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Article in *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport* · March 2011

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Culturally Relevant Physical Education in Urban Schools: Reflecting Cultural Knowledge

Sara B. Flory and Nate McCaughtry

Using a three-part theoretical framework, the cultural relevance cycle—which consists of (a) knowing community dynamics, (b) knowing how community dynamics influence educational processes, and (c) implementing strategies that reflect cultural knowledge of the community—we examined teachers' and students' perspectives on culturally relevant physical education in urban settings. We observed and interviewed 53 physical education teachers and 183 students in urban districts over 4 years. We identified themes of care, respect, language and communication, and curricular content that explained how these teachers enacted the cultural relevance cycle. Within these themes, teachers and students specified global and discipline-specific components of care, the flattening of social hierarchies among students and between students and teachers, accommodation of English as a second language and urban communication, and relevant curricular content as necessary for achieving cultural relevance. Enacting the cycle of cultural relevance resulted in respectful learning environments in which students were highly engaged; however, very few teachers enacted all three steps of the cycle.

Key words: cultural relevance, language, middle school physical education, respect

Research points to increasing diversity in the United States, especially among school-age children (Barnes, 2006; Lenski, Crawford, Crumpler & Stallworth, 2005). Villegas and Lucas (2002) noted that one in three students in the United States is a racial or ethnic minority and more than one third of all students have limited English proficiency. Because individuals interpret the world through a cultural lens (Geertz, 1973; Giroux, 1992), and these beliefs, values, and attitudes influence how environments and institutions are construed, preparing teachers who can account for diversity and culture in pedagogy is becoming increasingly important (National Association for Sport and Physical Education [NASPE], 2009). While race significantly influences cultural viewpoints, we

believe culture encompasses much more than race. We define culture as local to the social situation, including socioeconomic status, language, family structure, violence and crime, personal and public safety, immigration issues, race, ethnicity, and religion (Barrett & Noguera, 2008; Foster, 1995; Graybill, 1997; Irvine, 2003; Lenski et al., 2005; Monroe, 2005a, 2005b).

Several frameworks explain the role of culture in institutions like education, including cultural discontinuity and synchronization (Irvine, 2003), cultural congruence (Lee, 2003), cultural competence and cultural proficiency (Cross, Bazron, Dennis & Isaacs, 1989), multiculturalism (Banks, 1993), cultural responsiveness (Gay, 2000), and cultural relevance (Ladson-Billings, 1995). While the minutiae of these frameworks vary, three core needs are common: (a) to have sophisticated knowledge of community dynamics, (b) to know how community dynamics influence educational processes, and (c) to devise and implement strategies reflecting cultural knowledge of the community (see Figure 1). The fulfillment of these needs we call the “cultural relevance cycle.”

Culturally relevant teaching requires teachers to connect with students, but also involves understanding specific community dynamics. Teachers' knowledge of community dynamics includes things like whom students live with (family structures); ethnic, linguistic, and socio-

Submitted: March 2, 2009

Accepted: September 28, 2009

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economic backgrounds; levels of violence, crime, and/or gang activity; religions commonly practiced; immigration issues; and historical events leading to current events and practices. For example, knowing that vacant businesses characterize a neighborhood is not enough; knowing why those businesses shut down gives teachers broader community insights. Villegas and Lucas (2002) claimed, "If teaching involves assisting students to build bridges between their preexisting knowledge and new material, then teachers must know not only the subject matter they teach but also their students" (p. 26).

Second, teachers need to know how community dynamics influence educational processes. This may include the amount of parental support students receive with homework due to family structures, religious observances and practices that interfere with extracurricular activities, methods used to communicate with parents because of language diversity, additional student responsibilities interfering with schoolwork, and traumatic life events (i.e., death of a relative, crimes committed near a student's home) affecting students' ability to concentrate in school. Monroe (2005a) called for "knowing pupils' personalities, interests, values and inclinations; and acknowledging the multiple roles that youths play beyond their lives as students. Such layered interactions contribute to sound student-teacher relationships" (p. 157).

Finally, to provide culturally relevant instruction, teachers need to implement strategies reflecting their cultural knowledge. For example, to accommodate students with little supervision after school, teachers might provide ample class time to complete assignments requiring additional resources. Offering "extracurricular" clubs and activities during lunch periods may accommodate students who attend religious services after school. Translating materials into parents' native languages, or having bilingual students or paraprofessionals available for parent meetings could improve school experiences for those who speak English as a second language.

Cultural distance is the discrepancy between world-views, values, and backgrounds that shape individuals' and groups' explanations for how the world operates. Unfortunately, vast cultural distance separates school culture and teachers' backgrounds, on the one hand, from students and families in urban communities, on the other. Most teachers are predominantly White, middle class women from nonurban backgrounds, who view teaching from Eurocentric vantage points. Conversely, urban citizens are largely low to lower middle class minorities who live within a complex urban matrix (Freeman, Brookhart & Loadman, 1999; Stoddart, 1993; Ware, 2006). In short, urban teachers mostly teach students of different ethnic, cultural, economic, and geographic backgrounds than their own, for almost 80% of urban students are African American, Hispanic, or Asian American (Freeman et al., 1999; Snipes, Horwitz, Soga & Casserly, 2008). Discrepan-

cies between teachers' and students' cultural lenses can lead to misunderstandings as school norms created and reinforced by teachers are interpreted by students and families. Monroe (2005a) cited these misunderstandings as "fertile ground for school failure" (p. 158). Urban students face distinctly different cultures at school and home. Graybill (1997) noted, "When teachers face conflict in cultural values, they often react by rigidly adhering to their own set of values: thus, inadvertently, their behavior can interfere with the learning of their students" (p. 312).

