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Toward a Theory of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

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In the midst of discussions about improving education, teacher education, equity, and diversity, little has been done to make pedagogy a central area of investigation. This article attempts to challenge notions about the intersection of culture and teaching that rely solely on microanalytic or macroanalytic perspectives. Rather, the article attempts to build on the work done in both of these areas and proposes a culturally relevant theory of education. By raising questions about the location of the researcher in pedagogical research, the article attempts to explicate the theoretical framework of the author in the nexus of collaborative and reflexive research. The pedagogical practices of eight exemplary teachers of African-American students serve as the investigative "site." Their practices and reflections on those practices provide a way to define and recognize culturally relevant pedagogy.

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Teacher education programs throughout the nation have coupled their efforts at reform with revised programs committed to social justice and equity. Thus, their focus has become the preparation of prospective teachers in ways that support equitable and just educational experiences for all students. Examples of such efforts include work in Alaska (Kleinfeld, 1992; Noordhoff, 1990; Noordhoff & Kleinfeld, 1991), California (King & Ladson-Billings, 1990), Illinois (Beyer, 1991), and Wisconsin (Murrell, 1990, 1991).

Currently, there are debates in the educational research literature concerning both locating efforts at social reform in schools (Popkewitz, 1991) and the possibilities of "re-educating" typical teacher candidates for the variety of student populations in U. S. public schools (Grant, 1989; Haberman, 1991a, 1991b). Rather than looking at programmatic reform, this article considers educational theorizing about teaching itself and proposes a theory of culturally focused pedagogy that might be considered in the reformation of teacher education.

Shulman's often cited article, "Knowledge and Teaching: Foundations of the New Reform" (1987), considers philosophical and psychological perspectives, underscored by case knowledge of novice and experienced practitioners. Although Shulman's work mentions the importance of both the knowledge of learners and their characteristics and knowledge of educational contexts, it generally minimizes the culturally based analyses of teaching that have preceded it. In this article, I attempt to build on the educational anthropological literature and suggest a new theoretical perspective to address the specific concerns of educating teachers for success with African-American students.

Teaching and Culture

For more than a decade, anthropologists have examined ways that teaching can better match the home and community cultures of students of color who have previously not had academic success in schools. Au and Jordan (1981, p. 139) termed "culturally appropriate" the pedagogy of teachers in a Hawaiian school who incorporated aspects of students' cultural backgrounds into their reading instruction. By permitting students to use *talk-story,* a language interaction style common among Native Hawaiian children, teachers were able to help students achieve at higher than predicted levels on standardized reading tests.

Mohatt and Erickson (1981) conducted similar work with Native American students. As they observed teacher–student interactions and participation structures, they found teachers who used language interaction patterns that approximated the students' home cultural patterns were more successful in improving student academic performance. Improved student achievement also was evident among teachers who used what they termed, "mixed forms" (p. 117)—a combination of Native American and Anglo language interaction patterns. They termed this instruction, "culturally congruent" (p. 110).

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Cazden and Leggett (1981) and Erickson and Mohatt (1982) used the term "culturally responsive" (p. 167) to describe similar language interactions of teachers with linguistically diverse and Native American students, respectively. Later, Jordan (1985, p. 110) and Vogt, Jordan, and Tharp (1987, p. 281) began using the term "culturally compatible" to explain the success of classroom teachers with Hawaiian children.

By observing the students in their home/community environment, teachers were able to include aspects of the students' cultural environment in the organization and instruction of the classroom. More specifically, Jordan (1985) discusses cultural compatibility in this way:

> Educational practices must match with the children's culture in ways which ensure the generation of academically important behaviors. It does not mean that all school practices need be completely congruent with natal cultural practices, in the sense of exactly or even closely matching or agreeing with them. The point of cultural compatibility is that the natal culture is used as a guide in the selection of educational program elements so that academically desired behaviors are produced and undesired behaviors are avoided. (p.110)

These studies have several common features. Each locates the source of student failure and subsequent achievement within the nexus of speech and language interaction patterns of the teacher and the students. Each suggests that student "success" is represented in achievement within the current social structures extant in schools. Thus, the goal of education becomes how to "fit" students constructed as "other" by virtue of their race/ethnicity, language, or social class into a hierarchical structure that is defined as a *meritocracy*. However, it is unclear how these conceptions do more than reproduce the current inequities. Singer (1988) suggests that "cultural congruence in an inherently moderate pedagogical strategy that accepts that the goal of educating minority students is to train individuals in those skills needed to succeed in mainstream society" (p. 1).

Three of the terms employed by studies on cultural mismatch between school and home—culturally appropriate, culturally congruent, and culturally compatible—seem to connote accommodation of student culture to mainstream culture. Only the term *culturally responsive* appears to refer to a more dynamic or synergistic relationship between home/community culture and school culture. Erickson and Mohatt (1982) suggest their notion of culturally responsive teaching can be seen as a beginning step for bridging the gap between home and school:

> It may well be that, by discovering the small differences in social relations which make a big difference in the interactional ways children engage the content of the school curriculum, anthropologists can make practical contributions to the improvement of minority children's school achievement and to the improvement of the everyday school life for such children and their teachers. Making small

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> changes in everyday participation structures may be one of the means by which more culturally responsive pedagogy can be developed. (p. 170)

For the most part, studies of cultural appropriateness, congruence, or compatibility have been conducted within small-scale communities—for example, Native Hawaiian, Native Americans. However, an earlier generation of work considered the mismatch between the language patterns of African Americans and the school in larger, urban settings (Gay & Abrahamson, 1972; Labov, 1969; Piestrup, 1973).

