Picturing Culturally Relevant Literacy Practices: Using Photography to See How Literacy Curricula and Pedagogies Matter to Urban Youth

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This article reports on the findings of a photography and literacy project the authors conducted with 117 diverse city students. Relying on a critical pedagogy framework, the foundations for this study include research on cultural relevance, literacy, and visual sociology. The authors used Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) and photo elicitation methods to allow young adults to document their impressions of the purposes of, supports for, and impediments to school. Through a multi-stage process of analyzing these pictures and writings, the authors discovered insights about what youth believe are literacy pedagogies that are relevant to their cultures and help them to achieve in school.

"Shy"

> I'm shy. So, when I look at this photo of a stage, I am reminded of when I was in fifth grade and we had to come up with a rap about the first amendment. I went to the stage, freaked out, paused for a moment and then managed to perform. This stage also represents good things, like overcoming my fears of speaking in front of others and building self-esteem.
>
> —Chiquitta

Chiquitta took the image above and described it as a part of a photovoice project through which diverse high school youth in the United States were asked to share their perspectives on school. For Chiquitta, our high school literacy practices would have been more pertinent if we had recognized that her apparent resistance to them was, in fact, reluctance rooted in a fear of failure. Her anxiety had grown out of her frustration with teachers' insensitivity to her perspective that diverse urban adolescents should not expect to find success in school. When we spoke with her and considered her images and writings, we were dismayed to learn that her family members had known only school failure—and that she believed she should not anticipate teachers offering her any hope for academic achievement.

As literacy teacher educators and classroom teachers in U.S. urban communities, we have become interested in what the images young women and men have taken and the reflections they have drafted suggest about relevant reading, writing, speaking, and listening activities. We looked to photo elicitation and Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) methods to document and describe diverse city students' reasons for coming to school and what they believed were supports for, and impediments to, their engagement with school. While we did not ask adolescents directly what they understood about "cultural relevance," their pictures and writings revealed their understandings of responsive literacy teaching practices.

The often nebulous concept of cultural relevance has been in existence for more than two decades. While many teachers are intrigued by pedagogies that are applicable to their frequently disenfranchised students (Gomez, Allen, & Clinton, 2004; Teel & Obidah, 2008), educators continue to struggle to maximize the promise of this notion

(Journell & Castro, 2011). This article provides insights into the nature of culturally relevant literacy practices, drawn from our analyses of youths' photo elicitation products. Culturally relevant literacy education might be understood as a reflexive process utilizing media with which young people are already proficient—a procedure through which educators can both *examine* and *implement* this concept.

Framework and Recent Research

Our project and its research methods relied on the critical pedagogical assumption that educational practices should contribute to institutional conditions oriented around student empowerment (Kincheloe, 2004; Murrell, 2006). We considered a range of research literature foundations, including examinations of cultural relevance, current notions of literacy, and visually-oriented and Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) methods. We also explored the expanding literature on student voice, which incorporates literacy-oriented pedagogies and unique research methods.

The concept of cultural relevance was a principal foundation for our study—the result of the fact that the photographs and descriptions developed by the young people in our project highlighted the need for such responsive classroom practices. Culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) empowers ethnically diverse students and youth from under-resourced communities who struggle to engage with school due to societal perceptions of their deficiencies (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2009). CRP has long focused on teacher traits and the curricula teachers implement, mindful of the cultural dimensions which affect student learning (Esposito & Swain, 2009). CRP focuses on recognizing student cultural connections and addressing cultural mismatches with various components of school in an effort to facilitate students' academic success while building cultural competence (Boutte & Hill, 2006).

A culturally relevant orientation recognizes education as neither politically nor culturally neutral, calling on educators to help students challenge the current social order. CRP assumes that to address the challenges faced by marginalized and minority youth educators must reorient "the onus of responsibility for student academic and behavioral failure away from the student and instead look at the educator, the curricula, the school and the cultural mismatch between all three" (Journell & Castro, 2011, p. 11). Culturally relevant pedagogies enhance youths' positive ethnic identities and help them challenge the racism that numerous critics note stubbornly permeates the culture of U.S. schools (Hanley & Noblit, 2009; Seidl, 2007).

