

## "YES, BUT HOW DO WE DO IT?": PRACTICING CULTURALLY RELEVANT PEDAGOGY

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*In her groundbreaking book The Dreamkeepers and in numerous scholarly publications, University of Wisconsin professor Gloria Ladson-Billings has portrayed and analyzed the practice of successful teachers of African American students—teachers who embody what Ladson-Billings calls "culturally relevant teaching." Her work is used widely in teacher-preparation programs and has influenced a generation of educators. In the following essay, Ladson-Billings explains the elements of culturally relevant pedagogy, while arguing that improving the education of poor students of color is as much a matter of how we think as of "what to do."*

In 1989, when I began documenting the practice of teachers who achieved success with African American students, I had no idea that it would create a kind of cottage industry of exemplary teachers. I began the project with the assumption that there were indeed teachers who could and did teach poor students of color to achieve high levels of academic success (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Other scholars (Foster, 1997; Mathews, 1988) verified this aspect of my work. Unfortunately, much of the work that addresses successful teaching of poor students of color is linked to the notion of the teacher as heroic isolate. Thus, stories such as those of Marva Collins (Collins & Tamarkin, 1990), Jaime Escalante (Mathews, 1988), Vivian Paley (2000), and Louanne Johnson (1992) inadvertently transmit a message of the teacher as savior and charismatic maverick without exploring the complexities of teaching and nuanced intellectual work that undergirds pedagogical practices.

In this chapter, I discuss the components of culturally relevant teaching (Ladson-Billings, 1995) and provide practical examples of how teachers might implement these components in their classrooms. I choose to provide practice-based examples to remove some of the mystery and mythology tied to theory that keep teachers from doing the work designed to support high levels of achievement for poor students of color.

### BUT HOW DO WE DO IT?

Almost every teacher-educator devoted to issues of diversity and social justice finds himself or herself confronted by prospective and in-service teachers who quickly reject teaching for social justice by insisting that there are no practical exemplars that make such teaching possible. A semester or staff development session typically ends with teachers unsure of what they can or should do and eventually defaulting to regular routines and practices. Nothing changes in the classroom and poor students of color are no closer to experiencing the kind of education to which they are entitled.

I argue that the first problem teachers confront is believing that successful teaching for poor students of color is primarily about "what to do." Instead, I suggest that the problem is rooted in how we think—about the social contexts, about the students, about the curriculum, and about instruction. Instead of the specific lessons and activities that we select to fill the day, we must begin to understand the ways our theories and philosophies are made to manifest in the pedagogical practices and rationales we exhibit in the classroom. The following sections briefly describe the salient elements of teacher thinking that contribute to what I have termed "culturally relevant teaching."

### Social Contexts

Teaching takes place not only in classrooms. It takes place in schools and communities. It takes place in local, state, national, and global contexts that impact students regardless of whether teachers acknowledge them or not. How teachers think about those contexts creates an environment for thinking about teaching. Teachers who believe that society

is fair and just believe that their students are participating on a level playing field and simply have to learn to be better competitors than other students. They also believe in a kind of social Darwinism that supports the survival of the fittest. Teachers with this outlook accept that some students will necessarily fall by the wayside and experience academic failure.

Teachers who I term "culturally relevant" assume that an asymmetrical (even antagonistic) relationship exists between poor students of color and society. Thus, their vision of their work is one of preparing students to combat inequity by being highly competent and critically conscious. While the teachers are concerned with the students who sit in their classrooms each day, they see them in relation to a continuum of struggle—past, present, and future. Thus, the AIDS crisis in black and brown communities, immigration laws, and affordable health care are not merely "adult" issues, but also are a part of the social context in which teachers attempt to do their work.

Being aware of the social context is not an excuse for neglecting the classroom tasks associated with helping students to learn literacy, numeracy, scientific, and social skills. Rather, it reminds teachers of the larger social purposes of their work.

