

# Let's Produce Culturally Responsive Pedagogues on Deck

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## ABSTRACT

In this response, I extend the conversation started by Hayes and Juárez (2012) by highlighting how culturally responsive teaching is spoken in one teacher education program where I worked and served in the preparation of middle-level teachers. I also share my reflections concerning this idea and pose questions for critical thought, dialogue, and action. Finally, I challenge teacher-educators to speak, enact, and work to produce culturally responsive teaching/teachers in their teacher preparation programs.

## This article is a response to:

Hayes, C. and Juarez, B. (2012). There is no culturally responsive teaching spoken here: A critical race perspective," *Democracy & Education*, 20(1). Article 1. Available online at: <http://democracyeducationjournal.org/home/vol20/iss1/1>

**H**AYES AND JUÁREZ (2012) presented a compelling argument concerning how culturally responsive teaching is not spoken in a particular teacher education program. Using critical race theory to frame the article, they expressed many concerns about White racial domination in teacher education. More specifically, they discussed specific ways in which Whiteness operates and how the ideas of the dominant culture seem to propagate in teacher education programs. These ideological paradigms that often frame children of color as academically deficient, among other negatives, are taught to preservice teachers, and some preservice teachers enter our nation's classrooms with preconceived notions about the academic and behavioral "problems" associated with students of color.

Even though some teachers view students of color through a defective lens, our nation's classrooms are becoming increasingly diverse. It is projected that by 2040 one out of every three children entering a classroom in the United States will either be an immigrant or the child of an immigrant (Suárez-Orozco, Qin, & Amthor, 2008). In addition, children of color currently constitute approximately 40% of students in public schools, while White teachers constitute about 90% of the teaching force (Ochoa, 2007). Therefore, there seems to be a cultural mismatch as it pertains to our diverse student population of school-age children and our majority White teaching force. Coupled with that, some teachers' ideological dispositions frame students of color as intellectually and culturally inferior. One way to address this challenge in teacher

education is to speak and model culturally responsive teaching with and among preservice and in-service teachers.

While I subscribe to both culturally relevant teaching and critical race theory (for a discussion concerning critical race theory, see Jett, 2012), I focus this discussion exclusively on culturally relevant teaching. I borrow primarily from Gay's (2010) work on culturally responsive teaching and Ladson-Billings's (2009) work on culturally relevant teaching, and I use these pedagogical phrases interchangeably throughout the paper. In this response, I extend the conversation started by Hayes and Juárez (2012) by highlighting how culturally responsive teaching is spoken in one teacher education program where I work and serve in the preparation of middle-level teachers. I also share my reflections concerning this idea and pose questions for critical thought, dialogue, and action. Finally, I challenge teacher-educators to speak, enact, and work to produce culturally responsive teaching/teachers in their teacher preparation programs.

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## Where Is the Rage?

I do not wish to be seen as the “angry Black man” in this context, but I wish to elaborate on the construct of rage alluded to in the featured article (Hayes & Juárez, 2012). I am guilty of having feelings of rage when encountering the numerous deficit-oriented studies, narratives, frameworks, etc. concerning the achievement rates of students of color in general and Black male students in particular. These limiting descriptors were not continuously cast upon me during some of my own schooling experiences. Moreover, these ideas that begin with the shortcomings of Black male students do not demonstrate the promise and potential that I see in Black male students more broadly.

Returning to the idea of rage, let us think about the construct of rage in multiple contexts. Where is the rage when Black and Latino male students’ schooling experiences can be categorized as culturally unresponsive? Where is the rage when books on the shelves and posters on the walls do not reflect our diverse society in general and the cultures of students in our classroom spaces in particular (Au, 2009)? Where is the rage when some classrooms for students of color continue to be worksheet factories where students are expected to complete worksheet after worksheet as if they are robots? Where is the rage when some schools are thought of as dropout factories, given that the majority of the students, primarily students of color, drop out before even completing a high school diploma? Where is the rage when teachers enter classrooms unprepared to address the educational and cultural needs of students of color? Where is the rage when the histories of students of color are marginalized, misrepresented, or flat-out ignored in school curricula? Where is the rage when initial teacher-preparation programs and professional development workshops and institutes continue to operate void of culturally responsive pedagogy? Where is the rage, my people? Again, where is the rage?

