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Culturally Responsive Pedagogy in English and Eliminating the Achievement Gap

Since the advent of No Child Left Behind in 2002, teachers everywhere have become increasingly familiar with the term “achievement gap.” These words have come to represent one of the greatest struggles in public schools today, the struggle to educate all children regardless of race, class, gender, or religion. Currently in America, brown and black students lag behind their white counterparts on every standardized test in every subject (Perry, “Parched Earth” 7). In the state of Minnesota alone, white students are nearly 30% more proficient in reading than their African American counterparts and 33% more proficient in math (Minnesota Department of Education). Why, in a country so full of resources and a full fifty-four years after Brown vs. Board of Education, is this discrepancy in academic achievement a reality for African American students, especially in regard to African American males? What causes the gap? And how can teachers eliminate it, truly ensuring a quality education for all students? In this project, I will investigate the causes of the gap, overview best practice solutions, and demonstrate how I am using Culturally Responsive Pedagogy in my English classroom to eliminate the achievement gap.

Causes of the Achievement Gap

Over the years, while scholars have cited a myriad of reasons for the achievement gap in this country, the majority of these causes can be broken into two categories: external and internal. As they apply to this project, external causes are those outside the influence of the district or classroom teacher as external; those within control of teachers and the district are internal.

When faced with the shameful extent of the achievement gap, there is no shortage of scholars, administrators, and teachers willing to place blame on external forces (Belfiore, Auld, and Lee 856). As scholars have noted, poverty, illness, and genetic shortcomings have all at one time or another been cited as at fault for the lack of achievement in black or brown students (Belfiore, Auld, and Lee 855; Romney 31). Attaching the blame for the achievement gap on the shoulders of the African American community is also common. Lack of parental support, community violence, and student attitudes and ability are only a few reasons cited by teachers and administrators for the low achievement of African American and Latino populations (Kunjufu, "Critical Issues" 1; Belfiore, Auld, and Lee 855; Romney 31). This type of thinking falls into what H. Richard Milner calls "culturally deficit thinking," the belief that African American students, males in particular, do not possess the skills, prior knowledge, and attitudes necessary to learn, and that their home communities are unable or unwilling to help them ("But Good Intentions" 81). In her essay, "Up from Parched Earth," Theresa Perry explains the inherent danger in pointing fingers at the students and parents we wish to help. Such an endeavor:

will invariably become a conversation that blames Black parents, Black

students, and the Black community. The danger is that it will become yet another location for the recycling of the ideology of African-American moral, cultural, and intellectual deficiency.” (9)

Not only does blame on external factors alienate the very populations we teach, but in the end, it leaves all educators with a feeling of helplessness. After all, if the causes of the achievement gap truly lie outside the scope of individual teachers, no teacher, no matter how skilled or determined, will ever succeed in eliminating it.

There are, however, many educators who view the causes of the achievement gap very much within their control. Such educators recognize the pervasive influence of internal factors on the lack of achievement in their black and brown students. As several scholars have noted, factors such as stereotype threat, low expectations for African American students by their teachers, and the cultural discontinuity many African American students experience between their school and home culture all contribute to the achievement gap in this country (Graybill 312; Romney 33; Steele 111). Once understood, these barriers to student achievement can be eliminated.

The influence of stereotype threat has been explored by many prominent African American authors and educators. In “Stereotype Threat and African-American Student Achievement,” Claude Steele defines stereotype threat as “the threat of being viewed through the lens of a negative stereotype, or the fear of doing something that would inadvertently confirm that stereotype” (111). In essence, many African American students are aware of the negative perceptions white teachers may have regarding their intelligence, behavior, and ability to succeed. Faced with this stereotype threat, research shows that these students may choose to live up to the negative perceptions around them

and fail to thrive in the school system (Garrison-Wade and Lewis 156; McMillian 29). This awareness of negative perceptions regarding intelligence also influences the achievement gap. A 1999 study by Patricia Romney found that African American and Latino students who were aware of the achievement gap often failed to do well on standardized tests. She reports that these students, faced with their perceived inabilities, felt diminished even before taking the tests (33).

