

White Teachers in Urban Classrooms: Embracing Non-White Students' Cultural Capital For Better Teaching and Learning

Urban Education
2014, Vol. 49(1) 111–144
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sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/0042085912472510
uex.sagepub.com



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Abstract

The racial “mismatch” between a non-White student public school population and a primarily White teaching force continues to be underexamined through an appropriate cultural lens. This literature review provides examples of how White teachers must properly recognize non-White students’ actions and rhetoric in classroom settings as valuable cultural capital. By addressing how White teachers must reflect on their own race within the dominant school structure to close the opportunity gap, this literature review presents both a theoretical and a practical “call to action” for how White teachers in urban classrooms must critically rethink non-White students’ cultural capital in the context of teaching and learning.

Keywords

culturally relevant pedagogy, minority academic success, student self-esteem, teacher development, teacher education, White teachers

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Closing the achievement gap in America's schools remains a pressing issue for the long-term health of the nation—a common phrase used by both scholars and the general public. Yet, the fact that such rhetoric on “closing the achievement gap” has become so synonymous with reform efforts is representative of a larger problem in the educational research paradigm. Instead of framing the achievement gap in terms of educational outcomes (i.e., test scores) and documenting how students of color lag behind their White and Asian peers in graduation rates, researchers should instead reframe such achievement in terms of opportunity (Houser, 1996; Milner, 2010). Milner (2010) explains that “focusing on an achievement gap inherently forces us to compare culturally diverse students with White students without always understanding reasons that undergird disparities and differences that exist” (p. 8). These disparities and differences *in opportunity* for students of color are vast, and include not only educational components such as lack of school resources but also societal factors such as poor daily living conditions. Therefore, it is not so much that an achievement gap exists, but rather, the existence of an opportunity gap that creates an “education debt” owed to students of color (Ladson-Billings, 2006).

With an understanding of the need to address the opportunity gap, this literature review is intended to be a “call to action” for both teachers and researchers to reexamine one specific aspect of this educational disparity: How students of color are consistently being denied the *opportunity* to receive appropriate and equitable classroom instruction. Instead of zeroing in on student outcomes, we must focus “on the processes that *lead* to the outcomes—that is, *teaching and learning*” (Milner, 2010, p. 7; emphases added). At its core, education is a process that occurs, by and large, through the interactions between teacher and student, and we must recognize that for children of all races and ethnicities to be successful, these interactions must be beneficial and productive for the student. Students must have an opportunity to learn through a curricular framework that emphasizes student skills, interests, and knowledge—and from teachers who teach in solidarity with their pupils.

For these aforementioned opportunities to come to fruition and due to the importance of teaching and learning within classrooms, this article will further concentrate on one particular, but often underexamined, feature that is critical to student success in the classroom: culture. Understanding how students of color are typically not members of the “dominant culture” is crucial to learning how and why non-White children are less likely to engage in school, relative to their White and Asian peers. Sociologist Prudence L. Carter (2005) uses the phrase “dominant culture” in reference “to the system of mainstream and widely acceptable social practices and ideas, often based on

the ways of life of social groups with the most power in our society” (p. 185). Predictably, members of the dominant culture are primarily White Americans, whereas people of color are largely *not* members of the dominant culture (Darder, 1991; Freire, 1998; Giroux & Simon, 1989; Milner, 2007, 2010). Conversely, students of color in turn have their own cultural aspects unique to being members of an oppressed racial group in America, which Carter (2005) appropriately calls the “non-dominant culture.” Frankly, this clash of cultures often inadvertently occurs inside classrooms between students of color from mostly low-income households and their teachers who are predominantly White and middle class. Milner (2010) adds, “cultural conflicts can cause inconsistencies and incongruence between teachers and students, which can make teaching and learning difficult” (p. 14). As a White researcher who often works with students of color, I can attest to these cultural differences as my argument for why White teachers must engage with students’ nondominant cultural capital are based on my own past experiences. Frankly, I humbly recognize my own “positionality” in the writing of this literature review from my White, Eurocentric perspective (see Milner, 2007, 2012; Scheurich & Young, 1997).

Even though these cultural differences are known to exist, a large majority of students of color in public schools are still taught by White teachers. For example, in New York City’s public schools—the largest school district in the nation—over 70% of high school youth are students of color while over 80% of public high school teachers in the state are White (National Assessment of Educational Progress [NAEP], 2011; National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2008). Therefore, I am suggesting that a more nuanced understanding of the interactions between White teachers and their non-White pupils is needed, specifically in regards to students’ “non-dominant” cultural capital. Although more teachers of color are needed to increase faculty diversity in schools, I am not inferring that the racial mismatch itself is inherently a problem; White teachers are fully capable of teaching students of color—successful teaching happens every day. However, to be a successful White teacher in a non-White classroom, White teachers must recognize students’ nondominant culture and learn how to engage with it pedagogically (Gay & Howard, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Nieto, 2004; see Milner, 2011). With a rapidly rising non-White child population—by 2050 almost two thirds of all American children are projected to be students of color—and the fact that 63 of the 100 largest U.S. school districts are already more than half students of color, we must accept that the “changing dynamics of our nation’s schools indicate that white teachers currently in classrooms will find themselves with learners who possess markedly different experiences than

their own” (Dalton, Sable, & Hoffman, 2006, p. 6; T. C. Howard, 2010, p. 121; U.S. Census Bureau, 2008; see also Milner, 2010). Therefore, it is absolutely critical that White teachers are better prepared to engage a large non-White population in the classroom.

