

# THE NEED FOR CULTURALLY RELEVANT PERFORMANCE-BASED ASSESSMENTS POST-COVID-19

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## Abstract:

Ladson-Billings (1995a, 1995b, 2009) defines culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) as a teaching style that acknowledges the importance of embracing, respecting, and including students' cultural references and lived experiences in all aspects of learning. Thus, today we need to propose school reform policies that will improve school instruction and school settings for students of Color. The need for new policies is pivotal. We cannot continue to fail our students by proposing and implementing educational policies that focus on using high-stakes assessments to measure student achievement.

**Keywords:** *culturally relevant pedagogy, school reform*

In her most notable book, *The Dreamkeepers* (2009), Gloria Ladson-Billings argues that one does not have to be a teacher of Color<sup>1</sup> to become a culturally competent and relevant educator. If given the proper training and pedagogical knowledge, all teachers can successfully educate students from culturally, ethnically, racially, and linguistically diverse backgrounds. In this context, Ladson-Billings (1995a, 1995b, 2009) defines culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) as a teaching style in which the cultural references and lived experiences of students are acknowledged in the classroom. In addition, the literature in the area of CRP continues to grow (see Gay, 2018; Knight-Manuel & Marciano, 2018). However, since the enactment of the *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) Act of 2001, every year, children and youth in grades 3–12 in urban America have been forced to take annual high-stakes assessments in reading, writing, mathematics, and science; these assessments are not culturally, ethnically, racially, and linguistically relevant.

I must clarify that content knowledge (e.g., mathematics, science, reading, and writing) does not change depending on one's race or culture. However, when knowledge is assessed using a one-size-fits-all assessment (e.g., multiple-choice, text-dependent open-ended questions), students from diverse backgrounds begin to see education and its purpose in one's life from a negative perspective. To put it another way, as students progress throughout their K–12 educational career, they begin to realize that the essential purpose of schooling in urban America, amid social issues such as poverty and lack of educational resources, is to “teach towards the tests” (Carter & Welner, 2013; Dianis et al., 2015; Love, 2019; Noguera & Syeed, 2020). This is where, unfortunately, teachers and students in urban America find themselves feeling frustrated with high-stakes assessments in schools, as it is the only official means for assessing student learning and holding teachers accountable for student learning.

Despite such frustration and feeling voiceless, in mid-March 2020, an unexpected and deadly voice spoke in favor of teachers and students in urban America: COVID-19. Schools could not administer high-stakes assessments during the spring of 2020 and 2021 (Ladson-Billings, 2021). For the first time in two decades, urban children and youth found themselves free from the shackles of high-stakes assessments. Much like Ladson-Billings, I believe that the use of assessments in the classroom is pivotal. Assessing student learning is vital for educational success; yet as we enter a new era of public education in America post-COVID-19, we need “more innovative and culturally relevant ways to determine what students know and are able to do” (p. 74).

High-stakes assessments are not an equitable and culturally relevant way to assess student learning in twenty-first-century urban America. Policymakers and legislators today tend to believe that to hold schools accountable for student learning and improve our achievement gap, we must use computerized one-size-fits-all assessments that are not representative of a students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and most importantly, their interests. Furthermore, a high-stakes assessment aims to assess a students' mastery and comprehension of academic materials. However, one must critically think about the following questions: Is it equitable and culturally relevant to assess a student's understanding of addition and multiplication by simply using a computerized multiple-choice test? Nationally, what would our third-grade math scores look like if students were given the opportunity to use manipulatives to solve computational problems and oral expression to explain their reasoning and problem-solving?

With this in mind, this commentary argues how Ladson-Billings' theory of CRP can be used to assist federal and state education policymakers in proposing and implementing the use of culturally relevant performance-based assessments as an additional way

to officially assess culturally, ethnically, racially, and linguistically diverse students in urban America. I am not calling for the immediate termination of high-stakes assessments. Instead, I am inviting policymakers and legislators to provide urban public children and youth with the hope that they can demonstrate what they have learned in a different way. In this commentary, I first describe the educational reforms leading to the present day before describing what performance-based assessments are. Then I conclude with arguing the need for culturally relevant performance-based assessments today.

