

A Movement Against and Beyond Boundaries:¹ “Politically Relevant Teaching” Among African American Teachers

TAMARA BEAUBOEUF-LAFONTANT

University of Houston, Downtown

The purpose of this article is to examine culturally relevant teaching as a political pedagogy and a contemporary manifestation of what was considered “good” teaching in many African American communities served by black segregated schools. Through examining several ethnographies and autobiographical accounts of segregated schools that were valued by black students and families, I assert that the “good” of these institutions hinged not simply on the cultural similarities between teachers and students, but more importantly on the “political clarity” of the teachers. That is, these educators recognized the existence of oppression in their students’ lives and sought to use their personal, professional, and social power to encourage children to understand and undermine their subordination. I also contend that because they use their knowledge of society’s inequities and their influence to empower their marginalized students, the pedagogy of contemporary culturally relevant teachers might be more accurately called “politically relevant teaching.” I conclude the article by discussing how recognizing the political and historical dimensions of culturally relevant teaching may broaden its application, as issues of racism and social injustice are relevant to all Americans and not only to people of color.

The struggle is about whether education is for social transformation or system maintenance. Through their self-affirming resistance these teachers are choosing education for personal and social emancipation for their students. In so doing, they position themselves squarely on the “front lines” of this continuing struggle. (King, 1991, pp. 260–61)

In 1988, African American educator Lisa Delpit named a key problem in education: the distinction made by educators, policy makers, and the general public between “our children” and “other people’s children” (Delpit, 1988). She argued that given the persistent beliefs in the universality and superiority of white middle-class culture, many students are seen as different or “other” for being poor, of color, or from immigrant families. Not belonging to the

“culture of power” that Delpit and other antiracism educators have identified, these children are excluded from the social, political, and economic opportunities to which formal education provides access. Instead, they are pushed towards the margins of academic failure and continued social disenfranchisement.

Following the insights of Delpit, other researchers have attributed the problems and obstacles faced by African American children in schools to a breakdown in relationships between teachers and students. Since the late 1980s, the burgeoning literature of culturally relevant teaching² in particular has asserted that “other people’s children” tend to be *cultural* (read non-white) “others” (Casey, 1993; Delpit, 1986, 1988, 1995; Foster, 1990, 1991, 1993, 1996, 1997; Henry, 1992; hooks, 1994; Koerner & Hulsebosch, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1989, 1991, 1992, 1994a, 1994b, 1995; Lipman, 1994; McElroy-Johnson, 1993; Toppin & Levine, 1992). This literature also maintains that successful teachers of children of color are aware of the cultural distinctiveness and strengths of these students. As a result, culturally relevant teaching is a successful pedagogy because it is “relevant” (Ladson-Billings, 1992) to, or mindful of, the cultures embodied by students of color. In particular, culturally relevant educators are conscious of the presence of racism that surrounds students with distorted and overwhelmingly negative images of the cultures, histories, and possibilities of people of color. As a result, culturally relevant teachers view their classrooms as key sites of resistance, where students of color especially can come to see themselves and their communities in affirming ways while gaining access to mainstream “codes of power” (Delpit, 1988).

A persistent theme in the literature on culturally relevant teaching is the quality of the relationships that such teachers establish with their students. Culturally relevant teachers feel personally, and not simply professionally, invested in educating children of color. Often this commitment derives from the fact they share and understand the culture of their students. Thus, these educators are able to avoid the problem of “cultural mismatch” (Irvine, 1990) that has often been cited as a major problem between white teachers and students of color. Rather, they successfully encourage their students to be competent and comfortable in both their home culture and the larger society. Because culturally relevant educators view education for children of color as an additive rather than subtractive process, they resist the common assessment of African American students: that their culture is an obstacle to their learning, and that academic success for these children necessitates their becoming disconnected from their culture, or “raceless” (Fordham, 1988).

Theories of and research about culturally relevant teaching have broadened our understanding of what constitutes pedagogical success and how it may be achieved. Specifically, this literature has highlighted the philosophical beliefs held by such educators: namely, that formal education has a

responsibility to prepare students to take an active role in making society truly democratic. This literature has also made an important contribution to the field of education in terms of exploring the practices of engaged teachers who help students from marginalized groups realize academic success. Moreover, because most studies have focused on black women teachers, this literature has brought attention to a group of educators rendered invisible in many educational discussions.

