FIGHTING FOR OUR LIVES
PREPARING TEACHERS TO TEACH AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS

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The quest for quality education is a part of the ongoing struggle faced by African Americans. Few, if any, teacher education programs design programs that expressly meet the needs of African American students. Although some teacher preparation programs are designed for "urban" education, the significance of African American culture rarely is a feature of such programs. This article addresses the uniqueness of the African American cultural experience and details a variety of pedagogical and programmatic strategies that have been employed to assist teachers in better meeting the needs of African American students.

During the 1970s, school desegregation in U.S. northern cities became a national focal point. In Boston, a contested court order had parents, teachers, administrators, students, school committee members, and community members struggling with school busing to achieve desegregation. One African American parent, caught on the documentary film footage of the award winning civil rights series, "Eyes on the Prize" (Hampton, 1986), exclaimed, "When we fight about education, we're fighting for our lives." This urgent perspective of "fighting for our lives" informs the discussion about preparing teachers to teach African American students effectively. This article addresses the dearth of literature about preparing teachers to teach African American students, the attempts by scholars to fill this void, and the need for ongoing research in this area.

THE SILENCE OF THE LITERATURE

With very few exceptions, the literature does not expressly address the preparation of teachers to teach African American learners effectively (Ladson-Billings, 1994b). Instead, references to the educational needs of African American students are folded into a discourse of deprivation. Searches of the literature base indicate that when one uses the descriptor, "Black education," one is directed to see, "culturally deprived" and "culturally disadvantaged." Thus, the educational research literature, when it considers African American learners at all, has constructed all African American children, regardless of economic or social circumstance, within the deficit paradigm (Bettleheim, 1965; Bloom, Davis, & Hess, 1965; Ornstein & Viaro, 1968).

The literature is reflective of a generalized perception that African American culture is not a useful rubric for addressing the needs of African American learners, and thus, that African American culture is delegitimized in the classroom. Rather than seeing African Americans as possessing a distinctive culture, African American learners often are treated as if they are corruptions of White culture, participating in an oppositional, counter-productive culture (Ogbu, 1987). Schools and teachers treat the language, prior knowledge, and values of African Americans as aberrant and often presume that the teacher's job is to rid African American students of any vestiges of their own culture.

I would argue that the educational literature is silent on the issue of teaching African Ameri-

can students because much of the educational research has relied on generic models of pedagogy (Shulman, 1987) that position themselves as "culture neutral" when they actually support the learning of mainstream students. The emphasis on a "one best system" (Tyack, 1974) emerges from the 19th-century Americanization model that was designed to merge all students, regardless of ethnic and cultural origins, into one ideal "American" model (Olneck, 1995). Of course, this Americanization process considered only those immigrant and cultural groups from Europe. Indigenous peoples and people of African descent were not thought educable and therefore not a part of the mainstream educational discourse.

For many years, the education of African American learners was left solely to the African American community via state-supported segregated schools (Anderson, 1988). And, although not consistent with professed national ideals of equity and justice, there is some evidence to suggest that some segregated schools did meet the educational needs of African American students (Anderson, 1988; Siddle Walker, 1996). Community access and involvement, trust between teachers and parents, and concern and caring for students were all hallmarks of these schools where the needs of African American students were paramount. Foster (1990) indicates that African American teachers in segregated schools felt more comfortable introducing and discussing issues of race and racism in their all-Black settings than in the integrated schools in which they subsequently taught. Furthermore, Foster suggests that effective teaching of African American students almost always involves some recognition and attention to the ways that race and racism construct and constrict peoples' lives.

With the increasing diversity of the school population, more literature has emerged that addresses the needs of non-White students from the standpoint of language and culture (Banks, 1997). However, some of this literature has compressed the experiences of all non-White groups into a singular category of "other" without recognizing the particularity of African American experience and culture. It is important for teachers (current and prospective) to understand the specific and unique qualities of the African American cultural experience.

THE UNIQUENESS OF THE AFRICAN AMERICAN CULTURAL EXPERIENCE

Two concepts I attempt to have my own teacher education students grapple with are the notions of "equivalent" and "analogous," because discussions of racism, discrimination, inequality, and injustice sometimes degenerate into a "hierarchy of oppression;" that is, discussants want to talk in terms of who has suffered most. However, when we understand the ways in which oppression has worked against many groups of people based on their race, culture, class, gender, disability, and sexual orientation, we must recognize that there may be analogous experiences that are not necessarily equivalent ones. Thus, the displacement and forced removal of indigenous groups throughout the Americas and the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II are both examples of oppression. However, they are not equivalent experiences. Our understanding of the commonalties of oppression cannot wash out the particularities and specifics of each experience.

