URBAN EDUCATION AND EQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY: THE CASE FOR A CULTURALLY PRAGMATIC APPROACH TO EDUCATION IN URBAN SCHOOLS

by

Mohamed Dahir

A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree Master of Arts
Department of Leadership, Higher and Adult Education
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education
University of Toronto

©Copyright by Mohamed Dahir (2018)
ABSTRACT

Black American students continue to lag behind White Americans in measures of academic achievement. In this thesis, I make the case that the achievement gap and lack of social mobility faced by African American students can be attributed to the fact that urban schools have not set the conditions for equality of opportunity. I argue that the crux of the problem is mainly cultural; specifically, that the home culture of students is not utilized in the classroom, nor is the dominant culture explicitly taught in order to impart priceless cultural capital. To get closer to achieving equality of opportunity, I am proposing an approach I call “culturally pragmatic education.” This approach brings the home culture of students into the classroom and also incorporates cultural capital into the curriculum; thereby allowing students to maintain cultural integrity, while at the same time acquiring the cultural tools needed for success in mainstream society.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TABLE OF CONTENTS</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF FIGURES</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical Framework</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Context</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significance</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scope and Limitations</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. LITERATURE REVIEW</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equality of Opportunity</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Deficit Theory</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Difference Theory</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Reproduction Theory</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theory of Oppositional Cultural Identity</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. CULTURE AND EQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equality of Opportunity and Public Education</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why Does Culture Matter?</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why Culturally Relevant Pedagogy isn’t Enough</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acting “White”</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. CULTURAL CAPITAL</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is Cultural Capital</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linguistic Competence</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Competence</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Agency</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. CULTURALLY PRAGMATIC EDUCATION</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culturally Pragmatic Education as a Way Forward</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Success and Linguistic Competence</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Competence (Home) and Cultural Competence (Mainstream)</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical Consciousness and Personal Agency</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Remedy for Oppositional Cultural Identity</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What Makes Culturally Pragmatic Education “Pragmatic”</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. CONCLUSION</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implications</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REFERENCES</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Culturally Pragmatic Education Flowchart…………………………………………………………. 6
Chapter 1: Introduction

I grew up in Toronto’s Jane and Finch corridor; a low-income community of mostly visible minorities, located in the city’s northwest. It’s an area that has earned notoriety over the years for being a hotbed of crime. Despite such image problems, it remains a vibrant community, where hard-working people from all over the world call home. Jane and Finch is peculiar in that there are quite a few places in or near the neighbourhood that stand out in stark contrast to the backdrop of poverty. Within walking distance there’s York University, one of Canada’s largest universities; Black Creek Pioneer village, an open-air museum that recreates life in 19th century Ontario; and the Aviva Centre, a tennis stadium that hosts the Rogers Cup, with world-famous tennis stars, like Serena Williams, competing each year. I remember seeing university students cut through my neighbourhood on their way to and back from the York campus, and I remember hearing the crowd in the Aviva Centre cheering and clapping from the stands while my friends and I played basketball in a court half a kilometre away.

Back then university, museums and tennis stadiums seemed like places from a parallel world, very different from the one I and my friends resided in as young black boys growing up in a housing project. Fast forward a couple of years and I was fortunate enough to find myself making the same journey to and from York University. After graduating I was able to land a job as a student advisor in a college. But even as a university student, and afterwards in my professional role, I still felt somewhat out of place and even at times uncomfortable navigating certain situations I found myself in. I’m not a particularly shy or anxious person, so I couldn’t attribute these challenges to my personality. As I thought about why I couldn’t loosen up and be
just like the rest of my co-workers, I realized the issues I was having were rooted in cultural challenges. The way I spoke, my sense of humour, my fashion sense and the cultural references I was familiar with differed quite a bit from my colleagues, the majority of whom were White middle-class Canadians. I now understood that my feelings of unease in certain contexts were due to the disconnect between the culture I was socialized in within my community and the dominant mainstream culture I encountered in most places outside of Jane and Finch.

Looking back on my public-school days, I can remember examples of “culture clashes” between the school norms and the inner-city youth norms of my peers and I. For example, many of us would wear baseball caps to school, as it was part of our fashion sense at the time; a fashion sense that was heavily influenced by hip-hop and Black American culture. But upon entering the school with our hats still on, the hall monitors would either tell us to remove them or confiscate them for the entire day if we happened to be repeat offenders. If we were lucky enough to evade the detection of the hall monitors, the teachers would be just as quick to tell us we couldn’t wear hats indoors. I remember some teachers being quite offended if a student had the audacity to waltz into their class with headgear. It never occurred to the school staff that it made little sense to enforce hat etiquette, rooted in custom from Old Europe, on young Black boys whose families didn’t observe and might not even be aware of such a practise.

I remember how much the language we used differed from the language we encountered in textbooks, worksheets and tests. Most youth from Jane and Finch, and other neighbourhoods in Toronto with similar demographics and socio-economics, speak in a distinctive vernacular that is heavily influenced by Jamaican Patois and African American Vernacular English. I remember how students who struggled with standard English would pay for it on their essays, because teachers considered our variant of the language to be ungrammatical and not suited for academic
work. Also, I don’t recall a serious and systematic effort to help students get a hold of and eventually master the standard forms of speech and writing.

I began to wonder if the people I personally know who had disengaged from learning or dropped out from school all together, did so because of school practises like the ones I describe above? After a while I become convinced that the cultural disconnect between Black culture and the mainstream school culture plays a huge role in the Black-White achievement gap. I still have childhood friends who, after 12 years of formal education, find it very difficult to code-switch between standard English and vernacular, without using the latter as a crutch. It seems to me that urban schools are erasing the home cultures and identities of Black students from the classroom, and also failing to transmit to them the cultural and linguistic tools they need to succeed in mainstream society.

Numerous theories, not based on a cultural explanation, seek to shed light on the causal factors behind the achievement gap between Black and White students, but they’ve either been discredited or suffer from weaknesses. There’s a racialist view which attributes the gap on standardized test scores to genetic differences between Blacks and Whites (Jensen, 1969; Herrnstein and Murray, 1994), but it suffers from a lack of empirical evidence and questionable motivations (Nesbitt, 1998). Others have implicated the poverty and economic disadvantages concentrated in Black communities (Wilson 1996; Massey and Denton, 1993), yet research has shown that economic disparities only account for about a third of the achievement gap (Ogbu, 2003). Some theorists believe the performance differences are due to the nature of standardized tests, which they critique for being overly rigid and unable to account for the overall academic experience (Kozol, 2000; Meier, 2002), and for containing racial biases that put Black students at a disadvantage (Sacks, 1999). Though there is merit to this last view, it cannot completely
account for the achievement gap because it still exists on non-test measures such as grade point averages (Ogbu, 2003).

In this thesis, I use various culture-based theories to analyze what I consider to be a lack of equality of opportunity for Black students who attend urban schools. I don’t focus only on the achievement gap, because I consider it to be merely a symptom of the more general and pressing problem of the lack of equality of opportunity in the public-school system. Unfortunately, schools do not provide a level-playing field for all students. White middle-class students enjoy a continuity between their home culture and the culture they encounter at school and in mainstream society, providing them with advantages in the classroom and after they graduate. Black students from the inner-city find that the culture they were socialized in by their families and communities is quite different from the one they encounter at school and in society at large, which means they face greater academic challenges and more obstacles after they leave formal education.

**Theoretical Framework**

My theoretical framework is rooted in numerous culture-centred sociological and educational theories. One of them is Bourdieu’s (1977) theory of social reproduction and his concept of cultural capital. This theory is concerned with how schools reproduce social inequalities by rewarding students for possessing cultural capital, even though this form of capital is not taught in school and is not evenly distributed among school children. I use the theory of social reproduction to illustrate that equality of opportunity does not exist in the public-school system. As a solution, I call for the teaching of cultural capital in urban schools in order to get closer to a level playing field between Black and White students. As part of the cultural
capital to be taught in urban schools, I include E.D. Hirsch’s (1987) concept of cultural literacy, which constitutes knowledge of the dominant culture.

Also, I use Ladson-Billings’s (1995) culturally relevant pedagogy, itself rooted in cultural difference theory, which calls for schools to utilize the home cultures of minority students in the learning process. I use the theory to make the argument that we can get closer to achieving equality of opportunity in public education if Black students feel at home in school just as much as White students, which can be achieved through culturally relevant teaching. This is important, because bringing the home cultures of Black students into the classroom will balance out and create synergies with the teaching of cultural capital.

I also incorporate John Ogbu’s (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986) oppositional cultural identity theory, which argues that African American students, as a result of being an oppressed group, hold anti-education attitudes and consider doing well in school to be ‘acting White’. I predict that oppositional cultural identity among Black students can be reduced if schools take the dual-pronged approach of making sure teaching is culturally relevant and disseminating the cultural capital needed to navigate mainstream society.

I’ve combined elements from the work of all of these theorists to create a cohesive pedagogical model I call “culturally pragmatic education.”
Culturally Pragmatic Education

Cultural Difference Theory

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Academic Success  →  Linguistic Competence
Synergy

(Home)  Cultural Competence (Mainstream)
Balance

Critical Consciousness  →  Personal Agency
Balance

Decrease in Oppositional Cultural Identity

More Equality of Opportunity

Cultural Reproduction Theory

Cultural Capital
Context

This thesis will focus on the lack of equality of opportunity for Black students in the public-school system, which can be attributed to the failure of urban schools to introduce cultural inputs into the curriculum. I’ve decided to study this issue from an American perspective instead of a Canadian one for three reasons. Firstly, Canada does not collect race-based student data, so it’s difficult to write confidently about the issues covered in this work without enough informational resources. In comparison, the United States government has been collecting and utilizing race-based data for many decades. Secondly, most of the studies that look at the relationship between Black students, culture and urban schools have been conducted in America, and for the most part by American academics.

Lastly, the issues surrounding essentially segregated urban schools in the inner cities is a much more acute problem in America than it is in Canada. In some states like New York, Illinois and California, the majority of African American students attend schools that are 90 percent to 100 percent non-white (Howell & Peterson, 2006). Though there are pockets in the major cities of Canada in which certain schools are attended primarily by Black and other minority Canadians (e.g. Jane and Finch), the kind of extreme racial segregation that is so common in the United States does not exist here in Canada. So, for all of these reasons it seemed prudent to study the issues within the American context.

In the thesis I use the term Black, Black American and African American interchangeably. Also, it’s important to note that I will be focusing specifically on working-class and poor African Americans, who happen to make up the majority of the student body of urban schools in America’s inner-cities (Howell & Peterson, 2006).
Purpose

African American students from the inner-city are only half as likely as White middle-class students to score at the basic skill level on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (Harris & Herrington, 2006). Though the achievement gap rears it ugly head as soon as children begin formal schooling, the gap begins to get progressively wider after grade 3 until the end of high school (Harris & Herrington, 2006). This results in the sobering reality of the average test scores of 17-year-old African American students being equivalent to the average test scores of 13-year-old White students (Harris & Herrington, 2006). Only half of the students who attend urban schools matriculate from high school, and those who do end up graduating are only half as likely to go on to post-secondary education as their White counterparts (Carter, 2005).

