Where’s the Race in Culturally Relevant Pedagogy?

H. RICHARD MILNER IV

University of Pittsburgh

Background/Context: When Ladson-Billings described the pedagogical practices of successful teachers of African American children and consequently conceptualized culturally relevant pedagogy as an analytic resource to describe and make sense of pedagogical practices of teachers, her discussion was situated in a frame that examined instructional moves of teachers, especially with Black students. Since the introduction of this pedagogy, researchers and theorists have broadened Ladson-Billings’s conceptualization to include various other factors. However, race is no longer as central as it was when the framework was introduced.

Purpose/Objective: I examine published literature on culturally relevant pedagogy in mathematics and English language arts that has considered race in some form. The purpose of this synthesis is to highlight patterns across the literature and to consider potential future areas of study to strengthen and encourage focused research on race and CRP.

Setting: I reviewed established literature to examine the intersections of race, culturally relevant pedagogy, and mathematics or English language arts.

Research Design: I analyzed research articles in the areas of mathematics and English language arts that examined race in some form between 2004–2014 to determine how race is situated and connected to the core of culturally relevant pedagogy.

Conclusions/Recommendations: Although race was a critical component of Ladson-Billings’s conceptualization of culturally relevant pedagogy, research studies in the area demonstrate a marginal, at best, emphasis on race. Studies in the areas of mathematics and English language arts that do include race tend to focus on superficial aspects of race. Future studies should return to the root of the theory and include race as an essential component of empirical studies that draw from culturally relevant pedagogy as an analytic tool to describe pedagogical practices of teachers.

When Ladson-Billings (1994) described the pedagogical practices of successful teachers of African American children and consequently conceptualized culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) as an analytic resource to describe and make sense of pedagogical practices of teachers (Ladson-Billings, 1995), her discussion was situated in a frame that examined instructional moves of teachers (Ladson-Billings, 2009), especially with Black students. Since CRP’s introduction, researchers and theorists have
broadened her conceptualization to include various racial and ethnic groups of students that situate race (Hastie, Martin, & Buchanan, 2006; Howard, 2001; Pirbhai-Illich, 2010/2011) and a wide range of other factors (Hefflin, 2002; Morrison, Robbins, & Rose, 2008), including language through culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2014) and ethnicity in social context (Milner, 2011; Pirbhai-Illich, 2010/2011). But even in the midst of such expansion, where’s the race in culturally relevant pedagogy? In this article, I examine published literature on CRP in mathematics and English language arts that has considered race in some form. The purpose of this synthesis is to highlight patterns across the literature and to consider future potential areas of study to strengthen focused research on race and CRP.

Although this explanatory theory has expanded (for better or worse), Ladson-Billings (2009) was consciously deliberate in describing and naming successful teaching practices of Black—“raced” students. It is important to also stress that she was explicit about the diverse racial background of the teachers with whom she studied. An essential finding from her research was that teachers from any racial and ethnic background could be successful with any racial group of students when they possessed or developed the knowledge, attitudes, dispositions, beliefs, skills, and practices necessary to meet student needs. It is essential to remember that White is a race that should be investigated, just like other racialized categories. Thus, my point here is not to suggest that the theory cannot or should not be used to describe other (beyond Black) racial and ethnic groups of students or even to include matters outside of race. My point is that race was and, I argue, still should be an integral core of CRP.

Although 2015 marks the 20-year anniversary of the introduction of the construct, published in the American Educational Research Journal (Ladson-Billings, 1995), it can be argued that in many ways the educational state of Black children is just as dismal as it was at the time of CRP’s inception. In short, due to structural and institutional inequity (Anyon, 2005; Irvine, 1990; Milner, 2013, 2015; Payne, 2008; Siddle-Walker, 2000; Tate, 2008), Black students continue to be grossly and miserably underserved in schools across the United States. Because of the racist and inequitable educational system and society in which Black students live and the inadequate and racist practices common in too many schools serving Black students (Milner, 2015), I argue that race has a central and permanent place (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) in the fabric of the theory.
A LOOK AT SCHOOL FAILURE FOR BLACK STUDENTS

In her important book, Black Students and School Failure, Irvine (1990) described persistent neglect and underpreparedness of schools to support Black students. Although conventional wisdom would suggest that Black students themselves are underperforming, a closer, more critical and nuanced investigation would demonstrate that it is educational systems themselves that are not meeting the complex needs of particular students, because they are designed to reify the cultural practices and ways of knowing and being of the White majority (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Ladson-Billings (2006a) concluded that, in part because of variance in per pupil expenditures, there is no “achievement gap,” but rather an education debt that our system owes to so many students, especially those living in poverty, that it has underserved. Indeed, some states have regressive school funding that systematically distributes fewer state dollars to high-poverty districts (Baker & Corcoran, 2012). Ladson-Billings challenged educational researchers to reconceptualize and move beyond achievement discourse and to focus structurally on the education debt owed to students of color.

Irvine (2010) explained that the perceived achievement gap is the result of other gaps that seductively coerce people into believing that an achievement gap actually exists. Based on her analyses Irvine recommended that, rather than focusing on an achievement gap that places the blame on students, attention should be focused on closing other gaps in education that cause researchers, policymakers, practitioners, and administrators to believe there is an achievement gap. Irvine stated that the gaps that shape our belief in an achievement gap include “the teacher quality gap; the teacher training gap; the challenging curriculum gap; the school funding gap; the digital divide gap; the wealth and income gap; the employment opportunity gap; the affordable housing gap; the health care gap; the nutrition gap; the school integration gap; and the quality childcare gap” (2010, p. xii). My own work has expanded on opportunity-gap classroom structures that prevent teachers from developing and enacting learning opportunities for students, most often those on the margins of learning: colorblindness, the myth of meritocracy, cultural conflicts, deficit mindsets and low expectations, and social context neutrality (Milner, 2010).

Thus, the need to focus on race and Black students in particular is framed by disturbing patterns that must be addressed for us to have a fighting chance at reversing them. Consider, for instance, the following statistics regarding Black males (adapted from McGee, 2013):
Graduation: Only 41% of African American males graduate from high school (Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2012).

