

True to Form: Implementing a Culturally Relevant Pedagogy with Fidelity

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Culturally relevant pedagogy is a research term developed by Ladson-Billings (1995) to identify those methods implemented by teachers that address: (a) student achievement, (b) affirmation of cultural identity, and (c) the development of critical perspectives that challenge inequities. While the affirmation of cultural identity is an important part of this theory, achievement and critical perspectives are often overlooked. Implementation of a critically relevant pedagogy should address those factors that prevent all students from receiving a quality education. The unequal access to resources leads to unequal outcomes. Teachers can mitigate the effects of inadequate resources of schools by ensuring they can implement a pedagogical framework that addresses factors that impact student outcomes. Culturally relevant pedagogy is a framework that is appropriate for schools and classrooms that wish to address the differential outcomes experienced in schools. This is particularly important in urban schools where students are exposed to schooling that does not provide the same level of access as in suburban schools.

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Urban school students are experiencing a crisis in education (Anyon, 2014; Payne, 2008; Faced with mounting challenges, students are being forced to contend with issues, such as inadequate academic preparation for future opportunities, unequal access to higher level courses and the consequential decision to dropout (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Michie, 2012). The increased use of accountability policies that push youth of color out of schools at alarming rates

are also cause for concern (Tuck, 2012). Unequal social policies that lead to the disproportionate outcomes experienced by youth of color in urban areas is creating havoc on entire neighborhoods and communities (Tuck, 2012). While schools are not in control of the environments in which their children grow up, teachers and staff are responsible for ensuring that every student has an equal opportunity to achieve. The model of culturally relevant pedagogy provides a framework for addressing those components that are essential for addressing student needs in the classroom and beyond.

Background

Current School Policy as a Barrier to Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Neoliberal policies are shifting the focus of schooling from being public institutions to increasingly being privately controlled. Neoliberal policies are those that emphasize the “application of market-based logic to non-market problems” (Tuck, 2012, p. 27). In other words, it is the involvement and reliance on business and capitalism to solve challenges within the educational sphere. Neoliberalism is evident through the increase of policies that encourage accountability over a focus on providing equitable resources, or improving instruction (Stromquist & Monkman, 2014; Tuck, 2012). For instance, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) introduced stricter testing requirements that schools were required to adhere to in order to receive federal funding (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Mathison, 2004). As a result, many schools focused their efforts on improving performance and results in the subject areas that were being tested. Consequently, non-tested subjects were often neglected in favor of intense focus on subjects that would be evaluated formally. Since NCLB included negative consequences for schools with a high number of students that did not meet expected targets, many schools shifted their focus from their schools being student-centered best practices to being more focused on standard procedures and accountability (Tuck, 2012). The result was that attention to topics,

such as cultural relevance disappeared in the face of the pressure to achieve. Furthermore, disaggregated data revealed that students of color were not achieving at high levels of performance. Rather than an intense effort to equalize access to more rigorous and relevant curriculum, the conversations around their education centered less around them knowing relevant cultural accomplishments, and more about improving their achievement on standardized testing processes.

Literature Review

Ladson-Billings' (1995) seminal work on culturally relevant pedagogy lays the foundation for a comprehensive understanding of this framework. While most literature on cultural relevance focuses solely on the inclusion of diverse perspectives and affirmation of cultural identity, Ladson-Billings (1995) expands the definition to include student achievement and the development of critical perspectives in students. The presence of these three factors is what Ladson-Billings (1995) uses to identify culturally relevant teachers in her research. Using black feminist thought and critical theory as theoretical foundations, Ladson-Billings (1995) explores her positioning as a "native," (p. 470) or insider of the communities of color that she researches and the presumed expertise that she brings. Furthermore, as a critical theorist, she establishes culturally relevant pedagogy as a framework to develop students who "understand and critique the existing social order" (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 474).

Implementing a culturally relevant pedagogy with fidelity depends upon an understanding of all components. First, acknowledging the importance of academic achievement as Ladson-Billings (1995) means a recognition that the academic success of students should be the primary focus of teachers. In Ladson-Billings' (1995) study, teachers took ownership of implementing practices that supported student achievement. For instance, teachers used positive language when referring to students, they would not accept excuses from

their students, and they focused on changing their personal habits to encourage student achievement (p. 479). In an age of heightened accountability, the achievement of students matters because schools are judged by how well students perform. However, educators must remember that student achievement is important because students' ability to achieve will impact their future opportunities.

Secondly, Ladson-Billing explains that culturally relevant pedagogy helps students to accept and affirm their cultural identity. The demographics of public school teachers and students make this feature more salient. While 20 percent of public school students are Black, approximately 70 percent of public school teachers are White women (Garrison-Wade & Lewis, 2006). Ladson-Billings argues for students of color, particularly African American students, to preserve their cultural identity while experiencing high academic achievement in school. In other words, students have to be affirmed for their cultural expressions while finding positive outlets in school for full engagement.

