

The Gettysburg Address in English Class: An ‘Exemplar’ of Common Core’s Attack On Diverse Learners

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THE 2014-2015 SCHOOL YEAR represents the first year of implementation of the Common Core State Standards (Common Core) in the majority of public schools in the United States. According to the Common Core’s official website, “The Common Core is a set of high-quality academic standards in mathematics and English language arts/literacy (ELA). These learning goals outline what a student should know and be able to do at the end of each grade” (corestandards.org, 2014). The standards emerged from decades of work, led primarily by private business interests and state government officials, to create and implement common standards across schools in the United States in order to respond to the “crises” of international economic competition, declining college admission test scores, and the demands of businesses for employee training.ⁱ Later, calls to respond to racialized and economic “achievement gaps” were added to the tally of ways in which public schools were/are “failing” to meet national expectations (see Ladson-Billings, 2006a). There has been an immense amount of scholarly research into the neoconservative and neoliberalⁱⁱ character of such national, state, and local educational policies (see Berliner & Biddle, 1995; Apple, 2001; 2006; Casey, 2013; Casey, Lozenski, & McManimon, 2013; Davidson-Harden, Kuehn, Schugurensky, & Smaller, 2009; Hill, 2009; Hursh, 2007; Kliebard, 2002; Lipman, 2011; McDermott-McNulty, 2014; Wiley & Rolstad, 2014) as well as attention to the curricular and pedagogical practices, such as scripted curricula (Crocco & Costigan, 2007), these policies call for (see also Casey, 2011; Kumashiro, 2010; Sleeter, 2008). In light of this work, scholarly effort to demonstrate how the Common Core functions on the side of neoliberal global capitalism – while important – will strike many readers of this literature as self-evident. From the outset the leaders of Student Achievement Partners, Achieve Incorporated, and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation have made clear that their efforts to create and implement the Common Core State Standards stem from their commitments to better preparing young people for “college and career.” These are explicitly instrumental arguments (Horkeimer, 1947/2004), which imagine P-12 education almost solely as “preparation for future living” in the form of college and career readiness (Dewey, 1959).

The focus of this paper, though it relies conceptually and theoretically on critical educational and curricular studies of neoliberalism, is not concerned with how the standards themselves are positioned socio-politically, nor with the ways in which private interests and actors have become the leading power-brokers in public educational policy. Rather, this paper takes up a particular piece of curriculum made available to teachers and the general public as an “exemplar” of what English language arts courses operating under the Common Core ought to do. The lesson “A Close Reading of Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address: A Common Core Unit” was selected because it has been repeatedly referred to as an “exemplar” lesson by the primary writers of the Common Core State Standards: David Coleman, Susan Pimentel, and Jason Zimba. In a demonstration of the lesson conducted by Dr. Sandra Alberti, an employee of Student Achievement Partners, to teachers at the Colorado Legacy Foundation’s Integration Pilot Summit in June of 2012, Dr. Alberti shares that this *exact* lesson has been sent to textbook publishers and curriculum writers as a model other Common Core lessons should follow (Alberti, 2012). Because of the ways in which the authors of the Common Core have positioned this lesson, it follows that close analysis of the lesson can offer important insights into how the Common Core imagines students, teachers, and the complex acts of teaching and learning.

This work seeks to contribute to ongoing efforts in curriculum studies (see Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, & Taubman, 2002) to move away from the field’s relative state of “mourning,” or, as Snaza (2014) has put it, to allow “the ‘death of curriculum studies’ to die” (p. 164). Focusing in particular on an exemplar lesson put forward by the authors of the Common Core enables renewed focus on the ways “Curriculum theory is, then, about discovering and articulating, for oneself and with others, the educational significance of the school subjects for self and society...” (Pinar, 2004, p. 16). The focus on self and society here should be read as a critique of “bourgeois respectability, competition, [and] instrumentalism” that characterize so much of our present moment both in P12 schools as well as in curriculum theory (pp. 16-17). Finding sites of resistance, areas wherein curriculum scholars and teachers can make meaningful and material transformations of the dehumanizing neoliberal onslaught engulfing U.S. schools (see Casey, 2011) must become a renewed area of focus in order to shift away from our collective state of ‘mourning’ to one of engaged scholarship and solidarity. What I offer here is merely one version, of many possible (and needed) iterations, of such work.

