Educational Review: *For White Folks Who Teach in the Hood… and the Rest of Y’all Too: Reality Pedagogy and Urban Education*

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Abstract

This paper explores the book *For White Folks Who Teach in the Hood…and the Rest of Y’all Too: Reality Pedagogy and Urban Education* written by Christopher Emdin. The author challenges all teachers to radically transform urban education. Throughout eleven chapters, it is apparent that Emdin respects and is devoted to the urban youth of our nation. He calls for all educators (teachers, administrators, etc.,) to pause, reflect, and think critically about their own perceptions and perspectives about students and their communities. This review will provide an introductory paragraph to the book, a chapter by chapter summary, an analysis and application of course readings to the overall concept of the book, and a conclusion paragraph that summarizes what I learned and how it will be used to inform my future practice.

*Keywords*: urban education, reality pedagogy

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**Introduction**

 This New York Times Best Seller, *For White Folks Who Teach in the Hood…and the Rest of Y’all Too: Reality Pedagogy and Urban Education*, was written by Christopher Emdin in 2016. Emdin is an award-winning educator who provides us with a new lens and approach to teaching and learning in urban schools. He is an associate professor in the Department of Mathematics, Science, and Technology at Teachers College, Columbia University. Here, he also serves as associate director for the Institute for Urban and Minority Education. Further, Emdin is the creator of the #HipHopEd social media movement and Science Genius B.A.T.T.L.E.S., was named the 2015 Multicultural Educator of the Year by the National Association of Multicultural Educators, and has been honored as a STEM Access Champion of Change by the White House.

In his publication, this address to educators, Emdin draws on his own experiences of feeling undervalued and invisible in classrooms as a young man of color. He merges his experiences in the Bronx with his more than ten years of teaching and researching in urban America. This book is a much-called-for remedy to the traditional top-down pedagogy as it promises to radically reframe the landscape of urban education. Emdin believes that teachers who teach urban youth need to approach their style of teaching that most matches the learning style of the students based on how they teach and learn within their own community. This book is a revocation of an outdated pedagogy that utilized one approach to transmit one worldview to all students, regardless of race and culture. Emdin argues that there must be an effort to improve the practice of white teachers who are teaching across the nation. To support this, we gain a guide of actionable tools for the teacher who wants to “know better, do better” (Emdin, 2016).

**Chapter Summaries**

**Chapter 1 – Camaraderie: *Reality and the Neoindigenous***

 Emdin introduces his book with a historical background of the Carlisle Indian Industrial School. Through the first thirty pages, the author tells of how indigenous youth were taken from their Native communities, were stripped of their traditions and languages, and then forcefully assimilated to the dominant white culture. He goes on to analyze these experiences and use analogy to explain and identify the neoindigenous, the youth of color in today’s urban classrooms. Emdin argues that the neoindigenous endure authoritarian practices similar to those of the Carlisle school. Through “classroom colonialism” (Emdin, 2016, p. 14), the neoindigenous students learn how academic success is equivalent to acting in a way that is consistent with traditional school norms. In other words, to be successful, students are taught and learn to remove themselves from the culture of the surrounding community, conform to the expectations of the oppressors, and repress the identities they possess outside of the classroom. Emdin’s point of this chapter is to identify and acknowledge the experiences of the oppressed and to become in touch with the physical place and emotional space of our students so that we can better be in touch with the community. Further, we learn of reality pedagogy, which is an approach to teaching and learning that has us goal oriented towards meeting every student on his or her own “cultural turf” (Emdin, 2016, p. 27). It focuses on making the local experiences of the student visible and creating contexts where there is a role of reversal of sorts. While the teacher is in charge of delivery, the students are shaping the best way. There is open discourse about where students are academically, psychologically, and emotionally. Every person is perceived as having a distinct perspective and is given the opportunity to express that in the classroom (Emdin, 2016, p. 1-30).

**Chapter 2 – Courage: *Teach Without Fear***

The second chapter begins with a scenario of teachers viewing students on the first day of school. The educators are nervous as they peer out from the auditorium, and they are anxious to what is to occur in their classrooms. By explaining fear-based narratives, Emdin shows us how the stereotypes we bring into the classroom shape and determine our understandings of not just the students we will have but also of what it means to us to teach those students. The author describes that there is an unhealthy fear and nervousness that takes place of confidence and joy. As his experiences as a student unfold before us, it is important to see how the students are conditioned because they are “potentially dangerous and need to be saved from themselves” (Emdin, 2016, p. 36). However, Emdin expresses how to face those fears and to not hold off our “smiles until November,” but to be true to our teaching before and beyond (2016, p. 37). Teachers should not be reduced to test-prep robots that focus on a high-pressure classroom. Emdin further discusses the demand for courage and that educators should confront fear-based narratives about urban students. Educators should take on the position of “an ally who is working with [the students] to reclaim their humanity” (Emdin, 2016, p. 40). The point the author makes in this chapter is that the purpose of teachers’ work is to develop self-reflection that is necessary in order to deconstruct how the students are viewed and taught. Once we recognize how our biases can form a wall against our students, we can tear it down and truly begin to teach (Emdin, 2016, p. 31-43).

