Critical Pedagogy & Culturally Responsive Practice:  
Convergent Evidence in Practicing Teacher Research  
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In the current era of public education, many policy makers continue to see equity in terms of higher test scores. The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation of 2001 which advocates increased emphasis on standardized test scores has had an enormous impact on public education. While NCLB espouses the need to educate all children, it falls short of outlining how a teacher can be effective with culturally, linguistically, and ability diverse (CLAD) students or translating what the scores mean in relation to teacher effectiveness. Even though schools may continue to show gradual progress there has been no evidence of significant gains for minority children, children the law was suppose to help. This is due, in a large part, to the fact that high stakes tests “…do not demonstrate how our students have grown within a particular year in content knowledge… Instead, standardized tests point out how many of our students have not reached certain grade-level expectations, not the reason why (Olivos & Quintana de Valladolid, 2005, p. 288).” Many critics of NCLB have written articles, books, and given lectures on the impact of NCLB on education, especially on the education of minority students. As Linda Darling-Hammond (2004) articulates in Many Children Left Behind: How the No Child Left Behind Act is damaging our children and our schools, “…NCLB, as currently implemented, is more likely to harm than to help most of the students who are the targets of its aspirations, and it is more likely to undermine, some would even say destroy, the nation’s public education system than to improve it (p. 4).” Students of color are not seeing benefits from the NCLB reform, as policy makers would like the general public to believe. Instead, we find that they are suffering significant loses due to the extreme standardization of curriculum based on the dominant culture (White-Anglo culture), without taking into consideration the diverse world views that exist in many American public school classrooms in 2007. Most advocates for equal and empowering education for all children, especially for children of color, point to the fact that without
significant shifts in teacher attitudes, recruitment of minority teachers, retaining those teachers, and a critical investigation into the discursive and racist attitudes embedded in educational curriculum it is not possible to assume children of color will ever develop the voice and identity necessary for them to recognize and challenge the systems that continue to silence them (Olivos & Quintana de Valladolid, 2005). It is important to note that the realities of public education in the United States did not happen overnight nor will they disappear overnight.

With systems that alienate students from their own educational experience it is not surprising that many students of color are disengaged and disenfranchised by their own educational experience. As a result, they leave school believing there is no place for them in the school/educational culture. I believe that this process starts at a very early age. Students do not enter high school and decide that school is not for them. Their disengagement and lack of connection to the teacher, school culture, and most importantly, what they are learning happens the moment they enter public education. Therefore, early elementary education must begin to address this disconnect between school, student realities, student interests, and the curriculum taught.

What makes it possible for a teacher to connect in an authentic way with her students? How can she become an agent of change as opposed to continuing to perpetuate the hidden ideology that students of color do not have a place in education? Critical pedagogy and culturally responsive theories both provide a framework through which teachers can begin to reconnect students to what they are learning and show that education is for all, not just the select few that the teacher feels connected to socially, ethnically or linguistically.

Though critical pedagogy and culturally responsive theories have built a framework for educational practice few works have looked at what characteristics, attitudes, or practices
contribute to a teacher’s ability to embrace all students, while critically examining the social institutions they operate in. In an effort to shed light on what a good critical, culturally responsive teacher looks like several research articles were analyzed of convergent evidence. Through these articles teacher personality, life experience, practice and philosophical attitudes were investigated to help researchers understand and develop such dispositions in teachers and teacher education programs. The larger question being addressed through this analysis is does a teacher’s critical, culturally responsive approach increase achievement and encourage healthier identity development in students of color? The majority of articles used for this analysis deal with the teacher, yet the next step would be to investigate the correlation between teachers who identify or display critical, culturally competent philosophical attitudes and the students’ achievement and identity in those classrooms. This step is important in contributing to the validity and possibilities of critical, culturally competent educators to effect change and impact students’ lives in a positive and supportive way.