Employment: More than half of African American males between the ages of 16 and 19 are unemployed or underemployed (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010).

Geography of opportunity (see Tate, 2008): More than three-fourths of African American children born between 1985 and 2000 grew up in “high challenge” neighborhoods, characterized by high levels of unemployment, welfare, poverty, single-parent families, segregation, and density of children under age 18 (Sharkey, 2009).

Incarceration: There are more African Americans (mostly male) under correctional control today—in prison or jail, on probation or parole—than were enslaved in 1850, a decade before the Civil War began (Alexander, 2010).

Disciplinary policies and practices: 50% of African American males in grades 6–12 have been suspended, compared to 21% of White males; 17% of African American males have been expelled, compared to 1% of White males (Aud, Fox, & KewalRamani, 2010).

The situation for Black female students is relatively better but still unacceptable during a time when reform efforts do not seem to be making much of a difference (Milner, 2010; Payne, 2008):

Poverty rate: The poverty rate for Black women is 28.6%, compared to 10.8% for White women (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010).

Employment: 41% of Black women are unemployed (Guerra, 2013).

College degree attainment: 21% of black women hold at least a bachelor’s degree, versus 30% of white women; only 2% of the degrees are in STEM areas (Guerra, 2013).

Incarceration: Black women are three times more likely to be incarcerated than white women (Guerra, 2013).

Disciplinary policies and practices: 35% of Black female students have been suspended, versus 9.7% of White females; 8.2% of black females have been expelled, versus less than 1% of white females (Aud et al., 2010).

Collectively, structural and systemic barriers and the inability of schools to address them have resulted in children of color being perpetually underserved. For instance, proportionally, Black students are:
• Over-referred and over-represented in special education: Black students are three times more likely to receive special education services for mental retardation, and 2.3 times more likely for emotional disturbances, than students from all other ethnic/racial groups combined; further, they are more likely to be educated away from their peers than students from any other ethnic/racial groups (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 2009).

• Over-referred and over-represented in serious disciplinary infractions: Black students are suspended and expelled at a rate three times greater than White students (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2014b).

• Suspended at an alarming rate in preschool: Although African-American students represent about 18% of preschool enrollment, in the 2011–12 school year they made up 42% of the preschool students who were suspended once and 48% of those suspended more than once (Milner, 2014).

• Under-referred and under-represented in gifted education: Black and Latino students represent 40% of the enrollment in schools offering gifted and talented education programs but only 26% of the students enrolled in such programs (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2014a).

Thus, race, I argue, must be a consistent theme of studies that examine classroom practices through a culturally relevant pedagogical lens. As the data above suggest, an explicit focus on issues of race allows us the best chance of building instructional and other practices that meet the needs of Black students.

DEFINING CULTURE, CENTRALIZING RACE

Clearly, culture is not only about race; however, race is a central dimension of culture, and for some racial and ethnic groups, race is the most salient feature of their cultural identity (Milner, 2010, 2015). Culture can be defined as deep-rooted values, beliefs, languages, customs, and norms shared among a group of people. However, culture is not a static category “for conveniently sorting people according to expected values, beliefs, and behaviors” (Dyson & Genishi, 1994, p. 3). Culture is a dynamic concept that encompasses, among other areas, racial and ethnic identity, class, language, economic status, and gender. Gay (2010) maintained, “Even without our being consciously aware of it, culture determines how we think, believe, and behave, and these, in turn, affect how we teach and learn” (pp. 8–9).
Race is constructed physically, socially, legally, and historically. The meanings, messages, results, and consequences of race are developed and constructed by human beings, not by genetics or some predetermined set of scientific laws. Genetically and biologically, individuals are more the same than they are different. According to Nakkula and Toshalis (2006), “There is no biologically sustainable reason for establishing ‘races’ as distinct subgroups within the human species. . . . Race is a concept created in the modern era as a way of drawing distinctions between people such that some might benefit at the expense of others” (p. 123).

Thus, race is

• **physically constructed**: Based on skin pigmentation (Monroe, 2013), people in society construct ideas, characteristics, and belief systems about themselves and others. These physical constructions are sometimes inaccurate, but the constructions remain. It is important to note that physical constructions of race vary from one society to the next. For instance, constructions of race in Africa or Asia are different from constructions of race based on phenotype in North America.

• **socially constructed**: Based on a range of societal information and messages, people construct and categorize themselves and others. These social constructions are linked to, for instance, the performance, preferences, and worldviews of groups of people. Societal constructions are based on a range of areas, such as history and law, and these social constructions shape how we think about individuals and groups of people.

• **legally constructed**: Laws in U.S. society related to education help us construct what race is. Landmark cases and legal policies such as the Naturalization Law (1790), Plessy v. Ferguson (1896), Takao Ozawa v. United States (1922), Brown v. Board of Education (1954) and Brown II (1955), and Milliken v. Bradley (1974) all influence our constructions and definitions of race in U.S. society. For instance, there are laws that informed the “one drop rule” (Plessy, 1896) that determined one’s racial identity and consequent legal policies.

• **historically constructed**: Historical realities related to how people have been treated and how people have fared in a society also shape the construction of race. For instance, in the United States a history of Jim Crow laws, slavery, and racial discrimination forces us to construct and think about race in particular ways.
Race has been and continues to be examined to address educational inequity (Gooden & O’Doherty, 2015; Grooms & Williams, 2015; Jackson, Sealey-Ruiz, & Watson, 2014; Petchauer, 2015). I argue that classroom and pedagogical practices that centralize race should be examined with a clear understanding of the historical, current, social, legal, and phenotypical manifestations of race. In particular, as researchers theorize CRP, special attention needs to be placed on processes, roles, salience, centrality, and outcomes associated with race.

The terms culture, ethnicity, and race are sometimes misused and collapsed to carry the same explanatory meaning. African American denotes an ethnic group of people, not a singular, static cultural group; there is a wide range of diversity among people of African descent, although there are some inherent consistencies as well. African Americans share a history of slavery, Jim Crow, and other forms of systemic discrimination and racism that bind the group. At the same time, African Americans possess a shared history of spiritual grounding, thriving (Dillard & Okpalaoka, 2013), tenacity, and resilience through some of the most horrific situations that human beings have had to endure in modern civilization. However, while there are shared experiences, there are also many differences among African Americans. I argue that deeply understanding and operationalizing race, then, is an essential component to building theory from a CRP perspective.

