Culturally Responsive Education:

A Primer For Policy And Practice

by

Evan M. Johnston, Pamela D'Andrea Montalbano, and David E. Kirkland

NYU | STEINHARDT | Metropolitan Center for Research on Equity and the Transformation of Schools

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ABSTRACT

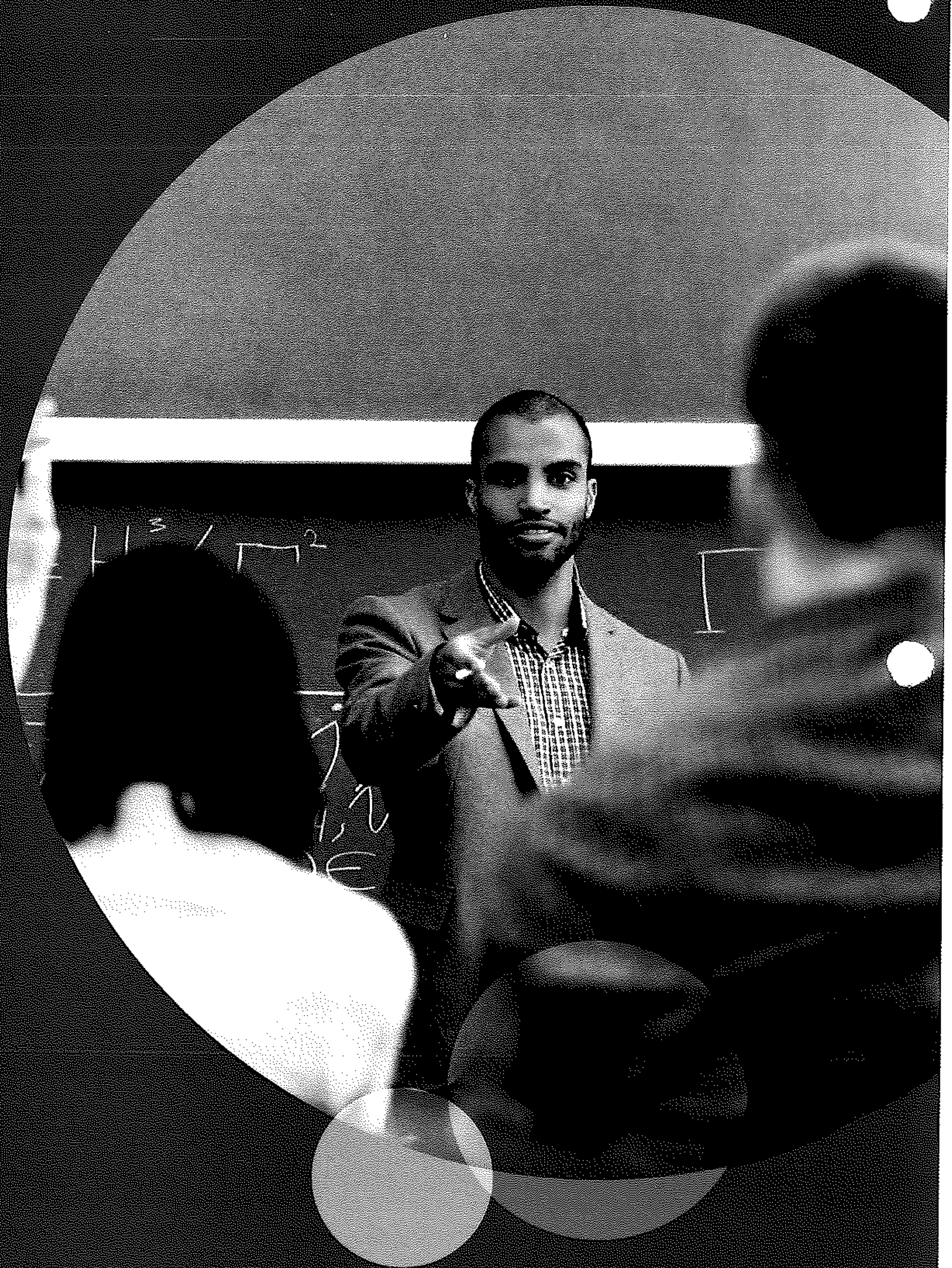
The terms culturally relevant teaching (alternatively culturally responsive education or culturally responsive pedagogy, appearing as "CRE" throughout this brief) constitute a significant intellectual contribution to the field of education and educational literature. With roots extending at least as far back as the 1930s with Carter G. Woodson's The Miseducation of the Negro, the concept has become fertile soil for the ongoing critique and advancement of theories of teaching and learning in areas ranging from curriculum and instruction to program design and disciplinary practices. However, even the most extensive reviews of its multiplicity of uses has had difficulty discerning or outlining the applications at the level of district or state policy. The purpose of this brief is to outline the extensive history and development of CRE in order to determine its most immediate practical applications. As suggested by gaps and inconsistencies in both the theoretical and empirical literature, this brief points out potential next steps and future directions for CRE that sit at the intersections of research, policy, and practice.