Critical forms of multiculturalism echo these notions, suggesting that ethnic minority students need assistance developing counter narratives about their cultures and academic abilities (May & Sleeter, 2010; Villegas & Lucas, 2007). Many examples of research on cultural relevance exist (e.g., Bondy, Ross, Gallingame, & Hambacher, 2007; Duncan-Andrade, 2006) but remain on the fringes of mainstream concepts of literacy (Esposito & Swain, 2009). Examples of the merging of cultural relevance and literacy education depict the integration of critical perspectives into language arts instruction (Edwards, Dandridge, McMillon & Pleasants, 2001; Greene & Abt-Perkins, 2003; Morrell, 2007).

The underpinnings of our CRP research include current concepts of literacy, studies of students' points of view on school, and visual sociology tools and YPAR methods. These offer strategies for engaging adolescents in reflection processes that suggest alternative notions of literacy-oriented cultural relevance. The junction formed by these research bases offers compelling possibilities for considering secondary students' alienation from our curricula and how culturally relevant pedagogies foster re-engagement.

We considered research on contemporary concepts of literacy (Alvermann & Strickland, 2004; Moje, 2008), which include visual, electronic, musical, and cultural texts (Christenbury, Bomer & Smagorinsky, 2009). Investigators have demonstrated how literacy educators might integrate these capacities into their pedagogies (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006; Williams, 2008), but these considerations remain the exception for most teachers (Zenkov & Harmon, 2009a; Eldsen-Clifton, 2006). Numerous researchers have detailed how youths' visual text proficiency leads to teaching methods that advance adolescents' appreciation for traditional literacy activities and notions of literacy-focused cultural relevance (Kroeger, et al, 2004; Marquez-Zenkov, 2007a).

The voices of diverse city youth have long been almost non-existent in public and policy debates about schools and teachers' practices (Doda & Knowles, 2008; Fine, Torre, Burns & Payne, 2007). Fortunately, the past decade has produced a considerable literature on youths' points of view on school (Cook-Sather, 2009; Schmakel, 2008; Yonezawa & Jones, 2009). Frequently involving YPAR methods, reports have explored how young adults can serve as informants about how school structures might better suit their needs (Ayala & Galletta, 2009; DeFur & Korinek, 2009).

Multi-modal literacy and student voice research come together neatly under YPAR traditions (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000; McIntyre, 2008). YPAR is conducted within a participatory community with the goal of addressing an area of concern and identifying actions that improve the quality and equity of outcomes (Mediratta, Shah, & McAlister, 2009). YPAR is authentically democratic, with participants helping determine the purposes of their inquiries. YPAR amplifies diverse youth voices, particularly around issues of educational justice (Carlo, et al., 2005; Torre, 2005; Zeller-Berkman, 2007).

YPAR researchers also increasingly utilize visual tools (Marquez-Zenkov, et al., 2007b; Mitchell, et al., 2005; Wilson, et al., 2007). When applied to examinations of youths' perspectives on notions of curricular relevance, image-based tools are among the most accessible to today's adolescents (Graziano, 2011; Streng, et al., 2004). Visual texts motivate youth to engage in reading and writing tasks, promote their sense of literacy efficacy (Marquez-Zenkov 2007a; Zenkov & Harmon, 2009b), and allow them to analyze classroom realities.

Young adults' perceptions of school are especially important to explore given that the dropout rate among diverse adolescents remains near 50% in city districts in the United States (Children's Defense Fund, 2008; Greene & Winters, 2006). Focused on an inquiry into what youth identify as the key elements of their relationships to school, the project on which we report utilized photographic tools and adolescents' written reflections in an attempt to elucidate and subsequently transform students' perceptions

of school as an often repressive and alienating institution (Mitra, 2009; Rudduck, 2007). The purpose of this study was to consider the nature of culturally relevant literacy practices in light of the insights shared by our diverse students and drawn from our analyses of their photo elicitation products. We share and discuss the connections youth made between their school experiences, what they saw as the purposes of school, and the factors that fostered or inhibited their success.

