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Challenges to Conceptualizing and Actualizing Culturally Relevant Pedagogy: How Viable Is the Theory in Classroom Practice?

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Abstract

Although culturally relevant pedagogy is widely espoused and applied in educational research and practice, it is often not commonly understood as a conceptual framework that advocates the elements of academic success, cultural competence, and sociopolitical consciousness. This study was a grassroots attempt to work collaboratively with a group of administrators and teachers at one urban school to define, implement, and assess culturally relevant pedagogy as a viable pedagogical tool. A qualitative approach that used the combined methods of action research and critical case study was employed for this study. Findings revealed deep structural issues related to teachers’ cultural bias, the nature of racism in school settings, and the lack of support to adequately implement theories into practice. The study also recommends further inquiry-based dialogue among scholars and practitioners to more consistently utilize the theory in academic research and in classroom instruction.

Keywords

race, class, gender issue; teacher knowledge and beliefs; achievement; school teacher effectiveness; action research; culturally relevant pedagogy

Since the 1990s, culturally relevant pedagogy has been taught extensively in teacher education programs and promoted by scholars and practitioners as an effective pedagogical tool to work with students of diverse backgrounds. Many studies to date, however, have discussed the difficulties that preservice and inservice teachers have in implementing multicultural education or culturally relevant teaching in their classroom pedagogy (Cochran-Smith, 2004; Gay, 1995; Gay & Howard, 2000; Sleeter, Torres, & Laughlin, 2004). Because there is a need to work with teachers on understanding how to put the theory into practice, this study was a grassroots attempt to collaborate with a group of educators who were committed to social justice to discuss, apply, and assess the theory of culturally relevant pedagogy in their practice.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

In her study of eight successful teachers of African American students, Ladson-Billings (1994) attributed their effectiveness to what she called culturally relevant pedagogy. She conceptualized the term as a “pedagogy that [empowered] students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (pp. 17-18). In 1995, she published two articles that laid the groundwork for culturally relevant pedagogy. She determined that the theory rested on three criteria: academic success, cultural competence, and critical or sociopolitical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 1995a). She further emphasized those criteria by defining culturally relevant pedagogy as 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 inequalities that schools (and other institutions) perpetuate” (Ladson-Billings, 1995b, p. 469). Because she felt that teachers used academic success, cultural competence, and sociopolitical consciousness in markedly different manners, she also outlined in the later article three theoretical underpinnings that broadly defined the teaching behaviors that would satisfy the criteria of a culturally relevant pedagogue. She categorized the underpinnings under the headings of conceptions of self and others, social relations, and conceptions of knowledge, and for the benefit of practitioners in school settings she provided concrete examples of what each would look like.

Subsequent research using culturally relevant, responsive, sensitive, and appropriate pedagogy as a theoretical framework...
provided varying definitions of the term. Although several studies have remained true to the three-pronged paradigm (Barnes, 2006; Gay, 2002; Hefflin, 2002; Patchen & Cox-Petersen, 2008; Yoon, 2007), many others have utilized the theory in a manner that focused mainly on culture. For example, culturally relevant pedagogy has been defined as a means to use students’ cultures and bridges to support the development of cultural knowledge (Boyle-Baise, 2005), and to recognize students’ home cultures, promote collaboration among peers, hold high standards, and connect home life with school experiences (Neuman, 1999). Swat (2007) even stipulated that there is general agreement among culturally responsive pedagogues insofar as how the theory is used in facilitating learning, structuring classroom management, providing multiple opportunities to demonstrate knowledge, and helping students to maintain their own culture while navigating in the mainstream culture. It is questionable, however, that such general agreement exists, considering that the list fails to account for one of the major components of culturally relevant pedagogy, which is to challenge issues of power and openly confront racial and social injustices (Gay, 2000).

Moreover, recent studies have actually elicited their own theoretical framework for culturally relevant pedagogy. Howard (2001), for example, postulated three criteria that constituted a conceptual framework for culturally relevant teaching practices for African American students, which included communication styles, culture and learning, and perceptions of knowledge. Culturally relevant pedagogues, according to Howard, were sensitive to the students’ use of expressionism, emphasized collaboration and the collective good, and possessed a critical view of knowledge. Meanwhile, Hefflin (2002) proposed a culturally relevant pedagogy framework for teaching literacy, which focused on culturally conscious themes in the literature, used call-and-response interaction patterns with the students, made communal connections with the students’ experiences, and made individual linkages to the literature. As innovative as these adaptations of the theory were, they nonetheless demonstrated how inconsistently culturally relevant pedagogy has been defined and utilized in scholarly research.

The theory’s varied usage was also evident at the classroom level. In Morrison, Robbins, and Rose’s (2008) meta-analysis of 45 classroom-based research studies from 1995 to 2008, less than one third of the classroom teachers in the studies that they reviewed utilized culturally relevant pedagogy as a way to promote academic success, cultural competence, and sociopolitical consciousness. Meanwhile, 42 of the 45 studies utilized the component of cultural competence for a variety of purposes, including using technology to create culturally responsive lessons (Duran, 1998) and studying African American students’ perceptions of White physical education teachers’ use of step dance to instruct in a culturally relevant manner (Hastie, Martin, & Buchanan, 2006). Even the researchers of the studies that Morrison et al. reviewed conceptualized culturally relevant pedagogy differently, with more than half of them bearing no reference to the sociopolitical consciousness component of the theory.

Although Ladson-Billings (2006) herself argued that being a culturally relevant pedagogue was more important than doing the work of culturally relevant pedagogy, one might wonder whether doing the work is tenuous because what it means to be a culturally relevant pedagogue is widely misconceived by scholars and practitioners alike. After a decade of the theory’s varied usage in the field of education, Ladson-Billings attempted to clarify the misconceptions around culturally relevant pedagogy by giving more concrete definitions and examples of academic success, cultural competence, and sociopolitical consciousness. Her point was not to prescribe elements that would make a lesson culturally relevant but rather to emphasize that a culturally relevant pedagogue is always conscious of all three components when planning lessons.