These issues are quite dire and are considered as such by the U.S. government and policy-makers, resulting in countless overhauls of urban education within the last couple of decades in an attempt to reverse the achievement gap. But unfortunately, these reforms have either been complete failures or have only led to temporary improvements. In his book *So Much Reform, So Little Change: The Persistence of Failure in Urban Schools*, Charles Payne (2008) lists some of these unsuccessful reform initiatives.

The late 1980’s and entire 1990’s were a period of unprecedented experimentation with ways to improve schools serving low-income children. We saw the national commitment to state-wide accountability systems-led initially by states like North Carolina, Kentucky, and Texas-culminating in the 2002 No Child Left Behind Legislation; the closely related standards-based reform movement and the restructuring movement that preceded it; the transfer of authority from traditional schools boards to mayors; the complete or partial reconstitution of failing schools; state takeovers of failing districts; the $500 million
investment of the Annenberg Foundation in improving schools; the National Science Foundation’s attempt to reshape science and math education in the cities; the small schools movement, the freshman academies, and other forms of personalization of the educational experience; calls for much more intensive forms of professional development and instructional support, including instructional coaching. (p. 3).

It’s interesting to note that none of these interventions have an explicitly cultural component, which I believe may have contributed to their lack of success. The purpose of this thesis is to present a culturally pragmatic approach to Urban Education, with the goal of moving closer to equality of opportunity for all students. I believe a culture-centred reform initiative in urban schools would help to close the achievement gap between Black and White students, and also lead to more opportunities for Black students after they leave school.

**Significance**

Most urban school reforms are intended to reduce the achievement gap, with resources deployed and instructional changes made to achieve this goal. But I find this to be a myopic understanding of the problem in urban schools. The fundamental problem, in my view, is a lack of equality of opportunity for all student in the public education system, which is what leads to the achievement gap, anti-school attitudes and ultimately the socio-economic disparities that have plagued American society throughout its history. It’s this bigger over-arching issue of equality of opportunity that I intend to address through culturally pragmatic education. If we can get closer to solving the root of the problem, we will also get closer to solving the myriad other problems which stem from the root cause.
The culturally pragmatic approach presented in this thesis is also significant for its ability to combine and reconcile pedagogical schools of thought that are considered to be at odds or even antithetical to one another. For example, it includes the views of Gloria Ladson-Billings and her culturally relevant pedagogy, while at the same time making room for E.D. Hirsch’s cultural literacy. This is no small feat, ideologically speaking, and it’s what makes culturally pragmatic education both pragmatic and unique.

**Scope and Limitations**

As I’ve already mentioned, the thesis is embedded in an American context and specifically addresses the plight of African American students in urban schools. But culturally pragmatic education can also be used to help minorities other than Black Americans, such as Latinos and Native Americans. Also, it’s not a location-specific approach, and so it can be used in other countries who have similar issues within their public education system.

As someone without a teaching background, I did not feel qualified going into detailed descriptions of specific pedagogical tools and strategies that could be effective in teaching in a culturally pragmatic manner. If the ideas in this thesis gain traction, then I would be interested in working with experienced teachers and curriculum experts in developing the techniques, strategies and tools that would be the best fit for this approach.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Equality of Opportunity and Public Schools

Equality of opportunity, as it relates to public education, is a highly contentious issue that continues to ignite much debate among academics and policy-makers. But despite the varying views on the topic, a particular position, which we can call the “meritocratic conception” (Birghouse and Swift, 2008), forms the basis for much of mainstream American thinking on the issue (Elford, 2015). According to Brighouse and Swift (2008), the meritocratic conception holds that “an individual’s prospects for educational achievement may be a function of that individual’s talent and effort, but it should not be influenced by his or her social class background” (p. 28) It makes sense that this view would be an influential one because the belief that social class background, and by extension race, which in America is inextricably tied-up with social class, should play no part in the prospects students have for success within school fits with most peoples’ intuitive sense of justice.

But there are two main ways the meritocratic conception is interpreted, each leading to very different pictures of what equality of opportunity should like in schools. The first is the permissive meritocratic conception (Elford, 2015), which views social class as “an objectionable influence only where it determines educational prospects in a way that is not mediated via the cultivation of talent and/or effort” (Elford, 2015, p. 269). In other words, schools should provide all students, regardless of background, with the same quality and quantity of instruction, the same standards and assessments and equal educational resources, with the only differentiating factors being individual levels of student talent and effort.
On the other hand, there is the restrictive meritocratic conception (Elford, 2015), which recognizes that social class itself plays a role in academic achievement. This perspective holds that “social class is an objectionable determinant of the prospects for educational achievement, including in the case where it determines those prospects via the cultivation of talent and/or effort” (Elford, 2015, p. 271). Since schools have no means, practically speaking (and possibly morally as well), of removing from students the talent and effort cultivated by their advantaged backgrounds, this restrictive meritocratic view instead opts to use supplemental educational and monetary inputs to give disadvantaged students a boost.

**Cultural Deficit Theory**

The cultural deficit theory holds that Black students from lower socio-economic status backgrounds don’t do as well in school compared to White and higher SES students due to cultural deprivation experienced in the home. Hess and Shipman (1965) argued that African American children struggle in school because their home environment is not conducive to the development of cognitive skills, concept formation, and the ability to engage in abstract reasoning.

Deutsch (1963) believed that a reduced exposure to a variety of stimulus inputs resulted in lower-class children becoming deficient in various cognitive abilities, such as perceptual discrimination, attentional mechanisms, expectation of reward for completed tasks and ability to use adults as sources of information. Since these are skills required to do well in academic settings, Deutsch pointed to these deficiencies as an explanation for the achievement gap between lower-class and middle/upper class students.
Bereiter and Engelmann (1966) saw language as the source of the academic woes of African American families. They were of the view that children from African American families speak language that is ungrammatical, disjointed and incapable of expressing abstract ideas, and thus not suitable for educational success.

Bernstein (1964) also focused on language with his linguistic categories of “elaborated code” and “restricted code.” He found that middle class families spoke and wrote in an elaborated code, which is language characterized by depth, complexity and creativity, while working class families, on the other hand, could communicate only in a restricted code. Because an elaborated code is expected in school, students from working-class families often lag behind other students as a result of their limited linguistic repertoire.

Cultural Difference Theory

Cultural difference theory posits that the home cultures of Black and working-class youth are not deficient, but rather merely different from mainstream middle-class culture. Labov’s (1969) work comparing African American Vernacular English with Standard English greatly bolstered cultural difference theory, because it showed that African Americans spoke in a variety of English that was structured, systematic and rule-governed, just like Standard English. This meant that African American students weren’t coming to school with a linguistic deficiency as a result of the cultural deprivation in their environments, as argued by the cultural difference theorists, but instead they brought into the classroom a different variety of English.

Nell Keddie (1973) argues that working-class children are not culturally deprived and that propagating such a view is tantamount to victim blaming. For Keddie, it makes little sense to talk in terms of cultural deprivation because a child cannot be deprived of their own culture.
Working class children are culturally different, but this difference becomes a disadvantage in a school system dominated by middle-class culture.

Ladson-Billings (1995), a proponent of cultural difference theory, has created a pedagogical approach she calls “culturally relevant pedagogy,” which is intended to address the shortcomings of schools as it pertains to the education of African American and other minority students. Culturally relevant teaching values the home cultures of the students and introduces them into the classroom to create a more engaging and inclusive educational experience. According to Ladson-Billings, for teaching to be considered truly culturally relevant, students must experience academic success, develop and/or maintain cultural competence, and develop a critical consciousness through which students challenge the status quo of the current world order.

**Cultural Reproduction Theory**

Bourdieu’s (1977) theory of cultural reproduction is concerned with the link between original class membership and ultimate class membership, and how this link is mediated by the education system. According to Bourdieu, the education systems of industrialised societies function in such a way as to legitimate and reproduce class inequalities. Success in the education system is facilitated by the possession of cultural capital. For Bourdieu, cultural capital encompasses a broad array of linguistic competencies, manners, preferences and orientations, which he terms “subtle modalities in the relationship to culture and language” (Bourdieu, 1977, p.82). Being that cultural capital is unevenly distributed between the classes, working-class students do not in general possess these traits, so the educational difficulties faced by many of them is inevitable. This explains class, and by extension racial, inequalities in educational attainment and the continuity or reproduction of the social status quo.
Theory of Oppositional Cultural Identity

John Ogbu (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Ogbu, 2003) has put forth a cultural opposition theory to explain the Black-White achievement gap in the United States. This theory postulates that many African American students are part of an oppositional peer culture that views many attitudes and behaviours that are required for doing well in school as equivalent to “acting White.” Since the relationship between Blacks and Whites in America has historically, and in many ways still is, characterized by oppression and discrimination, Black students recognize the expectations of the White power structure within schools to be a symbol of this oppression. For this reason, they refrain from adopting “White” attitudes, behaviours and speech in order to safeguard and preserve their own cultural identity as African Americans. In this context, assimilating into the dominant school culture would be deemed a betrayal of Black people, Black culture and Black linguistic patterns.
Chapter 3: Culture and Equality of Opportunity

Equality of Opportunity and Public Education

The connection between the social context a child is raised in and their achievement in school has been well known in educational circles ever since James Coleman’s 1966 study titled *Equality of Educational Opportunity*. The seminal study, commonly referred to as the “Coleman Report”, showed that the family background of students was a large factor in determining their schooling outcomes. Coleman’s study was the first to bring the Black-White achievement gap to public attention and did so by showing that educational disparities were largely a result of differences in the home environments between Black students, who were mostly working-class or poor, and White students, who were mostly middle-class.

John Rawls, who is a proponent of the meritocratic conception of equality of opportunity, which he calls “fair equality of opportunity,” readily admits that social background cannot be separated from talent and effort. He says,

The extent to which natural capacities develop and reach fruition is affected by all kinds of social conditions and class attitudes. Even the willingness to make an effort, to try, and so be deserving in the ordinary sense is itself dependent on happy family and social circumstances (Rawls 1971, p. 74).

The ways in which social class can mediate academic achievement are numerous. Middle-upper class families have more financial resources than low-income families, which they can use to purchase books, computers and other educational resources for their children (Lareau, 1987). Parents with higher socio-economic status are usually more educated than their low-income counterparts, which means they can help their children with homework and supplement
the instruction they receive in the classroom (Lareau, 1987). Also, the extent to which parents encourage educational achievement has a class basis, which in turn results in students from middle and upper-class families showing more diligence and effort in school-related tasks (Elford, 2015). In addition, low-income families have higher rates of single-parent households, which is correlated with lower academic achievement for students living with only one parent (Barajas, 2011).

These social class realities, which cannot be separated from race, have been taken into account by both government and policy-makers and have led to some changes intended to level the playing field. One such initiative is the Head Start program run by the United States Department of Health and Human Services, that gives children from qualifying low-income families access to improved nutrition, health services and early childhood education. Among the aims of the program is develop the cognitive skills of the children, so they can do well academically when they start school (Anderson et al., 2003). The effectiveness of The Head Start program has been called into question, with some studies finding that improvements begin to fade out by the 3rd grade (Lee, Brooks-Gunn, Schnur, & Liaw, 1990). With the limited utility of Head Start and other supplemental programs like it, the fact remains that the vast majority of students in America enter school either being academically advantaged or disadvantaged by their social class background.

