POWERFUL PEDAGOGY FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS
A Case of Four Teachers

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The disproportionate underachievement of African American students may suggest that teacher effectiveness with this student population has been limited. However, amidst these widespread academic failures, characterizations of effective teachers of African American students have emerged in an attempt to reverse these disturbing trends. This article examines the findings from a qualitative case study of four elementary school teachers in urban settings. The findings reveal teaching practices consistent with various norms espoused by African American students in a manner that could be termed "culturally relevant." In this article, three of the major pedagogical themes are discussed: holistic instructional strategies, culturally consistent communicative competencies, and skill-building strategies to promote academic success.

Effectively teaching African American students continues to be one of the most pressing issues facing educators. Despite the plethora of school restructuring and educational reforms, the disproportionate underachievement of African American students is a consistent occurrence in U.S. schools (National Assessment of Educational Progress [NAEP], 1994, 1996, 1998). Research on exemplary teaching strategies for African American students has been the focus of increasing scholarship over the past decade (Foster, 1989, 1992; King, 1991; Ladson-Billings & Henry, 1991; Lee, 1995). This research has emerged from the idea that identifying, describing, and analyzing successful teaching strategies for educating African American students can play an important role in reversing school failures (Delpit, 1995; Foster, 1992; Irvine, 1990).

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Although there have been significant gains in the educational endeavors of African American students over the past 40 years, there have been fewer gains in other indices. Research has shown that despite lower average family incomes and less parental education, African American 3-year-olds and 4-year-olds participate in preschool programs at a higher rate than do European Americans at approximately 53% compared with 44% (Patterson, 1997). African American students perform at about the same level as their European American counterparts on most tests of mental and social development. However, by the fourth grade, the academic achievement of African American students lags far behind that of European American students. The 1994, 1996, and 1998 NAEP data reveal that the majority of African American students in the 4th, 8th, and 12th grades have not reached grade-level competence in reading, mathematics, history, and geography. Less than one quarter of African American students are at or above grade-level proficiency in these subject matters. Less than 3% of African American students are at advanced levels of proficiency in these areas.

The academic underachievement of African American students represents only part of the educational dilemma that needs to be addressed in U.S. schools. Socially and emotionally, African American students struggle to adjust in U.S. schools. Although African American students make up 16.5% of the nation's public school enrollment, they represent 28.7% of children in special education classrooms (Patterson, 1997). In addition, the percentage of students in remedial programs increases with the percentage of African Americans in the student body. In many school districts across the nation, the percentage of African American students labeled at risk, ineducable, or in need of special or remedial education services is grossly disproportionate to the overall percentage of African American students in the school or district. Some have suggested that one of the reasons for this disproportionality is that African American teachers make up a mere 6% of the U.S. teaching population. As a result, chances are improbable that African American students will come into contact with African American teachers who may have an understanding of the cultural values and characteristics they bring to the classroom. Consequently, the potential

for cultural incongruence between African American students and their teachers is exacerbated. As a repercussion, the chances of cultural misunderstandings resulting in negative labels and subsequent academic underachievement become a part of the routine schooling experience for many African American students. The teachers who are the focus of this study are all African American, and the familiarity they have with their students' cultural background underscores the importance of cultural congruity between students and teachers.

Descriptions of effective teaching practices for African American students have been detailed in an attempt to diminish the preponderance of the cultural mismatch theory (Lessow-Hurley, 1986). Cultural mismatch theory suggests that when critical components of teaching and learning between student and teacher are not culturally congruent, there can be negative outcomes for students. The cultural discontinuity that many African American students encounter in schools is a contributing variable to the academic underachievement and social maladaptiveness that plagues many of them (Lee, Lomotey, & Shujaa, 1990). Therefore, further studies examining school environments that are successful in alleviating the cultural discontinuity are desperately needed.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study was to describe and examine the pedagogical practices that four elementary school teachers used with African American students in urban settings. Each of the teachers recognized the cogent role that culture plays in the learning process and, as a result, designed their teaching practices in ways that could be termed "culturally relevant" for African American students (Ladson-Billings, 1995a). Ladson-Billings (1995b) has described culturally relevant pedagogy as a critical "pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes" (p. 18). In other words, the teachers sought to use their pedagogical practices to create a learning environment that did not encourage

students to disconnect from their cultural identities while pursuing high academic achievement. This study attempted to give descriptive accounts of how such pedagogical practices are actualized in day-to-day settings. In addition to describing these teaching practices, the study sought to capture the teachers' ideological constructions behind the pedagogical practices that were used.

