

It's crazy; it makes me so mad. The papers and the TV keep saying about how Black girls are always having babies without being married and how we should wait and get married. But who are we supposed to marry, tell me, huh? It's not like there's some great guys sitting around just waiting for us. Most of the guys around here, they're hanging on the corner talking big talk, but they're never going to amount to anything. When I see those White people on the TV telling us we should get married, I just want to tell them to shut up because they don't know what they're talking about. What Black girl wouldn't want to be married instead of raising her kids alone (Rubin, 1994, p. 54)?

### **African-American Pregnant and Parenting Teens: How the Numbers Play Out**

Although teen pregnancy and birth rates in the United States declined for ten straight years during the 1990s and were less than half of comparative figures from 1957, the year of the all-time high of teen pregnancy, nearly one in ten teenage young women still became pregnant in 2001, with half of these young women giving birth. Teen pregnancy statistics are particularly high for minority youth in poor and work-

ing class urban areas. Twenty-five percent of teen births occur to African-American teens, and twenty-eight percent occur to Latina teens, despite the fact that African Americans and Latinas each account for only fifteen percent of the total teenage population (National Center for Health Statistics, 2001).

While the largest overall percentage of births occurs to Caucasian young women, race and class further complicate the study of pregnant and parenting teens. Indeed, unlike White middle-class women who become teen mothers, Black pregnant and parenting teens are far more likely to face disapproval by the general public and experience poverty in their lives and the lives of their children. Young Black women who reside in geographic pockets of poverty in urban areas also have higher than average pregnancy rates.

Baltimore, for example, accounts for twenty-one and a half percent of all births to teens in 2000 (Williams, 1991; Ladner, 1987). The correlation between poverty and pregnancy is striking when one considers that the poverty rate of children born to unmarried teenage, high school dropouts is 80 percent, compared to eight percent for children whose mothers are married high school graduates over the age of 20 (Pardini, 2003). Finally, Black and poor parenting teens are much more likely to have been systematically disenfranchised by a school system that provides few real chances for academic

or social advancement (Luttrell, 2003; Kaplan, 1997; Luker, 1996).

The perennial problems faced by young Black women who are either pregnant or parenting who have been disadvantaged in public schools is a troubling phenomenon that merits further attention. This article will provide an overview of societal and school obstacles that African-American pregnant and parenting teens face, and discuss one particular school's innovative response to these teens. By examining how this school and its teachers are employing culturally responsive pedagogy (Gay, 2000) in their work with their students, it is hoped that educators in urban schools elsewhere can begin to consider new and alternative ways of thinking about the education of African-American pregnant and parenting teens, a segment of the overall student population that is currently underserved and disadvantaged in public schools in the U.S.

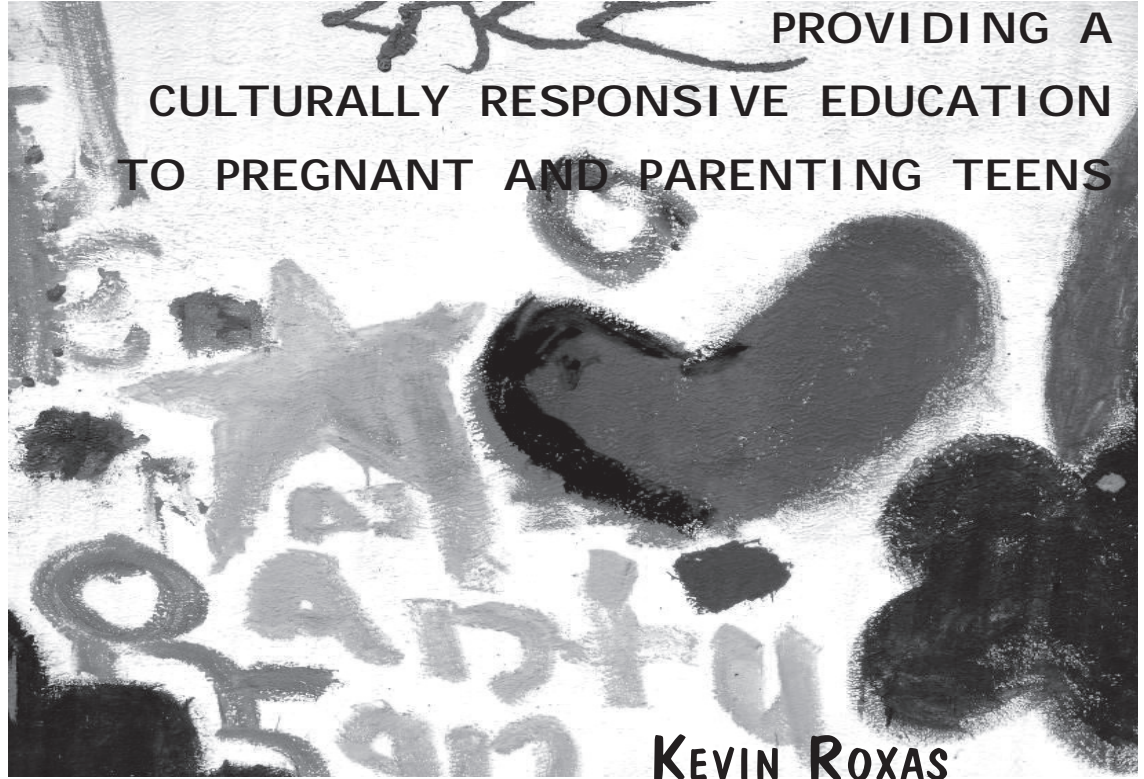
### **Societal Obstacles and Stereotypes for Pregnant and Parenting Teens**

