

# Achieving Culturally Relevant Education Through Democratic Class Structures

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## Introduction

Education, at its best, is a fundamental tool to overcome the inequities shaped by privilege and economic advantage. When done well, education can provide a pathway for students, access academic opportunities, improve one's socioeconomic status, and achieve better physical and mental health. The growing diversity of American public schools, as indicated by the 2016 report from the National Center for Education Statistics, shows that an increasing percentage of public-school students are members of minority groups.<sup>1</sup> The importance of teaching tolerance and citizenship to students in a multicultural democracy is ever-growing. Thus, it is critical to scrutinize the perpetuation of prejudice and discrimination against students of color and low-wealth students, embedded into American educational institutions, while proposing effective pedagogical strategies to overcome these forces.

The Encyclopedia of Informal Education defines teaching as, "the process of attending to people's needs experiences and feelings, and intervening so that they learn particular things and go beyond the given."<sup>2</sup> This process extends beyond the explicit curriculum presented to students, because teaching often also leads to the transmission of hidden values and perceptions connected to broader society, referred to as "the hidden curriculum."<sup>3</sup> Knowing that school curriculums are not neutral, it is important to teach students to be critical of the information they encounter in the classroom. Instead of shaping students through academic material, it is important to allow students to shape their educations through democratic classrooms. In doing

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<sup>1</sup> Jing Gao, "Asian American High School Students' Self-concepts and Identities," *Journal for Multicultural Education* 11, no. 2 (2017): 101, accessed December 3, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Mark K. Smith, "What Is Teaching? A Definition and Discussion," *The Encyclopaedia of Informal Education*, June 25, 2018, accessed November 16, 2018.

<sup>3</sup> Peter McLaren, *Life in Schools: An Introduction to Critical Pedagogy in the Foundations of Education*, Sixth ed. (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2015), 147.

so, students are able to experience activism as they learn to voice their opinions, advocate for themselves and their needs, and think independently.

### The Asian American Experience in Schools

The Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) population is the fastest-growing race group in the U.S., with a 46% increase in the number of people who identified as Asian between 2000 and 2010.<sup>4</sup> While aggregated data would suggest the AAPI community has relatively high economic and academic success, individual outcomes are extremely varied. The various ethnic groups that comprise the Asian American population have distinct histories and cultures that affect how they fare in the American school system. For example, while Japanese Americans have a poverty rate of 8.4%, Cambodian Americans and Hmong Americans have much higher poverty rates at 18.8% and 24%. Further, thirty percent of AAPI students attend high-poverty schools.<sup>5</sup> One in five Asian households in the U.S. is considered “linguistically isolated” in terms of English proficiency, contributing to lower academic performance.<sup>6</sup> Disaggregation of AAPI data shows 40% of Hmong adolescents do not complete high school, only 35% of Laotian students and 23% of Samoan students are proficient in Algebra, and only 14% of Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders have a bachelor’s degree.<sup>7</sup> Attention to the disaggregated data demonstrates the need for additional academic support for ethnic minorities within the AAPI community.

The academic needs within the Asian American population are often obscured by the Black-White binary that consumes discussions about race- and class-based inequities in schools.

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<sup>4</sup> "2010 Census Shows Asians Are Fastest-Growing Race Group," United States Census Bureau, March 21, 2012, accessed December 10, 2018.

<sup>5</sup> Tracey Ross et al., "Language Barriers and Poverty in the AAPI Community," Talk Poverty, May 12, 2016, accessed November 10, 2018.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

Gao describes, “Asian Americans are a marginal minority, invisible in school; school curriculum is irrelevant to Asian American life experiences and to their culture; in addition, American schools and administrators have little experience with Asian Americans and communities.”<sup>8</sup> An assumed separation is made between Asian students and Black and LatinX students. This separation is largely shaped by the comparative economic success within the Asian immigrant population, that led to the formation of the model minority myth, which persists the idea that individuals classified within the racialized ethnicity “Asian” are universally studious, affluent, and successful. Asian families are often perceived as having universal aspirations for children to attend college and beyond, with academic achievement viewed as an avenue for social mobility.<sup>9</sup> This discrimination, based on notions of culture and nation, is defined by McLaren and Farahmandpur as “the New Racism.”<sup>10</sup> For marginalized students, their experiences at school are often shaped by stereotypes created by dominant society to characterize certain populations as the “other.”