I begin my analysis with an overview of the lesson itself, based on both the text version made available at achievethecore.org as well as a video recording of Dr. Alberti’s demonstration. I then work to describe tensions that emerge between the lesson and the research literature on funds of knowledge, multicultural education, and culturally relevant pedagogy. These areas of inquiry contain critical and at times radical commitments (see Casey, 2010), yet they are also treated in some detail in Darling-Hammond and Bransford’s (2005) *Preparing Teachers for a Changing World: What Teachers Should Learn and Be Able to Do*.ⁱⁱⁱ This text, sponsored by the National Academy of Education, can be viewed as a collection of “research-based practices” for teacher education programs that seeks to synthesize the whole body of research on teaching and learning for teacher education programs. As such, funds of knowledge, multicultural education, and culturally relevant pedagogy are all seen as important elements of teacher education programs and the practice of teaching more broadly, yet seem to be in direct contradiction to the recommendations made in the Gettysburg lesson. I conclude with a discussion of what this analysis offers both practicing teachers as well as curricular researchers in the era of Common Core and the possible role(s) such inquiry can play in demanding and actualizing humanizing pedagogies (Freire, 2000).

A Close Reading of Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address: Overview of the Lesson

The lesson itself is comprised of three sections and is meant to span a three to five day period. The intended grade level is ninth to tenth, and while there are some prompts specifically for social studies courses, the lesson is designed for use in English language arts classrooms. Section one is titled “What’s at stake: a nation as a place and as an idea” and asks teachers to facilitate the following: students are to silently read the Gettysburg Address, then the teacher reads the speech out loud with students reading along to themselves. Next students translate the first two paragraphs into their own words. There are then 14 “guiding questions” for teachers to discuss with students.

Section two is titled “From funeral to new birth.” Similar to the first section, the teacher is asked to have students read the third paragraph to themselves before the teacher reads it out loud to the class. Next, students translate the third paragraph into their own words. Following this there are seven “guiding questions” that students are then to think through as they revise their translated paragraph. Section three is titled “Dedication as national identity and personal devotion” wherein the teacher is asked to “trace the development of the meaning of the word ‘dedicate’” throughout the speech by following the guiding questions in this section. After students have come to see “how [the term] ‘dedicate’ accumulates power” through its repeated use in the speech, students are to write a one-page essay that includes use of evidence from the speech to support their analysis of Lincoln’s “shift in focus” at the end of the second paragraph.

The full document of the lesson consists of 29 pages. After the sections described above there is a short list of “erroneous guiding questions” that are not suggested for classroom use, activities centered around examining different drafts of the speech, an activity around reciting the address and different examples of recitation, a section for history or social studies activities, and finally an appendix of vocabulary terms and their definitions is provided at the very end.

In the video recording of the lesson analyzed for this project, Dr. Alberti discusses this lesson as an example of “close analytical reading,” a practice that requires teachers and students to “read, re-read, in a very different way than we think typically happens in schools across the country” (Alberti, 2012). She shares that this lesson is not necessarily what every day looks like in a Common Core classroom, but should be seen rather as “one of the things we do in response to the Common Core.” She also told those in attendance that this particular lesson was given considerable attention by Student Achievement Partners, saying, “We spent more time on this module than some publishers spend on an entire text book.”

The lesson is designed to better prepare students for Common Core assessments, specifically to help students be “better at reading complex texts.” Dr. Alberti tells her audience, “Whatever you’ve heard about assessments coming down the pike, you’re not going to be able to introduce the text to the kids.” She mentions that these requirements mirror expectations for students’ analytical reading after high school, and advises her audience that the purpose here is for students to “get as much out of the text as we can.” The lesson is designed to respond to three shifts in literacy standards that the Common Core has produced. These are: 1) building knowledge using non-fiction; 2) using evidence from the text; and 3) increasing complexity (Alberti, 2012). To this last point, Dr. Alberti critiques the dominant practice of assigning texts to students based on their reading levels, and instead advocates for all students in a particular grade level to work with the same “complex” texts. She cites this as an example of “raising expectations.”

