Ten Ideas on Simultaneous Culture-Centric Approaches
From *Teaching Umoja*

Idea # 1

Reflect cultural images, relevancy, and continuity.

The first and strongest idea states the ideal educational environment for four to seven year-old African American and Latino children reflects positive cultural images, is culturally relevant, and has an " everyday" cultural continuity. It was developed from our discussion related to reflecting positive cultural images and using culturally relevant pedagogy. We all felt that an ideal educational environment for African American and Latino children aged four to seven would have images in the form of books, posters, puzzles, and materials that reflected the cultural backgrounds of the children.

Our demonstration class illustrated how we operationalized the concepts and ideas on cultural relevancy and the use of positive cultural images. As children arrived with their families, we greeted them at the door, welcomed them, and showed them to the classroom, which was full of images of African American and Latino culture and people. Posters of urban and rural Latino family life, collages of African Americans of various ages, skin colors, sizes, and hair styles, and photographs of people were hung at the child's eyelevel around the classroom.

We shared various strategies for working toward culturally relevant settings, such as, interviewing parents, seeking staff members from the same community, video or audio-taping parents telling stories, observing to see - how children react to the program, inviting parents to the class, and 'taking the school to the community and the community to the school.' We discussed the importance of not trying to speak for the cultural group but instead finding ways to collaborate and learn from the families of the program.

Idea # 2

Provide and model resistance and survival strategies.

All participants identified, in some way, the need for supporting African American and Latino children against the potential damage of racial discrimination and cultural and linguistic oppression. Idea 2 states past scars

from racial discrimination can be addressed and potential scars prevented by caring adults providing African American and Latino children with the opportunity and guidance to develop survival skills, 'rejecting rejection" strategies, and self-esteem; maintain or re-claim the home language; and address bias.

Participants specifically discussed scars that they had suffered or that they had observed children suffer because of cruel treatment related to racial discrimination. For some, the discrimination was obvious and overt. For others it was subtle and covert. These participants felt that racial discrimination attacked the self-esteem of the child. We discussed the real danger that surrounded our children. Our resistance and survival strategies had to be directed towards both potential physical and psychological attacks. Sometimes the strategies we shared with them were about not sharing everything about themselves. We also discussed the need to support children In the face of other forms of discrimination, based on gender, economic class, linguistic background, and ability.

In the Saturday morning demonstration session, we used direct and indirect resistance strategies with the African American and Latino children. The direct strategies included the "I Like Myself" song and the skin color variation story in Spanish. The more subtle and indirect strategies included using Spanish, having images of African American and Latino children and families around the room, and labeling of areas and materials in both English and Spanish. We believe that just providing a culturally relevant educational environment is itself a rejecting rejection strategy.

Idea # 3

Involve parents and community in program development.

We identified parent and community involvement as one of the major elements needed for a successful program for African American and Latino children. We see parents as the primary source for generating the materials, activities, and content of cultural relevant programs. This led to our third Idea: involving and creating partnerships with parents and community is central to developing culturally relevant teaching strategies.

Idea # 4

Reclaim, validate, and maintain the home language.

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The fourth idea relates to the children's home language and 'providing language models." it states that young African American and Latino children benefit from validation of the home language and daily contact with caring adult speakers modeling use of their home language in social interaction, in the school setting. We discussed the importance of providing language models and access to the children's home language in the school setting. Central to idea 4 is having people working with the children who are fully fluent in the home language and with highly skilled teaching abilities.

Idea # 5

Develop cross-literacy, loam second language, and negotiate culture of the classroom.

We discussed the importance of African American and Latino children learning about and interacting with other cultural groups. For some, this began with learning about others from the same ethnic group who may be from another region or speak differently. Some of us focused on the importance of learning about the specific cultural backgrounds of the children and families enrolled in the program. This contributed to the formation of the idea that once children of color are established in their own language and cultural systems and communities, developing cross literacy is valuable, appropriate, and necessary.

Idea # 6

Establish "critical mass" and consider intra-group cultural and linguistic variance.

The discussion of 'within group linguistic and cultural variance" and 'establishing critical mass" was identified in over half of our interview transcripts. Some discussed critical mass in relationship to the number of children from the same cultural/linguistic group needed in a program in order for a linguistic community to form. Others suggested it also related to having several children from the same cultural group in order to avoid any student being isolated. The issue of within group linguistic and cultural variance also emerged. This related to the idea of creating a critical mass of students because Just having five Latino students might not create the critical mass if they are from very different cultural, geographical, national, or linguistic backgrounds.

The six idea brought these two points together and states that establishing "critical mass" is a key role of culture-centric approaches to teaching; simultaneous culture-centric approaches consider critical mass as well as within group linguistic and cultural variance. Some participants of color discussed critical mass in reference to their own positive schooling experiences where they attended classrooms where many or all of the students were from their same cultural background.

Idea # 7

Promote "everyday" culturally relevant pedagogy.

We discussed the importance of passing on cultural traditions and oral and written literacy to the next generation. Culturally relevant pedagogy can provide ways for the educational setting to contribute to the transmitting of culture by opening up channels for the natural process of passing on and re-creating culture from generation to generation. The seventh idea states culturally relevant approaches have an "everydayness" feeling regarding culture, provide avenues for the transmission of cultural knowledge and traditional literacy, and provide highly skilled adults from the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of the children and families.