**Chapter 3 – Chuuuuch: *Pentecostal Pedagogy***

 In the third chapter, Emdin draws on dynamic interactions where the style is common of Black churches. Throughout this excerpt, we see Pentecostal teachings and how it interweaves with moments of reflection as well as the communication that takes place during the engagement matters of the students’ learning process. To better explain the connections and comparisons, Emdin compares great teachers to “Pentecostal preachers and rap MCs” (2016, p. 52). Similarly, we learn the connection between effective classrooms and neighborhood barbershops, how the atmosphere changes the game. For example, Emdin discusses how the pastor knows how to create a space where there is sort of a physical and emotional release so that he can have a longer sermon. In the same way, if we teach educators the pedagogical structures that the pastor uses to be able to engage the audience and support that usage in their teaching and learning practice, then we can model knowledge and understanding that is being born out of spaces such as the black church and the beauty shops. The author explains that it is all about knowing how to share what you know so that it can be optimally received. When we focus our strategies to a call-and-response approach, we elicit focus and engagement as a preacher calls to the altar; our students will be moved to be reflective (Emdin, 2016, p. 44-60).

**Chapter 4 – Cogenerative Dialogues**

Throughout the next few chapters, Emdin provides teachers with strategies or rather concrete tools. The author tells of the “Seven C’s” which offer specific strategies for implementing the element in the classroom. The first is the use of and need for cogernative dialogues. For example, the author draws on lessons from students’ participation in rap cyphers. In small groups of three to four, students meet with the teacher to “engage in a cogen as a type of cypher” (Emdin, 2016, p. 65) in order to design a plan for improving their classroom experiences. After the plan is designed, it is implemented and future meetings are dedicated to discussing the success of it and if there need to be modifications. We learn how these conversations are used as a tool to bring the teacher into dialogue with students who represent different demographics. We might be meeting with the high achiever, low achiever, and others but not the entire class; these students will represent all the social, ethnic, and academic characteristics that may exist (Emdin, 2016, p. 67). Having this dialogue will allow the educator to learn more about themselves and how they have used their culture while teaching and allow them to check for issues because their teaching needs to be culturally relevant with a check system in place. If you engage in dialogue with young people, they will create the boundaries for the teacher. Emdin teaches us that simple conversations between the teacher and their students with a goal of co-creating/generating plans of action can improve the classroom because each person is viewed as an expert on their own unique relationship to the classroom (2016, p. 61-80).

**Chapter 5 – Coteaching**

The second tool is co-teaching. In these pages Emdin urges educators to co-teach with their students by showing the depth of insight that a teacher can gain by letting students draw on their everyday experiences to create nontraditional forms of teaching. He also shows us how this approach allows students to communicate complex concepts to their peers. Important in this approach is the teacher’s own willingness to treat students as experts and to learn from them. In co-teaching, students are viewed as partners with the educators who are officially charged with the delivery of content, and the students are seen/named/treated as fellow teachers or co-teachers. This involves the transfer of student/teacher roles so that everyone within the classroom can gain the opportunity to experience teaching and learning from the other’s perspective. There is a redistribution of power that privileges the voice of the student. Students are encouraged to take ownership of their learning process (Emdin, 2016, p. 84). The idea of letting the student “be the teacher” has been around for a while, but Emdin calls us to this approach for new reasons. Essentially, we remain the content experts but not the delivery masters. Co-teaching is not relinquishing control of the classroom, but rather it is a way to signal to the students that we value improving ourselves as educators (Emdin, 2016, p.81-102).

**Chapter 6 – Cosmopolitanism**

Next, Emdin discusses the notion of cosmopolitanism is used to describe practices that establish family-like strucutres in the classroom. The purpose of cosmopolitanism is that students can support each other “in navigating the academic and social challenges” (Emdin, 2016, p. 124) and feel responsible for what is happening in their own classrooms. The author describes this is an approach to teaching that focuses on fostering socio-emotional connections in the classroom with the goal of building students’ sense of responsibility to each other and to the learning environment (Emdin, 2016, p. 105). For example, the students are involved with every aspect of the operation of the classroom such as being responsible for ensuring that citizenship in the classroom is both enacted and extended to everyone who occupies the same place and space. The teacher’s task is to let students know how important they are and how essential their jobs and roles are to the functioning of the classroom. Emdin argues, “The teachers’ acceptance of their [own] vulnerability” will allow them to connect with their students “who are often vulnerable” as well; this is a “prerequisite for change” (2016, p. 109.) This tool and approach focuses on free-flowing exchange and shared cultural practices (Emdin, 2016, p. 126). In developing a cosmopolitan ethos in the classroom, educators learn to speak the students’ language, implement distributed teaching, and build and foster a classroom family (Emdin, 2016, p. 103-128).