In spite of the focus on African American teachers in the culturally relevant teaching literature, there is no intrinsic relationship between such pedagogy and black educators. In other words, not all culturally relevant teachers are African American, and not all African American teachers hold culturally relevant views towards their profession (Ladson-Billings & Henry, 1990). Yet, much in the literature on culturally relevant teaching posits that academic success with African American students results primarily from teachers being knowledgeable about black culture and supportive of its norms (Irvine, 1990; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Furthermore, while issues of culture often lie at the heart of the culturally relevant teaching literature, it is also strongly implied in this research that because of the *political* understanding of education held by these educators, their actions are sensitive to and supportive of the antiracism and anti-oppression struggles of students of color generally (see, for example, Delpit, 1988; Hulsebosch & Koerner, 1994). For example, in reference to her often-cited and hotly debated 1986 article, “Skills and Other Dilemmas of a Progressive Black Educator,” Lisa Delpit describes “communication blocks” existing between most white educators and teachers of color. Whereas European American teachers tended to question her discussion of skills versus process approaches to literacy, she writes that “*all* of the nonwhite respondents [spoke] passionately about being left out of the dialogue about how best to educate children of color” (1995, p. 23, emphasis in original). In other words, regardless of their culture of origin, culturally relevant teachers appear to share an understanding of systemic inequity—that is, the political, economic, and racial structures that disproportionately limit the opportunities of children of color.

While research is needed to clarify the specific contributions of various cultures to culturally relevant teaching, a central assertion of this paper is that cultural similarity and understanding are important yet insufficient preconditions for teaching students from marginalized groups. As I elaborate in the following pages, at the heart of the struggle for decent schools in which African Americans have long been engaged is their understanding that their oppression is a complete contradiction of the founding ideals of democracy in the United States. Thus, I maintain that culturally relevant teaching should be considered through a renaming of it as “*politically* relevant teaching,”³ in order to emphasize the political, historical, social, as well as cultural,

understandings that such teachers bring to their profession. The philosophy of education embraced by politically relevant educators and their participation in the educational enterprise evidence their “political clarity” (Bartolome, 1994), or their knowledge that “both schooling for democratic citizenship and schooling for second-class citizenship have been basic traditions in American education” (Anderson, 1988, p. 1). Therefore, these teachers are mindful not only of the cultural norms, values, and practices of their students, but more importantly of the political realities and aspirations of people of color. As a result, their pedagogy is “relevant” to the *political* experiences of inequity and disenfranchisement of their students.

The Concept of “Political Clarity” Among Politically Relevant Educators

Poignant examples of “political clarity” appear in qualitative and ethnographic studies that indicate that many people of color who become politically relevant teachers are motivated by their experiences with and conceptual understandings of social injustice (Gordon, 1993; Koerner & Hulsebosch, 1995; Murrell, 1991; Toppin & Levine, 1992). These teachers feel personally committed to and responsible for breaking the cycle of subordination in which they believe schools to participate. For example, while examining the reasons people of color left other professions to pursue certification in teaching, Reeda Toppin and Linda Levine (1992) found that these future educators recognize “schooling as a sociopolitical institution” (p. 11).

[A]ll of these teachers view themselves as actors in particular socio-cultural and sociohistorical contexts, as people who expect to affect and be affected by the ideas and practices of many others. . . . A salient theme throughout the interviews is an emphasis on the social as well as personal meanings of their decision to teach. (Toppin & Levine, 1992, pp. 5, 6)

Even more striking was the finding that in many cases student teachers of color poignantly recalled *negative* experiences with school personnel and that “their own experience and concerns predispose them to find current arrangements ‘not good enough’ for themselves and for children” (p. 10).

The political stance of educators toward the existence of social injustice intimately affects how students of color experience formal education. As Michelle Fine (1986) found in her study of the institutional contexts that “frame” disproportionate rates of school dropout among African Americans and Latinos,

the lack of black teachers means that few students get an opportunity to talk about race and class contradictions in our society. While not all black teachers agree that these conversations belong in the classroom, white teachers appear more reluctant to raise the issues. White teachers

explain that they do not want to “demoralize” black and Latin students; black teachers complain about racism in their work relations, in the curriculum, and overheard in lunchroom conversations about “*those* students and their families.” (p. 400; emphasis in original)

The educators of color in Fine’s study recognized racism as a fact of life for themselves and their students. Consequently, they believed that to pretend that inequity and injustice did not exist did a disservice to students and encouraged problematic and contradictory behavior among the faculty: In particular, although many white teachers did not want to publicly acknowledge the existence of racism, some felt comfortable evidencing their racist perceptions of students of color in semiprivate discussions.

The actions and philosophies of politically relevant teachers also demonstrate how important it is for teachers to understand their power in and their influence on students’ lives. Although often unable to determine or influence school-wide policies for their students, politically relevant teachers are very much invested in their classrooms and in the possibilities they can encourage in those spaces. That is, aware of the lack of support that they face for their emancipatory practices and philosophies, many politically relevant teachers operate subversively. They view their classrooms as sites of resistance, where they take control not accorded to them in the school power hierarchy. In the words of one teacher, “I’m responsible for this classroom. . . . I’ve worked long enough to know what will work and what doesn’t work. I’m not going to just blatantly tell a principal what I’m not going to do. I’m just going to do what I need to do in order for students to achieve” (Ladson-Billings, 1989, p. 26).