Dr. Alberti also describes how Student Achievement Partners came to construct the guiding questions included in the lesson. She shares that the purpose of the questions is to elicit close

engagement with the text under discussion with little to no reliance on past experiences or knowledge necessary to participate. She points out the page on “Samples of non-text dependent questions” to her audience and explains that “students have unequal life experiences” and that asking questions solely about “what is just in the text” avoids this. She also responds briefly to critiques of the lesson “from blogs” that accuse Student Achievement Partners of “scripting” the lesson. Instead, Dr. Alberti tells her audience that the lesson is “not a script, just guidance” and suggests that teachers working with more English Learners, for instance, might emphasize different vocabulary words in the lesson.

Dr. Alberti concludes her presentation by encouraging teachers that part of what the Common Core offers is the possibility to share more resources across the country. She suggests “copying curriculum, lessons, [and] tests” because of the transferability of the standards across various state contexts. She ends with a call that teachers working with the Common Core are “believing here that we can literally change the world” through achieving the standards and practicing the strategies put forward in this lesson.

In the sections that follow I analyze the lesson and video demonstration of the lesson with explicit attention to the research literature on funds of knowledge, multicultural education, and culturally relevant pedagogy to highlight the ways in which this lesson works in opposition to critical research findings in relation to work with students of color and students living in poverty.

Funds of Knowledge: Silencing Students’ Prior Knowledge

The concept of “funds of knowledge” comes from the research of Luis Moll, Norma Gonzalez and their colleagues (see Moll, 1992; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992; Gonzalez & Moll, 2002). This line of thinking emerged from an anthropological approach to school and community partnerships through teachers conducting ethnographic home visits in their students’ homes. As Moll et. al. (1992) describe their project, “The primary purpose of this work is to develop innovations in teaching that draw upon the knowledge and skills found in local households” (p. 132). This research was carried out based on the authors’ findings, “that by capitalizing on household and other community resources, we can organize classroom instruction that far exceeds in quality the rote-like instruction these children commonly encounter in schools” (p. 132). Funds of knowledge thus refers to the dynamic ways of knowing that students arrive to school with. Drawing upon students’ funds of knowledge works to counter deficit-steeped notions of students of color and students living in poverty as “lacking” in knowledge that the school rewards (Wiley & Rolstad, 2014). Instead, students from historically marginalized communities are seen as possessing rich and valuable insight and information that can become scaffolded and embedded into classroom activities and instruction that allow the student to develop a positive sense of self in the practice (and praxis) of self-appropriated learning. Recognizing and acting on students’ funds of knowledge enables connections to be made between school content and the lived reality of students, as they become active creators of knowledge.

Moll and others working under the funds of knowledge concept have worked to build the capacity and ability of classroom teachers to imbed lessons learned in conducting ethnographic home visits into their school-based instruction. For those teachers who have not conducted home visits, the lessons from Moll et. al. are still apparent. Students come to school with a variety of experiences and knowledge that position them as creators of meaning and as capable of inquiring into their experiences in ways that foster academic rigor and achievement. Such a position demands explicit connections between school and home cultures; between the knowledge

students already possess and the skills and dispositions necessary for satisfactory performance on school-based work and activities.

In the Gettysburg lesson there are no suggestions based on a funds of knowledge approach to students. In fact, the opposite is true: the Gettysburg lesson makes an explicit case to *not* engage students' past experiences and knowledge that they bring to bear on the text of the Gettysburg Address. In the section of the lesson titled "samples of non-text dependent questions" the authors of the lesson provide examples of questions they see as working in contradiction to their aims for "close analytical reading." They explain that such questions "do not help students understand the text they are reading and take students' attention away from that text which can be misleading and rob precious class time for students and teachers (p. 19)."^{iv} There are two kinds of guiding questions the authors discourage. First are questions that "require no familiarity at all with Lincoln's speech in order to answer them (p. 19)." These types of questions, "seek to elicit a personal response that relies on individual experience and opinion, and answering them will not move students one inch closer to understanding the 'Gettysburg Address.'" Examples of these kinds of questions include "Have you ever been to a funeral?" and "Why is equality an important value to promote?"

The second group of questions that are discouraged are characterized as "questions [that] require students to go outside the text." Such questions, "take the student away from the actual point Lincoln is making in the text of the speech regarding equality and self-government." Examples of these kinds of questions are "Why did the North fight the Civil War?" and "Did Lincoln think that the North was going to 'pass the test' that the civil war posed?"

