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## CULTURALLY RELEVANT TEACHING AND THE CONCEPT OF EDUCATION

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The election of our first African American president gave us hope for the future. With so much talent, so long suppressed, the promise was great. The election also encouraged us to reexamine the past. With so much already accomplished, so long underappreciated, we had to ask, “What have we missed?” When President Obama spoke to the nation’s school children on September 8, 2009, he asked them to take responsibility for their education.<sup>1</sup> In his remarks we could hear an echo of teachers in separate Black schools who told their students that “racial uplift” was everyone’s responsibility and that their responsibility was to get a good education so they could make an important contribution in the future.<sup>2</sup> These teachers demanded a lot from their students. Much like the President, however, they also promised to give them all the help they needed. “We’re a family,” they said, “Your success is our success, too.”

In this article I address a problem that first occurred to me almost 40 years ago. Having finally arrived at a possible solution, I would like to share it with others. The issue was raised by John Dewey and taken up again by Richard Peters and Paulo Freire. It was not their main concern, however; nor has it been a major concern of philosophers since then. One of the purposes in writing this article is to interest a new generation of philosophers in what I take to be a central problem of education.

Dewey distinguished conservative and progressive theories of education. Conservative theories capture part of education, but according to Dewey, they miss the most important part. “Formation from without,” for example, takes “everything educational into account save its essence—vital experience seeking opportunity for effective exercise. All education forms character, mental and moral, but formation consists in the selection and coordination of native activities.”<sup>3</sup> Peters took the opposite view. He argued that “the child-centred teacher has the moral problem of choosing between

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<sup>1</sup> Barack Obama, “Prepared Remarks of President Barack Obama: Back to School Event,” The White House, retrieved from <http://www.whitehouse.gov/mediaresources/preparedschoolremarks/>

<sup>2</sup> See for example, Adam Fairclough, *Teaching Equality: Black Schools in the Age of Jim Crow* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2001).

<sup>3</sup> John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (1916, repr. New York: Free Press, 1966), 72.

letting children pursue their interests...and getting them to pursue what is in their interest.... Talk about ‘growth,’ ‘self-realization,’ and gearing the curriculum to the interests of children glosses over this fundamentally normative aspect of education.”<sup>4</sup> Freire disagreed (and agreed) with both. Though liberatory education is “constituted and organized by the students’ view of the world.... the task of the dialogical teacher...is to ‘re-present’ that universe to the people from whom he first received it...as a problem.”<sup>5</sup>

So which is it? Is education “essentially” or “fundamentally” progressive, conservative, or liberatory? Apparently none of the above, not even for their strongest advocates. Peters reminds us that

Emphasis will be given at different periods to different aspects of what it means to being educated. Such emphases emerge as “aims of education.” For as Dewey shrewdly remarks: “the statement of aim is a matter of emphasis at a given time. And we do not emphasize things which do not require emphasis—that is, such things as are taking care of themselves fairly well.”<sup>6</sup>

But here’s the problem: if Dewey, Peters, and Freire were just emphasizing different aspects of education, how are we to understand the relationships between them? Assuming that education is a coherent enterprise, there must be a fourth set of concepts we can use to describe how its different parts fit together. When teachers shift focus from what students *are* learning, to what they *should* be learning, to what they should *unlearn*, are they just being eclectic—choosing more or less randomly what seems to be needed at the time—or are they implicitly appealing to an even more fundamental “aim of education,” one which makes *those* choices at *those* times better than others? I am convinced, and hope to convince the reader, that the solution to this problem can be found in the conception of education first held by teachers in separate Black schools. These teachers were progressive, conservative *and* liberatory, not because they lacked a larger purpose, but because of the larger purpose they had.

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<sup>4</sup> R. S. Peters, *Ethics and Education* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1966), 35-36.

<sup>5</sup> Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Continuum, 1970), 109.

<sup>6</sup> R. S. Peters, John Woods, and William H. Dray, “Aims of Education—A Conceptual Inquiry,” in *The Philosophy of Education*, ed. R. S. Peters (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), 20.

