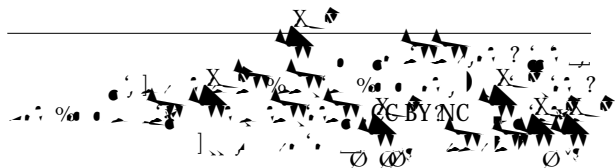


# How Pedagogy Makes the Difference in U.S. Schools

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*Emerging from the modern U.S. civil rights era, scholars have promoted ethnic and multicultural studies as strategies for improving the educational performance of students who have traditionally been marginalized in classrooms nationwide. Among the most marginalized are students who have experienced historic discrimi-*



Black people only made appearances as powerless, voiceless, and enslaved people. People of East Asian descent were described briefly in the context of their arrival to the U.S. west coast through Angel Island in the 1910s, and as the “Yellow Peril” when Japanese Americans were rounded up and interred during World War II. There was virtually no mention of Latine peoples except to discuss the Battle of the Alamo and the Bracero Program that brought them across the U.S. border during the labor shortages that developed during and after World War II.<sup>2</sup>

One of the school-based results of the civil rights era was a broadening of curriculum offerings with the development of programs in Afro-American or Black studies, Chicano studies, Native American or American Indian studies, and Asian American studies. The inclusion of these ethnic studies courses represented hard-fought battles in state and local school districts over curricula. For the most part, these courses were included as electives at the secondary level and sometimes as standalone units of study in both elementary and secondary schools. By the late 1970s and early 1980s, we began to see multi-ethnic and multicultural course offerings that represented a more integrated approach to the curriculum and to combat the trivializing of course content about diverse groups.

Pioneers in the work of multicultural education include scholars such as James A. Banks, Carl A. Grant, Geneva Gay, and Carlos E. Cortes, who published important foundational works about the content that was regularly omitted from most school courses in history, social studies, and literature.<sup>3</sup> Despite a growing number of titles and a seeming demand for multicultural content, this shift was not sufficient to help teachers who were prepared in conventional teacher education programs to weave new topics into their standard curriculum or to teach in ways different from how they taught the mainstream curriculum. Education scholar Larry Cuban argued that the students who struggled with conventional courses in U.S. history continued to struggle in ethnic studies courses that were taught in the same way.<sup>4</sup> Despite the change in curriculum content, students were still expected to read textbooks, listen to lectures, take tests, and write essays and reports.

In the early 1990s, Banks conceptualized what he termed, “the 5 dimensions of multicultural education” to combat the common misconception that multicultural education was something solely appropriate for social studies, English, art, and music classes, but had nothing to do with areas such as mathematics and the sciences.<sup>5</sup> This perception emanated from the idea that multicultural education was merely about content integration: adding content about diverse others into the dominant narrative. Banks went on to explore notions of knowledge construction, prejudice reduction, fostering an empowering school culture and social structure, and equity pedagogy.

Knowledge construction asks teachers to consider how the information they taught was built. For example, why is it that U.S. high school students can easily name the nations of Europe but struggle to recall more than a handful of African

nations? All nations appear on a world map, but because the curriculum usually depicts Africa as a continent consumed by war, famine, and disease, students rarely consider the individual African nations and their various struggles for independence. Students are often unaware that the maps they use are drawn in ways that

linguistic hierarchies in place and render the content changes in classrooms less powerful. Students are cognizant of which students are chosen for special honors such as gifted or advanced placement classes, as well as those regularly assigned to discretionary special education programs and who are regularly suspended and expelled from school. In schools that do not foster an empowering school culture, students come to believe that there is something inherent in their racial, ethnic, or linguistic identity that suggests they are worthy (or not worthy) of school-based benefits and privileges.

Finally, Banks's dimensions include what he terms equity pedagogy. In his article with Cherry McGee Banks, they define equity pedagogy as "teaching strategies and classroom environments that help students from diverse racial, ethnic, and cultural groups attain the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to function effectively and help create and perpetuate a just, humane, and democratic society."<sup>8</sup> As multicultural education emerged, much of the energy went into correcting curriculum errors and distortions, as well as infusing the school content with broader information from perspectives beyond what was previously available. Curriculum developers and educators paid limited attention to the way we taught students, and how our pedagogical practices might disadvantage the students who were struggling with the older, more Eurocentric curriculum. It is this feature of multicultural education in K–12 schools that I will explore in the remainder of this essay.

