

The Journey of a Culturally Responsive Teacher Educator

Kevin Cataldo

This interview explores what it means to be a culturally responsive teacher educator in today's world and why it is crucial to advocate for a culturally responsive and sustaining education for all students. It shares how an exceptional individual became a culturally responsive elementary teacher, and how she has become a culturally responsive teacher educator and educational consultant.

Kevin Cataldo: To start, can you state your name and current occupation?

Interviewee (MBG): My name is Michelle Brown-Grant. My life's work has centered around P-16 education for 32 years, particularly in urban settings. The last 12 years have focused on being a practitioner-scholar as an Assistant Professor of Teacher Education. I am currently an educational consultant and a curriculum and teaching doctoral student at Teachers College, Columbia University.

KC: As you know, this issue is about culturally responsive teaching, and you're known for teaching courses in education methods, early childhood, communication in educational settings, literacy, school policy, and supervision. You've also led professional development workshops on culturally responsive teaching for pre-service and in-service teachers and school leaders in urban school districts. Can you start by describing how you became a culturally responsive teacher?

MBG: My journey to becoming a culturally responsive educator began my first year of teaching in the fall of 1988. Thinking I was ready to transform my old neighborhood as a human development major from Cornell University, I encountered a group of students who challenged me from my first day alone with them. More than half of them were repeating third grade; some of them for the second time. The look of defeat and the anger some of them expressed in my early days with them was enough to make anyone give up. I followed my colleagues' advice in 'don't smile 'til Christmas. Keep them separated in rows.' I valued their advice at the time since some of them were my family's former teachers. Few of their strategies positively impacted my classroom climate. Some days I left work crying out of frustration and feeling helpless about how to help some of them see their value. Then one day, my brother

came to visit. Within five minutes, he identified every student with challenging behavior by observing where they were positioned in the classroom. For instance, he could tell which students felt hopeless, did not see their value as a learner, and were genuinely angry with life. His unfiltered analysis unleashed memories of watching my classmates with gum pushed on their foreheads and having to sit in their waste because of a no bathroom policy. I'd succumbed to problematic practices permeating urban schools which rendered some of my students into the category of deviant. That is students who would not go on to succeed in life and fall into the hands of our criminal justice system. Imposter syndrome surfaced. In other words, at the time, I felt that my undergraduate career did not truly prepare me to make a difference in my community as I had hoped. My undergraduate university did not include educational theory or methods in its catalog of thousands of courses. Though my professors there allowed me to create independent courses and field experiences to learn about schools, fundamental knowledge about the science of teaching escaped me. Rather than abandon my students, as more than 50% of teachers do in their first few months of teaching in urban areas, I decided to pursue knowledge about teaching and learning. This led to my enrollment in a teacher education program at Teachers College, Columbia University in the spring of 1989. My reading methods and reading diagnosis courses very quickly offered insight into where some of the gaps in my students' learning existed.

Next, I realized that many of my students needed more affirming experiences in school. Though I'd experienced success sitting in the same desks etched with remnants of some of my classmates' carvings, those students did not envision themselves as achievers. A transformation emerged in my classroom when I began

to link students' interests and cultures into my lessons. One of my students had difficulty with math concepts; however, she could remember every outfit and matching shoe I wore for weeks at a time. Once I let her share her recollections mathematically, that student showed others how to construct combinations of patterns and arrays. We celebrated her success on a math assessment on the topic. The memory of watching her lift her head from the desk with a gleam in her eye, then saying, *"Really, I did it?"* still moves me. Incorporating their lived experiences and celebrating their achievements, made a difference.