### The Students

Of course, teachers think about their students. But *how* they think about their students is a central concern of successful teaching. In my work as a teacher educator, I regularly see prospective teachers who approach teaching with romantic notions about students. They believe that the goodwill and energy they bring to the classroom will be rewarded by enthusiastic, appreciative students, who will comply with their requests and return the love they purport to give their students. Unfortunately, real life rarely matches that ideal. Poor students of color, like all children, live complex lives that challenge teachers' best intentions. Whether teachers think of their students as needy and deficient or capable and resilient can spell the difference between pedagogy grounded in compensatory perspectives and those grounded in critical and liberatory ones.

My best examples of the first perspective come from years of observing prospective teachers enter classrooms where students fail to comply with their wishes and directives. Quickly the students are constructed as problems—"at risk," behavior problems, savages—and those constructions become self-fulfilling prophecies (Rist, 1970). Before long, the classroom is no longer a place where students are taught and expected to learn. Rather, it becomes a place where bodies are managed and maintaining order becomes the primary task. Unfortunately, many urban schools reinforce and reward this type of pedagogical response (Haberman, 1991).

Culturally relevant teachers envision their students as being filled with possibilities. They imagine that somewhere in the classroom is the next Nobel laureate (a Toni Morrison), the next neurosurgeon (a Benjamin Carson), or the next pioneer for social justice (a Fannie Lou Hamer).<sup>1</sup> This perspective moves the teachers from a position of sympathy ("you poor dear")<sup>2</sup> to one of informed empathy. This informed empathy requires the teacher to feel with the students rather than feel for them. Feeling with the students builds a sense of solidarity between the teacher and the students but does not excuse students from working hard in pursuit of excellence.

Culturally relevant teachers recognize that their students are "school dependent."<sup>3</sup> I use this term to suggest that some students are successful in spite of their schooling, as a result of material resources and cultural capital. If they have incompetent or uncaring teachers, their parents and families have the resources to supplement and enhance the schooling experience. However, most poor students of color look to schools as the vehicle for social advancement and equity. They are totally dependent on the school to help them achieve a variety of goals. When the school fails to provide for those needs, these students are locked out of social and cultural benefits. For example, a number of poor students of color find themselves in classrooms with teachers who are unqualified or underqualified to teach (Ladson-Billings, 2005). More striking is that some of these children find themselves in classrooms where there is no regularly assigned teacher. Instead, the students spend entire school years with a series of substitute teachers who have no responsibility for supporting their academic success.

### The Curriculum

Typically, teachers are expected to follow a prescribed curriculum that state and local administrators have approved. In many large school districts, that approved curriculum may merely be a textbook. In several poorly performing districts, that curriculum may be a script that teachers are required to recite and follow. I argue that teachers engaged in culturally relevant pedagogy must be able to deconstruct, construct, and reconstruct (Shujaa, 1994) the curriculum. "Deconstruction" refers to the ability to take apart the "official knowledge" (Apple, 2000) to expose its weaknesses, myths, distortions, and omissions. "Construction" refers to the ability to build curriculum. Similar to the work that John Dewey (1997) advocated, construction relies on the experiences and knowledge that teachers and their students bring to the classroom. "Reconstruction" requires the work of rebuilding the curriculum that was previously taken apart and examined. It is never enough to tear down. Teachers must be prepared to build up and fill in the holes that emerge when students begin to use critical analysis as they attempt to make sense of the curriculum.

The perspective of culturally relevant teachers is that the curriculum is a cultural artifact and as such is not an ideologically neutral document. Whereas the highly ideological nature of the curriculum is evident in high-profile communities where there are fights over evolution versus creation or sex education curricula that advocate safe sex versus abstinence, it is more subtle and pernicious in other curriculum documents. For example, the history curriculum reflects ethnocentric and sometimes xenophobic attitudes and regularly minimizes the faults of the United States and some European nations. Even an area such as mathematics is susceptible to ideology that leaves poor children of color receiving mathematics curricula that focus on rote memorization and algorithms whereas middle-class students have early access to algebraic thinking and more conceptually grounded approaches.

