Culturally Responsive Pedagogy and Performance-Based Assessment

Carol D. Lee


Stable URL: http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0022-2984%28199822%2967%3A3C268%3ACRPAPA%3E2.0.CO%3B2-K

*The Journal of Negro Education* is currently published by Journal of Negro Education.
Culturally Responsive Pedagogy and Performance-based Assessment

Carol D. Lee, Northwestern University

A major challenge facing "authentic" instruction and assessment is the lack of evidence of their efficacy for students of color, excluding certain high-achieving Asian American groups, and poor students. This article considers the authenticity of performance-based assessments (PBAs), exploring their relationship to pedagogical practices that address ethnic and linguistic diversity. It details the author's efforts to transform English instruction and assessment in ways that draw upon cultural funds of knowledge that African American students bring from their home and community environments. Cognitive and cultural arguments for culturally responsive PBAs and the research implications of their use are presented.

The Dilemmas Of Testing

Arguments over the limits of traditional multiple-choice standardized testing have been made for many years and have emanated from many corners of academia (Wolf, Bixby, Glenn, & Gardner, 1991). The movement toward performance-based assessment (PBA) has been manifested in the more widespread appearance on the market of portfolio and other PBA test packages linked to commercially prepared teaching materials such as textbooks and other curriculum support materials. Additionally, over the last decade, a few key states (California, Kentucky, Maryland, and Vermont, among others) have begun to adopt formal performance-based assessment as part of their official statewide educational testing systems. The results of these state measures have been mixed and, in at least one state (California), rather disastrous. Nonetheless, performance-based assessments have been deemed "authentic" in the sense that they require students to tackle complex problems that have some real-world currency over an extended period of time. Such "understanding performances" (Perkins, 1992, p. 79) are often included as part of standards-based instruction, as in the rigorous New Standards Project (NSP) (1997), which is beginning to be adopted by several states as an articulation of world-class standards in both curriculum and assessment.¹

One of the major challenges facing the movement toward authentic instruction and assessment is the lack of external validity that has been obtained as far as minority student populations and the children of the poor are concerned. Closer examination of this movement reveals that it is largely driven by White, university-based researchers, while its assumptions and products are largely tested on and geared toward White,

¹The New Standards Project (1997) is a collaboration of the Learning Research and Development Center of the University of Pittsburgh and the National Center on Education and the Economy. The Project has developed rigorous performance standards and demonstrations of student work exemplifying its standards as well as examinations based on those standards.
middle-class students. Indeed, it is rare, if ever, that one sees included in examples of rigorous standards-based objectives, curricula, or assessments anything that smacks of ethnic or linguistic diversity.

For example, none of the samples of work provided in the New Standards Project guide, especially those in its applied learning strand, address cultural diversity or the needs or concerns of minority communities. As a case in point, the language arts section of the draft version of this guide presents an analytical essay considered to represent the quality of student work in this area that the assessment’s developers would like to see. The essay offers a response to Winston Churchill’s statement that the American Civil War was “the last romantic war and the first horrendous modern war.” However, the inclusion of this essay, and the elevated status attributed to it, strikes of insensitivity to African Americans, for whom the Civil War, though undoubtedly horrible in its physical manifestation, represents far more than either a romantic or an horrendous notion. It is doubtful that the test’s authors would have considered placing an essay focusing on romanticism in German literature during the period of the Jewish Holocaust as an exemplar. Moreover, in both the preliminary as well as the current edition, the NSP’s exemplar of a potential reading list across genres includes only a paltry representation of works by African American, Hispanic American, Native American, or Asian American authors—let alone authors from Africa, China, or Central America.