Various explanations have been advanced as to the causes of teen pregnancy for African-American pregnant and parenting teens. Some researchers link teen pregnancy to a widespread alienation and rebellion against traditional societal norms. Because some African-American young women are rendered largely invisible due to their race, gender, and economic

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# PROVIDING A CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE EDUCATION TO PREGNANT AND PARENTING TEENS

KEVIN ROXAS

class, these teens choose to opt out of mainstream society through their pregnancy and the birth of their child.

In the absence of more traditional and acceptable methods for achieving success such as high school graduation or acceptance into college, the bearing of children can be used as a symbol of the achievement of manhood or womanhood (Williams, 1991; Musick, 1993). However, for Black teenage parents, most of whom are poor, an underdeveloped local economy in urban neighborhoods offers one of the most visible explanations for the relatively high number of pregnant and parenting teens in the Black community (Luker, 1996; Ladner, 1987). According to Ladner (1987),

As blacks have faced greater economic scarcity in their neighborhoods and in employment opportunities, the black family has experienced increasing fragmentation which has led to a rapid increase in female-headed households, most of which are at the poverty level. In less than twenty-five years, black female-headed households more than doubled, increasing from twenty-one percent in 1968 to forty-eight percent in 1984. (p. 55)

Ladner goes on to explain that much of the increase in these percentages is due to increases in the number of teens who are becoming pregnant and raising children on their own.

The increase in the percentage of pregnant and parenting teens within the Black community also needs to be consid-

ered in terms of its effects on the teens who are becoming pregnant. Teenage pregnancy and parenthood often leads to poverty for the teen and for the children of teen parents. This poverty is caused by a higher dropout rate for pregnant and parenting teens, eroded earnings because of the lack of a diploma or the inability to work, and the social stigma associated with teenage pregnancy (Polakow, 1993). In order to succeed academically in schools, these students must daily face societal stereotypes that other students and sometimes teachers have about them which are manifested in labels such as "stupid sluts," "welfare moms," and "neglectful mothers" (Kelly, 2004).

Moreover, traditional schools often provide little to no meaningful support for pregnant and parenting teens. Avoiding the educational needs of these particular students or segregating pregnant and parenting teens into self-contained programs within a regular public high school or into an alternative setting such as an off-campus high school equivalency program appears to be the most frequent response from school administrators and officials. However, simply placing pregnant and parenting teens into another part of the school building without additional resources does not help these students succeed in school, especially when many of these students had academic difficulty prior to their pregnancy (Whitman, Bokowski, Keogh, & Weed, 2001; Coley, 1995).

Indeed, few public schools offer adequate support, such as on-site day care or academic remediation services that would enable teen mothers to attend regularly and participate fully in regular public high schools. In recent years, a new approach to the education of pregnant and parenting teens is the provision of alternative schools that are often still self-contained, but yet are comprehensive and highly responsive to the needs and aspirations of pregnant and parenting teens who wish to continue their schooling. These schools feature an educational setting for their teen students that usually include health care, counseling, and child-care programs (Kelly, 2004; Finkel & Thompson, 1997).

Against the prevailing trends in U.S. society to marginalize pregnant and parenting teens, this type of school actively seeks to meet the comprehensive needs of the students and their children. Rosa Parks Academy,<sup>1</sup> an alternative school in Acme City, a large city located in the Midwest, is one clear example of an alternative school striving to be culturally responsive to the needs of the predominantly African-American pregnant and parenting teens that it serves.<sup>2</sup>

This article will use Geneva Gay's conception of culturally responsive teaching, which is based on the assumption that "when academic knowledge and skills are situated within the lived experiences and frames of references of students, they are more personally meaningful, have

higher interest appeal, and are learned more easily and thoroughly” (Gay, 2000). By examining what this school does to meet the educational needs of its student population, this study provides insight into what teachers, administrators, and community members can do to serve this currently underserved student group.

