

## **An agenda to strengthen culturally responsive pedagogy**

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*ABSTRACT: Over the last two decades in many countries, culturally responsive, multicultural and bilingual approaches to teaching have largely been replaced by standardised curricula and pedagogy, rooted in a political shift toward neoliberalism that has pushed business models of school reform. I argue that neoliberal reforms, by negating the central importance of context, culture and racism, are reversing the empowered learning that culturally responsive pedagogy supports. To address these problems, I argue that educators who work with culturally responsive pedagogy must engage in three areas. First, a persistence of faulty and simplistic conceptions of what culturally responsive pedagogy is must be directly confronted and replaced with more complex and accurate views. Second, the research base that connects culturally responsive pedagogy with student learning must be strengthened. Third, the political backlash from work that empowers minoritised communities must be anticipated and addressed.*

*KEYWORDS: Culture, culturally responsive pedagogy, indigenous education, multicultural education, social justice education.*

I begin with a story that illustrates conceptual and political issues that culturally responsive pedagogy faces today. When, in 2007, the California State Superintendent of Education rather belatedly realised that there was a racial achievement gap in the state, he did a few things to respond. He charged his Advisory Council to recommend what the state might do to address the issue; the Council subsequently issued a report. His Department of Education sponsored a two-day, statewide conference on race and the achievement gap; it featured several high-profile speakers (only some of whom were educators) who addressed various issues related to race, racial sensitivity and racism.

A few months later, the Department sponsored a one-day think-tank on culturally responsive pedagogy, that was supposed to launch plans for teacher professional development. I was one of about 25 participants, along with various other teacher educators and administrators. Since most of the participants knew only a few others in the room (participants included few whose work in culturally responsive pedagogy is well-known), and since there had been no robust statewide dialogue about culturally responsive pedagogy, much of the morning discussion took the form of participants establishing their credentials and knowledge in the area. The rest of the day was spent brainstorming; all ideas were recorded, few were debated. Although the Superintendent dropped in, he did not stay. I subsequently helped to synthesise notes for use in two regional workshops, which were to be followed by a plan for a professional development program in culturally responsive pedagogy for the State's teachers. However, the project dissipated and was not taken up again. Instead, the Department of Education collaborated with an R&D institute to write a school climate

workbook that was made available to schools. It appeared to me that within the Department, there was little consensus about what culturally responsive pedagogy is, what it looks like in practice, how it impacts on student learning, and how it may or may not relate to standards-based reform.

Over the past twenty years, school reform has been driven increasingly by neoliberalism, with its emphasis on individualism and market competition. Following models of business management, states in the US have been directed to set high standards and align curriculum to them. Teachers are to teach to and test student mastery of them, with test results bringing consequences. Schools with scores that do not rise, like businesses whose profits do not expand, are subject to closure. Pushed by wealthy venture capitalists, various forms of privatisation and competition, such as charter schools, have emerged as the favoured way to improve schools. Pre-service teacher education in the US is being cut back, and professional development for practising teachers has shrunk (Wei, Darling-Hammond & Adamson, 2010).

I will argue that, while culturally responsive pedagogy supports empowered learning of diverse student populations in ways that neoliberal reforms do not, its advocates must confront three problems: persistent simplistic conceptions about its meaning, a research base that while promising is thin, and political backlash prompted by fear of its potential to upset the existing social order.

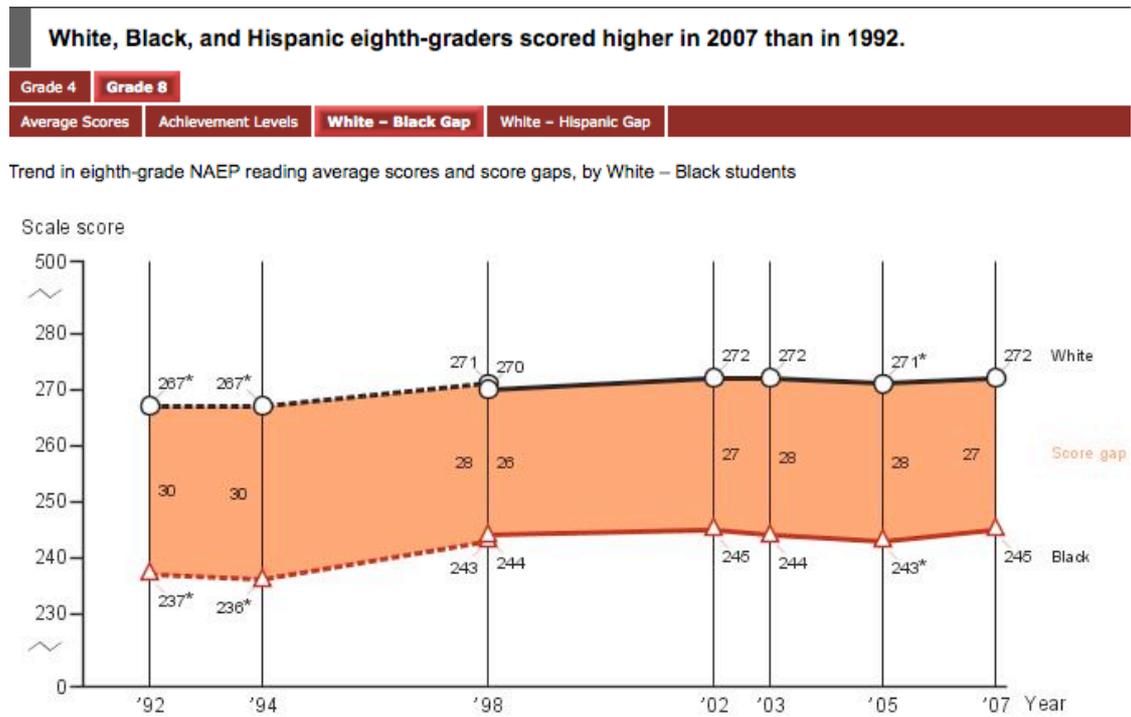
## **STUDENT LEARNING AND THE MARGINALISATION OF CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE PEDAGOGY**

