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Culturally Relevant Pedagogy: Ingredients for Critical Teacher Reflection

Teacher reflection continues to be part of the teacher education literature. More recently, critical reflection has been recommended as a means of incorporating issues of equity and social justice into teaching thinking and practice. This article offers critical reflection as a prelude to creating culturally relevant teaching strategies. The author outlines theoretical and practical considerations for critical reflection and culturally relevant teaching for teacher education. The author argues that the development of culturally relevant teaching strategies is contingent upon critical reflection about race and culture of teachers and their students.

AS THE UNITED STATES ENDURES its largest influx of immigrants, along with the increasing number of U.S.-born ethnic minorities, the nation must be prepared to make the necessary adjustments to face the changing ethnic texture of its citizens (Banks, 2001). The shift in ethnic demographics has important implications for schools and, more importantly, classroom teachers. While students of color currently comprise approximately one third of the U.S. school population, the U.S. Department of Commerce (1996) projects that by the year

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2050 African American, Asian American, and Latino students will constitute close to 57% of all U.S. students.

As educators address the demographic divide (Gay & Howard, 2001), teachers must face the reality that they will continue to come into contact with students whose cultural, ethnic, linguistic, racial, and social class backgrounds differ from their own. In short, U.S. schools will continue to become learning spaces where an increasingly homogeneous teaching population (mostly White, female, and middle class) will come into contact with an increasingly heterogeneous student population (primarily students of color, and from low-income backgrounds). Thus, teacher educators must reconceptualize the manner in which new teachers are prepared, and provide them with the skills and knowledge that will be best suited for effectively educating today's diverse student population.

In order to provide more meaningful knowledge and skills for teaching in today's cultural context, teacher educators must be able to help preservice teachers critically analyze important issues such as race, ethnicity, and culture, and recognize how these important concepts shape the learning experience for many students. More specifically, teachers must be able to construct pedagogical practices that have relevance and meaning to students' social and cultural realities. The purpose of this article is to highlight the importance

of critical teacher reflection as a tool for creating culturally relevant teaching practices.

Culturally relevant pedagogy has been described by a number of researchers as an effective means of meeting the academic and social needs of culturally diverse students (Gay, 2000; Howard, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Shade, Kelly, & Oberg, 1997). Gay (2000) asserts that culturally relevant pedagogy uses “the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning more relevant to and effective [for students]. . . . It teaches *to and through* strengths of these students. It is culturally *validating and affirming*” (p. 29). An additional, and some would argue the most important, goal of culturally relevant pedagogy is to increase the academic achievement of culturally diverse students.

This article is concerned with ways that teacher educators can equip preservice teachers with the necessary skills to critically reflect on their own racial and cultural identities and to recognize how these identities coexist with the cultural compositions of their students. Three central ideas will be examined in the article. In the first section, I will examine why race and culture are important concepts in teaching and learning. The increasing degree of racial homogeneity among teachers and heterogeneity among students carries important implications for all educators. The second section will detail why critical teacher reflection is important in developing culturally relevant pedagogy. The racial and cultural incongruence between teachers and students merits ongoing discussion, reflection, and analysis of racial identities on behalf of teachers, and is critical in developing a culturally relevant pedagogy for diverse learners. The final section offers solutions and skills that can be utilized by teachers and teacher educators to conduct the critical type of reflection that may help teachers effectively develop and use culturally relevant pedagogical practices with students from culturally diverse backgrounds.

Why Does Race Matter? And What Does It Have to Do With Teaching?

Race has been, and remains, one of the more intriguing paradoxes of U.S. society. As a nation, the United States has explicitly and implicitly subscribed

to racial hierarchies for the past four centuries (Horsman, 1981; Omi & Winant, 1986). DuBois’ (1903) notion that the preeminent problem of the 20th century would be the color line continues to ring true even louder in the 21st century. An examination of school achievement along racial lines underscores clear racial divisions about who is benefiting from school and who is not. Take for example the case of African American and Latino students. The two groups constitute the largest ethnic minority groups in U.S. schools. Yet the academic underachievement of many African American and Latino students has been abysmal for decades. Academically, a majority of African American students lag behind grade-level competence in core subject areas such as reading, math, science, and social studies (NCES, 1998, 2000). Latino students fare slightly better than African American students, but they have an unacceptable dropout rate that has remained near 30% over the past three decades and shows no sign of improving (NCES, 1998, 2000).