In a recent study, Newman and Associates (1996) studied 24 elementary and high schools that were attempting to implement authentic instruction and assessments, including PBAs. These researchers identified many examples of instruction and assessment that purportedly meet the high intellectual expectations articulated by the contemporary standards movement but actually fall short. They very appropriately admit that the kind of teaching and assessment being called for by this movement’s advocates are very difficult to accomplish. They further contend that the prior educational training and workplace conditions of many U.S. public school teachers contribute greatly to the difficulty of achieving this kind of whole school—or, for that matter, class-level—transformation. Additionally, they posit that the expectations held of teachers today are greater than they have ever been. Most significantly, the Newman et al. study reveals that for underachieving minority students, authentic teaching and assessments were no better predictors of academic achievement than were traditional teaching and testing methods. As the researchers note, “gender, race and ethnicity, and socioeconomic status (SES) exerted the same effects on performance in all classrooms, regardless of the level of authentic pedagogy” (p. 68).

Because the links between curriculum, instruction, and assessment are so intimate, one would expect each of these elements to have impact on the other. While intuitively this would seem to hold true, the Newman et al. study reports that the use of whole-scale PBAs in states like Maryland and Kentucky have not led to massive changes in how instruction is conducted, especially for minority students. Relative to assessment and equity, Newman et al. offer case studies of several schools that apparently have been positively transformed as a result of the delivery of authentic instruction and assessments. Although they acknowledge discussion of the unequal performance between majority and minority students, this aspect is not extensively addressed. The case studies chosen reflect instances in which the faculties of the schools were completely reorganized, allowing

---

Footnote: Interestingly, the predictor of academic achievement with which the authentic teaching and assessments examined in the Newman et al. study were correlated was the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), a not-so-authentic, not-so-performance-based standardized assessment instrument. It is useful to note, however, that NAEP’s developers has been experimenting with performance-based assessment tasks.
the administration to select its staff. Certainly, this is not an authentic case when it comes to typical urban school systems.

Ideally, one would like to think that if students can successfully tackle the quality of problem solving required to negotiate the best of performance-based assessments (such as the NSP's), they should be able to tackle the lower-level demands of timed, knowledge-on-demand, standardized achievement tests. That premise seems to make common sense. The evidence that minority students are doing well on one and then the other, however, is not available. It is not available from the work done at the state level, from the many years of work on the NSP, nor from Newman et al.'s (1996) work. When it comes to assessment, African American and other ethnic minority students, with the exception of Asian Americans, are apparently subject to a "double whammy." Traditional standardized measures of academic achievement have been used as a widespread brush signifying ignorance and underachievement and limiting the ability of non-Asian students of color to access more academically challenging coursework in elementary and middle schools. These assessments have also served as gatekeepers, effectively blocking these students from higher education and postsecondary education opportunities.

Miller (1996) has argued that the limitations of intergenerational educational capital within African American, Hispanic American, and Native American communities are so great as to make wholesale educational equity with White Americans nearly impossible. Although the weight of the statistical and historical evidence that Miller brings to bear on his argument is substantial, the picture is not as fatalistic as he portrays, but it is certainly as serious. Students of color and students living in poverty are caught in the middle of the debate over standardized basic skills tests versus performance-based assessments. In the midst of this heated debate, it is noteworthy that Barbara Sizemore, dean of the School of Education at DePaul University in Chicago, Illinois, has warned (in personal communications with the author) that she will stop teaching Black and poor kids to handle standardized achievement tests when Harvard and Princeton universities start asking only for portfolios and the results of performance-based assessments. Sizemore raises the uncomfortable premise that perhaps the educational dilemma for these students is more complex than the wholesale focus on standards for assessment—typically by academics and educators who do not work in poor inner-city and rural schools—would suggest. She further asserts that neither the public nor educational leaders at major private postsecondary institutions of higher learning share the vision of authentic assessment held by proponents of the standards movement. Thus, the debate over standardized versus performance-based assessments is more complex than a mere focus on issues of intellectual rigor and contextualization. The equity issues surrounding the debate are just not that simple.

