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Tonia Renee Durden

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, tdurden2@unl.edu

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# Do Your Homework! Investigating the Role of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy in Comprehensive School Reform Models Serving Diverse Student Populations

Tonia Durden

Department of Early Childhood Education, Georgia State University

## Abstract

Like the African proverb, “It takes a village to raise a child,” many educational researchers charge that it takes a comprehensive school reform to raise student achievement. With the passing of the No Child Left Behind legislation in 2002, national officials authorized the Comprehensive School Reform program to support low performing schools as they struggled to improve student achievement. As a result of this national effort, an increase in implementation of comprehensive school reforms is occurring in schools serving predominantly diverse student populations in urban areas. Therefore, this article explores the framework of comprehensive school reforms and challenges stakeholders to do their homework by investigating whether the school reform allows for the implementation of culturally responsive educational experiences for students.

**Keywords:** comprehensive school reforms, diverse student populations, culturally responsive teaching

## The Reformation of Education

With the signing of the No Child Left Behind law (NCLB) in 2002, national officials mandated that schools show evidence that they are meeting the needs of all their students. Particularly, the political lens has focused on children who have been labeled as “at risk”, “disadvantaged”, and “minority”. These students are primarily schooled in high-poverty, low performing schools (Lippman et al. 1996) and represent a diverse student population (Gay 1993, 2000). Diverse student populations are students who are distinguished from mainstream society by their primary

language, ethnicity, and social class (Lippman et al. 1996; National Center for Children in Poverty 2006). These diverse distinctions have become a hallmark reality in classrooms across America. For example, from 1979 to 2005 the number of school age children (5-17) who spoke a language other than English increased from 3.8 to 10.6 million (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics 2007). Additionally, 42% of public school age children represent an ethnically diverse student population (i.e. African America, Hispanic, Asian, Pacific Islander, and American Indian/Alaskan Native). Furthermore, in 2005, 48% Black, 49% of Hispanic and 36% of American Indian students were enrolled in schools with the highest measure of poverty. The highest measure of poverty refers to schools with more than 75% of its students on free and reduced lunch (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics 2006).

Nevertheless, research suggest that these multiple identities coupled with being schooled in high poverty, low performing schools plays a key role in the quality of students' schooling experience (Cochran-Smith 1997; Darling-Hammond 2005; Ladson-Billings 1994). For example the National Assessment of Educational Progress results in reading and mathematics shows that White students in fourth and eighth grade had higher average scores than their Black, Hispanic or American Indian peers (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Educational Statistics 2007). Specifically in the area of reading Black 4th graders scored on average 29 points lower than Whites while Hispanics scored 26 points lower than Whites (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics 2006). Similarly in the area of mathematics Blacks scored 34 points lower than Whites and Hispanics scored 27 points lower than their White peers (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics 2007).

Moreover, to achieve an equitable and quality education for students in these low performing schools, there are various research based initiatives and programs that have been sponsored by local and national agencies. One such initiative is the national sponsorship of research based comprehensive school reform designs implemented in low performing schools across America. In 1998 the Comprehensive School Reform Program was developed to help raise student achievement by employing research-based strategies in a school wide restructuring effort in low performing schools that primarily serve high poverty, diverse student populations. In light of the mass proliferation of school reforms in these schools, to assure that no child is indeed left behind, it is imperative that we pro-actively generate scholarly dialogues on how effective initiatives sponsored by NCLB are in raising achievement for the students they serve. Therefore this article will explore the framework and research of two popular comprehensive school reform models, and challenge schools to do their homework prior to adopting a reform to ascertain whether it complements the needs of the student population they serve.

### **Description of High Poverty Schools and Students**

As the proclamation of the NCLB legislation asserts, "The Founders did not want education for the elite or the many, they wanted education for all. John

Adams once exclaimed: 'Education for every class and rank from people down to lowest and the poorest.' The founding fathers were correct: Education is necessary for the growth and prosperity of our country" (Paige and Gibbons 2004, p. i). As outlined in this declaration, the outcome goal for NCLB is to provide a quality education for all students, especially, poor, marginalized student populations. The ambitiousness of this goal is reflected by the number and reality of children living in poverty. For example, according to a report sponsored by the National Center of Children in Poverty, approximately 13 million children live in families with incomes below the poverty level, which for a family of four is less than \$20,650 a year (Fass and Cauthen 2007). Nevertheless, among the number of children living in poverty, 66% are children of color (Fass and Cauthen 2007).