I have been researching and writing about what I have termed *culturally relevant pedagogy* for more than thirty years.<sup>9</sup> The genesis for this inquiry came from my observation that, although teachers had access to increasingly diverse curriculum materials such as textbooks, trade books, curriculum units, classroom posters, and decorations, the students from marginalized racial and ethnic groups were continuing to struggle to achieve academic success. These materials were not changing the ways teachers approached teaching. Students as young as eight years old (that is, third graders) often experience lecturing as a dominant form of instruction. Teachers are "telling" students information rather than having them inquire, discuss, and grapple with ideas and concepts.

Despite what was seen in the 1960s and 1970s, curriculum- and instruction-revolution classrooms in the United States remain remarkably similar.<sup>10</sup> According to educator Martin Haberman, many teachers, especially those who work in schools serving the most marginalized students, practice what he termed "the pedagogy of poverty."<sup>11</sup> This teaching consists of a steady routine of "giving information, asking questions, giving directions, making assignments, monitoring seatwork, reviewing assignments, giving tests, reviewing tests, assigning homework, reviewing homework, settling disputes, punishing noncompliance, mark-



example of learning that a culturally relevant teacher looks for. Seeing a student persist after they began the year easily frustrated with difficult tasks is another example of growth that matters to a culturally relevant teacher. These individual markers are combined with external measures like test scores.

**C**ulturally relevant pedagogy allows for a variety of evaluative measures. Students might create digital records of what they have accomplished and present a video, an electronic poster, or a multimedia presentation. Cultur-

mate and make sense in the lives and experiences of others. This decentering can help teachers understand the importance of context. The field of anthropology often seeks to “make the familiar strange.”<sup>17</sup> In 1956, anthropologist Horace Miner published the classic essay “Body Ritual Among the Nacirema,” which describes seemingly barbaric and painful rituals among a group of people he identifies as the “Nacirema.”<sup>18</sup> It is not until readers discover that “Nacirema” is “American” spelled backwards do they realize that Miner is describing dental practices among most people in the United States. Miner made the familiar strange.

The work of helping students develop cultural competence is not about teaching Black students static notions about Black culture or Latine students a homogeneous set of concepts and ideas about Latine culture. Instead, cultural competence is about recognizing that students arrive in classrooms with a set of cultural practices that reflect aspects of both a larger racial, ethnic, or linguistic culture, and a local culture found in the neighborhoods and communities in which they live.<sup>19</sup> In addition to those cultural practices, the work of the culturally relevant teacher is to help students remain grounded in their home cultures while acquiring fluency and flexibility in at least one additional culture. For students who experience marginalization in the classroom, that additional culture is most likely what schools regard as mainstream culture. This approach also includes helping students who are members of the cultural mainstream acquire fluency in a culture beyond their own. In an ideal world, all students should leave PK–12 schooling multiculturally competent because they will be entering a culturally and linguistically global culture and will need to function well in it. Minimally, all students should leave school bi-cultural, well-grounded in the language, history, culture, customs, and traditions of their own culture and fluent in at least one other. This is what we mean by cultural competence.

An example of fostering cultural competence might be a music educator teaching students about the term “classical.” A culturally relevant teacher recognizes that all cultures have traditions of classical music. Thus, it is important not to assume that “classical” is reserved for music and musicians from Europe. There is American classical music derived from African American music known as jazz. There is Chinese classical music. There is Mexican classical music. There is African classical music. Broadening the notion of classical is one example of helping students develop cultural fluency or competency. Another example might be helping students understand that all cultures have traditions of storytelling. Sharing literature across cultures can help students see and value the similarities and uniqueness found in storytelling cultures within and across nations.

The third component of the culturally relevant pedagogy equilateral triangle is perhaps the most ignored. This is the component identified as sociopolitical or critical consciousness. This is the aspect of school-based teaching and learning that answers students’ often expressed question, “So what?” Students ask, “Why

do we have to learn this?” Too often, teachers respond with pat answers such as “One day you’re going to need this!” It does not take long for students to recognize the fallacy of this response. Most students know that they will probably not use the Pythagorean theorem outside of a geometry classroom or they will not find a workplace that will require them to conjugate French verbs. The socio-political or critical consciousness that culturally relevant teachers seek to foster is one that helps students find answers to problems they grapple with. The geometry lesson might be especially important if students’ families are buying a carpet and want to make sure they are not overbuying. In a critical mathematics class in Chicago, I witnessed a teacher help students understand why having a command of the concept of compound interest was important in their everyday lives.<sup>20</sup> When students saw how paying higher interest rates impacted the cost of housing in their community versus what their upper middle-income peers were paying in a suburban community, they were incensed at the inequity. They wanted to know more about how to calculate interest so they could make better decisions about their own spending.

