

Pursuing



EQUITY

Through Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

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The demographic profile of Conard High School in West Hartford, CT, reflects the national trends in “first-ring suburbs.” Neither fully urban nor fully suburban, first-ring suburbs went from being generally less diverse than the nation in 1980 to more diverse by 2000 (Puentes, 2006). Conard students speak 53 different languages at home, a quarter of them are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, and 40% are racially and ethnically diverse. A trend that is less common, however, is that despite the growing diversity, rates of AP courses for all students in grades 11 and 12 are going up.

In 2000, nearly half of all Conard graduates had taken at least one AP course. Over the course of a decade, the numbers steadily climbed, and by 2011, the figure had reached 78%, including students who were racially and ethnically diverse. Despite the growth, Principal Peter Cummings is not satisfied. His goal is to increase the number of students

Having 78% of students taking AP courses is impressive, but one principal is focusing on how to reach the 22% who aren't.

who achieve at least a 3 on their AP exams and to increase participation among identified subgroups that are currently underrepresented in the 78% who are currently taking AP courses, such as Black female and Hispanic male students. “Our focus is on the 22 percent [of students] we did not reach,” he explained. Although AP participation is but one measure of the school’s performance, it has galvanized Cummings’ efforts to push for greater academic equity.

Partners in Equity

To help him and his staff develop a plan for action, Cummings sought out a partnership with the State Education Resource Center (SERC), which has been providing professional development, resources, and

technical assistance to educators, families, and community members throughout Connecticut since 1969. SERC has a particular focus on equity, and its many initiatives emphasize how race and culture intersect with educational achievement, special education, and student outcomes.

After an initial collaboration between SERC and a Conard history teacher, Cummings became aware of SERC’s expertise in culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP), an instructional approach that focuses on creating an educational environment that is culturally relevant and respectful. “We asked SERC to help us examine the structures, processes, procedures, and pieces of school culture that are getting in the way of that 22 percent,” said Cummings, “and CRP was a natural place to begin, given our focus on giving students ownership of their own learning.”

On the basis of the work of researchers and practitioners in the field, SERC (2009) has



developed a working definition for a culturally relevant and respectful environment as having the following elements:

1. Teachers who are highly aware of their own beliefs, attitudes, and biases—and those of others
2. Students who are empowered to use their own cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives for academic success
3. A curriculum that engages and affirms students' and teachers' identities, worldviews, and cultural and experiential reference points in the process of learning.

In its work with schools, SERC stresses that a culturally and racially relevant approach enables educators to relate to students and allows students to connect to the curriculum and demonstrate their knowledge in meaningful ways. “To do this work well,” says Cummings, “teachers have to become aware of the lenses they use while carrying out their practice [and] the lenses that their students use, and then figure out a way to meet in the middle.”

Developing Teacher Awareness

According to Joy Wright, one of Conard's three assistant principals, teachers value the diversity in the building, in the district, and in the city at large. “However, we're trying to move beyond appreciating diversity to start asking how we can integrate diverse perspectives and experiences into our instructional practice,” said Wright.

In its professional development for Conard, SERC gives the teachers opportunities to reflect on how their everyday experiences differ, sometimes radically, from those of the students who are in their classrooms. Although those differences are not based solely

on race, the topic of racial and ethnic identity surfaces frequently as teachers explore beliefs and attitudes they may not have ever had a chance to articulate to themselves and others.

The school administrators have been deliberate in creating a climate that supports this type of reflection. Wright, who is Black, notes that conversations about race are difficult to begin, much less sustain. Yet those conversations are essential if teachers are to transform their practice in a meaningful way. “I would love to see our school become so comfortable discussing CRP that if someone brings up race, people in the room don't immediately get defensive and wonder if that person is accusing them of being racist,” she said.

Further, race is not the only factor to consider in CRP. “I could work in a predominantly Black environment and still not be culturally relevant to the kids sitting right in front of me,” said Wright. “But as I get to know who they are, I will realize that maybe I need to listen to certain music or watch some television shows to make sure my instructional practices engage students in a format that is familiar to them.”

In 2007, Tracey Wilson, a teacher at Conard since 1979, recognized the need to adapt both her practice and her curriculum to the changing demographics of her classroom. While looking at student achievement data from a history course she was teaching at the time, Wilson noticed that nearly half of the Black male students in the class had Ds and Fs. “I believe history can be empowering and engaging, but clearly this course was not doing that for all my students,” Wilson said. She developed a new course, *US History Through the African American Experience*, in an effort to bridge the

gap between academic content and the cultural capital that students bring with them to school.