The model minority myth can lead to a heightened sense of failure because Asian American individuals are forced to compare themselves to the image of wealth and stellar academic achievement often associated with Asian-ness.<sup>11</sup> This image, “silences those Asian Americans who are underachieving, struggling with language and cultural adaptation and experiencing difficulty in communicating with schools.”<sup>12</sup> Their needs and challenges are

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<sup>8</sup> Gao, "Asian American High School Students' Self-concepts and Identities," 102.

<sup>9</sup> Vivian S. Louie, *Compelled to Excel: Immigration, Education, and Opportunity among Chinese Americans* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), xxcii.

<sup>10</sup> Peter McLaren and Ramin Farahmandpur, *Teaching against Global Capitalism and the New Imperialism: A Critical Pedagogy* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 133.

<sup>11</sup> Louie, *Compelled to Excel*, 87.

<sup>12</sup> Gao, "Asian American High School Students' Self-concepts and Identities," 103.

obscured by high-achieving Asian students in the American school system and largely ignored by educators.

Simultaneously, Asian Americans often benefit from this form of oppression, which can lead to internalized racism as well as heightened discrimination against other minorities, primarily Black and LatinX populations. Freire describes this phenomenon, when, “during the initial stage of the struggle, the oppressed, instead of striving for liberation, tend themselves to become oppressors, or ‘sub-oppressors.’”<sup>13</sup> This can be observed within schools, by Asian students widely accepting teachers’ expectations that because they are racially classified as Asian they are high performing and will not need additional support in school. While seemingly positive, this generalization prevents students from getting the support they need or receiving proper instruction.

One important aspect of the student experience, interactions with teachers, points to a potential factor contributing to lower academic performance for some Asian American students. In many ways, performance differences can be attributed to the stark contrasts between teacher and student population demographics, such that students of color do not see themselves represented in the teaching or administrative staff. Specific to the Asian American population, only 2% of teachers in the United States are Asian, while AAPIs make up 6% of the U.S K-12 public school population.<sup>14</sup> This discrepancy indicates the need to prepare teachers to educate students with entirely different backgrounds and identities from themselves. For teachers who lack shared life experiences with their students of color, culturally-relevant practice is vital.

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<sup>13</sup> Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed: 30th Anniversary Edition*, (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic & Professional, 2014), Ch 1.

<sup>14</sup> Ethan S. Ake-Little, "The Case for More Asian-American Public School Teachers | Perspective," *The Inquirer* (Philadelphia), July 11, 2018, accessed December 4, 2018.

Teachers must build a better understand of the challenges facing Asian American students and ways to support them while being mindful of the role of family, cultural values, and norms.

For example, Louie describes,

“the immigrant experience is traumatic, bringing as it does loss in any number of dimensions, from language and status, to social and kin networks, or, in short, an internal map of the way the world works... perhaps not surprisingly, then, a powerful sense of obligation emerges on the part of second-generation children in response to their parents’ losses and trials.”<sup>15</sup>

For Asian American students whose family immigrated to the U.S. in recent history, such obligations to family place extreme pressure on students to succeed academically and gain financial security. One’s ties to family are challenged when growing up in America because of the generational divides that emerge through language, culture, and national context.<sup>16</sup> Schools must work to lessen this divide by allowing students to explore their cultural backgrounds in an academic setting.

The family plays a large role in teaching and inculcating children; however, when experiences with one’s family are ignored or White-washed by the formal school setting, a student is forced to adapt between two dramatically different spaces multiple times, each day. Children of immigrants may speak different languages at home versus school, have different diets and clothing at home versus school, or embody different personalities and behaviors at home versus school. This “code-switching” is the process of shifting between difference cultures and cultivating one’s communication style and behaviors to suit different environments.<sup>17</sup> This constant negotiation of one’s identity is mentally exhausting and emotionally taxing for students of color. Additionally, it may lead many Asian American students to reject or downplay certain

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<sup>15</sup> Louie, *Compelled to Excel*, 123.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 146.

