Cultural Vibrancy: Exploring the Preferences of African American Children Toward Culturally Relevant and Non-Culturally Relevant Lessons

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Abstract   Despite the laudable intent of various educational initiatives in raising the achievement level of all children, limited progress has been made. In an effort to diminish the achievement gap of students of color, some researchers have examined the cultural relevancy of the curriculum in promoting student achievement. The purpose of this mixed methods study was to explore the preferences of African American children toward culturally relevant and non-culturally relevant lessons, through a six-week series of lessons in an American History classroom. Critical Race Theory and Racial Identity Development provided the theoretical underpinnings of this study. This study takes place in an ethnically diverse high school in Colorado. Culturally relevant lessons were rich in oral traditions, music, historical connections, and a structured culturally relevant field trip. Non-culturally relevant lessons were administered devoid of cultural referents, and utilized the existing curriculum guide. Study results revealed statistically significant findings for African American children's preferences for culturally relevant lessons. These lessons were found relevant to their culture when administered by a culturally responsive and caring teacher. Recommendations are made for educators and administrators in promoting achievement through culturally relevant lessons and curriculum.

Keywords   Cultural vibrancy · Culturally relevant · African American high school students · Critical race theory · Racial identity development · Curriculum

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Basically, the erroneous core assumption is that African American children are nothing more than incomplete copies of Western European white children. When it is recognized that African American children have a unique culture, that culture is usually seen as inferior to the Western European culture (Hillard 1995, p. 92).

Hillard (1995) raised some imperative questions regarding the negative perceptions of African American children, the invalidation of their culture, and the failure of the educational system to recognize and authenticate these differences. These distinctive patterns that African American children bring to the academic setting are described by Irvine-Jordan (1991) and Irvine-Jordan et al. (2000) as cultural traditions, rituals, language, behaviors, style, dress, mannerisms, learning styles, movement, and African-centered perspectives. Because of the differences in cultural behavior, African American children often experience "cultural disconti-nuity in schools; particularly schools in which the majority, or Eurocentric persons, control, administer, and teach" (Irvine-Jordan 1991, p. 15). Cultural discontinuity can produce apathy, academic disengagement, and school discontent (Irvine-Jordan et al. 2000). This discontinuity has been evidenced by a well-documented academic achievement gap that has repeatedly shown that African American children are lagging behind academically in all areas (D'Amico 2001; Haycock 2001).

Although numerous curricular, programmatic, and systemic interventions have been implemented, the minority achievement gap continues to be problematic. While some positive changes were noted, particularly in the early 1970's, the achievement gap has widened in the past 10 years (Johnson and Viadero 2000). An initiative intended to raise the achievement level of all children and close the achievement gap, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001, mandates that schools demonstrate that all students are achieving academically, and that teachers are competent within specified time frames, in all instructional areas. Despite NCLB's laudable intent, limited progress has been made in diminishing the achievement gap; although some gains have been made on the part of African American children in mathematics and writing skills (Ladson-Billings and Tate 2006). Darling-Hammond (2007) states that the complex requirements of the law failed to achieve the intended goal, and have harmed the students that the law intended to help. Among the intended consequences of the law are a "narrowed curriculum, focused on the low-level skills generally reflected on high stakes tests; inappropriate assessment of English language learners and students with special needs; and strong incentive to exclude low-scoring students from schools, so as to achieve test targets" (p. 245). Yet there is no consequence for failure to meet the standards and requirements of NCLB (2001). Over 20 states and dozens of school districts have protested the Act and voted to withdraw their participation and funding for implementation (Darling-Hammond 2007).

The achievement gap of African American students and the limited academic improvements has led many scholars to examine more closely the culturally relevancy of the curriculum as an avenue toward increasing achievement and school connectedness for African American children (Asante 1992; Banks 2001; Gay 2000; Giddings 2001; Hale 2001; Ladson-Billings 2000, 2006; Lynch 2006; Thompson 2004; Webster 2002). This study examined African American student's preferences for culturally relevant or non-culturally relevant lessons in an effort to further

examine the importance of culturally relevant curriculum on African American student achievement. We propose that African American student preferences will add to the current body of knowledge related to curriculum, instruction, school connectedness, and motivation. Student evaluation of culturally rich curriculum has the potential to yield important information regarding the academic preferences and academic motivating factors of African American children when utilizing culturally relevant curriculum. This study also provides knowledge about the lessons that appeal to and potentially have a positive impact on the academic achievement of African American children. This study was guided by two research questions framed to discover perceptions and preferences regarding culturally relevant and non-culturally relevant lessons, specifically from African American children. These questions are: (1) Do African American students prefer culturally relevant or non-culturally relevant lessons in school, and; (2) How do culturally relevant lessons relate to the lives of African American students?

Bridge to Cultural Vibrancy

The title of this study, Cultural Vibrancy, was conceived while the first author (Dr. Darlene Sampson) was watching the vibrant faces of African American children engaged in a culturally relevant lesson. The interest level, teacher-student camaraderie, and connectedness to the culturally relevant curriculum were exceptional during the lesson. Students indicated that the creativity and energy generated by the lesson was unprecedented in their short academic lives. Sadly, the students indicated that this pedagogical innovation was infrequent. Allowing students to connect with their culture while achieving academic success should not be a matter of cultural conflict for them; rather, it should be the standard upon which learning and cultural connection is based.

The need for experiences and curriculum that mirror home life, community, and African-centered principles, such as collectivity, engagement, sharing, and respect, are often devoid in educational settings where the majority of African American students are taught by non-Blacks. Irvine-Jordan (1991) argues that a cultural mismatch, or lack of cultural sync may occur when African American children do not see themselves in the curriculum, and have frequent experiences in which their cultural behavior is not honored or accepted. Several have demonstrated that school achievement and motivation improves significantly when protocols and procedures of teaching are synchronized with the cognitive abilities, physical and verbal style, ethnic frames of reference, and African-centered principles of African American children (Albury 1992; Boykin 1994; Diamond and Moore 1995, Gay 2000; Howard 1998; Krater et al. 1994; Tatum 2000; Tuck and Boykin 1989).

This pedagogical process, coupled with the basic premise that African American children are valued, intelligent, and can and must succeed, has a significant impact on African American achievement. In order for African American children to fully see themselves as being valued in the educational process, educational institutions must mirror their lives and history. It is these culturally relevant experiences that connect the African American child to their cultural self and have the ability to

improve their motivation and academic success (Lynch 2006). Banks and Banks (1995), for example, argue that all students and teachers can bridge this cultural disconnect and rise to meet these current challenges through culturally relevant curriculum and pedagogy. Thus, infusing cultural perspectives into the curriculum may increase educational equity for all students.

The inclusion of diverse curriculum allows teachers and students to examine and dissect racial attitudes and behaviors while addressing diverse student needs. Stephan and Stephan (2004) further argue this point by asserting that students with diverse curriculum and diverse thinking can develop more positive attitudes and behaviors towards individuals of different groups, with the inclusion of diverse curriculum and expectations. Curriculum becomes more than cognitive; it has the ability to transform students and teachers culturally, politically, academically, and socially.

Conceptual Framework

Critical Race Theory and Racial Identity Development are the conceptual frameworks used in this study to understand the role that culture and ethnicity have in foundations of learning and interactions. Critical Race Theory (CRT) acknowledges the power, privilege, and inequities inherent in society, and specifically in school settings that impact the mis-education of African American children. Racial Identity Development assists in understanding the self-esteem and identity components of the African American psyche, which African American children bring to the classroom on a daily basis.

Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory (CRT) focuses on the social construction of race, and the relationship between race, racism, and power (Delgado and Stefancic 1995). Specifically, CRT presents three arguments that are particularly related to education: (1) Race continues to be a significant factor in determining inequity in the United States; (2) U.S. Society is based upon property rights; and (3) The intersection of race and property creates an analytic tool, through which we can examine social and school inequality (Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995, p. 48). CRT can be used to inquire about social justice, educational inequities, social consciousness, and hegemony in educational settings.

Critical race theorists broaden the tenets of CRT by insisting that it address the origin of racism as a deeply rooted component of American life, which is ingrained through historical and ideological consciousness; and is particularly prevalent in educational systems (Bell 1988; Delgado 2002; Harris 1983; Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995; Matsuda 1987; Williams 1987). Thus, these scholars have inserted issues of race into the power and privilege components of educational systems due to the need for a richer discussion about how issues of race and oppression infiltrate the educational setting. For example, teachers must understand their own biases and experiences they bring to the educational arena to monitor unconscious and conscious practices that maintain educational inequities. CRT is helpful in

analyzing the individual and complex system issues that create inequities in education, and in scrutinizing systems that continue to subjugate and maintain power disequilibrium for the African American child.

Racial Identity Development

The world of the African American child cannot be viewed thoroughly unless it is coupled with racial identity development, which assists in understanding the self-esteem and identity components of the African American psyche (Sheets and Hollins 1999; Tatum 1997). Racial Identity Development becomes an important concept, as students of color do not leave their racial and ethnic identities at the school door. Rather, they bring their language, style, movement, and cultural realities and differences to the school experience on a daily basis.

Invalidating or denying the culture of the student can impact self-esteem, and can produce what Ogbu and Davis (2003) refers to as oppositional cultural behavior. Oppositional cultural behavior, as set forth in Ogbu's cultural-ecological theory, occurs when African American children actively resist schooling, behavior, and institutions that they believe subjugate them and their differences. Often students of color act out in the school day and develop their own positive or negative peer groups to counteract this phenomenon. Students who perform well academically also face a plethora of issues impacting self-esteem, identity, and academic achievement (Ogbu and Fordham 1986). They are often ostracized by same race peers who perceive them as acting white or conforming. As academic skills increases for many African American students, peer connectedness decreases based on the perceptions of acting white. This dilemma, coupled with teacher misunderstanding of the African American child's racial identity development, can produce multiple invalidating experiences for teachers; and more importantly, for students.

Banks (2001) postulated that teachers who state they do not see color and differences are not providing African American children with favoritism; rather, they are validating white privilege and negating racial identity development by refusing to acknowledge the social, political, and economic differences that exist, and that African American children face. More importantly, this lack of acknowledgement has the potential to maintain the status quo, and informs African American students unintentionally that the value of their identity and experiences is unimportant.

Racial Identity Development is characterized by several important components outlined by Cross (1971, 1978). To understand the African American experience, Cross developed one of the first and well-noted models of Racial Identity Development, entitled the Nigrescence Model. The five-stage process from whiteness to total immersion in the Black experience includes: (1) pre-encounter, (2) encounter, (3) immersion-emersion, (4) internalization, and (5) internalization-commitment. Pre-encounter behaviors include refusing to embrace Blackness, history, and characteristics of Black culture. As the person evolves, the encounter stage becomes a stage of reckoning, as the person is exposed to a situation or crisis that reminds them of their Blackness, and the racial issues inherent in society that impact them. This stage also assists the individual in re-interpreting their racial identity, as a result of an assault on their reality. The encounter stage is a catalyst for

further development along the continuum toward racial identity development. The immersion-emersion stage allows the individual to re-integrate back into their Blackness. Often the individual in this stage chooses to engulf themselves with African-centered culture. However, this stage is devoid of authentic Black self-esteem. In the last two stages of racial identity development, the individual finds that within the internalization stage, there is an appreciation and acceptance of Blackness. This more genuine appreciation and acceptance is characterized by inner peace. Lastly, in the internalization-commitment stage, the individual is accepting, proud, and active in social change in behavior and consciousness. Cross (1971, 1978) laid the foundation for understanding the process of becoming black. Later, several scholars have challenged and revised the theories of nigrescence to address each stage of development; particularly from a non-pathological perspective (Vandiver 2001; Sellers et al. 1998). Cross (1991, 1995) later revised and expanded his own work, and collapsed the fourth and fifth stage of his original model to account for incorporation of racial differences over time. In Cross' later model, he also addressed multi-ethnic identities, socio-political influences, and his thinking around self-worth in the pre-encounter stage. He continues to be the premier scholar of racial identity development having laid the foundation for many other scholars.

Methods

This study employed mixed methods (qualitative and quantitative) to determine the preferences of culturally relevant and non-culturally relevant lessons for African American students. Guided by two research questions, we sought to understand: (1) Do African American students prefer culturally relevant or non-culturally relevant lessons in school, and; (2) How do culturally relevant lessons relate to the lives of African American students?

Culturally relevant lessons are lessons that teach to the diverse needs of students through the use of cultural artifacts, language, ethnic referents, and cognitive and linguistically contexts familiar to children of color (Gay 2000; Irvine-Jordan 1991; Ladson-Billings 1994). Non-culturally relevant lessons are the opposite of what is described above, and although they are also based in the instructional areas of psychology, history, and social studies, they did not include references to issues impacting students of color; nor, did they provide the cultural lens, images, and cultural mirror of African American life.

The existing lesson plans developed from the classroom's curriculum guide were used as the non-culturally relevant lessons. All of the lessons followed the existing trajectory mandated by the study school district; however, the culturally relevant lessons were based in the literature of culturally responsive practice. The literature review of culturally responsive practices emphasizes positive student–teacher relationships, socio-political discourse, home to school connections, recognition of racial identity development, and a cultural mirror in which students can find familiarity within the existing curriculum (Gay 2000; Giddings 2001; Tatum 1997). All lessons in the study employed a multi-instructional approach that was experiential, and included movement, collaborative group work, technology,

facilitated learning, and student-led discussions. However, the culturally relevant lessons included all of the latter and strategies anchored in the research of culturally responsive practice, as well as culturally relevant topics that connect home to school (Gay 2000; Ladson-Billings 1994; Murrell 2002).

Preferences are defined as lessons that African American students describe as being their favorite, and the lessons they liked and enjoyed. Students in the study received six lessons (one per week over six weeks); three lessons were culturally relevant, and three were non-culturally relevant. Table 1 provides a detailed description of the lessons.

Site and Participants

The setting for this study was a large urban high school in Colorado. The school was chosen due to its diverse demographics, culturally, economically, and racially. The school is demographically reflective of the community, and has undergone major changes educationally, socially, and academically. Specifically, over the past 4 years, the high school population shifted considerably from majority African American to Latino, contributing to cultural tension and transition issues within the community and school. High school students were chosen given the burgeoning development that is occurring in this age range, connection to social networks, progressive intellectual, physical and emotional development, improved critical thinking skills, and emerging deductive reasoning abilities that support hypothetical solutions at this age. High school students are also offered more complex developmental tasks as they move toward adulthood (Schulenberg and Bryant 2004). The principal of the school suggested four classrooms in which this study could be conducted. The teachers of these classes were contacted, but only two agreed to participate in the study. After a review of the two classrooms, the American History classroom was chosen, as more African American students were enrolled in the class; thus providing better representation of the students who are complimentary to this study.