Within this demographical framework, I argue that educators must grapple with the complexity and importance of identifying students’ culture to close the opportunity gap that continues to hold student achievement stagnant. Thus, this review is organized into two sections roughly divided between theory and practice. Part I asks: How does the theory of cultural capital apply to students of color in schools? The first part of this article not only examines the current understanding of this question, but seeks to broadly contextualize culture in the classroom. To do this, Part I reviews the seminal literature that explains why culture is important; the differences between dominant and nondominant cultural capital (a central element of this article); the intersections of culture, race, and social class; and briefly, the current theories for students’ disengagement. Conversely, Part II gears more toward practice, examining how important recent literature—reviewed cohesively—can provide specific “steps” that I argue can help improve student engagement. Part II implicitly asks: How does non-White students’ (assumed) lack of possession of cultural capital affect the pedagogical practices of White teachers? To answer this question and illustrate these practical “steps” that White teachers can utilize in (and out) of the classroom, I provide various tangible examples: one, teachers must realize, through self-reflection, that being White must be acknowledged and so must teachers’ place in the dominant framework; two, teachers need to recognize students’ nondominant culture in the classroom as culture and *not* as resistance to learning; and three, teachers must embrace students’ nondominant culture pedagogically in the classroom and believe that it can successfully be done. Overall, the purpose of this article is *not* to condemn White teachers in urban settings but rather, to serve as a starting point to advance the discussion on how White teachers can better engage with students of color, providing them the *opportunity* to succeed academically at the high levels they are capable of achieving and at the levels that America needs.

Part I: Contextualizing Culture in Education

The “C” Word: What Is Culture? And Why Study It in Schools?

Before I discuss the theoretical components of culture and how White teachers engage with students’ nondominant culture, it is essential to first briefly

examine what I exactly mean by “culture” and its significance in education. Of course, the concept of culture elicits a wide range of connotations, definitions, and ideas as it is beyond the scope of this article to dissect which definitions of culture are correct or, for example, the origins of its anthropological roots (see Freilich, 1972, 1989). However, despite no set definition, it is crucial to have at least a general understanding of culture, broadly speaking, and recognize that within education, culture is a word that is frequently used (Erickson, 2011). Seminal anthropologist Clyde Kluckhohn (1962) described culture as an important facet of human life that is “learned by people as a result of belonging to some particular group, and is that part of learned behavior which is shared with others” (p. 25; see also Baldwin, Faulkner, Hecht & Lindsley, 2006; Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1952; Parsons, 1949). Furthermore, in the social sciences and in relation to education, Trumbull et al. (2001) explain that culture refers to sets of ideas, beliefs, and acquired knowledge that are passed on through teaching and learning—both consciously and unconsciously (see also Erickson, 1986; Gutierrez & Rogoff, 2003). To believe that classrooms are a culture-less space where only subject-related knowledge or test prep skills are being taught is overly naïve; every individual has culture and stopping cultural transmissions and reflections from occurring between student and teacher is impossible because the way people talk, act, and think are all reflections of our cultural values and upbringings (Erickson, 2002; Gutierrez, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1995b; Lee, 2007; Mohatt & Erickson, 1981). Carter (2005) adds that specifically, schools are “key sites of socialization and cultural reproduction” (p. 9). Thus, T. C. Howard (2010) asserts that not only does “culture matter,” but how well its “intangible aspects shape attitudes and behaviors has tremendous consequences for teachers and students in diverse schools” (p. 52). In sum, it is critical that educators (and policymakers) reexamine the ways in which culture impacts classroom learning by reviewing the seminal and current literature that can better frame the teaching practices of White teachers in urban classrooms.

Breaking Down “Cultural Capital” and the “Non-Dominant Culture”

Despite the prevalence of culture in both teachers’ and students’ lives and the fact that schools are a pivotal place where culture is shared and developed, it is also important to further understand how certain people’s culture is valued more than others—and how this plays out in schools. French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1986/2011) put forth the term “cultural capital” to describe the beliefs, knowledge, and sense of self that is “closely linked to [a] person”

and has value in the marketplace of society (p. 85; Bourdieu, 1977, 1984; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Specifically, Bourdieu (1986/2011) explains that cultural capital can exist as three different entities: the embodied state, or generally the qualities that make up a person's self-disposition; the objectified state, or actual "cultural goods" a person possesses; and the institutionalized state, or broadly speaking, an individual's academic qualifications (among other traits) that determine his or her social status (p. 85). My article primarily deals with the former two states of cultural capital, which applied cohesively, broadly include tangible cultural identifiers such as mannerisms, dress, beliefs, and values (e.g., taste in music or food) that advance a person's self-worth. In addition, specific "high-status cultural signals" indicate individuals who possess cultural capital—"dominant" cultural capital that, as I will discuss, many students of color are ascribed to not having (Bourdieu, 1984; Carter, 2003; Lamont & Lareau, 1988, 2011; A. Pallas, personal communication, October 17, 2011).

Bourdieu's terminology of cultural capital remains a prominent concept in the sociological field and has been examined at length in reference to education, such as its role in reproducing educational inequality (e.g., Apple, 2001; Apple & Au, 2009; Carnoy, 1982; Giroux, 1983) as well as debates on whether or not possession of cultural capital correlates with academic achievement (e.g., Carter, 2003; DiMaggio, 1982; Dumais, 2002; Kingston, 2001; Lareau & Weininger, 2003). Yet, despite the steadfast prominence of cultural capital theory in education, it has been underexamined in the specific context of teaching and learning *inside* classrooms (which Part II of this article explores). The theory of cultural capital presents trouble for non-White children of low-socioeconomic status who do not have the ability to accrue this middle-class and White cultural capital. Conversely, these students grow up in racially segregated and low-income urban neighborhoods, developing the type of cultural capital that "is seldom congruent with mainstream or dominant practices associated with success" (McLaren, 2007, p. 226). Schools favor the aforementioned dominant capital that students of color do not possess—and that White teachers usually do, presenting a cultural dynamic that does not promote academic collaboration (Carter, 2005; McLaren, 2007; Milner, 2010; Spring, 2008; T. C. Howard, 2010).

However, it is important to understand that through this framework, the cultural capital—and cultural beliefs in general—of students of color are seen as deficient and in some way "worse" than the cultural capital of the dominant (White) society (Carter, 2003, 2005). In the context of teaching, learning, and the racial dynamics of a classroom, White teachers may be led to believe that students do not have cultural capital, at least any that can be

beneficial in the classroom. Yet, as examples, Yosso (2005) explains six specific types of valuable cultural capital that communities of color possess: aspirational capital, linguistic capital, familial capital, social capital, navigational capital, and resistant capital. Therefore, educators should not “ignore that students should and can possess different kinds of cultural capital”—in what Carter refers to as “non-dominant” cultural capital (Carter, 2005, p. 10). It is the responsibility of the teacher to recognize this capital and pedagogically *utilize* it in the classroom in ways that enhance student learning. Understandably, this is not an easy task; however, with the proper steps (that I outline later), White teachers undoubtedly can succeed in creating a rich and compelling learning atmosphere that engage low-income students of color through recognizing and emphasizing students’ “non-dominant” cultural capital.