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## CULTURALLY RELEVANT TEACHING

Jacqueline Jordan Irvine, commenting on the recent surge in interest in culturally relevant teaching,<sup>7</sup> says that many teachers have only a “cursory understanding” of the pedagogy, and their efforts to “bridge the cultural gap” between themselves and their students often “fall short.” One teacher, for example, bought a CD called “Multiplication Rap” to teach mathematics using “repetition and rhyme, hand-clapping and a hip-hop musical style.”<sup>8</sup> Students, however,

focused on the music itself, paying little attention to the math objectives. Several were unimpressed with the CD, and commented on the poor audio quality and amateurish lyrics....Except for the musical debate, nothing much happened. The failure rate on Edwards’ weekly exam did not change.<sup>9</sup>

For Irvine, culturally relevant pedagogy is “*effective* teaching in culturally diverse classrooms”<sup>10</sup> (emphasis added). Thus a second teacher told this to students:

They were going to write letters to the mayor, asking for changes that would make life better in their neighborhood. She told students...they should go into the community and ask relatives, neighbors and church leaders about the problems in the community. The students did their research...and wrote their letters. The teacher held a “march to the mailbox,” mailing their letters with great ceremony. And not long afterward, the mayor was on the phone with the principal, asking when he could visit the class and address their concerns in person.<sup>11</sup>

The teaching was ineffective in the first example because the teacher wanted to teach mathematics, the students wanted to teach music appreciation, and neither was prepared to learn from the other. In the second example the teaching was effective because the teacher and students shared a common goal, and to reach that goal they depended (and knew they depended) on each other.

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<sup>7</sup> See for example, Arin Gencer, “Preparing Students for a Brighter Future: AVID College Preparatory Program at Woodlawn High Aims to Raise Achievement Among Black Male Teens,” *Baltimore Sun*, January 2, 2010, retrieved from <http://articles.baltimoresun.com>

<sup>8</sup> Jacqueline Jordan Irvine, “Relevant: Beyond the Basics,” *Teaching Tolerance* 36 (2009), para. 3, retrieved from <http://www.tolerance.org/magazine/number-36-fall-2009/relevant-beyond-basics>.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, para. 4.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, para. 6.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, The March to the Mailbox, para. 4.

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Geneva Gay has written the most authoritative account to date of culturally relevant teaching.<sup>12</sup> She traces its origins to the early 1970s when Abrahams and Troike argued that teachers must learn about their students' cultural differences and capitalize on them as a resource; when Chun-Hoon suggested that culturally relevant teaching creates "psychic space" for Asian Americans, helping them transcend "the psychological colonization promoted by the mass media, which makes them virtually invisible and totally silenced"<sup>13</sup>; and when Forbes emphasized the importance of "community building and 'success' for Native American students."<sup>14</sup> Despite these varied beginnings, however, most of the research and practice over the past 40 years has focused on the teaching of African American students.<sup>15</sup>

Gay says that culturally relevant teaching (CRT) *validates, affirms,* and *empowers* diverse students. CRT is also *transformative*, making academic success a "non-negotiable mandate for all students" and preparing them to be "productive members" of "their respective ethnic communities,"<sup>16</sup> and *emancipatory*, releasing "students of color from the constraining manacles of mainstream canons of knowledge."<sup>17</sup> Finally, culturally relevant teaching is both *multidimensional*, encompassing all aspects of classroom climate, curriculum, teaching, learning, and assessment, and *comprehensive*, encouraging students' "intellectual, social, emotional, and political learning"<sup>18</sup> and holding them accountable for their own and for each other's learning.