Villegas (1988) challenged the microsocial explanations advanced by sociolinguists by suggesting that the source of cultural mismatch is located in larger social structures and that schools as institutions serve to reproduce social inequalities. She argued that

> As long as school performs this sorting function in society, it must necessarily produce winners and losers. . . . Therefore, culturally sensitive remedies to educational problems of oppressed minority students that ignore the political aspect of schooling are doomed to failure. (pp. 262–263)

Although I would agree with Villegas's attention to the larger social structure, other scholars in the cultural ecological paradigm (Ogbu, 1981, 1983) are ahistorical and limited, particularly in their ability to explain African-American student success (Perry, 1993).[1] The long history of African-American educational struggle and achievement is well documented (Anderson, 1988; Billingsley, 1992; Bond, 1969; Bullock, 1967; Clark, 1983; Harding, 1981; Harris, 1992; Johnson, 1936; Rury, 1983; Woodson, 1919; Weinberg, 1977). This historical record contradicts the glib pronouncements that, "Black people don't value education."

Second, more recent analyses of successful schooling for African-American students (King, 1991a; Ladson-Billings, 1992a, 1994; Siddle-Walker, 1993) challenge the explanatory power of the cultural ecologists' caste-like category and raise questions about what schools can and should be doing to promote academic success for African-American students.[2]

Despite their limitations, the microanalytic work of sociolinguists and the macrostructural analysis of cultural ecologists both are important in helping scholars think about their intersections and consider possible classroom/instructional adjustments. For scholars interested in the success of students of color in complex, urban environments, this work provides some important theoretical and conceptual groundwork.

Irvine (1990) developed the concept of *cultural synchronization* to describe the necessary interpersonal context that must exist between the teacher and African-American students to maximize learning. Rather than focus solely on speech and language interactions, Irvine's work describes the acceptance of students' communication patterns, along with a constellation of

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African-American cultural mores such as mutuality, reciprocity, spirituality, deference, and responsibility (King & Mitchell, 1990).

Irvine's work on African-American students and school failure considers both micro- and macro-analyses, including: teacher–student interpersonal contexts, teacher and student expectations, institutional contexts, and the societal context. This work is important for its break with the cultural deficit or cultural disadvantage explanations which led to compensatory educational interventions.[3] A next step for positing effective pedagogical practice is a theoretical model that not only addresses student achievement but also helps students to accept and affirm their cultural identity while developing critical perspectives that challenge inequities that schools (and other institutions) perpetuate. I term this pedagogy, *culturally relevant pedagogy*.

Several questions, some of which are beyond the scope of this discussion, drive this attempt to formulate a theoretical model of culturally relevant pedagogy. What constitutes student success? How can academic success and cultural success complement each other in settings where student alienation and hostility characterize the school experience? How can pedagogy promote the kind of student success that engages larger social structural issues in a critical way? How do researchers recognize that pedagogy in action? And, what are the implications for teacher preparation generated by this pedagogy?

The Illusion of Atheoretical Inquiry

Educational research is greeted with suspicion both within and outside of the academy. Among practitioners, it is regarded as *too theoretical* (Kaestle, 1993). For many academicians, it is regarded as *atheoretical* (Katzer, Cook, & Crouch, 1978). It is the latter notion that I address in this section of the article.

Clearly, much of educational research fails to make explicit its theoretical underpinnings (Argyris, 1980; Amundson, Serlin, & Lehrer, 1992). However, I want to suggest that, even without explicating a theoretical framework, researchers do have explanations for why things "work the way they do." These theories may be partial, poorly articulated, conflated, or contradictory, but they exist. What is regarded as traditional educational theory—theories of reproduction (as described by Apple & Weis, 1983; Bowles, 1977; Weiler, 1988) or neoconservative traditional theory (as described in Young, 1990)—may actually be a *default* theory that researchers feel no need to make explicit. Thus, the theory's objectivity is unquestioned, and studies undergirded by these theories are regarded as truth or objective reality.

Citing the *ranking,* or privileging, of theoretical knowledge, Code (1991) observes:

> Even when empiricist *theories* of knowledge prevail, knowledgeable *practice* constructs positions of power and privilege that are by no means as impartially ordered as strict empiricism would require. Knowledge gained from practical (untheorized) experience is commonly regarded as inferior to theoretically derived or theory-confirming knowledge, and theory is elevated above practice. (p.243)

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In education, work that recognizes the import of practical experience owes an intellectual debt to scholars such as Smith (1978, Atkin (1973), Glaser and Strauss (1967), and Lutz and Ramsey (1974) who explored notions of grounded theory as an important tool for educational research. Additionally, work by scholars in teacher education such as Stenhouse (1983), Elliott (1991), Carr and Kemmis (1986), Zeichner (1990), and Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1992) illuminates the action research tradition where teachers look reflexively at their practice to solve pedagogical problems and assist colleagues and researchers interested in teaching practice. Even some scholars in the logical positivist tradition acknowledged the value of a more experientially grounded research approach in education (Cronbach, 1975). More fundamental than arguing the merits of quantitative versus qualitative methodology (Gage, 1989) have been calls for broader understanding about the limits of any research methodology (Rist, 1990). In using selected citations from Kuhn, Patton, Becker, and Gouldner, Rist (1990) helps researchers understand the significance of research paradigms in education. For example:

> Since no paradigm ever solves all of the problems it defines and since no two paradigms leave all the same problems unsolved, paradigm debates always involve the question: Which problems is it more significant to have solved? (Kuhn, 1970, p. 46)
>
> A paradigm is a world view, a general perspective, a way of breaking down the complexity of the real world. As such, paradigms are deeply embedded in the socialization of adherents and practitioners, telling them what is important, what is reasonable. (Patton, 1975, p. 9)
>
> The issue is not research strategies, per se. Rather, the adherence to one paradigm as opposed to another predisposes one to view the world and the events within it in profoundly differing ways. (Rist, 1990, p. 83)
>
> The power and pull of a paradigm is more than simply a methodological orientation. It is a means by which to grasp reality and give it meaning and predictability. (Rist, 1990, p. 83)

It is with this orientation toward the inherent subjectivity of educational research that I have approached this work. In this next section, I discuss some of the specific perspectives that have informed my work.