Unlike culturally responsive pedagogy, neoliberal reforms that purport to address racialised achievement gaps treat racism and culture as if they do not exist. Although racial achievement gaps in the US have been a focus of attention, solutions have emphasised offering all students the same curriculum, taught in the same way, regardless of the fact that they are based on the language, worldview and experiences of white English-speakers (Gutiérrez, Asato, Santos & Gotanda, 2002). While my analysis will be situated mainly in the US, the growing impact of neoliberal reforms is felt in many areas around the world, as illustrated by Comber and Nixon's (2009) discussion of Australia.

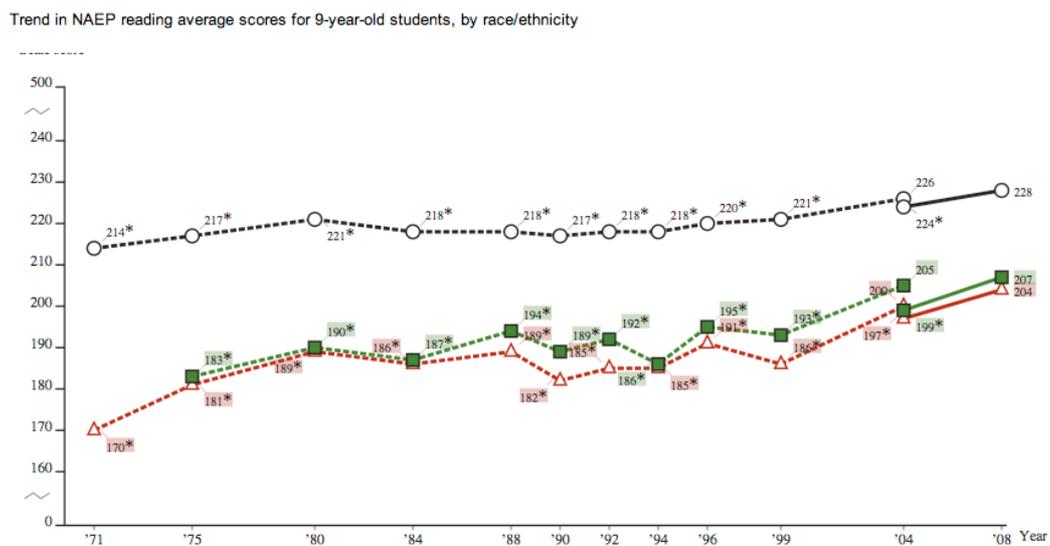
The National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) is a set of standardised tests in the US that serve as a useful tool to gauge the impact of national trends on student learning, since it has been administered periodically since the early 1970s to national samples of students in grades 4, 8 and 12 in various subject areas. A short view of NAEP data, illustrated in Figure 1, would seem to suggest that neoliberal reforms are improving student achievement. Figure 1 shows NAEP scores of 8<sup>th</sup> graders in literacy by race (Black, White), between 1992 (about when standards-based and test-based reforms commenced in the US) and 2007. This display would suggest that they are on the right track, since achievement scores of students have gradually improved (albeit very slowly) and racial achievement gaps have narrowed somewhat.

However, NAEP scores from the early 1970s to the present offer quite a different picture. Figure 2 shows trends in reading scores for 4<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> graders since 1971, disaggregated by race/ethnicity (White, Black, Hispanic). Although results for 4<sup>th</sup> graders might seem to favour standards-based reforms, results for 8<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup>

graders do not. Racial achievement gaps had been narrowing during the 1970s and 1980s, being at their 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 flattened out. Figure 3 shows the same data in math, where the pattern, while not as striking, is still evident. Brayboy and Castagno (2009) have made the same observation about what NAEP achievement scores reveal for American Indian students. (Black circles: White students; green squares: Latino students; red triangles: African American.)