ASSET-BASED PEDAGOGY

CRP as a theory can be situated within related, broader conceptualizations that draw on and from the cultural and racial assets or strengths of students, families, and communities. Asset- or strength-based pedagogies allow researchers opportunities to make sense of, nuance, and name instructional and relational moves of educators in real classrooms. For instance, in defining CRP, Gay (2010) wrote:

a very different pedagogical paradigm is needed to improve the performance of underachieving students from various ethnic groups—one that teaches to and through their personal and cultural strength [emphases added], their intellectual capabilities, and their prior accomplishments. Culturally responsive teaching is this kind of paradigm. It is at once a routine and a radical proposal. It is routine because it does for Native American, Latino, Asian American, African American, and low-income students what traditional instructional ideologies and actions do for middle-class European Americans. That is, it filters curriculum content and teaching strategies through their cultural frames of reference to make the content more personally meaningful and
easier to master. It is radical because it makes explicit the previously implicit role of culture in teaching and learning, and it insists that educational institutions accept the legitimacy and viability of ethnic group cultures in improving learning outcomes. (p. 26)

Moll and Gonzalez (2004) conceptualized funds of knowledge, and Lee (2007) conceptualized cultural modeling—both as potential explanatory theories to make sense of teacher practice with communities that have been underserved in education. Lee explained that teachers should think about and use their learning about students as “cultural data sets” (p. 35) from which to build and learn. I would add that attention emphasis should be placed on race as well, allowing teachers to examine their students as racial and racialized data sets in school and society. Similarly, Ladson-Billings (2009) explained that teachers should study their students in deciding what, when, and how to teach.

Moll and Gonzalez (2004) pointed to the necessity of learning from and with the families of students as important curriculum and instructional sites in the classroom. The funds of knowledge emphasis has a powerful connection to how we might think about working with and drawing from the strengths of families, communities, and parents in particular, in order to develop instructional practices. Moll’s framework would recommend that family members of students teach teachers about home practices that can be linked to various subject areas. Lee’s (2007) cultural modeling framework also empowers teachers to focus on outside-of-school factors that shape learning inside of school. However, her framework is linked more closely to students themselves in everyday practices, while Moll’s framework is broader in scope. The idea here is that students and teachers are actively engaged in knowledge construction and learning about the outside-of-school practices, experiences, and realities of students and families that can be mirrored and connected to in the school curriculum in different subject areas. Lee provided explicit examples of how teachers in different subject areas, including literacy and mathematics, can use students’ practices to connect with learning in school. The point here is that there are many opportunities to build knowledge (in mathematics and English language arts) by centralizing race and concurrently operationalizing these interrelated frameworks to advance our knowledge for raced and minoritized students. Although these asset-based frameworks have culture in their description and as a framing guide, I am not suggesting that there is only one culture or cultural practice among any group. Again, culture and cultural practices vary and are dynamic across races and regions.
CULTURALLY RELEVANT PEDAGOGY AS AN ASSET-BASED EXEMPLAR FOR RACE

Researchers have made a compelling case for development of culturally relevant curriculum and instruction practices for all students, but especially Black students, in the P–12 classroom (see Boutte & Hill, 2006; Howard, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Morrison et al., 2008; Young, 2010). However, the lines of conceptualization and employment of the theory vary (Young, 2010). For instance, the utilization range of the theory ranges from its employment as a tool to name and capture teachers’ practices in real classrooms, to instructional design and intervention models meant to train teachers in implementing the theory in practice. Although Ladson-Billings (2006b) cautioned against developing a checklist of teacher moves regarding CRP for fear that teachers would adopt the checklist without critical examination of the social context of their particular classroom milieu, others have stressed the need to move the theory into action to benefit students in preK–12 classrooms (Young, 2010). In this way, culturally relevant teaching is sometimes viewed as an intervention or improvement practice that can be taught to educators, rather than an explanatory tool from which researchers can draw to make sense of teachers’ observable instructional practices.

Ladson-Billings (1992) maintained that CRP is an approach that serves to empower students to the point where they will be able to examine critically educational content and process [emphasis added] and ask what its role is in creating a truly democratic and multicultural society. It uses the students’ culture to help them create meaning and understand the world [emphasis added]. Thus, not only academic success, but also social and cultural success is emphasized. (p. 110)

The explanatory construct suggests that students develop a critical consciousness and that they move beyond spaces where they simply or solely consume knowledge without critically examining it. The idea is that teachers create learning environments where students develop voice and perspective and are allowed to participate more fully in the multiple discourses available in a learning context, by not only consuming information but also helping to deconstruct and to construct it (Freire, 1998). Ladson-Billings (1994) further explained that CRP uses student culture in order to maintain it and to transcend the negative effects of the dominant culture. The negative effects are brought about, for example, by not seeing one’s history,
culture, or background represented in the textbook or curricu-
lum . . . . Culturally relevant teaching is a pedagogy that empow-
ers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically
by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and at-
titudes. (pp. 17–18)

Educators who design culturally relevant learning environments are
those who see students’ culture as an asset to their success, not a detri-
ment. Teachers actually use student culture in their curriculum plan-
ning and implementation, and they cultivate student skill development
to question how power structures are created and maintained in U.S.
society and beyond. In this sense, the teacher is neither the only nor the
main arbiter of knowledge (McCutcheon, 2002). Students are expected
and empowered to develop intellectually and socially in order to build
skills to make meaningful and transformative contributions to society. In
essence, CRP is an approach that helps students “see the contradictions
and inequities” (Ladson-Billings, 1992, p. 382) that exist inside and out-
side of the classroom and ultimately work to eradicate them. Through
culturally relevant teaching, teachers prepare students with skills to
question inequity and fight against the many isms and phobias that they
encounter, while allowing them to build knowledge and to transfer what
they have learned through classroom instructional/learning opportuni-
ties to other experiences.