Low expectations for African American students by teachers are another major internal factor in the achievement gap (Kunjufu, "Critical Issues" 2). Like stereotype threat, teacher expectations for African American and Latino students are often based on perceived deficiencies in these students (Kunjufu, "Black Students" 95). Jawanza Kunjufu maintains that these perceived deficiencies result in below average placement in college preparation classes and above average referrals to special education ("Keeping Black Boys" 12, 18). Kunjufu warns in his book, Critical Issues in Educating African American Youth, "there is a lack of appreciation for different learning styles, and if Black children cannot fit the norm they are placed in special education" (43). Without exposure to the same tailored instruction as their white counterparts, and often removed from the classroom setting, African American students are denied the cultural capital they need to do well on standardized tests, resulting in a wider gap.

The third internal factor affecting the achievement gap is the cultural discontinuity African American children face between their home culture and school. Most classrooms in America are conducted in a way that can be defined as Eurocentric. The accepted language, teaching styles, and behavior expectations are all based on what is considered normal in white mainstream society (Graybill 312; Kunjufu, "Black

Students” 96). For example, many classrooms rely on an analytical learning style. This style is characterized by a part-to-whole approach that values written text over oral expression and individual work over group learning. In contrast, many African American children are global learners, favoring a whole-to-part approach when learning and thrive on a communication style that is group oriented, oral, and full of movement. In “Questions of Race and Culture: How they relate to the classroom for African American students,” Susan Graybill quotes Hakim Rashid on the factors that influence the lack of success for African American children in the classroom:

the education of white children is relatively more successful than that of black children because the schools are designed for white education. In other words, an “essentially African” group of people must function in “essentially European” schools. (315)

Faced with a learning style so clearly mismatched to their own, many black and brown children, especially males, become defeated, defiant, and tuned out (McMillian 25; Young, Wright, and Laster 519).

Eliminating the Achievement Gap

Clearly, an important step for eliminating the achievement gap in this country is to refrain from blaming African American parents, communities, and children for its existence and concentrate instead on changing those internal factors within our control as educators. Only then can we begin to create a future where all children are given the opportunity in schools for great success. Though there are many solutions available to teachers, including more helpful communication with parents, creating partnerships with

the community, and taking advantage of professional development opportunities for diversity training (Larocque 158; McGee 108; Wenglinsky 2), I am going to concentrate on three techniques I have found most helpful in my classroom: establishing mutually respectful, caring relationships with students, implementing challenging curriculum for all students, and engaging in culturally responsive pedagogy.

A study conducted by Tyrone Howard in four inner-city schools found that positive relationships between students and teachers that fostered a sense of community in the classroom were ranked as number one in importance to African American children (133). Though this seems like an insignificant solution for the achievement gap, Howard found that African American students who felt they were respected and loved by their teachers were more likely to stay engaged, work hard, and possess positive self-esteem as learners (138). Simple steps such as being aware of students' interests, asking questions about family, and offering a welcoming smile and a willingness to help are all ways to create positive relationships in the classroom. As with stereotype threat, children who believe their teacher likes them will like their teacher and in return like school.

A rigorous curriculum and high teacher expectations for all students have also been found to reduce the achievement gap (Belfiore, Auld, and Lee 856). Kunjufu finds that too often African American students are placed in tracked classes with teachers who do not truly believe they are capable of learning the material ("Critical Issues" 7). Faced with a lower educational status and curriculum that focuses on rote memorization, many African American children internalize their own perceived failings. In A Handbook for Teachers of African American Students, Baruti Kafele discusses the importance of self-confidence in the success of African American students:

The first key ingredient for success is belief. In order for your students to achieve academic excellence, it is essential that they believe that they have the ability to do so. If they lack belief in themselves, chances are good that they will not achieve at the level that you expect them to achieve. (53)

Holding black and brown students accountable to high standards of learning, as Claude Steele maintains, while simultaneously voicing the belief that they are capable of meeting those challenges, will result in students who are not only engaged but have a higher self esteem (126). Exposed to the same educational opportunities as their white peers, black and brown students will be able to acquire the cultural capital needed to excel on standardized tests.

Finally, in order to eliminate the achievement gap once and for all, teachers must engage in culturally relevant pedagogy—a way of “designing instruction to make explicit connections between content and literacy goals and the knowledge and experiences students share with family, community, and peers” (Risko and Walker-Dalhouse 98). In short, culturally relevant teachers recognize the important part culture plays in student learning, and the deficit we have placed upon our African American students by refusing to acknowledge their culture within in the classroom in a regular and meaningful way.