## Methods

During the 2004-2005 and 2005-2006 school years, I conducted a qualitative study to identify how teachers at Rosa Parks Academy used culturally responsive pedagogy in their instructional practices and other interactions with their pregnant and parenting female students (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994; Schumacher & McMillan, 1993). This school was chosen for this project because of its successful retention and graduation rates with pregnant and parenting teen students as compared to other schools with similar student populations at the state and national levels.

Multiple interviews and observations were conducted with six teachers in the school. Teacher participants came from different disciplines within the school, taught at multiple grade levels, and ranged in years of experience at Rosa Parks Academy. Teachers were identified through the use of snowball sampling in which the school principal, other teachers, and students provided me with recommendations for teacher participants who were culturally responsive to the needs of their students (Berg, 1995).

All interviews were audio-taped, transcribed, and followed up with at least one observation of each of the teacher participants’ classrooms. Interviews focused on how each individual implemented culturally responsive teaching in their work with pregnant and parenting students in the classroom, in extracurricular activities, and in personal interactions. During observations, I noted types of classwork, homework and group work assigned, the classroom materials used, types of instructional approaches used, and teacher interaction with students in the classroom.

Ethnographic field notes were taken during each interview and subsequent observation and were used in the final data analysis. I also collected archival data including teacher newsletters to families, homework assignments, program policy descriptions, and enrollment and graduation statistics. As the data from the interviews and observations were analyzed, several themes emerged as to how these teachers approached their work with pregnant and parenting teens and their families.

These themes were identified through an open coding process in which interviews and observations were analyzed for common themes and patterns. Coding frames were then used to organize the data and identify findings. These findings were recorded frequently in the form of analytic and integrative memos, which were subsequently used to write the findings section of this paper (Emerson et al, 1995; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Glense & Peshkin, 1992, Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Gay’s concept of culturally responsive pedagogy was used as a framework for identifying the different themes of teacher practices and is also used as a means to organize the findings section of this paper (Gay, 2000). Specific attention was given during data analysis to the ways in which teacher practices at Rosa Parks Academy exemplified Gay’s six characteristics of culturally responsive teaching (validating, comprehensive, multidimensional, empowering, transformative, and emancipatory).

## Explaining the Success of Rosa Parks Academy: Lessons Rooted in Culturally Responsive Teaching

Pregnant and parenting teen mothers have exceptionally low probabilities of completing their schooling and thus show weak employment prospects. Just over half of teenage mothers complete high school during adolescence and early adulthood. Many who complete high school do so with only an alternative credential, such as the General Educational Development (GED) certificate or graduate from high school with very low basic reading, writing, and math skills (Cao, Stromsdorfer, and Weeks 1995; Nord, Moore, Morrison, Brown, & Myers, 1992).

The combination of low educational credentials, low basic skills, and parenting responsibilities means that teenage parents have limited employment opportunities, and are primarily restricted to the low-wage market (Moore, Myers, Morrison, Nord, Brown, & Edmonston, 1993). These high drop-out rates and low educational achievement levels contribute to a cyclical effect of poverty for these mothers and their children that can lead to a life of reliance upon social service and welfare.

Despite these overwhelmingly negative national statistics, the staff at Rosa Parks Academy has had success with the pregnant and parenting teens that they serve. Although upon initial enrollment at RPA most of the young women are in the process of dropping out of their traditional high school, Rosa Parks Academy achieves

a 90 percent graduation rate with 100 percent of those who do graduate accepted into two to four year colleges, some with financial aid (Collins, 2004). An ongoing commitment to being culturally responsive to the specialized needs of their students is one of the keys to success for the teachers and staff at Rosa Parks Academy.

In her book, *Culturally Responsive Teaching*, Gay (2000) explains that good teaching must be viewed as contextual and situated practice. She underscores the importance of using culturally responsive pedagogy when she writes:

If educators continue to be ignorant of, ignore, impugn, and silence the cultural orientations, values, and performance styles of ethnically different students, they will persist in imposing cultural hegemony, personal denigration, educational inequity, and academic underachievement upon them. Accepting the validity of these students’ cultural socialization and prior experiences will help to reverse achievement trends. (p. 25)

Gay contends that schools will only perpetuate the status quo if they do not accept the important contributions that the students they serve can bring to classrooms.

Indeed, trying to be “culturally blind” to students’ prior life experiences and cultural backgrounds does not help students from diverse backgrounds learn any better; rather it disadvantages them by discounting any contributions they can bring to the classroom from their own lives. Hence, in order to empower students who have been traditionally disenfranchised by public education because of their race, social class, and academic background, teachers and teacher educators have explored the possibilities of employing culturally responsive pedagogy in their practice and their theory about practice (Villegas & Lucas, 2002; MacGillivray, Rueda, & Martinez, 2004; Lee, 1997).

