"We the Afro Club"

Relationship Capital Established Between a White Male Teacher & a Cadre of Black Boys in Literacy

Grace Kang & Terry Husband

> I wouldn't say that my instruction is different, I just try to have more contact with that group of four than the others. And I don't see any way around that at least until mid-year when they are tested. So in the meantime, I'm not happy about it, but I think I am going to have to work with them at the expense of others. You know, *others will be left behind at least for the meantime*.
>
> —Al Miles, fourth-grade teacher

Introduction

Four Black fourth-grade boys were called over by a White male teacher to make their way to the "kidney bean" table for guided reading. This was a daily practice, and the boys were familiar with being signaled for guided reading, but after many weeks and sessions of being beckoned, today they decided to high-five each other, cheer, and shout, "We the Afro Club."

Contemporary activists and scholars have framed how Black males are faced with constant policing and killing of Black bodies by White police officers (Coates, 2015) and how Black boys are being sent to punishment rooms in urban schools (Ferguson, 2000). Therefore it is not surprising that teaching in our politically and racially charged times can be daunting for both a White male teacher and Black boys in an urban school.

Unnerving statistics about Black students reveal they are performing behind their White peers. Blacks are more likely to be expelled from school, and they are twice as likely to drop out of school as their White counterparts (Aud et al., 2010). Given these shocking statistics, society is too often led to focus on the failures of Black students or the teachers of Black students. However, there are teachers who are applying culturally relevant teaching (CRT) and who are mindful of students' funds of knowledge and cultural backgrounds.

Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies

Gay (2010) revealed that CRT uses the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively. Au (2009) expanded further, indicating that CRT is aimed at school success for students of diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds and that it also closes the achievement gap between students of diverse backgrounds and their White counterparts. To do this effectively, teachers must be open to learning about the cultural particularities and funds of knowledge of the ethnic groups within their classrooms and transform that sensitivity into effective classroom practices (Phuntsog, 1999; Pransky & Bailey, 2002).

Exemplary teachers using CRT have seen students' academic improvements and gains (Essien, 2017; Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1999). CRT does not offer a step-by-step formula, however, and instructional practices of teachers that use CRT will differ based on their students' cultural, linguistic, and ethic backgrounds.

Within Black culture, Murell (2002) highlighted three themes that influence effective teachers' practice: (a) communalism; (b) the epistemological belief that knowledge is socially constructed; and (c) verve, the high-stimulation and energetic action of the culture. Husband (2014) proposed that teachers should rethink ways of adapting and altering reading activities to reflect the lived experiences of Black students in society. Specifically in teaching for literacy, Black boys will be more likely to be engaged if the activities are racially and culturally relevant to their lives.

Woodard, Vaughan, and Machado (2017)highlighted that "the misappropriation and widespread uncritical uptake of this work led to . . . a newer version of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy—one that addresses its ubiquity and foregrounds critical ideology" (p. 216). Hence, Paris, and Alim (2017) called for the term *culturally sustaining pedagogies* (CSPs) to highlight that we cannot privilege and perpetuate White middle-class literacy skills and cultural knowledge as gatekeepers in literacy classrooms.

Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies (CSPs) advocate for "schooling to be a site for sustaining the cultural ways of being of communities of color" (Alim, 2017, p. 5). Moreover, CSPs shift toward a contemporary understanding of culture as dynamic, in which the past and present are considered along a continuum

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depending on the community's race/ethnicity, language, and culture. CSPs not only apply these asset pedagogies; they call for supporting the practices of youth and communities of color, resulting in a critical stance against regressive practices that marginalize members of their communities.

Pedagogy of Care

We draw from Noddings's (1984, 1992) seminal work on applying an ethic of care in which the teacher-student relationship embodies a relational view of caring, where both the carer and cared-for contribute to this relationship. Noddings offered a complex perspective on the importance of establishing the teacher-student relationship even beyond any content area of study. A large body of research has stressed the teacher-student relationship in the primary and intermediate years of schooling (Birch & Ladd, 1997; Pianta, 1999, 2001).