By my third year of teaching, I created my mental tool belt with instructional practices and resources that would allow me to meet all my students' learning needs and provide them with learning experiences that would enable them to

enhance their cultural awareness. This meant numerous trips to cultural institutions around NYC as well as our community. Whereas others saw abandoned buildings and empty lots, my students learned to view elements of their community that were assets. They discovered how there

were many places of worship within a three-mile radius from their school. Imagine a group of eight and nine-year-olds with clipboards taking notes and drawing images in the neighborhood back in the '80s. Walking trips to McDonalds and White Castles exposed them to adding, calculating tax, subtracting across zeros, and counting change. An excursion to the Apollo Theater in Harlem to witness a live radio show showed them the importance of communication. My students walked through the school building singing songs which affirmed them as students. I can still recall a poem by [Teachers College] alum Lindamichelle Baron (1981) we chanted daily- *"This is the way, hey. We start the day, hey. to get the knowledge, hey. to get to college, hey. We won't stop there, hey. Go anywhere, hey. We work and smile, hey. cause that's our style, hey. This is the way we start the day, cause we don't play, hey. Now, what do you say? HEY!"* (Baron, 1981). I added the last line to the poem. Wow! I can still remember it. We climbed school stairs counting by threes, fours, or whatever

multiples we needed to remember for our multiplication and division facts that week. Oh, the raps my classes and I used to make up as mnemonic devices to remember facts. My third year of teaching was my most memorable. From the trips, collaborations with special education classes, and freedom to teach as long as I "covered the curriculum," my black and brown students' performance on district, city, and state assessments exceeded expectations.

Later in my educational program at [Teachers College], the scholarship of Dr. Gloria Ladson-Billings, Dr. Sonia Nieto, and Dr. Geneva Gay fueled my interactions with students. Their work enhanced my tool belt by offering me research and a language to confirm how my instructional practices strengthened my students' achievement. In essence, I evolved into becoming culturally responsive.

Some of those same practices I used in teaching in the Bronx evolved as I began to teach in the suburbs. Later as a supervisor, director of instruction, principal, consultant, and teacher educator, I began to share principles guided by research and my experiences which led to successful classroom climates where students could thrive. Those ideas included:

- Investing in learning about one's students through informal assessments and conversations. This will facilitate creating and strengthening a community of learners.
- Viewing students' diverse backgrounds as assets. Consider strengthening every part of their development- social-emotional, cognitive, physical as one creates learning experiences.
- Having high expectations for student learning and scaffold students as they acquire their knowledge skills, and dispositions. Model and take risks in front of them to demonstrate phases of the learning process and resiliency strategies.
- Knowing one's content and developing a plethora of strategies to engage students in learning it. Staying abreast of current trends that positively impact teaching and learning.
- Involving students in their learning which also includes centering students' voice as they learn to construct knowledge and develop their ideas.
- Offering authentic, collaborative, relevant learning experiences connected to students' lives.
- Using families as resources by tapping into their funds of knowledge.

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- Teaching students how to end oppression and discrimination and inequitable actions of any kind. Teach to transgress, not be bystanders.
- Focus on equity and not equality. Students are unique. They have diverse lived experiences, interests, needs, and influences on their lives.
- Being flexible and fluid. Don't let the standards and assessments paralyze or stagnate teaching. Consider what the people in front of you need at the time. Some may have gaps in knowledge due to a lack of exposure or opportunity.

KC: Do you consider yourself to be a culturally responsive teacher educator today?

MBG: Of course. As a teacher and leadership educator, I acknowledge that to facilitate meaningful learning experiences that lead to increased knowledge and culturally responsive practices, I must accept, value, and embrace the various cultures, lived experiences, and funds of knowledge people bring with them to my classrooms and workshops. In doing so, I establish positive relationships with them and see their cultural identities have a voice in our meeting spaces, especially in the curriculum. My classrooms and workshops engage people in reflecting on their own experiences. This facilitates their ability to later make sense of their actions as they interact with others.

KC: Can you share scholarly books published by Dr. Gloria Ladson-Billings and Dr. Sonia Nieto that have challenged your thinking and influenced your work as a culturally responsive teacher in the Bronx and as a teacher educator?

