A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a baccalaureate degree in Elementary and Kindergarten Education with honors in Elementary and Kindergarten Education

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the discovery of a culturally responsive teaching model that builds a learning community for students in their English language acquisition. The goal of this research was to explore how a teacher could connect students’ cultural background and funds of knowledge with outside knowledge from the teacher in a manner that empowers the students’ community. This was a participatory action research project in Rwanda, Africa, which means I took part in community service through research. The methods involved collecting qualitative data consisting of videotaping activities, field observations of teachers and students, interviews of teachers and students, personal written reflections and assessments of students’ work. To analyze my data, Geneva Gay’s, “Preparing for Culturally Responsive Pedagogy” was used as a framework for this study. An instructional practice was developed for teachers in Rwanda and America to use to help their students learn the English language in a positive learning environment and further to learn what works and what does not work in developing an effective learning community.
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Part 1

Theoretical Context

Paulo Freire, an educational scholar and activist, has brought light to areas of darkness and sound to quiet corners. His discovery of what is described as “culture of silence” (Freire, 1997) of the dispossessed has brought awareness to the unfair aspects of the suppression of marginalized ethnic groups. These learners are victimized from systematic social, economic, and political domination instead of being empowered. These groups were not encouraged to be educated citizens so that they were kept “submerged” (Freire, 1997) in a way that critical awareness and response were practically impossible. Sadly, one of the major instruments of the maintenance of the culture of silence is the educational system (Freire, 1997).

According to scholar bell hooks (2009), teachers and visitors to marginalized communities have a history of authoritarian attitude, where they force their ideas on others, thereby impeding critical learning and empowerment of the students. Engaged pedagogy and the teacher’s role in this transformative education could possibly counteract this deficit approach. Hooks explains that educators remain unwilling to take part in any pedagogical practices that emphasize mutual participation between teacher and student because more time and effort are required to do this work (2009). The lack of equal partnership creates a sense of hierarchical social arrangements, which hinders the possibility of a productive learning community within the classroom.

Geneva Gay (2002) offers a means of approaching this problem by implementing culturally responsive pedagogy. Maxim describes this concept as being centered on culture:

The concept of culturally responsive education is based on the premise that ethnic and cultural content is fundamental to curriculum reform and that culturally responsive materials and activities not only help to develop a greater awareness of
one’s own culture, racial, and ethnic identity but they also help students respond positively to individuals from groups other than their own (Maxim, 2012, p. 64).

Thus, in culturally responsive pedagogy, the teacher ultimately uses the student’s background as a tool to teach and build cultural consciousness. Culturally responsive instruction is firmly supported by a foundation of democratic principals: liberty, justice, freedom, fairness, equality, and equal opportunity (Maxim, 2010).

Geneva Gay provides a framework on preparing for culturally responsive teaching. These five essential elements of culturally responsive teaching consist of: (1) developing a knowledge base about cultural diversity; (2) including ethnic and cultural diversity content within the curriculum; (3) demonstrating caring and building learning communities with ethnically diverse students; (4) cross-cultural communications; and (5) cultural congruity in classroom instruction. These elements define the use of cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse learners as a passage for effective teaching. Culturally responsive teaching is based on the assumption that when academic content and skill are situated within the lived experiences and frames of reference of the students, the learning experience becomes more personally meaningful, creates engagement, and the concepts are easier to comprehend (Gay, 2002).

The first element of the framework, Developing a Cultural Diversity Knowledge Base means that explicit knowledge about cultural diversity is imperative in meeting the educational needs of ethnically diverse students. It is necessary for educators to build on their funds of knowledge and obtain detailed factual information about the cultural particularities of the specific ethnic group.
For the second element, Designing Culturally Relevant Curricula, Gay argues that educators must deal directly with controversy by studying a wide range of ethnic individuals and groups and contextualize issues within race, class, ethnicity, and gender. In addition, teachers need to include a variety of perspectives and knowledge. These different aspects of culturally responsive teaching can be accomplished through symbolic curriculum, which can be anything and everything displayed on the walls in the school and classroom, for example, a word wall or bulletin board. Implementing culturally relevant curricula allows students to learn that what to value is present, which is displayed on the walls. In the end, it is their culture.

