CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE TEACHING: A NARRATIVE EXPLORATION OF BEING A WHITE MALE ART TEACHER IN A SOUTHERN BLACK HIGH SCHOOL

By

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A CAPSTONE PROJECT PRESENTED TO THE COLLEGE OF FINE ARTS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS

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Abstract

The following capstone project explores the practice of culturally responsive teaching by using the qualitative mode of inquiry described as narrative analysis. Written in the first-person, and within the framework of critical race theory, the research details my experiences as a student and now as an art teacher in a low-income, predominately black community in the Deep South and the public high school that is located within. Outlined as well are some of my understandings about how multiculturalism, visual literacy, and popular culture, as they are talked about within art educational discourse, inform my teaching. Throughout this supporting paper the reader will find information that describes the culture of my community and school. However, the primary aim was to find common cultural ground with my students and recognize my limitations as an art educator.
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Hey White Boy!

The phrase “Hey white boy” made its way to my ears quite frequently while walking the halls as a student in high school. Each time I heard these words I assumed they were meant for me, because usually, I was the only white boy in the vicinity. As a high school student, I was introduced to an environment where I was a part of the minority. As a white male, I had to be thoughtful and reflective as to how I presented myself in a school that was, at that time, about 85% black. Often I was referred to by other names besides just the ambiguous white boy. Sometimes I would also be called Opie, Shadow, or Space Ghost. I never took offense to being called these names, even though they were only used because of the color of my skin. Sometimes I would get called Bird because of my ability to shoot a three-point shot. My freshman year I was even given jersey number 33 in reference to my perceived likeness to the NBA basketball great, Larry Bird (See Figure 1).

*Figure 1:* Yearbook picture of me playing basketball for my alma mater
Statement of the Problem

13 years later, I am back in this same school as an art educator and I find myself in a setting where I am even more of a minority than I was when I was a student. The makeup of the student body has increased from an 85% to 99% black majority. There are many reasons for this which will be further discussed throughout this paper. The focus here is that I am a white teacher in an all-black school and I feel the need to be more attentive to that fact. As I strive to be a caring educator, it is important for me to be able to teach to my target audience as proficiently as I possibly can.

According to a study by Stanford University and Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching conducted in 1998 (as cited in Americans for the Arts, 2009), “Young people who participate in the arts are…four times more likely to be recognized for academic achievement, three times more likely to be elected to class office within their schools, four times more likely to participate in a math and science fair, three times more likely to win an award for school attendance, participate in youth groups nearly four times as frequently, read for pleasure nearly twice as often, and perform community service more than four times as often” (para. 1). For these reasons, I believe I can make a real difference in my students’ lives as their art educator. In order to understand my limitations in this environment and work to improve myself as an art educator, I have decided to critically analyze my teaching strategies in a self-actualizing manner so that I can better serve my students.

Prichard, AL: Past and Present

Because I had a car as a student in high school and many of my teammates did not, I frequently found myself taking friends home to some of the most dangerous neighborhoods in
the area. Often I would be told, “Don’t come back to this neighborhood without me.” I even remember on one occasion, as I was dropping a teammate off at his house, he to me turned and said “If you ever come in here to pick me up for practice and someone stops you, tell them you are preaching The Word.” Though I would get scared on occasion, I had conditioned myself to show as little fear as possible. I figured that the less fear I showed the less chance there would be that I would be seen as an easy target for violence. It was as close to a survival of the fittest type of environment that I have ever been exposed to. Though I was never assaulted or robbed during my four years as a student, there were times when I was forced to rely on my natural survival skills in order to safely remove myself from potentially dangerous situations.

Unfortunately for my students, after being away for more than a decade, I can see that the violence in this community hasn’t decreased. Students are constantly put in dangerous situations. Some of them knowingly place themselves in the middle of this violent culture while others are drawn in by other factors. I feel that some of the students at the school, more specifically some of the students that reside in the community immediately surrounding the school, are impeded in their ability or motivation to learn due to the distractions and popularity of violent street life. Many of them also face extreme problems within their homes that make it hard for them to focus on school.

People in the areas surrounding the town where I teach harbor negative assumptions about its residents with regards to race, violence, education, employment, and social status. These stem from the stories presented about the town by local media outlets as well as from firsthand accounts that many people experienced when they were once residents. Because the city is a predominately black, low-income area, full of vacant homes, and known for crime, many white residents with means have chosen to move out of the county. This white flight has
led to a lack of cultural diversity that seems to further perpetuate the negative associations made about the area.