The Participant-Observer Role for Researchers Who Are "Other"

Increasingly, researchers have a story to tell about themselves as well as their work (Carter, 1993; Peterson & Neumann, in press). I, too, share a concern for situating myself as a researcher—who I am, what I believe, what experiences I have had all impact what, how, and why I research. What may make these research revelations more problematic for me is my own membership in a marginalized racial/cultural group.

One possible problem I face is the presumption of a "native" perspective (Banks, 1992; Narayan, 1993; Padilla, 1994; Rosaldo, 1989) as I study effective

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practice for African-American students. To this end, the questions raised by Narayan seem relevant:

> "Native" anthropologists, then, are perceived as insiders regardless of their complex backgrounds. The differences between kinds of "native" anthropologists are also obviously passed over. Can a person from an impoverished American minority background who, despite all prejudices, manages to get an education and study her own community be equated with a member of a Third World elite group who, backed by excellent schooling and parental funds, studies anthropology abroad yet returns home for fieldwork among the less privileged? Is it not insensitive to suppress the issue of location, acknowledging that a scholar who chooses an institutional base in the Third World might have a different engagement with Western-based theories, books, political stances, and technologies of written production? Is a middle-class white professional researching aspects of her own society also a "native" anthropologist? (p. 677)

This location of myself as native can work against me (Banks, 1992; Padilla, 1994). My work may be perceived as biased or, at the least, skewed, because of my vested interests in the African-American community. Thus, I have attempted to search for theoretical grounding that acknowledges my standpoint and simultaneously forces me to problematize it. The work of Patricia Hill Collins (1991) on Black feminist thought has been most helpful.

Briefly, Collins's work is based on four propositions: (1) concrete experiences as a criterion of meaning, (2) the use of dialogue in assessing knowledge claims, (3) the ethic of caring, and (4) the ethic of personal accountability. Below, I briefly describe the context and methodology of my study and then attempt to link each of these propositions to a 3-year study I conducted with successful teachers of African-American students.

Issues of Context and Methodology

While it is not possible to fully explicate the context and method of this study in this article, it is necessary to provide readers with some sense of both for better continuity. I have provided more elaborate explanations of these aspects of the work in other writings (Ladson-Billings, 1990; 1992a, 1992b, 1994). Included here is a truncated explanation of the research context and method.

In 1988, I began working as a lone investigator with a group of eight teachers in a small (less than 3,000 students) predominantly African-American, low-income elementary school district in Northern California. The teachers were identified through a process of *community nomination* (Foster, 1991), with African-American parents (in this case, all mothers) who attended local churches suggesting who they thought were outstanding teachers. The parents' criteria for teaching excellence included being accorded respect by the teacher, student enthusiasm toward school and academic tasks, and student attitudes toward themselves and others. The parents' selections were

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cross-checked by an independent list of excellent teachers generated by principals and some teaching colleagues. Principals' criteria for teaching excellence included excellent classroom management skills, student achievement (as measured by standardized test scores), and personal observations of teaching practice. Nine teachers' names appeared on both the parents' and principals' lists and were selected to be in the study. One teacher declined to participate because of the time commitment. The teachers were all females: five were African American and three were White.

The study was composed of four phases. During the first phase, each teacher participated in an ethnographic interview (Spradley, 1979) to discuss her background, philosophy of teaching, and ideas about curriculum, classroom management, and parent and community involvement. In the second phase of the study, teachers agreed to be observed by me. This agreement meant that the teachers gave me carte blanche to visit their classrooms. These visits were not scheduled beforehand. I visited the classrooms regularly for almost 2 years, an average of 3 days a week. During each visit, I took field notes, audiotaped the class, and talked with the teacher after the visit, either on-site or by telephone. The third phase of the study, which overlapped the second phase, involved videotaping the teachers. I made decisions about what to videotape as a result of my having become familiar with the teachers' styles and classroom routines.

The fourth and final phase of the study required that the teachers work together as a research collective or collaborative to view segments of one another's videotapes. In a series of ten 2–3-hour meetings, the teachers participated in analysis and interpretation of their own and one another's practice. It was during this phase of the study that formulations about culturally relevant pedagogy that had emerged in the initial interviews were confirmed by teaching practice.

My own interest in these issues of teaching excellence for African-American students came as a result of my desire to challenge deficit paradigms (Bloom, Davis, & Hess, 1965) that prevailed in the literature on African-American learners. Partly as a result of my own experiences as a learner, a teacher, and a parent, I was convinced that, despite the literature, there were teachers who were capable of excellent teaching for African-American students. Thus, my work required a paradigmatic shift toward looking in the classrooms of excellent teachers, *through* the reality of those teachers. In this next section, I discuss how my understanding of my own theoretical grounding connected with the study.

Concrete Experiences as a Criterion of Meaning

According to Collins, "individuals who have lived through the experiences about which they claim to be experts are more believable and credible than those who have merely read and thought about such experience" (p. 209).

My work with successful teachers of African-American students began with a search for "expert" assessment of good teachers. The experts I chose were parents who had children attending the schools where I planned to

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conduct the research. The parents were willing to talk openly about who they thought were excellent teachers for their children, citing examples of teachers' respect for them as parents, their children's enthusiasm and changed attitudes toward learning, and improved academics in conjunction with support for the students' home culture. In most cases, the basis for their assessments were comparative, both from the standpoint of having had experiences with many teachers (for each individual child) and having had several school-age children. Thus, they could talk about how an individual child fared in different classrooms and how their children collectively performed at specific grade levels with specific teachers.

