

Culturally Responsive Early Childhood Education
**An Analysis of the Implementation and Importance of Culturally
Responsive Pedagogy in Early Childhood Education Programs**

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Section I: Introduction

Cultural differences that exist in schools often complicate the way in which students are taught and receive information. When cultural inconsistencies exist between students, teachers, and administrators it often makes it difficult for students of color to learn the same skills as their white counterparts. The incorporation, celebration, and understanding of cultural differences in schools is referred to as culturally responsive education. This term is one of the newest iterations of the continued academic effort to effectively teach diverse populations in the American education system. Other terms that have been used to describe this concept are anti-bias education, cultural competence, diversity, and multicultural education. Many researchers, scholars and policy makers have attempted to make the case for the incorporation of culturally responsive education in American schools. The ultimate goal of these efforts has been to create a more equitable education system, in which school acts as an equalizer, as opposed to an institution that perpetuates the systematic inequalities that many students of color face as they become adults.

This essay will build upon current literature about the effectiveness of culturally responsive pedagogy through an analysis of its importance and implementation in early childhood education. The importance of culturally responsive early childhood education will be understood through an in depth analysis of the deficits that students of color face when they are taught in ways that are developmentally but not culturally appropriate. Research will demonstrate how children of color are not prepared for primary education because they are not learning fundamental skills (referred to as personal and social skills) that would equip them with the tools to excel at the cognitive skills they are expected to learn and understand in primary and secondary education. The social/personal skills that will be highlighted and discussed are racial

identity, resilience, and social development. This section will argue that culturally responsive early childhood education programs (ECE) offer a promising intervention to reduce the achievement gap, as they foster the development of personal/social competencies including self-identity, resilience, and all-encompassing social development. These competencies are fundamental to achievement on cognitive skills such as reading, math, and writing, which are often tested for in standardized tests.

Once the importance of culturally responsive early childhood education is supported through research, this essay will explain the mechanisms through which a culturally responsive early childhood education program is able to thrive. This section will be devoted to understanding what it means to teach early childhood education in the culturally responsive way, and how this pedagogy teaches the social/personal skills that many students of color are lacking. The variables of focus in this section are curriculum, teacher training and the environment. This section will argue that when establishing a culturally responsive early childhood education program it is necessary to have teachers who are able to recognize their privilege and position in society, using their commitment to equitable teaching to begin to reframe how they view and teach students who are different from them. It will also argue that it is integral to the program's success that there is a material environment that represents all children, as well as a curriculum that fosters student centered learning. This project aims to shed light on the necessity of culturally responsive early childhood education as a mechanism to create opportunities for students of color to excel in education, as well as later in their lives.

Section II: The Problem

Understanding the Achievement Gap

In 2002 President George Bush signed the No Child Left Behind Act. This reform increased the nation's focus on testing and accountability in the American education system. It

focused specifically on the achievement of certain subgroups, such as African Americans, as it attempted to decrease the achievement gap. While many debate the positive effects of *No Child Left Behind*, it did usher in a number of tests, which further highlight the disparities that exist.¹ Many of the measures used provide an extensive view of the educational attainment of students. However some scholars challenge the use of these categories to measure “achievement”, arguing that they do not provide a holistic understanding of a student’s potential.² This issue is beyond the scope of this essay as it calls into question larger issues with the American education system and how we measure success. This essay will be using the current measures of academic success, which are largely based on cognitive skills, recognizing that they are flawed and problematic, however that they also have merit as the current standard of achievement measurement.

No Child Left Behind continues to highlight the large disparities that exist between the academic achievement of students of color, specifically African Americans, and their white peers. These disparities are referred to as the achievement gap. The National Education Association defines the achievement gap as, “the differences between the test scores of minority and/or low-income students and the test scores of their white and Asian peers.”³ In order to understand the nature of the achievement gap it is important to provide statistics on the severity of these disparities, highlighting the racialized nature of this problem within the United States. Much of the data regarding the achievement gap is interpreted from the National Assessment for

¹ PBS . The New Rules: An overview of the testing and accountability provisions of the No Child Left Behind Act. . 2014. 25 April 2017

<<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/schools/nochild/nclb.html>>.

² Howard, Tyrone. Why Race and Culture Matter in Schools. New York City: Teacher College Press , 2010.

³ National Education Association . Students Affected by Achievement Gaps. 2015. 19 March 2017
<<http://www.nea.org/home/20380.htm>>.

Educational Progress (NAEP).⁴ The 2006 NAEP assessment demonstrates large disparities between white students and students of color, specifically African American, Latino and American Indians, in the subject areas of reading, math, writing, science, and citizenship.⁵ Data on reading levels in the fourth grade demonstrate that 58%, 54% and 52% of African Americans, Latinos, and American Indians (respectively) are performing below basic reading level. This is compared to 24% of white students performing below basic level. These are troubling statistics given the importance of reading to future academic success. A report conducted by Donald Hernandez, a senior advisor of the Foundation for Child Development, found that a child's reading level by the end of third grade is an indicator of high school completion and adult potential earning. Hernandez found that, "One in six children who are not reading proficiently in third grade fail to graduate from high school on time, four times the rate for children with proficient third-grade reading skills."⁶ The gaps in reading are also prevalent in mathematics, another academic area that is seen as integral to academic success.

Data on mathematics represents similar trends in achievement gaps between students of color and their peers. The 2006 NAEP assessment found that 40%, 32% and 32% of African Americans, Latinos, and American Indians (respectively) are performing below proficient in math, a gap that becomes even more pronounced among 8th grade students. The data shows that only 1% of African American and Latino students are performing at advanced levels.⁷ Math and reading are seen as two of the most important indicators of academic achievement.

⁴ National Center for Education Statistics. National Assessment of Educational Progress. 30 March 2016. 20 March 2017 <<https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/about/>>.