The third aspect of the framework, Demonstrate Cultural Caring and Building a Learning Community, which means that teachers should demonstrate culturally sensitive caring and building culturally responsive learning communities are accomplished by caring so much about ethnically diverse students and their achievement. Therefore, teachers must accept nothing less than high-level success by working diligently to accomplish it. With demonstrating cultural caring and building a learning community for the students, allows for teachers to be placed in a relationship that is ethical, emotional, and ultimately an academic partnership with the students.

The fourth element, Cross-Cultural Communication, contends that teachers need to have an understanding of the communication styles of different ethnic groups. They must understand how those styles reflect cultural values and modifies interactions within the classroom to better accommodate the learner. Cross-cultural communization is especially important for work with English language learners.

The fifth and final element, Cultural Congruity in Classroom Instruction, encompasses the actual delivery of instruction to ethnically diverse learners. At this point, teachers must take what they have prepared for and test the theory by building pedagogical bridges to connect prior
knowledge with new knowledge and the known with the unknown. The elements of this framework create a rubric for assessing a culturally responsive teacher.

**Background: Teaching and Learning**

Dr. Randall Fegley, Global Studies Program coordinator, has collaborated with the Association REFUGE pour les Enfants des Grands Lacs Africains (Children of the African Great Lakes), an organization, which surfaced during the 1994 Rwandan genocide. Dr. Fegley oversees this study abroad program with up to twelve interns in Rwanda every other summer. The interns explore Rwanda, traveling throughout the county for six days before settling down in the village of Kabuga, Rwanda for three weeks of community service working within a local school (Penn State Berks Website, 2012).

The 2011 Rwanda Internship Program had nine Penn State Berks students and two faculty advisors. Of these nine students, six of the interns were Global Studies majors; one was a Pre-Med major; and two were Elementary Education majors. Prior to departure, the interns attended four mandatory sessions on Rwandan history, culture and practical matters. Also, a group counseling session with a psychologist was required of all interns before leaving to help prepare us for the societal impact of the 1994 Rwanda genocide and provide us with advice on how to address this issue with cultural sensitivity (Penn State Berks Website, 2012). These pre-departure orientations and the assigned readings built a strong foundation and understanding of the traumatic effects of the 1994 Rwanda genocide.

Blondine Uwimana Eya Nchama started the Association REFUGE Program in 1998. Blondine received a teaching degree from a university in Burundi and a Business Administration degree from the International University of Geneva. The Association REFUGE center served as a vocational school and eventually opened in 2005 for primary school students. This school is now open as a vocational school for genocide orphans as well as a primary school for children
from two and a half to eight years of age. The students begin school in “M1” class that is equivalent to American pre-school and continue through “M2” (pre-kindergarten), “M3” (kindergarten), “P1” (first grade), and finally “P2” (second grade), before they move onto the next school. They attend school everyday from 8 AM to 12 PM year round, with a vacation in October and January; they also receive a two-week break in April and a three-week break in August.

Gaining background knowledge on Rwanda prior to departure and a deeper understanding of the school and the history of Rwanda played a large role in deepening my cultural sensitivity. This knowledge also aided in my ability to adapt to the Rwandan curricula so that I could be culturally responsive. Becoming culturally responsive was what I wanted to accomplish, while avoiding any authoritarian mentality. I wanted to use the students’ culture as a tool to teach, and I would measure my success through the success of my students.

**Part 2**

**Culturally Sensitive Learning and Teaching**

When I first stepped into my placement in the P1 classroom I could feel every little eye peering up at me. The students’ excitement was flattering, but the butterflies in my stomach were distracting. When I began to talk, I felt the words slipping between my lips but getting lost on the way to the desired destination. So many thoughts ran through my head: what had I gotten myself into? How am I going to teach these students English? Where do I begin?

