Using Culturally Relevant Pedagogy to Develop an Anti-Racist Practice: A Reflection from an Intern

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Abstract: In this article the author examines and reflects about what anti-racism education can look like in a privileged suburban high school that includes mainly White students. She draws on the work of anti-racism and equity-focused authors to provide suggestions to teachers of all grade levels across multiple contexts.

KEYWORDS: anti-racism, educator preparation, equity, Professional Development Schools, PDSs, school-university partnerships, teacher education

NAPDS REVISED NINE ESSENTIALS ADDRESSED:
Essential 1: A professional development school (PDS) is a learning community guided by a comprehensive, articulated mission that is broader than the goals of any single partner, and that aims to advance equity, antiracism, and social justice within and among schools, colleges/universities, and their respective community and professional partners.
Essential 2: A PDS embraces the preparation of educators through clinical practice.
Essential 3: A PDS is a context for continuous professional learning and leading for all participants, guided by need and a spirit and practice of inquiry.
Essential 4: A PDS makes a shared commitment to reflective practice, responsive innovation, and generative knowledge.
Introduction

The focus of this article is to explore the question, “What does it look like to be an anti-racist teacher?” This is a question I believe all teachers should work to answer. Author and theorist Ibram X. Kendi writes, “The opposite of racist isn't 'not racist.' It is 'antiracist.' What's the difference?... One either allows racial inequities to persevere, as a racist, or confronts racial inequities, as an antiracist” (2019, p.9).

Making education work for all of our students requires an anti-racist approach—actively confronting racist policies and practices in our schools and districts—or else we allow the harmful status quo to continue unchecked. For new teachers—and especially for white teachers, like me—we don’t come to education knowing what it looks like to be anti-racist teachers. This is something we need to learn in order to support all our students.

I will be reflecting on the process of developing an inquiry project focused on creating and implementing an anti-racist English curriculum. I designed this project as part of my Masters of Arts in Teaching program in a small liberal arts college committed to social justice and school-university partnerships. This process of inquiry and reflection connects to PDS Essential five: Research and Results. Although this is my eighth-year teaching, this is my first inquiry project. Through this project, it has become explicitly clear to me how developing an intentional process of inquiry leads to better teaching for both me and my wider educational community.

Background

For the past three years, I’ve worked at the Andrews School (pseudonym), a predominantly white and wealthy school in a metropolitan region. I took a break from teaching there to begin my Master’s program, and I was re-hired at the school during my last year in the MAT program.

This fall semester, I took a literacy class that revealed to me that discrimination and oppression in literacy is an area that I’ve been failing to fully name and push back against. Reading The Skin that We Speak, edited by Lisa Delpit and Joanne Kilgour Dowdy (2002), raised questions for me about the ways language and literacy can unintentionally be used to as means of control and oppression. This class inspired me to learn more about ways I could shift my English classroom to a space where we work towards liberation. When it came time to begin planning my action research project, I began my inquiry by exploring what an anti-racist English curriculum could look like. I started out by looking towards culturally relevant pedagogy as a way to implement anti-racist teaching my classroom.

Cultural Relevant Pedagogy

The term “culturally relevant pedagogy” was coined in 1995 by Gloria Ladson-Billings as a response to what she identified as an education system that was not built for Black students and did not recognize their strengths. Ladson-Billings, and many before her, recognized that students whose home culture doesn’t match the culture of their teachers, schools, or classrooms, are at a disadvantage. Her theory of culturally relevant pedagogy didn’t just accommodate or tolerate students’ home culture, but celebrated and honored it through a “synergistic relationship between home/community culture and school culture” (1995, p. 467).
Ladson-Billings defines culturally relevant pedagogy as a way for teachers to approach their students, the curriculum, and the world. Culturally relevant teachers, according to Ladson-Billings, move beyond superficial “niceness” and celebrations of students’ cultures. They acknowledge that the world (and schooling) is unequal, privileging some students and disadvantaging others.

According to Ladson-Billings, culturally relevant pedagogy must do three things: lead to academic achievement, cultural competence, and increased sociopolitical consciousness. Culturally relevant teachers see it as their responsibility to give students the skills and tools they need to succeed in an unequal world and confront “inequitable and undemocratic social structures” (p.474). Culturally relevant teaching requires all students to become aware of inequities and be armed with the tools to fight them.

In 2014, Ladson-Billings wrote an update to her original piece, called “Culturally Relevant Pedagogy 2.0: a.k.a. the Remix.” Twenty years after her original essay, this update reflected on how her work has been (mis)interpreted throughout the past decades and drew on the work of Django Paris. Ladson-Billings identified that a problem with culturally relevant pedagogy is that it has become a buzzword and lost some of its meaning. People, schools, and districts often claim to be using culturally relevant pedagogy, but tend to only focus on culture, leaving out sociopolitical consciousness and neglecting to engage students with current social problems and problem-solving.

This echoes the results of a study completed by Evelyn Young in 2010. Young identified that it can be challenging for teachers to put what they have learned about the theory of culturally relevant teaching into practice in their classrooms. She conducted a study at a racially diverse urban school in the Northeast to see how teachers and administrators “understand and utilize culturally relevant pedagogy” (2010, p. 249). Young found that predominantly white teachers put more emphasis and focus on students’ home cultures but did not tend to engage with building students’ sociopolitical consciousness, which required identifying and challenging existing societal power structures and how students and schools fit into those. Often, this was because teachers lacked their own sociopolitical consciousness.