Creating student-centered classrooms within what they perceive as oppressive, inequitable schools, these teachers see themselves not only as role models, but as advocates (Irvine, 1989) and “gate openers” for students:

“Gate keeper” conjures up the image of people who stand at the door of schooling armed with standards and norms, [and] methodically sort through the “smart” kids and the “dumb” ones. A “gate opener” is someone who keeps a watch at the “doors,” but looks for ways to let people in; perhaps, opening up the routes to success in school, access to middle class, finding a route to teacher certification. (Koerner & Hulsebosch, 1995, p. 9)

Often by supporting and advocating for students, who seem to be stumbling on the same impediments to success (namely racism) the teachers themselves had, these educators find themselves rectifying a wrong or “going back into the future” (Koerner & Hulsebosch, 1995) and changing some of the negative self-perceptions that schooling projects upon students of color.

Although studies of politically relevant teachers elucidate the ideologies of such educators, they have not deeply investigated an important context for such pedagogy among African American teachers: the historical record.

The educational history of African Americans suggests that from slavery through segregation, there has existed among black educators a clear-sightedness about the importance of formal education to liberation—a clear-sightedness that resembles the political clarity of contemporary politically relevant teachers. For the remainder of this article, I discuss politically relevant teaching as it has been defined and operationalized historically by African American educators, in order to demonstrate how this tradition reflects the crucial roles that teachers play in abetting or subverting a social system of domination.

“KNOWING BEYOND THE BOUNDARIES OF WHAT IS ACCEPTABLE”:⁴
EDUCATION FOR LIBERATION AND
THE SALIENCE OF BLACK TEACHERS

African Americans have long lived a disturbing contradiction—the experiences of systemic racial oppression in the first modern democracy, and exploitation in a country founded on the ideals of justice and liberty. The social institution of formal education has not been untouched by or sheltered from the larger contradiction of racism in the United States. Consequently, there has been a long-standing discussion among African Americans about the role that formal education could play in either maintaining or transforming the existing social order.

Whether in clandestine, church-supported schools that were illegal during slavery or in private schools constructed by freed blacks from Reconstruction onwards, African Americans have struggled to have control over the schools that would educate their children (see Anderson, 1988, for an in-depth discussion of this point; also, Higginbotham, 1992; Perkins, 1989). Because schools socialize children into particular ways of seeing themselves, others, and the society in which they will function as adults, these social institutions have been a key site for black resistance to white domination.

In manifesting resistance from slavery throughout segregation, African Americans were making a profoundly political statement: They believed in being considered and treated as equal citizens in society; they were painfully aware of their social, political, and economic subjugation and would work to resist it; and they understood that formal education played a key role in either encouraging true democracy or sanctioning a system of continued oppression (Anderson, 1988; Foner, 1990). As community members themselves, black teachers who staffed these schools often complimented and enhanced the efforts of rural communities to ensure the physical presence of schools as well as exert control over the ideological vantage point of the education their children would receive in such schools.

The Philosophy of "Racial Uplift" Among African American Teachers

In recognizing the political nature of formal education, many African American teachers were guided by the philosophy of "racial uplift" developed in the first half of the nineteenth century in black churches (Perkins, 1989). Drawn from African and Christian theological notions of the interdependency of the individual self and the collective, this philosophy asserted that African Americans had a moral and spiritual responsibility to help each other rise above their enslavement.

The concept of racial uplift was an active form of social protest as it promoted an "oppositional consciousness" or an ideology of resistance against the "hegemonic ideology" (Morris, 1993) or system of beliefs that whites used to legitimize their domination of blacks. Aldon Morris (1993) illuminates the political significance of such consciousness:

Oppositional consciousness seeks to redirect the blame for suffering from divine and personal domains to the system of human domination itself. . . . [It] develops ideas about the rightness of social justice and provides conceptions of a just society. (p. 24)

Based on African Americans' apprehension of their oppression, this philosophy encouraged the cooperation of both men and women to contest the racist premise of their intellectual and moral inferiority as people of African descent. It was generally agreed upon that all adults would have to take an active role in the education of African Americans to ensure that children matured with the psychological and academic strengths necessary to subvert white domination (Perkins, 1983).

Educators in particular were exhorted to use their sense of collective responsibility to help the masses of their fellow African Americans understand and act upon their rights as citizens of a democracy (Higginbotham, 1992; Perkins, 1983). The following words of an African American principal during the first half of the twentieth century illuminate how teachers were asked to understand their duty.

The teacher who underrates and underestimates her role in the ongoing progress of mankind has never really looked and seen that boy or girl who sits before her each day. He is not clay, not stone, not metal, not even a sapphire or a diamond, but he is a human being. As a human being he has a mind and as a teacher it is our job to so guide, so direct and so motivate his mental progress to the end that he may become a responsible citizen in our society. What more glorious task is there to perform. (Walker, 1996, p. 150)

One career teacher inspired by such spiritual commitment to children was Mamie Garvin Fields. Her recollections (Fields & Fields, 1983) on the teacher training she received reveal the combination of moral obligation to service

and practical information that enabled African American teachers to educate poor black children successfully.