The second area where concrete experiences as a criterion of meaning was evident was with the teachers themselves. The eight teachers who participated in this study had from 12 to 40 years of teaching experience, most of it with African-American students. Their reflections on what was important in teaching African-American students were undergirded by their daily teaching experiences.

The Use of Dialogue in Assessing Knowledge Claims

This second criterion suggests that knowledge emerges in dialectical relationships. Rather than the voice of one authority, meaning is made as a product of dialogue between and among individuals. In the case of my study, dialogue was critical in assessing knowledge claims. Early in the study, each teacher participated in an ethnographic interview (Spradley, 1979). Although I had specific areas I wanted to broach with each teacher, the teachers' own life histories and interests determined how much time was spent on the various areas. In some cases, the interviews reflect a teacher's belief in the salience of his or her family background and education. In other instances, teachers talked more about their pedagogical, philosophical, and political perspectives. Even after I began collecting data via classroom observations, it was the teachers' explanations and clarifications that helped to construct the meaning of what transpired in the classrooms.

Additionally, after I collected data from classroom observations and classroom videotaping, the teachers convened as a research collaborative to examine both their own and one anothers' pedagogy.[4] In these meetings, meaning was constructed through reciprocal dialogue. Instead of merely accepting Berliner's (1988) notions that "experts" operate on a level of automaticity and intuition that does not allow for accurate individual critique and interpretation—that is, they cannot explain how they do what they do—together the teachers were able to make sense of their own and their colleagues' practices. The ongoing dialogue allowed them the opportunity to re-examine and rethink their practices.

The Ethic of Caring

Much has been discussed in feminist literature about women and *caring* (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 1984, 1991). Other feminists have been critical of

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any essentialized notion of women (Weiler, 1988) and suggest that no empirical evidence exists to support the notion that women care in ways different from men or that any such caring informs their scholarship and work. I argue that Collins's use of caring refers not merely to affective connections between and among people but to the articulation of a greater sense of commitment to what scholarship and/or pedagogy can mean in the lives of people.

For example, in this study, the teachers were not all demonstrative and affectionate toward the students. Instead, their common thread of caring was their concern for the implications their work had on their students' lives, the welfare of the community, and unjust social arrangements. Thus, rather than the idiosyncratic caring for individual students (for whom they did seem to care), the teachers spoke of the import of their work for preparing the students for confronting inequitable and undemocratic social structures.

The Ethic of Personal Accountability

In this final dimension, Collins addresses the notion that *who* makes knowledge claims is as important as *what* those knowledge claims are. Thus, the idea that individuals can "objectively" argue a position whether they themselves agree with the position, as in public debating, is foreign. Individuals' commitments to ideological and/or value positions are important in understanding knowledge claims.

In this study, the teachers demonstrated this ethic of personal accountability in the kind of pedagogical stands they took. Several of the teachers spoke of defying administrative mandates in order to do what they believed was right for students. Others gave examples of proactive actions they took to engage in pedagogical practices more consistent with their beliefs and values. For example, one teacher was convinced that the school district's mandated reading program was inconsistent with what she was learning about literacy teaching/learning from a critical perspective. She decided to write a proposal to the school board asking for experimental status for a literacy approach she wanted to use in her classroom. Her proposal was buttressed by current research in literacy and would not cost the district any more than the proposed program. Ultimately, she was granted permission to conduct her experiment, and its success allowed other teachers to attempt it in subsequent years.

Although Collins's work provided me with a way to think about my work as a researcher, it did not provide me with a way to theorize about the teachers' practices. Ultimately, it was my responsibility to generate theory as I practiced theory. As previously mentioned, this work builds on earlier anthropological and sociolinguistic attempts at a cultural "fit" between students' home culture and school culture. However, by situating it in a more critical paradigm, a theory of culturally relevant pedagogy would necessarily propose to do three things—produce students who can achieve academically, produce students who demonstrate cultural competence, and develop students who can both understand and critique the existing social order. The next section discusses each of these elements of culturally relevant pedagogy.

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Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and Student Achievement

Much has been written about the school failure of African-American students (see, e.g., African American Male Task Force, 1990; Clark, 1983; Comer, 1984; Irvine, 1990; Ogbu, 1981; Slaughter & Kuehne, 1988). However, explanations for this failure have varied widely. One often-cited explanation situates African-American students' failure in their "caste-like minority" (p.169) or "involuntary immigrant" status (Ogbu, 1983, p. 171). Other explanations posit *cultural difference* (Erickson, 1987, 1993; Piestrup, 1973) as the reason for this failure and, as previously mentioned, locate student failure in the cultural mismatch between students and the school.

Regardless of these failure explanations, little research has been done to examine academic success among African-American students. The *effective schools* literature (Brookover, 1985; Brookover, Beady, Flood, Schweitzer, & Wisenbaker, 1979; Edmonds, 1979) argued that a group of schoolwide correlates were a reliable predictor of student success.[5] The basis for adjudging a school "effective" in this literature was how far above predicted levels students performed on standardized achievement tests. Whether or not scholars can agree on the significance of standardized tests, their meaning in the real world serves to rank and characterize both schools and individuals. Thus, teachers in urban schools are compelled to demonstrate that their students can achieve literacy and numeracy (Delpit, 1992). No matter how good a fit develops between home and school culture, students must achieve. No theory of pedagogy can escape this reality.