A Few Disclaimers: The Untidy Intersections of Race, Culture, and Social Class

However, issues of culture within an educational context do not occur in a vacuum and although the primary objective of this article is to examine cultural capital, educators must also retain a basic sense of clarity in the relationship between culture, race, and social class. To start, culture and race (and often ethnicity, which is attached to place of origin as opposed to phenotype) are strongly correlated but are *not* necessarily the same; an individual’s culture (and in relation, cultural capital) is shaped by a wide range of factors *other* than race such as immigration status, social class, language, or religion that are often shared by people across different races (Lee, 2003, 2007; T. C. Howard, 2010). Thus, for this reason, researchers cannot automatically assume that people who identify as the same race possess the same cultural capital—Black culture or Latino/a culture, for example, are not monolithic categories as this must be kept in mind throughout this literature review. In this vein, although numerous studies have examined the successful teaching practices of teachers of the same race of their students (e.g., Ladson-Billings, 2009; Milner, 2006; Mitchell, 1998; Valenzuela, 1999), it is also important to note that “teachers from the same racial group as their students do not have a ‘built-in’ capacity to be excellent teachers of those students” (Nieto, 2002, p. 231; see also, Gay, 2010). In addition, as previously mentioned, I am not claiming that all White teachers are unsuccessful in urban settings—numerous scholars have proven otherwise (e.g., Cooper, 2003; Gay, 2010; Hill, 2009a; Ladson-Billings, 2009). Thus, both of these disclaimers must be internalized; one, no monolithic culture exists in connection

to any race and two, it is inaccurate to automatically assume a teacher's race completely qualifies or disqualifies him or her from being an effective teacher. Although I argue that the overwhelming number of White teachers in non-White classrooms is problematic because of previously described cultural differences, it is important to keep in mind that any general pairing of race with culture is *imperfect* because of the intersecting nuances between the two.

In addition to the disclaimers on race and culture, I must also point out the imperfections of using social class interchangeably in discussions of culture and race. Throughout this literature review, I often add "middle class" to my description of White teachers and "low income" when describing students of color. Spring (2008) explains that the idea of student resistance is also a "function of *class* and culture" and not just attached to race; for example, he states how his research subjects of high-income African American students argue that social class is actually more relevant than race (p. 205; emphasis added). Similarly, many social scientists also argue that social class is one of the most accurate predictors of academic success, more so than race, and should be a focus of educational research (Lareau, 2002, 2011; Rist, 1970; Rothstein, 2004). With this research in mind, it would be remiss to not consider the potential affects social class may have, specifically, on the cultural exchanges between White teachers and non-White students. Therefore, while a discussion of class and its intersections (and tensions) with race and, especially, culture, is beyond the scope of this article, educators must be cognizant of the importance of social class and the reason why I refer to social class when discussing teachers and students throughout this essay.

Problematizing Student Culture: Why Do Students Disengage?

Finally, before working toward solutions to the "problem" of low student engagement, a brief understanding of *why* students—and *which* students specifically within such a large denomination—continue to perform poorly in school is also essential.¹ Although there are many factors to why students of color generally have low academic achievement (especially the wide prevalence of the aforementioned "opportunity gaps" where some students have better opportunities to learn than others), the issue of culture undoubtedly plays a large factor in why students largely disengage from school and thus achieve at lower levels than they are of course capable of. One of the most prominent theories that explain children's disengagement—and one directly related to my focus on culture—is "oppositional culture theory" put

forth by the late anthropologist John Ogbu in regard to Black students. Although there are many tenets of his thesis, Ogbu (1986, 2004/2011) argues that African American students, broadly speaking, resist schooling for fear of “acting White” and possess a certain culture of speech and behaviors that are in opposition to the dominant culture of schools. In response to Ogbu, an array of studies have addressed the numerous problems associated with oppositional culture theory, especially pointing out that students who are “oppositional *and* academically successful is not presented as a possibility” (Nieto, 2004, p. 267; for example, Ainsworth-Darnell & Downey, 1998; Carter, 2005; Harris, 2006, 2011; T. C. Howard, 2010; Lundy, 2003). In part, this article solidifies that possibility, explicitly reviewing research where students were academically successful while maintaining their cultural identity. While there remains truth behind students of color offering resistance to schooling, they are not resisting the idea of academic achievement—in fact research has shown all students want to learn—but instead a culture of schooling that they see as unwelcoming and dismissive of their “cultural competences and capitals” (Carter, 2005, p. 10; Harris, 2011; Kohli & Solórzano, 2012; Morrell, 2008; T. C. Howard, 2010). Furthermore, in Carter’s (2005) study, she describes the type of students who fit this above model, referring to them as “noncompliant believers”—students who feel that schools devalue their nondominant cultural capital while refusing to embrace the dominant school culture and expectations. Although not all students of color are so-called noncompliant believers (some students do conform to the dominant school structure), according to Carter’s research, they most likely make up a majority of students in addition to the fact that we know large amounts of non-White students are not engaged inside school walls.

Overall, a clear theoretical comprehension of why students fail in school in addition to understanding the many nuances of culture, such as grasping the concept of nondominant cultural capital, is essential knowledge for all educators. Therefore, Part I reviewed the foundational literature—and key distinctions culture plays in the classroom—that all educators should internalize prior to moving toward practical steps aimed at improving “teaching and learning.” Furthermore, educators must rid themselves of a “deficit theory model” that considers students of color as “culturally deprived” who either possess no culture or at best, whose cultural capital is unimportant (Banks & Banks, 1995; Milner, 2010; Natriello, McDill, & Pallas, 1990, p. 7; Riessman, 1962; T. C. Howard, 2010, p. 53). For example, in Carter’s (2005) study, one of the young students she interviewed “perceived that teachers evaluated students as deficient based on their own personal standards of

cultural decorum . . .” (p. 67). Yet, students of color from low-income, urban neighborhoods *do* have a distinct culture—just as White, middle-class individuals do—and regardless of whether students’ culture is actually oppositional or not is further irrelevant; moving into a more antideficit framework, educators must tap into students’ nondominant cultural capital to promote academic success. Thus, with these notions of culture in mind, part two explains *how* White teachers can begin to effectively do this in the classroom by reviewing important research on pedagogy through a cultural capital lens.