Due to the appeal of street life, students who live in this type of environment may not be able to visualize the effects of a good education, and therefore may not relate to the value of traditional schooling. Wilson (2011) noted in *Being Poor, Black, and American: The Impact of Political, Economic, and Cultural Forces*, “Venkatesh argues that the code of shady dealings is a response to circumstances in inner-city ghetto neighborhoods, where joblessness is high and opportunities for advancement are severely limited” (p. 22). Too often these students give up on themselves at a very young age and that can make it very difficult to perform the job of educating them. My school is one of the few schools in the county (in the largest school system in the state) at which veteran teachers refuse to be employed. For instance, before I could assume position as the art teacher at my school, I first had to wait for another teacher in the school system to either accept or decline his/her mandatory transfer into the position that I was trying to fill. After declining the transfer for most of the summer, that teacher chose to take an early retirement instead of coming to work at my alma mater.

It is assumed by many privileged white representatives in the outer circles of this area that the majority of the students at my school lack the intelligence that their peers, attending other schools in the county, may have. This assumption stems from massive amounts of socially and lawfully unacceptable behavior taking place in the neighborhoods surrounding the school and being presented through local and national media (McGehee, 2010). Most of the stories about the area that make the nightly news tend to be about shootings, theft of property, drug busts, and high-speed car chases. The stories about these cultural codes ultimately hinder my students and other members of this community from integrating into bordering towns.
As an out-of-town observer driving down these streets, it would be hard not to see that the city is in need of positive change. One of the first things I notice as I drive into the city is the number of vacant businesses and houses in the area (See Figure 2). Left in place of these once lively establishments is an overgrowth of greenery and havens for illegal activity. Vandals have ransacked most of the buildings, stripping them of anything valuable, including the copper. While the rate of vacancy in housing within the area (13%) is only four percent higher than the national average (9%), there are some neighborhoods within the city where the rate is as high as 25%.¹ One such neighborhood, which my students call the 3rd Ward, is only a few blocks from my school and is littered with these vacant trap houses. While a few of them may still be standing strong, most of these abandoned houses have either fallen, or been burned to the ground.

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¹ Vacancy Rates according to the 2000 census: Worst Neighborhood – 25%, The City – 13%, The State – 12%, United States – 9%
The town of my alma mater has a unique story. It is one that begins with the landing of the Clotilda; the last known African slave ship to land in the United States (Glennon, 1999). African slaves aboard that ship arrived in the area just prior to the Civil War and due to the North’s victory became free people shortly thereafter. Once free, most remained in the area and settled in a small corner of the city where some of their descendants still remain today. From the time the Clotilda arrived in 1859, and throughout the early part of the 20th century, the area settled by these former slaves has been referred to as Africatown.

Just before World War I the city grew at a rapid pace because shipbuilding companies began building company housing in the town. In 1925, the residents voted to incorporate as a city so that they could have basic city services, such as a police force. The city witnessed its greatest growth between this time and the 1960s, when the population swelled to 47,000. Since this peak, the population has been on a constant decline. Because of the departure of Scott and International Paper Mills, as well as other large businesses in the area, the decline in population is one that has been very sharp. As of 2010, according to the population census, the number had dipped to 22,659. White flight can be blamed for a large percentage of this decline, but the flight has not been limited to just the whites. With a governmental body that had to file bankruptcy in 1999 and then again in 2009, many black families have moved out to other parts of the county as well (Kaetz, 2011).

The most economically stable years of this city seem to conclude at the same time as the beginning of the race wars of the mid 1960s and the integration of my alma mater. Years of talking with older alumni of my school have introduced me to many stories of violence between whites and blacks that took place on the grounds at that time. Local residents have told me that
because of this violence, many of the white families left the city and moved to other neighboring cities within the same county. After leaving the area many of these families and their offspring cut ties with the city and, in some cases, have never returned, not even for a visit.

**Research Questions**

I built this research project around the following questions:

1. What aspects of my students’ culture should I focus on in order to become a culturally responsive art educator in my unique setting?

2. In what ways does the fact that I am a privileged white male affect my efforts to be a culturally responsive educator in my particular setting?

**Purpose of the Study**

Using a narrative research approach, my goal in conducting this Capstone Project was to examine contemporary cultural life in and around my school and analyze my observations and interpretations so that I could be more responsive to my students’ needs. As the art teacher I feel that I have freedom to explore and implement cutting edge curriculum that challenges traditional methods. The freedom I have also allows me to discuss cultural phenomena with my students, both locally and internationally, and create lessons based on those trends. In examining, myself in this place and recording my responses to daily occurrences, I was looking for the best ways to approach and re-present cultural trends and make them meaningful to my students, myself, and, as in turn, our community.

**Assumptions of the Study**

I am a white male aiming to teach in a culturally responsive style in a southern black environment where racism and racist policy are alive and well. In attempting to examine the culture of this environment I knew I would face challenges and limitations due to the color of my
skin. Though I knew there would be challenges, I was confident that my status as an alumnus would allow me certain access that other white males in this environment may not have been able to obtain. I also assumed that because I was accepted by my peers in high school, that I would also be accepted in my new role by the current student body. Common ground that most individuals in this community stand on is the fact that they attended this same school when they were high school students. I share this history and I used it in this study to initiate meaningful conversations about some of the issues that the city and my students face.

