the theme. First, she sought to affirm and validate the beauty of black hair. Anyone who has delved into the politics and issues surrounding hair in the black community (from both inside and outside forces) can appreciate the need to counter culturally invasive and assaulting messages about black hair. Even though there has been considerable appreciation for the beauty of black hair within the black community in recent years, innuendos and intimations about "good" hair and "bad" hair still are alive and well among many blacks (Collison, 2002). Pronouncing that black hair is a topic worthy of study in school and making it an integral part of the course of study as opposed to a peripheral add-on served as a counternarrative in itself. Other counternarratives used by Mrs. Tyler included a text set on black hair and artwork featuring

TABLE 6. Middle School Art Teachers' Text Set on Hair.

The teacher starts by affirming the students' culture then ventures out to related global topics. Works of Art and Black Artists

- *Three Generation*, Mauuk Hulis
- *Middle Passage*, Tom Feelings
- *Three On One*, Annie Lee
- *Full Set Or Fill In*, Annie Lee
- *Extentions*, Annie Lee
- *You Next*, Sugar, Annie Lee

Books About Black Female Hair (to affirm black female hair). While these books are children's book, students enjoyed looking at the hairstyles.

- *Rapunzel* (African version), Fred Crump
- *I Love My Hair*, Natasha Anastasia Tarplay
- *Fohuke: The Afro Queen*, Nefertari Hilliard-Nunn
- *Nappy Hair*, Carolivia Herron
- *Cornrows*, Camille Yarbrough
- *Happy To Be Nappy*, Bell Hooks

Books About Males, Females, and Other Cultures. Read to broaden initial concept and to demonstrate that both similarities and differences should be valued.

- *My Hair Is Beautiful Because It's Mine* (black males and females), Paula Dejoie
- *Hair Designs* (females; multicultural; non-fiction), Margaret Caldwell
- *Hats Off To Hair* (males, females, multicultural), Virginia Knoll

Related Concepts

- *Madame C. J. Walker* (History—to teach about the first black female millionaire who earned her money selling hair products), A'Leia Perry Bundles
- *Black Hair: Art, Culture, Style*. Nonfiction discussion of black hair including works of art, A'Leia Perry Bundles

Science Concepts (Delpit, 2005)

- Unit on the chemical content of hair dressing and popular hair and makeup products;
- Names, properties, and other purposes of chemicals;
- Process of testing products.

Math

- *Ethnomathematics*. Examined the work of Dr. Gloria Gilmer, Ethnomathematician who studies patterns and tessellations in African braiding. Photographs of students' hairstyles (boys and girls) (see Figure 2 A–G). Hair patterns were related to patterns in baskets, quilts, and other similar crafts.
- Studied patterns in hairstyles in works of art (sculptors and prints, e.g., “Middle Passage” by Tom Feelings);
- Estimation of amount of hair needed for various styles;
- Monetary issues such as the cost of hairstyles;
- Length of time hair styles will last and cost-effectiveness of styles.

History

- *History and Social Studies*. Hair has interested humans since the dawn of history;
 - Website that traces hairstyles through history (www.queensnewyork.com/history/hair.html);
 - Sumerian noblewomen;
 - Babylonian and Assyrian men dyed long hair and beards black and crimped and curled them;
 - Greece—Greeks used curling irons; some women dyed their hair red, blue, dusted with red, gold, or white powder;
 - “Forefathers” of America wore white wigs.
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(Continued)

TABLE 6. (Continued).

Related topics

- Bookkeeping/record keeping;
- Marketing;
- Small business operation and entrepreneurship;
- Chemistry, anatomy, biology (knowledge for giving proper facials for particular skin types and structures; proper hygiene);
- Electrical currents (electrical apparatuses).