⁵ (Howard)

⁶ Hernandez, Donald J. "How Third-Grade Reading Skills and Poverty Influence High School Graduation." Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2011. 6.

⁷ (Howard)

One of the most startling yet important statistics regarding the achievement gap is the relationship between socioeconomic status, race and achievement. Scholars originally attributed the achievement gap to socioeconomic status. Those of low socioeconomic status are less likely to have the resources to achieve academic success when compared to those of higher economic status. Research, however, has dispelled this demonstrating that when socioeconomic status is held constant there are still disparities between students of color and their white counterparts.⁸

Understanding the Readiness Gap

This essay focuses specifically on Early Childhood Education. One of the primary reasons for this focus is because the disparities in achievement in the United States begin long before students enter primary and secondary education. As described in the 2006 Harvard Education Letter, research demonstrates that there are gaps in school preparedness between students of color and their white peers. This is commonly referred to as the school readiness gap.⁹ According to the National Education Goals Panel, school readiness is defined by the development of five major categories, these include:

- 1) Physical wellbeing and motor development
- 2) Social and emotional development
- 3) Approaches to learning
- 4) Language development
- 5) Cognition and general knowledge¹⁰

Research however demonstrates that Hispanic, African Americans and American Indians are significantly less likely to be ‘school ready’ than their white counterparts. In early understandings of this gap, many attributed this gap to disparities in preschool attendance.

⁸ (Howard)

⁹ Sadowski, Michael. "The School Readiness Gap." *Harvard Education Letter* 22.4 (2006). *Social Development in Children*. 26 April 2017 <<https://www.scanva.org/support-for-parents/parent-resource-center-2/social-development-in-children/>>.

¹⁰ Trends, Child. "Early School Readiness: Indicators of Child and Youth Well-Being." *Child Trends*, 2015.

However with the increasing number of Head start programs, minorities, specifically African Americans, have preschool attendance rates similar to white students.¹¹ Therefore there must be something that students of color are not learning from preschools and kindergartens that white students are. The remainder of this essay aims to uncover why these disparities exist, and how we can begin to counter them. It will be focusing on early childhood, recognizing that the readiness gap is an important precursor to the achievement gap.

Section III: Personal and Social Skills

The previous section has highlighted the disparities that plague the American education system. This section will argue that these disparities exist, in large part, because students of color are not receiving certain foundational competencies that prepare them for future educational pursuits. The examples that will be used to support this claim include positive self-identity, resilience and social development. However, it is important to note that there are many other personal/social competencies that could also be highlighted, including perseverance, emotional development, and empathy. Students of color often grow up in communities that have been denied resources that white communities have incorporated into their culture. The access to resources has an important impact on academic achievement and could be discussed in detail, however for the scope of this essay it will not be included in the analysis.

These competencies are seldom explicitly taught in traditional early childhood or primary education. One of the principle tenants of this argument is that white students because of their position in the dominant culture often learn these personal and social competencies. This essay will discuss how cultural positionality often affords white students, specifically white high income students, the opportunity to learn these skills without explicit and targeted instruction. Without culturally responsive education, students of color who exist outside of the dominant

¹¹ (Sadowski)

culture are left without these foundational skills, which cause long term consequences to their educational pursuits. The deficits in these skills are what perpetuate the achievement gap. This section will describe the three highlighted competencies, emphasizing how the development of these skills impacts achievement and school readiness. It will also provide developmental research on why it is important to begin to teach these skills to children during early childhood.

Identity:

Definition

An identity is a multifaceted, fluid understanding of and belief in oneself. Embedded in the term identity is an understanding of one's individual and cultural identity. Author Tracy Robinson defines individual identity as, "both visible and invisible domains of the self that influence self-construction. They include, but are not limited to, ethnicity, skin color, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, and physical and intellectual ability."¹² Cultural identity is best defined by Edward Taylor as, "one's understanding of the multilayered, interdependent, and nonsynchronous interaction of social status, language, race, ethnicity, values, and behaviors that permeate and influence nearly all aspects of our lives."¹³ A person's racial identity is inextricably linked to many of their life experiences. An identity enables a person to negotiate who they are, and how the world views them.

Influence on Academic Achievement

A positive self-identity directly influences a student's academic achievement. In a literature review conducted by the Heinz Endowment, researchers discuss significant studies that demonstrate the importance of a positive identity on a student's academic achievement,

¹² Robinson, Tracy. "The Intersections of Identity." Souls Looking Back: Life Stories of Growing Up Black. Ed. Andrew Garrod, et al. New York : Routledge , 1999. 85-98.

¹³ Taylor, Edward. "Lessons for Leaders: Using Critical Inquiry to Promote Identity Development." Racial and Ethnic Identity in School Practices: Aspects of Human Development. Ed. Rosa Hernandez Sheets and Etta R Hollins. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates , 2010.

specifically students of color. A study conducted by Attschul et al (2006) had students report levels of positive racial identity over the course of two academic years. Racial Ethnic identity (REI) was rated based on the following three categories:

1. Student connectedness to their racial group
2. Students awareness of how society viewed people of their race
3. Students perceptions on the potential of academic success for individuals of their race

The study found that higher REI scores correlated with higher grade point averages.¹⁴ Another study conducted by Smalls et al (2007) found positive racial identity was correlated with higher achievement, measured by test scores.¹⁵ Based on all of the literature reviewed, this meta-analysis found that positive racial identity has a protective effect for students, especially students of color who face racism in their lives. This is described in the analysis saying, “These studies all point to the protective nature of racial identity in the face of a racially structured society. In the face of racism, students with a strong racial identity are motivated to achieve.”¹⁶ Improving student’s racial identity would therefore create positive effects on the achievement of students of color.