Most of the studies on culturally relevant pedagogy to date have been case studies, ethnographies, or descriptive studies, thereby employing data collection strategies such as interviews, observations, journaling, and examination of documents (Morrison et al., 2008). Only a few have entailed participant observation or action research methodologies, and in most of these cases the researcher was also the teacher engaged in self-reflective practices (Lee, 1998; Sheets, 1995). Because of the inconsistency with which culturally relevant pedagogy is understood and applied in academic research and in the school setting, this study aimed to work with a group of administrators and teachers as coresearchers through collaborative inquiry to define, implement, and assess culturally relevant pedagogy. The research questions driving this study were the following: (a) How do teachers and administrators understand and utilize culturally relevant pedagogy? (b) What process is involved in the coparticipatory effort to conceptualize and actualize culturally relevant pedagogy in classroom practice? and (c) What challenges arise in the definition, implementation, and evaluation of culturally relevant pedagogy?

Method

This study was rooted in a larger research project that used critical race theory (CRT) as the epistemological framework for examining the racialized practices existing in schools. In the first phase of the study, I utilized the tenets central to CRT to engage a group of administrators and teacher leaders in difficult conversations concerning race and achievement. The discussions focused on raising educators’ race consciousness as well as exposing the participants to the endemic nature of racism (Bell, 1987; Crenshaw, 1988). This phase of the study was designed in a course-like format, wherein I took on a participant observer role in facilitating and
examining the discussions that took place in the inquiry group meetings.

In the second phase of the study, which is reported on here, the participants and I acted as coresearchers as we sought to transform the theories learned into a viable pedagogical tool. We began by looking at how culturally relevant pedagogy was used in scholarship and how we could establish a common understanding of the theory to implement it effectively in classroom practice. This phase of the study was inquiry based. Thus, a qualitative approach using the combined methods of critical case study (Rossman & Rallis, 2003) and action research (Reason & Bradbury, 2001) was used.

It was the assumption of this study that racism was deeply rooted in the structure of the schools and that underlying the racial achievement gap were unaddressed issues of hegemony. By using action research, the researcher and the participants were immersed in a process of collaborative inquiry as we strove to understand and alter the existing oppressive conditions rooted within the school setting (Reason & Bradbury, 2001).

### Setting and Participants
The study took place at Maplewood Elementary School, which was located in a large metropolitan area in the northeastern United States. The total student enrollment at Maplewood for 2007-2008 was approximately 220 students. The demographic breakdown of the student population was roughly 40% African American, 40% Latina/o or Hispanic, 12% White, 5% Asian, and 3% Other. Based on the 2008 adequate yearly progress report, Maplewood fell in the “corrective action” category for English language arts and the “needs improvement” category for mathematics on the state’s standardized test. Because the performance level of African American and Latina/o or Hispanic students at Maplewood has historically skewed to the needs improvement and warning/failing categories in both subject areas, the principal found it necessary to openly address the issue of race and racism at the school.

In all, eight participants took part in the study. Table 1 outlines each participant’s race, role at the school, and years of experience in the district. All of the participants were members of the school’s leadership team, and many of them played active roles in the school, in the district, and in professional organizations. The principal intern was enrolled in a school leadership program at a nearby university. He asked to be part of the study when he learned of the project’s emphasis on promoting antiracism in urban education.

### Data Collection
The data were collected over the course of 3 months using a variety of strategies: interviews, inquiry group meetings, follow-up meetings with the principal and the principal intern, classroom observations, the participants’ reflections, the district’s documents, online discussions, and the researcher’s journal.

**Pre- and postinquiry group interviews.** Participants were asked semistructured questions at the beginning and the end of the study to see whether there were perceived changes in their beliefs and attitudes toward their awareness of racism in school policies and practices and in their understanding of culturally relevant pedagogy. Each interview was audiotaped and lasted 45 to 60 minutes.

**Inquiry group meetings.** The inquiry group meetings took place before school, lasting an hour each. In preparation for each meeting, the participants were asked to read assigned articles and write reflections based on prompts that were related to the discussion topics. In the first phase of the study, I acted as a participant observer in the discussions as I conducted a critical case study of the phenomenon. The first 4 weeks of the meetings were therefore more researcher directed, where I selected the readings and assigned the writing prompts beforehand. The latter 4 weeks were based on action research, where the inquiry group questions and agenda were more driven by the participants as researchers than by me. The readings and the reflection prompts were also determined by the questions and challenges that arose in each meeting. The inquiry group meetings were videotaped and audiotaped, and I wrote up field notes and reflections immediately after each session.

**Meetings with the principal and the principal intern.** After each inquiry group session, the principal, the principal intern, and I met to reflect on the proceedings of the meeting and to discuss the agenda for each subsequent meeting. These meetings lasted for 15 to 30 minutes each, and the conversations were open ended and loosely structured. I audiotaped the meetings and wrote up the reflections immediately after the conversations ended.

**Classroom observation.** I made one scheduled classroom observation in each teacher’s classroom to document how he or she had attempted to apply culturally relevant pedagogy in his or her classroom instruction. I made holistic observations of the teacher’s behavior, the students’ participation, the materials that were used, the classroom dynamic during the discussions and activities, and the ways in which the teacher attempted to make the lesson reflect cultural relevancy. I took on the role of an observer as I audiotaped and took extensive notes on each lesson. Because of student privacy issues, I did not videotape the lessons.

**Participants’ reflections.** Participants were asked to submit weekly written reflections based on assigned prompts. On occasion, I also asked the participants to reflect at the beginning or at the end of the inquiry group meetings, particularly near the end of the study when the participants found it more difficult to keep up with the reflections.