"Culturally responsive pedagogies and practices examine instructional philosophy and practice critically, both acknowledging and searching for the presence of historical forms of oppression embedded in curriculum, instruction, and approaches to teacher - student relationships."

INTRODUCTION

The terms culturally relevant teaching (alternatively culturally responsive education or culturally responsive pedagogy, and hereafter "CRE") constitute a significant intellectual contribution to the field of education and educational literature. With roots extending at least as far back as the 1930s with Carter G. Woodson's The Miseducation of the Negro, the concept has become fertile soil for the ongoing critique and advancement of theories of teaching and learning in areas ranging from curriculum and instruction to program design and disciplinary practices. However, even the most extensive reviews of its multiplicity of uses has had difficulty discerning or outlining the applications at the level of district or state policy. What is known is that culturally responsive pedagogies and practices examine instructional philosophy and practice critically, both acknowledging and searching for the presence of historical forms of oppression embedded in curriculum, instruction, and approaches to teacher-student relationships.

When districts embark upon the necessary but arduous work of culturally responsive education, the challenge is how to solidify the theory of cultural responsiveness into concrete policies and practices that can support learning for all students. To this extent, its critical lens has been applied to curriculum, classroom design, instruction, home-school relationships, disciplinary policies, and school-wide initiatives to promote equity, social justice, community outreach, improvements to school climate, and academic achievement. The practices that CRE recommends, thus the framework of CRE, must also extend into all these arenas. The purpose of this brief is to outline the extensive history and development of the research and literature on culturally responsive education in order to determine its most immediate practical applications and point out some of the next steps and directions suggested by gaps and inconsistencies remaining in the empirical literature on CRE.



Framing Culturally Responsive Education

PART I.

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The origins of CRE can be traced to ancient Egyptian philosophies on education, which realized the rootedness of learning in one's experience and culture as useful to the concerns of one's life (cf. Asante, 2009). By 1933, Carter G. Woodson put forward his own formulation of the concept in his foundational text The Miseducation of the Negro, which argued, among other points, for a program of "re-education" where learning begins with constructs that not only affirm but build the self (as fundamentally based in the self). Some have argued that the pan-Africanist message of Garvey; the Black nationalists thinkers such as Malcolm X; the decolonial philosophies of the Rastafari, Fanon, and Diop; the educational principles driving the Civil Rights Movement, the Black Power Movement, El Movimiento; among other historical social rights struggles that have played out over centuries, had a proto-form of CRE as elemental to their driving logics. The point here is that CRE had long grafted itself as an educational philosophy, and particularly among the vulnerable, perhaps for millennia.

Notwithstanding, modern derivations of CRE particularly as tied to pedagogies that embrace and solidify diversity and its value in classrooms, curriculum, and communities come from a set of foundational writings that reflected on changes to educational policy and the composition of schools in the 1960s and 70s and in the backdrop of school desegregation efforts (Aronson & Laughter, 2016). Efforts to define what teaching to diverse populations was or consisted of included the coining of such terms as "cultural appropriateness" (Au & Jordan, 1981), "cultural congruence" (Mohatt & Erickson, 1981), "culturally responsive," (Cazden & Leggett, 1981), "culturally compatible," (Jordan, 1985; Vogt, Jordan & Tharp, 1987), and "mitigating cultural discontinuity" (Macias, 1987).