Methods

Our methods included distinct and overlapping *project* and *research* elements. The project components primarily relate to our photovoice YPAR-based intervention with diverse young people who focused on their perceptions of school. The research elements are chiefly associated with our data analysis procedures, which resulted in the culturally relevant literacy findings we detail.

The 117 youth who participated in this project came from a major Midwestern U.S. city's most diverse neighborhoods. This article's authors are all Caucasian, and the adolescent participants were African American, Latina/o, Asian American, and Caucasian young women and men. Schools' communities were composed of working class families, and most participants were children of high school dropouts. Young adults in these schools mirrored national trends in U.S. urban schools, where ninth graders average below a 5th grade reading level (USDOE, 2007; McCombs et al., 2005), and the high school dropout rate in these two city school districts had hovered above 40% for more than four decades.

We worked with youth through our roles as teachers and teacher educators associated with universities where Kristien has been based. The first group of 34 project participants was enrolled in Jim's video production class at an area high school, where Kristien supervised student teachers. The succeeding iteration involved 36 youth from another city high school in an English class taught by a veteran teacher serving as a mentor for the teaching licensure program Kristien directed. The third project included 47 students and took place over two summers at an inner-ring suburban high school where Jim was teaching English and Kristien was working with pre-service teachers. Appropriate consent was obtained for use of student images and writings.

Marriam, Athene, and Megan assisted with data analysis and reporting, conducted versions of the project in their own schools with English language learners, and partnered with Kristien to employ the project in university-based teacher education contexts. Anthony and Corey are university faculty members who have recently partnered with Kristien to implement the project and assisted with the analysis of the data considered for this report. The project at each site was approved by the Institutional Research Board of both of the universities where Kristien has been based while conducting this research, and all youth participants gave consent to participate in the project.

Data Sources

The project was supported by foundation or university grants, enabling us to

provide participants with digital or 35mm "point and shoot" cameras and film. We instructed students in camera operation and led them on initial "photo walks," modeling the photo evaluation process and the consideration of camera angles and composition. We then called on youth to complete photo walks in their communities, schools, and homes—focusing on the project's guiding questions and any subjects in which they were interested. We conducted each version of the project for four months to a year, with each participant taking an average of 100 images in response to the three project questions:

1) What is the purpose of school?
2) What helps you to be successful in school?
3) What gets in the way of your school success?

We met with youth approximately every two weeks for 8-10 sessions to view, discuss, and write about their images. We considered numerous photographs with young people as a part of this elicitation process, asking questions like "Why did you take this picture?" and "What do you like about this image?" We transcribed their oral reactions to images, which they then drafted as paragraphs about photographs they felt best answered the project questions. Youth shot a total of more than 10,000 images and, after small group and one-to-one discussions, wrote about approximately 400 pictures—an average of four photographs per participant—in paragraph-length reflections.

Data Analysis

As part of ongoing data analysis processes, in our post-project session discussions among this paper's authors, we shared our impressions of the photographs about which young adults were writing, and we agreed that literacy relevance elements were a prominent theme. At the conclusion of these three iterations of the project, conducted over three school years, we analyzed the content of the full collection of approximately 400 images and writings, coding prevalent and outlying visual and descriptive themes (Creswell, 1998; Patton, 2002). We then completed a framed content analysis of all images and accompanying reflections (Pole, 2004; Van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2001). While our project questions focused on youths' perceptions of school's purposes, supports, and impediments, we reconsidered our content analysis notes and visual and written data through the lens of what these suggested about the broad topics of "culture" and "relevance" as they related to our literacy pedagogies (Rose, 2006). We also conducted informal member checks (Morse et al., 2002) with youth participants, sharing the themes we identified with the students who had created the image/reflection combinations that served as key evidence of that theme.

In the findings section below, we introduce a number of the more than 30 themes we discovered through these analyses, but we concentrate on two categories with the clearest implications for literacy instruction—specifically teacher relationships and role models. We describe and illustrate these themes using sample students' reflections and visual data. First, we detail how these data explicate more complicated, fluid, and

persistent relationships with teachers; secondly, we describe the expanded notions of the kinds of role models youth are seeking in literacy education settings.