Educational theorists have long understood the need for scaffolding, making connections between a child’s prior knowledge and new learning. According to Victoria J. Risko and Doris Walker-Dalhouse, the success of culturally relevant pedagogy lies in the recognition that culture is the key for scaffolding with students of color (99). In “Unlocking the Potential of African American Students: Keys to Reversing Underachievement,” Yvette Jackson writes, “Cultural experience is what makes

something relevant and meaningful to an individual, so that understanding and learning are directly impacted by culture” (204). When exposed to culturally relevant pedagogy, research shows that African American students are freed from the restraints of learning new material in an unfamiliar cultural context (Perry, “Competing Theories” 55). As a result, they improve markedly in engagement, motivation, and positive teacher relationships (Howard 136). No longer asked to choose between success in school and abandoning their home culture, black and brown students are given the permission to thrive.

An important component of culturally relevant pedagogy is the type of material chosen for the classroom. Curriculum must go beyond simply portraying people of color. It must also avoid reinforcing negative stereotypes and racism. Bena Hefflin refers to this material as “culturally conscious literature,” which she defines as “that which illuminates the experience of growing up in a non-white group by portraying African American perspectives and lifestyles” (236). In order to assist teachers in selecting suitable curriculum, Hefflin has created five rules for culturally relevant material:

1. Select literature from authors and illustrators who have established reputations for publishing culturally sensitive material, and look at material that highlights the works of new and up-and-coming authors and illustrators.
2. Analyze how the characters are portrayed in the story.
3. Analyze the author’s use of language.
4. Examine the illustrations for appeal, ethnic sensitivity, and authenticity.
5. Evaluate factual information for accuracy. (237)

Using materials that meet these criteria, says Heflin, allows students of color true access to their prior knowledge and affirms their racial identity as learners (232).

The components of culturally relevant pedagogy, however, go beyond simply incorporating multicultural literature into the classroom. As Risko and Walker-Dalhouse state in “Tapping Students’ Cultural Funds of Knowledge to Address the Achievement Gap,” culturally relevant pedagogy “capitalizes on the knowledge and literacy strategies students learn in their home and communities, the ways that students reason about and make sense of their world, and the language and communication patterns of students” (98). Risko and Walker-Dalhouse further state that culturally responsive pedagogy requires teachers to step outside their comfort zone and get to know each child’s home culture, language, and interests. Only then can teachers tap into the wealth of knowledge children bring into the classrooms (98). Gloria Ladson-Billings suggests that this may mean deconstructing district-sanctioned curriculum and constructing it again on the foundation of culturally relevant materials utilizing techniques that capitalize on the learning styles of all students (32). These techniques, as researchers have demonstrated, include drama and role-playing, cooperative discussions, hands-on activities, opportunities for movement, and popular culture (Brown 60; Graybill 315; Landsman 53; Risko and Walker-Dalhouse 98). Unlike in traditional classrooms, culturally responsive teachers honor African American and Latino traditions and cultures with call and response instead of hand raising, group learning instead of individual projects, and dance and music instead of long hours seated at a desk, creating an environment where learning is a stimulating activity for all students.

Culturally Responsive Teaching and My Classroom

For the past seven years, I have worked as a seventh grade Literary Arts teacher at F.A.I.R. School in Crystal, Minnesota. F.A.I.R. School is a grades 4-8 fine arts magnet school that focuses on diversity and anti-racist practices. Children enter our school through a lottery system and come from any of twelve districts in the metropolitan area, including Minneapolis. F.A.I.R. students mirror the diversity found in many public schools: 18% of our students receive free and reduced lunch, 10% are special education, 23% are African American, 68% white, 5 % Asian, 3% Latino, and 1% American Indian. F.A.I.R. has consistently scored above 80% proficiency on the Reading MCA II and 75% proficiency on the Math MCA II due in a large part to our use of culturally relevant pedagogy in the classroom. In 2007, African American and white students in my classroom scored 91% proficient on the Reading MCA II, eliminating the achievement gap entirely (Minnesota Department of Education).