Much of this literature, which emerged from the field of anthropology of education, attempted to distill the pedagogical roots and strategies

employed by teachers to develop and implement instruction that was more in tune with students' lived experiences and everyday lives (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011; Sleeter, 2012). Ladson-Billings (1990; 1992) coined and defined a term she felt more accurately reflected the pedagogical focus of such instruction: "culturally relevant teaching" (carried forward from King & Wilson, 1987).

It is important to note that the historical emergence of the awareness of "culture" in education was not organic, but a byproduct of multiple court cases calling for recognition of the linguistic diversity of students. However, as pointed out in the scholarship that would follow, this awareness of cultural diversity was not initially intended as foundational to a means of better educating diverse populations of students but rather to facilitate their assimilation by dominant systems and ideologies which centered Anglo-European-Christian-Judeo-cis-hetero-male whiteness as the normative reference point to which all other cultures and categories were expected to conform to meet the standards for "normalcy."

Culturally responsive education theories challenge this doxa by centering the assets and knowledge of students who were not members of this orthodoxy (Paris & Alim, 2017). What the earliest of these writings did achieve was connect some of the earliest studies on cultural and linguistic diversity in education (Cuban, 1972; Gay, 1975; Kleinfeld, 1975) with scholarship on the purpose of education. They dovetail with work that positioned schools as transmitters of the social order (Mehan, 1978) and silencers of particular voices (Fine, 1987; Shulman, 1987).

These two functions—transmission of various privileges and the silencing of the underrepresented—were both largely antithetical to the more Deweyan (1910) narrative of the purposes of education in the United States. They also positioned schools as not only collaborating sites of repeated historical forms of domination but also gatekeepers of access to the benefits of schooling for full and equal inclusion in a pluralistic, democratic society. This cycle of denied access reinforces social, economic, racial, linguistic, ability, and gender disparities while reinforcing oppression of the wisdom, knowledge, literacies, and "ways of knowing" of disempowered, non-centered groups (Giroux, 1988; Giroux & Simon, 1989).

The identification of this problem at the intersection of education and culture led scholars such as Ladson-Billings to seek the answer to the question of exclusion: Whose voices were still excluded from the practice of education, despite the illusion of integration and given the presumed goal of "assimilation," and what was lost by failing to connect culture and education? Delpit (1988) identified within schools and classrooms a "culture of power" governed by rules of access defined by those in power and obscured to those who are not explicitly told these informal rules.

These investigations into quality instruction were situated within the early 1990s efforts for educational reform following "A Nation at Risk" (Gardner, 1983), under which education reform became centered on standards, standardization, and accountability.

In light of this tectonic shift in the landscape of education, assimilation to the norm became seen as more important than ever. The failure of education to connect to the differentiated learning styles and needs of the full student population while attempting to indoctrinate and absorb them into a standardized, singular culture disconnected from many students' lives left underlying inequalities unaddressed and unexamined (Villegas, 1988; Irvine, 1990). The result, from an instructional standpoint, appeared to construct low-income minority students as "others" who, according to Delpit (2006/1995), were seen as damaged, dangerous, vulnerable, and impressionable. The mission of the teacher became clearly not to connect to these diverse groups of disengaged, disconnected students on a cultural or empathetic level, but to instruct them in standardized ways and judge their value by normatively biased standards.

When the home cultural values of students and their families elevate the status of teacher and place emphasis on not questioning authority, "pedagogies of poverty" (Haberman, 1991) take hold and characterize the relationships between instructors and students. Teachers assume unquestioned authority in classrooms filled with students they do not fully understand, causing them to frequently misinterpret and miscategorize student actions and misinterpret a family's hesitance to engage in solutions (Phelan, Yu, & Davidson, 1994). At the same time, students recognize their feelings of being treated differently on either a conscious or unconscious level, students internalize their identities within schools as "other," which can cause students to disengage from education and appear to develop "an oppositional social identity" in school (Tatum, 1997/1999/2003) which even leads to discouraging participation in the act of learning by ascribing to it the pejorative, "acting white" (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986).