SCHOOL, CULTURE, AND EDUCATIONAL EQUITY

Many efforts to implement educational reforms that reflect cultural equity have done so through including ethnic content of culturally diverse groups in school curricula (Banks, 1994). However, some of these efforts have fallen short of their intended goals and objectives because they fail to structure teaching styles in ways that meet the needs of culturally diverse students (Cuban, 1972), thus underscoring the necessity of culturally effective pedagogy. In addition to creating cultural consistency from home to the classroom, effective pedagogy should also deal with how new knowledge can be formed through firsthand experiences. Giroux and Simon (1989) state,

> When one practices pedagogy, one acts with the intent of creating experiences that will organize and disorganize a variety of understandings of our natural and social world in particular ways. . . . Pedagogy is a concept which draws attention to the processes through which knowledge is produced. (p. 239)

The idea of a culturally sensitive pedagogy is tied to the belief that if learning structures and stimuli are grounded in a cultural context familiar to students, the potential for cognitive expansion is enhanced. In one of the first attempts to understand the role that culture plays in cognition, Vygotsky (1931) maintained that the "various psychological tools that people use to aid in their thinking and behavior [are called] *signs*." He added, "we cannot understand human thinking without examining the signs that cultures provide" (pp. 39-40). Because cultural signs have a major impact on

cognitive development, to counter the academic underachievement of students of color educators should recognize the cultural signs these students bring to the classroom and make curriculum and instruction more compatible with these signs.

A number of researchers have described ways in which the cultures of students of color differ from and are in conflict with the culture of many schools (Au & Jordan, 1981; Foster, 1993; Heath, 1983; Kleinfeld, 1975; Ladson-Billings, 1994). Likewise, several studies over the past quarter century have also indicated that the academic achievement of students is increased when teachers modify their instruction to make it more congruent with the cultures and communication styles of culturally diverse students. As far back as three decades ago, Phillips (1972) found that when teachers used participation structures in discussion that were similar to those used in the culture of Native American students, the students participated more actively in discussions. In a study by Au and Jordan (1981), the reading achievement of native Hawaiian students was increased when teachers used story structures consistent with those within students' culture and incorporated information about their culture into instruction. Lee (1995) examined the efficacy of *signifying*, a form of social discourse in the African American community, as a scaffold for teaching skills in literary interpretation. She discovered that when teachers used signifying and students' prior knowledge, there was a statistically significant improvement in performance on posttest measures of literary interpretation.

METHODS

My study draws upon and extends the work on culturally sensitive pedagogy for African American students. I wanted to determine the extent to which four teachers who were judged effective teachers of African American students used teaching strategies and techniques that could be described as culturally sensitive or responsive. Participating teachers were judged to be effective by parents, school principals, community members, and peers. Twenty-one nominators (6 elementary school principals, 4 parents, 5 teachers, 3

school district administrators, and 3 civic leaders) were asked to identify teachers whose pedagogical practices contributed to the academic and social development of African American students. Nominators were not given a criterion on which they were to identify what they considered to be effective teachers. They were merely asked to provide the names of teachers they believed were making a difference in the academic performance of African American students. The nominators identified an initial list of 12 teachers. To reduce the list of 12 teachers to a smaller number to study, a conceptual framework was developed that incorporated numerous pedagogical practices that have been described in previous research as culturally relevant for African American students (Boykin, 1994; Foster, 1997; Heath, 1983; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Lee, 1995). As the principal investigator, I observed all 12 teachers in their classrooms to identify teachers who used or allowed students to use a minimum of 15 of the 20 practices that were outlined in the conceptual framework as shown in Figure 1.

Upon observing and examining the teaching practices of the nominated teachers, four were identified as using a minimum of 15 of the instructional strategies or modifications of them and, as a result, made up the teacher participants in the study.

The teachers were interviewed and observed in their classrooms over a 4-month period. Each teacher was formally interviewed three times. Additional data were collected from informal discussions with the teacher during observations. On the basis of interviews and conversations with these four teachers and observations of their classrooms, I concluded that these teachers used many methods and teaching strategies that are consistent with culturally sensitive pedagogy.

