

Proposed Teaching Strategies for Black and Latinx Studies in Connecticut

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Abstract

In 2020, Connecticut became the first U.S. state to require all public high schools to offer Black and Latinx studies. This monumental decision has raised a fair amount of concern over what constitutes effective and conscionable teaching practices for Black and Latinx studies at the classroom level. In this paper, I propose several teaching strategies, all grounded in critical, dialectical, and responsive theories of pedagogical praxis. I deliberate on the strengths and potential weaknesses of each approach with equal attention, and at the end of each section I offer some examples of how these strategies can be applied in the classroom. I conclude by restating how important Black and Latinx studies are in facilitating the reimagining of educational practice and classroom pedagogies throughout Connecticut.

Keywords: culturally relevant pedagogy, problem-posing education, multiculturalism, interculturalism

Introduction

On December 9, 2020, Governor Ned Lamont of Connecticut issued a declaration requiring all public high schools in the state to offer African American, Black, Latinx, and Puerto Rican studies as part of the social studies curriculum (Office of Governor Lamont, 2020)—the first U.S. state to do so.¹ Connecticut's public high schools are now required to offer a one-year, full-credit elective course on these subjects beginning in fall 2022, at the latest. The curriculum contains two units, the first semester focusing on Black and African American history and the second on Latinx and Puerto Rican history (Connecticut in Color, 2021). This declaration came a year after Lamont signed Public Act No. 19-12, a bill passed with bipartisan support, which directs local and regional education boards throughout the state to give students the opportunity to learn about the historic, cultural, and economic contributions Blacks and Latinx have made in the United States.

The proposed curriculum will address the construction of race, analyze the intersection of race, power, and privilege, and articulate the role Black and Latinx communities have played in shaping U.S. society (Connecticut Proceeding, 2020). In an increasingly racially diverse state, where 27% of students identify as Latinx or Hispanic and 13% as Black or African American (Asmelash & Sturla, 2020), this unprecedented decision rightfully acknowledges the experiences of Connecticut's Black and Latinx community members and, importantly, could encourage other U.S. states to follow suit.

Prime facie, the introduction of these courses seems a laudable move toward acknowledging the histories and cultures of people of color and weaving them into the larger tapestry of American history. However, the fact that these courses are only electives raises reasonable doubts about the extent to which they can help bring about the kind of systemic change that, as one state representative commented, can lead to better race relations and a more inclusive state (Aggarwal, 2020). As a person of color who was raised and educated in Connecticut and has firsthand experience of what it's like to be a student of color in a social studies class at a predominantly White high school, I view the aims of this new policy with a fair amount of skepticism. I wonder, for example, how the new curriculum will be taught statewide, given that social studies instruction differs across the state's public high schools and that the racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic demographics of communities across Connecticut are highly disparate.

My purpose in this paper is not to speculate about the stakeholders' underlying intentions, nor is it to critique the curriculum itself. My aim, rather, is to spark discussion around what should

constitute effective and conscionable teaching practice for Black and Latinx studies in Connecticut classrooms and to propose several effective teaching strategies that can help the new curriculum bring about transformation in the classroom. By effective teaching strategies, I refer to those grounded in critical theory that will foster critical reflection among students and teachers. I first recommend critical multiculturalism and interculturalism (Barrett, 2013; May & Sleeter, 2010). I maintain that the success of Black and Latinx studies in Connecticut will depend equally on applying a uniform critical pedagogy statewide, one that prioritizes conversations around structural racism and the unequal power relations that exist outside the classroom, and on a transformation of the teacher-student relationship. Therefore, I advocate for the adoption of a problem-posing education model driven by dialogical theory of praxis and knowledge (Bartlett, 2005; Freire, 2000). I also call for the state to promote culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogies (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris & Alim, 2014) aimed at uplifting and celebrating Black and Latinx communities rather than reinforcing monolithic or stereotypical notions of Black and Latinx identities. I conclude with suggestions for how teachers of Black and Latinx studies can adopt and implement these strategies, with the hope of normalizing their use in every classroom in Connecticut.