From a funds of knowledge perspective we can approach the first set of discouraged questions as asking teachers to view students' past experiences and knowledge as a source for squandering "precious class time (p. 19)." Such an approach hierarchically imposes the demands of the curriculum, of "coverage," over the scaffolded and nuanced connections that students could forge between what they already know and what they are being asked to learn. The question that asks students if they have attended a funeral, for instance, has immense pedagogical value as an anticipatory set to call attention to the somber and reflexive character of the speech under scrutiny. Thinking about the kinds of things that are said at funerals, the way those in attendance interpret the messages delivered, helps to humanize a distant historical figure and can call on students to articulate for themselves the relevance of engaging historical texts about death and remembrance. Asking students to engage their own beliefs about equality again calls on students to place what they are reading and learning in school in conversation with their own ideas and beliefs, as well as their cultural community's ideas and ideals around equality. To characterize such critical engagements as a waste of "precious time" is to condemn student voice and student experience to a secondary status, as less important than the text in question.

The second set of discouraged questions employs a deficit lens wherein the past experiences and knowledge students have about the historical context of the Gettysburg Address and the Civil War are silenced. Operating under the logic that not all students will have had the same exposure and understanding of the Civil War, students are denied the possibility of offering their own perspectives in the role of pedagogue (or student-teacher, to use the Freirean (2000) term). Students are not figured as knowers capable of creating new knowledge, but rather are seen only as passive recipients, and whatever knowledge they have about the Civil War is devalued and discouraged. Seen again as a waste of time, or time away from meeting content standards, denying students the opportunity to place a text in context based on what they already know functions in anti-intellectual ways to instrumentalize all content. That is, the purpose of the

Gettysburg Address becomes what the text offers in the cultivation of “close analytical reading” decoupled from anything outside, beyond, or behind the text.

The authors of the Gettysburg lesson argue that the aforementioned approach works to “raise expectations” and “complexity” by making the entire lesson function at the level of the text-as-such. By locating these restrictions on student-centered contributions in the rhetoric of “diverse experiences” the lesson does serious ideological work to undermine the perspectives of a funds of knowledge approach to classroom instruction with students from diverse backgrounds. By insisting that “students have unequal life experiences” the authors give themselves permission to eliminate consideration of diverse experiences. That is, teachers are given permission to not consider the content of the “unequal” life experiences for the rich diversity that exists therein. Rather than demanding teachers take account of the different experiences students have had, and relishing the learning opportunities created for students who have had these different experiences, the fact of difference is used instead as a way to avoid engaging in anything outside of the text. Such avoidance has cultural implications of re-centering white capitalist heterosexual male hegemonic norms, as they manifest in texts, without any space made available for dissent, critique, or context (hooks, 1994). The result is the negation of what Banks (1995) has articulated as an “equity pedagogy” as a part of multicultural education.

Multicultural Education: Faking Equity

Multicultural education insists that schools and classrooms as traditionally imagined and practiced deny equal opportunities for students from diverse racial, gender, sexual, and class backgrounds (see also, Gay, 1997; Gay & Howard, 2000; Nieto, 1995; Sleeter & Grant, 1987). As such, scholars in the field have called for reforms at both the classroom and larger systemic levels in order to achieve educational equity. James Banks, widely seen as the foremost expert on multicultural education, has described what he calls five “dimensions” of multicultural education. They are: content integration; the knowledge construction process; prejudice reduction; equity pedagogy; and an empowering school culture and social structure (see Banks, 1993, 1995, 2004). To summarize these dimensions briefly, we can first understand content integration as imbedding texts, data, and information from a diverse range of cultures and groups into the formal school curriculum. Knowledge construction insists that the ways people come to make meaning and construct new knowledge are inherently beset with cultural claims: raced, gendered, and classed ways of being and knowing that are not all given equal weight in traditional classroom spaces. Prejudice reduction seeks to equip all students with “more democratic racial attitudes and values” that enable students to see each other as equally human and of equal worth regardless of their racial, ethnic, gender, or sexual identity. Equity pedagogy works to counter what Banks (1993) has described as the “cultural deprivation paradigm,” which views people of color as lacking in comparison to white middle class norms and values, and rather insists on a pedagogy wherein students are not asked to compromise their cultural identities to be successful in schools. Empowering school culture refers to the systemic or structural level of schools as complex social entities and calls attention to the ways that the entire system of education must be refined and transformed in order to ensure that all elements of multicultural education can be practiced.

