

# **Culturally Relevant Pedagogy Redux: Canadian Teachers' Conceptions of their Work and its Challenges**

Nisha Parhar  
*Delta School District*

Özlem Sensoy  
*Simon Fraser University*

## **Abstract**

This study examined how teachers who practice culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) describe their work and its challenges. Data is from ten semi-structured interviews with teachers in Vancouver Canada. Analysis revealed four themes in relation to participants' practice to support students who are culturally diverse: themes 1 and 2 align with CRP scholarship, while themes 3 and 4 add new elements to the existing literature. Theme 1) An inclusive classroom of meaningful student-teacher relationships, collaborative learning, and a respectful classroom climate; 2) Expanded conception of the curriculum that validates students' cultures, develop critical consciousness and agency; 3) A resource team including families and support workers; 4) Purposeful renewal of knowledge via research and professional development. In addition, participants described institutional barriers common to their practice.

## **Resumé**

Cette étude a examiné comment les enseignants, qui pratiquent une pédagogie culturellement pertinente, décrivent leur travail et ses défis. Les données proviennent de dix entretiens semi-directifs avec des enseignants de Vancouver au Canada. L'analyse a révélé quatre thèmes en relation avec la pratique des participants pour soutenir les étudiants dont la culture est différente : les thèmes 1 et 2 s'alignent avec la documentation actuelle sur la pédagogie culturellement pertinente, tandis que les thèmes 3 et 4 ajoutent de nouveaux éléments aux écrits existants. Thème 1) Une classe inclusive avec des relations élèves-enseignants riches et constructives, un apprentissage collaboratif, et un climat de classe respectueux. 2) Une conception élargie du programme qui valide les différentes cultures des élèves et développe une conscience critique. 3) Une équipe de ressources comprenant les familles et des travailleurs de soutien. 4) Le renouvellement intentionnelle des connaissances par la recherche et le développement professionnel. En outre, les participants ont décrit des obstacles institutionnels fréquents dans leurs pratiques.

## **Culturally Relevant Pedagogy Redux: Canadian Teachers' Conceptions of Their Work and its Challenges**

*The notion of equity as sameness only makes sense when all students are exactly the same.* (Gloria Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 33)

### **Introduction**

There is compelling evidence that students who are culturally diverse have a tenuous relationship with schools due to exclusionary educational practices and Eurocentric ideologies that negate their identities and devalue their cultural capital (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Howard, 2001a, 2001b). The school experiences of students of Colour show that far from providing opportunities for upward mobility, schools routinely exclude children from non-dominant cultural backgrounds. Educators are increasingly under pressure to adjust their practices in ways that respond to the cultural diversity of students. Among some educators, though, this adjustment often manifests as a "good intentions" approach that attempts to be non-discriminatory by attempting to "not see colour" or "treat all students the same."

Some research has found that how the culture of school converges with or diverges from the culture of the student contributes to that student's academic and social achievement (Irvine, 1990; Ladson-Billings, 1992, 1995; Gay, 2000; Henry, 1994). On the other hand, disregarding the culture and race of students breeds space for disconnection from the school, and ultimately to disengagement with what is being taught (Howard, 2001a, 2001b; Irvine & Armento, 2001), resulting in lower academic and social achievement (Irvine, 1990; Ladson-Billings, 1992, 1995; Gay, 2000). Ladson-Billings (1994) maintains that when claiming *not* to notice student differences, the teacher is in fact disregarding one of the most salient features of a student's identity. What this research collectively indicates is that teacher failure to account for students' differences in their planning and instruction may result in student disinterest and alienation, ultimately manifesting in lower academic achievement and barriers to social well-being.

In the Canadian context, there is an ongoing body of research supporting the need to integrate students' cultural backgrounds into schooling (Dei, 1992, 1997; Henry, 1994; Solomon, 1992). Carol Schick and Verna St. Denis (2005) write that "public education lately remains reflective of white, Western or Eurocentric interests" (p. 298). The effect of this is that most students who are not White rarely see themselves or their experiences reflected in the curriculum, while those students who are White and who fit the dominant culture of the classroom see themselves reflected in the school curriculum.

Numerous Canadian studies attest to the challenges faced by the school system in meeting the needs of students who are culturally diverse. The high drop-out rate among Black students in Ontario is one example.

According to Dei, James, James-Wilson, and Zine (2000) this rate is partly due to differential treatment, especially those students who fail to fit the mould of what a student should be according to the standards of the dominant group. Duffy (2003) additionally points out that feelings of discrimination profoundly affect the self esteem

and academic performance of students who are culturally diverse, resulting in high dropout rates among immigrant secondary school students. His study research describes how the integration of English language learners into regular classrooms fails to serve their complex needs. Research also highlights the disturbing ongoing Aboriginal students who currently have higher dropout rates in secondary school, when compared to the general population (Gorman, 1999; Egbo, 2009).

Alongside these sobering statistics, recent immigration patterns reinforce that ethnocultural diversity is a reality. Statistics Canada (2003) reports that immigrants of European descent account for less than half (43%) of the total immigrant population. In the province of British Columbia alone, the 2006 census enumerated over 1 million people who self-reported as being a member of a visible minority. The province's 1,008,900 visible minorities represented 24.8% of its population, the highest proportion among all of Canada's provinces and territories. The vast majority (86.8%) of visible minorities in BC reside in metropolitan Vancouver, accounting for 41.7% of Vancouver's population in 2006 (Statistics Canada, 2006). The demographics of Canadian schools mirror the ethno-cultural diversity that exists in wider society, especially in large urban centres. In Vancouver, 61% of school-age children who came to Canada in the 1990s spoke a language other than English or French, compared with 50% in Toronto, and 43% in Montréal (Statistics Canada, 2006).

The 2006 Safe School and Social Responsibility Survey for secondary students conducted by Hymel (2008) in the Metro Vancouver region, revealed factors indicative of why many students who are culturally diverse may feel disengaged and alienated in the school system. The survey, which had 19,551 participants from eighteen secondary schools, found that White students reported feeling a greater sense of belonging at school as compared with their peers who are culturally diverse. When asked if adults at their school are accepting of individuals, regardless of race, White students most frequently answered "yes." Findings from this survey reveal that White students consistently reported positive feelings of school, as compared to their peers who are culturally diverse. Nonetheless, when seeking explanations for student disengagement, many teachers struggle with both seeing and responding to the structural inequalities of schooling. Though there is often little evidence to substantiate them, cultural deficit explanations for student disengagement still prevail in staffroom chatter in schools across Canada. These explanations point to students' home environments or cultural backgrounds, such as poor child rearing practices, as the root of student underperformance in schools (Valencia, 1997).

*Culturally relevant pedagogy* has been one response to the gap between the increasing cultural diversity of schools in relation to the predominantly White teacher population (In fact, as Ryan, Pollock, and Antonelli (2009) point out, although the actual number of teachers of colour in Canada has increased, their relative proportion to the Canadian visible minority population has *decreased*.) As a response to both the cultural deficit explanation for minority student underachievement, as well as the ongoing underrepresentation of teachers of Colour and minoritized perspectives in the school curriculum, scholars in the 1990s advocated for "culturally relevant – or culturally responsive – pedagogy." This approach asserts the value of focusing classroom curricula and practice upon students' cultural frames of reference. It is a pedagogy that recognizes students' differences, validates students' cultures, and asserts that upon cultural

congruence of classroom practices, students will discover increasing success in school.

The present study set out to examine the practices of teachers who are committed to meeting the needs of students who are culturally diverse, in order to better understand these teachers' interpretations of the opportunities and barriers to working with students who are culturally diverse. Through a series of semi-structured interviews, we hoped to gain insights into these teachers' beliefs regarding culturally relevant pedagogy and examine how they described these beliefs manifesting in their work with students who are culturally diverse. We sought to explore how these teachers describe carve out spaces of resistance in their practice to facilitate the success of students.

### **A Culturally Relevant Pedagogical Approach**

The gap between students of Colour and the Eurocentric practices of mainstream schooling has prompted many scholars to argue for a more representative and empowering way of teaching. One of these arguments resides in an approach known as *culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP)*. Within the last three decades, scholars have developed a theoretical framework for culturally relevant pedagogy, a pedagogy sometimes also referred to as *culturally compatible* (Jordan, 1985), *cultural appropriateness* (Au & Jordan, 1981), *culturally congruent* (Au & Kawakami, 1985, 1994; Mohatt and Erickson, 1981), and *culturally responsive* (Erickson, 1987; Gay, 2000).