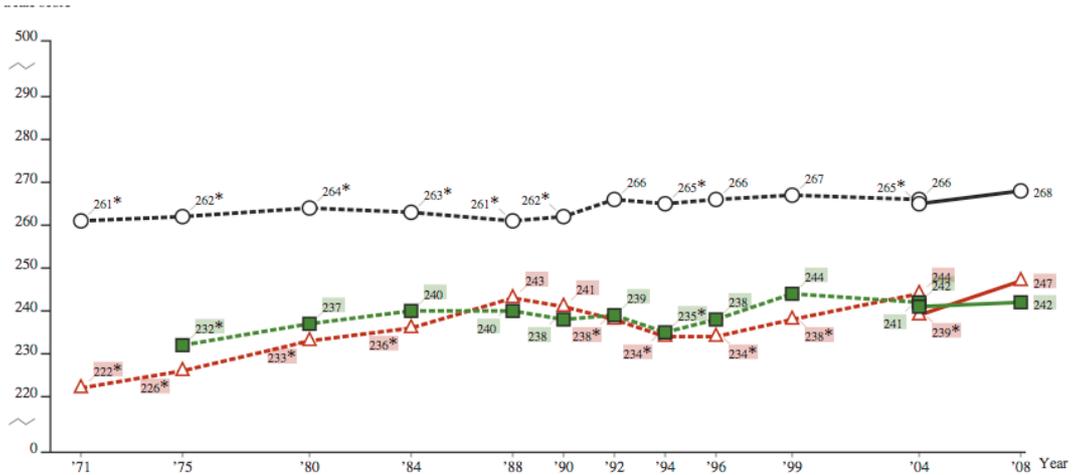


**Figure 1. NAEP scores of 8<sup>th</sup> graders in reading, by race (Black, White)<sup>1</sup>**

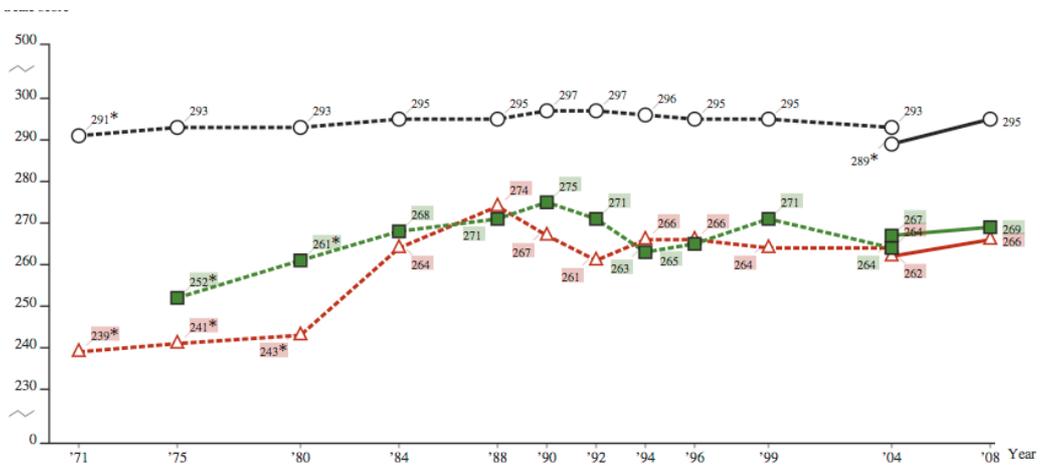


<sup>1</sup> Source: National Center for Education Statistics

Trend in NAEP reading average scores for 13-year-old students, by race/ethnicity

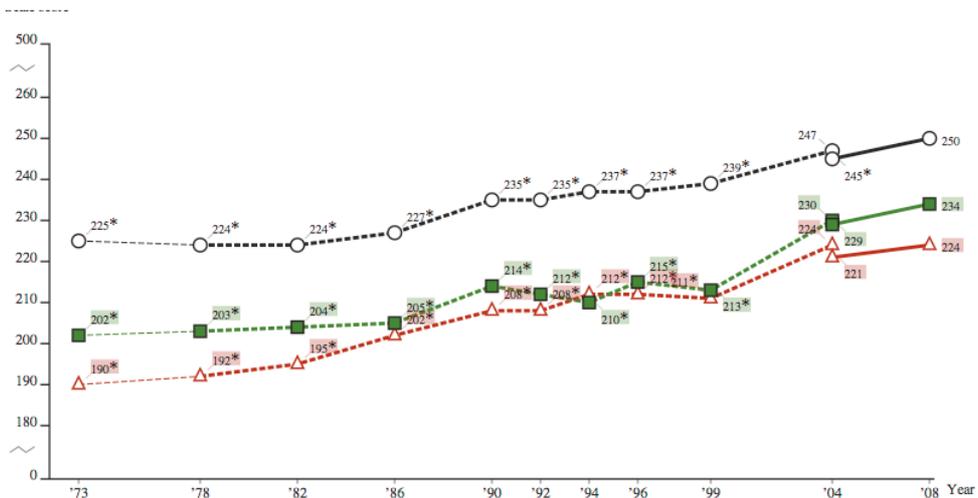


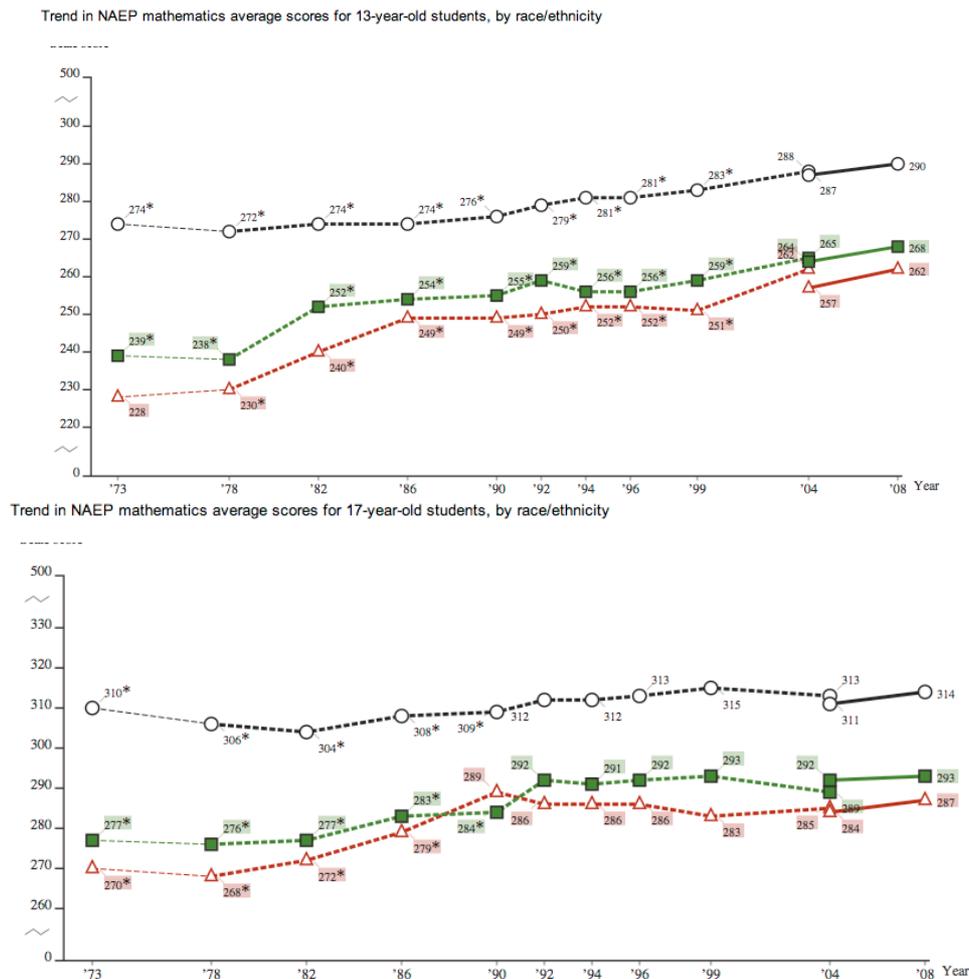
Trend in NAEP reading average scores for 17-year-old students, by race/ethnicity



**Figure 2. Trends in Reading between 1971 and 2008**

Trend in NAEP mathematics average scores for 9-year-old students, by race/ethnicity





**Figure 3. Trends in Math between 1973 and 2008**

What was happening during the 1970s and 1980s that led to jumps in the achievement of students of colour? During the 1970s, schools across the US 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, just as Seattle Public Schools was beginning to develop curriculum and pedagogy for teaching diverse students, and was sending teachers (such as myself) to workshops and institutes on multicultural teaching. School districts were also developing bilingual education programs, especially following the 1972 Supreme Court decision *Lau v. Board of Education*. 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 visibly in development, such as the Kamehameha Early Elementary Program for Native Hawaiians (Au, 2003) and Rock Point and Rough Rock community schools for Navajo students (Watahomigie & McCarty, 1994).