So positioned, multicultural education aims to center student experience and to build curricula and learning opportunities that are representative of diverse peoples and cultures, with the intent to challenge and question traditional schooling. Such pedagogical practices require teachers to know, value, and respond to student knowledge and experience and are very

congruent with a funds of knowledge approach, as detailed above. We could thus make very similar critiques of the Gettysburg lesson as those already described. However, in this section I work to take up in greater detail the problem of “cultural construction” that the lesson encourages teachers to avoid in discussing the Gettysburg Address.

To say that something is “culturally constructed” is to make a political argument. It is political because of the imbedded claim of the impacts of culture on human actors as they make meaning of their experiences. To say that something is constructed in cultural ways begs the question of whether there are any social categories that are not made within particular cultural constructs, epistemologies, and ontologies. From the perspective of multicultural education, students and teachers are to view the whole of the social world in explicitly cultural terms: as reflecting particular cultural customs, presumptions, biases, and beliefs.

As Gloria Anzaldúa (1999) writes, “Culture forms our beliefs. We perceive the version of reality that it communicates” and further, “culture is made by those in power – men” (p. 38). Culture must then be understood in explicitly political terms because of the ways in which it is produced, made in Anzaldúa’s terms, based on particular vested interests. While Anzaldúa is primarily concerned with the ways culture is produced in patriarchal and (neo)colonial contexts, her work opens up important critical ways of contextualizing multicultural education. Because culture is produced, it is inherently malleable, mercurial, and open to (re)interpretation. This is the fundamental project of multicultural education, to name and contextualize the ways in which power and culture collide to produce our contemporary reality, including our beliefs and the ways in which we perceive our lived reality. This notion of culture necessitates engagement with issues of power, privilege, and oppression and a stance that rejects a static conception of culture. Thus the *multi* in multicultural education signals the ways in which competing conceptions of culture – multiple cultures, multiple productions – are to form the basis for a critical engagement with both dominant and resistant (or radical) epistemologies and ontologies.

Banks (1993; 2004) and others (see Casey, 2010; Gorski, 2006) have critiqued the ways in which multicultural education is often reduced to the first of Banks’ dimensions: content integration. The purpose of working with texts for and by historically marginalized populations in the multicultural classroom is not solely to incorporate or “cover” diverse perspectives, but rather to engage students in the deeper probing of how *every* text and idea is a product of the cultural context in which it was/is made as well as the cultural context in which it was/is interpreted. The Gettysburg lesson functions to foreclose any such possibility.

In Section one of the lesson we can better understand the ways in which this approach to Common Core functions in opposition to a multicultural education that demands interrogation of the cultural context of texts. Here there are a series of guiding questions provided, including “When was ‘for score and seven years ago?’” and “what important thing happened in 1776?” The latter question is worth focusing on because in the “instructional commentary,” that appears alongside the question, the authors concede that it is a question that “goes beyond the text.” This possible slippage is brought back into the text-centric fold, however, with their description: “It’s OK to mention the Declaration, but the next step is to discover what students can infer about 1776 from Lincoln’s own words now in front of them.” Leaving aside the condescending move of saying “it’s OK,” here we see the explicitly ideological work to obscure the cultural specificity of the text in question.

The Declaration of Independence is a culturally explicit document, containing within it those who are to be seen as within the group asserting their independence, and those who stand in opposition. Knowing that this document was written in 1776, or “four score and seven years ago”