### Instruction

No curriculum can teach itself. It does not matter if teachers have access to exceptional curriculum if they do not have the instructional

skills to teach all students. College and university professors have the means to provide students with intellectually challenging and critical knowledge, but few professors are able to teach the wide variety of students who show up in K-12 classrooms. Precollegiate teachers must have a wide repertoire of teaching strategies and techniques to ensure that all students can access the curriculum. Unlike postsecondary teachers, K-12 teachers teach students who may or may not wish to be students. That means that their teaching must engage, cajole, convict, and perhaps even fool students into participation. Culturally relevant teachers understand that some of the pedagogical strategies that make teaching easier or more convenient for them may be exactly the kind of instruction they should avoid. For example, placing students in ability groups or tracks may serve to alienate struggling students further. Lecturing, no matter how efficient, may do nothing more than create greater gaps between successful students and those who are not. Even those strategies that progressive educators see as more democratic may fail to create the equal access teachers desire. In this instance, I refer to the almost unanimous belief that cooperative learning is a preferred teaching strategy. Many teacher preparation programs emphasize cooperative and other group strategies as preferable to more traditional classroom arrangements. However, when poorly managed, cooperative learning creates unequal workloads and instances in which students exclude other students from the process. High achievers sometimes resent being placed with struggling students and struggling students can be embarrassed by their inability to be full participants in the group setting.

Thus, if teachers must consider the ways that the social contexts of schooling impact their work and that their context may not be supportive, what, if anything, can they do? I argue that teachers must engage in a culturally relevant pedagogy that is designed to attend to the context while simultaneously preparing students for the traditional societal demands (i.e., high school completion, postsecondary education, workplace requirements, active and participatory citizenship). I next address the elements of culturally relevant pedagogy that teachers must attend to in order to achieve success with students who have been underserved by our schools.

### ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

When I wrote the words "academic achievement" almost ten years ago, I never dreamed that I would regret using this term. What I had in mind has nothing to do with the oppressive atmosphere of standardized tests; the wholesale retention of groups of students; scripted curricula; and the intimidation of students, teachers, and parents. Rather, what I envisioned is more accurately described as "student learning"—what it is that students actually know and are able to do as a result of pedagogical interactions with skilled teachers. However, because I started with the term "academic achievement," I will stay with it for consistency's sake.

The teachers who focus on academic achievement (i.e., student learning) understand that this is their primary function. They are not attempting to get students to "feel good about themselves" or learn how to exercise self-control. Rather, they are most interested in the cultivation of students' minds and supporting their intellectual lives. They understand that through engaged learning students will develop self-esteem and self-control. They recognize that the outbursts and off-task behaviors are symptoms, not causes, and as teachers the one thing they have at their disposal are pedagogical tools to draw students into the learning in meaningful ways.

Culturally relevant teachers think deeply about what they teach and ask themselves why students should learn particular aspects of the curriculum. In these classrooms, teachers are vetting everything in the curriculum and often supplement the curriculum. For example, in a culturally relevant high school English class the teacher may understand that he or she has to teach *Romeo and Juliet* but would couch that book in the context of students' own struggles with parents over dating. There may even be a detailed discussion of suicide and the level of desperation that adolescents may experience when they cannot communicate with adults. Finally, the teacher may include some films, popular music, or other stories that take up the theme of young, forbidden love. The point here is that a culturally relevant teacher does not take the book as a given. Rather, the teacher asks himself or herself specific questions about what reading this book is supposed to accomplish. This

same teacher might be quite explicit about the place of the text in the literary canon and the cachet and clout students acquire when they can speak intelligently about such texts. One of the major academic activities in the classroom of culturally relevant teachers is engaging in critique of texts and activities. Over and over students ask and are asked "Why are we doing this?" "Why is this important?" and "How does this enrich my life and/or the life of others?"

For tasks that seem mundane, teachers may use a very pragmatic skill (e.g., changing a tire) to help students understand how simple component parts of a task (e.g., blocking and braking the car), are necessary prerequisites to the larger task. The chemistry teacher may spend time helping students learn the precise way to light and use a Bunsen burner not because lighting a Bunsen burner is a marketable skill, but because having a lit Bunsen burner will be important for many of the subsequent labs.