To be sure, problems such as low teacher expectations of students of colour, ethnocentric curricula, disproportionate placement of students of colour in special education, and disproportionate disciplinary referrals of students of colour were (and still are) common. Further, one certainly cannot attribute gains in achievement of students of colour solely to beginnings of multicultural, bilingual and culturally

responsive teaching. The desegregation of schools coupled with other efforts, such as the War on Poverty, were significant. Yet, the importance of work to respond to diverse students in schools, coupled with visible social movements for equity, should not be underestimated.

Over the last two decades, however, culturally responsive, multicultural and bilingual approaches to teaching have largely been replaced by standardised curricula and pedagogy, pushing culturally responsive pedagogy to the margins. I will argue that this has happened for three primary reasons: 1) a persistence of faulty and simplistic conceptions of what culturally responsive pedagogy is, 2) too little research connecting its use with student achievement, and 3) elite and white fear of losing national and global hegemony.

### **SIMPLISTIC UNDERSTANDINGS OF CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE PEDAGOGY**

Culturally responsive pedagogy is often understood in limited and simplistic ways, which is problematic for several reasons. Simplistic conceptions give an illusion of having made meaningful change without having done so. Simplistic conceptions of culturally responsive pedagogy can also be demonstrated as ineffective, or dismissed entirely. I will briefly discuss four simplistic conceptions that I encounter repeatedly: cultural celebration, trivialisation, essentialising culture, and substituting cultural for political analysis of inequalities.