A common assumption is that poor areas are located in rural or urban areas. Cardiff (1999) investigates whether such assumption is empirically valid by examining whether the data presented by the Census Bureau matches our stereotypes of poor areas. Cardiff found that many poor counties have been poor for a very long time. In support of Cardiff's findings, recent research suggests that while poverty rates for young children are highest in urban areas, they are also substantial in rural and suburban settings (Douglas and Hall 2007). For example, according to the 2006 census data, 48% of children living in poverty reside in urban areas, 31% suburban, and 47% rural (Douglas and Hall 2007).

Since it is likely that children living in poverty attend high poverty schools, what are the educational impacts of living in poverty? In answering this question, it is important to explore the characteristics and circumstances of the high poverty schools these children attend. On average, student achievement declines as school poverty increases. In one study, students in high poverty schools scored significantly below their peers who attended low poverty schools (Abt Associates 1993). Furthermore, schools with a high poverty concentration are characterized as having the least qualified teachers, lower high school completion, and fewer educational resources (Lippman et al. 1996). Therefore, as noted earlier, the significantly lower scores of diverse student populations comparative to their White peers reflects their inequitable schooling experiences.

As outlined by Lee (2002), the most common factors that affect racial achievement gaps are: (a) socioeconomic and family conditions, (b) student and youth behaviors, and (c) schooling conditions and practices. After conducting a regression analysis of these variables, Lee (2002) concluded that these factors do not correlate with the trends of the achievement gaps between Blacks, Whites, and Hispanics. For example, the Black-White achievement gap narrowed at the basic skills level during the 1970s and early 1980s but grew at the advanced skills level during the late 1980s and 1990s. By contrast, the Hispanic-White achievement gap has hardly changed over the past three decades despite the fluctuations in the Hispanic socio-economic and family conditions (Lee 2002). Since factors used in the past to explain gaps no longer seem valid, alternative explanations are being investigated by educators and researchers to explain why the achievement gap has yet to narrow.

## Following the Script: Educating Children in Low Performing Schools

One of the most popular factors identified to contribute to the achievement gap is the lack of quality and equitable educational experiences and resources afforded to children in high poverty schools (Carey 2004; Truscott and Truscott 2005). Critics argue that because children in these schools are given a second-class education their educational future is inevitably destined for failure (Kozol 2005). To address this seemingly bleak fate, researchers and educators have shifted their focus from how students contribute to low school performance, to how schools contribute to the low performance of students. Interestingly, one of the products of this shift is the emergence of comprehensive school reform models for low performing, high poverty schools. These school reforms are intended to provide a first-tier education for students in low performing schools. While the emergence of school reform models such as Comer's School Development Program have been around for decades (Comer 2004), their alliance with the national campaign to close the achievement gap and create quality educational experiences for all students was marked by the development of the Comprehensive School Reform program by national officials in 2002 (The Comprehensive School Reform Quality Center 2005).

Although comprehensive school reform models have been around for over 30 years, the Comprehensive School Reform Program is a nationally sponsored initiative that focuses on implementing a whole-scale, standardized educational reform model in low performing schools (The Comprehensive School Reform Quality Center 2005). In 1998, the Comprehensive School Reform program began and in 2002 was signed into law under the Title I, Part F of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. This initiative is an essential part of the No Child Left Behind effort to raise student achievement, as evident by the \$308 million dollars Congress appropriated to the comprehensive school reform program and restructuring process in 2003 (U.S. Department of Education 2004). This restructuring entailed reforming the school's curriculum, organizational structures, and instructional practices (Datnow and Stringfield 2000). The CSR program allocates funds to states, which in turn, provide grants to schools with comprehensive school reform models.