<sup>17</sup> Eric Deggans, "Learning How to Code-Switch: Humbling, But Necessary," NPR, April 10, 2013, accessed January 10, 2019.

qualities that are stereotypically associated with Asian-ness in predominantly White spaces, to avoid racism and marginalization from peers and teachers. Thus, students are required to perform to the dominant racial group in order to feel comfortable and reach success within the U.S. school system.

The American public school curriculum, defined by standardization and high-stakes testing requirements, largely ignores Asian American issues, history, culture, art, communities, role models, and literature, such that educators are implicitly communicating to their students that these aspects of Asian American culture are irrelevant and unimportant.<sup>18</sup> This begs the question: how can schools mitigate this loss of culture and life-experiences by attempting to embrace unique cultures instead of erasing them? It is impossible to classify one, universal “Asian American student experience.” Thus, the challenge lies in attending to the individualized needs of each student who has been disenfranchised by mainstream curricula within the American public-school system.

### Counteracting Cultures of Power

The opportunity gap is a manifestation of inequalities in society primarily tied to class, race, and gender. The American public-school system has failed students who, due to factors entirely out of their control, lack the same opportunities for academic success. U.S. schools do not provide enough support to students, often low-wealth, people of color, and/or women, disenfranchised by dominant society. This disenfranchisement is furthered by stereotypes that stem from classist and racist ideas that individuals in poverty and people of color are inherently lesser than wealthy, White people. Often, the term “culture” is used to describe different racial groups in an attempt to disguise underlying assumptions tied to race and class.

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<sup>18</sup> Gao, "Asian American High School Students' Self-concepts and Identities," 103.

It is important to examine the ways in which rhetoric about culture is used to sustain deficit ideologies. For example, the “culture of poverty” concept originated in 1961 and suggests that discrepancies in academic achievement are caused by inherent cultural differences between those who are poor and those who are wealthy. The culture of poverty completely ignores systems of advantage embedded into American society by suggesting certain people (often people of color) are predisposed to be lazy, unmotivated, and uninvolved, such that they do not work hard enough to make money or perform well in school.<sup>19</sup> This myth is used to further the discrimination against low-income students such that those in power were entirely absolved of any responsibility to address the inequities in American society.

The term “cultural competence” was first introduced in the health care field, due to the need to communicate effectively with ethnically diverse communities. This same need was recognized in schools, where many students of color become, “disinterested in, disengaged from and drop out of school at alarming rates.”<sup>20</sup> In attempts to overcome alienating race- and class-based stigmas within schools and reduce disparities in academic achievement, the concept of culturally relevant teaching emerged in educational theory. This practice emphasizes the need for teachers to cater instruction and materials to specific cultural norms, priorities, and experiences, primarily focused on the “culture” of African American students.<sup>21</sup> While an important development towards equity in education, the basis of culturally-relevant teaching is hugely problematic. In many ways, the pursuit of culturally relevant pedagogy morphs into the pursuit to define culture as a static set of beliefs, priorities, and experiences tied to an individual’s ethnicity,

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<sup>19</sup> Paul Gorski, "Beyond the “Culture of Poverty”: Resources on Economic Justice." *Multicultural Perspectives* 10, no. 1 (2008): accessed January 10, 2016.

<sup>20</sup> Bruce A. Jones and Edwin J. Nichols, *Cultural Competence in America’s Schools: Leadership, Engagement and Understanding* (Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, 2014), 2.