Finally, teachers who implement a culturally relevant pedagogy must be aware of and reject social inequities, while encouraging students to do the same (Ladson-Billings, 1995). The tradition of critical pedagogy provides a foundation for teachers to examine societal inequities and construct lessons that allow students to do the same. Ladson-Billings espouses the responsibility of teacher preparation programs to increase recruitment of teachers dedicated to justice (p. 476), but recognizes the need to provide current pre-service teachers with the tools to become critical through exposure to various perspectives that will allow them to engage through a critical lens. Furthermore, teacher education has to accept responsibility for isolating issues of cultural diversity, rather than bringing these issues to the forefront to avoid confusing pre-service teachers who begin to see cultural competence as separate from content preparation (Ladson-Billings, 2006, p. 38)

Stemming from a tradition of research that long considered the significance of cultural relevance in education, Sleeter (2012) addresses the importance of developing a deeper understanding of the culture of the students one teaches. Students' culture cannot be ignored if teachers are expected to achieve positive outcomes with all students. Students' abilities must be examined and encouraged through the lens of their cultural strength (Gay, 2010; Sleeter, 2012). Teachers who use students' cultural background as a foundation for teaching have students who are more likely to experience academic success. More importantly, teachers must understand the meaning of culturally relevant pedagogy to avoid oversimplification of the concept and have a significant impact on student outcomes (Milner, 2011).

Sleeter (2012) discusses the dangers of teachers who misunderstand the purpose of culturally relevant pedagogy and only view culturally relevant pedagogy as cultural celebrations. This view is an oversimplification that reduces the importance of connecting to students in a genuine manner that treats students' cultures as a form of entertainment, instead of a necessity for improving their academic achievement (Sleeter, 2012). Furthermore, simplistic views of culturally relevant pedagogy "trivialize" (p. 568) cultural relevance to those connections that can be made within classrooms, rather than seeking authentic ways to become involved in students' wider communities. Finally, misunderstanding culturally relevant pedagogy can lead to what Sleeter (2012) terms "essentializing" (p. 570). This view of students' cultures is representative of a fixed view based on a students' ethnic, racial, or cultural origin.

Ultimately, Sleeter (2012) advocates for combatting uninformed perspectives on multiculturalism and diversity through discourses that analyze the topic through a political lens, which provides more context for the problems faced by marginalized groups that impact achievement. Sleeter argues for "anti-racist education, critical pedagogy, and critical

multiculturalism” (p. 572) to probe the underlying reasons for the outcomes experienced by historically marginalized groups and belief systems that continue to marginalize students. Each strategy prioritizes structural analysis of the inequalities in American society and critically examines the unequal distribution of power and resources, rather than just exploring the surface-level cultural differences between groups, such as music, language, and customs. While this form of inclusion is important, it must be done in a manner that does not reduce the culture of students to just celebration (Berry & Walkowiak, 2006, p. 175). Approaching multicultural education from these viewpoints requires teachers to have an in-depth personal knowledge, while at the same time confronting limited worldviews.

Like Ladson-Billings (1995) and Sleeter (2012), Milner (2011) argues that culturally relevant pedagogy benefits student learning and understanding of the world. Milner (2011) concludes that teachers should create learning environments where students are given a platform to respond critically to knowledge, rather than just passively internalizing facts given to them. Students must be full participants in the process of knowledge production and consumption in the classroom (p. 72). Milner’s specific focus is on the transformation of students through the development of a deeper understanding of themselves. Teachers can assist in this process by incorporating curriculum that is reflective of the students in their classrooms. More importantly, Milner argues for building teacher competence in this area in order for them to be more effective with students. Rather than focusing on “a specified set of practices” (p. 76) for teachers to duplicate, Milner (2011) instead uses his research to illustrate one teacher’s journey towards cultural competence and how this teacher developed the disposition that empowered students in the classroom.

Data

Current data indicates that public schools are experiencing problems with producing equal outcomes for all students. According to the 2015 National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP) results, Black, Latino, American Indian and Multi-racial students perform below the level of Asian and White students, as shown in Table 1. Performance for Black students was 224, which is 24 points below that of White students. Native American and Latino students were also below the average performance of Whites with scores of 227 and 230 respectively. White students' performance also lags behind that of their Asian counterparts. While Asians scored an average of 257, Whites only scored 248. This data illustrates a prime opportunity for public schools within the U.S. to raise the achievement of all students.

Table 1
U.S. Student Achievement in 4th Grade Math by Race/Ethnicity

Year	White	Black	Hispanic	Asian Pacific Islander	American Indian Alaska Native	Two or more races
	Average scale score	Average scale score	Average scale score	Average scale score	Average scale score	Average scale score
2015	248	224	230	257	227	245
2013	250	224	231	258	227	245
2011	249	224	229	256	225	245

Note. [Source: National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) Institute of Education Sciences (IES) National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 2015.]

