

# Using Balanced Literacy for Delivering Culturally Relevant Pedagogy to Prepare Teachers: A 20-Year Perspective on *Dreamkeepers*

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**Abstract**—The purpose of this article is to highlight the teaching practices of two teacher educators who teach at universities in the Midwest. The authors detail the myriad ways in which they use a balanced literacy approach that is culturally relevant in their courses at Illinois State University (Normal, IL) and the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (Milwaukee, WI), to more effectively prepare PK-12 urban educators. The authors point to the demographic imperative, as shifting demographics continue, the need for highly effective teachers who can teach our nation’s culturally and linguistically diverse PK-12 students becomes ever more critical.

2014 marks the 20-year anniversary of the publication of Ladson-Billings’ (1994) *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children*. Universities across the United States have honored this seminal research. For instance, the University of Pennsylvania organized an event in tribute to Dr. Ladson-Billings’ prescient work.

In *The Dreamkeepers*, Ladson-Billings shares the findings from a study of eight teachers. In the foreword to the second edition Ladson-Billings (2009) says this: “All eight teachers had a strong focus on student learning, developing cultural competence, and cultivating a sociopolitical awareness in their students” (p. xi). These are key competencies needed to successfully educate diverse urban students. The question becomes, how do pre-service teachers develop these characteristics? As young junior faculty members, we aim in this article to detail the myriad ways in which we use a balanced literacy approach that is culturally relevant in our courses, our aim being to better prepare pre-service teachers to teach in our culturally and linguistically diverse PK-12 classrooms.

## OVERVIEW OF BALANCED LITERACY

Balanced literacy is most often talked about as a methodology

for PK-12 teaching. According to Frey, Lee, Tollefson, Pass, and Massengill (2005), balanced literacy is a “philosophical orientation that assumes that reading and writing achievement are developed through instruction and support in multiple environments by using various approaches that differ by level of teacher support and child control” (p. 272). This method emphasizes the four domains: reading, writing, listening, and speaking throughout the curriculum; balanced literacy also calls for a positive, cooperative environment in the classroom and high expectations for all students (Pressley & Allington, 1998), as well as the inclusion of community, home (Frey, Lee, Tollefson, Pass, & Massengill, 2005), and sociocultural and political factors that affect student achievement (Heydon, Hibbert & Iannacci, 2005). We use balanced literacy in our classes, not only to model *how to teach* in culturally relevant ways, but also because balanced literacy is a holistic approach that allows students to explore their own ideologies and biases, in a safe, supportive environment, while developing and strengthening their own critical literacy skills.

In this article we examine how a balanced literacy approach that is culturally relevant in our courses at Illinois State University and the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee seeks to more effectively prepare PK-12 urban educators. We first share an overview of balanced literacy. Specifically, we share details of the settings and sociopolitical surroundings of Chicago and Milwaukee. Nicholas shares some of what his students experience in his Social Foundations of Education course, which is ‘subject-centered.’ Next, Tatiana shares how she incorporates cultural pedagogy and balanced literacy into her courses. Finally, we close the article with some concluding thoughts on culturally relevant pedagogy and balanced literacy.

## REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

During the last few decades, the United States urban school population has changed tremendously. White flight, coupled with housing policies and gerrymandering, as well as new waves of

immigration, have resulted in a shifting of the student enrollment in our nation's schools. Despite numerous attempts to reform urban education, culturally and linguistically diverse students continue to struggle with academic proficiency; as a result, these students experience high rates of dropping out of school altogether. Nationally, 18.3% of Latin@ high school students drop out each year, compared to 9.9% of African American students and 4.8% of White students (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). Researchers have concluded that some of the causes for dropping out are the lack of middle-class preferred forms of capital (Kao & Thompson, 2003; Stanton-Salazar, 1997), lack of authentic relationships in school (Hof, Lopez, Dinsmore, Baker, McCarty, & Tracy, 2007; Katz, 1999; Popkewitz, 1998; Stanton-Salazar, 1997; Valenzuela, 1999), an assimilative curriculum (Valenzuela, 1999), the practice of schools internally tracking students (Kao & Thompson, 2003; Meier & Stewart, 2010), and barriers of language and identity (Baez, 2002; Barse & De Jong, 2008; Bernal, Knight, Garza, Ocampo, & Cota, 1990; Cummins, 2000; Gibson, 1998; Rumberger & Larson, 1998; Umaña-Taylor & Fine, 2004).