Students in the eight classrooms I observed did achieve. Despite the low ranking of the school district, the teachers were able to help students perform at higher levels than their district counterparts. In general, compared to students in middle-class communities, the students still lagged behind. But, more students in these classrooms were at or above grade level on standardized achievement tests.[6] Fortunately, academic achievement in these classrooms was not limited to standardized assessments. Classroom observations revealed a variety of demonstrated student achievements too numerous to list here. Briefly, students demonstrated an ability to read, write, speak, compute, pose and solve problems at sophisticated levels—that is, pose their own questions about the nature of teacher- or text-posed problems and engage in peer review of problem solutions. Each of the teachers felt that helping the students become academically successful was one of their primary responsibilities.

Culturally Relevant Teaching and Cultural Competence

Among the scholarship that has examined academically successful African-American students, a disturbing finding has emerged—the students' academic success came at the expense of their cultural and psychosocial well-being (Fine, 1986; Fordham, 1988). Fordham and Ogbu (1986) identified a phenomenon entitled, "acting White" (p. 176) where African-American students who were academically successful were ostracized by their peers. Bacon (1981)

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found that, among African-American high school students identified as gifted in their elementary grades, only about half were continuing to do well at the high school level. A closer examination of the successful students' progress indicated that they were social isolates, with neither African-American nor White friends. The students believed that it was necessary for them to stand apart from other African-American students so that teachers would not attribute to them the negative characteristics they may have attributed to African-American students in general.

The dilemma for African-American students becomes one of negotiating the academic demands of school while demonstrating cultural competence.[7] Thus, culturally relevant pedagogy must provide a way for students to maintain their cultural integrity while succeeding academically. One of the teachers in the study used the lyrics of rap songs as a way to teach elements of poetry.[8] From the rap lyrics, she went on to more conventional poetry. Students who were more skilled at creating and improvising raps were encouraged and reinforced. Another teacher worked to channel the peer group leadership of her students into classroom and schoolwide leadership. One of her African-American male students who had experienced multiple suspensions and other school problems before coming to her classroom demonstrated some obvious leadership abilities. He could be described as culturally competent in his language and interaction styles and demonstrated pride in himself and his cultural heritage. Rather than attempt to minimize his influence, the teacher encouraged him to run for sixth-grade president and mobilized the entire class to organize and help run his campaign. To the young man's surprise, he was elected. His position as president provided the teacher with many opportunities to respond to potential behavior problems. This same teacher made a point of encouraging the African-American males in her classroom to assume the role of academic leaders. Their academic leadership allowed their cultural values and styles to be appreciated and affirmed. Because these African-American male students were permitted, indeed encouraged, to be themselves in dress, language style, and interaction styles while achieving in school, the other students, who regarded them highly (because of their popularity), were able to see academic engagement as "cool."

Many of the self-described African-centered public schools have focused on this notion of cultural competence.[9] To date, little data has been reported on the academic success of students in these programs. However, the work of African-American scholars such as Ratteray (1994), Lee (1994), Hilliard (1992), Murrell (1993), Asante (1991), and others indicates that African-centered education does develop students who maintain cultural competence and demonstrate academic achievement.

Culturally Relevant Teaching and Cultural Critique

Not only must teachers encourage academic success and cultural competence, they must help students to recognize, understand, and critique current social inequities. This notion presumes that teachers themselves recognize

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social inequities and their causes. However, teacher educators (Grant, 1989; Haberman, 1991b; King, 1991b; King & Ladson-Billings, 1990; Zeichner, 1992) have demonstrated that many prospective teachers not only lack these understandings but reject information regarding social inequity. This suggests that more work on recruiting particular kinds of students into teaching must be done. Also, we are fortunate to have models for this kind of cultural critique emanating from the work of civil rights workers here in the U. S. (Aaronsohn, 1992; Morris, 1984; Clark, 1964; Clark, with Brown, 1990) and the international work of Freire (1973, 1974) that has been incorporated into the critical and feminist work currently being done by numerous scholars (see, e.g., Ellsworth, 1989; Giroux, 1983; Hooks, 1989; Lather, 1986; McLaren, 1989). Teachers who meet the cultural critique criteria must be engaged in a critical pedagogy which is:

> a deliberate attempt to influence how and what knowledge and identities are produced within and among particular sets of social relations. It can be understood as a practice through which people are incited to acquire a particular "moral character." As both a political and practical activity, it attempts to influence the occurrence and qualities of experiences. (Giroux & Simon, 1989, p. 239)

Thus, the teachers in this study were not reluctant to identify political underpinnings of the students' community and social world. One teacher worked with her students to identify poorly utilized space in the community, examine heretofore inaccessible archival records about the early history of the community, plan alternative uses for a vacant shopping mall, and write urban plans which they presented before the city council.

In a description of similar political activity, a class of African-American, middle-school students in Dallas identified the problem of their school's being surrounded by liquor stores (Robinson, 1993). Zoning regulations in the city made some areas dry while the students' school was in a wet area. The students identified the fact that schools serving White, upper middle-class students were located in dry areas, while schools in poor communities were in wet areas. The students, assisted by their teacher, planned a strategy for exposing this inequity. By using mathematics, literacy, social, and political skills, the students were able to prove their points with reports, editorials, charts, maps, and graphs. In both of these examples, teachers allowed students to use their community circumstances as official knowledge (Apple, 1993). Their pedagogy and the students' learning became a form of cultural critique.

Theoretical Underpinnings of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

As I looked (and listened) to exemplary teachers of African-American students, I began to develop a grounded theory of culturally relevant pedagogy. The teachers in the study met the aforementioned criteria of helping their students to be academically successful, culturally competent, and sociopoliti-

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cally critical. However, the ways in which they met these criteria seemed to differ markedly on the surface. Some teachers seemed more structured or rigid in their pedagogy. Others seemed to adopt more progressive teaching strategies. What theoretical perspective(s) held them together and allowed them to meet the criteria of culturally relevant teaching?