Cultural distance can be overcome with strategies reflecting teachers' cultural knowledge (Bondy, Ross, Gallingane & Hambacher, 2007; Brown, 2004; Cochran-Smith, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Successful teachers involve themselves in the communities where they teach; understand historical, political, and economic factors affecting their communities; and view students as family (Gay, 2000; Ware, 2006). Foster (1995) and Irvine (2003) identified teachers aligning their practice with students' home cultures to bridge divides between school and home. Many scholars advocate for instruction that builds on students' lives, rather than expecting them to learn in unfamiliar ways. Cochran-Smith (1995) suggested that teachers "explore and reconsider their own assumptions, understand the values and practices of families and cultures that are different from their own, and construct pedagogy that takes these into account in locally appropriate and culturally sensitive ways" (p. 495). Ladson-Billings (1995) and Gay (2000) claimed that culturally relevant teaching allowed students to achieve *through* culture, instead of forcing them to fit rigid demands of a prescribed curriculum. Ladson-Billings (1995) described a teacher who, rather than using outdated lessons, taught poetry through rap lyrics. Villegas and Lucas (2002) claimed that teachers who bridged cultural distance used "knowledge about students' lives to design instruction that builds on

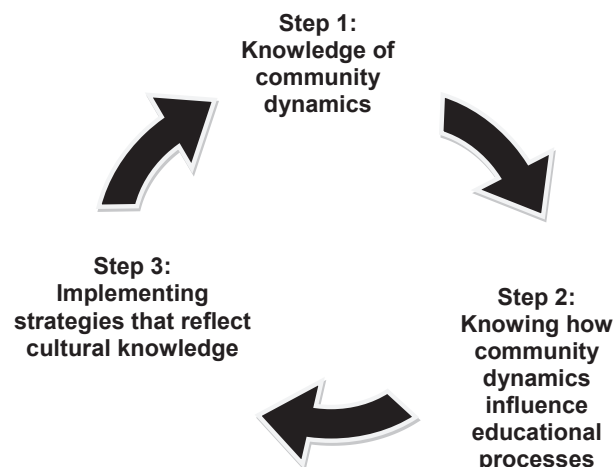


Figure 1. The cycle of cultural relevance.

what they already know while stretching them beyond the familiar” (p. 21). Finally, Monroe (2005a) claimed that “creating a culturally responsive classroom requires expanding instructional materials to connect with students through written, oral, aural, and artistic forms... developing academic assignments and routines that employ student strengths as starting points for learning and continued growth” (p. 154).

Much literature documents the shortcomings of trying to “do” cultural relevance in curricular interventions, one-shot workshops, and surface-level adjustments (Cochran-Smith, 1995; Monroe, 2005b). Instead, cultural relevance is an ongoing process, or cycle, in which the teacher considers community dynamics, how community dynamics influence education, and implementing teaching strategies that reflect cultural knowledge. Villegas and Lucas (2002) stated, “Teachers need to continuously adjust their plans of action to meet students’ needs while simultaneously building on their strengths. Clearly, teaching cannot be reduced to a rigid prescription that, if faithfully followed, automatically results in student learning” (p. 25).

Despite examples of cultural relevance in general education, few authors have examined it in physical education. From a practitioner perspective, some argue and provide suggestions for creating equitable practices in physical education related to gender, sexuality, race, and social class issues (Butt & Pahnos, 1995; McCaughtry, Dillon, Jones & Smigell, 2005; Sparks, 1994; Williamson, 1993), while others address unintentional forms of racism in physical education (King, 1994). Little research exists on culturally relevant physical education (CRPE). Stanley (1997) found that multicultural education courses did not improve preservice teachers’ culturally sensitive teaching practices. McCaughtry, Barnard, Martin, Shen, and Kulinna (2006) described the challenges that teachers face when trying to provide culturally relevant urban physical education curriculum, including local relevance of physical activities, diverse language and representations in curriculum, and communication with students who may have little proficiency in English. Finally, Ennis’s (1998) strategies for creating meaningful school experiences for urban teachers and students included shared expectations, trust, second chances, and student ownership.

While these studies identified important complexities in urban education, we were specifically interested in examining urban physical education using cultural relevance as a theoretical framework to help expand the literature base. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to understand teachers’ and students’ perspectives on CRPE in diverse urban settings. In particular, we wanted to identify (a) how teachers understood community dynamics, (b) how community dynamics influenced education according to teachers and students, and (c) the ways in which teachers and students believed that teachers reflected cultural knowledge.

Method

To understand teachers’ and students’ perspectives on CRPE, we immersed ourselves in urban schools after receiving approval from the university institutional review board and school district, and informed consent from teachers, students, and parents. Guided by interpretive, qualitative methodologies (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999), we conducted fieldwork in five Midwestern urban districts characterized by low socioeconomic status (51–92% of students received free or discounted lunches), high crime rates, and large minority populations (49–99% African American and other minority students).

Participants

We studied 53 physical education teachers (28 men and 25 women) of various backgrounds and experiences over 4 years. Fifty-three percent of participants were African American, 43% Caucasian, and 4% identified as “Other.” Teachers had between 1 and 37 years of experience ($M = 18.54$ years) and were 29–61 years old during the study. We also studied 183 students in sixth through eighth grades.