**Testing and Contesting in a Culturally Responsive Context**

I am currently engaged in a three-year project at an underachieving inner-city high school. With some urging from the district, this high school was encouraged to participate in the New Standards Project through the National Alliance for School Restructuring. Specifically, I am working with this school's English Department faculty to transform the delivery of English instruction and assessment and expand the uses of technology in the curriculum in ways that draw upon the cultural funds of knowledge that the project's African American students bring from their home and community environments (Lee,

---

3Even among so-called "model minority" Asian American students, it is more likely that students of Chinese, Japanese, or Korean heritage will succeed academically than will Hmong, Vietnamese, or Thai students.
1993, 1994, 1995a, 1995b, 1996). As part of my commitment to this effort, called the Cultural Modeling Project (CMP), I taught one high school English class each year. This was a particularly eye-opening experience for me on many levels. On the one hand, I came to realize that the 8- to 10-year experience of schooling accumulated by my high school freshman and sophomore students was a powerful force that influenced their assumptions about what goes on in the places called “schools.” My students’ frequent efforts to resist a curriculum based on tackling complex thinking problems involving literary and other texts provided me with a wake-up call. The prospect of covering fewer subjects in greater depth and applying knowledge to real-world contexts was not necessarily something many students (or parents, for that matter) from both poor and well-to-do backgrounds generally wanted, for a variety of reasons. However, I refused to give in to the students’ or other department teachers’ desires for simplistic, “fill-in-the-blank” worksheets and assessment problems that do not require too much thought. The resulting interchange of ideas between me and my students led to many powerful and intellectually stimulating dialogues that we came to enjoy—somewhat.

Perhaps one of the more challenging aspects of my experience teaching at this high school was facing the external pressures brought to bear by the school district on my practice. Through a complex web of political events involving the governor of the state, the state legislature, and the mayor of the city, the school system had become more politicized than ever. The mayor had more direct influence over the school system than previously. As a result, his political future was intricately linked to the ability of the public schools to show evidence of academic achievement.

This was especially the case for those schools that were notoriously failing the city’s predominantly African American and Latino student population. Massive numbers of these schools had been placed on academic probation. This sanction, however, was both a bane and a blessing. It was a blessing in the sense that it marked the first time that these schools had been held accountable for anything other than housing students during the day. It was a bane in that one single measure of school transformation had currency as far as the system administrators and politicians were concerned. That measure was students’ ability to score at national norms on the district’s mandated, standardized, multiple-choice achievement tests: the TAP (Test of Academic Proficiency) at the high school level and the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) at the elementary school level. Attempts by me and other local academicians to help the school system develop and implement multiple measures of academic achievement, including portfolio and performance-based instruments, met with little success.

The impact of the district’s focus on standardized achievement tests on the work I have been trying to do with the CMP has been direct. The CMP focuses on helping students use the linguistic and cultural knowledge they have constructed from their home and community lives as bridges to tackle complex problems of literary interpretation. Project instructors have focused on rich, canonical literature, especially African American and other “culturally diverse” literary texts, for several reasons. Chief among these are the following:

(1) We believe that if we can socialize our students into the habit of reading rich texts, we can help develop a generation of avid readers. People who read a lot are more often than not good readers.

(2) We believe that rich literature offers profound insights into the human experience. We especially believe that African American literature provides for African American students a necessary and rewarding “microscope” through which to view and understand the complexities of being Black in America and to balance the “double-conscious-
ness" that DuBois (1903) so brilliantly illuminated in his classic work, *The Souls of Black Folk*.

(3) We believe that the quality of analysis we attempt to apprentice students into constructing in response to these texts cannot be captured or assessed through a multiple-choice, timed reading achievement tests such as the TAP and the ITBS. Nevertheless, the school at which I taught will be judged in the public and political arenas in terms of whether or not a majority of its students score in the 50th percentile rank on these tests. To make matters worse, the state and the city cannot agree on a common assessment, although recently at least some beginning conversations to resolve this matter have taken place. More importantly, state and city educational officials have very different conceptions of what is to be tested.

The expectations regarding the quality of knowledge and problem solving required on the state assessment have very little consistency with the district-mandated assessment tests. The state assessment is given to a body of students who, on the whole, do not give a hoot about either one. It is somewhat more authentic for the following reasons:

- the passages in the reading section are longer;
- there are multiple correct answers; and
- it includes questions relating to students’ prior knowledge, based on the correct assumption that performance in reading comprehension evaluations is positively correlated with the quality of prior knowledge that students have about a topic.