Since we were being taught, above all, how to be a good influence on the children, much of the classroom work was about how to discipline ourselves to be able to make do with whatever we had, wherever we went—what to do with 125 children, by yourself, in a one-room school, for example. . . . We learned that beating a child for not knowing his lesson was a shame on you as his teacher. . . . [Y]ou were encouraged to get to know the community, adults as well as children, and try to help the community as a whole. (Fields & Fields, pp. 99, 100)

It is not insignificant that during her teacher training, Fields was taught to place herself squarely in relationship with her students, their families, *and* the socioeconomic realities faced by their communities. Recent historical studies have demonstrated that an unintended effect of the deprivations that African Americans were forced to endure during the segregation of the first half of this century was that black people maintained and nurtured their oppositional consciousness. Descriptions of this consciousness emerge in accounts of what some scholars have come to identify as the “good” black segregated schools. A recurring theme in the many ethnographies of these schools and autobiographies of school attendees is the personal interest that African American teachers took in their students’ lives.

Teaching for Liberation in the “Good” Black Segregated Schools

The most vivid examples of how some black teachers roused an oppositional consciousness in African American communities exist in the many ethnographies and autobiographies that have chronicled the years before, during, and after desegregation (Cecelski, 1994; Dempsey & Noblit, 1993a, 1993b; Edwards, 1993; Foster, 1990, 1993a; Goetz & Breneman, 1988; Hunter-Gault, 1992; Philipsen, 1993, 1994; Siddle Walker, 1993a, 1993b, 1996; Sowell, 1974; Wade-Gayles, 1993). Although the lack of adequate materials and finances was a very real constraint, contemporary researchers have found that material deprivation did not necessarily define the personal and political experience of education in some of these schools. Until the last decade, the historical record has largely described black education in the segregated South through its material wants (Walker, 1996). As some historians have argued, this description of black education as thoroughly deficient has resulted from the general academic imagery that has characterized African Americans as historically insignificant (Foner, 1990). In recent years, however, scholars have gone beyond this stereotype to see black people as actors and creative participants in U.S. history.

My centering on the “good” black schools is in no way an assertion that every black school and every African American teacher was committed to the liberation of all students. Class and skin color differences among African Americans have long problematized notions of there being a unitary or agreed-upon form of cultural expression (see, for example, Russell, Wilson, & Hall, 1992). Moreover, as personal and research accounts demonstrate, some schools painfully heightened class differences between teachers and students and among students, thereby reinforcing rather than contesting the subjugation of the poorest children (Davis, 1974/1988; Fields & Fields, 1983; Luttrell, 1993; Mebane, 1981, 1983).

In referring to autobiographies and retrospective studies of segregated schools, I also understand that such accounts are always subject to the nostalgic interpretation of experience. This reality is a caution to any researcher relying on people’s memories. At the same time, however, the points of convergence in these separate investigations of black segregated schools are many and they suggest in a compelling manner that African Americans are recalling aspects of their history that warrant the attention of educational researchers. Foremost are the following: One, despite the very real economic, political, and social inequities forced upon the African American community following emancipation through segregation in the South, blacks did create and maintain a number of schools that they valued and considered “good”; two, the “good” of such schools extended beyond the effective teaching of literacy and numeracy and depended on the ability of teachers to engage students in the psychological and political processes of seeing themselves as deserving of first-class citizenship; and three, in the implementation of desegregation, African Americans lost not only cultural icons and role models of black success, but control over the political ties between education and liberation in the schools that their children attended.

“Good” Teachers in the Segregated South

Despite the lack of adequate teaching materials, secondhand and outdated books, and glaring disparities in teacher salaries and facilities in comparison to white schools, there were black segregated schools that educated their students both academically and politically (Cecelski, 1994; Siddle Walker, 1996). Several accounts of this period assert that educators became part of students’ extended families, as they resided, worshipped, and worked in the same communities as their students (Dempsey & Noblit, 1993a, 1993b). These studies further maintain that because of their knowledge of and investment in the communities of their students, black teachers were able to create home-like atmospheres in schools where students experienced a continuity of expectations and interactional patterns between their homes and schools, their parents and their teachers (Foster, 1993; Siddle Walker, 1993a).