How equality of opportunity can be achieved in public education is an important issue for all segments of American society. But it’s especially important for the students of urban schools in the inner cities and their parents, most of whom are African Americans from low socio-economic status backgrounds. That’s because they’re the population group that efforts to level the educational playing field are intended to help, and the failures to do so will have profound
effects on their future trajectories and life outcomes. With increased funding for urban schools showing very little improvement in student performance (Hanushek 2016), and Head start’s failure to narrow the achievement gap (Hanushek, 2016), I think it’s important we look beyond monetary and non-culture based instructional inputs as the means to achieving equality of educational opportunity.

I put forward a restrictive meritocratic view that specifically looks at the academic and overall life advantages accruing to White middle and upper-class students from cultural factors inherent in their socio-economic backgrounds. Students from Black low-income families do not have these same advantages, and to remedy this imbalance I propose specific cultural inputs be included in the curriculums of urban schools. In the remainder of the chapter I will look at why I believe cultural factors are central to the question of equality of opportunity in public schools. But first, I want to briefly look at an important distinction that is rarely made in discussions of equality of opportunity.

Is equality of opportunity in education important for its own sake, or is it important because education is a vehicle to better life outcomes? This question brings to the fore the distinction between equality of opportunity for education and equality of opportunity through education (Lazenby, 2016). In the former view, education is conceived of as having intrinsic value, while in the latter view education is thought to have instrumental value that allows one to acquire various goods on offer within society and to avoid potential social, physical and financial hazards (Lazenby, 2016). Research shows that people with higher levels of education enjoy better health (Schillinger, Barton, Karter, Wang & Adler, 2006), higher incomes (De Gergorio & Lee, 2002), more stable marriages (Copen, Daniels, Vespa & Mosher, 2012) and a host of other benefits. I hold the position that equality of opportunity in education is imperative not just for its
own sake, but because education, especially with the cultural elements I will expound upon in this work, is a means to achieving better life outcomes in general, especially for the disadvantaged students in urban schools.

**Why does Culture Matter?**

Culture is an important part of the conversation on equality of opportunity in education in America. This is because the cultural identity of the United States is not a monolith, where all the various socio-economic and racial groups share the same norms, customs, values and behaviours. Instead, the various social classes and racial communities differ in ways that impact educational and general life outcomes. For example, White middle-class parents engage in what can be described as “concerted cultivation” with the intent to develop the talents of their children, while Black working-class parents allow the talents of their children to develop naturally (Lareau & Weininger, 2003). When it comes to patterns of communication, White middle-class parents tend to use extensive reasoning when speaking to their children, while African American working-class parents tend talk to their kids with the use of directives (Lareau & Weininger, 2003). There are also differences along class lines in the sense of entitlement fostered in children by their parents. Middle-class children show a higher sense of entitlement when dealing with professionals and adults outside of the home when compared to working-class children (Lareau & Weininger, 2003).

An example of racially based cultural differences in American society is the linguistic differences between African American Vernacular English (AAVE), spoken by millions of black people in America, and the varieties of English deemed to be more standard (Wolfram, 1998). Throughout the history of American race relations AAVE has been considered by much of the majority population, including many professional educators, as a form of expression that is lazy,
uneducated, or otherwise ‘substandard’ or deficient (Richardson, 1998). Standard American English is the expected norm for communication in a public forum, such as government, education, or media (Richardson, 1998). A study by Ladson-Billings (2005) showed that standard American English was preferred to AAVE by all participants, both White and Black, on several key measures, including on all measures of competence. That even the Black participants in the study preferred standard American English on all measures of competence just goes to show how entrenched value-laden beliefs about cultural and linguistic differences are within America.

Negative appraisals of working-class and African American culture are not confined only to popular perceptions, but have also found a home within academic circles. In the 1960’s a collection of academics propagated variations of a cultural deficit theory to explain why African American and working-class children lagged behind their White middle-class counterparts in academic achievement. The cultural deficit theory holds that students from minority and lower socio-economic status backgrounds don’t do as well in school compared to White middle-class students as a result of cultural deprivation experienced in the home (Fayden, 2015; Valencia, 1997). Some of the deficit based explanations that were put forth included: African American and working-class homes are not conducive to the development of cognitive skills and abstract reasoning (Hess & Shipman 1965; Deutsch, 1963); children from African American families speak language that is ungrammatical, disjointed and incapable of expressing abstract ideas, and thus not suitable for educational success (Bereiter & Engelmann, 1966); and that working class families spoke in a restricted code of speech characterized by lack of depth, complexity and creativity that differed from the elaborate code expected in school (Bernstein, 1964). Unfortunately, such views have remained influential and form the basis for thinking in certain
academic circles, with even well-known public intellectuals unapologetically employing such arguments. For example, Dinesh D’ souza (1995), in his book *The End of Racism*, has a chapter entitled “the pathologies of black culture,” and the famous economist Thomas Sowell (1995) had this to say about what he calls handicaps in Black “ghetto culture,”

Ghetto youths who think talking jive, getting girls pregnant and being belligerent are all part of black identity do not realize how much they are just a throwback to ignorant white…Young people in the ghettos do not have any kingdoms to lose. They only have a future to lose. That future is going to belong to whoever can function in the high-tech, internationally competitive world. Those who cling to the obsolete past are going to be left behind…those blacks who have not yet made it beyond the cultural handicaps of the past are being encouraged to cling to this millstone around their necks (p. 8).

I believe cultural deficit theorists make two mistakes. One is their assertion that African American culture suffers from deficits. What these theorists call cultural deficits are in fact differences between African American culture and the dominant mainstream culture (Keddie, 1973; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Many of the academic problems minority and working-class students face in the classroom can be attributed to differences and discontinuities between their home culture and the culture they encounter at school (Keddie, 1973; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Labov’s (1969) work comparing African American Vernacular English with Standard English greatly bolstered cultural difference theory, because it showed that African Americans spoke in a variety of English that was structured, systematic and rule-governed, just like Standard English. This shows that African American students aren’t coming to school with a linguistic deficiency as a result of the cultural deprivation in their environments, as argued by the cultural difference theorists. Instead they bring into the classroom a different variety of English. An insistence on
viewing the problem through a deficit lens is not only misguided but also tantamount to victim-blaming.

By pin-pointing the problem entirely in the culture of African Americans, cultural deficit theorists make another mistake, which is to essentially absolve the school system from playing a role in the creation and maintenance of differential educational outcomes along racial and class lines. Instead, schools should be interrogated as sites that fail to provide equality of opportunity for all groups, because some students must overcome obstacles that do not stand in the way of others. A major obstacle to learning is the fact that cultural difference is not recognized in most urban schools in North America. This means African American students do not have their home cultures validated, valued and included in the classroom, while White students can take it for granted that their home culture and the school culture will be congruent. Whether policy-makers, administrators and teachers intend to or not, the exclusion of the home cultures of Black students from schools, and in some cases their active discouragement (e.g. telling students not to speak in African American Vernacular English), communicates the message that only the dominant culture has value. This can have deleterious academic and psychological effects on Black children, who may view schools to be an alien and hostile place where they cannot be themselves.

In addition to urban schools not creating room for cultural differences, they also expect Black students to be just as adept at navigating the dominant school culture as their White middle-class counterparts. This reality masks the creation and maintenance of inequality with a veneer of meritocracy. To put it another way, schools function in a manner that assumes minority and working-class students possess the cultural capital required to succeed, despite the fact that such cultural capital is distributed unevenly along class lines and is acquired primarily from the home.
It’s unreasonable for schools to expect from these students the possession and deployment of cultural capital that it does not give to them. Bourdieu (1997) describes this reality saying,

By doing away with giving explicitly to everyone what it implicitly demands of everyone, the education system demands of everyone alike that they have what it does not give. This consists mainly of linguistic and cultural competence and that relationship of familiarity with culture which can only be produced by family upbringing when it transmits the dominant culture. (p. 494)

Take for example a middle school teacher who presents a short poem to her class, asking the students to analyze and interpret its meaning. Such a task assumes both linguistic and cultural competence that many Black working-class and poor students will not have. Depending on the complexity of the poem, these students may not have mastery of the vocabulary required and they may be quite unfamiliar with the style, rhythm and often figurative and allegorical meanings that are part and parcel of the poems valued as art in the dominant culture. Compare this with their White middle-class counterparts, the majority of whom would be quite comfortable with interpreting the poem, as it would be at least a somewhat familiar task, for which they would have the necessary cultural capital. But even though Black working-class pupils are seriously disadvantaged in the classroom and in the competition for educational credentials, the results of this competition are seen as meritocratic and therefore as legitimate (Sullivan, 2001). The few minority and working-class students who do end up doing well are used as proof that the education system provides equality of opportunity, even though in reality it serves to maintain and reproduce socio-economic inequalities.
Why Culturally Relevant Pedagogy isn’t Enough

Fortunately, the absence of the home cultures of African American students from urban schools, and the problems this poses has not gone unnoticed by academics. Numerous scholars in the field of education have argued that the dominant mainstream culture, which is essentially White and middle-class in nature, alienates and sidelines cultural minority students and contributes to their poor academic performance (Fayden, 2015; Ladson Billings, 1995; Valencia, 1997). Together their views have coalesced around a field of scholarship that promotes what is referred to as culturally relevant pedagogy. This approach to education has also been described as culturally congruent (Au & Kawakami, 1985, 1994; Mohatt and Erickson, 1981), culturally responsive (Erickson, 1987; Gay, 2000), culturally appropriate (Au & Jordan, 1981) and culturally compatible (Jordan, 1985). It calls for teachers to become knowledgeable about the cultures of minority students in their classrooms and use what they’ve learned to inform their teaching, with the aims of engaging the students and using content that is culturally familiar as scaffolds to enhance their learning (Ladson-billings, 1995). Jordan (1985) describes this approach by saying,

Educational practices must match with the children's culture in ways which ensure the generation of academically important behaviors. It does not mean that all school practices need be completely congruent with natal cultural practices, in the sense of exactly or even closely matching or agreeing with them. The point of cultural compatibility is that the natal culture is used as a guide in the selection of educational program elements so that academically desired behaviors are produced and undesired behaviors are avoided. (p.110)
Gloria-Ladson Billings, who is responsible for popularizing the term culturally relevant pedagogy, has a model of the approach that I find useful and will form an integral part of the pedagogical approach that will be introducing in this thesis. It has three focal points: academic excellence, cultural competence and critical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 1995). In this model, academic success is made central to the overall goals of the approach. This success is predicated on the high expectations of teachers for their students, who it is hoped will internalize such expectations and begin performing at their full potential. This is important, because low teacher expectations for Black working-class students has been shown to negatively impact their academic development (Rist, 1970). Instead of viewing the social identities of African American students as a deficit or limitation, culturally relevant teachers use these student traits as assets in the pursuit of academic success.