Numerous educational researchers, as well as PK-12 practitioners, have called for policy reform at the national and local levels to mitigate the catastrophic epidemic of academic failure; according to Payne (2008), however, there has been 'so much reform' with 'so little change.' In the 1990s Ladson-Billings introduced the concept of culturally relevant pedagogy as a possible curricular reform that could assist in the battle for high quality education for minority students (Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995a, 1995b). Related to multicultural education, culturally relevant pedagogy seeks to include groups that have been previously excluded by traditional approaches within the educational system, especially within the curriculum. The central idea behind culturally relevant pedagogy is that children should have an "equal chance to achieve in school, choose and strive for a personally fulfilling future, and develop self-respect, regardless of home culture or language" (Sleeter & Grant, 1999, p. 157). In order to do so, advocates of culturally relevant pedagogy demand that schools organize "their concept and content around the contributions, perspectives and experiences of the people of the United States" (Grant & Ladson-Billings, 1997). As a result, culturally relevant pedagogy "utilize[s] students' culture as a vehicle for learning" (Ladson-Billings, 1995a, p. 161). Culturally relevant pedagogy must go beyond incorporating culture. It must allow for students to experience academic success, develop and/or maintain cultural competence, and develop a critical consciousness through which they challenge the status quo (Ladson-Billings, 1995a, p. 160).

## DEMOGRAPHIC IMPERATIVE FOR CULTURALLY RELEVANT PK-12 PRACTICE

In multilingual and multicultural classrooms across the United States where the teacher does not look, sound, or talk like his or her students, adopting a culturally relevant curriculum presents a challenge for those who are supposed to deploy it (Fasching-Varner & Dodo-Seriki, 2012; Howard, 2006). Although many teachers are invested in delivering high quality curricula to their students, teachers still may lack multicultural and multilingual experiences and knowledge<sup>4</sup>, meaning that their curricula potentially remain Eurocentric and traditional.

As assistant professors in teacher preparation programs in the Midwest, we have seen this scenario play out countless times. The majority of the pre-service teachers we prepare have limited cultural and linguistic experiences different from their own. The pre-service teachers we work with are very much part of the 'demographic imperative' of mostly white, middle-class females who have attended segregated schools, and who have been raised in the segregated communities all of their lives (Fasching-Varner & Dodo-Seriki, 2012). Pointing out to them the numerous lies their past teachers have told them is challenging for us and them (Loewen, 1995). But understanding the importance of better preparing teachers to honor students' first language and culture is critical if we wish to impact the achievement and experiences of culturally and linguistically diverse PK-12 students in our nation's schools. Consequently, we both attempt to protect spaces that allow our students (who are all pre-service teachers) to explore, reflect on, and understand culturally relevant pedagogy in a more contextualized and nuanced way.

In the next section of this article we share how we both use a balanced literacy approach that is culturally relevant in our courses at Illinois State University and the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, to effectively prepare urban PK-12 educators. We begin by describing our university settings and the school districts in which we both mainly work. Nicholas begins by sharing about the Chicago Public Schools and also Illinois State University, where he teaches undergraduate courses on the Social Foundations of Education and doctoral courses on the Cultural Foundations of Education. Tatiana follows by describing the Milwaukee Public Schools and the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, an Urban-13 University where she teaches undergraduate/graduate courses in Curriculum and Instruction.

## SOCIOPOLITICAL SETTINGS AND SURROUNDINGS

### *Chicago, Illinois*

Chicago, Illinois is home to the state's largest school district, and the nation's third largest urban school district. At the time of this article's writing, Chicago Public Schools (CPS) was comprised of

106 high schools and 472 elementary schools. Notable CPS graduates include NBA Chicago Bulls basketball player Derrick Rose and Pulitzer-Prize winning authors Studs Terkel, Saul Bellow, and Mike Royko. According to CPS statistics, during the 2012-13 school year there were 403,461 students in CPS (see Table 1).