**District’s documents.** Prior to the study, I informally interviewed the interim executive director of the Achievement Gap Committee at Centralia School District (CSD) and examined several documents given to me during the interview. These documents included an “Eliminating the Achievement Gap Committee at Centralia School District (CSD) and examined several documents given to me during the interview. These documents included an “Eliminating the Achievement Gap Committee at Centralia School District (CSD) and examined several documents given to me during the interview. These documents included an “Eliminating the Achievement Gap Committee at Centralia School District (CSD) and examined several documents given to me during the interview. These documents included an “Eliminating the Achievement Gap Committee at Centralia School District (CSD) and examined several documents given to me during the interview. 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Gap Policy Statement” that laid out a 12-goal plan to address the racial achievement gap, a PowerPoint presentation of the district’s efforts to implement the policy statement, and various handouts on professional development activities, seminars, and workshops held by the district that attempted to address race and achievement issues.

Online discussions. Because our hour-long inquiry group discussions often concluded with unresolved issues and questions, the participants and I frequently continued our conversations online. This provided an opportunity for the participants to ask clarifying questions as they attempted to integrate the theories discussed into classroom practice. It also became a forum in which we could share additional information and insights with one another in response to the topics that were discussed in the inquiry group meetings.

Researcher journal. Throughout the study, I wrote up field notes with extensive description, reflection, analysis, and interpretation of the data.

Data Analysis

All of the video and audio recordings from the interviews, inquiry group meetings, meetings with the principal and the principal intern, and classroom observations as well as the district’s documents, the written reflections, and online conversations submitted by the participants were transcribed and coded using deductive and inductive analysis in an ongoing manner. Using culturally relevant pedagogy as a framework, I deductively looked for keywords that exemplified evidence of academic success, cultural competence, and sociopolitical consciousness. Concurrently, I used grounded theory as a form of inductive analysis to code for themes that directly emerged from the data.

Each transcript was analyzed twice, the first time manually using line-by-line coding and the second time using HyperResearch in an effort to reduce the number of codes that emerged from the data. I used the strategy of open coding to break down and examine the data to identify key concepts and to group them by categories and subcategories. I also employed axial coding to look for relationships among the categories and to assess whether novel themes emerged (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Furthermore, I had the teachers code their own classroom observation transcripts for academic success, cultural competence, and sociopolitical consciousness. I also had them critique my coding and reflection of their transcripts. Moreover, I asked the principal and the principal intern to examine my coding from an administrator’s point of view to discuss how they would challenge the teachers to move their lessons toward sociopolitical consciousness. Using this strategy, the data from the classroom observations were analyzed and cross-checked by three different parties—the researcher, the teachers, and the administrators.

Maintaining the rigor of qualitative research, I frequently showed my data to the participants throughout the study and invited them to critique, affirm, and/or provide feedback on the analysis, interpretation, and reporting of the data.

Findings

Confusion over culturally relevant pedagogy was palpable in all facets of data collection. In an effort to cogently articulate the findings, I have organized this section in the following manner. In the first part, I examine the district’s documents and the teachers’ preinterviews and analyze them with regard to Ladson-Billings’s definition of culturally relevant pedagogy. Second, I describe the process that took place in the inquiry group meetings as the participants and I sought to move culturally relevant pedagogy as a theoretical model into actual classroom practice. Third, I articulate the process of observing, analyzing, and cross-checking the classroom observations with the participants, along with the challenges that arose. Fourth, I describe the perceived changes in the participants’ understanding of culturally relevant pedagogy in the postinterviews.

Examining the District’s and Teachers’ Interpretation of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

In sorting through the district’s documents and the preinterview transcripts on how the district and the teachers understood

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Role at school</th>
<th>Years of experience in the district</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lynn</td>
<td>Latina</td>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amy</td>
<td>Black Caribbean</td>
<td>3rd grade teacher</td>
<td>15 (also previously taught in Trinidad)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jamie</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Special education teacher</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karen</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>3rd grade teacher</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bob</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Science teacher</td>
<td>8 (second career)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Madison</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Kindergarten teacher</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Will</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Principal intern</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Researcher</td>
<td>Asian American</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Description of the Participants

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the term *culturally relevant pedagogy*, I categorized the data under academic success, cultural competence, and sociopolitical consciousness. Below is a closer examination of how Ladson-Billings, the district, and the teachers in their preinterviews defined each component of the theory.

**Academic success.** Ladson-Billings (2006) regarded academic success as the emphasis on student learning, where academic achievement is prioritized over feel-good curricula and character education. Teachers who practiced culturally relevant pedagogy set rigorous learning objectives, engaged students in critical thinking, held high expectations and long-term goals for their students, and utilized real-life examples to help students understand difficult concepts.

In CSD’s “Eliminating the Achievement Gap Policy Statement,” two major themes exemplified academic success. One was high expectations and the other was same standards for all. According to the district, school leaders were expected to “model a belief in high expectations for all students where failure is not accepted as an option” (CSD, 2006, p. 2). To such end, the district had designated “closing the gap in achievement among the various subgroups as a primary and urgent priority” (CSD, 2006, p. 1). In other words, there were to be no excuses for why all students could not attain the same minimal academic standards if high expectations were the district’s norm and the same standards were maintained for all students.

Surprisingly, in defining culturally relevant pedagogy, none of the participants made any reference to academic success in the preinterviews. Although this idea was made in response to other questions, it was not conveyed when describing their understanding of culturally relevant pedagogy. In general, the participants regarded the students’ cultural capital as the means to build learning on their personal experiences and to make the curriculum meaningful to them but not necessarily as a way to promote rigorous academic learning.

**Cultural competence.** Ladson-Billings (2006) readily admitted that cultural competence was the most difficult of the three to describe. She articulated it as the means “to helping students to recognize and honor their own cultural beliefs and practices while acquiring access to the wider culture” (p. 36). She saw it as a meeting of two worlds: utilizing the knowledge and experiences of minority students to bridge their entrance into the dominant society.

