

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy in the post-COVID-19 Era

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Introduction

In 1995, Gloria Ladson-Billings introduced a landmark essay entitled “But That’s Just Good Teaching! The Case for Culturally Relevant Pedagogy” to the world of educational research and teaching. It explained culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) and its three tenets—academic success, cultural competence, and critical consciousness. Ladson-Billings’ main argument was that public schools in America were not serving their children and youth of Color¹ well.

Her argument is still discussed and well-documented in today’s literature (see, for example, Emdin 2016, 2021; Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2021; Muhammad, 2020; Nieto, 2000, 2010). Ladson-Billings (1995a, 1995b, 2001) defines CRP as a form of teaching where teachers use a student’s culture to guide student learning. In this view, a culturally relevant teacher: (1) acknowledges that one’s culture and identities are dynamic and fluid in society rather than static. In doing so, the teacher becomes responsive to the ever-changing cultural, economic, and social contexts of the lives of their students (Nieto, 2000, 2010); and (2) is consciously aware that public schools in America are social institutions that thrive on systemic racism and pedagogical practices of a bygone era (Ladson-Billings, 2001; Lyiscott, 2019).

With this in mind, in this essay, I will revisit and critically analyze the three tenets of CRP. My unique positionality, specifically my identities as a novice Latino urban educator and doctoral student of Color informs the reflective questions I pose to educationalists throughout this essay. I define an educationalist as individuals who know various principles and pedagogical practices of teaching (e.g., classroom teachers, school leaders, literacy coaches, curriculum writers, and teacher educators). I will explore the three tenets of CRP by situating Ladson-Billings’ theory in the post-COVID-19 era. I will do so by asking: What does CRP look like in a classroom post-COVID-19? I define the “post-COVID-19 era” as the period after the lockdown imposed on the United States by the pandemic (e.g., closure of businesses and public schools). By posing such a question, I invite educationalists to critically re-analyze CRP and its need in schools today more than ever before (Ladson-Billings, 2021).

Tenet #1: Academic Success

Schools must make it their priority to provide students with many opportunities to experience academic success. Ladson-Billings (1995a, 1995b, 2001) argued that for students to become successful citizens in a democracy, in the United States, they must develop their academic skills (e.g., reading, writing, mathematical, technological, and intrapersonal and interpersonal social and political skills). Students must develop such critical skills regardless of the social inequalities and inequities present in our society. While I agree with many aspects of Ladson-Billings’ argument, I disagree with her overall conclusion that regardless of the social inequalities and inequities (e.g., systemic racism,

poverty, persistent social and economic inequalities, and lack of appropriate school funding), students should be expected to develop their academic skills fully.

In other words, how can students grow as critical thinkers and learners if they are not taught how to acknowledge and regulate their emotions—which are consistently influenced by the negative impacts of social, economic, and political inequalities and inequities present in society? Not all children and youth learn to process these negative interactions and experiences; therefore, they cannot reach the level of critical thinking Ladson-Billings suggests because academic success is not independent of emotional security.

Furthermore, as we think about our American society and what it will look like post-COVID-19, specifically the future of schooling in America educationalists need to ask themselves the following question: How do we define academic success post-COVID-19 through the lens of social and emotional learning (SEL)? Cristóvão et al. (2017) define SEL as the “capacity to recognize and manage emotions, solve problems effectively, and establish positive relationships with others” (p. 1).

As we continue to battle COVID-19, I define academic success as a learner’s ability to: (1) acquire and create new knowledge individually and collectively across the content and subject areas; (2) acknowledge that to grow as a learner, one must learn the importance of regulating one’s emotions, which are constantly impacted by the social, economic, and political inequalities and inequities around them; and (3) recognize that learning is a lifelong journey where one’s mind is constantly on a quest for new knowledge. Schools cannot meet Ladson-Billings’ definition of academic success in the current climate, but if schools cultivate these three abilities in students, only then can society expect children and youth to develop their academic skills fully.