Findings

Our analyses of these data sources have revealed more than 30 themes related to diverse urban youths' perceptions of school and its purposes, supports, and impediments. While our focus here on culturally relevant literacy precludes us from describing all topics in detail, these have included notions of school leadership, with youth calling on administrators to serve as school- and community-spanning leaders of teachers, youth, and families. Young people have also consistently reflected on secondary school curricula, suggesting that lessons and activities should have clearer vocational elements and teach young people to be advocates for their learning. Project participants have perhaps most frequently concentrated on teachers' limited expectations for them and demanded professional resilience in their teachers—a quality that fosters adolescents' academic self-efficacy.

The findings that seem most pertinent to this journal's readers include not only examples of what our students considered relevant literacy instruction principles and pedagogies, but also answers to criticisms of current notions of cultural relevance. This concept has been disparaged for its attention to context-dependent detail, diminishing entire cultures to key descriptors that are "relevant" only to particular populations. The visual, youth-centered data of this study suggest an alternative concept of relevance, while providing examples of relevant literacy guidelines and pedagogies that illustrate—without essentializing—U. S. urban youths' cultures.

Specifically, our findings suggest that culturally relevant literacy instruction depends on more meaningful relationships with teachers; these relationships should be complex and fluid and include teachers' willingness to cross traditional boundaries and exhibit professional persistence and what we call "daily forgiveness." Our findings also reveal that we should be operating with expanded notions of role models, which challenge many teachers' assumptions about these ideals and young adults' responsibilities for identifying and serving as these exemplars. These themes relate both to the processes with which we engage as literacy educators and to the content of participants' photographs and writings. While we discovered these findings through our considerations of many youths' images and writings, we share these through the lenses of individual students' pictures, reflections, and stories.

Complex, Fluid, and Forgiving Relationships with Teachers

"It's About Passion"

> Team sports, in many ways, help you succeed and accomplish your goals. If I didn't have softball, there would be something missing. Every day before I go to school...I am thinking about softball. I am thinking about plays, about Ms. Zak, my coach, and about how to help another player

> when they are having a bad day. Softball is such a big part of my life...[and] some of my teammates might drop out of school without it.
>
> —Samantha

Samantha—or Sam—and her best friend Maria were involved with the first iteration of our project and were the most prolific photographers. Sam accompanied the quote above with an image of her softball team, coached by her English teacher, which illustrates the first element of the notion of culturally relevant literacy we have identified: teachers' relationships with youth are critically important to their abilities to engage with school and its literacy tasks. These relationships should be complex, fluid, and rooted in teachers' willingness to cross school and community boundaries. Given that literacy content often incorporates students' personal writings and responses to literature, literacy educators appear to be well positioned for developing such relationships and engaging in such border spanning.

Our data further revealed the complexity of the relationships teachers form with youth and suggested that we must be extremely cautious not to assume that we know more about students than is accurate or with which they are comfortable. Illustrating this idea and practice, Alycia reflected on a photograph of a basketball floating in a large puddle in an alley:

"Clogged"

> This picture makes me think of all the struggles that get in the way of me succeeding. For example…I had a Catholic schoolteacher for sixth grade who blamed me when she lost her baby. How can you tell a sixth grade student that it's their fault for having a miscarriage? The drain is clogged and that could be representative of all the stuff that holds me down but the basketball is there to remind me that I still need to get up and do what I need to do in order to succeed.
>
> —Alycia

When she produced the paragraph above, Alycia was in sophomore English, and she often distracted the class with what we thought was a teenage sense of drama or ill-timed humor. But it turned out that behind these behaviors was a young woman who had experienced a great deal of pain at the hands of the men in her life. We discovered not just *her* difficult experiences but also numerous other examples of complicated—and even inappropriate—relationships between youth and English teachers.

Even in cases where adolescents' teachers were from the same communities as their students, too often adults developed what appeared to be too great a familiarity with young people. Cultural *familiarity* is not tantamount to the ability to engage students in our literacy classes or school in general. Again, we must be extremely cautious with what we *think* we know about youth and the types of relationships we develop with them.