The four teachers who participated in the study—Hazel, Dorothy, Marilyn, and Louise (pseudonyms)—were all African American women. Although Louise spent the first 18 years of her life in Haiti, she identified herself as African American. Their teaching experience ranged from 5 to 20 years. Each taught in predominately African American school settings in lower-class to middle-class areas of a city located in the northwestern region of the United States. Data for the study were collected using qualitative research meth-

Communication Styles	*Culture & Learning*	*Perceptions of Knowledge*
Expressive Individualism	Community Solidarity	Subjective View of Knowledge
Straightforward/Direct	Warm Demanders	Critical View of Knowledge
Signifying	Affirmation of Students' Cultural Identity	Emphasis on Skill Development
Use of Black English Vernacular	High Expectations for Students	Use of Students' Cultural Knowledge
Oral Expression	Emphasis on Collaboration and Collective Good	Universal Literacy
Spontaneity	Learning as Social Process	Creating New Knowledge
Social Interaction Styles		
Non-Verbal Communication		

FIGURE 1 Conceptual Framework for Culturally Relevant Teaching Practices for African American Students

ods, primarily in-depth, structured interviews and classroom observations during the 1997-1998 school year. Recorded interviews and observational field notes were transcribed, and the transcriptions were coded and analyzed using standard qualitative research methods (Bogdan & Bilken, 1992; Miles & Huberman, 1994). A grounded theory approach was also used to analyze the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). Grounded theory suggests that findings evolve during actual research. However, if theories already exist that have relevance to the area of investigation, these theories may be elaborated and modified as new data are analyzed and compared with them. Given the existing research and theory on the pedagogical practices of effective teachers of African American students, the grounded theory methodology enabled me to relate the findings to the existing theories and provide additional descriptions, different interpretations, and contextual accounts to those theories.

FINDINGS

In providing descriptions and philosophical rationales for their teaching practices, the participants in the study maintained that understanding student culture was essential. The data revealed three major pedagogical themes that are discussed in further detail:

holistic instructional strategies, culturally consistent communicative competencies, and skill-building strategies to promote academic success.

HOLISTIC INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

Research indicates that effective teachers of African American students are not exclusively concerned about students' academic and cognitive development but about their social, emotional, and moral growth as well. Holistic instructional strategies used by the teachers in this study reflected a desire to teach students academic, moral, and social competencies. Dorothy stated that it is becoming increasingly important for teachers to address a range of topics (academic and nonacademic) with students. She elaborated,

> The problems they [the students] bring to class are getting larger. They are not getting better. These kids are dealing with more things in their lives than you and I would ever imagine in a lifetime, and they're getting worse. You can just ignore them, because they're making marks on them already. Many teachers don't extend themselves beyond the role of a teacher. Of course, the way things are these days, you're scared to step over the line. But for African American kids, there's a certain amount of [nonacademic] teaching that we need to do.

Holistic instructional strategies entail a belief stated by Marilyn that "it's important not only to teach book sense, but common sense, because as the old folks say, 'You don't want to be an educated fool.'" A holistic approach to teaching stresses character building, producing students who are honest, responsible, respectful, skilled, cooperative, sympathetic to others, and who act in ways consistent with the social norms of the classroom and larger community. Holistic instructional strategies actualize the belief that education is a comprehensive and integrative approach to developing students' cognitive capacities, integrity, and wisdom. They are concerned with developing all the faculties of learners so that students are intellectually capable (able to master cognitive and academic tasks), socially adaptable (able to coexist with peers and

adults in a respectable manner), and morally sound (able to adhere to teacher and societal norms).

With the increasing demands placed on teachers for students' academic proficiency, the usefulness of teaching nonacademic issues and content would appear to have diminishing value. However, the teachers in this study believed that holistic teaching carries significant value for African American students. Hazel told me that "teaching is more than the three Rs (reading, 'riting, and 'rithmetic) [and] it should include the two Cs—community service and citizenship." Hazel used holistic instructional strategies by increasing her students' awareness about socially and economically marginalized groups. Her class frequently made trips to convalescent homes to visit and read to the elderly and to soup kitchens to help feed the homeless. She stated,

> Initially, there's a lot of resistance from students about going to visit the elderly and the homeless. Many of them [the students] break out crying . . . for many of them, there is an immediate impact. You can see how it affects them. And a lot of discussion was that they didn't know [homeless] people lived that way or that people got that old. . . . It is important because when they see the homeless and the elderly, they think about how the decisions that they make today affect the lives they live tomorrow.