from the time of the Gettysburg Address, is treated in the Gettysburg lesson as elements of close reading: as information one can glean solely from the text under consideration. However, such a move, of asserting the importance of the text as such and of discerning as much as one can from the text is not what the authors of the lesson are actually after. For example, there are no evaluative questions suggested for teachers that would ask students to comment on the worth or merit of the speech. This has the effect of placing the text in an ahistorical vacuum, but it also denies the possibility of critiquing the content of the speech as well. Further, this allowable reference to something outside of the text points to a conceptual hole in the logic of Common Core's "close analytical reading" with explicitly nationalist connotations that work to silence student voice and force upon students a shared culture that cannot be established (or critiqued), only assumed. The notions of "founding fathers" and "all men are created equal" are beset with patriarchal notions of agency and historical worth. A lack of any mention of the native peoples who were already living in the supposed "new nation," that the "fathers" founded functions to legitimate settler colonialism and the imperial nation state. These are cultural constructions of male superiority and white supremacist manifest destiny. There is no space in the span of the five days of this lesson for such criticisms to be heard or engaged in serious conversation in the classroom.

In fact, such criticisms could be coded under the heading of "outside of the text" quite easily, and thus could be dismissed not because of nationalist or misogynist beliefs in the inherent value of the Gettysburg address as such, but rather under the curricular commandment that nothing outside of the text be engaged in "close analytic reading." This work violates the knowledge construction process Banks details, because it implicitly places the cultural context of the Gettysburg Address as beyond the pale of inquiry and students are thus tasked to construct meaning in limiting and partial ways that may or may not align to their own culturally explicit practices. It also insists that an equity pedagogy can be achieved by avoiding moments when students' lived experiences could create "unequal" experiences with a text or with the context in question. However, such a move actually functions to deepen the unequal character of experience if only certain experiences (albeit, in implicit ways) are validated as others are negated. Past knowledge of Lincoln, the Civil War, and the historical references in the speech are not necessary components of the lesson, but could all offer more students more ways of entering into relation with the text, more ways of finding and creating meaning. The authors of the lesson have thus mobilized the discourse of equalizing opportunity as they demonize the very practices best suited to engage those students who have been most underserved historically by schools and society alike. There is a palpable avoidance of moves to center relevance for students, and this lack of cultural relevance is the final lens through which I read the Gettysburg lesson in this paper.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy: Denying Sociopolitical Consciousness^y

Culturally relevant pedagogy is a concept developed by Gloria Ladson-Billings (see Ladson-Billings, 1995; 2006b; as well as Osborne, 1996; Schmeichel, 2012; Milner, 2011) that aims to "provide a way for students to maintain their cultural integrity while succeeding academically" (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 476). She has identified three main components of culturally relevant pedagogy: academic achievement, cultural competence, and sociopolitical consciousness. Academic achievement, for Ladson-Billings, is concerned with student learning, what students actually know and are able to do. In later work (see Ladson-Billings, 2006b) she has made explicit that such a notion of academic achievement cannot be reduced to standardized test scores,

but is instead inclusive of a funds of knowledge conception of lived experiences and knowledge that students bring with them to school as they develop and cultivate new skills and knowledge. Cultural competence refers to the work of students to “recognize and honor their own cultural beliefs and practices” through an engagement with official school culture (Ladson-Billings, 2006b, p. 36). Such work entails building students’ cultural sense of self as they navigate the demands of schooling in such a way that students are not forced to sacrifice elements of their culture in order to be successful in school. Sociopolitical consciousness demands that teachers work to engage students in lessons and activities that allow for a critique of the status quo, students’ social positioning, and the social and historical context in which they find themselves. Taken together, culturally relevant pedagogy is the practice of scaffolding students to mastery of academic content through a close and personal engagement with the social forces in their lives and the ways in which their home cultures and experiences are central to the acts of teaching and learning.

Cultural relevance is not addressed in any explicit ways within the Gettysburg lesson. Instead, the relevance is seen as self-evident. Dr. Alberti commented early in the video demonstration of the lesson that the Gettysburg Address “has some relevancy to the larger cause of education” but did not elaborate on what this relevance was. Further, if the lesson has relevance to the “larger cause of education,” what cause is this supposed to be? The cause of social uplift through educational experiences? The cause of social reproduction and maintenance of an oppressive social reality? Leaving the relevance at the level of implicit assumption allows the authors to proceed in their ideal lesson in ways that do not require the teacher to take any count of the actual content of their students’ lives, their past experiences, and the things they (already) know. Any such consideration would constitute a departure from the text, and would call attention to the “unequal” life experiences different students bring with them to their work in classrooms.