Using the tools of classroom-based research to develop more complex profiles of their students, teachers and teacher educators can use their growing knowledge of the lives and cultures of these students to design appropriate teaching methodologies and curriculum (Delgado-Gaitan, 2006; Morrell, 2004; Irvine, Armento, Causey, Jones, Frasher, and Weinburgh, 2001).

In the remainder of this article, I will describe how Gay’s framework of culturally responsive teaching can be seen in the teaching staff at Rosa Parks Academy and how successful this approach can be with African-American pregnant and parenting teens. By linking culturally responsive teaching to a school that serves predominantly African-American pregnant and parenting teens, this article seeks to



showcase the models of practice exhibited by culturally responsive teachers in one school setting. It is hoped that these models can be further studied and discussed by teachers and teacher educators seeking to improve schools and schooling experiences for this currently underserved segment of the student population.<sup>3</sup>

**Rosa Parks Academy:  
“These Girls Deserve an Education Just  
Like Any Other Child”**

The Acme City Public School System is known nationally for its dilapidated facilities, the failing test scores of its students, and the mismanagement of its finances (Mirel, 1993). However, Rosa Parks Academy, has attempted to reverse the negative attention that Acme City Public Schools has received in the last few decades by meeting the needs of a this specialized set of students—African-American pregnant and parenting teens.

Founded in 1985, Rosa Parks Academy attempts to educate pregnant and parenting teens who otherwise would not be adequately served by the public schools. Each year the school enrolls over 400 students and 200 of their infants and young children. In a traditional high school, the needs of these students and their young children would not always be met. Teachers and principals would hope that the problems that these students bring to school with them in the form of pregnancy and young motherhood would go away and the students would drop out (Pillow, 2004; Luttrell, 2003; Kaplan, 1997).

However, Mary Taylor, the principal of Rosa Parks Academy, and her teachers, have consciously and purposefully set out to provide every opportunity for these students to learn and succeed in schools. By offering comprehensive services for its teenage mothers (child care, counseling, medical services), a low teacher to student ratio, and an intensive, innovative curriculum including the use of an extensive farm and animal husbandry program that teachers and students have created behind the school building, the school has succeeded in raising the graduation rate and college placement rate of its students and has won several national awards, including the Breakthrough High School Award by the National Association of Second School Principals in 2004.

In a personal interview, Taylor explains her philosophy of working with the students at RPA. “Many people think that these girls in our school are delinquent just because they’re pregnant and that just isn’t right. These girls deserve an educa-

tion, just like any other child, and we’re here to provide them with the opportunity for just that.” She goes on to explain that she originally began working at the school because she saw that few schools were adequately meeting the needs of pregnant mothers. If anything, she felt that these mothers were being ignored and cast away to the margins of society.

Taylor set out to change that mode of thinking and schooling and has, over the last 15 years of the school’s existence, invited teachers interested in working with these young women to help her in building a positive, safe environment for pregnant and parenting mothers. Besides an extensive hands-on science program that integrates animal husbandry on a farm on the grounds of the school and an innovative on-site day care program for newborns to six year olds, Taylor has coordinated intensive summer school camps in university settings and sightseeing trips to the west coast and to the Pacific Northwest.

Taylor tries to encourage these types of trips because she feels quite strongly that “Experience along with curriculum is what helps these kids succeed.” To graduate,

students must do an internship in a professional setting, such as in the business office of one of the major newspapers in Acme City or in the production department of a local theater company.

The rest of the teaching staff at the school echoes Taylor’s belief in positively meeting the needs of these pregnant and parenting teens. Upon enrollment at the school, school counselors work with each student to come up with a graduation plan and help them apply to college and for grants and scholarships. Each student is then assigned to a homeroom teacher who she stays with until she graduates. The homeroom teacher is responsible for looking after the student and making sure she feels like an important part of the school.

Teachers too understand the unique position that the pregnant and parenting teens at the school are in. For example, a few years ago, teachers at Rosa Parks Academy voted to switch to a block period schedule and quarter-long classes in order to provide more flexibility for students. Using this system, students can miss one or two months or a quarter of classes due to pregnancy or childbirth but still be able to