Tenet #2: Cultural Competence

Living in a pluralistic society requires its citizens to value different cultures and their role in society. Ladson-Billings (1995a, 1995b, 2001) argued that culturally relevant teachers provide their students with the opportunities to affirm and value their culture while acquiring knowledge and fluency in another culture. That is, a culturally competent teacher uses the culture of their students to guide their learning. Nieto (2000) defines culture as “the ever-changing values, traditions, social and political relationships, and worldview created, shared, and transformed by a group of people bound together by a combination of factors that can include a common history, geographic location, language, social class, and religion” (p. 139).

With this notion of culture in mind, I have realized that before teachers can successfully learn about the cultures of their students, they must first embrace their own cultural identities. Educators must also challenge their biases, assumptions, and stereotypes about specific cultural, racial, and ethnic groups—both consciously and subconsciously. We live in a nation where classroom teachers often allow their own biases, assumptions, and stereotypes to lead to deficit perspectives of diverse students; I am guilty of this myself. Thus, as we embark on a new era of education in the United States, the post-COVID-19 era, educationalists should ask themselves the following question: Through the lens of conscious and unconscious bias, how do I define cultural competence post-COVID-19? I define cultural competence as: (1) a teacher’s ability to embrace their cultural identities and of their students and use them to drive classroom learning; and (2) an educator’s

capacity to critically challenge their biases, assumptions, and stereotypes that they have for students, which negatively influences teaching and learning.

Tenet #3: Critical Consciousness

In order for students to thrive in our American democratic society, schools must teach them how to develop their critical consciousness. Ladson-Billings (1995a, 1995b, 2001) defined critical consciousness as a student's ability to critically analyze the world around them, explicitly the societal inequalities and inequities that affect their lives. Ladson-Billings' conceptualization of critical consciousness is relevant in today's world. We are still amidst the COVID-19 pandemic and continue to witness the exacerbation of social, racial, political, and economic inequalities and inequities. While I agree with Ladson-Billings, schools must provide students with a chance to develop their critical consciousness; classroom teachers must also get the opportunity to engage in professional development to enhance their critical consciousness. They must explicitly learn more about how social, political, and economic inequalities and inequities negatively impact student learning. I currently teach in an urban school district that does not invest in meaningful professional development opportunities for its teachers and school leaders (e.g., antiracist teaching and leadership, how to teach a culturally responsive curriculum, how to address systemic racism in schools, and how to facilitate conversations about intersectionality and its role in teaching and learning).

Hence, as educationalists, we must ask ourselves the following questions: How do I define critical consciousness post-COVID-19? I define critical consciousness as: a teacher and student's ability to critically challenge (individually and collectively) the social, political, and economic inequities and inequalities, along with the racial and social injustices that affect our American society—our public schools.

What's Next? — The Future of CRP Research in the Post-COVID-19 Era

To conclude, in this essay, I situated Ladson-Billings' theory of CRP within the context of post-COVID-19 era. I did so by inviting educationalists along with educational researchers and scholars interested in CRP and its use in schools to explore my critical analysis of CRP and its three tenets in their research. In doing so, we can continue to build upon Ladson-Billings' seminal scholarship (Ladson-Billings, 1995a, 1995b, 2001).

I plan to continue the conversation using my identities, that of a Latino novice, culturally relevant teacher, doctoral student, and emerging teacher educator, researcher, and scholar. I will explore the reflective questions posed throughout this essay using my identities as my lenses and qualitative self-study teacher research which is situated in my personal and teaching experiences (Samaras, 2011). Through self-study teacher research, I will continue to reimagine public education in America. Using my identities and teaching experiences during the post-COVID-19 era, I will continue to establish my ideas and re-conceptualizations of CRP and its three tenets within the context of my teaching experiences (both past and present) along with the schooling experiences of my students—all which are dynamic. By doing this, I will continue to build upon the scholarship of my predecessor, Ladson-Billings (1995a, 1995b, 2001, 2021) and continue to work towards creating learning environments that are equitable and inclusive for students of Color.

Note

[1] “Color” is capitalized intentionally as a means for empowering those who identify as people of Color.

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