Repeatedly, culturally relevant teachers speak in terms of long-term academic goals for students. They rarely focus on "What should I do on Monday?" and spend a considerable amount of their planning trying to figure out what the semester or yearlong goals are. They share those goals with students and provide them with insights into their teaching so that students know why they are doing what they are doing. These teachers use many real-life and familiar examples that help the classroom come alive. They may use metaphors to paint word pictures. One teacher refers to the classroom experience as a trip and uses many travel metaphors. "We're still in San Jose and you know we've got to get to L.A." is what she might say when the class is falling behind where she thinks it should be. Or, she can be heard to say, "Hey, Lamar, why are you in Petaluma?" when referring to a student who is off task and doing the exact opposite of what she wishes to accomplish.

Interestingly, Foster (1989) describes a community college teacher who structured her classroom as an economy. Even with adult learners this teacher understood that the metaphorical language helped her students visualize their objectives. The students who were "on welfare" wanted to get jobs in "the bank." The symbolism and imagery resonated with the students and the teacher used it as a way to get the very best out of her students.

### CULTURAL COMPETENCE

Of the three terms ("academic achievement," "cultural competence," "sociopolitical consciousness") that I use to describe the components of culturally relevant pedagogy, I find the notion of cultural competence the most difficult to convey to teachers who wish to develop their own practice in this way. One of the problems is that like academic achievement, the term "cultural competence" has another set of meanings. Currently, many of the helping professions—such as medicine, nursing, counseling, social work—refer to something called "cultural competence." However, in these professions the notion of cultural competence refers to helping dominant group members become more skillful in reading the cultural messages of their clients. As a consequence, novice practitioners in these fields practice aspects of their work in ways that represent culturally sensitive behaviors—not pointing; speaking in direct, declarative sentences; directing questions and statements to an elder. Unfortunately, these practices reflect a static and essentialized view of culture and tend to reinforce stereotypes, rather than dispel them.

My sense of cultural competence refers to helping students to recognize and honor their own cultural beliefs and practices while acquiring access to the wider culture, where they are likely to have a chance of improving their socioeconomic status and making informed decisions about the lives they wish to lead. The point of my work is to maintain teachers' focus on what improves the lives of the students, families, and communities they serve—not to make teachers feel better about themselves. I presume that teachers who do learn more about their students' backgrounds, cultures, and experiences feel more capable and efficacious in their work as teachers, but the teachers are not my primary objective. In the most instrumental way, I think of the teachers as a vehicle for improving students' lives.

Teachers who foster cultural competence understand that they must work back and forth between the lives of their students and the life of school. Teachers have an obligation to expose their students to the very culture that oppresses them. That may seem paradoxical, but without the skills and knowledge of the dominant culture, students are unlikely to be able to engage that culture to effect meaningful change.

I visited two middle school teachers who created an etiquette unit in which they introduced students to information about manners. However, it was not a unit merely focused on what to do; it included historical, cultural, and sociological information about why these practices are as they are. At the end of the unit, the teachers took the students in small groups out to dinner at a quality restaurant. For many of the students, this was the first time they had attended a restaurant with linen napkins and multicourse dinners. The idea of this activity was not to attempt to make the students middle class but, rather, to have the student experience and critique middle-class ways. A surprising response to the dining experience was that of one female student, who said, "Now that I know what this is like I'm not going to let a guy take me to McDonald's and call that taking me out to dinner."

In one of the most powerful and striking instances of cultural competence, MacArthur Award winner,<sup>4</sup> teacher, and forensics coach Tommie Lindsey of James Logan High School in Union City, California, uses culturally specific speeches and dialogues to help his largely black and brown forensics team win local, state, and national competitions. The students use pieces from African American and Latina/Latin writers in the midst of a venue that can only be described as upper middle class and mainstream. Lindsey has successfully merged the students' cultural strengths with the forensics form. The students have exposure to a wider world without compromising aspects of their own culture.

### SOCIOPOLITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

I can typically convince teachers (both preservice and in-service) that it is important to focus on student learning as well as make use of students' culture. However, the idea that developing sociopolitical consciousness is important is a much harder sell. One of the reasons this aspect of the theory is difficult is that most of the teachers I encounter have not developed a sociopolitical consciousness of their own. True, most hold strong opinions about the sociopolitical issues they know about, but many do not know much about sociopolitical issues. When I talk to teachers about economic disparities, they rarely link these disparities with issues of race, class, and gender. Thus, the first

thing teachers must do is educate themselves about both the local sociopolitical issues of their school community (e.g., school board policy, community events) and the larger sociopolitical issues (e.g., unemployment, health care, housing) that impinge upon their students' lives.

The second thing teachers need to do is incorporate those issues into their ongoing teaching. I am not talking about teachers pushing their own agendas to the detriment of student learning. Rather, the task here is to help students use the various skills they learn to better understand and critique their social position and context. For example, in my original study of cultural competence and sociopolitical awareness, a student complained about the deterioration of the community and expressed strong emotions about how unhappy he was living in a place that had lots of crime, drugs, and little in the way of commerce and recreational facilities. The teacher used the student's emotion to develop a community study. Although it is typical for students to study their community, this study involved a detailed examination of the reality of the community, not a superficial look at "community helpers." The teacher retrieved information from the historical society's archives so that the students could compare the community's present condition with that of the past and raise questions about how the decline had occurred. Ultimately, the students developed a land-use plan that they presented to the city council.

### THE CULPABILITY OF TEACHER EDUCATION

Most discussions of what teachers fail to do give teacher education a pass. We presume that teachers are doing something separate and apart from their preparation. However, I argue that teacher preparation plays a large role in maintaining the status quo. Teacher educators are overwhelmingly white, middle-aged, and monolingual English speakers. Although more women are entering the academy as teacher educators, the cultural makeup of the teacher-education profession is embarrassingly homogeneous. This cultural homogeneity of the teacher-education profession makes it difficult to persuade convincingly preservice teachers that they should know and do anything different in their classrooms.

In addition to the overwhelming cultural homogeneity of the teacher-education profession, we organize our profession in ways that suggest that issues of diversity and social justice are tangential to the enterprise. Most preservice teachers enter a program that ghettoizes issues of diversity. Somewhere in a separate course or workshop, students are given "multicultural information." It is here that students often are confused, angry, and frustrated because they do not know what to do with this information. Regularly preservice teachers report feelings of guilt and outrage because they receive information about inequity, racism, and social injustice in ways that destabilize their sense of themselves and make them feel responsible for the condition of poor children of color in our schools.

In some instances, preservice teachers participate in a teacher-education program that requires them to have at least one field experience in a diverse classroom and/or community setting. When such field experiences are poorly done, this requirement becomes just another hoop through which students jump to earn a credential. Students in these circumstances regularly speak of "getting over" their diversity requirement. Rarely do such students want to do their most significant field experience—student teaching—in diverse classrooms. When these field experiences are well conceived, they allow preservice teachers to be placed in classrooms with skillful teachers and be supervised by careful teacher educators who can help them make sense of what they are experiencing and create useful applications for the multicultural knowledge they are learning.

Although the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education includes a diversity standard in its accreditation process, most programs struggle to equip novice teachers fully to work with children who are poor, linguistically diverse, and/or from racial or ethnic minority groups. Teacher candidates may resist the lessons of diversity and social justice, but that resistance may be intimately tied to the lack of credibility their professors and teacher-education instructors possess. Why should preservice students believe that teacher educators who spend much of their lives in the comforts of the academy can understand the challenges today's classrooms present? Why should tenuous 1960s civil rights credentials be made proxies for twenty-first-century problems? I am not



suggesting that participation in the civil rights struggle is an unimportant part of one's biography—it is a part of my own biography. Rather, I am suggesting that in this new time and space, that aspect of one's biography may not prove adequate for helping students navigate the multiple ways that race, class, gender, and language identities complicate the pedagogical project. Teacher education has much to answer for concerning its role in preparing teachers who fail to serve classrooms of poor children of color well.