The study classroom is a mixed grade (9–12) American History class. The principal and teacher from the study school selected the classroom to participate in this study given that the culturally relevant lessons were aligned well with American and United States History lessons that frequently discuss history, culture, social issues, and social justice. The classroom was a large, well-lit, new classroom that was added on to the existing school building approximately 7 years ago. The classroom is technologically advanced, equipped with a television and DVD, and has numerous computers easily accessible for student use. Use of projectors and PowerPoint was also common in the study classroom. Student desks are rectangular, seating up to six students, and are arranged horizontally in two rows. The classroom was organized in pods according to academic content. The class provided seating for up to thirty-eight students comfortably, although forty-five students were enrolled. The study classroom was physically distant from most of the academic classrooms, providing privacy and space. The study classroom's profile and demographics are delineated in Table 2.

Table 1 Culturally relevant and non-culturally relevant study lessons and descriptions

Lesson title	Description	Instructional approach	N	Race/gender of participants
1. Ellis Island	DVD overview of immigration to Ellis Island connecting the historical journey to the current Mexican immigrant population in the community of the study school	Lecture, Inquiry-Based, Experiential	12	4 African-American 8 Latino 2 M 10 F
2. US History Quiz	Bingo game version of US History Facts utilizing student incentives and review of material prior to the game	Lecture, Inquiry-Based Experiential	25	5 African-American 19 Latino, 1 Asian-Pacific Islander 9 M 16 F
3. The N Word*	DVD history of the N Word, origin of the word, and evolution of current usage involving student presentations on decisions to continue to use or not use the word	Lecture, Inquiry-Based, Experiential, Use of Cultural Artifacts, Home to School Connections, Collaborative groups, Culturally Responsive Vernacular, Images, Technology, Art, History, Rap, and Poetry	27	8 African-American, 17 Latino, 2 Asian-Pacific Islander 11 M 16 F
4. Declaration of Independence*	Hip Hop Rap Version of the Declaration of Independence using poetry, spoken word, a researcher rap, and group developed rap presentations	Lecture, Inquiry-Based, Experiential, Cultural Artifacts, Home to School Connections, Collaborative Groups, Use of Culturally Responsive Vernacular, Images, Technology, Art, History, Rap, and Poetry	30	8 African-American, 21 Latino, 1 Asian-Pacific Islander 13 M 17 F

Table 1 continued

Lesson title	Description	Instructional approach	N	Race/gender of participants
5. Culturally Relevant Field Trip*	Field trip to African American Research Library and Tortilla Factory involving historical bus tour of downtown, the library, and hands-on tortilla making and tasting	Lecture, Inquiry-Based, Experiential, Use of Cultural Artifacts, Home to School Connections, Collaborative Groups, Culturally Responsive Vernacular, Images, Technology, Art, History, Rap, and Poetry	22	4 African-American, 17 Latino, 1 Asian-Pacific Islander 6 M 16 F
6. Top 5 Test Review	Shared answer test review in student-chosen groups	Lecture/Inquiry-Based/Experiential	26	6 African-American, 18 Latino, 2 Asian-Pacific Islander 8 M 18 F

* Culturally relevant lessons

Table 2 Study school classroom profile and demographics

Colorado Secondary School	
Grades:	9–12
Total students:	45
Population/Ethnicity:	
25	Latino
18	African American
0	Caucasian
2	Other (Asian, Samoan)
Gender	18 M, 27 Female

The classroom teacher in the study is a Caucasian male. The first author (Dr. Darlene Sampson) collected the data for this study as a part of her dissertation; however, both authors collaborated on crafting this manuscript. Dr. Sampson was the teacher administering all the lessons in the study; she is an African American female. Forty-five students were enrolled in the class; however, only thirty to thirty-two attended class regularly. Between twelve and thirty students participated in the study, depending on the class session and number of students in attendance. The race and gender composition of the classroom was diverse. Approximately 33% of the students were African American. All participants completed consent forms to participate in the study. See Table 1 for the number of participants per lesson.

Data Collection and Analyses

Three data collections techniques were used in the study, including: student feedback form, transition-termination group discussions and feedback question-naire, and African American focus group. An anonymous student feedback form was completed by the students after each lesson (see Appendix 1). The form generated qualitative and quantitative responses. Student responses were compiled after each lesson to determine positive or negative regard for each culturally relevant or non-culturally relevant lesson. While the form was completed anonymously by the students, they did indicate racial characteristics. The purpose of having the students indicate race was to identify responses from African American students, who later participated in a focus group to further identify and clarify answers provided on the feedback form. All student responses were evaluated overall; however, the responses of African American students were specifically separated for the purposes stated above. Next, the transition-termination group (entire class) was used to gather informal perceptions of how the students perceived the 6 weeks of lessons had progressed. Students were given a questionnaire to rank order their favorite lessons from one to six (See Appendix 2). The transition-termination group process is derived from psychotherapy literature which characterizes the termination phase as an essential component of discontinuing interaction (Barnett and Sanzone 1997). The components of transition and termination are re-creation of the previous environment prior to the interaction, assisting the participants in understanding that relationships will end, and

acknowledging that the quality and content of the interaction has changed. The transition-termination group was also designed to provide closure with the students who were in the study classroom, and return normality to the existing classroom teacher. Students also expressed their feelings about the study experience, asked questions, and said goodbye to Dr. Sampson. It was imperative to allow the students to return to their classroom experience, and to assist them in placing into context the study experience.

After the transition-termination group, a focus group was convened specifically with African American students to clarify and review their qualitative and quantitative input on the student feedback sheet. The focus group was conducted with six African American students from the study classroom, with a follow-up interview with four of these six students one month after the first focus group. The initial focus group was guided by a focus group protocol (see Appendix 3). Additional questions were formulated after a cursory review of the comments on the student feedback sheet.

Quantitative Analysis

Utilizing the NCSS Statistical Program, an Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was run to detect the presence of at least one mean difference between groups. The Tukey's multiple comparison post hoc test was used to determine each possible pair of means, and to locate significance, if any. The alpha level was set at 0.05. Student participants ranged from 12 to 30. Given the fact that only twelve students participated in non-culturally relevant Lesson 1 (Ellis Island), it is possible that the power to detect a statistically significant effect could have been limited within the study; especially when comparing Lesson 1 results with the other five lesson samples.

Qualitative Analysis

Content analysis provided a coding process that identified the patterns of experiences students brought to the study, and described what patterns characterized their participation in culturally relevant and non-culturally relevant lessons (Bogdan and Bikley 1992; Huberman and Miles 1983). Initially, the first author reviewed the data line-by-line to identify codes from key words and/or phrases that emerged from the data. Second, she narrowed down the themes by collapsing and/or merging key themes. Then, the second author reviewed the data and themes independently and either verified and/or questioned the codes. Next, both authors reviewed and came to conscientious on the final themes. An outsider researcher also reviewed the final themes to validate the coding process.

Qualitative data were evaluated by using the responses from students on the student feedback form after each culturally relevant and non-culturally relevant lesson. The narrative answers were clustered initially by lesson, and later by content. Themes were drawn from the clusters to assist in analysis of student responses to each lesson. The themes were then coded, organized, and re-evaluated to detect bias and overlap. After an extensive process, the data was paired down to a

narrative format with emerging themes. All themes, patterns, and contrasts were placed in a table and further comparisons and preliminary conclusions were compared to the quantitative data derived from the quantitative questions on the student feedback form.