Data Collection

Data collection consisted of teacher and student interviews, lesson observations, document analysis, and informal conversations with teachers during school visits. We privately interviewed and audiorecorded each teacher between one and three times ($N = 121$) using interview guides with probes for approximately 60 min. In Year 1, we conducted two interviews with 27 teachers ($n = 54$). In Year 2, we conducted one interview with 8 Year 1 teachers and 13 additional teachers ($n = 21$). In Year 3, we conducted two interviews each with 3 additional Year 1 teachers, 2 Year 2 teachers, and 5 additional teachers ($n = 20$). Finally, in Year 4, we conducted two interviews each with 2 additional Year 1 teachers, 3 additional Year 2 teachers, and 8 additional teachers ($n = 26$).

We held 49 focus group interviews (2–6 students) with 183 students in sixth–eighth grades. Students were characterized by racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, ability, and participation diversities within schools and physical education classes. We conducted 22 mixed-sex, multiracial interviews, 11 single-sex interviews (4 boys, 7 girls), and 16 single-race interviews (4 Asian, 9 African American, and 3 Hispanic American) to attain various viewpoints. To ensure privacy and confidentiality, we conducted interviews in private locations and asked students to use pseudonyms. Focus group interviews lasted 30 min, and they were audiorecorded.

Interviews and conversations with teachers and students focused on all three components of our theoretical

framework. Example questions included the following: What cultural issues have proven most important to know about your students/to have your teachers know about you in order to teach/learn well? How do the perspectives and experiences of your students/teacher differ from your own, and how do they affect your teaching/learning? What modifications do you/does your teacher make to your/his or her teaching to connect with students' perspectives and experiences?

During each fieldwork session, we observed at least two physical education lessons (total class observations = 278), concentrating on students' general dispositions and participation, teachers' behaviors, and other noteworthy events. Observations provided insights about how teachers and students "did" physical education in urban schools, and we included particular events in interviews. For example, a female student wearing a scarf prompted a question about how this affected her participation. Last, teachers voluntarily provided documents, including course descriptions, syllabi, behavior contracts, parent letters, lesson plans, homework assignments, handouts, and assessments.

Data Analysis

Each day after leaving the research setting, we reviewed and analyzed the data we had collected using constant comparison and inductive analysis (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999). First, we transcribed all recorded interviews and written fieldnotes. Next, we coded the data. Any piece of data (observation, document, or excerpt from an interview) that reflected one aspect of the cultural relevance cycle was coded with a short description of its content and how it applied to the cycle. Then, we used these codes to plan for our next round of data collection (e.g., constructing interview guides and observation protocols) with that teacher and his or her students. About halfway through the study, we conducted a cross-teacher/student analysis, looking for instances of data regarding aspects of the theoretical framework that consisted of similar topics across most of the teacher and student participants. For example, as explained in the first theme in the findings section, this cross-teacher/student analysis revealed that most teachers and students discussed notions of care as it related to community factors, implications in schools, and influences on teachers' pedagogies. Once we identified this theme and built a wide explanation with ample data, we pursued it in more detail with the teachers and students to refine, refute, or expand their perspectives. We continued to ask teachers and students what was going on in their communities that made them feel that care was important, why teachers used care in their teaching, and the ways it was integrated into physical education classes. We pursued this topic in subsequent observations and interviews until we had a thorough understanding of whether

and how care played a part in the three components of the cultural relevance cycle. We eliminated topics with fewer codes, or ones that did not significantly exemplify all three components. Therefore, themes emerged because we had ample instances of data with similar codes across the majority of teachers and students related to the teachers' enactment of the cultural relevance cycle.

We used several trustworthiness principles to lend credibility to our interpretations, including prolonged engagement, persistent observation, informal and formal member checks, researcher journals, and peer debriefing (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Prolonged engagement enabled us to learn the culture of the setting and build trust with participants. Persistent observation allowed us to identify "normal" occurrences at each research site, determine relevant and irrelevant information, focus on research questions in more detail, and add depth to study descriptions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Informal member checks occurred by including concepts raised by developing interpretations in later interviews to determine whether teachers thought our interpretations were accurate. We conducted formal member checks with 10 teachers after the final data collection and analysis process. The researcher journal facilitated reflectivity and the questioning of potential biases as the study unfolded. Finally, we discussed findings, interpretations, concerns, and obstacles with an experienced peer debriefer who asked "searching questions" and provided alternative viewpoints to prevent researcher bias (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Results

We identified four themes exemplifying important ways in which teachers enacted the cultural relevance cycle in teaching urban physical education. These themes involved issues of care, respect, language and communication, and curricular content. We viewed the cultural relevance cycle as an ideal. While many teachers enacted parts of the cycle through particular themes, not every participant enacted each step of the cycle.

Care

The cultural relevance cycle began with caring for students. Most teachers felt their first priority was to make students feel cared for. Jonas said, "You have to open your heart to students, kids are the first to know when you don't care." Karen similarly shared that caring was a mainstay of her job, "You'll never last as a teacher if you don't care about kids!" Urban students also claimed that caring teachers were essential for surviving school. Diamond (seventh grade) shared, "Teachers *should* care, they don't know what students go through. School should be safe, but if teachers yell and tell you you're no good, it's like

you're back on the streets." We found that urban teachers established two distinct forms of care: *global* and *discipline-specific*. Urban teachers and students voiced the need to demonstrate both forms to create a fully caring classroom.

Global Care. Global care emerged as a sense of concern expressed for students' general well-being, happiness, and physical and emotional safety. Caring was especially important considering the unique challenges faced in urban schools. Teachers alluded to two community dynamics related to global care: family structure and rates of crime and violence. Several teachers claimed that many students came from single-parent households or were raised by extended-family members. Frank stated, "Most kids don't go home to two parents like they might in the suburbs. I could be their most stable contact." Teachers also cited high rates of crime and violence in school communities. In one neighborhood, six of eight houses across from the school were abandoned or burned, boarded up by the city, and "tagged" with local gang symbols.