In another publication, I described a social studies classroom in which a student was upset about his school’s “hat rule.”<sup>21</sup> The hat rule stated that no students could wear a hat inside the building. The student, an African American male, arrived in the classroom visibly upset and his teacher asked what was wrong. “This school is racist!” he declared. “Why do you say that?” his teacher asked. The student relayed his observation that only Black boys were stopped and sanctioned for wearing a hat in the building. The teacher challenged him to produce evidence of his claim. When it was clear that the student only had anecdotes from himself and his friends, the teacher helped the class design a survey and data collection strategy to determine the validity of his claim. By dividing the class into fourths, there was a small team dispersed to survey each year—freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors. The students collected demographic data from each student they surveyed and asked: “Have you ever been stopped for wearing a hat in the building? If yes, what happened after you were stopped?” Once the students compiled the data, they were able to affirm the student’s initial observation. Black male students were heavily surveilled and sanctioned for wearing hats in the building. The students produced a report they shared with the school principal and the principal confronted the school staff saying, “Either we will have a hat rule, or we will not have a hat rule. What we won’t have is a hat rule for certain students!” The teacher who helped the students design the study pointed out that learning mathematics, English, and social studies helped them to undertake the work that allowed them to solve a problem they identified.

In today’s political climate, many teachers are afraid to take on what they see as highly charged topics and ideas related to race, diversity, and equity. Increasingly, states and local school districts are prohibiting teachers from focusing on equity



issues related to race, class, gender, and sexuality. Instead of arguing that instruction related to diversity, equity, and inclusion helps make stronger and more active democratic citizens, some teachers are self-censoring because they are told teaching related to diversity, equity, and inclusion is indoctrination. The misinformation, distortions, and omissions of the past are making their way back into many classrooms. From the fractious fight over the African American studies advanced placement course to the banning of scores of children's and young adult books, we see a suppression of knowledge and information students need to be the kind of active and engaged citizens who can make important decisions in a democratic society.<sup>22</sup>

Taken together, student learning, cultural competence, and sociopolitical or critical consciousness provide a vision of culturally relevant pedagogy aimed at decreasing the educational disparities that students experience in schools. However, unless we recommit to two important promises that we have made to the nation's students decades ago, we will continue to struggle to narrow the outcome inequities that plague the United States. We have yet to live up to the mandate of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision to desegregate our schools and the promise of *Serrano v. Priest* to equitably fund our schools.<sup>23</sup> All our concerns about teaching

gloom that COVID-19 created, there was a bit of a silver lining, as explained in nov-

families. Communities cherished those moments. In today's classrooms, adults must take advantage of students' need for relationships. Culturally relevant pedagogical approaches seek deeper student-to-student and teacher-to-student relationships because interpersonal relationships are crucial to student success. We need to organize schools around these relationships. The mental health challenges COVID-19 presented for our students have been substantial. At least 204,000 children and teens in the United States lost parents or in-house caregivers because of COVID-19.<sup>30</sup> Our students need more access to adults who can assist teachers, counselors, social workers, and school psychologists. This may mean making changes to staffing ratios to ensure that students (and their families) do not slip through the cracks.

Second, the COVID-19 pandemic has taught us that time is fungible. The insistence that school-based learning only takes place from about 8:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. Monday through Friday was challenged by the emergency precautions taken in 2020 and 2021. Educators in schools doing virtual/remote teaching and asynchronous learning soon realized that it was possible (and sometimes desirable) to assemble students at atypical hours. High school students were very amenable to meeting at times outside of conventional school hours, particularly those students who were working to help support their families. COVID-19 also helped us reconsider whether credit-hours is the best way to evaluate student academic progress. Perhaps we are now ready for systems with more focus on competency. We should seriously consider developing evaluation systems that allow students to demonstrate mastery of knowledge, skills, and abilities rather than merely counting how many hours students spend seated in a classroom.

Third, COVID-19 taught us that technology must move to the center of the teaching-learning experience. Before the pandemic, many schools had technology on the periphery of their classrooms. Educators consulted IT personnel when their wi-fi connections or email did not work. COVID-19 helped us understand that we could and should have more robust use of technology. Today, most classrooms can digitally record and archive lessons, and this may mean that student absences can become a thing of the past. Teachers and their students can create classroom webpages allowing students to log on and catch up on whatever they missed. These videos can also serve as an opportunity for students to review concepts and information they may not have understood in real time. The lessons we learned from teaching during the earliest years of the pandemic should bring technology into substantive conversations about curriculum and instruction, not just technical tasks. Educators should use technology to improve their management strategies for grading and other recordkeeping. They should also use technology as a communication device. Texting parents and caregivers, creating parent portals, and posting important information online are vehicles for giving students, parents, and caregivers ready access to what is transpiring in schools and classrooms.