Racialized Nature

The development of a positive racial identity is more natural for white students because they are a part of the dominant culture. The article “Cultural Identity and Education: A Critical Race Perspective” describes how African Americans operate in what is referred to as a “binary construct in a dichotomous relationship to those referred to as white.”¹⁷ This means that the construction of their race and identity is based on the white standards that society operates

¹⁴ Hanley, Mary Stone and George W Noblit. "Cultural Responsiveness, Racial Identity and Academic Success: A Review of Literature ." The Heinz Endowments, 2009.

¹⁵ (Hanley and Noblit)

¹⁶ (Hanley and Noblit, 56)

¹⁷ Berry, Theodora Regina and Matthew Reese Candis. "Cultural Identity and Education: A Critical Race Perspective." Educational Foundations (2013). 45.

within. It is often more difficult to accept your own identity when constantly operating within another race's standards. The article supports this claim when it quotes Tracy Robinson saying, "For White Americans, experiences and identities have served as the model for all "other" Americans. And although 'White Americans also have a racial identity ... it is rare that a White person has an experience that causes them to assess their attitudes about being a racial being.'¹⁸ "In school settings students of color are often negotiating two worlds. They are constantly trying to fit into the mold of white society, however are often unable to because of the color of their skin. While white students have their identities affirmed by society, it is necessary that schools serve as identity affirming spaces for students of color. It is imperative to their success that they begin to learn, from a young age, to view themselves and their race positively. This can only be accomplished when schools make the commitment to explicitly celebrate all of the cultures in the classroom as opposed to just the dominant one.

Development

It is necessary for early childhood education programs to focus on the development of a positive sense of identity in children, because they begin to develop this competency at a very young age. Anti-bias educator Louise Derman-Sparks has outlined the development of racial identity, describing three key stages between the ages of birth to five, in which children develop important characteristics of identity. The first stage begins when children are age two. At this age, they begin to observe what she terms *socially prevailing stereotypes and biases*. By age four children attempt to reconcile the observed differences between people, and negotiate why people are different from them. Finally, by age five children begin to make comparisons between racial groups. They are observing socioeconomic and institutional factors that affect different groups

¹⁸ Robinson, Tracy. "The Intersections of Identity." Garrod, Andrew and Janie Victoria Ward. Souls Looking Back: Life Stories of Growing Up Black. Ed. Andrew Garrod, et al. n.d. 85-89.

¹⁹ (Berry and Candis, 45)

and these observations begin to weigh on their sense of self, and whatever group they belong to.²⁰ Author Beverly Tatum provides examples of this in the book “Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?” And Other Conversations About Race. She describes how children in preschool are focused on outward appearance as they question and reconcile differences between themselves and their peers. She provides many examples of the questions that her son has asked her, growing up in predominantly white spaces, but being African American. One question that her son was asked at preschool was if he was brown because he drank chocolate milk. Tatum discusses how this was not a mean spirited inquiry, but instead was the classmate’s effort to reconcile why he was observing differences between himself and his friends.²¹ These stages represent the beginning of the development of racial identity which continues until children are around 10 years old, at which point it would take a life-changing experience to restructure or alter their beliefs of their racial identity.²² In order to develop strong identity, it is necessary to address these questions and understandings of race when children are in early childhood. Teachers must learn how to appropriately foster the development of a positive sense of self within students who are often not affirmed by society.

Resilience:

Definition

Resilience, much like identity, is fluid. It is the ability of a person to overcome life’s challenges through positive adaptations. The definition of resilience is highly contested, however many scholars support the definition described by the American Psychology Association’s task force

²⁰ Derman-Sparks, Louise. Stages of Children’s Racial Identity Development. 6 May 2017 <<http://www.earlychildhoodwebinars.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Stages-of-Childrens-Racial-Identity-Development.pdf>>.

²¹ Tatum, Beverly Daniel. Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?” And other Conversations about Race. New York : Basic Books , 1997.

²² (Louis Derman-Sparks)

on Resilience in African American Children which states, “resilience is a dynamic, multidimensional construct that incorporates the bidirectional interaction between individuals and their environments within contexts (family, peer, school and community, society).”²³

Resilience is the mechanism through which a person is able to take a negative experience and produce positive outcomes. Harvard University has produced a working paper that describes five defining features of an individual who is resilient. These include:

- 1) The ability to adapt to disturbances to functioning and development
- 2) The ability to respond to stress in a way that does not impact an individual behaviorally or psychologically
- 3) The ability to use resources towards positive outcomes
- 4) The ability to function in a positive way after adverse events
- 5) The ability to be vulnerable to adverse events²⁴

Resilience has effects on development at the biological level. The stressors that cause disruptions in the brain activate the stress response system. When activated too often, because of lack of resilience (among other factors), stressors can have deleterious effects on the development of the brain and corresponding organs.²⁵ Resilience is a necessary tool for students to develop at a young age in order to effectively overcome the challenges that they will face as they matriculate.

Influence on Academic Achievement

A literature review conducted by Scholar Centric describes multiple studies that highlight the argument that resilience is correlated with higher levels of academic achievement. A study conducted by Scales et. al (2003) determined that higher GPA is correlated with more characteristics of resilience. Another study described in the review attempted to understand resilience and academic success in low-income inner city students. It found that students who

²³ Resilience in African American children and adolescents: A vision for optimal development. American Psychological Association, Task Force on Resilience and Strength in Black Children and Adolescents. Washington, 2008. 16.

²⁴ "Supportive Relationships and Active Skill-Building Strengthen the Foundations of Resilience: Working Paper 13." National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2015.