Critical Pedagogy

Critical pedagogy provides teachers with a way to begin questioning the material being taught and begin the investigation into the long held social and political factors that impact education. Education is never an apolitical act (Freire, 2002). In order to develop this attitude toward teaching and one’s own practice, it is necessary for teachers to first develop a critical view of the world, themselves, their practice, and the institution they operate in, before they can encourage such attitudes in their students. For “critical pedagogy compels us to acknowledge the profoundly historical and political nature of educational institutions and their practices, practices that are neither “accidental” nor “natural” (Olivos & Quintana de Valladolid, 2005, p. 284)”. Teachers need to feel comfortable with their own experiences and understanding of education
and socio-political ramifications of educating. Not only do teachers need to understand themselves, but they must being to encourage students to question the world around them. They should question the material they are being taught, the rules they follow, and how their minority or majority ethnic group is viewed in the larger social context. Critical pedagogy encourages the development of critical thinking and personal reflection skills to empower the individual to question the social and power structures around them. In this model of teaching, the teacher is no longer viewed as the sole source of knowledge. The teacher’s role shifts to that of co-constructor of knowledge. Mary Cowhey (2006), an elementary school teacher, in her book, *Black Ants and Buddhists: Thinking critically and teaching differently in the primary grades*, dedicated her work to her students and encourages educators to recognize, embrace, empower and marvel in what young children can learn and advocate for when they are truly and authentically engaged in their learning. “I choose to teach critically because I believe young children are capable of analyzing things far more than is usually expected of them. I choose to teach critically because it lets me keep learning alongside my students. I teach this way so that I can hear every child’s voice and see each jewel sparkle (p. 18).” Cowhey’s attitude toward teaching and each of her students embodies critical pedagogy, plus she shows how to extend the state prescribed curriculum in directions that were of interest to the students and the larger community. Her students did not just learn what the standard required for how to be a ‘good citizen,’ they lived, practiced, advocated, studied, and embraced the definitions they developed and connected to.

**Culturally Responsive Practice**

Culturally responsive practice encourages similar ideologies in that it recognizes the culture and social realities students face on a daily bases. “Teachers must learn how to
recognize, honor, and incorporate the personal abilities of student into their teaching strategies (Gay, 2000, p. 1).” Students must be able to see themselves in the school culture and curriculum. “Seeing” themselves must not be a continued enforcement of long held social stigmas or stereotypes, it must be an examination and investigation into why and how those stigma and stereotypes continue to perpetuate today. Geneva Gay (2000) points out that students of color frequently suffer from educational systems that do not understand them personally, culturally or socially. “Culturally responsive teaching is a means for unleashing the higher learning potentials of ethnically diverse students by simultaneously cultivating their academic and psychosocial abilities (p. 20).”

Convergent Evidence

In any given research article the author has chosen a particular lens through which to view the data. Individual research articles provide one side of usually very complex social phenomena around even more complex theoretical frameworks (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Critical pedagogy and culturally responsive theories have sparked numerous studies and countless articles summarizing those studies. One must begin to wonder what common elements exist between all of the studies and can those commonalities be identified as a framework for how critical pedagogy and culturally responsive practice looks in the classroom?

This particular investigation into the research that exists on critical pedagogy, culturally responsive practice and teaching practices in the elementary school years is in no way exhaustive due to the time limits and rather narrow established search parameters. Even still, it is possible to identify convergent evidence, evidence that was routinely identified in study after study (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Convergent evidence gains validity through repeated emphasis in the research articles being reviewed. Within this paper, it could be argued that the criteria for
article collection impacted the convergence. Yet, the power of numerous articles within one criteria setting that continuously call for similar teaching practices is significant. Teacher attitudes toward students and certain types of curriculum is powerful and strengthens the argument that many of the elements identified as critical pedagogy and culturally responsive teacher practices should be more widely embraced for all students, especially for culturally, linguistically and ability diverse students.

Analysis of Research

The nine articles analyzed, discussed and investigated critical pedagogy and culturally responsive attitudes in practicing teachers. Themes were established by reading and re-reading each article while looking for emerging commonalities. Two main themes were identified as displaying convergence between all of the articles: teacher identity, and teacher-student relationships.

Teacher Identity

Critical pedagogy encourages educators to understand who they are and to understand how they are oppressed or are oppressors (Freire, 2002). From this understanding, reflection and personal awareness comes the ability to empower students, especially students of color, who have often become disconnected from their learning. Once a teacher is able to engage herself in critical thinking and reflection she is able to begin to see the need to engage her students in such activities. If she has developed a healthy identity, she sees and understands why it is important to foster such characteristics in her students. Teachers who engage in deep personal reflection and have well developed personal cultural/ethnic identities are better able to understand and therefore encourage the development of voice and personal identity in their students, for if a person has not investigated and studied the impact of race, ethnicity, language, ability, and
gender within their own view of society then it becomes very difficult to develop such skills in students (Gay, 2000). In analyzing the research, the continued reinforcement and emphasis placed on the personal identities of the teachers was a point of convergence between the various articles. Granted, each article discussed the teachers’ sense of self to varying degrees. The point of interest is that it appeared to be a rather salient point across the articles. Each of the nine articles discussed, in varying degrees, the identities of the teachers being researched. Several of the articles identified the teachers’ well developed personal identities as an important factor to how they interacted and related to students.