At the same time, “good” teachers were very cognizant of the fact that by virtue of their education and social standing as professionals, they were people who had “made it” into a life that exposed them to more opportunities than the parents of their students. Not only did many of these teachers visit the homes of their pupils and conduct adult education courses at night for parents, they were also community advocates who negotiated with the white power structure on behalf of poor, illiterate blacks (Clark, 1990; Foster, 1993). Thus, the political nature of racial uplift depended on teachers taking the personal initiative to invite and welcome students and their families of origin into the status-laden “family” or “community” of learned people. An example from Emilie V. Siddle Walker’s (1993b) ethnography of a school in rural North Carolina demonstrates this point:

When teachers of the former Caswell County Training School talk about the students and their day-to-day interactions with them, they frequently describe how important they felt it was “not to sit high and look low on the children” and how they wanted “to make the children believe that they were somebody.” . . . This caring that students perceived to be at the root of their interactions with the teachers and principal made them feel they could relate to the teachers, made them want to be like their teachers, and made them believe what the teachers told them about their success potential. (pp. 66, 72)

These teachers recognized that they had the personal and social power to influence students’ self-perceptions and guide their aspirations beyond the immediate limitations of their segregated environments. Capitalizing on this influence was a political act because it contradicted the racist rhetoric of black inferiority. If black students could be convinced that they were as capable as whites, then they would be less likely to believe what the dominant society had maintained as truth: that black people had not and would not accomplish anything of value, apart from menial service to whites.

A recurring theme in the literature on “good” black segregated schools is the fact that teachers took on the role of surrogate parents toward their students (Cecelski, 1994; Siddle Walker, 1996). As teachers, they believed that they were both ethically and “ethnically responsible for preparing these youth for future leadership and for making contributions to this unique mission, namely the liberation and enhancement of the quality of life for black people” (Adair, 1984, cited in Walker, 1996, p. 206). As a result, their concern was for the “whole child,” not simply their students’ academic well-being. Thus, the teachers’ political clarity was connected to their personal investment in their students. This merging of the personal and the political is illustrated in the following description of the black schooling that English professor Gloria Wade-Gayles received in Memphis, Tennessee, during the 1940s:

I attribute our arrogance not only to our parents, but also to black teachers who were tough, challenging, and uncompromising in their insistence on excellent academic performance and exemplary character. . . . If revolutionaries are people who work to change a system, to bring it down, black teachers were quiet revolutionaries in our communities. . . . That we were special and destined for distinction of some kind was a belief our teachers required us to learn in bold black conspiratorial lesson plans. (Wade-Gayles, 1993, pp. 8–9)

As “quiet revolutionaries,” teachers essentially sought to convince students that they rightfully belonged in the classroom, and that school was a supportive place that would encourage them to define and work towards achieving “their highest potential” (Siddle Walker, 1996) in society. In the words of one former student, “Our teachers could see our potential even when we couldn’t, and they were able to draw out our potential. They helped us imagine possibilities of life beyond what we knew” (Foster, 1997, p. 99).

DESEGREGATION AND THE LOSS OF POLITICAL CLARITY AMONG TEACHERS OF AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS

During the first half of the twentieth century, African Americans pursued the integration of the dual system of schooling and life in an effort to bring them into the democracy of the United States. It had been the hope of white school officials and the general European American population that disparities in teacher compensation, educational opportunity, and school physical plant would foster a cheap yet efficient way of controlling the quality and ends of black education (Anderson, 1988; Fultz, 1994). For example, a 1930s study of black teachers in the rural South found them to have 70% of the training of white teachers in terms of years of education beyond the eighth grade; yet they earned only 41% of the salaries of their white counterparts (Fultz, 1994, p. 554).

It is certainly true that African Americans faced incredible odds in realizing their dream of a liberatory education. The inequities were significant and painful, and often did create the intended effects of feelings of inferiority and inadequacy among African Americans (see, for example, Davis, 1974/ 1988; Luttrell, 1993; Mebane, 1981; 1983). Systemic inequities in per-pupil expenditures, building maintenance, teacher salaries, and educational materials made clear that the public schooling system was “separate” and far from “equal.” Furthermore, these educational disparities mirrored and lent an air of legitimacy to the social injustice of a racially segregated society. As a result, African Americans sought legal recourse to end segregation, and their efforts culminated in the Supreme Court desegregation ruling of 1954, *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* (Blumberg, 1991; Douglas, 1995).

However, in light of the continuing educational, economic, and political disenfranchisement of blacks, many in recent years have viewed desegregation as at least a “mixed blessing” if not a clear Pyrrhic victory (Adair, 1984; Deever, 1992; Edwards, 1993). With desegregation, not only were the majority of black schools closed down in order to create a unitary system (Cecelski, 1994), but thousands of African American teachers lost their jobs while those who remained were sent to integrate white schools. In the two decades following the 1954 Brown decision, researchers have argued that racism and discrimination resulted in over 31,000 black teachers being dismissed or not hired to reach racial equity and parity among teachers and students in the 17 border and southern states (Ethridge, 1979). Consequently, by 1972, “the Black student population in the South had increased from twenty-one to twenty-three percent, while the Black teacher population had decreased from nineteen to seventeen percent” (Ethridge, 1979, p. 224). As one observer wrote in 1965,

It is clear that in the past, Negro teachers were employed specifically and exclusively for the purpose of teaching Negro pupils in segregated schools. . . . It has been, and still is, widely assumed by many school board members that Negroes, both students and teachers, are intellectually inferior. From this specious premise, it follows that “quality education” can be obtained only when schools, even after being integrated, remain in spirit and often in name “white schools.” White schools are viewed as having no place for Negro teachers. (Ethridge, 1979, p. 218)

Such disparities in the racial compositions of the teaching force and student population demonstrated not simply a quantitative problem, but a qualitative shift in the relationship of many African Americans to formal education in the years following the Brown decision. Desegregation, or the creation of a unified educational system, took a “one-way” direction. Rather than a synthesis of the strengths of both black and white schools, desegregation modeled public schooling overwhelmingly on the needs and concerns of European Americans.