Cultural competence is another of the focal points in this model, with the purpose of bringing the home cultures of minority students into the classroom in order to make them feel comfortable and valued and help them develop positive identities (Ladson-Billings, 1995). This is very important, because students from minority cultures may feel pressured to shed manifestations of their own cultural beliefs and norms and assimilate into the dominant mainstream culture of the school, which often has negative emotional, psychological and academic consequences (Sheets, 1999). So, this focus on creating space for and welcoming Black cultural identities allows students to maintain competency in their home cultures, which can also be used as tools in the learning process. Billings (1995) gives the example of a sixth-grade teacher named Ann Lewis who she describes as “culturally Black,”

In her sixth-grade classroom, Lewis encouraged the students to use their home language while they acquired the secondary discourse (Gee, 1989) of “standard” English. Thus, her
students were permitted to express themselves in language (in speaking and writing) with which they were knowledgeable and comfortable. They were then required to “translate” to the standard form. (p. 161).

The third and final part of culturally relevant teaching is critical consciousness. This means teachers should try and produce students who look at the world critically. Students who have a broad sociopolitical consciousness that allows them to re-evaluate and “critique the cultural norms, values, mores, and institutions that produce and maintain social inequities” (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 162). Such students will be cognizant of the distribution of power and privilege within society and will recognize that membership in White middle-class circles affords individuals certain privileges in society not afforded to those who do not fit that profile.

Culturally relevant teaching can be used to remedy the problem of cultural exclusion in urban schools, since it’s a pedagogical approach which utilizes the cultures of minority students in the classroom. But urban schools still need to grapple with the fact that many of their students do not come into school with the cultural capital needed to navigate and succeed within the dominant culture that permeates schools, other institutions and mainstream society in general. So, in addition to providing culturally relevant teaching, urban schools need to start giving to their students the cultural capital that it erroneously assumes they bring with them into school. Without imparting the cultural capital required to achieve the academic credentials and obtain the social and economic goods on offer in Western capitalist societies, equality of opportunity through public education will remain a chimera.

To move towards achieving equality of opportunity through public education I propose that urban schools adopt what I call “culturally pragmatic education.” This approach brings together and synthesizes culturally relevant teaching and cultural capital in an effort to create a
school environment that provides all students with an equal playing field. It’s pragmatic in that it takes a realistic view of what is required for Black low SES students to succeed in Western capitalist nations. Relying solely on culturally relevant teaching to equip students in urban schools for success can be thought of as naive. Though utilizing the home cultures of students as vehicles for learning and for positive identity formation is very important, it does not change the fact that these students will be expected to navigate the dominant culture and will be judged against its hegemonic framework (Lareau & Weininger, 2003). This means they require the knowledge, skills, habits and orientations that constitute the cultural capital that is valued by the dominant culture within mainstream society.

Culturally pragmatic education is about providing an education that values and utilizes the cultures of minority students while simultaneously imparting the linguistic and cultural tools to do well in school and broader society. This, in my view, essentially covers the most pressing educational needs of students within urban schools and transforms equality of opportunity through education from a pipe dream to a goal we can come close to achieving.

**Acting “White”**

Many Black students develop a cultural identity that is at odds with the mainstream culture they encounter at school (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Ogbu, 2003). As members of a group that continues to experience discrimination and oppression within American society, schools are perceived as one of the institutions of the oppressive White power structure. So as a form of protest or resistance, Black students adopt values that clash with the mainstream values they’re taught in school, because they become associated with “White” values (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Ogbu, 2003). Black students who try to assimilate into the dominant school culture by changing their behaviours, the way they talk, and their study habits often have their Blackness called into
question by their peers and accused of “acting White” (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Ogbu, 2003). The peer pressure to maintain an authentic Black identity can dissuade many African American students from engaging in behaviours that are conducive to succeeding in school. Ogbu (1998) gives some examples from his research of what is considered White culture in schools,

What the students reject that hurt their academic performance are “‘White’ attitudes and behaviors conducive to making good grades (Ogbu & Simons, H.D., 1998). In Shaker Heights, for example, they include speaking standard English, enrollment in Honors and AP classes, being smart during lessons and having too many White friends. In Oakland, they include talking proper, studying a lot or doing homework everyday, having mostly White friends, taking hard/advanced placement courses, acting like a nerd, taking mathematics and science classes, spending a lot of time in the library and reading a lot. (p. 57).

Some have taken Ogbon’s oppositional cultural identity theory to be holding Black culture responsible for the academic challenges of Black students, and thus they view it as a form of “blaming the victim.” With this misguided understanding of Ogbon’s work, they placed his perspective alongside the various cultural deficit theories that pinpoint the problem of Black underachievement within the “deficiencies” inherent in Black cultural and linguistic norms. As a result, Ogbon’s theory of oppositional cultural identity has not been well received by some scholars in the field of education, because it’s been interpreted as absolving systematic and structural realities in society from playing a role in racial disparities in educational achievement (Hamann, 2004). In fact, this association between the oppositional culture theory and cultural deficit theories has made Ogbon almost taboo in some academic circles. Edmund Hamann (2004)
relates what transpired when a paper he wrote on student mobility was presented at a Task 3 meeting:

At a national Task 3 meeting at the end of August in 2001 at which I was not present, the draft student mobility paper was harshly criticized for reflecting a cultural deficit point of view, with the citation of Ogbu as the proof of that allegation. In the piece I used most heavily in my dissertation and the draft paper (Ogbu, 1987) and in his final book (Ogbu, 2003), Ogbu explicitly claims not to be operating from that framework. Nonetheless, it was my citing of his work that had led to that charge. (p. 404)

This is unfortunate, because oppositional cultural identity theory makes a sharp break with cultural deficit theories, since it does not blame the individual nor Black culture for the academic and socio-economic circumstances African American students find themselves in. Instead, it is oppression and societal discrimination which is the causal factor that Ogbu (1986) implicates, which in turn creates the conditions for the manifestation of oppositional cultural and linguistic forms on the part of Black students, which is used a form of resistance to the oppressive power structure. In other words, African American students aren’t struggling academically vis-à-vis White students because they’re part of a deficient and dysfunctional culture; they’re struggling because they respond to historical and current discrimination and disenfranchisement with an oppositional cultural ethos at odds with the mainstream culture of their oppressors, in order to protect their cultural identity.

Though the empirical evidence for “the burden of acting White” is mixed (Mocombe, 2011), the numerous studies which have found solid support for the existence of an oppositional culture among African American students definitely make a case for its role in the lack of achievement among black students in urban schools. But this theory doesn’t fully explain the
achievement gap because the academic disparities between Black and White students start early in elementary school, before students can conceive of the notion of “acting White.” This shows that schools, especially urban schools, are not sites of equal opportunity from the outset and the later development of an oppositional cultural identity among black students is a response to this. It’s schools on their own that create and maintain the differential academic outcomes between Black and White students, and the oppositional cultural identity which develops as a result only serves to exacerbate these educational disparities.

The fact that urban schools do not utilize the home cultures of African American students leads to the maintenance and reproduction of racial inequality, which in turns sets the stage for oppositional cultural identity among black students. It makes intuitive sense that Black students would resist assimilating into the dominant culture of schools when there is no room for their own. For many, giving in to this one-way acculturation is tantamount to betraying one’s roots and giving up self-respect. Based on her ethnographic findings in a community college, Weis (1985) found that,

students more or less interpreted mastering academic work as a one-way acculturation. A Black professor told the researcher that “a lot of Black students see (the academic world) as a White world…(If I) tell students, ‘you’re going to be excellent…’ often times excellence means being…White….and that kind of excellence is negative here.” (p. 100).

Cultural capital is not included in the curriculums of urban schools and this may also be contributing to the aversion of Black students to what they perceive as “acting White,” because it confirms to them, consciously or subconsciously, that the game of education is rigged against them. Rigged in the sense that schools expect from students and reward them for having certain
cultural traits, sensibilities, habits and behaviours which are not explicitly taught. Such cultural capital is not evenly distributed along racial and class lines, and so Black low SES students who don’t possess such cultural capital are at a great disadvantage. The importance of cultural capital on academic and life outcomes is not lost on many African Americans, who Ogbu (2008) refers to as assimilationists. He relates how,

Assimilationists try very hard to talk like White people. Some go for special coaching to ‘‘talk better’’ in order to keep their job or get promoted. Some send their children to private school where they will learn to ‘‘talk better’’ or to ensure that they learn to ‘‘speak White’’ when they have to, such as at school, on the job, and in the company of ‘‘better class of people. (Ogbu, 2008, p. 49).

It seems that it’s also not lost on the Black students who take on an oppositional cultural identity, because trying to do well academically may seem futile when schools won’t give you the cultural capital other students get from their families.

Culturally pragmatic education addresses both the lack of culturally relevant pedagogy and lack of cultural capital dissemination in urban schools, with the aim of bringing about equality of opportunity. For this reason, it’s an approach that can also reduce oppositional culture identity, because new school norms, which recognize diversity and teach mainstream cultural tools for success, would no longer be viewed as oppressive and unfair by African American students.
Chapter 4: Cultural Capital

What is Cultural Capital?

A major component of culturally pragmatic education is the explicit transmission of cultural capital through the curriculum. It’s not possible to give African American students from the inner-city an equal opportunity for success within modern Western society unless the pedagogical paradigm within urban schools addresses their lack of cultural capital. Research shows that schools do not play a major role in transmitting linguistic ability, cultural knowledge and other forms of cultural capital, and this lack of school effect is evidence that cultural capital is transmitted in the home (Sullivan, 2001). On the other hand, cultural capital has been shown to have an affect on test scores and academic performance. (Sullivan, 2001).

The fact that school rewards students on tests and assessed coursework for demonstrating cultural capital that is not explicitly taught to them serves to institutionalize the reproduction of inequality, because cultural capital is not evenly distributed between groups. It is unlikely, and can be argued undesirable, that urban schools will adopt a form of assessment that does not reward for the display of cultural capital. This presents a conundrum that in my view can be adequately addressed only when urban schools incorporate knowledge, styles and behaviours associated with the dominant culture into the curriculum.

Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital is not clearly defined, and thus has been defined and operationalized in different ways by various theorists and researchers. A common definition of the concept found in the literature is cultural capital as the consumption of “high brow” or formal cultural products (Prieur & Savage, 2013). For instance, De Graaf (1986), in his operationalization of cultural capital, uses a measure of the number of visits per month to
museums, galleries, theatres and historical buildings. But this definition of cultural capital is problematic for a number of reasons. Firstly, this interpretation of cultural capital as “high brow” cultural forms is not in keeping with Bourdieu’s own conception of the term. For Bourdieu cultural capital is any “competence” that facilitates the appropriation “of the cultural heritage” of a society, and creates “exclusive advantages” as a result of it being unequally distributed between groups (Lareau & Weininger, 2003, p. 579). There is nothing in this definition that points to “high brow’ and formal cultural products being inherent facets of cultural capital.

