Teaching and Teacher Education 77 (2019) 43–52

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Teaching and Teacher Education

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/tate

Culturally relevant pedagogy: Developing principles of description and analysis

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Reports on the culturally relevant pedagogic practices of a case study of Singapore teachers.
- Offers an analytic framework to describe practices of culturally relevant pedagogy.
- Demonstrates the cultural struggles over pedagogy and pedagogical forms.
- Identifies ways teachers can relate their teaching to students' backgrounds.

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 15 December 2017
Received in revised form
6 August 2018
Accepted 18 September 2018

1. Introduction

Over the last two decades, the notion of culturally relevant pedagogy has been adopted in countless schools, classrooms and teacher education programs across North America as an approach to helping marginalized students achieve academic success and cultural affirmation (Gay, 2000, 2013; Hastie, Martin, & Buchanan, 2006; Howard, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1994). Promoted by both researchers and practitioners, much of this work has focused on identifying students' unique cultural backgrounds as strengths and nurturing these to create bridges between their home and classroom experiences (Ladson-Billings, 1995b, 1995a). Despite, however, this manifest practical focus on improving teacher education and teaching practice, many studies to date continue to raise issues related to its use and implementation. Among some of the most often cited concerns are misconceptions and ambiguities over what culturally relevant pedagogy involves or looks like in classrooms (Gay, 2002; Young, 2010); difficulties related to its enactment (Foster & Peele, 1999; Seidl, 2007); and overly simplified and superficial ways of enacting it (Kim & Pulido, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 2014), resulting in trivialized and static notions of culture (Morrison, Robbins, & Rose, 2008; Sleeter, 2012; Young, 2010).

In this paper we make a move towards addressing a number of these concerns. Drawing upon qualitative data comprising lesson observations of and interviews with five teachers in Singapore who teach in the system's lower-progress academic tracks, we document the creative approaches taken by these teachers as they engage in culturally relevant ways of working with their students. Of particular significance, however, is that in doing so we draw upon and further develop on the English sociologist of education Basil Bernstein's (1990, 2000) theoretical writings on pedagogy to offer an analytic framework that would provide "specific principles of description" of culturally relevant pedagogy (Bernstein, 2000, p. 3). Responding recently to the over- and misuse of the term "culturally relevant pedagogy" in the literature, Ladson-Billings (2014, p.83) pointed to the need for "more powerful pedagogical models [so that] our pedagogical practice [would] be buttressed with significant theoretical grounding". Bernstein's work – in particular his typology of educational codes comprising the notions of strong/weak classification and frames – has often been used to understand the covert processes through which knowledge and social relations are both produced and reproduced in schools and classrooms (Lim, 2016a; Morais, 2002; Sriprakash, 2012). In thus drawing upon Bernstein's theoretical insights and using these to analyze classroom case studies from Singapore, this paper makes the following contributions. First, in focusing on the novel approaches and experiences of Singapore teachers in developing culturally relevant pedagogies in an education system characterized by traditional teacher-dominated instruction and high-stakes examinations, the paper illuminates the challenges and possibilities teachers in similar education systems face. Second, the paper

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https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2018.09.011
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provides a set of theoretical propositions to describe and understand what culturally relevant pedagogies involve, illustrating, through the use of Bernstein's work, how teachers pursuing such pedagogies employ weak classification and framing in their teaching to counter hegemonic approaches to knowledge and pedagogy. Third, in the context of societies in Asia tightly controlled by the state (Lim & Apple, 2016), the use of Bernstein's sociological concepts reveals how struggles over pedagogical forms are invariably bound up with what the political theorist Nancy Fraser (1997, 2003) calls struggles over recognition and redistribution.

We begin by outlining in the literature review of the paper three bodies of work central to our research: the major emphases, insights, as well as concerns of the research on culturally relevant pedagogy; the use of Basil Bernstein's sociological analysis of pedagogy as a set of theoretical principles for understanding and describing such practices; and the extent state of pedagogy in Singapore schools and classrooms. We next detail the study's research methodology, before reporting on and discussing in the final two sections of the paper the pedagogic practices of five teachers in Singapore. Here, we draw upon the analytic framework developed earlier to show how the practices of the teachers we study depart from convention, and also, crucially, how in an ostensibly meritocratic education system such as Singapore, these departures represent teachers' efforts at creating counter-hegemonic spaces as they work both with and against official state discourses.