In Arce (2004), the teachers “…were asked to participate because of their expressed commitment to social justice and issues of equity. These teachers entered the profession with social consciousness, coupled with a history of community activism, a background in ethnic studies and with the goal of become critical educators (p. 234).” The strong identities of the teachers served to influence many aspects of their teaching, plus their social consciousness lead them to become particularly good critical and culturally responsive teachers. Since these teachers had well developed personal identities, before they entered the classroom, they were able to see where students needed support in developing their own voice/identity. Most of the teachers in the study used history as a starting point to investigate and examine what the students had already learned. The teachers offered the students an alternate story. During these discussions, the teachers were able to bring their own experiences as Latino/bilingual individuals to the classroom. Their strong sense of self coupled with their ability to critically question society and histories taught provided a space for critical dialogue and cultural investigation to occur.
A strong sense of personal/cultural identity was discussed in Ware (2006). In this article, the experiences of the two African American teachers, even though they were very different, had an enormous impact on how and what they taught. For one teacher, an experienced (30+ years) veteran, her own life experiences in segregated schools and her long experience encouraging and developing healthy identities in students and herself lead her to teach and support all students in her class. “Through these experiences, she developed a positive African American cultural identity and she supported her African American students and their parents (Ware, 2006, p. 450).” For the second teacher, even though she was much younger, her experiences as an African American woman had a significant impact on her and how she taught. She experienced being the only African American student in many of her classes and having only one African American teacher. Her ability to encourage and support her students came from her understanding of herself and her lived experiences (Ware, 2006). Even with their very different experiences, the two teachers relied heavily on their experiences and felt pride in their identities as African American women. Each used different strategies and content areas to weave in African American identity and encourage students to question the world around them. Ware (2006) identifies the enormous impact their identity had on their teaching as one of the key factors in their effectiveness. “…This study posits that teachers’ warm demander pedagogy is positively influenced by their cultural/racial identity. …Their strong identification with their African American/African heritage [was used] to encourage their students. These teachers also used their knowledge and comfort with their heritage to teach students in their school about their heritage (p. 451).”

In contrast, Bondy, Ross, Gallingane and Hambacher (2007), selected three teachers from three different ethnic groups (African American, Asian American and European American) in
order “… to explore potential cultural differences in their use of strategies (p. 332).” All three teachers felt it was important to discuss their own identities and school experiences with their students in order to form a relationship. The participants in this study identified themselves in a more generic sense. For example, one teacher revealed that her husband fixed her hair everyday, another used popular culture icons in a poster she prepared about herself, and still another revealed that she “loved to sing.” Even though these teachers shared parts of themselves with their students, their racial/ethnic identities did not appear to be discussed as it was reported in the article.

In Flores-Dueñas (2005) and Souto-Manning (2007), the teacher shared a direct connection to her students’ experiences. La Mæstra Miriam frequently drew on her own experience as an English Language Learner (ELL) when working with her students (Flores-Dueñas, 2005). She shared a similar cultural/ethnic background with the students; she was a first generation Mexican American. “I share about my life and I make time for them to share with me… I am trying to teach them how to share with others and to see their experiences are valuable (Flores-Dueñas, 2005, p. 243).” In comparison, Souto-Manning’s (2007) re-naming case study becomes of particular interest as she retells her own experience with her own name “Mariana.” Through her own identity development, she discusses the discursive impact of re-naming children in order to encourage assimilation into American culture. Her strong and well developed understanding of identity development is what lead her to visit with the child’s family and come to understand how and why re-naming practices are so frequently experienced by immigrant children.

In Cammarota and Romero (2006), their own students reminded them of the importance of sharing one’s self in order to gain trust and encourage dialogue. “…[one of the students] told
us after class that perhaps we would have an easier time getting the students to talk if we would open up and let them know us personally. …the students wanted to know something about our lives and family experiences (p. 20).” This quote demonstrates the power of revealing one’s self to students. The process of discussing, at the appropriate times, one’s racial/ethnic/cultural identity helps to start the building of the relationship that forms between student and teacher. This relationship is deeply rooted in the teacher’s own level of personal identity formation and cultural/racial/ethnic self awareness.