Culturally relevant teaching, in one sense, is about everything. It assumes that the dominant modes of schooling in this country are based on narrow cultural roots and that our teaching practices must be completely re-envisioned to serve the needs of culturally diverse students. Understood in this way, it is not difficult to see why effectiveness is such a concern: simply put, CRT is not easy. Culturally relevant teaching is also about one thing—success—and this suggests a second reason why it's not easy. Historically, success depended on hard work alone, but only for white, Protestant, male, middle class students. For everyone else, it also depended on students changing the way they and others perceived the group or groups they belonged to. Culturally relevant *teaching* is not easy because culturally relevant *learning* is not easy. The hard work needed for academic success is still there but it's even harder, equal treatment depending on superior achievement. And then there are

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<sup>12</sup> Geneva Gay, *Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory, Research, and Practice*, 2nd ed. (New York: Teachers College Press).

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

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the additional tasks of overcoming, and helping others overcome, the burdens of prejudice and of making a contribution to the success of the group.

This is not the first time teaching has been re-invented to meet the needs of culturally diverse students. Progressive educators in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries had to re-think what they were doing in response to the arrival of large numbers of migrant and immigrant students.<sup>19</sup> What is different about culturally relevant teaching is its recognition of the importance of family and community in the lives of students. For progressive educators, family and community were, if anything, the problem not the solution. The task schools had before them was to build the nation and strengthen its democracy by initiating migrant and immigrant students into a new way of life, one driven by the interests and concerns of individuals. Thus, progressive teachers like Katherine Mayhew and Anna Edwards at Dewey's Laboratory School in Chicago involved their students in making important decisions about curriculum and embedded academic learning in activities and projects which appealed to (and helped extend) their immediate interests and concerns.<sup>20</sup> For culturally relevant teachers, on the other hand, the main task is community building: students are seen and are taught to see themselves as valued members of important ethnic communities, and academic learning is embedded in activities and projects which appeal to students' desire to help their communities.

Michele Foster gives an overview of the main themes to emerge from research on the culturally relevant pedagogy of African American teachers. Effective Black teachers, according to Foster, demonstrate *cultural solidarity* (they consider themselves part of the communities they serve) and make extensive use of familiar *cultural patterns*, especially the values of "equality and collective responsibility" in tasks that are "generally performed within a group context."<sup>21</sup> In her own research, Foster traced the roots of these practices to the 1950s and earlier, when most African American students attended and almost all African American teachers taught in separate Black schools. She based her findings on interviews with 20 community-nominated teachers, most of whom had attended historically Black colleges and de jure segregated Black schools, some as early as the 1920s. When Foster asked them to characterize

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<sup>19</sup> See for example Lawrence A. Cremin, *The Transformation of the School: Progressivism in American Education, 1876-1957* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969) and Larry Cuban, *How Teachers Taught: Constancy and Change in American Classrooms, 1890-1990* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1993).

<sup>20</sup> See Cremin, *The Transformation of the School* and Cuban, *How Teachers Taught*.

<sup>21</sup> Michele Foster, "African American Teachers and Culturally Relevant Pedagogy," in *Handbook of Research on Multicultural Education*, ed. James A. Banks and Cherry A. McGee Banks (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001), 577.

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the teachers who had most influenced their practice, “the modal description” they gave was one of “concerned individuals who commanded respect, were respectful of pupils, and who, although caring, were strict in requiring all students to meet high academic and behavioral standards.”<sup>22</sup> When asked about other influences on their teaching, several teachers mentioned participation in church events and pageants where, as one put it, “everyone had a part—even if it was as a lamb.”<sup>23</sup> Learning for these teachers was a “social event.”<sup>24</sup> In a similar study, Grace Stanford characterizes the cultural solidarity demonstrated by “remembered teachers” as *Lifting as We Climb* (racial uplift through education) and *Giving Forward* (teaching those who would strengthen the community in the future).<sup>25</sup> Black teachers were “caring but strict” because when they looked at their students they saw both individual children, many needing a surrogate parent and a family-like atmosphere in the classroom, and young African Americans who had to be equipped, personally, socially, and academically to shoulder responsibility for advancing the Black community.