Socially and emotionally, African American and Latino students have struggled to adjust in U.S. schools. These students are grossly overrepresented in special needs categories (Ford & Harris, 1999). Currently, African American and Latino students constitute approximately 28% of the nation’s public school enrollment. However, during the 1998-99 school year they represented close to 50% of all students labeled as mentally retarded, nearly 40% of all students identified as developmentally delayed, and approximately 37% of all students classified as emotionally disturbed (U.S. Department of Education, 1999). In many school districts the percentage of African American and Latino students labeled at-risk, ineducable, or in need of special or remedial education services is twice that of their overall percentage in schools (U.S. Department of Education, 1998).

The disturbing educational trends of African American and Latino students has led to reified images of students who appear to be more suited for special education and remedial schooling, and less suited for gifted education and advance placement. The persistent school failure of an increasing number of racially diverse students should prompt educators to ask the difficult, yet obvious question: What, if anything, does race and culture have to do with the

widespread underachievement of nonmainstream students? Thus, the need to rethink pedagogical practices is critical if underachieving student populations are to have improved chances for school success.

Teachers need to understand that racially diverse students frequently bring cultural capital to the classroom that is oftentimes drastically different from mainstream norms and worldviews. Bourdieu (1973) discusses cultural capital as a form of cultural transmission that individuals acquire from their given social structure. Cultural capital embodies the norms, social practices, ideologies, language, and behavior that are part of a given context. Thus, if students come from a home or social structure in which the cultural capital places a high value on their non-English, native language, they may be at an extreme disadvantage in many U.S. schools that frequently give considerable privilege to students whose primary language is English. Bourdieu argues that many times education systems institute “pedagogic action,” which requires a familiarization with the dominant culture and all its beliefs, behaviors, and ideals. The schism that exists between students who are familiar with dominant or mainstream cultural capital and those who are not may explain some of the academic discrepancy among students from diverse backgrounds.

The racial and cultural incongruence between students and teachers may be another factor that explains school failure of students of color. Teacher practice and thought must be reconceptualized in a manner that recognizes and respects the intricacies of cultural and racial difference. Teachers must construct pedagogical practices in ways that are culturally relevant, racially affirming, and socially meaningful for their students. In summary, it should be clear that race has always and continues to matter in an increasingly racially diverse society. More importantly, many of the patterns of success and failure in U.S. schools have obvious racial ramifications that cannot be ignored. Thus, it is crucial that teachers begin critical discussions about their perceptions of racially diverse students.

Critical Reflection and Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Over the past decade the teacher education literature has seen an increase in works concerning

reflection for preservice teachers (Gore, 1987; Gore & Zeichner, 1991; Schon, 1983; Sparkes, 1991). Central to much of this work has been the idea that reflection gives attention to one’s experiences and behaviors, and meanings are made and interpreted from them to inform future decision-making. Dewey (1933) was one of the early theorists who talked about the value of reflection in education. He viewed reflection as a special form of problem solving steeped in scaffolding of experiences and events that should be viewed as an active and deliberate cognitive process. Much of Dewey’s philosophical framework still guides the thinking on reflection in education. The term *critical reflection* attempts to look at reflection within moral, political, and ethical contexts of teaching. Issues pertaining to equity, access, and social justice are typically ascribed to critical reflection (Calderhead, 1989; Gore, 1987). Critical reflection is the type of processing that is crucial to the concept of culturally relevant pedagogy. More importantly, it is the notion of “reflective action” that Dewey referred to as the active component of behavioral intervention. Thus, once cognitive processing is complete, reflective action can be a more useful tool for addressing social and emotional issues, namely those issues pertaining to race and culture.