<sup>21</sup> Gloria Ladson-Billings, *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2009).



socioeconomic status, or gender. Yet, culture is not homogenous. It is, “inseparable from economic, political, religious, psychological, and biological conditions,” that affect all aspects of experience<sup>22</sup>

Most forms of culturally relevant teaching fall short because they rely on broad generalizations about incredibly diverse populations instead of making meaningful pedagogical suggestions that address the opportunity gap in U.S. schools. Instead, equity must be improved by employing the practice of critical pedagogy and democratic teaching to achieve cultural responsiveness. Emphasizing democratic class structures when incorporating cultural relevancy into the classroom can support the empowerment of students via their unique cultures rather than stereotyping or type-casting them. This paper explores the applicability of critical pedagogy and democratic teaching to achieve culturally relevant pedagogy. The commonalities between these practices create meaningful opportunities to engage students as activists for themselves and their communities.

### Key Principles of Culturally Relevant and Critical Pedagogies

Put simply, the crux of culturally responsive teaching is valuing and caring about students’ individual experiences. Associating cultural capital with success is fundamental to countering inequities in education that de-value lived experiences compared to mainstream conceptions of academic performance and success.<sup>23</sup> In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire describes the disenfranchisement of powerless communities, including low-wealth families and people of color, within academic settings. Freire describes the pedagogy of the oppressed as the pedagogy of people, alienated by systems of power, engaged in the fight for their own

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<sup>22</sup> Arther Kleinman and Peter Benson, "Anthropology in the Clinic: The Problem of Cultural Competency and How to Fix It," *PLoS Medicine* 3, no. 10 (October 2006): accessed November 4, 2018.

<sup>23</sup> McLaren, *Life in Schools*, 162.

liberation.<sup>24</sup> This goal to overcome alienation aligns closely with the purpose of training culturally-competent educators. Culturally-responsive teaching is founded on personal relationships with students and approaches student differences as an asset rather than an obstacle.<sup>25</sup> Cultural competence requires recognition of the cultural and community norms of students, to read and react to challenging scenarios that stem from such differences among students and staff.<sup>26</sup> The goals of culturally relevant pedagogy include:

“acknowledging the legitimacy of the cultural heritages of different ethnic groups... as worthy content to be taught in the formal curriculum, building bridges of meaningfulness between home and school experiences as well as between academic abstractions and lived sociocultural realities, using a wide variety of instructional strategies that are connected to different learning styles, teaching students to know and praise their own and each other’s cultural heritages, [and] incorporating multicultural information, resources, and materials in all the subjects and skills routinely taught in schools.”<sup>27</sup>

These goals typically fall on the teacher to achieve, with educational theorists assuming the teacher is at the center of the classroom. In culturally competent education, the teacher is responsible for ensuring academic equity for students; knowing students, cultural backgrounds, and neighborhoods; utilizing relationships as the foundation for all learning, reflecting about their personal histories, beliefs, and values; and actively using student attendance, behavioral and academic data.<sup>28</sup> The teacher does not learn because he -- more often, she -- knows everything. The teacher thinks for the class, is the only person to talk, disciplines students, chooses subjects, and has authority over all. These aspects of schooling and teaching are incredibly important; however, this system places the responsibility of cultural competence primarily on teachers, without considering to opportunity to include students as co-constructors of knowledge, which

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<sup>24</sup> Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Ch 1.

<sup>25</sup> Jones and Nichols, *Cultural Competence in America’s Schools*, 68.

<sup>26</sup> Ladson-Billings, *The Dreamkeepers*.

<sup>27</sup> Lisa Scherff and Karen Spector, *Culturally Relevant Pedagogy: Clashes and Confrontations* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Education, 2011), 3.

<sup>28</sup> Jones and Nichols, *Cultural Competence in America’s Schools*, 7.

offers a more effective option for implementation. While promising in its underlying goals to attend to the individualized needs of students and teach through personal relationships and community-building, when done incorrectly, teachers attempting to achieve cultural competence can further ostracize students of color. Thus, it is important to consider the best strategy to employ culturally-relevant pedagogy, by giving students a voice in the process.

