
Confronting the Marginalization of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

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Abstract

Globally, over the last two decades, attention to culturally responsive, multi-cultural approaches to teaching have largely been supplanted by standardized curricula and pedagogy that derive from neoliberal business models of school reform. In this essay, I discuss three factors that contribute to the marginalization of culturally responsive pedagogy: (a) a persistence of faulty and simplistic conceptions of what culturally responsive pedagogy is, (b) too little research connecting its use with student achievement, and (c) elite and white fear of losing national and global hegemony. After discussing these factors, recommendations are offered.

Keywords

cultural responsiveness, culturally relevant pedagogy, minority academic success

Over the past 20 years in the United States and increasingly globally, neoliberalism has driven school reform. Neoliberalism is an economic philosophy that, as Hursh (2007) puts it, “promotes personal responsibility through

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individual choice within markets” (p. 496). Neoliberalism holds that human well-being can best flourish within a framework of individualism, free markets, free trade, and competition, under which the role of government shifts from regulating markets to enabling them, and privatizing public services (see Harvey, 2005). Following models of business management, states have been directed to set high standards and align curriculum to them, and teachers to teach to and test student mastery of them. Test results bring consequences, such as whether a student receives a diploma or what kind of publicity a school or its teachers receive. Schools with scores that do not rise, like businesses whose profits do not expand, are subject to closure. Pushed by wealthy venture capitalists, charter schools have emerged in the United States as the favored strategy for school improvement (see, for example, Dakari, 2009). Many now question the value of preservice teacher education; professional development for practicing teachers has shrunk (Wei, Darling-Hammond, & Adamson, 2010).

I will argue that neoliberal reforms, by negating the central importance of teacher professional learning, as well as context, culture, and racism, reverse the empowered learning that culturally responsive pedagogy has the potential to support. While research on the impact of culturally responsive pedagogy is thin, it is quite promising. But advancing culturally responsive pedagogy requires not only a stronger research base but also political work to combat its marginalization due to persistent simplistic conceptions of what it means, and backlash prompted by fear of its potential to transform the existing social order. While my analysis of the marginalization of culturally responsive pedagogy is situated mainly in the United States, multicultural policy is in retreat in many other countries as well (Modood, 2007), and policies that use standardization and testing to tie education directly to economic productivity are in ascendance (e.g., see Comber & Nixon’s, 2009, discussion of Australia).

It is helpful to begin by clarifying what culturally responsive pedagogy means. Gay (2010) defines it as teaching “to and through [students’] personal and cultural strengths, their intellectual capabilities, and their prior accomplishments” (p. 26); culturally responsive pedagogy is premised on “close interactions among ethnic identity, cultural background, and student achievement” (p. 27). She notes further that, “Students of color come to school having already mastered many cultural skills and ways of knowing. To the extent that teaching builds on these capabilities, academic success will result” (p. 213). Ladson-Billings (1995) proposed three dimensions of culturally relevant pedagogy: holding high academic expectations and offering appropriate support such as scaffolding; acting on cultural competence by reshaping curriculum, building on students’ funds of knowledge, and establishing

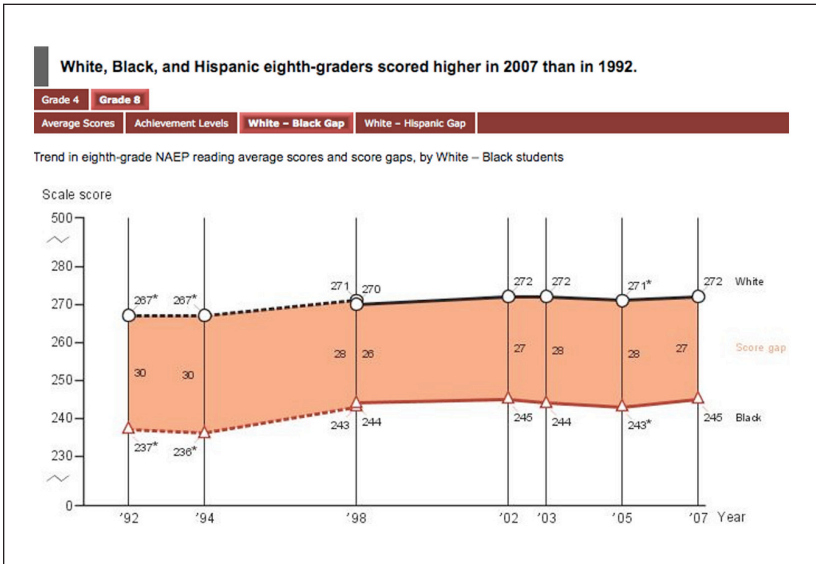


Figure 1. NAEP scores of eighth graders in reading, by race (Black, White)

Source: National Center for Education Statistics.

relationships with students and their homes; and cultivating students' critical consciousness regarding power relations. Later in this article, examples will flesh out these key ideas.