Results

Quantitative

Several statistically significant findings emerged from the quantitative analysis. In comparing ethnicities by question within lessons, The N Word Lesson Three was found to be statistically significant at the ≤ 0.05 level for African American students as compared to the Latino students, when analyzed using the Tukey multiple comparisons test. The African American mean score ($m = 3.50$) was significantly higher than the Latino score ($m = 2.41$). African American students also indicated that The N Word lesson was most relevant to their culture. Using the Tukey's multiple comparisons test for questions four within Lesson Five, the Culturally Relevant Field Trip, (was this lesson relevant to my culture), found the African American mean score ($m = 3.75$) was significantly higher than the Latino mean score ($m = 3.00$) African American students indicated their preference for lessons that were experiential and relative to their current history

The final statistically significant finding from the analysis was within question seven (how well did you like this lesson) by gender. In comparing gender within question seven, the girls mean score ($m = 3.81$) within non-culturally relevant Lesson Two, The US History Quiz, was significantly higher than the boys mean score ($m = 3.33$). Latinas particularly enjoyed the US History Quiz, as they were able to work solely in same race groups in which they completed the lesson in Spanish.

In comparing solely African American responses to questions four, five, six, and seven, the means for culturally relevant lessons were higher (for questions four, five, and seven), than the means for non-culturally relevant lessons for African American Students. In comparing ethnicity by question within lessons, none of the omnibus tests of the main effect of ethnicity were found to be statistically significant at the $p < 0.05$ level for question five. From a purely descriptive perspective, African-American mean scores were higher than Latino mean scores for Lesson Three (The N Word) and Lesson Six (Top 5 Test Review). The mean scores for the "other" group (non-Latino and African American), were higher than African-American and Latino scores for all lessons; however, these differences were not statistically significant. Only one, $F(2, 139) = 4.08$, of the omnibus tests of the main effect of ethnicity were found to be statistically significant at the $p < 0.05$ level. The African-American mean score ($m = 3.17$) for question four (This lesson was relevant to my culture) was significantly higher than the mean Latino score ($m = 2.77$) at the $p < 0.05$ level, indicating that African American students found that the lessons were more relevant to their culture. African-American mean scores were higher than

Latino mean scores for questions four, six, and seven; however, the results for questions six and seven were not statistically significant.

Another statistically significant finding in comparing lessons by overall questions was detected in Lesson Five for The Culturally Relevant Field Trip; question seven (how well did you like this lesson). African American student mean scores ($m = 3.73$) at the $p < 0.01$ level were significantly higher for this lesson. Students found the field trip appealing and rated this lesson as most relevant to them. The obvious reasons were that this lesson focused on the history and lives of African Americans. It also provided experiential activities, and included community-based connections that were culturally relevant.

On the transition-termination survey 100% of the students ($n = 25$), from all racial groups, ranked the culturally relevant field trip as their most favorite lesson, followed by The N Word (culturally relevant) as the second favorite lesson. Equal numbers of students choose Ellis Island (non-culturally relevant), The US History Quiz (non-culturally relevant), and the Top Five test review (non-culturally relevant) as their third favorite lessons. The fourth favorite lesson for all participants was the rap version of The Declaration of Independence (culturally relevant). The fifth favorite lesson was Ellis Island (non-culturally relevant), followed by the Top five test review (non-culturally relevant) as the sixth favorite lesson. The final rank order of lessons by all student participants was as follows: (1) The Culturally Relevant Field Trip, (2) The N Word, (3) US History Quiz, Top 5 Test Review, and Ellis Island Immigration Lesson; and (4) The Hip Hop Rap Version of the Declaration of Independence.

African American students ranked the N Word lesson as the lesson they preferred the most, followed by the Culturally Relevant Field Trip as their second preferred lesson. The third preferred lesson for African American students was equally the rap version of the Declaration of Independence, and the Top Five test review. The lessons rated as the three most preferred lessons by African American students were all culturally relevant lessons.

The key findings of the quantitative data were complimentary to the findings of the qualitative data. The narrative responses overlapped and were similar to the data derived from the quantitative responses on the student feedback sheet, and the rank order of the most favorite lessons in the transition-termination group. The results of the quantitative data are also connected to culturally relevant curricular studies, which indicate student interest in culturally relevant curriculum is high (Chan 2006; Duncan-Andrade and Morrell 2000; Hefflin 2002; Ware 2006; Weldon 1996).

Qualitative Data

The qualitative data provided an array of student responses with several overlapping themes. Students described pedagogical as well as curriculum desires within each theme. Three key themes derived from the student responses on the qualitative portion of the feedback sheet were as follows: (1) challenging topics such as racially demeaning terminology can be enriching and stimulating; (2) lessons should be interesting and fun; and; (3) teacher interaction, energy, sense of humor, and interest in the student is imperative in promoting student learning. Even though the lessons

were designed to stimulate learning and to connect specifically with African American students, many Latino students within this study also had high interest in all lessons.

Theme 1, Challenging Topics such as Racial Demeaning Terminology can be Enriching and Stimulating

Many students spoke with pride regarding the lessons from their culture that focused specifically on them. In regard to the N word lesson, a student commented, "I liked this lesson…it showed people the N word was a bad word and also the positive things about the word." "We talked about something nowadays and not in the past…it's important to know the meaning of the N word for those who use it…I don't use it…it gets people all defensive." Others felt ambivalent about this focus, believing that culturally relevant lessons may offend non-African American children, even though African American children may have this same invalidating experience on a daily basis. An example of this was reflected in the comment of an African American male who stated, "this lesson could be considered racist, and made some people uncomfortable," I liked the lesson, because we got to speak our mind…I really haven't done something like this before, and that's why I like it." Another African American female commented:

> I liked this lesson because we talked about something I wanted to discuss. It wasn't like any other lesson I have ever had. Seeing the video about the N word made me think about using the word in the future…sometimes we need to talk about life and what people really say and do.

African American History was also prevalent within the culturally relevant field trip while walking through the study city. Lessons were not only based in history, but were designed to challenge and augment thinking toward stimulating political and social consciousness. This is the hallmark of culturally relevant pedagogy and curriculum as described by Banks (2001, 2006). Knowledge of the student's current environment assisted in student interest and learning. Students also indicated that they learned more during the lessons due to the stimulating nature of the lessons. One African American boy communicated that he enjoyed the field trip because "it has enriched my knowledge of history by enlightening me on historical events I see locally." He also stated, "this lesson is completely different…it's longer, more deep, and was in a different location…it encouraged more cognitive thinking than other lessons." Another African American female particularly enjoyed the field trip, stating, "We got to know about African Americans and that's a good thing…so yes, I liked the lesson. It was nice to see how far African Americans have come." Retention of information was also communicated by students as increasing, due to the experiential activities.

In addition, students provided great insight into why they liked The N Word lesson; indicating it was relevant to their current language. Students had been told not to use the word by their parents; however, some students reported that many African American parents were contradictory; alternatively using the word in a negative form, and as a term of endearment. Also, the classroom teacher overheard

some students in class frequently using the N word. Given that the teacher was a Caucasian male, he did not feel entirely comfortable with addressing the issue. In several discussions with the classroom teacher, a decision was made to provide a historical perspective seamlessly woven into the history lessons around immigration that provided the opportunity to discuss a sensitive topic of relevance to students by an African American researcher. Great discussion emerged around the socio-political use of The N Word and its current use by youth today. Few students knew the history of The N Word and its evolution in becoming one of the nation's most incendiary words. The N Word lesson also stirred up many unspoken emotions which were simultaneously frightening and appealing for students. Heightened interest in lessons that discuss political and social issues was of great relevance to particularly the African American students, who must navigate these issues on a daily basis.