One of the central tenets of culturally relevant teaching is a rejection of deficit-based thinking about culturally diverse students. Ladson-Billings (1994) has argued that one of the central principles of culturally relevant pedagogy is an authentic belief that students from culturally diverse and low-income backgrounds are capable learners. She maintains that if students are treated competently they will ultimately demonstrate high degrees of competence. To become culturally relevant, teachers need to engage in honest, critical reflection that challenges them to see how their positionality influences their students in either positive or negative ways. Critical reflection should include an examination of how race, culture, and social class shape students’ thinking, learning, and various understandings of the world.

In adding further clarity to the concept of critical reflection, there are three areas that should be essential components toward the development of culturally relevant teaching practices. First, teachers

must acknowledge how deficit-based notions of diverse students continue to permeate traditional school thinking, practices, and placement, and critique their own thoughts and practices to ensure they do not reinforce prejudice behavior. Second, culturally relevant pedagogy recognizes the explicit connection between culture and learning, and sees students' cultural capital as an asset and not a detriment to their school success. Third, culturally relevant teaching is mindful of how traditional teaching practices reflect middle-class, European American cultural values, and thus seeks to incorporate a wider range of dynamic and fluid teaching practices.

Effective reflection of race within a diverse cultural context requires teachers to engage in one of the more difficult processes for all individuals—honest self-reflection and critique of their own thoughts and behaviors. Critical reflection requires one to seek deeper levels of self-knowledge, and to acknowledge how one's own worldview can shape students' conceptions of self. Palmer (1998) contends that "we teach who we are," and that for teachers, separating one's own lived experiences from the act of teaching is an arduous, yet necessary task. Palmer (1998) maintains the following:

Teaching, like any truly human activity, emerges from one's inwardness, for better or worse. As I teach, I project the condition of my soul onto my students, my subject, and our way of being together. The entanglements I experience in the classroom are often no more or less than the convolutions of my inner life. Viewed from this angle, teaching holds a mirror to the soul. If I am willing to look in that mirror and not run from what I see, I have a chance to gain self knowledge—and knowing myself is as crucial to good teaching as knowing my students and my subject. . . . In fact, knowing my students and my subject depends heavily on self-knowledge. When I do not know myself, I cannot know who my students are. I will see them through a glass darkly, in the shadows of my own unexamined life—and when I cannot see them clearly, I cannot teach them well. (p. 2)

Palmer's notion of "we teach who we are" has significant implications for teachers of today's learners. What is important, within a culturally relevant pedagogical framework, is for teachers to ask themselves the important question of whether "who we are" contributes to the underachievement

of students who are not like us. Critical reflection can be useful in helping teachers recognize if they consciously or subconsciously subscribe to deficit-based notions of culturally diverse students.

The difficulty of critical reflection

The formation of a culturally relevant teaching paradigm becomes extremely difficult, if not impossible, without critical reflection. The nature of critical reflection can be an arduous task because it forces the individual to ask challenging questions that pertain to one's construction of individuals from diverse racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds. While posing these questions proves difficult, honest answering of such questions becomes the bigger and more difficult hurdle to clear. Yet, the stakes for teachers are too high not to engage in this process. As the teaching profession becomes increasingly homogeneous, given the task of educating an increasingly heterogeneous student population, reflections on racial and cultural differences are essential. In order to become a culturally relevant pedagogue, teachers must be prepared to engage in a rigorous and oftentimes painful reflection process about what it means to teach students who come from different racial and cultural backgrounds than their own. Some of the questions that teachers should consider in this reflective process could include the following:

1. How frequently and what types of interactions did I have with individuals from racial backgrounds different from my own growing up?
2. Who were the primary persons that helped to shape my perspectives of individuals from different racial groups? How were their opinions formed?
3. Have I ever harbored prejudiced thoughts towards people from different racial backgrounds?
4. If I do harbor prejudiced thoughts, what effects do such thoughts have on students who come from those backgrounds?
5. Do I create negative profiles of individuals who come from different racial backgrounds?

An honest and thoughtful reflection on these types of questions often becomes painful because it may result in individuals recognizing that close family members harbored racist and prejudiced notions of

racially diverse groups that were passed down from generation to generation. Coming to grips with such unfortunate realities is critical in developing an antiracist pedagogy.