2. Culturally relevant pedagogy

Variously referred to as culturally responsive teaching, culturally congruent teaching, culturally appropriate pedagogy, and culturally sustaining pedagogy (see for example Ferger, 2006; Gay, 2000; Hastie et al., 2006; Paris, 2012), one of the central insights arising out of this literature is that in diverse and often academically low-progress classrooms,[1] students bring into the classroom cultural capital that is different from mainstream norms and worldviews (Howard, 2003). As Gay (2000, p.29) explains, in these settings culturally relevant pedagogy becomes especially important because it uses "the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning more relevant and effective … It teaches to and through the strengths of these students [and] is culturally validating and affirming." Probably the most influential piece of research in the field is Gloria Ladson-Billings' (1994, 2009) three-year ethnographic study of eight "exceptional" teachers of African-American students. Ladson-Billings found that while on the surface the teachers subscribed to a variety of instructional strategies and classroom routines from structured/unstructured to didactic/dialectic, all of them sought to harness the cultural and social capital embedded in students' home backgrounds, using these as resources to promote a more meaningful and engaged classroom environment, as well as to empower them to critique, challenge and transform social inequities and injustices (see also Lipman, 1995; Sleeter, 1996).

Since the late 1990s Ladson-Billings' observations have been studied across numerous classrooms (Gay, 2010; Gutierrez, 2000; Kidd, Sanchez & Thorp, 2008; Morrison et al., 2008; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). While much of this scholarship seeks to document the richness of pedagogical practices that are filtered through students' cultural experiences, it has also been consistent in its complaints and concerns. For one, what it means to be a culturally relevant pedagogue is inconsistently understood by scholars and practitioners alike. Multiple definitions and conceptions exist, most of which pay different emphases to, for example, Ladson-Billings' (1995a) insistence that a theory of culturally relevant pedagogy needs to promote academic success, cultural competence and socio-political consciousness. In a meta-analysis of classroom-based research on culturally relevant pedagogy, Morrison, Robbins & Rose's (2008) found that just 15 of the 45 studies reviewed sought to encapsulate all of Ladson-Billings' three aspects above. Other proponents have sought to develop their own criteria. Writing about culturally relevant teaching practices for African-American students, Howard (2001) argues that this required a taxonomy of being sensitive to students' use of expressive individualism, emphasizing collaboration and the collective good, and possessing a critical view of knowledge. Others like Gay (2002) focus on the development of a "cultural diversity knowledge base" – an explicit set of knowledges about the cultural characteristics and contributions of different ethnic groups, their cultural values, traditions, communication, learning styles, contributions and relational patterns. And Paris (2012) and Paris and Alim (2014) go further in their work on culturally sustaining pedagogy. Rather than focus singularly on one racial or ethnic group, and/or expect that pedagogy be relevant or responsive to the experiences of students, these scholars point to the multiplicity of cultures shaping today's youth and the hybridity and fluidity of global identities emerging in the arts, literature, music and film, and argue that what is required is pedagogy that seeks to perpetuate and foster the pluralism that is part of the fabric of schools and society.

As Young (2010) acknowledges, while these adaptations may represent refinements and/or developments in scholarly research, they have nevertheless resulted in misunderstandings at the level of practice and add to teachers' difficulties in constructing culturally relevant forms of interaction for their students. To be sure, Seidl (2007) points out that even experienced teachers who have participated in in-service courses on the topic struggle to apply what they've learnt to the development of personal teaching pedagogies – and when they do this is often misinterpreted or put to use in superficial ways (see also Foster & Peele, 1999). The consequence, as Sleeter (2012, p. 562) surmises, is a "persistence of faulty and simplistic conceptions of culturally responsive pedagogy" that (dangerously) trivialize what it means to be culturally relevant by assuming static and essentialized notions of culture.[2]

Responding to years of the theory's varied usage, Ladson-Billings (2014) has recently attempted to clarify some of the misconceptions by providing more concrete examples of culturally relevant pedagogic practices. But such a move perhaps gets ahead of itself, begging the question as to whether it is indeed more concrete examples that are needed to make sense of such a paradigm of teaching and learning – or more specific principles of description. Charting the future developments of the field, Ladson-Billings directs our attention to the importance of the latter. "If we are to help novice teachers become good and experienced teachers to become better, we need theoretical propositions about pedagogy that help them understand, reflect on, and improve their

[1] In saying this it should be noted that academically low-progress classrooms are neither synonymous nor coextensive with diversity (in terms of ethnicity, social class, culture, or other social categories). Rather, as the research on culturally relevant pedagogy empathically shows, the former is due in large part as a result of the systemic misrecognition of the latter.

[2] One of the reasons for the less than transformative adoptions of culturally relevant pedagogy into classrooms may lie in that the various models of culturally relevant pedagogy discussed earlier are based on different fundamental purposes – outcomes (Ladson Billings, 1995a), elements (Gay, 2000), guidelines (Howard, 2001), identities (Paris & Alim, 2014) – rather than actual pedagogical practices. We thank one of the reviewers for this insight.

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