Thus, as a nationally sponsored initiative, comprehensive school reforms are being widely implemented in many high poverty, low performing schools. For example, in a longitudinal assessment of 400 schools with comprehensive school reforms, Tushnet et al. (2004) found that 45% of the schools with comprehensive school reform models had a poverty rate of at least 75% and 47% of the CSR schools had high concentrations of diverse students. Additionally, CSR schools are more likely to be located in urban areas (47%) as compared to Title One (26%) and non-CSR schools (25%) (Tushnet et al. 2004). Today there are over 500 distinct comprehensive school reform approaches that have been adopted in over 5,000 schools (The Comprehensive School Reform Quality Center (CSRQC) 2005). The CSR models differ in their theoretical approach to education, content focus, and instructional methods employed (CSRQC 2005). However, all models are research based and intended to raise student achievement. It is also important to differentiate that for the scope of this review a comprehensive school reform model refers to a distinguished type of approach and implementation, whereas

the comprehensive school reform design itself represents the frameworks of these models (Datnow and Stringfield 2000; U.S. Department of Education 2004). In other words, the comprehensive school reform design is defined as a school wide improvement effort that primarily addresses all aspects of a school's operations. School reform models vary in pedagogical and theoretical approaches to learning. Examples of some of the most widely used reform models include Success for All, Accelerated Reader, Direct Instruction, and Core Knowledge. Additionally, as described in the NCLB legislation, (Title I, Part F, Section 1606), Table 1 displays the 11 components all comprehensive school reforms must exhibit in order to receive federal funding.

**Table 1.** Components of comprehensive school reform

Component	Description
1	Employs proven strategies and proven methods for student learning, teaching, and school management that are based on scientifically based research and effective practices and have been replicated successfully in schools
2	Integrates a comprehensive design for effective school functioning, including instruction, assessment, classroom management, professional development, parental involvement, and school management, that aligns the school's curriculum, technology, and professional development into a comprehensive school reform plan for school-wide change designed to enable all students to meet challenging State content and student academic achievement standards and addresses needs identified through a school needs assessment
3	Provides high quality and continuous teacher and staff professional development
4	Includes measurable goals for student academic achievement and benchmarks for meeting such goals
5	Is supported by teachers, principals, administrators, school personnel staff, and other professional staff
6	Provides support for teachers, principals, administrators, and other school staff
7	Provides for the meaningful involvement of parents and the local community in planning, implementing, and evaluating school improvement activities consistent with section 1118
8	Uses high quality external technical support and assistance from an entity that has experience and expertise in school wide reform and improvement, which may include an institution of higher education
9	Includes a plan for the annual evaluation of the implementation of school reforms and the student results achieved
10	Identifies other resources, including Federal, State, local, and private resources, that shall be used to coordinate services that will support and sustain the comprehensive school reform effort
11	Has been found, through scientifically based research to significantly improve the academic achievement of students participating in such program as compared to students in schools who have not participated in such program

(U.S. Department of Education 2004, Section 1606)



## Differentiation of School Reforms

While the comprehensive school reform models must adhere to these 11 components they differ in the educational philosophy, instructional methods, and content focus employed. For example, the second most widely used comprehensive school reform model in the nation, Success for All (SFA), implements a pedagogy of engaging children in cooperative learning activities. The vision of SFA is that success of every child is mediated by prevention and intensive early intervention (Slavin et al. 1996). Currently, SFA is implemented in more than 1,200 mostly high poverty schools that have a high concentration of diverse students (Slavin and Madden 2001). Developed in the late 1980s by Robert Slavin and his associates at John Hopkins University, the SFA model has a scripted curriculum and a prescribed set of instructional practices. These practices extend to the core content areas of writing, reading, and mathematics with an optional curriculum for science and social studies (Borman et al. 2005).

While SFA embraces cooperative learning as an instructional strategy, other models such as Direct Instruction (DI) employ a more teacher directed instructional program. The DI model is grounded in Siegfried Engelmann's educational philosophy that children from "disadvantaged" backgrounds can benefit from a scripted curricular program that entails teacher directed, comprehensible, and fast paced presentations (Engelmann et al. 1988). For over 40 years, Engelmann and his associates have revised and tested the DI reading processes and materials while also creating additional curriculums for handwriting, science, social studies, and fact learning. The guiding principles for DI's curriculum and instruction include scripted and predictable lessons, daily assessment of student progress, flexible and homogenous groupings, intensive training, and field-tested instructional practices (Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory & The Center for Comprehensive School Reform Model and Improvement 2004).