Relationships

Both critical pedagogy and culturally responsive theory place great emphasis on forming authentic caring relationships between teacher and student, due to the human to human connection needed in order to facilitate learning. Caring relationships must be purposeful, authentic and reflect a deep love for each individual learner. The need for relationships between teacher and student becomes even more instrumental when teaching culturally, linguistically, and ability diverse students. This is one of the key factors in how most diverse students become discouraged and disengaged from their own education process. The need for a personal relationship with the teacher is even more important when this is the reality that most students of color face (Gay, 2000). Therefore, it is not surprising that all of the ten articles discuss relationships on various levels.

In two of the articles, the teachers conducted ‘home-visits’. Souto-Manning (2007) decided to meet with one of her student’s parents after realizing that the mother had ‘re’-named the child. Through talking and listening to the mother’s rationale to ‘re’-name her child, the teacher gains a deep understanding and awareness of the family and their personal experiences around being immigrants in the US. Moll and Gonzalez (2004) in their “funds of knowledge”
research believe very deeply in the need to connect with families and students through ‘home-visits.’ These visits are organized to gain a deeper appreciation and to find ways to integrate student home/cultural/real experiences into the classroom curriculum. These two articles believed that the teacher-student relationship began by connecting to families and knowing students’ lived experiences. Teachers in these two articles found that they connected to students and were then able to transfer that relationship to create a connection to classroom content.

The more common discussion around relationships revolved around the teacher valuing, connecting and building relationships in the classroom. As Brown (2004) observed, “Teachers take time out of each day to communicate individually with many students on nonacademic matters (p. 275).” Several of the teachers in Brown’s study commented on their purposeful connections and the need build caring relationships with students. As one teacher said, “I like to create a friendliness and a kind of security and belonging that has been my focus above the academic stuff. The academic stuff is there, but that can’t happen unless students feel safe, valued and secure (p. 276).” As many of the teachers state, without the connection of themselves to each student the task of teaching and learning becomes very difficult.

La Mæstra Miriam re-established the relationship with her students in many different ways over the entire year. Her relationships were built from the modeling behaviors she wanted the students to demonstrate. For example, she valued the sharing of personal experiences and stories. Therefore, she told many of her stories and shared her experiences with her students. She did not ask the students to do anything that she was not willing to do herself (Flores-Dueñas, 2005).

In Ware (2006), the two teachers wove their relationships with students into every aspect of their teaching. The relationships for both teachers were built on respect, understanding, and a
willingness to help students deal with their lived realities. “If the children appeared with unwashed faces and unclean clothes, she provided clothing and toiletries for their use (p. 443).” Of course, this was but one small example of how they built their teacher-student relationship but it speaks to their deep genuine love and respect for each child they taught. While the teachers, in the Ware (2006) study, often went beyond what one might consider within the scope of a teacher’s role they believed this was what was needed from them.

In contrast, teachers in Bondy et al. (2007) discussed the development of relationships in more pragmatic ways. The three teachers planned activities for the first day of school that would help foster relationships among students and encourage teacher-student connections. Even though the article looked for how they built the relationship, the teachers still vocalized why they spent so much time, energy and emphasis on the formation of these relationships. All three teachers saw the development of relationships as important because “…they perceived relationships to be at the core of a productive learning environment (p. 335).”

In Gillanders (2007), the teacher was focused and rather concerned that the language disconnects between her and her students would hinder the development of a healthy relationship. “In Sarah’s mind, she wouldn’t be an effective teacher if she wasn’t able to communicate with her students (p. 50).” Therefore, she begins to find other ways to connect to students than she might have used in the past. For example, she began to use non-verbal and physical contact more, plus she saw that stable and consistent routines helped limit the anxiety for all students, especially freed English language learners. In addition, she spent a lot of time on developing, fostering and encouraging healthy relationships between the students. Finally, she showed respect and understanding by encouraging English language learners to use their home language in the classroom. Sarah is a good example of how teachers must sometimes alter their
ways of developing relationships with students especially when those students are from different ethnic/cultural groups than the teacher.