The African American social and cultural experience, like those of each cultural group, is unique. African Americans are the only group forcibly brought to the Americas for the expressed purpose of labor exploitation through racial slavery (Franklin & Moss, 1988). As one of the earliest nonindigenous groups to appear in the Americas, African Americans have a history in this country that predates most European Americans.[1]

The creation of a racial hierarchy with White and Black as polar opposites has positioned all people in American society (King, 1994) and reified "whiteness" in ways that suggest that the closer one is able to align oneself to whiteness, the more socially and culturally acceptable one is perceived to be. Thus, when European Americans of various ethnic groups assert, "My people faced discrimination, and they made it. Why

can't Blacks pull themselves up like we did?" they are ignoring the very different historical trajectories from which these cultural groups were launched and the very different symbol system that has been created to reinscribe blackness and whiteness as fundamentally opposite (Morrison, 1991).

The ideology of White supremacy (Allen, 1994) argued that African Americans were genetically inferior and not fully human. Thus, the expectation for educating them was (and continues to be) low. Early efforts at state-supported education for African Americans was directed at training for manual labor and domestic service (Anderson, 1988). Scholarly arguments to the contrary (DuBois, 1903/1953; Woodson, 1933) failed to make their way into the mainstream literature. Thus, separate and unequal education continued for many decades past the Civil War.

As a group, African Americans have been told systematically and consistently that they are inferior, that they are incapable of high academic achievement. Their performance in school has replicated this low expectation for success. In addition to being told that they cannot perform at high levels, African American students often are taught by teachers who would rather not teach them (Grant, 1989; Haberman, 1989).

By the time the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) decision was rendered, many African Americans were arguing from a position of sameness (Tate, Ladson-Billings, & Grant, 1993). That is, they were asserting that African American and White children were alike and deserved the same educational opportunities. This rhetoric of "equality means sameness" tended to ignore the distinctive qualities of African American culture and suggested that if schools were to make schooling experiences identical for African Americans, we somehow could achieve identical results.

However, because African American learners do not begin at the same place as middle-class White students either economically or socially, and because what may be valued in African

American culture (Boykin & Tom, 1985) differs from what may be valued in schools, applying the same "remedy" may actually increase the educational disparities. For example, in the case of gender differences, we know that female students do not perform as well as male students in mathematics. A variety of reasons have been posited to explain this differential. Some reasons are related to females' abilities in spatial relations. Others (Gilligan, 1993; Houston, 1994) examine the ways that male students dominate classroom discussion and teacher time. Still, others (Campbell, 1995; Willis, 1992) argue about the way mathematics is organized and presented. The way to improve female performance, however, is not merely to continue to give female students more of the same, but rather to reorganize mathematics education in some fundamental ways. For example, all-female mathematics classes, integration across math areas (algebra, geometry, trigonometry), and more obvious and specific connections of math to everyday lives, are being employed to improve the performance of female students (and students of color) in school mathematics. Uncovering optimal learning environments for female students may mean deciding on very different strategies for male versus female mathematics learners. The same thing may be true in developing effective strategies for African American learners. As we begin to learn more about successful teaching for African American learners (Hollins & Spencer, 1990; Ladson-Billings, 1994a), we are better able to address their needs through curricular and pedagogical strategies.

STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING THE EDUCATION OF TEACHERS

Teacher preparation is culpable in the failure of teachers to teach African American students effectively. Most teachers report that their preservice preparation did little or nothing to prepare them for today's diverse classrooms (Ladson-Billings, 1994b). Reviews of the literature on multicultural teacher education (Grant & Secada, 1990; Ladson-Billings, 1995a, 1996; Zeichner, 1992) indicate that most preservice

approaches rely on individual courses and diverse field experiences to satisfy legislative and professional association calls for meeting the needs of diverse students.

However, no single course or set of field experiences is capable of preparing preservice students to meet the needs of diverse learners. Rather, a more systemic, comprehensive approach is needed. Work that uses autobiography, restructured field experiences, situated pedagogies, and returning to the classrooms of experts can each provide new opportunities for improving teaching.

Autobiography

Jackson (1992) argues that autobiography provides an opportunity for the "critical examination and experience of difference" (p. 4). She further asserts that autobiography allows individuals to speak as subjects with their own voices, "representing themselves and their stories from their own perspectives" (p. 3). This use of one's own story is also employed by Gomez and Tabachnick (1992) as a way to get preservice teachers to reflect on their practicum experiences in diverse classrooms. Hollins (1990) refers to "resocializing pre-service teachers in ways that help them view themselves within a culturally diverse society" (p. 202) through the construction of personal/cultural autobiographies. Similar to this, King and Ladson-Billings (1990) link critical education theory and multicultural teacher education to help prospective teachers "consciously re-experience their own subjectivity when they recognize similar or different outlooks and experiences" (p. 26), both in courses and field experiences.