In contrast to the scripted curriculums of SFA and DI, some comprehensive school reform models such as Accelerated Plus, Coalition of Essential Schools, Conet, and Onward to Excellence provide teachers' instructional and management strategies (CSRQC 2005). Another difference among the reform models is the content focus. For example, models such as Break through Literacy, Comprehensive Early Literacy Learning, Literacy Collaborative, and National Writing Project target literacy development, whereas models like Different Ways of Knowing, Core Knowledge, Comer Development Model, and Modern Red School House provide schools and communities with strategies that support the holistic development of the child such as social, emotional, psychological, physical, and cognitive development (CSRQC 2005).

Without a doubt, CSR models vary in their approach to learning, content focus and philosophy. However, a key element that all CSRs have in common is that they serve primarily students of color who attend high poverty low performing schools. Therefore, in reflecting on the diversity of reform models implemented in these schools, a logical question becomes whether these reform models adopted support the learning needs of the diverse student populations they serve and whether they help to close the achievement gap as well.

## **Closing the Achievement Gap: High Poverty, High Performing Schools**

“What should we be doing? The answers, I believe, lie not in the proliferation of new reform programs but in some basic understandings of who we are and how we are connected to and disconnected from one another.” (Delpit 1995, p. xv)

In providing equal access to quality educational experiences for all children and closing the achievement gap, there have been noted strategies implemented by schools and districts to improve student achievement. In the winter of 2000, over two hundred educational leaders in California joined twelve school leaders from high poverty high performing schools to raise awareness of why and how these schools were effective in teaching student populations that historically have had low academic achievement. According to the results from this collaborative symposium discussion, achievement resulted *not* in the adoption of specific ideologies or reform programs but instead focused on making learning meaningful, applicable and rigorous for students (Bell 2001). School leaders charged that student achievement increased by (a) implementing practices that involve rigorous standards and high quality teaching for all students, (b) recruiting and retaining innovative, resourceful and strong principals and school leaders, (c) having district support for instructional program, (d) early intervention, and (e) helping faculty and students see themselves as valued contributors to the learning community (Bell 2001). Most importantly, the 12 schools that participated in this symposium stressed the importance of developing collaboration, collegiality, and community partnerships as an integral component of how the school conducted business (Bell 2001, p. 10). The effectiveness of such strategies in transforming student performance in these high poverty low performing schools offers a counterargument to the rationale for mass proliferation of school reforms in schools that also struggle to increase student achievement (Darling-Hammond 2005).

Moreover, elsewhere, educational researchers and scholars have also explored how high poverty, low performing schools are able to increase student achievement (Schmoker 1999; Sizemore 1985). For example, in his acclaimed book on strategies for increasing student achievement, Schmoker (1999) cited several examples of how low performing schools serving primarily African American and Hispanic students have been transformed into top performing schools. These examples ranged from the staff focusing on collaboration and goal setting to schools implementing an inquiry-based approach to research projects. Other scholars such as Barbara Sizemore (1985) further suggested that student achievement is attained through strategic partnerships with parents, community, business, and civic and foundation resources.

### **The Role of Culturally Relevant Teaching**

Schmoker (1999), Sizemore (1985), and Bell (2001) presents diverse strategies and pedagogies for increasing student achievement. These educational scholars



offer an alternative to implementing reform models that standardize experiences for students, which potentially track them to a standard of achievement that may not reflect their potential for excellence (Darling-Hammonds 2005; Hilliard 2006). The various methods and approaches to increasing academic achievement for diverse student populations in high poverty, low performing schools are limitless and diverse. In other words, good teaching will inevitably produce good results. Multicultural scholars argue that immersing students in their culture, by espousing culturally affirming teaching practices develops children who see themselves as cultural workers and leaders. These practices, in turn, reverse the current trend of low performance among these groups (Freire 1973; Ladson-Billings 1994).

Nevertheless, as school officials and districts show interest in adopting a school reform, one would expect that evidence of its effectiveness on increasing student achievement has been reviewed. However, when educating children who are culturally and linguistically diverse, a critical component of this review is not just ascertaining whether the reform improves academic achievement, but also whether it allows for learning to be channeled through the cultural reality and experiences of the learner. Multicultural scholars argue that to truly improve the long-term educational outcomes and reverse the trend of the historically low performance of diverse student populations, schools must view learning through the lens of the child (Delpit 1995; Hilliard 1992). In other words, schools should connect children's school experiences with their cultural reality. For example, as learners, whenever we attempt to make sense of our world, we construct an understanding of the event by using our prior knowledge, past experiences, and cultural references or tools. We are engaged, not passive learners. As reflected by socio-cultural theorist Lev Vygotsky, how children think is largely governed by his/her culture (Trawick-Smith 2000). The social and cultural environment impacts and determines what and how we think. In short, what we think is determined by what is culturally relevant, while how we think is developed by the use of cultural tools.