Then I realized my first approach to climbing this barrier of communication would be simply to smile. By using the only language that we had in common, body language, the foundation of a rapport began to thrive. I introduced myself by putting my hand to my chest and saying, “Hello, my name is Jessica.” The Rwandan students replied in a memorized monotone with what little English they had learned prior to my arrival, “Fine, thank you.” They then told
me through their posture and engaged expressions that their desire to learn would be another stepladder towards the goal of the students’ English language acquisition and my attempts in building a learning community.

This first interaction of communication was the much-needed icebreaker, which foreshadowed that we would be learning together. I had taken my first step toward demonstrating culturally responsive caring because I, the teacher, began to fall into an ethical, emotional, and academic partnership with my Rwandan students, a partnership that would be “anchored in respect, honor, integrity, resource sharing, and a deep belief in the possibility of transcendence” (Gay, 2002, p. 52). The beauty of it all was that there was a foundation of cultural caring before I stepped into the P1 classroom because my expectations were high. I exemplified what Au discusses: “There are consistent messages, from both the teacher and the whole school that students will succeed, based upon genuine respect for students and belief in student capability” (Au, 1993, p. 6). I strongly believed in the academic success of my Rwandan students. Moreover, I believed, that with my guidance as a catalyst, the success of the students would be possible through their own potential.

Another aspect of culturally responsive pedagogy that played a large role in creating a learning community in the P1 classroom was the designing of culturally relevant curricula. Once I developed diverse knowledge based on the Rwandan culture by studying what the students were expected to know and the books that they used (see Figure 1), I would be able to design culturally relevant curricula. This was also the time I constantly collaborated with my host teacher and showed him that I was eager to learn.
Once I enriched my funds of knowledge of the Rwandan culture, I was able to contribute an effective relevant instructional strategy consisting of creating a word wall based on symbolic curriculum (see Figure 2). I knew that using the Rwandan students’ mother tongue and pictures of objects that are situated within the lived experiences and frames of reference of the students would create a more personally meaningful experience and higher interest appeal for the students. Ideally, the word wall would contribute to the students’ English language acquisition more easily and, more importantly, thoroughly (Gay, 2002).
After plenty of modeling, guided practice, independent practice, and simply advertising the word wall as a resource to the students, ongoing assessments provided evidence of success with signs of mastery. Also, the students learned important lessons from what are displayed on their classroom walls. By creating this positive learning environment and promoting a sense of community by taking advantage of designing and displaying culturally relevant curricula, the students would learn to value what is present, which is their culture (Gay, 2002).

In addition, the use of multicultural literature was another attempt to create culturally relevant curricula. A story called **The Sand Mountain** had illustrations with a variety of children with different skin tones. The four characters were from all over the world, and I took advantage of this diversity by implementing an interdisciplinary lesson incorporating language arts and geography. After my host teacher and I read the story together in English and then in Kinyarwanda, I would point to a character and then point to a continent on the map. The students stayed engaged throughout the entire story, fascinated by the colorful pictures and visual connections of origin. To assess the students’ comprehension, I asked the host teacher to instruct the students to draw pictures of the story on the blackboard (see Figure 3). This summative assessment was more fun than I expected!

![Figure 8: Comprehension Assessment](image)
With few materials to utilize, the chances for modifying the materials and curriculum became slimmer. Stepping away from *The Sand Mountain* and looking toward incorporating more interdisciplinary lessons, I decided to connect the story to the map of the world (see Figure 4) to my P1 students.

![Figure 9: “The World” Map used in the P1 classroom](image)

Another intern brought books (see figure 5) to complement the poster of a map of the world to enrich the lesson.

![Figure 10: P1 students exploring a book on Australia](image)

As she presented each book, I noticed an extremely important continent that was missing in the literature selection. In that moment, I realized that Africa was missing and wished that I had thoroughly evaluated the selection before the lesson had begun.
After the lesson was over, I asked my colleague why she did not bring a book on Africa. She innocently replied, “Well, they live here.” I could not blame her for having this viewpoint, but I also could not help my emotions exploding inside of me. I then explained, “That makes it even more important. What would have been most effective would have been actually starting the lesson off with a focus on Africa. This is their world.” I was happy to see the empathy fill her eyes. The conversation ended with my saying to her, “Come back tomorrow and bring the book on Africa.” I knew that modifying the lesson by adding the book on Africa would exhibit cultural sensitivity and connect to the students’ cultural background; the adjustments were essential in being culturally responsive and effective (Algozzine, 2009).