Hazel also stressed the importance of public behavior and social etiquette to her students during their visits. She talked about the necessity for African American students to acquire basic knowledge about how to conduct themselves in public settings and not to reinforce negative stereotypes about African American children and their behavior. This statement, taken from interview data, highlights her philosophy:

> You see, education isn't just about what goes on in the class. Education also takes place outside of the class. For example, these kids need to realize that there is a way to behave outside of the home, and that's what I want them to learn. So I tell them, when you go to school or when you go to church, or when you go downtown on the bus, or when you go anywhere, there are rules of behavior in society that don't always jive with rules of behavior at home. Your parents

> will accept many things from you that other people will not. I tell them that they need to know how to listen, follow directions, all that stuff. I tell them to speak clearly, stand straight, don't act silly, and have some pride about them.

In addition to extracurricular activities and social etiquette, the teachers used holistic teaching strategies by explicitly teaching certain values. Among the values that each teacher tried to teach were perseverance, responsibility, and respect for authority. Each of the teachers believed that values need to be explicitly taught in school. Marilyn attributed many of the current problems in schools to students' lack of respect for authority. She stated,

> They [students] fight against authority. I know that if we're going to be living in this world, there's always going to be authority figures and people we must respect, and the sooner we learn to do that, the younger we learn to do it, the better off we'll be. Now you don't have to throw out your values. You don't have to be a person you're not. I may disagree with the school district, but even I have to follow the rules that I don't dare break. And that's the way it is. . . . We're supposed to be raising citizens for the world, then what we need to have are students who understand that respecting authority is not being a slave. That's what I heard a kid say one time when I insisted he say "Yes" or "No, Ms. Russell," he said "you trying to make us into slaves". . . . And he couldn't understand it, so I insist that they say "Yes, Ms. Russell," and that's all I am going to accept. Not because I want you as my slave, but because that's respect, and why is it so difficult just to be polite?

Each of the teachers in this study spent a lot of time teaching and talking about the importance of students being responsible. Dorothy continually stressed to her students the importance of being responsible for their own learning. She said,

> I tell them [the students] that they have to take responsibility for their own learning, darn straight. Because there are a lot of times when they sit back and they expect the teacher to give them something. I tell them "You've got to keep bugging that teacher until you find out, until you get what you need." And this generation of kids, that is coming up is scary. Because there's not an agenda, they think everything should be handed to them, and they have no

responsibility for taking the initiative for what they want or what they have in life.

Hazel was less tolerant than the other teachers about student responsibility. She would frequently ask her students, "Who is responsible for your education?" Students who did not complete assignments or follow through on orders and requests were not allowed to blame others for their failures and were frequently chastised for giving excuses. A large banner in the front of her classroom read, "Results and Responsibilities Right Here, Right Now, Not Excuses!!" However, students who were able to honestly acknowledge their lack of responsibility were often given second chances, as noted in this interaction between Hazel and one of her students:

Hazel: Donnell, where's your homework, sir?
Donnell: I don't have it, Ms. Russell.
Hazel: What do you mean you don't have it? Why not?
Donnell: No excuse, Ms. Russell, just carelessness.
Hazel (to entire class, elatedly): Ahhh! Class, here's a young man who has taken responsibility for his actions. I like that. He didn't give me a bunch of excuses or blame someone else. This is what I like to hear, accountability. I will give you a chance to make it up, since you are being responsible.

Holistic instructional strategies are consistent with the belief of educating the whole child. The teachers in the study exhibited this practice based on their concern and commitment to developing well-rounded students who not only developed excellent academic knowledge and skills but also became emotionally and socially adjusted.

CULTURALLY CONSISTENT COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCIES

Research on successful African American pedagogy has highlighted the important role that language plays in the teaching and learning process. The teachers that were studied understood the salience of language for their students and used culturally consis-

tent communicative competencies to facilitate communication in their classrooms. Consistent with the findings of previous research on exemplary African American teaching practices, the teachers structured discourse patterns, phrases, person-to-person interactions, and vocabulary in their classrooms in ways consistent with many of the communication modes their students used at home. Such practices were used so that students would not experience cultural discontinuity between home and school when interacting with their teachers and peers. Each of the teachers claimed that they wanted students to use their cultural forms of expression if this allowed students to explain their comprehension of content more effectively or if it helped them cognitively connect with various concepts being taught.