This facet of cultural disconnect between teachers and students can be exacerbated by cultural differences in communication style. As Pasteur & Toldson (1982) observe, African-American children enter school coming from cultures in which frank and direct communication is valued and preferred, whereas in Eurocentric white cultures that dominate the classroom and student-teacher norms, deference and indirect communication are preferred. This disconnect results in what can still be seen today as misinterpretation by teachers of certain communication patterns as "defiant" or "confrontational," and the labeling of Black children as having behavioral problems, often ascribed to poverty and labeled as deficit rather than forthrightness (Shade, Kelly, & Oberg, 1997).

In schools in which culture is assigned non-essential or even irrelevant status, students are still capable of succeeding, but they often must sacrifice their cultural identities or attachments to do so (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Curriculum that does not directly perpetuate Euro-American-centric history and values but overlooks the significance of teaching to and about diverse cultures and identities fails to meet the learning needs of students from those diverse backgrounds, and to the objection of teachers who would wish to see greater advocacy in curriculum (Foster, 1995, 1997). Culturally relevant teaching was initially thus considered to be "creative but not disruptive."

These facets of the educational system which have emerged over decades of political and structural changes to schools serve to indoctrinate minorities into the dominant culture so they can further serve the reproduction of their current roles in society through entering the workforce and perpetuating the same economy that isolates and takes advantage of those like them. Students who demonstrate compliance and assimilation are seen as desirable, while those who do not fit in are sorted in accordance with any number of labels that mark them as different, deficient, defective, disturbed, disruptive, or disabled (Gay, 1975; Katz, 1985; Boykin, 1994).

The creation and assignment of such labels separates students into those who are alienated from their identities and those alienated from education as unuseful, unproductive, or likely unsuccessful, and they are further inundated with similar messages of inadequacy and undesirability in media and society (Nieto, 1994), or what Shade, Kelly, and Oberg (1997) called "establish[ing] the psychological climate in which students work" (p. 41). Boykin (1994), in citing Cummins (1986), observed:

Much of the functioning that transpires at the cultural deep structure level is especially effective because it is done in an unarticulated, matter of fact way without explicit reference to the cultural power issues at play. These dynamics often are effective, but not for the officially intended goal of educating children. They are effective for children who have different cultural capital in the process of uneducating them, alienating them, and disempowering them. (p. 247)

While the problem is clearly institutional, much scholarship has focused on the teacher as the agent of systems of domination and oppression, particularly in the enforcement of "Standard" English education at the expense of the languages more frequently practiced and employed in students' lives. Delpit (1995/2006) locates racism and the reluctance of those from a privileged cultural status as obstacles to exposing the rules of the game to students and making them aware of their subjective status in such institutions. This leads to the construction of students from nondominant cultures, in the minds of teachers, as "other people's children" (Delpit, 1995/2006). One of the established negative outcomes of such praxis is "stereotype threat," the term for the phenomenon by which student anxiety arises from the student's recognition of expectations of their incongruence and expected failure in settings in which they perceive their fitness subject to the judgment of others (Steele & Aronson, 1995).

In response to these systematic and historical problems in education of disconnectedness to significant and growing segments of student populations, culturally relevant teaching, culturally responsive education, and culturally sustaining pedagogies attempt to answer the call for more inclusively-minded and more asset-focused instruction of diverse student populations. Ladson-Billings (1992) called upon the work of Freire (1973/2000), Aronowitz and Giroux (1985), King & Wilson (1987), and McLaren (1989) in defining culturally relevant teaching as "what minority teachers must do to emancipate, empower, and transform" their classrooms and the educational experiences of their racially and culturally diverse students (p. 105).

When students do not perceive their instruction to be personally and culturally relevant, student resistance appears in the classroom: resistance to curriculum, to instruction, to teachers, and to the very institution of school itself, which becomes constructed (recognized) by the student as antagonistic to their identities (Lee, 1999; Mirón & Lauria, 1998). On the other hand, when curriculum is seen as relevant to their lives and needs, the curriculum and instruction are accepted and seen by the student as "nurturing." This must also be true of teacher practices, as teachers transmit expectations and levy grades upon students that signify the student's perceived potential value and welcomeness within a classroom, shaping how future students are permitted to imagine for themselves in their society.

