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Engaged Pedagogy and Critical Race Feminism

By Theodorea Regina Berry

Oh, fix me

Oh, fix me

Oh, fix me

Fix me, Jesus, fix me.

We're still blaming teachers. At conferences and in publications, we're still blaming teachers. In the news and at school board meetings, we're still blaming teachers. We're still talking about what teachers aren't doing and what they don't know. Teachers are faulty and broken. And everyone has something to say about how to fix them.

Yes, it's the teachers who are broken, faulty, and require fixin'. But I submit to you that teachers, like the students they serve, are victims. They get smashed by school districts with wrecking balls of bureaucracy, limited resources, and inadequate pay. They get smashed by impractical professional development that does little to support the realities of day-to-day school life. But sadly, they are also wrecked by us: teacher educators. But we are victims, too. We suffer the indignities of a political tenure track system that rarely values collaborative work in schools and school communities. We suffer the injustice of state and NCATE standards that

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devalue true social justice and academic freedoms that embrace a true and authentic meaning of curriculum.

But rarely do we get at the source. It is rare that we talk about how teachers are developed. How are teacher education programs structured? In what ways are these programs evaluated? And, in what ways do teacher educators engage in and model critically reflective self-assessment and evaluation toward the continual improvement of a praxis that supports educational equity?

As a woman of color scholar whose work focuses on the intersections of social foundations and curriculum theory in the context of urban teacher education, I am an advocate and purveyor of scholarship and praxis that raises the intellectual value of the work of teachers and teacher educators who wholeheartedly and unselfishly support those who are most likely to be underserved in the educational arena, k-20.

I advocate for and subscribe to the praxis of engaged pedagogy as defined by cultural critic and scholar bell hooks (1994). I advocate for and subscribe to the theoretical and conceptual notion of critical race feminism as defined by legal scholar and social activist Adrien K. Wing (1997). What I propose is a classroom praxis of engaged pedagogy from a critical race feminist perspective. In this article, I will describe hooks' engaged pedagogy in the context of the experiences I gained from a group of African American pre-service teachers in a social foundations course. This will be followed by a description of critical race feminism. The article will conclude with a discussion on engaged pedagogy from a critical race feminist perspective.

Engaged Pedagogy

bell hooks (1994) speaks elegantly about the process of teaching students “in a manner that respects and cares for” (p. 13) their souls as opposed to “a rote, assembly line approach” (p. 13). As a contrast to the ‘safe’ place of lecture and invited response, hooks moves to a place of resistance as she espouses “a progressive, holistic education ... more demanding than critical or feminist pedagogy” (p. 15). hooks advocates an education that goes beyond the classroom (Florence, 1998) and relates to students as whole human beings. In the context of the social foundations classroom at a historically Black university, this required finding ways to get to know my students and their connections to their families. This meant students interjecting their experiences regarding such issues as parental involvement to include their right to question the value of attending local school board meetings as part of their learning experience. Beyer (as cited in Florence, 1998) suggests that this may mean including elements of popular culture in the classroom experience. In my social foundations classroom, my students expressed a preference for writing rap and poetry to deliver their ideas, rather than the essay style writing required in the syllabus I developed. Our discussions lead to a compromise that allowed for all written expressions to be acceptable. As the teacher educator, it was necessary to engage in a praxis that would create resistance to the status quo. This

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facilitates classroom discussion that allows students to interject many facets of their complex lived experiences into the curriculum. From this position, students and professors/teachers can free themselves into an engaged pedagogy that is holistic and progressive, incorporating passion, dialogue, and interaction.

Another significant component of engaged pedagogy is mutual vulnerability. The life experiences of the students within the context of the curriculum as a means of validating the curriculum is important. Life experiences, when permitted into the classroom and given voice, can call to task the established or official knowledge (Apple, 2000) generated and perpetuated in education. This voice, which hooks speaks of frequently (1984, 1989, 1990, 1994), has the potential to move professors/teachers from a 'safe' place of lecture and invited response to a place of resistance (Florence, 1998) thereby challenging the "implications of equating White middle/upper class male experience and cultural histories to a national cultural heritage" (Florence, 1998, p.96).