An antiracist pedagogy requires teachers to adopt a commitment to thinking, feeling, and acting in ways that combats racial discrimination in schools. Derman-Sparks and Brunson-Phillips (1997) maintain that there are four key steps in developing an antiracist pedagogy: (a) develop deeper self-knowledge about one's racial and cultural identity, and how racism has shaped this identity; (b) acquire a new information base about the role that race and racism play in various educational policies and practices; (c) de-center and extend empathy to increase one's knowledge base about racially and culturally diverse groups; and (d) become activists to develop skills and competence to combat racial inequities in work, school, and community settings.

It is critical for teacher educators to provide spaces for preservice teachers to express their uncertainties, frustrations, and regrets over prejudiced notions. Milner (2003) suggests that teacher educators should guide the reflection on race with preservice teachers by using "race reflective journaling." He describes race reflective journaling as a process wherein teachers are able to process issues of racial differences in a more private manner through writing, as opposed to sharing ideas of racial and cultural differences in a more open and public forum that might become uncomfortable and difficult for some. Milner presents a critical reflective questionnaire about race that can serve as an excellent guide for teacher educators to facilitate sensitive discussions about race.

Critical teacher reflection is essential to culturally relevant pedagogy because it can ultimately measure teachers' levels of concern and care for their students. A teacher's willingness to ask tough questions about his or her own attitudes toward diverse students can reflect a true commitment that the individual has toward students' academic success and emotional well-being. A number of scholars have included the concept of care as a critical component of effective teaching (Gay, 2000; Howard, 2001; Valenzuela, 1999). Gay (2000) maintains that one of the most fundamental features of culturally

responsive teaching is the power of caring. She states that caring is frequently manifested through teacher attitudes, expectations and behaviors. Nieto (1999) posits that "the way students are thought about and treated by society and consequently by the schools they attend and the educators who teach them is fundamental in creating academic success or failure" (p. 167).

A Case Study of Critical Reflection: Teaching Teachers to Reflect

As an instructor in a teacher education program that prepares teachers to teach in urban school settings, I have been part of a team of faculty members who have created a new course titled "Identity and Teaching." The purpose of this mandatory course is for preservice teachers to interrogate various notions of their multiple identities. The students wrestle with questions such as, Who am I? What do I believe? Does who I am and what I believe have ramifications for the students I teach? As part of the course, students engage in readings and activities that pertain to their own racial, ethnic, social class, and gender identities. The reflections and revelations that emanate from the course are invaluable, and the emotional outpouring is a testament to how difficult it is for many individuals to come to grips with their own notions of privilege. Many of the students, though, have come to realize the value in critical reflection and the correlation it can have for them teaching in culturally diverse school settings.

A number of types of identity are explored in the course. However, grappling with race has been the most challenging for the preservice teachers. Many of the students in the course explain how their discomfort is a result of race being a taboo topic, and they express concerns such as not wanting their comments to appear racially insensitive, racist, prejudiced, or politically incorrect. Yet, I have found that part of guiding race-related discussions is to not allow individuals' discomfort or ignorance about race to become an escape for not addressing and analyzing their own beliefs.

To assist the reflective process in the identity course each of the instructors went through a 3-day workshop before teaching the course. The instructors engaged in a series of activities identical to the ones

they take their own students through that asks them to come to grips with their own identities around race, ethnicity, social class, and gender. The willingness on the part of teacher educators to share their own lived experiences, expose their own human frailties, and reflect on their ever-evolving identities within a community of diverse individuals is important. The practice of reflecting on race in teacher education becomes superficial at best if facilitators of such discussions are not clear and comfortable with their own identity and, more importantly, the identity of others.

Being able to effectively initiate and facilitate critical reflection about race and race-related issues requires the ability to critically examine one's own personal beliefs, opinions, and values about racial identity, and the race of others; and the ramifications of these intersecting and colliding values and beliefs. Therefore, whatever reflective mechanisms are put in place in teacher education programs must go beyond reflection just for the sake of thinking about issues in teaching. Critical reflection should inform all facets of teaching and become culturally relevant for the students being taught. In order for these measures to possess optimum effect, a number of suggestions are offered to aid teacher educators, preservice teachers, in-service teachers, and school administrators on how to translate critical reflection into culturally relevant teaching.