**Definition of Terms**

*Narrative Analysis.* A narrative analysis is a study that relies on stories which emerge as data are collected and then framed and rendered through an analytical process that is artistic as well as rigorous (Coulter & Smith, 2009).

*Culturally Responsive Teaching.* Culturally responsive teaching can be described as an educational discourse developed by the instructor in response to the cultural common grounds of the students being taught (Ladson-Billings, 1994).

*Multiculturalism.* Under the school reform movement known as Multicultural Education, multiculturalism is the understanding of the complex issues of cultural diversity and the application of those understandings into educational art lessons (Ballengee-Morris & Stuhr, 2001).

*Visual Literacy.* Visual literacy can be described as the interpretations which are formed through the deconstruction and critical interpretation of popular visual imagery (Chung, 2007).

*Popular culture.* Often referred to as pop culture, it simply denotes a widely accepted group of practices or customs.
Study Limitations

The biggest limitation that I knew I would face throughout this research is that I am not black and I will never know what it is like to be black. I am a white male, raised in a white community, where I attended a white church and socialized with white people. It was not until I became a high school student that I began to spend the majority of my time in a non-white setting. This limits my ability to study and analyze black culture, because it is a culture that I can never fully experience. Though I strive to gain as much black cultural knowledge and experience as I can, I will always be an outsider looking in.

Literature Review

In deciding upon literature that I would read to help examine my studies, I began to search for anything in the realm of art education that had been previously written about race relations, culture, and hip-hop. I chose to read literature pertaining to these topics because I felt that they were the most relative places to start. What I found were some very interesting ideas formed out of research that I could take and apply to my study. This was important so that I was not just doing research based on my own perceptions and feelings. By analyzing prior research in the fields of critical race theory, multiculturalism, and hip-hop culture, I was able to better frame my ideas and responses to my own research.

Culturally Responsive Teaching within the Framework of Critical Race Theory

DeCuir and Dixson (2004) stated that “critical race theory was derived during the mid-1970s as a response to the failure of Critical Legal Studies (CLS) to adequately address the effects of race and racism in U.S. jurisprudence” (p. 27). For this educational study critical race theory provided a framework that needed to be used within my classroom because of the history of racism in this community. Within the framework of critical race theory it is understood that
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racism is a permanent ideal ingrained in U.S. culture (Milner, 2007; DeCuir and Dixson, 2004). Within the framework, the narrative, or story told by the researcher, and counter-narrative, story told by the research participants, are also essential due to the fact that race and racism are central components within critical race theory (Milner, 2007; DeCuir and Dixson, 2004). A third tenet of critical race theory in education is interest convergence, or what Donnor (2005) describes as “an analytical construct that considers the motivating factors…to eradicate racial discrimination or provide remedies for racial injustice” (pp. 57-58). The following excerpt by Milner (2007) sums it up:

…because race and racism exist in society, they also are present and prevalent in education and in the research and practice of education. People in society make up the education system, and thus education research and practice are also infiltrated with matters of race and racism…Critical race theorists attempt to expose racism and injustice in all its forms and facets; they attempt to explain the implicit and explicit consequences of systemic, policy-related racism; and they work to disrupt and transform policies, laws, theories, and practices through the exposure of racism (p.391).

Culturally responsive teaching is a pedagogy that recognizes the importance of including students’ cultural references in all aspects of learning (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Within the framework of culturally responsive teaching, the topics of multiculturalism, visual literacy, and popular culture are key components to constructing a meaningful, relevant art curriculum. I find this important because it allows the art educator to engage students with the cultural images, traditions, and perceptions that influence them the most. Keifer-Boyd, Amburgy, and Knight (2007) assert: “investigations into cultural meaning systems help us to break free from
oppressive systems that uncritically privilege hegemonic meanings as knowledge or truth” (p. 21). It is up to the educator to determine the demographics and culture of the target audience and decipher what is important to them. Once the art educator has determined which topics are important, he should then locate the most suitable examples of contemporary popular visual imagery for their own cultural climate and use them as teaching tools.

**From The Inside Looking Out**

For an art educator to understand what cultural content is relevant to their students, one must try and see things from their perspectives. Reading bell hooks’ (1994) *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* offered me the view of a white teacher from hooks’ own position as a black female student growing up in the south. During the years of desegregation, hooks describes, upon moving to a school with white teachers for the first time, “the rare white teacher who dared to resist, who would not allow racist biases to determine how we were taught, sustained the belief that learning at its most powerful could indeed liberate” (p. 4). I understand that this is not 1960 and we are not on the brink of civil war, but the breakdown in communication between affluent white communities and poor black communities continues to be a social and cultural problem. Hooks (1994) seems to believe that the key to breaking down barriers of race within the education system is to make sure that relevant education is the focus, no matter the racial make-up of participants. Holistic art education aims to do just that - promote community, something on which we can all find common ground.