Of the three categories, I also found cultural competence to be the one that elicited the most diverse responses. Under cultural competence, three major themes emerged, but little in these themes echoed Ladson-Billings’s proposal to promote the students’ understanding and knowledge of both their own culture and the culture that oppresses them. These three themes were to (a) know your students, (b) build relationships with your students, and (c) affirm students’ cultural identities.

The theme that was most frequently mentioned both by the district and by the teachers was the importance of knowing your students. The district argued that “increasing knowledge about students . . . [is] critical to maximizing staff’s ability to work with challenged and challenging [populations]” (CSD, 2006, p. 3). Similarly, the teachers also felt that to connect with the students, it was necessary to “know the students in front of you” (Karen, preinterview) and to “be aware of your students’ cultural identities” (Amy, preinterview). In other words, to know the students well required the teachers to know them beyond the walls of the school; it meant taking a personal interest in them as individuals, not simply as pupils behind desks.

The second major theme, building relationships with your students, was heavily stressed in the district’s policy statement. For example, the document emphasized the “critical role of relationship building as a means of making instruction relevant to all students” (CSD, 2006, p. 3). For some teachers, building relationships meant celebrating holidays and multicultural months by having parents bring in ethnic foods or sharing about their cultures. One of the participants also found that students appreciated it when he spoke a few words in their native language. These strategies, although well intentioned, built relationships with the students in only a superficial manner. In many regards, they merely highlighted the sense of otherness commonly felt by minority students (Troyka, 1987).

The importance of the third theme, affirming students’ cultural identities, was perhaps best articulated by Madison (preinterview), who said, “It’s important for [the students] to have a sense of who they are. . . . You don’t want people changing just to fit in.” The teachers attempted to accomplish this goal by using multicultural literature in the classrooms and connecting the students’ origins to the lessons at hand. Another participant felt that without a proper and positive image of oneself, it would be difficult for minority students to affirm and respect other cultures in turn (Will, preinterview).

In summary, all of the participants readily provided examples of cultural competence in their definition of culturally relevant pedagogy. In the absence of the bridging element between the students’ cultures and that of the dominant culture, however, the participants’ understanding of the term merely reflected the feel-good curricula that Ladson-Billings sought to dispel.

**Sociopolitical consciousness.** Ladson-Billings (1994) also saw culturally relevant pedagogy as being about “questioning (and preparing students to question) the structural inequality, the racism, and the injustice that exist in society” (p. 128). She recognized, however, that teachers were often unprepared to discuss issues of social and racial inequality mainly because they lacked the awareness of “the larger sociopolitical issues . . . that impinge upon their students’ lives” (Ladson-Billings, 2006, p. 37). As in the case with academic success, although a couple of the teachers raised issues of social and racial inequalities in response to other questions in their preinterviews, none of them mentioned the need to address sociopolitical consciousness in their definition of culturally relevant pedagogy.
This underdeveloped understanding of sociopolitical dilemmas was also evident on a district level. Nowhere in the policy statement did the district convey a sense of the need to challenge the curriculum or address issues of social inequality, largely because the district tenaciously held to the belief that the purpose of schools was to “eliminate the achievement gap by holding the staff accountable at every level of the organization” (CSD, 2006, p. 1). Moreover, the overtone of the PowerPoint handout presented by the superintendent was one of urgency to close the gap, not necessarily to question it. Written on the slides were statements such as “these disparities [between subgroups] are unacceptable” and “to advance these goals WE MUST!” (CSD, 2007). This sentiment was echoed almost verbatim by the teachers when asked how they felt about the standards and accountability movement, which seemed to suggest that the district’s promotion of “cultural sensitivity,” “culturally relevant strategies,” and “culturally relevant service delivery” had more to do with ensuring that students met grade-level proficiency on the standardized tests than with promoting their sociopolitical consciousness. Although the district may not have foreclosed the conversation on sociopolitical consciousness, its rhetoric in the policy statement certainly did not encourage it.

Because of the range of responses in the participants’ understanding of academic success, cultural competence, and sociopolitical consciousness, it became clear that a common definition of the theory was needed before we could proceed with constructing lessons grounded in culturally relevant pedagogy. Below, I articulate the process that we took in our attempt to define the term.

Developing a Shared Understanding of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

At the fifth inquiry group meeting, the participants and I discussed Ladson-Billings’s (1995b) article and constructed a checklist for determining the characteristics that constituted culturally relevant pedagogy. In her analysis of how the teachers in her study achieved culturally relevant pedagogy, Ladson-Billings (1994) proposed the emergence of three theoretical underpinnings: concept of self and others, social relations, and concept of knowledge. These underpinnings were more concrete for practitioners to understand, as Ladson-Billings provided bulleted examples of what culturally relevant behaviors would look like under each category.

Although I had come into the inquiry group meeting with the intention to define academic success, cultural competence, and sociopolitical consciousness, the participants had other visions in mind. Because action research studies are driven by cooperative inquiry, in which “all those involved in the research endeavor are both co-researchers, whose thinking and decision-making contributes to generating ideas, designing and managing the project, and drawing conclusions from the experience” (Reason, 1999, p. 207), a proposal from one of the participants, and concurrence from others in the group, led us also to conceptualize culturally relevant pedagogy by generating a list of characteristics that fit under concept of self and others, social relations, and concept of knowledge instead (see Table 2).

At the surface level there appeared to be a lot of overlap between the two lists of culturally relevant characteristics. A closer examination of the two lists, however, revealed a fundamental difference between how Ladson-Billings and the teachers viewed cultural relevancy. Interestingly, in Ladson-Billings’s (1995b) description of culturally relevant pedagogy, she wrote very little about the students’ culture. Most of her examples were about the teachers’ attitudes about the students, their emphasis on community building, and their style of teaching. Cultural relevance to Ladson-Billings was more about establishing a culture of high expectations, creating a community of learners, and critiquing knowledge as a socially constructed concept.