²⁵ (Supportive Relationships and Active Skill-Building Strengthen the Foundations of Resilience: Working Paper 13)

were characterized as a minimal risk for dropping out of school were those students with higher reported resilience. Finally, the literature review describes a study conducted by Solberg et al (1998) that found that educational resilience involved six characteristics, which include building confidence, making connections, setting goals, managing stress, increasing well-being, and understanding motivation. The study also found that developing educational resilience caused students to perform better in school.²⁶ Research supports the claim that resilience is necessary for students' academic success. In order for students to receive and understand information and process it through cognition, they must be able to communicate, and recognize the importance of learning new information. When students are resilient they have increased motivation to learn material. Resilience therefore enables students to actively participate in academic settings, which ultimately translates to increased mastery of the material.

Racialized Nature

An understanding of the racialized nature of the development of resilience requires recognition that many children of color are often exposed to life stressors and risks from a young age. When children are exposed to adverse events such as poverty, or negative parental relations they have delayed development of resilience and other non-cognitive skills. This essay does not wish to paint the image that all children of color suffer from adverse events. However, research does demonstrate that for many children of color adverse events are often a reality. Paul Tough author of the book How Children Succeed wrote an article titled "How Kids Learn Resilience". This article provides important evidence for understanding why children of color, who are often faced with adverse life events from a young age, are often less likely to develop resilience during early childhood. He writes,

²⁶ Christine. "Resiliency and Academic Performance." Scholar Centric , n.d.

For children who grow up without significant experiences of adversity, the skill-development process leading up to kindergarten generally works the way it's supposed to: Calm, consistent, responsive interactions in infancy with parents and other caregivers create neural connections that lay the foundation for a healthy array of attention and concentration skills. Just as early stress sends signals to the nervous system to maintain constant vigilance and prepare for a lifetime of trouble, early warmth and responsiveness send the opposite signals... These messages trigger adaptations in children's brains that allow them to slow down and consider problems and decisions more carefully, to focus their attention for longer periods, and to more willingly trade immediate gratification for promises of long-term benefits.²⁷

Schools are places where focused efforts to build resilience can reverse some of the harm of adverse events. Early childhood education can help children develop the resilience they need to continue their education.

Development

Resilience is developed through multiple life experiences. Research has honed in on multiple attributes of resilient individuals, attempting to understand how resilience is developed. Research demonstrates that there are multiple behavioral systems that contribute to resilience including the self-regulation system, the peer system, and the school system. Each of these systems must be nurtured in order for individuals to develop resilience. The integrations of these systems is best described by Masten et al. when they write "In early childhood, it is particularly important that children have the protections afforded by attachment bonds with competent and loving caregivers, the stimulation and nutrition required for healthy brain development, opportunities to learn and experience the pleasure of mastering new skills, and the limit-setting or structure needed to develop self-control."²⁸ All of these protections must begin when children are young, allowing them to develop positive stress responses.

²⁷ Tough, Paul. "How Kids Learn Resilience." *The Atlantic* June 2016.

²⁸ Masten, Ann, Abigail Gewirtz and Julianna Sapienza. "Resilience in Development: The Importance of Early Childhood." *Encyclopedia of Early Childhood Development* (2013). 3.

Social Development:

Definition

While resilience and identity are often more internal to the student there is also a need for children to develop social skills in order to interact with their peers. Social skills are often researched in the domain of psychology. According to the glossary of American Psychology, Social Development refers to how people develop social and emotional skills across the lifespan, with particular attention to childhood and adolescence. Social development can be effected by a child's personality, the opportunities they have for social interaction, behaviors learned from parents, and developmental disorders.²⁹ Social development encompasses the skills and knowledge that children require that enable them to conduct themselves appropriately in society, whether that is at school, in their communities, or at home.

Influence on Academic Achievement

In 2011 a researcher named Joseph Durlak conducted a meta-analysis that provides evidence for the importance of social skills on academic achievement. The study used data from 213 social and emotional development programs. The study found that children that were exposed to social and emotional development through intervention programs improved by 11 percentile points in academic achievement.³⁰ This study highlights the importance of teaching children these skills. It also supports the claim that the earlier these skills can be fostered the more benefits the students can gain throughout their matriculation.

Racialized Nature

Social Development occurs largely in the context of an individual's culture. Oscar Barbarin describes this in the article, "Emotional and Social Development of African American Children"

²⁹ Psychology Glossary 2017. 15 April 2017

<<https://www.alleydog.com/glossary/definition.php?term=Social%20Development>>.

³⁰ Durlak, Joseph , et al. "The Impact of Enhancing Students' Social and Emotional Learning: A Meta-Analysis of School-Based Universal Interventions." *Child Development* 82.1 (2011).

when he states, “cultural norms serve as precise and exacting standards against which the acceptability of specific behavior is measured. In this way, culture influences the development of social behavior.”³¹ In order to understand how these cultural differences negatively influence students of color, it is important to understand the work of author Lisa Delpit. In the article “Silenced Dialogue”, Delpit describes what she refers to as the culture of power. She describes five characteristics of this culture of power, which are:

1. Issues of power are enacted in classrooms
2. There are codes and rules in participating in power
3. Rules of the culture of power are rules of the culture that has power
4. If you are a participant of the culture of power being told the rules makes getting power easier
5. Those with power are least aware of their power³²

Delpit describes how many students of color are not privy to this culture of power. They are often not equipped with the skills, many of which are social, to exist in this alternate culture. Without explicit cultural instruction it is much more difficult for students of color to develop the social skills to interact in a world that differs from the one to which they are exposed at home.

Development

There are a number of developmental milestones that demonstrate the successful acquisition of good social abilities among children. Between the ages of zero to two years old children are undergoing rapid and complex development. By age two children who are developing socially begin to sense and react to individuals. At this age they begin to imitate those that surround them. It is important for children to have contact with many different people, allowing them to see and adopt cultural norms through socialization. When children are between the ages of three to five they begin to adjust to the needs of others. It is during this time that

³¹ Barbarin, Oscar. "Emotional and Social Development of African American Children ." Journal of Black Psychology (1933). 384.