In light of the discussion of school failure for Black students presented
in a previous section of this article, an important question has to do
with the relationship between CRP and student outcomes, particularly
for Black students. That is, what are student outcomes when teachers de-
sign learning environments and pedagogical approaches that are shaped
by and grounded in CRP? Is it possible to design research studies that
examine the extent to which student outcomes are correlated with CRP?
What would such analyses provide for our discourse—that is, would such
examinations assist the field in building more robust designs to support
greater numbers of students, or would such correlations result in further
attempts to standardize instruction and curriculum? Answers to these
questions are not ones that, I believe, can be answered by looking ex-
clusively at students’ test-score performance. Rather, the outcomes of
CRP seem to extend far beyond what might be measured on a standard-
ized exam. Grounded in Ladson-Billings’s framing, as well as my own
research (Milner, 2010, 2013, 2015), student outcomes can be captured
in at least three broad categories—especially if we are willing to think of
student performance as prevalent and possible beyond traditional test-
score measures.
One outcome for students who experience CRP is empowerment. Students are empowered to examine more intently what they are learning; to create, construct, and deconstruct content meaning; to contribute to the multiple conversations in a classroom and beyond with agency; to succeed academically and socially; and to gauge contradictions and inequities, both in and outside of school. In addition, CRP allows students to see their culture in the curriculum and instruction, and students are encouraged to maintain or, as Paris (2012) has stressed, sustain it. This idea of seeing oneself in the curriculum and through instruction helps students understand the important ways in which their culture has contributed to various genres and features of curriculum content and also to the broader fabric of society. And third, as an outcome, students who experience culturally relevant instruction are challenged through learning opportunities that are innovative and that allow them to meaningfully understand the sociopolitical nature of society and how society works. In Figure 1 I attempt to capture and summarize some of these important outcome features—beyond results on a standardized exam—of CRP that research regarding the needs of Black students would suggest are legitimately essential for their success (McGee & Pearman, 2014).

**Figure 1: Broadened outcomes of culturally relevant pedagogy**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Culturally Relevant Pedagogy</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>EMPOWERS</strong> students to:</td>
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<tr>
<td>examine educational content and processes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>create and construct and deconstruct meaning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>succeed academically and socially</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>see contradictions and inequities in local and larger communities</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>INCORPORATES</strong> student culture in:</td>
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<tr>
<td>curriculum and teaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>maintaining it</td>
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<tr>
<td>transcending negative effects of the dominant culture</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>CREATEs</strong> classroom contexts that:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>are challenging and innovative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>focus on student learning (and consequently academic achievement)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>build cultural competence</td>
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<tr>
<td>link curriculum and instruction to sociopolitical realities</td>
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TENETS OF CULTURALLY RELEVANT PEDAGOGY

Three interrelated tenets shape Ladson-Billings’s conception of CRP: academic achievement/student learning, cultural competence, and sociopolitical consciousness. Several underpinnings shape these principles: conceptions of self and others, social relations, and conceptions of knowledge. Ladson-Billings (2006b) expressed her regret for using the term “academic achievement” when she first conceptualized the theory, partly because educators immediately equated academic achievement with student test scores. What Ladson-Billings actually envisioned, however, was that CRP would allow for and facilitate student learning: “what it is that students actually know and are able to do as a result of pedagogical interactions with skilled teachers” (Ladson-Billings, 2006a, p. 34). Academic achievement, then, is about student learning and the ability of teachers to cultivate the kinds of learning opportunities that connect students to the content being taught. Student learning, then, will not always show up on test-score measures.

A second tenet Ladson-Billings conceptualized is cultural competence. Cultural competence is not necessarily about helping teachers develop a set of static information about differing cultural groups in order for teachers to develop some sensitivity towards another culture. Rather, for Ladson-Billings, cultural competence is about students’ acquisition of cultural knowledge regarding their own cultural ways and systems of knowing society and thus expanding their knowledge to understand broader cultural ways and systems of knowing. This second tenet of cultural competence is tantamount to the ways in which Paris (2012) and Paris and Alim (2014) extended CRP through discussions of linguistic/culturally sustaining pedagogy. Ladson-Billings (2006b) explained that the focus of cultural competence being on students runs counter to the ways in which other disciplines such as medicine, clergy, and social work may think about and conceptualize cultural competence. In medicine, for instance, physicians are sometimes trained to improve their bedside manner through developing a set of information about differing cultural groups to complement their ability to work with people who may be very different from them. For instance, it seems viable and quite logical for younger physicians to be educated to work with older patients. Bedside manner for physicians might also be enhanced when they develop knowledge about people living in poverty or people from different racial or ethnic backgrounds. The notion that physicians are attempting to deepen their knowledge base about cultural groups of which they have very little knowledge and understanding can serve as an essential space to build competence for physicians. However, it is of
paramount importance that physicians and others attempting to build knowledge realize the enormous range of diversity inherent within and among various cultural and racial groups of people. The point is definitely that we should not generalize, essentialize, and stereotype based on preconceived conceptions of the “other” in attempts to build cultural competence.

Thus, what Ladson-Billings (2006b) meant by cultural competence was “helping students to recognize and honor their own cultural beliefs and practices while acquiring access to the wider culture, where they are likely to have a chance of improving their socioeconomic status and making informed decisions about the lives they wish to lead” (p. 36). In CRP, cultural competence concerns the ability of teachers to help foster student learning about their own culture; other cultures; how the world works, in order to be able to function effectively in it; and also how to contribute to their communities. Building cultural knowledge for students, in Ladson-Billings’s perception, also has a goal of self- and collective knowledge in order to challenge and transform power structures. The idea is that in order to have a seat at the table and to be able to participate in discourses of those in power (Freire, 1998), one must deeply understand who those in power are and one’s own relationship to those in power.

A third tenet of CRP, according to Ladson-Billings, is sociopolitical consciousness. Sociopolitical consciousness is about the micro-, meso-, and macro-level matters that have a bearing on teachers’ and students’ lived experiences and educational interactions. For instance, the idea that the unemployment rate plays a meaningful role in national debates as well as in local community realities for teachers and students would be centralized and incorporated into curricula and instructional opportunities to propel and heighten both teachers’ and students’ levels of consciousness. Ladson-Billings (2006b) stressed that this tenet is not about teachers pushing their own political and social agendas in the classroom. Rather, she indicated that sociopolitical consciousness is about helping “students use the various skills they learn to better understand and critique their social position and context” (p. 37).