To reiterate, social cultural theory views learning as culturally mediated. Therefore, looking through the lens of the child requires teachers to implement a curriculum and instructional practices that are culturally sensitive and relative to the child's experience. As presented by Gay (2000), culturally relevant practices uses "the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning more relevant to and effective [for students].... It teaches to and through strengths of these students. It is culturally validating and affirming" (p. 29). Howard (2003) further proclaims that culturally relevant pedagogy is validating and affirming because it challenges teachers to

acknowledge how deficit-based notions of diverse students continue to permeate traditional school thinking, practices, placements, and critique their own thoughts to ensure they don't reinforce prejudice behavior. Second, culturally relevant pedagogy recognizes the explicit connection between culture and learning and sees students' cultural capital as an asset (p. 198).

Thus, as described by Gay (2000) and Howard (2003), culturally relevant pedagogy entails connecting learning and classroom experiences to children's home discourses and experiences. To effectively do this Ladson-Billings (1994) reports

that teachers and schools must first believe that all students can succeed, maintain an affirming student-teacher relationship, and believe that assessment must incorporate multiple forms of excellence. Hilliard (2000, 2006) further notes that schools should abandon the typical deficit ideology portrayed in such labels as "at risk" and disadvantaged, and instead view their roles as awakening the natural genius in students (Hilliard 2000, 2006). Secondly, culturally relevant teaching sees excellence as a complex standard that takes student diversity and individual differences into account. Teachers and programs with culturally relevant practices help students make connections between their community, national, and global identities. It also encourages children to work collaboratively and expects them to teach and take responsibility for each other (Ladson-Billings 1994, 1995). These practices can and should be infused across disciplines and not exclusive to holidays and what Louise Derman-Sparks and the A.B.C. Task Force (1989) labels as "tourist curriculum practices". A tourist curriculum is defined as one that patronizes and trivializes a group of people. The real life experiences and everyday realities of people from different cultures are not captured (Sparks and A.B.C. Task Force 1989). Sparks argues that instead teachers should celebrate the comprehensive diversity of students (i.e., family styles, gender, physical differences, culture, etc.) by employing culturally affirming relevant practices.

Additionally, it has been argued that culture provides children with tools of intellectual adaptation that allow children to adapt and use basic mental functions. In retrieving and executing these basic mental functions, language and writing systems are critical components of the cultural tools that are available to and developed by people in various societies (Au 1998). Au (1998) argues, for example, that within the framework of literacy learning, children should be engaged in authentic and relevant literacy activities as opposed to activities that are contrived for practice like those dictated in scripted reform models. In one study exploring effective practices for supporting linguistically diverse students, researchers found that the use of instructional and communicative scaffolds are key to their success (Truscott and Watts-Taffe 2003). Instructional scaffolding includes opportunities to use children's background knowledge, activities that expose children to new words orally and in writing, and opportunities for cooperative and collaborative dialoguing with more experienced teachers and peers. Communicative scaffolding involves teachers communicating to children explicitly the class rules and academic and behavioral expectations (Truscott and Watts-Taffe 2003).

Currently there is an extensive body of literature and research that explores how using the cultural capital and tools that children bring with them to the classroom to accelerate, enhance, and affirm educational experiences for diverse student populations (Bell 2001; Hilliard 2006; Ladson-Billings 1994, 1995; Perry et al. 2003; Schmoker 1999; Sizemore 1985; Trawick-Smith 2000; Truscott and Watts-Taffe 2003). Acknowledging the positive impact of making learning culturally responsive for students holds considerable implications for schools deciding on an adoption of a comprehensive school reform model. This decision is made even more difficult when the reform model is curriculum focused, externally administered, and is prescribed and scripted. If the reform is curriculum focused, how does the scripted curriculum reflect positive images of diverse student populations and connects to the experiences and reality of the students? Additionally,

how does the externally administered script account for the unique and diverse needs of the community of learners that will be using the school reform? These are critical questions for the stakeholders to consider because by implementing curriculum focused, externally administered, and scripted reform models, school leaders and teachers could potentially be restricting opportunities to make learning culturally and linguistically responsive to students. In such a case, schools can apply a culturally responsiveness rubric to assess the extent to which the reform is likely to complement the learning styles and reality of the students they propose to help. Examples of culturally responsive guidelines to consider are the following:

- Does the model allow for the implementation of culturally responsive teaching such as children learning in their native language, cooperative learning groups, stimuli for creative arts, etc? (Ellison et al. 2000)
- How does the reform's philosophy uphold an ideology that all children can succeed and applies a pedagogy that is rigorous and challenging? (Ladson-Billings 1994, 1995)
- How does the reform bridge home-school discourses and experiences? (Flores et al. 1991)
- Do the instructional materials represent a "tourist curriculum" or allow for multiple perspectives and affirm the contributions of diverse student populations? (Sparks and A.B.C. Task Force 1989)

Such questions provide an integral foundation for exploring how culturally and linguistically responsive the reform models may be and whether a particular reform model is best suited to meet the needs of diverse student populations. Therefore, reflecting on the literature presented, it is now imperative to focus on the ways in which curriculum reform models widely implemented in schools may encourage culturally relevant pedagogy and content. This is an important discussion because most school reform models are implemented in high poverty, low performing schools serving diverse student populations.

In their meta-analysis of 29 of the most widely implemented models, Borman et al. (2003) concluded that Success for All, Direct Instruction, and Comer's School Development Program models were the most generalizable and had the strongest evidence of effectiveness on student achievement. Of these three reform models, I will explore the empirical evidence for Success for All and Direct Instruction because these reform designs include a prescriptive, externally administered, scripted curriculum model, and they are widely implemented in low performing schools serving primarily students of color. The Comer Developmental Model will not be used because it does not represent an instructional scripted program but rather focuses on internally developed strategies that addresses the interactive components curriculum, school context, familial relationships, society issues, administrative leadership, child development, and student and teacher competence (Comer 2004). To guide this discussion of the current research, ideology, and pedagogy of the two reforms, I compared them with the characteristics of culturally relevant teaching and learning detailed above.

### Success for All "At Risk" African American and Hispanic Children

Relative to other reforms, research evidence on the impact of Success For All (SFA) on student achievement is considered strong (Borman et al. 2003). To concur with these results, The Comprehensive School Reform Quality Center (2005) reviewed 115 quantitative studies that investigated the effect of Success for All on student achievement. Among these 115 studies, 31 met standards for rigor of research design, had conclusive results, and became the foci of the research review. Accordingly, 12 studies rendered no overall significant effects, 11 demonstrated consistent positive effects on SFA achievement, and eight offered a mix of positive and no significant results (The Comprehensive School Reform Quality Center 2005). Because SFA has been identified as a reform that has considerable research evidence to support overall positive influences on student achievement, a key focus should be to examine which findings within the study did not have significant effects. For example, findings from a study exploring the reading performance of minority students using SFA versus non-minority students not using SFA in grades 1-3, indicated overall positive effects for SFA on reading performance (Ross et al. 1997). However, upon closer examination of the results, the researchers noted that the program effect for SFA declined over time and the program influences on ethnic group differences were mostly inconclusive. These specific findings are critical in examining the impact of SFA on the achievement of diverse student populations especially if our goal is to leave no child behind and close the achievement gap. We must ask what conclusive evidence is there that SFA has long-term effects for students? Nevertheless, while there are several studies that show "overall" positive effects of SFA on student achievement (Datnow et al. 2003; Munoz and Dossett's 2004; Ross et al. 1997) closer examinations of specific effects and outcomes will render a different verdict on the program's effectiveness for diverse student populations.

In another example, Datnow et al. (2003) mixed-method study, used ethnicity as a variable and found that SFA actually benefited English language learners (ELLs). The study concluded that non-ELL performed lower than ELLs in both reading and mathematics. However, as noted by the researchers, schools in the study made adaptations for English Language Learners in order to meet the oral language development needs of the students, and to differentiate instruction (e.g., vary the pacing). Therefore, as with any reform, the question becomes whether positive effects of SFA is the result of the implementation of the program itself or teachers' modifying the program to meet the individual and cultural needs of the students in their classrooms.