Another limitation of culturally competent schooling is that the program can be tainted by the oppressive society. Jones and Nichols emphasize the importance of cultural competence because of, “(1) the increasing diversity of the nation’s population and school systems, (2) the globalization of our economy as a result of major technological advances... and (3) the critical necessity of our educational institutions to succeed in the global economy.”<sup>29</sup> If the goal of cultural competence is to allow students to succeed in the capitalist system, it fails to challenge the very system that disenfranchises low-wealth individuals and people of color. In some ways, this narrative of multiculturalism is necessary to address neoliberal capitalist efforts to further segregate American schools.<sup>30</sup> However, instead of teaching students to challenge the existing order, these goals play into the continuation of white supremacy and hegemony while pitting students against each other in the competition to succeed after school. This arbitrary separation of school and “real life” ignores the holistic experience of students growing up in the academic setting. Contrastingly, the root of a culturally responsive teaching is the necessity of political diligence in the choices made, instructional mandates rejected, and consequences of goals upheld for the educational process. Culturally-relevant pedagogy must counter the dominant society as an agent of change. Instead of allowing society to shape the goals of the school, the school must lead change in society to pursue equity and collaboration between students.

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<sup>29</sup> Jones and Nichols, *Cultural Competence in America’s Schools*, 9-10.

<sup>30</sup> McLaren, *Life in Schools*, 25.

When framing cultural relevancy through the lens of a democratic classroom, the key initiative of recognizing that everyone has a unique point of view on life and no one's point of view is better than another's, is more-fully achieved. Instead of asking the teacher to account for these many unique perspectives, each perspective is presented by those who know them best: the students. Critical pedagogy, which is achieved in a democratic school setting, is founded on five key principles:

- ”1. All Education is Political
2. The Goal is to Eliminate Interlocking Structures of Oppression
3. The Value of Popular, Community-based, and Subjugated Knowledge
4. The Use of Dialogue and Problem Posing as Pedagogical Strategies
5. The Cycle of Critical Consciousness and Praxis.”<sup>31</sup>

These principles intersect with the goals of culturally relevant pedagogy in powerful ways, revealing the value of combining these two theoretical approaches to teaching to achieve more holistic and inclusive education systems.

### The Democratic Classroom

Democratic practices in the classroom allow the learner to be centrally involved in deciding the content of one's education. Democratic practice is tied to critical pedagogy, which is, “a politics of understanding and action, an act of knowing that attempts to situate everyday life in a larger geopolitical context, with the goal of fostering regional collective self-responsibility, large-scale ecumene, and international worker solidarity.”<sup>32</sup> By doing so, a democratic education emphasizes active participation in the world, thus inspiring activism and promoting social justice.

Critical education theorists argue that schools fail to fulfill the promises of Dewey and American traditionalists because they fail to provide opportunities for, “self and social

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<sup>31</sup> Scherff and Spector, *Culturally Relevant Pedagogy*, 62-69.

<sup>32</sup> McLaren, *Life in Schools*, 9.

empowerment,” because “school curricula, knowledge, and policy depend on the corporate marketplace and the fortunes of the economy.”<sup>33</sup> This means that schools serve the interests of those in power, including wealthy and White people, which leads to the transmission and reproduction of dominant, status-quo culture.<sup>34</sup> One important aspect of critical pedagogy is recognizing cultural imperialism, or the ways in which dominant cultural groups oppress subordinate groups with stereotypes, marked, and inferior images of the group.<sup>35</sup> This experience accurately describes the disenfranchisement of Asian American students as well as other students of color, that creates the immediate need for culturally relevant pedagogy.

Based on Dewey’s conceptualization of schools, academic institutions are at the center of society, thus students and teachers must lead the world. In the pursuit of a more egalitarian society, schools must teach respect, equality, and open-mindedness. Or, in the words of Paulo Freire, schools must teach humanization through the emancipation of labor and affirmation of all as people.<sup>36</sup> A democratic education enables individuals to change the systems they are part of, so they have the opportunity to deconstruct class- and race-based division.

However, this shift is not as simple as creating new lesson plans. McLaren and Farahmandpur describe, “naming, let alone questioning the social, political, cultural, and economic arrangements under capitalism constitutes a form of political intervention and activism that for many educators is simply too risky.”<sup>37</sup> Instead of these unchecked expectations for teachers to independently manage cultural competence in the classroom, it is important to consider the roles students can play in building culturally competent classrooms. Instead of

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 126.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>36</sup> Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Ch. 1.