However, there is a need for more studies that hone in on the intricacies and particularities of developing the teacher relationship with Black students. Muller (2001) asserted that social capital in the classroom setting is defined as a caring teacher-student relationship in which students feel that they are both cared for and expected to succeed. Osorio (2018) reframed the teacher-student relationship through the teacher's modeling of vulnerability and openness.

Murray and Malmgren (2005) conducted a study in a high-poverty urban high school that focused on increasing positive relationships between low-income high school students and their teachers to improve academic outcomes. Their findings showed that students who participated in the intervention significantly improved their grade point averages over the course of five months.

Carothers (2014) drew from her own experiences as a Black student, teacher, and teacher educator and articulated eight guiding principles that can inform classroom practice and support Black students' learning. Each of the eight principles stems from the necessity for the teacher to know, love, and care for the students. The establishment of a positive teacher-student relationship is pivotal and a catalyst before any change or growth will take place.

Thus pairing CSPs and an ethic of care was an appropriate context for this study as we investigated the teaching and learning that resulted from the relationships that evolved in a culturally diverse classroom in the contemporary era of educational standardization.

Teaching Black Males

Sealey-Ruiz, Allen, and Nolan (2014) revealed that if teachers recognize their male students of color, they may see the connections between the performance of Black males and the structural elements in schools that pose a threat to those students. Sealey-Ruiz and Lewis (2011) suggested that these structures impose particular ways of knowing and acting that often are in conflict between how students experience relationships and expectations in their home and school communities.

Black males are often stereotyped and misjudged and, as a result, are placed in lower tracked classes or special education (Ferguson, 2000; Noguera, 2008). Carothers (2014) highlighted the idea that for Black students to be taught successfully by their teachers, they must first matter to those teachers. The relationships between Black students and their teachers are critical and essential for learning to take place (Cholewa, Amatea, West-Olatunji, & Wright, 2012).

A body of research has challenged the dominant perspective of how adolescent males of color are misjudged and misunderstood in literacy (Haddix, 2009; Johnson, Jackson, Stoval, & Baszile, 2017; Kirkland, 2011; Kirkland & Jackson, 2009). The ways in which teachers view and stereotype Black boys can inhibit the boys from reaching their full potential. Often, what they are expected to read and write about in school is irrelevant to their cultural backgrounds, funds of knowledge, and home languages. This is part of the mismatch between their home and school lives.

Husband (2014) noted the reading achievement gap between Black boys in fourth grade who do and do not qualify for free and reduced-price lunch, stating that Black boys who did qualify for free and reduced-price lunch scored significantly lower than their White and Asian counterparts on National Assessment of Educational Progress testing. These data highlight reading achievement disparities between fourth-grade Black boys and fourth-grade boys from other racial backgrounds who have similar socioeconomic status. Additionally, from 2005 to 2011, Black boys made some progress in reading achievement, but overall, they demonstrated relatively small achievement gains (U.S. Department of Education National Assessment of Educational Progress in Reading).

Essien (2017) has noted the benefits of exemplar teachers using CRT and therefore issued a call for more in-depth case studies to explore strategies and practices that can improve the outcomes for Black boys using CRT. Cholewa and colleagues (2012) emphasized the emotional connectedness between teacher and students. They highlighted how a Black teacher used CRT to build strong relationships with Black students to facilitate learning.

This study responded to these calls for more research that examines the teacher-student relationship in a variety of academic subjects and at different grade levels. Additionally, because the majority of teachers are White, there have been calls for a study in which a White teacher used CRT to develop and focus on relationships with Black students to strengthen instruction.

Methods

Our data came from a larger study that examined a school's fourth-grade team's collaborative opportunities and from a case study of a teacher's literacy instruction and his interactions with his students. The overall project was a qualitative study of a group of teachers to highlight their perspectives, lived experiences, and meaning making (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Dyson & Genishi, 2005; Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995).

A case study approach highlighted the nature of the culture in the school and demonstrated how the students made meaning in the teacher's classroom for six months. The research questions addressed in this article are as follows:

1. What is the nature of the teacher's relationships with his students?
2. How do the cultural backgrounds of the students impact his literacy instruction?