The principles of culturally relevant pedagogy offer both optimistic and concrete guidance to educators who seek to improve the academic and social achievement of culturally minoritized students. Many advocates for CRP argue that culturally responsive practices must occur *alongside* other efforts to create more equitable schools. This approach is not about unilateral practice such as, "teach students from group X like this." Rather, this approach postulates that if schools and teaching change to reflect and draw upon students' identities, their cultural backgrounds and heritages, student achievement will improve. Although it draws upon an assortment of terms, the literature describing culturally relevant pedagogy and the need to make classrooms more consistent with the cultural orientations of ethnically diverse students is consistent.

Geneva Gay (2000) defines culturally relevant pedagogy as "using 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" (p. 29). She adds that this pedagogy is one that "teaches *to* and *through*" (p. 29) the strengths of students who are culturally diverse. Gloria Ladson-Billings, who popularized the term "culturally relevant teaching" (1992, 1994, 1995) adds that this approach "empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes" (p. 18). Valerie Ooka-Pang (2001) refers to these cultural referents as "cultural content," which includes elements such as experiences, knowledge, events, values, role models, perspectives, and issues that arise from the community from which the student comes.

### **Methodology**

The focus of this study was to revisit the efficacy of the most common tenets of

culturally relevant pedagogy in order to examine how educators who are committed to facilitating the success of students who are culturally diverse describe their practice and the challenges they face. In doing so, we hope to discover what of CRP is still at the forefront of challenges faced by educators committed to culturally responsive practices, as well as identify any new terrain needing closer study.

Via purposive snowball sampling (Spren, 1992), teachers whose practice aligns with CRP were nominated and contacted about the study. Three professors who teach in intersecting areas of equity and education (including anti-racist, feminist, and other anti-oppressive approaches to education) were asked to nominate teachers they knew from the Metro Vancouver area whose practice aligned with critical multicultural, anti-racist education, and the tenets of CRP. Three teachers' names repeatedly emerged, and they were the first participants approached, and subsequently interviewed. These three teachers further nominated other teachers whom they worked with and whom they believed practice CRP. In total ten teachers were interviewed.

In addition to the nomination, each nominated teacher was emailed the list of tenets associated with culturally relevant pedagogy (Figure 1). These tenets were generated from the literature in CRP. The tenets were ordered numerically for organizational purposes only.

**Teachers who practice culturally responsive teaching:**

- Teach subjects from diverse perspectives, not just one that is Eurocentric.*
- Build bridges between academic learning and student's prior understanding, knowledge, native language and values.*
- Learn from and about their students' culture, language, and learning styles to make instruction more meaningful and relevant to their student's lives.*
- Have an "inclusive curriculum" meaning the voices and perspectives of students are included.*
- Hold students to high standards and have high expectations for all students.*
- Ensure classroom practices are challenging, cooperative, and hands-on, with less emphasis on rote memorization and lecture formats.*
- Encourage a "community of learners" or encourage students to learn collaboratively.*
- Motivate students to become active participants in their learning.*
- Attempt to create a climate of caring, respect, and the valuing of student's cultures in the classroom.*
- Validate students' cultural identity in classroom practices and instructional materials.*
- Encourage students to think critically about knowledge, social issues, the media etc.*
- Encourage students to be aware of discriminatory structures in society and struggle against them.*
- Have a relationship with students that is fluid or humanely equitable rather than fixed and hierarchical.*
- Demonstrate a connectedness with all students.*
- Educate students about the diversity of the world around them.*

**Figure 1:** Tenets of culturally responsive pedagogy. Adapted from Ladson-Billings, 1994 and Gay, 2000.

In order to participate in the study, the teacher had to self-report that s/he followed a majority of the above tenets. It was under participant discretion as to what a "majority" entails and participants' self-assessment of their practices. The participants represent five elementary and five secondary school teachers. Demographic details as self-reported by participants are shown in Table 1.

Table 1.  
*Participant Demographics*

Participant pseudonym	Currently teaching/ has taught	Years of experience in education	Self-description of cultural heritage
Anne	Secondary ESL: primarily refugees	20 yrs. as a classroom teacher	Prairie Canadian
Anya	Grades 2-4; resource; ESL	25 yrs. as a classroom teacher	Hungarian
Clark	Secondary social studies and English	34 yrs: 10 yrs. as a classroom teacher; 24 yrs. in a provincial organization; teacher education	White, North-American privilege; Irish background
Joanna	Social studies 8, 10, 11; comparative civilizations 12; English	21 yrs. as a classroom teacher	Irish, English; raised in rural Cree community
Lauren	Kindergarten	12 yrs. as a classroom teacher	Canadian "mutt"
Mariah	Grades 4-7	11 yrs. as a classroom teacher	German-Dutch
Nina	Spanish; French; psychology 8-12	10 yrs. as a classroom teacher	East Indian: Punjabi
S'ekoia	Grades 4-7	7 yrs. as a classroom teacher; 3 yrs. as an anti-racism consultant	Ethnicity Chinese, Nationality Canadian
Tania	Grades 3-6	10 yrs. as a classroom teacher	Mixed race: South African Black and South African White
Zoya	Grades K-5, 7, 8	22 yrs: 15 yrs. as a classroom teacher; an anti-racism consultant; positions in provincial organizations	Chinese: third generation

Interviews of approximately one hour each were conducted by Parhar between April and May 2008. The transcripts were transcribed, then returned to each interviewee for member checking wherein participants were invited to add, delete, or clarify any item in the transcripts. Thematic coding of the interview transcripts and field notes resulted in four themes related to teachers' work and challenges in CRP. In addition to the transcriptions of the interviews, data sources included Parhar's personal notes taken during the interviews and during follow up telephone conversation to clarify questions arising from the interviews. The only questions guiding the interview were related to the list of tenets. At the interview, each participant was given a copy of the CRP tenets above and asked to select three tenets which they consider most representative of their teaching, and one tenet they consider to be most challenging to implement in their practice. These tenets essentially served as a prompt for the discussion. The research was approved by the ethics review board of the researchers' university, all names have been anonymized,



and participants were informed in the consent form as well as verbally that they could withdraw from the study at any point.

The teachers responded to the prompt to talk about the tenets: *select up to three of these tenets that you feel are most important in your practice, and which one is most challenging*. From our analysis, four macro themes related to teachers' culturally responsive practice emerged: Building an inclusive classroom culture; Expanding what counts as the curriculum; The importance of a community resource network; Commitment to ongoing knowledge renewal.

### **Theme 1: Building an Inclusive Classroom Culture**

For the participants, an inclusive classroom meant three things: building meaningful teacher and student interactions; using collaborative learning strategies to foster meaningful student-student relationships; and a discourse about the importance of a safe and respectful classroom and school culture.

**Building meaningful teacher-student interaction.** All participants found it central, and offered examples of connecting with their students. This is very much in line with the literature in CRP that indicates that a central aspect to working with culturally diversity students is building relationships (Gay, 2000; Egbo, 2009).

Participants believed that building an inclusive classroom culture began with meaningful teacher-student relationships. For example, Mariah described how at the onset of the school year, she asks students to complete a questionnaire detailing their hobbies, educational goals and learning styles. Anya highlighted connections she forged with students by informally speaking to them on manners regarding their out of class interests and activities. She described an example of attending a student's out of school Sri Lankan dance concert. Anya explained, how her students "are excited to come tell me things every morning, and I love to listen."

Tania's example is one that typifies the importance participants placed upon connecting with students based on their cultural background. She stated that school should address the whole child, which encompasses the emotional, physical and intellectual, among others aspects. To this end, she explained, "Caring, respect and value, those are key words and those are what I strive for in my relationships with all my students," in an attempt to ensure her students develop a "positive sense of belonging and positive sense of identity" which, for Tania, entails "valuing their experiences, what they bring to the classroom." She gave an example of an Aboriginal student:

He rarely said anything the first two months of school and I would try to engage him, not having much success. He didn't write much in his journal either. He had difficulty writing so it was hard to get any information from him, but he had written a sentence that he was going up north to his home town for about a week. When he came back I asked him about it.