On the other hand, the participants’ concept of cultural relevance centered largely on the students themselves: their background, needs, family, and experiential knowledge. Everything else stemmed from a deep knowledge of the children, including how to push them toward higher level thinking skills, how to allow them to acquire and demonstrate knowledge in multiple ways, and how to make learning meaningful to them. The participants took to heart the word culture in their understanding of the term. This finding was consistent with their overemphasis on cultural competence in the interviews.

The disparity in the two lists was an interesting find that warrants much more attention in scholarly research. Why predominantly White educators primarily focus on minority students’ home culture when conceptualizing culturally relevant pedagogy rather than a wider culture that embraces high expectations and collegial support from the school, the community, and society at large may speak more to the pervasive issues of power, privilege, and prejudice. At present, however, such speculations cannot be substantiated without further inquiry.

Applying Culturally Relevant Pedagogy to Lesson Planning

After having collectively identified the characteristics of what the participants viewed as culturally relevant pedagogy, at the subsequent inquiry group meeting we broke off into groups to examine two curriculum guides that the teachers currently used in their classrooms. One of the teachers, Bob, had brought in a science unit on water using the Full Option Science System kit, which is a popular hands-on science module adopted by many schools around the United States. Immediately, the teachers began to engage in an informal conversation about the growing concern for water scarcity, particularly in light of the realities of global warming and population increase. That sparked a conversation between
Will and Bob about how fresh water sources all over the United States are diminishing. With lakes and rivers drying up all over the United States, Bob noted with irony that pretty soon there would be stricter immigration control along the Canada–U.S. border than along the Mexico–U.S. border. This later also led to a discussion about Hurricane Katrina and how Bob had engaged a group of fifth graders in a conversation about whether the displacement of minorities might be racially driven.

Just in this short conversation, we turned a simple concept of water into what could be a lesson that touches on social and racial inequalities, environmental and social concerns, and higher level thinking skills. This example showed that unlike what many educators may believe, science is not a subject that is culture and value free. Educators who are mindful of culturally relevant pedagogy can turn a seemingly neutral topic such as water into one that utilizes the students’ background and experiences to promote rigorous academic learning and sociopolitical consciousness.

Concurrently, Karen, Jamie, and Amy broke into a small group to discuss a third grade math lesson on measuring temperatures. The curriculum guide that they used was from Math Investigations, a hands-on exploratory approach to understanding mathematical concepts that was designed by Technical Education Research Centers. The lesson entailed multiple objectives: learning to read a thermometer in Fahrenheit and Celsius, graphing temperatures of different U.S. cities, and understanding the concept of negative numbers. To make the lesson more culturally relevant, the teachers decided to graph the temperatures of the students’ cities of birth. They also discussed the incorporation of different countries’ climates to help students understand that things such as snow and humidity are not experienced globally. But in the end, they criticized the volume of objectives crammed into each lesson and how it was virtually impossible to cover all of the mathematical concepts in sufficient detail. Karen pointed out, “You only have seventy minutes a day to teach math, and then they have to pass the test.” In essence, they were asking the question, would the incorporation of culturally relevant pedagogy impede the students’ mastery in math?

I, however, entered the conversation from a different angle. I suggested to the teachers that perhaps a discussion on U.S. insistence on the use of Fahrenheit as a system of measurement when no other country uses it might be fruitful. In other words, I raised the question of whether it was appropriate for the United States to compel the rest of the world to continue the use of the English system for the sole purpose of maintaining economic relations with the United States. This comment, however, drew sharp criticisms from Karen for my seemingly anti-American stance, which led her to question whether the imposition of one’s values in the name of culturally relevant pedagogy rendered one sociopolitically conscious. Karen’s resistance to my proposition not only supported Ladson-Billings’s (2006) claim that teachers often lacked the awareness of larger sociopolitical injustices but also suggested that there may be confusion between ideological imposition with that of

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concept of self and others</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ladson-Billings (1995b)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Believed that all the students were capable of academic success</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Saw their pedagogy as art—unpredictable, always in the process of becoming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Saw themselves as members of the community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Saw teaching as a way to give back to the community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Believed in a Freirean notion of “teaching as mining” or pulling knowledge out</td>
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<tr>
<td>Participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Be ready to learn from students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Be flexible to adapt to the needs of the students</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Be inclusive of all students’ experiential knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Know your students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Attend to the voices and stories of your students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Instill and create a community of belief in students’ success</td>
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<tr>
<th>Social relations</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ladson-Billings (1995b)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Maintain fluid student–teacher relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Demonstrate a connectedness with all of the students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Develop a community of learners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Encourage students to learn collaboratively and be responsible for another</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Tie curriculum to family connections</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Encourage higher level thinking skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Set high expectations for all students</td>
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<td>• Bring in outside resources</td>
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<th>Concept of knowledge</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ladson-Billings (1995b)</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Knowledge is not static; it is shared, recycled, and constructed</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Knowledge must be viewed critically</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Teachers must be passionate about knowledge and learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Teachers must scaffold, or build bridges, to facilitate learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Assessment must be multifaceted, incorporating multiple forms of excellence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Acknowledge that there are multiple ways to acquire and demonstrate knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Be mindful to apply curriculum to real life circumstances</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Be critical of knowledge and social inequality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Teach students to be metacognitive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Be continuously learning and challenging knowledge</td>
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raising the students’ critical consciousness. The role of a culturally relevant pedagogue is to invite students to question, challenge, and critique structural inequalities that exist in society, not to replace one hegemonic ideology with another.