Fortunately, we encountered numerous examples of the potentially positive effects of these more complex and fluid relationships. Many students' images and writings echoed the idea represented in Sam's reflection above—that such relationships are best developed through our interactions with students in settings *beyond* our classrooms. As well, our analyses of youths' visual and written work—perhaps best represented by Marcus' image and reflection below—suggest that it was the intensely personal nature of these multimodal inquiries that allowed adolescents to share insights into the nature of their associations with teachers who are simultaneously tenacious and forgiving:

"Leader"

> This is a picture of my brother and he taught me everything I need to know about school and life…. [W]hen it comes down to school and my books, he stays on me and teaches me to do the same for my younger brother…. [H]e's the only person that's really been there for me…. I think kids need role models because they need someone to set the standard on what they could be doing. My brother sets the standard by providing for his girlfriend, my mom, my little brother and me.
>
> —Marcus

Marcus was peripherally engaged in our 10th grade English class. He was like so many of the African American young men in our classes: we were able to build a very positive rapport with him, but his academic performance remained maddeningly inconsistent. Marcus was also initially an erratic participant in this project, but his stance shifted dramatically one day, when a volunteer pre-service teacher sat with him and reviewed a pool of images including the one above.

Marcus drafted the accompanying paragraph almost verbatim on that day, and he offered us clear insight into the nature and importance of role models in our students' lives—our second findings theme, which we discuss in more detail below. But it was the *means* through which Marcus came to craft what was one of his most substantial pieces of writing that is important to this "relationships" element of cultural relevance. Marcus chose this image only after Kristien, Jim, and Ethan—the future teacher assigned as his

project mentor—showed persistent interest in his pictures and engaged Marcus in lengthy conversations about each one.

We recall watching Marcus's investment in the project and his writing grow almost minute by minute on that day, through our sincere curiosity in his photographic work and the stories behind them. Via our facilitation of the photographic elicitation process and the writing conferences that followed, Marcus became increasingly open to the literacy tasks we were presenting. It is this persistence and "daily forgiveness" in the face of resistance that we now count as another core element of the relationships that English teachers should build with young adults as a part of their culturally relevant literacy practices.

Other youths' images and writings and our interactions with these young people revealed additional examples and elements of these persistence and "daily forgiveness" qualities. Many of our students were passively, if effectively, evasive both in terms of their literacy tasks and their trust of us as adults. Engaging them with our literacy activities required a different form of relationship perseverance and amnesty—making it evident that we had to keep reaching out to students, rather than only doggedly redirecting them. For example, we came to appreciate the all-important, everyday literacy activity of simply greeting youth—who had been reluctant and even resistant participants in our classes for days, weeks, and even months on end—when they entered our classrooms each next day. While young people rarely stated that our tenacity was the determining factor in their decision to eventually engage with our literacy tasks, the sheer quantity and quality of the work they produced suggests that this resolve and the notion of daily forgiveness should be core elements of a culturally relevant literacy pedagogy.

Role Models in Literacy Settings

"My Adopted Inspiration"

> There is a program in [our city] called "Big Brothers and Big Sisters"…. The "bigs"…are meant to serve as mentors, like a big brother or big sister type…. I was paired with Jodi as my third and best match. Jodi is a big inspiration in my life…. She sets a good example for me, which helps me carry on my success in school. She has completely surpassed her duty as

a “big sister”…. She’s always there for me.

—Kayla

Kayla was a spitfire of an individual—easily one of the most demanding of the students we have encountered as teachers. She was a junior when we met her, and she was on an absolute mission to succeed in our English class, in school, and in life, even though she had few models to look to for examples of how to attain this achievement. While her quote above and this section concentrate on the nature of culturally relevant role models, it was also Kayla’s bond with Kristien and Jim that reinforced the significance of youths’ relationships with teachers as one of the primary elements of culturally relevant literacy practices. Kayla and the young adults in our project repeatedly called on us to allow for broader notions of exemplars and mentors who support young adults in our classes and beyond. Culturally relevant pedagogies and curricula might be defined by the literacy-oriented processes of *asking* youth about these role models, allowing them to identify these mentors and exemplars and engaging with them to develop role model structures inside and outside our classrooms.

