

Moving Beyond Seeing with Our Eyes Wide Shut

A Response to “There Is No Culturally Responsive Teaching Spoken Here”

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ABSTRACT

A struggle exists to engage in culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) that authentically represents the voices and interests of all across the K–20 spectrum, from higher education institutions, to teacher preparation programs, and into U.S. classrooms. This article responds to Hayes and Juárez’s piece “There Is No Culturally Responsive Teaching Spoken Here: A Critical Race Perspective” by extending the conversation with the suggestion that one of the major problems in speaking CRP has to do with a disconnect between articulated commitments and actual practices. This response article takes a critical look at the landscape in which educators work to reveal the nature of overrepresentation of privileged identity markers in teacher composition that do not match with student demographics. The response also examines how misunderstandings about CRP’s theoretical and empirical frameworks, along with resistance, permeate individual teachers’ discourses and evidence how higher education institutions, teacher preparation programs, and teacher professional-development programs operate. The response ends with suggestions as to the identity work that is necessary if we are to hope for educators across settings to see and speak a CRP.

This article is a response to:

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HAYES AND JUÁREZ (2012) present a multifaceted and complex call to educators seriously invested in the educational outcomes of students. Through a series of arguments, they show that despite potential program commitments in higher education and teacher preparation, many conditions by which programs and individuals refuse to speak Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP) exist. The authors make a link between tenets of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and CRP to analytically support the idea that CRP is not spoken in higher education. While they examine the experiences of faculty in higher education settings, what may be missing from their analysis is an understanding of the identity landscapes in which we as educators work, and, in particular, the pervasiveness of Whiteness in the U.S. educational system (Dixson, 2008; Dixson & Fasching-Varner, 2008; Fasching-Varner, 2006, 2009; Tierney, 2003). Another construct important to the authors’ call and our response is the importance of linking the

theoretical underpinnings of CRP with what actually happens in teacher preparation programs and then examining teachers’ praxis (or lack thereof) with respect to CRP once in the field (Dixson & Fasching-Varner, 2009).

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Understanding the Call and Extending the Response

This response, while concurring with many of the ideas that Hayes and Juárez present, works to extend their arguments in a more expansive manner (Crenshaw, 1995; Tate & Rousseau, 2002; Dixson & Rousseau, 2005), opening up the dialogue across the K–20 spectrum. Unlike Hayes and Juárez, our claim is not that CRP is not spoken “here” (with “here” reflecting higher education, teacher education, and K–12 environments) rather that CRP is spoken all the time but in ways that misuse CRP ideas, bringing us further and further from the hopes and aspirations of the original scholarship on CRP (Ladson-Billings, 1994, 2005, 2006; Gay, 1984, 2000; Dixson & Fasching-Varner, 2009). The problem of equitable and socially just educational practices lies with what is actually being spoken in the name of CRP. Our argument is that when educators, across levels, claim to engage in any practice (and, in this case, invoke CRP) without connecting back to the foundation of the practice, educators are working and seeing with eyes wide shut.

Seeing with eyes wide shut can be understood as engaging in any ill-informed praxis wherein a particular discourse is invoked without a clear vision and understanding of what ought to inform the practice. The articulated and the actual praxes are, consequently, significantly different. Our response is a first step away from seeing with eyes wide shut, and reveals important ideas about how educators can work to speak CRP in ways that are meaningful for students. The orientation of our response begins with understanding the context and nature of teaching and learning landscapes in the 21st century. With an understanding of the landscape, we then follow with an overview of the challenges to CRP, along with what we call a free and reduced pedagogy, followed with some insights into what could change in educators’ work to more fully live the call of CRP. Our hope is that educators’ praxis is not only for CRP to be spoken but also spoken well and enacted with both eyes wide open to the realities of the challenges and opportunities of learning in the 21st century.

Blinded by the White—the Persistence of Whiteness in U.S. Educational Landscapes

To begin to understand the ways in which schools operate, it is important to have a sense of the demographic landscape for both teachers and students. For clarity purposes, we use the terms *historically overrepresented* and *historically underrepresented* when discussing school populations. Representation is a framework by which we might understand how opportunity has been conferred to groups. White middle-class populations, for example, are overrepresented when examining high-paid employment opportunities and political representation, as well as entrance into and successful completion of higher education. Minority populations (to include African American, Native American, and Latino/a groups) are historically underrepresented in those same categories.

