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Culturally Relevant Theatre Practices: A Vision of the Possible

by

Lorenzo Garcia

Tall, wiry, bearded, full of quiet energy, David slowly crosses to the open area at the front of the room. He sits on the floor among the children as I make my way to a chair against the north wall. After a lively discussion about a variety of topics ranging from basketball games to visits from relatives, the students huddle even closer around David to listen to him read from the picture book, *Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge*, by Mem Fox. Certain that everyone is paying attention, he reads the story in which an inquisitive little boy helps his elderly friend, whom everybody dismisses as senile, find her "lost" memory. David finishes reading the story, briefly reviews the story's major incidents, and then instructs the students "to picture a good memory of being in first grade." I shut my eyes and "picture" with the class. The classroom is silent.

On David's cue we open our eyes and begin a lively discussion of memories. Mike discusses staying after school to help his first-grade teacher straighten the classroom. Diane recalls the happy and sad faces her first-grade teacher put beside students' names; she seems proud to announce that she never received a sad face. Amelia remembers looking out the big windows of the school she attended in Mexico. I relate a memory of Mrs. Jones, my first-grade teacher who once held and rocked me because I felt ill. David describes the small, warm cloakroom off to the side of his first-grade classroom. After several more students share their memories, he brings the discussion to a close.

David is a White, middle-class, third grade teacher with 28 years of experience. He is in his fourth year at Fisher School. Almost 80% of the student population at Fisher receive free/reduced lunches. Over 20 languages are spoken, and 10% of the students are monolingual in a language other than English. The 26 students assigned to his class reflect Fisher's overall ethnic breakdown of 9.1% Asian, 10.2% American Indian, 12.9% African American, 29.9% Latino, and 37.9% White. The cultural differences between David and his students are distinct and readily visible. Yet, David's work in the classroom can be viewed as "successful." He displays little difficulty in meeting the interests and needs of his culturally diverse students. He treats each student with respect and positive regard, and he frequently employs theatre as an instructional strategy to achieve an understanding of the cultural diversity in his classroom.

Affirming cultural diversity through the use of theatre is a concern many teachers will embrace. Yet how successful teachers of culturally diverse students understand their teaching situations and use of theatre remains largely unexamined. Carter and Chatfield advocate that comprehensive descriptions of successful teachers' work in the classroom can yield "a vision of the possible" (1986, p. 230). To unravel how David communicates and interprets his vision of the possible, I observed and interviewed him over the course of five months. An examination of what David believed was possible through his teaching and use of theatre proved more to be an exploration of "culturally relevant" teaching practices. Teachers who teach in culturally relevant ways offer students the opportunity to choose academic excellence but do not discount their commitments, values, learning styles, and the knowledge encountered in their natal communities (Ladson-Billings, 1990, p. 337; Hemmings, 1993, p. 3). What follows is a discussion of a "successful" teacher, his thoughts about teaching and the use of theatre in culturally relevant ways, and his efforts to maintain a vision of the possible.

Culturally Relevant Teaching at Fisher School

Fisher School is located in an old, transient neighborhood consisting of an assortment of large apartment complexes, subsidized housing, and single family homes—many of which are in varying stages of disrepair. As if to offset the plain architectural style of the houses in the neighborhood, tall trees and greenery line the wide sidewalks and chain-link fences. The neighborhood carries the reputation of a high crime rate, gang activity, and drug trafficking.

Needing a challenge, David transferred to Fisher School. He believes that all children are indeed capable of learning but adds: “The issues are not all the same. A lot of kids at Fisher ... are hit and hurt ... at home or at school, or both. ... If you can’t have needs met, you’re going to turn to something, [such as] gangs.” Though his students at Fisher are “different” from those previously taught at other schools, he states that, “they are not lesser children because different is not better or worse, just different.” Rather than dismissing his students as “lost souls” with problems too numerous to address, he instead interjects “a concern from the heart.” According to David, his priorities as a teacher at Fisher School are obvious: “My goals are to find out who they are ... [and] to provide validation and affirmation.”

David also has definite ideas about classroom management. He frequently discusses his ability to create “a sense of order.” Establishing “order” involves the twin principles of “structure” and “direction.” To create a sense of structure, he keeps students in line with “the ways of our class”—that is, rules of conduct with specific consequences for infractions. Drawing an analogy to basic concepts in subject matter (e.g., fractions in math), he describes “appropriate classroom behavior” in terms of “basic skills,” such as “listening, observing, following simple directions, and a dose of self-control.” The notion of “direction” demands equal attention and refers to a sense of purpose, “a reason for doing it [the classwork].” To further illustrate how structure and direction are interrelated, he reads from a crumpled note written by a student’s parent who is a visual artist: “Elements without composition—without order—make noise, not music. They are like words with no poetry, a picture with no focus.” Similar to the artistic process, the principles of structure and direction provide students a framework within which to make sense of “noise.” Put differently, clear, consistent goals and expectations lead to the creation of a sense of order in his classroom.

