

## Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

### Exploring the Use of Culture in Singapore's Low Progress Classrooms

Leonel Lim and Michael Tan

#### KEY IMPLICATIONS

- Culturally relevant pedagogy foregrounds a sensitivity to students' needs, home experiences and family backgrounds.
- Teachers enacting culturally relevant pedagogy understand knowledge and the curriculum as fluid and they need to be connected to the unique challenges, aspirations and motivations that students experience.
- Teachers practicing culturally relevant pedagogy often seek to develop students' social agency and community engagement, and foster stronger affinities with school and school experiences.

#### BACKGROUND

In recent years, culturally relevant pedagogy has gained attention as a student-centered approach to helping low progress students achieve academic success. Research around culturally relevant pedagogy focuses on the place of culture in low progress classrooms, the forms it takes, and how teachers can leverage upon these to better connect students' home/school experiences to provide for a more engaged and meaningful learning (Gay, 2003; Howard, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2009).

#### FOCUS OF STUDY

The research focuses on:

1. Identifying what constitutes culturally relevant pedagogy in Singapore's low progress classrooms.

2. Describing and documenting how teachers in these classrooms are engaging in these pedagogies and how students are responding.
3. Identifying opportunities for the improvement of pedagogic practices in low progress classrooms.

#### KEY FINDINGS

While all the teachers were each unique in their teaching and how they related to their students, as teachers, they shared similar backgrounds and drew upon similar pedagogical practices:

1. All the teachers identified strongly with teaching, and, in particular, teaching in the low progress tracks.
2. Most of the teachers could point to a transformative experience in their own personal lives—emotional/financial/physical hardships—that either made them join teaching and/or reassess why/how they taught.
3. All the teachers showed an intimate understanding of the problems their students faced beyond the classroom and the ways in which these were often related to the latter's home/family environment.
4. Collectively, the teachers took up four major pedagogical approaches:
  - Developing students' voices, identities and personal expression.
  - Fostering affinity with school and school experiences.

- Developing social agency and community engagement.
  - Acknowledging students' social locations and the unique and important perspectives these bring.
5. The teachers also sought to keep relations between themselves and their students fluid and less hierarchical. They encouraged students to learn collaboratively, teach each other, and be responsible for each other's learning.

## SIGNIFICANCE OF FINDINGS

Findings suggest that in better engaging low progress students, schools need to connect in-school learning experience with students' out-of-school lives, ultimately developing curricula and pedagogic interactions that identify as strengths the knowledges, prior experiences and aspirations of their students.

## PARTICIPANTS

We worked with five secondary school teachers who were routinely deployed to teach in the Normal

Academic tracks. Small groups of students from each of the teachers' classes were interviewed.

## RESEARCH DESIGN

The research was designed around qualitative case studies of the five teachers. Data comprised (1) interviews with teacher-participants, (2) observations of lessons by these teachers, and (3) focus group discussions with small groups of students from these classes. The data was coded on the basis of how each teacher presented knowledge in the classroom and the nature of their pedagogic interactions with students.

## REFERENCES

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