Tania explained that the interest she placed in his culture positively impacted her relationship with him:

As soon as I asked him about it his eyes lit up. He was so happy that I remembered that he had gone, that I cared enough to ask him. Because I valued the time he spent with his family, he made a really big deal about it. He could tell I was interested about the time he spends with his family and what he did there... [For the remainder of the year], he wasn't afraid to tell me about himself and his culture. He was a different kid just from that simple conversation. I was able to get him to write about it and have conversations about the time he was away with his family.

Tania further described how through “developing that relationship, other learning was able to take place” lending her student a sense of confidence in other aspects of his learning. She concluded by describing her role as one that is “more of a facilitator, I’m not standing at the front of the room telling them what I know.” In this way, she perceived her role as more than a non-approachable entity, dispensing meaningless information, but as someone who had to consciously work to develop meaningful relationships with her students.

Zoya’s comment sums up the importance the participants gave this principle, “If you don’t have a good relationship with kids, it doesn’t matter how good you know your curriculum, it doesn’t matter how good you are with those strategies. If you don’t have a connection with the kids, nothing else matters.”

### **Building meaningful student-student interactions: Collaborative learning.**

In addition to building meaningful teacher-student relations, participants believed that building an inclusive classroom culture meant building good collaborative student-student relationships. Indeed, collaborative learning, or a “community of learning,” is highlighted in the CRP literature as being a foremost avenue of learning through which students develop camaraderie and an ethic of success which permeates all curriculum and interactions (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Eight of the ten participants spoke of the value of collaborative learning both as a means to support student interaction as well as to promote academic and social success. These participants argued that collaborative learning allows students to develop social skills as they learn to support one another.

Nina stated, “Two heads are always better than one. You can pick up on another’s strengths. You can help on areas in which you are not strong.” The value of collaborative learning in forming social skills resurfaced in conversation with Anne who teaches English language learners often arriving from rural communities with small populations. She explained that collaborative learning is an exceptional forum in which her students may practice collaborative vocabulary that may be helpful in their relations outside of school. She explicated the value of “learning the language of appreciation, learning the language of disagreement and actually teaching them expressions and rehearsing in non-emotional situations with their peers, so that when a situation occurs they can do something constructive with it.”

In order to ensure students work collectively for the benefit of one another and themselves, participants provided examples of ways in which they structure collaborative learning activities. For example, Clark explained:



Where there is clearly mutual responsibility, you stand together or you fall together, it's a learning environment that has a structure within so that one student can't do all the work and have all the others copy and get credit for it. They have to do something together or it won't work. Mutual responsibility is the biggest factor.

However there were challenges that participants detailed in instilling in students the benefits of working as a team. Though Clark described himself as a "champion" for collaborative learning, he stated it is "difficult to do" as "the school system isn't all that accommodating for collaborative learning." Tania also commented on the difficulty of implementing collaborative learning. She explained that "It's a challenge with a big class of thirty or thirty-two kids in class. It's hard to have the physical space."

**A respectful, safe classroom and school.** The third aspect to building an inclusive classroom culture was a discourse about what it meant to be in school space that was safe and respectful to all students. Certainly, the literature on CRP highlights how students of culturally diverse backgrounds may feel a disconnect between their home communities and their school environment, resulting in feelings of alienation and lack of confidence in social situations and academic matter (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Six of the ten participants described this as foundational to building relationships and participating in meaningful learning opportunities. Joanna said it is important for the teacher to "create an environment that is safe" so that students may seize the opportunity to raise questions and not feel degraded by their peers or teacher. Mariah also highlighted the importance of making school an enjoyable experience, which for her means "trying to make school experiences as rich as possible so that students have a good feeling of school, not that it is some dreaded horrible institution that they despise."

The discourse of a safe classroom atmosphere re-emerged in conversation with Tania, who stated the importance of establishing this at the start of the school year. Tania described this classroom environment as a tone. She said:

A climate of respect and valuing I think is important because there is definitely a tone that is set right at the beginning of the year. It's that tone that is part of everything we do in the classroom and as a teacher in your relationship with the kids. You can feel it as soon as you walk into a classroom or school, the kids and parents can pick up on it. It sets a foundation, that feeling.

For these participants, the creation of an inclusive classroom means a classroom in which students feel valued, safe and welcome. This is a classroom of meaningful teacher and student interactions, implementing collaborative learning to advance students' social skills and establishing a safe and respectful classroom atmosphere. Our study did not include classroom observations or interviews with students and families which may help confirm how students actually experience participants' efforts at building "meaningful" or "safe" relations.

It is quite possible that these educators are overstating the effects of their efforts,

for example when Tania says "You can feel it as soon as you walk into the classroom" it goes unstated that perhaps *she* can feel it, but how does she so confidently know that the students and their families feel it too? It is a limitation of this study that we did not obtain these additional perspectives. However what we can glean from the insights of these culturally-responsive pedagogues is that the culture of students and the classroom is a central component of their practice, and a starting point from which the curriculum is taken up.

The curriculum and expanding government-mandated notions of the curriculum are the focus of the second major theme to emerge from our interviews.

## **Theme 2: Expanding what Counts as the Curriculum**

In describing their culturally responsive practice, teachers described ways in which they move beyond the governmentally-mandated curriculum. This movement beyond the mandated curriculum emerged in the following ways: the teachers described the curriculum and assessment practices as either flexible or constraining - emerging along grade-level clusters; they utilized the curriculum as a means to validate students' cultures; they used the curriculum as an entry point to instilling a sense of critical awareness; the teachers encouraged students to move beyond the classroom and curriculum to become active in their communities. Indeed, expanding upon ministry designated curriculum to empower students by critically engaging them with the world and others is reflected in the tenets of CRP (Gay, 2000; Villegas & Lucas, 2002).

**The curriculum and assessment as flexible or constraining.** The teachers' views of the curriculum and its learning objectives and assessment norms were summarized as either flexible or constraining to their practice. Six of the ten participants, all elementary school teachers, described the curriculum as easily adaptable to student interests, if the teacher is so willing to take initiative.

S'ekoia's comments illustrate the flexibility: "learning outcomes are quite vague and for people to say it's too difficult, or it's too structured, are not giving it enough of a chance to be able to weave in what they want to do." The idea of teacher initiative reappeared in Anya's comments when addressing Eurocentricity in the curriculum. Anya explained, "Different languages and literature and parents' expectations are all a part of our school. The curriculum allows for bringing these in. It's up to us." Mariah also addressed the flexibility of learning outcomes and the role of teacher initiative, one may "take a learning objective and design a lesson around it, or you could take a lesson and go find the learning objective that matches it," the latter being "far more my style." Mariah further described developing relevant lesson plans for her students as her "creative outlet." She explained, "If I have to teach something different, I look at the curriculum, but I don't base all my lessons on it." She refuses to follow the governmentally-mandated curriculum "because it takes my job away from me. It doesn't let me come up with ideas for how I would like to have the learning done."

Those participants who teach or have taught at the secondary level, discussed how teacher agency does little in the way of influencing an ultimately constraining curriculum and assessment practices. As Clark discussed the purpose of school, he spoke at length about the emphasis placed upon literacy and numeracy, which is "very much to the

exclusion of social aspects of learning [namely] social consciousness, social justice, and social responsibility.” He added that “There remains an emphasis on content that traps a lot of teachers. The effect of more emphasis on measurable objectives has an impact on the degree to which content is churned out.” As a result Clark explained, “aspects of learning which are more difficult to measure, in the classic sense, tend to get left by the roadside, such as critical thinking.”

Aggravation pertaining to assessment practices, in particular, reappeared in Joanna’s interview. She detailed how courses with governmentally-regulated exams leave little opportunity for class dialogue, instead they confine her to lecture format, mirroring questions on an exam:

The provincial exams, you just have to get through. I don’t like it when I have to stand up there and do the talking head thing. It’s gone from the richness of dialogue and sharing. Now I’m talking about format of an exam. You answer the question, you have to memorize.

Joanna explained that conducting large scale research projects is simply not possible in a class with a provincial exam component. She said:

The spontaneity...something comes out of a dialogue...some of my class projects would not have happened if I had a provincial exam. I just couldn’t risk not covering everything that was on the exam.