Hazel stated that it is very important for teachers who have little or no experience working with African American students to understand how verbal many African American students can be. She stated, "I think that with African American children, you have to be able to accept a certain amount of verbiage. Sometimes it may seem very close to the edge of disrespect, or lack of it." Hazel is a stern disciplinarian and always has strict control of her class. She acknowledged the oral mode of expression used by her students but did not attempt to alter or change it. All of the teachers in this study recognized the unique verbal skills of many African American students. Each of them mentioned how they tried to structure their teaching in ways that allowed African American students to take advantage of their verbal skills and discourse styles. Dorothy explained,

> They [African American students] bring verbal skills that are a part of our culture. In fact, a lot of times what you see is [a] discrepancy [between] how they verbally deal with problem solving and how they put it on paper. So one of the things that is really important to me is to help them identify that [they] have the strength, so how do you [get them to] transpose that into [their] daily work? Many of them have good leadership qualities. But they tend not to use them in the right channels. For example, the talking, they can talk all day in class and not get focused, but if you give them leadership roles of leading a group or leading a class discussion, they are very successful.

Dorothy was quite successful in helping her students use their verbal and leadership skills as part of their learning by incorporating "Morning Circle" into the daily routine of her class. The students came together in a circle at the start of each day to share with one another current events, issues, people, and concerns in their lives. This sharing time was highly valued by both students and the teacher. In explaining why she made "Morning Circle" a part of her daily routine, Dorothy said,

> I have found that by just giving them that 15- to 20-minute time to talk about whatever is going on in their lives, it cuts down on so much more of the chit-chat throughout the day. They have things going on in their lives, and they want to share them with their friends or with me. If I were to have them come in here and start right away on an academic task, it would be so crazy in here, because they'd be trying to share what's going on in their lives, especially after a weekend.

Dorothy believes one of the factors that hinders the academic success of African American students is teachers' propensity to rely excessively on written tasks to assess student understanding. She recognizes that many African American students prefer oral to written expressions. Consequently, verbal opportunities as a form of student assessment are an integral part of her teaching. She talked about why and how she does this:

> I give them [students] the experience of orally hearing a story and then moving in with writing it. It's constantly moving back and forth between the two [speaking and writing]. Kids need to be able to explore what their thinking is, and they can't always do it on paper, so doing it orally helps.

In addition to understanding the verbal characteristics of many African American students, the teachers in this study were also committed to using language and discourse patterns as a means of connecting out-of-school experiences to school content. Each of the teachers in this study used various forms of African American discourse patterns in their pedagogy to connect with their students and to encourage them to achieve at higher levels. The teachers believed that the incorporation of African American discourse pat-

terns is helpful in the academic success of many African American students. Louise talked about this:

> Sometimes for these stories [that are read in class], they [students] don't have the background knowledge to understand. They've never heard anything about Greek mythology. They're [the students] like "Polyphemus, Odysseus, what is that?" If they don't have the background knowledge, then it becomes harder for them to understand. So what I do is try to present information about Greek mythology in language they know. I use analogies or metaphors to help them make connections.

Louise used stories in which students had little background information and made meaningful parables to help them transfer knowledge from their personal understanding to the story message. In the case of Odysseus, she told the class to think of "Dwayne" (a student in the class) as the wisest and shrewdest leader in the class who fought hard to protect Room 7 (Louise's classroom) from other classrooms that were trying to take it over. She continued the analogy by casting other students in the classroom as other participants in the Trojan War. In an animated and emotional tone, she asked the students, "Can we allow Room 14 to 'dis' [disrespect] us like that?" To which the students replied in unison with a resounding, "No." She continued, "Now we've got to deal with 'Diondre' [cast as Polyphemus], and y'all know he's a mess because he has done something that we just can't tolerate. He killed 'Ray' [cast as Acis] because he was jealous of 'Shaneequa' [cast as Galatea]. These are some crazy people, so let's deal with it." These types of parables were common in Louise's classroom. By using meaningful examples with unfamiliar content, she actively engaged students in the learning process in highly motivating ways.

One of the major types of communication used by many African American students is Black English Vernacular (BEV). Three of the teachers in the study recognized Ebonics as a legitimate form of discourse used by their students but taught their students to understand the appropriate contexts for its use. Said Dorothy:

> I don't have any problems with that [Ebonics], but I also want them [students] to know that Ebonics and standard English are two

> different things. Both are just as valid, but standard English is what's going to get you through this world . . . and what you have to do is learn how to jump back and forth. I do it everyday. I go home and speak it [Ebonics] . . . or sometimes when I get angry I use it. . . . When they see me move into that stuff, I tell them, "What you just saw me do was transition. Now, which one works more effectively here?" I have to identify it for them.

