Reading summary

Ladson-Billings, G. (1995). Toward a theory of culturally relevant pedagogy. *American Educational Research Journal,* 32(3), 465-491.

In 1995 Gloria Ladson-Billings wrote two foundational articles about culturally responsive pedagogy (that she terms culturally relevant pedagogy), and has since produced a huge body of work on the subject. The article *Toward and theory of culturally relevant pedagogy* is based on observations of eight exemplary teachers and their work with African American students. These teachers went beyond traditional teaching methods by incorporating students' cultural backgrounds into the curriculum. They exhibited spontaneity and energy in their lessons, often making on-the-spot decisions to challenge stereotypes and promote a more inclusive understanding of culture. For instance, one teacher countered her students' narrow view of royalty by introducing an African folk tale, thereby broadening their perspectives on representation.

Ladson-Billings highlights the importance of community involvement, noting that a sense of belonging and pride among students was fostered as they engaged in projects that explored their community's history and potential for reclamation. One teacher's project involved students researching local history and presenting their findings to city officials, which helped students recognise the value of their community and their role in its future. The article also discusses the significance of the cultural competence of students. Teachers encouraged students to embrace their cultural identities while achieving academic success. For example, one teacher used rap lyrics to teach poetry, validating students' cultural expressions and making academic content more relatable. This approach not only engaged students but also allowed them to see academic achievement as compatible with their cultural identities.

Ladson-Billings argues that culturally relevant pedagogy must also include a critical examination of social inequities. Teachers should help students recognise and critique the systemic issues that affect their lives. This involves fostering an environment where students feel empowered to question the status quo and engage in discussions about social justice. The teachers in the study created a collaborative classroom environment where students supported each other's academic success, reinforcing the idea that one person's success is a collective achievement. Effective assessment should be multifaceted, allowing for various forms of excellence and encouraging students to take ownership of their learning. The article concludes by emphasising that knowledge is not static; it is constructed and shared among students and teachers.

Take-Home Messages

Cultural Relevance is Key: Effective teaching must incorporate students' cultural backgrounds to foster engagement and understanding.

Community Connection Matters: Teachers who are involved in their students' communities can create a sense of belonging and pride, enhancing the educational experience.

Empowerment through Identity: Encouraging students to embrace their cultural identities can lead to greater academic success and self-esteem.

Critical Examination of Inequities: Education should include discussions about social justice and systemic inequities, empowering students to critique and challenge societal norms.

Collaborative Learning: A classroom ethos of mutual support and collaboration can enhance academic success and foster a sense of community among students.

Dynamic Knowledge Construction: Knowledge should be viewed as a shared and constructed entity, allowing for diverse perspectives and experiences to inform learning.

Flexible Assessment Strategies: Assessment should be multifaceted and inclusive, recognising various forms of excellence and allowing students to demonstrate their understanding in diverse ways.

Discussion questions:

Ladson-Billings emphasises that knowledge is 'constructed and shared.' How does this view challenge traditional teaching approaches, and what opportunities might it create for both teachers and learners?

The article suggests that student success should be viewed as a collective achievement rather than purely individual accomplishment. How might this perspective shift the way we think about our role as educators, and about competition and collaboration in our classrooms?