Strategy 1: Critical Multiculturalism and Interculturalism

Critical multiculturalism is rooted in the convergence of antiracist education and critical race theory. As a teaching approach, it foregrounds sociological understandings of identity and encourages critical analysis of the structural inequalities that differentially impact minoritized groups (May & Sleeter, 2010). Critical multiculturalism denounces the construction of minoritized students in deficit terms and frames culture within the context of the unequal power relations that are lived out in daily interactions. It also creates spaces where students can share their personal histories of racial and ethnic discrimination or other experiences of marginalization. As students are given the agency to interrogate the perceptions of themselves conveyed by mainstream ideologies, they can become their own source of cultural knowledge. The classroom thus will be transformed into a safe haven where the teacher strives to make students feel comfortable unpacking everyday instances of racial and ethnic injustice.

Connecticut educators must view the new Black and Latinx studies curriculum as an opportunity to engage students in introspection and in analyzing the institutionalized inequalities that occur locally and across the U.S. The school is a microcosm of society that can either reify wider structural constraints or dismantle them. Banks (1993, p. 33) conceptualizes the school as a cultural system with “a specific set of values, norm, ethos, and shared meanings.” It is within the school boundaries that students internalize institutionalized conceptions of themselves that are made commonplace by power structures reflective of the external environment. In a 2019 focus group hosted and organized by the State Education Research Center (SERC), Black and Latinx students in Connecticut reported feeling that they only learn “White man’s history,” which results in further division between “their America” and “White Man’s America” (SERC, 2020b). In a 2020 state hearing, Connecticut youths vocalized their collective pain and frustration, demonstrating wisdom beyond their years. As one student testified,

Growing up Black, I rarely felt that my history was discussed in school, except during the month of February. Even then we were taught a sugar-coated version of this history centered around a smooth transition from a violent racist society to a peaceful equitable one that we were supposedly living in. (SERC, 2020c)

Another student claimed that the traditional social studies curriculum only scratches the surface of the unique cultures and histories of their people (Blanks, 2020). These students clearly yearn for a learning environment that wholly legitimizes their cultural identities and does not omit the factual consequences of White supremacy in the U.S. The critical multiculturalist approach can satisfy the needs of these learners by offering a more visceral method for Connecticut educators to teach Black and Latinx studies. This would mean genuinely grappling in the classroom with normative assumptions around race and ethnicity and enabling students to gain skill in open discourse on the systemic racial/ethnic oppression functioning at the macro level. An example of a multiculturalist approach in action would be when a teacher supplements lesson plans with activities that challenge

the monolithic treatment of Black and Latinx people, and encourages students from these communities to share their unique customs and ideologies.

Akin to critical multiculturalism, interculturalism is also concerned with tackling the underlying structural disadvantages and inequities experienced by marginalized groups (Barrett, 2013). However, the central emphasis of interculturalism is on intercultural dialogue that helps to reduce prejudice and stereotypes in society. For example, through focus group discussions, marginalized peoples enjoy an equal platform where they can engage in constructive dialogue with members of dominant groups that promotes mutual understanding and respect. In this way, dialogue becomes a force that can promote social cohesion between members of dominant and marginalized groups. Therefore, the intercultural classroom relies on teachers and students to use dialogue to break down prejudice and superficial stereotypes.

Reflecting on the potential weaknesses of critical multiculturalism and interculturalism, it goes without saying that mere discussion of racial/ethnic discrimination and social inequalities will not break down the dominating power structures outside of the classroom. In implementing the new Black and Latinx studies curriculum, Connecticut educators should not overestimate the power of critical analysis and intercultural dialogue, and they must communicate to students that the new curriculum will not necessarily translate into changes in racialized institutions beyond the school.