Zoya also addressed the content-heavy nature of the curriculum, she detailed a specific example of why she feels teachers feel obliged to teach according to the curriculum and standardized exams. She said:

Grade 10 math is a gatekeeper. If we don’t teach kids according to the curriculum in elementary school, by the time they get to high school they’re going to sink. We have not done those students any favours. There is pressure to have them learn certain things because I know that if they don’t get grade 10 math, it closes the doors for their dreams and for jobs.

It’s clear that culturally responsive pedagogues feel constrained when asked to teach to the test. This is in line with scholarship in CRP which asserts that current educational reform is from a business framework and excludes the voices of teachers and students. That is, current reform centers upon the belief that one number can measure the worth and drive the education of human beings and that predetermined scripts make good teaching (Baker & Digiovanni, 2005). Indeed, grade and subject areas that are not provincially examinable or examined offer much sought after autonomy to (paraphrasing Mariah) not have their jobs taken away from them.

**Validating students’ cultures through the curriculum.** All of the teachers spoke about the importance of integrating students’ cultural perspectives into the curriculum. This is done as a way to validate students who are culturally diverse, helping

instil in them a positive sense of cultural identity. This element is a core aspect of CRP literature wherein scholars such as Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995) argue that teachers must shape curriculum and instruction in a way that uses the cultural knowledge and frames of reference of their diverse students, ultimately validating their prior knowledge in school. Five teachers expressed their dismay concerning the “touristy” approach to multiculturalism. They acknowledged this approach may be valuable simply as an entry point to further cultural integration into mainstream curriculum.

Joanna described teachers who “have often trained through a very colonial, imperialistic curriculum presentation” and as a result often teach in a manner that “has the potential to become very canned. Here are the handouts, here’s the colouring, without the richness.” When teaching about religions, Zoya explained, “I have students research about the significance of Diwali or Ramadan, so not just the fun, food and frolic parts of multiculturalism, but also the other aspects that you can integrate so that students see themselves, their ethnicity as well as who they are, everyday in the curriculum.”

The teachers spoke of instilling a positive cultural identity in students. Lauren explained, “If there is only one child from a culture, then it is even more important to bring in that culture. If there are three or four of them from the same culture, at least they see their own reflections around them.” In her class of English language learners, Anne described her attempts to validate her students’ home languages while simultaneously encouraging them to speak English. She explained, “It’s really hard with beginner students, to have them understand that you are just getting them to speak more English, that you are not disparaging their own language.” She offered an example of some of her colleagues belittle their students’ mother tongues:

Fining students in any way if they are to use their own language in their classroom. I know classrooms where that is happening and that just makes the hair on my neck stand up, so retrograde.

Anne explained that falling short of substantively reflecting on one’s practice and insulting students’ languages fails to understand that “what you teach impacts students.”

Another example of cultural validation through the curriculum is Clark’s inquiry-based lesson called “How Good Were the Good Old Days?” He explained:

They were to interview the oldest person they knew. The kids had to come up with some questions that would allow them to determine how good these times were. Things like, for example, what kind of health care did you have?

Clark explained:

What the kids were able to do was find some verification and value in a cultural background that they didn’t actually know anything about. That inquiry gave value to their personal experiences and their cultural experiences.

He detailed that many of his students of Chinese background, had parents who

had emigrated from China at the onset of the Cultural Revolution. He discovered that most of his students knew little about their parents' childhoods. The lesson, then, gave them insight into their culture and their parents' lives in China.

**Developing critical consciousness.** In addition to expanding the notion of what counts as curriculum, and developing strategies to have students see themselves reflected in the curriculum, participants explained that integrating critical thinking skills in the curriculum was an important goal. Certainly, scholars of CRP argue that developing critical thinking skills and applying them by challenging the status quo of the current social order is a cornerstone of true CRP (Gay, 2000 & Delpit & Kohl, 2006). S'ekoia explained that school is a "venue for engaging students to be critical thinkers," because "if students are not able to view knowledge and practices in a critical way, they are not able to make informed decisions and make change in the future."

The teachers spoke specifically about critical awareness in reference to textbooks. Joanna provided an example of a grade ten social studies lesson plan in which she highlighted the significance of considering multiple perspectives by comparing differing accounts in various textbooks. Regarding the gold rush in Western Canada and the prospectors who came to stake claims, Joanna asked her students, "How do you think these people ate?" She gave her students textbooks edited by Keith Carlson and written by the Sto:lo people of British Columbia. Joanna explained what she did next:

We read the textbook and started dialogue. The reality is that the Sto:lo people fed them. I wrote Xwelitem on the board, and asked them if they knew what it means. I told them it means hungry people, and we [White people] are still called that today because we are still taking. So, I asked them where is this history in our textbook?

Joanna's intent was to illuminate for students that 1) the school textbook is a constructed account representing a particular perspective, and 2) that differing perspectives on the same historical event do exist.

Tania addressed the difficulty of viewing perspectives which are often contrary to conceptions deep-seated in students' minds, such as that textbooks hold "the truth". She provided an example of bringing about critical awareness with her elementary students:

If we are looking at a textbook that is an older edition, I'll say to the kids, open the first page and find the date that this first book was printed. Who wrote this book? What do you think their background is? The authors of this book were all men and White, are they going to tell other parts of the story?

Tania stated that critical understanding is essential as it empowers students to question texts as well as authority figures who are frequently presented and perceived as unquestionable.

**Empowerment outside "the box."** The final element of what we coded thematically as "expanding notions of the curriculum" was a discourse related to

connecting students to the world outside the classroom. Referred to explicitly in five interviews is the challenge participants face in encouraging students to participate in activism in their communities. The culturally responsive pedagogues we talked to addressed the difficulty in moving students to *utilize* their critical knowledge to contest injustices around them.

S'ekoia believes that school should empower students to make change in their communities. School is an arena for students to discover "how they can contribute in society. Looking critically at aspects of society and how they can make change so they are represented fairly." She provided an example:

You could have them be aware of discriminatory structures, but along with awareness comes responsibility for action and this is where I think it becomes debilitating for students. They might be aware it's happening in the school system, but how many teachers are culturally sensitive? How can they approach those teachers and tell them their voice isn't being heard? It's a difficult conversation to have with a teacher.

The challenge of encouraging students to take action reappeared in Clark's comments who advocates for a learning community that is "inclusive and literate to social change driven by notions of social justice." During his time as a teacher, he explained that he had little opportunity to give rise to student activism as it is "difficult getting kids out of the classroom." Though there are teachers who attempt to do so, principally at an international plane, he described how the quality of these experiences varies greatly:

International concerns related to global education vary in terms of their quality. They range from being vaguely disguised tourism to a genuine involvement in community development. I'm careful not to criticize teachers who take students to the Philippines to build playgrounds, but at the same time I try to find ways of asking questions of: What else could you be doing there? What would have a longer term lasting effect in a positive way on the people living there?

Joanna, the community relations representative of her school, elaborated upon the significance she places in attempting to move her student beyond the confines of the classroom. She explained, "I like to take them outside the textbook and outside of this box. To allow them to experience learning in real life situations, give them an opportunity to see how what they learn at school applies." She described how she also tries to model this commitment:

As community relations representative for the school, what I like to do is see opportunities for the students in the community and make it happen for them. I'm always at meetings somewhere in the community, and I'll see something and tell the students about it, encourage them, so they can join.



Though Joanna presses for student activism, she addressed the bona fide constraints she faces in attempting to do so. Turning back to assessment constraints she simply stated, “You can’t do it with provincial exams.” Joanna spoke of student activism via the school as being greatly dependent upon the administration and school district as it “really depends on their definition of progressiveness.”

### **Theme 3: Development of a Community Resource Network**

While fostering an inclusive classroom and expanding what counts as curriculum were two important themes that are in line with existing discussions in the CRP literature, two additional themes that expand the existing literature also emerged in our research. The third theme was related to teachers' purposeful collaboration with community members. This collaboration had two dimensions: collaborating with families, and collaboration with support/ resource workers.