I concur that rage causes one to act (Hayes & Juárez, 2012; hooks, 1995). If we as teacher-educators, in-service teachers, preservice teachers, and other community constituents really are concerned about the education and future of our children of color, then we must act differently in our respective spaces to bring culturally responsive teaching to the fore. By not speaking culturally responsive teaching, are we not guilty of perpetuating a system that is White supremacist in nature (Hayes & Juárez, 2012)? Because if culturally relevant pedagogy is not spoken in some teacher education programs, then what is?

## A Black Male Teacher-Educator’s Reflection

After reading the article by Hayes and Juárez (2012), I immediately felt an inclination to share my insights on this pertinent issue in teacher preparation and extend the conversation started by these scholars. One way of extending the argument is by sharing my reflections as someone who speaks culturally responsive pedagogy. I formerly worked at an institution that is situated in an urban city and has an urban-education focus in its teacher preparation programs. In the undergraduate program there, preservice teachers choose two concentrations among five content areas (i.e., language arts, mathematics, reading, science, and social studies). These students take a diversity course during

their sophomore year, and they take a more advanced course focusing on culturally responsive teaching during their junior year, building upon what they previously learned in the diversity course. During the fall semester of senior year, students take methods courses and complete their practicum experiences (usually two to three days per week). In these methods courses across all the content areas, teacher-educators infuse into the class and earmark culturally relevant teaching practices as responsive to the developmental needs of students. Preservice teachers conclude the program during the spring semester, completing their student teaching and enrolling in a seminar that parallels the student teaching experience and further accentuates the culturally responsive theme.

I have taught approximately 200 middle-level preservice teachers over the last three years in courses exploring and extrapolating the tenets of culturally responsive teaching. As such, culturally responsive teaching is spoken in my courses centered on preparing teacher-candidates to meet the educational needs of culturally and ethnically diverse learners. More important, I seek to employ a culturally responsive praxis with our diverse student body in all of the courses that I teach. Therefore, my own teaching serves as one example of culturally relevant pedagogy. Added to that, culturally responsive teaching is spoken in other courses and spaces in our program as we prepare teachers to work within urban contexts.

After a discussion in a practicum seminar, I was amazed at the discussions that I heard that were so devoid of culturally responsive teaching in general and the knowledge of using students’ cultural experiences as a springboard for teaching and learning in particular. The following questions permeated my thinking: Was I overreacting, over thinking, and being overly critical concerning this singular incident? What about those ideas that were espoused by the teacher-candidates in their culturally responsive creeds? Do our placements in African American populations further magnify the stereotypes preservice teachers have about students of color in general and Black children in particular?

In another discussion, a student-teacher shared how her culturally responsive mentor-teacher engaged children of color in the teaching and learning dynamic. She shared how her mentor-teacher had such unique relationships with students and related and connected with them well. This student-teacher shared that she was learning and growing in this domain and expressed that she saw how tenets of culturally responsive teaching could be made manifest in classroom spaces. After reflecting on this scenario, the following questions permeated my thinking: What was it about this particular classroom space and mentor-teacher that allowed aspects of cultural responsiveness to unfold? What can we learn from classroom environments like these, and why aren’t more of these examples highlighted in the research literature? How can we ensure that other classroom spaces allow culturally responsive teaching to thrive?

In my experience, there are some challenges preservice teachers face pertaining to actualizing what they have expressed in their creeds as student-teacher interns. It appears that there is also a disconnect between what they are learning in their university

courses and what some of their mentor-teachers are doing in the field. After reflecting more critically on the Hayes and Juárez (2012) article, I continue to grapple with issues salient to culturally responsive teaching. Some of my queries are as follows: Is culturally relevant pedagogy “well received” in my experience because I am working at an urban education institution? Do teacher-candidates really understand the big picture about culturally responsive classrooms, schools, and communities? Do teacher-candidates truly understand that culturally responsive teaching is for *all*?

Moreover, is my work in vain if one “bad” experience with a student of color causes a preservice teacher to doubt the intellectual abilities of all students of color? Do class discussions in some way, shape, form, or fashion contribute to racist ideologies? Do class discussions about poverty and the like further perpetuate teacher-candidates’ biases concerning children in poverty? Do discussions concerning the achievement gap continue to frame Black children as intellectually inferior? Why do I wish to add more about culturally responsive teaching to my courses? Why do I wish to say more? Why do I wish to do more? Am I doing too much? Am I thinking too much? Am I allowing myself to drift into a fit of rage?