As both Foster and Stanford point out, however, the influence of remembered teachers had to be “interpreted” before it could be drawn on by a later generation of teachers who worked in integrated schools. Everett Dawson taught in a segregated school from 1943 to 1970 and then in an integrated school from 1970 to 1984. For Dawson, “the biggest difference is that we were able to do more with the black students in all-black schools.” Dawson would ask his students,

Do you know where your competition is? Your competition is not your little cousin sitting over there. Your competition is that little white kid sitting over in the other school. He’s the one you’ve got to compete with for a job. And the only way that you’re going to get that job is that you are going to have to be better than he is.... [But] once you integrated, and had mixed groups, I didn’t feel comfortable getting into the

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<sup>22</sup> Michele Foster, “Educating for Competence in Community and Culture: Exploring the Views of Exemplary African-American Teachers,” *Urban Education* 27, no. 4 (1993), 377.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 384.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 386.

<sup>25</sup> See Grace C. Stanford, “Successful Pedagogy in Urban Schools: Perspectives of Four African American Teachers,” *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk* 2, no. 2 (1997) and Grace C. Stanford, “African-American Teachers’ Knowledge of Teaching: Understanding the Influence of Their Remembered Teachers,” *The Urban Review* 30, no. 3 (1998).

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things the whites did to us as black people because I know how I felt when they talked about me.<sup>26</sup>

Teachers and students in integrated schools may no longer have shared racial uplift as a common goal. As we will see, however, the teachers were soon able to re-envision the purpose of education, and the responsibility everyone had for it, in a way that allowed them to reach out to all of their students.

Gloria Ladson-Billings has done more than any other scholar to develop the theory of culturally relevant pedagogy. “By situating it in a more critical paradigm,” she says, CRT “would necessarily propose to do three things—produce students who can achieve academically, produce students who demonstrate cultural competence, and develop students who can both understand and critique the existing social order.”<sup>27</sup> Ladson-Billings cites Freire, McLaren, Giroux, Apple and other critical theorists; and they clearly help her focus on the relationship between education and the “existing social order.” But African American educators have had this focus for as long as there has been separate Black education. Whether they sought to understand and work within it, as Everett Lawson did, or understand, critique and seek to change it, as Ladson-Billings and her contemporaries did 30 years later, African American educators have never had the luxury of taking the existing social order for granted. Equally important influences on Ladson-Billings’ thinking are her own education (when she first arrived at school she noticed that “everyone there was Black”<sup>28</sup>), her knowledge of the history of separate Black education, and her teaching and research in predominantly Black schools.

Ladson-Billings conducted a ground-breaking, ethnographic study of eight elementary teachers working in a low-income, predominantly African American school district in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Five of the teachers were Black, three were white. The majority of students were African American but a significant minority was Hispanic. There were also Asian and Pacific Islander students. The teachers in Ladson-Billings’ study held distinctive conceptions of *self and others*, the *structure of classroom interactions*, and *knowledge*. Like Foster’s and Stanford’s remembered teachers, they “see themselves as part of the community, see teaching as giving something back to the community, and encourage their students to do the same.”<sup>29</sup> The teachers also went to great lengths to develop a sense of community in their classrooms.

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<sup>26</sup> Michele Foster, *Black Teachers on Teaching* (New York: New Press, 1997), 6-7.

<sup>27</sup> Gloria Ladson-Billings, “Toward a Theory of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy,” *American Educational Research Journal* 32, no. 3 (1995), 474.

<sup>28</sup> Gloria Ladson-Billings, *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009), 3.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

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Ann Lewis, for example, took her students on a five-day camping trip each fall because, she explained, “they have to care about each other and to depend on one another before we can really get anything meaningful accomplished. We have to have a sense of family, of ‘teamness.’”<sup>30</sup>

Given their conception of self and others, the teachers organized classroom interactions in distinctive ways. Thus they encouraged students “to work within a collective structure” and rewarded “group efforts more often than individual ones.”<sup>31</sup> In Patricia Hilliard's class, for example, the students formed “extended family groups,” and in their groups they were responsible for “monitoring one another’s academic work and personal behavior and for solving group problems.”<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, the teachers maintained “fluid student-teacher relationships,” relationships which were “equitable and reciprocal.”<sup>33</sup> Each student, for example, was expected to be the “expert” in at least one area and to act as the go-to person for other students (and for the teacher) on that topic.