**Table 1.** *Chicago Public Schools Student Enrollment, 2012-2013*

Race/Ethnicity	Student Enrollment
White	36,415 (9.00%)
African American	163,595 (40.50%)
Native American/Alaskan	1,409 (0.30%)
Asian/Pacific Islander	111 (0.03%)
Hispanic	180,274 (44.70%)
Multiracial	4,310 (1.10%)
Asian	13,581 (3.40%)
Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	530 (0.10%)
Not Available	3,236 (0.80%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>403,461 (100%)</b>

Source: Chicago Public Schools (2013)

**Table 2.** *Chicago Public Schools, 2012-2013*

Student Category	Student Percentage
Bilingual	16.15%
Special Education	12.28%
Free and Reduced Lunch	84.67%

Source: Chicago Public Schools (2013)

### *Nicholas*

The ‘demographic imperative’ refers to the ethnic, racial, and cultural imbalance between PK-12 students and their teachers. Stated differently, our nation’s public PK-12 schools are filled with students who are, in many ways, different than the overwhelmingly white, middle-class teachers who teach them. According to Toldson (2011), 63.02% of our nation’s PK-12 schoolteachers are white females. The imbalance of a

monoracial teaching force and a multicultural student population has caused many to advocate for recruiting more teachers of color, a worthy effort. However, an equally worthy pursuit would be to better prepare the white women who currently occupy teaching positions to use culturally relevant pedagogy effectively.

Tatum (1997) re-frames the suggestion that black students self-segregate by asking the question *Why we do not we seem to notice the white children who are more self-segregated than the Blacks in the cafeteria?* Like Tatum, I ask a similar question: *What needs to happen in colleges and schools of education to better prepare white teachers to be culturally relevant in their teaching practice?*

As a Korean teacher educator, I employ intentional strategies to help my students at Illinois State University experience what Kuh (2008) labels high-impact educational practices. According to Kuh (2008), field-based “experiential learning” with community partners constitutes a high-educational practice, and

[i]n these programs, field-based “experiential learning” with community partners is an instructional strategy—and often a required part of the course. The idea is to give students direct experience with issues they are studying in the curriculum and with ongoing efforts to analyze and solve problems in the community. A key element in these programs is the opportunity students have to both apply what they are learning in real-world settings and reflect in a classroom setting on their service experiences. These programs model the idea that giving something back to the community is an important college outcome, and that working with community partners is good preparation for citizenship, work, and life. (Kuh, 2008, p. 11)

Undergraduate students in my Social Foundations of Education are required to participate in several activities that are field-based and ‘experiential’ in nature. The most important of these is the two-night, three-day trip to Chicago, where they engage with CPS students and Chicago-based Community Based Organizations.

My students travel by coach bus to Chicago. During the day they go on community excursions, traveling by public transportation. For many of my students this is their first experience riding on public buses or on the elevated train (the “El”). Before they go on excursions in small groups, they are instructed on how to navigate the city using various maps (rather than the GPS on their smartphones). The students are instructed on how the city of Chicago is based on a grid system. They learn how to read a map of bus lines and how to pay for and ride on the train. Prior to heading out on their individualized excursion(s), the students have to pre-map their routes and have them be ‘okayed’ by me. The first stop on their excursion is the school that they will visit the next day. It is important that my students learn that schools are sites that speak to the communities in which they are situated. Walking within the community that they will see the next day helps them process the experiential learning to which they are being

exposed.

Beyond the Chicago-based field experience outlined above, my college students also engage in activities in Normal, IL, where Illinois State University is located. For instance, my students and I volunteer one class period sorting children’s toys in a warehouse in a section of town to which they would never otherwise travel.

The warehouse is owned by a homeless shelter and is run entirely on volunteer support and revenue generated from the donation center. For instance, donated objects are refurbished and later re-sold in two thrift shops in the Normal, IL community. While sorting the toys in the warehouse, my students frequently engage in side conversations. These conversations are points of entry for when we return to the college classroom at Illinois State University.

The conversations we have in the classroom encompass why there is poverty, what role schools play in reducing or intensifying poverty, and the politics of service-learning (e.g., see Westheimer & Kahne, 2004), among other things. For instance, we discuss the difference between charity and service work. We also discuss power relations, as it relates to volunteering. This is all achieved via a “subject-centered” approach (see Figure 1). A subject-centered approach is different than teacher-centered and student-centered approaches. A subject-centered paradigm consists of when all course participants, including the professor, come together around the subject of inquiry—in this case, the Social Foundations of Education—in order to learn and transform (Hartlep, 2014).

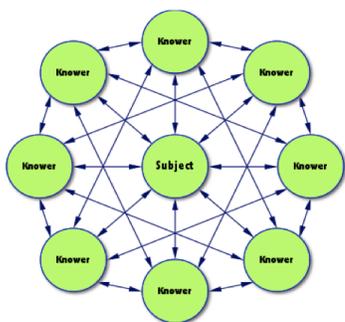


Figure 1. Subject Centered Curriculum

A caveat must be made: While the volunteerism and visitation to Chicago that my students experience in my class is temporary, I do my best to link relevant readings and discussions to the heart of culturally relevant pedagogy and to life outside of higher education. Using a balanced literacy approach, my students read, write, listen, and speak about issues related to the school closings in CPS, teachers who resist standardized examinations by refusing to give them to their students (Hogan, 2008), and schools that were created due to a hunger strike (e.g., see Stovall, Calderon, Carrera, & King, 2009). I must admit, there lies the real potential danger that

these experiential activities metastasize into charity and a “white savior” mentality and thereby lose their educational and affective value. For this reason, my students also engage in assignments that force them to take stock of themselves, such as taking an Implicit Association Test (IAT) and writing about the results through self-reflection and exploration.