**Collaboration with families.** Six of the teachers explained that collaboration with family is vital to informing their practice. Lauren explained, “There is the individual, the family and the community and it takes a village to raise a child, and the school is the village.” In this way, the school is necessarily associated to a child and her or his family. Anne also explained that for students who are from a culture that has a strong group identity, familial connections are essential as students “get their cues from the group.” Anya’s comments also reflect a belief shared by many participants that “the family needs to feel part of the school community as much as the kids do.” She explained, “In some Chinese cultures the grandparents are very involved. They come to school when the parents are at work, bringing a hot lunch everyday.” In all of these ways, the participants believe that interaction among teachers and family members allows students to feel increasingly a part of the school, and that the school becomes a part of their family.

Limited opportunity for interaction with parents is a challenge that six of the teachers referred to. Nina explained how there is little room given to include parents in their child’s education, other than parent-teacher meetings which typically take place no more than twice a year. Nonetheless, teachers spoke of the importance of connecting with parents and why they continue to find space to do so. Anya highlighted how she purposefully makes room to interact with parents through informal means such as on the playground. Additionally, Lauren described her approach to create space which allows for communication with family, “inviting them every single morning from nine o’clock until nine twenty in our community meeting time.” As the case with other participants, she appreciates that “often the parents are working” therefore “the grandparents that are looking after them or their aunties usually come.”

Another challenge, described by Nina, was a power dynamic she has observed between teachers and parents wherein teachers habitually overpower conversations and final decisions. Nina stated that in order to ensure interaction is constructive, teachers must genuinely take into account parents’ views and opinions regarding the education of their children. She explained:

The challenge is to bring the parents into it in a way that is good for

them and for us. What I hear from my colleagues is that we are always looking for the parents to think the way that we want them to think. I think we have to think more globally. We need to broaden our views, and I don't see that happening yet.

Nina and other participants described the challenge of dissimilar educational philosophies. Nina explained, "Often they [parents] are most interested in getting 95% and going to Harvard. They don't see the day to day lesson planning." Rather than circumventing parents, she sees these as situations where teachers must purposefully create dialogue with parents in order to better understand what may be a result from differing cultural expectations. She said:

So that it's not just the teachers making judgments about the culture of the parents, and the parents being frustrated about how the school doesn't meet their cultural expectations. Trying to create something new, so they can share their thoughts and we can share our practice. Being able to dialogue, why it is they may have certain expectations and what we can do.

Anya and Nina's observations highlight the significance these teachers place on connecting with parents in order to develop a relationship of mutual support rather than animosity. Family members who feel welcomed at the school are likely to be supportive of their children's education and supportive of the teachers.

**Collaboration with support workers.** The second element to building a community of support is the importance of support workers. Five of the teachers we spoke to described collaboration with support workers as essential to facilitating the achievement of students who are culturally diverse. Support workers were described as language interpreters, multicultural workers, Aboriginal workers, school counsellors and ELL teachers. In particular, participants spoke of these workers as fundamental resources through which they are able to communicate with students' families and students themselves, especially if there are language barriers.

Lauren detailed the difficulty inherent in attempting to educate oneself on a culture and language that is not common in Vancouver. She explained, "it's harder to get information and support, and get it right, and it's easier to make mistakes and misinterpret things." In these situations, communication with those people who best know a culture is fundamental. Lauren explicated, "You would be on a wild goose chase if you didn't have somebody who gives you the right information. Even if you get the right country, there are sometimes fifty different dialects in the country." She provided an example of a new student from Indonesia with whom a language barrier prevented effective communication. She explained, "He kept saying 'Acehnese.' He was ESL, and I kept telling him he's not Chinese, he's Indonesian." Through the aid of an interpreter, she gained clarification and spoke to him and his mother:

I told his mom, who didn't speak English either, but through the multicultural interpreter we hired from outside of our school board, I

learned that “Acehnese” is a dialect in Indonesia. So, the child was telling me that’s what he speaks. Here I was telling him that he’s not Chinese!” With the interpreter translating I was able to apologize to the student and tell him that he was right.

Nonetheless, Lauren addressed the difficulty entailed in hiring an interpreter, adding that much of the final decision is based upon school administration:

The school board doesn’t have translators for a lot of languages. If the family doesn’t have money it’s basically what the administrator can do. You have to convince them to spend school money on a translator for one child. That’s eighty bucks out of field trip money, and I argue that it is really important. We need to be able to communicate with the family. Some administrators go for it, and some don’t.

Purposeful collaboration with support workers resurfaced in Anya’s interview. She explained that because a school counsellor has the necessary skills, family members often volunteer more information to the counsellor than to the classroom teacher. She said:

The person who has made the biggest difference for me this year is our school counsellor. The families will open up to a counsellor more than to the teacher because they sometimes want you to give their kid good marks. She has the skills to speak to them.

Anya highlighted an example of the ways in which her school counsellor assisted her in working with a student who displayed harmful behaviours and was struggling academically. The counsellor worked with the student’s family to develop a workable strategy. She explained, “Every critical thing you say to a child, you have to say five nice things to make up for it. She [the counsellor] told me that is what she suggested to the dad and the grandma.” Anya described the positive impact the counsellor had on the student’s behaviour and academic achievement, stating “Now he’s friendly, he likes doing his work, a very bright kid, and grandma is always smiling on the playground.” Anya explained “the counsellor is the one with the real skills” and that she “wouldn’t have known what to say to the dad or grandma.”

Collaborating with those who can best assist them in meeting the needs of students who are culturally diverse is a focus that emerged as having great significance with participants. For these teachers whose work aligns with culturally responsive pedagogy, purposeful interaction with families and collaboration with support workers are two key means through which they see the success of their students occurring.

#### **Theme 4: Renewal of Knowledge**

The final theme to emerge from these interviews with culturally responsive pedagogues was related to ongoing knowledge renewal. All ten participants made reference to the continual learning process embedded in teaching. Many of the teachers discussed how discomfort was a necessary feeling when one critically self-reflects on one's attitudes and how problematic patterns are implicated in one's own practice. Seven

of the ten participants directly cited scholars, theorists or researchers when describing their educational beliefs and practices. Five participants directly referred to the opportunities they seek for involvement in professional development opportunities, namely teacher workshops. The three elements of the fourth theme involved: discomfort, scholarship, and professional development opportunities.

**Experiencing discomfort.** Five teachers explained that feelings of discomfort are often the first step in ongoing critical self-reflection. Participants described renewing one's knowledge as a choice that requires initiative, and if not pursued, may result in insular teaching practices.

As an anti-racism advisor for a school district in Metro Vancouver, S'ekoia organizes and implements workshops regarding multicultural and anti-racism education. She spoke at length about the importance of self-reflection and experiencing discomfort. From her experience in implementing workshops, she also addressed the resistance she faces from numerous educators explaining that "It's challenging to have those discussions with teachers because it is based on their prejudices and their upbringings. Some teachers shut down."

Nina explained the challenge of finding a community of other teachers who share her pedagogical framework. She described that at her school there is hesitancy to experience discomfort and that support from other teachers to be reflective of one's practice is rare:

I think there has to be a group of teachers who are really committed to the topic, but at this school I don't think that is the case. I'm pro-d ? chair and we had multicultural workers come in and talk about the importance of students' cultures, but there seems to be an element of the staff that is not interested. Until that interest is there amongst a larger group and until people are more comfortable exploring these things without feeling put down, it's not going to happen.

Anya also addressed the issue of teacher hesitancy. She added that there are various opportunities for teachers to advance their practice and become active in their learning:

You read a book, you go to a workshop, you meet a teacher who tells you something they tried, and then you go and try it! You can always renew yourself if you want to, and if you are open to things. If you're not open to it, unfortunately, you continue to do the same thing all the time.

Unquestionably, participants felt that teachers must move beyond feelings of hesitancy to critically self-reflect upon their biases and prejudices and how they are implicated in their practice. And it became clear that at least some of the participants felt frustration in not finding a culture of unsettling pedagogy among their colleagues at the school site. For these participants, emotions relating to discomfort were described as necessary to becoming reflective and successful teachers of students who are culturally diverse. And that doing so requires them to move outside of their comfort zones and become active in

searching for opportunities to renew their knowledge.