Culturally consistent communicative competencies are grounded in the belief that teachers have frank discussions with their students about the use and appropriateness of Ebonics or BEV. The teachers in this study had explicit conversations with their students about the use of BEV. Although these conversations did not belittle the use of BEV, students were told that standard English could open social, educational, and financial opportunities. The teachers were also willing to demonstrate that they were frequent users of BEV themselves, which enabled their students to understand the contextual use of it. Marilyn described a scenario in her class that illustrates how she talks to the students about language.

> Sometimes when I teach the verb "to be," I'll start off with, "[A]lright, I be teaching you a lesson today," and all of the kids will fall out of their chairs laughing, and I'll say, "How many of you talk like that?" I say, "Well, I want you to know that there's nothing to be ashamed of if you do, that's the way some of us [African Americans] talk, and when we go home, you can say, "I be this" and "I be that" and "I does this" and "I does that" all you want, but when you want to get a job and if you walk in saying "I be wanting a job," they will laugh in your face. . . . So what you do at home is your business. When you go out in the world, you also have to know that there's another way and that's the way to be successful out there [in the world]. So we're going to learn that way. Because you already know the other way.

The episodes and beliefs of the teachers described above underscore an important element of culturally consistent communicative competencies. Even if teachers do not use the same forms of discourse as their students, they are able to engage them in a dialogue about its appropriate contextual use.

SKILL-BUILDING STRATEGIES TO PROMOTE ACADEMIC SUCCESS

One of the critical attributes of the teaching styles observed in this study was the teacher's ability to help students develop skills for increasing academic achievement. Marilyn said that skill building meant helping students understand "the what, when, how, and why" of specific rules on academic tasks. The importance of this practice was exemplified by Dorothy, who asked, "What good does it do to teach about Black history and cultural pride if these kids don't know how to read, write, or spell?" Skill-building strategies also required that teachers understand students' academic strengths and weaknesses and devise effective intervention. Skill-building strategies cannot be implemented without establishing a classroom environment that is conducive for academic and behavioral success. All of the teachers studied had exemplary classroom-management strategies that allowed them to maximize class time for student learning. They encouraged students to take risks even though they might give incorrect answers. The students were also encouraged to make informed decisions and choices. Marilyn declared, "These kids need to get the nuts and bolts of learning, because without them, they're lost."

Many teachers and schools embraced such slogans as "All children can learn" and "Believe and students will achieve." However, the teachers in this study did more than hold high expectations for their students; they created the opportunities necessary for students to acquire the knowledge vital for school success. Hazel talked about why actions had to be consistent with beliefs about students' ability to succeed:

> You hear everybody say all the time that "all kids can learn." Okay, and we should have high expectations, and we should tell them that we have high expectations, and I do all of those things. But it isn't just enough to tell a child that you can do it. You also have to show the child how he can do it.

Hazel stated that one of the reasons some of her students do not fare well academically is because of a negative perception they

have about their level of "smartness." These students, according to Hazel, believed that some individuals have smartness and others do not. A major part of Hazel's skill development was to stress to her students that all students are smart but have different skill levels. She wanted her students to understand that smartness is something that everyone has, but skills are something that is acquired over time. Hazel told her students that they needed to put forth effort to improve the skills associated with smartness. She also told them that other individuals who appeared to be smarter had worked harder and made the necessary sacrifices to develop the skills required for school success. She explained why she used these "smarts" and "skills" examples:

> One approach that I find that really works is rather than referring to "you're smarter at this" or "you're better at that" to use the word *skills*. That says to the children that skills are something acquired over time. Then, if someone is more skillful at something, then it simply means they've had more practice at it. And you can rise to that skill level if you practice. So it makes it attainable. But if you use the word *smart*, most children interpret that as either having it or not. The key is to stress that everyone can improve skills.

