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# Democracy & Education

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## Problematizing Assumptions, Examining Dilemmas, and Exploring Promising Possibilities in Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

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### Abstract

In response to the study and recommendations presented in the article “I Didn’t See it as a Cultural Thing,” written by Linda Griffin, Dyan Watson and Tonda Liggett, we explore three interrelated topics. First, we seek to problematize some of the assumptions in the study. We review some of the authors’ approaches and assertions that seem to reflect a hierarchical power structure and a deficit model. Second, we examine our own dilemmas and struggles in enacting culturally relevant practices within our teacher education program. Our reflections derive from our recent experience preparing for a reaccreditation site visit by NCATE. Third, we end by exploring some promising possibilities in culturally relevant teaching by describing a successful project we have been able to implement, which involved a partnership with a school district.

### This article is in response to

Griffin, L., Watson, D., Liggett, T. (2016). “I Didn’t See It as a Cultural Thing”: Supervisors of Student Teachers Define and Describe Culturally Responsive Supervision. *Democracy & Education* 24(1), Article 3. Accessible online at: <http://democracyeducationjournal.org/home/vol24/iss1/3>

**W**E READ WITH great interest the article entitled “I Didn’t See It as a Cultural Thing’: Supervisors of Student Teachers Define and Describe Culturally Responsive Supervision” (Griffin, Watson, & Liggett, 2016). As teacher educators in a regional public university, we found ourselves nodding in agreement as we considered the issues, tensions, and dilemmas discussed so cogently in the article.

Just like Griffin, Watson, and Liggett (2016), we work in a teacher education program where the majority of the students are Caucasian and middle-class, who in turn will be teaching children who come from diverse racial, cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. It is crucial for our teacher candidates to understand how their students’ cultural lenses, worldviews, and experiences impact the way they learn. Within our program, through coursework, field-based assignments, and clinical

experiences, we encourage our teacher candidates to examine their own beliefs through a self-reflective process and to structure learning opportunities based on the “funds of knowledge” (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005, p. 89) that learners bring to their classrooms individually and as family/neighborhood groups.

As discussed by Lucas and Villegas (2011), teacher candidates must develop specific qualities in order to effectively serve their students. These qualities include attitudes and beliefs (i.e., “orientations” such as sociolinguistic and sociocultural consciousness,

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value of diversity, and desire to advocate for students and families), as well as knowledge and skills (i.e., identifying bias in materials and assessments, applying key principles of second language learning in the classroom, etc.). The development of these qualities requires a robust integration of *knowledge* of theory, pedagogy, and the subject matter, *practice* of skills and strategies, *reflection* on actions and attitudes that affect the classroom context, and *vision* that guides one's educational mission (Walqui, 2011). We agree with the authors that this tight integration of knowledge, practice, reflection, and vision is only possible through a careful "bridging between teacher education coursework and student teaching experiences" (Griffin, Watson, & Liggett, 2016, p. 3).

Zeichner (2010) remarked that "field experiences are important occasions for teacher learning rather than merely times for teacher candidates to demonstrate or apply things previously learned" (p. 91).

According to Pennycook (2004), during their field experiences, teacher candidates must negotiate several competing domains: the knowledge and ideas gained through formal coursework; the history, beliefs, and embodied practices they bring with them; the possibilities presented by their learners' cultures, wishes and interests; and the constraints and affordances of the particular teaching context. He called for a model of student supervision that encourages teacher candidates "to develop a continuous reflexive integration of thought, desire, and action" (p. 335). To accomplish this goal, university supervisors must keep questions of race, language, discourse, power, and identity in the foreground when working with their teacher candidates. They should explore these questions by "seeking and seizing small moments" that will open the door for transformative dialogues (p. 341). Therefore, as the authors pointed out, university supervisors play an important role in the development of candidates' culturally responsive qualities within teacher education programs. Their research study represented an attempt to identify barriers and challenges faced by supervisors in carrying out this work and to recommend specific actions for overcoming them.

In response to Griffin, Watson, and Liggett's (2016) study and recommendations, in this essay, we explore three interrelated topics. First, we seek to problematize some of the assumptions in the study. Second, we examine our own dilemmas and struggles in enacting culturally relevant practices within our own teacher education program. Third, we end by exploring some promising possibilities by describing one successful approach we have been able to implement.

### **Problematizing Assumptions**

The authors acknowledged their program's reliance on a cadre of adjunct supervisors who are mostly retired educators and who have had little experience in diverse classrooms and have limited training in culturally responsive pedagogy. Instead of problematizing the practice of not involving tenure-line professors in the important work of field supervision, the study focused on providing professional development opportunities for the adjunct supervisors. There was clearly a hierarchical power differential at play, with the faculty researchers positioning themselves as the

experts who would offer training for the adjunct supervisors and then conduct interviews to gauge their understanding of culturally relevant practices. We might ask then, when power structures inform our actions, is there a risk of inadvertently modeling these power structures in our own teacher education programs (i.e., professor telling a supervisor what s/he should do and how s/he should act)? Do these sorts of interactions continue to promote the image of the field supervisor as a semi-skilled technician, subordinate to the political hierarchies inherent in institutions of higher education?