Student Learning Under Standardization

The National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP), a set of standardized tests that have changed little over the years, is a useful tool for assessing the impact of national trends on student learning. NAEP has been administered periodically since the early 1970s to national samples of students in Grades 4, 8, and 12 in various subject areas. Used to gauge how the nation's schools are doing, it is sometimes referred to as "the nation's report card."

A short view of NAEP data would seem to suggest that neoliberal school reforms that standardize teaching and learning are improving student achievement. Figure 1, which shows NAEP scores of eighth graders in literacy, by race (Black, White), between 1992 and 2007, illustrates how NAEP data are currently reported in a way that suggests that such reforms are on the right track since achievement scores of students have gradually improved (albeit very slowly), and racial achievement gaps have narrowed somewhat. For

those who support neoliberal and standards-based education policy reforms, such data suggest that things are moving in the right direction.

However, if one examines NAEP scores from the early 1970s to the present, a different picture emerges. Figure 2 shows trends in reading scores for 4th, 8th, and 12th graders since 1971, disaggregated by race/ethnicity (White, Black, Hispanic). Although results for 4th graders might seem to favor standards-based reforms, results for 8th and 12th graders do not. Notably, racial achievement gaps were narrowest around 1988 and 1990. After dropping when standards-based reforms were initiated in the 1990s, scores for African American and Latino students only partially rebounded, then virtually flattened out, offering a dismally slow trajectory of improvement (Lewis, James, Hancock, & Hill-Jackson, 2008). Figure 3 shows the same data in math, where the pattern is not as striking but still evident. Brayboy and Castagno (2009) make the same observation about what NAEP scores reveal for American Indian students.

Education reforms that have dominated U.S. schools since the 1990s have been deliberately context-blind. Although racial achievement gaps have been a focus of attention, solutions have emphasized offering all students the same curriculum, taught in the same way—based on the language, worldview, and experiences of White English-speakers (Gutiérrez, Asato, Santos, & Gotanda, 2002). I will not belabor a critique of these reforms as much has been written about them already. Instead, what interests me here is what was happening during the 1970s and 1980s that led to jumps in the achievement of students of color, and why policies and practices suddenly changed.

During the 1970s, schools across the United States were undergoing desegregation, and school districts were experimenting with approaches to working productively with more diverse student populations. I began teaching in 1972 in Seattle, about when Seattle Public Schools was developing early curriculum and pedagogy for teaching diverse students and was sending teachers (including me) to workshops and institutes on multicultural teaching. In addition, spurred on by the 1972 Supreme Court decision *Lau v. Board of Education*, school districts were also developing bilingual education programs. Although the term “culturally responsive pedagogy” had not yet been invented, the concept of cultural deficiency was openly challenged; approaches to schooling that responded constructively and proactively to culturally and linguistically diverse students were visible in development (Gay, 1983). Some notable examples include the Kamehameha Early Elementary Program for Native Hawaiians (Au, 2003) and Rock Point and Rough Rock community schools for Navajo students (Watahomigie & McCarty, 1994).