Politically and socially charged lessons must be handled carefully by a sensitive teacher. During the N Word lesson, a young African American boy became upset over a Latino girls' insistence that The N Word should not be discussed. This resulted in a verbal altercation in which Dr. Sampson had to intervene and physically separate the two students. The African American boy believed that the Latino girl was not recognizing the power of the word, and that she only wanted to talk about what was relative to her and other Latinos. This exchange was the catalyst for a poignant interaction about the power of words, how they hold great pain and history, and how they can have many meanings for different groups.

The N Word lesson was just as challenging for Dr. Sampson given the need to monitor it closely for bias, and due to the stimulating nature of the lesson. Students also noted Dr. Sampson's interest and interaction while conducting The N Word lesson. They commented on her vulnerability in sharing history as it relates to her personal history with The N Word. Students openly respected her perspective just as she did their perspectives. This was evidenced by an African American male who thoughtfully evaluated his use of the N Word by stating, "We are adding an a or ah on the end of the word…it's not the same, but I can understand why you feel the word is bad because of what you have been through." Still another student commented on Dr. Sampson's interest level during the lesson by adding:

> I liked your tone of voice, and also trying to keep the class in it…just not letting them just listen the whole time, and you do little things to make sure they understand. Most teachers won't ask them (students) if they understand.

Overall, the students felt simultaneously overwhelmed and exhilarated by this lesson, resulting in the need for down time before transitioning out of the classroom. Although The N Word was a powerful lesson, the ability to discuss difficult issues openly and honestly was cited as equally important.

Students of Latino and African American descent were able to find similarities in derogatory words or perceptions about students of color, and were encouraged to share how the perceptions impacted each group. They particularly liked The N Word lesson because it was relevant and fun. They also seemed to like the "shock-value" that the lesson and accompanying N Word video (Larkins and Echegoyen 2006) had upon the entire classroom. This lesson was the epitome of social and

political consciousness described by Banks (2006) within the knowledge construction process. This process occurs when teachers assist students in challenging frames of references, bias, and cultural, political, and ethnic assumptions.

Theme 2, Lessons should be Interesting and Fun

African American students described the culturally relevant lessons as interesting, fun, and familiar. For example, one student indicated on the student feedback form, during the Culturally Relevant Field Trip, that he had extreme pride "in visiting an African American library." The student reported, "I liked it because it was fun and educational…I learned about history, and we actually left the classroom to learn." African American students particularly enjoyed learning about themselves and their history.

Students particularly enjoyed going on the Culturally Relevant Field Trip to learn how tortillas were made, and to experience an African American museum, not just for the obvious reason of being able to leave the school, but because experiencing their community was quite exciting. One African American male student mentioned that participating in the Culturally Relevant Field Trip broadened his thinking and exposed him to another culture. He stated:

> The field trip was my favorite lesson because we explored a whole different part of town. We could move around, laugh, and have fun. I got to see how tortillas were made and tasted Mexican desserts. I never try Mexican desserts because I avoid Mexican stores.

Learning about the African American and Latino history in their own community produced much excitement and curiosity. Many students had never visited an area of the city known for great music and historical buildings. Students commented about their positive treatment in the community while on the field trip. This was demonstrated by a well-behaved and interested group of students who were fully engaged. They thanked Dr. Sampson for the opportunity to experience their community, and recognized the time and energy put into developing the field trip experience. An important insight was made by an African American male who stated that the Culturally Relevant Field Trip assisted in preparing him for college, because he believed that "most of the learning in college is done outside of the classroom." He added, "We left the classroom to learn a real lesson." Sadly, many students had never visited their own community, and were shocked at the landscape; the baseball fields, the number of people working in the area, and the diversity they witnessed while on the trip. Many stated that they learned more than they had the whole previous semester; particularly about the history of their city. One African American female stated, "It will be hard to not have lessons like this next semester". Experiential pedagogy was powerful and successful in creating opportunities and interest for students.

A common request across all lessons was student requests for stimulating and interesting lessons. Although asking for stimulating lessons may appear simplistic, students specifically requested broader more meaningful lessons in which they could be involved experientially. One student bluntly stated, "Don't just lecture,

lectures are boring." Still another student interjected that "most of our teachers don't know how to make it tight. They just do the same thing day after day, that's why we aren't learnin (sp) nothin." The ability to embrace and fully participate in lessons was requested consistently. Students desired lessons that were not rote and not paper and pencil tasks. They desired engaging and relevant lessons applicable to their current lives. Students frequently referred to history lessons as boring and irrelevant to their current lives.

While students acknowledged that history is important, they requested that it be interspersed with current history to make it more relevant and interesting. A student commented that teachers must "make lessons youthful, they should appeal to young people, not old people." The desire for history lessons that are relevant were implied by a young man who stated, "I know we almost always have to study history, but I would like it better if we actually followed through with your (Dr. Sampson's) lessons…we needed more time." He also added, "Teachers should remember that school was boring when they had no choices…most don't remember when they were kids…they only want to get us ready for CSAP (Colorado State Assessment Program)."

Theme 3, Teacher Interaction, Energy, Sense of Humor, and Interest in the Student is Imperative in Promoting Student Learning

An important perception underlying many of the students' responses was best communicated by a young African American girl, who stated, "We just want to go to school and believe our teachers like us." This simple but profound statement suggests the dilemma that African American students face in their academic lives. To have heightened anxiety about simply being liked by the teacher was an overarching theme for many African American students. Other students seemed shocked observing Dr. Sampson's high interest, sense of humor, and engaging culturally responsive strategies. The African American female student indicated "Every time you came there was something new, something different." Another student stated:

> At first I did not know how to act because we were encouraged to make noise and move around during class – that took time to get use to. We are usually asked to be quiet and not talk to each other. I liked that you allowed us to do that, it made class more relaxing and fun.

Students desired to be thought of as capable and smart, and they did not want to be set apart from non-African American children in regards to different lessons. African American students are asking that teachers simply believe in who they are and what they are capable of; while demonstrating this through behavior and pedagogy. Students within this study also desired teachers who, by their behavior, demonstrated interest in them beyond the school day. This is shown by teacher behavior and interaction in and outside of the classroom. Students connected teacher attitude and interest with teachers who have an interest in what is being taught, as well as interest in the lives of African American students. Students indicated over thirty times that teacher interaction, as displayed by Dr. Sampson, was significant in maintaining interest. There were also particular student statements that commented

on her interest and emotion. Students particularly enjoyed that Dr. Sampson could be silly. As one student stated, "Ms. Sampson had the nerve to rap." This was especially amusing to the students who were entertained by a mature African American woman attempting to connect to their current lives, while showing vulnerability, emotion, humor, and interest. Another student added, "you (Dr. Sampson) are funny and sarcastic at the same time, that makes us laugh." Students also indicated that this simple task of making up a rap was validating of their musical interests, when adults often belittled them for listening to rap music. Embracing youthful interests was very important to students.

The student's appreciation of teacher attitude is not simply focused in regard to their likes or dislikes. Students viewed teacher interest and attitude as validating and honoring them. They particularly enjoyed the emotion, change of voice and tone, the use of their names within stories, and Dr. Sampson changing positions in the classroom throughout each lesson. Howard (2001) describes this as entertainment pedagogy, which connects to the highly affective needs and verve-oriented preferences of African American children to their cultural self.