Part II: Moving From Theory to Practice Inside Schools *Recognizing Teachers’ Culture Within a Dominant School Framework*

As White teachers begin to understand the importance of culture, theories of cultural capital, and that students resist the dominant norms of society, teachers must first participate in an admittedly tough but absolutely necessary self-reflection of their “positionality” in the classroom. Initially, it is pivotal that teachers do not see themselves as a culture-less (and race-less) leader; while the idea is novel that teachers can teach without acknowledging their race or past cultural experiences, they must realize that they are part of the dominant group in society that continues to oppress people of color (Landsman & Lewis, 2006; Leonardo, 2004; Lipsitz, 1998; McIntosh, 1992; McIntyre, 1997; Pennington, Brock, & Ndura, 2012; Tatum, 1992). T. C. Howard (2003) refers to this self-understanding as “critical reflection,” which helps teachers explore how “traditional teaching practices reflect middle-class, European American cultural values” (p. 198; see also Milner, 2003a, 2003b, 2006; Tatum, 2001). In addition, teachers must also honestly assess the issue of race as students are aware of the racial dynamic in the classroom and teachers must similarly be aware of it as well (G. R. Howard, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 1999, 2009; Landsman & Lewis, 2006; Lewis, 2006; T. C. Howard, 2010; Ulluci & Battey, 2011). Furthermore, regardless of White teachers’ backgrounds and potential passion for social justice, students are critical of the dominant school culture that teachers are inherently members of—a school culture where Carter (2005) explains that students have continually underachieved and felt culturally underrepresented. For example, in his seminal work *Life in Schools*, McLaren (2007) explains how as a White middle-class teacher in a low-income school, “students were actively contesting the unconscious efforts of teachers—including [the author]—who valued their own middle-class cultural capital over that of students” (p. 229). Therefore, White teachers must first recognize that their classroom is part of

the larger dominant–nondominant framework that encompasses society as they must then understand that the lens they view students through is a function of this society (McLaren, 2007).

With this framework in mind, specifically, teachers must also internalize that the way they see the world—and thus students of color—is specific to their cultural frame of reference. As Delpit (2006) writes, “we all interpret behaviors, information, and situations through our own cultural lenses; these lenses operate involuntarily, below the conscious awareness, making it seem that our own view is simply ‘the way it is’” (p. 151). Essentially, White teachers must internalize that their cultural lens—or their beliefs based on the compilation of their life experiences—is different than the lenses of their students. Milner (2010) further expands on this framework, explaining that “when teachers operate primarily from their own cultural ways of knowing, the learning milieu can be foreign to students whose cultural experiences are different and inconsistent with teachers’ experiences” (pp. 23-24). In result, White teachers must use this knowledge to recognize that students of color similarly have different lenses that encourages *them* to see what they “feel” is reality, which often runs counter to what a teacher believes through his or her dominant framework. In her popular book *White Teacher*, Paley (1989) exclaims that the biggest takeaway from her teaching experience as a White teacher in a diverse classroom is not that students are different, but the biggest incompatibility often exists between *teacher* and student. Carter (2005) adds that “what is knowledgeable and valuable in one social setting is not necessarily what signifies cultural competence in another” (p. 10; see also Ladson-Billings, 2009; Ulluci & Battey, 2011). Overall, as White teachers step into a classroom full of culturally and racially unique youth, they must internalize that students perceive the classroom, school, learning, and them (a White teacher) differently than how that teacher thinks the students *should* perceive these characteristics.

Recognizing Nondominant Cultural Capital in the Classroom

At the core of connecting a theoretical essay of White teacher pedagogy to a more practice-oriented review is a metaphorical bridge where the activist must attempt to put theory into action. Thus, once teachers understand that their students bring unique forms of cultural capital into classrooms, they must engage with the second step: How do teachers recognize it? What does this nondominant cultural capital actually “look” like in a classroom setting? And how might teachers misrecognize students’ cultural capital as resistance? Carter (2005) gives the ultimatum that “until educators grasp the

value and functions of black and other nondominant forms of cultural capital, they will continue to have difficulty engaging many African American students”—and I argue, all low-income, students of color (p. 72). After internalizing the fact that they are the recipients of a dominant framework, White teachers must be able to pinpoint students’ culture in the classroom instead of recognizing it as resistance. Yet, there is no specific list of cultural characteristics to look for or a rulebook in deciding what is or is not culture—identifying cultural capital in a classroom is admittedly an ambiguous process. However, there are three specific genres of examples where teachers can identify students’ cultural capital inside the classroom: *language/communication*, *expression/behaviors*, and *values/interests*.

First, student displays of culture are extremely prevalent when dealing with the way students communicate and the way they navigate language. For example, a specific type of cultural capital that students of color often share inside the classroom is “linguistic capital” (Yosso, 2005; Monkman, Ronald, & Thérémène, 2005). Bilingual Latino/a students have an array of skills; not only are they able to speak two (or more) languages—an increasingly important quality in a rapidly globalizing world—but possess skills such as what Orellana (2009) refers to as “language brokering,” or being able to act as translators for their immigrant families and become important members of the household at young ages (see also Buriel, Perez, de Ment, Chavez, & Moran, 1998; Morales & Hanson, 2005; Weisskirch, 2005; Weisskirch & Alva, 2002). Thus, students may often “code-switch,” or switch languages, during classroom instruction or choose to answer writing questions with Spanish words that cannot be expressed in English. In her seminal work, Valenzuela (1999) vividly describes how language is a part of Latino/a students’ culture and is often disvalued by teachers. Yet, since the “U.S. has developed into a culture in which the category of citizen (and by extension, student) has been defined in terms of having a primary allegiance to speaking only in English,” teachers may view such cultural expressions as disrespectful or off-topic (Gándara, 2010, p. 43). In addition, while proficiency in English will always be the goal—and appropriately so for many practical reasons—a “child’s fluency in his or her native tongue need not be undermined to achieve it” (Leiding, 2006, p. 91). Yet, this idea of language also applies to African American students, in terms of African American vernacular that students often speak but historically has been frowned upon by educators (Alim, 2003; Hollie, 2001; Labov, 1972; Lee, 2006, 2007; Morgan, 2002; Smitherman, 2000). For example, Lee (2007) describes how students often speak in ways that are not viewed as standard English, and argues that these interactions should be treated as a valuable commodity for self-expression