**Chapter 7 – Context and Content**

In the seventh chapter, Emdin analyzes the power of context and content in the classroom. He suggests that teachers should connect to students’ networks, get involved in students’ communities, and become embedded in students’ neighborhoods so that they can use “context as a pedagogical tool” (Emdin, 2016, p. 137). Having first-hand experiences in students’ lives outside of school can help an educator make deeper connections with class content. This approach is about making connections between the out-of-school context and classroom teaching. Doing so allows the educator to truly fulfill the role to lead students to learn something new or see the world differently than they did before they walked into the classroom. This combination of content and neoindigenous contexts allows the teacher to bypass the tensions that can arise from the cultural misalignments between school and community. Emdin explains how this tool involves the use of artifacts from the places youth come from as the anchor of instruction; these can be tangible or symbolic (2016, p. 143-144). We also learn of the “W Board” which is a dedicated bulletin board or whiteboard where students can post content-related questions at any time. This is important since it encourages students to ask questions that can stump even the teacher and then the class can explore the question(s) together. This board is referred to as a “parking lot” since tangential questions do not have to disrupt the flow of the lesson but can be addressed at any time (Emdin, 2016, p. 149). Once the content and context focus on challenging the teachers’ view where the students come from and the ways they engage, then our nature of the classroom will change (Emdin, 2016, p. 129-150).

**Chapter 8 – Competition**

Emdin uses this chapter to discuss the use of competition in our classrooms. Using examples of community hip-hop battles, Emdin advocates for class competitions that replicate those practices for the service of students’ academic learning. Additionally, teachers and administrators should recognize the value that students’ clothing and speaking styles carry in students’ communities. Instead of ridiculing students for their clothing choices, teachers should consider what those clothes are intended to convey and what changes in their own clothing styles they could make to become close to their students. These are in reference to hip-hop battles that Emdin is known for. Bringing the battle into the classroom helps neoindigenous youth heal from traditional teaching and concurrently helps teachers to approach competition in the classroom differently (Emdin, 2016, p. 154). These interactions allow for the teachers to create cultural learning experiences and to focus on building or supporting the community or being successful together instead of individual competition when class/school competes against another class/school (Emdin, 2016, p. 157). Each day we have the opportunity to activate our students’ potential and “allow for their brilliance to flourish” (Emdin, 2016, p. 151-162).

**Chapter 9 – Clean: *Change the World and Dress Well Doing It***

The ninth chapter is geared towards the significance of appearance and walking in our students’ shoes. Emdin talks about the significance of aesthetic for urban youth of color and how it is what matters. One of the scenarios Emdin uses is of teachers who go into urban neighborhoods wearing the same pair of New Balances for eight years because they do not care to buy new ones. The author expresses how this action of wearing worn to the core sneakers causes the kids to not respect the teacher because even though he is engaging in culturally relevant practices, the students just see busted sneakers so they don’t listen. It would seem to be insignificant, but it has value. When teachers engage in conversations with young people, they identify the extent to which you embrace their culture (Emdin, 2016, p. 164-167). There are tangible practices we can implement in the classroom that support the students in their aesthetic customs. Through this text we realize that educators need to not only acknowledge students’ artistic customers, but we also need to engage them in a significant way. In doing so, we are able to foster an appreciation and respect that further allows us to connect with our students (Emdin, 2016, p. 163-174).

**Chapter 10 – Code Switching**

Towards the end of the book, Emdin switches gears and has us pay attention to the actual language our students are using. As to this language that students use, Emdin suggests that teachers create intentional structures and implement practices that will help students see words from different registers for the same concepts to support their code-switching practices. We are introduced to a new term: code switching. This term is where and how a speaker alternates between two or more languages or dialects in the context of a conversation or interaction (Emdin, 2016, p. 175). The author encourages us to teach in this way because students must be taught to become code switches, social chameleons, and instigators or catalysts of the new norms in the world through the development of new and powerful hybridized identities (Emdin, 2016, p. 176). In this they will be able to match the way that they speak and act to the correct social context. These exercises make way for students to see how imperative their word understanding is as well as how the dialect and culture are respected. Moreover, our students learn to authentically engage in the fluency and appreciation of cultural identities (Emdin, 2016, p. 175-183).