Many students also noted how validating working in groups was for them. This was best expressed by a young African American female who stated, "We were in groups most of the time, that was better because we picked our friends, usually we have to go with what the teacher says." Another student added, "Most teachers don't want us to be with our friends, or they will make sure we go with another student who isn't Black because we have too much fun."

This culturally relevant pedagogy also appeals to the African American child, as many experience this style of relating within their homes. The familiar quality assists African American children in maintaining home to school connections, and allows them to feel comfortable within their own skin.

African American study participants had many ways of describing caring and connecting behaviors of culturally responsive teachers. When asked what teacher behaviors show caring, students had an array of answers that often had little to do with academics, including: (1) teachers who go to the football and basketball games; (2) those who chaperone school-related events; (3) teachers who recognize cultural fashions and hairstyles; (4) those who accept slang and African American vernacular and; (5) teachers who "step to us" and are not afraid. These characteristics have more to do with connectedness, acceptance, and interest in the lives of African American children than they appear to be connected with academics.

Focus Group Discussion

African American students within the focus group provided some expected and unexpected perceptions of culturally relevant lessons. Four themes emerged from the focus group data: (1) Culturally relevant lessons are empowering; (2) Students enjoyed the engaging experientially-based activities; (3) Teacher style, tone of voice, and interest in lesson is imperative to learning; and (4) It is important for the teachers to understand and embrace cultural differences.

Culturally Relevant Lessons are Empowering

While students were committed to the idea of culturally relevant lessons in school, they did not want to have specific lessons at a specific time. They desired that culturally relevant lessons become seamlessly integrated into existing curriculum. This premise is based on the students' perceptions that African American students require specific lessons in order to succeed. Students were clear that they are just as capable as other students; consequently, they preferred that culturally relevant lessons be integrated as an integral, but not separate part of their academic lives. One student felt that teacher-student relationships were most challenging instead of the types of lessons. This African American female asserted, "I think we just need teachers that better understand us. We should be treated equally, not differently." Several students implied that separate lessons could offend non-African American students; therefore, they preferred that issues of culture and race discussions be incorporated within the existing curriculum.

During the focus group, an African American student commented on how this study empowered and broadened his thinking; "I have always asked teachers to do something different…I have actively throughout the years, but I have never asked for anything to be about Black people, I would feel comfortable doing that now." Another student commented on how culturally relevant lessons could be seamlessly integrated by adding, "I would make lessons about Blacks more substantial, it wouldn't keep people off pace if you put more time into it; it would be accepted easier."

Some African American students expressed concern that other students may become offended by the prospect of lessons that focus specifically on them. Unfortunately, some African American students seemed ambivalent regarding their right to have lessons that are appealing to them. This ambivalence was communicated by an African American male in the focus group discussion. He stated:

> It seems that you (Dr. Sampson), at times, put too much emphasis on African Americans when we should focus on all minorities. At times, I usually noticed the other minorities in our class, the Hispanics, felt in ways ignored when your communication seemed to carry a message that African Americans were more important, that created a defensive or uncomfortable climate in the classroom with non-African Americans.

This focus group interchange became quite confrontational when an African American female accused the African American male of being "superficial and disinterested in his "blackness." Given the highly volatile nature of this interchange, Dr. Sampson re-directed the students in recognizing that questioning the racial identity of their same race peers is counterproductive and disrespectful, and is akin to the discount that occurs in educational settings when issues of race are prevalent.

Another important interpretation of this stance may not be a lack of self-advocacy on the part of these students, but may have evolved from the multi-cultural initiatives that have occurred in the study school: African American students are now the minority in what was once a majority African American

school. A great deal of work had been consistently maintained to challenge and change the culture of the school. There have been increased relationships and camaraderie across racial lines. This can actually be positive, as it demonstrated caring of others by African American students in the quest for greater multicultural understanding.

Other reasons why African American students may not have wanted separate culturally relevant lessons is derived from student voices, which indicate that they want to have appealing culturally relevant lessons, but not at the expense of feeling that only they can benefit from the lesson. One student mentioned that separate lessons for African American students would be detrimental, as "I would feel like I'm not as good as the rest." Another student wisely summarized their perspective on specific lessons for African American students, by stating, "No, I think we just need teachers that better understand us. We should be treated equally, not differently." Even though students desired to read and hear about culturally relevant artifacts and history as a part of their academic lives, they were cognizant that this may not be supportive of their peers. They did not want lessons applied separately from existing curriculum. They indicated that this was disruptive to their learning. African American students noted the increased interest in The N Word and the Declaration of Independence lessons by Latino students. A student observed that "the Declaration of Independence (rap version) was fun; it seemed to be fun for everyone because everyone got involved." They viewed this interest with pride and seemed validated by their peer's participation in the lessons.

Students Enjoyed the Engaging Experientially-Based Activities

African American students found the culturally relevant lessons to be particularly experiential, meaningful, and enjoyable. Students indicated that the language employed in the culturally relevant lessons was relevant to them. One student stated, "I liked the lesson because we got to express our feelings about something I wanted to talk about." Students particularly favored lessons in which movement, music, games, field trips, or other experiential activities were included. Another student commented, "Yes, I liked this lesson because we got to sing and rap." Students indicated they wanted to leave the classroom more and be involved in their learning; "we want more field trips and up to date games…if you are in class and the teacher is talking but never asks you anything, you don't care either." Students were astonished that they were asked to make noise; "we were actually asked to make up our own raps."

The student voices and interest were extremely high when visiting the African American Library and Mexican restaurant. Students talked about how exciting it was to not see "the same old people" all the time. African American students also need to see others who look like them, as they are often alone in their academic world, devoid of faces and behaviors that are familiar. We sometimes forget that our students need change, transition, and interesting stimuli to maintain interest. One student reminded educators that they once were also in schools and "must understand that we get bored with the curriculum just like you do… teachers should remember that school was boring when they had no choices… most don't remember when they were kids…they only want to get us ready for CSAP [State testing]."

Teacher Style, Tone of Voice, and Interest in Lessons is Imperative to Learning

The teaching strategies utilized in each lesson were noted by students, as they believed that teacher interest, energy, and sense of humor assisted in connecting to the lesson, as well as to the teacher. Students commented, "You made us laugh when you tried to rap," and "most teachers don't plan field trips for us to make tortillas"…"you [Dr. Sampson] seem interested every time you came…there was something new-something different…that kept us interested…you should have came for a whole series, not just once or twice a week." Several students commented on her humor and tone of voice indicating, "If they [teachers] aren't into it, then you know it…. like if they just want to get through it and not have fun with it even though we have to learn it… it's boring…" "I liked your tone of voice, and also trying to keep the class in it… just not letting them listen the whole time."

It is Important for Teachers to Understand and Embrace Cultural Differences

Students also believed that an African American teacher has more commonality and understanding of their unique cultural experiences. However, they did not rule out a sensitive and culturally emerging non-African American teacher as equally effective. One student commented that it may not make a difference if a teacher was not African American as long as "the teacher is passionate about African American history as I am learning the subject." Still another student indicated that he believed that African American teachers had more commonality and under-standing of his unique needs by stating "nine times out of ten, African American teachers have gone through what I'm going through as a teenager."

Students within this study desired teachers to acknowledge and incorporate their differences. They were somewhat subtle in acknowledging their differences in the classroom. Yet, in the focus group discussion, of all African American students, they were lively and unbridled in asserting their cultural and racial differences with Dr. Sampson. Students appeared safe to show this behavior to her because of the acceptance and validation by Dr. Sampson through lessons and behavior. More importantly, students indicated that they felt close to her as another African American. A student stated, "You talked more about Black things. You weren't afraid to say anything, you could relate to more of what I'm going through than a white teacher can."