1. Ensure that teacher education faculty members are able to sufficiently address the complex nature of race, ethnicity, and culture.

This task can prove to be difficult if there are not faculty members willing to engage in critical reflection. However, clinical educators, lecturers, or mentor teachers can be equally helpful in facilitating this process with preservice teachers. In many ways, if the teacher education program as a whole is not concerned with issues of equity and access, and does not address the role of race and ethnicity in education, critical reflection will become a fruitless endeavor.

2. Be aware that reflection is a neverending process.

Schön (1987) describes reflection as a process that is tied to action, and talks about the need for "reflection-in-action." He conceptualizes reflection-in-action as an ongoing process that is predicated on

continually thinking about one's actions and then modifying them accordingly. For teacher educators engaging preservice teachers in critical reflection, it is important to stress that one never completely arrives at a place of completion with their reflection. The very nature of teaching is built on revisiting curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment. Preservice teachers should be mindful of the fact that even the most seasoned teachers who use culturally relevant forms of teaching are prone to mistakes, lapses in judgment, or other forms of missteps. However, they acknowledge their errors and improve their teaching accordingly.

3. Be explicit about what to reflect about.

There are a number of considerations teachers must keep in mind in a critical reflection process. Teachers should examine class data on an ongoing basis and ask deep-seated questions about equity in the classroom. For example, questions that could be used to guide reflection could include:

- What is the racial breakdown of students who are referred for special needs services?
- What is the racial breakdown for students referred for gifted education or AP courses?
- How frequently do I differentiate instruction?
- Do scoring rubrics give inherent advantages for certain ways of knowing and expression?
- Do I allow culturally based differences in language, speech, reading, and writing to shape my perceptions about students' cognitive ability?
- Do I create a multitude of ways to evaluate students? Or do I rely solely on paper, pencil, and oral responses? How often do I allow nontraditional means of assessment, such as role-playing, skits, poetry, rap, self-evaluations, Socratic seminars, journaling, student-led conferences, or cooperative group projects, to be a part of my class?

4. Recognize that teaching is not a neutral act.

Ladson-Billings (1994) contends that culturally relevant teaching seeks to instill political consciousness in students. Thus, teachers should be mindful of how their actions can contribute to the development of a consciousness that is emancipatory and has social and cultural relevance. Conversely, teachers who refuse to monitor their own beliefs and classroom ethos can contribute to resistance on the part of students. Recognizing that all facets of teaching carry explicit and implicit

political implications should result in ongoing reflection to clarify the educational agenda that is being promoted within a classroom setting.

5. Avoid reductive notions of culture.

Culturally relevant pedagogy is based on the inclusion of cultural referents that students bring from home. Teachers must be careful to not allow racial classifications of students to be used as rigid and reductive cultural characteristics. A critical reflection process enables teachers to recognize the vast array of differences that can exist within groups. Thus, not all African American students work well in groups, not all Latino students are second language learners, and all Asian American students are not high achievers. Teachers must avoid creating stereotypical profiles of students that may only do more harm than good. While there may be central tendencies shown within groups, teachers should develop individual profiles of students based on students' own thoughts and behaviors.

Conclusion

The need for critical reflection can be an important tool for all teachers. Yet, teachers of students from diverse backgrounds stand to gain immeasurable benefits from a process that requires them to put the needs of their students ahead of all other considerations. The call for a culturally relevant pedagogy is situated on the belief that many of the current educational practices and philosophies that permeate schools have failed miserably when it comes to educating students from culturally diverse and low-income backgrounds. Culturally relevant teaching offers an intervention for reversing the perennial underachievement that has become commonplace for an increasing number of students. However, the assistance of teacher educators in this process cannot be understated. Critical reflection is a personal and challenging look at one's identity as an individual person and as an active professional. Facilitation of this process must be sensitive and considerate to the lived experiences that people bring to their current time and space. The purpose of critical reflection should not be to indict teachers for what they believe and why it does not work for students. It is a process of improving practice, rethinking philosophies, and becoming effective teachers for today's ever-changing student population. Given the current

cultural and racial demographics of our schools and society, the stakes we face as a profession and as a nation are too high to fail in this endeavor.

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