**FIGURE 2.** Mrs. Tyler photographed students' hairstyles to use when teaching about tessellations and patterns.

black hair (Table 6). Photographing the children's hair also served as an important counternarrative. Too often black females' elaborate hairstyles that are worn with pride go unnoticed by educators or are regarded with disapproving comments while white females' new perms are complimented (Boutte, LaPoint & Davis, 1993). As students proudly posed for photos or called her attention to other students' creative styles, Mrs. Tyler was able to demonstrate the cultural legacy of hairstyles in the African diaspora via African sculptors and prints by renowned artists like Tom Feelings. Prints showing intergenerational hairstyling routines and women congregating in beauty salons reiterated the beautiful and affective process of "doing

someone else's hair." While "sistahs" are getting their hair *fried, dyed, and laid to the side* (borrowing a proverbial phrase commonly heard in black salons), there is also an unspoken communal bonding process taking place. The communal spirit built in such settings parallels that of barbershops for males. Amidst the braiding, cutting, coloring, straightening, curling, and weaving, little girls learn about womanhood in its many possibilities. In schools, black female students rarely see black female teachers or administrators. So it is not surprising that in schools that are dominated by white female teachers, the cultural memory and accompanying significance of "getting yo' hair did" is unknown, unacknowledged, and overlooked as an important part of one's being. In thinking about this unit, Mrs. Tyler was well aware that too often black female students will learn that hairstyles labored over and praised at home receive little or no notice at school and in society outside of one's community.

Congruent with one of the tenets for culturally relevant teaching, Mrs. Tyler helped her students make connections between their community, national, and global identities (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Recognizing that she needed to take students beyond their own worldviews and current skill levels, she ventured into content areas and perspectives beyond art and black culture and was careful to include males as well. In the final analysis, the study served as an important segue for further study in science, math, and history. It should be emphasized that while the learning process was engaging, it was also rigorous and academically based. Working with other content teachers on the unit and consulting outside resources made it possible for teachers to see learning connections and possibilities that may have gone unnoticed or been labeled pejoratively as extracurricular or related arts. As a student from another classroom who viewed a power point presentation summarizing the unit commented, "I didn't know that you could learn all of that about hair!"

PREACHING AND POETRY

—MR. NATHANIEL BONAPARTE, CEEEAAS HIGH SCHOOL
ENGLISH TEACHER

Classrooms have their own distinct flavor that is mediated through teachers' personalities, experiences, interpretations (Ladson-Billings, 1994). So while Mrs. Tyler's class has the quiet undertones of a soft melody, Mr. Bonaparte's class has spiritual overtones reflecting his other occupation as a minister. Mr. Bonaparte, who is of average height and slight build, has been teaching for five years. Capitalizing on his strength and passion as a minister, one day he entered the classroom dressed in a graduation gown (simulating a minister's cloak), stood at the podium, and began reciting James Weldon's Johnson's "Go Down, Death (A Funeral Sermon)." Knowing that students in

TABLE 7. Excerpt From James Weldon Johnson’s “Go Down, Death (A Funeral Sermon)” (Student responses are in italics).

Weep not, *weep not*
 She is not dead; *no!*
 She’s resting in the bosom of Jesus. *Yes!*
 Heart-broken husband—weep no more;
 Grief-stricken son—weep no more; *no more*
 Left-lonesome daughter—wee no more; *no more*
 She only just gone home. *Yes.*

his class attended church regularly, he instructed them to respond in a call and response manner, a common church tradition (see Table 7). Once he completed the first rendition, a student pleaded to read the poem and to wear the gown. After the student finished, Mr. Bonaparte then read Emily Dickinson’s “Because I Could Not Stop For Death” using his best English accent.

Instead of the sterile feel of the classroom, the sermon generated an emotionally charged excitement level among the students. Parts of the sermon being dramatized could be heard throughout the classroom. In small groups, students looked for examples of personification in both poems. They also discussed death as the common literary theme. They ended by writing a paragraph outlining the major differences between the two authors’ personification of death and why the poems are so different. Students were expected to understand perspective and context. Students left the class reciting and playacting verses from the various poems.

Each year, Mr. Bonaparte struggles with ways of generating student interest in topics most remote to them. To do so requires that he, like the other two teachers, focus on what he knows about Black culture in general, his students specifically, himself as a teacher, and the content. This is the ongoing tension that teachers seeking to be effective teaching in a culturally effective manner will face.

Implications For Educators

The implications of these teaching examples are simple, straightforward, and obvious. Each community possesses strengths that should be recognized and built on. In the often misguided complete focus on “covering” the standards and applying generic *best practices*, many educators neglect to consider the cultural capital that students bring from their homes and communities. Each community has its own style of discourse, stories, symbols, rituals and routines that can inform educators. Utilizing them can shift educators from positioning Black communities as pathological to viewing them as resources and sources of information.