These dynamics affected students' education in several ways. Because many students came from nonnuclear families, children spent long hours at school. Students who did not stay after school for care or other activities returned home to empty houses after school, creating a situation where supervision and strong relationships with significant adults were lacking. Jeanette shared, "A lot of my students are raising themselves, I'm not sure they know what it's like to be cared for. That's really sad." Some teachers felt that students tried to fill this void by forming relationships with teachers. Heather recognized this exceptional bond, "Students get really attached; you have to be careful not to let go. I'm the emergency contact for a student; she has no one else."

Teachers also shared that violence and crime lured many students to join gangs for protection and safety. This led to high absenteeism rates and tense interactions in halls and classes. Martin said, "I'm sure a lot of kids are in gangs, and I don't blame them. If no one's at home, they at least have someone looking out for them. That logic probably sounds twisted, but around here, it's about survival."

Teachers reflected cultural knowledge by demonstrating global care in several ways. Belinda relied on personal attention, "I'll pull kids aside and ask how their day is going. I could be the only person who does that." Joshua focused on positive feedback, "If they're doing a good job, I'll tell them. If you compliment them, it means a lot. They appreciate me taking interest." Some teachers used amorous nicknames like "sweetheart" and "baby," hugged or high-fived students, and stopped class if an injury occurred. During an observation, a sixth grader fell in Teresa's class while running. She asked the rest of the class to work on a fitness activity at the other end of the gym while she tended to the injured student. Later, she said, "Darrius wasn't bleeding, but I'll always console students. They appreciate the attention, they know I'll keep

them safe. It feels good to get a hug, doesn't it? I'm not certain that every one of my students gets that at home." Teachers also demonstrated global care outside of physical education. Deja (seventh grade) said, "[Mr. Turner will] sing out in the halls. It never sounds right, but it makes us have a better day." Eric said caring for students went beyond class time, "If something's going on, they find me, even during my prep. They just want someone to listen, usually there's no one at home that can."

Discipline-Specific Care. Teachers and students identified discipline-specific care, focused on mastery of content and academic success necessary for life. In addition to nontraditional family structures and high rates of community violence and crime, schools in these urban communities had dropout rates as high as 60%. However, these could not be confirmed because many students left school before reaching ninth grade.

Extraordinary dropout rates meant students approached education with much apathy. Jocelyn realized that grades did not motivate students. When 13 of 17 girls sat on the bleachers during a visit, she shared, "I told all those girls they're getting an E. They shrugged their shoulders or rolled their eyes. Grades don't mean much." Jeannette said that most of her students had aspirations involving fame and fortune, but not education, "So many of my kids want to be singers, rappers, and pro athletes. I never hear my kids saying they want to be doctors, lawyers, engineers, or even teachers." Sam shared that middle school graduation was a big event at his school. He said, "Parents go all out for eighth-grade graduation because it might be the last one they celebrate. They'll rent a limo, buy new outfits, even throw a party. A lot of them don't make it through high school."

Because students spent long hours without adult supervision and were regularly exposed to gang activity and violence, students solved in-school conflicts by verbally or physically assaulting one another. During several class observations, teachers had to prevent verbal exchanges from escalating. Rhonda shared, "I break things like that up almost every other day. I'm not sure my students know any other way to solve things."

Teachers addressed the complex dynamics their students faced with several strategies regarding discipline-specific care. We observed three of these strategies used to combat students' indifference. First, teachers connected content to students' future well-being, caring that students stayed healthy after leaving school. Shane said, "I relate knowledge back to their everyday life, what conditioning can do for them as adults." Suzanne's students developed a slogan as a cue for staying active: "I'll say, 'Motion is the Potion,' and they get moving!"

Second, teachers demonstrated discipline-specific care through passion and commitment to physical education. Donna's zeal spilled over in her classes: "I always say this isn't just 'gym!' Kids can use what they learn in

here right away. You can't do that in every class." Sam said, "What message do I send if I update attendance or do other work during class? I participate with them, and they take class seriously."

Finally, teachers demonstrated discipline-specific care by resisting "rolling out the ball" and planning active lessons. Lindsay (seventh grade) said, "Our old teacher always gave us free gym. But with Mrs. C., there's a plan every day!" Demonstrating discipline-specific care communicated expectations and encouraged students to work hard. Miranda's use of a dry erase board to list daily activities increased students' activity levels: "My students get right down to business, sharing my plan really helps."

Teachers and students said both discipline-specific and global care must be present. Angela identified this balancing act, sharing, "You have to show both sides of care with what and how you teach." Similarly, Joe said, "Students want to know you're on top of things, but that you care about them, too. If there's nothing behind your instruction, it's just demands." Destiny (eighth grade) said, "Last week my mom and I were arguing, but Ms. E. didn't force me to play. Mentally, I just couldn't work out, but she was okay with that."

The absence of either type of care left students questioning teachers' intentions. Teachers focused on discipline-specific care (neglecting global care) emphasized behavioral compliance. Maria (eighth grade) shared, "Mr. Z. gets mad if you don't participate. He treats you different if you sit out three times." Conversely, caring teachers who were less passionate about lessons or who allowed liberal free time seemed ineffective. Emanuel (seventh grade) said, "You can tell if they don't know how to teach. Basketball was cool, but we learn so much more with Mrs. G."