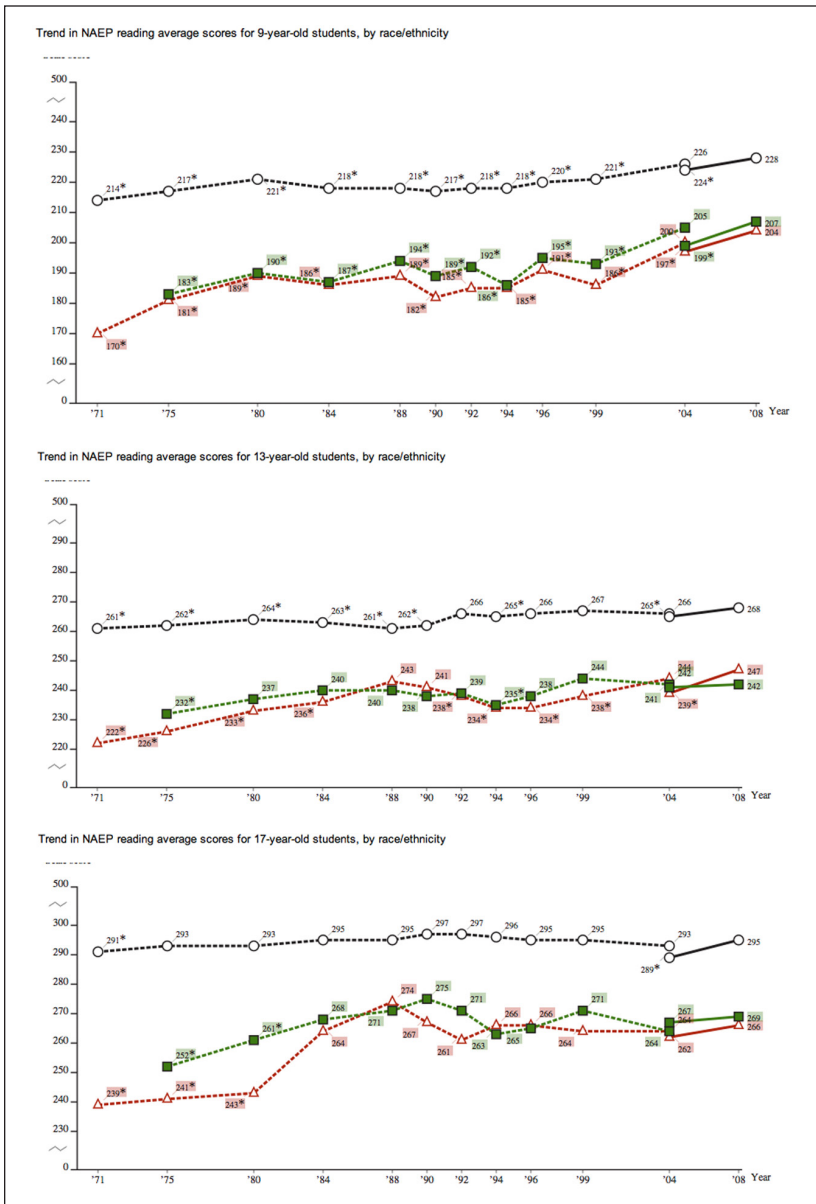


Figure 2. Trends in reading between 1971 and 2008
 Note: Black circles: White students; Green squares: Latino students; Red triangles: African American.

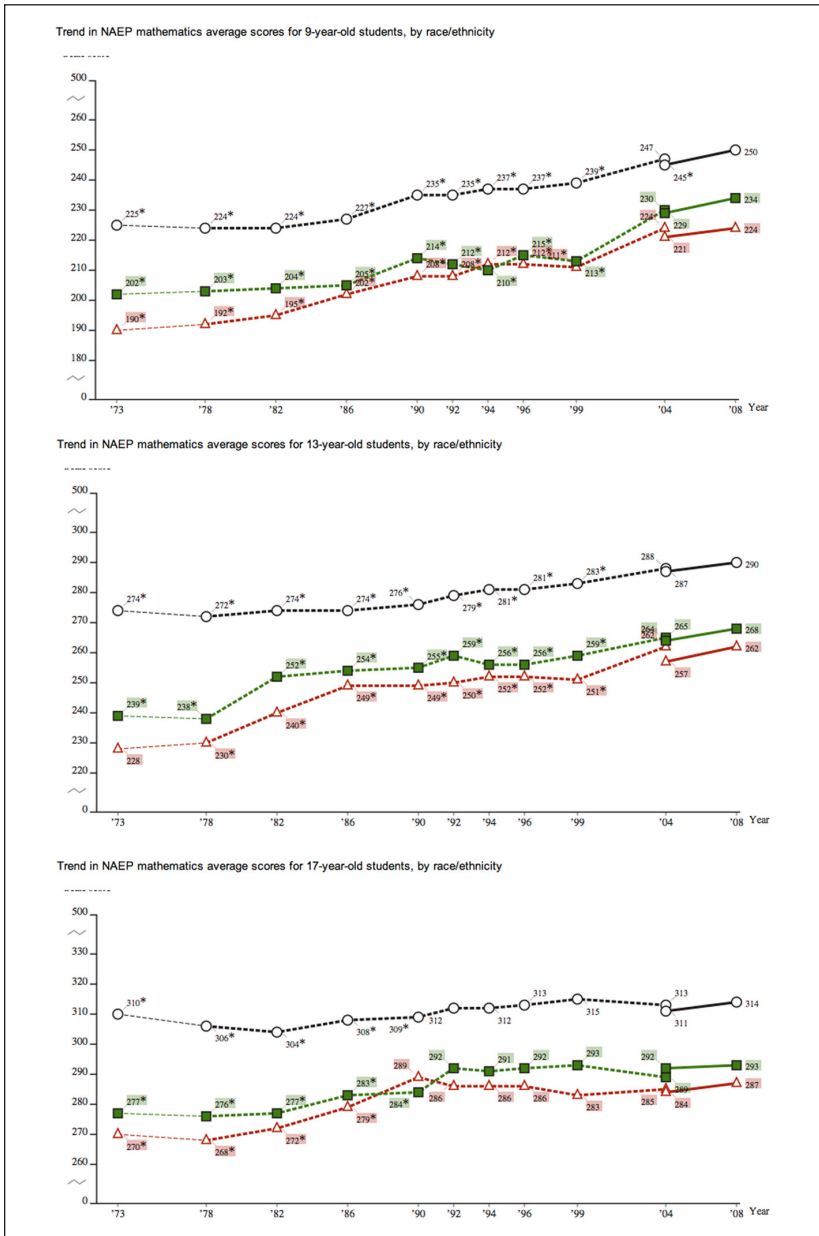


Figure 3. Trends in math between 1973 and 2008

Note: Black circles: White students; Green squares: Latino students; Red triangles: African American.