Bourdieu’s emphasis on competence presents another weakness of the “high brow” definition, because research has shown that consumption of formal culture merely serves to communicate status and has little to no effect on the development of competencies and skills, while other forms of cultural capital, like reading and television viewing, do (Sullivan, 2001). According to Sullivan (2001),

Pupils' reading and television viewing habits each account for a significant proportion of the variance in linguistic ability and cultural knowledge, whereas participation in formal culture does not. This backs the view that reading develops the intellectual abilities of pupils, whereas participation in formal culture does not. This could be interpreted as supporting the views of Crook (1997) that public cultural participation serves to communicate status, whereas private cultural consumption is a means of intellectual self-development. Television watching is not an indicator of cultural capital that has been used by previous authors, but television, in common with books, transmits information and may introduce an individual to new vocabulary and styles of expression. (p. 22).

Another reason why conceiving of cultural capital as formal capital has limited utility is because “high brow” tastes and dispositions no longer hold the same currency within mainstream
society as they once did (Prieur & Savage, 2013). Holt (1997) argues that the “crux of the postmodern condition is the breakdown of the hierarchy distinguishing legitimate ‘high’ culture from mass ‘low’ culture, as well as the breakdown of the direct relationship between such classifications and class” (p. 103). What has developed, specifically among the middle and upper classes, is a sort of eclecticism. According to Prieur and Savage (2013),

eclecticism may be a new form of cultural capital, together with the confident handling of classifications. Rather than a sign of its demise, openness to diversity is itself a modality of cultural capital, since it is especially highly valued among those in the higher positions. (p. 256)

A middle-class youth from the suburbs may know Mozart, has probably heard some Frank Sinatra and can most likely name one or two rap songs by 2pac Shakur. This eclectic cultural consumption and openness to diversity, exhibited by those in the middle and upper classes, allows them to comfortably navigate institutions and the majority of social situations, leading to favorable evaluations and thus social and material benefits.

The culturally pragmatic model will utilize the definition of cultural capital developed by Lareau and Weininger (2003). In their article, Cultural capital in education research: A critical assessment they state,

Our conception (of cultural capital) emphasizes micro-interactional processes whereby individuals’ strategic use of knowledge, skills, and competence comes into contact with institutionalized standards of evaluation. These specialized skills are transmissible across generations, are subject to monopoly, and may yield advantages or “profits” (p. 569)
I have chosen this conception because it captures the essential components of cultural capital and its role in Bourdieu’s theory of social reproduction. It recognizes that this form of capital consists of knowledge, skills, and competence and that it’s value is acknowledged by socially institutionalized criteria. Also, it highlights the fact that cultural capital is inherited through the family, and that it’s an unevenly distributed asset that provides those who have it with various socio-economic advantages.

It’s important to note that the advantages one gains from acquiring cultural capital go beyond better test scores, favourable evaluations from teachers, higher educational credentials and other school related benefits. Cultural capital also, and maybe more importantly, allows one to acquire various privileges and opportunities on offer within society. This can be in the form of higher-paying jobs, better customer service or increased likelihood for being approved for a loan. It also allows one to successfully navigate situations with potentially negative outcomes, such as knowing how to speak to authority figures to avoid sanctions. This is why I view culturally pragmatic education, and specifically its focus on the transmission of cultural capital to African American students in urban schools, as a means to achieve equality of opportunity through education, and not merely for education. It’s not enough that all students get the same opportunity to succeed in school, instead it’s crucial for a democratic society that the public education that is offered allows everyone an equal shot at achieving desired social and economic outcomes.

In my view the development of linguistic competence, mainstream cultural competence and personal agency are the most critical skills and competences for students in urban schools. In accordance with the definition above, how much students develop these abilities will determine how well they do in institutions and social arenas, like schools and the job market, with standards
of evaluation based on the dominant culture. Also, because these skills and competences are unequally transmitted through the family, schools can and should be used to mitigate these inequalities so that every student will have a fair shot at success.

**Linguistic Competence**

Linguistic competence in standard English, or the ability to effectively understand and use spoken and written standard forms of the language, is a key determinant of academic success and employment and salary prospects (Atkins, 1993). But this skill is not evenly distributed and shows strong stratification along racial and socio-economic lines. Studies have shown that African American children score lower on tests that assess early reading, writing, basic vocabulary and decoding skills when compared to White children of the same age (Fryer & Levitt, 2004; Jencks & Phillips, 1998). It is estimated that up to 70% of eighth-grade minority students from low-income households do not meet basic comprehension requirements (Balfanz, Spiridakis & Neild, 2002). Many students in urban schools eventually hit a “literacy ceiling” by the time they’re in middle school, meaning they’re unable to "independently access the knowledge and information embedded in the books and other printed materials that are part of a curriculum" (Higgins, 2007, p. 71).

This has dire consequences for many African American students, because without the literacy skills and linguistic repertoire to fully comprehend, analyze and synthesize the knowledge they are being exposed to in the classroom, meeting academic requirements becomes an unreachable goal. The implications also go beyond the school walls, because these same literacy and linguistics competencies are required in other mainstream settings and institutions, such as job interviews, courts, public speaking, civic engagement and consuming and participating in media. This greatly curtails the opportunities open to many African American
students, and partially explains the persistence of the pernicious inequality that has characterized American society for centuries.

This disparity in linguistic competence between Black and White students is evident even before children begin formal schooling, which indicates that the home environment is primarily responsible for the perceived differences (Hart & Risley, 1995). It is estimated that for the first years of life, children from low socio-economic status families hear approximately 30 million fewer words within the home than children from more affluent families (Hart & Risley, 1995). These early experiences children have with their parents have such a profound effect on their linguistic abilities that they reliably predict their academic performance at age 9-10 (Hart & Risley, 1995). Another reason why many African American students struggle with the language used in school is that the kind of English they speak at home is not the same variety used in the classroom (Labov, 1969; Wolfram, 1998). These students speak a variety of the language known as African American Vernacular English, also commonly referred to as Ebonics, that differs both grammatically and lexically from standard English (Labov, 1969; Wolfram, 1998). Upon starting school, the task of most students in public education is to build on their existing linguistic foundation, while for most African American students it’s to build a new foundation in a new variety of English before they can even begin to properly build on their knowledge.

Though the evidence shows that the disparities in literacy between low SES Black students and White middle-class students originates in the home, it does not force one to take a deficit based view that places blame at the feet of parents and African American culture. Hart & Risley (1995), the authors who brought to light the 30-million-word gap, were careful not to have their work interpreted as propagating a cultural deficit narrative by making it clear that their research actually showed the opposite. They state,
While we were observing in the homes, though we were aware that the families were very different in lifestyles, they were all similarly engaged in the fundamental task of raising a child. All the families nurtured their children and played and talked with them. They all disciplined their children and taught them good manners and how to dress and toilet themselves. They provided their children with much the same toys and talked to them about much the same things. Though different in personality and skill levels, the children all learned to talk and to be socially appropriate members of the family (Hart & Risley, 1995, p.7).

It’s important to recognize that African American working-class parents socialize their children to be able to function and flourish within their specific web of social relations, communities and culture. It makes little sense to speak of deficits when these children are raised with all the linguistic and cultural tools they need to navigate the culture within their communities. Just because they do not have all of the cultural capital to successfully navigate the Euro-centric capitalist culture of the West does not mean they’re suffering from a deficit. Such a view assumes that mainstream White middle-class culture is the standard, and that other ways of being are deficient to the extent that they deviate from it. But if we were to make inner-city Black culture the standard against which other cultures are judged, then all of a sudden it would be White middle and upper-class Americans that are “culturally deficient” since they would have a very hard time communicating, behaving, dressing and expressing similar attitudes and norms as Black people. This just demonstrates how ludicrous it is to speak in the language of deficits when we should be speaking of differences. Speaking on the destructive nature of deficit views pertaining to African American students E.D Hirsch (2007) says,
Telling children that their home speech is somehow inferior sends the cruel message that these children and their homes are inferior too, a disparagement that, besides inflicting psychological damage, could very well discourage them from enthusiastically learning the language of reading and writing. No good school or teachers wants to send such a harmful message. (p. 56).

The disparity in linguistic competence between groups is at its root a cultural capital gap, which I believe can and should be addressed by urban schools. African American students from working-class homes do not come into school with strong enough command of standard English, nor with the same repertoire of vocabulary as their White middle-class counterparts, and these differences persist throughout middle and high school (Hart & Risley, 1995). If we wish to achieve equality of opportunity through education, urban schools must put into effect the necessary curricular and pedagogical changes that are required to create a level playing field between African American and other students. In her study of cultural capital and educational attainment, Allice Sullivan (2001) found that reading, and to a lesser extent television viewing habits, made significant differences in the linguistics ability and cultural knowledge students had, which in turn had a major effect on academic success.

Therefore, in order to help close this cultural capital gap, urban schools need to place a greater emphasis on reading, so that minority and lower-class students can develop wider vocabularies and the linguistic competencies that are evaluated positively by schools and other institutions and settings. For example, this could entail giving less activity and task based home work, and instead ask students to read books of their choosing for homework and write short reflections on what they’ve read. Also, teachers should assign the viewing of quality television programs, documentaries and online videos, as other means of building up the linguistic
competence of students (Sullivan, 2001). Overall the goal of urban schools should be to create a culture of curiosity that is expressed through reading, writing, listening and reflecting.

**Cultural Competence**

Competence in mainstream Western culture gives one the ability to successfully navigate social institutions, settings and contexts, resulting in a greater ability to take advantage of the opportunities and goods on offer within society. An important component of cultural competence is cultural literacy, a term created by E. D. Hirsch Jr., which refers to the ability to understand, be at ease and fully participate in a given culture (Hirsch Jr., 1987). It entails shared knowledge of culturally-specific idioms, allusions, stories, expressions, names and places, which allows people to form implicit bonds and alliances when communicating (Hirsch Jr., 1987). In other words, people who are culturally literate become “insiders,” while those who aren’t struggle to communicate and understand and be understood by others.

Another equally important aspect of competence in the dominant culture is the ability to behave and present oneself in culturally expected ways. The various social intuitions and settings each call for a specific way of dressing, talking and behaving, and if one fails to meet these expectations they are often met with negative social appraisals. For example, if one is unaware of the behavioural norms and conventions expected in a court setting, they may lack the usual level of formality when addressing the judge, which can possibly be misinterpreted as a lack of respect for the court proceedings. This negative reading of the behaviour can lead to the formation of unconscious biases that can influence the outcome of the court ruling.

Many African Americans from the inner cities do not possess levels of cultural competence that would allow them to have the same opportunities and outcomes as White
middle-class Americans. They have to contend with the fact that their cultural knowledge and patterns of behaviour differ from what is expected in school and other settings. On the other hand, middle-class Whites can make a seamless transition from home to school and other settings, because the cultural competence they develop at home provides the necessary foundation to “fit in” within broader society. Williams Raspberry (1985) comments on the importance of cultural knowledge:

The news hits like a series of bombshells as one schools district after another reveals that black children are significantly behind their white counterparts on standardized achievement tests…Whose fault is it that blacks tend to get lower scores? I don’t know all the answers to that one. Surely a part of it is the simple fact that those children who come to school already knowing a good deal of what the society deems important to know tend to find it easier to learn more of it. The more you know, the more you can learn. (p. 19)

This observation on the part of Raspberry not only sheds light on the fact that students come into school with different levels of cultural competence, but that those who do have the requisite knowledge will be able to learn more than others who don’t. This is because cultural knowledge builds on top of previous cultural knowledge, and when one is missing the necessary foundation to build upon they will find it difficult to keep up with their peers (Hirsch Jr., 1987).

