

# OPERATIONALIZING ELEMENTS OF CULTURALLY RELEVANT PEDAGOGY

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## Vexation

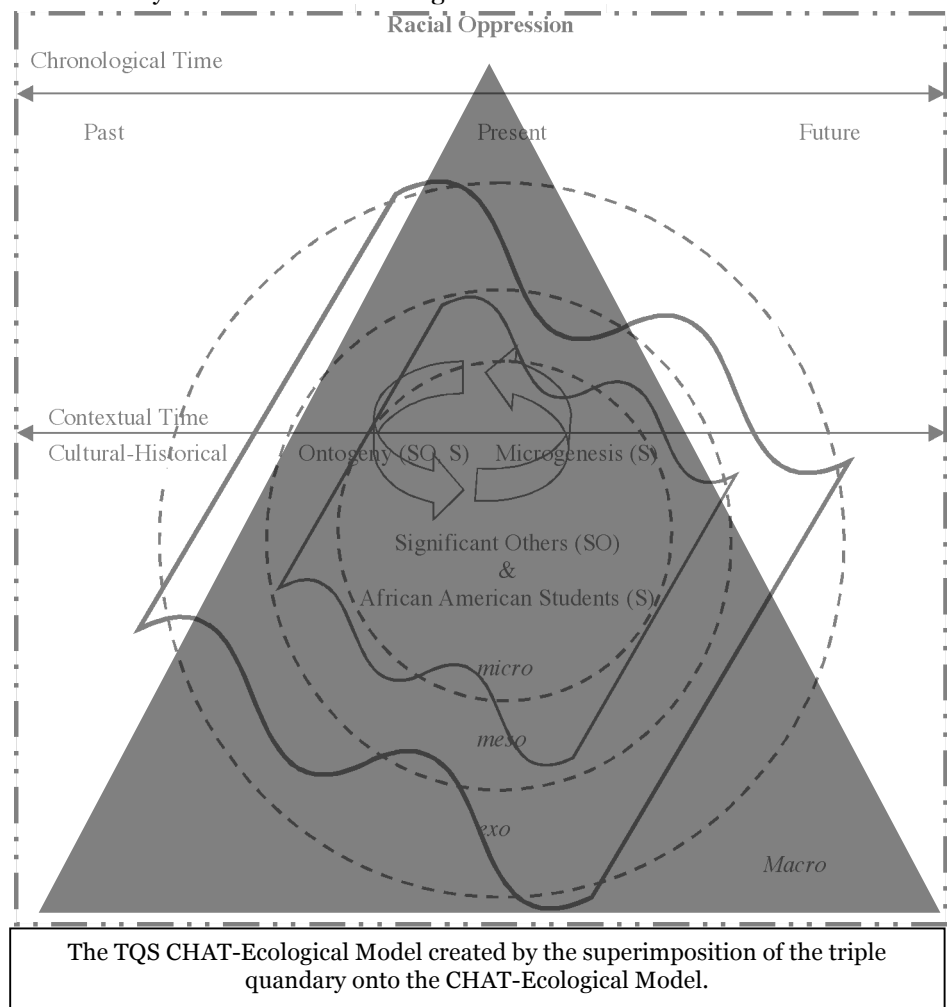
Culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP), in its original form proposed by Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995), captured the practices of elementary school teachers who were deemed successful with African American children. The major elements that comprised culturally relevant pedagogy were as follows: 1) Academic excellence — teachers believed the students could achieve and expected them to do so; 2) Cultural competence — teachers valued the students' cultures and provided avenues for them to maintain their cultural integrity while simultaneously encouraging students to be proud of their cultures; and 3) Critical social consciousness — teachers acknowledged and worked to change injustices and promoted this critical social consciousness in their students. Although the research includes numerous qualitative studies, the research to date has been characterized as anecdotal. My vexation is how to operationalize the second and third elements of culturally relevant pedagogy so that it can be employed and researched in a systemic fashion on a larger scale.

I situate CRP within my research agenda on social contexts. To think about and accommodate contexts in a critical way, I synthesized three theories posited by cultural psychologists (see diagram taken from Parsons, in press). The synthesis began in *Crossroads* 2006. The model synthesized Michael Cole's cultural historical activity theory (CHAT), Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecology systems theory, and Wade Boykin's triple quandary.