For the IAT paper, students choose to take an IAT from the website (<https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/>) that interests them. After they complete the test and print off the results, their task is to respond to those results in a personalized and vulnerable way. These papers are very revealing and place the student in a vulnerable situation, which is important from my perspective since teaching for transformation requires that teachers be transparent not only with their students but even more so with themselves (Michie, 2012).

**Milwaukee, Wisconsin**

Milwaukee, like Chicago, is Wisconsin’s largest urban school district. Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) is home to over 78,000 students (see Tables 3 & 4) and consists of 165 schools. The district offers families a multitude of programs to meet the needs of children including Language Immersion Schools, International Baccalaureate Schools, Montessori Schools, STEM and many others. Nationally and statewide, the district was recognized with top-school rankings for several of its schools. Although the school district works hard to provide quality programs to families, the district as a whole is placed near the bottom among urban school districts.

Although the student population is very diverse in MPS, the same is not true for the teachers: currently, minority teachers are only 29.62% of the total teaching population. Sadly, the percentage of minority students in the UW-M teacher preparation program is also very low (currently 22%).

Table 3. Milwaukee Public Schools Student Enrollment, 2012-201

Race/Ethnicity	Student Enrollment
American Indian or Alaska Native	590 (0.8%)
Asian or Pacific Islander	4283 (5.5%)
Black not Hispanic	43,399 (55.7%)
Hispanic	18,835 (24.0%)
White not Hispanic	10,901 (13.9%)
Total	78,363(100%)

Source: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (n.d.)

**Table 4.** *Milwaukee Public School, 2012-2013*

Student Category	Student Percentage
Students with Disabilities	20.3%
Limited English Proficiency	9.8%
Economically Disadvantaged	82.3%

Source: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (n.d.)

### *Tatiana*

My goal as an Assistant Professor in Urban Education is to help “pre service teachers critically analyze important issues such as race, ethnicity, and culture and recognize how these important concepts shape the learning experience for many students” (Howard, 2003, p. 195). I do this by providing students with a safe space to “discover their own knowledge, create new knowledge, and act on this knowledge” (Auerbach, 1995, p. 16) regardless of their ethnicity, or race. The four domains of balanced literacy (listening, writing, speaking, and reading) become pillars that allow my students to explore and understand “the social contexts of their lives and grapple with the transformation of their social reality and the world in which they live” (Ajayi, 2008, p. 211). My classroom becomes a sanctuary, a safe environment for students to express and question their biases, frustrations, and uncertainties without feeling attacked. This is extremely important in my teaching because it allows pre-service teachers to acknowledge deficit-based notions that they may have of our diverse students. This also allows students to begin to understand the cultural, social, and linguistic capital that their students will bring with them to the classroom and how using this capital in their own classrooms benefits the academic performance of their students.

Together, my students and I engage in critical reflection through different means. First, my students are provided with a set of readings that encourage dialogue. These readings (although they cover a range of topics) are chosen because they allow critique and understanding of the inequalities in our current educational system. After reading these articles, I encourage my students to engage in written reflection about their own understanding of the material; this allows for students to think about questions they may have, and make connections. I allow them to use their life experiences and prior knowledge as a lens for processing the material--although at times deficit notions surface. I encourage discussion in my classroom, both in small and large groups, but most importantly, I encourage and demand that students listen to one another and provide respectful, constructive feedback. Together we peel back

negative stereotypes and myths that often pollute our understanding of urban teaching.