**Information and support from scholarship.** Seven participants referred to the importance of drawing upon work by educational scholars, theorists and researchers. Zoya, for instance, described how scholarly literature informs the approach she takes to structure cooperative learning during her literature circles. She explained:

There is a lot of literature which has outlined how you can structure literature circles. I sort of mixed and matched the literature, what works for me. Really depending on the students, you have to know what your students are interested in.

Mariah described the role of educational scholars in informing a unit plan she developed. By reading current research, she realized her learning objectives were far from being met. Referring to Megan Boler's "The Risks of Empathy," Mariah described how Boler's ideas reshaped her unit on slavery:

The risks of empathy are, for example, if you read a book on the Holocaust and afterwards you say that you completely understand what it must have been like. I realized it's very dangerous to say this. You're voyeuristic, you haven't actually lived through it.

After reading the article, Mariah described how she reflected upon what she considered to be a most insightful unit on slavery and ultimately changed the way she taught the subject:

I used to have kids compile a slave dairy where they pretend to be a slave leaving from the south making their way to Canada. I realized it was probably the worst thing I could do. I wanted them to empathize with what it would feel like to be a slave. I realized it's more valuable to get them to research documentation of slaves, to look at those words. Then, if they want to, create a poem or art piece based on that.

Mariah explained that as a teacher she is immersed "in a learning process," continually determining approaches she may take to best reach her students, certainly through staying connected with the research community.

Nina described the value of reading the work of researchers; however, she voiced a concern when describing how numerous colleagues view theoretical work as an "ideological world removed from the reality of actual teaching." Nina explained this may be because teachers find it difficult to access research. She described her attempts to find "ways to bridge the gap" to get to the practicality of theory. As a solution to the perceived disconnect between researchers and practicing teachers, she expressed interest in "having an outreach" between, for instance, the Center for Intercultural Studies in Asia at the University of British Columbia and schools in the lower mainland. Nina described how an outreach may in fact persuade teachers to approach theory with an open mind, utilizing it, and becoming conscious of the many ways in which it is central to their everyday practice.

In addition to referring to the work of others, participants described their work as educational researchers as well as teachers. For instance, Clark described his ongoing participation in the research communities at Simon Fraser University and the University of British Columbia. Moreover, he worked for a notable provincial teaching association where he wrote and published articles on social justice and education. Another participant, Joanna, is actively involved in research at the college and university levels. She works with professors conducting action research on social issues, most pertaining to environmental sustainability.

**Information and support through professional development.** As well as staying connected to the research community, five participants expressed the significance of professional development on their practice. Participants described that workshops, administered by their respective school districts and regarding issues such as anti-racist and culturally responsive teaching practices, are an essential means of professional development.

For example, Anya emphasized the ways in which attending professional development occasions replenished her educational beliefs and instructional strategies. For Anya, taking note of the ideas and concepts presented in workshop forums, as well as subsequently reflecting on what she hears, motivates and supports her educational philosophy. She said:

Workshops have given me so much. I went to a BCTF social justice conference and the guy speaking was so inspiring about social justice in every classroom. I came away thinking that I feel right carrying on with the way I teach. I'm not going to let the curriculum flood me by telling kids to sit and write and make it neat. That's not what it's all about.

It was evident that these teachers place great importance upon remaining active learners. Participants spoke of the need to experience discomfort and reflect on their practices by continuously renewing their knowledge by staying connected with educational scholarship and attending professional workshops.

### **Discussion of Key Challenges and Opportunities**

The findings from our interviews with teachers who were identified by others as practicing a culturally responsive pedagogy were informative. Their responses raise many questions, and reveal the limitations of what we set out to do. While we set out to minimize challenges related to self-reporting in teacher responses, our data was not set up to triangulate self-reporting. For example, that students and families did address teacher engagement the way these teachers expected, or that the scholarly content teachers hoped would make it into their practice actually was there. We did not conduct interviews with students or families, nor did we conduct any classroom observations.

Similarly, it should not go unnoticed that four of 10 participants were teachers of Colour, and six were White. It is an important limitation of the work that participants did not explore how their personal cultural knowledge, insights, or biases contributed to their



perspectives.

If we do however accept these teachers' accounts, then there are some valuable insights to be gleaned. Themes 1 and 2 describing the belief and practices of participants (not surprisingly) align with the CRP literature. Yet, beliefs and practices coded as themes 3 and 4 highlighted central aspects of these teachers' culturally responsive pedagogy that are *not* discussed in a substantive manner in the CRP literature. Furthermore, these teachers described numerous challenges they encountered when attempting to facilitate the success of their students who are culturally diverse, which we believe warrant closer study and attention. We describe these below.

### **Challenge: Implementing Collaborative Learning**

Although participants discussed the benefits of collaborative learning, they continuously voiced the challenges they faced when putting this strategy into practice in a meaningful way. Notably, participants addressed the need to establish structures and self-educate about various models for integrative and collaborative learning strategies. As Clark recalled:

I didn't even know what it [collaborative learning] was. There was certainly no distinction made then [in my teacher education program], and even now, between collaborative or cooperative learning and group work. I didn't understand it myself until well into my career.

For this reason, many participants felt like they were starting from scratch, so to speak with each group of new students in the classroom. Though it is likely that students have had experience working with their peers, they may not have learned how to collaborate in a manner that encourages *collective* accomplishment and accountability for one another's work.

The participants detailed the ways in which collaborative learning is especially challenging in the context of large class sizes, which limit the time a teacher can spend with each group. Increased class sizes, in conjunction with the arrangement and inadequacy of physical classroom spaces, illustrate how schools are designed for a mode of individual learning that privileges an independent, individualistic ideology (e.g. sitting independently in rows rather than in groups or 'workstations'). Indeed, this is in contrast to CRP, which argues for a "community of learners" wherein students work together to build projects and brainstorm ideas (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Additionally, participants discussed the constraints of the formal curriculum and assessment practices. The individualistic and competitive nature of mainstream assessment practices often disregards the social aspects of learning. This is in contrast to the philosophies held by the participants. Lauren's frustration was apparent when she exclaimed:

You cannot pretend not to notice that when you get a report card language and math take up three quarters of the paper and then one quarter of the paper is for social, emotion, physical and all the rest of the human being.

Participants position themselves as facilitators of active student learning, not as the source of knowledge in a classroom. As facilitators, they attempt to instill in students a confidence that their knowledge and contributions are valuable in school. This form of learning, then, is indicative of participants purposefully “lifting the veil of absolute authority” (Gay, 2000, p. 78), and giving students’ voices primacy in the learning process. And this on a conceptual level is in line with CRP scholarship. Their challenges offer important clues into how teacher education (both preservice and inservice) might support culturally responsive practice, for example by supporting teachers in developing creative strategies for collaborative learning while also developing arguments and strategies for resisting state mandated constraints (such as expanding class sizes).

### **Challenge: Criticality & Empowering Education**

These teachers also had a commitment to develop in students a sense of critical consciousness. Participants explained how they encourage students to question the information and authority of textbooks. They recognized that in textbooks, a focus on Eurocentric history, accomplishments and perspectives often marginalizes the contributions of people of Colour and others who are culturally diverse. However, the standard curriculum and assessment norms were key structural constraints, limiting teachers who see benefits in conducting critical inquiries. The particular forms of critical thinking projects carried out by participants in their classrooms are not assessed through common assessment instruments such as standardized exams.

Another barrier to teaching critical thinking is what participants perceived as the supremacy of dominant ideologies especially in the standard curriculum. It is likely that teachers find it demanding to unearth innovative and influential approaches that will illustrate to students the oppressive nature of the status quo. This is especially difficult in light of the fact that they often do not have adequate teaching resources that allow them to do this. For this reason, teachers are forced to use their own time to compile resources, typically without any support or incentive to do so. Gay (2000) describes the commitment to fostering a critical consciousness as the transformative characteristic of culturally relevant pedagogy.

While the literature recognizes the importance of student empowerment and student action in their communities (Ladson-Billings, 1995a; Gay, 2000; Henry, 1994; Montgomery, 2001) there has been less detailing of the obstacles when promoting student activism. Though these teachers may strive to empower students, the challenges they face reveal structural constraints at every turn. Attempts for students to be active in their communities often manifest in superficial work (such as charity drives) wherein students do very little activism. Also, the curriculum and provincial exams give little credit for learning that takes places through community involvement.