³² Delpit, Lisa. "The Silenced Dialogue: Power and Pedagogy in Educating Other People's Children." Harvard Educational Review 58.3 (1988).

children learn how to interact with others in ways that are deemed socially acceptable and also begin to trust certain individuals.³³ Disruption in social development can be detrimental to children as it can hinder children's ability to properly interact with those that surround them. Much of the development up to age five involves learning cultural habits and norms. If children exist outside of dominant cultures their social development does not provide them with the same foundational tools to socialize within the dominant culture, which can be detrimental later in life.

Section IV: A Promising Solution

There is an association between a child's development of social and personal competencies and their ability to achieve high levels in academic settings. Students of color often lack personal/social competencies because of the common phenomenon of teaching to the dominant culture. The achievement gap is therefore racialized, because certain students are not receiving the same developmental foundation, despite attending the same early childhood programs. In order to create an environment where students are receiving equitable educational opportunities, schools must begin to teach in a way that is culturally appropriate for all students. It is not enough to simply teach cognitive skills, but we must recognize the importance of personal/social competencies and begin to shift towards a more explicit instruction of these skills, specifically to students who do not receive them because their culture differs from that of their peers. One possible method to accomplish this is through creating early childhood education programs where staff and administrators are committed to teaching in a culturally responsive way.

³³ Social Development in Children. 26 April 2017 <<https://www.scanva.org/support-for-parents/parent-resource-center-2/social-development-in-children/>>.

Background of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

In the 1960's President Lyndon B. Johnson launched the War on Poverty. The War on Poverty was Johnson's attempt to end poverty through a number of social welfare programs.³⁴ Education was zeroed in as one of the mechanisms through which poverty was created, and was also presented as a potential solution to poverty within the United States. At this time there were distinct differences in the educational attainment of the diverse groups within the United States, specifically low-income minority populations and high-income whites. Prior to the War on Poverty these academic differences were explained through genetics. As scholars began to understand that genetics did not account for these differences they constructed what is called the cultural deprivation paradigm. The cultural deprivation paradigm blames the differences in achievement on the limited cultural capital within low income and minority neighborhoods.³⁵ This paradigm was eventually challenged because of the problematic nature of suggesting that these low-income students had limited potential to improve academically. Scholars found that this led many teachers to have lower expectations of students of color. In the 1970s scholars created the cultural difference paradigm, which has undergone multiple iterations. The cultural difference paradigm recognizes that cultural differences impact students' academic achievement, however it places the onus on teachers to engage multiple cultures in their pedagogy. From the cultural difference paradigm emerged culturally responsive pedagogy.

The previous section emphasized the deficits in social and personal competencies that many students of color face. At the root of these deficits is the idea that students of color are often being taught within a mold that is outside of their culture. Author Geneva Gay describes

³⁴ Cooley, Aaron. *War on Poverty*. 12 June 2016. 18 March 2017
<<https://www.britannica.com/topic/War-on-Poverty>>.

³⁵ Gay, Geneva. *Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory, Research and Practice*. New York City: Teachers College Press, 2000.

the pervasive nature of culture in her book, Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory, Research, and Practice. She highlights the fact that culture serves as a mediator of knowledge. Without cultural understanding it is often difficult for students to develop the necessary skills to perform academically and socially. The previous section has made the case for three important skills that are mediated by culture, often to the disadvantage of students of color. Culturally responsive education places culture at the epicenter of learning. No skills are just assumed but, instead, culturally responsive programs focus specifically on transmitting knowledge to their students in a way that is centered on a student's culture. For example, in a culturally responsive classroom, it is not assumed that students recognize their potential. Instead, teachers work with students to counter societal perceptions of who they are and what they could become. This enables students to find self-motivation, and self-confidence, which is vital later in their academic career when they are faced with challenges.

This section will be devoted to understanding what it means to teach early childhood education in the culturally responsive way. The focus of this section is curriculum, teacher training, and physical environment, which are integral to a culturally responsive education program. Culturally responsive early childhood education is a type of pedagogy that highlights the importance of integrating a student's culture into his or her learning experience. It is important to note that culturally responsive education has undergone multiple pedagogical iterations. For the purpose of analysis this essay will also include research on anti-bias education, multicultural teaching, and cultural competence.

Before discussing teacher training, curriculum, and the environment, which will be highlighted as three of the most significant mechanisms to create a culturally responsive early childhood education program, it is first necessary to understand culturally responsive education

in a broader sense. The Brown University Education Alliance has determined a number of key characteristics of culturally responsive education. These six characteristics will be briefly discussed in the following section.

Characteristics of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (adopted from The Brown Education Alliance)

1. Positive perspectives on parents and families

A culturally responsive education program focuses on parental involvement, creating an environment where both parents and teachers work together. This involves open communication between teachers and the parents. This enables teachers to understand a student's background, home life, and culture.

2. Communication of high expectations

A culturally responsive program ensures that students understand that they are held to high standards. This involves creating environments for students to challenge themselves. This also involves teacher's recognition that despite a student's background or readiness for school, they can still excel in the school environment. This is extremely essential in developing a positive value in self in students and also encourages teachers to maintain dedication to each student.

3. Learning within the context of culture/culturally mediated instruction

A culturally responsive program incorporates the cultures of students into the educational environment. It emphasizes the culture in which students have been taught to learn and incorporates that style of teaching into the curriculum.

4. Student centered instruction

A culturally responsive program focuses more on the student than on the teacher, allowing the students and teachers to engage in discourse that guides the teaching. This helps foster students who are engaged with their learning, and also pushes students to challenge themselves further.