While we as teachers may not be conscious of the complexity of these mentoring activities and mentors’ roles in students’ lives, these peers, friends, and family and community members are often aware of the convoluted nature of the positions they occupy. This awareness appears to make these individuals more efficient and effective leaders, as they have too often known mostly failure in our literacy classes and schools but they appreciate the obligation they have to persuade the young people whose lives they impact not to follow this course. Again, our literacy processes might be the best means through which youth and teachers can identify the often negative assumptions made about who might serve as the most effective role models.

Of course, adolescents’ adult family members perform crucial roles in guiding them toward connections to our literacy courses and school, modeling and discussing a range of experiences with and perspectives on classes and curricula. The evidence of this study revealed two significant risks of literacy educators’—and all teachers’—perhaps very logical but ultimately short-sighted conjectures about these role models. The first danger is that literacy educators will merely be incorrect about who these role models are, wrongly identifying to whom they should be looking for support for their literacy instruction efforts. Secondly, literacy education professionals may underestimate the effect of these role models on young adults’ perspectives on literacy activities. As a result, we might fail to engage these exemplars with activities that can support our instruction, such as inviting friends and family and community members into our classes to share their own school and English class experiences.

Our students’ images and writings suggested that teachers moving beyond assumptions about *who* might serve as role models is not enough to support youth in school and our literacy classes. We must also help young people explicitly identify and perhaps even serve in our classes as part of this expanded range of mentors. The visual and written data of our project offered numerous instances of participants identifying these unexpected role models. Accompanying an image of her “stepfather” standing by a staircase in their home, Neena’s reflection spoke to such an unanticipated

example:

"My Dad"

> I took pictures of my stepfather because he helps me out so much. He supports me with everything that I do…. He pushes me so much and tells me I could do better. He motivates me a lot, as does the rest of the family. Overall I took lots of pictures of my family because they support and help me so much. They motivate me a lot. I have a wonderful family.
>
> —Neena

What was most unusual about Neena's story—paralleling many of the reflections that we encountered in other data—was that the role model on which she counted most was her "stepfather," who was, in fact, just her mother's ex-husband, who had never adopted Neena and had no legal role in her life. Yet she lived with him during high school and he was unfailingly supportive of her school endeavors, including the writing pursuits and photography activities in which we engaged her.

These young people recognized role model lessons not only in their immediate families, but also in the often-difficult worlds they navigated every day. Time and again the data and processes of our project revealed how our students need opportunities to articulate, depict, and describe how they are also serving as role models for their peers—in life, in school, and in our classes. Among the numerous photo/reflection combinations addressing this theme was Bryon's below, in which he used an image of a moving company franchise to depict both the challenges he faced with his family's transience and his mature perspective on high school:

"Moving"

> When I moved is when I started going to high school. Getting to school resulted in a problem of being late and missing out on new things to learn…. School and life is like a jungle where when you are moved from one place to another you must adapt and you experience something new each and every time. The good thing about moving is that you…get to experience what you never have experienced before. Moving is all about growing up and maturing using all of what you have learned in school.
>
> —Bryon

Our diverse adolescents need opportunities to make sense of these problematic realities and articulate the challenging and positive lessons of these experiences. Again, our literacy-related activities may provide some of the best opportunities for such reflection, given their focus on writing and reading.

Finally, perhaps the most intriguing example of both the importance of allowing youth to identify these potential role models for us—their teachers—and for themselves arose as a result of our writing conference conversations with Bryon. Bryon described how a natural part of school might be young adults formally serving as mentors for their peers and even adult family members—people who, in many cases, were transitioning from one school or home to another. Bryon's suggestion was that our literacy class structures might support programs that engage adolescents and their families in mentoring activities that explicitly serve *both* city students and the adults in their lives.

Discussion, Implications, and Conclusion

Our analyses of youths' images and reflections and our interactions with young people have revealed that the concept of literacy-related cultural relevance with which educators operate—in the United States and beyond—might become more complicated. While scholars have identified the impact CRP can have on youths' perceptions of and engagement with school, the deep connections between theory and practice remain limited to traditional representations of how school curricula are imparted (Esposito & Swain, 2009). Yet, as we have described in this article, literacy education settings provide exceptional opportunities for introducing alternative notions of relationships and roles models into our pedagogies, and literacy educators have a primary responsibility for enacting an expanded notion of cultural relevance.