Of course, the 1970s and 1980s were not a “golden age” of excellent schooling. Low teacher expectations, ethnocentric curricula, disproportionate placement of students of color in special education, disproportionate disciplinary referrals of students of color, and related problems were (and still are) common. And, it would be a mistake to attribute gains in achievement of students of color solely to growth of multicultural, bilingual, and culturally responsive teaching. Other efforts, such as desegregation and the War on Poverty, were also significant. But the significance of work seeking to respond to diverse students in schools, coupled with visible social movements for equity, should not be underestimated.

Over the last two decades, however, attention to deepening culturally responsive, multicultural and bilingual approaches to teaching has largely been replaced by efforts to standardize curricula and pedagogy. For example, based on interviews with about 200 teachers in New York city, Crocco and Costigan (2007) reported teachers’ frustration with shrinking time to forge relationships with students, pressure to adhere closely to a mandated curriculum, and pressure to organize their teaching in prescribed ways that often contradicted their professional judgment. I will argue that attention to culturally responsive pedagogy has been relegated to the margins for three primary reasons: (a) persistent faulty and simplistic conceptions of what it is, (b) too little research connecting its use with student achievement, and (c) elite and white fear of losing national and global hegemony.

Simplistic Ways Culturally Responsive Pedagogy Is Often Used and Understood

Culturally responsive pedagogy is often understood in limited and simplistic ways. I will briefly discuss four simplifications: cultural celebration, trivialization, essentializing culture, and substituting cultural for political analysis of inequalities.

Culturally responsive pedagogy understood as *cultural celebration* tends to relegate attention to culture to the margins of instruction, ignore low academic expectations for students, as well as the lived culture of the school and classroom, and ignore power relations altogether. For example, following a presentation in which I had specifically discussed connections between culturally responsive pedagogy and student academic learning, a participant expressed puzzlement. An advocate of multicultural education, she emphasized interest in “cultural celebration” as an end in itself and commented that linking culture and academic learning was new to her. Understanding culture in a way that disconnects it from academic learning is common.

Young (2010) studied seven teachers in an urban school. The teachers had been working to unpack the link between race and student achievement; Young wanted to find out how they understood culturally relevant pedagogy. Significantly, although all seven spoke of valuing and building on student culture, none linked this directly with improving students' academic learning. Similarly, in an evaluation of a professional development program for culturally responsive pedagogy in New Zealand, Meyer and colleagues (2010) found that while many teachers' academic expectations for Maori students had improved as a result of the project, quite a few were vague about what their academic expectations were, and several worked with culture in elementary ways such as adding Maori terms for days of the week.

The tendency to view culturally responsive pedagogy as cultural celebration that is disconnected from academic learning seems to be fairly common among educators who have not examined their own expectations for the academic learning of historically underachieving students, and whose attention has become focused on learning about other cultural traditions as an end itself. Learning "about" culture then substitutes for learning to teach challenging academic knowledge and skills through the cultural processes and knowledge students bring to school with them. Writing about this limited view of culturally responsive pedagogy, Nykiel-Herbert (2010) noted, "One of the major reasons why minority students in general, and immigrant newcomers in particular, perform poorly in schools is that their home cultures, while being 'celebrated,' are not sufficiently utilized as a resource for their own learning" (p. 2). I suspect that many educators, parents, or policy makers interpret culturally responsive pedagogy as cultural celebration, *even when* it is presented as a process for building academic learning on the cultural repertoires students bring.

Trivialization of culturally relevant pedagogy involves reducing it to steps to follow rather than understanding it as a paradigm for teaching and learning. For example, during a visit to a professional development school that was connected with an urban teacher education program, I asked some administrators and teachers about connections the school had built with the community it serves. They fumbled to answer my question, saying things such as the community was hard to reach, the school serves different communities, and there are no existing community networks to work with. As I pressed the idea that community networks probably exist, responses suggested that the individuals I was talking with were unsure of their relevance. Then, when meeting with some student teachers who immediately told me how well prepared they were in culturally relevant pedagogy, I asked them what this meant. They showed me their textbook that was organized around

10 best practices of teaching; culturally responsive teaching was embedded in some of those practices, and they had learned to base their knowledge of students' backgrounds on a few short activities that asked students about their interests and lives outside school. When I observed student teachers working in four different classrooms, I saw only one lesson that reflected culturally responsive pedagogy (a science lesson designed around cooperative learning), and one that directly contradicted it, being pitched at an exceptionally low academic level involving content that was completely irrelevant to the students. By the end of the day, it was apparent that the student teachers' perception of themselves as knowledgeable in culturally responsive pedagogy derived from a reduction of its meaning to steps they could take to get to know their students within the walls of the classroom.