While global care resulted in better behaved and enthusiastic students, establishing global and discipline-specific care led to fewer managerial issues and more meaningful, trusting relationships between teachers and students. Frank claimed that "problem students" were never an issue: "When kids know you care about them and what they're doing, everything gels, it works. Teachers complain about 'problem' kids, but they don't act up for me. They've probably never expressed interest in them." Michelle shared, "Seeing both ends [of care] lets them open up and trust you. Kids don't have deep relationships with teachers in middle school, they spend 45 minutes a day together." Keyonte (seventh grade) explained the bond he had with his caring teacher, "He's cool. He'll check you for actin' up, but if I'm havin' problems, I go to him first."

Respect

Teachers and students claimed respect played a vital role in demonstrating teachers' understanding of community dynamics and their ability to reflect cultural knowl-

edge. We observed two forms of respect based on flattening social hierarchies (including social hierarchies among students and between students and teachers).

Reducing Social Hierarchies Among Students. Although social hierarchies among students exist in many school settings, in urban physical education they manifest through domination, where students with more status exercise power over others (based on skill, popularity, violence, etc.). Students and teachers cited several community dynamics that influenced these social hierarchies. First, since many residents lived in poverty-like conditions, students' only means of power came from respect and fear of their peers. Teresa shared, "It's tough out there for my students. It's really dog-eat-dog. I totally get why kids bicker and snap at one another. I don't like it, but it's their way of life." During several observations, we noticed students being silently bullied; students with more status threatened less powerful ones into giving up equipment, personal items (e.g., iPods, cell phones), or food when the teacher could not see. Many students sat out when domination and taunting was possible, claiming sickness or injury, or calling classmates "ballhogs."

Second, gang culture was prevalent in these schools, which allowed students to intimidate and disrespect peers without much consequence. Joe said, "One of my guys has pictures on his phone holding guns and cash. A lot of teachers won't discipline him, and other kids won't mess with him because they're afraid of what might happen."

Inequitable social hierarchies, exacerbated by hostile community dynamics, create very negative and uncomfortable learning environments. Martin said, "It's a big downfall, I can't have kids laughing at each other, especially if they're going to open up and be vulnerable." Jan felt that respect among students was more important in urban schools, "They see disrespect enough elsewhere. I want this space to be safe." Whitney (seventh grade) said, "If kids start stainin' [disrespecting] on one another, everyone stops to join in or listen. Our teacher has to stop them before we can play again."

Social hierarchies among students turned class activities into "win-at-all-costs" situations. During an observation, a floor hockey game escalated to an aggressive grudge match that the teacher abruptly ended before a fight started. Elsewhere, a game of elimination basketball caused visible frustration as higher-skilled students harassed those struggling to make shots. Serena (seventh grade) said, "There's so much pressure, everyone yells. If you miss, it's like you ruined the game."

Teachers implemented several strategies reflecting cultural understanding of social hierarchies. First, teachers outlined specific policies against "trash-talking" and put-downs. Rhonda said, "I don't allow remarks from the peanut gallery. That breaks things down." Greg shared, "I explain my expectations from the get-go, they know they

have to respect one another. We all improve if we respect one another.”

Second, teachers used in-class strategies to prevent disrespect and amplification of student hierarchies. Carlos allowed student captains one “draft pick,” but then assigned students equitably to prevent uneven teams. Madison (seventh grade) commented, “Everyone has to mix together and get along, especially for teams. Mr. Everett doesn’t let kids gang up on a side.” Amy kept close tabs on disrespectful behavior by participating in class activities. She said, “If I’m involved, I can pick up on situations that might get ugly.” Nick (eighth grade) felt that his teacher sensed disagreements: “Mr. K. will stop things before they even happen. He’ll pull kids out in the hall if they’re goin’ at it.” Jeanette used teachable moments to discuss respect with students. She said, “I really stress ‘community.’ I don’t want them to be against someone. That’s different than outside school, where there’s a pecking order.”

Finally, some teachers avoided competitive activities altogether. Frank concentrated on skill development and had students peer-teach one another at stations. He mentioned, “I rarely do full-sided games or tournaments. It turns into who can out-showboat who.” Heather also adjusted her content: “My students would insult each other and argue during games—but fitness activities are about improvement, not getting more reps than others. Now they encourage one another!” To overcome students’ aggression, teachers wove social and interpersonal skills into the curricula. Several teachers used behavior contracts in their course outlines distributed at the beginning of the semester. Some teachers included whole units regarding social skills. Greg shared, “I always teach a conflict resolution unit—I’m convinced some students never consider working things out rather than fighting. I can’t expect them to know things they’ve never been *taught*.” Frank taught social skills informally during lessons. He said, “I remind kids to shake hands after games, or have someone compliment a teammate. I try to stress sportsmanship and compassion—I have a better chance of getting those skills across than most teachers.”

Flattening Social Hierarchies Between Teachers and Students.

Most teachers knew students viewed social hierarchies between teachers and students negatively, but community dynamics intensified these negative effects. Most schools were situated in neighborhoods populated exclusively by poor, minority residents. Historically, minorities and the poor are the most oppressed populations in the United States, and this history affected residents’ outlook toward majority cultures and mainstream education. Logan said, “Students enter my class and have assumptions about me as a teacher because I’m White. I don’t think students trust me or think we have anything in common.”

Based on historical trends of minority oppression and disbelief in public education, students were hesitant to respect teachers, regardless of race. Carrie said, “We

don’t get instant respect anymore, from students or parents. Students challenge us, I negotiate with students more than ever.” Brian (eighth grade) said, “Some teachers think they’re better than us, or they’re mean to kids ‘cause they’re in charge. I’ll skip sometimes to avoid dealing with it.”