This enables teachers to meet each student at their own level, as opposed to pushing them beyond their abilities, for sake of maintaining the pace of the class.

5. Reshaping curriculum

The curriculum should facilitate incorporation of multiple cultures, especially the cultures of the students who are in the classrooms. The curriculum should provide teachers with a platform to incorporate different cultures and student centered learning.

6. Teacher as facilitator

The teacher is the gatekeeper to the culturally responsive classroom. They should be fostering an environment where all students feel comfortable and are able to learn in a method that is relevant to their cultures. The role of the teacher is extremely important especially in early childhood education because they are integral to a student's development of self, social skills and resilience.³⁶

These characteristics highlight the integral tenants of culturally responsive education; the remainder of the essay will focus on three of the most influential components of culturally responsive education, and that is the teacher and the curriculum. The following section will be highlight key components of being a culturally responsive teacher. This section will describe these in an effort to describe some of the best practices of culturally responsive pedagogy in early childhood education. Throughout these sections anecdotes will be used from observations conducted at Calvin Hill Daycare Center and Conte West Hills.

The Schools

Calvin Hill Daycare Center is located in New Haven, Connecticut. The daycare center serves Yale and surrounding greater New Haven community, and is devoted to providing affordable

³⁶ Brown University. Culturally Responsive Teaching. 2017. 17 April 2017
<<https://www.brown.edu/academics/education-alliance/teaching-diverse-learners/strategies-0/culturally-responsive-teaching-0>>.

high quality early childhood education. The Calvin Hill Daycare Center serves students of many nationalities and ethnicities and is focused on providing culturally responsive early childhood education while also enriching students through play and work. Conte West Hills, also located in New Haven, Connecticut, is a public school that is preschool through 8th grade. Conte serves a much more economically disadvantaged student base than Calvin Hill, and is largely Hispanic and African American. The teaching staff is mixed with white and black teachers. The observations were conducted at both schools in kindergarten classrooms. It is important to note that these anecdotes provide important and enriching information, however they do not provide statistically generalizable information about how to create or run a successful culturally responsive early childhood education program.

The Teacher

One of the most influential gatekeepers of culturally responsive classroom is the teacher. Teachers have the most direct interactions with their students and often have the most control over how the classroom operates. Teachers in early childhood education have many roles, all of which are extremely important in the development of the child. Jill Miels describes the role of the early childhood educator in the article titled “The Seven Faces of the Early Childhood Educator”. Among these she includes two that are crucial to the role of a culturally responsive educator. Early childhood educators are facilitators. They should facilitate learning in all forms helping guide students towards the appropriate development. The role of the facilitator involves taking special care in assuring that students are receiving the necessary skills to continue to grow and develop. The teacher in early childhood education is a model. They model the kinds of behavior that students then mimic. This modeling involves special care in ensuring that they are communicating appropriately and exhibiting the type of behavior they wish to see in their

students.³⁷ The teacher is also a nurturer. The Childcare Education Institute describes this when they write, “To nurture is to nourish. Nurturing a child encompasses all aspects of development: social, emotional, cognitive, and physical. In every interaction, a teacher should nurture appropriate growth and development.”³⁸ Finally teachers serve as the necessary bridge between a student’s home life and the school environment. A teacher must help students negotiate the differences between their home and culture and that of the school and other students. This is where culturally responsive teachers become necessary. They must constantly recognize their influence and help students develop the skills to understand the challenging cultural landscapes that they will be a part of.

Reflection of Self

In order for teachers to effectively teach in a culturally responsive way they must first understand themselves. This involves recognizing their privilege and positionality, whether that is socioeconomically or racially. They must reflect deeply on how they view the world, and understand that their view of the world may differ from that of their students. A culturally responsive educator must also make a commitment to the students, honoring the diversity and cultural perspectives of all of the students within their classroom. In an article by Michael Vavrus he describes this in saying, “culturally responsive teachers need to be aware of how the concepts of White privilege and property rights can be manifested in contemporary political, economic, and educational systems through various forms of biases and racism, including color blindness.”³⁹ Through this understanding teachers are better able to identify their own personal

³⁷ Miels, Jill. The Seven Faces of the Early Childhood Educator . 2008. 6 May 2017

<http://www.earlychildhoodnews.com/earlychildhood/article_view.aspx?ArticleID=171>.

³⁸ Childcare Education Institute. "Teacher Roles and Responsibility ." Teacher Enrichment Training and Solutions 3.8 (n.d.). (Miels)

³⁹ Vavrus, Michael. "Culturally Responsive Teaching." Good, Thomas L. 21st Century Education: A Reference Handbook. Vol. two . Thousand Oaks: Sage Publishing , 2008. two vols. 49-57.

biases. Many multicultural trainings focus specifically on this issue. The trainings aim to uncover a teacher's understanding of themselves and how they have formed their identities. They are then able to understand how their own personal experience can influence their classroom. Author Lisa Delpit describes what she refers to as the culture of power. In our society the dominant culture holds the power.⁴⁰ In order for a teacher to effectively teach in a culturally responsive way they must recognize the power that they have, taking the appropriate steps to ensure that they are acutely aware of how this impacts the students that they are teaching.

Reflection of Student

Teachers must also understand their own biases. While many teachers are devoted to their students and their success, they often hold subconscious biases. As a teacher it is necessary to understand these biases and work to dispel them. In 2016 Yale researcher Walter Gilliam published a paper titled, "Do Early Educators' Implicit Biases Regarding Sex and Race Relate to Behavior Expectations and Recommendations of Preschool Expulsions and Suspensions?" Gilliam based his research on the increasing number of preschool expulsions especially among children of color. This unsettling phenomenon has gained recent attention among communities of scholars as they attempt to understand why children of color are being disproportionately punished in early childhood settings. In the study Gilliam had teachers complete two tasks. The first measured teachers gaze in early childhood education classrooms. This task found that teachers spent more time staring at boys, specifically black boys than any other group of students.⁴¹ The second task randomized teachers into groups in which they were given standardized vignettes of a preschooler's behavior and were either given names that were

⁴⁰ Delpit, Lisa. "The Silenced Dialogue: Power and Pedagogy in Educating Other People's Children." Harvard Educational Review 58.3 (1988).