Forced to dismantle their schools, African Americans incurred profound cultural and psychological losses among teachers, students, and communities alike (Cecelski, 1994; Dempsey & Noblit, 1993a, 1993b). One poignant description of the impact of desegregation on the student-teacher relationship is offered by social and literary critic bell hooks.

Bussed to white schools, we soon learned that obedience, and not a zealous will to learn, was what was expected of us. Too much eagerness to learn could easily be seen as a threat to white authority.

When we entered racist, desegregated, white schools, we left a world where teachers believed that to educate black children rightly would require a political commitment. Now, we were mainly taught by white

teachers whose lessons reinforced racist stereotypes. For black children, education was no longer about the practice of freedom. Realizing this, I lost my love of school. (1994, pp. 3–4)

From hooks' recollections, and those of other former students, desegregation broke the relationships of love, caring, and support that they had formerly experienced with their teachers. Significantly, hooks refers to desegregation as "one of the first great tragedies of growing up" (1990, p. 34). In the experiences of some black students attending newly desegregated schools, education became politically repressive because teaching, for the white teachers they encountered, was often not about a political or personal commitment to black children. In the eyes of these students, many of their white teachers conceptualized teaching only as the presentation of subject matter, without any critical reflection on whose interests such knowledge served (Dempsey & Noblit, 1993a).

Remembered as "the demise of caring" (Dempsey & Noblit, 1993b), and the end of respectful and encouraging relationships between black students and teachers, and black teachers and communities, desegregation also represented in the African American community the loss of educators with the requisite political clarity regarding the need for schools to undermine the subjugation of black children. Some African American educators who have experienced both segregated and desegregated schooling maintain that it was in desegregated schools, and not necessarily in segregated ones, that many black students encountered and were forced to take on a "minority status" often fostered by white school personnel. These educators further assert that the contemporary resistance to education observed among African American students is a result of their having to endure this minority status, to which they react with feelings of inferiority, humiliation, and depressed aspirations toward educational success (Adair, 1984; Foster, 1997; Jeffries, 1994).

Among those African American teachers who were not dismissed in the wake of the Brown decision, some have observed the development of an "I can't" attitude among their black students and parents, and even among themselves. This spirit of defeat seems oblivious to the "I can" attitude promoted and even demanded in the "good" black segregated schools (Edwards, 1993). Perhaps this shift is clearest in the words of a male African American high school teacher:

The big difference [between segregation and desegregation] was that I can see we were able to do more with the Black students. . . . I'd get up on top of my desk and sit down and just talk to them. "Why are you here? . . . Do you know where your competition is?" . . . "Your competition is not your little cousin that's sittin' over there. Your competition is that white person over there in that other school. . . . And the only way that you're going to be able to get that job is that you can't be as good as

he is, you got to be better.” And I could drill that into their heads. . . . I got disillusioned with integration . . . because I could not get to my people and tell them all the things that they needed to know. (Foster, 1990, pp. 133–34)

Evident in this teacher’s words is that in moving into schools that were racially desegregated, yet under white control, he felt he lost a forum for educating his black students about the reality of racial inequality and could no longer prepare them for the unjust world he knew they would soon enter. His words strongly suggest that his teaching lost its former political clarity. Thus, his teaching became defined not by his knowledge of the world as a member of an oppressed group, but by the rules of a white-dominated school in which racism was regarded neither as a matter worth discussing, nor as a lingering problem that white students and faculty needed to recognize and address. Although not commonly pursued in the educational literature, how some African American educators, such as this teacher, essentially depoliticized their practice after desegregation is certainly a subject in need of research.

Preoccupied as it was with the material disparities between black and white schools, the desegregation ruling failed to recognize that what was “good” and “unique” about some black schools was that they encouraged teachers and students to develop a critical consciousness about their oppression. These black segregated schools had operated as political spaces where African Americans celebrated a history of subversion in which they controlled perhaps not the production of images about them, but the interpretation and manipulation of these images in their community (Foster, 1991). Doing so, blacks were able to contest the white racist belief of their racial, cultural, and intellectual inferiority. Yet, in the wake of desegregation, African Americans’ historical and cultural connection between education and social change was devalued, silenced, and forced underground.