One of F.A.I.R.'s greatest strengths is the freedom teachers have to create curricula that mirror the culture of their students. In my seven years at F.A.I.R., I have rewritten the majority of my curriculum to reflect culturally relevant practices and continue to revise units to incorporate new strategies. Much of my curriculum revolves around A. Wade Boykin's Nine Dimensions of African American Cultural Ethos. The dimensions I focus on most are: spirituality, movement, verve, communalism, expressive individualism, and orality. According to Boykin, spirituality is the belief that there is a supreme force that pervades all aspects of life. Movement is defined as the importance of rhythm, musicality, and dance in everyday existence, while verve is the love of excitement and varied stimulation. The value communalism stresses the interdependence

of a people and the importance of relationships within that group. Boykin defines expressive individualism as being unique in expression and style while cultivating an individual self. Finally, the value of orality emphasizes oral communication for passing along information and stories, as well as using the spoken word as performance (39-40). I try to incorporate these dimensions when planning activities, assigning work, and dealing with behavior. These dimensions are especially important to me when choosing culturally relevant materials for my classroom.

My academic year is broken into several large units that tie into themes and information students are learning in their other classes. Over the course of the year, my students will study the Harlem Renaissance, write and analyze hip hop and classic poetry, read The House on Mango Street, and complete a short story unit. Along with these units, I interweave grammar instruction through the use of district-purchased curriculum. I am able to meet the majority of Minnesota State Standards through these four large units. The remaining standards are covered through a variety of smaller projects.

Of all the units I teach, my Hip Hop and Classic Poetry Unit is the best example of culturally relevant pedagogy. This unit focuses on interpreting poetry and using poetic devices through the lens of hip hop music and culture. Students are also given the opportunity to compare the poetic qualities of hip hop to classic poems and to write their own poetry and hip hop. Once completed, this unit meets twenty-four Minnesota State Standards. More importantly, by the end of this unit, my students are not only more thoughtful consumers of hip hop music but also consider themselves poets and readers of poetry as well.

Hip hop as a body of literature is well suited to the needs of all students, but in particular African American students. Emerging in the 1970s, hip hop music and culture has long served as a vehicle to “crystallize the young, urban minority identity and unite listeners through a shared discourse of pride and power” (Forell 29). As a well-known component of the African American community, hip hop automatically allows young students of color access to a type of writing where they already possess a great deal of cultural capital. In addition, the culture of hip hop reflects the lives of many African American students who have historically felt marginalized by the Eurocentric curriculum of most schools. Jabari Mahiri states in “Streets to Schools: African American Youth Culture and the Classroom”:

Because hip hop and rap texts inherently bring into their critique (and therefore into the classroom) perspectives of race, class, gender, ethnicity, power, and authority that are problematic in schools as well as in the larger society, students who had felt marginalized found that a context had been created for their voices and participation. (337)

The combination of students’ familiarity with the genre and hip hop’s historical significance to the black community is a recipe for success in the classroom.

One of the greatest contributions hip hop can make in an English/Language Arts classroom is an increase in literacy for all students. Written to mimic the oral traditions of the African American experience (Grace, Hinchman and Smith 484), hip hop can help students negotiate Standard English. For example, K Leigh Hamm Forell finds that students studying the narrative patterns of rap can scaffold that knowledge to understand and use more formal narratives to tell their own stories, effectively combining confidence

with competence (31,33). In addition, students can practice code-switching between their home language and Standard English by “translating” favorite lyrics into more formal poems. This exercise not only allows students to grasp the linguistic patterns of Standard English, but also helps them understand what “the language of power.” Gloria Ladson-Billings discusses the importance of this step in an interview with Arlette Ingram stating, “Because language is so powerful, one of the things I think teachers have to be aware of is that when they help kids develop literacy skills, they do help kids become empowered” (qtd. in Ingram 63). Forell observes that the role of theme in many hip hop songs is also useful in an English classroom (36). Students who can identify themes in the lyrics with which they are familiar will find themselves far more willing and able to translate that skill to short stories or novels. Taken further, students can compare and contrast theme between the two works, thus emphasizing yet another tool for increasing literacy.

Beyond the advantages hip hop offers in content, I have found it to be an excellent vehicle for using Boykin’s Nine Dimensions of African American Cultural Ethos: the use of rhyme and meter create movement opportunities, the lyrics mirror the values of expressive individualism and affect, and the verbal nature of the genre allows many opportunities for students to practice orality. Songs by Mos Def and Tupac offer glimpses of the communalism valued in many African American households and can set the stage for wonderful discussions of power and perseverance in texts like Cisneros’ The House on Mango Street or Countee Cullen’s “If We Must Die.” For teachers who are willing to open their eyes to the positive aspects of hip hop language and culture, they will find countless pedagogical possibilities for their use in the classroom.