Hooks (1994) goes on to describe the majority of her college professors to be lacking in “basic communication skills, they were not self-actualized, and they often used the classroom to enact rituals of control that were about domination and the unjust exercise of power” (p. 5). In any educational setting this would represent the model not to follow, assuming communication is
a must and being self-actualized promotes excellence. Also, I am reminded by this quote that it is not my job to maintain order, though that is sometimes necessary in order for me to teach. My job is to promote higher learning through the arts in the most responsive and relevant ways and, as hooks (1994) suggested: “professors who embrace the challenge of self-actualization will be better able to create pedagogical practices that engage students, providing them with ways of knowing that enhance their capacity to live fully and deeply” (p. 22).

**Multicultural Art Education**

One of these pedagogical methods is described as multicultural art education. According to Ballengee-Morris and Stuhr (2001), “it is important to understand culture and cultural diversity because culture provides beliefs, values, and the patterns that give structure and meaning to life” (p. 6). They also stress the importance of critically thinking about one’s own actions, the actions of one’s subjects, and who is being empowered or disenfranchised by those actions; this includes making and interpreting the meaning of art and visual culture (Ballengee-Morris & Stuhr, 2001). Tavin and Hausman (2004) observe that “the subjects and themes for classroom study should encompass the scope and scale of our students’ experiences” (p.48). And, according to Andrus (2001), “multicultural practice should be integrated throughout school experience, taking place over time and promoting goals of social equality and cross-cultural understanding” (p. 16). Further, and important to this study: “teachers taking such a holistic approach realize that a great deal of what it means to be culturally competent is the willingness to address diversity by rethinking what they are already doing and making it better” (Andrus, 2001, p. 16).

In the last two decades art educators have been discussing ways to reconstruct art theory and practice. This reconstruction holds roots in cultural studies, anthropology, and critical theory
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(Parks, 2004). The social goal of multiculturalism, as described by Ballengee-Morris and Stuhr (2001), is to “provide a more equitable distribution of power, to reduce discrimination and prejudice, and to provide social justice and equitable opportunities” (p. 8). In reference to the art educator’s role in facilitating these opportunities, Smith (cited in Ulbright, 2003) stated “if teachers devoted more time to art’s social concerns, then art instruction might be seen as useful and have a more secure place in the school curriculum” (p. 7). Due to the difference in cultural history, heritage, and traditions between me and my students, it is imperative that I consider these understandings of multiculturalism to meet my goal of becoming a culturally responsive teacher.

**Hip-Hop Culture**

Sexism, violence, and materialism are major components of the culture among young people of the community where I teach. These are major components in culture within other communities throughout the world as well, but in my teaching environment sexism, violence, and materialism are glamourized and perpetuated daily through the popularity of hip-hop. According to Chung (2007), “increasing numbers of teenagers, regardless of racial/national backgrounds, immerse themselves in hip-hop culture and copy the ways in which hip-hop characters on television act, move, dress, and talk” (p. 34). Murray (2004) describes those same videos as explicit displays of wealth and sexism where “‘bling-bling’ excesses have dominated” and “women serve as mindless props or accessories to be doused with expensive champagne or to shake their half-naked bodies to repetitive beats and sexist lyrics” (p. 6). As Murray also suggested, this makes hip-hop “an easy target for criticism on many fronts for its overt violence, misogyny, homophobia, and grotesque materialism” (p. 8).
Occasionally, I will catch my students watching these, and other violent videos on their cell phones during class. Often, when they should be engaged in the class assignment, some students will create drawings of guns or “hood” affiliations which get left behind for me, or other students, to find, respond to, and dispose of. In reference to such violent imagery, Diket and Mucha (2002) argue that art educators must be “attentive to students’ socialization, pay attention to the images created by young people, and encourage frank discussion of violence in schools” (p. 17). In essence I must take into account the popularity of these types of images and the affects that they are having on my students and try to offer guidance in this arena.

**Summary of Literature Review**

By analyzing prior research in the fields of critical race theory, multiculturalism, and hip-hop culture, I have learned more about the general perceptions of the type of culture that my students gravitate towards, as well as better ways to communicate and represent those ideas within the framework of critical race theory. I have also become educated on the importance of a multicultural teaching environment as well as multicultural lesson plans.