**Table 1**

Characteristic	Description
<i>Validating</i>	Uses the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them. It teaches to and through the strengths of these students. It is culturally validating and affirming.
<i>Comprehensive</i>	Develops intellectual, social, emotional, and political learning by “using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills and attitudes.”
<i>Multidimensional</i>	Encompasses curriculum content, learning context, classroom climate, student-teacher relationships, instructional techniques, and performance assessments. For example, language arts, music, art, and social studies teachers may collaborate in teaching the concept of protest.
<i>Empowering</i>	Boosts students’ morale, provide resources and personal assistance, develop an ethos of achievement, and celebrate individual and collective accomplishments. Teachers and students work towards an “agenda of values” that emphasize participatory, problem-posing, situated, multicultural, dialogic, de-socializing, democratic, inquiring, interdisciplinary, and activist learning.
<i>Transformative</i>	Makes academic success a non-negotiable mandate for all students and an accessible goal. It promotes the idea, and develops skills for practicing it, that students are obligated to be productive members of and render service to their respective ethnic communities as well as the national society. CRT also circumvents the tendency towards learned helplessness for students of color in traditional public schools, where their achievement levels decrease the longer they remain in school (Holliday, 1985).
<i>Emancipatory</i>	Lifts the veil of presumed absolute authority from conceptions of scholarly truth typically taught in schools. No single version of “truth” is total and permanent. Not should it be allowed to be uncontested. These learning engagements encourage and enable students to find their own voices, to contextualize issues in multiple cultural perspectives, to engage in more ways of knowing and thinking, and to become more active participants in shaping their own learning.

enter the school in the middle of the year and gain some credit. Despite this system, some students at Rosa Parks Academy still have problems with regular attendance and teachers try to attend to those needs as well. Referring to the student who just signed up for his class, one of the teachers remarks,

One of my students had a baby that was really sick for about two weeks and she had to stay home and care for her. There are rules we have here about attendance but I always try and think of the circumstances of the student too. It's always a struggle on how to best meet the needs of the students within the constraints of the school system. (Interview)

By examining the work that Rosa Parks Academy teachers do with pregnant and parenting students, it is possible to see teachers developing classroom activities, curriculum, and relationships that ultimately help "unteachable" students learn despite enormous odds. Despite the fact that many people in society have already written off these students and pushed them to the margins of society, the teachers at this school continue to work each day to develop classroom activities and instructional approaches that are innovative and child-centered. Although improvisation and flexibility is needed in this particular school environment, these teachers still uphold high expectations for their students in the work that they do.

While the largely positive institutional conditions that are present in Rosa Parks Academy, such as small class size and a supportive principal, may not be possible or present in all schools, it is important for all teachers and staff working with pregnant and parenting teens to consider how individual teachers can be culturally responsive to students within their own individual classrooms. In *Culturally Responsive Teaching*, Gay identifies six specific characteristics of culturally responsive teaching including: validating, comprehensive, multidimensional, empowering, transformative, and emancipatory. These characteristics are briefly outlined in Table 1.

Following in this article, three (comprehensive, empowering, and emancipatory) of these six characteristics will be examined more closely in the practice of three Rosa Parks Academy teachers. Although all six teachers interviewed for this project exemplified multiple elements of culturally responsive pedagogy, these three teachers in particular exemplified instructional practice consistent with Gay's explanation of culturally responsive teaching.

I will illustrate how each teacher uses one of the elements of culturally responsive pedagogy in their work. By

focusing more closely on one teacher and one characteristic of Gay's framework at a time, I hope to develop a thicker, more detailed description (Geertz, 1973) of how culturally responsive teaching works in practice and illuminate the successes that are possible with the students that these teachers serve.

### **Michael Mills: Providing an Education that is Comprehensive**

Gay maintains that culturally responsive teachers employ a *comprehensive* instructional approach with their students. She writes that comprehensive teachers:

...are committed to help students of color maintain identity and connections with their ethnic group and communities; develop a sense of community, camaraderie, and shared responsibility; and acquire an ethic of success. Expectations and skills are not taught as separate entities but are woven together into an integrated whole that permeates all curriculum content and the entire modus operandi of the classroom. Students are held accountable for each others' learning as well as their own. They are expected to internalize the value that learning is a communal, reciprocal, interdependent affair, and manifest it habitually in their expressive behaviors (p. 30).

By weaving together the intellectual, social, emotional, and political lives of the students that they teach in a comprehensive instructional approach, culturally responsive teachers can begin to make important connections between the home and personal lives of their students and the school curriculum. Moreover, by stressing the importance of learning as "a communal, reciprocal, and interdependent affair," teachers can begin to build community among the students in their classrooms.

This comprehensive component of culturally responsive teaching is especially important for pregnant and parenting teens, because for many of them, their previous experience with schools and classrooms has been one marked by a sense of alienation and lack of connection to their school, fellow classmates, and the larger community surrounding the school.

Michael Mills, an English teacher at Rosa Parks Academy, has tried to provide a comprehensive educational experience for the pregnant and parenting teens at their school by designing a variety of school projects that require teamwork on the part of students, cross over academic disciplines, and reach out into the local community of which they are a part. One way he is able to help students understand that "learning is a communal, reciprocal, and interdepen-

dent affair" is through the way in which he conducts homeroom periods.