Throughout the discussion of findings, it would have made a different impact if the positive aspects of what the field supervisors were able to do and understand had prefaced the discussion of what they were lacking or not doing. Unfortunately, in places, the analysis is seemingly built on a deficit model. The supervisors' views of culturally responsive pedagogy are described as "limited" and with "glaring omissions." In discussing the supervisors' work with teacher candidates, words such as *challenging*, *inadequate*, and *aversion* are used. We wished that the authors would have described the supervisors' reflections and dilemmas first in a positive light and then critiqued them to show what was underlying their perspectives.

Given that the first three chapters in the book *Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory, Research, & Practice* (Gay, 2010) are used as the primary source for the education of supervisors; it is worth examining Gay's (2010) preliminary guiding assumptions. Five were noted. Three are sufficient for this discussion: (a) that "teachers need to understand different cultural intersections and incompatibilities, minimize the tensions, and bridge the gaps between different cultural systems" (p. 12); (b) that a deficit orientation impedes successful implementation of "conventional paradigms and proposals for improving the achievement of students of color" (p. 13); and (c) that being aware of cultural differences, while well intentioned, is not enough "to bring about the changes needed in educational programs and procedures to prevent academic inequities among diverse students. Goodwill must be accompanied by pedagogical knowledge and skills as well as the *courage to dismantle the status quo*" [italics ours] (p. 14).

Our impression is that the authors' work with the field supervisors was well situated within Gay's (2010) first and second convictions. They did seem, perhaps intentionally, to fall short of the third. Is this to be expected? While Gay clearly established the multicultural envisioned environment by providing numerous "cultural referents" in content and pedagogy, few stories were provided that would lead one to recognize the sorts of action that might be taken to change educational programs and elicit liberatory acts. Gay emphasized the necessity of transformative education that begins with knowledge and leads to action. She continued with the idea of students becoming change agents and acting out a culturally responsive teaching transformative agenda.

The authors provided ample urging to have field supervisors stimulate talk and awareness of racism and "White" culture, but the transformative stance was missing, and political tactics were glossed over. This is not to say that "reducing discomfort with race talks," "expanding one's understanding of culture," broadening

one's conception of culturally responsive teaching and purpose, and targeting attention to personal action are not important. These are important. However, when praxis is limited, "responsiveness" takes on an aura of cognition rather than comportment. But one can't be blamed for this if the first three chapters of Gay's book are used as a directive. In the first four chapters, Gay provided few stories that speak directly to liberatory strategies. It wasn't until chapter five that more "combative" strategies were developed for the reader.

It would have been helpful for the authors to critically examine their own perceptions and shortcomings as teacher educators and acknowledge that culturally relevant teaching is a journey and not a destination. Our suggestion would be for them to adopt a more collaborative team approach to the professional development sessions and perhaps to organize a study group where they would engage in a shared process of inquiry along with the field supervisors. It would also be important to recognize that different individuals are at different stages of the cultural competence continuum and to acknowledge that feelings of inadequacy, tension, and fear are important (and inevitable) elements of culturally relevant teaching.

### Examining Dilemmas

Our position comes from our personal experiences and struggles with our attempts to broaden our diversity efforts within our teacher education program. Any critique we offer comes from a realization we encountered when examining our own practices during a recent reaccreditation site visit by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE).

After articulating our diversity initiatives and practices and developing our evidence and justifications according to the NCATE diversity standards, we summarized our work in a poster session shared with the NCATE review team and community members. For our diversity poster, we enlarged a chart developed by Nieto (2004) and then pinned all of our different practices onto the most appropriate place on the chart. Nieto's "levels of multicultural education" portrayed the development of multicultural practices by increasingly challenging "a monolithic and ethnocentric view of society and education" (pp. 386–387). Nieto broke the characteristics of multicultural education into four segments beyond monoculture. These are: tolerance, acceptance, respect, and in a single final grouping, affirmation, solidarity, and critique. Each characteristic was further distinguished in the following levels: antiracist/antidiscriminatory; basic; pervasive; important for all students; education for social justice; process; and critical pedagogy.