Although critical multiculturalism and interculturalism cannot erase the hierarchy of privilege or status differentials in the classroom, Connecticut's new Black and Latinx studies curriculum could serve as a starting point for dialogue between teachers and students. However, educators considering teaching this curriculum from either of these critical standpoints must tread carefully along the line between empowering students by teaching the histories of Black and Latinx peoples and suggesting that the course is a panacea for the oppression still occurring throughout the U.S.

Strategy 2: Problem-Posing Education

The success of Connecticut's Black and Latinx studies curriculum is contingent upon the transformation of teacher-student relations, as driven by problem-posing education (PPE), which is a liberatory praxis rooted in love and mutual respect in teacher-student relationships (Bartlett, 2005; Freire, 2000). This critical theory of education practice contrasts with what Freire (2000) describes as the banking model of education, wherein learners are considered the passive recipients of knowledge: they are presumed not to have any prior knowledge or inherent intelligence and are expected simply to absorb information "deposited" into their minds by their teachers. This kind of transaction raises communication barriers between teachers and students, whereas PPE narrows, if not eliminates, the social distance between them. It is a transformative model that promotes dialogue in the learning process as a means to create reciprocal relationships and solidarity between students and teachers (Bartlett, 2005). The model gives students from marginalized and non-dominant cultural backgrounds the tools to name, evaluate, and understand their world while also questioning the interests of those in power. In contrast to interculturalism, which is also based in dialogue, PPE is specific to educational settings; its foremost goal is to revolutionize the teacher-student dynamic as a way to create social change.

Applying the PPE approach to Black and Latinx studies will provide an opening to lower the communication barriers created by racial disparities between Connecticut's teachers and students. It is well known that Connecticut needs to increase the recruitment and retention of teachers of color. A 2019 survey revealed that fewer than 10% of Connecticut teachers identified as teachers of color (Jones, 2020); in roughly half of the state's school districts Black and Latinx teachers are less than 3%. In contrast, nearly 40% of students in Connecticut schools are students of color. Some of these students lament that they don't see themselves reflected in their school's teaching staff (Jones, 2020). The introduction of Black and Latinx studies as an elective course will not compensate for the obvious need for more educators of color in Connecticut.

With respect to PPE, White teachers of Black or Latinx studies in Connecticut can gain the confidence and trust of students of color by making their positionality known at the start of the course.

To legitimately claim a progressive or liberatory position, White teachers must first thoroughly examine their own inherent privilege, as well as their own possible complicity in the perpetuation of racist ideologies (Freire, 2000). White teachers must reach this state of awareness before they can truly support students of color's development of critical social analytical skills, which is only half of the PPE experience. One small but critical act would be for White teachers to present a personal positionality statement to their students early in the course. These statements should include what White privilege looks like from their perspective.

The other half of PPE, and its essence, lies in the reversal of the teacher and student roles (Bartlett, 2005). The teacher-student transformation process is predicated on the transfer of knowledge from student to teacher knowledge. In Connecticut, students of color need to be empowered to take control of their own learning. White hegemony remains a strong characteristic across all public domains, including education, thus the new Black and Latinx studies curriculum should center on the lived experiences of Black and Latinx students. The voices of Black and Latinx students must be at the forefront of PPE, and White teachers in Connecticut must give students of color the space to express their anguish and unfiltered opinions and honor their refusal to accept depictions of themselves as fashioned by White supremacy. Allowing students to become agents in their own learning is a tremendous introductory step in the PPE process. A concrete example of how teachers can do this is by providing opportunities for Black and Latinx students to lead class discussions in which they are comfortable sharing their empirical knowledge and lived experiences as people of color. The new curriculum will be instrumental in starting these difficult conversations, but the real teacher-student transformation will come about through a praxis founded in mutual love and respect, one that challenges the complex notions of power and oppression (Bartlett, 2005).