Culturally responsive pedagogy understood as *cultural celebration* tends to separate attention to culture from academic instruction, and leave existing academic expectations for students intact. In addition, this conception tends to ignore issues of power and equity. For example, in a study of how one US school “does diversity”, Ngo (2010) found that efforts went into ethnic clubs and celebration fairs, but no further. She commented that the “politeness and cheeriness” of these efforts covered over serious issues of relationships, cross-cultural communication and instruction (p. 484).

A personal example illustrates the power of this conception to block attention to deeper issues. On two occasions recently, I conducted a one-day workshop on teacher preparation for culturally responsive pedagogy for an urban teacher education program. The first occasion was for university faculty members; the second was for teachers in partner schools. One university faculty member inadvertently came to both. During a break in the second workshop, I said that I was delighted to see her but that since this workshop repeated the first one, she wouldn’t learn anything new. However, she replied that she wanted to stay because she was hearing with “new ears”. Afterward, she explained that she was on sabbatical, visiting an urban secondary school whose mission was to prepare students of colour from high poverty backgrounds for university. She was puzzled because, while she had always thought that “cultural celebration” was the way to go, the school seemed to be having success with its students without using what she had understood as culturally responsive teaching. As I probed further, it became apparent that she had not connected culturally responsive pedagogy with high-level academic learning. Participating in my workshop the second time, she realised that although I explicitly connected these, her

prior understandings had led her to “hear” cultural celebration and filter out everything else.

Of course cultural celebrations are not antithetical to academic learning. It is substituting celebrations for academic learning that is the problem. In our evaluation of Te Kotahitanga (Meyer et al., 2010), we found that while many teachers’ academic expectations for Maori students had improved as a result of the project, quite a few still articulated vague expectations, and several “added in” culture in simplistic ways such as using Maori terms for days of the week. In a study of seven teachers in a US urban school who were exploring links between race and student achievement, Young (2010) found that, although all seven spoke of valuing and building on student culture, none linked this directly with improving students’ academic learning.

Viewing culturally responsive pedagogy as cultural celebration seems to be fairly common among educators who have not examined their own expectations for minoritised 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. Separating culture from learning also seems to be common among teachers whose fixed view of their subject matter, such as mathematics, hinders their ability to see how culture might inform students’ engagement with it (Leonard, Napp & Adeleke, 2009). In a study of immigrant students and classroom teaching, 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 utilised as a resource for their own learning” (p 2).

*Trivialisation* of culturally responsive pedagogy involves reducing what is actually a paradigm for connecting teaching and learning with students’ community-based culture, to steps to follow. For example, I visited a professional development secondary school that was working with an urban teacher education program in the US. When I asked a group of administrators and teachers about connections the school had built with the community it serves, they were not able to respond directly, saying things like: the school serves different communities, and there are no community networks to work with. As I pressed the idea that community networks probably exist, it became evident that this group was unsure of the relevance of seeking out ways to engage with the local community. Later I met with a group of student teachers who proudly began to explained how well prepared they were in culturally responsive pedagogy. When I asked them what this meant, they showed me their textbook that had embedded strategies for personalising instruction within 10 best practices of teaching that structured the book. The student teachers had learned to base their knowledge of students’ backgrounds on a few short activities in which students answered questions about their interests and lives outside school. With a couple of exceptions, the student teachers had not visited the students’ community themselves.

I then observed student teachers working in four different classrooms. One used cooperative learning fairly well to engage students in science, two lessons were unmemorably routine, and one was pitched at an exceptionally low academic level involving content that was completely irrelevant to the students. It appeared that the student teachers’ perception of themselves as knowledgeable about culturally

responsive pedagogy was based on reducing what it means to steps to get to know their students, without leaving the classroom.

Culturally responsive pedagogy can become simplified or trivialised in a variety of ways. For example, checklists are sometimes used as an administrative tool to document compliance with an expected change (such as responding to the cultural diversity of students) while minimising what is actually changed. 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 (for example, Nelson, Bustamante & Onwuegbuzie 2008; Underwood, 2009), even if items reflect recommended culturally responsive practices, greatly reduce attention to cultural complexity.

*Essentialising* culture means assuming a fairly fixed and homogeneous conception of the culture of a minoritised group, with an assumption that students who are members of that group identify with that conception of who they are. As May and Sleeter (2010) put it, “Culture, often equated or elided with ethnicity, is seen as a characteristic of individuals, and as a set of stable practices that can be described and taught” (p. 4). In New Zealand this might take the form of teachers (who may be Maori themselves) assuming that their own understanding of te ao Maori applies to all Maori, and that it gives them an understanding of their students that does not require input from the students themselves.