Furthermore, critics such as Pogrow (2000, 2002) have challenged the results of SFA charging that there is a research bias due to the abundance of the research being conducted by either the developers or SFA affiliates. Borman et al. (2003) also concur with Pogrow in noting that for half of the studies reviewed, SFA's analysis not only had some type of quasi-experimental control group but also displayed effects that had been achieved by the developers themselves. This raises questions about the reliability and trustworthiness of the results, and more implicitly the agenda for such extensive research conducted by the developers

themselves. Arguably, considering that reforms such as SFA has been nationally sponsored (U.S. department of Education 2004) the question becomes whether the increased research by the developers is a result of genuine program evaluation and improvement or a strategy to present positive research results to continue program funding. This latter agenda of course poses threats to ensuring that the quality of the SFA program is most responsive to and in the best interest of the stakeholders they are intended to serve.

Therefore, after an exhaustive search of the current knowledge and research base on the effectiveness of SFA on student achievement, it is reasonable to conclude that there is little to no evidence on how this model meets the cultural and linguistic needs of the students it serves. As argued previously, offering students a culturally responsive environment not only affirms their cultural gifts and talents but also enhances the quality of learning experiences and long-term effects for students (Gay 2000; Hilliard 2006; Howard 2003; Ladson-Billings 1994). Based on the scripted/prescribed nature of this reform model, one could question how SFA allows teachers the autonomy to connect learning to the cultural reality and experiences of their students. We can ask how does the curriculum reflect teaching practices that are the most responsive to diverse student populations? While the SFA model should be commended for having a bilingual component in the literacy reform model and use of cooperative learning as an instructional strategy, there are currently few studies that explore in depth how such components are authentically culturally relative to linguistically diverse students (Delpit 1995; The Comprehensive School Reform Quality Center 2005). Additionally there is an absence of research that explores how the prescribed instructional materials and strategies allow for multiple perspectives to be presented and present positive images of diverse student populations: all essential components of culturally relevant teaching and learning. As a result, the current research provides little evidence on whether SFA presents a tourist curriculum which in turn jeopardizes the long-term success and affirmation of culturally and linguistically diverse student populations. Therefore, without such exploration, schools implementing this curriculum reform model may be facilitating culturally subtractive school experiences that may go undetected under the smokescreen of "overall positive results" in student achievement scores (Hilliard 2006; Valenzuela 1999). Furthermore, while the mission and goals of SFA is to provide a challenging and inspiring education for all students, particularly "disadvantaged and at-risk students in pre-K through grade eight" (Success for All Foundation 2005), arguably labeling children as disadvantaged and at risk denotes a deficit ideology that views children's cultural capital and tools as non-existent and irrelevant to increasing student achievement in the classroom (Hilliard 2000, 2006). In closure, when considering whether to adopt SFA, school leaders should critically examine how the model allows authentic culturally and responsive teaching for diverse students. It is likely that the results of this evaluation of SFA will indicate that the reform model allows minimal opportunities to affirm and use the cultural talents and tools of the students they aim to serve.



## Direct Instruction for Diverse Student Populations

Direct Instruction is another widely used curriculum model in schools with diverse student populations. This model focuses on accelerating student performance using systematic, interactive, and explicit instruction. The two principles governing this design model are (a) when taught using proper techniques all children are capable learners, and (b) when given research based materials and strategies all teachers can be effective (CSRQC 2005). Like SFA, DI is a prescriptive, externally administered and scripted curriculum model and is supported by research that demonstrates overall positive effects for increasing student achievement. Also, like SFA, DI is implemented in mostly high poverty, low performing schools serving diverse student populations, primarily African American students (Schweinhart and Weikart 1997, 1998). According to the research review conducted by the Comprehensive School Reform Quality Center (2005), 10 of the 56 studies reviewed qualified as rigorous, the results were conclusive, and they became the foci of the research review. For example, the findings from 1 of the 10 studies reported overall positive results for students using the DI program (Yu and Rachor 2000). In their study, Yu and Rachor (2000) examined the reading achievement of students in three urban elementary public schools in the northwest that served "at risk" African American students. They found that by the end of third grade, students that had DI in K-3 grades had significantly higher reading and math scores than the comparison students. Similarly, in their quasi-experimental study, Umbach et al. (1987) examined the reading achievement of first graders and found that students using DI Reading mastery program scored significantly higher on all three subtests of the Woodcock Reading Mastery Test. In more recent studies from the review of research, and by contrast to the positive results mentioned above, Mac Iver and Kemper (2002) and Ross et al. (2004) reported no significant difference between student achievement in schools with DI and control schools.