⁴¹ Gilliam, Walter. "Do Early Educators' Implicit Biases Regarding Sex and Race Relate to Behavior Expectations and Recommendations of Preschool Expulsions and Suspensions?" Yale University, 2016.

typically black or white, while the control group just received the vignettes. This component of the study found that white participants saw white children's behavior as more severe than when the child was assumed to be black. While this result seems contrary to Gilliam's original hypothesis, the underlying reason for this result points towards implicit bias. White teachers saw black students' behavior as less severe because they hold these students to lower standards. The study found that white teachers often expected black students to misbehave and therefore were not as concerned when they did. These lower expectations lead to less attention on these students and less favorable outcomes for students of color. Gilliam's work highlights the omnipresent nature of bias in classrooms.⁴²

In order for teachers to begin to combat their biases, they must recognize that they have them. Much like the privilege, bias is inherent. Appropriate anti-bias training encourages teachers to evaluate how they see people of different cultures. Louise Derman-Sparks and Julie Olsen Edward wrote a book specifically about anti-bias early childhood education programs. In the book they write a chapter explaining the journey to becoming an anti-bias educator. One of the key suggestions that they make is making a list of how stereotypes influence your decisions as a teacher. The authors suggest writing down all of the stereotypes you have of different cultures, understanding how you learned these stereotypes, and then writing down the feelings that you have when you work with students of different cultures.⁴³ Teachers who aim to teach in a culturally responsive way have to make a commitment to this pedagogy. You cannot train a teacher to be culturally responsive unless they are willing and able to. It requires a lot of self-reflection to become a culturally responsive educator, however through breaking down these internal biases you are unlocking a world of possibilities for students of color. While the teachers

⁴² IBID.

⁴³ Derman-Sparks, Louise and Julie Olsen Edwards . Anti-Bias Education fro Young Children and Ourselves. Washington DC : National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2010.

are extremely important for culturally responsive early childhood education, it is also important to focus on the curriculum and physical environment of a culturally responsive program. If a teacher is aware of themselves and aware of their students, they can only do as much as their program will allow them. A culturally responsive curriculum is what enables students to learn the personal/social skills described above, countering the culture of power and gaining access to knowledge outside of cognitive skills that will enable them to achieve high academic success once they enter primary school.

The Environment

Calvin Hill Daycare Center is covered in student art, and the books that are on display represent a multitude of cultures. During the observations it was Chinese New Year, and this was reflected in a number of decorations in celebration of this holiday. The languages represented on the walls also reflect a diversity of cultures. A culturally responsive classroom such as Calvin Hill focuses a lot of energy on the environment that students are in. What students see around the classroom reflects how they interact with society, and how they understand their position in society. A culturally responsive classroom makes precise decisions about how students' identities are represented in the classroom setting. While there are many requirements for safety protocols of early childhood education classrooms, culturally responsive classrooms should also ensure that they have checklists of the physical classroom environment. The built environment includes but is not limited to the wall decorations, toys in the classroom, and books for students to read.

Wall hangings

The items on the wall are the first thing that people see when they walk into the classroom, and are often what students are fixated on when they look around the classroom as they learn. The decorations on the wall must represent the students within the classroom. Many

classrooms are decorated in commercially produced classroom posters. In the fourth edition of Teaching and Learning in Diverse World the authors suggest using photographs because of the limitations of commercial classroom decorations.⁴⁴ While commercial decorations often perpetuate stereotypes, or even fail to include diversity, using photographs of students allows them to see themselves or people like them interacting with the world in ways that are similar to their cultural understandings of the world.

In practice this looks very similar to Calvin Hill. In speaking with the director of the program she indicated that the teachers rarely post anything but images of the children or their own work on the walls. Through this they are able to represent all students in the classroom environment. This prevents students from only having exposure to the dominant culture. Children respond positively to seeing people like them reflected in the artwork that the teacher is seemingly revering because it was placed on the wall. This affirmation of belonging fuels the explicit learning of a positive racial identity.

Toys/ Materials

There are often many requirements regarding the types of materials required within classrooms. These materials often represent the dominant culture and isolate students who exist outside of this culture. The curriculum in a culturally responsive program looks to expand the materials used so that they are embracing all of the students and their backgrounds. This is similar for toys. Toys around the classroom should represent diversity not only in the skin tone of baby dolls, but also in their representation of cultures. If the class has a small toy kitchenette it is important to not only put toy forks and knives in the kitchen but also to include chopsticks. It

⁴⁴ Ramsey, Patricia. Teaching and Learning in a Diverse World. New York City : Teachers College Press, 2004.

is small gestures such as these that validate student's racial identity as they begin to see pieces of their cultures throughout the classroom.

Books

While many early childhood education centers use books that are status quo, a culturally responsive early childhood program aims to critically analyze the books to which children are exposed. Derman-Sparks and Edwards have created a checklist of the material environment of a classroom. They specifically address books, describing how books must accomplish three important things, which are:

1. Present accurate images and information with no overt or covert stereotypes
2. Challenge unfairness and prejudice
3. Encourage children to take action when faced with unfairness toward themselves or others⁴⁵

The books students read are crucial in the formation of their identity. They are also critically important in modeling social behavior more explicitly for students of color who are attempting learn how to exist in spaces that were often only made for white people. The books serve as important tools for the social development of students of color.