Since the landmark *Brown v. Board* decision, a trend of resegregation has occurred through a leveraging of resources that have moved White families into either suburban settings, private-school settings, or magnet schools with intra-segregated populations (Kozol, 1992, 2006; Sitkoff, 2001). To paint a picture of the

demographic makeup of schools in the 21st century, the Pew Center for Research (Fry, 2007) suggests that nearly 75% of students from historically overrepresented groups attend schools in which slightly less than 5% of students are from historically underrepresented groups. Conversely, nearly 60% of students from historically underrepresented groups attend schools that are defined as “all or nearly all minority,” with less than 5% of those student bodies comprised of students from overrepresented populations (Fry, 2007).

An important consideration, therefore, to understand how CRP may be spoken in a variety of schools and teacher preparation programs, has to do with the identity landscapes in which children are socialized on a daily basis. The demographics for teacher populations provide an equally disturbing but not unexpected perspective: the National Center for Education Information (2005) estimates that, over the last 20 years, 85% to 92% of the teaching force has been both White and female. The teaching force is disproportionately overrepresented by female and White populations.

There are several explicit messages that can be derived from statistics about student and teacher landscapes. First, and perhaps most important, students in the United States receive increasingly stratified and segregated learning experiences, despite Brown I’s and Brown II’s explicit commitments to ending inequity thought to be caused by segregated learning experiences. Second, while learning in segregated settings, students are taught by a predominance of White teachers. White and female identity markers continue to be given disproportionate representation in U.S. schools. By having disproportionate access to all children, White teachers become the main socializing force for children of all colors. Racial identity is complex. Femaleness and Whiteness are not singular constructs, and so all teachers’ understandings of their genders and races are not lived the same way. At least phenotypically, however, a predominately White teaching force is teaching a predominately non-White student body in segregated schooling structures, and that disparity warrants our considered exploration as educators. In order to take CRP seriously, we need to take seriously the varied foci of research that have explored the effects, implications, and contradictions of a schooling system that is both dominated by and overshadowed by White educators (Carter & Goodwin, 1994; Haviland, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Sleeter, 2001, 2005), particularly since that composition is unlikely to change in the near future.

A Free and Reduced Pedagogy Is Never a Culturally Relevant One

A NOTE ON CULTURALLY RELEVANT PEDAGOGY

While Ladson-Billings (1994, 2005, 2006) and Gay (2000) long ago introduced critical theoretical and empirical frameworks to establish what CRP is, teachers have struggled to put CRP practices into action. The struggle for CRP engagement exists despite teachers’ articulation that they are in fact CRP practitioners. This section of our response highlights the disconnect between the theory of CRP and how teachers articulate what it is that they actually believe to be culturally relevant. Before exploring that

tension, we wish first to highlight briefly the theoretical thrusts behind the seminal scholarship on culturally relevant and culturally responsive teaching.

In this first part of the 21st century, educators often appear to think that being culturally relevant somehow merely involves the niceties of vaguely connecting with what they assume to be the cultural traditions of their students. CRP is not about superficially connecting to students but is rather a three-part framework that centers first and foremost on high academic expectations for student success (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 2005, 2006). The focus on high academic expectations is often absent in the conversation about CRP, but it is the critical foundation of the theory. In addition to having high academic expectations for student success, CRP scholarship suggests that teachers must be culturally competent (Gay, 2000; Dixson, 2008; Dixson & Fasching-Varner, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 2005, 2006). The idea of being culturally competent is not just an awareness of what teachers assume to be their students' cultures but rather a complex understanding of teachers' own identities, and how culture is framed and understood within the context of students' lives, reconciling differences in open and transparent ways. Finally, the CRP framework, as suggested by Ladson-Billings (1994, 2005, 2006) and Gay (2000), insists that educators who enact a culturally relevant praxis also live out sociopolitical commitments as agents of change. While teachers may articulate that the thrust of their work centers on students and classrooms, their students live in a broader community that educates them all the time. Teachers have sociocultural and sociopolitical obligations to the communities they serve. An active and vigorous commitment to the cultural and political realities that affect policy, curriculum, and outcomes in students' lives is paramount to claiming a pedagogy that is culturally relevant in nature.