A final point of convergence and future research states with the fact that the majority of the articles encouraged a reconnection between teacher educators and their critically conscious culturally responsive teachers. Interestingly, final comments were often about how isolated, conflicted and torn these teachers felt with what they believed was best for culturally, linguistically, and ability diverse learners and what they had learned in certification or graduate programs. The isolation was very evident in Arce’s (2004) “…they must break their isolation. Bilingual teachers must find alternative ways to align with other bilingual and non-bilingual critical educators, to participate in their own and in their students’ communities, and to engage with progressive professors in teacher educator (p. 243),” she then goes on to suggest ways that university professors and teachers can help and support each other. Some had looked at and developed programs that connected classroom teachers and university professors “…we have created a support system of critical educators that allows us to discuss and share our work with colleagues and school communities (Olivos & Quintana de Valladolid, 2005, p. 292).” The majority of the articles point out that sustaining teachers in supporting students of color in critically investigating their world and helping them to develop their own personal identities and voice required community and support from other like minded educators.

Contradictions

A contradiction represents the disconnect between theory and reality. The reality in American public schools is that the majority of the teaching force is white, female, and middle-class, but the majority of the student population does not share these same lived experiences. I see a major contradiction between what is valued and seen as being best for educating culturally,
linguistically, and ability diverse students. In looking at the convergent evidence found in the
nine articles presented here, I wonder if the majority of the American teaching force is able to
connect with or demonstrate the characteristics seen as being crucial in critical pedagogy and
culturally responsive practice. The two main themes emphasized in the articles both relied very
heavily on the teacher’s understanding of his/her position in society. In many cases, it was
explicitly stated or inferred that the teacher had deeply examined his/her minority position in
society. In those cases where the teacher was not of a minority ethnic/racial group, he/she
appeared to be aware of the differences between their realities and the realities of their students
and had learned from lived experiences in diverse settings. The impact on learning for students
of color with teachers who embrace and practice critical pedagogy and culturally relevant
teaching is enormous. With that in mind and the reality that the majority of teachers are not from
the same ethnic, race or social class of their students, schools of teacher education must begin to
look at ways to fund, encourage, attract, and graduate qualified minority teachers. If critical
pedagogy and culturally responsive theory is to live on and continue to impact culturally,
linguistically and ability diverse students there must be a comparable teaching force to identify,
connect, and educate in ways that embrace diversity, not just talk about it but experience it and
live it.

Limitations

While some of the limitation of this paper are obvious; limited number of articles, narrow
search parameters and time constraints, others may not be as obvious. Some limitations and
questions emerged in looking at the data. The teachers researched in the nine articles were
extremely multi-cultural and had developed particularly critical lens through which to view their
teaching and position in society. In addition, it became apparent that this set of educators strived
for equity and social justice in their teaching. These attributes become limitations when the reality of the American teaching force is taken into consideration. The fact that “eighty-nine percent are white, [and] only 7% are black and 2 percent are Hispanic (Latham, 1999, p. 1),” while the majority of the students they will teach are either ethnic, racial or language minorities.

These limitations bring into question how critical pedagogy and culturally responsive practices looks when the teacher is of the dominant ethnic group in a society. It would be of interest to look into research dealing with critical pedagogy and culturally responsive practice with White teachers. Would the same themes emerge? How would the themes differ? And why? If this type of research is limited or not widely published, why is that? What is the consequence of this fact on the validity and replicability of critical pedagogy and culturally responsive theories? Is it because both critical pedagogy and culturally responsive theories require awareness of social power and encourages one to investigate oppressive practices within oneself and the large social structure?

Conclusion

Even though this analysis provided a validation of the convergent evidence that exits between critical pedagogy and culturally responsive theories it also raises many questions as to how to develop these skills in more teachers. I believe the fact that the majority of teachers do not share racial, ethnic, language or social class of their students is a huge obstacle to creating spaces were students can develop critical thinking skills and form authentic caring relationships with their teachers. I do not think this means that critical pedagogy and culturally responsive theories should only be relegated to or only possible if the teacher is a minority. On the other hand, I do believe that it places more emphasis on teacher education programs and how they prepare teachers to deal with and connect to students that are more than likely very different
from them. Teacher education programs must find ways to integrate and develop the voices of ethnically diverse teachers, while providing experiences that develop the awareness in White teachers. In addition, teacher education must continue to provide funding, support, and encouragement to recruit minority teachers in to their programs. As the convergent evidence presented here demonstrates, a teacher’s minority lived experiences has a significant positive impact on the way she/he teaches, connects, and encourages her/his students.
References