There are many ways in which culturally responsive pedagogy becomes simplified or trivialized. Patchen and Cox-Petersen (2008) found science teachers they studied to pick out strategies they could insert into teacher-directed instruction, such as occasional use of cooperative learning, rather than reconsidering their entire approach to teaching science. Thomas and Williams (2008) found mathematics teachers they worked with to define culturally relevant teaching as what they already do. Checklists that ask educators how often they engage in practices such as teaching to varied learning styles, using a culturally inclusive curriculum, and accommodating immigrant students (e.g., Nelson, Bustamante, & Onwuegbuzie, 2008; Underwood, 2009), even if they closely reflect research on culturally responsive pedagogy, reduce complexity and allow taken-for-granted assumptions to replace inquiry. Consider, for example, a rater interpreting "Meets the needs of all students" for a checklist that asks how frequently a teacher performs certain things. Furthermore, checklists may be used as an administrative vehicle for documenting compliance with an expected change, while minimizing what is actually changed.

Essentializing culture means assuming a fairly fixed and homogeneous conception of the culture of an ethnic or racial group, assuming culture to be a fixed characteristic of individuals who belong to a group, and that students who are group members identify with that conception. For example, the teacher who equates culture with foreign country and race when asking her students "What are you?" and "Where are you from?" exhibits a very superficial and damaging understanding of culture (Dutro, Kazemi, Balf, & Lin, 2008).

Consider "Hispanic foods" sections of many grocery stores. This designation assumes that people from countries that speak Spanish eat much the same foods. However, when we consider the fact that "Hispanic" lumps

together people who live in or have national origins that can be traced to most of South America, Central America, Spain, and parts of the Caribbean, one begins to question the sense of assuming an essentialized “Hispanic” culture. To drill down a bit deeper, in a description of diversity within Mexico, Ramos (in press) critiques the Mexican government’s designation of “diversity” as meaning only the indigenous peoples of Mexico. He points out that not only did the Spanish conquer Mexico, but Mexico has also received immigrants from countries as different from each other as China, France, Ireland, Turkey, Korea, the United States. Furthermore, indigenous Mexicans also comprise many different ethnic groups that speak different indigenous languages and are culturally different from each other. For a teacher to assume a homogenous Mexican culture is to engage in essentializing.

What makes more sense is for teachers to bring to the classroom an awareness of diverse cultural possibilities that might relate to their students, but then to get to know the students themselves. For example, based on her research investigating what excellent mathematics teachers of such students do, Gutiérrez (2002) argues that rather than basing pedagogy and curriculum on global and stereotypic racial and language identities that others project onto the students, excellent teachers take the time to get to know their students, then shape their pedagogy around relationships with them. Garza’s (2009) interviews with White and Latino students confirm the importance of teachers building caring relationships, then scaffolding new learning in a way that builds on what is familiar to students. Gutiérrez argues that learning to support students culturally in a way that does not essentialize culture is complicated, but results in the kind of teaching in which students thrive.

Substituting cultural for political analysis involves maintaining silence about the conditions of racism and other forms of oppression that underlie achievement gaps and alienation from school, assuming that attending to culture alone will bring about equity. Lewis and colleagues (2008) point out that underlying the achievement gap is a “web of interrelated impediments”—ideologies, practices, and policies—“that are actively and passively undermining widespread academic excellence among African Americans attending urban schools. Race- and class-based inequalities create and perpetuate the unequal distribution of educational resources, which sustains the Black–White achievement gap” (p. 148). Teachers’ construction of minoritized students in deficit terms, with negative consequences for their longer term academic success (Shields, Bishop, & Mazawi, 2005), results from long-standing racialized institutional policies and practices that consistently disadvantage minoritized students.

Because of the centrality of institutional racism to students' experiences, Beauboeuf-LaFontant (1999) proposed the term "politically relevant teaching," emphasizing that the central issue is often subordination rather than culture per se. Based on a review of the history of African American educators, she points out that their practice centers on a shared "understanding of systemic inequity—that is, the political, economic, and racial structures that disproportionately limit the opportunities of children of color" (p. 704); schooling is a vehicle not only for access to the mainstream but also for engaging in social change. She argued that the teachers' political clarity about the lives of their students is more central to their refusal to allow students to not learn, than is their cultural similarity with students.

Several related multicultural education discourses give priority to a political analysis. Antiracist education scholars, initially writing in a British context, were among the first to dismiss a culturalist emphasis as naïve and counterproductive because it simply ignores the wider structural constraints, such as racism, sexism, and discrimination, which affected minoritized students' lives. Critical race theory examines the structural roots of racism and the persistence of collective White control over power and material resources. Critical pedagogy develops such concepts as voice, dialog, power, and social class that overly cultural analyses of education too often either underutilize or ignore. Critical multiculturalism gives priority to structural analysis of unequal power relationships, analyzing the role of institutionalized inequities, including but not necessarily limited to racism (May & Sleeter, 2010). A structural analysis situates culture in the context of unequal power relations, as lived out in daily interactions, examining how these power relations contribute toward the ongoing production of culture, and a fluidity of identity depending on context.