During homeroom, students are given an extended opportunity to discuss problems that they are facing at school and at home in a safe, structured environment. During one particular homeroom, Mills led a discussion in which students actively talked about the role of conflict in their lives and the role that each individual can play in situations of conflict. Mills provided students with different scenarios in which conflict could be present (e.g. problems with day care services at the school, gossip being spread about them) and asked students to write down how they would respond to one of the conflicts.

Once most of the students finished their written responses, Mills opened up the floor for discussion. All at once, students' voices filled the room with comments about how to deal with conflict. Many students wished to voice their opinion especially about the day care provided at the school. Some students shared their concerns about age-appropriate stimulation for their babies and toddlers. Others remarked that, despite the recent introduction of Head Start to the school, they did not see much difference in the quality of education for their children. Near the end of the discussion, Mills asked the students if they would like to spend a day in the nursery in order to see what a day care worker needs to do in the course of one day on the job. Many students agreed that this would be an enlightening experience for them to have.

Throughout this discussion, students were really motivated to participate because these topics were realistic to their lives and immediately affected them. By constructing a homeroom session based upon the topic of "conflict" that affected all of the students in some way, Mills was able to draw upon the various experiences that students had as students, parents, and as consumers of social services and engage them in a discussion that encouraged them to think through their personal lives, construct sound arguments, and engage with others in the classroom in a constructive debate.

Moreover, by designing the lesson plan of the classroom discussion such that students had to share ideas, listen to one another, and come to a consensus, Mills promoted the notion that his students' learning could indeed be a "communal, reciprocal, and interdependent" educational experience rather than allowing students to occur in isolation from one another.

Gay also writes that providing a comprehensive education means that teachers must create opportunities for "students of

color to maintain identity and connections with their ethnic group and communities." In this regard, Mills has devised several ways for students to work together to engage with subject matter in order to construct new meaning and knowledge. Sometimes, in his English class, he will ask his students to write poetry or a story together so that the students can build confidence in their writing skills. Teamwork, not competition, is the focus of class work.

In an effort to save money on field trips and have his students work together outside of the school grounds, Mills has recently helped his school purchase thirty bicycles so that teachers can more easily take students into the community to local museums, art exhibits, or community events. Students in Mills' class are also actively involved in taking care of goats, chickens, and other barnyard animals that are on the school grounds and tending to the small vegetable plots that are behind the school. In their care for and reporting about these animals and the fields, Mills has designed assignments that require his students to make use of their English, mathematics, and science skills.

Mills and his fellow teachers feel strongly about community involvement in their school and school involvement in their community, echoing Gay's belief that comprehensive education should "develop a sense of community, camaraderie, and shared responsibility." Local community members are invited into the school on a regular basis to help model poetry writing and poetry performance skills for students, assist with the barnyard animals and fields, and to give guest lectures on social studies topics or preparation for college. Recently a team of scientists came to the school to explain how soil sample tests work. Subsequently students became actively involved with the project by testing the acidity of the soil on campus and on the property of surrounding homes.

Students collected all the data, analyzed the data, and eventually did a presentation on their findings to the city council. Mills has a strong vision for his students in terms of their involvement with the community. "I don't want the students to view the school as a separate vacuum apart from the community. I mean the whole objective of school is to integrate them into the community when they are done with school."

This approach to continual involvement in the local community has shown students how their education at Rosa Parks Academy is more than just about reading and writing in Mills' English class, but it is about what Gay calls is a compre-

hensive approach to using what they learn in their education for the greater good of the community.

### **Cassandra Gordon Teaches Life Lessons through the Arts and Other Subjects: The Exhibition of Teaching That Is Empowering**

Gay writes, "Because culturally responsive teaching is *empowering*, it enables students to be better human beings and more successful learners. Empowerment translates into academic competence, personal confidence, courage, and the will to act. In other words, students have to believe they can succeed in learning tasks and be willing to pursue success relentless until mastery is obtained" (p. 32).

Cassandra Gordon, the dance teacher at Rosa Parks Academy since 1985, can remember many instances of class projects and field trips in which she has actively sought to empower the pregnant and parenting teens she teaches. Because her students often feel like they have so little power in their lives, Ms. Gordon, as she is known to all of her students and fellow teachers, has purposefully created opportunities for students to find success and empowerment through experiential activities and trips that they would not otherwise have had. These activities and trips are designed to show students the power they have within them to transcend the negative stereotypes that society all too often holds against them.