In Coles' CHAT, culture is central to humans' interactions with their surroundings and is conceived as socially inherited cultural practices. I do not delimit culture to socially inherited practices as contended by Cole (Cole, 1996, 1998) that are acquired, developed, and refined through individuals' prolonged immersions in communities as asserted by

Gutierrez and Rogoff (2003). Because some practices are unconscious and exist outside

cognitive awareness, I also view culture as consisting of deep tacit processes that are resistant to change (Lee, 2002). These cultural practices are passed consciously and unconsciously from one era to the next, from one generation to another (Cole 1996, 1998; Gutierrez & Rogoff, 2003). Cole captures this transmission in several time domains. In my work, I emphasize the (a) cultural-historical, the history of the cultural group in which an individual is born; (b) ontogeny, the history of an individual; and (c) and microgenesis, moment-to-moment interactions encompassed in an experience. For example, when examining an African American female teaching middle school science from a CHAT perspective, I would consider her life experiences and worldviews in relation to the cultural-historical events of slavery, Jim Crow, racial and gender discrimination, Civil Rights movement, etc. Ontogeny would consider her specific life history with respect to individual circumstances like family structure. Microgenesis would examine her work and practices as a science teacher in a middle school



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classroom. In addition to viewing cultural practices with respect to time, Cole also asserted that these practices must be examined within the institutional arrangements in which they occur. Bronfenbrenner's ecological environment system is one characterization of these institutional arrangements.

Bronfenbrenner posited that an individual's direct and indirect connections to and interactions with settings comprise the individual's ecological environment. An individual's ecological environments are represented by a set of nested, concentric circles that are treated as a system. The system includes multiple layers of contexts in which individuals of interest directly participate (microsystems, mesosystems) and life-impacting ones in which individuals are not directly involved (exosystems, macrosystems). Microsystems may involve an individual's home, community programs, and science classrooms and the mesosystem refers to the relationships among these settings. Individuals are not directly involved in the exosystem but what occurs there affects them. For example, standardized testing enforced by a school district is an illustration of the exosystem. The macrosystem encompasses the wider society, the ideologies and values that constitute its culture. In the macrosystem, various groups are positioned differently. Within the context of the United States (U.S.) macrosystem, African Americans occupy a status and position distinguishable from any other group. Boykin (1986) characterized this positioning as a triple quandary.

The triple quandary consists of three interacting spheres—oppression, mainstream U.S. culture, and African-rooted Black culture. When one considers the cultural-historical aspects of the African American experience in the U.S., racial oppression (the systematic, prolonged, and race-based denial of a group's access to material and symbolic resources that have the potential to advance the group within the power structures of society) and cultural hegemony (the domination of one culture over another) are dominant themes. In the triple quandary, oppression encompasses racial oppression and the relationships between the mainstream U.S. and African-rooted Black culture capture cultural hegemony. The triple quandary casts mainstream U.S. culture as the valued culture and African-rooted culture as its antithesis (Boykin, 1994). In brief, a few cluster values distinguish the mainstream U.S. and African-rooted culture. In the U.S. culture, individuals and their rights are paramount whereas the group and relationships among group members are of greatest importance in the African-rooted culture. Human interactions in a situation are highly valued in the African-rooted culture; in mainstream U.S. culture, tangible products from those interactions are key. Mainstream U.S. culture advocates the development of rational thought and the repression of emotion; in contrast, African-rooted culture nurtures emotional expression as a part of rational thought. To make sense of reality, reality is separated and reduced to the observable and material in mainstream U.S. culture; in the African-rooted culture, reality is perceived as a harmonious whole that extends beyond the realm of the physical into the spiritual.

The synthesis of Cole's CHAT, Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, and Boykin's triple quandary resulted in a two-tiered model. The first layer is applicable to all groups in a society. In the figure, the box earmarked with the CHAT time domains and the concentric circles representing layers of context comprise the first tier. The second tier consists of the large and small banners and the triangle; these symbols represent the triple quandary. My present vexation is situated within the micro- and meso-levels in relation to the triple quandary, specifically with respect to science classrooms and the homes and communities of African American students. Although the macro is not explicitly included in the foci, what occurs in the micro is influenced by the broader contexts surrounding it.

## **Venture**

My venture lies with the second and third components of CRP. At present, I contemplate ways to develop a systematic way to ascertain and assess cultural competence and critical social consciousness on a large scale within the contexts of science classrooms. Do we create checklists of characteristic language and events and determine the frequency of their occurrences inside and outside (e.g. places of significance to student groups of interest) the classroom?