Moreover, while there are some studies which show no significant effect on student achievement, there still is a body of research that suggests Direct Instruction does improve student achievement; particularly on basic skills development. However, there are currently no studies that explore how the ideology and pedagogy espoused by Direct Instruction represent culturally relevant practices. As defined earlier, culturally relevant pedagogy is "a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural references to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes" (Ladson-Billings 1994, p. 18). Nowhere in the mission and goals of the DI program does it mention the use of students' cultural references in learning. In fact, one of the components of culturally relevant pedagogy is to allow students opportunities to engage in collaborative and community group work (Ladson-Billings 1994). Again, because direct instruction pedagogy focuses on individualized instruction centered on acquiring basic skills through rote practices and memorization, collaborative communal work is not implemented. Also, the reliance on basic skill development refutes the culturally relevant pedagogical goal of providing both rigorous and challenging instructional opportunities for children beyond basic skill attainment (Gay 2000; Ladson-Billings 1994, 1995). Therefore, because of the prescribed and scripted na-



ture of the program, teachers do not have the autonomy to make learning meaningful, applicable, and culturally relevant to the students they teach, and therefore teachers and school leaders become inevitable partners in implementing culturally subtractive experiences for students. So the question for school leaders would then become whether they are willing to compromise the ability to implement culturally and linguistically responsive classroom practices in order to adopt Direct Instruction.

### **Lights, Camera, Script: Last Casting Call for Culturally Responsive Curriculum Reform Models**

In response to this review of the current literature on the lack of culturally responsive teaching in popular school reforms serving diverse student populations, a defense could be that the “proof is in the pudding”: that the overall positive results presented should be enough evidence that the reforms are effective for teaching diverse student populations. However, to counter this argument, further research and scholarly dialogues exploring the presence of culturally responsive teaching and learning in these models questions whether they are the most applicable and beneficial learning experiences for diverse student populations: particularly if the reform model contains curriculum model that is prescribed, externally administered, and scripted.

Questioning whether the comprehensive school reform model allows teachers and the school to implement culturally relevant practices is a valid and just inquiry. Stakeholders and decision makers must ask: Is the reform effort inclusive of the voices and experiences of diverse students and their families? Are empathic interactions promoted and critical thinking supported? Does the reform model include a tourist or an authentic curriculum? Does the curriculum reform model connect to children’s culture and language tools, and talents? Are teachers given flexibility and opportunities to differentiate instruction based on the unique cultural and linguistic needs of the students in the classroom? Are children affirmed through classroom pedagogy, ideology and expectations? The answer to these questions can allow for a more informed decision on which model to adopt.

It is clear that stakeholders must consider both the short and long-term implications of adopting a curriculum model that may prove to be culturally subtractive for students (Valenzuela 1999). As culturally responsive teaching suggests, educational experiences should directly connect with the cultural and linguistic talents, and realities that children bring with them to the classroom, rather than make learning an exercise in standardizing experiences and assimilating children into mainstream discourse and culture. Thus, stakeholders are challenged to do their homework by engaging in careful, preventive consideration prior to adopting or sponsoring a comprehensive school reform model. As presented earlier, there is evidence that making curriculum culturally relevant and salient is as Ladson-Billings (1995) notes “just good teaching” (p. 159). Therefore, if reforms are indeed the silver bullet for improving the quality of education for students, closing the achievement gap, and leaving no child behind, schools are encouraged to do your homework when selecting among the 500 models. Schools, districts, and

the national community must champion for curriculum and instructional practices that affirms all children, and connects their cultural reality to their learning experiences. Indeed, by doing our homework in this way, we can begin to take meaningful steps in leaving no child behind and providing a quality education to all.

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