Additionally, the hierarchal nature of the system places control of classroom decision-making in the hands of those in authority who are outside of the classroom. Participants’ comments illustrate how administration or district resistance can immobilizes a teacher’s efforts and enthusiasm to encourage student activism. As Joanna explained, “it depends on their [administration and school district’s] definition of progressiveness.” Those teachers who struggle to create opportunities for their students to

get involved in the community may be labelled as radical or uncooperative. So, teachers who work to empower their students may in fact be silenced, for fear of being ostracised by colleagues or their administration. For instance, Joanna's position as a Community Relations Representative for her school was discontinued by her administration because her projects were considered too radical.

### **Challenge: From Isolation to Collaboration**

These interviews also provided insights about how committed the participants are toward meeting the needs of their students who are culturally diverse. It was also clear that they have a humility about their efforts to facilitate the success of their students. During interviews, they continually questioned whether they were doing enough to reach students. This modesty may be a foundation of their personal cultural identities making this work as personal as it is pedagogical, or their persistent efforts to discover innovative educational conceptions, reinvent instructional strategies, and form connections with those who are like-minded. What became apparent is that participants do not work in isolation. They are the antithesis to an image presented in popular discourses of the educational "lone ranger". Rather, participants described situations that reveal the extent to which their interactions with community members, the research community, and educational support workers inform their practice.

The CRP literature encourages teachers to become active in the communities of their students and stresses the importance of dialoguing with parents (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Neito, 1996). In line with this literature, participants discussed how parents are a necessary part of the school community. Participants understand that students' home lives, family values and perspectives, cannot be separated away students while they are in school. These participants recognize that they do not single-handedly possess the pre-eminent techniques and strategies needed to facilitate the success of their students. As consistent with the literature, family members serve as valuable resources for gaining insight into a student's culture, interests, and behaviours (Neito, 1996; Villegas & Lucas, 2002).

A fundamental challenge in interactions with the family, voiced by participants is reconciling often dissimilar expectations and educational philosophies about the role of teachers and families. Participants recognized that conflicting values reflect how educational expectations are culturally mediated. Though reconciling expectations may serve to be a considerable challenge, participants indicated that in our pluralistic society, teachers *must* address and accommodate differences. This should not be done by measuring differences against a common standard, but by beginning to explore the possibilities for change based on different cultural ways of knowing.

Participants strongly emphasized the importance of partnering with support workers (especially with multicultural workers and translators). They provided numerous examples of ways in which support workers assist them and some participants stated that without the support workers, they could not have reached particular students, as they do not have the necessary expertise. The necessity for this collaboration was especially apparent when participants discussed working with multicultural home stay workers and translators, both of whom work with students learning English. Because participants centralized communicating with parents, the importance they placed upon the role of

support workers in establishing lines of communication with family members is not surprising. For instance, Anne explains that during parent-teacher conferences, the parents of refugee students “usually won’t come unless they know for sure there are going to be multicultural workers.” In this way, bridging the gap between home, school and community epitomizes the role of support workers.

Confronted with pedagogy that is different from what they are accustomed to, many parents who are culturally diverse may feel disempowered when they fail to affect change, or simply gain a better understanding of their child’s educative process. Participants see support workers as resources who facilitate parental empowerment, as they allow parents to effectively communicate with their child’s school. Additionally, support workers enhance cross-cultural understanding by providing relevant information regarding the school in the first language of the family. As well, participants described how support workers help to inform them of the cultural backgrounds and expectations of these families. This can foster a sense of empowerment amongst families and students, as they become aware that their voices are being heard by the school.

Adding to what we know from the CRP literature about the value of working alongside support workers, interviews revealed the structural constraints on this partnership. There are often too few support workers in the school system, as schools generally have a limited number of counsellors (perhaps only one assigned to several grades). Typically, each school district has a set number of Aboriginal workers or translators who are often not from the same cultural group, or do not speak the same language as the student in need. This assumed homogeneity speaks of a general lack of cultural awareness found in the school system - as well as a lack of funds channelled into these support services. Participants described how lack of funding was a key constraint. Lauren explained that her school is often forced to make budget choices between field trips and providing fundamental assistance to students.

For the teachers we spoke to, research is often utilized to *substantiate* their equity philosophies and strengthen their confidence in their pedagogical decision-making. For instance, Anne spoke of the importance of developing students’ social skills, explaining that educational theorists, the Johnson brothers, strengthen her knowledge on this subject. As well, Anya often explains her pedagogical choices by referring to research that supports them. She explained that following workshops she attended, her views were reinforced: “I came away thinking that I feel right carrying on with the way I teach. I’m not going to let the curriculum flood me.”

In addition, participants spoke of connecting with the research community to *inform* their practice. Foundational to this pursuit may be a commitment to a notion that has become rather cliché in educational practice: teaching necessitates life long learning. As participants recognize that student bodies are becoming increasingly diverse, they turn to scholarship and professional development opportunities to assist in informing instructional strategies that are responsive to students. For instance, Mariah spoke of altering the objectives of her unit plan on slavery subsequent to reading an article on the risks of empathy. Participants’ remarks are indicative of their appreciation of the often dissimilar perspectives and experiences tied with each generation of students and each wave of immigrants. In this way, participants recognize that if their pedagogical approaches are to be relevant to their current student body, they must pursue continuous professional development. There is certainly no “best way” to attend to the needs of all

students as evidently, the participants are particularly sensitive to variability within cultural communities.

### **Challenge: The Need for Reflection**

For participants, the concepts of lifelong learning and renewing knowledge are coupled with a continuous reflection upon one's teaching. Though participants indicated a great deal of personal reflection, they described their colleagues' hesitancy to do the same. According to the participants, this hesitation is the result of a reluctance to experience discomfort. While many teacher education programs focus a great deal of attention on reflective practice, for in-service teachers, there seem to be numerous ways in which the school structure allows teachers to forgo critical self-reflection. Anne says, "I don't think we have a place in ongoing professional development to really be reflective on how what you teach impacts the students". In addition, there are few opportunities for professional development forums where teachers can share knowledge and reflect in a collaborative manner. While workshops are key, some research has shown that "one-stop workshops" are ineffective in terms of genuinely providing for teachers the space for dialogue and reflection upon their biases (Sleeter & McLaren, 1995). Workshops must to be continuous, and learning points need to be reiterated in order for them to take effect. For S'ekoia (who serves as the sole anti-racism advisor in her entire school district), finding opportunities to revisit the schools under her jurisdiction is a challenge, to say the least.

Although pressed, participants failed to offer examples of collaboration with fellow teachers. Rather, they focused on interaction with parents and partnerships with support workers and connections with the research community. There are numerous factors that may explain this. For instance, time constraints may limit opportunities for collaboration with colleagues. Because support workers are hired to assist teachers, their presence may be more accessible, allowing for more frequent collaboration. Purposeful collaboration with family, rather than with other teachers, may result from a belief that the family holds the greatest insight into a child.

Another reason why there could be a lack of peer collaboration is a mismatch of philosophies among participants and their colleagues. Anne stated that collaboration with teachers "depends on the teachers." She made clear, "if someone's personal and pedagogical values are different than mine I am not as interested as I probably once was in trying to convert them or trying to have conversations." Anne's comments seem to indicate that at one point, perhaps at the beginning of her career, she had the passion and energy to dialogue about divergent philosophies of learning. Now, Anne's comments seem to present a disheartened view - perhaps she feels that too many of her colleagues have philosophies that disregard or disadvantage cultural diversity in schools. This suggests that participants have to make a decision: either put effort into dialoguing with others who may have divergent ideas but who are open to reflection, *or* channel their energies into working alongside like-minded professionals in the urgency of assisting students who are marginalized by the existing school structure. Participants most often chose the latter.