The Hip Hop and Classic Poetry unit in my classroom follows on the heels of our study of the Harlem Renaissance. Having studied the varied literature of that time period, students begin the new unit excited to see the transformations that have occurred in African American culture and literature since the Harlem Renaissance. This excitement combined with adolescents' inherent love of music generates a high level of motivation in my classroom even before the unit begins.

I always begin each day of this unit with a poem. Chosen from a variety of poets of color and traditional canonical poems, the daily reading often introduces the concept for the lesson and creates a sense of ritual in our classroom, which Howard maintains is an important component of culturally relevant pedagogy (142). I start by sharing background about our chosen poet, emphasizing their educational successes. Next, I choose a student volunteer to read the poem to the class. By allowing students to read the poems instead of reading them myself, I accomplish two tasks. One, I honor the African American quality of orality, and, two, I quickly check the fluency of my student volunteer in a non-threatening manner. The student's reading is followed by a very brief question and answer session to gauge comprehension and practice skills such as literal and inferential interpretation. This emphasis of orality is also repeated often in the unit as students are given opportunities to share their own writing through informal performances in class.

I spend the first two weeks of the unit assessing students' prior knowledge and creating a base of information all students will need to be successful. For the first three days, students develop a level of comfort around the concept of poetry by exploring the vast reserves of poetry books I have at my disposal. Working in pairs, students select a

poem from the books to which they feel a personal connection. After reading the poem and discussing it with their partner, they create an artistic poster that represents an image in their poem. Once they have completed their posters, students share their poems with the class and hang their posters somewhere in the building for the entire student body to enjoy. These posters, which will remain up the entire quarter, can be found in the office, gym, cafeteria, halls, and theater. In this way, not only does poetry become an element of their Literary Arts class, but it becomes a fixture in our school as well, emphasizing our commitment to the genre and developing a sense of community.

Now somewhat comfortable interacting with poetry, students view a documentary and PowerPoint on the origins of hip hop, further developing a base of knowledge for our unit. By spending two days on the history of hip hop, I legitimize it as a genuine literary form and validate the culture of my African American and Latino students while acknowledging the love of music shared by the class as a whole. Informed and excited, students end their first week ready to tackle the finer points of the genre.

By week two, students are introduced to the working vocabulary of this unit through a card sort technique developed by the National Urban Alliance or NUA. NUA travels the country mentoring teachers and administrators and sharing best practices for eliminating the achievement gap through literacy instruction. The card sort activity they designed is specifically created for global and kinesthetic learners and works well for introducing keywords and concepts in a unit (National Urban Alliance). For this activity, students are given poetry and hip hop vocabulary words on index cards. It is not necessary that they know the definitions for the words as that will come later. Working in groups to establish interdependence and community, students sort the words into

categories of their choosing, which they then label. Students may use any labels they like, but their categories must connect to poetry or sound in some way. After groups finish, they volunteer to share their categorizations with the class by sorting the words, which have been enlarged and magnetized, on the board. The class may then challenge each group as to how they categorized their words. This process is repeated with several groups, which allows for a great deal of movement and community interaction within the class. By the end of the hour, the combined input of students has helped the class as a whole develop a rudimentary idea of what the vocabulary words mean, leaving all students anxious to return the following day and find out if their guesses were correct. This lesson is an example of culturally relevant pedagogy in its incorporation of cooperative learning, movement, manipulatives, and opportunities for critical thinking.

As the unit progresses and students become more familiar with the vocabulary of poetry, they are taught to critically analyze classical poems and hip hop lyrics. This process begins with a two day lesson that compares Dylan Thomas's "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night" and Tupac's "If I Must Die." Both poems touch on spirituality, a dimension of culture shared by many of my students regardless of race, making them especially suitable for an introductory lesson. The lesson begins with a volunteer reading Dylan Thomas to class. Next, I share ten questions with students that they should be able to answer when they analyze a poem:

Who is the speaker?

Who is the speaker addressing?

What is the setting of the poem?

What is the theme of the poem?

Is this theme stated directly or indirectly?

From what perspective is the speaker describing the events?

What kind of figurative language does the poet use (simile, metaphor, personification, hyperbole)?

What is the structure of the poem (meter, rhyme, number of lines, number and structure of stanzas)?

How does the poem make you feel?