THE CHALLENGES OF CULTURALLY RELEVANT TEACHING

Between 2008 and 2011, we have, along with different colleagues throughout the country, explored with pre-service as well as in-service teachers what is meant by CRP, while also examining the actual practices of these teachers. One particular study (Dixson, 2008; Dixson & Fasching-Varner, 2009) explored middle-school students' experiences in a Midwestern urban context and revealed that teachers either overemphasized a rhetorical vision of CRP without action (an end without means) or enacted actions they called CRP without a vision of what the CRP framework suggests is culturally relevant (means without an end). In the classrooms studied, teachers reduced their pedagogical practices to what other professionals had suggested during district-wide professional-development opportunities. These ideas were followed to the exclusion of engaging the very students in front of them as a set of experiential knowledge that could in fact shape practice. As Hayes and Juárez point out, CRT is concerned with valuing the knowledge and experiences of peoples from underrepresented populations (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005; Fasching-Varner, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001). When teachers engage with students themselves, along with acquired professional knowledge, they can frame students as knowers who have valuable contributions. Additionally, students can be partners with teachers

at resolving conflicts between teacher and student identities. Collaborative approaches such as partnering between overrepresented and underrepresented groups can lead to transformative, engaged, and culturally relevant experiences.

ON A FREE AND REDUCED PEDAGOGY

Over the past three years, we have interacted with approximately 450 teacher candidates at different institutions at the graduate and undergraduate levels while teaching a variety of courses in teacher preparation. A refrain we often hear from both pre-service and in-service teachers is, "Tell me how to teach _____ students." What is in the blank varies from *African American* and *Latino/a*, to *behaviorally challenged* and *disruptive*, all the way to *free-and-reduced-lunch students*. The lack of person-first language is often stunning, but perhaps more alarming is the staunch and often fierce desire of the educators to learn about how to deal with "others" as opposed to thinking through how their identities as educators might interact with the identities of students in productive and complex ways. In balancing who we are as educators and researchers with what we believe about teaching and preparing other teacher educators, we are struck by the resistance many White educators exhibit when asked to pivot the focus from how to work with others to how to learn about self, and how self-study might be the first step to enacting a culturally relevant approach in the work we all do as educators.

Educators (higher education and K–12 settings) enact what we call a free and reduced pedagogy when they fail to engage with each other across identity differences. The idea of a free and reduced pedagogy is consistent with Hayes and Juárez's arguments about CRP not being spoken. In a free and reduced pedagogy, underrepresented identity features become a means to disengage and disconnect in the very act of what might be culturally relevant education.

Resistance comes from many angles. Pre-service and in-service teachers often attempt to use explicitly politically correct, progressive, and evolved narratives to speak about difference while simultaneously inserting *but*s and *well*s that reveal more implicit perspectives on those whom teachers see as different from them. The reductionist framing of students by their identity features first (such as calling someone a free-and-reduced-lunch student) and their personhood second is likely to lead not to a culturally relevant practice but rather to a practice that is itself free and reduced. Free and reduced pedagogy is not only limited to practicing teachers—it has also infiltrated academic discourses such as the work of Ruby Payne, who reduces teaching to differences that are framed in deficiency orientations (Bomer, Dworin, May, & Semington, 2008; Gorski, 2006; Ng & Rury, 2006; Osei-Kofi, 2005).

DISPOSITIONS TO MOVE BEYOND

A FREE AND REDUCED PEDAGOGY

When in-service and pre-service teachers express a desire to engage in CRP, it is often articulated around a need for effective strategies to engage students across difference. Given that CRP's framework centers on high academic expectations, sociopolitical commitments, and cultural competence, we do not believe that one can be taught to be culturally relevant "through orchestrated

strategies; [CRP] is not something that one can be 'given'—rather it is dispositional, attitudinal, and political” (Dixson & Fasching-Varner, 2009, p. 121). We do not believe, consequently, that teaching CRP strategies per se is a fruitful practice for educators to engage with if our hope is to prepare teachers in culturally relevant and responsive ways for the realities of their work.