## Conclusion

This study focused on the perspectives of classroom teachers who are dedicated to facilitating the success of students who are culturally diverse. It sought to address the question, how do teachers committed to meeting the needs of students who are culturally diverse describe their beliefs, practices and the challenges they encounter in relation to their commitments? The participants in this study as well as the scholarship regarding culturally relevant pedagogy provide insight into how one may facilitate success among a diverse student population. While it has remained unstated in this discussion, the literature in CRP is quite clear that culturally responsive pedagogy is "good pedagogy" for *all* students. A further aspect of CRP is the importance of teaching about the inequities in society (the 'isms' such as racism, sexism, and classism) all of which are issues that can be controversial and, therefore, are often avoided by classroom teachers. Indeed, it is important for all students, regardless of cultural background, to partake in critical dialogue regarding these issues as no one is untouched by them in a society characterized by all of them (Baker & Digiovanni, 2005). It is hoped that this study brings to the dialogue the voices of experienced educators who are committed to finding consistent ways to achieve success with all students. The responses of the teachers in this study reveal the belief that a positive sense of cultural identity and self-worth are intertwined with academic achievement. Participants validate students by honouring their prior knowledge, building meaningful relationships with students, and fostering a sense of community. They work to empower students by using the curriculum as a means for students to take ownership of their learning, providing students with a critical lens through which they may deconstruct notions of absolute truths, and attempting to make available opportunities where they may exercise activism in their communities. Participants' descriptions of their practice reflect the high degree to which they seek out and exercise pedagogical agency. They disrupt the domineering Eurocentric interests of schools, connect with the research community in order to understand and develop strategies for how this may be accomplished, and work in collaboration with others who share these commitments.

However, alongside of these commitments and successes, participant responses have also revealed deep cracks that add complexity to participant's agency to enact culturally responsive pedagogies. Many of the challenges they face reflect structural or institutional constraints such as the hierarchical nature of school decision-making for community-based action and activism, the imposition of standardized tests that constrain creativity and criticality in the classroom, the lack of resources to respond in the best ways to culturally diversity students and families, and the lack of time and at times the perceived lack of will for ongoing and sustained opportunities for professional dialogue and development within and across the ideological spectrum. The undeniable presence of these constraints in participants' interviews, raise questions about the degree to which a teacher can truly exercise any pedagogical agency. Though participants described their dedication to supporting students who are culturally diverse, questions emerge about the long-range impact of their efforts on students experiences at a given school.

Participants did not address the challenges they face lightly. It is apparent that the institutional arrangements governing a school effectively establish the parameters within which teachers work. These arrangements include how schools are organized as well as



how schools incorporate the rules and structures built into the wider environment. For this reason, attending exclusively to theories and methods of learning and teaching involved in a single classroom may be insufficient when looking to impact change for the betterment of culturally diverse students. According to these participants, teaching practice is structured fundamentally by the institutional structures that support or interfere with at least some of the tenets of culturally responsive pedagogy. This has implications for numerous factions of our education system. For example, it calls on teacher educators to consider how well pre-service teachers are prepared to recognize and respond to the *structural* aspects of schooling that impact their activities in a single classroom (such as advocating for students and their families for translation supports). And it calls on educators and administrators to consider what barriers there may be to collaboration among teachers in ways that are enriching, and that offer ongoing engagement with a range of scholarly research and theories.

The results of this study require that any pedagogical and professional agency for change cannot occur without simultaneous attention to and advocacy for institutional and structural reform.

### References

- Au, K., & Jordan, C. (1981). Teaching reading to Hawaiian children: Finding a culturally appropriate solution. " In H. Trueba, G. Gurtheir, and K. Au (eds.), *Culture ad the Bilingual Classroom: Studies in Classroom Ethnography* (pp. 139-152). Rowley Mass.: Newbury House.
- Au, H. H., & Kawakawi, A. J. (1985). Research currents: Talk story and learning to read. *Language Arts*, 62(4), 406-411.
- Baker P.B. & Digiovanni, L.W. (2005). Narratives on culturally relevant pedagogy: Personal responses to the standardized curriculum. *Current Issues in Education*, 8(15), 1-13.
- Dei, G. S. (1992). *Anti-racism education: Theory and practice*. Nova Scotia: Fernwood Publishing.
- Dei, G.S., Mazzuca, J., McIsaac, E. (1997). *Reconstructing 'dropout': A critical ethnography of the dynamics of black students' disengagement from school*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Dei, G. J. S., James, I. M., James-Wilson, S., & Zine, J. (2000). *Removing the margins: The challenges and possibilities of inclusive schooling*. Toronto: Canadian Scholars Press.
- Delpit, L. & Kohl, H. (2006). *Other people's children: Cultural conflict in the classroom*. New York: New Press.
- Duffy, A. (2003). Class Struggles: Public Education and the new Canadian. The Atkinson Charitable Foundation. Retrieved September 22, 2006, from <http://atkinsonfoundation.ca/files/duffyrev.pdf>
- Egbo, B. (2009). *Teaching for diversity in Canadian schools*. Toronto: Pearson Education Canada.
- Erickson, F. (1987). Transformation and school success: The Politics and culture of educational achievement. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 18, 335-356.
- Fordham, S., & Ogbu, J. (1986). Black students' school success: Coping with the burden of acting White." *Urban Review*, 18(3), 176-206.
- Gay, G. (2000). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research and practice*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Gorman, W. (1999). Canadian native students and inequitable learning. *Canadian Social Studies*, 33(4), 114-116.

- Henry, A. (1994). The empty shelf and other curricular challenges of teaching for children of African descent: Implications for teacher practice. *Urban Education* 29(3), 298-319.
- hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. New York: Routledge.
- Howard, T. (2001a). Telling their side of the story: African-American students' perceptions of culturally relevant teaching. *Urban Review*, 33(2), 131-149.
- Howard, T. (2001b). Powerful pedagogy for African American students. *Urban Education*, 36(2), 179-202.
- Hymel, S. (2008). *2006 Safe school and social responsibility survey*. University of British Columbia.
- Irvine, J. (1990). *Black students and school failure*. New York: Greenwood Press.
- Irvine, J. (1990). Cultural mismatch in schools: A Barrier to learning. *Catalysts*, 48 (9), 8-9.
- Irvine, J. & Armento, B. (2001). *Culturally responsive teaching: Lesson planning for elementary and middle grades*. Boston: McGraw Hill.
- Jordan, (1985. Translating culture: From ethnographic information to educational program. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 16(4), 105-123.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1992). "Culturally relevant teaching: The Key to making multicultural education work." In Grant, C (Ed) *Research & Multicultural Education: From the margin to the Mainstream*, London, Farmer Press. p106-121.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1994). *The dreamkeepers: Successful teachers of African American children*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1995). But that's just good teaching! The case for culturally relevant pedagogy. *Theory Into Practice*, 34(3), 159-165.
- Mohatt, G. and Erickson, F. (1981). Cultural differences in teaching styles in an Odawa school: A sociolinguistic approach. In H. Trueba, G. Guthrie, & K. Au (Eds.), *Culture and the bilingual classroom: Studies in classroom ethnography* (pp. 105-119). Rowley, MA: Newbury House
- Nieto, S. (c1996/2003). *Affirming diversity: The Sociopolitical context of multicultural education*, (2nd ed). Longman Publishers.

- Pang, V. O. (2001). *Multicultural education: A caring centered reflective approach*. New York, N.Y.: McGraw-Hill Higher Education.
- Ryan, J., Pollock, K., & Antonelli, F. (2009). Teacher diversity in Canada: Leaky pipelines, bottlenecks, and glass ceilings. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 32(3), 591-617.
- Schick, C & St. Denis, V. (2005). Troubling national discourses in anti-racist curricular planning. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 28(3), pp 295-317.
- Sleeter, C. & McLaren, P. (1995). *Multicultural education, critical pedagogy, and the politics of difference*. New York: SUNY Press.
- Spreen, M. (1992). Rare populations, hidden populations and link-tracing designs: What and why?, *Bulletin Methodologie Sociologique*, 36, 34-58.
- Statistics Canada. (2003). *Canada's ethnocultural portrait: The changing mosaic*. Retrieved 04/01, 2006 from <http://www12.statcan.ca/english/census01/products/analytic/companion/etoimm/pdf/96F0030XIE2001008.pdf>
- Statistics Canada (2006). 2006 Canadian Census. Retrieved from <http://www.statcan.ca>
- Valencia, R. R. (Ed.). (1997). *The evolution of deficit thinking: Educational thought and practice*. Washington DC: Falmer Press.
- Villegas, A. & Lucas, T. (2002). *Educating culturally responsive teachers: A Coherent approach*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.