This is the greatest call to action for white educators like me. We can’t be anti-racist if we don’t work to understand how racism has shaped our identities and the perspectives we bring into the classroom. Culturally relevant pedagogy calls on us to build a practice of reflection, accountability, and growth—to work to understand our own racial identities and to continually develop our sociopolitical consciousness. We can do this by developing a practice of ongoing learning and professional development; building relationships with other educators who will hold us accountable for continued reflection, learning, and growth; we can also consistently seek and apply feedback from parents and students to help us identify areas for growth. One element of my study is using my own written reflections as a way to hold myself accountable, along with conversations with respected colleagues and friends.

**Culturally Relevant Pedagogy in a Privileged Private School**

All students benefit from a classroom that challenges traditional teacher-student power structures, creates opportunities for students to be leaders and experts, and sees knowledge not as something that is fixed and imparted, but as something that changes, grows, and comes from students. These last principles are ones I’m comfortable with and have been emphasized at the progressive schools where I’ve worked. However, reading Ladson-Billings helped me to realize
that without the addition of cultural competence and sociopolitical consciousness, constructivist teaching that gives students voice, leadership, and ownership is merely progressive, and not culturally relevant. To move towards anti-racist education, I am working to move beyond my comfort zone of progressive pedagogy to culturally relevant pedagogy.

Culturally relevant teaching is for students and teachers of all races. In 2014, Ladson-Billings wrote, “In our attempt to ensure that those who have been previously disadvantaged by schooling receive quality education, we also want those in the mainstream to develop the kinds of skills that will allow them to critique the very basis of their privilege and advantage” (Ladson-Billings 2014 p.83). In my predominantly wealthy and white classrooms, it is especially important to maintain a focus on developing students’ sociopolitical consciousness.

I implemented the inquiry project during a unit where my eighth-grade students were reading Out of My Mind, by Sharon Draper. It’s a great novel in a number of ways; however, it’s written by a non-disabled author and perpetuates some harmful stereotypes of people with disabilities. While I didn’t select the novel, it offered an opportunity to build students’ (and my own) understanding of disability and explore the intersections between disability and race.

In the beginning of the unit, we learned about stereotypes in media of people with disabilities and read and watched texts and videos (including TED Talks and TikToks) by people with disabilities from a variety of cultural, racial, and other backgrounds. In these videos and articles, the subjects talked about a variety of topics related to disability, ableism, and representation. Learning from disabled people of all identities about how they like to be talked about as well as other elements of ableism helped students learn about the importance of accurate representation. We worked together to develop a set of guidelines for how to identify stereotypes, as well as realistic, nuanced, and complex representations of disabilities, and we applied these guidelines throughout our reading of Out of My Mind. I saw all students carry the learning from these early classes and apply it throughout the rest of the unit in their reading of Out of My Mind; this practice also helped students develop the tools to reflect on how people with other marginalized identities are represented in books, movies, television shows, and beyond.

The summative assessment, a persuasive letter, was designed to measure all three elements of culturally relevant teaching. Students chose an area of media they are passionate about; identified a problem connected to representation in that type of media; researched their topic; decided on an audience who has power over that issue; and outlined, planned, wrote, revised, and ultimately sent their letter. Students chose powerful topics—Asian stereotypes in Disney Channel shows, hyper-sexualization of women in an Anime show, the lack of coverage of women’s sports by sports channels; disability representation in young adult literature; harmful representation of Black people in video games, and more. Their choices, research, and writing showed growth in all three areas—students’ writing had clearly improved from the summative assessment in the prior unit; students selected topics that they connected to personally, including ones about representation of people with their own identities; and their analysis of the media they chose showed significant growth in sociopolitical consciousness. They were able to apply what they had learned, about how people with disabilities deserve to be represented, to different groups in their analysis of media that that enjoy outside of school.

One implication from this study is that we should teach students to take a critical look at all the texts we assign. Along with typical language arts skills like analyzing for theme, characterization, point of view, and more, English teachers should give students the skills and the
freedom to question the choices of the authors of texts. I believe it’s possible for students to love and appreciate elements of literature while still being invited to look for harmful representation and its impact.

**Conclusion**

This past fall in one of my graduate classes, I heard a colleague say, “I’m so over hearing about culturally relevant pedagogy.” I was caught off guard by this statement. It raised a number of questions for me—does this teacher not care about students of color? Does he not really know what culturally relevant pedagogy is? What is it that is making him so “over” or frustrated by this term?

I’ve kept those questions in my head as I worked on this inquiry project. What I think now is that it wasn’t that my classmate didn’t care about students of color; it’s that, as Ladson-Billings identified in 2014, “culturally relevant pedagogy” has been used so many times that it ceased to have meaning for him. In my research, I realized that this classmate wasn’t alone—many people misunderstand or water down culturally relevant pedagogy. But that’s not an excuse to roll our eyes at it. We’re teachers of human beings first, then of subject matter. Culturally relevant pedagogy, at its root, requires us to recognize our students’ humanity, to be excellent teachers for all of our students, and to prepare them to make the world a better, fairer, and more just place. And as new (or new-ish) teachers in the profession, it’s our responsibility to develop our own sociopolitical consciousness. Just as we can’t deny how our students’ cultures and identities affect their learning, we need to learn and reflect on how our own racial and cultural identities affect who we are as teachers. Preparing for and teaching this unit helped me identify gaps in my own sociopolitical consciousness. It also reminded me of the importance of co-constructing knowledge with students—this was the first time I have taught about disability, which allowed me to approach this unit with a beginner mindset. I made it clear that I was learning with my students, which made them feel more comfortable sharing their own experiences, taking risks, and asking honest questions without as much fear of getting something “wrong.” I plan to carry this learning forward to my future teaching.

Our job is about the students. In order to truly make it about all our students, and to work towards a world where education lifts up and celebrates students of all identities, we should look to culturally relevant pedagogy.

**References**


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