The material environment of a classroom is critical in positioning children to be successful in school settings. The environment must be strategically set up to encourage the development of social personal skills. It is necessary for students to see their classroom setting as an extension of their cultural settings in their homes, and therefore it is integral to the functioning of a culturally responsive early childhood education program to create a culturally accepting and celebrating environment.

The Curriculum

In the 1991 article titled "Culturally Responsive Pedagogy for the 1990's and Beyond" the author Ana Maria Villegas writes, "The curriculum should be integrated, interdisciplinary,

⁴⁵ (Derman-Sparks and Olsen Edwards)

meaningful and student centered. It should include issues and topics related to the students' background and culture. It should challenge the students to develop higher-order knowledge and skills.⁴⁶

Student Centered Learning

At Calvin Hill students are completely independent learners. From the moment they entered the classroom they were in control of their learning experience. They would discuss with the teachers, explaining why they wanted to play with a specific toy, or conduct a survey throughout the classroom, and ultimately this led to 20+ students working independently or in small groups throughout the classroom. This differs drastically from Conte West Hills, where children are expected to learn at each other's pace. They are not given much control over how they exist in the classroom, and they are not allowed to play as a way to learn. The Calvin Hill model that was observed throughout this project highlights one of the most important components of a culturally competent classroom, and that is student centered learning. In early childhood student centered learning often functions best when children are encouraged to play as a way to learn.

In early childhood education, children are entering the classroom at many different levels. They are coming from a multitude of cultures and have often never been in settings where they are expected to interact with cultures outside of their own. In many early childhood programs students are expected to assimilate to the dominant culture. This assimilation denies them the ability to develop the personal/social skills described at the beginning of this essay. A culturally responsive classroom, on the other hand, is better able to teach for these skills as each child is

⁴⁶ Villegas, Ana Maria. "Culturally Responsive Pedagogy for the 1990's and Beyond." 1991. 1-48

being taught lessons that meet them where they are. This is described in a paper written about the Calvin Hill observations when I write,

At Calvin Hill the children had complete control over the pace at which they learned. As described in the chapter Play is Life for Children, this sense of control enables children to develop competence, and mastery. Rogers and Sawyer describe how play enables children to see how their actions have an impact on the results they get, and often recognize that adjustments to their actions adjust the results. Through play children develop competence because they are not comparing themselves to others, but instead are developing self worth as they successfully challenge themselves and overcome obstacles. They are mastering content because they are determining how fast, or slow they need to move through activities, and truly understand concepts before they continue to the next hurdle. This claim is supported when the authors quote Mann (1984) saying, "Mastery is achieved one small step at a time. Play permits children to decide both the size of those steps and provides an "as if" context allowing trial and error experimentation. Though the road may be long it leads to competent, well-adjusted and satisfying interactions with the environment." Play enables children to take control of their learning experience allowing them to set their own pace, and ultimately creates confident and competent learners.⁴⁷

Student centered learning embraces each child. Many educational settings attempt to place each student in the same mold, which is especially detrimental to students of color. The mold that students are often forced into is that of a culture that is foreign to them. The main crux of culturally responsive education is that it attempts to understand each child on an intimate level, and through this the educators are able to create educational plans that fit each student's needs. The beauty of student centered learning is that students guide educational process, and therefore are able to move at their own pace. This is applied well at Calvin Hill. Students are allowed to make their own decisions about what they want to do, however at the same time the teachers are keeping a detailed log of the student's activities. Through this tracking system, students are given the power over their education, but it ensures that students are not falling through the cracks. This could apply well in a setting with students of color, because teachers are able to build

⁴⁷ Williams, Kaylyn. "Observation Paper." 2017.

resilience among these students through creating self-motivation, but also are able to keep a keen eye on each individual student's progress. Teachers are then able to adopt more explicit instruction of social skills, or racial identity formation with certain students, without making the entire classroom participate in that learning.

The curriculum is important in culturally responsive education. It enables teachers to have the freedom to work specifically with certain students, in an effort to provide each student with the foundational skills that they lack when they enter the school building. A student-centered curriculum that focuses on the formation of foundational social and personal competencies is necessary in a culturally responsive early childhood education program.

Section V: Conclusion

Early childhood is an impressionable time for children. They are undergoing rapid and complex development as they begin to develop skills that they will carry with them throughout life. Many of these skills are learned through life experiences, while others are explicitly taught to students. Students of color are often at a significant disadvantage because many of the skills white children learn through life experiences are culturally mediated. This often means that early childhood education does not explicitly teach these skills and students of color therefore have a more difficult time acquiring them. This essay has argued that this contributes to the readiness and achievement gap. Early childhood centers often teach to the dominant culture, omitting the more explicit instruction on social/personal skills, therefore failing to prepare all of their students. This essay has suggested culturally responsive early childhood education programs as a possible solution because they place culture at the center of learning. Culturally responsive programs focus on celebrating and understanding a student's culture as a tool for teaching students at their own pace. This provides them with the foundational skills that will help them be

successful as they matriculate. Through observations of Calvin Hill the essay has highlighted some of the key components of a culturally responsive program. Culturally responsive programs focuses on student centered learning. They create a physical environment of cultural celebration, with teachers who are devoted to understanding the cultures of the students that they teach. Through this developmentally appropriate high quality learning experience there is significant promise in reducing the readiness and the achievement gap.

The next step is to begin to understand how this pedagogy can be implemented in programs across the country. The challenge with culturally responsive classrooms is that they require a lot of training, and a number of resources including time, and dedication of the entire staff. In many of the classrooms that students of color inhabit all of these resources are in short supply. It is necessary for policy makers to begin to think of ways that these types of programs can be implemented given the specific restraints of certain early childhood education programs. With this information, students of color can begin to receive equitable high quality early childhood education, setting them up for continual academic success.

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