For example, Ginwright (2004) documented an initiative in Oakland, California to transform an urban secondary school that served mainly Black youth from low-income families. The African American educators leading the initiative wanted to improve students’ academic performance, prepare them for university, and make school district policies more equitable. To formulate a plan, they consulted with several prominent African American scholars who work with Afrocentric curriculum and pedagogy. The scholars persuaded the local educators to base reform in “African precepts, axioms, philosophy” (p. 80), and to structure the curriculum around themes in African knowledge in order to develop the students’ identity by connecting them with cultural and intellectual roots in Africa. But as the reform was implemented, the Black students rejected it because it ignored their needs and identity. Ginwright argues that the reform initiative pitted two conceptions of Blackness against each other: that of middle class Black reformers who connected African and African American knowledge systems with origins in Egypt, and that of low-income urban Black youth whose central concerns revolved around practical needs such as housing and employment, and whose identity was formed through urban youth cultural forms and local experiences with racism and poverty.

Gutiérrez (2002), based on her case studies of excellent mathematics teachers of Black and Latino students, made similar arguments. She found that, rather than basing pedagogy and curriculum on essentialised ethnic identities that others project onto the students, the teachers took the time to get to know their students and then shaped their pedagogy around what they learned through close relationships with the students. Their pedagogy included respect for students’ racial/ethnic cultures, and encouraging students to be themselves. The teachers did not, however, project onto the students an essentialised view of what mathematics is, what a Black or Latino/a mathematician is like, or who Blacks or Latinos are. Gutiérrez argues that learning to support students

culturally in a way that does not essentialise culture is complicated, but produces the kind of teaching in which students thrive.

*Substituting cultural for political analysis* involves assuming that working with culture will, by itself, solve problems of equity and justice, thereby ignoring conditions of racism and other forms of oppression that underlie disparities in education outcomes. Shields, Bishop and Mazawi (2005) explain that teachers' construction of indigenous and other minoritised students in deficit terms, which has inevitable negative consequences for their longer-term academic success, is a product of longstanding racialised and institutional policies and practices that consistently disadvantage minoritised students. As Kincheloe and Steinberg (1997) comment, cultural approaches engage "in [a] celebration of difference when the most important issues to those who fall outside the white, male and middle class norm often involve powerlessness, violence and poverty" (p. 17). Based on a review of the work of African American educators in the US, Beauboeuf-LaFontant (1999) points out that at the heart of their practice is "an understanding of systemic inequity – that is, the political, economic, and racial structures that disproportionately limit the opportunities of children of colour" (p. 704). They view schooling as a vehicle not only for access to the mainstream, but also for engaging in social change. Beauboeuf-LaFontant argues that the teachers' deep 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; for that reason, she renames culturally relevant teaching "politically relevant teaching".

May and Sleeter (2010) briefly review discourses that prioritise a political analysis over a cultural analysis. Antiracism, initially developed in a British context, dismisses a culturalist emphasis as naïve and counterproductive because it simply ignores the wider structural constraints, such as racism, sexism, and discrimination, that affected minoritised students' lives. Critical race theory examines the structural roots of racism and the persistence of collective white control over power and material resources, emphasising the notion of "political race". Critical pedagogy emphasises such concepts as voice, dialogue, power and social class that cultural analyses too often either under-utilise or ignore, particularly when taken up in schools. Critical multiculturalism gives priority to a structural analysis of unequal power relationships, analysing the role of institutionalised inequities, including but not necessarily limited to racism. A structural analysis does not ignore culture, but situates it 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. As May and Sleeter (2010) put it, "Culture and identity are understood here as multilayered, fluid, complex, and encompassing multiple social categories, and at the same time as being continually reconstructed through participation in social situations" (p. 10).

Practitioners generally struggle more with implications of structural than cultural analyses, for several reasons. Liberalism, which emphasises individualism, is far more prominent in mainstream ideology than critical perspectives, so educators tend not to question assumptions of liberal multiculturalism. Further, much of the theoretical work in critical multiculturalism, as with other critical work, is conceptually dense, with relatively few illustrations of what this looks like in practice. In addition, critical multicultural approaches clash with and challenge institutionalised structures and

processes in schooling, prompting those who view traditional schooling as politically neutral to see critical multiculturalism as “too political”.

## LIMITED RESEARCH

Although there is quite a bit of research on culturally responsive pedagogy, far too little systematically documents its impact on student learning, and clarifies what practices most strongly impact on students, and in what contexts. This limited research makes advocating for culturally responsive pedagogy difficult.

There are many studies that illustrate culturally responsive pedagogy in practice, sometimes going under different terms such as multicultural teaching, equity pedagogy, sociocultural teaching, or social justice teaching (for example, Dilg, 2010; Duncan-Andrade, 2007; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Santamaria, 2009; Sleeter & Stillman, 2007). For example, Cazden (1989) described Richmond Road School in Auckland, a diverse school that offered a deep learning community for both the students and the adults in the community. The study does not document student achievement resulting from the school’s culturally responsive teaching, but one can picture what that teaching looked and felt like, and use the portrayal as a model for professional development. Rich descriptions such as this can help to counter simplistic conceptions of culturally responsive pedagogy, particularly when they are connected with a theoretical framework, thereby showing how theory works in particular contexts.