that can be used for creative writing and engagement with past heritage. Overall, students of color from multiple backgrounds—including students from select Asian populations—consistently tap into their cultural capital that revolves around communication and language in the classroom.

Another way that students of color display their cultural capital in the classroom is through their expressions and behavior that differ from White teachers' dominant cultural capital. Kochman (1998) compares how Blacks and Whites, for example, have a number of "culturally different patterns" that manifest in their behaviors including how Blacks are "spontaneous, improvisational, exaggerated, expressive, and personalized while whites are methodical, systematic, understated, restrained, and role-oriented" (p. 134; see Hale-Benson, 1986; T. C. Howard, 2010). In addition, he explains how Blacks are traditionally more argumentative while Whites are more discussion oriented (Kochman, 1998). Yet, how would this play out in the classroom? For example, if two Black students are arguing over a topic in class, a White teacher may see this as out of control and threatening. T. C. Howard (2001) explains how teachers, for example, instead must "understand how verbal African American students can be" as teachers in his study "recognized the unique verbal skills" students had to offer (p. 190). Therefore, educators must comprehend that analyses such as Kochman's (1998) aligns with what McLaren (2007) describes as "street-corner culture" where "knowledge [is] 'felt'" as opposed to objectified (p. 229; Giroux & McLaren, 1991). McLaren (2007) further describes that street knowledge is different than classroom knowledge because on the "streets," students interact with each other in more confrontational ways and also their lives—and their safety—is often based on intuition and quick reflections of their environment. Therefore, students of color are much better versed to act impulsively compared to those of the dominant culture, who are more focused on "inflated rationalism, including a stress on deductive reasoning" (McLaren, 2007, p. 229). In result, students in class may constantly talk about their home experiences instead of engaging with the academic material or they might speak impulsively about events in their lives that are seemingly unrelated to class discussions. The existence of student voice—a key tenant of critical race theory scholarship—must be seen as an educational asset as opposed to a deficit (e.g., Bernal, 2002; Delgado, 1995; Dixson & Rousseau, 2005; Yosso, 2002; see also Daniels & Arapostathis, 2005). Therefore, White teachers must recognize these assets of student self-reflection and skills in improvisation as being valuable cultural capital instead of viewing these classrooms behaviors as resistance to learning. White teachers from suburban, middle-class neighborhoods must understand that "people develop as participants in cultural

communities . . . their development can be understood in light of the cultural practices and circumstances of their communities . . .” (Rogoff, 2003, pp. 3-4). Frankly, teachers must see some behaviors—such as the way students might verbally engage with a particular lesson—as reflections of students’ lived experiences and upbringing that are different, but still just as valuable, as their own.

A third aspect of students’ culture that youth bring into the classroom is many of their values and cultural tastes that are not traditionally classified as dominant cultural capital. For example, the type of dress, hobbies, and music that students from urban neighborhoods favor would not constitute as high-status cultural capital. Yet, regardless of whether such capital is indeed valuable in society or not, “the possession of nondominant cultural capital is critical to the status of individuals from socially marginalized groups—to their sense of belonging, connection, and identity” (Carter, 2005, p. 161). Predictably, then, students put this type of cultural capital on display quite often in every urban classroom; for example, students’ valuing of hip-hop music may often emerge during displays of perceived resistance throughout classroom discussions and interactions. Instead of interacting with the canonical literature in English class, for example, students may “act up” by reciting a rap lyric or walk into class blaring such music from their iPod. Yet, is this resistance or students merely displaying their nondominant cultural capital? Morrell and Duncan-Andrade (2004) note that hip-hop “truly represents the vibrant voice of youth and points to problems that this generation and many other Americans face in daily life” (p. 251; Alim, 2006; Hill, 2009a; Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2002, 2005). Teachers from White, middle-class neighborhoods may not be versed with hip-hop culture (and by broader extension, popular culture) and thus, may view that type of knowledge as worthless. Yet, teachers would be wise to recognize that knowledge base in hip-hop and popular culture not as resistance but as students’ own cultural values (Hill, 2009a; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Milner, 2010; Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2002, 2005). Another hobby, for example, that Black girls often participate in during schools is “stepping”—a rhythmic foot-stomping dance that is “used as a marker of racial group identity” (Carter, 2005, p. 57; Gaunt, 2006). At my integrated high school in St. Louis, MO, USA, we had a stepping group comprised of Black students who often performed at pep rallies and other school events. However, since “stepping” was not considered as important to the school culture compared to the cheerleading performances, White students—like myself—admittedly looked down on it as a school-sponsored activity. Yet, exploring the politics of whether or not knowledge of “stepping” and hip-hop is actually valuable in society is irrelevant; more importantly,

educators must recognize that these interests of students are indeed part of the nondominant cultural capital that students possess. In the case of Latino/a students, and specifically Chicano/a students, having interest and knowledge of their Mexican culture in terms of history, important figures, and values should also be recognized as cultural capital. For example, a White teacher of European-American background should realize that a Chicana student attending class occasionally outfitted in traditional Aztec dress is a form of nondominant cultural capital (as stereotyped as this image may be). Trueba (2002) explains that having multiple identities is considered cultural capital and a “new asset” in today’s society (p. 24). Overall, many types of more noticeable characteristics of non-White youth that show up in the classroom, such as musical taste, language, and dress, is actually nondominant cultural capital that teachers must recognize and embrace. Practically, inside the classrooms, White teachers who recognize students’ nondominant capital can then better connect with students of color and promote a more positive learning environment.

