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Culturally Responsive Teaching: The Harlem Renaissance in an Urban English Class

Andrea J. Stairs advocates culturally responsive teaching, a practice that explicitly highlights "issues of race, ethnicity, and culture as central to teaching, learning, and schooling," and emphasizes the necessity of interrogating the themes of race, power, and privilege in the urban classroom. Stairs observes two student teachers as they actively integrate rap lyrics, jazz and blues music, the poetry of Langston Hughes, discussion of figurative language, and analysis and imitation activities to examine elements of racism and prejudice during the Harlem Renaissance.

What makes urban teaching different from other teaching contexts, and what does it take to be a successful English teacher in an urban high school? Lois Weiner, an urban educator and scholar, helped me to understand what is different about urban schools and the teaching and learning that go on in them. She says several factors characterize urban schools: large, impersonal, bureaucratic school systems hampered by excessive rules and regulations; inadequate funding, overcrowded classrooms, and insufficient numbers of faculty and staff; the greatest concentration of poor, immigrant students who experience hunger, homelessness, and violence in their everyday lives; teachers who do not reside in their students' neighborhoods and are socially isolated from them; curricular and instructional decisions made in central offices; and the most culturally and linguistically diverse student bodies of any school context. Weiner suggests we define "urbanness" on a continuum "ranging from the largest cities (New York City and Los Angeles) on one pole to the least urban communities (small, wealthy suburbs populated almost entirely with European Americans) on the other" (18). The largest city schools often possess all of Weiner's characteristics, while the smallest, wealthiest schools may possess few or none. Somewhere in the middle might be schools in smaller cities (Lowell, Massachusetts) or larger suburbs (Framingham, Massachusetts) that possess some of these characteristics.

The lesson on the Harlem Renaissance that I share in this article was taught by two of my former student teachers in a Boston high school that leaned toward the most urban end of the continuum. Brighton High School (BHS) enrolls over 1,200 students each year, mostly African American (46.3 percent) and Hispanic (39.7 percent), with lower White (8.3 percent) and Asian (5.4 percent) representation. These students come from low-income households and Boston's poorest neighborhoods; nearly 75 percent receive free or reduced-price lunch (Boston Public Schools). Most of my student teachers were White, middle class, and apprehensive about teaching in an unfamiliar school context. As one student wrote in her final reflection paper, "I had many stereotypical ideas regarding urban schools. . . . I was slightly disturbed by the metal detectors and by the craziness in the hallways in between class periods. . . . Walking into my first classroom, I was in a racial minority, definitely a different experience for me." However, student teachers learned through their urban course and field experience at BHS and from each other, their

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professors, and their cooperating teachers that culturally responsive teaching would help them to be successful in urban classrooms.

What Is Culturally Responsive Teaching?

Culturally responsive teaching is an approach particularly suited to urban schools where educating linguistically, culturally, and racially diverse students is a reality that some teachers find challenging and are ill-prepared to address. The underlying assumption of culturally responsive pedagogy is that diversity is an asset that enriches the learning of all students, not a deficit to overcome. Jacqueline Jordan Irvine and Beverly Jeanne Armento explain this approach: "The term *culturally responsive pedagogy* is used interchangeably with several terms such as culturally responsible, culturally appropriate, culturally congruent, culturally compatible, culturally relevant, and multicultural to describe a variety of effective teaching approaches in culturally diverse classrooms. These terms all imply that teachers should be responsive to their students by incorporating elements of the students' culture in their teaching. . . . *Responsive* simply means reacting appropriately in the instructional context" (4; italics in original). Some may wonder how this is different from what any good teacher does to engage students and ensure that they see the relevance of school in their daily lives. The difference is that culturally responsive teachers make explicit the issues of race, ethnicity, and culture as central to teaching, learning, and schooling, a stance not often evident in more homogeneous, suburban teaching contexts. Interrogating and inquiring into the relationships among race, power, and privilege is typical in culturally responsive classrooms. A "color-blind" approach to teaching diverse urban students ignores critical aspects of students' personal identities and senses of self and simply cannot be perpetuated if we believe that success for *all* students is a priority.

Culturally Responsive Teaching in Action: "Swaying To and Fro on His Rickety Stool"

I use a line from Langston Hughes's poem "The Weary Blues" in the title of this section because it represents the pupil engagement I observed during Cara and Laura's culturally responsive lesson on the Harlem Renaissance taught to a diverse, ninth-grade English class of twenty-eight students. Cara and Laura were White undergraduate women who were partnered to complete an urban methods course and field experience under my supervision at BHS and were participants in my larger study of effective teacher preparation for urban teaching (Stairs, "Preservice," "Urban"). Their cooperating teacher at BHS, Karen Coyle, was a National Board Certified English teacher with six years' experience. She incorporated many workshop elements in her student-centered classroom and she co-taught the site-based methods course with me, providing student teachers with an example of a successful, young, White teacher in a diverse urban school.