But practitioners generally struggle more with implications of structural than cultural analyses for several reasons. First, since liberalism is far more prominent in mainstream ideology than critical perspectives, educators tend not to question assumptions of liberal multiculturalism. Second, much of the theoretical work in critical multiculturalism and critical race theory is conceptually dense, with relatively few illustrations for classroom practice. Third, and a point I will return to, naming and directly challenging systemic racism through pedagogy clashes with institutionalized structures and processes teachers are expected to adhere to.

Oversimplified and distorted conceptions of culturally responsive pedagogy, which do not necessarily improve student learning, lend themselves to dismissal of the entire concept. So too does the body of empirical work that

connects culturally responsive pedagogy with students learning, not because it does not document a positive impact, but because it does so mainly through small-scale case studies.

Research Connecting Culturally Responsive Pedagogy With Student Learning

Although considerable theory links culture and learning (e.g., Nasir & Hand, 2006; Rogoff, 2003), and quite a bit of research investigates culturally responsive pedagogy in the classroom, far too little systematically documents its impact on student learning.

Many case studies show what culturally responsive pedagogy looks like (variations of which go by other terms such as multicultural teaching, equity pedagogy, culturally relevant pedagogy, sociocultural teaching, and social justice teaching). Such studies may be based on interviews with minoritized students (e.g., Garza, 2009), interviews with exemplary teachers of minoritized students (e.g., Brown, 2004), or classroom observations along with interviews (e.g., Duncan-Andrade 2007; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Milner, 2011; Sleeter & Stillman, 2007; Ware, 2006). For example, Mitchell (2010) analyzes the teaching practice of three African American professors to illustrate key dimensions of culturally responsive pedagogy, noting that culturally responsive teachers are “students of their pupils’ communities” (p. 626). All three situated Black life in the United States within a history of White supremacy that has ongoing effects that must be named and challenged. They recognized Black students’ experiences with racism; they also recognized students’ cultural assets, and they specifically sought out students’ “inherent brilliance” (p. 626). Mitchell points out that the teachers became highly skilled improvisers in the classroom who were able to set the right tone for open discussions of racism in a way that prompted rather than hindering students’ academic learning. Portraits such as this serve as helpful tools that can move teachers beyond simplified notions of culturally responsive pedagogy discussed earlier.

Several small-scale studies connect culturally responsive pedagogy with student engagement, reasonably suggesting that academic learning follows engagement (e.g., Copenhaver, 2001; Hill, 2009; Nykiel-Herbert, 2010; Rodriguez, Jones, Pang, & Park, 2004; Thomas & Williams, 2008). For example, using observations and interviews, Howard (2001) studied the impact on African American students of four elementary teachers who used culturally responsive pedagogy. The students described the teachers as caring about them, creating community and family-like environments in the

classroom, and making learning fun. As a result, they wanted to participate. In one of the very few large-scale studies on culturally responsive pedagogy, Savage and colleagues (2011), who investigated 23 secondary schools in New Zealand, found Maori students to describe with enthusiasm their responses to and engagement with teachers who had been trained in culturally responsive pedagogy. Specifically, students appreciated that teachers acknowledged their identity as Maori learners, and teachers' attempts to know the students and incorporate things Maori into the classroom.

The relatively few studies that directly connect culturally responsive pedagogy with its impact on student academic learning, although very helpful, also consist of small-scale case studies (e.g., Camangian, 2010; Krater & Zeni, 1995; Lipka et al., 2005; Rickford, 2001; Sheets, 2005; see also reviews by Brayboy & Castagno, 2009; Gay, 2010). For example, Lee's (2006) Cultural Modeling Project "is a framework for the design of curriculum and learning environments that links everyday knowledge with learning academic subject matter, with a particular focus on racial/ethnic minority groups, especially youth of African descent" (p. 308). Lee has assessed its impact both quantitatively and qualitatively, often by having students write an analysis of a short story they have not seen before. For example, in a study comparing four English classes taught using Cultural Modeling with two taught traditionally, she found that, from pretest to posttest, the Cultural Modeling students gained over twice as much as the traditionally taught students (Lee, 1995). Lee's (2006) qualitative research shows students gradually learning to direct discussions interpreting and analyzing texts through the Cultural Modeling process, which traditional English achievement tests often do not capture (Lee, 2007).