One of the places I began to look for these commonalties was in teachers' beliefs and ideologies. Lipman (1993) has suggested that, despite massive attempts at school reform and restructuring, teacher ideologies and beliefs often remain unchanged, particularly toward African-American children and their intellectual potential. Thus, in the analysis of the teacher interviews, classroom observations, and group analysis of videotaped segments of their teaching, I was able to deduce some broad propositions (or characteristics) that serve as theoretical underpinnings of culturally relevant pedagogy.

I approach the following propositions tentatively to avoid an essentialized and/or dichotomized notion of the pedagogy of excellent teachers. What I propose represents a range or continuum of teaching behaviors, not fixed or rigid behaviors that teachers must adhere to in order to merit the designation "culturally relevant." The need for these theoretical understandings may be more academic than pragmatic. The teachers themselves feel no need to name their practice culturally relevant. However, as a researcher and teacher educator, I am compelled to try to make this practice more accessible, particularly for those prospective teachers who do not share the cultural knowledge, experiences, and understandings of their students (Haberman, 1994).

The three broad propositions that have emerged from this research center around the following:[10]

- the conceptions of self and others held by culturally relevant teachers,
- the manner in which social relations are structured by culturally relevant teachers,
- the conceptions of knowledge held by culturally relevant teachers.

Conceptions of Self and Others

The sociology of teaching literature suggests that, despite the increasing professionalization of teaching (Strike, 1993), the status of teaching as a profession continues to decline. The feeling of low status is exacerbated when teachers work with what they perceive to be low-status students (Foster, 1986). However, as I acted as a participant-observer in the classrooms of exemplary teachers of African-American students, both what they said and did challenged this notion. In brief, the teachers:

- believed that all the students were capable of academic success,
- saw their pedagogy as art—unpredictable, always in the process of becoming,
- saw themselves as members of the community,
- saw teaching as a way to give back to the community,

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- believed in a Freirean notion of "teaching as mining" (1974, p. 76) or pulling knowledge out.

The teachers demonstrated their commitment to these conceptions of self and others in a consistent and deliberate manner. Students were not permitted to choose failure in their classrooms. They cajoled, nagged, pestered, and bribed the students to work at high intellectual levels. Absent from their discourse about students was the "language of lacking." Students were never referred to as being from a single-parent household, being on AFDC (welfare), or needing psychological evaluation. Instead, teachers talked about their own shortcomings and limitations and ways they needed to change to ensure student success.

As I observed them teach, I witnessed spontaneity and energy that came from experience and their willingness to be risk takers. In the midst of a lesson, one teacher, seemingly bewildered by her students' expressed belief that every princess had long blond hair, swiftly went to her book shelf, pulled down an African folk tale about a princess, and shared the story with the students to challenge their assertion. In our conference afterward, she commented,

> I didn't plan to insert that book, but I just couldn't let them go on thinking that only blond-haired, White women were eligible for royalty. I know where they get those ideas, but I have a responsibility to contradict some of that. The consequences of that kind of thinking are more devastating for *our* children. (sp-6, Field notes)[11]

The teachers made conscious decisions to be a part of the community from which their students come. Three of the eight teachers in this study live in the school community. The others made deliberate efforts to come to the community for goods, services, and leisure activities, demonstrating their belief in the community as an important and worthwhile place in both their lives and the lives of the students.

A final example I present here is an elaboration of a point made earlier. It reflects the teachers' attempt to support and instill community pride in the students. One teacher used the community as the basis of her curriculum. Her students searched the county historical archives, interviewed long-term residents, constructed and administered surveys and a questionnaire, and invited and listened to guest speakers to get a sense of the historical development of their community. Their ultimate goal was to develop a land use proposal for an abandoned shopping center that was a magnet for illegal drug use and other dangerous activities. The project ended with the students' making a presentation before the City Council and Urban Planning Commission. One of the students remarked to me, "This [community] is not such a bad place. There are a lot of good things that happened here, and some of that is still going on." The teacher told me that she was concerned that too many of the students believed that their only option for success involved moving out of the community, rather than participating in its reclamation.

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Social Relations

Much has been written about classroom social interactions (see, e.g., Brophy & Good, 1970; Rist, 1970; Wilcox, 1982). Perhaps the strength of some of the research in this area is evidenced by its impact on classroom practices. For example, teachers throughout the nation have either heard of or implemented various forms of cooperative learning (Cohen & Benton, 1988; Slavin, 1987): cross-aged, multi-aged, and heterogeneous ability groupings. While these classroom arrangements may be designed to improve student achievement, culturally relevant teachers consciously create social interactions to help them meet the three previously mentioned criteria of academic success, cultural competence, and critical consciousness. Briefly, the teachers:

- maintain fluid student-teacher relationships,
- demonstrate a connectedness with all of the students,
- develop a community of learners,
- encourage students to learn collaboratively and be responsible for another.

In these teachers' classrooms, the teacher-student relationships are equitable and reciprocal. All of the teachers gave students opportunities to act as teachers. In one class, the teacher regularly sat at a student's desk, while the student stood at the front of the room and explained a concept or some aspect of student culture. Another teacher highlighted the expertise of various students and required other students to consult those students before coming to her for help: "Did you ask Jamal how to do those math problems?" "Make sure you check with Latasha before you turn in your reading." Because she acknowledged a wide range of expertise, the individual students were not isolated from their peers as teacher's pets. Instead, all of the students were made aware that they were expected to excel at something and that the teacher would call on them to share that expertise with classmates.