### **How Did We Get Here? Educational Reforms of the 1990s**

During the 1990s, educational reforms in America revolved around the following three components: (1) standards-based reform, (2) standardized testing, and (3) teacher accountability (Cross, 2014). These three components were at the forefront of conversations and debates among federal and state politicians, lobbyists, and education policymakers (Cross, 2014). What led to this higher accountability movement was “the notion that all students can learn at much higher levels and that adults must be held accountable for what students learn” (Cross, 2014, p. 9).

At the time, the belief was that all students should be exposed to rigorous content knowledge and skills, regardless of their academic abilities and where they lived in the United States. This notion eventually led to the enactment of the NCLB. The essential goal of the standards-based reform was to ensure that all students were learning and that teachers were held accountable for student learning. Since the 1990s, classroom instruction has been aligned with state teaching standards and standardized assessments. Standards-based reform remains a heated debate in American education even today, with scholars calling for a culturally relevant classroom curriculum, particularly in urban America. Emdin (2016), Love (2019), and Muhammad (2020) in particular have argued that the teaching standards, which align with high-stakes assessments, do not allow historically marginalized students of Color to thrive academically, which leads to disengagement with learning. When students of Color cannot find the strength within to engage with their learning and understand the purpose of education, they become disconnected with their public educational career. Thus, leading to frustrations and anger towards the need for high-stakes assessments in schools.

### **What Are Performance-Based Assessments? Why Should We Use Them?**

Performance-based assessments are tasks that allow students to share and apply their knowledge and skills learned through the creation of written responses or a product. Unlike a traditional high-stakes assessment, a performance-based assessment requires students to use their higher-order thinking skills (Stanford School Redesign Network, 2008). Performance-based assessments should be offered as an additional way to measure student learning because they provide students with meaningful and engaging tasks that allow them to acquire new knowledge, apply their current knowledge, and tap into their higher-order thinking skills; it also allows students to connect to their lived experiences, cultures, and prior knowledge, increasing their engagement with their learning (Bae & Kokka, 2016). When students are engaged with their learning, they feel more confident and have autonomy when creating personal learning goals. Moreover, research (see Guha et al., 2018) shows that about 17 states in the United States promote or require students to complete performance-based assessments to demonstrate college and career readiness in lieu of simply taking various high-stakes assessments. With 17 states currently using performance-based assessments, and as legislators and education policymakers soon convene to discuss the reauthorization of the ESSA, they should consider allowing the use of performance-based assessments as an official way to assess student learning.

### **The Need for Culturally Relevant Performance-Based Assessments**

Although I wholeheartedly support performance-based assessments, it is pivotal to keep in mind that public schools in urban America today are becoming significantly more culturally, ethnically, racially, and linguistically diverse (Gay, 2018; National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). Therefore, to better serve urban schools, we need to use the three tenets of CRP to create performance-based assessments that are culturally relevant.

### **Academic Success and Culturally Relevant Performance-Based Assessments**

Academic success refers to academic achievement, and students can accomplish this by setting meaningful learning goals independently and alongside their teacher (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Student learning goals are fundamental for academic success, mainly because they promote the production of knowledge. It is pivotal for teachers to assess student learning differently instead of relying on standardized assessment as the only form of assessing student learning. For instance, for a language arts literacy assessment, instead of having students only read a passage and respond to multiple choice and explicit text-dependent questions, students should be given a chance to read a culturally relevant and grade-appropriate text that will allow them to (1) critically engage and analyze the text, (2) answer text implicit questions, and (3) be able to relate with the text

in different ways (e.g., connections with their lived experiences and identities). In addition, for the writing aspect of the assessment, students should be allowed to use the same text and select from a series of open-ended questions that will enable them to synthesize the information they learned and, most importantly, generate their responses, which will allow them to develop their arguments. When students are given a chance to make arguments, they use their voices to show the reader who they are.

Finally, unlike high-stakes assessments, performance-based assessments allow students to revise their work, which enables them to submit their best work and provide their teachers with the chance to adjust their instructional practices to better serve their students. The purpose of instruction is to teach students how to become passionate and lifelong learners, not engage in practice tests or modules where they learn strategies and tricks on how to beat “the test” and score proficient or advanced proficient. Hence, we can no longer allow the single-use of traditional high-stakes assessments to prevent students in urban America from thriving academically; we can no longer allow students in urban America to see themselves as simply a number on a data report.