There is a moment in the video demonstration when Dr. Alberti calls her audience’s attention to the “samples of non-text dependent questions” section of the printed lesson that is worth paying special attention to in the context of a discussion of culturally relevant pedagogy. She uses the first example question, “have you ever been to a funeral?” as a starting point from which to offer her own critique of such questions. She says,

That is really engaging to kids, can be kind of emotional as well, I mean I’ve been in some of those classes where teachers are doing that and its wow get back to the lesson, it’s really hard. It’s interesting sometimes teachers are really into that kind of thing, but its not getting us back to the text.

Her fear in engaging such questions, as discussed above, is in calling attention to the “unequal” experiences students will bring to such a discussion. She shares that some student responses could be traumatic, some not so much, and other students might not have any experience whatsoever with funerals. Such a moment, however, represents a powerful learning opportunity for students to work closely together as they learn from one another. These moments could allow for students to describe their experiences, or tell a story, in culturally congruent ways that could then be scaffolded into the performative tasks requested by the teacher or the lesson.

Such work could also call on students to articulate their own stake in the subject under discussion. Locating oneself in historical content, for instance, can help students to make

connections between their lived reality in the present and how such a reality has been constructed in history. This work functions to enable students to develop a historical context that they are then able to apply as they interpret texts and content. This is the work of sociopolitical consciousness raising that Ladson-Billings insists be included in culturally relevant pedagogy. There is a need for students to work to understand the conditions of their lives in politically explicit ways, in order to act on their realities as social change agents. Without this active piece, the passivity of the student experience is held up as the model: the purpose of interrogating a text remains at the level of the text, or in the abstract category of “close reading” without attention to the various ways that many social spaces are ripe for “close reading” and critique. Helping students to name their reality in powerful ways is absent from the Gettysburg lesson, for the same reason that such an approach is necessary: because of unequal experiences. Students from historically marginalized populations bring with them to school a rich set of experiences and dispositions, many of which can be and are critical of the existing status quo. Without such emphasis, a pedagogy cannot be culturally relevant, and relying on relevance at the level of “education” functions to dehumanize by positioning students as little more than receptacles wherein skills of close reading devoid of context can be cultivated.

Conclusion(s): Making Space for Critical Work

Martha McDermott-McNulty (2014) has asked of the Left’s response to Common Core, “Where are the voices of Jonathan Kozol, Paulo Freire, Bill Ayers, or Maxine Greene?” (p. 44). In her short article, she discusses how the bulk of opposition to the Common Core has come under the banner of Rightist corporate interests such as the Koch brothers, and worries that coalitions against the Common Core will be dominated by those seeking to privatize public education. She writes, “Opposing Common Core ‘together,’ only to watch it be replaced by creationism and sustained efforts to privatize public education is not a goal I share with Koch-minded CCSS opposition” (p. 45). Research has already called attention to the ways that the Common Core standards rely on a “deficit orientation embedded in language-related proposals [that] hold negative consequences for policy and practice” (Wiley & Rolstad, 2014, p. 38). Other scholars have called attention to the ways in which the standards fail to interrogate the ideologies responsible for racial inequity (see Leonardo, 2014; Savage, O’Connor, & Brass, 2014). Yet there seems to be a fatalist attitude in critical scholarship in relation to the act(s) of teaching within the standards. As an example, Avila and Moore (2012) write, with regards to their work on incorporating critical literacy in English language arts classrooms working within the Common Core, “Standards will likely never overtly endorse critical literacy; however, the Common Core State Standards should not intimidate teachers into avoiding reciprocal approaches that encourage them to involve their students in critical literacy work” (p. 32). I conclude here with a discussion of why such a stance fails practicing teachers, and highlight directions for future curricular research.

Assuming a position of inevitability, with regards to standards, works to limit the possible responses of both teachers and researchers to the oppressive character of such policies. Lamenting that the standards do not include those dispositions and modes of inquiry integral to a critical literacy or critical pedagogy approach, for instance, does not alleviate the desires of critical practicing teachers who wish to take up the work of teaching and learning with their students in powerful, humanizing ways. In our present neoliberal moment in education, it is crucial for researchers and teachers alike to continue to assert the needs of actual students above those of the needs of the capitalist economy (Casey, 2011). While the standards movement and

barrage of standardized testing has worked to undermine public education, unions, and teacher autonomy, we must be cognizant of the glaring inequities this data has shown regarding social class and racial disparities in student performance. In this regard, the research literature has made it clear that we must adapt traditional classroom practices to best serve the increasing racial, ethnic, class, gender, and sexual diversity of public schools.