The following day was powerful because the student were able to explore literature on Africa (see Figure 6), which allowed them to make connections to the geography lesson and take ownership of their learning.

![Figure 6: Book on Africa, presented to the students on day two of the lesson](image)

**The Positive Aspects and Challenges of Collaborating with Teammates**

The geography lesson that I co-taught was, in the end, a great lesson for all of the stakeholders. Not only did the students learn the seven continents but my friend and colleague
also gained the knowledge and foundation for being culturally responsive. This positive experience was followed by the invitation of another intern to co-teach a mathematics lesson to my P1 students. After collaborating and planning a lesson on addition with the use of manipulatives, our biggest goal to reach, other than the objective of understanding the concept of addition, was to be culturally responsive. Therefore, we decided to use fruit that the students had available to them on a daily basis (See Figure 7).

![Figure 7: Mathematics lesson on addition, using Rwandan oranges as manipulatives](image)

After modeling different addition problems and giving the students opportunity for guided practice, my co-teacher and I put the students to the test. The independent practice and summative assessment was based on a performance task, which the students were able accomplish by using the oranges to get a sum. My expectations were always high, but my students were always able to impress me in some way. Once my colleague and I assessed our students’ success, we then assessed our own. We were pleased to see our success in the fulfillment of the objective, and we loved to see smiles on the students’ faces (see Figure 8).
Figure 8: Group picture after completion of math lesson on addition

Although we enjoyed collaborating with others, we also faced challenges in making group decisions that stayed true to the culturally responsive approach. During the first breakfast at the school, my teammates and I talked about their concerns about our work. Some believed that we needed to create a schedule to “better” the school. The whole time I felt anger with the thought that people were unable to realize the importance of being culturally responsive and that our customs and beliefs are not superior. One intern finally made a comment about adapting to the classroom teacher’s culture and not changing it. Another intern quickly added, “I believe walking into the classroom with an agenda would create a colonial attitude.” I breathed a sigh of relief but knew that we had just experienced the beginning of a constant absence of understanding.

The first and persistent challenge in collaborating with teammates pertained to creating word walls for all the classrooms. Only two out of the nine interns were Elementary Education majors who had background knowledge on different teaching strategies. Some of the interns would approach us and ask questions regarding teaching and how to be effective. Other interns felt that it was as simple as 1+1=2 and acted as if the students were a blank slate.
After I presented my word wall as a model, comments were made such as “This is stupid” and “A wall with words on it is useless.” It was also difficult for some of the interns to grasp the importance of putting both English and Kinyarwanda, along with pictures, on the word wall. The only way that I could explain the importance of the word wall in a way that the interns could relate to by saying, “How would you feel if you walked into a classroom where you were expected to learn a new language like Spanish and all you saw on walls were Spanish words?” One intern replied, “I would walk away.” I excitedly blurted out, “Exactly! Now how do you think these students would feel?” This conversation was helpful because, for a moment, some of the interns were able to place themselves in the shoes of their students.

Breakthroughs like the conversation stated above made me feel more optimistic, but every time I felt we were taking a step forward, something would happen that felt as though there was a push to take two steps backwards. Negativity was the most challenging aspect of trying to create a positive learning community for my students because it affected my own learning environment. The frustration began to affect me in a way that deflected from my goal of building a learning community for my Rwandan students.