Cara and Laura decided to teach a lesson titled Metaphor and Poetry in the Harlem Renaissance after consulting with Coyle. They said the structure of their lesson imitated the format Coyle modeled for them: begin with a Do Now, conduct a minilesson, provide time for guided practice, share out with the class, and wrap up at the end. As Laura reflected after they had observed Coyle and taught in the long block period, "You can't just do direct instruction the whole time. The kids won't respond to it."

Cara and Laura's lesson began with a start-up activity written on the board: "Please define metaphor, simile, and renaissance, and then write about what comes to mind when you think about the word *Harlem.*" After allowing the students just under ten minutes to write, Cara and Laura focused on figurative language. They called on students by name to read their definitions of simile and metaphor and clarified the definitions. They placed examples and nonexamples of metaphors and similes on the overhead and called on students to read a line and identify it as a simile, a metaphor, or neither. The dozen lines they projected were all from popular rap songs familiar to many students. One line read, "I'm like a young Marvin in his hay, I'm a hustler homie (Jay-Z)"; another read, "I love you like a fat kid loves cake (50 Cent)." Laura said, "The sentences I chose were . . . quotes from rap songs. So we thought that would just kind of get the kids engaged in the lesson right away. Like a fun kind of start, just a quick review of simile and metaphor, so I thought that was pretty engaging. They seemed to enjoy it." I observed that students were smiling

and quietly giggling as each rap-song line was read; they were clearly engaged with the lesson opener. Additionally, the students' playful reactions to the use of rap-song lyrics showed appreciation for the preservice teachers' attention to youth culture in general and African American culture in particular. This is not to suggest that all Black students or all young people like rap music, but it is a familiar art form to most students, and the lines selected from songs were frankly pretty entertaining. The choice of lesson opener also reminds us that we need to thoughtfully engage students with the lesson topic from the beginning and throughout the lesson, especially since many urban students experience basic skills instruction, sometimes from scripted curriculum, and therefore miss opportunities such as these.

For the minilesson, students shared their written responses to the word *Harlem.* Laura called on students as Cara wrote their responses on the board, such as *New York, basketball, subway, African Americans, Walter Dean Myers, shopping, theater,* and *gangs.* They asked students who had visited Harlem to share their impressions and then moved ahead with a handout titled, "The Harlem Renaissance," which included a map of 1920s "Harlem Hot Spots" and a paragraph describing the rebirth of Harlem during that time period. In our interview, Cara told me how important it was to be sure students understood that the purchase of New York real estate was dominated by White buyers until the Harlem Renaissance, when a developer came to Harlem and provided Blacks opportunities to become homeowners, beginning the rebirth of African American culture in the United States. She said, "We weren't sure how much exposure they might have to classical jazz music," which is why they proceeded with the next steps in their lesson. Cara called on a student to read the paragraph and then explained more about what went on at the hot spots on the map, such as the Cotton Club's jazz musicians and dancers. Cara played a jazz song by Duke Ellington and asked students to write words they heard about Harlem; a few wrote, but most swayed in their seats and snapped their fingers, reminding me of the line from Hughes's poem, "Swaying to and fro on his rickety stool." Cara told them that Langston Hughes was known for the beat and rhythm in his poetry, just like in the music. Later she told me, "I thought these kids would really like the music in the class. . . . They don't usually listen to music in English, so I thought it was kind of interesting and got them excited about the lesson, to get them motivated."

Laura then provided a picture of the poet and a paragraph-long biography of Langston Hughes, which one student read aloud. Laura's next handout included Hughes's poem "The Weary Blues" and a few clip-art pictures of musicians. She played blues music in the background as she read "The Weary Blues." Again, students swayed and snapped with the music. When she finished reading, she let the music continue playing and conducted a discussion about the tone of the poem and music (*tone* was a literary term students had been working on most recently) and how it was different from the jazz music. Students said the poem was depressing and about dying, and she encouraged students to go back to the text and provide specific examples supporting their claims. When Laura shared that she was a musician and that part of being an effective musician is to create tone, just as in Hughes's poetry, a girl asked what instrument she played. Laura said she played the oboe, and students giggled. During our interview Laura mentioned that BHS pupils were interested in what was going on in their student teachers' lives, which is why she told them she played the oboe, "and that got a few chuckles. . . . So I think telling them about our lives, too, they are interested in what we are doing. And that Ms. Coyle even mentioned afterwards that she thinks that personalizing the lesson instead of just telling them, 'Here is the Harlem Renaissance. This is what it was like. Here is Langston Hughes.' Telling them about what it means to us transfers a lot of meaning to them, too."