In our self-analysis, interestingly, the practices that we knew were problematic and needing changing fell sporadically among the lower levels of the chart (i.e., tolerance, acceptance, respect). The practices that we felt satisfied accreditation concerns were mostly clustered within acceptance and respect. And our proposed practices (the changes that were most difficult to achieve) were sprinkled in the areas of solidarity and critique. What may be more insightful, however, is when we placed the NCATE, InTASC (Interstate Teacher Assessment and Support

Consortium), and edTPA (Teacher Performance Assessment) standards on the chart, we found that their expectations encourage school practices to fall only within the areas of acceptance and respect. The more extreme actions, those that push for "combative" and liberatory practices, are not promoted. This is an important dilemma for us to consider. We struggle to enact culturally responsive practices that can be genuinely transformative for our students and their learners. Contradictorily, at the same time, we are bound by standards and evaluation rubrics that are designed to objectify students and teachers, endorse mechanisms of control, and maintain the status quo. It is important for all of us in teacher education, in the university classroom, and in the field placements to wrestle with this dilemma, attempting to comply with these top-down directives while at the same time challenge them. Additionally, we need to make our own tensions explicit to our teacher candidates, as they will face similar dilemmas in their future teaching careers. We must model for them our own process of reflection, struggle, and action.

### Exploring Promising Possibilities

Zeichner (2010) proposed transforming field experiences in teacher education programs through the creation of "third spaces" that connect theory and practice. According to him, third spaces are hybrid spaces that "bring practitioner and academic knowledge together in less hierarchical ways to create new learning opportunities for prospective teachers" (p. 92). The creation of third spaces involves an "equal and more dialectical relationship" between school and university teacher educators while supporting teacher candidates (p. 92). As he explained, third spaces generate new synergies and expand opportunities for learning "through the interplay of knowledge from different sources" (p. 95).

Recently, through a grant awarded by our state's department of education, our university had the opportunity to work on a project that created the type of hybrid/third space advocated by Zeichner. The project (Dantas-Whitney, Hughes, & Thompson, 2015) involved a collaborative partnership between our university, a school district with a highly diverse student population, and two community organizations (a food bank and a child development center). Based on principles of culturally responsive pedagogy, we worked on three overarching objectives: (a) develop a professional development school (PDS) partnership program between the school district and the university implementing a co-teaching approach (St. Cloud University, 2009); (b) strengthen and expand a contextualized English language development (ELD) instructional model for English learners, which meaningfully integrates content and language learning; and (c) actively involve teacher candidates and clinical teachers, as well as university faculty, in self-reflection and community activities framed toward advocacy for equity and social justice. This yearlong project included professional development opportunities for all participants, mentoring and coaching within classrooms, service-learning projects involving teacher candidates and K–12 students, and organization of community events to increase interaction between schools and families. An advisory council composed of university faculty, field supervisors, clinical teachers and administrators, teacher candidates, as well as

community members, met regularly throughout the year to review project activities and steer the direction of future efforts.

Together with seven university faculty members, two of whom served as field supervisors, 79 teacher candidates and clinical teachers were involved in the project. The field supervisors were hosted by two schools, which enabled them to build strong relationships with the teachers and administrators within the buildings, participate in meetings and professional learning communities, as well as provide opportunities for team teaching, professional development, and other collaborations. The clinical teachers and teacher candidates were videotaped while delivering lessons, which gave them opportunities to reflect on their lessons, debrief in groups, and learn ways to make changes in their practice in order to create more relevant and engaging instruction for their diverse students. Importantly, we also explored institutional barriers for the academic success of diverse students in the district, including practices that perpetuate subtractive acculturation. In discussing these barriers, we considered ways to remove them (or to provide supports for students to overcome them). Increased openness was evidenced by more detailed and candid discussions at follow-up meetings and increased collaboration among clinical teachers and teacher candidates. By the end of the year, there was a sense of enthusiasm and a strong desire by all participants to continue this work even after the external funding was no longer available. However, a change in administration and subsequent shift of priorities within the district made it impossible to expand the project to its second year.

Nevertheless, we remain optimistic in knowing that the teacher candidates and clinical teachers who participated in the project will continue to implement culturally relevant practices within their own classrooms and in their spheres of influence within the community. The project has already produced important benefits for our campus program. One of our field supervisors is now co-teaching a course on campus with a clinical teacher who participated in the project. We are also using the materials and videos developed during the project to enrich our methods courses in our teacher education program. We are confident that we will continue to utilize the lessons learned from this project again in the future. In fact, we are already discussing the possibility of developing a similar partnership with another school district. A new partnership will undoubtedly entail new learning opportunities as we adapt and adjust our practices to a different context.

## Concluding Thoughts

Perhaps our partnership project, described above, exemplifies the situated and impermanent nature of our work as teacher educators striving to enact culturally relevant practices. These practices are by definition highly contextual and personal, so they must be constantly defined and redefined according to the contexts and circumstances in which we find ourselves. In creating different conceptions of culturally relevant pedagogy, one essential element that needs to be present is a “transformation in the epistemology of teacher education,” to allow for different aspects of expertise from schools and communities “to coexist on a more equal plane with academic knowledge” (Zeichner, 2010, p. 95).

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