This inability to fully navigate mainstream Western culture has serious consequences for African Americans, because it impacts their ability to gain and keep employment, their treatment by the justice system, the quality of the customer service they receive and a host of other things. In her book Unequal City, Race, Schools, and Perceptions of Injustice, Carla Shedd (2015) conducts interviews with African American students, some of whom attend urban schools in the
inner-city of Chicago, while others attend schools located in affluent suburbs. A student named Boomer, who attends a school with a student body that is predominantly White and Asian, describes the connection between getting a job and how one dresses:

Like, I went for a job interview at Wendy’s [restaurant], and it was three other guys with me. I was the only who had a shirt, a tie, and pants on. Everybody had on blue jeans with gym shoes and jerseys, and stuff like that. And I feel as though, if you gon’ be ignorant to the fact of the proper way to go into an interview, you holding yourself back. And it’s sad to say, but African Americans are really ignorant of the way you supposed to carry yourself in society (Shedd, 2015, p. 90).

He also goes on to mention that even though he knew he needed to dress well for the interview, it was his mother who made sure he specifically put on a long-sleeve button-down shirt and a tie. Here Boomer, subscribes to a deficit view of his own African American culture, and blames the difficulties African American have on the job market on their ignorance of culturally expected norms and behaviours. He seems unaware that if he had been born to a Black family with less cultural capital and he had not gone to a school where he could learn from the mainstream cultural competence modeled by his peers, he could very well have been dressed just like the three other guys at that interview. But despite his misplaced blame, he is right about the fact that not meeting cultural expectations can result in the loss of opportunities, partially explaining the enduring inequalities between African Americans and Whites within American society.

Because cultural capital in the West has moved away from strictly high brow and formal manifestations, to something more broad and eclectic that encompasses popular tastes and diversity, some may have thought it would usher in an era of cultural capital democratization.
But this has not been borne out by reality, because this new cultural openness has largely been confined to the elites (Prieur & Savage, 2013),

This openness to cultural diversity is highly valued by contemporary elites, because openness itself has become a status marker (Prieur & Savage, 2013), and also because it increases their ability to be at ease in and navigate unfamiliar settings (Sennett, 1974). These affluent elites have the resources and opportunities to learn about and understand cultures and subcultures other than their own. For example, they may go to restaurants that serve African American “soul food” or Hispanic cuisine. This is not possible for many African Americans from the inner-city because of financial restraints, which is why these emerging forms of cultural capital have not led to a decrease in cultural inequalities or cultural democratization (Calhoun, 2002). If we stick to the example of dining out, most African Americans from the inner cities cannot afford to dine at restaurants that are frequented by the middle and upper classes. It may not be obvious how something like cultural knowledge of cuisine may impact opportunities and outcomes, but it becomes more apparent when one considers that there are many implicit assumptions and expectations that are part and parcel of the dining experience of each culture.

Take for example the case of a young African American woman who grew up in the inner city and is fresh out of Law school. She lands a job with a corporate law firm and she finds herself having to go to dinner with potential clients in order to secure their business. She may be less than her confident self in her interactions with the client because she may not know much about the etiquette and norms expected in more high-end restaurants. She may also have little knowledge about the various expensive wines and dishes she finds on the menu. This could affect how the potential client perceives her overall competence as a lawyer, and could cost her their business. This resource-based understanding of openness to cultural diversity and
eclecticism moves us away from the essentialism that paints the elites as intrinsically open-minded and others as close-minded people who find little value beyond their own cultural worlds.

It is important to note as well that when it comes to having cultural competence in more than one domain, the stakes are higher for African Americans from low SES communities. Middle and upper-class Whites can have a cursory understanding or limited competence in popular, foreign or sub-cultures, and still manage to achieve the dual goals of signaling status through the display of openness to diversity and being more comfortable in unfamiliar settings. They don’t have to demonstrate a perfect command of the forms of cultural knowledge, norms and behaviors outside of the one they were raised in in order to have access to the opportunities and advantages they enjoy. African Americans on the other hand need to have a good grasp on the dominant mainstream culture or risk being negatively perceived when they come into contact with institutionalized standards of evaluation.

To ensure that all students have an equal opportunity to succeed within Western capitalist society, urban schools should make it a priority that students develop mainstream cultural competence. The curriculum needs to include well-known concepts, events, references, sayings and idioms so students can graduate being culturally literate. An African American youth from the inner city should be just as likely to know that it was John F. Kennedy who uttered the famous words “Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country” and be just as likely to understand and use proverbs, such as “what’s good for the goose is good for the gander.” In addition to cultural knowledge, urban schools should explicitly teach the norms and conventions that are expected in various settings and social intuitions, so that African American students can have the tools to navigate them.
Personal agency

Research shows that people from the middle and upper classes have a sense of entitlement, self-belief and confidence that allows them to be active agents in events affecting their lives (Lareau & Weininger, 2003). Those poorer backgrounds often times do not display the same levels of self-belief, but instead are usually more passive and show more deference when faced with institutions and people vested with authority (Lareau & Weininger, 2003). This self-belief and personal agency is a form of cultural capital incubated and passed on in the home of middle and upper classes from one generation to the next, resulting in better academic, occupational and other socio-economic outcomes.

But why do the middle and upper classes have a greater sense of entitlement and exhibit more personal agency than those with lower SES? One of the reasons can be attributed to the fact that they believe they have extensive control of the outcomes in their lives, while those with lower SES, because of their lower position in the social hierarchy, feel they have a diminished sense of personal control (Lachman, 1986; Lachman & Weaver, 1998). It makes sense then that the more affluent members of society would display more self-entitled behaviours and exercise personal agency since they believe their intervention will change the outcome of a given situation.

For the working-class, individual agency and personal advocacy is often considered to be futile because of their belief that they can have little to no impact on events effecting their lives. This difference between the social classes not only has behavioural consequences but also psychological and health implications as well (Seligman, 1975; 1991; Taylor, 1989). Research suggests that people who have a high sense of control over their outcomes experience psychological benefits that protect against feelings of hopelessness and apathy (Seligman, 1975;
Studies also show that affluent members of society also experience better physical outcomes as a result of their elevated sense of control (Johnson & Krueger, 2005;2006).

If we look specifically at parental interactions with professionals and institutions, we find another reason that helps to explain the class differences in personal agency. Within the last few decades new ideas about children and child-rearing have entered mainstream consciousness (Lareau & Weininger, 2003). Professionals no longer advise parents to put complete trust in professionals by acquiescing to their recommendations and guidance (Lareau & Weininger, 2003). Instead, parents are now encouraged to “trust themselves” and become active, assertive, informed and educated advocates for their children (Lareau & Weininger, 2003). This has created a new set of evaluative criteria against which parents are judged.

But this presents problems because these new parental expectations, and the skills they require, are not evenly distributed across social classes. As a result, we find that middle and upper-class parents who, in their micro-interactions, deploy cultural resources that position them as advocates for themselves and their children, are often able to gain more compliance from professionals and institutions. Working-class parents, on the other hand, often operate under the old set of rules in which deference and acquiescing to professional advice was expected. But under the new rules such behaviour can be perceived as being unengaged, indifferent and irresponsible, and can negatively impact the treatment they and their children receive from professionals, such as teachers.

Lareau and Weininger (2003) present the case of a middle-class African American mother whose daughter was just below the cut-off for the gifted program even after being re-tested:
She then took the scores back to the district, and, even though Stacey still was just below the cut-off, advocated on behalf of her daughter to an administrator. Ms. Marshall was ultimately successful, and Stacey was admitted to the gifted program. This example illustrates both the strategies and techniques that Ms. Marshall used to supervise, monitor, and intervene in her daughters’ lives, a pattern we observed with other middle-class parents, black and white. The results of these interventions can be significant. Gifted programs, for example, enable children to be exposed to special curricula. They also mark them as unusually “talented,” which may shape teacher expectations. Track placement in elementary school is influential in shaping track placement in middle school and high school. In all of these ways, Ms. Marshall gained a payoff for her daughter. (p. 591).

Ms. Marshall was able to use a micro-interactional style with the administrator which, according to current normative standards, presented her as an engaged and responsible parent, ultimately leading to the compliance of the administrator. Let’s compare her style with the interaction Tara’s mother, a working-class African American woman, had with her daughter’s teacher at the parent-teacher conference:

For example, in a parent-teacher conference, Tara's mother listened with interest, volunteering that she had bought her daughter "Hooked on Phonics." However, she was far less assertive than most of the middle-class mothers we observed. Thus, during the conference, the teacher persistently pronounced Tara's name differently than the family did at home. (Rather than calling her "Ti-ray," she called her "Tar-rah.") At one point, the teacher got up the from the conference table and, still talking, walked over to her desk to pick up a piece of paper, all the while referring to "Tar-rah." Under her breath, Tara's
mother whispered, "It's Ti-ray, Ti-ray" in a frustrated tone; but when the teacher returned, she did not correct her pronunciation. Nor did Tara's mother ask detailed, substantive, questions, or probe, test, or challenge the teacher about her daughter's educational experiences. In short, she turned responsibility over to the teacher. This contrasted with her behavior in other settings, in which we witnessed Tara's mother being quite vocal and assertive. Thus, the difference in her demeanor cannot be attributed to her personality. (Lareau & Weininger, 2003, p. 594).

The differences between the two micro-interactional styles of Ms. Marshall and Tara’s Mothers are clearly evident. These differences are important because they will also determine to a large extent how their own children will interact with professionals, people in authority and institutions. The personal agency, self-entitlement and confidence one demonstrates in these micro-interactions are culturally mediated, and children receive and internalize the cultural messages and the interactional behaviours modelled by their parents. African American children who grow up in working class homes face the world believing they have little personal control over outcomes, and that authority figures should be deferred to. They lack the cultural capital that instills self-belief and self-entitlement, which are pre-requisites for exercising personal agency and self-advocacy. Without these cultural tools required to become advocates for themselves and their families, they will find it difficult to reap the same social and economic rewards as those from more affluent social classes. This can negatively impact their educational outcomes, employment opportunities, salaries, health and other areas that are important determinants of overall quality of life. For this reason, I believe it should a responsibility of urban schools to teach students the importance of personal agency and how it can impact one’s chances in life. Teachers in these schools should foster self-belief and confidence in their
students and help them internalize the fact that they can personally influence the outcomes of situations they find themselves in. They should also make it explicit that assertiveness and self-advocacy are now expected and almost a pre-requisite to success within mainstream society. All of this should be done in an effort to level the playing field for all students and achieve equality of opportunity through education.
Chapter 5: Culturally Pragmatic Education

Culturally Pragmatic Education as a Way Forward

Standard education in urban schools suffers from weaknesses on two fronts, both stemming from problems of omission. These being the omission of the students’ home cultures from the curriculum, and the omission of explicit teaching and instruction on the dominant or mainstream culture. Many students in urban schools feel a sense of alienation, develop a poor self-image and face academic challenges as a result of schools leaving little to no room for their culturally-specific ways of talking, behaving and understanding the world (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Culturally pragmatic education essentially brings together culturally relevant teaching and cultural capital into one cohesive model. It takes what I view to be the most important kinds of cultural capital required for success in Western societies, namely; linguistic competence, cultural literacy and personal agency, and fuses it with the constituent components of culturally relevant literacy, which are academic success, cultural competence and critical consciousness. Through this merger we get a model that creates synergies and an overall balance that would not be possible if either culturally relevant education or the teaching of cultural capital stood on their own.