Describing the Process of Observing, Coding, and Reporting the Classroom Observations

In the following week, I observed one lesson in each of the five teachers’ classrooms that they had prepared with culturally relevant pedagogy in mind. After the lesson observations, I realized that a reorganization of the checklist was necessary. Because my own understanding of culturally relevant pedagogy had evolved as a result of ongoing synthesis of the literature and the inquiry group discussions, I proposed to the participants that reframing the checklist under the headings of academic success, cultural competence, and sociopolitical consciousness might be more appropriate. It was this revised checklist that the teachers and I used to code the classroom observation transcripts. In Table 3, I provide a brief description of each of the lessons and the number of instances in which the lessons exemplified academic success, cultural competence, and sociopolitical consciousness.

As can be seen, the participants and I differed greatly in our coding of the classroom observation transcripts. In general, the teachers saw fewer instances of their use of culturally relevant pedagogy in their lessons than I did. This was largely because the teachers coded in chunks whereas I coded for every occurrence. For example, although Madison marked the code 2 for cultural competence for the entire discussion on what the students knew about butterflies, I marked 2 for every instance in which she attempted to tap into the students’ prior knowledge. A more interesting finding, however, was that the teachers overwhelmingly emphasized the components of academic success and cultural competence in their use of culturally relevant pedagogy, and in some cases to the exclusion of sociopolitical consciousness. This seemed to suggest that the teachers possessed an incomplete understanding of culturally relevant pedagogy and perceived sociopolitical consciousness as incongruous with the teaching of academic standards, or at least with the pressure to pass the test.

Indeed, when asked to reflect on her own lesson, Jamie readily admitted that she struggled with the concepts of sociopolitical consciousness while planning for the lesson. She particularly felt frustrated by the exercise because even though she wanted to go beyond teaching the academic content itself, “there [was] always the pressure to cover the material.” As a special education teacher whose students were already performing well below proficiency, pushing her students to meet grade-level expectations was primary on her agenda. Her singular focus on the students’ academic success foreclosed her understanding of how to use the elements of cultural competence and sociopolitical consciousness in her lesson.

One way to have pushed Jamie’s lesson toward sociopolitical consciousness while maintaining the rigor of high academic learning would have been to do as Will proposed later at the inquiry group meeting:

You’d have to consciously change the lesson… you’d have to talk about like when African Americans were considered 3/5 of a vote… What does that mean? Out of every 5 African Americans, you only counted 3… they were counted only for 3/5 of a human being.

In other words, Will was aware that culturally relevant pedagogy asked for an entirely new way of thinking. Rather than teaching fractions from a purely mathematical perspective, culturally relevant pedagogy required teachers to teach mathematics “as a racialized endeavor” (Martin, 2009) to challenge social and racial inequalities.

Another example of teachers’ incomplete understanding of culturally relevant pedagogy was Karen’s lesson on the founding of the English colonies. Although she did touch on sociopolitical consciousness when she led the students into a conversation about who was in the country before the colonization of the Europeans and whose voices were missing from the curriculum, it was still puzzling as to why she did not challenge the teaching of the Eurocentric curriculum itself considering that her class was largely composed of Latina/o and Hispanic students. At one point in her lesson, she went over the dates on the timeline presented in the book. When she came across the date 1565, she asked the class what was written in the caption. One student answered, “First colony, St. Augustine, Florida. Spain.” In response, Karen said, “The first one was in Florida. Great. Let’s go on now… What comes next?” In so doing, she quickly brushed over what could have been a salient point in connecting the students’ own cultures to U.S. history. Furthermore, when they came across the date 1620, Karen showed her bias when she said out loud, “Ah, I like that date—1620. Now why did I say I liked 1620?”

When I questioned her later in the inquiry group meeting why it was necessary for every student in America to know something about 1620, the Plymouth, and the Mayflower but not about Cortez, the Spanish conquistadors, and the Franciscan frères who sought to evangelize Native Americans through flagellation, slavery, and deculturization, Karen’s response to me was,

Because it’s the [state] curriculum and because it becomes too big to do all this [in the third grade]. It is repeated in junior high and other colonies are focused on then, when they are cognitively ready to take in more info at once.

In other words, Karen not only found it unnecessary to introduce sociopolitical issues when they deviated from the academic standards but also felt that it was premature to raise the students’ awareness to racial and social injustices at such a young age.
Given her position as a White, middle-class female, this assumption showed deep cultural biases. According to Conrad and Sellers (2005), African American families begin instructing their children about racism in society and preparing them to successfully navigate in an oppressive environment through a process of racial socialization at a very young age. Thus, Karen’s attempt to shelter minority students from addressing racially sensitive issues revealed a misunderstanding of culturally relevant pedagogy, which may be because of an unintended cultural bias or an unpreparedness to confront issues that are racially and socially charged.

Postinterview Observations

Overall, our inquiry group discussions on the classroom lessons were enlightening for some, were uncomfortable for others, and raised challenges to culturally relevant theory in general. Although none of the participants made any mention of academic success and sociopolitical consciousness when describing their understanding of culturally relevant pedagogy in the preinterviews, this was not so in the postinterviews. In the end, some continued to primarily focus on the cultural competence component of the theory, such as when Karen defined the culturally relevant pedagogy as “being mindful of who’s in front of you . . . and [bringing] into the classroom their culture and [making] it part of your teaching,” or when Madison articulated it as having kids “share their culture with the class and celebrate them to make everyone feel that they belong here.” On the other hand, others began to think more about the sociopolitical consciousness component of the theory, such as when Bob argued that to promote good citizenship, the students needed to be “[prepared] to deal with