Cammarota and Romero (2009) document the impact of the Social Justice Education Project (SJEP) in Tucson's Mexican American/Raza Studies Department, on student learning. SJEP, which was designed on a model of "critically conscious intellectualism" for strengthening teaching and learning of Chicano students, comprises a four-semester high school social studies curriculum. It includes critical pedagogy in which students create rather than consume knowledge, authentic caring in which educators demonstrate deep respect for students as full human beings, and social justice content that directly counters racism through Chicano studies intellectual frameworks that connect directly with students' lived experience. The curriculum, which teaches about racial and economic inequalities, includes a community-based research project in which students gather data about manifestations of racism in their school and community and use advanced-level social science theory to analyze why patterns in the data exist and how they can be challenged.

Chicano students in the SJEJ outscore Anglo students on the state's reading, writing, and math exams, and their graduation rates exceed those of Anglo students in the site(s) where the program is offered. Importantly, the SEJP students come to see themselves as intellectuals, and they credit the program itself for their academic success.

Research on the preparation of teachers for culturally responsive pedagogy is also thin and consists mainly of case studies. Case studies of teachers learning culturally responsive pedagogy illuminate problems and barriers teachers experience, sometimes showing how those problems can be addressed (e.g., Bondy, Ross, Gallingane, & Hambacher, 2007; Milner, 2010; Patchen & Cox-Petersen, 2008; Sleeter, 2005; Thomas & Williams, 2008). For example, in their case study of two mathematics teachers, Leonard, Napp, and Adeleke (2009) found teachers to make inaccurate assumptions about what might be relevant to their students. Because the authors were working with the teachers on an ongoing basis, they were able to prompt the teachers to question and think beyond their assumptions. Most case studies of teachers learning culturally responsive pedagogy explore the impact of specific kinds of preservice and professional development programs, including school–university partnerships (e.g., Bales & Saffold, 2011), inquiry-based courses (Jennings & Smith, 2002), teacher networks (El-Haj, 2003), community-based learning (Fickel, 2005; Moll & González, 1994), and sustained workshops combined with classroom-based coaching (Zozakiewicz & Rodriguez, 2007).

Connecting professional development of practicing teachers, their implementation of culturally responsive pedagogy, and its subsequent impact on students is challenging because teachers do not necessarily enact a robust conception of culturally responsive pedagogy as a result of professional development. Nonetheless, there is some such research; I will highlight research on two projects in New Zealand.

Te Kotahitanga is a professional development model focusing on culturally responsive teaching of Maori students; the model includes workshops linked with classroom mentoring and support. Bishop, Berryman, Cavanagh, and Teddy (2009) studied its impact on 422 teachers in 12 schools, finding a shift in teachers' pedagogy from didactic to discursive and relationship-based teaching, which was accompanied by an increase in Maori students' literacy and numeracy test scores. In addition, in an external evaluation of the program using quasi-experimental methodology, Penetito, Hindle, Hynds, Savage, and Kus (2011) found Te Kotahitanga schools to retain Maori students at a higher rate than comparison schools, prepare students for university entrance at a much higher rate, and yield higher results on some

national certification academic evaluations. In addition, they found Maori students in Te Kotahitanga Schools to describe teachers respecting them as Maori, which was quite different from how Maori students described teachers in non-Te Kotahitanga schools. Phillips, McNaughton, and MacDonald (2004) studied the impact on 73 teachers in 12 schools of a professional development project focusing on a sociocultural approach to teaching literacy to Maori and Pasifika young children. Using an experimental research design, they found children being taught by the teachers participating in the intervention to outperform the students of teachers in the nonintervention group on all measures of literacy achievement.

There is clearly a need for much more systematic research that links culturally responsive pedagogy with its impact on students, and also research that links teacher professional development in culturally responsive pedagogy with improved student learning. At the same time, such research needs to attend to two related issues. The first is describing and clarifying what culturally responsive pedagogy means and looks like in any given study. In an attempt to operationalize culturally responsive pedagogy by synthesizing 45 classroom-based studies, Morrison, Robbins, and Rose (2008) found a wide variation of loosely related actions teachers might take. They classified 12 kinds of actions into three broad categories, following Ladson-Billings' (1995) theoretical framework: high academic expectations with appropriate support such as scaffolding; cultural competence reflected in work with curriculum and students' funds of knowledge, and establishing relationships with students and families; and cultivating students' critical consciousness regarding power relations. Significantly, none of the 45 studies depicted all 12 key actions although each study depicted several of them.

The second related issue that warrants attention is the cultural context(s) of students, and how a given conception of culturally responsive pedagogy derives from or fits that context. Ladson-Billings' (1995) articulation of culturally relevant pedagogy, for example, although frequently applied to other contexts, was based on her study of effective teachers of African American students in the United States. Bishop and colleagues' (2009) articulation was based on narratives of Maori students in New Zealand. While both conceptions overlap, they are not identical. Because of the centrality of context to culturally responsive pedagogy, researchers cannot skip over the task of grounding what it means in the context being studied. At the same time, while maintaining context specificity, it is important to also show what principles of culturally responsive pedagogy apply across groups and across national boundaries. There is a tendency in the United States, for example, to ignore research outside the United States based on the assumption that

such research is about “them over there,” and therefore has no direct application to “us over here.”