The limitations of PPE cited most often are its abstraction and difficult application in education practice. The model is derived from Freire's critical theory of education, which some argue is too far removed from everyday practice. Opponents to its use claim that PPE is limited by its impracticality and inability to subvert a domineering rational pedagogy, a theory of education conjectured from the works of Pierre Bourdieu in which non-dominant groups are resigned to making decisions aligned with the dominant class for the sake of social mobility (Burawoy & Von Holdt, 2012). Education systems across the U.S. continually inculcate students of color under deprivation paradigms and rational pedagogies. Many of us, especially those of us from working-class families, are made to believe that we are underachieving and that the only way to achieve in education is to follow pathways to success laid out by well-to-do White people. Buying into these myths will never disrupt racial power structures in education or in other public spheres; only PPE can do this. Connecticut educators should note that the greatest limitation of PPE is its lack of implementation. If PPE or dialogical praxis is applied in Connecticut, state and local education boards can anticipate groundbreaking results from the addition of Black and Latinx studies.

Strategy 3: Culturally Relevant and Sustaining Pedagogies

Offering Black and Latinx studies courses can help to transform the teacher-student relationship and promote greater mutual understanding, which in turn can create a learning environment that supports culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogies. Ladson-Billings (1995) describes culturally relevant pedagogy as a student-centered approach by which students learn to accept and affirm their cultural identities while developing critical perspectives that challenge the inequalities perpetuated by schools and other institutions. Culturally sustaining pedagogies similarly challenge educators to promote, celebrate, and critique the multiple and shifting ways students engage with culture, both in and outside the classroom (Paris & Alim, 2014). Culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogy enables educators to help students develop an understanding of and appreciation for cultural differences and to value cultural competency. The implementation of this pedagogical practice in Connecticut will be a critical component of the Black and Latinx studies curriculum and related activities.

Fortunately, Connecticut currently advocates for culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogies across its schools under the term "culturally responsive education" (CRE). On February 3, 2021,

the Connecticut State Board of Education (SBE) approved a revised position statement on CRE, as the former version had not been updated in ten years. The former version was bogged down with tenets and objectives that delimited possibilities for critical education reform. CRE was described primarily as a means to increase student achievement and engagement (SBE, 2012). Its guidelines for policymakers included language on teachers' responsibilities, such as "maintaining high expectations of all students regardless of functional background" and "recognize that the culture of students of color may differ dramatically with the classroom and school" (SBE, 2012, p. 5). Most of the principles expressed in the first version felt like a devolution from asset-based pedagogies (Paris & Alim, 2014), as some statements actually seemed to regress the work of culturally relevant pedagogy.

The current conceptualization of CRE in Connecticut now centers on developing students' and teachers' critical consciousness in tandem with socio-political awareness, cultural competency, and academic achievement. The latest CRE position calls for Connecticut educators to "become conduits of learning by affirming their content expertise through their own identities" (SBE, 2021, p. 1), and teachers receive clear instruction on what it takes to apply CRE effectively. The updated statement typifies three actions vital to implementing culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2010, 2013). First, deficit perspectives of students and their communities are replaced by asset-based approaches that capitalize on students' diversity via co-construction of knowledge. Students' own knowledge and unique cultural competencies are given value in the classroom; students and their families are positioned as informants in the learning process. Second, teachers are encouraged to provide a classroom environment in which students' diverse backgrounds are equally recognized and uplifted. Finally, teachers are guided in how to make pedagogical connections in their teaching contexts through partnering with students and their families to build toward CRE that is informed by community-based knowledge. For example, the statement includes a call for families and community partners to work with schools to empower their children to use and embrace their cultural identities in the classroom. This type of community involvement would help Black and Latinx students feel more supported in their learning. In my view, there are virtually no weaknesses in culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogies, although complications can arise if educators misinterpret or water down the approach.