### **Cultural Competence and Culturally Relevant Performance-Based Assessments**

Cultural competence is present and thrives in the classroom when teachers (1) genuinely understand culture and its role in learning and (2) take the time to learn about their students’ culture, community, identities, and lived experiences (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Therefore, when designing and implementing culturally relevant performance-based assessments, education policymakers and assessment developers must keep in mind and understand the role of culture in the lives of historically marginalized students of Color who reside in urban America. Nieto (2000) argued that one’s culture is not static; it will forever be dynamic. Thus, public schools need performance-based assessments that represent the current generation of school children and youth. We can no longer solely depend on different versions of reading, writing, and mathematical high-stakes assessments whose origins trace back to the early 1990s, and, most importantly, are not culturally relevant. For example, in a fourth-grade social studies classroom, instead of having students complete a multiple-choice assessment of what they recall about the Columbian Exchange, they should complete hands-on and inquiry-based performance assessments allowing them to explore how the exchange still influences their daily lives today. In doing so, students have the chance to learn more about their cultural backgrounds, histories, and identities.

### **Sociopolitical Consciousness and Culturally Relevant Performance-Based Assessments**

According to Ladson-Billings (2009), for students to develop their sociopolitical consciousness, teachers must educate themselves on the social and political realities that affect the lives of their students (e.g., racism). However, when proposing, designing, and implementing culturally relevant performance-based assessments, it is vital for education policymakers and assessment developers to engage in critical conversations around the social and political realities that plague urban schools. In addition, by engaging in the development of one’s sociopolitical consciousness, teachers can then serve as facilitators that guide their students to critically analyze their lived experiences, specifically the various forms of social, economic, and political injustices that negatively impact their lives every day. In urban America, students of Color can come to make sense of the world in which they live and enhance their sociopolitical consciousness by completing culturally relevant performance-based assessments. This would include assessments that require students to critically analyze real-world problems and social issues (e.g., racism, xenophobia, social status, educational attainment). For example, in a fourth-grade classroom, using the novel *Morning Girl* (1992) by Michael Dorris (a novel that talks about what life was like for the Taíno people before the arrival of Christopher Columbus in the New World in 1492), students are given the opportunity to apply what they have learned about colonialism and its effects on a community to present-day life in the United States.

### **Conclusion**

Research around CRP has evolved over the years (Paris & Alim, 2017; Gay, 2018; Muhammad, 2020). However, as we all embark on a new era of education in the United States—and with the reauthorization of the ESSA, which will most likely occur during the Biden administration—we can no longer allow our public education system to fail its students of Color (see Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2021; Lyiscott, 2019). Our current federal, state, and local education policymakers and legislators see traditional standardized assessments as a one-size-fits-all way to assess student learning and hold teachers accountable. Despite failing to provide our students of Color with a chance to succeed academically (see Carter & Welner, 2013), our education policymakers, their lobbyists, and assessment developers can use Ladson-Billings’s theory of CRP, specifically its three tenets (academic success, cultural competence, and sociopolitical consciousness), as a guide to propose and implement culturally relevant performance-based assessments as an additional way to assess student achievement.

With this in mind, I call upon our education policymakers, their lobbyists, and assessment developers to use Ladson-Billings’s theory of CRP, specifically its three tenets (academic success, cultural competence, and sociopolitical consciousness), as a

guide to propose and implement culturally relevant performance-based assessments as an additional way to assess student achievement. Historically, state and federal policymakers view culturally, racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse students of Color from a deficit perspective, particularly when it comes to student achievement. The passages of the NCLB and ESSA have forced federal and state legislators and policymakers and legislators to view cultural differences as hindrance as opposed to assets. Today, if education policies and standardized assessments do not begin to acknowledge cultural differences in all aspects of schooling, then as a nation, we will continue to do a disservice to our culturally, racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse citizens.

In September of 2021, schools around the country returned to in-person instruction, and as we prepare to enter a new era of education in the United States, the post-COVID-19 era, state and federal legislators and policymakers should advocate and implement policies and high-stakes assessments that acknowledges cultural differences as a source of academic excellence. This cannot be accomplished within a blink of an eye. However, we can begin by engaging in critical discourse on the role of culture in student learning and ways to assess student achievement—move away from the high-stakes assessment “one-size-fits-all” approach.

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[i] Color is intentionally capitalized to reject the standard grammatical norm. Capitalization is used as a means to empower this marginalized groups of students.

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