Academic Success and Linguistic Competence

Achieving academic success by using culture as a vehicle for learning is one of the three components of culturally relevant teaching (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Using the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives most familiar to minority and working-class students makes learning a more meaningful and engaging experience (Lasdon-Billings, 1995). Naturally, such learning will entail the learning of more words and improved linguistic ability.
Ladson-Billings (1995) describes an exercise a teacher named Ann Lewis, whom she describes as “culturally black”, did with her sixth-grade students. She says,

In her sixth grade classroom, Lewis encouraged the students to use their home language while they acquired the secondary discourse (Gee, 1989) of “standard” English. Thus, her students were permitted to express themselves in language (in speaking and writing) with which they were knowledgeable and comfortable. They were then required to “translate” to the standard form. By the end of the year, the students were not only facile at this “code-switching” (Smitherman, 1981) but could better use both languages. (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 161)

On the flip side, a focus on linguistic ability through an emphasis on reading and consuming quality media will also lead to better academic outcomes. In other words, there is cross-facilitation occurring between the pursuit of academic success through culture as a vehicle and the focus on linguistic ability, producing a synergistic effect.

**Cultural Competence (Home) and Cultural Competence (Mainstream)**

Cultural competence is another pillar of Culturally relevant pedagogy, intended to make sure students maintain their cultural integrity (Ladson-Billings, 1995). This means minority and working-class students will be allowed to express their cultures within classrooms and teachers will also actively teach using cultural symbols, historical figures, art and folktales that are familiar to the students (Ladson-Billings, 1995). But, with a culturally pragmatic approach, teachers will also focus on transmitting mainstream cultural competence to students, which is an indispensable form of cultural capital.
The promotion and teaching of both cultural competence and mainstream cultural competence will ensure that students remain true to their own cultural identities, while also being able to successfully navigate the dominant culture. This balancing act alleviates the problem of having to choose between one’s home culture and mainstream culture. Minority students won’t have to worry about feeling like sellouts or being told they’re “acting White,” since they will maintain competence in their own cultures and will able to seamlessly transition or “codeswitch” between the two cultures as the situational context demands.

**Critical Consciousness and Personal Agency**

The third and final part of culturally relevant teaching is critical consciousness. This means teachers should try and produce students who look at the world critically. Students who have a broad sociopolitical consciousness that allows them to re-evaluate and “critique the cultural norms, values, mores, and institutions that produce and maintain social inequities” (Ladson-Billings, 1995). In addition to this macro-level focus on societal structures, culturally pragmatic education would also emphasise personal agency.

A focus on critical consciousness alone could engender a sense of powerlessness in minority and poor students, who may feel like their personal situation cannot be altered unless structural change takes place first at the societal level. An emphasis on personal agency alone poses the risk of giving students a perspective that is too individualistic, and not focused enough on broad injustices and social inequalities. But by including both orientations, culturally pragmatic education creates a balance that ensures students in urban schools develop an awareness of societal issues that need to be addressed, while at the same time having the confidence to exercise their personal agency to affect change in their own lives.
A Remedy for Oppositional Cultural Identity

John Ogbu’s opposition cultural identity theory features prominently in urban education literature to explain the Black-White achievement gap. I find it to be a valuable theory that provides good insights into why Black students continue to struggle in American schools. But I don’t think it paints a picture that can completely account for the achievement gap. If oppositional values and behaviours did not exist among African American students, I believe there would still be educational disparities between them and their White counterparts. That’s because without a culturally pragmatic approach to education in urban schools, that combines culturally relevant pedagogy with cultural capital, African American students will not enjoy a level educational playing field with White and middle-class students. So in my view, oppositional values and behaviours only exacerbate the educational disparities in the American public education system, which have become endemic as a result of it’s failure to achieve equality of educational opportunity.

Also, oppositional cultural identity theory strikes me as being overly deterministic, in that it views the underlying causal factors that give rise to oppositional culture to originate outside the school. It holds that the oppressive social structures and the discrimination of African Americans within American society produce the oppositional behaviours exhibited by Black student in urban school settings. Fordham (1985) says,

Therefore, Ogbu (1978, 1981c, 1981d) suggests that the disproportionately high rate of school failure among Black Americans is an "adaptation" to their limited social and economic opportunities--i.e., to Black ecological structure. Maintaining that Black school failure is, in effect, a fait accompli given the imperatives of the ecological structure, he dismisses other explanations of school failure. (p. 4)
This means that without a broad transformation of American society that fundamentally alters the relationship between Black Americans and oppressive power structures, little can be done about reducing oppositional culture among African American students. This view underestimates the role schools can play in reducing the manifestation of behaviours and values that are impediments to educational success.

John Ogbu (1985) forwards the idea that the job ceiling for African Americans, which restricts their upward social and economic mobility, causes students to become disillusioned with the real value of schooling, leading them to put less effort into their studies. Although discrimination against African Americans still exists within the job market, there is no doubt that Black Americans with higher educational credentials gain access to better jobs and higher salaries than those who lack the same qualifications (Mocombe, 2011).

There is a strain of thought in urban education that views oppositional culture to be caused by academic failure and not by perceived injustices and societal oppression against African Americans, as is put forth in Ogbu’s theory (Tyson, 2002). In other words, African American children who experience academic difficulties will begin to develop negative school related behaviours and attitudes in order to avoid further academic failures. I think both this view and Ogbu’s contain part of the answer into the causes of oppositional cultural identity. It seems to me that African American students don’t develop negative attitudes and adopt oppositional behaviours only because they face academic challenges, but they do so because they’re aware that others don’t face the same challenges as they do, thanks to the advantages they’ve received from their families. Their also aware of the fact that schools do not step in to give them the same advantages. So, in my view, academic failure does play a role in the genesis of oppositional
culture, but only within the context of students resisting the oppressive public educational system that advantages some over others, and thereby reproduces existing socio-economic inequalities.

With this understanding, I hold that these oppositional behaviours and values have become common within urban schools for two main reasons: 1. African American culture and linguistic forms are not recognized, valued and used as vehicles for learning within the classroom; and 2. the cultural capital needed for success within schools and mainstream society is not disseminated through the curriculum. These two facts, which preclude the possibility for equality of opportunity in education, have made academic failure an all too common feature of urban schools. African American students perceive that they face additional academic barriers through no fault of their own, and so some decide to resist rather than engage with a system that they feel is rigged against them. A culturally pragmatic approach to education in urban schools addresses both of these shortcomings in the education of inner-city students, and thus can create the conditions to greatly reduce negative schooling attitudes and behaviours among African American students.

Each component of the culturally pragmatic approach can contribute to promote pro-education values among urban school students. The focus on Academic Success does this by instilling self-confidence in African American students. Teachers who expect their African American students to succeed can positively shape the self-concepts of their students, because such expectations can help students to internalize the fact that they are just as capable as White or Asian students from more affluent backgrounds. The opposite is also true, with low teacher expectations for African American students having a negative impact on student achievement. This is why building up the confidence and self-image of African American students, by holding them to the same standards as other students and expecting them to succeed academically, is one
of the most crucial pieces for successful urban education. When African American students see that doing well in school does not have to be the preserve of White and Asian students, and that they also can and should succeed, they may become more engaged in the learning process and display fewer oppositional behaviours. Ladson-Billings (1998) details what she saw eight in classrooms she observed with teachers that focused on academic success for their students:

Despite the low ranking of the school district, the teachers were able to help students perform at higher levels than their district counterparts. In general, compared to students in middle-class communities, the students still lagged behind. But, more students in these classrooms were at or above grade level on standardized achievement tests. Fortunately, academic achievement in these classrooms was not limited to standardized assessments. Classroom observations revealed a variety of demonstrated student achievements too numerous to list here. Briefly, students demonstrated an ability to read, write, speak, compute, pose and solve problems at sophisticated levels—that is, pose their own questions about the nature of teacher- or text-posed problems and engage in peer review of problem solutions. Each of the teachers felt that helping the students become academically successful was one of their primary responsibilities. (p. 211).

The culturally pragmatic focus on linguistic competence can also make headway against oppositional culture. It is well documented that African American students do not start school with the same command of standard English as White students (Hart & Risley, 1995). These differences in vocabulary size and reading and writing abilities continue to grow throughout middle and high school (Hart & Risley, 1995). Without cultural capital in the form of linguistic competence African American students will face significant challenges in school and in broader society after they leave formal education. Schools reward White middle-class students for their
linguistic competence, and penalize African Americans for what are often perceived as linguistic shortcomings. This status quo is inimical to equality of opportunity, and results in students developing values that are in opposition to the ones espoused by the education system. If urban schools focus on the development of the linguistic competence of their African American students through reading books and viewing quality media, it should reduce student oppositional behaviours, because the tools to succeed in and outside of school would then be more equally distributed.

A culturally pragmatic approach to education ensures that students develop and maintain cultural competence in both their home cultures and the dominant mainstream culture. This can help prevent students from developing anti-school values in two ways. Firstly, bringing African American culture into the classroom and incorporating culturally relevant material into the curriculum will go a long way in making students feel that they’re valued as important members of their school communities. If Black culture and African American Vernacular English become part and parcel of the urban school experience, and effectively remove the hegemonic status enjoyed by White middle-class culture, the perceived link between “acting White” and doing well in school will weaken significantly. This will take tremendous pressure off of Black students who are teased and considered sell-outs for being academically inclined, and will allow many more to become engaged students, as they’ll no longer feel they have to choose between maintaining their identity and assimilating into the dominant culture.

Secondly, reforming the curriculum in urban schools to ensure it transmits the cultural capital required to develop mainstream cultural competence can also serve to reduce oppositional behaviours and attitudes among African American students. Possessing cultural literacy and being adept at behaving and presenting oneself in ways that are evaluated as positive by
institutionalized standards provides one with advantages and opportunities, and the lack of such knowledge and traits significantly undermines one's ability to compete within society. That these inequalities are not remedied through the school system is an affront to the idea that public education provides equality of opportunity for all its student. Ogbu (1978) asks,

[Is] it logical to expect that blacks and whites would exert the same energy and perform alike in school when the caste system, through the job ceiling, consistently underutilizes black training and ability and underrewards blacks for their education?” (p. 195)

I think this question misses the mark and we should instead be asking “is it logical to expect that Blacks and Whites would exert the same energy and perform alike in school when public education does not disseminate the tools required to navigate mainstream society and achieve upward social mobility?” This reframes the issue and locates motivation for oppositional behaviour within failures in the school system itself. If urban schools implement curricular changes with the goal of imparting competence in the culture of mainstream Western capitalist society, I predict that school engagement among African American students will increase.