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Culturally relevant teaching was initially situated specifically within the problematic context posed by traditional educational systems and practices to Black and African-American students. This established the foundation of culturally responsive education as recognition and advocacy for the most historically oppressed identities. As more identities would begin to assert more vocal resistance to other forms of oppression, the door opened for culturally responsive pedagogies to likewise recognize some of these "kindred" struggles.

Gay (2000/2010) expanded upon the initial conceptions of culturally relevant teaching in her theorization of "culturally responsive" education. To her, cultural responsiveness was rooted heavily in practice, requiring "multiethnic frames of reference" (p. xxiii). Gay continued to critique the classrooms that embraced deficit perspectives of students as the most likely to fail those students, and that instead, successful classrooms embraced asset views of students and their cultural groups. Gay levied a specific critique against test scores and grades, both in terms of deficit expectations and by taking group averages that sacrificed nuances of class and the inequities of assessment frameworks, stating, "no ethnic group is culturally or intellectually monolithic" (p. 18). Culturally responsive education, then, views the diverse cultural backgrounds of students as strengths and contends that embedding more culturally inclusive curriculum, assessment, and instruction makes the act of education more "comprehensive, multidimensional, empowering, transformative, and emancipatory" (pp. 27-8).

CRE arrived late enough in the education reform debate to include a narrative of what standards and standardized testing meant for the education of oppressed groups. Specifically, Gay noted that No Child Left Behind (NCLB) pushed forward the agenda for standards and created real funding consequences for schools who did not utilize approved evaluative frameworks, curriculum, and assessment to demonstrate the "success" of different racial, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic subgroups. However, by focusing on outcomes but not process, the game was once again stacked against historically disadvantaged students. The normative frameworks and stakes essentially propped up dominant groups and cultures at the expense of all others, and used accountability to push forth other political agendas of schools using minority children as chips and pawns in the game. As she stated:

Their achievement levels are not increasing by leaps and bounds; the overall quality of their educational opportunities continues to be substandard; they do not have highly qualified teachers in all of their classrooms; uniform curriculum content is not tweaking their interest, developing their intellect, or enticing them to remain in school; the curriculum scope is narrowing; and the under resourced schools they attend are further compromised because they are sanctioned and penalized by losing funds for not reaching the levels of yearly average progress mandated by NCLB and state regulations. (Gay 2010, p. 14)

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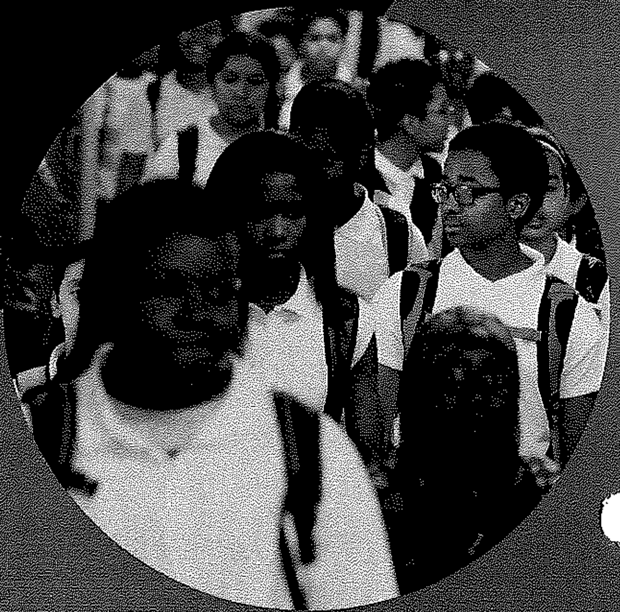