The key findings of the focus group discussion corroborated the quantitative findings from the responses on the student feedback sheet, and the rank order of the most favorite lessons in the transition-termination group. African American children chose as their most favorite lessons the three culturally relevant lessons; which were The N Word, The Hip-Hop Rap version of the Declaration of Independence, and the Culturally Relevant Field Trip. Students stated these lessons were liked the most and were most relevant to them. Overall, students found the culturally relevant lessons as most relevant to them because of content, movement, and familiarity. The study results align to culturally relevant curricular studies, which indicate student interest in culturally relevant curriculum is high (Chan 2006; Duncan-Andrade and Morrell 2000; Hefflin 2002; Ware 2006; Weldon 1996).

Discussion

Several of the findings are worthy of discussion. Differences evolved from gender preferences among the lessons, and racial differences across most lessons. Latinas were particularly interested in Lesson 2, the United States History quiz. This was a bingo game version in preparation for an upcoming test, and was one of the non-culturally relevant lessons. Additionally, Latinas were interested in choosing the brightly-colored notebooks provided to gather answers for the test. African American student mean scores were significantly higher for the culturally relevant field trip and The N Word lesson. The obvious reasons were that both lessons focused on the history and lives of African Americans. It also provided experientially—based activities, and included community-based connections that were culturally relevant.

This study's findings imply African American students prefer integrated rather than separate culturally relevant lessons. This appears to deviate significantly from previous studies (Chan 2006; Duncan-Andrade and Morrell 2000; Hefflin 2002; Ware 2006). African American student preferences were highlighted by one student, who stated that culturally relevant lessons were somewhat disruptive as "we were learning old history… then we switched to current stuff… we had a big ole shift from what we were learning that made your (Dr. Sampson's) lessons totally different, and made Mr. __'s look boring… we starting being able to talk and move around." Although there are differences in student requests for integrated lessons within this study, the findings of this study collaborate with other studies (Chan 2006; Duncan-Andrade and Morrell 2000; Hefflin 2002; Ware 2006) that indicate African American students prefer culturally relevant lessons.

Students' desire for culturally relevant lessons through critical inquiry, as evidenced in the N word lesson or discussions of interest impacting their community and school, aligns with the theoretical foundations of Critical Race Theory and Cross' (1971, 1978) Racial Identity Developmental. This critical inquiry challenges hegemony and existing privileges and paradigms in educational systems that sustain privilege. Critical inquiry specifically embraces Critical Race Theory and Racial Identity Development, serving to connect with the authentic self of the African American child, while also deconstructing racial barriers that are inherent in curriculum and within educational systems. Creating instructional accountability within the boundaries of CRT, coupled with understanding the racial identity of the African American Child is extremely imperative.

While Cross (1971, 1978) expanded the five stages of racial identity development across the lifetime of African Americans, students in this study could also be plotted in various stages of their own racial discovery. This was evidenced by students disagreeing over how much emphasis should be placed on lessons that specifically appealed to African American students and disagreements over one's level of "blackness." Despite the student's developmental diversity, the majority of students communicated being more comfortable in same race groups, as they believed this supported racial identity, commonality, and maintenance of cultural integrity. African American students also desired African American teachers because of shared history and camaraderie. Cross (1971, 1978) indicates that the re-interpreting

of racial identity by same race individuals minimizes the assault on the identity of the individual. Many African American students discussed being comfortable with Dr. Sampson's culturally responsive lessons, while simultaneously feeling proud of the extra attention placed on them.

Furthermore, the students within this study stated they want teachers who value them, establish relationships with them, call them by their names, and have creative learning environments that stimulate them experientially. This information is not new; it is consistent with the literature that supports high achievement for African American children, coupled with strong, yet warm relationships that denote caring (Brown 2004; Dalhouse and Dalhouse 2006; Gay 2002; Hale-Benson 1982; Howard 2003; Jordan 1984; Parsons 2005). Howard (2001) evaluated student perceptions of teachers who provided caring environments for students. He found that African American students desired teachers who: (1) Displayed caring attitudes and genuine interest; (2) desired teachers who established ties with the community, and created an atmosphere that was home-like and; (3) African American students want teachers who were entertaining and fun. African American students also desire educators to find the curriculum they teach as interesting, and to show genuine interest in them in the process of teaching.

Culturally responsive pedagogical practices were further operationalized by Dr. Sampson in several ways prior to, during, and after the study. At the beginning of the study process, a series of pre-research activities were initiated to engage parents and students. A Family Night occurred prior to the study, in which all of the students and parents were invited to dinner at the school to informalize the study process, and to provide the parents and students an opportunity to ask questions of Dr. Sampson. A variety of ethnically-prepared food and linguistically appropriate materials were available for the families in the evening, to accommodate the working schedules of the parents. A Spanish interpreter, who had been apprised of the study protocol, was also available to assist with language differences, and the fears of Mexican immigrant parents who harbored anxieties about being undocumented. An atmosphere of camaraderie and connection to the students were forged prior to the study beginning. Family Night was a successful, culturally responsive avenue to assist in connecting parents and students.

Many parents of color were apprehensive about involving their students in research. However, when connecting with families face to face, and after providing them with a light meal, the parents indicated that this was a very thoughtful approach toward them and their children. A total of seventeen Latino parents or guardians, and fourteen students attended Family Night. Some students attended without parents or guardians, and all received a packet of information to take home. No parents declined student involvement after a thorough overview was provided of the research, the study protocol, and the study schedule.

Throughout the study, Dr. Sampson included a variety of experiential activities in every lesson, and provided educational incentives such as brightly colored notebooks, pencils, books, age-appropriate snacks, and other materials to further cultural vibrancy and connection. Many students commented on the items of interest, and assisted in helping Dr. Sampson select the most desired items for the activities.

Clearly, the results of this study indicate that African American students prefer culturally relevant lessons in school, as these lessons most relate to them and their lives. Both the qualitative and quantitative data aligned closely with the research on the infusion of culturally relevant curriculum and its benefits (Brown 2007; Gay 2002; Hale 2001; Howard 2003; Lynch 2006; Murrell 2002). This study also revealed many important student perceptions regarding their feelings about academic achievement, and the life and challenges of being African American students.

Recommendations for Educators

While it is appropriate and possible to provide plausible suggestions for educators regarding how they may approach culturally relevant pedagogy and curriculum, we must return to the literature that suggests that teachers must first look at themselves, their issues, biases, and practices that contribute to African American student disconnect in schools (Gay 2002; Ukpokodu 2003). This is not to blame teachers for their lack of knowledge and skills in building and sustaining culturally relevant classrooms. However, culturally relevant teachers must first acknowledge that there are differences. Just as African American students do not check their culture at the school door; neither do teachers, who may have been largely influenced by European values that collide with the values and behaviors of African American students (Gay 2000; Hale 2001; Howard 2003; Thompson 2004; Ukpokodu 2003).

African American students desire to be stimulated in the classroom, but also value the learning that occurs outside of the classroom. They also need to have the opportunity to experience their culture outside the classroom. These experiences must include movement, technology, historical connections, home to school integration, music, drama, games, and other experiential activities in keeping with African American children's preferences for affective interaction (Hastie et al. 2006).