**Methodology**

I have conducted this project through narrative research. Narrative research is generally understood to refer to qualitative research that uses and tells stories. The following excerpt is taken from *Narrative Approaches to Education Research* by Sikes and Gale (2006):

Many people who use explicitly narrative approaches do so, at least partly, out of a political conviction that social research should be accessible and interesting. They believe that it should seek to capture something of the sense of life as it is lived, and they want to avoid the negative ethical and power consequences of assuming the sort of authoritative voice that denies the possibility of multiple realities. Having said this it is important to
reiterate that it is only possible to re-present, not re-create experiences, perceptions and emotions. (p. 47)

In reality, the research for this narrative began nearly 15 years ago when I was a student at the high school where I currently teach. But work for this study in particular occurred during a 30 day period at the beginning of the 2013-2014 school year and research material has been collected and is being presented at my website, www.jasonoutlawartwork.com/capstone-project.html. I intend to continue to my journey of self-actualization within this culture by engaging in conversations about pop culture and the culture of their community with students and community members. In essence, this is a research process that will continue as long as I am an art educator.

**Subject and Site Selection**

I am the primary subject of this study and I have been reflecting on my teachings to a southern black teenage audience at a high school that is located in one of the more economically-depressed cities in my state. Teaching within the classroom that I was an art student in for four years myself, my intent is to gain better perspective my students’ culture by recognizing noticeable trends in their behavior, interests, and concerns and then using that information to become a more self-actualized art educator. By analyzing myself as an art educator in this unique environment, I hope to gain knowledge about my students’ culture that will enable me to lead them down the path of higher learning.

**Description of the Study**

This study focuses on my experiences and aspirations as a white male art educator in a southern black high school. It includes stories about the cultural lives of students where I teach and, more importantly, my response to those stories. I am interested in exploring the aspects and
influences of contemporary culture on my students with the goal of becoming a more culturally responsive art educator. Observations and self-reflections have been used to collect information that is presented in a journal-style sketchbook in the form of narrative. No students were documented through photographs or video; only stories about them based on my interpretations (with no names attached), responses to classroom assignments, and interpersonal discussions. This study is about me, responding as an art educator to my students and our cultural environment.

**Data Collection Procedures**

Data has been collected using qualitative research methods in the form of narrative research. This data was collected spontaneously in a sketchbook as interesting interactions, project responses, and interpersonal conversations that took place in and around my classroom. The data collected is not specific to any particular class or set of students. For 30 days I basically became a fly on the wall, occasionally inserting myself into my students’ interactions. As I observed I wrote freely about the discussions and interactions taking place. Engaging in visual note-taking as well, I would periodically stop and create a page of artwork reflective of the notes being written, engaging that content in new ways (see Figures 3 & 4). This gave me an opportunity to internalize and reflect artistically upon the recurring themes of violence, sexism, and materialism that were becoming apparent.
Figure 3: All That Glitters Is Made of Gold

Figure 4: Schools Are Still Segregated By Skin Color
Data Analysis

The theoretical foundation of narrative inquiry is the belief that “telling a story about oneself involves telling a story about choice and action, which have integrally moral and ethical dimensions” (Rice & Ezzy, 1999, p.126). This form of research represents a change in focus from individual meanings to cultural narratives and their influence on people’s lives (Byrne-Armstrong, 2001). The aim of narrative inquiry is therefore not to find one generalizable truth but to “sing up many truths/narratives” (p.112). Because this narrative was completed within a unique social, cultural, and historical context, it must be assumed that the findings are not objective but reconstructions of memory from my own subjective perspective. This must be taken into consideration when analyzing this type of data because validity is dependent on the context of the narrator and the listener and are not intended to represent truth (Hunter, 2010).

Due to the limitations in validating such research, it was important for me to look for recurring themes within my research journal. By looking for themes within my journal and checking them against documented social, cultural, and historical accounts found in books, newspaper articles, websites, and conversations I was able to validate my findings to a degree that were satisfying to me as the researcher.

Along with noticing recurring themes, among which were violence, sexism, and materialism, this research has been validated through discussions with my colleagues and students as well as community members in the style of a member check. This is when data, analytic categories, interpretations and conclusions are tested with members of those groups from whom the data were originally obtained and is viewed as a technique for establishing the validity of an account. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985) member checking is the most crucial technique for establishing credibility in this form of research. This analysis recognizes
the counter-narrative, which is understood to offer validity within the framework of critical race theory (Milner, 2007; DeCuir and Dixson, 2004).

Because I was the focus of this research, I could not conduct member checking as it is thought of in the traditional sense. I instead had to engage in informal conversations with students, coworkers, and local community members about my research and some of the themes that were found. Rather than looking for further evidence to inform my research, the purpose of these conversations, or member checks, was to see whether these individuals agreed or disagreed with my interpretations. Though not objective, my findings have been validated by checking with the members of the school and community and concluding that many of them recognize the same recurring themes that I do.