Working on the overhead, and with student input, I model how to answer the questions marking my text as I go to reflect my thought processes. Harold Wenglinzky find this type of metacognitive instruction especially important in developing literacy in African American students: “There is a link between students’ performances in reading and teaching metacognition” (4). Throughout this process, I encourage students to share their ideas and answers verbally in a call and response method that mimics the vocalizations of African American churches. By dropping the emphasis on Eurocentric traditions of hand-raising, I have found my participation of students of color dramatically increases during these discussions while having no adverse affects on the participation of students of other races.

Once we have thoroughly discussed the ten questions and come to an understanding of the poem together, students are asked to pair up with a partner of their choice. These partnered groups go through the same steps, this time analyzing a rap by Tupac. Choosing Tupac for the students’ first foray into analysis is important for several reasons. In the African American community, Tupac has taken on an almost mythical quality since his death in 1996 according to Michael E. Dyson (13). Because he is a hero

figure for young black males, including him in the unit alongside a classical poet like Dylan Thomas, not only honors the genre but the lives of students as well. Having analyzed Tupac in pairs, we reconvene as a larger group and share our findings on the overhead. Again, students are asked to explain their thinking and given opportunities to mark up the text. We end with a brief discussion on the similarities and differences between Dylan Thomas and Tupac, both in their writing styles and subject matter.

Familiar with analysis and the vocabulary of genre, students move towards creating their own poems in the following weeks. Over the course of the unit, students will write a total of ten poems, many based on famous works both classical and hip hop. Each poem will demonstrate one of or more of the vocabulary words for the unit and include additional opportunities for students to practice their analysis and comparisons of classical poetry and hip hop lyrics.

In the lesson, *Silent Loud Eternal*, students are asked to create a poem using onomatopoeia focusing on things in life that are silent, things that are loud, and things that are eternal. We begin by analyzing two poems that contain onomatopoeia, “The Congo” by Vachel Lindsay and “Datskat” by the Roots. (It is important to note that the use of Lindsay’s poem should include a dialogue with students about the controversial nature of this poet’s portrayal of African people.) These poems are analyzed on the overhead and in pairs through worksheets found in a wonderful book called Hip Hop Poetry and the Classics written by Alan Sitomer and Michael Cibelli. Once analysis is complete, students brainstorm using a lexicon strategy from NUA. In this strategy, students label A-Z down the side of their paper. They then must think of an example of things that are silent, loud, or eternal for each letter of the alphabet. This strategy works

well for increasing students' vocabulary as they must push themselves to find examples for their sheet (National Urban Alliance). Dictionaries are allowed, and many students take advantage of them, furthering their exposure to new vocabulary. Students complete this step using think/pair/share, meaning they work on their own for ten minutes, share their ideas with a partner for ten minutes, and then share as a whole group. By the end of the exercise, we have an example for each letter of the alphabet that students can use as inspiration for their poem. Students are then asked to create a poem for homework either rhymed or unrhymed that elaborates on their examples of silent, loud, and eternal and incorporates onomatopoeia. They are given opportunities to share these poems the following day. Below is an example of a Silent, Loud, Eternal poem from one of my students this year:

As their final project for this unit, students create an anthology of poetry they have written. This anthology must include five poems and examples of meter, metaphor or simile, personification, hyperbole, onomatopoeia, and rhyme. Working with a partner, students select the best examples of their writing, edit their poems, write final drafts, and create their booklets. In addition, their booklets must contain a paragraph for each poem explaining why it was chosen and analyzing it for poetic devices and content. Students then decorate their anthologies with artwork to create a finished project that reflects their individuality. Finally, students perform one poem from their anthology for the class. Parents and community members are invited to attend this performance and honor the poets. Perhaps more important than any other aspect of the unit, is this final performance which allows the class to recognize and celebrate their success as a community.

Over the past seven years, I have witnessed culturally relevant pedagogy transform my classroom into a community of students who are proud, motivated, and energized to learn. More importantly, I have seen a change in myself both personally and professionally. I am no longer blind to the vast resources my students bring to the classroom, nor am I ignorant about the challenges they face everyday in navigating a world that may or may not be set up for their success. More than ever before, I am aware of the fact that my role in the classroom, from the type of curriculum I choose to my behavior policy, plays a large part in shaping the future of my students as learners. As educators, we must constantly ask ourselves, “Am I truly committed to the success of every child?” My answer is “yes.”