The state’s writing performance assessment is more authentic than the ITBS, which features multiple-choice questions about where commas and semicolons go; the TAP has no writing or other performance aspects to it. However, the state assessment is not genuinely authentic in that it asks students to write two essays in two 40-minute sessions, offering little time for revisions and certainly no time for multiple revisions, while paying no attention in its scoring to evidence of pre-writing strategies. Indeed, the state’s writing performance test almost begs for a low-level perfunctory performance.

To further complicate this assessment scenario, about a month-and-a-half after taking the state-mandated standardized and performance tests and the district’s standardized test, sophomore students at my high school, which is affiliated with the New Standards Project, had to take the New Standards Reference Examination (NSRE). Although this assessment is certainly more authentic and intellectually challenging than the other two tests, like the others it too has little to do with either the lived experiences of these students or with the culturally relevant texts they study through the Cultural Modeling Project. Moreover, students’ achievement on the NSRE had very little public currency because the district had explicitly informed principals that the TAP is “what counts”; state officials, on the other hand, contended that *their* test was the most important. Subsequently, during the first semester we teachers in the Cultural Modeling Project focused on culturally relevant literacy tasks with high intellectual complexity, while in the second semester we shifted gears to begin drill-and-practice with multiple-choice tests of both the state assessment and the TAP variations. Then, after the first marking period of the second semester, we shifted back to our original focus, keeping a cautious eye toward the NSRE.

**The Need for Culturally Responsive Performance-based Assessments: Arguments and Evidence**

Implementing and developing performance-based assessments, let alone culturally responsive ones, brings educators into highly politicized territory where the outcomes are neither clear nor easy. Two bodies of research at least theoretically support the proposi-
tion that culturally responsive PBAs will be useful and empowering for underachieving minority students under certain conditions of pedagogy.

The Cognitive Argument

Though the arguments for performance-based assessments have been well articulated, the case for culturally responsive PBAs has not been formally put forth. Current propositions in cultural psychology support an argument for the efficacy of the latter. Indeed, a major shift in the study of thinking and problem solving has occurred in recent years that has let to the recognition that the contexts in which humans carry out tasks are important (Cole & Scribner, 1981; Jacob, 1992; Lave; 1977; Lave, Murtaugh, & de la Rocha, 1984; Scribner, 1984; Stigler & Baranes, 1989). These contexts may include the goals pursued, the tools employed, and the forms of human support provided as well as the historical traditions, ideas, and practices inherited. Together, these elements of human context comprise what is generally called “culture.” Culture may also be defined through the experience of nationality, ethnicity, and gender as well as communities of practice. How humans organize knowledge and strategies to carry out tasks has been studied in many different cultural contexts. Some of the central propositions to emerge from this body of research include the following:

1. The complexity of real world problem solving, as opposed to the sometimes arbitrary nature of contrived school-based tasks, often involves a kind of ill-structured problem that forces one to adapt multiple strategies, resources, and funds of knowledge to meet the constraints of the practical situation.

2. Thinking or cognition is distributed across more than one person, with different levels of expertise contributing and learning simultaneously—that is, the interactions among people engaged in problem-solving activity involves thinking processes being shared across participants (Solomon, 1993).

3. Everyday tasks demand complex thinking and often involve drawing on discipline-based knowledge (e.g., reading, mathematics, science).

4. Interesting and complex relationships exist between school-based disciplinary knowledge and knowledge as it is used in everyday contexts across multiple cultural boundaries.