<sup>37</sup> McLaren and Farahmandpur, *Teaching against Global Capitalism and the New Imperialism*, 7.

expecting teachers to guide the class, the opportunity to spread this responsibility across all members of the classroom is possible through democratic teaching. This opportunity, for students to engage in the democratic process from a young age, can incite activism in students and teach self-advocacy, essential skills for combating injustice across society.

Through standardized curriculums, students are encouraged to memorize a biased narrative created by a person in power. Instead, the knowledge presented in schools must be made relevant and meaningful to students by incorporating their own lived experiences.<sup>38</sup> Problem-posing education is the best alternative to this banking model of education, because both teachers and students must put forth effort to engage in critical thinking. Through this practice, the teacher must be intentional with the types and format of questions asked, but everyone in the classroom is equally responsible to contribute to the process of growth and understanding.<sup>39</sup> In a democratic classroom, the role of a teacher is to present counternarratives to student perspectives. The goal is to continue challenging students to consider new perspectives and be critical of the information and ideas presented to them.<sup>40</sup> Ultimately, through this format, the students must carry the weight of changing their classrooms and the content of their educations.

### Building a Community

The ultimate goal of a democratic classroom is to level the playing field between teacher and student, such that all students are empowered to shape their educations and contribute to the communal learning environment. Freire describes the teacher-student relationship as fundamental to building a democratic classroom. Teacher-student equality can only be

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<sup>38</sup> McLaren, *Life in Schools*, 177.

<sup>39</sup> Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Ch 2.

<sup>40</sup> McLaren and Farahmandpur, *Teaching against Global Capitalism and the New Imperialism*, 181.

maintained in a classroom with a strong sense of community. In some ways, the ultimate democratic classroom would suggest that the individual designated as “teacher” could be anyone, without consequence, if the students are leading the classroom. A common thread between scholarly writing about culturally-relevant and democratic practice is avoidance of any specific suggestions as to what a teacher must do to achieve the goals of these practices. Instead, authors often suggest the process must be organic and more genuine than following a specific check-list of steps. For example, McLaren describes, “I will not provide a blueprint for doing critical pedagogy (which goes against the entire principle of critical pedagogy).”<sup>41</sup> However, the reality is that a successfully democratic classroom requires a specific type of educator. This democratic teacher must inherently respect children and have the humility to recognize areas students may have more knowledge or experience in. The qualities of a democratic teacher overlap with that of a culturally-mindful teacher: active listening, tolerance, open-mindedness, creativity, and curiosity. Both practices are fundamentally at odds with the mainstream, dominant approach to education.

To achieve the goals of critical pedagogy and culturally-responsive education, schools must attend to and fulfill the intellectual, social, emotional needs of students of color. To do so, first requires knowing one’s students and building trust.<sup>42</sup> Freire describes that classroom dialogues must be infused by love, which requires faith in humankind and the belief that all individuals can do better.<sup>43</sup> This expectation of sustained achievement and improvement can be fulfilled through the ‘Warm Demander’ model of teaching. According to Kleinfeld, who coined the term in 1975, a warm demander is a teacher who communicates personal warmth while

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<sup>41</sup> McLaren, *Life in Schools*, 10.

<sup>42</sup> Jones and Nichols, *Cultural Competence in America’s Schools*, 87.

<sup>43</sup> Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Ch 3.

instructing a class with “active demandingness.”<sup>44</sup> The warm demander has an established caring relationship with all students that demonstrates, no matter how demanding or strict that teacher acts towards a student, such expectations come from a core of believing in each student. To be an effective warm demander requires understanding each individual student to know what makes them tick and how to best engage each student. The teacher is also aware of his or her own preferences and how to best interact with students in a mutually fulfilling way.<sup>45</sup> This model, of knowing individual students and holding them to high expectations, is the best way to achieve a democratic classroom and meaningful classroom community.