Limitations

Because of the barriers still prevalent between blacks and whites in this region, my findings are limited by the color of my skin. Findings are also limited to this community and my experiences within this particular environment. The time frame for this research was also a limitation as culture and a culturally responsive teaching practice are ever-evolving entities and must be re-evaluated constantly. What I find today may change tomorrow. By using narrative research I have learned to observe and reflect upon events that take place in my environment, further allowing me to address issues, through art curriculum, as they arise.

Findings

A primary goal of this research was to determine a method for connecting with my students and determine my limitations as an art educator. I was looking to establish a practice of listening and interacting with my students so that I could best meet their needs. The following section describes a few of the more important things that I have learned during this process. First I will discuss the necessity of both discipline as well as compassion within this type of setting,
then explain my theory of teaching to each child as an individual, and conclude by describing the process of becoming a self-actualized educator.

**Discipline, Compassion, or Both?**

While introducing a lesson on altered books, I pulled one out for myself and worked through the process until I had a few pages to use as examples for my students. On the first page of *The Shoes of the Fisherman* by Morris L. West, I came across a quote that resonated with me and reaffirmed a teaching principle that has always been important in my professional approach. “I have to be so careful of discipline. I am torn always between compassion and my duty to enforce the law.” In the context of the teaching profession, it may be better suited for the word “law” to be replaced by “rules.” In any case, this is a dilemma that I am faced with daily. If I show weakness I will be treated as if I am weak, but if I throw the hammer down every time someone walks in my room with sagging pants, then I will be just another up-tight adult trying to change the culture.

I’ve come to recognize that I am somewhat biased when it comes to disciplining my students for minor behavioral infractions. The sad thing is that I am probably disciplining the students that need more compassion and showing compassion to the students that I should be disciplining. For instance, I noticed that if I was already under the assumption that the child was a trouble-maker then I was being more lenient toward them. I’m not sure why this is. Maybe it’s because I am trying to be one of the few people in their lives that isn’t always reprimanding them for every single small infraction. Maybe it’s because I’m afraid they’ll say I’m racist. Whatever the case, I have got to do
a better job of holding all students accountable while not removing compassion from our relationships.

I have found that instead of waiting for a violation to occur, it is best if I am diligent in taking steps to correct misbehavior before it occurs. Taking a pro-active approach to thwarting misbehavior before it occurs, compassionately and reasonably, allows me to be much more successful at limiting the amount of bad behavior within my classroom. One thing that is important for me in this environment is to maintain a certain level of respect between myself and all of my students. This is significant because the idea of respect is such an important aspect of my students’ culture. I have found, however, that it is important to help them recognize that respect is understood differently within a classroom or professional setting than it is on the streets. Some of my students think of respect as something that can be demanded of someone through the use of violence or other coercive actions. So, while giving respect in order to get respect may seem obvious to most folks, it is somewhat foreign to many of my students. Many of them are used to taking what they want, as opposed to earning it. By allowing them to see that I do in fact respect them for the individuals that they are, they in turn seem to show me more respect.

Rather than approaching a student who is misbehaving, or not on task, with anger and resentment, I try to present myself as a compassionate individual who has an understanding of their circumstance. For many of them, the adults in their lives use aggressive methods of yelling and screaming in order to gain respect. Making them understand that most people have, at one time or another, been a victim of circumstance seems to relieve them of the pressures of feeling like they have to act out. As an individual who has experienced many of the same distractions that this institution and its surroundings area have to offer, I can recommend to them alternative
ways of earning respect. While it may not be the same respect that is referenced on the street, it one that carries weight in society and may even help them learn to leave the street life behind.

**Teaching to the Individual**

Teaching to the individual, is a concept that I really need to work on. I am ashamed to say it, but I think I have been thinking of my students too broadly. I caught myself a few times during my research making assumptions about students that were completely off mark. I can’t assume that one student feels the same way, acts in the same way, perceives things in the same way, or has the same agenda as any other student. Too often I say things like, “these kids” when speaking negatively about a small group of students. I have to dissociate any prior knowledge that may create negative associations when thinking of and speaking about my students and learn to think of them more as individuals rather than members of a certain socio-economic community. Essentially, every student is different, no matter the similarities in environments that each child comes from, and every child should be taught as such. According to hooks (1994), “the professor must genuinely value everyone’s presence. There must be an ongoing recognition that everyone influences the classroom dynamic, that everyone contributes” (p. 8).

In order to achieve this, we must take time to get to know our students, and help them get to know one another. The conditions in which they live, their learning abilities, past successes and failures, their strengths and weaknesses, and also their future desires all play a role in their learning, and should play a role in how we teach them. What I have found is that in some cases, no one has ever asked these students what they hope to get out of life. It has never been a concern for anyone. While I do not feel that it is my responsibility as an educator to raise
students as if I were their parent, I do feel that it is important for me to fill some of those roles and ask some of those questions that may not be being asked elsewhere. When the students begin to open up to questions and give responses in a loving compassionate manner, they begin to form a community of learners who are not afraid to show vulnerability in front of one another and can approach each other in a more understanding way.