However, such vulnerability must be mutual; engaged pedagogy warrants the vulnerability of the teacher/professor via revealment of personal lived experiences in connection with the subject. In fact, hooks insists that initial revealment come from the teacher/professor, facilitating movement from that safe place to a place of resistance. As the teacher educator in the social foundations classroom, it was necessary to initiate such revealment in an authentic and genuine way. It was necessary, in the context of this classroom, to begin the course (and continue throughout the course) to reveal my stories. I was deliberate to tell my stories not just for the sake of telling my stories but always in the context of the curriculum to be delivered. In one instance, we covered the similarities and differences in the educational philosophies of W.E.B. DuBois and Booker T. Washington. I likened their differences to those of my parents regarding my post-secondary experience. In my effort to illustrate the differences, I explained that my father wanted me to follow in his footsteps and join the Air Force to gain some practical experiences. My mother wanted me to attend a local college. Such teacher/professor revealment has the potential to shift the power relationship. The possibility of change in the power relationship between teacher/professor and student(s) via teacher/professor revealment has the potential to change the way teacher education is conceptualized.

At the beginning of the course, students were asked to write their educational autobiographies. In order for students to begin and continue to reveal their personal experiences, trust has to be established through the duration of the relationship. As a teacher-educator utilizing engaged pedagogy, I have to establish this trust. Furthermore, engaged pedagogy requires me to initiate vulnerability to establish trust. I believe that telling my own story first helps to establish that trust; revealing other life stories about myself in the context of the curriculum strengthened the trust and established an environment where students revealed their own stories.

There are those who disagree. There are those who question and challenge the use of dialogue and interaction in the classroom experience. Ellsworth's (1989) work, which is a critique of critical pedagogy, addresses a need for something

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more demanding than critical ... pedagogy. In *Why Doesn't This Feel Empowering? Working Through the Repressive Myths of Critical Pedagogy*, Ellsworth (1989) identifies the need for teachers/teacher-educators to "criticize and transform her or his own understanding in response to the understandings of students" (p. 300). Ellsworth contends that by moving critical pedagogy to lived experiences placed into current reality, teachers and teacher-educators can begin to deconstruct the perceived empowerment gained from such a classroom experience. In this way "students would be empowered by social identities that affirmed their race, class and gender positions ..." (p. 300). She seems to suggest that focusing on the understandings of students through their lived experiences detracts from the political singularity of critical pedagogy. In other words, the teacher/teacher-educator is no longer the sole provider of empowerment. The content/material of what is learned becomes affirmed by the students' experiences. Such valuation "redistribute[s] power to students" (p. 306), delineates "the socially constructed and legitimated authority that teachers/professors hold over students" (p. 306) and understands that students' lived experiences provide dimensions of knowledge into the classroom that the teacher/professor could not know "better" than the student. However, "to assert multiple perspectives ... is not to draw away from the distinctive realities and oppressions of any particular group" (p. 323). Creating a space for multiple perspectives is in no way designed to oversimplify or homogenize any one's experiences regarding oppression and conflict in the classroom. Rather, it may facilitate the valuation of multiple ways to experience. hooks' (1994) engaged pedagogy allows for students' lived experiences to facilitate their understandings, thereby creating an understanding for teacher/teacher-educator. Ellsworth and hooks appear to agree on these points.