According to Hazel, it is difficult for some of the students to overcome the stigma of not having the smarts needed for academic success. She explained why:

> You see, they [students] compare themselves to their neighbors [classmates], and they say, "Yeah, he's smart, and I'm dumb." So they have this idea of innate intelligence; even though they don't have the words to explain it, this is what they believe. He was born smart and I was born dumb, you know, whatever their reasons may be, and I don't think that there is any easy way to becoming that way or believing that way; each child reaches that point through his own path. A lot of it [self-doubting] occurs from what other teachers have told them or how they've treated them. That he believes that I'm stupid and they're smart. [Initially] I didn't know how to overcome that [type of thinking]. I kept saying, "But you can do this, you can do this," and they [the students] kept looking at me like I had lost my ever-loving mind, looking at me like, "She just don't know that I'm stupid" kind of thing. So I talked to them about developing strategies and building skills that can help them become smart.

Hazel emphasized how, for many of her students, realizing that they can attain certain levels of academic proficiency was a sigh of relief that made their efforts worthwhile.

> [With many of the students] you can see the light bulb go on. . . . It was almost like, "thank you, I'm not stupid." Because this one child actually thought she was stupid. And somehow that [skill building] made sense to her. All year, I've been telling them that education is like a chain, and I'm getting ready to give you a link [to connect to your other links]. Well, all of a sudden, it just made all of that clear.

In addition to stressing the importance of skills, several of the teachers mentioned the importance of placing skill development as a higher priority than developing affectionate bonds with the students. The teachers in this study had their own unique ways of showing concern and care for their students. However, they made it a point to clarify that the love or affection they showed their students was not their top priority. Helping students acquire necessary academic and social skills and preparing them for their next grade was their most important objective. Hazel, for example, told me that having her students develop essential academic skills superseded any desire to have them form affectionate bonds with her. Even though many of her students complained about her strict, no-nonsense, no-excuses, disciplinarian teaching approach, Hazel explained how it had a purpose:

> You see, I know they're [the students] upset [about her teaching style]. They'll come back next year, and they won't be upset. Because they'll go to middle school, and they'll find out that all the stuff that I made them learn is of value. . . . The important thing is that I don't worry about how they feel about me right now. If I'm worried about just making them love me, then I won't be able to help them. If they were first graders and we were gonna go all the way to fifth grade, then I would not have to be as hard and as tough as I am here. . . . I've got only 180 days to try to get these kids in shape to be successful in middle school. I can't be worried about whether they love me or not. I have to be worried about whether or not they get it [the appropriate skills]. That's why I'll say "I'm going to make you get this" because I know, in the long run, they're going to be grateful that I did, and then they will love me.

Clearly emotional when discussing the issue of teachers loving their students as opposed to teaching them, Hazel became increasingly passionate as she expressed her thoughts.

> You have to know and be aware and willing to accept hate before you can ever get a child to love you. . . . That's why I don't like to let them leave my class [without the skills] because there's too much of this bleeding heart liberal, "let me love you, let you love me" stuff going on out there. These kids continue to fail while their teachers "love them." I'm not gonna go out with that. I'll give them an understanding to a degree, but there are some times when you have to push to a certain level before they can open their eyes and see where you are coming from.

DISCUSSION

As emphasized in the introductory sections of the article, I share the view of scholars such as Ladson-Billings (1994) and Foster (1997) that instructional strategies situated in a cultural context consistent with African American students' home setting offer them a more equitable opportunity for school success. As indicated by the findings in this study, personal experiences or familiarity with African American cultural values and norms seemed to influence many of the practices used by the teachers. Even though African American culture was a framework for many of the practices each teacher used, each applied them in her own unique way, which was predicated on her own set of experiences and the ways that she interpreted those experiences. In Hazel and Marilyn's case, as veteran teachers who have witnessed dramatic downward shifts in the achievement levels of African American students over the years, they both adopted no-nonsense policies in their classrooms that entailed teaching their students with a sense of urgency. This underscores Hazel's insistence on not allowing caring or affection to come before teaching core academic skills. She frequently mentioned that during her childhood, the key to helping Black kids do well in school "had nothing to do with teaching Black history but helping kids learn what was needed to do well in society." Each of the teachers talked about their personal upbringings as having sig-

nificant influences on their teaching philosophy and pedagogical styles. Each teacher grew up in predominately Black urban environments and talked about how they had been strongly influenced by community and cultural norms, which were largely shaped by family members, school teachers, church ministers, and other community members. Consequently, each of the teachers attempted to incorporate many of the same core values in their teaching styles.