This meant having people (teachers, parents volunteers, and support staff) from the linguistic and cultural backgrounds of the children. This did not negate the role of and effectiveness of linguistically and culturally responsive European American teachers in the school or program. However, all agreed that situations where all European American staff worked with predominantly African American and Latino children were not culturally relevant. The discussion included having representation at the management and leadership levels of the program.

Idea # 8

Prepare culturally and linguistically relevant teachers.

In several of our interview transcripts, a discussion of who should work with African American and Latino children and the kinds of experiences and skills they would need emerged. One of the barriers identified in idea nine was the lack of qualified, culturally and linguistically relevant teachers. Some participants also pointed out that just being from the same ethnic group did not automatically qualify a person. These ideas led to the idea that adults working with young children possibly have issues to process regarding their

own internalized oppression, feelings of being unqualified, and lack of awareness of the context of education for children of color, which require critical analysis and self-reflection, guidance and modeling, and theoretical and professional development.

Idea # 9

Address barriers to providing culturally relevant learning environments.

Our interview question regarding barriers to ideal educational environments for African American and Latino children generated a range of responses which are addressed with the ninth idea that barriers to providing quality culturally relevant educational environments to African American and Latino children include lack of resources, materials, and teachers; willingness on the part of teachers and administrators; and systemic cultural oppression and racism.

The rank order of the top three barriers identified by the whole group was (1) lack of resources, (2) the educational system and greater societal systems, and (3) lack of linguistically and culturally relevant teachers. The most identified barrier for the African American participants was lack of teachers. For the Latino group and the European American group the most identified barrier was a lack of financial resources.

Idea # 10

Encourage development of tri-literacy in children.

The tenth and final idea pulls together our perspectives on full literacy, transformational education, and codes of power. Each in our own way, we spoke to what simultaneous culture-centric approaches could be for African American and Latino children. This idea states that simultaneous culture-centric approaches to teaching young African American and Latino children support children in both developing bicultural skills and in developing a "tri-literacy," beginning with strengthening their own cultural identity and understanding of their world.

Our Conclusions

We would like to share an important observation we discovered about the value of culture-centric research strategies. We noticed that the use of three

different kinds of data was very useful and that people from different cultural backgrounds tended to respond better to a particular style -- individual interviews, focus group discussion, or the opportunity to try out ideas in practice. It seemed as if our group was in an "unconscious' process of collectively defining a cross-cultural common ground from which to discuss and create theory, paralleling the process we were defining for our children. Participating in this study was an exercise in 'moving the center' as described by Thiong'o (1993) and "making the road by walking" as defined by Horton and Freire (1990).

We were attempting to engage with the challenge the study represented. Whether it was a conscious process or not we were reflecting on and discussing issues of maintaining one's cultural identity and centricity while engaging in cross and multicultural dialogue, and at the same time attempting to use this model as we participated in the activities of the study. This included supporting others in participating without having to shift their conceptual center, communication style, or learning style in order to be a valued part of the group. All the participants had their interview transcripts translated so that there was an English and Spanish copy available for others. In a sense, we modeled what it was we were trying to define for working with the children. We used a transformative culturally relevant approach as the focus, content, and means of participating in this study.

In closing, we would like to thank you for joining our dialogue. We hope you found something useful for your work with children and families. We see this as one contribution to the growing field of culturally relevant pedagogy. Is there a question you have in your community that needs attention? Why don't you consider a participatory research project and bring together community members, teachers, administrators, parents, students, artists, health professionals, and social workers to address it?

Teaching Umoja - Simultaneous Culture-Centric Approaches

Idea #1 - The ideal educational environment for four-to-seven year old African American and Latino children reflects positive cultural images, is culturally relevant, and has an "everyday" cultural continuity.

Idea #2 - Racial discrimination can be addressed and its potential scars prevented by caring adults providing African American and Latino children with the opportunity and guidance to develop skills or strategies for survival, and resisting efforts to separate them from their cultural, linguistic, and familial backgrounds.

Idea # 3 -- Involving and creating partnerships with parents and community is central to developing culturally relevant teaching strategies.

Idea #4 - Young African American and Latino children benefit from validation of the home language and daily contact with caring adult speakers modeling use of their home language in social interaction and in the school setting.

Idea # 5 -- Once children of color are established in their own language and cultural systems and communities, developing cross literacy is valuable, appropriate, and necessary.

Idea # 6 -- Establishing 'critical mass' is a key role of culture-centric approaches to teaching; simultaneous culture-centric approaches consider critical mass as well as within group linguistic and cultural variance.

Idea # 7 -- Culturally relevant teaching has an "everydayness" inclusion of culture; provides avenues for the transmission of cultural knowledge and traditional literacy, supports the dynamic negotiation of present culture; and involves highly skilled adults from the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of the children and families.

Idea # 8 -- Adults working with young children may have to process issues regarding their own internalized oppression, feelings of being unqualified, and lack of awareness of the most appropriate educational context for children of color. These issues require critical analysis and self-reflection, guidance and modeling, and' theoretical and professional development.

Idea # 9 -- Primary borders to providing quality culturally relevant educational environments to African American and Latino children include lack of resources, materials, and teachers; willingness on the part of teachers and administrators; and systemic cultural oppression and racism.

Idea # 10 -- Simultaneous culture-centric approaches to teaching young African American and Latino children them develop skills for functioning in their own, each others, and mainstream United States culture.

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