“Building community” is yet another important facet of David’s teaching at Fisher. While the concept of “order” focuses on classroom management, “building community” revolves around the creation of a special kind of classroom environment in which “students learn about acts of kindness, unity, good will, and living in harmony.” David believes that students gain a conceptual understanding of community through constant interaction with each other. He further reveals that a reciprocal relationship exists between the concepts of community and interaction. That is, keeping students meaningfully interacting throughout the school day engenders a sense of community within the classroom, and a community of learners increases the likelihood that meaningful interaction among students will occur. Through an emphasis on community, David provides a safe environment—though not always completely free of conflict—in which students learn about and experience emotional security, respect, a sense of belonging, support, and trust.

A visit to David’s classroom reveals an attractively decorated, well-organized classroom. Stapled to the walls are large movie posters. Colorful picture book covers and student artwork adorn his bookcases. Hanging from the ceiling directly inside the door hangs a huge, multi-colored bundle of 1,000 paper cranes that students folded to welcome David back after an extended illness.

He is in constant motion during carefully timed segments that focus on such subject areas as math, spelling, and social studies. To learn about students' rich cultural backgrounds and family lives he has them continuously write about their experiences outside the classroom. He reads to his students exciting and moving literature selections—*James and the Giant Peach*; *A Million Fish: A Cajun Folk Tale*; *A Story, A Story*; and *Aida*—to stimulate their imaginations and extend their personal experiences (Fennessey, 1995). Furthermore, he sets aside time in class to listen to their concerns, fears, interests, and hopes. As a way to provide “authenticity,” he encourages them “to bring their own personality and interpretation to the discussion.” Through close monitoring of students' responses during spirited discussions and coverage of academic material, he is able “to give them what they need and yet take them to a different place.” The “what” ranges from additional content to words of encouragement, and the “place” refers to students' academic and personal growth.

In David's classroom individual freedom and public demonstrations are celebrated and cherished. Therefore, it is not a complete surprise that David incorporates theatre into his daily teaching. According to David, theatre is “the connecting bond” that makes learning in the classroom meaningful, hence, connected to students' personal lives. He takes full advantage of what he calls “the power of theatre” to keep his students engaged in the learning process. Literature selections come to life as students add narration, dialogue, sound, and movement. Throughout the improvisational exploration of literary material, David encourages students to express their own kinds of understandings in their own individual ways, and by doing so, puts the full responsibility on them to decide how to present that particular understanding. By transforming literature from a print to an expressive form, students vicariously participate in ways of living that may be extremely different from their own (Banks, 1994).

Most importantly, theatre provides “a coming together,” a moment of active involvement for him and his students. During theatre sessions, he strives to connect with the uniqueness of the humanity encountered face-to-face. In this respect, theatre contributes to positive presentations of self and represents what Maxine Greene describes as “authentic personal encounters” in which the “other” is simply accepted as other, as someone to know and with whom to exchange understandings (1993, p. 13). This focus on positive presentations of self is also similar to Noddings' notion of confirmation in which teachers attempt to reveal “an attainable image [of students] that is lovelier than that manifested in present acts” (1984, p. 193). Similar to the spirited discussions and timed segments focusing on academic content, he pursues constantly during theatre sessions his instructional ideals of total class participation, cooperation, commitment, and intimate connections between students and himself.

A Vision of the Possible

The experience of observing and interviewing David brings new insight to demographic patterns that show the student population is becoming increasingly diverse, while the teacher workforce remains predominately White, middle class, English-speaking, and female (National Education Association, 1992). Such a demographic mismatch between the student population and teacher workforce places the focus on what teachers need to know to make their teaching more effective for culturally diverse groups of learners. David attempts to bridge the cultural gap in his classroom by maintaining “a vision of the possible,” a unique understanding about how to deal with the complex demands of serving a culturally diverse student population.

David's vision of the possible is a perspective that looks to the future. This implies that he considers who the particular students are and what they bring to the learning situation at Fisher School. To achieve this end, he gathers sufficient information about his students' cultural backgrounds, experiences, values, commitments, traditions, hopes, and dreams. It also implies that he assists them in the development of competencies that will give them access to power, success, and opportunity both within their own and mainstream culture (Delpit, 1995). Parallel with the same careful contemplation which informs and shapes his overall teaching, his approach to theatre is grounded in his understanding of students' real and present circumstances.

As the student population becomes increasingly diverse, the issue of teaching theatre in culturally relevant ways will become even more serious. I tend to agree with Pearson-Davis who raises the concern that, "too little is being done that utilizes ... theatre as a tool for multicultural awareness, understanding, and education" (1993, p. 16). David is incorporating culturally relevant theatre practices at a time when there are little professional development opportunities and research in the field of theatre education to inform the decisions which must be made (Lazarus, 1996). Yet, viewing committed and caring teachers like David, one can glimpse possibilities for change, for making meaning, and for building new knowledge (Stock & Robinson, 1990). If theatre is to become a strategy with which to serve all students equally well, more teachers will have to find ways to make who students are and what they bring to the learning situation an important and meaningful part of their use of theatre in the classroom.

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