Becoming literate in a second language depends on the quality of teaching, which is a function of the content coverage, intensity or thoroughness of instruction, methods used to support the special language needs of second-language learners and to build on their strengths, how well learning is monitored, and teacher preparation. (August, 2006, p. 3) Without my attitude in line with what it should be, the students would not be able to succeed or at least not as well as they deserved.
Stepping back and reevaluating the situation made me realize that I needed to be culturally responsive to all learners that I come into contact with, even if they are adult learners. I know that I could not change what someone believes, so all I could do was present the research that brought me to a mindset where my passion is so strong on culturally responsive teaching. Geneva Gay (2002) gave me the steps necessary to become culturally responsive and the evidence needed to prove that a word wall that creates a print rich environment for the students is more than just a “wall of words”.

**Figure 9: Example of interns’ bulletin board**

I was happy to see that once my teammates completed their word wall or bulletin board for their own classroom, they were able to see how it could be used as a tool in the classroom.
(see Figures 9 and 10). Delpit explains why such tools are effective: “Child-centered, whole language, and process approaches are needed in order to allow a democratic state of free, autonomous, empowered adults, and because research has show that children learn best through these methods” (Delpit, 1995, p. 31). I conducted an interview with an intern and one question I asked was, “How do you think you were culturally responsive in the classroom?” Her reply provided me with much relief.

One thing that we did was that we worked on a word wall for the students displaying what they did so far. My class, M3, learned shapes, colors, time, different articles of clothing, alphabet, different greetings, and parts of the body. My host teacher and I made a board to display what they have learned. The words were displayed in Kinyarwanda, their native language, as well as English, the language we have been teaching them. That was a way of incorporating their culture as well as teaching them English. They really had a lot of fun with it (Intern interview, July, 2011).

I hope that, regardless of any challenges experienced, the interns and host teachers walked away with a better understanding of culturally responsive teaching and their roles as educators.

**A Community of Learning**

The materials that were available were slim to none and at first made reaching the goal of teaching English seem that much more difficult. As I look back on my experiences teaching, these circumstances allowed the students and me to learn on our toes and brought us to a neutral place where there was a sense of psychological comfort. Along with this comfort came kinesthetic aspects, brain breaks, and personal choices that all enriched the possibility of my P1 students’ success in acquiring English as a second language.
Mathematics was one of the most fun and easiest subjects to communicate throughout. All of the math lessons made both the students and me feel capable by their success and the reassurance I felt by their smiles. Below are pictures (see Figures 11 and 12) of two math lessons that show evidence of the kinesthetic aspect of the students’ learning and how we adapted the “manipulatives” by using what we had available, which a lot of the time was our bodies.

Figure 11: Whole, halves, fourths math lesson

Figure 12: Bar graphs

Other subjects took more adapting to be effective for the students. When teaching colors, I wanted to show the words in both languages (see Figure 13). Once the P1 students had an opportunity to get a basic understanding of the translations, I then connected each color to
something within the room, to their clothing, and objects outside the classroom. They looked down at green grass, up at blue skies, and over to red flowers. They made me look at a more colorful world; the students showed me the world through teaching and learning.

Figure 13: Teaching the colors and using both languages

All of the lessons needed to be accompanied with more fun. I took advantage of brain breaks, which are short amounts of time where the students stop doing the current assignment, stand up, and move around. Some brain breaks consisted of activities such as dancing or stretching (see Figure 14). To get the students’ blood flowing and at the same time teach them more terms that would increase their English vocabulary, I would have them repeat the verb over and over or the body part we were touching at the time. For example, in the picture below, they knew what to do when they heard the words “SHAKE! SHAKE!” In addition, they learned the different body parts, and not by memorization. I wanted the students to think critically. Therefore, I would assess their abilities by saying the wrong body part. The students would explode with laughter every time and corrected me, which made us enjoy the activity even more. Their screams of, “NO! ELBOW!” when I said “knee” while touching my elbow, filled me with joy. They were incredible.
To add to all the positive interactions and learning experiences between the students and me, my next approach to show them that they had the freedom to learn was to give them a choice. Opening the door to the library and asking my host teacher to explain that the students get to choose any book they want was one of many memorable moments. The fact that I had to explain to my host teacher more than once what I was requesting showed the lack of student choice within the school. What I wanted was for them to feel the freedom to learn and love the idea of learning. Their smiles made me feel successful, and the skipping and gallops I witnessed on the way back to the classroom reinforced this success (see Figure 15). To top it all off, as the students looked through the books they picked out for themselves, out of nowhere they began to sing the song, “The Itsy Bitsy Spider”, that we had read in a story.
Along with a print-rich environment, I wanted these students to feel that the classroom was their classroom. After filling the walls of the classroom with both English and Kinyarwanda labels, I then gave them an opportunity to decorate the room with their work. Without this sense of ownership, the classroom would be just another classroom. Instead, their artwork turned the classroom into something that the students created. I wanted the students to fill the walls with the same warmth that they were able to fill my heart with (see Figure 16).
In the end, through teacher collaboration, respect for students’ own knowledge and abilities, community-building, humor, and choice, we were able to build a rapport (see Figure 17) that opened doors and windows to opportunities of a positive learning community that would support the students’ English language acquisition.

