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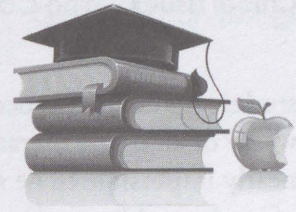
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# Who Can Teach Our Children? Re-Stat-ing the Case for Culturally Relevant Teaching



by Gloria Ladson-Billings

Over my more than 40 years as a teacher, I have far too often heard teachers respond, when struggling to be successful with students they perceive to be different from themselves, "I wasn't prepared to teach these kinds of children!" That statement always leaves me bewildered. My first response is to retort, "Well what kind of children were you prepared to teach?" And I begin to think about other professionals and whether the response of those teachers would make sense in their fields. Can you imagine a physician, dentist, or lawyer saying, "I wasn't prepared to treat/represent these kinds of patients/clients? Or, to be more personal, can you imagine parents who give birth to a child with special needs deciding not to work hard to meet his/her needs and responding with resignation, "I wasn't prepared to raise this kind of child?" No practitioner in the helping professions can ever be prepared to meet all of the eventualities their work will present. What makes them professionals is their ability and willingness to problem-solve and work toward solutions.

The other concern that the statement, "I wasn't prepared to teach these kinds of students," evokes from me is one about the nature and adequacy of our teacher education programs. What are teacher educators doing to ensure that the people we recommend for certification are prepared to teach each and every student who walks through the school house door? In earlier writing (Ladson-Billings, 2005), I suggested that teacher educators have culpability for the quality of teachers we produce. I also argued that few teacher educators (via their teacher preparation programs) make use of the leverage points that already exist in the



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field—admissions, student teaching, and recommendation for certification.

Briefly, as teacher educators we have say-so over who enters the profession. We do not have to admit everyone who applies. We can set criteria that extend beyond grades and test scores. Second, just because someone has been admitted to our programs and is academically successful in our courses does not mean they are prepared to be in a classroom with students. The decision to place someone in a classroom with the responsibility of teaching children or youth is a major one. However, most teacher education programs take this step as a matter of course and automatically assign students to classrooms. Third, even if prospective teachers do complete course work and student teaching, teacher educators are not obligated to recommend them for certification. Our recommendation to the state licensing agency is affirming that someone is prepared to teach ALL the students of the state. We do not have to make that affirmation and should not make it without compelling evidence.

More than 25 years ago, I began studying teachers who were successful with African American



students. I made this decision because I had grown weary of all of the literature suggesting that it was nearly impossible to be successful with this group of students. I knew that someone had to be able to reach and teach this group of students because I was one of those students. I grew up in a household with parents who did not have the advantage of education. I grew up in what people might describe as an "inner city, urban, ghetto" community. My neighbors were poor to moderate income folks who worked hard but struggled to get ahead. My parents could not help or assist with schooling. The only thing they knew to do was to trust our education to the people their tax dollars paid to do the job.

And do the job they did! I attended an elementary school of more than 700 students and of that large number there was but one White (extremely poor) family. But my teachers never let the circumstance of our economic poverty stand in the way of educating us to high standards and maximum proficiency. Those teachers served as a catalyst for my research, and during three years of study in Northern California, I found another 8 teachers—both African American and White—who demonstrated this same dogged determinism to help all students reach success. Although they exhibited different teaching "styles"—some were more traditional while others more progressive—they all maintained a powerful set of beliefs about the ability and capability of their students and themselves as teachers, about the nature and import of social relationships, and about the nature of knowledge. Ultimately, I would term their work, "culturally relevant pedagogy" (2009/1994) and identify 3 crucial aspects of their practice: Student Learning, Cultural Competence, and Critical Consciousness.

**Student Learning:** The bottom line is that no matter what else teachers are charged with, their main responsibility is to ensure student learning. Culturally relevant teachers are capable of assessing what students know soon after they arrive in their classrooms and can provide evidence of what they

know and are able to do at any point in the school year. A culturally relevant teacher is not consumed with telling a parent or guardian how "nice" (or "bad") their student is. Rather, their conferences with parents are filled with documentation of student progress.

**Cultural Competence:** Culturally relevant teachers understand that we exist in a complex, diverse, globally connected world, and that the world their students will enter as adults will be even more so. Thus, they comprehend the importance of helping students understand and appreciate their home culture while acquiring skills in additional cultures. But, it is impossible for teachers to cultivate this competency in students if they themselves lack it. Far too many of our teachers have a mono-cultural experience and show little or no interest in learning about other experiences and cultures.

**Critical Consciousness:** This third component—critical consciousness or socio-political consciousness—speaks to the social and political reality of personal, community, national, and international civic life. To be able to function well in complex democracies, our teachers must help students make sense of these complexities. For students to come to school after witnessing multiple negative interactions of Black people with law enforcement or hearing political leaders rail against entire groups of people because of their home language or immigrant status can be confusing. Helping students make sense of these realities and rhetoric is what we must do to increase their engagement and help them see the relevance of schooling to everyday life.

Student learning, cultural competence, and critical consciousness are the basic elements of culturally relevant pedagogy. It is not about holding hands and singing "Kumba-Ya!" Culturally relevant teachers have a deep investment in their students, the community, and the social context in which they do their work; and they are prepared to teach all of our children.



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