This week’s reading of “But That’s Just Good Teaching! The Case for Culturally Relevant Pedagogy” by Gloria Ladson-Billings expanded on concepts that have been discussed elsewhere in our program, and provided examples of educators who tailored their pedagogy for the community they serve. Ladson-Billings focused specifically on teachers who were successful at working with African-American students. Success was defined by members of the community, rather than through test results. The reasons these teachers were successful varied, but the fact that they were chosen by the people they were serving was especially meaningful.

Ladson-Billings went on to define the term “culturally-relevant pedagogy.” Culturally relevant shares many similarities with critical pedagogy, but has a special focus on collective, rather than individual, empowerment.

The main finding of the study was that the teachers who were deemed exceptional had diverse methods in the classroom. Ladson-Billings did not find any classroom technique that was implemented universally by these teachers. Despite the variety of methods they used, they shared philosophical ideas. The effective teachers all chose to be teachers. They all shared the belief that their students were capable learners and that they brought valuable knowledge into the classroom. These teachers were involved in the community outside of the schools. They had all chosen to work in the schools they worked in. The teachers in this study were dedicated to their profession, and the fact that they reflected about the importance of their work greatly enhanced their success in working with African-American students.
A theme that was touched upon in this reading and has been addressed more explicitly elsewhere is the role of the outsider perspective when working in communities of color. The two examples of White teachers who were successful in this article were not explicitly described as outsiders, but the fact that their race was mentioned is significant. One of the two teachers was described as “culturally Black,” which was not expanded upon within the article. Both of these teachers found ways to connect in culturally relevant ways by incorporating aspects of the community they served.

The example of Gertrude Wilson, who brought in parents who had specific forms of cultural knowledge, was especially interesting to me. This seems like a great way for someone who is an outsider to a community to incorporate insider knowledge in a meaningful and authentic way, and avoids essentialism that could take place if a White educator was trying to specifically cater to students of color. “She was deliberate in reinforcing that the parents were a knowledgeable and capable resource…[her students] also learned that what they had and where they came from was of value” (161). This is incredibly important in a system that denies the relevance of all experiences outside of the culture of power. The acknowledgement of these forms of knowledge is not only valuable but vital to the success of students.

The other White educator who was explicitly mentioned in this article was Ann Lewis, who was described as “culturally Black.” Lewis welcomed the use of the colloquial language that her students used in class. Over time, she showed ways of translating between the way they talked and standard English. This process of translating strengthened students’ understandings of both the language they used outside of academic settings and the standard English they needed to be successful in school. This is interesting to me because I had never thought of the process of
learning standard English as beneficial for conversational English as well. Also, this strategy is interesting because it validates the students’ experiences while at the same time giving them the tools they need to advocate for themselves and work within the system that is in place. I found this much to be much more of an authentic means of connecting with students than artificially inserting “cultural artifacts” into the curriculum.

This reading made strong connections with some of the central themes of our program. The fact alone that these teachers were reflecting on their practice and were invested in it made them more effective educators. Obviously, the methods of instruction play an incredibly important role, but it was interesting to see that the frame of mind that the teachers were in seemed to have the largest impact was fascinating. The ideas of Milner, Greene, Friere, and Horton were echoed in this reading for me especially.

I saw these successful teachers as, on a more pragmatic level, rejecting a colorblind approach and deficit mindsets as described by Milner. These teachers saw their students as capable and unique, rather than seeing them simplistically as less successful students. This attitude is what allowed them to invest so heavily in working with their prior knowledge. Without this approach, teachers try to make their students fit into the culture of power without any consideration of where they are coming from and what that actually means in a classroom.

I saw the ideas of Greene in this study through the importance of critical self-reflection. Green advocates for teachers who engage in philosophical thought to understand their position in the world. A teacher in Greene’s framework is always questioning. The teachers in these examples show a dedication to figuring out exactly what their responsibilities are and how to best serve the students they work with. While Ladson-Billings does not specifically bring up
philosophical thought the way that Greene does, I thought the description of an actively critically thinking teacher overlapped significantly.

Lastly, I saw connections with our readings of Freire and Horton. These two men formed the basis of critical pedagogy as we know it, and Ladson-Billings’ culturally relevant pedagogy owes a great deal to this framework. Both of these pedagogies seek first and foremost, to empower people. The differences are small: critical pedagogy is more focused on empowerment on the individual level, while culturally relevant pedagogy aims for the liberation of whole communities.

I didn’t see anything about this article that I disagreed with, but I am curious about the conclusion of the study. I do agree that a teacher’s attitudes and philosophical outlook have a significant effect on how well that teacher can connect with students. However, I can’t help but think that classroom methods play a part in how successful a teacher is. From our learning so far, I would assume that teachers that mostly utilize direct instruction techniques would be less engaging than teachers who encourage active participation from their students. As our program moves forward, I am excited to have more opportunities to connect our learning from the Methods of Teaching strand with the content from the other strands. I am curious about other studies that could more explicitly make connections between classroom methods and culturally relevant pedagogy.
Citations:

Ladson-Billings, Gloria (Summer, 1995) “But That's Just Good Teaching! The Case for Culturally Relevant Pedagogy” Theory into Practice, Vol. 34, No. 3, Culturally Relevant Teaching, pp. 159-165