Management practices, philosophies, and class structures played important roles in flattening teacher-student hierarchies. Policies about respect were meaningless if teachers were disrespectful. Richard claimed he respected kids, but the following vignette tells a different tale.

Richard approached Naveen and Khadija, dressed in full hijab (traditional Muslim apparel). “Why aren’t you girls participating? This is the third time this week!” Naveen replied, “My parents don’t want me to dress for PE.” Khadija quietly said, “My parents won’t let me change.” Richard angrily replied, “You show me in the Qur’an where it says you can’t exercise or take gym!” Richard turned to Shreya, another Muslim girl, and asked if this was accurate. Shreya shrugged and said, “I can play.” Naveen and Khadija later said their parents followed rules in the Qur’an about modesty and dress, which contradicted policies Richard had in physical education.

Many teachers recognized the cultural importance of flattening social hierarchies between themselves and students, and did so by giving students respect first, disciplining students privately, and giving students freedom, power, and voice through choices. Amy said, “I’m constantly reflecting about my approach. My tone, posture, thoughts, all of it.” Jonas discussed a disciplinary issue privately with a student in his class, rather than “calling him out” publicly. Jonas later commented, “I know if I want to get anywhere with my students, I have to give them the respect they’re craving.” Demetrius (seventh grade), the student being disciplined, said, “Mr. F. took me to the side, told me to stop clownin’ and asked if there was anything going on. He didn’t put me on blast.” Alejandro (sixth grade) said, “He doesn’t put himself higher. He doesn’t tell us ‘do this ‘cause I’m in charge.’ It’s your choice, it’s your grade.”

Teachers and students shared positive outcomes of respectful classes. Teachers believed reducing student social hierarchies enhanced learning environments. Teresa shared, “You have fewer interruptions when students are respectful. I haven’t had a fight in years!” Logan said, “When kids respect one another, class is smooth. They keep each other in line.” Flattened social hierarchies between teachers and students resulted in more participation, better behavior, and effort. Corey (eighth grade) said, “I’ll do what they ask if they’re respectful. But if not, forget it, why should I respect someone who won’t give it back?” Alexus (sixth grade) said, “If a teacher treats you cool, you’ll act better. He gives me a lot of effort, so I’ll give him a lot.”

Language and Communication

The third theme through which teachers enacted cultural relevance involved language barriers and urban student communication.

English as a Second Language. The community dynamics affecting students who spoke English as a second language (ESL) included immigration status and family structure. In these communities, there was great diversity in both the languages spoken and levels of English fluency in schools. Patricia said, “You won’t see a school with 80% ESL students out in the suburbs, but that’s not uncommon in the city.” One diverse school boasted over 40 different languages spoken by students. Family structure also influenced ESL students, since many students lived with family members who had even less English fluency. This meant students’ ability to acquire language skills was limited to school hours.

Several teachers cited language diversity as a barrier to teaching. Donna said, “How can you really communicate with students if they don’t understand what you’re saying?” Many students struggled with colloquialisms, phrases, and teachers’ directions. Sam considered what teaching only English-speaking students would be like: “I’m sure it would be easier, you wouldn’t repeat directions all the time or wait for students to translate. I’d get through more content for sure.” Eric shared, “Sometimes students get off task when I’m breaking things down for the ESL students, then I have to wrangle them back.”

Most teachers had high expectations for ESL students, and enacted four strategies to demonstrate cultural knowledge. First, teachers relied on demonstrations to communicate with ESL students. Miranda shared, “I show my ESL students so much, I don’t always have to worry about directions.” Second, teachers used bilingual students as peer translators. Joshua said, “Most of the time ESL students get it when I show them, but if they’re struggling, I’ll have Rosaria or Angel translate.” Third, teachers learned key phrases in students’ native languages. Greg admitted that he learned from students, “I know *cuidado*, and *vamos*, and some other phrases.” Donna said, “I bought a program and practiced my Spanish all summer.” Finally, teachers used classroom materials in students’ native languages. Carrie’s Spanish-speaking aide translated her posters so students could benefit from seeing both languages. Logan purchased Spanish versions of bulletin board materials, “I put both languages up for kids, and copies in the office for families. The ESL teacher uses them for lessons, too.”

Teachers and students claimed these strategies resulted in higher participation, compliance, and greater effort. Shane recognized a difference immediately after using students’ native language, “They were surprised when I used Spanish, but it meant something. They were excited; it was like something ‘clicked.’ They trust me now,

they respond quickly when I use Spanish.” An ESL student conveyed (through a peer translator), “Mr. Franklin uses some Spanish, so I’ll dress and try hard in PE. He doesn’t make us feel bad for not knowing English like our other teachers do. He makes us feel comfortable.”

Urban Communication. Many teachers recognized unique ways that students communicated with teachers and peers, citing that local community culture influenced both slang and dialect. Teresa claimed, “My students have their own language!” Although some slang was universal, students in one district used vastly different slang than students in a neighboring district. Furthermore, communication patterns were influenced by the concentration of single-parent households and challenges of urban living, resulting in more direct communication between urban parents and children.