The culturally relevant teachers encouraged a community of learners rather than competitive, individual achievement. By demanding a higher level of academic success for the entire class, individual success did not suffer. However, rather than lifting up individuals (and, perhaps, contributing to feelings of peer alienation), the teachers made it clear that they were working with smart classes. For many of the students, this identification with academic success was a new experience. "Calvin was a bad student last year," said one student. "And that was last year," replied the teacher, as she designated Calvin to lead a discussion group. Another example of this community of learners was exemplified by a teacher who, herself, was a graduate student. She made a conscious decision to share what she was learning with her sixth graders. Every Friday, after her Thursday evening class, the students queried her about what she had learned.

A demonstration of the students' understanding of what she was learning occurred during the principal's observation of her teaching. A few minutes into a discussion where students were required to come up with questions

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they wanted answered about the book they were reading, a young man seated at a table near the rear of the class remarked with seeming disgust, "We're never gonna learn anything if y'all don't stop asking all of these low level questions!" His comment was evidence of the fact that the teacher had shared Bloom's *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives* (1956) with the class. At another time, two African-American boys were arguing over a notebook. "What seems to be the problem?" asked the teacher. "He's got my metacognitive journal!" replied one of the boys. By using the language of the teacher's graduate class, the students demonstrated their ability to assimilate her language with their own experiences.

To solidify the social relationships in their classes, the teachers encouraged the students to learn collaboratively, teach each other, and be responsible for the academic success of others. These collaborative arrangements were not necessarily structured like those of cooperative learning. Instead, the teachers used a combination of formal and informal peer collaborations. One teacher used a buddy system, where each student was paired with another. The buddies checked each other's homework and class assignments. Buddies quizzed each other for tests, and, if one buddy was absent, it was the responsibility of the other to call to see why and to help with makeup work. The teachers used this ethos of reciprocity and mutuality to insist that one person's success was the success of all and one person's failure was the failure of all. These feelings were exemplified by the teacher who insisted, "We're a family. We have to care for one another as if our very survival depended on it. . . . Actually, it does!"

Conceptions of Knowledge

The third proposition that emerged from this study was one that indicated how the teachers thought about knowledge—the curriculum or content they taught—and the assessment of that knowledge. Once again, I will summarize their conceptions or beliefs about knowledge:

- Knowledge is not static; it is shared, recycled, and constructed.
- Knowledge must be viewed critically.
- Teachers must be passionate about knowledge and learning.
- Teachers must *scaffold,* or build bridges, to facilitate learning.
- Assessment must be multifaceted, incorporating multiple forms of excellence.

For the teachers in this study, knowledge was about doing. The students listened and learned from one another as well as the teacher. Early in the school year, one teacher asked the students to identify one area in which they believed they had expertise. She then compiled a list of "classroom experts" for distribution to the class. Later, she developed a calendar and asked students to select a date that they would like to make a presentation in their area of expertise. When students made their presentations, their

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knowledge and expertise was a given. Their classmates were expected to be an attentive audience and to take seriously the knowledge that was being shared by taking notes and/or asking relevant questions. The variety of topics the students offered included rap music, basketball, gospel singing, cooking, hair braiding, and baby-sitting. Other students listed more school-like areas of expertise such as reading, writing, and mathematics. However, all students were required to share their expertise.

Another example of the teachers' conceptions of knowledge was demonstrated in the critical stance the teachers took toward the school curriculum. Although cognizant of the need to teach certain things because of a districtwide testing policy, the teachers helped their students engage in a variety of forms of critical analyses. For one teacher, this meant critique of the social studies textbooks that were under consideration by a state evaluation panel. For two of the other teachers, critique came in the form of resistance to district-approved reading materials. Both of these teachers showed the students what it was they were supposed to be using along with what they were going to use and why. They both trusted the students with this information and enlisted them as allies against the school district's policies.

A final example in this category concerns the teachers' use of complex assessment strategies. Several of the teachers actively fought the students' *right-answer* approach to school tasks without putting the students' down. They provided them with problems and situations and helped the students to say aloud the kinds of questions they had in their minds but had been taught to suppress in most other classrooms. For one teacher, it was the simple requiring of students to always be prepared to ask, "Why?" Thus, when she posed a mathematical word problem, the first question usually went something like this: "Why are we interested in knowing this?" Or, someone would simply ask, "Why are we doing this problem?" The teacher's response was sometimes another question: "Who thinks they can respond to that question?" Other times, the teacher would offer an explanation and then ask, "Are you satisfied with that answer?" If a student said "Yes," she might say, "You shouldn't be. Just because I'm the teacher doesn't mean I'm always right." The teacher was careful to help students to understand the difference between an intellectual challenge and a challenge to the authority of their parents. Thus, just as the students were affirmed in their ability to code-switch, or move with facility, in language between African-American language and a standard form of English, they were supported in the attempts at role-switching between school and home.

Another teacher helped her students to choose both the standards by which they were to be evaluated and the pieces of evidence they wanted to use as proof of their mastery of particular concepts and skills. None of the teachers or their students seemed to have test anxiety about the school district's standardized tests. Instead, they viewed the tests as necessary irritations, took them, scored better than their age-grade mates at their school, and quickly returned to the rhythm of learning in their classroom.

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Conclusion

I began this article arguing for a theory of culturally relevant pedagogy. I also suggested that the tensions that surround my position as a native in the research field force me to face the theoretical and philosophical biases I bring to my work in overt and explicit ways. Thus, I situated my work in the context of Black feminist thought. I suggested that culturally relevant teaching must meet three criteria: an ability to develop students academically, a willingness to nurture and support cultural competence, and the development of a sociopolitical or critical consciousness. Next, I argued that culturally relevant teaching is distinguishable by three broad propositions or conceptions regarding self and other, social relations, and knowledge. With this theoretical perspective, I attempted to broaden notions of pedagogy beyond strictly psychological models. I also have argued that earlier sociolinguistic explanations have failed to include the larger social and cultural contexts of students and the cultural ecologists have failed to explain student success. I predicated the need for a culturally relevant theoretical perspective on the growing disparity between the racial, ethnic, and cultural characteristics of teachers and students along with the continued academic failure of African-American, Native American and Latino students.