Although it was not explicitly focused on race, in Morrison et al.’s (2008) synthesis of the literature on classroom-based research concerning CRP, several broader themes emerged beyond Ladson-Billings’s tenets that were situated, characterized, and conceptualized as culturally relevant instruction. The following themes were prevalent among the 45 studies reviewed:
high expectations, modeling, scaffolding, and clarification of the challenging curriculum, using students’ strengths as instructional starting points, investing and taking personal responsibility for students’ success, creating and nurturing cooperative environments, high behavioral expectations, reshaping the prescribed curriculum, building on students’ funds of knowledge, encouraging relationships between school and communities, critical literacy, engaging students in social justice work, making explicit the power dynamics of mainstream society, and sharing power in the classroom. (Morrison et al., 2008, pp. 435–443)

This synthesis of the established research literature called into question whether pedagogical practices are indeed culturally relevant if they do not, as a foundation, meet all three of Ladson-Billings’s principles. Moreover, some of the qualities that emerged were situated around the teachers themselves rather than the actual teaching practices. In this way, teacher characteristics and instructional moves/practices were sometimes nebulously conflated in established literature.

REVIEW METHOD

In this section, I share the review method that guided the selection of the mathematics and language arts empirical articles reviewed in subsequent sections. I limited the search to English language arts and mathematics, mainly because these two content areas tend to be considered “high stakes” in schools across the U.S., and Black and Brown students tend to be underserved in these content areas. Initially the search spanned the years 1995–2014, following Ladson-Billings’s formal introduction of the theory in 1995. I searched three databases (SpringerLink, Web of Knowledge, and JStor) using the following keywords: (a) “culturally relevant pedagogy/teaching” and mathematics and (b) “culturally relevant pedagogy/teaching” and “English language arts.” Although studies and conceptual discussions exist in extant literature from many countries, the focused search was of studies conducted in the United States. In this initial search, I found the following numbers of refereed journal articles:

- SpringerLink:
  - culturally relevant pedagogy/teaching and mathematics: 107
  - culturally relevant pedagogy/teaching and English language arts: 13
I then narrowed the search to a 10-year span (2004–2014) to identify articles that focused on CRP, mathematics or English language arts, and race. I narrowed the focus to a 10-year timespan in order to determine the extent to which more contemporary studies considered race, given the genesis of Ladson-Billings’s framework. Moreover, although there were several conceptual articles in the literature that operationalized this intersection (CRP and mathematics or English language arts) and race, I was only interested in empirical studies, because these studies would demonstrate the ways in which researchers examined their content areas, drawing from culturally relevant pedagogical frameworks and race. Of the articles that considered race in the 10-year period (2004–2014), I randomly selected a total of 12 from both sets of articles (in mathematics and English language arts) to examine the following interrelated questions: (a) How is race examined in the studies? (b) How is culturally relevant pedagogy operationalized and/or employed in the studies/articles? and (c) What are essential findings from the studies?

EXAMPLES OF RACE IN CULTURALLY RELEVANT PEDAGOGY

In this section of the article, I focus on mathematics and the role that race plays in the reviewed studies.

MATHEMATICS

In their mixed-methods study, Sampson and Garrison-Wade (2011) examined African American students’ instructional preferences of culturally relevant and non-culturally relevant lessons in mathematics classrooms. The authors conceptualized CRP as a pedagogical approach rather than a theoretical tool while using racial identity development theory and critical race theory as analytic tools to examine the data. The researchers sought to answer the following two questions: “(1) Do African American students prefer culturally relevant or non-culturally
relevant lessons in school, and (2) How do culturally relevant lessons relate to the lives of African American students?” (p. 284). Consistent with Howard (2001) and Hubert (2014), the authors examined the preferences of Black students, which represented a deliberate focus on race through measuring and understanding culturally relevant instructional lessons and practices of students.

Hubert (2014) also examined Black students’ perceptions of culturally relevant instructional practices. The researcher employed CRP as an analytic framework to examine student participants’ voices and drew from Howard’s (2002) metaphor of “footsteps in the dark” (p. 425) as a conceptual rationale for designing the study. Traditionally, studies in mathematics have examined practices of teachers, and the authors stressed that very little research takes into account student perspectives. In particular, the case study examined the influences of CRP on students’ attitudes toward and interest in mathematical content. Five students who participated in a culturally relevant mathematics intervention were interviewed. According to the study, Black students reported positive views of and attitudes toward culturally relevant instruction, and these students “preferred” a culturally relevant instructional method over traditional mathematics instruction. Hubert outlined six themes that emerged from the student interviews that captured the essence of the culturally relevant lessons: “(1) home-like classrooms; (2) ethic of caring; (3) participation opportunities; (4) technology use; (5) confidence; and (6) motivation. In addition, all students [who] participated in the study experienced an improved attitude and/or interest toward mathematics” (p. 324). Further, Hubert reported, “If teachers want to be successful with African American students in mathematics, they can begin by genuinely caring for these students and their academic success. They can also create classrooms that resemble the homes of these students by using [and building on] the culture of the students” (p. 335). It was unclear how or whether student learning increased from the use of this instructional approach.

Rubel and Chu’s (2012) mixed-method study observed 68 classrooms of seven teachers. The researchers employed CRP as the analytic tool to examine mathematics instruction in two low-income urban high schools with a majority of students of color. The professional development project was designed to assist teachers in building knowledge and instructional skill to teach mathematics in a culturally relevant manner. In framing the findings from the study, Rubel and Chu wrote:
These findings illustrate relationships among and between ratings of quality of instructional environment, the cognitive demand level of the lesson’s mathematical task and the range of participation modes organized by the teacher, in this particular context of urban schools in low-income neighborhoods. Low-level tasks require memorization of facts or the execution of a well-defined procedure and, accordingly, lend themselves to listening and practicing. In contrast, tasks with higher-level cognitive demands, in which students must detect patterns or make and communicate connections across mathematical representations, and afford more varied opportunities for students. (pp. 49–50)

Emphasizing the importance of understanding and examining the social context of instruction and learning, “These findings, especially in conjunction with the narrow mathematics course offerings at [their research sites], demonstrate the limited opportunities to learn mathematics at these urban high schools and point to the need for teacher professional development specifically organized to work with teachers (and school administrators) to help them question, challenge and improve their practices” (Rubel & Chu, 2012, p. 50). This study focused mostly on the mathematics being taught, the instructional practices, and the context of the learning, while emphasizing the fact that most of the students in the school were of color.