Unique urban dialects affected students’ educational experiences because teachers gave directions or spoke to students in unfamiliar ways. Monique (seventh grade) commented, “It’s easier to understand a teacher if they talk like you normally do, instead of thinking about what they’re saying, and how to say things right.” Pop culture strongly influenced student communication; students infused slang terms from song lyrics, movies, professional sports, and television shows. Some teachers recognized the impact of pop culture, viewing it as a generational rite of passage. Angela said, “It definitely influences kids, but we experienced it, too. Everyone goes through it.” Moreover, students ignored teachers’ directions if they were not as direct as their caretakers. Kenneth (eighth grade) said, “My mom tells me straight up. A teacher called home ‘cuz I was acting up, and she said ‘Get another call, see what happens.’ There’s no playing—you just do it.” Eric said, “There’s something about a strong mother figure—some of my biggest, toughest guys will straighten right up when five-foot-two mom comes in here.” Although “with-it-ness” is an issue for teachers and students in any type of school, this gap was exaggerated in urban areas because the lifestyles of teachers and students were incongruent.

To demonstrate cultural knowledge, teachers used pop culture references, slang, and direct language in their teaching. Frank used “fist bumps” to greet students, while Darcy asked, “What’s poppin?” Cheryl said, “I try to use slang, some of their words. It keeps things jovial and light. When you say something on their level, it’s accepting.” Carlos thought slang kept more students engaged, “If I say ‘C’mon dog, get your work done,’ they understand. It’s better than ‘Please sit down and continue with your assignment.’ I’m not that formal.” Karen felt knowing students’ interests kept her connected, “Having those tidbits of information helps you relate. Even if you’re not an expert—they like being able to inform me!”

Conversely, some teachers perceived slang to be inappropriate and unprofessional, and insisted that students use “correct” language. Don was cautious not to “slaughter

the English language,” while Richard insisted he “wouldn’t go to their level.” These teachers felt they would lose students’ respect if they crossed this line, and they were concerned that attempts to connect with students would be perceived as “fake.”

Students felt that teachers who used slang were more approachable and understanding. DeJuan (eighth grade) shared, “If a teacher knows the movies we watch, that’s cool because they like the same stuff we like. It makes me trust them more, like they understand me better.” Marcia (seventh grade) expressed frustration with teachers who prohibited slang, requiring students to speak “proper” English: “If you always get corrected, you don’t want to talk at all. It makes you feel so dumb.”

Based on their knowledge of family structures, the teachers emphasized compassion and directness in interactions with students. Michelle felt this mirrored students’ experiences away from school, “If you say something in a question, there’s an option. They might say, ‘No, I don’t want to pick up the basketballs!’ You have to be direct, that’s how it’s done at home.” Anthony shared, “Asking politely just isn’t what my students respond to. You have to word things so there’s not an ‘out.’” Many students confirmed these notions about parent-child communication. Rayvon (seventh grade) said, “Mrs. Marshall asks us all nice to bring stuff back when class ends. She’s yelled, but only if we don’t do it right away. If my momma was teaching, dang, I’d run so she didn’t get mad.”

Curricular Content

When examining content, we found three categories of teachers: those expressing cultural knowledge through content, those understanding community dynamics but not expressing cultural knowledge, and those without any cultural knowledge of content. Five community dynamics influenced students’ access to after-school physical activity. First, teachers and students claimed violence and safety issues were a barrier to physical activity. Green spaces and parks were scarce, and teachers gathered that parents did not want their children outside. Karen said, “Parents aren’t comfortable with kids playing outside with all of the abandoned houses in the neighborhood.” Second, family structures meant older siblings had responsibilities after school while parents worked. Students said chores, meal preparation, and caring for younger siblings made physical activity after school difficult. Sabrina (eighth grade) said, “I have to watch my sister, do housework, and homework. There’s a lot to do, there’s not much time for exercise.” Third, low socioeconomic status and poverty-like conditions meant families lacked additional resources for extracurricular activities (i.e., recreational sports leagues, clubs). Amy said, “Some can barely afford school uniforms, I doubt there’s extra money for gym memberships.” Suzanne compared the experiences of

her granddaughter to her students, “Emily takes riding lessons so she can join the equestrian team in high school. She’s *nine!* My students don’t have those opportunities.” Fourth, religious practices limited students’ participation in physical activity. Many Muslim students fasted during religious holidays, making physical activity impractical. Furthermore, some Muslim girls faced additional barriers because standards of modesty prohibited physical activity in sight of boys. Finally, students’ race and ethnicity placed greater cultural value on some activities, and these usually differed from the activities that physical education teachers included.

These dynamics meant teachers emphasizing physically active lifestyles sent mixed messages when their physical education content was inaccessible. Students craved activities done easily in their homes, with friends and family, and activities with specific cultural meaning. Monae (eighth grade) shared, “We played badminton, and Mr. Phillips told us how it’s like tennis. But there’s no courts in my neighborhood, so what’s the point?” Jeannette was surprised by students’ reactions to exercise videos, “It’s opened up some new possibilities. The kids said, ‘My mom has this video!’ I’ll do it more often now.” Carlos shared his experiences of teaching in a community highly connected to soccer, “On the south side, it was all about soccer. Kids played at recess, after school, and with parents. They asked to play in class, too. I could tell that it meant a lot.”

Teachers not demonstrating cultural knowledge taught physical education in rigid ways that neglected students’ interests or cultural perspectives. Don said, “It’s frustrating...you plan units, the kids hate it, but you stick to your guns. Yesterday, 14 kids sat out! But they need structure.” Rachel claimed, “They only want basketball, they’re resistant to anything new.” This approach was unpopular with students. Imari (eighth grade) shared, “We play floor hockey, but nobody has sticks at home. It would be better if we did skating, dancing, or bowling.” Students shared perspectives on repetitive, “played out,” and locally unavailable activities. Jamal (eighth grade) said, “Half the class sits out because they’re bored. We’ve been doing the same things every week since Christmas.”