Restructured Field Experiences

The practical aspects of learning to teach are overwhelmingly valued by teachers as the most important part of their preparation. Unfortunately, many of these field experiences occur in White middle-income communities that offer a different set of challenges and opportunities from those that teachers can expect to encounter

in the urban classrooms populated by African American students. Thus, when new teachers enter urban settings, they experience a mismatch between what they expect based on their preservice preparation and what they find in urban schools.

Some teacher education programs require that part of the field experience occur in a "diverse" setting (Zeichner, 1993). However, sometimes these "diversity requirements" are seen by students as hurdles in the way of their "real" student teaching (i.e., in middle income, suburban schools). Spending limited time in urban classrooms often serves to reinforce students' stereotypes and racist attitudes toward African American students because they are not accompanied with requisite understanding about African American culture and cultural practices.

Other programs stress "immersion" experiences in diverse communities (Mahan, 1982; Noordhoff & Kleinfeld, 1991), placing students in community (as opposed to school) settings to help them understand the daily lives of the children in context. Moving away from the predictability of the classroom with its rules, routines, and rituals, prospective teachers may recognize that limited access to goods and services, poor health care facilities, uneven police and fire protection, and unsafe and dilapidated playgrounds, all work against students' willingness to participate in school tasks.

At the same time, community experiences also can help students to see the strengths that reside in a culture. Self-governing bodies such as churches, lodges, social clubs, and neighborhood associations serve as purveyors of culture. Students may learn that families use a variety of child-rearing practices that may or may not map neatly onto schooling practices. They may learn of the role of "other mothers" (Collins, 1991) who, although not blood relatives of particular children, serve in a maternal capacity. Learning to see students with strengths as opposed to seeing them solely as having needs may inform the pedagogical practices of novice teachers in positive ways.

Situated Pedagogies

The literature of educational anthropologists has addressed culturally specific pedagogies (e.g., see Au & Jordan, 1981; Cazden & Leggett, 1981; Mohatt & Erickson, 1981; Vogt, Jordan & Tharp, 1987). This work has described teachers' attempts to make the school and home experiences of diverse learners more congruent. The majority of this literature has dealt with small-scale, encapsulated communities where cultural practices are easily recognizable and not as intertwined with other cultures.

Critical scholars have posited theoretical, conceptual, and research possibilities for situated pedagogies that consider race, class, and gender (e.g., see Ellsworth, 1989; hooks, 1989; McLaren, 1989). By addressing the specifics of particular diverse communities, this literature avoids the platitudes and unsubstantiated generalities of generic pedagogical perspectives. This work asks teacher educators to think more carefully about the relationship of teacher preparation to the communities in which they are located and the school populations that their graduates are likely to serve.

Returning to the Classrooms of "Experts"

In my work on successful teachers for African American students (Ladson-Billings, 1995b), I began looking for common beliefs and practices among such teachers. What I discovered were three propositional notions about how they conceived of their practice that form the basis of what I term *culturally relevant pedagogy* (Ladson-Billings, 1994a, 1995b). These propositions involve academic achievement, cultural competence, and sociopolitical critique.

Academic achievement. In the classrooms I observed, teaching and learning were exciting, symbiotic events. Although teachers established routines and rituals, the classrooms were never dull. Students were regularly reminded that they were expected to learn and that learning would be rigorous and challenging. Some of the teachers taught from what might be considered a constructivist (Fennema, Carpenter,

Franke, & Carey, 1992) position (i.e., students' own knowledge forms the basis of inquiry either as part of the official curriculum or as it interacts with the official curriculum). Standards were high in these classrooms. Students were expected to work hard, and they welcomed this responsibility.

Cultural competence. In addition to promoting learning and academic achievement, culturally relevant teachers foster and support the development of cultural competence. Cultural competence refers to the ability to function effectively in one's culture of origin (Ladson-Billings, 1995b). For African American students, this means understanding those aspects of their culture that facilitate their ability to communicate and relate to other members of their cultural group (Gay & Baber, 1987). Because of the pervasive negative representations of Black culture (Merelman, 1995), students may unwittingly ally themselves with schooling that works to promote their disaffiliation and alienation from African American culture.

Cultural competence can be supported in the classroom by acknowledging the legitimacy of students' home language and using it as a bridge to American Edited English.[2] It also is supported through the use of curriculum content selections that reflect the full range of humanity extant in students' cultures.