The teachers in Ladson-Billings’ study viewed knowledge as something that is “continuously re-created, recycled, and shared.”<sup>34</sup> It was, for example, what “each student brings to the classroom.”<sup>35</sup> One teacher said that when you “teach something” and students respond “with something to share about the same topic,” “it’s just like, ‘let me help do this teacher.’”<sup>36</sup> Ladson-Billings concludes that culturally relevant teachers

come to participate in a reciprocal relationship with students in which they use their professional knowledge and skills to help students academically, socially, and culturally. In turn, the students can use their cultural and community knowledge to help their teachers more fully integrate into the students’ (and their parents’ and communities’) worlds.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>33</sup> Ladson-Billings, “Toward a Theory,” 480.

<sup>34</sup> Ladson-Billings, *The Dreamkeepers*, 340.

<sup>35</sup> Ladson-Billings, “Toward a Theory,” 95.

<sup>36</sup> Gloria Ladson-Billings, “Returning to the Source: Implications for Educating Teachers of Black Students,” in *Readings on Equal Education, Vol. 11: Qualitative Investigations into Schools and Schooling*, ed. Michele Foster (New York: AMS Press, 1991), 240.

<sup>37</sup> Gloria Ladson-Billings, “Liberatory Consequences of Literacy: A Case Study of Culturally Relevant Instruction for African American Students,” *Journal of Negro Education* 61, no. 3 (1991), 388.

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The teachers in Ladson-Billings' study may have taught in mixed schools, but the practices they found effective were all-but-indistinguishable from the practices of teachers in all-Black schools. Racial uplift may have become community improvement, but the task was no less daunting; and the idea that everyone was needed and everyone had a contribution to make was still very much in mind. Also, even while classroom "families" were evolving into "teams," teachers still served as surrogate parents for children in need. These teachers were asking as much (if not more) of their students as teachers in separate Black schools; but if the example of Ann Lewis is anything to go by, they were prepared to do whatever it took to help them succeed.

#### THE CONCEPT OF EDUCATION

Culturally relevant teaching helps us better understand the concept of education because it gives us an example of how conservative, progressive, and liberatory education can fit together. CRT, according to Ladson-Billings, empowers students "to examine critically the society in which they live and to work for social change."<sup>38</sup> If this were all it involved, however, it would not be much different from what conservative teachers do when they use social issues to teach critical thinking skills. The difference is that, while teachers cannot predict where their students' critiques will take them, culturally relevant teachers feel the need to be there with them, wherever "there" might be. The problems of poverty and discrimination are so intractable that students are unlikely to make much progress on their own. On the other hand, because the problems are so obviously, so hugely, wrong, it's almost certain they'll be able to do something. Either way, poverty and discrimination are everyone's problems. Also, more pragmatically, culturally relevant teachers see themselves as working *with* their students because the new reality they are creating is going to be their (the teachers') reality, too. As Margaret Rossi puts it, "these children are the future," and "there is no way for me to have a secure future if they don't have one. It's going to take three of them to support one of me in my retirement years."<sup>39</sup>

All teachers "give forward," that is, prepare the next generation to make important contributions in the future. Culturally relevant teachers do this as well, but they also work with students on projects which benefit the local community right away. These projects, of necessity, are partnerships of equals. Students, as always, rely on teachers' general knowledge and organizational skills, but now teachers have to rely on students' local knowledge and access to community members. This shift means that culturally relevant teachers have to develop more "fluid" and "humanely equitable" patterns of interaction with

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<sup>38</sup> Gloria Ladson-Billings, "Reading Between the Lines and Beyond the Pages: A Culturally Relevant Approach to Teaching Literacy," *Theory Into Practice* 31, no. 4 (1992), 314.