Although having a connection to and awareness of the cultural context that students bring from home was important, what seemed to be equally important in the development of these teachers' teaching practices was a belief that their students were capable of being academically successful. Whereas teacher expectations have been associated with student academic performance, student's expectations of their own academic success is often a greater predictor of academic attainment (Coleman, Hoffer, & Kilgore, 1982). The teachers in this study believed that it was important to convince their students that they possessed the potential to make a difference in their academic development. As a result, Hazel used her skills versus smarts analogy, and Louise was a big proponent of teaching fundamental competencies in the area of reading. The emphasis that each teacher placed on skill development implies that the cultural connection between student and teacher alone does not dictate student success. What is critical to note is that although these teachers stressed the importance of the cultural awareness of their students, the creation of a rigorous learning environment was just as vital in the development of their pedagogical philosophies and practices. Teachers' belief in student capability also has cultural connections. Research has suggested that central to many of the child-rearing practices used by African American parents is the promotion of an achievement orientation wherein parents have high expectations for their children's academic development. Moreover, parents using more authoritative parenting encourage autonomous behavior and independent decision-making skills in an attempt to instill confidence in children's perception of their abilities (Baumrind, 1972; Hill, 1995; Moos, 1974).

The teachers in this study revealed how significant the role of language is for African American students. Not only does language

have implications for academic achievement but sensitivity toward linguistic differences also has direct consequences for cultural identity. Coincidentally, the teachers talked about how important it is for African American students not to have essential elements of their native language denigrated or taken away from them in the name of academic pursuit. This type of pedagogical philosophy speaks to the essence of culturally relevant pedagogy, wherein students can pursue academic excellence while maintaining their cultural identities. By recognizing students' propensity to use BEV and preference toward oral means of expression, the teachers tailored their instructional strategies in ways that allowed students' methods of communication to be used as academic strengths and not cognitive handicaps. Dorothy talked about "verbal skills being a part of our culture," and as a result, she set up the "Morning Circle" as a venue to allow students the opportunity to converse about issues, events, and people to start their day. Louise's use of metaphors and analogies is an example of how school content can be tied to cultural and language contexts familiar to students and, as a result, offer students a better opportunity for academic success while maintaining their cultural and linguistic integrity.

The findings from this study reveal teaching practices used by teachers who have an awareness of unique characteristics of many African American students. However, it should be noted that the practices highlighted in the study are not exclusive to African American teachers. Each of the teachers in the study indicated that non–African American teachers could replicate the practices that they used. They maintained that it would require a willingness to conduct critical self-examinations about assumptions, beliefs, and stereotypes they may have about African American students and, more important, how these assumptions negatively or positively affect the teaching and learning process for such students.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This research adds to the increasing scholarship on culturally responsive pedagogy for African American students. By contex-

tualizing the findings within existing research, I have attempted to build on existing theory and shed new insights into the complex yet critical role culture plays in the learning process. The pedagogical practices identified and described in this study have implications for the way that four classroom teachers think about the instructional strategies that they use with African American students. The findings provide classroom teachers with a conceptual framework that may help them to improve the academic achievement and social and emotional development of African American students. Although the findings do not describe every useful strategy teachers can use in the education of African American students, they should help to crystallize the direction, nature, and action of theorized strategies for elementary preservice and in-service teachers on how to teach African American students in urban schools. This current study suggests that teacher education curricula take into account findings such as these and others similar to them as well as several key principles. First is the importance of nonaca- demic competence: Teachers should develop strategies that are designed to improve the social, psychological, and moral growth of students. Giving informal lessons about personal pride, common courtesy, and showing respect to peers and elders are examples of how to incorporate nonacademic issues in pedagogical practices. Second, recognition of nonmainstream methods of discourse is important. Language plays a quintessential role in the communicative process for African American students. Teachers should recognize that any attempts to invalidate or denigrate the use of nonstandard English might have detrimental effects on the academic prospects for African American students. Third, improving the educational experience of African American students not only requires the infusion of ethnically and culturally relevant content in the curriculum but also the development of basic skills necessary for academic success. Teachers should not assume that exposure to ethnic content alone improves academic proficiency. Teachers should have high expectations for students and establish attainable goals and objectives.

The challenge of educating African American students is a complex one. Although the task may seem daunting, it is not hopeless.

Countless numbers of teachers across the country continue to prepare African American students to increase their academic and social achievement. In the final analysis, if serious attempts are to be made to offset the academic disenfranchisement of African American students, understanding the role that cultural socialization as understood, respected, and imparted by teachers remains critical to the teaching and learning process.

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