MBG: *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children* (1994), and *Crossing over to Canaan* (2001), are two major books published by Dr. Ladson-Billings that influenced and inspired me to practice culturally responsive teaching. In reading and studying her work, I came across three tenets of culturally responsive teaching that guide my work in teacher education—academic achievement/student learning, cultural competence, and socio-political consciousness. Every time Dr. Ladson-Billings is in the area, I am compelled to hear her speak in person. I find myself signifying to affirm her assertions. She does not hesitate to speak the truth.

Dr. Sonia Nieto's *The Light in Their Eyes: Creating Multicultural Learning Communities*

(1999) helped me understand the role of culture and lived experiences in student learning. When she shared her journey in education through *Brooklyn Dreams: My Life in Public Education* (2015), Nieto made me reflect on my own experiences. Maybe when I've reached another milestone in education, I will share my own story.

KC: I'm wondering about the significance of each of the tenets of culturally relevant education, can you tell me a bit more?

MBG: Sure. Dr. Ladson-Billings' research has suggested that to ensure that students receive a high-quality education, students must experience academic achievement. Teachers are responsible for facilitating student learning by challenging students' minds through meaningful learning experiences. When providing students with the chance to enhance their knowledge, it is also essential for teachers to help students develop their cultural competence. Teachers must help their students expand their knowledge and understanding of their own culture while acquiring skills from another culture. Hence, giving students the chance to become culturally competent learners in society.

Finally, students must get the chance to develop their socio-political consciousness. That is, students must get the opportunity to challenge and critically analyze the social inequalities and inequities that are produced and reproduced in their communities and the wider society. In doing so, students learn more about the current conditions of the society in which they live. Back when I used to teach third grade and took my students on those community walks, they also discovered issues in their neighborhoods. After our trips, my students learned to write letters to community leaders about elements of their community that were problematic. One year, this learning experience led to a trip to our town to meet the mayor and visit the city council chambers. Part of being a culturally responsive educator is recognizing that students learn best when learning is natural and connected to their interests and life experiences.

KC: You've been an active member in the field of education for three decades, and earlier you shared with me scholarly literature that has influenced your day-to-day practice. I'm wondering if there are any other role models

that continue to guide and motivate you to be a culturally responsive teacher educator today?

MBG: When I think of others whose practices laid the blueprint for me to create my day-to-day practices as a culturally responsive teacher educator, many of them were more activists than scholars. Women like Mary McLeod Bethune, Dorothy Height, Shirley Chisholm, Marva Collins, Dr. Adelaide Sanford, Dr. Leslie Williams, Dr. Vanessa Siddle Walker, Dr. Cynthia Dillard. Oh, I can't forget about Dr. Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz and her scholarly work in addressing issues of diversity, equity, and social justice in education. Her spirit, every time Yolanda enters a room, I am drawn to her spirit. Though I've never taken a class with her at [Teachers College], Dr. Sealey-Ruiz always makes time to engage in any conversation I initiate. We never part without a hug. I'm a hugger. Human connection is a vital part to my energy and existence. My students who get to know me outside of the classroom context come to see that. It's a shame that because of the actions of some, educators are not allowed to hug children for fear of accusations.

KC: It is great to hear that you consider yourself to be a culturally responsive teacher educator. Can you tell me about your experience with a teacher education curriculum? Precisely how you approach the curriculum through the lens of culturally responsive teaching.

MBG: Though teacher education programs have many masters to serve as accredited entities, my course artifacts are designed to help my students make practical connections to the content to meet the needs of the students I teach each semester. All of the professional organizations' standards connect to the course goals and student learning outcomes; however, I take the time to learn about my students' cultural identities as the courses progress. Through our discussions and my reflective assignments, they reveal their interests, prior knowledge, and current needs as learners.