Political Backlash

Culturally responsive pedagogy is not only about teaching, but is also a political endeavor. Earlier I situated schooling within neoliberalism and its reforms based on standardization and decontextualization, reforms that frame education as both a commodity for individual economic advancement and a tool to shape workers for the global economy. Although there is considerable variation among nations in the extent to which school practice is being shaped by such reforms, they are increasingly pervasive.

As the work of teachers is standardized and pressurized, attempts to work with culturally responsive pedagogy become increasingly difficult. Teachers have less time to research and develop curriculum that students can relate to, nontested curriculum disappears under pressure to raise test scores, and teachers are increasingly patrolled to make sure they are teaching the required curriculum, at the required pace (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2006; Comber & Nixon, 2009; Crocco & Costigan, 2007; Gillborn & Youdell, 2000; Sleeter & Stillman, 2007). For example, in a study of new teachers whose preparation had been from a critical multicultural perspective, Flores (2007) found that the schools in which they were hired pressured them away from it in various ways: through what veteran teacher colleagues modeled and espoused, the standardization of curricula and testing, and the institutionalized model of a “good student.” While teachers can learn to navigate accountability pressures (Sleeter, 2005), and while principals can buffer demands on teachers (Bergeron, 2008; Stillman, 2011), teachers in schools where students are underachieving tend to be pressured toward standardization rather than responsiveness to their diverse students.

Describing neoliberal reforms as “backlash pedagogy,” Gutiérrez and colleagues (2002) note that they make it “professionally and, in some cases legally, risky” to use culturally responsive practices that conflict with mandated “sameness” masquerading as equality for all (p. 345). Indeed, one should anticipate backlash as historically oppressed communities make gains. As Gutiérrez and colleagues argue,

Backlash pedagogies do not just happen: they are rooted in backlash politics, products of ideological and institutional structures that legitimize and thus maintain privilege, access, and control of the sociopolitical and economic terrain. Backlash politics are counterassaults against real or perceived shifts in power. (p. 337)

NAEP data show clearly that in the United States, during the 1970s and 1980, while students of color were making dramatic gains in achievement, White students were not. Achievement gains of students of color were accompanied by other political, social, and economic gains communities of color were making. Ultimately, culturally responsive pedagogy represents a paradigm of education that challenges, and in turn is being challenged by, neoliberal school reforms.

Nowhere is political backlash against culturally responsive pedagogy clearer than in Arizona. Earlier I noted results of research on the academic impact of the Social Justice Education Project on Chicano students. The Mexican American/Raza Studies Department in Tucson has gathered data showing a marked positive impact on students, not only in the SJEP but also in the department's other academic programs (Cammarota & Romero, 2009). Yet it is under attack in Arizona, and is the target of the state's ban on ethnic studies. At issue is what many White Arizonans regard as an un-American curriculum (Kossan, 2009; see also Bunch, 2010).

Recommendations

In light of connections among politics, research, and perceptions of culturally responsive pedagogy, I offer three recommendations. First, there is a clear need for evidence-based research that documents connections between culturally responsive pedagogy and student outcomes that include, but are not necessarily limited to, academic achievement. Politically, it is difficult to build a case to change approaches to teaching without strong evidence. Small-scale case studies illustrate what is possible, but we also need research on the impact of scaled-up work in culturally responsive pedagogy, including research showing how teachers can learn to use it in their classrooms (see Sleeter, 2011). Research that documents the impact of culturally responsive pedagogical practices on White students would also be helpful. The Te Kotahitanga work in New Zealand, for example, has evidence that White students also benefit when teachers learn to teach Indigenous students better because teachers become better with all of their students (Meyer et al., 2010). Such evidence can help to counter White fears that somehow culturally responsive pedagogy will harm White children.

Second, there is a need to educate parents, teachers, and education leaders about what culturally responsive pedagogy means and looks like in the classroom. Although presently there are many helpful descriptions in the professional literature, widely accessible portraits that include video would be very useful. Researchers might work to create such portraits with organizations that already have a sizable audience. For example, the Southern Poverty Law

Center has been collaborating with the American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education to develop an online resource for teaching about culturally responsive pedagogy, including video portraits of classroom teaching. Such a resource could be very helpful for guiding teachers, parents, and other members of the public beyond simplistic conceptions of what culturally responsive teaching means.

Third, there is a need to reframe public debate about teaching, especially teaching in diverse and historically underserved communities. Nurturing intellectual development in complex classrooms is a complex process (Ball, 2009). It might be relatively cheap to impose standardized and scripted curricula on teachers, and doing so might seem logical when students from underserved communities are viewed through a deficiency lens. However, I believe that a public case must be made that it is in the interest of society as a whole to nurture the intellectual talent of its highly diverse population and that investing in developing quality professional teaching that is culturally responsive to today's students is one necessary factor.

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