Fourth, COVID-19 has revealed that schools are an important site of support for students' and their families' personal needs. When schools closed in the United States during emergency protocols, one of the first responses of schools was to provide food for students and their families. The amount of food insecurity among our students is startling. Far too many public-school students are dependent on schools to provide ten meals per week: breakfast and lunch, Monday through Friday. Schools were required to provide mobile devices and wi-fi for many students. In cold weather climates, schools also must provide warm weather clothing: hats, gloves, scarfs, coats, and boots. These COVID-19 revelations can provide us with



## endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Carter G. Woodson, *The Mis-Education of the Negro* (The Associate Publishers, 1934), 12.
- <sup>2</sup> Scholars vacillate between the terms *Latinal o*, *Latinx*, and more recently *Latine*. While there is no agreed upon term, I use the term *Latine* to acknowledge those who have national origins in Latin America and the Caribbean, who may speak Spanish as a first language.
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- <sup>4</sup> Larry Cuban, "Ethnic Content and 'White' Instruction," *Phi Delta Kappan* 53 (5) (1972): 270–273.
- <sup>5</sup> James A. Banks, "Multicultural Education: Historical Development, Dimensions, and Practice," *Review of Research in Education* 119 (1993): 3–49.
- <sup>6</sup> Uma Hornish, "Why Your View of the World May be Completely Wrong," Quantitative Methods in the Social Sciences, University of Michigan, <https://sites.lsa.umich.edu/qmss/2022/06/14/why-your-view-of-the-world-may-be-completely-wrong> (accessed on November 26, 2023).
- <sup>7</sup> Gloria Ladson-Billings, *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children*, 3rd ed. (Jossey Bass, 2022).
- <sup>8</sup> Cherry McGee Banks and James A. Banks, "Equity Pedagogy: An Essential Component of Multicultural Education," *Theory into Practice* 34 (3) (1995): 152.
- <sup>9</sup> Gloria Ladson-Billings, "Culturally Relevant Teaching: Effective Instruction for Black Students," *The College Board Review* 155 (1990): 20–25.
- <sup>10</sup> Larry Cuban, "The Open Classroom," *Education Next* 4 (2) (2004), <https://www.educationnext.org/theopenclassroom>
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- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 291.
- <sup>13</sup> Ladson-Billings, *The Dreamkeepers*.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>15</sup> Gloria Ladson-Billings, "It's Not the Culture of Poverty, It's the Poverty of Culture: The Problem with Teacher Education," *Anthropology & Education Quarterly* 37 (2) (2006): 104–109.
- <sup>16</sup> Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz, "An Archaeology of Self for Our Times: Another Talk to Teachers," *English Journal* 111 (5) (2022): 21–26.
- <sup>17</sup> Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (Basic Books, 1973).
- <sup>18</sup> Harold Miner, "Body Ritual Among the Nacirema," *American Anthropologist* 58 (3) (1956): 503–507.

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- <sup>19</sup> Kris Gutierrez and Barbara Rogoff, "Cultural Ways of Learning: Individual Traits or Repertoires of Practice," *Educational Researcher* 32 (5) (2003): 19–25.
- <sup>20</sup> Eric Gutstein, *Reading and Writing the World with Mathematics: Toward a Pedagogy for Social Justice* (Routledge, 2005).
- <sup>21</sup> Ladson-Billings, *The Dreamkeepers*.
- <sup>22</sup> Kasey Meehan and Jonathan Friedman, "Index of School Book Bans in America, April 20, 2023," <https://pen.org/report/banned-in-the-usa-state-laws-supercharge-book-suppression-in-school> and Anemona Hartcollis and Eliza Fawcett, "The College Board Strips Down Its A.P. Curriculum for African American Studies," *The New York Times*, February 1, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/01/us/college-board-advanced-placement-african-american-studies.html>
- <sup>23</sup> *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, 347 U.S. 483 (1954); and *Castro v. Priest*, 5 Cal.3d 584 (1971).
- <sup>24</sup> Grace Hauck, Karl Gelles, Veronica Bravo, and Mitchell Thorson, "Five Months In: A Timeline of How COVID-19 Has Unfolded in the U.S.," *USA Today*, April 21, 2020, <https://www.usatoday.com/in-depth/news/nation/2020/04/21/coronavirus-updates-how-covid-19-unfolded-u-s-timeline/2990956001>
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