A key tool in hooks' engaged pedagogy that facilitates this experience is dialogue. This is where hooks and Ellsworth distinctly depart from one another. hooks' engaged pedagogy incorporates passions, dialogue, and interaction through the entrance of lived experiences. Ellsworth has identified dialogue "as a fundamental imperative of critical pedagogy" (p. 314) with rules that include the assumptions that all members have equal opportunity to speak, all members respect members' rights to speak and feel safe to speak ..." (p. 314). However, among other problems, she feels that critical pedagogy does not alleviate the historical power of the teacher/professor and thereby can limit the freedom of speech in the classroom setting. hooks does not address this dilemma in her engaged pedagogy in this way. Ellsworth refers to this as a problem of "the students' and professor's asymmetrical positions of difference and privilege" (p. 315). In hooks' engaged pedagogy, there is a failure to address these asymmetrical positions and the issues of difference and privilege (or lack thereof) that accompany them. As a result, what also does not get specifically addressed in hooks' engaged pedagogy is how privilege and difference may silence such dialogue.

However, hooks (1994) does approach this issue differently. Engaged pedagogy warrants the vulnerability of the teacher/professor via revelation of personal lived

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experiences in connection with the subject. In fact, hooks insist that initial revelation come from the teacher/professor, facilitating movement from that safe place to a place of resistance. In this view of engaged pedagogy, it may be assumed that such revelation of by the teacher/professor is a comfortable position from which to operate in the traditional space of the classroom. This may be true for hooks; however, hooks does not address issues of comfort or ease for others attempting to move into this position. Critical pedagogy, as presented by Ellsworth (1989), presents dialogue as an entrance to multiple perspectives. But critical pedagogy places the responsibility on the students to gain the empowerment as it is assumed that it is freely provided by the teacher. It also places the point of vulnerability on the student as a means of effective dialogue, thus, accentuating the problem as presented by Ellsworth, regarding difference and privilege. In other words, if the student doesn't reveal their oppression, the dialogue, if any, isn't effective. By contrast, hooks' engaged pedagogy insists the teacher/professor initiate and continue to participate in such revelation as a means of effective dialogue. And although there is no guarantee that the teacher/professor acknowledges and relinquishes any privilege, teacher/professor vulnerability via revelation has the potential to shift the power relationship. This has the potential to have a positive effect on how the asymmetrical positions of difference and privilege play out in the classroom. In the social foundations classroom, this required being open to learn from the students. It also required the act of listening: hearing comprehending, and taking action. The possibility of change in the power relationship between teacher/professor and student(s) via teacher/professor revelation has the potential to change the way teacher education is conceptualized. In this view of engaged pedagogy, the teacher/professor must be critically thought-full about shifts in power and privilege via vulnerability within the classroom curriculum.

Critical Race Feminism

I subscribe to and advocate critical race feminism (CRF). As an outgrowth of critical legal studies and critical race theory, it suits my sensibilities in that it acknowledges, addresses, and accepts my Black experiences as different from those of my brothers (critical race theory) and my womanhood as different from those of my sisters (feminist theory). Critical race theory (CRT) has been identified as a movement of "a collection of activists and scholars interested in studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power" (Delgado & Stefanic, 2001, p. 2). CRT has several basic principles, three of which are most appropriate for this discussion. The first principle asserts that racism is ordinary and normal in American society. Rather than accept the societal and political marginalization placed upon people of color as identified in CRT, critical race feminism places me and my sisters as women of color in the center, rather than the margins, of the discussion, debate, contemplation, reflection, theorizing, research, and praxis of our lives as we co-exist in dominant culture. CRT and CRF adherents like myself utilize narrative

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or storytelling as counterstories to the master narrative, the dominant discourse. However, unlike CRT adherents, critical race feminism is multidisciplinary as it draws from “writings of women and men who are not legal scholars” (Wing, 1997, p. 5) as evidenced in the social and political writings of Patricia Hill Collins (1990; 1998), bell hooks (1990), and Joy James (1999).

CRF is supportive of and concerned with theory and practice. As an adherent of the CRF movement, I believe abstract theorizing must be supported with actual concerns of the community. Here, I not only want to support engaged pedagogy as a theory but also as a practice within the context of teacher education, a significant place for pedagogy to live. As an advocate of CRF, I support a discourse of resistance such as that found in engaged pedagogy.