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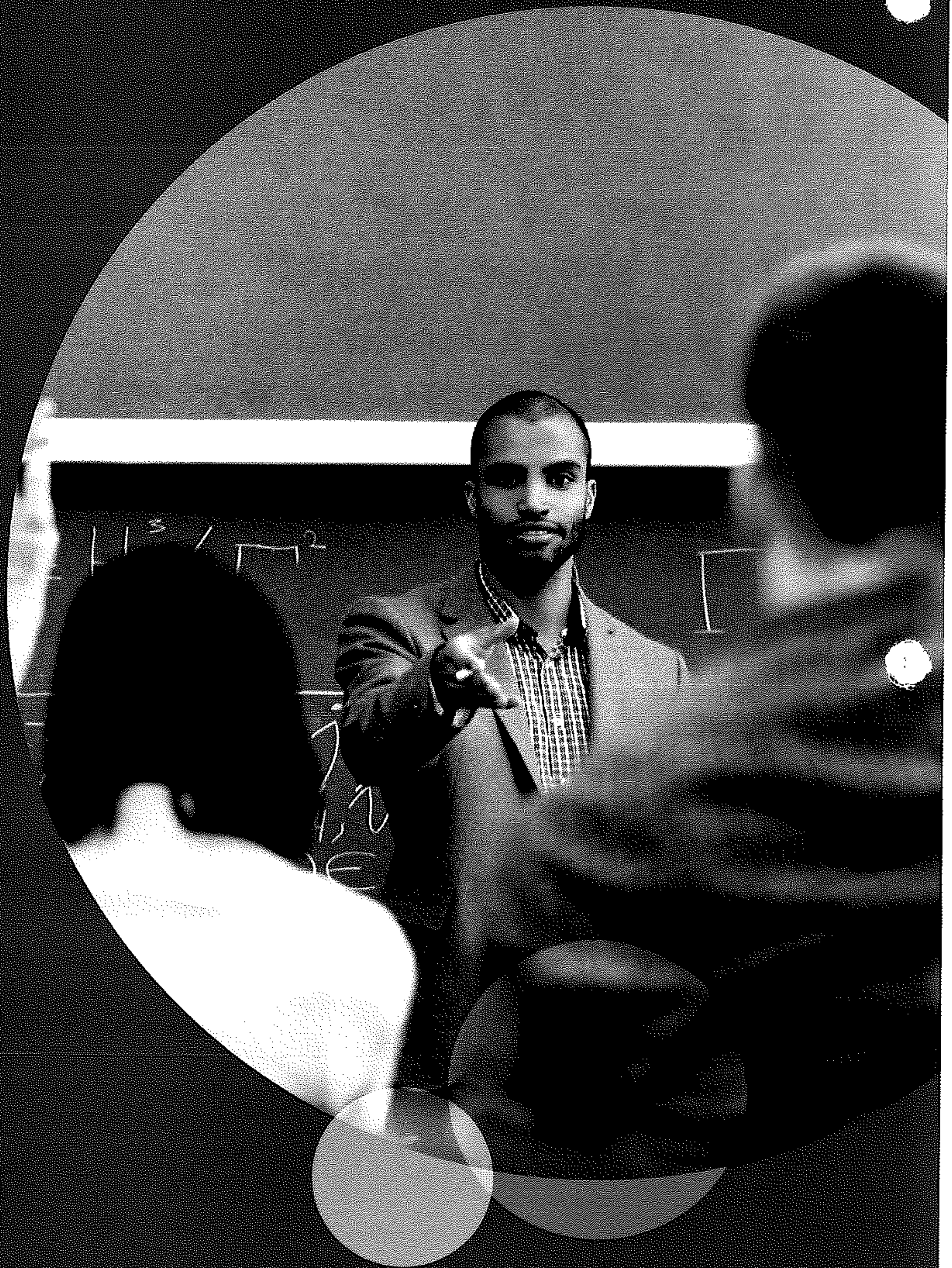

PART I.

Framing Culturally Responsive Education

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The identification of this problem at the intersection of education and culture led scholars such as Ladson-Billings to seek the answer to the question of exclusion: Whose voices were still excluded from the practice of education, despite the illusion of integration and given the presumed goal of "assimilation," and what was lost by failing to connect culture and education? Delpit (1988) identified within schools and classrooms a "culture of power" governed by rules of access defined by those in power and obscured to those who are not explicitly told these informal rules.

