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Integrating theory and practice in culturally relevant pedagogy

Lauren Mizock¹

A Review of:

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy: Clashes and Confrontations

Edited by Lisa Scherff and Karen Spector. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010.

I.

Among the clashes and confrontations that occur in teaching in multicultural settings, integration of theory and practice is often a challenge. This tension is evident in *Culturally Relevant Pedagogy: Clashes and Confrontations*, a collection edited by Lisa Scherff and Karen Spector of the University of Alabama. *Culturally Relevant Pedagogy* presents powerful case material and stimulating theoretical background. Perhaps the difficulty of incorporating theory and practice in the field is reflected in the often-unwieldy combination of these elements in the book. However, Scherff and Spector provide an important reader that encourages culturally thoughtful approaches to teaching through pedagogical inquiry.

Culturally relevant pedagogy, a term coined by Gloria Ladson-Billings (1994), is a complex process of challenging the status quo in education with multiple objectives of making teaching culturally applicable to students, honoring their cultural heritages, and catering to a diversity of learning styles. In the introduction, the editors outline the goals of this pedagogy, which they wrote motivated by a difficult experience teaching a 9th grade English class of African-American students at a poorly performing school in the Deep South. Notably missing from the introduction is a statement about the objectives of the book. In this place and in others, the book would benefit from further commentary, transitions, and conclusions by the editors to weave the chapters together.

The edited volume includes case vignettes interspersed throughout the chapters. The authors' presumed attempts to diversify the voices and tone of the articles in this book with these vignettes is fitting with the theme of cultural relevance. Expansion of the vignettes in the same fashion as the longer academic articles in this volume would have given greater attention to these voices.

The book opens with the first case vignette, "Recognizing Culturally Relevant Pedagogy: Then and Now." In this segment, Victoria M. Whitfield makes a meaningful connection between several cultural clashes during her own education as an African-American student and as a teacher. She recalls her former teacher's denunciation of rap as an art form, and a white American student who challenges her coverage of the Harlem Renaissance. She notes the Confederate flags adorning his attire and poses questions about whether her culturally relevant approach to the curriculum should become more inclusive of his culture as well.

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Chapter 1, “Unpacking the Critical in Culturally Relevant Pedagogy: An Illustration Involving African Americans and Asian Americans,” by Eileen Carlton Parsons and Steven Wall, more comprehensively delineates Ladson-Billings’ notion of culturally relevant pedagogy as a system of education that interrogates the traditional power dynamics in educational institutions to promote cultural competence, academic excellence for students from a variety of cultures, and awareness of issues of social justice. To promote awareness of the culturally unique needs of different groups of students, they present the disparate histories of Asian Americans, initially primarily voluntary immigrants, and African Americans, who were forced into immigration. Implications are suggested for education settings by underscoring how these distinct histories contribute to differences among students in their attitudes towards traditional systems of education in the U.S.

Chapter 2, “Race, Identity, and the Shredding of a District Survey: Following Children into Relevance in an Urban Elementary Classroom” is written by Elizabeth Dutro, Elham Kazemi, and Ruth Balf. This article recounts the powerful story of a group of middle-school students who took offense to a survey developed by upper-level administrators to assess the diversity climate of the school. The teacher decided to take the opportunity to engage the students in an emotional dialogue about race and ethnicity. The students describe the failure of the survey to adequately capture the difficulties they face with racial categorization and discrimination. This chapter demonstrates the importance of student-initiated responses to cultural issues in the classroom in addressing issues of identity and racism directly and with cultural relevance.