The underlying concepts of culturally relevant pedagogy that were emphasized in this article were twofold. First, educators have to recognize, acknowledge and affirm the strengths that students bring to school—regardless of students' circumstances. Educators should position themselves as learners and approach the learning setting with the query, "What can I learn from this community?" Careful and respectful examination of institutions that students engage in daily can shed much insight on how educators can infer relevant *best practices* for their classrooms. To do so, it is essential that educators familiarize themselves with the existing knowledge bases on students of color.

Second, while educators should use students' cultural capital as a starting point for teaching and learning, schools also have the obligation of extending students' knowledge and understandings beyond their own worldviews. Since many non-mainstream communities may not spend exorbitant amounts of time doing so, schools could complement communities by providing global dimensions to students' knowledge bases.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

This article invites educators to claim the positive image of young Black men and women inherent in many institutions in the African American community. Readers are encouraged to continuously counter the dominant and pervasive negative images of African American communities in lieu of more positive images that can be used as a source of inspiration for teaching and learning. The three examples shared in this article span different disciplines and grade levels to illustrate the elasticity of culturally relevant pedagogy.

Examination of "conventional" classrooms against the backdrop of the culture reflected in African American institutions will likely reveal that schools are lacking in important aspects of African American culture (e.g., spirituality, harmony, verve, creativity, movement, affect, communalism, expressive individualism, social time perspective, and oral tradition)—making schooling a remote and foreign experience for many students from non-mainstream backgrounds. Culturally relevant instruction is a viable transition between homes and schools. Potentially, it can also transform schooling to make it a more equitable process. While there is much discussion about changing the negative performance trends of students of color, attention must be directed to changing the *structure* and *fabric* of current instruction and curriculum if schools are to move beyond rhetoric of "no child left behind." There is no indication that continuing to problematize students, their communities, and culture will lead to substantive positive changes.

Re-emphasizing the caveat that effective teaching cannot be prescribed, the common understanding of the three teachers with diverse styles is the central belief that their students and communities are not flawed and should

be consulted. Each teacher utilized what he or she knew about black culture and students' communities to make necessary adaptations in instruction. Teachers did not limit themselves to standards, but rather sought to ensure depth of understanding and exposure to concepts. They tacitly understood that as educators there is much we can learn from communities. At some point, educators must seriously interrogate our instructional practices and views of students who are not faring well to determine what must be revised in our teaching and curriculum. When educators see and understand the beauty and wisdom that exists in students' communities, they can then begin to translate this knowledge and values into their classrooms as necessary and foundational building blocks for teaching and learning. While seemingly straightforward and common-sensical, this revelation escapes the radar of far too many educators to the detriment of students' success in school and life. Instead of searching far and wide for effective teaching solutions for students of color, educators need to start in the communities from whence our students come. There is much to be learned.

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APPENDIX A

Standards Taught in Barbershop Unit

- *Social Studies*
 - *IV. Production, Distribution, and Consumption: Economics*
 - 3:14 The learner will demonstrate an understanding of markets and the role of demand and supply in determining price and resource allocation. The student will be able to: 3:14:2 give examples of goods and services that have increased or decreased in supply. 3:14:4 name a wide range of job opportunities in South Carolina, and 3:14:5 discuss the role of the entrepreneur in the state and local community.
- *Language Arts*
 - SC.ELA.3-C1.1—Demonstrate the ability to face an audience, make eye contact, and use the appropriate voice level.
 - SC.ELA.3-C1.2—Demonstrate the ability to initiate conversation.
 - SC.ELA.3-C1.5—Begin giving brief presentations, demonstrations, and oral reports.

- SC.ELA.3-C1.9—Demonstrate the ability to use visual aids, props, and technology to support and extend his or her meaning and enhance his or her oral presentations.
- SC.ELA.3-C1.12—Demonstrate the ability to participate in interviews and in reading and writing conferences.

APPENDIX B

Standards For Mr. Bonaparte’s English Lesson

- E1-R2.3
 - Demonstrate the ability to compare and contrast universal literary themes as they are developed in works in a variety of genres.
 - Demonstrate the ability to evaluate an author’s use of stylistic elements such as personification.