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The creation and assignment of such labels separates students into those who are alienated from their identities and those alienated from education as unuseful, unproductive, or likely unsuccessful, and they are further inundated with similar messages of inadequacy and undesirability in media and society (Nieto, 1994), or what Shade, Kelly, and Oberg (1997) called "establish[ing] the psychological climate in which students work" (p. 41). Boykin (1994), in citing Cummins (1986), observed:

Much of the functioning that transpires at the cultural deep structure level is especially effective because it is done in an unarticulated, matter of fact way without explicit reference to the cultural power issues at play. These dynamics often are effective, but not for the officially intended goal of educating children. They are effective for children who have different cultural capital in the process of uneducating them, alienating them, and disempowering them. (p. 247)

While the problem is clearly institutional, much scholarship has focused on the teacher as the agent of systems of domination and oppression, particularly in the enforcement of "Standard" English education at the expense of the languages more frequently practiced and employed in students' lives. Delpit (1995/2006) locates racism and the reluctance of those from a privileged cultural status as obstacles to exposing the rules of the game to students and making them aware of their subjective status in such institutions. This leads to the construction of students from nondominant cultures, in the minds of teachers, as "other people's children" (Delpit, 1995/2006). One of the established negative outcomes of such praxis is "stereotype threat," the term for the phenomenon by which student anxiety arises from the student's recognition of expectations of their incongruence and expected failure in settings in which they perceive their fitness subject to the judgment of others (Steele & Aronson, 1995).

In response to these systematic and historical problems in education of disconnectedness to significant and growing segments of student populations, culturally relevant teaching, culturally responsive education, and culturally sustaining pedagogies attempt to answer the call for more inclusively-minded and more asset-focused instruction of diverse student populations. Ladson-Billings (1992) called upon the work of Freire (1973/2000), Aronowitz and Giroux (1985), King & Wilson (1987), and McLaren (1989) in defining culturally relevant teaching as "what minority teachers must do to emancipate, empower, and transform" their classrooms and the educational experiences of their racially and culturally diverse students (p. 105).

When students do not perceive their instruction to be personally and culturally relevant, student resistance appears in the classroom: resistance to curriculum, to instruction, to teachers, and to the very institution of school itself, which becomes constructed (recognized) by the student as antagonistic to their identities (Lee, 1999; Mirón & Lauria, 1998). On the other hand, when curriculum is seen as relevant to their lives and needs, the curriculum and instruction are accepted and seen by the student as "nurturing." This must also be true of teacher practices, as teachers transmit expectations and levy grades upon students that signify the student's perceived potential value and welcomeness within a classroom, shaping how future students are permitted to imagine for themselves in their society.

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Culturally relevant teaching was initially situated specifically within the problematic context posed by traditional educational systems and practices to Black and African-American students. This established the foundation of culturally responsive education as recognition and advocacy for the most historically oppressed identities. As more identities would begin to assert more vocal resistance to other forms of oppression, the door opened for culturally responsive pedagogies to likewise recognize some of these "kindred" struggles.

Gay (2000/2010) expanded upon the initial conceptions of culturally relevant teaching in her theorization of "culturally responsive" education. To her, cultural responsiveness was rooted heavily in practice, requiring "multiethnic frames of reference" (p. xxiii). Gay continued to critique the classrooms that embraced deficit perspectives of students as the most likely to fail those students, and that instead, successful classrooms embraced asset views of students and their cultural groups. Gay levied a specific critique against test scores and grades, both in terms of deficit expectations and by taking group averages that sacrificed nuances of class and the inequities of assessment frameworks, stating, "no ethnic group is culturally or intellectually monolithic" (p. 18). Culturally responsive education, then, views the diverse cultural backgrounds of students as strengths and contends that embedding more culturally inclusive curriculum, assessment, and instruction makes the act of education more "comprehensive, multidimensional, empowering, transformative, and emancipatory" (pp. 27-8).

CRE arrived late enough in the education reform debate to include a narrative of what standards and standardized testing meant for the education of oppressed groups. Specifically, Gay noted that No Child Left Behind (NCLB) pushed forward the agenda for standards and created real funding consequences for schools who did not utilize approved evaluative frameworks, curriculum, and assessment to demonstrate the "success" of different racial, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic subgroups. However, by focusing on outcomes but not process, the game was once again stacked against historically disadvantaged students. The normative frameworks and stakes essentially propped up dominant groups and cultures at the expense of all others, and used accountability to push forth other political agendas of schools using minority children as chips and pawns in the game. As she stated:

Their achievement levels are not increasing by leaps and bounds; the overall quality of their educational opportunities continues to be substandard; they do not have highly qualified teachers in all of their classrooms; uniform curriculum content is not tweaking their interest, developing their intellect, or enticing them to remain in school; the curriculum scope is narrowing; and the under resourced schools they attend are further compromised because they are sanctioned and penalized by losing funds for not reaching the levels of yearly average progress mandated by NCLB and state regulations. (Gay 2010, p. 14)

More recent scholarship has extended the critique of exclusion beyond the policies and practices of teaching, seeking to once again center culture and difference as central to reclaiming the purpose of education. Paris (2012), Paris and Alim (2014; 2017), Alim et al. (2017), and others ask whether the evolution from deficit to difference to asset to resource pedagogy goes far enough, suggesting that the responsibility of education is not only to prevent the exclusion of historically silenced, erased, and disenfranchised groups, but perhaps also to assist in the promotion and perpetuation of cultures, languages and ways of knowing that have been devalued, suppressed, and imperiled by years of educational, social, political, economic, and other forms of oppression. This philosophy, founded on several "loving critiques" of Ladson-Billings' culturally relevant pedagogy, is called by these scholars culturally sustaining pedagogy, or CSP.

CSP makes its focus the historical struggles for recognition, emancipation, and inclusion in social, political, and human life and positions the classroom at the heart of those ongoing struggles for acceptance of all forms of difference into the project of humanity. Paris and Alim (2017) describe CSP as a fundamental act of dissention and disruption of the "colonial project" of assimilation that has made, in their words, "anti-Indigeneity, anti-Blackness, and related anti-Brownness (from anti-Latinidad to Islamophobia) and model minority myths" parts of the foundation of state-sanctioned schools (p. 2). Waitoller and Thorius (2017) and Alim et al. (2017) extend the CSP discussion to other underrepresented groups, particularly disabled persons, identifying CSP as liberatory for all forms of difference.

Rather than simply arguing for inclusion in the curriculum, a proverbial seat at the table, CSP asserts that in addition to the assets that all students bring to the classroom, the teacher and school have a reciprocal and binding duty to prepare students to have the "dynamic cultural dexterity" required in a pluralistic society (Paris & Alim, 2017). CSP emphasizes neither singular nor static changes in pedagogy, but rather accepts and embraces the fact that since cultures are in constant states of flux, teacher adaptability and versatility need to be sufficient to sustain cultures that are not static (Paris & Alim, 2017; Pennycook, 2007). Thus, culture is not an artifact to be displayed in a classroom but a vibrant and evolving resource that schools have an obligation to both preserve and sustain as among their core function and mission.

Also receiving a greater focus in CSP are the bodies of students as objects of the same forms of historical oppression, carried out in the modern day through seating arrangements, classroom and school disciplinary policies, and implicit bias. As Paris and Alim (2017) state, "we cannot separate culture from the bodies enacting culture and the ways those bodies are subjected to systemic discrimination" (p. 9).

CSP also reasserts differences in language not as deficits to be overcome but rather essential salient cultural identifiers; thus, including cultures in the curriculum without valuing the languages and literacies they practice is an incomplete and insufficient brand of inclusion that falls short of the goal (Paris, 2012).

In terms of practice, CSP also calls out curriculum and policy that pays token homage to languages and cultures in superficial ways. Examples of this essentializing are the "multicultural days" that feature food or music as emblematic of an entire culture and then set aside these cultures until the next such planned activity. These essentializing acts distill a culture or language down to a single stereotyped icon, phrase, or holiday, and can actually further relegate and trivialize rich histories and cultures which engage and validate the lives of students in classrooms who identify with those cultures on a deep level. Since the new mainstream in U.S. schools, in contrast to the mid-20th century, is a mainstream of culture, there must be a genuinely perceived and executed effort to "strive toward equality in an unequal and shifting racially and ethnically diverse society" (Paris, 2015, p. 222).

These pedagogies, CRT, CRE, and CSP, embody the philosophies of "resource" pedagogy (Moll & González, 1994; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 2001) and recognize, value, and welcome students' "funds of knowledge" into the acts of teaching and learning in the classroom. In contrast to the deficit pedagogies that preceded them and can still be found in classrooms throughout the country today, these pedagogies view the languages, cultures, and identities of students of various backgrounds not as barriers to be overcome or shed for inclusion, but in fact the means of education itself (Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2017).

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