### **How Culturally Responsive Teaching Is Spoken and Enacted in My Space**

Perhaps my rage causes me to be more deeply committed and to act to ensure that teacher-candidates’ pedagogical frameworks are culturally responsive in nature. In order to accomplish this goal, culturally responsive teaching is spoken in my courses in the texts I select as required readings (i.e., Delpit, 2006; Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Landsman, 2009) as well as in the many class discussions, course readings, and writing assignments that dissect issues germane to culturally relevant teaching. In one diversity course I teach that advances the tenets of culturally responsive teaching, I help students make connections and visualize ways to use culturally responsive teaching as a pedagogical framework to explore all issues, including issues related to sexuality (Blackburn, 2012), language (Perry & Delpit, 1998; Hudley & Mallinson, 2011), and social class (hooks, 2000; Jensen, 2009), to name a few. Consequently, preservice teachers end this course with the notion that our children are not flawed and that our students of color come to our classrooms with many different talents, strengths, and gifts (Darling-Hammond, 2005; Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2009). In the succeeding paragraphs, I highlight some of the exercises that capitalize on preservice teachers’ strengths and permeate my own pedagogical practices.

First, I listen to and value my students’ voices and embrace dialogue in the class, whether it happens in small collaborative groups or as an entire professional learning community. With small groups, the learning objectives and needs of the students as well as the need to ensure that students are exposed to multiple, diverse perspectives are the base upon which group dynamics form. Students dissect questions from themselves, the empirical research literature, and me. Examples include the following: What are your thoughts about ideological management, the hidden curriculum, and the like? Is culturally responsive teaching important? What do you plan to do to strengthen cultural responsiveness? These queries

stimulate students’ (as well as my own) thinking patterns and bring various educational inequities, injustices, etc. to the forefront to be examined through critical dialogue using students’ interdisciplinary knowledge bases and cultural experiences as analytical tools. This practice is consistent with one of the missions of culturally responsive teaching: to be a “student” of diverse learners, using their cultural norms and practices as a catalyst for learning (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2009).

Next, I have students complete a puzzle-piece activity at the beginning of the semester. With this assignment, students create their own cultural collage and share it with members of the professional learning community. During this sharing, students reveal information about their religious belief systems (or lack thereof), sexual preferences, family dynamics, and so forth. The classroom culture is rooted in the idea that all differences are welcomed, acknowledged, validated, and celebrated. After that course meeting, I collect the puzzle pieces and configure them into one cohesive unit. This exercise simultaneously highlights the cultural diversity among teacher candidates and emphasizes that we are interdependent learners, among other things. As such, collaboration and community building are the course’s prominent themes and are congruent to culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2010).

Further, my students and I watch clips of critical films, explore brief portions of documentaries, analyze popular song lyrics and themes, etc. as a means to educate the entire professional learning community, to expose students to diverse perspectives, to generate critical discourse, and so forth. In addition, I exchange ideas with my students through their personal reflective journals (Gay, 2010). As students submit personal reflective journals, I use my responses as a mechanism to praise their work and to further challenge them to expand their thinking regarding culturally responsive teaching. Interestingly, this exchange is not limited to their journal entries as conversations continuing the dialogue ensue via e-mail, during class breaks, during office hours, and before and after course meetings.

Additionally, students complete a culturally responsive pedagogical creed (Gay, 2010). Retrospectively, I challenge students to synthesize epistemological frameworks connected to culturally relevant teaching and outline their own individual ideological paradigms in this domain. In this culturally responsive pedagogical creed, students chart with specificity goals that they (tentatively) plan to adhere to as they enter the teaching profession as culturally relevant pedagogues. In conjunction with the creed, they submit a cover letter providing information regarding their mission to complete their culturally responsive pedagogical creed, their challenges with devising the creed or the theory, and their beliefs concerning enacting culturally relevant tactics. With this assignment, students use empirical research to inform their work in this area.