Lastly, recognition of a variety of learning modalities that are current, interesting, and multi-experiential is an important component of culturally relevant curriculum. As this study demonstrates, educators can create supportive learning and school connectedness by relating genuinely, sharing their unknowing with students, and accepting multiple perceptions and perspectives. Although the process of curricular integration is complex, the foundation of this process is one rooted in genuine respect and high expectations for the African American learner.

Implications for Practice

This study has important implications for curricular accountability and planning for the academic needs of the African American child. Designing curriculum, as guided by the experiences of African American children, assists educators in understanding the pieces of the academic achievement puzzle. No one aspect may be successful in resolving this curricular dilemma; however, working in conjunction with the consumers of education—our children—can result in highly relevant and culturally

responsive approaches that resonate with and validate the life of the African American child.

A very important benefit of teaching to the interest and cultural validation of African American children is the vigor and interest students communicated when engaged. As Dr. Sampson was involved in teaching the students, their energy and interest sustained her teaching skills and motivation. There is a positive reciprocal impact that can occur when student and teacher are fully engaged. This engagement increased her level of pedagogical innovation, and thus, impacted student interest. In this process, Dr. Sampson found great hope for learning, cultural vibrancy, and a vivid imagination and creativity on the part of study participants.

Limitation of the Study

One limitation of this study, of course, may have been the joint role of researcher and teacher. It was challenging for Dr. Sampson to remove her cultural and ethnic identity from the process. As an African American teacher-researcher, it was improbable that cultural identity did not permeate the curricular intervention at all times. African American students particularly commented on Dr. Sampson's language and movement, which was validating and stimulating to them. They openly desired the same level of engagement and discussion in the non-culturally relevant lessons. Given that it was difficult not to engage students in socio-political conversations within the non-culturally relevant lessons, they seemed confused about the difference, and attempted to discuss racial and cultural dilemmas in history during all lessons; not just the culturally relevant lessons. Students viewed Dr. Sampson's presence as a catalyst to discuss specific issues of culture and race. This is the dilemma that African American students carry with them on a daily basis, the need to discuss issues that are relevant to them; however, no catalyst to foster this discussion (Murrell 2002; Thompson 2004). This connection to Dr. Sampson may have supported student preferences for culturally relevant lessons.

Future Research

It is important that future research focus on the applicability of culturally responsive lessons administered by a non-African American teacher. African American students within this study preferred a same race teacher; however, they noted that an emerging culturally responsive Caucasian teacher would also be validating. A study design using African American teachers as mentors to Caucasian teachers, or utilizing the existing classroom teacher to administer the lessons may also be beneficial in establishing a united team designed to support culturally relevant pedagogical practices.

Students within this study also requested culturally relevant lessons that are integrated within current lessons. Further understanding regarding how culturally relevant lessons can be seamlessly integrated into existing curriculum is an important finding that requires further inquiry. A unit of extensive culturally

relevant lessons, rather than a series of lessons, should be considered to better understand the cumulative impact on students academically. Student academic performance over time should be evaluated for any positive or negative effects after the inclusion of culturally relevant curriculum.

It is important to recognize that African American students are not monolithic. While the African American students in this study preferred culturally relevant lessons, there are certainly variances in cultural pride, self-esteem, and racial identity. The ability to understand the differences and similarities in African American students is important in evaluating another study of this nature addressing issues of racial identity development.

This study specifically focused on culturally relevant pedagogy and lessons as it relates to African American children. A great deal of interest was observed by Latino children within this study. Given that there is also a significant achievement gap for Latino children as well as African American students, it is appropriate to conduct a similar curricular intervention infusing culturally relevant aspects of Latino culture. Finally, it is evident that research on student voice is an important component that requires further exploration to understand and incorporate student perceptions of their curricular preferences.

Appendix 1

STUDENT FEEDBACK FORM

Date:_____Lesson Title_____

Please Circle: I am: AFRICAN AMERICAN / LATINO-
MEXICAN/CAUCASIAN/OTHER_____ (SPECIFY)

I am: (circle)   Male/Female

1. Did you like this lesson? Why or why not?

2. Was this lesson different from lessons you receive in other classes? How was it the same or different?

3. Would you prefer to have lessons like this one, as compared to other lessons you receive in school? Yes or No. Explain.

4. This lesson was relevant to my culture (Circle your answer below).

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Agree | Strongly Agree |

5. Describe your interest level each class period when this curriculum was being delivered.

(high   med   low)

6. This lesson was provided in a caring and supportive environment

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Agree | Strongly Agree |

7. How well did you like this lesson? (Circle using scale below)

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| Not at all | Very little | Somewhat | Very much |

Appendix 2

TRANSITION-TERMINATION GROUP FEEDBACK

Date:_____

Please Circle: I am: African American/ Latino-Mexican/ Caucasian/
Other_____(specify)

I am: (circle)   Male/Female

Which lesson(s) did you prefer (favor or like)? Rank the lessons in the order that you liked
them, and indicate why you liked the lesson.

1=most favorite lesson   2= second favorite lesson

3=third favorite lesson   4=fourth favorite lesson

5=fifth favorite lesson   6=sixth favorite lesson

Rank

_____Lesson 1: Ellis Island: Why:

_____Lesson 2:   US History Quiz: Why:

_____Lesson 3: The N Word: Why:

_____Lesson 4: The Declaration of Independence: Why:

_____Lesson 5: Blair-Caldwell Library & LaPopular Tortilla Factory: Why:

_____Lesson 6: The Top 5 Test Review: Why:

Is there anything else you would like to share?

Appendix 3: Focus group guide

Protocol and questions

Moderator introduction, thank you, and purpose (2 minutes)	Hello. My name is Darlene Sampson. I will be moderating our discussion today. I would like to begin by thanking each of you for taking time to help me with our study. Your voice really does matter. We will be here for about an hour or no longer than an hour and a half. The reason we are here is to get your opinions on culturally and non-culturally relevant lessons.
	(Provide definitions)
	I am not here to convince you of anything or try to sway your opinions. My job is just to ask you questions and then encourage and moderate your discussion.
Consent (3 minutes)	Before we begin with introductions of participants and guidelines, I want to go over a few things on how this session will be conducted and what we need from you.
	First of all, we will be tape recording our discussion to make sure we document all of the valuable information you will be sharing. However, no names are attached to any report.

continued

	Also, if at any time you are uncomfortable to continue to participate, you are free to leave.
	Finally, to participate in this focus group, we need to make sure we have a signed consent form from each of you.
Guidelines (3 minutes)	To allow this sharing process to flow more freely, I would like to go over some guidelines.
	1. Please only talk one at a time and avoid side conversations.
	2. Everyone does not have to answer every question. On the other hand, I would like to hear from each of you today as the discussion progresses. I will call on you to break the silence. You are not forced to answer, but your feedback is valuable.
	3. This will be an open discussion. Feel free to comment on each other's remarks.
	4. There are no "right or wrong answers," just different opinions.
	5. Say what is true for you, even if you are the only one who feels that way. Do not let others students change your opinion if that is the way you feel. However, if you do find yourself having a changing viewpoint, please let me know.
	Any questions regarding the guidelines?
Questions	Why?
1. Tell me how you rated the lessons?	
2. What was your most favorite lesson?	Why?
3. What was your least favorite lesson?	Why?
4. How did the lessons relate to you as an African American student?	In what specific ways?

Conclusions

1. Last minute questions/clarifications
2. Summarize the major areas
3. Next steps explained (data will be transcribed and analyzed for meaning to help inform other educators)
4. Thank you
5. Appreciation/refreshments

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