I have created several assignments that move students from understanding and exploring to making connections and, hence, encourage them to begin thinking of themselves as possible agents of social change—all while encouraging literacy. One assignment in particular is my Language Loss/Language Maintenance Survey. In one of my classes, we spend a substantial amount of time talking about the consequences of not allowing children to use their first language in the classroom. For many of my monolingual students, this idea of language loss is hard to understand, because they have not had to experience it. My assignment calls for them to interview a family member in the hope of exploring their cultural roots and the trajectory of the language first spoken amongst their ancestors. After completing their interviews, students have an opportunity to digest these stories and connect them to current stories and material presented in class; for many, this becomes an eye opening experience. Many become upset; they feel robbed of the opportunity to have learned a second language. These connections allow them to understand the importance of incorporating a child’s first language in the classroom, and for many of my students, this “aha” moment is often the first step in their transformation, as they come to realize how incorporating culturally relevant pedagogy in the classroom can help their own students be successful.

Although exciting and liberating to do, incorporating this critical reflection and culturally relevant methodology has its challenges. For many of my students, much of the material presented is new to them. Due to their minimal experience with urban living, many of them come in with discrepancies and negative beliefs about students in urban schools. For some of them, the information is often hard to swallow; as a result, they spend a lot of time questioning the source and even questioning my own experiences and preparation. I was told a few semesters ago that my view only represented me; and although I always present the research accompanied with panel participants, videos, or counter narratives (and never my personal view) this student believed that all of it was just my opinion—she discredited any and all of the research presented and continued to display erroneous assumptions about urban students. No matter how I attempted to reach out to her, she was not ready to explore, understand, or transform her biases and prejudices.

Another positive challenge—if I may call it that—is posed by minority students. Because of current UW-M School of Education Grow Your Own Initiatives, we have recruited many local minority students to join the School of Education and become certified to teach. The majority of these students come in having grown up in urban environments and are often language learners. They have experienced many of the issues we talk about in class; however, many of them do not have the words to describe or name their reality. To them, the introduction of culturally relevant pedagogy is empowering; many of them realize the damaging experiences they

went through as students and are quick to come to the realization that they have the power to turn it around and become agents of social change for their students. Their stories are often so powerful that, if allowed, they can easily become spokespeople for their racial/ethnic/linguistic group. These students are very important in my classroom because they can provide their counter narrative; however, I always balance it by providing counter narratives from other racial/ethnic/linguistic groups, or even from their own group. These stories help all my students understand that we cannot generalize and believe that *everyone* shares the same experiences or thinks the same way about others.

Minority students bring another challenge that has to do with literacy. Because of their experiences in an educational system that did not respect or encourage biliteracy and bilingualism, many of these students never fully develop their academic writing in either language. These students struggle with written assignments, and sometimes with communicating. My students understand that in my class a balanced literacy is extremely important, but it is not the sole indicator of their performance. I am far more interested in their message and reflection; the literacy we can work on together. Because of that, we have a rewriting policy on all assignments, and I encourage my students to use university services, like the Writing Center, to develop their writing.

I am fortunate to work in a university that supports my work and my teaching methodology/philosophy. We are program committed to urban education; hence, my emphasis on culturally relevant pedagogy is very much encouraged and appreciated. I struggle with the student population; I often question how we can admit students who are not committed to urban education and the inclusion of culturally relevant pedagogy in their own curriculum; these students are often not ready to explore, question, and transform their lives to ensure quality urban education for their students. The reality is that although our programs have admission requirements (such as an essay) that focus on enrolling students committed to urban education, it is often not enough of a picture of the reality of our students. Further, we still have too many roadblocks in the system that blocks other students, who might truly be committed, from enrolling. My only hope, and what I strive for on a daily basis, is that I am doing my part to prepare teachers to become the best teachers that they can be.

### CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Teacher preparation programs benefit new and upcoming. In this article we have shared how we both call upon Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and deliver it through an approach that is informed by both Balanced Literacy and our experiences as minoritized teachers. Our hope is that this approach allows us to incorporate our life experiences into our courses, which will

assist our students in transforming their biases, prejudices, and misperceptions of schools and society.

As demographic patterns continue to change in schools, and children come in with different life experiences, it is extremely important for our teachers to be prepared to teach *all* students; this includes undocumented children, recent immigrants, non-English speaking students, and students who identify as Queer or a member of the LGTBQ community (Quinn & Meiners, 2009). Our teachers, when we were growing up, had the choice to incorporate Culturally Relevant Pedagogy into the curriculum. This is no longer the case. In our current times, failure to prepare culturally relevant PK-12 practitioners will have detrimental consequences for society. If allowed to fail, our public school educational system will continue to serve as a pipeline to fill prisons. The school-to-prison pipeline is one symptom of ineffective teaching (Meiners, 2007; Meiners & Winn, 2010). It is for that reason, that we are committed to end this school-to-prison pipeline, to prepare teachers, and to give *all* children the opportunity to be successful.

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