Engaging Students for Success: Channeling Student Resistance Into Achievement

Once White teachers recognize students’ nondominant culture in schools, they would most likely respond similar to Ladson-Billings, one of the leading scholars in culturally relevant teaching: “yes, but how do we do it?”² Ultimately, moving from theory to practice in actually *utilizing* students’ cultural capital in the classroom to increase academic achievement is the final step in pushing the boundaries of how we think of cultural capital in schools. In recent years, a cadre of progressive scholars—many of whom I have referred to throughout this review—have begun examining how to critically engage students of color while also helping students gain the traditional academic skills that are required for success in society. Thus, this final portion of the essay will point out and review some of the important (and recent) work of scholars who have rethought “teaching and learning” in urban schools by specifically focusing on students’ nondominant cultural capital. To be clear, as Morrell (2004) and Delpit (2006) note, I am not advocating for White progressive teachers to abandon teaching children the skills needed for social mobility (and in effect, exposing them to the dominant cultural capital) but merely arguing that *both* can simultaneously occur at the same time. Although there is a profuse amount of literature that addresses culturally relevant pedagogy (e.g., Banks & Banks, 1995, 2009; Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011; Davis, 2006; Foster, 1995; Gay, 2002, 2010; Gay &

Howard, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995a, 1995b, 2009; Milner, 2011; Nieto, 1999, 2004; T. C. Howard, 2003, 2010), building on such seminal works, I intend to further explore specifically how teachers can engage students' nondominant *cultural capital* in the classroom within the context of resistance.

First, recall that the noncompliant believers described by Carter (2005, 2006) make up the bulk of the non-White population—those students who fail to engage in school, resisting to the traditional paradigm of what they view as “education” through a display of nondominant cultural capital. Carter (2005) explains that despite a belief in education as the route to future success, these students embrace their collective racial and ethnic culture while having implicit “critiques of the educational system and its cultural structure, its curricula, pedagogy, and codes of achievement” (p. 36; see also Fine, 1991; MacLeod, 1995; Solórzano & Bernal, 2001; Solórzano & Solórzano, 1995). Putting this in context, how are White teachers supposed to reach students—using so-called “traditional” teaching methods—who do not embrace the traditional structure of schooling? As Carter (2005, 2006) and numerous other scholars have shown, students display their own nondominant cultural capital as a way to resist the dominant structure of schooling and possibly, the presence of a White teacher. Therefore, through curricular instruction, these teachers must channel students' implicit critiques of the social order that they already have (Fine, 1986, 1991; Milner, 2010; Morrell, 2008; Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2002; Solórzano & Bernal, 2001). For example, Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2008) describe how students' discussions of inequality in their school (and in their neighborhoods) helped them beneficially tap into their cultural capital instead of using it as a way to resist instruction. During a film about race and justice, a student asked her classmates if they had justice at their school; Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2008) write that “the students knew that they did not, in fact, receive justice at their high school,” as a discourse about inequities followed (p. 65). In result, students spent 6 weeks designing a magazine in which they worked on an array of individual assignments explicitly discussing their lives or topics relevant to their lives in some venue. Duncan-Andrade and Morrell engaged their students in challenging writing and research assignments that allowed them to use their inherent preference for self-expression—a nondominant cultural capital trait—to *critique* the dominant structure instead of *resisting* it. In another instance with a group of high school Latino/a students, de los Ríos and Ochoa (2012) vividly illustrate how the creation of a school-district approved Chicano/a-Latino/a elective course, designed by de los Ríos through the urging of her students, allowed students the opportunity to question dominant school structures and societal narratives; in this elective

class, students discussed timely issues that affected their community such as an anti-immigration bill and the divide between their communities and neighboring affluent communities. In regards to the latter example, instead of students resisting against the normal curriculum that traditionally would ignore such relevant topics, de los Ríos utilized students' nondominant cultural capital asset of possessing a strong connection to their community to improve relations with the affluent part of town, setting up a mentoring program with students at a nearby university.

While these types of activities help channel the resistance that students of color often have, they are still initiated by the teacher. Critical theorist Giroux (1996) argues that teachers "must become public intellectuals who adeptly employ this language of critique combined with a questioning pedagogy to help youth make sense of the dangerous and damaging messages sent to them through popular media" (as cited in Morrell, 2004, p. 25; see also Giroux, 1990, 2010; Giroux & Simon, 1989). These messages explain that students' cultural capital does not have value. Therefore, teachers must work with students to make them feel as if their cultural capital *is* important—at least once they step inside the school doors—as this can be authentically done through empowering instruction that is community-driven and allows students to be self-expressive.

Engaging Students for Success: Valuing Nondominant Cultural Capital Through Instruction

Although teachers must continue to provide opportunities for students to use their cultural capital to challenge the dominant framework of society, understandably, teachers cannot always provide lesson plans that explicitly do so (such as those mentioned in the above section). Yet, having students engage with other forms of their nondominant cultural capital itself is an act that implicitly opposes the school norms. Therefore, teachers must consistently value students' home culture with curricular material that emphasizes students' cultural capital (Carter, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1995a, 2009; Nieto, 2004). For example, in recent years, a number of scholars have immersed themselves in hip-hop literacy, using students' knowledge in hip-hop (nondominant cultural capital that many students of color possess) to increase engagement in English classes (e.g., Alim, 2006; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Ginwright, 2004; Hill, 2009a, 2009b; Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2002, 2004, 2005; Stovall, 2006). For example, in the framework of a district-mandated curriculum, Morrell and Duncan-Andrade (2004) infused students' knowledge of hip-hop with traditional canonical works

such as T. S. Eliot, Walt Whitman, and Shakespeare during a poetry unit. As Morrell and Duncan-Andrade (2004) explain, they intended to place rap music side by side with the traditional works “so that students would be able to use a period and genre of poetry they were familiar with as a lens to with which to examine other literacy works . . .” (p. 255). Therefore, students were engaging with their nondominant cultural capital *and* the dominant cultural capital as the unit was a resounding success. Similarly, anthropologist Marc Lamont Hill has participated in a number of studies where he has specifically worked with high school students in the context of hip-hop curriculum (Hill, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c; Hill, Pérez, & Irby, 2008). However, unlike Morrell and Duncan-Andrade, in one instance for example, Hill (2009b) worked specifically with a White high school English teacher with no previous experience in hip-hop and created an elective English class entitled “Hip-Hop Lit.” In response to his findings that displayed increased academic engagement among students, Hill (2009b) concluded that, “we must work with youth to construct educational contexts that respond to their particular circumstances . . .” (p. 374). The teacher who was paired with Hill was open to this type of cultural (and pedagogical) embrace and in result, low-income students of color were highly engaged. Hip-hop based instruction, if used to specifically increase reading and literacy skills, offers a great example of how to practically use students’ nondominant cultural capital in the classroom.