Leonard, Brooks, Barnes-Johnson, and Berry (2010) argued that social justice theory and CRP have the potential to motivate African American students to learn and increase their interest in mathematics. They provided intricate details of cases that illustrate effective mathematical instructional practices as well as some of the challenges embedded in the learning contexts, with explicit implications and recommendations for teacher education in preparing mathematics teachers. Unlike other studies that use race as a potential site of analysis in a research design, this study actually attempted to analyze race at a deep level by examining the extent to which mathematically robust opportunities and examples were available to students to think and learn in the context of their lived experiences. The researchers drew from and built on the research of Nasir (2002), for instance, regarding mathematical thinking and student engagement with basketball. The researchers also identified potential barriers regarding assumptions about student interests and participation in community practices such as calorie counting of items on the menu at a McDonald’s restaurant (Spurlock, 2004). The researchers were particularly interested in the links between Black student interests and instructional selections and practices that might increase these students’ motivation toward mathematics.
Although most of the studies I reviewed with a mathematics focus were situated within preK–12 classrooms, the following studies were situated in teacher education. Leonard, Moore, and Brooks (2014) used CRP as an analytic tool to study curriculum selections of elementary teachers in a methods course in a teacher education program. The study revealed that 28% (5 of 18) of the teacher education candidates selected books that were “culturally contextual or culturally amenable” (p. 344). However, 89% (16 out of 18) selected texts that were “mathematically robust” or “mathematically peripheral” (p. 344). The results of the study were mixed. The authors wrote:

Race and gender operate in white institutional spaces to influence decisions among teacher educators and teacher candidates. Use of culturally relevant pedagogy in mathematics classrooms in the U.S. is sparse and under-theorized in mathematics education courses. While there is a learning curve associated with CRP, appropriate examples and greater effort are required of teacher educators to make clear connections to mathematics content. (Leonard et al., 2014, p. 344)

The findings from the study demonstrate that as teacher education programs work to prepare teachers, race (and gender) must be addressed, not only with teachers learning to teach students in preK–12 classrooms but also among the teacher educators themselves. The study critiques and calls into question how Whiteness manifests in teacher education programs, albeit unintentionally. Moreover, the study also illuminates the point that as teachers are being prepared to select curriculum materials that are culturally relevant, such selections have to work in tandem with their ability to select texts that provide mathematically robust opportunities for students to learn in preK–12 environments. Thus, there is no mutual exclusivity in designing culturally relevant and mathematically robust opportunities for students to learn.

Hernandez, Morales, and Shroyer (2013) combined tenets of culturally responsive teaching with those of CRP and coded their study findings, deductively, to map onto these principles. The culturally responsive principles included content integration, facilitating knowledge construction, prejudice reduction, social justice, and academic development. The authors situated issues of race in their research and determined that schools need teachers who not only understand the importance of effective science and math instruction, but also who understand the increasingly diverse students in their classrooms. . . . Teacher education programs must develop strategies to educate
all teachers to meet more effectively the needs of diverse learn-
ers and to integrate themselves more effectively into the com-
unities where they will teach. (Hernandez et al., 2013, p. 817)

Again, similarly to Leonard et al. (2014), the Hernandez et al. study
(2013) pointed to the tensions of dissonance between ensuring that
teachers are prepared to teach math (and science) and the need to
teach racially and culturally diverse students in real classrooms.

Ye, Varelas, and Guajardo (2011) emphasized a range of matters from
curriculum opportunities—what students have access to—to the racial
demography of teachers in urban schools. The study examined how edu-
cators make sense of urban settings in which they work while investigat-
ing how the tenets of CRP can be applied to their research. In essence,
the authors investigated nuanced, complex tensions between and among
building teacher identity and developing cultural knowledge and subject-
matter knowledge. This study, again, substantiated the point that it is not
enough for teachers to be prepared with subject-matter knowledge but
that issues of race in developing cultural knowledge are essential as well.

THEMES ACROSS THE MATHEMATICS STUDIES

Several themes emerged across the reviewed mathematics studies with a
focus on race and CRP. Two of the five studies reviewed allowed student
voices and perspectives to inform their analyses. Although many studies
that focus on pedagogy use teachers and teaching as the site of analysis,
these studies solicited and examined students’ input, satisfaction, and
motivation toward the instructional practices constructed and carried
out by their teachers in the classroom. Importantly, the studies inves-
tigated students’ perceptions of practices, not necessarily the teachers
themselves. A second theme that emerged from these studies was an em-
phasis on professional development, where teacher education programs
were designed to prepare teachers to engage in learning more about
and teaching raced students in a culturally relevant manner. Common
across the studies that focused on teacher education and students’ pers-
spectives was a focus on motivating and engaging students and building
instructional practices that cultivate student interest in mathematics. A
third theme that surfaced in these studies concerned the need for teach-
ers preparing teachers to build robust cognitive “loads” or demands for
students to engage with mathematics as well as culturally relevant les-
sons. In other words, the researchers stressed that developing cultur-
ally relevant lessons should not overshadow teachers’ designing rigorous
learning opportunities for students.
ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS

In this section, I shift the emphasis away from studies that consider mathematics, CRP, and race to focus on the nexus between/among English language arts, CRP, and race. Employing CRP as a conceptual framework, Hill (2009) examined writing pedagogy that fostered code-switching by studying issues of race with two students, Monet and Kiki. Analyses focused on the role of home language to support standard and non-standard writing. Hill concluded that “teachers should provide nonthreatening spaces for negotiating and applying nonstandard and standard English and recognize that home language is linked to student [racial] identity” (p. 120).