We cannot respond to the present realities of our classrooms by retreating to past conceptions of “best practices,” nor can we eliminate student diversity by insisting on never engaging anything outside of the text of our lessons. There already exists a rich body of literature on teaching and learning with diverse learners, and these findings must become part of the “research-base” that informs the Common Core. Future research should further interrogate the ways in which the existing research literature is positioned in the Common Core, and whether research findings specific to students of color and students living in poverty are mobilized in the standards and example lessons. As the authors of the Common Core have made every effort to defend their work as “research based,” there is a need to evaluate and critique the ways in which some research is seen as worthy for inclusion in the standards, while some is not.

For P-12 teachers, the realities of testing, merit-based pay, erosion of autonomy, and the declining strength of unions have all become part of what it means to work in classrooms in our present historical moment (see Lipman, 2011; Sleeter, 2008). Practicing teachers can cultivate a critical disposition to the Common Core, however, and can work to “adapt” rather than “adopt” exemplars like the Gettysburg lesson and others that are part of the Common Core. As Bob Fecho (2004) has described, too often districts, schools, and teachers have sought to “merely replicate [curricular programs] rather than matching the program to the skills, interests, resources, and beliefs” of the teachers and students who take them up and act on them (p. 44). While we will not be rid of standards by wishing them away, teachers can and must reclaim their autonomy and intellectual abilities to *adapt* curricula to best suit their and their students’ needs. There is a great need for research that examines such work from both empirical and conceptual paradigms, in order to provide further counter-stories that work in opposition to the continuing assault on teachers and students who have been demonized as “failing.”

I have worked here to demonstrate the ways in which the Common Core, as exemplified by the Gettysburg lesson, undermines critical research findings and approaches to work with diverse learners. If this lesson is truly the model from which other Common Core lessons are to be imagined, we must follow McDermott-McNulty’s (2014) call for more critical voices from the Left that locate the particular ways such lessons fail the needs of so many of our students. As Common Core advocates continue to mobilize the discourses of “raising expectations” and “educational equity,” those on the Left who are critical of such policies must document, critique, and offer alternatives to the existing manifestations of Common Core curricula and the ways such lessons and activities fail to meet the needs of teachers and students, particularly students of color and students living in poverty. This entails scholarship that does not only rely on the structural analysis of neoliberal and neoconservative policies, but that also interrogates concrete material examples of lessons and standards that fail to account for the complexity and continually changing character of public schools in the United States.

Notes

ⁱ Much of this history is available in the special issue of the *Journal of Curriculum and Pedagogy* special issue on the Common Core State Standards from 2014 as well as in Calfee & Wilson (2016).

ⁱⁱ I base my use of “neoliberal” here on the work of David Harvey (2005) who defines neoliberalism as “a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade” (p. 2). We can think of neoliberalism as ‘market fundamentalism,’ applying the logics of the ‘free market’ to all social spaces and goods.

ⁱⁱⁱ As this particular book features many of the most widely cited educational researchers I cite it here to call attention to the “mainstream” character of funds of knowledge, multicultural education, and culturally relevant pedagogy. Their inclusion in the chapter titled “Teaching Diverse Learners,” for instance, indicates that these are more than “radical” or “leftist” constructs, and rather are seen as integral to “what teachers should learn and be able to do.”

^{iv} Here Ellsworth’s (1997) work to question “who does this pedagogy think you are?” comes to mind. While creating space for student voice does not automatically produce just and equitable outcomes in terms of classroom practice, the Gettysburg lesson disallows even the possibility for intra-class tensions to emerge and become part of the content and curriculum of the class, regardless of outcome.

^v While I am treating culturally relevant pedagogy in its own section for the sake of the arguments within this work, it should be noted that there are many important similarities between culturally relevant pedagogy and multicultural education. The focus of my analysis here is primarily concerned with the notion of “sociopolitical consciousness,” a particular facet of culturally relevant pedagogy.

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