Cara and Laura also worked on "Dream Deferred" with the whole class. Cara asked students if they remembered reading *A Raisin in the Sun* earlier that semester and who remembered what *deferred* meant; one boy said, "To put off." They then asked for fourteen volunteers, as the poem had fourteen numbered stanzas of varying lengths, which represented fourteen different voices of Harlem residents during the Harlem Renaissance; however, they did not tell the students this before reading the poem. After reading and hearing fourteen different students read the fourteen stanzas,

Cara asked students why they had fourteen people read. Students replied, "Because each person in the poem wants something different," "It sounds different," and "Each person reads differently." Laura probed further by asking why Hughes wrote the poem this way. One student said that each stanza represented a different dream. Another said, "They're all put on hold, just like the title." Cara called out different numbers of the different readers and asked them what they wanted—a stove, two suits, a radio. Cara explained that Hughes wrote about dreams and struggles of real people in Harlem, as was evident in the poem.

Laura then provided two handouts, one with three of Hughes's poems and one with three questions about each poem related to metaphor. Laura read "Mother to Son" from the handout and led students through the concept of extended metaphor. She instructed students to turn to a partner and work together on the handout's questions about this poem. After sharing answers, Laura and Cara instructed students to form small groups and finish reading and responding to the other two poems on the handout ("Dreams" and "I, Too, Sing America"). Students selected their groups quickly and worked diligently on the assignment as Cara and Laura moved from group to group providing support. After twenty-five minutes, Cara and Laura brought the class together to share what students had learned about metaphors in Hughes's poetry. They focused specifically on the discrimination that Hughes expressed in "I, Too, Sing America" and how discrimination today compared to that of the 1920s. Cara and Laura explained the homework handout, which had Hughes's poem "Theme for English B" and the following directions: "After reading 'Theme for English B,' write your own 'Theme for English C' (C block) relating your feelings about school. Things to include: Hughes's jazz style writing, 1 simile, 1 metaphor, at least 10 lines." After homework was assigned, the lesson concluded.

The use of rap lyrics to discuss figurative language, the minilesson on the Harlem Renaissance and Hughes's poetry, playing jazz and blues music, and the in-class and homework assignments of poetry analysis and imitation serve as examples of culturally responsive pedagogy.

Analysis of Cara and Laura's Lesson as Culturally Responsive Teaching

Cara and Laura's lesson is a remarkable example of culturally responsive teaching. Cara and Laura knew their students (particularly in C block) and knew the types of activities that would engage them. They planned a lesson with both variety and consistency, moving smoothly from one moment to the next. The use of rap lyrics to discuss figurative language, the minilesson on the Harlem Renaissance and Hughes's poetry, playing jazz and blues music, and the in-class and homework assignments of poetry analysis and imitation serve as examples of culturally responsive pedagogy. Ana María Villegas and Tamara Lucas suggest "[c]ulturally responsive teachers not only know their students well, they use what they know about their students to give them access to learning" (27). To teach figurative language, Cara and Laura used what they knew about their students to make the lesson interesting and personally relevant. They also applied theoretical constructs underlying improved academic performance by African Americans: "[m]otion and movement, music, frequent variability in tasks and formats, novelty, and dramatic elements in teaching" (Gay 112).

An aspect of culturally responsive pedagogy is knowing students as individuals and as members of cultural groups (Irvine and Armento; Villegas and Lucas), and Cara and Laura believed that the success of their lesson hinged on their relationship with their students. These preservice teachers and their pupils in C block had developed mutual respect and enthusiasm for each other and their shared learning experiences. In a short span of time—a total of ten Thursdays over the course of a semester—Cara and Laura learned the tendencies for each class of students, as well as students' individual strengths and weaknesses; they used this information to adapt instruction. Not only did they understand how important it was to modify instruction based on pupils' needs, but they also understood the complexity of urban teaching. Laura's suggestion that "You've got to pick and choose your battles" is in line with advice from urban educator and scholar Lois Weiner, whose work was at the center of our urban course and field experience. Weiner suggests, "[G]ood teaching

starts with knowledge of your students. The more you know about your students, the more effective you will be because you'll be able to find that lesson or project that will excite them, and you" (29). It is also in line with the practices modeled by Cara and Laura's cooperating teacher, Ms. Coyle, reinforcing the influence of an effective cooperating teacher.

