

**Cultural competency is not enough:  
Advancing culturally relevant teaching  
as politically relevant teaching**

*Summary: The purpose of this pamphlet 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 segregated schools. An examination of accounts of these schools that were valued by students and families reveals 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. Thus, it was not the fact they shared the students' culture, but that they shared their politics. Teachers used their knowledge of society's inequities and their influence to empower their marginalized students. By recognizing the political and historical dimensions of culturally relevant teaching its applications are broadened, expanding to issues of racism and social injustice that are relevant to all Americans.*

## **Schooling for democratic citizenship or second-class citizenship? Formal education as a means to prepare students to take an active role in making society**

The issue of cultural competence for all urban teachers is limited. Although discussions concerning culture are needed, the fundamental issue or question for urban educators concerns the purpose of public education: Is it a means of social transformation in the form of education for the personal and social emancipation for their students or system maintenance of the status quo?

Over the last 20 years, the idea of cultural competence maintained that successful teachers of children of color must be aware of the cultural distinctiveness and strengths of their students. Indiana Law IC 20-10.2-8, Cultural Competency in Educational Environments, mandates training for pre-service and regular public school teachers. By sharing and understanding a variety of cultures, urban educators will be more committed to their students.

### **Two limitations of cultural competency**

#### **Cultural awareness is not enough**

Cultural competency is based on a system of behaviors, attitudes and policies that enable teachers to work effectively in diverse, multi-cultural environments. Unfortunately, cultural competency is important yet insufficient preconditions for teaching students from marginalized groups and has limited culturally relevant teaching. The concept limits orientation to understanding and appreciating culture--ignoring the political realities in urban schooling with which many educators cope, confront, simply avoid, or naively do not recognize.

#### **Unintended consequences**

Cultural competency, for middle-class teachers of all skin tones, who work in urban schools, is supposed to make schools work. Cultural competency will enable relationships, decrease discipline referrals; consequently, it will increase academic performance. Basically, it will quiet things down, and especially avert the political controversy that made cultural competency an issue in the first place. Indeed, cultural competency is a necessity for urban teachers. Nonetheless, it can also perpetuate a school climate that limits teachers who see public schools as opportunities to talk about race and class contradictions in our society, recognizing racism as a fact of life for themselves and their students. As a result, these educators have to pretend that inequity and injustice do not exist because cultural competency mandates now preclude discordant voices and perspectives. Eventually, racism will be regarded neither as a matter worth discussing, nor as a lingering problem that white students and faculty need to recognize and address: each teacher is culturally competent; and, so all is well in our public schools.

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### **Other unintended consequences**

The unintended silencing affects of the cultural competency mandate on the daily experiences of African American students can "persuade" them to pawn their awareness of inequity in their communities and schools for the persona of a "good" student. Students train themselves to produce two voices: one's "own" voice alternated with an "academic" voice. These voices are affected by the expectations of everyone, both those who support cultural competency as well as those who do not. Students may deny class, gender, and race conflict; repeat the words of hard work, success, and their "natural" sequence; and, stifle any desire to disrupt. The price of success of the cultural competency initiative may be muting one's own voice.

Such evidence also reveals how urban schools generally do not educate their students to see public schools and themselves as "locations of possibility" for fostering social justice.

Urban teachers, who see beyond the well meaning, but limited cultural competency concept, and who have not lost **political clarity**, will continue to have emancipatory practices and philosophies. Operating subversively, they view their classrooms as sites of resistance where they take control not accorded to them in the school power hierarchy.

### **Political clarity or cultural competence or both?**

#### **The concept of political clarity: Education as "oppositional consciousness"**

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 U.S

There has been a longstanding discussion among African Americans about the role that formal education could play in either maintaining or transforming the existing social order, reflecting the crucial roles that teachers play in abetting or subverting a social system of domination.

#### **Recognizing schooling as a "socio-political institution"**

Because public 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 such 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.

By recognizing the political nature of formal education, many African American teachers in segregated schools that existed before *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, used their classrooms to promote an "oppositional consciousness" or an ideology of resistance against the "hegemonic ideology." They sought to redirect the blame for suffering from divine and personal domains to the system of human

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domination itself. This helped develop ideas about the rightness of social justice and provided conceptions of a just society.

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. They wanted to make sure African American children matured with the psychological and academic strengths necessary to subvert white domination.

As "quiet revolutionaries," these educators, capitalizing on this classroom influence, were committing political acts because it contradicted the racist rhetoric of Black inferiority.

### **Advancing culturally relevant teaching: Characteristics of politically relevant teaching**

Due to the anti-assimilationist orientation of the culturally relevant teaching concept of Gloria Ladson-Billings, it is viewed more accurately as politically relevant teaching.

The basis of politically relevant teaching states: Cultural similarity and understanding are important yet insufficient preconditions for teaching students from marginalized groups.

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.

- Because of the political understanding of education held by these educators, their actions are sensitive to and supportive of the anti-racism and anti-oppression struggles of students of color. They are conscious of the presence of racism which surrounds students with distorted and overwhelmingly negative images of the cultures, histories, and possibilities of people of color.
- As a result, politically 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."
- Therefore, they successfully encourage their students to be competent and comfortable in both their home culture and the larger society.
- The philosophical beliefs held by such educators believe public education has a responsibility to prepare students to take an active role in making society truly democratic.

### **Tamara Beauboeuf-LaFontant's concluding remarks: "Education as the practice of freedom"**

The political clarity of generations of Black teachers is less a reflection of culture and more an embodiment of these educators' personal and political commitments.

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This means that any urban educator, regardless of color and culture, may be limited by the best intentions reflected in cultural competency. Without a genuine identification with the political realities students (and the families and communities) face, *cultural competency is not enough*.

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.

*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 dropping out 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, Indiana must advance culturally relevant teaching as politically relevant teaching.

This advancement is an attempt to expand the concept of cultural competence and culturally relevant teaching by drawing attention to the political clarity, or the courage and savvy of such Hoosier 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.

*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.* Advancing culturally relevant teaching as "politically relevant teaching" is important for at least three reasons:

1. 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;
2. 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; and,
3. 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 non-white 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 competency, we become interested in helping teachers identify and reflect on their

political convictions and their pedagogy as a manifestation of their stance towards the positive struggle for democracy.

Beauboeuf-LaFontant took the title of her paper, as well as many of the section headings, from the work of feminist educator and cultural critic bell hooks (*Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*). She closes her paper with a description of the personal and social implications of politically relevant teaching written by bell hooks:

“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.”

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This pamphlet is a compilation of quotes from Tamara Beauboeuf-LaFontant’s 1999 article, “A Movement Against and Beyond Boundaries: Politically Relevant Teaching among African-American Teachers.” *Teachers College Record*, 100(4), p. 702-723.

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