Understandably, however, critics can argue that English instruction and hip-hop literacy are isolated examples that happen to align in ways that might be unrealistic in other subjects, such as science and math. Although the literature is admittedly scarce, recently, scholars have been actively attempting to do this type of research that emphasizes students’ cultural capital of hip-hop knowledge in the “teaching and learning” process in non-English subjects. For example, Christopher Emdin (2010b) has successfully interwoven hip-hop and popular culture into urban science classrooms, embracing students’ culture *and* the traditional science curriculum (see also Emdin, 2010a). During his work in a Bronx school, before every class, Emdin would look at pictures that represent hip-hop culture and deconstruct them scientifically; if a picture happened to be of a rapper with an array of “chains” hanging from his neck, then students would think about the physics of this chain and the chemical components of the metal. Emdin’s (2008) work has focused on finding “effective approaches to science instruction in urban schools that will allow students and teachers to have shared positive experiences” (p. 773). This work presents the type of teaching and learning that must occur between an embrace of students’ culture by teachers, even in a

nonhumanities subject such as science. In relating this example specifically to White teachers, as long as they can first recognize this cultural capital of students and develop a critical consciousness, then they can unequivocally embrace students' nondominant cultural capital and have similar classroom successes. For example, the recent work of Laughter and Adams (2012) illustrates how two White teachers in an urban school were able to interest middle school students in science by critically relating it to their lives; the authors discussed with their students instances of when scientists (and not science itself) were culturally biased (see also Barton, 2003; C. C. Johnson, 2011). In addition, the authors also engaged in discussions on race, leading students to question, for example, how scientists could claim "we are one human race" when people are still classified by skin color (Laughter & Adams, 2012, p. 1122).

Besides science, mathematics, as well, has often been the most difficult topic for teachers to embrace students' cultural capital because on the surface, it would appear that there are no ways for students' culture to relate to the curriculum or to teachers' lesson plans. Yet, various scholars have found ways to do so (see Envedy & Mukhopadhyay, 2007; Gutstein, Lipman, Hernandez, & Rebeca de los Reyes, 1997; Ladson-Billings, 1995b; Lipka et al. 2005; Secada, Fennema, & Byrd, 1995; Tate, 1995). For example, Ensign (2003) specifically examined how fifth grade students were more engaged when teachers used math problems that directly related to specific costs and issues that were relevant to their lives, such as living expenses. As previously discussed, because "urban students were acutely aware of how much their rent and other necessities cost," the students were more engaged in the math problems that seemed important to their lives (Ensign, 2003, p. 419). Thinking about mathematics education from a distinct racial standpoint, Martin (2009) explains how mathematics education is consistently taught through a race-neutral pedagogical framework, arguing that "the dominant [colorblind] orientations to race among mainstream mathematics education researchers, policy makers, and practitioners mirror those found in the larger society" (p. 301). Instead of pretending that all students equally succeed in math through a colorblind pedagogy, teachers could address the issue of race, teaching a lesson using statistics about the levels of mathematics achievement among students of color; for example, in a probability and percentage math unit, teachers could employ higher education statistics on tenured professors in mathematics while in an algebra unit design word equations using state test score results. Thus, teachers are tapping into students' awareness of racial stereotypes, or parts of their nondominant capital, to interest them in succeeding in math and reversing that paradigm. Similarly, the recent work by

Yi, Varelas, and Guajardo (2011) examines how urban students construct their personal identities within science and mathematics classrooms. In the future, more pedagogical practices and strategies to specifically use students' cultural capital—such as self-expression and not just hip-hop knowledge or aspirational capital, for example—need to be addressed in future research.

Overall, throughout this literature review, I have displayed how many scholars remain invested in research that examines how to tangibly use students' cultural capital in the classroom to improve student engagement—and close the opportunity gap for appropriate teacher instruction and curriculum. However, the examples in this section may seem handpicked, and in a way they are; this type of cultural embrace by teachers, especially White teachers, in non-White classrooms has not been an area of wide research. Although numerous scholars have studied the interactions of White teachers in non-White classrooms and elements of whiteness in the teaching process (e.g., Bell, 2002; G. R. Howard, 2006; L. Johnson, 2002; Landsman & Lewis, 2006; Milner, 2005, 2007; Pennington, Brock, & Ndura, 2012; Sleeter, 2004), still, a substantial need exists for researchers to specifically illustrate *what* pedagogic strategies White teachers can employ in the classroom to utilize their students' nondominant cultural capital for better “teaching and learning.” Frankly, besides needed research across different subjects, additional gaps remain unaddressed, such as differentiating the types of engagement for high school students compared to elementary school students. For example, how do White teachers engage a Latino/a first grader? Or, in regards to expanding subject breadth, how do educators use students' cultural capital in history classrooms besides just including the so-called name-drops of important people of color?³ (Rains, 2006, p. 138). Even more, what type of training would history teachers need to undergo to employ this type of culturally relevant pedagogy in social studies? (Fitchett, Starker, & Salyers, 2012). Although these questions remain largely unanswered, the examples of scholars who have done this type of work forms a blueprint to follow for future research.