**Being a Self-Actualized Art Educator**

My third finding was that I needed to become a more self-actualized educator. Self-actualization can be described as a desire for self-fulfillment. Someone who seeks to become self-actualized is thought of as someone trying to reach their full potential. Rather than thinking I have all the answers because I was once a student in this environment, I need to think more in the present tense. I need to figure out what will interest my students today and not what interested me as a student years ago. I also have to realize that being a graduate only gives me minor credibility in the eyes of my students. At the end of the day I am still a white man in a southern black environment and that presents certain limitations.

During my research, I have found that the more I can internalize the events and cultural trends that take place among my students and try to facilitate a learning environment focused on those events and trends, the easier it is to create lessons that are engaging and beneficial to my students. For instance, after having several conversations with my students about the Air Jordan tennis shoes that many of them wear, I became intrigued by how oblivious many of them were to the cultural impact that the shoe has made not only in this country, but across the world. As I began researching Air Jordan and the impact it has had on our culture, I came across several documentaries and news articles pertaining to the topic. I began watching and reading anything
that pertained to Air Jordan. Before I knew it I had amassed enough information to teach a thorough lesson about the impact that Air Jordan has had on contemporary society.

Throughout the lesson, they were introduced to *Jordan Heads*, a documentary about Air Jordan collectors, *Behind the Swoosh*, a documentary about the sweat shops in Asia where many Air Jordan’s are made, as well as news articles about riots and murders that took place due to the sale of Air Jordan. As the students began to construct their own shoes, I realized that many of them were more engaged than I had ever seen them be (see Figure 5). While the lesson was a success with my students, what really made an impact on me was that if I wanted to reach the students that typically hesitate to participate, I had to find educational and artistic value in the things that they find culturally valuable.

*Figure 5: The Man, The Shoe, The Obsession*
Summary

In each of my three research findings, there is one common theme that stands out. Teaching in a culturally responsive manner takes time and dedication to research and reflect and build interpersonal relationships with students and community members. For me personally, it means that I have to acknowledge my limitations as a white male teaching to an all-black student body as well as the importance of introducing culturally relevant topics that my students may not have previously found to be of importance. Probably the most important thing that I found is that we must all, as educators in one capacity or another, learn to communicate and break down barriers of racism, classism, sexism, or any other “ism” that may be impeding knowledge construction within the classroom setting.

Discussion and Conclusion

My goals in conducting this research were to find common ground with my students and recognize my limitations as an art educator. From the scholarly literature I was able to determine the cultural trends of sexism, violence, and materialism found within my setting can be studied and analyzed through educational presentations using popular culture imagery as a teaching tool. I also found that by thinking about art curriculum from a multicultural standpoint, within the framework of critical race theory, I can strive to promote social equality and cross-cultural understanding. By using the qualitative mode of narrative research I was able to gain a better understanding of my students’ cultural environment of and apply those understanding to my pedagogical approach. In the following sections I will describe what I now think about my findings and how I have interpreted the data that has been collected in my observation journal.
Discussion and Interpretation of Findings

By analyzing critically my place in this environment, and reflecting upon the state of the community and institution where I teach, I have learned that there are opportunities, even if in a limited capacity, for me to make a positive impact in my place. I realize now that no matter how hard I try, I will not be able to “save” every child. I feel that my heart is in the right place though, and that I am making an impact as an art educator and a male role model in this community.

I also believe that several things are key when trying to follow the model that I have presented. The main thing is communication. I have found that if I just make the attempt to communicate with parents, community members, and students in a way that is understanding of the environment yet suggestive that the students deserve of better, then I can begin to gain respect as an art educator based on the fact that I want more for my students, and in turn the community. Others in a similar position to mine should take this approach to communication as well. It is important not to communicate in a way that is demeaning, instead is uplifting, honest, and compassionate. It may be difficult for the art educator to convey sincerity in this matter, especially if the culture of the area is one, like mine, which has a storied history of violence due to racism. All that one can do is make an effort to improve the lines of communication. Without communication, bridges cannot be built from the art room to the community and in turn the art room will remain isolated and perceived as irrelevant.

Significance, Implications, and Recommendations

This study has encompassed years of observing a community of people that hail from a different background than I. Throughout my observations I have found that, while all people are created equal, the environments in which we grow up may not be. None of us choose the
environments that we are born into and not all of us have the individual fortitude to break free from oppressive circumstances. Children being educated in these conditions want better for themselves and their families but may not have the tools to create better circumstances on their own. I feel that this is where art educators in similar environments to mine can offer guidance and support and possibly a way out. We have the imaginative capacity to dream big dreams and the opportunity to represent life in a positive light.