Sociopolitical critique. Perhaps if teachers could get students to achieve academically and manifest cultural competence, they might be more than satisfied with their pedagogical efforts. However, culturally relevant teachers recognize that education and schooling do not occur in a vacuum. The individual traits of achievement and cultural competence must be supported by sociopolitical critique that helps students understand the ways that social structures and practices help reproduce inequities. This aspect of culturally relevant teaching links it closely with a critical pedagogy that argues for students and teachers alike to participate in a collective struggle (Boggs, 1974). Thus, students must be challenged to ask questions about the ways that whole groups of people are systematically excluded from social benefits.

ANTIRACIST TEACHER EDUCATION: A PROMISING PRACTICE

Autobiography, restructured field experiences, situated pedagogies, and examining the classrooms of experts all provide glimpses of possibility for facilitating the pedagogy of teachers who teach African American students. However, each has the potential to fail to confront the major stumbling block in preparing teachers for success with African American students: racism.

Although many teacher education programs include some form of multicultural education (Grant & Secada, 1990; Ladson-Billings, 1995a), confronting issues of racism in a deliberately antiracist framework is less common (Cochran-Smith, 1995; Kailin, 1994). Discussions of race and racism are absent from educational discourse even when our conceptions of race are more embedded and fixed than ever before. Teacher educators who have attempted to bring issues of race and racism to the forefront of their preparation programs have been subjected to resistance and harsh criticism from students (Ahlquist, 1991; Tatum, 1994).

Lee (1985) states that the "aim of [anti-racist education] is the eradication of racism in all its various forms. Anti-racist education emerges from an understanding that racism exists in society and, therefore, the school, as an institution of society, is influenced by racism" (p. 8). Thus, teacher education that embraces an anti-racist perspective recognizes that prospective teachers' and "teachers' sensibilities are shaped by the same forces that mold us in the society at large" (Kailin, 1994, p. 173). However, anti-racist educators understand racism as learned behavior and, as such, it can be unlearned.

Kailin's (1994) approach to antiracist staff development for teachers addresses two perspectives on racism: individual and institutional. The individual aspect of her work requires teachers to know and understand themselves, a process also used by King and Ladson-Billings (1990). Kailin employed strategies for developing collective autobiography, understanding teachers' social backgrounds, participating in multicultural and race awareness exercises, examining teacher expectations of student competency, and exploring the manifestation of individual racism in teacher-student interactions and in school culture. At the institutional level, Kailin's approach prompts teachers to examine the historical roots of institutional racism in the United States as well as the ways that texts and curricula and schools as institutions support racism.

To prepare teachers to be successful with African American students, teacher educators must help prospective teachers recognize the ways that race and racism structure the everyday experiences of all Americans. More specifically, teachers must understand how race and racism negatively impact African American students and their ability to successfully negotiate schools and classrooms. Some of the recommendations for change in teacher education that may lead us to more positive outcomes include:

Reassessing admissions procedures. A good deal of our struggle in teacher education resides at the admission door. Haberman (1989) argues that we will not get better teachers until we admit better people into the profession. Current admission procedures continue to screen out potentially excellent teacher candidates who desire to teach in African American communities, while at the same time including many candidates who have no intention or desire to serve those communities.

Reexamining course work. Dissatisfaction with teacher education course work has been widely expressed by both those within and outside of the profession. One of the places where course work is particularly weak is in its lack of attention to the perspectives and concerns of African Americans. Many of the foundations and methods courses fail to mention African Americans except as "problems." Course work that addresses the legitimacy of African American culture and problematizes Whiteness can begin to make preservice course work more meaningful for those who teach African American students.

Restructuring field experiences. As previously mentioned, field experiences tend to leave a lasting impression on teachers. Restructuring

these field experiences may help students to understand the complexities of communities and cultures. Rather than having prospective teachers dread going into African American communities, field experiences may play a role in addressing the stereotypes and racist attitudes that they may hold.

Recruiting and retaining African American scholars. For too many prospective teachers, their only encounter with African Americans is as subordinates. Increasing the numbers of African American faculty can help to disrupt some of the preconceived notions that they may have about the competencies and abilities of African Americans. Certainly, African American faculty can serve as a resource and counterbalance to prevailing notions of African American communities, for both adults and children.

Ultimately, the work of education in a democracy is to provide opportunities for all citizens to participate fully in the formation of the nation and its ideals. These ideals can never be fully realized if significant portions of our society are excluded from high-quality education and the opportunity to play public roles in the society. African American students are suffering in our schools at an alarming rate. They continue to experience high drop-out, suspension, and expulsion rates. Although possessing a high school diploma is no guarantee of success in U.S. society, not having one spells certain economic and social failure. Thus, when we fight about education, we indeed are fighting for our lives.

NOTES

1. The European American slave trade was legally ended in 1848. The bulk of European immigration occurred in the 1890s. Thus, most African Americans have historical roots in this country that predate those of most European Americans.

2. Rather than the term *Standard English* I use *American Edited English* to refer to the particular formal language used in the United States.

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