Conclusion

In this paper, I described and examined several critical pedagogies that can be used in teaching the new Black and Latinx studies curriculum in Connecticut. I discussed the merits and critiques of critical multiculturalism, interculturalism, problem-posing education, and culturally relevant education. Although I presented these strategies in a particular order, this is not to suggest that each build on the others or that they should be scaffolded in any specific way. My goal is to prompt discussion among Connecticut teachers about the importance of incorporating critical pedagogy in their teaching strategy and to encourage them to develop productive ways of transferring theory into practice. Connecticut educators who seek radical change in racial/ethnic relations in the classroom and in their communities must be courageous in adopting such critical praxes as their mainstream teaching style. Teachers should carefully choose which elements of these strategies would best fit their unique classroom contexts.

As a person of color and former pupil in the Connecticut public education system, I am honored to have been educated in a state that is leading a new "first" in the history of education in America: an exemplary move to include the histories of Black and Latinx peoples in this country at a time when critical discussions around race in the K-12 classroom are considered virtually taboo in some other states. As proud as I am of this achievement, knowing what it is like to be a student of color at a predominantly White high school in Connecticut, I am concerned that the new Black and Latinx studies course offerings will not be successful without commensurate changes in how teachers instruct and relate to students of color. I know what it's like to experience microaggressions in the classroom and to feel unsafe as a young person of color in the learning environment. In my own experience, I was one of the few Black students in my honors and AP social studies courses. I cringed inside whenever we got to discussing African American history or the experiences of people of

color in the U.S. My Blackness became hypervisible whenever we discussed these histories, and I can still hear some of the ignorant racist comments made by my White peers. Once a kid jokingly compared me to an image of a Black slave in one of our textbooks, but I was too unfazed to call them out or report them to a teacher or school official. In fact, the thought did not even occur to me. By that point in time, I was already too desensitized to hearing anti-Black sentiments at school. I now wholeheartedly believe that those social studies courses would have been impactful if critical pedagogies were at the heart of teaching strategy. I imagine my experience would have been more positive if I felt comfortable openly sharing my own racial, ethnic, and cultural experience with my White teachers and peers. I would have loved to engage in deeper conversations about the history of race, power and privilege in the U.S., in addition to the contributions made by peoples of color. It would be wrong of me to say here that I was never provided these spaces. I did have some teachers who tried to create such opportunities; however, it was rare and not the norm.

The passing of Public Act No. 19-12 in Connecticut has also renewed conversations around making Native American studies a required course offering across public high schools (Asmelash & Sturla, 2020), again as an elective. I argue that stakeholders should seize the moment and make compulsory both Black and Latinx studies and other courses that explore the history and contributions of people of color. Teaching strategies that increase awareness of wider social inequities, inspire transformational dialogue, and promote sustainable cultural practices can help to bring about radical change in the classroom and establish a model for future curricular updates.

Appendix

APPLICATIONS FOR TEACHERS

Strategies	Actions
Critical multiculturalism	Recognize cultural differences as a source of empowerment. Inspire students to interrogate and analyze the structural inequalities that govern their lives.
Interculturalism	Surpass passive acceptance of multiculturalism. Stress communication and dialogue across racial and ethnic boundaries to reduce prejudice and stereotypes.
Problem-posing education	Examine your individual privilege or your complicity in the perpetuation of racism. Encourage transfer of knowledge from student to teacher through dialogue rooted in mutual love and respect. Believe in critical dialogue as a powerful instrument for upending power imbalances in the classroom.
Culturally relevant and sustaining education	Make pedagogical connections to the local cultural context. Encourage students to develop self-affirmation of their own cultural identities.

Suggestions

- Supplement lesson plans with cultural content that challenges static or unidimensional stereotypes about Black and Latinx peoples.
- Allow time for student-led focus groups at the end of each unit.
- Create artistic spaces for critical self-reflection around identity and power.
- Share positionality statements with students.
- Hold meetings to check in with students and respond accordingly to their social and emotional needs.
- Invite Black and Latinx parents and community members to contribute to classroom discussions or activities.

Endnotes

¹ Throughout this paper, I use the term Latinx in place of Latino as stated in the actual bill. Latinx is a more inclusive term to refer to people of Latin American descent who don't wish to be identified by their gender.

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