<sup>39</sup> Ladson-Billings, *The Dreamkeepers*, 97.

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students. Thus a teacher who “regularly sat at a student’s desk, while the student stood at the front of the room and explained a concept or some aspect of student culture,”<sup>40</sup> was not just helping students consolidate their learning (as a progressive teacher might) or waiting to correct their faulty assumptions (as a conservative or liberatory teacher might). The teacher was also depending on students to make original contributions to the topics being discussed.

Finally, while all teachers are concerned with students’ learning, and most will acknowledge the importance of learning from students, the main concern of culturally relevant teachers is what they and their students are learning together. Because knowledge is something that is continuously “re-created, recycled, and shared,” CRT necessarily involves teachers and students working together to develop a common understanding of the world they live in. Patricia Hilliard asked students to perform and then explain to her the meaning of an M. C. Hammer rap. She then “translated” the words into Standard American English, “doing what interpreters do.” Hilliard explained, “I want the children to see that they have some valuable knowledge to contribute. I don’t want them to be ashamed of what they know but I also want them to know and be comfortable with what school and the rest of the society requires.”<sup>41</sup> Hilliard and her students were, in effect, creating a New American English everyone could use.

Culturally relevant teachers can be progressive, conservative, *or* liberatory. Which way of thinking and which set of practices they emphasize depends on what they and their students need at the time. Given that they are trying to understand, critique, and change the society they live in, the teachers must ask: are students on to something new, something potentially important? Then focus on their learning. Do teachers already have some of the answers? Then focus on their knowledge. Is new research needed? Then do it. Is there a difference of opinion? Then work to resolve it. Culturally relevant teachers have no choice but to be “all things to all people.” Given that their aim is to develop a shared understanding of the world they and their students will live in, they know they have a lot to learn from students, students have a lot to learn from them, there is a lot no one yet knows, and there is going to be no shortage of disagreements along the way.

#### CONCLUSION

For culturally relevant teachers, what is “essential” or “fundamental” in education is not what students learn, should learn, or must unlearn, but what teachers and students learn together. Teachers are progressive, conservative *and* liberatory because they must be if they hope to develop a shared understanding with their students. But are culturally relevant teachers just

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<sup>40</sup> Ladson-Billings, “Toward a Theory,” 480.

<sup>41</sup> Ladson-Billings, *The Dreamkeepers*, 91.

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emphasizing another aspect of education, one which needs attention now? Yes and no. Clearly CRT focuses attention on something different, and now is probably its time. But I have argued elsewhere that Dewey, Peters, and Freire were not persuasive when they claimed (as they sometimes did) that their conception of education was more fundamental than others,<sup>42</sup> whereas I hope I have said enough here to convince the reader that the same claim made on behalf of culturally relevant teachers is at least plausible.

A second lingering doubt, which I will more fully address in another article, is important to mention here: whether culturally relevant teaching is a true critical pedagogy. An argument can be made that CRT addresses each of the twelve “central points” Kincheloe and McLaren associate with critical theory.<sup>43</sup> But does CRT’s main goal of community building serve to further marginalize low-income, ethnically diverse students? Yes and no. The immediate goal is certainly to build strength in diversity, rather than challenge the existing social order; but strength is gained by engaging representatives of that order—in the first instance, the teachers themselves—and the long term goal is to build a new, more equal, more just social order. Culturally relevant teachers may not set out to be revolutionaries, but if that’s where their students take them, they’re prepared to go.

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<sup>42</sup> Kelvin Beckett, “R. S. Peters and the Concept of Education,” *Educational Theory* 61, no. 3 (2011), 239-255.

<sup>43</sup> See Joe L. Kincheloe, “Critical Pedagogy in the Twenty-first Century: Evolution for Survival,” in *Critical Pedagogy: Where are We Now?* ed. Peter McLaren and Joe L. Kincheloe (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), 21-24.

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