In sum, I enact culturally responsive tenets and practices through multiple modalities by drawing upon the cultural strengths of my students to execute this teaching and learning dynamic. Exercises challenge students (as well as myself) to confront their own biases, assumptions, stereotypes, and

preconceived notions about various ethnic groups. For example, preservice teachers actively engage in critically analyzing school textbooks from various disciplines for their content as well as their cultural effectiveness (Gay, 2010). Students propose innovative ways to supplement textbook materials with the hope of providing a more comprehensive representation of diverse portraits of success. By engaging in this activity, preservice teachers come to further realize that the textbook is not the primary teaching tool for authentic learning but rather a resource among many. Activities such as this one create a powerful, transformative learning environment, generate discussion about authentic content knowledge, and enable improved learning concerning culturally responsive teaching. Other examples include a proverbs activity, a prejudices activity, and a stereotyping activity; these activities allow preservice teachers to critically assess their own cultural assumptions as well as to nurture their cultural competencies.

Please note that my pedagogical practices are not new in any capacity, as many other scholars and teacher-educators have offered suggestions that inform my work and have shared their experiences about culturally responsive teaching, multicultural education, social justice instruction, and the like (e.g., Au, 2009; Chartock, 2010; Gay, 2010; Howard, 2009; Kafele, 2009; King, 1991; Ladson-Billings, 2005, 2009; Le, Menkart, & Okazawa-Rey, 2008; Nieto, 2010; Schultz, 2008; Wager & Stinson, 2012). Moreover, my journey as a culturally responsive pedagogue is ongoing, and I emphasize to students that we all build on our learning in this domain throughout our entire lives and educational careers. Hence, culturally responsive teaching is spoken, and we make efforts to model the culturally synchronous dispositions that we wish teachers who are entering today's classroom spaces to possess.

### **Culturally Responsive Pedagogues on Deck**

As Hayes and Juárez (2012) noted, there are some challenges associated with speaking culturally responsive pedagogy in some teacher-education program spaces. I wish to propose a paradigm shift, so to speak. There are some success stories of those who are speaking culturally responsive teaching in teacher education. In other words, there is hope. I envision that institutions across the county and the world will produce culturally competent teachers willing and ready to infuse culturally responsive ideas into their pedagogical practices. My goal is for us currently working in teacher education programs to have culturally responsive pedagogues on deck.

Let us explore the concept of *on deck*. In baseball, that means a player is the next player to bat. If the team gets three outs, then the player on deck does not get an opportunity to bat. Additionally, the player on deck can be replaced by the coach or manager. Within the context of popular culture, *on deck* is synonymous with possessing more than enough of something. *Stacks on deck* has become a popular euphemism in the hip-hop community indicating that someone has lots and lots of money. I liken the concept of being on deck to that of culturally responsive teaching. Let me elaborate further on this metaphor.

First and foremost, we need culturally relevant pedagogues on deck! In other words, we need teachers who are responsive to the needs of culturally and ethnically diverse student populations seeking to enter the teaching profession, and we need to sustain learning communities where these teachers are currently doing this work. I caution that if a teacher on deck is discerned as subscribing to cultural deficiency, then he or she needs to be replaced. The same concept should hold true for teacher-educators and professional development leaders. With the current economic situation, teacher-candidates are seeking to transition into teaching from other career professions. This fact coupled with the current enrollment of preservice teachers in traditional teacher-education programs should lead us to be more selective regarding who is granted access to our children, especially our children of color.

Thus, in some educational spaces, unfortunately, we are striking out as it pertains to meeting the educational needs of students of color. We are failing to provide our children with the skills needed to thrive in their developing chosen career pathways. If any educators strike out, then teacher-educators, instructional leaders, administrators, etc. should be in a position to throw them off the deck. As it stands, there is a call for highly effective teachers who are simultaneously attuned to the cultural needs of diverse students. As such, preservice teachers should learn more about the tenets of culturally responsive teaching and seek to become more culturally responsive in their teaching practices.

My hope is that we can change the discourse even in teacher education programs where White students overwhelmingly populate the program and where culturally responsiveness is not a priority for (White) teacher-educators. Further, I envision teacher education programs and schools for children of color as socially and culturally transformative sites. Let us seek to influence a discourse where culturally responsive teaching is spoken, internalized, and actualized in all educational spaces, especially where students of color congregate. Let us *all* do our part to speak culturally responsive teaching in teacher education programs and do our part to produce culturally responsive pedagogues on deck.

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