One of the student projects that she is most proud of is a summer camping trip she used to run in which she took teachers, students, and the students' children went to the western part of the United States, a place many students had never seen before. She remarks that:

One of the most wonderful things that happened to me since I have been here is I actually designed a camping program and our students went out and they camped and we've gone as far as Yellowstone National Park! And it was an all women's operation and so we did tent camping and so we had to teach the girls a lot of cooperation in camping. And the beautiful thing is that we were outside and they took their babies and we took, um, some child care workers. And we had to cook our meals and clean and pitch those tents and take down those tents and then we utilized all of the resources around us. (Interview)

Trips like this one helped students to see places that they've talked about in their classes and empowered students to believe in themselves. On one camping trip

to the South, the students had a chance to visit the home of Martin Luther King, Jr. Gordon remarks, "It was so moving for them, they were like 'I never thought I would have ever had the chance to do something like that.'" Similar comments have been made when students participated in home-building projects for Habitat for Humanity in California.

Extra-curricular activities and trips are often difficult for most pregnant and parenting teens to participate in, but by allowing these young mothers to bring their children along, Gordon gave her students multiple opportunities to travel through, experience and see the United States. By expanding their experience and knowledge of the world beyond Acme City, Gordon gave her students rich opportunities to broaden their conceptions of where they could live and what they could do in their lives.

After graduation, many of Gordon's students visit Rosa Parks Academy and show her old, faded pictures of these trips. She is always amazed when graduates pull out pictures of a camping trip that they took with her 10 to 15 years ago and when they tell her how much the trip changed the course of their lives. Some of her former students now in professions such as law, medicine, and education cite these trips as one of the most transformative events in their young adulthood and tell her that it provided them with the motivation and self-confidence to continue their education through high school and college, through whatever hardship they may endure.

Through her ongoing commitment to provide students with opportunities both in class and in the surrounding community that allow them to succeed, Gordon continues to be a source of empowerment to both current and former Rosa Parks Academy students, whose self-confidence is often shaken by the negative attitudes and stereotypes they encounter almost daily in society at large and in their schools.

### **Courtney Patterson: An Emancipatory Teaching Philosophy**

Gay writes that culturally responsive pedagogy is *emancipatory* because it:

lifts the veil of presumed absolute authority from conceptions of scholarly truth typically taught in schools. It helps students realize that no single version of "truth" is total and permanent. Nor should it be allowed to appear uncontested. These learning engagements encourage and enable students to find their own voices, to contextualize issues in multiple cultural perspectives, to engage in more ways of knowing and thinking, and to become



more active participants in shaping their own learning. In order to accomplish this, teachers make authentic knowledge about different ethnic groups accessible to students.” (p. 35)

The work of Courtney Patterson, one of two resource teachers in the school for students with special needs, can be viewed as emancipatory. Patterson believes that she has responsibility for all students at the school to become academically successful and productive members of the community, but she especially attends to the education of students with “special needs, emotionally impaired, cognitively impaired, learning disabled or who are physically and otherwise handicapped.”

Before she became a member of the teaching staff at the school, no individualized attention was given to students with special needs. They were placed in mainstream classes without any additional academic or social support. These students, in particular, struggled to “find their own voices” and be engaged “in more ways of knowing,” because of their dual struggle as pregnant and parenting teens, but also as students with learning disabilities.

Realizing that these students were especially having difficulty at Rosa Parks Academy, Patterson committed herself to transforming both her own practice with students with special needs and also to educating and transforming the teaching of all the teachers on the staff on how to best meet the needs of these students through running workshops, organizing professional development days, and personally coaching teachers.

The most poignant example of how Patterson’s teaching can be seen as emancipatory at Rosa Parks Academy is in her work with Torianna Jackson, a special needs student who was herself an alcohol syndrome baby. Jackson spent three entire years at Rosa Parks Academy without earning much academic credit because she kept withdrawing and re-enrolling in school. However, once Patterson began working at Rosa Parks Academy, she worked closely with Jackson on her reading, had her enrolled in Rosa Parks Academy’s intensive summer school program, and began to work with other teachers in ways that they could help her.

Patterson actively sought to make Jackson an “active participant in shaping [her] own learning” by giving her leadership roles in the classroom and having other students rely upon her during social studies assignments that highlighted her extensive knowledge of the history and of the neighborhoods in Acme City. She also challenged other teachers to fully engage

Jackson in their own classrooms to improve her reading and writing skills.

Patterson knew that Jackson had really begun to take responsibility for her own learning during the last summer session in which she was enrolled. The students in Patterson’s class were trying to improve vocabulary and they were asked to avoid “illegal” words like “good” and “bad” and were supposed to use more descriptive words such as “extraordinary” and “boring.” Jackson stopped the exercise and admitted that it was hard for her to think of these more descriptive words and said, “Look, I don’t even know this word. How can I give you another word for it? I can’t even read this one. Mrs. Patterson, I want a meeting with all the teachers so they can know me and know my needs.”