Enrollment in the course has increased through the years and approximately half of her current students are Black or Latino. Wilson explains that at the start of the course, some students are confused about how a White teacher is going to help them understand the experiences of Black people in the United States. “What they don't get at first,” she said, “is that their role in understanding those experiences is as important as mine, if not more so.”

Tapping Students' Cultural Capital

Each year, Wilson's first assignment for students is to write a history of themselves as learners. Those essays help her understand how to engage students effectively with the course content. Yet during the first years she taught the course, the essays provided little besides information about schools that students had previously attended. “What I wanted were insights into who my students were,” she said, “but the essays I got showed me that students had not necessarily thought about how they got to be who they are.” To move beyond the surface information, Wilson enlisted the help of SERC consultants, who offer youth workshops that promote greater self-awareness and build advocacy skills.

SERC ran a six-hour workshop with approximately 60 Conard students, including those in Wilson's class. “The turning point in the day happens when we put ourselves out there, and we tell the kids our own life stories,” said Nicole Vitale, one of the SERC workshop leaders. The facilitators deliberately select anecdotes that illustrate how aspects of race and culture affected key decisions they

made. Afterwards, they ask students to reflect on the following questions: How do you view yourself? and How does society view you? “Then they have to grapple with the inconsistencies between those two views, and the fact that society’s view of us can significantly impact our individual choices,” explained Vitale. Those questions are entry points into a daylong exploration of the multiple facets of a person’s identity.

After the workshop, Wilson says, students’ autobiographies are a lot more reflective. The essays create a foundation for the rest of the year, as students learn the course content by thinking critically about such questions as, Why did slavery last so long?, and engaging in formal and informal debates.

Students especially enjoy the formal debates. Two of Wilson’s Black male students remarked that they appreciate her openness to multiple perspectives about history. “You know where she stands on an issue because she’s straightforward,” said one of the students, “but she also respects and listens to our views”—even if they are different from hers.

Toward an Inclusive Curriculum

As Cummings and his staff members collaborate with SERC to hone the school’s equity-focused approach, student voice is playing a central role. SERC facilitators are working with youth again this year, extending the work they began with Wilson’s students. Cummings has asked SERC to train a small, representative group of students to carry out a project that will inform future activities. “We will use a student-driven, inquiry-based approach to guide students through this process,” said Vitale. Students will formulate research questions to help them catalog and describe equitable

practices at Conard. They will also develop instruments, gather data, analyze their findings, and draft recommendations for the administrators.

“We’re pushing through a plateau right now,” explained Cummings, referring to the school’s efforts to increase AP participation among targeted subgroups and increase the percentage of seniors earning at least one 3 on an AP exam. Strategies include one-on-one meetings between all students and guidance counselors, intensive parent outreach, carefully redesigned course pathways, and AP boot camps for first-time AP students.

The focus now is on examining instructional practices. “We are going to look at classroom-level practices,” said Cummings. “To get to the next level, we need new voices to tell us what we are not seeing,” he said, and those voices must include those of the students.

When discussing the challenges of weaving CRP into the fabric of the school, Wright noted that science, technology, English, and math teachers may have difficulty getting started. On the surface, English and social studies curricula could appear to lend themselves more easily to incorporating student experiences and viewpoints. But what does it look like to practice CRP in, say, math?

“It does not mean that we all need to make up rap songs,” said Wright, or that equity-themed posters cover the walls of a room. Instead, she advises teachers to find authentic ways to connect to students in the course of a regular lesson. To make these authentic connections, said Vitale, teachers have to take time to understand who their students are: “Something as simple as asking students how they could use what they are learning in their daily life could go a long way.” Given the reciprocal nature of CRP, students should also have opportuni-

ties to understand something meaningful about the teacher’s experiences or those of recognizable community members.

Beyond Add-ons

If a school is planning to invest its professional development resources in CRP, Cummings advises that administrators ensure that the provider’s activities are grounded in research about how adults learn, how teachers improve their craft, and how systems change. “We are not interested in CRP as an add-on; we want it to become the norm of how we do instruction,” he said.

With this long view, he and SERC consultants have mapped out a plan that includes measuring the impact of the professional development on teachers, students, and parents. Cummings does not expect overnight change, but he believes that with “a proven strategy to pursue, multiple measures to track our progress, and a solid partner, we will eventually get the results we seek.” **PL**

REFERENCES

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Author’s notes: Quotes from Peter Cummings and Joy Wright were taken from interviews on December 11, 2012. Quotes from Tracey Wilson were taken from a panel presentation she made on December 14, 2012. Quotes from Nicole Vitale were taken from an interview on December 27, 2012.

SERC’s framework for equity in education can be found online at www.ctserc.org/equity.