Many small-scale studies connect culturally responsive pedagogy with student engagement (for example, Bean, Valerio, Senior & White, 1999; Hill, 2009; Howard, 2001; Nykiel-Herbert, 2010). For example, Lee (2006) studied the use of Cultural Modeling in secondary English classrooms that serve African American students in low-income communities. Cultural Modeling “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). Based on her observations in classrooms where teachers use Cultural Modeling, she posits that African American life affords young people a wealth of cultural scripts and contexts that can be used in the classroom to develop literary analysis strategies students can then apply to unfamiliar texts, and that a curriculum that enables students to use their cultural frames of reference immediately engages them in much higher levels of cognition than is the case with a traditional curriculum.

The relatively few studies that connect culturally responsive pedagogy with its impact on student academic learning consist mainly of small-scale case studies (for example, Au, 1993; Sheets, 1995). For example, Cammarota and Romero (2009) developed, taught in, and evaluated the Social Justice Education Project (SJEP) in Tucson, Arizona, where over 40% of its Chicano students leave school during the high school years. SJEP is a four-semester, secondary school, social studies curriculum designed on a model of “critically conscious intellectualism” for strengthening teaching and learning of Chicano students. The model has three components: 1) an academically rigorous curriculum that is culturally and historically relevant to the students, and aligned with state standards but designed through Chicano intellectual knowledge; 2) critical pedagogy in which students develop critical thinking and critical consciousness, creating rather than consuming knowledge, and 3) authentic caring in

which teachers demonstrate deep respect for students as intellectual and full human beings. Students are immersed in advanced-level theoretical material, and conduct community-based research examining manifestations of racism in their school and community. Achievement data show that Chicano students in the SJEP outscore White students on the State's reading, writing and math exams, and SJEP students' graduation rates exceed those of White students in the site(s) where the program is offered. SEJP students credit the program itself for their academic success.

Although research connecting culturally responsive pedagogy with student achievement consists largely of small-scale case studies, findings of research reviews by different authors converge. Gay (2010) remarked that, "Students of colour 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," as demonstrated by various programs and projects (p. 213). Similarly, Brayboy and Castagno (2009) conclude that even though a more systematic research base is needed,

There are a number of examples in the literature of programs that have successfully developed and implemented CRS [culturally responsive schooling] for Indigenous youth. What many of these case studies have in common is a "grass roots" approach in which local communities play a key role in developing and sustaining the program, sustained financial support, and careful record-keeping of both achievements and setbacks. (p. 45)

My own review of the impact of ethnic studies curricula, taught with culturally responsive pedagogy, concur; I found 15 out of 16 studies that I was able to locate that reported student outcome data reported a positive academic impact on minoritised students (Sleeter, 2011).

Research on the preparation of teachers for culturally responsive pedagogy is also thin, and consists of case studies. Case studies of teachers learning culturally responsive pedagogy illuminate problems and barriers that teachers experience, sometimes showing how those problems can be addressed (for example, Leonard, Napp, & Adeleke, 2009; Patchen & Cox-Petersen, 2008; Sleeter, 2005). For example, Camp and Oesterreich (2010) report a case study of a teacher who, during pre-service preparation fieldwork, was highly distressed to see the impact of teacher-centred, worksheet-dominated teaching on urban students. As a beginning teacher, she learned to enact inquiry-based, democratic and culturally responsive teaching by drawing on her own life experiences with injustices and teacher education coursework that offered her an alternative to the kind of pedagogy she was seeing in schools. Most such case studies explore the impact of specific kinds of professional development programs on teachers, including a series of workshops (DeJaeghere & Zhang, 2008), inquiry-based graduate courses (Jennings & Smith, 2002; Sleeter, 2009), teacher networks (El-Haj, 2003), teacher collaborative inquiry groups (Hynds, 2007), community-based learning (Fickel, 2005; Moll & González, 1994), and sustained workshops combined with classroom-based coaching (Zozakiewicz & Rodriguez, 2007).

It is challenging to connect teacher professional development, teacher implementation of culturally responsive pedagogy, and impact on students because teachers do not necessarily shift their practice in accordance with the aims of professional

development. Nonetheless, there is some such research. Bishop, Berryman, Cavanagh and Teddy (2009) studied the impact of Te Kotahitanga, a professional development model that includes workshops linked with classroom mentoring and support, on 422 teachers in 12 schools. On the whole, they found 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 asTTle scores. An external evaluation of the program by Meyers et al. (2010; see also Sleeter, in press) found Te Kotahitanga schools to retain Maori students at a much higher rate than comparison schools, prepare students for university entrance at a much higher rate, and yield higher results on some NCEA evaluations. 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 non-intervention group on all measures of literacy achievement. There is clearly a need for much more systematic research on the impact of culturally responsive pedagogy on students, as well as research like the studies above that links teacher professional development in culturally responsive pedagogy with an impact on students.