When I asked Cara and Laura in our post-observation conference to share more about what they thought their students learned from their Harlem Renaissance lesson, and how they knew they learned, they mentioned formal and informal ways they evaluated student learning. They suggested that the students learned about simile and metaphor, as evidenced in their group work and the poems they wrote for homework. They also thought they learned other important lessons:

> I think they learned about the Harlem Renaissance and what was going on through the poetry, too. In the "I, Too, Sing America" they saw the prejudice and racism, too, and that was shown through the literature and they wrote about that in their responses to the questions. So they definitely learned about the Harlem Renaissance and how the music and the culture, the explosion of literature, how that influenced like, African Americans began writing, writing of their experience, so I think they saw that, too. (Laura)

> I think they also saw, especially with playing the music, they saw, they felt the jazz rhythm and then they were able to see that in the actual poems and connect it, which I think was important for them to see how poetry could be influenced or writing could be influenced by something else. (Cara)

Perhaps more important than learning about figurative language, students recognized elements of racism and prejudice in Hughes's work. Gloria Ladson-Billings states, "Culturally relevant teaching is about questioning (and preparing students to question) the structural inequality, the racism, and the injustice that exist in society" (128). Cara and Laura provided these opportunities with their lesson, and students responded to these topics in their writing, engaging with difficult ideas that most understood firsthand from personal experience many decades after Hughes wrote his poetry, as in this excerpt from one student's poem written for Cara and Laura's homework assignment:

> If you take a walk through my soul
> All you'll hear and see is anger
> A screaming child wrapped up in a sheet
> Tangled, fighting to get out.
> On second thought,
> Why not stay in my cocoon wrapped?
> Outside, there's more hate and violence going on.

Though this student compared going to school with a "screaming child wrapped up in a sheet," she preferred this cocoon to the world she faced daily outside the school's doors, reminding us of the realities many urban students experience in their neighborhoods and how necessary it is for teachers to prepare students to critically examine society, equity, and opportunity.

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Making the Case for Culturally Responsive English Teaching

As English teachers, we are always making choices about what to teach and how to teach it, balancing the classics with contemporary texts, juggling reader response with formalist theory. Though all English teachers share the experience of negotiating contradictions and controversies in determining curriculum, instruction, and assessment, we must recognize that teaching English in urban schools is different than teaching in other contexts. Today, urban teaching means not only a diverse student population, bureaucratic school system, and lack of resources but also a prevalence of "test-prep pedagogy" (McNeil). With the demands of meeting adequate yearly progress per No Child Left Behind and keeping their schools off the local newspapers' failing-schools lists, some English teachers feel compelled (or are mandated by their school districts) to revert "back to the basics" with underperforming urban high school students. However, they know in reality that providing rich literacy opportunities

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will improve test scores more than drilling students with worksheets on grammar and literary terms.

Cara and Laura's lesson demonstrated the potential of culturally responsive pedagogy for motivating and engaging urban high school students. The students' positive response to the numerous learning opportunities in an eighty-minute English block should be evidence enough for the value of culturally responsive pedagogy. One student wrote on the lesson evaluation survey, "I like the fact that we got to listen to music while reading poetry. Though it's not my kind of music, it was cool." Another said, "I liked it because it was organized. They looked like they were teaching years. It was awesome." However, I further make the case that urban students will develop their language arts skills and be better prepared to succeed in a multicultural and global knowledge society (Hargreaves) by drawing from the rich variety of experiences and intelligences students bring with them to our English classes. Culturally responsive teaching helps us to be successful urban English teachers.

I conclude with the words of Ladson-Billings, who also makes the case for culturally relevant teachers:

> They see their teaching as an art rather than as a technical skill. They believe that all of their students can succeed rather than that failure is inevitable for some. They see themselves as a part of the community and they see teaching as giving back to the community. They help students make connections between their local, national, racial, cultural, and global identities. . . . They encourage a community of learners; they encourage their students to learn collaboratively. . . . They view the content of the curriculum critically and are passionate about it. Rather than expecting students to demonstrate prior knowledge and skills they help students develop that knowledge by building bridges and scaffolding for learning. (25)

When we approach our urban English classrooms in this manner, the possibilities for meaningful literacy learning, as well as social justice and equity, are endless.

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION **Lisa Storm Fink, RWT**

The Harlem Renaissance was a vibrant time that was characterized by innovations in art, literature, music, poetry, and dance. "A Harlem Renaissance Retrospective: Connecting Art, Music, Dance, and Poetry" invites students to conduct Internet research, work with interactive online tools, and create a museum exhibit that highlights the work of selected artists, musicians, and poets of the Harlem Renaissance. The culturally relevant teaching in this lesson emphasizes critical thinking, creativity, and interdisciplinary connections.
http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=252