When I take the time to connect with my students genuinely, I revisit my course goals and objectives throughout the semester. I revise assignments based on student gaps and interests. At times, I feel that it drives some of my students crazy. However, as a culturally responsive teacher educator, I believe that it is important to be tuned into your students as you teach. In other words, as you teach, you

should be scaffolding their learning. At times, that means modifying or eliminating certain assignments. This has allowed me to embrace and enhance the lived experiences, cultures, and funds of knowledge that my students bring with them to the classroom.

KC: Now that we've talked about how you consider yourself to be a culturally responsive teacher educator. Can you tell me how you have grown as a culturally responsive teacher educator throughout your career?

MBG: I'm glad that you've asked such a question. I believe that to be an effective culturally responsive teacher, one must be willing to be a lifelong and reflective learner. In doing so, one acknowledges that being a teacher requires on-going personal and professional growth. Over the years, as a culturally responsive teacher educator, I've grown in the following ways:

- Became more observant.
- Began using more evidence to base my teaching decisions.
- Attended conferences to stay abreast of research in different areas (not always easy when you are teaching 5-8 courses a semester on different topics/with different foci)
- Became more consciously skilled in modeling and being able to give examples to help students make connections.
- Learned to allow the wait time for my students to process information and give feedback on what they've understood about what was shared.
- Became more transparent with my expectations and grading.
- Developed analytic rubrics for almost every course assignment to eliminate the guesswork in how to get the A.
- Designed and implemented more socially conscious and culturally based assignments (e.g., such as WebQuests that examine crucial social issues).

KC: You mentioned earlier that you had grown as a culturally responsive teacher educator over the years. I'm wondering beyond yourself, your personal and professional growth, who benefits from culturally responsive practices?

MBG: That's a powerful question that I believe all culturally responsive teacher educators should ask themselves. I believe schools are becoming increasingly more diverse (culturally, linguistically, racially, and ethnically),

not just in urban areas. While everyone can be enlightened when they learn the value of treating others respectfully and equitably, it is historically marginalized people who benefit most from others learning about culturally responsive teaching practices.

Remember, culturally responsive teaching is all about embracing, respecting, and including students' cultural references and lived experiences in all aspects of learning. Dr. Gloria Ladson-Billings has been arguing this for years through her research and scholarship. Therefore, despite the social disparities and inequities that plague our schools, culturally responsive teaching provides our children and youth with the chance to develop their literacy, mathematical, technological, social, and political skills.

KC: Earlier, you described how you approach your teacher education curriculum through a culturally responsive educator's lens. At the moment, I'm wondering, and would like to know if you provide your teacher candidates with meaningful and professional learning experiences outside the classroom?

MBG: I'm glad you've asked this question. About three years ago, at my former institution, I helped students revive our Teacher Education Club and became their faculty advisor.

For the first time in the club's history, members of the executive board and club members were able to fundraise money to attend the New Jersey Education Association (NJEA) Convention in Atlantic City. That particular unique experience provided our teacher candidates with the chance to socially interact and learn from other New Jersey pre-service and in-service teachers. To me, culturally responsive teaching is also about providing teacher candidates with the opportunity to apply their coursework experience outside of the classroom—in a professional setting. They also need the ability to network and collaborate with their peers. Attending that conference opened opportunities for them.

The following year, someone else was asked to advise them; however, the executive board continued to seek me out. We spent many nights in my office discussing the state of education, and in particular, teacher education. Some members of the group decided to next lead our teaching honor society chapter, *Kappa Delta Pi*. Our conversations motivated them to organize our institution's first-ever culturally responsive teaching conference. The conference gathered

in-service and pre-service teachers and teacher education professors from nearby colleges and universities. This student-organized conference provided participants with the opportunity to learn from other experienced culturally responsive teacher education professors, such as Dr. Ana María Villegas and Dr. Monica Taylor from Montclair State University.

Teaching in a space where many espoused color blindness was not an easy experience; the micro and macro aggressions there ... anyway, listening to the students use culturally inclusive language, witnessing the growth of their communication and leadership skills made me feel like a proud parent since I taught all of them since their freshmen year.