Two overarching implications of this body of research are central to this argument for culturally responsive assessments. The first of these is that the quality and complexity of knowledge demonstration is directly tied to the task and circumstances of performance. Second, there exist multiple contexts and tasks through which complex thinking may be demonstrated. To better link these implications to understandings of everyday or situated cognition, recognition of the following attributes shared in common by culturally responsive PBAs is helpful:

- culturally responsive PBAs must be linked and integrated directly with curriculum and instruction;
- they must involve tasks that draw on culturally based funds of knowledge from both the communities and families of the students as well as the knowledge the students bring from their youth culture;
- they must address some community-based, authentic need and, as a result, may well have political linkages;
- they must demand that students draw on knowledge sources from several disciplines; and
- they must involve students in working together as well as working with others from outside their schools.
The challenge of linking thinking in everyday contexts and culturally responsive performance-based assessment—or, for that matter, culturally responsive curriculum and pedagogy—surrounds the question of “whose” everyday context one is considering. A careful look through the literature on everyday cognition reveals few studies focusing on persons from African American, Native American, or Latino communities involved in the conduct of everyday inquiry involving complex thinking and problem solving. Another case has been made regarding the presence of cultural discontinuities between the home and school for disempowered ethnic minority communities (Irvine, 1990). Ladson–Billings (1994) maintains that culturally responsive pedagogy is a direct response to that discontinuity and its often negative consequences for student achievement.

A culturally responsive framework attributes significance to the everyday context of the lives of students who may be African American, Native American, Latino, or live in the Appalachians. Such a framework, for example, looks more closely and carefully at the wisdom of semiliterate elders. It also attributes significant status to the vernacular and non-English language varieties spoken outside of school, the routine household tasks carried out by mothers and children living in poverty and the production of popular art forms like rap music. Practices associated with each of these are viewed as potentially rich intellectual sources and resources for the design and conduct of what Perkins (1992) calls “understanding performances.”

In order to take seriously the central argument underlying the literature on everyday cognition, one must contend that the circumstances and the nature of the tasks students are asked to carry out on tests such as the NSRE as demonstrations of their competencies do matter. Such a viewpoint suggests that cognitive competencies are situated rather than absolute—that everyday representations and operations are neither incorrect nor impoverished, merely different. Recent research in reading is increasingly making a similar case that reading is a relative rather than an absolute skill. This research points out that prior knowledge, one’s goals for reading, access to specific reading strategies, and metacognitive monitoring of one’s own understanding interact to influence comprehension (Anderson, 1994). Thus, it is quite feasible that a student may be expert at reading certain kinds of texts and quite a novice at reading other kinds of texts.

I myself came face-to-face with this phenomenon when I entered graduate school. After not having been enrolled in a mathematics class for 26 years, I had to read a statistics textbook for one of my classes. I had a master’s degree in English, had been a teacher of reading, and felt confident that I was an expert reader—until I tried to tackle that text. It was not until I learned central constructs within statistics that I was able to read and comprehend the material in that book. I faced a similar challenge in my work with the CMP in Chicago. In the second year of this three-year project, I and other CMP teachers developed alternative curriculum and assessments for the American literature course offered sophomores and the traditional English literature course for juniors. This involved continuous struggle on our part with the dilemma of content. That is, if one of our fundamental concerns was enhancing inner-city African American students’ ability to engage rich literary texts and construct generalizations from texts that they can then apply in some way to their own lives, we then had to ask ourselves: what role does the selection of texts play? The research base suggests that context is important, but the politics of the curriculum—and, by association, assessment content—rears its figurative head in any efforts to design and implement both culturally responsive pedagogy as well as culturally responsive performance-based assessments. On one hand, we were certain that the literature which is closest to the experiences of these students would be most engaging for them and provide them with the best opportunities to demonstrate their competencies in reasoning about complex texts. However, at the same time, the arbitrary nature of the
expectations to teach the European American and Western literary canon impinged on our efforts to design more culturally responsive curriculum content and assessments.