Addressing unequal outcomes in achievement is contingent upon an understanding of one of the key tenets of culturally relevant pedagogy that is often overlooked- academic achievement. While Ladson-Billings never intended for academic achievement to be fully

represented by performance on standardized test scores (Milner, 2011; Ladson-Billings, 2006), nevertheless, we find ourselves in the predicament where school success is measured primarily by test scores. While raising the achievement scores of historically marginalized students and White students relative to the scores of Asian students is key, so is incorporating relevant materials that make curriculum more meaningful to students (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Milner, 2011; Sleeter, 2012). According to Ladson-Billings' (2012) study, teachers who took on student achievement as a priority were successful with student outcomes (p. 475). Furthermore, these teachers rejected deficit narratives that explain disparate achievement by blaming families and children, instead of examining school-level and societal structures that contribute to low achievement (ibid).

U.S. student performance on international assessments indicates a need to integrate culturally relevant pedagogy across all age and grade levels, as well as subject areas. On the 2012 Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), U.S. students performed 30th out of 65 countries in the area of mathematics for 15-year old students. For this same group, performance in science ranked the U.S. as 23rd out of a total of 65 countries. Finally, in reading U.S. students were ranked 20th overall. These rankings are concerning for the U.S., which in was declared to be in danger of low performance by the report *A Nation at Risk* (1983). The data shows that U.S. students as a whole are in need of teachers who can implement a culturally relevant pedagogy that will connect to all students and improve student achievement for all (Kena et. al., 2015).

Discussion

Culturally relevant pedagogy is a term that encompasses three significant tenets including: student achievement, affirmation of cultural identity, and development of critical perspectives for the purpose of challenging inequity (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Freire, 2000).

While the concept emphasizes a holistic approach, many have a shallow understanding, or approach to culturally relevant pedagogy that does not keep student needs at the center. Students need to be educated to have a critical perspective in life. This includes students from dominant groups, as well as those from marginalized groups. This dialogue is central to Ladson-Billings' (1995) theory, as it promotes an equal interaction between teachers and students to increase understanding. The understanding and connection will lead to higher achievement, which will benefit the U.S. as it seeks to raise standings in international comparisons.

Much of the knowledge students learn today is devoid of an opportunity for them to contribute. Yet, in the midst of such a punitive environment, there are teachers and schools that are experiencing successful outcomes with all students. Though Ladson-Billings (1995) and Milner (2011) did not identify specific actions to be demonstrated by all teachers, there were similarities between highly successful teachers of African American and other marginalized students. These teachers had high expectations of students and expected their students to succeed. They did not stigmatize students based on where they were from, but instead made valuable connections to students' communities (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Moreover, they instilled pride in students and did not permit them to fail (pp. 478-479).

Conclusion/Recommendations

In the current era of educational reform, accountability standards have eclipsed the importance of implementing a culturally relevant pedagogy that is focused on student achievement, affirmation of cultural identity, and development of critical perspectives. Without these key tenets, public schools are likely not going to make a significant difference in the lives of students. Furthermore, only implementing a partial, reconstructed version of culturally relevant pedagogy encourages continued ignorance of societal structures that lead to the

underachievement of students. In order for teachers and school leaders to begin implementing culturally relevant pedagogy with fidelity, I recommend the following:

- ***Select more readings of critical texts from a wider variety of authors in pre-service programs.*** Pre-service teachers need to be exposed to a wider variety of authors from various cultural backgrounds. These can be critical readings specifically for the purpose of training teachers in pedagogical methods that will enhance their teaching, or these readings might specifically be young adult literature that can be incorporated into the classroom.
- ***Increase exposure of teachers to diverse field experiences sooner.*** Pre-service teachers should have the opportunity to begin field placements in schools with high numbers of low-income students, or schools with large populations of students of color. Students should complete staff development that will give them adequate training to understand the context of the school in which they will be working. By exposing pre-service teachers to diverse experiences sooner, the likelihood of being successful in the classroom will be increased.
- ***Implement regular professional development in schools that develop teachers' ability to implement relevant pedagogical strategies.*** Regular professional development for teachers needs to incorporate strategies that are related to the content area of teachers. Professional development should be ongoing and meaningful and allow for time for follow-up to ensure that teachers are implementing the content in a manner that is relevant to students.

Improving academic achievement help increase the likelihood that students will succeed in the future. Students must have the academic knowledge and skills to connect to the content they are required to learn. Without this connection to the content, students' interest will not be

sustained long enough to develop the essential skills needed to be competitive. By implementing culturally relevant pedagogy that is focused on the academic achievement of students, incorporation of culturally relevant materials, and development of socially conscious students, teachers can ensure they give students the best chance possible to compete.

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