When examining the English language arts studies that addressed the nexus between CRP and race, I found that the analyses sometimes focused on the nature of the curriculum itself rather than on classroom instructional practices. For instance, using CRP and, more specifically, curriculum as a framework, Sleeter and Stillman (2005) analyzed English language arts standards documents in California to explore how the standards movement has essentially reified power and in whose interests. Employing policy document analyses, the researchers determined that the state’s curriculum standards fit within a political movement to reconfigure power relations among racial, ethnic, language, and social class groupings. This is not simply about trying to improve student learning, but more important, about reasserting who has a right to define what schools are for, whose knowledge has most legitimacy, and how the next generation should think about the social order and their place within it. (Sleeter & Stillman, 2005, p. 27)

Although English language arts was a content area used for policy analysis, the systematic review was situated to understand and examine more policy ramifications than the nature of culturally relevant curriculum practices in schools. Although most of the research I examined focused on preK–12 and/or teacher education social context, the Sleeter and Stillman study (2005) remained at a more macro level, with some implications for micro-level contexts and practices of English language arts.

In another study focused on culturally relevant curriculum alignment and assessment-based literacy instruction. Peck (2010) described a process of transforming an urban school with large numbers of students of color, placing special attention on English language arts. Peck described the curriculum reformation and school transformation in the following way:
The move from textbook-based instruction to inquiry-based curriculum allowed teachers to fit their curriculum to the needs, interests, and lives of their students. Whereas before, students were fit into the curriculum, now the curriculum could evolve to fit the particular academic needs of these urban students. This shift to student-centered instruction was central and led to increased agency as students and teachers took responsibility for learning and creating curriculum. (p. 296)

In this sense, studies in English language arts stressed that both curriculum (the what) and instruction (the how) were essential in the process of providing optimal learning opportunities for all (raced) students. Peck maintained that “the story of . . . success in transforming [the] school to a place where achievement and ownership are high and students are motivated to read has a lot to offer all schools . . . the transformation led to three aspects of successful urban instruction: ownership of teaching and learning, sustained support, and culturally relevant pedagogy” (p. 400).

English language arts studies also made explicit links to teacher education, either through designing and studying aspects of their work in teacher education or drawing links from preK–12 to teacher education. Bales and Saffold (2011) built explicit implications for teacher education focused on the nexus between content knowledge and the preparation of teachers to teach. Although the article did not focus exclusively on English language arts teachers or teaching, English language arts was a content area that the researchers used as a critical site for teacher development and study. Employing CRP as a conceptual framework, the researchers examined their practice in preparing teachers for urban environments. This study was especially important because it offered specific attention to the need for teachers to critically examine and interrogate their own race, “ethnicity, gender, and social class then use that knowledge to enhance various disciplinary-based instructional activities for P–12 pupils. The findings suggest new ways of preparing teachers for the children attending urban schools” (Bales & Saffold, 2011, p. 953).

Gere, Buehler, Dallavis, and Haviland’s (2009) study analyzed the ways in which race consciousness informs preservice teachers’ development in understanding culturally responsive practices. In addition to learning about principles of culturally responsive pedagogy, the preservice teachers experienced opportunities to learn how to engage literacy texts in an under-resourced school. At the core of the study, Gere et al. analyzed how their preparation “created spaces that made the diverse and complex understandings of cultural responsiveness held by teacher
candidates and instructors visible and how race consciousness shaped these understandings” (p. 816). Gere et al. explained major dimensions of the findings in the following way:

Findings suggest that incorporation of multicultural literary texts, continual interrogation of attitudes toward race and racism, and explicit engagement with race consciousness fosters learning about how beginning teachers take up cultural responsiveness, given the persistent stereotypes and the race consciousness that shape their language and perceptions. (p. 816)

As White researchers and teacher educators studied preservice teachers and their own practice, issues of Whiteness and White privilege also served as an essential site for critique among the teacher educators themselves: “We have also come to realize the extent to which our own race consciousness—in particular, our Whiteness—impacted how we presented CRP to our students” (Gere et al., 2009, p. 824). It is important to note that these researchers, like others, conceptualized culturally relevant pedagogy and culturally responsive pedagogy in a somewhat synonymous manner.

THEMES ACROSS THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS STUDIES

The English language arts studies that focused on CRP and race tended to focus less on cognitive content demand or academic rigor and more on policy, power, and racial identity. Policy emphases ranged from standards and what was expected to be taught and learned in schools to assessment mechanisms. In addition, although the majority of studies with a mathematics concentration that I reviewed were concerned with instruction, several of the English language arts studies highlighted the curriculum and made inferences about how the curriculum should be reformed in schools through culturally relevant lenses. Like the studies on mathematics, the English language arts studies focused on student interests and motivation. There was also a connection to outside-of-school matters, as one study highlighted the “home” language and interests of students. Moreover, like the mathematics studies, several English language arts studies focused on teacher education and development, examining teacher attitudes and beliefs regarding race and CRP. The studies that focused on teacher development stressed the need for teacher educators themselves to examine their own race, and Whiteness in particular, as they prepared opportunities for teachers to develop.
SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

Interestingly, although race was a critical component of Ladson-Billings’s conceptualization of CRP, my perusal of research studies in the area demonstrates a marginal, at best, emphasis on race. This lack of concentration on race led me to pose the question that shaped this article: Where’s the race in culturally relevant pedagogy? Studies reviewed that did consider race as a central, or perhaps even a marginal, site of investigation through CRP revealed several patterns that deserve attention to advance the work, maintaining the integrity of the original intent of the framework:

- Some studies conflated race and ethnicity, but it was clear throughout the studies that the authors intended to centralize the role race played in examining culture with teachers and/or students.
- Race was often used as a descriptive category to reference demography, but few studies systematically examined and contextualized race historically, socially, legally, and so forth. Thus, even when studies included race as area of investigation, it tended to be treated superficially: “Black students benefit from culturally relevant pedagogy . . . .”
- Studies tended to focus either on teachers’ or students’ racial backgrounds, but few focused on the intersections of both students and teachers to understand race emergence between and/or among the groups.
- Research approaches varied from qualitative to quantitative, with the vast majority of studies being qualitative. The dominance of qualitative studies was consistent in both mathematics and English language arts studies.
- In mathematics, most of the studies focused either on tenets of CRP or mostly on mathematics content with CRP mentioned as tangential framing. In other words, CRP was analyzed somewhat independently of mathematics content, or vice versa.
- The constructs culturally relevant pedagogy and culturally responsive pedagogy were sometimes used interchangeably, without differentiating nuances embedded in each framework.
- Some studies focused more on issues of curriculum than of instruction, while still relying on tenets of CRP in their conceptualization.