CRF suits my sensibilities as it addresses all of my intersecting beings: African American, woman, teacher-educator, researcher, scholar, sister, friend, and more. By permitting myself to engage in the ideology of critical race feminism, I can be more free to bring all of who I am into the classroom. By doing so, I can disregard the monolithic discourse of the universal Black woman and acknowledge the multi-dimensionality of my personhood.

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But, why is critical race feminism and engaged pedagogy important to preparing African American pre-service teachers? First, CRF encourages me to acknowledge and accept of my multi-dimensionality as an African American woman who is a teacher-educator, among other things. As such, I must understand that I bring my whole self, and all connected experiences, into the classroom. It also encourages me to acknowledge and accept the multi-dimensionality of my African American students. Commonality of race does not produce commonality of self-identity. Engaged pedagogy provides spaces for my vulnerability to be present and able in the context of curriculum. By understanding this, I also understand that my students bring all of their experiences and knowledge into the classroom. Students’ stories of their educational experiences contain many variables, regardless of race. And what I intend to teach to them gets filtered through these experiences. Engaged pedagogy permits and encourages the integration of students’ lived experiences in the curriculum.

CRF also acknowledges the importance of storytelling. Students’ stories, including their stories of school, are important to know in the context of their development as teachers because these stories, these experiences, may influence what they learn and how they learn it as well as what they choose to teach and how they choose to teach as emerging teachers. Making their stories important to the teaching and learning experience also centers, rather than marginalizes, their personhood. CRF advocates for such centering. Through the lenses of CRF, I could ‘see’ my complexities. By viewing the world through such lenses, I can ‘see’ more of the complexities of “others.”

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As a critical race feminist, I understand that one's racial/ethnic appearance does not dictate a singular story about who they are. CRF is a multidisciplinary theory that addresses the intersections of race and gender while acknowledging the multiplicative and multi-dimensionality of being and praxis for women of color. While advocates of CRF are concerned with theory, praxis is central to this theory; theory and praxis must be a collaboration. CRF theorists strive to center those who are considered socially and politically marginalized in the dominant culture; those whose cultural identities are often placed as other become centralized in time, space and place. African American pre-service teachers are likely to possess lived experiences that help them to better understand such marginalization; it is my job to "teach" them the ways in which they can center their experiences while helping their students to engage in such centering.

Additionally, adherents of CRF support storytelling or counterstory as a means of understanding multiple positionalities of individuals or groups of individuals, particularly those stories of socially and politically marginalized persons living at the intersections of identities. As much as this theory applied to me as an African American female teacher educator and researcher, this also applies to White students, Latino students, Asian students, gay and lesbian students, Muslim students, Hindu students, Native American Indian students, etc. As memoir an important part of my work and a key component of hooks' engaged pedagogy, I decided to centralize the counterstory in the teaching and learning lives of my teacher-students as a model for de-marginalizing the lives of their students.

Counterstory, as described by Delgado (2000), is created by the outgroup, the members of the socially marginalized group, aimed to subvert the reality of the dominant group. For socially marginalized groups, this reality centers on a host of presuppositions, commonly held wisdoms, and shared understandings by the dominant group about the outgroup. These presuppositions, wisdoms, and understandings are what Romeo and Stewart (1999) refer to as the master narrative, stories of shared reality that subsume differences and contradictions and narrowly define people and their identities by supporting ideas constructed by the dominant group. These are "stories we were taught and teach ourselves about who does what and why" (p.xiv).

Engaged pedagogy from a critical race feminist perspective is, in fact, a counterstory. It allows teacher educators to support the lived experiences of socially marginalized students to accept the curriculum, be in the curriculum and live the curriculum. But, most importantly, it provides a space for all teacher educators to be all of who they are in the space and place of the teacher education classroom.

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