It is my hope that well-defined and systematically designed experiments or action research involving the development, implementation, and evaluation of culturally responsive PBAs will contribute literal “dashes of color” to the literature on everyday, situated cognition. Such research will contribute enormously to demonstrations of academic achievement among those student populations that have been held back from the gates of the academy by a singular reliance on standardized, multiple-choice measures of achievement. However, attainment of this latter goal will not be easy or straightforward. As yet, no evidence supports the claim that African American, Native American, and Latino students, on the whole, perform any better on complex PBAs (be they the NSRE or large-scale, state-mandated assessments) than they do on standardized measures. The reality is quite the contrary, especially with regard to establishing the link between curriculum standards, instruction, and assessment. Nonetheless, evidence from the QUASAR Project (Silver, Smith, & Nelson, 1995), the Latino Math Project (Fuson, Smith, & LoCicero, 1997), and the Algebra Project (Moses, Kamii, Swap, & Howard, 1989; Silva, Moses, Rivers, & Johnson, 1990) strongly suggests that traditionally underachieving students can perform to rigorous standards, as demonstrated both through standardized and performance-based measures, when the instruction they experience is culturally responsive. It is no accident that each of these projects attends in explicit ways to issues of culture and links cultural knowledge to instruction. Each is also labor-intensive in terms of the types and extent of professional development required for their teachers and the demands associated with curriculum and assessment development.

The Cultural Argument

The cultural argument for culturally responsive PBA draws on the literature focusing on learning styles and educational foundations. Within this literature, the African American cultural framework provides a useful prototype for thinking about the special configurations for other cultural communities. The body of literature on learning styles among African American youngsters is particularly relevant for the broad distinction it makes between African American students as “field-dependent” and European American students as “field-independent” learners (Shade, 1982; Willis, 1989). Broadly speaking, field-dependence involves a need to have problems placed in context, while field-independence involves the ability to look at information and problems in more decontextualized ways. Irvine and York (1995) have acknowledged and critiqued that literature, warning that teachers should not essentialize African American or other students; they further note that translating the significance of field-dependent constructs to actual day-to-day teaching is challenging.

In addition to the literature on learning styles, Boykin’s (1979, 1982, 1983, 1994; Boykin & Allen, 1988) basic research examining learning environment preferences among African American students, particularly at the elementary level, further buttresses this cultural argument. Based on his research as well as his analysis of African and African American cultural history, Boykin (1994) has articulated what he calls an “Afro-cultural ethos.” He proposes nine features of learning environments that are consistent with this ethos, concluding that African American students are better able to meet academic demands when their learning environments present the following elements:

1. Spirituality—an acceptance of a nonmaterial higher force that pervades all of life’s affairs;
Harmony—a belief that human functioning is inextricably linked to nature's order and should be synchronized with this order; Movement—the placing of a premium on the interwoven amalgamation of movement, (poly)rhythm, dance, and percussion, as embodied in musical beats; Verve—a receptiveness to relatively high levels of intensity and variability in stimulation; Affect—acknowledgment of the centrality of affective information, emotional expressiveness, and the equal and integrated importance of thoughts and feelings; Expressive Individualism—a belief in the uniqueness and genuineness of personal expression, personal style, and self-expression; Communalism—a commitment to the fundamental interdependence of people and to the importance of social bonds, relationships, and the transcendence of the group; Orality—recognition of the centrality of oral and aural modes of communication for conveying full meaning and the cultivation of speaking as a performance; Social Time Perspective—a commitment to a social construction of time as personified by an event orientation.

In contrast to Slavin and Oickle (1981), Boykin also contends that African American students prefer to work in groups and that they do so for the sake of the social interaction rather than for external goals or rewards.

If Boykin's line of reasoning holds true, then it implies particular characteristics that should be incorporated into the design of performance-based assessments that are responsive to the culture of African American students. This suggests that culturally responsive PBAs should include demonstrations of vervistic performances, should be socially situated, and should provide opportunities for multiple modalities. Obviously, performances meeting these criteria will look very different from the models represented in the New Standards Performance Standards and existing state-level tests. It also means that establishing criteria for the evaluation of such performances will present additional challenges and reliability issues that must be carefully considered.