Although, with the exception of a few, most studies focused on classroom-level instruction, even studies that situated their design in teacher
education showed that more research is needed that dialogically examines micro and macro interplay. For instance, in what ways do classroom-level analyses provide insight into policies that support teachers and students, and vice versa? Further, although social contexts, environments, and overall ecologies were examined and emphasized in some studies—especially urban contexts—much more work is needed to operationalize the links among content (mathematics and English language arts), CRP, race, and place. Indeed, in Esmonde’s (2009) words, “There is still a need for research into how various classroom ecologies support particular kinds of engagement with mathematical ideas and [racial] identities” (p. 1038).

In addition, although there were a small number of quantitative, large-scale studies that examined CRP, the literature is inundated with qualitative studies that capture the essence of CRP. These qualitative studies are especially useful when they elucidate how race manifests in the classroom. There are real opportunities, however, to enhance the literature with a stronger synergy between findings from qualitative studies and those of quantitative ones. For instance, in Figure 2 I capture some of the themes—instructional moves and practices of teachers—that emerged across the studies reviewed in this article as well as in my own research (Milner, 2010). I want to suggest that these areas (and others grounded in the qualitative research literature) could be used as sites for larger-scale analyses to test the potential effects of them with larger groups/numbers of students, teachers, and classrooms.

As a theory, CRP has allowed researchers many opportunities to examine practices of teachers that effectively meet the needs of students of color across various contexts, but especially in urban environments. However, based on my review, there are sometimes tensions over whether CRP is a conceptual framework, an epistemological frame for naming or making sense of cultural practice, or a pedagogical approach meant to be designed as an intervention. This tension seems to be pervasively lingering.

Finally, I argue that it is not enough to focus on culture broadly in this work that has the potential to describe and/or transform teaching practices that can improve learning experiences of raced students—many of whom are being underserved in schools. Indeed, I argue, race needs to be re-centered and re-emphasized in the fight to support students of color with what they rightfully and highly deserve: educational opportunities that address and build on their many strengths and that have the potential to support students with tools to improve their communities for the benefit of mankind.
Figure 2: Testable features of culturally relevant pedagogy

Adopt learner lenses: Teachers do not assume that they know everything and learn about the life experiences of their students.

Engage in critical self-examination and reflection: Teachers engage in introspection that brings to the fore their own strengths, weaknesses, privileges, and issues; teachers encourage students to engage in self-reflection; both groups work to examine how they contribute to disharmony in the classroom, attempting to avoid blaming the other.

Make the culture of power (Delpit, 1995) explicit: Teachers do not assume that students implicitly understand expectations and rules; teachers make the power structure explicit to students.

Uses accessible, relevant language: Teachers do not complicate expectations by using unclear and inaccessible language.

Caring and empathetic attitudes and dispositions: Teachers attempt to understand their students and work with them to solve problems, rather than seeing students as the enemy.

Rejection of deficit thinking: Teachers believe that students are in fact knowledgeable and bring a wealth of knowledge and expertise into the classrooms; teachers see students as assets, not as liabilities.

Cultural and racial awareness and understanding: Teachers understand that students’ experiences are shaped historically, socially, and politically; teachers attempt to connect to students’ cultural and racial heritage.

Avoid color-blind ideologies: Teachers recognize and acknowledge students’ race as a central dimension of who students are; teachers attempt to know more complete students, not just fragmented ones.

The development and maintenance of trust: Teachers create a trusting environment for students by demonstrating care and establishing bonds with their students by the ways in which they treat students, by their expectations, and by building classroom community.

Parental and community partnerships: Teachers recognize that there is strength in having partnerships with parents and the community; teachers work hard to develop partnerships with parents to both understand and scaffold learning and behavior in the classroom.

Multiple opportunities: Teachers understand that students are often learning a new culture of power and that they will need multiple chances to succeed; teachers do not give up on students quickly and easily; teachers realize that many students are not used to experiencing success and work to help students “see the other side.”

Avoid placing students’ destiny in the hands of others: Teachers realize that they likely know the student better than any other in the school and refuse to place the students’ future in the hands of another (e.g., principal, resource officer).
Develop and maintain high expectations: Teachers realize that they must push students to reach success, because the stakes are so high for these students once they are in the real world; teachers refuse to water down the curriculum because they feel sorry for their students; teachers are on a mission to help their students succeed and refuse to grant students permission to fail.

Realize that each student is an individual: Teachers reject the idea that equal means the same and realize that each student brings a different set of needs into the classroom that must be met.

Be stern and fair: Teachers make it clear that they expect excellence and, at the same time, keep in mind that they must be fair to each student.

Use humor to demystify and break down barriers in the classroom: Teachers understand that it is acceptable to laugh but also recognize that humor has to be framed and complemented by their authority.

Develop a frame of mind for success: Teachers really believe that their students can and will succeed.
NOTES

1. The terms African American and Black will be used interchangeably throughout this article.

2. The education debt carries several important features, according to Ladson-Billings (2006a): historical debt, economic debt, sociopolitical debt, and moral debt.
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H. RICHARD MILNER IV is the Helen Faison Professor of Urban Education, Professor of Education, Professor of Sociology, Professor of Social Work, and Professor of Africana Studies as well as Director of the Center for Urban Education at the University of Pittsburgh. His research, teaching, and policy interests concern urban (teacher) education, African American literature, and the sociology of education. His recent book is *Rac(e)ing to Class: Confronting Poverty and Race in Schools and Classrooms* (Harvard Education Press, 2015).