Table 3. Coding of Classroom Observations for Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Subject and grade</th>
<th>Lesson description</th>
<th>Coder</th>
<th>AS</th>
<th>CC</th>
<th>SC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jamie</td>
<td>Math, 3rd (SPED)</td>
<td>Jamie reviewed the concepts of numerator, denominator, writing and reading fractions, and comparing fractions through direct teaching. She then challenged the students to make a sum of 1 using cutout fractional pieces. Although the task was baffling at first, the students all eventually came up with complicated equations such as $1/2 + 1/4 + 1/4 = 1$.</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Bob</td>
<td>Science, K</td>
<td>Bob introduced the concepts of air currents by showing the students a video of him parachuting out of an airplane to demonstrate how classroom learning can be brought to real life. He then took the class out to the blacktop to show how air moves bubbles.</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>0</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Madison</td>
<td>Language arts, K</td>
<td>Madison read a story called “From Caterpillar to Butterfly” because the class had decided the day before that they wanted to learn more about butterflies. As she read the story, she asked questions about where students had seen butterflies and what they knew about butterflies. She also introduced vocabulary words such as molt, chrysalis, and metamorphosis.</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>0</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Karen</td>
<td>Social studies, 3rd</td>
<td>Karen taught a lesson on the founding of the English colonies where the students read from If You Lived in Colonial Times. She went through each date on the timeline with the students, particularly emphasizing the years 1620 and 1776. She asked probing questions about why the Pilgrims decided to come to the new land, who was there before the arrival of the Europeans, and how the students might be able to connect their stories to the colonists’ experiences.</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Amy</td>
<td>Class meeting, 3rd</td>
<td>Amy capitalized on a “teachable moment” to hold a discussion about respect for racial and cultural differences. One African American girl shared that sometimes other kids would tell her that she couldn’t play in their games. When Amy asked why that was so, a Latino boy answered, “Maybe it’s because they don’t like your race.” The conversation turned into whether it was possible or even advantageous to be color blind to skin color when it is the most noticeable aspect of one’s physiology.</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>27</td>
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Note: AS = Academic Success; CC = Cultural Competence; SC = Sociopolitical Consciousness; R = Researcher’s coding; P = Participant’s coding.
the shortcomings in America,” or when Amy challenged the standard curriculum for being “written for one group of students, but not for all the groups.” Nonetheless, the majority still felt that culturally relevant pedagogy was more fitting for classroom meetings and teachable moments than for instruction of core content areas. In essence, the participants continued to have difficulty conceptualizing culturally relevant pedagogy as a three-pronged tool, where the promotion of the students’ academic success and critical consciousness is inseparable from that of cultural competence.

Discussion

In our effort to define, implement, and assess the practice of culturally relevant pedagogy, the participants and I repeatedly encountered obstacles that led us to question the viability of the theory for practice. Morrison et al. (2008) found that one of the challenges to culturally relevant pedagogy was that the theory “ultimately clashes with the traditional ways in which education is carried out in our society, thus making [it] seem herculean to many teachers” (p. 444). The participants in the present study, especially the newer teachers who were just becoming familiar with the curriculum, did in fact find culturally relevant pedagogy a seemingly impossible task. The teachers also felt overwhelmed by the limited length of time to cover the material so that the students met grade-level proficiency. These concerns were likewise echoed by Morrison et al., who argued that culturally relevant pedagogy is ultimately a constructivist pedagogy, which stands in sharp contrast to a standardized curriculum and high-stakes tests. And although they continued to praise culturally relevant pedagogy as a “task that teachers must undertake if they wish to help fulfill our society’s ideals for equitable education for all” (p. 445), they did “call for future research that seeks to . . . parse out the complexities” (p. 444).

This study did just that, with unsettling results. The complexities extend much further than the challenges of designing time-consuming, real-life lessons that reflect a commitment to culturally relevant pedagogy in the face of high-stakes testing. The concerns that the participants raised spoke prominently to three critical challenges to the theorizing, research, and practice of social justice education. These challenges include the need to (a) raise the race consciousness of educators and encourage them to confront their own cultural biases, (b) address systemic roots of racism in school policies and practices, and (c) adequately equip preservice and inservice teachers with the knowledge of how to implement theories into practice.

Raising the Race Consciousness of Educators

Gay and Howard (2000) cautioned, “Unless European American teachers seriously analyze and change their cultural biases and ethnic prejudices (toward self and others) they are not likely to be very diligent and effective in helping students to do likewise” (p. 8). Indeed, in their attempt to utilize culturally relevant pedagogy in their lesson planning, the participants revealed cultural biases about what they expected the students to know and what knowledge was considered important. Their frustration with the lack of time to plan and the pressure to cover materials seemed to suggest that although the participants embraced the principles behind the theory, their unspoken preference for the traditional curriculum prevented their conceptualization of how to effectively use the pedagogy in their lesson planning.

It was not particularly surprising that it was Amy, the only non-White teacher in the study, who was willing to engage her students in thoughtful and self-reflective discussions about race and racism. Her status as a Black immigrant female in the United States afforded her a different outlook about the school experiences of minority students and the importance of cultural relevance in classroom instruction than her colleagues. Sleeter (2001) argued that although “preservice students of color bring a richer multicultural knowledge base to teacher education than do White students” (p. 95), White students’ race consciousness could be raised through inquiry-based scaffolding strategies such as learning to question, modeling, and supporting systems (Sleeter et al., 2004). Well-intentioned educators need to thoroughly examine how their hidden biases may undermine the value of culturally relevant pedagogy and how they may inadvertently sabotage the theory’s effectiveness in classroom instruction.

Addressing the Systemic Roots of Racism in School Policies and Practices

The participants’ skepticism toward the effectiveness of culturally relevant pedagogy also spoke to a larger issue of the persistence of racism in American schooling. Literature on CRT is fraught with examples of how school practices contribute to the suppression of intellectual rights of minority children (Ladson-Billings, 1998) and how culturally sensitive rhetoric often masks the interest-convergence agenda of the dominant group (Chapman, 2007; Milner, 2008). For example, on the surface, it may appear that the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) has the best interest of underprivileged minority students in mind, particularly with its promise to “close the achievement gap . . . between minority and nonminority students, and between disadvantaged children and their more advantaged peers.” A deeper analysis of the statute, however, suggests that it may be inadvertently increasing, not decreasing, the failure rates of students already struggling in school (Gay, 2007).