By providing positive opportunities for Jackson to learn and feel comfortable in the school setting, Patterson helped her to become emancipated in thinking about her own education. By the end of her time at Rosa Parks Academy, Jackson had found “her own voice” and become a more “active participant in the shaping of her own learning.” Last school year, Jackson graduated from Rosa Parks Academy at the age of 23. As she walked across the stage on her graduation day, she asked the principal, “After I graduate, can I still come back for Mrs. Patterson’s reading class to get help on my reading?”

#### **School’s Out: Lessons Learned**

Black and pregnant and parenting teens have often been vilified in the press and in society for being “welfare queens” or “neglectful mothers.” Although White female young women actually account for the largest overall percentage of births for pregnant and parenting teens, negative stereotypes about lazy mothers with “crack babies” are often held primarily against Black teens.

Race, in this case, becomes a means with which to further stigmatize the Black and the poor. Moreover, because so much negative attention is given to the stereotypes that society has of teenage mothers, little attention is given to some of the underlying causes of teenage pregnancy and its effects. The dearth of adequate economic and academic opportunities for Black schoolgirls and the extreme poverty of inner city life that contributes to a sense of despair in poor Black males and females is never discussed.

The cyclical nature of teenage pregnancy including higher dropout rates, eroding earnings, and increased social

stigma is also not addressed. Instead, at this particular intersection of race, class, and gender, more attention is put on blaming poor Black pregnant and parenting females teens as the cause of the problem itself rather than as the consequence of societal neglect and lack of care towards the truly disadvantaged in U.S. society (Wilson, 1997).

This lack of attention is particularly poignant when one understands that the structure and approach of traditional schools for pregnant and parenting teens can often limit the educational achievement of students and lead to poor educational outcomes and higher drop-out rates (Whitman et al., 2001; Coley, 1995; Maynard, 1996)

What is needed then is a paradigm shift in further thinking about how to seriously consider and address the needs of poor Black pregnant and parenting teens. The teachers and administrators at Rosa Parks Academy have taken some first steps in carving out a space in society in which pregnant and parenting teens can feel safe and supported in schools. Working against the low standards and expectations set at traditional high schools and other schools solely for mothers, Rosa Parks Academy staff have begun to work in partnership with their students to counter some of the prejudices and discrimination that their students face for being poor, Black, and female in society.

Mills designs comprehensive classroom activities and class discussions that bring members of the community into the school to work with his students on academic projects in order to help his students learn the subject matter, but also for the community to know more about the students at the school. Gordon empowers the students she takes on trips throughout the United States by introducing them to people and places that broaden their view of the world and engaging them in activities that build their self-confidence and belief in their ability to succeed in school and in their home lives. Finally, Patterson provides students, like Jackson, the academic skills to take responsibility for their own learning and to understand the emancipatory power of being an educated person.

Several structures exist at Rosa Parks Academy to make the work of these teachers and other teachers possible. Taylor and other administrative staff have made a conscious effort to provide a high quality educational experience for the pregnant and parenting teens at the school. Faculty too support the school’s mission of meeting the needs of the student population and are committed to working together to

devise school-wide policies that take into consideration the special needs of students who are in the midst of their pregnancy or already the parent of a young child.

Additionally, comprehensive support services are in place for both the social service and academic needs of the students as well as for the needs of their children. Finally, funding support is in place to provide administrators and teachers the opportunity and time to provide these resources and support programs.

Although all of these structures may not be in place at every school that currently works with pregnant and parenting teens, teachers and administrators who work with these young women and their children should realize that some of the changes outlined in this article require minimal financial resources. Indeed, some of these changes rely upon the creativity and inventiveness of the instructors in their lesson planning and use of local resources and community agencies, the foresight of teachers to reach out to community members to get involved with the school for both local and national field trips, and the personal dedication of each teacher to seeing the students in their classes succeed. Mills, Gordon, Patterson, and the other Rosa Parks Academy teachers interviewed for this study realize that pregnant and parenting teens are not usually well supported and encouraged in schools, so they have taken it upon themselves to change that approach in ways that they can and to ceaselessly work as advocates for the students they work with.

Hopefully, by providing a description of how teachers at Rosa Parks Academy have enacted a pedagogy that is culturally responsive and fully committed to the unique needs of these young women, this article also provides administrators and other members of the school community possible avenues to imagine how the oppression of young, poor and Black pregnant and parenting teens can begin to be lifted.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> All place and participants names are pseudonyms.

<sup>2</sup> Ninety-four percent of the student enrollment at Rosa Parks Academic is black and five percent is Hispanic. Ninety percent of the student body is eligible for free and reduced lunch.

<sup>3</sup> These models of practice need to be adapted to the particular context and institutional structures of each school setting. The staff at Rosa Parks Academy had a clear school mission, a principal supportive of that mission, and the educational resources to support its teachers.

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