Some teachers claimed to understand community dynamics, yet felt powerless to accommodate students. Limited resources (including equipment, space, and time) prevented teachers from including relevant content. Patty said, “I don’t get much new stuff. They replaced some basketballs and bought jump ropes, but I wanted dynabands and Pilates videos.” Jan shared, “My students get six weeks of PE, and I share the gym with the elementary program. I do what I can—resources are a big problem.”

Finally, a small group of teachers implemented strategies demonstrating cultural knowledge. To accommodate safety concerns, family structures, and restrictive budgets,

teachers included content that could be done easily at home and with little equipment. During a fitness unit, Martin taught students to replicate strength exercises using soda bottles filled with water. Amber (sixth grade) said, "He showed us a lot of stuff we can do at home. For step benches, you can just do stairs!" When religious practices impeded physical activity, teachers adjusted dress requirements and teaching schedules. Martin re-scheduled fitness testing so fasting students would not be disadvantaged. Carrie altered her dress policy in her course outline requiring "clothing comfortable for physical activity." This accommodated all students, especially those required to dress modestly for religious reasons. Last, several teachers reflected knowledge about cultural values by being "in tune" with students and offering meaningful content. Damon overheard students discussing a visit to a roller rink and encouraged students to bring in their own skates. Patricia noticed students practicing choreographed dances during breaks: "They were constantly dancing, so they're helping me plan a dance unit. I still have to preview the CDs they brought, but they're excited!"

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to understand teachers' and students' perspectives on CRPE in urban settings, using a theoretical framework that examined (a) how teachers understood community dynamics, (b) how community dynamics influenced urban students' education, and (c) the strategies teachers implemented to reflect cultural knowledge. This framework served as an excellent tool to understand better the complex role that culture plays in urban physical education.

The Cultural Relevance Cycle. The first step of the cultural relevance cycle is to understand community dynamics, which requires knowledge acquisition. Teachers must have rich, sophisticated knowledge of their students and community dynamics, to understand particulars of students' reality. Many researchers have identified the importance of knowing students in profound ways (Barrett & Noguera, 2008; Graybill, 1997; Lenski et al., 2005; Monroe, 2005b) and challenged teachers to know students as cultural beings (Irvine, 2003; Monroe, 2005a), yet our study identified unique urban-community dynamics. The second step of the cultural relevance process is to understand how community dynamics influence educational processes. Similar to the work of Irvine (2003), and Lenski, et al. (2005), this step requires introspection about how values, biases, feelings, and worldviews differ from students'. Several authors have documented ways that urban students' home experiences affect their education (Brown, 2004; Delpit, 2006; Godley, Carpenter & Werner, 2007), but few have examined how this looks in physical education. The final step in the cultural relevance cycle

is to enact strategies reflecting teachers' cultural knowledge, where teachers must consider ways of instructing and connecting with students. Even experienced teachers may find previous methods of instructing students "misses the mark" in urban schools. This action-oriented step has been well documented by many researchers (Delpit, 2006; Gay, 2000; Irvine, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1995); however, it requires teachers to bring students' cultural realities to the forefront of their pedagogy.

The Cycle in Action. While we present the cultural relevance cycle as an ideal, few teachers enacted it completely. Some were naïve to community dynamics and responded with shock and disbelief. Some understood community dynamics, but did nothing to address them. Others felt sorry for students and did not connect community dynamics and education.

Some teachers, operating from a deficit perspective, understood community dynamics and blamed them for student failure. Teachers in this category made remarks about students having unstable home lives, or labeled them "crack babies." Some teachers understood community dynamics and their impact on education, but did not alter their pedagogies because they felt it would compromise their teaching. For example, teachers such as Don and Richard chose not to use slang with students because they did not understand meanings, or thought students would view use of slang negatively. Others, like Jocelyn and Carrie, felt that giving students "fist-bumps" or high fives diminished teacher authority, and did not want to be viewed as a peer.

Finally, a handful of teachers enacted the cultural relevance cycle by understanding community dynamics, making connections between community dynamics and education, and developing strategies reflecting cultural knowledge. Teachers like Frank, Eric, and Suzanne seemed to be most connected to classes; they were well respected by students, had few behavioral issues, and had active and engaged students. We were interested in identifying the traits that suggest a teachers' likelihood of enacting the cultural relevance cycle. A participant analysis based on race, gender, age, and years of experience failed to identify any trends.

Outcomes of Culturally Relevant Physical Education. Although examples were limited, teachers who enact the cultural relevance cycle transform teaching environments into safe havens for students who want to work hard, are respectful of teachers and peers, and are excited and motivated to learn. Gay (2000) stated, "When instructional processes are consistent with the cultural orientation, experiences, and learning styles of marginalized...students, their school achievement improves significantly" (p. 181). These findings also echo outcomes of Ennis's (1998) work on shared expectations, in which teachers establish sound classrooms to "nurture the seeds of school and content relevance" (p. 169).

Implications for Future Research

The national standards for beginning physical education teachers (NASPE, 2009) state that teachers should be proficient in reaching students of diverse backgrounds, yet urban school landscapes present challenges to the teaching of meaningful physical education. We must examine how teachers acquire the sophisticated social and emotional knowledge necessary to achieve CRPE. Questions for further study include the following: Do urban teachers feel well prepared for urban schools? How do physical education teacher education programs encourage White, middle class teachers to critically examine their cultural templates? How do we provide preservice teachers in nonurban environments with learning experiences to prepare them for diverse settings? Understanding knowledge acquisition may provide insights into broader educational dilemmas in urban schools, such as teacher burnout and student achievement gaps. However, ignoring these concerns may result in more “shooting in the dark,” a dangerous concept when considering the larger implications of urban student disengagement.

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