One of the goals of culturally pragmatic education is to develop the critical consciousness of students in urban schools, in order to transform how these students view school, society and their place within both. A broad socio-political awareness that is critical of societal norms and power structures can empower students in urban schools to be agents of change within their schools and communities. Ladson-Billings (1995) likens critical consciousness with Paulo Freire’s concept of “conscientization” since both are “processes that invite learners to engage the world and others critically” (p. 162). Increasing the critical awareness of African American students may reduce oppositional attitudes to school once students realize that knowledge and activism used in the right way can lead to a more just society that is better for them and everyone
else to live in. Ladson-Billings (1995) relates her observation of a classroom in an urban school in which critical consciousness led to teacher and student action. She says,

Rather than merely bemoan the fact that their textbooks were out of date, several of the teachers in the study, in conjunction with their students, critiqued the knowledge represented in the textbooks, and the system of inequitable funding that allowed middle-class students to have newer texts. They wrote letters to the editor of the local newspaper to inform the community of the situation. The teachers also brought in articles and papers that represented counter knowledge to help the students develop multiple perspectives on a variety of social and historical phenomena. (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 162)

Such activism occurring within urban classrooms can have the profound effect of shifting the perception of African American students of schools from places that cement and recreate inequalities to places that can be used in the service of social justice.

Lastly, I hold that oppositional behaviours and anti-education attitudes can be reduced if urban schools take the culturally pragmatic approach of promoting personal agency among their students. This would entail helping African Americans students to develop a sense of entitlement, self-belief and greater levels of confidence, all of which are needed for individual agency (Lareau & Weininger, 2003). Also, it would be necessary to show students how being active agents in micro-interactions, especially when dealing with institutions and authority figures, can help them achieve equitable treatment. Many African Americans believe the racial inequality in the social system is only reversible through collective rather than individual action (Fordham & Ogbu, 1985). There is merit to this viewpoint when looking at macro-level issues, since a lot of the advances towards equality were hard won by the collective activism of African Americans during the civil rights era. Such activism continues to this day, with groups like Black
Lives Matters continuing the struggle against White supremacy in American society. Yet, this view may obfuscate and undermine the power that exercising personal agency has on leveling the playing field during micro-interactions. If urban schools use case studies which demonstrate the utility of individual agency, like that of Ms. Marshall and her daughter introduced earlier in this thesis, and at the same time teach the micro-interactional skills required in such situations, I believe many African American students would be more engaged in schooling because they would feel more in control of the outcomes from their interactions, whether in school or broader society.

**What Makes Culturally Pragmatic Education “Pragmatic”?**

Many scholars, policy-makers and teachers will not agree with some aspects of the culturally pragmatic approach to education presented in this thesis. They will specifically find issue with the notion that cultural capital, in the forms of linguistic competence, mainstream cultural competence and personal agency, should be included in the curriculum and explicitly taught in urban schools. For many, such reforms to urban education would be tantamount to cultural imperialism, which is when the experiences of the dominant group are universalized and established as the cultural norm (Adams et al., 2013). These concerns will understandably be compounded by my choice to make use of E.D. Hirsch Jr.’s (1987) concept of cultural literacy, which is a very controversial and contentious issue within education circles. His view that all American students need to be taught and know a litany of items, which he’s deemed to constitute cultural literacy, in order to function in mainstream society, has been criticized for propagating and further entrenching euro-centric cultural dominance within American society. Bell-Robinson (2016) is one of those critics, and she has this to say on the mater,
With his establishment of the list, Hirsch (1987) creates a universalization of the dominant experience, which in turn gets taught and/or interpreted and becomes capital “T” truth to everyone including those Hirsch labels as hyphenated Americans. In his use of the phrase “hyphenated American,” Hirsch is referring to Americans whose origins stem from other locations. He uses the phrases “Italino-American,” “Polish-American,” “Asian-American,” and “Afro-Americans” as examples of the populations to which he is referring (p. 98). He insists that while diversity is important, it is only natural for national culture to assert its dominance over smaller and more local communities. Hirsch’s list attempts to whitewash the differences that exist among people in the United States. (p. 27).

Though I agree with Hirsch that cultural literacy (along with other aspects of cultural capital) is important for social mobility, I break with his views in two important ways. Firstly, Hirsch’s views are prescriptive, which is glaringly evident from the title of his book Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know. From this we can see that he is privileging a certain body or canon of cultural knowledge, which he believes should form the basis for a common cultural “language” between Americans. Unlike Hirsch, I don’t advocate the teaching of cultural literacy, and other aspects of cultural capital, so that the dominant culture can retain its hegemonic status, but rather so that African Americans, and other disenfranchised groups in America, can gain access to the mainstream. When enough people from groups who have been historically excluded from gaining privilege and power begin to acquire both, the defining features of the dominant culture will gradually change to reflect the growing diversity within mainstream circles. As it stands now, too many African Americans lack the cultural tools to bypass the various gatekeepers to the mainstream, such as teachers and employers, so giving
them these tools through education will serve to further the cause of equality of opportunity through education and the struggle for social justice in America.

Secondly, unlike Hirsch, the culturally pragmatic approach to education I advocate would not entail the whitewashing or erasing of the cultural differences between African Americans and White Americans. Since culturally relevant pedagogy is an essential component of the culturally pragmatic approach, the home cultures of African Americans would be part and parcel of their educational experience in urban schools. This way, they won’t have to choose between assimilating into the mainstream culture, which they often perceive as “White” culture, and staying true to their own racial and cultural identities.

Yet, despite these differences between my views and Hirsch’s, I think some will still be uneasy about the cultural literacy and cultural capital facets of the culturally pragmatic approach to education. But how many of them would think it’s a good idea for an educated and qualified young African American, who happens to be a hip-hop aficionado, to do a job interview dressed in urban street fashion, while speaking in African American Vernacular English? Of course, most if not all of them would think this was a bad idea, because they intuitively understand that evaluations and judgements shaped by the dominant culture hold sway within the job market, schools and broader society. So, their opposition to teaching cultural capital, though intended to prevent the sidelining and oppression of minority students, effectively does the opposite by making sure students do not receive the cultural tools that can ensure that they aren’t excluded from the opportunities within Western capitalist societies.

Such a view is idealistic, in that it more concerned with what ought to be than what is. Yes, a young African American ought to be able to do a job interview dressed in urban fashion and speaking in African American Vernacular, which is a legitimate form of English. But in
current mainstream culture their choice of dress and speech would be evaluated negatively by intuitional gatekeepers, even though neither have anything to do with their ability to do the job. A critical stand against culturally pragmatic education on the grounds that it contradicts the way education should look in urban schools can serve as a barrier to equality of opportunity through education for African American students. In addition, the most powerful voices of opposition to such reforms will most likely be from academics and policy-makers, and as members of the societal elite they nor their children will be negatively impacted by their opposition to introduce the explicit teaching of cultural capital into urban schools.

The culturally pragmatic approach to education is at odds with the idealistic impulse to stick to principles irrespective of the consequences. It’s a fundamentally pragmatic view of education in the inner-cities of America, because it is concerned with the effects, outcomes and consequences of urban education as it relates to equality of opportunity. Garrison and Neiman (2003) explicate pragmatism’s emphasis on consequences in the following quote,

We may understand pragmatism as emerging out of the theory of meaning. Peirce introduces pragmatism in 1878 with the famous pragmatic maxim: “Consider what effects, which might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object” (Peirce, [1878] 1992, p. 132). There is no difference of meaning so fine that we cannot detect it in terms of a difference of possible consequences. If the consequences of two conceptions are identical, their meaning is identical. This emphasis upon consequences provides the starting point for almost any pragmatic analysis. (p. 21).

To put Peirce’s maxim into use here, the object of conception would be culturally pragmatic education. The effects of this approach, which can conceivably have practical bearings, would be
a reduction in oppositional culture and increased equality of opportunity through education for African American students. So according to this pragmatic principle, our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of culturally pragmatic education.

Also, along with a concern for consequences, antifoundationalism is also a part of the pragmatic ethos (Garrison & Neiman, 2003). This means “pragmatism is extremely open, tolerant, and accommodating; it evades attempts to totalize it into a single dogmatic vision” (Garrison & Neiman, 2003, p. 21). This antifoundational nature of pragmatism is what made it possible for me to bring together and marry various educational methods that are commonly perceived to be at odds with each other, such as Ladson-Billing’s culturally relevant pedagogy and Hirsch’s cultural literacy, into one cohesive model.
Conclusion

Ever since the Coleman Report came out in the 1960’s, we have known that the differences in family background and environment in the home are largely responsible for the achievement gap between Black and White students. According to Hanushek (2016),

the finding that family-background factors powerfully affect student achievement is not and never has been disputed. Virtually all subsequent analyses have included measures of family background (education, family structure, and so forth) and have found them to be a significant explanation of achievement differences. Indeed, no analysis of school performance that neglects differences in family background can be taken seriously. (pg. 5).

Many people who believe family income is the main determinant of school achievement continue to cite the Coleman report as support for their position, despite the fact that the report did not even measure family income. Instead we find that Coleman measured things that can be considered cultural capital, such as the number of books and other reading materials in the home, parents’ interests, and parents’ educational desires (Hanushek, 2016). It seems that the evidence that culture is central to the questions of equality of opportunity and student achievement has been in our grasp for many decades now, but many policy-makers, researchers and administrators continue to look in the wrong direction for the solutions. Hopefully, this thesis can help reorient the thinking around these issues and place culture in its rightful place as one of the main determinants of school achievement and general life outcomes.
Since cultural capital, which is transmitted in the home through the family, has such a large impact on school achievement, it can be used to absolve schools from responsibility in contributing to and maintaining the status quo. According to Hanushek (2016),

The suggestion that schools add little beyond the family to student performance has provoked many schools teachers and administrators to accept this at face value, as it simply confirms what they already believe: school should not be held responsible for poor students performance and achievement gaps that are driven by family background factors. (p. 5).

The arguments presented in thesis are meant to demonstrate that school effects on achievement are being overshadowed by family background effects, mainly because urban schools are not doing the hard work of supplementing African American students with the cultural capital they have not received in the home. In addition, urban schools are not recognizing and validating the home cultures of African American students through culturally relevant teaching. Culturally Pragmatic Education seeks to reshape urbans schooling so that Black students can have their identities respected and valued, while at the same time being given the cultural tools they need to succeed in school and mainstream society. This can go a long a way in reducing oppositional cultural attitudes and behaviours and getting closer to the goal of equality of opportunity for all students in America’s public-school system.

The emphasis on culture in this thesis is not meant to downplay the racial realities of being Black in America. African Americans are facing issues, such as police-brutality and housing discrimination, that cannot be solved through culture-centred urban school reform, but instead require a change within the power structures and institutions of American society. Having said that, it’s my view that culturally pragmatic education can bring about changes that
positively impact Black student achievement and their life outcomes after leaving formal
education. It is not a panacea to the problems of racism and discrimination, and it’s not meant to
be. But I do believe it can increase the school engagement of African American students and
open doors for them, so they can access privileges and opportunities that are currently out of
reach for too many of them.
References