Conclusion: Learning Happens in Classrooms—A Call to Action

Coming full circle, the achievement gap in education, or more accurately, the opportunity gap that scholars such as Milner (2010) and Ladson-Billings (2006) put forth, remains one of America's greatest national concerns—the so-called “civil rights cause of our generation” as declared by both liberal and conservative politicians and pundits (Duncan, 2010; Luntz, 1998). However, this racial schism in student outcomes *and* more importantly, opportunities, is

not due to a lack of attention or national interest; education as a national policy issue the last two decades has been more prominent than ever before (Cross, 2010; McGuinn, 2006). In addition, youth are increasingly interested in education reform as some of America's most brilliant minds and esteemed scholars have dedicated their lives to this cause. Yet, no matter what seems to be done, the opportunity gaps, and thus achievement gaps, remain.

Of course, it is not the lack of effort that is the problem, but that these efforts and what is currently *being* done is the wrong approach (i.e., that the policies are wrong, not just the research). Countless influential scholars such as Darling-Hammond (2010) have inclusively addressed most of the tangible issues—and opportunity inequities—that need to be fixed such as the nation's structural inequality (and weakening social safety net), unequal distribution of resources, school segregation, inequitable funding and teacher distribution, and poor curriculum, among many others. Although research has reaffirmed these needs, where is the focus on “teaching and learning”? Learning, above all else, occurs inside classrooms, *at schools*, and although educational and societal factors are incredibly important to—and a reliable predictor of—student outcomes, the *process* of teaching and learning between teachers and students is a nuanced and complicated phenomenon that deserves greater attention in the national discourse. Coming full circle, it is the lack of opportunity for an equitable and culturally appropriate education for students of color that has impacted such oft-cited problematic outcomes.

Throughout the course of this review, I argue that within the study of “teaching and learning,” one of the most important aspects of this process revolves around culture—specifically, Bourdieu's (1977, 1986/2011) term of cultural capital. Traditionally, individuals who are White and from the middle class and above possess the cultural capital deemed valuable in society. Conversely, low-income people of color have traditionally been seen as having little cultural capital, or as Carter (2003, 2005, 2006) refers to it, non-dominant cultural capital. These clash of cultures are part of society's larger structural framework that favors the dominant culture of White high socioeconomic status (SES) Americans over low SES people of color. Yet, as I explain, issues of culture do not happen in a vacuum; these similar societal dynamics occur in millions of classrooms everyday between White teachers and non-White students. This article represents a call to action for researchers (and by extension, policymakers) to rethink learning and rethink how misunderstandings of cultural capital reverberate in schools all across the country. Such an environment where teachers fail to emphasize students' cultural capital in instruction or fail to recognize it at all, no matter what policy is implemented, is not conducive to learning.

Of course, however, this article also operates through a racial lens, focusing on teaching and learning specifically between White teachers and non-White students. I specifically focus on White teachers not because they are inherently special or possess better or worse characteristics than other teachers, but because the reality remains that they make up the majority of the teaching force in America. With this in mind, the success of students of color—and for ultimately closing the opportunity and achievements gaps—lay in the hands of the millions of White teachers in urban schools. Therefore, I argue that in a cultural context, White teachers must take three steps to better engage students of color; first, they must critically self-reflect and recognize that their race plays a problematic role in their teacher–student relationship and overall effectiveness. White teachers must realize that regardless of their benign intentions, students portray them as part of the dominant school structure that many students resist against. Once teachers adjust their ethos and awareness accordingly, White teachers then must learn how to recognize a diverse set of students’ nondominant culture inside the school doors instead of seeing their differences as resistance to learning. Finally, White teachers must turn theory into practice, embracing students’ cultural capital through innovative pedagogic methods to better engage them in the classroom.

However, I am not going to pretend that doing these steps are easy, especially within rigid school structures that often limit teachers’ ability to connect with students of color; for example, even *prior* to navigating the taboo-like nature of discussions on race inside classrooms, critical self-reflection for White teachers alone is difficult because “race is not often spoken about by those from racially privileged or dominant positions” (T. C. Howard, 2010, p. 115). Yet, it is a necessary first step to improving teaching and learning within the classroom. Furthermore, I am also not going to assert that a cultural capital rulebook exists that lays out the guidelines for how teachers recognize students’ nondominant culture—admittedly, this is hard for teachers who have had little exposure to the nondominant culture, a topic that teacher education researchers such as Milner (e.g., 2006, 2007, 2010) are addressing in their research on pre-service education programs (see also Cochran-Smith, 1995, 2003, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 1999; Milner & Smithey, 2003). In addition, figuring out how to actually *teach* students while embracing their cultural capital *and* increasing achievement is a relatively unexplored phenomenon in educational research. Nonetheless, scholars who have engaged in this groundbreaking work have laid a blueprint—no matter how rough—for teachers to better engage students. Particularly in a period of educational reform where rote atmospheres and deadening instructional methods

are increasingly employed to teach youth of color, conversely, educators must push back and illustrate how these students respond better to vibrant teaching methods steeped in culturally relevant pedagogy. In order to close the “teaching and learning” opportunity gap that will then improve student outcomes, all of us—teachers, administrators, policymakers, scholars, students—must work together to find answers and not only renew our focus on the too often ignored salient aspects of education such as race and culture (especially cultural capital) but most importantly, do so with an open mind, an open heart, and with the utmost sense of urgency.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. In the interest of brevity, I use the word “problem” to describe the calamity of students’ low-academic achievement, but such a word, itself, is problematic. More often than not, society incorrectly frames students as being the “problem” themselves and not the oppressive dominant system that is replicated in every facet of school structure and curriculum.
2. This phrase is taken from the title of Ladson-Billings’ (2008) article.
3. Although there have been a plethora of non-Eurocentric U.S. history books written, most notably the works of Howard Zinn and James Loewen, there has been a general lack of educational research that addresses how to *engage* students in history besides just surface curriculum changes, despite their importance. Although not specifically geared with an eye toward the racial mismatch, see works that “re-think” history instruction, such as Wineburg (2001). My current work at Teachers College, Columbia University’s Institute for Urban and Minority Education (IUME) examines how students of color researching the history of their community by “doing” history, as opposed to just consuming it, can be an empowering pedagogical method.

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