The most critical aspect of this school community is student input; therefore, students must be equally engaged in the pursuit of a democratic class structure. The student is responsible for sharing his or her own original experiences, interpretations, and opinions while continuing to challenge his or her own prejudices, assumptions, and contradictions. This can be challenging, as student must be taught that they deserve representation in their education and understand ways to counteract injustice that they may not even be fully aware of. However, the best teacher will know how to elicit the unique strengths of each student such that they are empowered to actively contribute to the democratic classroom structure.

This process allows for a more balanced approach to material compared to lessons that solely include America-positive, White-dominated versions of the truth. For example, teachers in the STEM field must be cognizant to counteract dominant assumptions that all scientists, technologists, and mathematicians are White men. History teachers must be clear about the unreliability of historical narratives while encouraging investigation of source material and

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<sup>44</sup> Elizabeth Bondy, and Dorene D. Ross, "The Teacher as Warm Demander," *Educational Leadership* 66, no. 1 (September 2008): accessed January 14, 2018.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.



inherent biases. In more subtle ways, educators must make sure the women in the classroom are given equal opportunity to contribute to the discussion as men are. Disciplinary action must be carefully evaluated for fairness, by allowing students to advocate for themselves and collaborate with teachers or administrators to decide what rules are created in school and how they should be upheld.

Ultimately, all of these processes must be performed with the underlying goal to counter existing power relations in U.S. society. Instead of simply going through the motions, both students and teachers must truly believe in the ability of their community to enact change. Instead of relying on the narratives created by standardized curriculum, the goal of culturally-relevant and critical pedagogy is to use relatable topics in the classroom and connect learning to reality.

### Conclusions

Both democratic classrooms and culturally-responsive classrooms seek to prepare students to become critically literate, allowing them to experience meaningful learning experiences and validate and legitimate experiences from their everyday lives.<sup>46</sup> A successful schooling is one that aspires to enable all individuals to “attain their fullest possible development as persons and communities to live in peace and harmony.”<sup>47</sup> Instead of pursuing a standardized curriculum, the goal of culturally-relevant, democratic teaching is to nurture the uniqueness of students, with a focus on developmental needs from a social and academic perspective.<sup>48</sup> Recognition and expression of one’s culture is an incredibly important manifestation of power in society.<sup>49</sup> Thus, allowing students to express their cultures in school is a critical aspect of leading

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<sup>46</sup> McLaren, *Life in Schools*, 25.

<sup>47</sup> Mulcahy, *Pedagogy, Praxis and Purpose in Education*, 175.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 78-79

<sup>49</sup> McLaren, *Life in Schools*, 139.

the way towards equity and changes to existing power dynamics in American society. This is especially important for the Asian American community because their academic needs are largely obscured by stereotypical portrayals of the “model minority,” while their cultures are mostly excluded from American curriculum.

The pursuit of a perfect school system is undertaken by students, teachers, parents, policy-makers, politicians, and philosophers. Whether working in a school, attending school oneself, or sending a child or loved-one to school, the hope is for school, in some way, to improve the individual. Doing so requires recognition of schools as cultural terrain where student empowerment and self-transformation are recognized and fostered.<sup>50</sup>

Educators are learned scholars, community researchers, moral agents, philosophers, cultural workers, and political insurgents.<sup>51</sup> The best are those who recognize that learning is grounded in the individual. The challenge for schools is maintaining a community of quality teachers within a capitalist society where the production of value, rather than wealth, is alienated and undervalued.<sup>52</sup> In assessing the success of culturally-relevant and democratic practices, it is more difficult to quantify and objectively measure. Rather, improvements will be seen in the nature and quality of human interaction, the school environment, and the interactions with community constituents.

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 132

<sup>51</sup> Joe L. Kincheloe, "Afterward: Ten Short Years—Acting on Freire's Requests," *Journal of Thought* 43, no. 1-2 (2008): accessed November 14, 2018.

<sup>52</sup> McLaren and Farahmandpur, *Teaching against Global Capitalism and the New Imperialism*, 206



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