Instead of creating schools in which educators and parents collaborated toward the goal of education for liberation, African Americans were compelled to endure schooling, and its attendant socialization, in white environments where racism was for the most part unacknowledged and barely mitigated by school personnel. In the words of one researcher, “Desegregation put African American children in a racist context hoping that they would learn anyway because, at least, they then could share in the same material benefits of an integrated school” (Edwards, 1993, p. 343). Restated in less subtle terms, one researcher writes, “Schooling became part of [the] White man’s world; education was undermined, taken from the community and placed in the hands of others” (Gordon, 1992, p. 5). Desegregation thus encouraged a problematic shift from an oppositional to a hegemonic consciousness among the teachers (both white and black) of African American students.

This shift is represented poignantly in the steady numerical decreases in the proportion of the teaching force that is African American. Whereas, in the

late 1940s, almost 80% of college-educated African American women who sought employment became teachers, by the mid-1980s, less than a quarter of such women entered the profession (Murnane et al., 1991; cited in King, 1993, p. 124). Additionally, while in 1970, 12% of the teaching force was African American, by 1986 the percentage had dropped to 6.9% (King, 1993). These numbers are particularly distressing in light of the fact that black students account for 16.2% of the public school population, and researchers and policy makers have boded an increasing disparity between the presence of African American students and the absence of sufficient numbers of African American teachers (Foster, 1993). Certainly, it is difficult to determine how increased economic and professional opportunities for African Americans since the civil rights legislation of the 1960s have contributed to declining numbers of blacks in the teaching force. However, given that the population of students includes potential teachers among its ranks, a considerable insight into the influence of desegregated schooling on the aspirations of students of color to become teachers may lie in briefly examining their experiences in schools.

Silencing African American Student Voices in Desegregated Schools

As Lisa Delpit (1995) found in her interviews with teachers of color, most believe their pedagogy to be guided not by school knowledge but by their own experiences as students and the wisdom of often-unschooled members of their communities. A major obstruction to such teachers' connection with the content of their schooling is that very often the public schools silence discussions of political contradictions and the need for social justice (Giroux, 1990; Fine, 1991). In particular, schools promote themselves as universal melting pots that reflect an eclectically American rather than a culturally specific identity (Delpit, 1988; Willis, 1994).

Yet, the experiences of those who are labeled "culturally different," "disadvantaged," or "at risk" reveal that in fact there does exist a culture in schools, and that it centers on the experiences, realities, and aspirations of the white middle class. Consequently, many public schools take part in "silencing" discordant voices and perspectives. As Michelle Fine (1992) has asserted, this silencing affects the daily experiences of African American students, compelling many to pawn their awareness of inequity for the persona of a "good" student.

"Good students" . . . trained themselves to produce two voices. One's "own" voice alternated with an "academic" voice. The latter denied class, gender, and race conflict; repeated the words of hard work, success, and their "natural" sequence; and stifled any desire to disrupt. . . . The price of success may have been muting one's own voice. (Fine, 1992, pp. 126–127)

Fine's analysis elucidates the reality of "miseducation," of which African American historian Carter G. Woodson warned sixty years ago: the silencing of the connections between formal education and social reality is particularly costly for black students since it deprives them of any belief in their agency, promise, and worth as African Americans. Woodson (1933/1993) explains,

This so-called modern education . . . has been worked out in conformity to the needs of those who have enslaved and oppressed weaker peoples. For example, the philosophy and ethics resulting from our educational system have justified slavery, peonage, segregation, and lynching. . . . Negroes daily educated in the tenets of such a religion of the strong have accepted the status of the weak as divinely ordained. . . . (p. xii)

The ethnographic research of Signithia Fordham (1988, 1991, 1993, 1996) has similarly found that academically successful African Americans often experience their schooling as a Pyrrhic victory. These students follow school demands to deny their racial affiliations, while they take on the cultural norms and political perspectives of the dominant white society.

[These students] do not appear to believe—nor does their experience support—the idea that they can truly be bicultural. . . . As a result, the students are also led to believe in the view of racism and discrimination as the practices of individuals rather than as part and parcel of institutionally sanctioned social policies. (Fordham, 1988, pp. 79, 80)

As the research on the schooling experiences of black students suggests, "good" students are instructed not to question social inequality; rather, they learn to align themselves, consciously or not, with the norms of the schools they attend. In the case of African Americans and members of other oppressed groups, these norms promote the continuation of the status quo rather than a radical revisioning of the institution of education and its lingering ties to social injustice. Such evidence also reveals how schools generally do not educate their students to see schools and themselves as "locations of possibility" for fostering social justice (hooks, 1994, p. 207).

CONCLUDING REMARKS ON "EDUCATION AS THE PRACTICE OF FREEDOM"⁵

The foregoing investigation into the historical tradition of education for liberation within the black community is neither simply nor exclusively a lesson in African American educational history. Its significance is much larger, as an illustration of how teachers' understandings of systems of power and privilege poignantly influence the ways in which politically and economically subjugated students experience schooling. The political clarity of generations of black teachers is, I believe, less a reflection of culture and more an

embodiment of these educators' personal and political commitments. Teaching incorporates one's professional training, cultural identity, *and* ideological commitments. It is the convergence of all these sources of identity that defines one's practice and thinking as an educator (Shujaa, 1995; Smith, 1989).