The findings we have shared here both support and extend the conclusions other scholars have discovered. In particular, educators' efforts to enhance and rely on their relationships with youth have been proven to be particularly effective at improving the school climate and reducing instances of anti-social behavior, particularly amongst increasingly diverse student populations in U.S. schools (Nation, Vieno, Perkins, & Santinello, 2008; Ozer, Wolf, & Kong, 2008). But few of these studies have considered the content-specific settings in which these still untraditional relationships are developed. Recent studies of U.S. schools have illustrated the positive impacts of these connections, particularly in schools with increasing percentages of adolescents who are

unfamiliar with the cultures of these schools (Green et al., 2008; Jimenez & Rose, 2010). Literacy educators might consider these more complex, fluid, and persistent relationship-building efforts to allow our content to matter to students (Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2010; Suárez-Orozco, Pimentel, & Martin, 2009*).*

The results of our examination likewise echo and expand upon recent reports that have detailed the importance of role models for our diverse youth. Numerous reports of culturally relevant curricula emphasize the enhanced functions that peers and family and community members play as role models for diverse youth, particularly with regard to their relationships to school (Jackson, Johnson, & Askia, 2010; Somers, Owens, & Piliawsky, 2009). Research has also documented the importance of peer networks for supporting constructive classroom interactions (Faircloth & Hamm, 2011; Rhodes, 2002), but many definitions of cultural relevance typically consider only structures such as peer editing processes (Graham & Perin, 2007). Inviting youth to illustrate and describe the ways in which these exemplars impact students' relationships to school moves us beyond these narrow notions of cultural relevance, while calling on youth to use both traditional literacy skills and contemporary texts in the act of naming these alternative role models (Kellett, 2009).

In addition, the findings of our study suggest three types of implications for literacy educators; these are related to the principles of cultural relevance with which we operate, the curricular content of our literacy education efforts, and the pedagogies on which we might rely. The core principles of a culturally relevant literacy practice indicate that we might challenge the very assumptions of just who the constituents of our schools are. Guided by a culturally relevant literacy orientation, schools and teachers might explicitly focus on serving not just youths but also their families and communities.

Our curricular content might also better highlight and incorporate the types of knowledge our increasingly diverse students bring to our classrooms. This idea echoes Banks' (1996) seminal work on the personal/cultural knowledge that our students "derive from personal experiences in their homes, families, and community cultures" (p. 6). While photovoice and visually-based methods offer one way to access and integrate this knowledge, both more traditional and more contemporary tools might be similarly effective. As well, teachers must actively work to build relationships with students and develop connections with young people that honor this knowledge—in the ways that multimodal inquiries uniquely allow. Such instructional strategies give teachers the space to develop foundational relationships with diverse youth that serve them well in our literacy—and likely *all*—classes.

These notions of cultural relevance and examples of culturally relevant literacy will require shifts in the very structures and schedules of our literacy classrooms and schools. Diverse youths and families simply do not operate—and their knowledge often cannot be honored—in a standard school day. Additionally, teachers might work in a more "elementary" (as in elementary school) fashion—across subjects, with fewer youth during the school day—if they are to build the relationships that are foundational to adolescents' school and literacy achievement.

The best informants for a new and evolving definition of cultural relevance may be our culturally diverse students themselves (Mitra, 2007). Providing adolescents with

the opportunity to see themselves and their cultures as “essential ingredients” (Journell & Castro, 2011, p. 17) of their learning manifests in a fundamental notion of living in a participatory democracy—a secure sense of agency around the processes which affect their lives. While the concept of cultural relevance often remains ill-defined, we are more resistant than ever to offering a single definition of this notion as it relates to literacy education.

Finally, we have realized that culturally relevant activities enter our literacy classrooms through the proverbial back door, rather than through our explicit concentration on supposedly pertinent strategies. If cultural relevance is to become a central tenet of literacy teachers’ pedagogies, then seeing and showing through relevant processes of reflection might become part of our everyday classroom realities. Perhaps the search for models of relevance does not *lead* to the best example of cultural relevance but is, in fact, *the* model of such relevance. Definitions of culturally relevant literacy may not be as important as the *process* of engaging young people in such considerations.

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