Being a culturally responsive teacher educator, I truly believe that it is crucial to provide our teacher candidates with meaningful professional learning experiences to nurture them as future educators.

KC: Based on your experience and expertise, should teacher educators, teachers, school leaders, and all other stakeholders advocate for culturally responsive and sustaining education for all urban children and youth?

MBG: I believe that today, more than ever before, as a nation, we need to recognize that our schools are becoming increasingly more diverse. For that very reason, advocating for culturally responsive and sustaining education for our children and youth is a must! We must acknowledge that they all possess meaningful knowledge and lived experiences that are crucial for their personal and professional growth, and most importantly, their academic success.

KC: In what other ways do you find yourself advocating for culturally responsive teaching and sharing your experiences and expertise?

MBG: Whenever possible, I share my experiences, expertise, and advocate for culturally responsive teaching at professional conferences held at my former institution (e.g., their annual Teachable Tuesday Conference for their pre-service teacher candidates) and through professional organizations. Many of those workshop sessions have centered on culturally responsive teaching. For example, I've led many workshops at the New Jersey Council for Exceptional Children (NJCEC) annual conferences.

KC: Earlier we’ve discussed why you believe that we need to advocate for culturally responsive teaching and sustaining education in our urban schools as a society. To end our conversation today, I’m wondering what your thoughts are on professional development opportunities for teachers? Can they serve as a way to advocate for more culturally responsive schools?

MBG: First, thank you for asking such a question. To me, it is a very personal and reflective question. As a culturally responsive teacher educator and educational consultant, I’ve led professional development workshops centered on culturally responsive teaching for early childhood school leaders in Newark, New Jersey, as well as for coaches, teachers, and assistants in New Haven, Connecticut, as a consultant through Bank Street College of Education. Last spring, this work also included coaching school leaders in observing and facilitating culturally responsive practices in their teachers through classroom visits with them.

This spring, I assumed a different role supporting culturally relevant and sustaining education under the mentorship of my dissertation sponsor at [Teachers College], Dr. Michelle Knight-Manuel. Authors of *Classroom Cultures: Equitable Schooling for Racially Diverse Youth* (2018), Dr. Knight-Manuel, and Dr. Joanne Marciano, led interactive, culturally relevant, and sustaining education professional development workshops for teachers, social workers, school counselors, and school leaders in Newark, New Jersey. Participants explored their lived experiences and how they impacted their interactions with students. Knight-Manuel and Marciano also shared culturally relevant practices they have observed in teachers through their work in New York City

During these workshops, I learned more about educators’ perceptions of culturally relevant pedagogy across the generations since participants were diverse in professional experiences. I believe it is essential to provide both veteran and novice teachers with opportunities to share their voices in safe spaces. In other words, share their knowledge and express their concerns they may have when it comes to implementing research-based, culturally relevant best practices, especially in these racially charged times. The timing of our workshops allowed us to process the deaths of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and Ahmaud Arbery. We also discussed the growing social justice movement around the world to end injustice when

it comes to policing. Our conversations led to how to discuss social justice and inequality in classrooms with our students.

Participants worked in groups to develop action plans to implement culturally relevant and sustaining school-wide practices to increase student engagement and achievement. This fall, I am looking forward to witnessing how the schools enact those plans even in the midst of COVID-19.

For three decades I have been at the forefront of leading others to examine their practices as they interact with others. When you are doing the work, it is challenging to reflect on or document its impact. Through assisting Drs. Knight-Manuel and Marciano, I’ve become an observer, listening more to how the power of culturally responsive teaching and sustaining education can help our youth become more active participants and advocates in their own educational experiences. The field of education is finally moving forward in re-centering students as learners. Now that COVID-19 essentially wiped out standardized testing and leveled practices which allowed schools to suspend and expel students, we have hope.

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