### WHAT IS A TEACHER TO DO?

As I noted earlier, many well-meaning teachers lament the fact that they do not know what to do when it comes to meeting the educational needs of all students. Indeed, a group of soon-to-be teachers recently said to me, "Everybody keeps telling us about multicultural education, but nobody is telling us how to do it!" I responded, "Even if we could tell you how to do it, I would not want us to tell you how to do it." They looked at me with very confused expressions on their faces. I went on to say, "The reason I would not tell you what to do is that you would probably do it!" Now, the confused expressions became more pronounced. "In other words," I continued, "you would probably do exactly what I told you to do without any deep thought or critical analysis. You would do what I said regardless of the students in the classroom, their ages, their abilities, and their need for whatever it is I proposed." I concluded by asking the students who had taught them to "do democracy." They acknowledged that no one had taught them to do democracy, and I rejoined that doing democracy is one of their responsibilities. Slowly, the conversation moved to a discussion of how democracy is a goal for which we are all striving and although there are a few cases such as voting and public debate during which we participate in democracy, for the most part democracy is unevenly and episodically attended to. As teachers they have the responsibility to work toward educating citizens so that they are capable of participating in a democracy and nobody (and no teacher-education program) is going to tell them how to do it. They are going to have to commit to democracy as a central principle of their

Eventually, the preservice teachers began to see multicultural education and teaching for social justice as less a thing and more an ethical position they need to take in order to ensure that students are getting the education to which they are entitled. As a teacher educator, I have worked hard to motivate preservice teachers to become reflective practitioners who care about the educational futures of their students. Often we are naive enough to think that all teachers care about the educational futures of their students. The truth is that most teachers care about what happens to their students only while they have responsibility for them. To that end, they take on a tutorial role for some students, making sure they learn and advance. They take on a custodial role for some students, taking care of them in whatever state they are in but not advancing them educationally. They take on a referral agent role for others, shipping them off to someone else (e.g., a special educator, a parent volunteer, a student teacher) and expecting others to take responsibility for them educationally. But, how many teachers look at the students in their classrooms and envision them three, five, ten years down the road? Our responsibility to students is not merely for the nine months from September to June. It is a long-term commitment, not just to the students but also to society. Although we may have only a yearlong interaction with students, we ultimately have a lifelong impact on who they become and the kind of society in which we all will ultimately live.

An analogy I will use to illustrate this point is my experience with healthcare professionals. I do this with full knowledge that many people have not benefited from our current healthcare arrangements. Thus, this analogy uses an *N* of 1. Currently, I see four different physicians—an internist, an allergist, a gynecologist, and an oncologist. My internist is like my "homeroom" teacher. He tracks my schedule and makes sure I get to my other classes (i.e., the other physicians) on a regular basis. All of my physicians take responsibility not just for the aspect of my health in which he or she is expert but also for my total health. They all want my weight to be within a certain range. They all monitor my blood pressure. They all look at the various medications I am taking so that they can make intelligent decisions about what they should or

merely invested in me. I am arguing that my physicians are invested in the health of the community as well as my personal health. It does not benefit the community to have me be unhealthy within it. Similarly, it does not benefit our democracy to have uneducated and undereducated people within it. Our responsibility to the students who sit before us extends well into the future, both theirs and ours.

### CONCLUSION

This chapter asks the question Yes, but how do we do it? I have laid out an argument for why "doing" is less important than "being." I have argued that practicing culturally relevant pedagogy is one of the ways of "being" that will inform ways of "doing." I have suggested that our responsibility extends beyond the classroom and beyond the time students are assigned to us. It extends throughout their education because we contribute to (or detract from) that education. In a very real sense, the question is not how we do it but, rather, How can we not do it?

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### NOTES

1. I purposely chose examples that represent people who came from working-class and poor backgrounds.
2. I borrowed this term from Professor Pat Campbell, University of Maryland.
3. I first used this term in a school-funding equity case against the State of South Carolina.
4. The MacArthur Award is also referred to as a "genius" award.