**Chapter 11 – Curation and Computing**

Finally, Emdin discusses curation and computing. In the final pages, he recommends constructive use of social media in the classroom that will allow students to “curate” their experiences and provide windows into their worlds. Once students’ everyday experiences are curated (identified, collected, packaged, shared) they become teaching tools for both the students and the teacher (Emdin, 2016, p. 185). In our technological lives, social media is one of the most powerful types of ethnography and areas for curation in the contemporary world (Emdin, 2016, p. 188-201). The author refers to Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram to be the arenas of curation. Emdin supports this tool by bringing about metalogues which merge the types of exchanges that occur on social media with student-curated artifacts, creating powerful classroom norms that students respond to positively to and that allows the teacher to gain keen insight into important aspects of what is happening in the classroom (2016, p. 201). These are shared journals that are a type of informal communication between students and teachers. At any given moment, the teacher can ask students to bring out their group’s journal and then give them a prompt. Students write for a certain amount of time before passing the book to the next group member. During this, the students are sharing their ideas about the learning process all while solidifying new concepts or making connections to old ones. Together, all of these elements work to recognize realities of students’ lives and cultural practices in order to decolonize schooling and restore the joy of learning for urban youth. We envision how to implement these practices and believe that change for the better is possible (Emdin, 2016, p. 184-205).

**Analysis and Application**

 Now that I have introduced the book and summarized the chapters, I will provide an analysis and application of course readings to the overall concept of the text. Throughout the modules, we learn of various cultures and contexts. Culturally relevant contexts are so important for us to understand and for all students to be really engaged in the lesson. We must understand where students come from, place and space. Teachers, regardless of their backgrounds, can learn from their students on how to best teach them. All educators need to let go of the traditional and sterilized classroom environment and allow for student reactions and participation in nontraditional ways. We should allow students to express themselves through their art and dress, as long as it does not cause an impediment to students’ learning. By focusing on historical foundations of multicultural education and racial marginalization in Pk-12 public schools, educators can become culturally responsive teachers. If we continue to examine whiteness and white supremacy, study racial oppression and students of color, and further examine language and religion, then we can create a safe and accepting atmosphere for our students. We should allow our students to thrive and flourish without getting in our own way. Researching cultural capital, poverty, and classism will also make us better equipped to teach, along with addressing patriarchy, femininity, and gendered spaces. As we continue to advocate for all of our students, including the abled and disabled, we direct ourselves towards a successful future not just for educators but also for the lives of our students.

**Conclusion**

To conclude, I will summarize what I learned from the book and how it will be used to inform my future practice. Before I step into a classroom, I know that I need to examine and unpack my own biases and preconceived notions. As a new teacher, I know that I will have diverse students and by using the reality pedagogy framework, I can create a learning environment that not only accepts all students but one that also celebrates their unique contributions. Even as a teacher who will not be teaching for a few years (once my children are school age,) elements of reality pedagogy will still influence the way I teach and reach my students. I know I need to learn and understand as much as I can about my students to ensure they are engaged and excited to learn. This goal can be reached if I immerse myself into the community, speak with parents and family, communicate with my students, and if I read up on cultures, norms, and practices so I understand how it impacts my classroom. I will allow students to express themselves in the way that is most comfortable for them. I will allow multiple entry points for lessons to match the students’ current instructional level. I will reduce the focus on individual achievement and focus on building or supporting the community or being successful together. I will enact change and advocate transformation for my students. Most of all, I will incorporate real-world, culturally relevant contexts into the classroom so that my students receive well-rounded support and obtain success in their futures.

References

Emdin, C. (2016). *For white folks who teach in the hood...and the rest of y’all too: Reality pedagogy and urban education.* Boston, MA: Beacon Press.



 



**Book Review Assignment Description**

Each student is required to read and complete a book review of the text *For White folks who teach in the Hood... and the rest of y'all too: Reality pedagogy and urban education.* You are encouraged to start reading the book during the first week that the semester begins to allow for a thorough and critical analysis of the text. Your book review should consist of the following: (a) Introductory paragraph to the book (what is the book about and background information on the author), (b) Chapter by chapter summary of the book (this should include a chapter by chapter paragraph description of the book), (c) Analysis and application of course readings to the overall concept of the book (for example, how can the readings in Module 1-7 be used to understand the book?), and (d) Conclusion paragraph that summaries what you learned from the book and how it will be used to inform you future practice. Each chapter-by-chapter summary as well as the Introduction and Conclusion section should be a ½ page in length. Also, please include a Reference page that lists information on the book using APA formatting. Additional resources for writing a book review can be found here: http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/2005615X.2016.1166687?journalCode=rmer20 http://www.urbanedjournal.org/category/article-category/book-review https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/560/01/