“The Central Paradox of Critical Pedagogy: Learning from Practice in an Urban ‘Last Chance’ High School,” by Kysa Nygreen, provides a substantial review of theory blended smoothly with experiences from the classroom. Nygreen describes her experience in a predominantly African-American high school for students demonstrating challenges to academic success. She identifies a “central paradox of critical pedagogy” that values “the popular or subjugated knowledge of participants while, on the other hand, seeking to impose particular forms of specialized knowledge on those very participants” (p. 62). Nygreen provides a substantial background of various forms of critical pedagogy that view education as political, with goals to reduce oppression and promote social change. She outlines the paradox of current education practices to include: being theory-driven instead of practice-driven, having ambiguous short-term political aims, and that teaching students to critique systems of power in education may reduce their motivation to participate in academic settings. Nygreen intersperses theory with her experience teaching a social justice class at a “last chance” high school in California where students resisted the writing assignments she required of them. Nygreen highlights the assumption of critical pedagogy that critiquing power in systems of education will inspire more involvement in curriculum; in fact it may do the opposite, leaving students disaffected from many classroom settings.

Melanie Shoffner and Matthew Brown add Chapter 4, “From Understanding to Application: The Difficulty of Culturally Responsive Teaching as a Beginning English Teacher.” This article includes reflections by Brown, an early-career teacher at a school in southeastern South Carolina. Shoffner, an experienced professor of education who trained Brown, interjects comments throughout his reflections. Brown narrates his experiences as a middle-class, white, Midwestern teacher working with students with values and priorities that are very different from his, marked by teen pregnancies, materialism, and academic apathy. Shoffner asks important questions to ground his academic experiences with students, such as: “Is any value placed on what [the students]—as individuals, as a community—bring to their education? Is there any

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point in playing by the teacher's rules when the world as they know it doesn't conform to the teacher's beliefs in fair play, equal opportunity, and social mobility?" (p. 104).

This chapter is followed by the second vignette, "Lotus: A Pedagogy of Listening." Jacqueline Deal tells the story of an African-American teacher working with low-income students who are disengaged in the classroom. She writes about learning of the difficult origins and home life of one student who showed her the potential for each student to grow. This case material in particular would profit from a transition by the authors to explicitly embed the narrative into the book's theory.

Karen Spector's "Reading Romeo and Juliet and Talking Sex: Critical Ideological Consciousness as Ethical Practice" is Chapter 5. Spector's chapter contains the observations of a researcher in a predominantly African-American Southern classroom with a white teacher. The class conducts a reading of Romeo and Juliet, which the teacher uses as an opportunity to lecture about the moral wrongs of teen pregnancy. The researcher confronts the teacher about these actions, and appears to have inspired her to return to school to rethink her positioning as a white teacher working with African-American students.

In Chapter 6, "Proper' Spanish is a Waste of Time: Mexican-Origin Student Resistance to Learning Spanish as a Heritage Language," Kimberly Adilia Helmer illustrates how a well-intentioned, social justice-oriented teacher can experience difficulty capturing students' attention despite a course's cultural relevance. When presented with traditional rote learning and a reliance on textbook material, students were reluctant to participate. In addition, inter-student hostility interfered with creating a safe environment for learning—showing other dimensions of the classroom environment that are necessary for culturally relevant pedagogy's success. An educational climate of caring may also be important to the Latino culture of the students. These missing elements contribute to a performance strike (Shor, 1992) in the classroom, in which problems with achievement and discipline occur as students collectively refuse to connect with the curriculum.

Stephanie Jones' Chapter 7, "Bodies Before Me," describes the pressures she felt in her work as a professor of education to conform to the cultural norms of the education system. A student on the last day of her education course discusses an incident of racial bias that occurred in a kindergarten classroom. Jones offers a positive deconstruction of oppressive school systems that education students require to become culturally responsive teachers.

In the closing vignette, "The Distance of Formality: Working within (and through) Propriety," Aaron M. Kuntz reflects on his experience as a white male professor from the North working in the South. He attempts to deconstruct his own power through informal interactions with students and the community, clashing with cultural values of formality in the South that require deference to his status as a professor.

Sherff's and Spector's *Culturally Relevant Pedagogy: Clashes and Confrontations* is a much-needed work on teaching that will ground readers in theory and practice, and gives a culturally thoughtful approach. This book is a useful guide for a broad readership of educators across the developmental spectrum, promoting a commitment to social justice while remaining aware of the paradoxes and conflicts that can emerge from the process of engaging in culturally relevant pedagogy.

References

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