Throughout the study, the participants repeatedly targeted NCLB as the singular cause of their having to narrow their instruction to focus on test coverage, reduce their usage of multicultural curriculum, and place an overemphasis on teaching basic literacy and numeracy skills. Although the participants in general lauded NCLB for its effort to level the playing field, raise
expectations for the students so that the teachers could not discount a group of kids, and stop the separation of power, knowledge, and authority, they also sharply criticized the statute for its poor implementation at the policy level and the punitive measures imposed on the educators for failing to make adequate yearly progress. Moreover, they complained about how stifling the district’s mandate to use scripted curriculum in mathematics had been, how wrong it felt to waste valuable instructional time teaching test-taking strategies, and how shameful it was that the school had virtually eliminated the training of students for citizenship and democracy at the expense of “producing efficient economic units” (Bob, preinterview). One of the unintended consequences of NCLB, therefore, had been to increasingly normalize the curriculum in the district and push nontested curriculum to the wayside so that all students were learning the same thing, at the same time, and at the same rate. Although the district’s rhetoric continued to promote culturally responsive teaching and differentiated instruction, teachers were at a loss as to how they were expected to teach scripted curriculum in an individualized or culturally relevant manner.

Gay (2007) argued that overtones of racism could be found in the false promises of NCLB, which claims to ensure high-quality educational opportunities and achievement outcomes for everyone, when instead it may be “preserving the advantages of some groups over others, and sorting out those who mainstream society historically has deemed the ‘intellectually fittest’ from the socially undeserving, than about providing genuine high-quality, egalitarian education for all students” (p. 282). As standard-based curriculum increasingly deposits the essential basic knowledge necessary for students to survive and function in the existing social world, minority students’ knowledge, culture, and language are also becoming increasingly standardized. It would appear then that NCLB seeks to maintain, rather than to alter, the racialized status quo, which flies directly in the face of culturally relevant pedagogy.

**Adequately Equip Teachers With the Knowledge of “How”**

Gay and Howard (2000) lamented, “We seriously doubt that existing preservice programs are adequately preparing teachers to meet the instructional challenges of ethnically, racially, socially, and linguistically diverse students in the 21st century” (p. 1). Their sentiment was shared by Ladson-Billings (1999), who argued that “multicultural teacher education continues to suffer from a thin, poorly developed, fragmented literature that provides an inaccurate picture of the kind of preparation teachers receive to teach in culturally diverse classrooms” (p. 114). Their distress is not without substance, as evidence from this study can testify.

As we worked to apply culturally relevant pedagogy into curricular planning, the question that kept surfacing was “How?” Will represented the participants’ frustration well when he commented,

How do you do [culturally relevant pedagogy] without deviating too far from the curriculum? Are our kids really mature enough to address such deep inequalities? Do they even know how? Do we as teachers? . . . It’s a great idea . . . [but] how do we do it?

The call for help signifies a great shortcoming of teacher preparation programs and professional development programs. Not enough is being done to extend ongoing support to practitioners who have accepted and are willing to implement scholarly theories into their pedagogy. Perhaps a more sustainable, more collaborative methodology is needed to support the teachers’ implementation of a theory into practice. Sleeter and Delgado Bernal (2004) found that even when they worked with teachers who already embraced the ideals of critical pedagogy, they ended up dismissing it because they did not know what to do with it in their classrooms. This study advocates a more hands-on, more praxis-oriented, and more collaborative model of research design that calls for inquiry-based discourse and iterative action and reflection to further support the work of teachers.

**Conclusion**

This project attempted to address two critical areas of teacher education: raising the race consciousness of educators and working with practitioners to implement culturally relevant pedagogy into classroom instruction. Unlike most studies discussed in the literature, this study took an on-site, coparticipatory approach to working with administrators and teachers rather than with students in teacher preparation programs. The findings were in part overwhelming because they highlighted deep structural complexities in resolving issues of cultural bias among educators, the persistence and prevalence of racism in school settings, and the shortcomings of preservice programs and inservice professional development to adequately prepare teachers to apply culturally relevant pedagogy to their practice. At the same time, however, the findings were in part underwhelming because this study had several limitations. First, it was a small-scale study involving eight participants at one school. Even though the study was conducted in the most ideal of circumstances—with teachers who were leaders in the school and in the district, a principal who was committed to racial equality, and a district that made eliminating the racial achievement gap its top priority—the findings cannot be broadly generalized. Second, it was greatly limited in time. Raising educators’ race consciousness is not something that can be done in one college course, in a professional development seminar, or, in this case, in 8 weeks of inquiry group sessions over the course of 3 months.

Despite the limitations, however, this study gives hope for what a study of larger magnitude and of lengthier time frame might yield. Throughout the inquiry group meetings, the participants and I wrestled with just how systemically rooted
racism was in the policies and practices of schools, and we pushed one another toward a greater consciousness of White privilege, cultural bias, and color blindness. Moreover, we could also see small, but tangible, evidence of progress toward the application of culturally relevant pedagogy that went beyond celebrating holidays and highlighting minority students’ origins of birth but instead touched on addressing social and racial inequalities. Although the existing literature is inundated with research that demonstrates how racism is prevalent in schools, how teachers are underprepared to address issues of diversity, and how a rift exists between theory and practice, this study reveals how the researcher and the practitioners can address these very issues at the ground level through inquiry-based discourse and ongoing reflection. The void in scholarly research is not in the knowledge of theories but in the knowledge of how to implement them, particularly in a way that has a wide-reaching and sustainable impact on teacher education.

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1. The names of the school, the district, and the participants have been replaced by pseudonyms.

References


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