A second line of argument pertaining to cultural factors has to do with the political dimensions of education for communities that lack power and are marginalized. For example, since the Holocaust of African enslavement, Africans in America have viewed education as having a political dimension and as an instrument of ethnic identity and community empowerment. Those in the position to influence the quality and resources available for the education of African Americans have also understood this political dimension. During the enslavement era, it was illegal for Africans in the South to learn to read or write. Numerous stories abound of Africans being brutally punished or mutilated after being caught attempting to read or write. Despite these horrendous threats, Africans surreptitiously gained literacy. After the Civil War, the Freedman's Bureau sent White and "free" Black teachers to the South to help the newly emancipated Africans obtain schooling. These representatives discovered that the Africans had already established their own schools, control of which they tenaciously struggled to maintain (Anderson, 1988; DuBois & Dill, 1911). This dual legacy, of viewing education as a tool of liberation and of resisting external educational control, was manifested during the 1920s and 1930s when southern Blacks balked at White philanthropists' and industrialists' attempts to impose second-rate vocational education on Black institutions of learning (Anderson, 1988). It was further evidenced in the rise of "freedom schools" during the years of the civil rights struggle and in the proliferation, in the last three decades, of African-centered education in private/independent and public schools as well as university-based Black Studies programs. These efforts reflect a very different way of viewing education as something other than solely a means for individuals to gain access to higher paying jobs.
A similar case can be made for other marginalized groups. For example, public and parochial schools historically have been used to disconnect Native American students from their culture. At these institutions, the Native Americans' traditional names were replaced with European ones; students were not allowed to speak their indigenous languages nor practice their native religions. Movements have emerged within the Native American as well as Latino communities to make public schooling more responsive to the cultural distinctiveness and the political needs of these groups.

Culturally responsive assessment and pedagogy must speak to the political dimension of education for disenfranchised, marginalized communities. Specifically, culturally responsive PBAs must address the authentic needs of these communities and help to socialize and develop a sense of community responsibility within the students who spring from them. Underachieving students from marginalized communities often feel disengaged from schooling. Many come to see the work that goes on in schools as having no purpose beyond the walls of the school building—besides helping one get a job, that is—and when they fail to see even that connection, the experience of schooling becomes even more problematic.

Most commercially available PBAs pay virtually no attention to issues of community empowerment. However, if they did, they would ask examinees to show evidence of the following:

- the ability to work through a community problem that is authentic, imminent, or historical;
- the ability to link with institutions within the community;
- the ability to draw on local and/or ethnic history; and/or
- the ability to engage the intellectual traditions of the communities in question.

**Research Implications**

To be truly effective and accurate, culturally responsive PBAs, particularly large-scale assessments, must meet the same stringent standards for internal and external validity and reliability that other assessment measures must meet. This will require a major dedication of resources and the collaboration of multidisciplinary research teams to develop, test, norm, and implement. This multidisciplinary approach is crucial for a number of reasons. First, the nature of culturally responsive PBAs demands the design of performance tasks that cross disciplinary borders. For cross-disciplinary work to be sufficiently intellectually challenging, it must have the capacity to engage conceptual issues within disciplines with rigor and deep understanding. Besides subject-matter specialists and test design specialists, such teams will also require the expertise of those whose work focuses on teacher cognition and beliefs as well as policy and decision-making experts at the school, district, state, and federal levels. This is because, as Cohen and Barnes (1993) and Elmore and McLaughlin (1989) point out, an understanding of the relationships between policy and instruction is so important. Such teams must also include minority scholars from diverse disciplines in large numbers—not simply as token representatives or "colored appendages" to largely all-White male research teams.

Scaling-up interventions beyond the individual classroom level is an enduring problem in educational research. It thus may be useful to think about supporting the development of such assessments at the district and local school-site levels because local authorities are often more likely to understand in greater detail the nuances of different cultural communities and the ways that PBAs might engage students from these communities. Field testing culturally responsive PBAs presents another problem, and doing so will require meaningful access to diverse populations. For this reason, it is important not to
underestimate the time required to develop and test such assessments. Teachers at the local site level typically do not have the time to devote to these tasks; therefore, supporting the transformation of instruction in individual classrooms so that these assessments can grow naturally from the daily experience of classroom life that engages students is crucial.

To the extent that culturally responsive PBAs and classroom instruction do not match, the impact of the kinds of assessment transformations I have described in this article will have little meaning. Whether a commitment to or even interest in such efforts from major funding sources exists is not clear. Certainly, however, the time is ripe to test those waters.

References