Future research should also attend to two concerns. First, it is very important to clarify what culturally responsive pedagogy means and looks like in any given study, since there is wide variation in possible meanings. Contrast, for example, the following two studies. In Rubie, Townsend and Moore's (2004) study of a year-long intervention, culturally responsive pedagogy meant that Maori children were taught waiata, haka, poi, and other Maori performance activities. In contrast, in Phillips, McNaughton and MacDonald's (2004) study, teachers and students participated in joint activity, with the teacher serving as "expert" other, in order to manage mismatch between home and school literacies. These are quite different conceptions. In an attempt to operationalise culturally responsive pedagogy as practiced in 45 classroom-based studies, Morrison, Robbins and Rose (2008) found a wide variation of loosely related teaching actions. They classified twelve kinds of actions into three broad categories: high academic expectations with appropriate support such as scaffolding; cultural competence reflected in reshaping curriculum, building on students' funds of knowledge, and establishing relationships with students and their homes; and cultivating students' critical consciousness regarding power relations. None of the 45 studies depicted all twelve teaching actions, although each study depicted several of them.

Second, it is important to attend to how a given conception of culturally responsive pedagogy derives from or fits the specific cultural context(s) of students. Ladson-Billings' (1994) theory of culturally relevant pedagogy, for example, was based on her study of effective teachers of African American students, while Bishop and colleagues (2009) based theirs on narratives of secondary-level Maori students. While both conceptions overlap, they are not identical. Because of the centrality of context to culturally responsive pedagogy, researchers cannot simply ignore grounding what it means in the context being studied. At the same time, while maintaining context specificity, we need to know what principles of culturally responsive pedagogy apply across groups and across national boundaries so that educators in diverse cultural and national contexts can learn appropriately from each other's work.

## **CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE PEDAGOGY, ELITE HEGEMONY, AND BACKLASH**

Culturally responsive pedagogy is not only about teaching, but is also a political endeavour directed toward equity and justice. Neoliberalism and its reforms based on standardisation and decontextualisation frame education as both a commodity for individual economic advancement and a tool to shape workers for the global economy. Although globally there is considerable variation in the extent to which school practice is being shaped around neoliberalism, neoliberal reforms are increasingly pervasive. Not only are they antithetical to culturally responsive pedagogy, but neoliberalism itself can be understood as a backlash movement against political gains of poor and minoritised peoples (see Harvey, 2005).

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). As the work of teachers becomes increasingly prescribed, attempts to work with culturally responsive pedagogy are increasingly difficult. Teachers have less time to research and develop curriculum that students can relate to, non-tested curriculum disappears under pressure to raise test scores, and teachers are increasingly patrolled to make sure they are teaching the required curriculum (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2006; Comber & Nixon, 2009; Flores, 2007; Gillborn & Youdell, 2000; Sleeter & Stillman, 2007).

Specifically, culturally responsive pedagogy may prompt descendents of colonisers to enact backlash toward indigenous peoples regarding who has legitimate claim to the land. Based on an example in Canada, Marker (2006) suggests that, because of the history of colonisation and theft of land, contemporary descendents of white invaders are deeply insecure “when confronted by the indigenous Other” (p. 485), and particularly expressions of “ancient and sustained relationships to land” (p. 486). Further, the Western conceptualisation of knowledge as rooted in science, objectivity, and progress, and of schooling as “assimilation into global technocratic norms” that are disconnected from any particular place (p. 502) clashes with traditional indigenous knowledge that is connected with place. A clash of worldviews about the purpose of schooling and nature of knowledge “has left nonnative educators in a haze of confusion about how to be culturally responsive to the indigenous community while conforming to the pressures and presumptions of cultural neutrality in mainstream schools” (p. 502). Not only does the fundamental structure of indigenous knowledge conflict with that of Western knowledge, but the expectation that colonisers take seriously indigenous peoples’ relationship with land can prompt backlash.

Indeed, one should anticipate backlash as minoritised communities make gains. As Gutiérrez and colleagues (2002) argue,

Backlash pedagogies do not just happen: they are rooted in backlash politics, products of ideological and institutional structures that legitimise 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)

In the US, during the 1970s and 1980, while students of colour were making dramatic gains in achievement; white students were not. Further, achievement gains of students

of colour were accompanied by other political, social and economic gains communities of colour were making. Nowhere is the political backlash against culturally responsive pedagogy clearer than in Arizona, where the state legislature passed a law banning ethnic studies. Despite research on the academic impact of the Social Justice Education Project on Chicano students in Tucson, and despite an audit commissioned by Arizona's State Superintendent of Education that finds the program in compliance with the law, the Superintendent still vows to close down the program. At issue is what many white Arizonans regard as an un-American curriculum and (Kossan, 2009).

## CONCLUSION

An agenda to strengthen culturally responsive pedagogy must include strengthening research that both elaborates on what it looks like in classrooms, and that connects its practices with impacts on students. Further, an agenda must clearly articulate the nature of culture as it is lived everyday and relationships between culture and learning, as well as forms of racism that continue to perpetuate achievement disparities. As social justice work, culturally responsive pedagogy is political and its successes will prompt backlash. To be prepared, we need strong research, as well as well-informed and skilled practitioners.

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