While CRP in itself cannot be taught, there are dispositional commitments that we do see as being consistent among teachers who espouse and live culturally relevant orientations. Teachers who engage in CRP have a fundamental and unmovable belief in the full humanity of their students. Across any area of difference (that might include race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, etc.), these teachers recognize that they have a profound obligation and commitment to foster the innate and already extant talents and abilities of their students. Culturally relevant teachers understand that when they engage the real-life experiences of their students, while simultaneously understanding and critically examining how their own experiences shape their understandings of students, the real work of social change and ending inequity happens. Because the work of engaging in culturally relevant ways centers within educator dispositions, we encourage teachers to teach and live with both eyes wide open—open to the historical, economic, political, and moral debts that have been levied against underrepresented groups in the United States and that have shaped educational outcomes since the founding of this nation’s public schooling systems (Ladson-Billings, 2006).

STANDALONE MEANS YOU’RE ALWAYS STANDING ALONE

An obstacle to educators engaging CRP in seen, well-spoken, and fully lived ways relates to the very nature of how teacher preparation programs, like the programs Hayes and Juárez describe through Malik’s composition experience, as well as district-level professional-development programs operate. Often issues of difference and diversity are relegated to single standalone courses or teacher-development workshops. The explicit message that educators derive when a program frames understanding diversity and difference as the purview of a single course or a single professional development experiences is that engaging diversity is not the institution’s full ideological commitment. The information given in these courses is relegated to being add-ons or a set of ideas that need only be discussed once in isolation—a check-off approach. Faculty with explicit commitments to CRP and social justice education often find themselves standing alone in trying to communicate the importance of the work.

Faculty like Malik in the Hayes and Juárez piece attempt to convince university and district administrators, as well as pre-service and in-service teachers, through acts of persuasion (Woods & Demerath, 2001). These acts of persuasion seem largely to fall on deaf ears, yet if we wish for the change to occur, educators must look, necessarily, at their own identities. Setting high expectations, learning how to be sociopolitically committed, and being culturally competent are vital parts of the educational enterprise that cannot be affirmed simply through discourse but must also be matched in action. Acts of persuasion in teacher preparation are increasingly difficult to make convincing, despite articulated

institutional commitments; we suggest this challenge centers in part on how educators learn about difference and equity in isolated standalone courses and professional development offerings. Additionally, as suggested by Foster (2004), there are not enough models of professional development in urban settings (which most often serve underrepresented students) that “effectively link the exemplary practices of urban educators to their students and the schooling contexts in which they teach” (p. 24). This means that practicing teachers are often exposed to professional development that lacks a collaborative synergy or sustained energy and an effective practice that centers on reconciling teacher identities, student identities, and schooling contexts.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS: REENVISIONING TEACHER EDUCATION SO THAT CULTURALLY RELEVANT PEDAGOGY IS SPOKEN HERE

We call on higher-education faculty, higher-education institutions and programs, and school districts to hear Hayes and Juárez’s call and work to change the system. Specifically, we urge educators to center issues of social justice, diversity, and identity by having ideological commitments and theoretical understandings about difference across programs and in each and every course that candidates take (in higher education) or throughout sustained and integrated professional-development programs (in school districts). When understanding of and commitment to diversity are integrated in programs for the long-term, faculty and professional developers are not faced with the burden of being the only contact a pre-service or in-service teacher may have with the knowledge and dispositions of CRP. Consequently, the act of persuasion becomes shared in a way that is less burdensome and more authentic in nature.

EDUCATORS’ (HOME)WORK

In addition to program (re)orientation, we suggest that teaching and working with both eyes wide open is an important way to take on Hayes and Juárez’s challenge that CRP to be spoken here, in education. The question then remains, what might teaching with both eyes wide open look like? We argue that the first step to having CRP being spoken well and with a full vision centered on change is for educators to do our own (home)work. As our discussion earlier suggests, teachers serve as one of the primary socializing forces in students’ lives, and the (home)work of all educators revolves around better understanding our own racialized, gendered, sexualized, and abled identities. We urge educators across the K–20 spectrum to reflexively and critically analyze the nature of how personal narratives are embedded reflections of identity privilege. A rigorous study of our own narratives, particularly how narratives reveal identity aspects that are overrepresented, appear as one way to address the problem of how the pedagogical beliefs and practices of teachers are shaped. Gay (1984) suggested that there are profound and positive implications when educators understand identity, particularly identity development within the nature of teacher narratives (Cook-Gumperz, 1993; Gee, 2001). By situating identity narratives within an understanding of privilege—where and when differences in identity exist between

and among underrepresented groups—a process of reconciling differences can become a public and on-record discourse (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

WHY IS THE (HOME)WORK IMPORTANT?

