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Afterword

Culturally Responsive Teaching: A Reflection

In the process of explaining multicultural education and culturally responsive teaching to preservice teachers, Grant and Sleeter (2007) commented that, “Fantastic teachers, as we observe them teach, are convinced that their students can learn, expect a lot of their students, and find ways to make whatever students bring to school a learning asset” (p. 133). The articles in this issue of *Praxis* thoughtfully elaborate on this idea, linking culturally responsive teaching with various areas of teacher education, and giving us insightful analyses and many rich examples for the classroom, professional preparation, and school reform.

Central to culturally responsive teaching are the teacher, his/her expectations of students, and his/her ability to build on knowledge students bring and to engage them. In this issue, Martinez speaks to the central role of the teacher, and the powerful impact expectations have on Chicano/a students, which her research participants attributed at least partially to how teachers viewed their language and cultural identity. Ironically, today’s English-only policies and high-stakes testing in English may be returning us to the kinds of conditions her research participants described. Cheesman and De Pry examine overlaps between culturally responsive teaching and strategies for teaching literacy, wisely cautioning teachers to judge what works based on evidence of student learning – including, I would add, classroom-based evidence of learning. Reif and Grant show strong overlaps between culturally responsive teaching and integration of the arts into teaching, arguing that the arts offer a powerful means of engaging students, and offering delightful examples of what it is possible to do.

Preparing teachers to teach in a culturally responsive way is a challenge that these articles take up productively. Frye, Button, Kelly and Button studied the impact of a process aimed at strengthening teacher efficacy in culturally responsive teaching. For teacher educators, studying the impact of our work is important, since this is what gives us an evidence base for strengthening teacher preparation. I was also intrigued by the creative units in which they engaged the teacher candidates, drawing on African American history and literature in meaningful ways. Similarly, Sauer and Sauer share a variety of helpful strategies that prompt preservice teachers to think critically about issues related to disability, language, and culture. I encourage these researchers to extend their studies longitudinally, following program graduates into the classroom in order to tease out which kinds of experiences seem to have the most lasting impact on them.

Although culturally responsive teaching is frequently discussed in relationship to the classroom alone, two articles in this issue extend the discussion beyond the classroom. De Pry and Cheesman show us how, when culturally responsive teaching is connected with Response to Intervention and Positive Behavior Support, educators can build a systemic approach within the school as a whole that supports culturally diverse students and prevents learning and behavior problems from escalating. Finally, Harmon, Carne, Lizardy-Hajbi, and Wilkerson ask us to question the exclusion of undocumented students from higher education, theorizing counter-strategies such students use for gaining an education, and challenging policymakers and gatekeepers to reverse policies and practices that exclude them.

I will add to the discussion here with some reflections on my experiences helping preservice teachers to grasp the meaning of culturally responsive teaching. I commonly encounter four problems in how people conceptualize what it means. First is the problem of essentializing (mentioned by some of the authors in this issue), which means defining students mainly in terms of broad sociocultural group membership, then applying cultural practices associated with that group to one's students, rather than getting to know one's students and the community they are actually from. One cannot simply assume a given set of cultural practices is meaningful to specific students by virtue of their membership in a racial or ethnic group. Second is the problem of misplaced expectations, or assuming that culturally responsive teaching means teaching students about their culture rather than using what students know as a resource for teaching new academic knowledge. Third is the silver bullet problem, which is the tendency of many educators as well as members of the public to search for the one way to raise academic achievement. This problem pits different but useful approaches against each other (such as explicit teaching of new skills versus culturally responsive teaching) rather than, as several authors in this issue have done, asking how multiple strategies and approaches can complement each other. Fourth is the "them" focus, or the problem of viewing culturally responsive pedagogy as something to do when students of color are present, rather than examining oneself and one's teaching as culturally constructed.

I have come to see learning culturally responsive teaching as starting with dialog (between the teacher and students, the teacher and parents, and so forth), and with a teacher's willingness to spend time as a learner in the community of his or her students. Indeed, I have learned to practice culturally responsive teaching beginning with dialog and with placing myself in other cultural contexts, supporting and extending that learning through formal studying. So, as a teacher educator, much of my work was to place teacher candidates in the position of learners in community contexts that were culturally unfamiliar to them. Part of a multicultural education course I taught for many years involved teacher candidates spending 50 hours as volunteers in grassroots

community organizations that served low-income Black and Latino neighborhoods. To guide teacher candidates' learning, I prepared about 20 semi-structured interviews and observation guides (Sleeter, 2001); teacher candidates were to complete three of them, which included written reflections on their learning that were often used as the basis for discussion in class.

For example, Linda (a pseudonym) was a white preservice student who was tutoring in an after school recreation center. As one learning activity, she observed a group of young adolescent girls as they chatted informally among themselves. Using a simple observation guide, she noticed some patterns that surprised her. For example, although more than one speaker talked at a time, all of the girls were able to track multiple simultaneous conversations. The girls frequently touched each other, such as placing a hand on the arm of another girl, and to emphasize a point or gain attention of other participants, a girl would frequently turn up the volume, often with gestures; these were behaviors that none of the girls seemed to find offensive or as violations of their sense of personal space.

When Linda (and others who had completed this activity) debriefed in class, we considered several issues that relate to culturally responsive teaching. Most strikingly, the cultural rules governing interpersonal interaction in the community center were different from those in the classroom. Linda realized that when students (especially if they were Black) interacted in the classroom like they did in the community center, she and other white teachers assumed they were being defiant or disrespectful, often referring them for disciplinary action. Linda was surprised to note that the girls were able to follow multiple conversations simultaneously, having assumed that if one is talking with a neighbor, one is not listening to someone else such as the teacher. These realizations led us to reflect on cultural patterns of interaction that are common among white people, and to consider the ramifications of white teachers assuming our norms to be the "correct" way to express learning, attention, and respect. We then considered which rules for classroom interaction might be made more flexible, and which rules the girls in the community center could learn to adapt to in school, which led us to a discussion of teaching students to code-switch. Finally, we discussed the possibility of letting students help to establish classroom rules and procedures so that they would support academic learning while allowing students to "be themselves," and so that reasons behind classroom rules and procedures could be meaningfully discussed and made transparent.

I commend the faculty at the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs for not only their commitment to preparing teachers to work with all students, but also for their thoughtful research that helps to advance how culturally responsive teaching is operationalized in professional preparation.

Given the urgency of developing the academic intelligence of all of our students, I greatly appreciate such work.

—*Christine Sleeter*

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