Although I agree with Haberman's (1991b) assertion that teacher educators are unlikely to make much of a difference in the preparation of teachers to work with students in urban poverty unless they are able to recruit "better" teacher candidates, I still believe researchers are obligated to re-educate the candidates we currently attract toward a more expansive view of pedagogy (Bartolome, 1994). This can be accomplished partly by helping prospective teachers understand culture (their own and others) and the ways it functions in education. Rather than add on versions of multicultural education or human relations courses (Zeichner, 1992) that serve to exoticize diverse students as "other," a culturally relevant pedagogy is designed to problematize teaching and encourage teachers to ask about the nature of the student–teacher relationship, the curriculum, schooling, and society.

This study represents a beginning look at ways that teachers might systematically include student culture in the classroom as authorized or official knowledge. It also is a way to encourage praxis as an important aspect of research (Lather, 1986). This kind of research needs to continue in order to support new conceptions of collaboration between teachers and researchers (practitioners and theoreticians). We need research that proposes alternate models of pedagogy, coupled with exemplars of successful pedagogues. More importantly, we need to be willing to look for exemplary practice in those classrooms and communities that too many of us are ready to dismiss as incapable of producing excellence.

The implication of continuing this kind of work means that research grounded in the practice of exemplary teachers will form a significant part of the knowledge base on which we build teacher preparation. It means that the research community will have to be willing to listen to and heed the

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"wisdom of practice" (Shulman, 1987, p. 12) of these excellent practitioners. Additionally, we need to consider methodologies that present more robust portraits of teaching. Meaningful combinations of quantitative and qualitative inquiries must be employed to help us understand the deeply textured, multilayered enterprise of teaching.

I presume that the work I have been doing raises more questions than it answers. A common question asked by practitioners is, "Isn't what you described just 'good teaching'?" And, while I do not deny that it is good teaching, I pose a counter question: why does so little of it seem to occur in classrooms populated by African-American students? Another question that arises is whether or not this pedagogy is so idiosyncratic that only "certain" teachers can engage in it. I would argue that the diversity of these teachers and the variety of teaching strategies they employed challenge that notion. The common feature they shared was a classroom practice grounded in what they believed about the educability of the students. Unfortunately, this raises troubling thoughts about those teachers who are not successful, but we cannot assume that they do not believe that some students are incapable (or unworthy) of being educated. The reasons for their lack of success are far too complex for this discussion.

Ultimately, my responsibility as a teacher educator who works primarily with young, middle-class, White women is to provide them with the examples of culturally relevant teaching in both theory and practice. My responsibility as a researcher is to continue to inquire in order to move toward a theory of culturally relevant pedagogy.

Notes

I am grateful to the National Academy of Education's Spencer postdoctoral fellowship program for providing me with the funding to conduct this research. However, the ideas expressed here are my own and do not necessarily reflect those of the National Academy of Education or the Spencer Foundation.

[1]Although issues of culturally relevant teaching can and should be considered cross-culturally, this work looks specifically at the case of African-American students.

[2]It is interesting to note that a number of trade books have emerged that detail the rage and frustration of academically successful, professional, middle-class, African-American adults, which suggests that, even with the proper educational credentials, their lives continue to be plagued by racism and a questioning of their competence. Among the more recent books are Jill Nelson's *Volunteer Slavery* (1993), Brent Staples's *Parallel Time* (1994), and Ellis Cose's *The Rage of a Privileged Class* (1993).

[3]It should be noted that the "cultural deficit" notion has been reinscribed under the rubric of "at-risk" (Cuban, 1989). Initially, the U. S. Commission on Excellence in Education defined the nation as at risk. Now, almost 10 years later, it appears that only some children are at risk. Too often, in the case of African-American students, their racial/cultural group membership defines them as at risk.

[4]The research collaborative met to view portions of the classroom videotapes that I, as researcher, selected for common viewing.

[5]These correlates include: a clear and focused mission, instructional leadership, a safe and orderly environment, regular monitoring of student progress, high expectations, and positive home–school relations.

[6]Students in this district took the California Achievement Test (CAT) in October and May of each school year. Growth scores in the classrooms of the teachers in the study were significantly above those of others in the district.

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[7]This is not to suggest that cultural competence for African-American students means being a failure. The problem that African-American students face is the constant devaluation of their culture both in school and in the larger society. Thus, the styles apparent in African-American youth culture—e.g., dress, music, walk, language—are equated with poor academic performance. The student who identifies with "hip-hop" culture may be regarded as dangerous and/or a gang member for whom academic success is not expected. He (and it usually is a male) is perceived as not having the *cultural* capital (Bourdieu, 1984) necessary for academic success.

[8]An examination of rap music reveals a wide variety of messages. Despite the high profile of "gansta rap," which seems to glorify violence, particularly against the police and Whites, and the misogynistic messages found in some of this music, there is a segment of rap music that serves as cultural critique and urges African Americans to educate themselves because schools fail to do so. Prominent rap artists in this tradition are Arrested Development, Diggable Planets, KRS-1, and Queen Latifah.

[9]I am indebted to Mwalimu Shujaa for sharing his working paper, "Afrikan-Centered Education in Afrikan-Centered Schools: The Need for Consensus Building," which elaborates the multiplicity of thinking on this issue extant in the African-centered movement.

[10]Readers should note that I have listed these as separate and distinct categories for analytical purposes. In practice, they intersect and overlap, continuously.

[11]These letters and numbers represent codes I employed to distinguish among the interview data and field notes I collected during the study.

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