



Culturally Relevant Pedagogy: A Primer

Since the early 1990s, researchers have developed multiple theories about best practices in the classroom that would raise student achievement in schools. These theories were then implemented into classrooms around the country, but the problem of addressing racial disparities in learning outcomes remained unaddressed. Though critical pedagogy, defined by the works of Paulo Freire (1970) and other critical scholars, had entered into the American educational realm, there remained a need to ameliorate the issues faced in classrooms that were filled with students of color, especially African American students. Gloria Ladson-Billings proposed that culturally relevant pedagogy would address the needs of those students whose cultures were not reflected in mainstream educational standards while also pushing students to be at their academic best.

What is Culturally Relevant Pedagogy?

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP) has been used interchangeably with terms like culturally relevant teaching, culturally competent teaching, urban pedagogy, social justice pedagogy, etc., but specifically CRP addresses the teacher's attitudes and dispositions. CRP is not simply implementing culturally appropriate texts and teaching strategies; it is a disposition that determines instruction, planning, and assessment.

Culturally relevant pedagogy is comprised of 3 elements (Ladson-Billings, 1995):

- Students must experience academic success.
- Students must develop and/or maintain cultural competence.
- Students must develop a sociopolitical consciousness through which they challenge the status quo of the social order.

All three elements must be present in a classroom in order for the teacher to be considered a practitioner of culturally relevant pedagogy.

Geneva Gay defines the practices of culturally relevant teaching in her foundational work *Culturally Relevant Teaching: Theory, Research, and Practice*. Culturally relevant teaching must attend to students' academic needs. Teachers can find ways to get students to choose academic excellence but they must make learning relevant vis a vis students' interests. According to Ladson-Billings, teachers must "use students' culture as a vehicle for learning." They recognize the value of knowledge insides a student's community and use that knowledge to empower students and to engender their highest learning. Culturally relevant teachers push students to be critical thinkers by teaching them how to analyze the

world around them and to make it a better place. In their classrooms, students are expected to engage the world and each other critically.

Components of Culturally Relevant Teachers (Adapted from Gay and Ladson-Billings)
<ul style="list-style-type: none">● CRTs are a part of the community in which they teach. They attend community events, frequent places where students and families may be present. They see themselves as a member of the community and have an active stake in improving that community.● CRTs fundamentally believe that all students can succeed, and they see their roles as being the facilitators of students' success by any means necessary.● CRTs see the relationship between them and their students as fluid and equitable. They encourage students to take charge of their own education, and they give ample opportunities for students to become the teacher in the classroom.● CRTs incorporate learning and resources from outside of the state curriculum framework and materials. They teach students to interpret these materials and to critique them.● CRTs exhibit passion about teaching and learning, and they are proud of their jobs as educators.

Making the Case for Culturally Relevant Education in Maryland

In Maryland, only about 41 percent of third to eighth grade students meet the statewide standard for English test scores, and only one-third meet the standard for Math. When these numbers are disaggregated along the lines of race, Black and Latinx students underperform compared to their white and Asian peers. Maryland is not unique in this; the result of this nation's inability to educate all of its diverse students has led to lower life expectancies and career opportunities for students of color. Culturally relevant education (CRE), a combination of Ladson-Billings' CRP and Gay's CRT, can serve as a building block to close the opportunity gap between students of color and white students; however, currently, there is a misconception about the availability of evidence-based research on the effects of CRE. Due to this misconception, it is often stated that culturally relevant education is impossible to achieve because of lack of information.

The truth is that there are many studies that showcase the effectiveness of CRE. Two researchers, Aronson and Laughter (2016) synthesized the results of over 40 studies of culturally relevant educators to demonstrate the effectiveness of their practices in improving student achievement. Most of the studies that demonstrate the effectiveness of culturally relevant pedagogical practices occur on a small scale. In order to "rate" the effectiveness of CRE, educators and policymakers must look past standardized test scores as the primary marker of educational achievement and look to other indicators of student success, such as "motivation, empowerment, critical discourse, and agency." Through synthesizing the literature, they discovered CRE led to increased student motivation and achievement across all subject levels. CRE even improves educational outcomes for English Language Learning (ELL) students.

Gutstein (2003), a white middle school math teacher in an predominantly Latinx urban district, observed the positive benefits of CRE in his 7th and 8th grade classrooms. By creating lessons that centered different facets of social injustice, he was able to empower his students to see math as a viable tool to change the world in which they lived. They not only critiqued inequity in mathematics, but they

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also used math to see how inequity functioned in the “real world.” In one lesson, Gutstein provided students with traffic-stop data, and with mathematical analysis, they were able to surmise racial profiling. By connecting their math lessons with social justice issues, he was able to raise their sociopolitical consciousness while raising their standardized test scores.

For ELL students, CRE can help to foster a positive, affirming classroom environment by providing them with teachers who recognize their cultural and linguistic differences *and* make these differences valued knowledge in the classroom (Wortham and Contreras 2002; Aronson and Laughter 2016). Wortham and Contreras conducted a 2-year ethnographic study that included a bilingual teacher who allowed students to speak both Spanish and English in the classroom. This rural New England classroom was structured similarly to students’ homes: multiple activities in which students could participate, strong emotional support, and flexible assignments. While her students faced other challenges that hindered their success in school, she still saw increased attendance and student performance by implementing these techniques.

A common misconception is that CRE only benefits students of color; however, white students also reap benefits from a classroom environment led by a culturally relevant teacher. Christianakis (2011) and Morrell and Duncan-Andrade (2002) observed that the use of hip-hop pedagogy in English classrooms allowed for Black, Asian, and white students to relate more readily to the content, producing higher “intellectual creativity” and increased student motivation. Difference in tests scores between white students and students of color in these classrooms were negligible. These teachers also achieved scores that were among the highest in the schools, illustrating that culturally relevant pedagogical techniques produced high test scores.

The changes in Maryland’s linguistic, racial, and socioeconomic landscapes necessitate a change in the pedagogical practices of teachers in diverse classrooms. CRE provides a framework for teachers to improve learning outcomes for students who are traditionally underserved in mainstream education.

Resources

These books are great places to start if you are looking to learn more about CRP/CRT. Referring to the bibliographies of each will lead you to many more studies on the topic.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy/Teaching Overview

Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995) *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teaching for African-American Students*

This is the landmark study for culturally relevant pedagogy. Ladson-Billings uses mixed methods to provide a research-based argument for culturally relevant classrooms.

Geneva Gay (2018) *Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory, Research, and Practice*

Another landmark study that gives practical application tips for educators who wish to become culturally relevant teachers.

Zaretta Hammond (2015) *Culturally Responsive Teaching & the Brain: Promoting Academic Engagement and Rigor Among Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students*

Hammond provides neurological evidence to undergird theoretical and empirical studies of culturally relevant education practice to conclude that students learn better and faster with culturally responsive teachers.

Theories of Practice

Christopher Emdin (2017) *For White Folks who Teach in the Hood...and the Rest of Y'all too: Reality Pedagogy and Urban Education*

Emdin merges his own experiences as a young Black boy in urban schools with research-based techniques (coined as Reality Pedagogy) to provide a practical guide to teachers in urban contexts.

Sonia Nieto and Patty Bode (2008, 2012, 2018) *Affirming Diversity: The Sociopolitical Context of Multicultural Education*

Nieto is known as one of the pioneers of multicultural education. Though distinct from culturally relevant education, this textbook provide practical advice for educators looking for implementable ways to make their classroom environment more affirming for diverse students.

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