Given that teachers from overrepresented populations make up a significant portion of the teaching force in the United States, any effort at reforming the academic performance of students must trace back to the teachers who both educate and socialize the nation's student body. We argue that the unexamined narratives of educators, particularly where overrepresented identity constructs are embedded into the narratives, contribute to the historical, sociopolitical, economic, and moral educational debts that Ladson-Billings (2006) has discussed as framing the education debt. Ladson-Billings has argued that educational debts work in tandem with economic debts that create inequity in our nation's public schools. As such, redressing the achievement gap or education debt should begin with an examination of teacher narratives where insights about privilege and marginalization are often reflected.

CRT suggests that there is value to the narratives themselves as a mechanism of transmitting the value conferred to overrepresented groups through racial privilege. Given that 85%–92% of teachers are likely in any given year to be White, the nature of educator narratives has inherent racial implications. Critical Race theorists (Bell, 1995a, 1995b; Crenshaw, 1995; Delgado, 1989, 1990; Delgado & Stefancic, 1997, 2001; Dixson & Rousseau, 2006; Harris, 1995; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) suggest that Whiteness holds certain value as property. The narratives of White educators have the potential of serving as instruments that denote value and worth. How do the narratives, or the value of Whiteness, socialize children to the meaning of Whiteness? What might the narratives reveal about the limits of having CRP being spoken as Hayes and Juárez suggest? What might the narratives reveal about the ways in which CRP is misspoken and engaged in blinded and blinding ways, as this response suggests? Finally, how are narratives negotiated into the pedagogical practices of teachers? These questions are vital as the conversation that began long before *Brown v. Board* continues to unfold in the 21st century. An understanding of how White educators, as the overrepresented supermajority in the profession, link the value of Whiteness through narratives to ideas about teaching and learning can give teacher-educators considerable insights into how to push future teachers to be culturally competent, sociopolitically committed agents of change. As agents of change, teachers can work at disrupting privilege to create equitable learning opportunities for all students through high expectations—in other words, become culturally relevant teachers (Ladson-Billings, 1994, 2005, 2006).

WHAT IT ALL BOILS DOWN TO

In responding to “There Is No Culturally Responsive Teaching Spoken Here,” we would feel remiss if we did not end by highlighting two interrelated principles that suggest why this work begun by Hayes and Juárez, extended in our response and, we hope, taken up in conversation by the readership of *Democracy & Education* is of

critical import. First, children of color are not performing well in school, at least not as measured by assessment mechanisms (systems we know favor overrepresented populations) in a schooling system that is dominated by White educators, and used as examples in larger national rhetoric against all people of color. Speaking CRP can no longer remain optional, nor can misspeaking CRP be acceptable if we are to set high expectations for student academic achievement and support students in meeting those expectations. The success of students of color from any historically underrepresented group as well as the success in teaching students from overrepresented groups about the nature of their privilege are both crucial elements as we navigate through the 21st century.

Second, the demographic composition of the U.S. teaching force has remained largely stable with an overwhelming majority of White teachers, signaling that White teachers essentially determine and control educational opportunities for all students. That CRP is not spoken or not spoken well and that teaching practices are engaged with both eyes wide shut represents privileges of already overrepresented and privileged groups. The makeup of the teaching force, the relatively low number of teachers of color, and the lack of engagement by teachers in authentic practices that are culturally relevant, represent an absolute urgency as we think about how to provide successful experiences for all children. Most White students are likely to have a K–12 school experience with less than 5% of their peers being from historically underrepresented groups (Fry, 2007). This data suggests that White students, too, are learning important messages about what it means to be White and overrepresented. White educators teach White children as much about the experience of being White as they teach these messages to students of color. Contextualizing the identity landscape of education, understanding the limits of practices teachers describe as culturally relevant, and thinking about how educator (home)work (imbedded in educators' own narratives) are important considerations as we look to the types of socialization experiences children have. At a more fundamental level, and of interest to the readership of this journal, doing the work of CRP well is our profound obligation and responsibility as democratic educators and engaged democratic citizens concerned with a better tomorrow.

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