While cultural similarity and understanding between teachers and students are certainly helpful, these points of connection are not sufficient for addressing and remedying the contemporary problems of underachievement, alienation, and dropout that too many students of color experience. In order to emphasize the political understanding of social systems of power and a personal commitment to educating children regardless of their social origins, I have renamed culturally relevant teaching as *politically* relevant teaching. This renaming is an attempt to expand the concept of culturally relevant teaching, by drawing attention to the political clarity, or the courage and savvy, of such educators committed to reaching out to and successfully educating "other people's children."

The significance of politically relevant teachers to education lies in their belief that schools can be vehicles for social change, community building, and access to the mainstream; and that educators can take a leading role in promoting social justice. Thus, it is possible for an advocate of culturally relevant teaching, such as Michele Foster (1996), to see many similarities between the exemplary black teachers she has studied and the white Catholic nuns from her own schooling.

A large part of their effectiveness was because the nuns took seriously their responsibility to teach all their pupils, including the Black ones. . . . [L]ike the teachers I have been studying, these nuns espoused an ideology that all students could be successful academically and master the curricular offerings, whatever they were. Because they believed in their own self-efficacy and subscribed to the belief that effort, not ability, produced achievement, they were tough, demanding, and insistent on quality performance. (pp. 104–5)

Such a belief in the power and potential of schools and educators is less a cultural trait than it is a personal and political conviction. Renaming culturally relevant teaching "politically relevant teaching" is important for at least three reasons. First, discussions of "culture" as a reference for teaching can gloss over the complexity of class, gender, and ethnic diversity that exists within any "cultural" group. However, centering on the political draws attention to the active decision making and commitments of an educator to uphold certain viewpoints (e.g., hegemonic or oppositional; oppressive or democratic) that transcend culture. Second, the term "political relevance" compels us to see beyond what is sometimes presented as an essentialist quality of social groupings. The concept of political relevance maintains that there is a

political history of striving to bring the practice of democracy in line with our founding ideals, and that this “positive struggle” has included people of *various* cultural and social backgrounds (Wills, 1996, p. 383). Last, consciously focusing our attention on the political rather than cultural experiences of students provides us with a way of productively engaging with the reality of a majority white female teaching force educating an increasingly nonwhite public school population. If we consider that the successful education of poor students and students of color hinges on *political* congruence between teachers and students, rather than on cultural similarity, we become interested in helping teachers identify and reflect on their political convictions and their pedagogy as manifestations of their stance toward the positive struggle for democracy.

The history of “good” black segregated schools and the teachers fondly recalled in those schools is important to the concept of political relevance because it evidences this positive struggle and demonstrates that politically relevant teaching has a long and proud past. Yet, it is important to remember that the struggle for democracy, liberation, and social justice has been enriched and supported by individuals from *all* social groups (Wills, 1996). Hispanics, Native Americans, and native peoples of Alaska and Hawaii are just some of the other groups who have also experienced marginalization, and who have similarly contested their oppression within schools (see, for example, Spring, 1994).

Marilyn Cochran-Smith (1995) has named the transformation of hegemonic ideology and the development of political clarity among her preservice teachers, both white and black, as a process of “rewriting autobiography.” In light of the foregoing discussion, I believe it helpful to hear and analyze the autobiographies of teachers from various cultural backgrounds who have decided against dominant hegemonic school practices. It is in seeing ourselves in a tradition larger than our individual selves and our contemporary social reality that we gain a historical perspective on the nature of “the struggle” and an appreciation for all people who have contributed to this “movement against and beyond boundaries.”

I have taken the title of this paper, as well as many of the section headings, from the work of feminist educator and cultural critic bell hooks. It is thus fitting to close with her own description of the personal and social implications of politically relevant teaching:

The classroom, with all its limitations, remains a location of possibility. In that field of possibility we have the opportunity to labor for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our comrades, an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress. This is education as the practice of freedom. (hooks, 1994, p. 207)

Notes

1 hooks (1994), p. 12.

2 In referring to the culturally relevant teaching literature, I am including both research that explicitly identifies itself in this line of thinking (e.g., Ladson-Billings, 1994a), as well as other research that embodies culturally relevant ideals—namely, by positing that there are particular cultural strengths and a certain distinctiveness in the pedagogy advocated by some African American teachers (see, for example, Foster, 1990).

3 In order to emphasize this point of the political understandings of injustice that culturally relevant teachers demonstrate, for the remainder of this article I will use the term “politically relevant teaching” to refer to the literature on culturally relevant teaching.

4 hooks (1994), p. 12.

5 hooks (1994), p. 207.

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