Figure 17: Evidence of a great rapport

These positive feelings were evident not only through my observation data, but also through data from interviews with the students. To interview the students, I had a translator ask them my questions about their learning experiences. The hands that flew up provided many examples of different activities that were implemented, such as learning the continents. Once this lesson was mentioned, the P1 students began to point to the different continents and say each name. If a student mentioned a song that he or she enjoyed, the class began to sing it together. This interview turned into an open window, showing me all the success that was accomplished within the classroom.

Throughout this interview one specific student spoke for the whole class. With every word he spoke, the class simply nodded in agreement. His words will stay with me for as long as I teach. With the help of a translator I asked, “Out of all the examples they gave, ask them what
their favorite was and why?” The student then replied, “I liked the world. I liked all the things you taught me, they made me happy. You gave us easy things and you showed us what you were teaching us” (P1 Students interview, August 2011).

“They made me happy.” This statement made me feel accomplished in a way that I did not know was possible. The P1 students, without any prompts, let me know that I was able to join their classroom and become a part of the whole. During our farewell ceremony we were able to share with the community what the P1 students learned by presenting the word wall and showing their friends and family that they knew every word placed on it. In the short amount of time that we were given to work together, a great amount of learning was achieved. This achievement was seen and felt in performances and through unseen aspects of the point in time (see figure 18).

Figure 18: Group picture of enthusiastic P1 students
Part 3
Conclusion

Prior to departing for Rwanda, Africa, I wanted to find out how to develop a culturally responsive teaching model that would build a learning community for students to support the students’ English language acquisition. One of my main concrete contributions to these students was the word wall. This project became one of the most beneficial and challenging aspects of the participatory action research. I found many challenges in collaborating with teammates and also many positive experiences at the same time. From this, I learned that I not only have to be culturally responsive with my students, but with all stakeholders, regardless of their age. In the end, counteracting the negativity with optimism was all that I could do. Constantly keeping my students in mind gave me the strength to reach my goals of being culturally responsive in building a learning environment.

Despite these challenges, success was inevitable with my mindset and the rapport that developed between my students and me. The P1 students and I became a team, striving to learn in circumstances that did not seem very promising. The progress that was made with both rapport and academics was exceptional. This model of being culturally responsive will ideally provide teachers all over the world a viewpoint that is trustworthy because it has been lived. My ideas are not better than anyone else’s, but I know that success can only be found within the person striving to excel.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A

Interview Questions Posed to Penn State interns

1. What was the hardest thing to adapt to in the classroom other than the language barrier?
2. What was your major goal in the classroom?
3. If you could do something different to better prepare yourself for this experience what would it be?
4. Was there something about the Rwandan culture that you learned and didn’t expect to?
5. How do you think you were culturally responsive in the classroom?
APPENDIX B

Interview Questions Posed to Rwandan students

1. What was your favorite thing you learned since I’ve been here?
2. What was your favorite math lesson?
3. Out of all the examples they gave, ask them what their favorite was and why?
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Kabuga, Rwanda
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- Boscov Excellence Award
- Commonwealth Awards for international study
- Berks Honors Program
- Phi Kappa Phi
- Phi Lambda Theta
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