Conclusion

At the beginning of this research, I had to ask myself if what I was doing would be perceived as intelligent and objective or biased and racist. Being that I have been involved in this environment for so long and have so many life-long friends in the community, I felt that I could present this research in a way that would be accepted by anyone. I hope that I have done just by the people of this area as well as my students. In saying those things, I must conclude that this was necessary research, not only for me, but for anyone in a similar position to mine. To anyone who is struggling in this type of environment I will leave you with these suggestions: be attentive to each individual, learn to communicate in a loving manner, do not assume your students are incapable of anything, and do whatever you can to find common ground.
References


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Appendix A

Institutional Review Board Application
August 7, 2013

To Whom It May Concern:

Jason Outlaw has permission to conduct research in his art classroom at C.F. Vigor High School. I understand that this research is being conducted as part of a graduate student project and thesis. I understand that the focus of this study is culturally responsive teaching in an all-Black public high school from the perspective of a privileged White male educator. Students will not be participating in this study, although some of their thoughts and actions will be represented in Jason's field notes.

There are no potential physical risks or physical discomfort that will take place during this research. It will involve documentation by the teacher on a daily and weekly basis which will reflect topics of conversations and actions among the students as observed by the teacher.

Findings will be available to the public through University of Florida. Student opinions, thoughts and approaches will be kept confidential by tracking the information and not who provided it. Jason will store his field notebooks in a secure location throughout the study.

I will address questions or concerns about this research to Jason Outlaw, principal researcher or his advisor, Jodi Kushins. I am aware that the University of Florida Institutional Review Board is reviewing this project and I can pose questions to them as well.

Regards,

Kenneth Edwards
Kenneth Edwards
Principal
Vigor High School
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<td><strong>Title of Protocol:</strong> Culturally Responsive Teaching: A Narrative Exploration of Being A White Male Teacher in A Southern Black High School</td>
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<td><strong>Principal Investigator:</strong> Jason Outlaw</td>
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<td><strong>Degree / Title:</strong> BA - Art/Business</td>
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<tr>
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<td><strong>Telephone #:</strong> 251-602-0227</td>
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<td><strong>Co-Investigator(s):</strong></td>
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<td>Jodi Kushins</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Department:</strong> Art Educaiton</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Telephone #:</strong> 614.499.6176</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Date of Proposed Research:</strong> Research will be conducted for 30 days of the 2013-2014 academic calendar</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Source of Funding</strong> (A copy of the grant proposal must be submitted with this protocol if funding is involved): N/A</td>
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Revised August, 2009
Scientific Purpose of the Study:
This is a self-study created to identify ways in which my position as a privileged White male affects my efforts to be a culturally responsive educator in a predominantly Black high school in the Deep South. By paying attention to my students' interests, concerns, and personal voices, I want to determine which aspects of my students' culture I can focus on in order to be the best teacher I can be in my unique situation.

Describe the Research Methodology in Non-Technical Language: (Explain what will be done with or to the research participant.) I will take field notes in a sketchbook as important findings present themselves throughout the course of the normal school day. As I review and analyze these notes, I will create artworks that address areas that I can grow as a culturally responsive teacher. Member checking will take place through daily informal conversations with students. All comments and actions made by students will remain anonymous. No names or images of students will be used.

Describe Potential Benefits: I hope teachers in similar situations will find this research an inspirational useful tool in their efforts to become more culturally responsive in their classrooms as well.

Describe Potential Risks: (If risk of physical, psychological or economic harm may be involved, describe the steps taken to protect participant.) I do not plan any particular interventions in my classroom or interactions with students what would produce any risks in this research.

Describe How Participant(s) Will Be Recruited: I am the lone participant in this research.

| Maximum Number of Participants (to be approached with consent) | 1 |
| Age Range of Participants: | 31 |
| Amount of Compensation/course credit: | 3 credits |

Describe the Informed Consent Process. (Attach a Copy of the Informed Consent Document. See http://irb.ufl.edu/irb02/samples.html for examples of consent.)

(SIGNATURE SECTION)
Principal Investigator(s) Signature: [Signature]
Date: 8/7/13

Revised August, 2009
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<td><strong>Department Chair Signature:</strong></td>
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Author Biography

Jason Kent Outlaw is a public high school art teacher at C.F. Vigor High School where he is also the head baseball coach. This is his second year teaching at the school where he was once a student. After graduating from Vigor in 2000, Jason attended Spring Hill College, a local private, Jesuit institution, on a baseball scholarship. While at Spring Hill he received his BA in Art/Business. Since returning to Vigor, Jason has worked hard to reinvigorate a baseball program that has seen eight coaches pass through in the last twelve years. He has also spent time in the art room trying to reinvigorate the spirit and pride that Vigor High School is known for. Jason is also currently working with the City of Prichard on an art project that will result in the development and design of a new historical park located within the city.