Participants and Site

Al Miles (teacher)

Al Miles is a White, male, fourth-grade teacher who has taught at Frost Elementary School[1] for all 14 years of his teaching career. He was a journalist prior to entering the teaching profession. Although he still loves to write, he explained that he got to a point in his life where he was frustrated with that line of work and decided he needed a change. He enrolled in a teacher education program because in the past he had been involved in hockey refereeing and officiating and had eventually became a certified instructor. He always enjoyed developing relationships with the players and revisited those memories as he decided to change careers.

Because the focal teacher of this study was traced across contexts (e.g., schoolwide professional development, collaborative sessions, classroom instruction), the researcher was able to observe the teacher's interactions with fellow teachers and students. Kang observed in Al's classroom and watched particular students more closely based on the types of practices that were discussed in the grade-level collaboration meetings as well as specific students who were referenced or discussed (i.e., "cadre") in the meetings. Kang collected reading and writing artifacts and recorded interactions that the students had with the teacher and their classmates.

Focal Classroom

The school was located in a small urban town in the midwestern region of the United States. Frost Elementary School served 400 students from kindergarten to fifth grade. Al's classroom was diverse and predominately low income. In fact, 74% of the children were considered low income, and 19.1% of the students had individualized education plans.

Thus there was immense pressure for schools in the district to meet the Annual Yearly Progress goals and a strong emphasis to improve literacy achievement, as Frost is a Title I school receiving federal funds to meet the needs of students who are labeled "at risk." In 2013, 41% of Frost's students who took the state test met or exceeded standards, which is one of the lowest percentages in the district and contributed to the district's close monitoring of Frost.

Cadre of Students

Early in the year, the teachers were required to pick a "cadre of Black or special education students" to move from what was labeled the yellow to the green level in the AIMSweb[2] testing protocol. The district was using AIMSweb, an assessment and management tool for response to intervention. Key phrases like "tangible improvements" and "it's data driven" and "helps create better outcomes for students" highlight the nature of the assessments that were taking place. AIMSweb claims to allow educators to screen all students using valid and reliable assessments, and in turn, they can make crucial data-driven decisions.

In the intermediate years, strict standards were placed on students' reading accuracy and speed. Curriculum-based measurements (R-CBMs) were used to assess reading fluency by quantifying the number of words read per minute. The teachers were required to administer R-CBMs and progress-monitor each student or assess each student's progress or performance every week.

The rhetoric that was often used to identify students who were or were not making adequate progress was movement between red (below grade level), yellow (at grade level), and green (above grade level). Students at the cusp of moving from red to yellow or yellow to green were often labeled "bubble kids."

The teachers were told that each cadre of students was required to exhibit growth and that if they did not improve, the teachers would be held accountable. The administration encouraged teachers to pick "bubble kids" for their cadres in order for the most growth to be visible. The cadre in Al's classroom included Markus, Javon, Timmy, and Kenny. His students in the cadre were all Black boys who were in the same guided reading group.

Data Sources and Analysis

Data sources for the study included (a) observations of classroom literacy instruction, (b) informal interviews with the focal teacher, and (c) 200 artifacts of pictures and copies of student work and instructional materials. All forms of data sources provided a lens for understanding how literacy instruction was viewed at the school and district levels as well as teachers' perspectives at the classroom level.

Data were analyzed inductively through a sociocultural perspective, emphasizing both teachers' and students' meaning making surrounding literacy that took place in and out of the classroom (Vygotsky, 1978; Watson-Gegeo, 1988). After sifting through the open codes, Kang organized the data into more focused codes that emerged from the data around (a) Al's relationships with his students, (b) the trust established in the class, and (c) Al meeting the needs of his cadre.

As we looked across the data, we noticed that the themes revolved around Al's personality and character traits, teaching style, and relationships with his students. Data were then divided into three cycles of two-month spans, and specific quotations and pieces of the data were inserted into these three larger codes.

Findings

Relationship Capital

Relationship capital is described as the "quality of interpersonal connections and relationships" (Kang, 2016a), highlighting the relationships between teachers and a literacy coach to collaborate effectively and meaningfully. The development of relationship capital was necessary for teachers to be open to collaborating with the literacy coach.

In the same way that it is imperative for teachers to develop trust and rapport with one another in order to collaborate, it is vital for the teacher and students to develop strong relationship capital for teaching and learning to take place. Al had a genuine interest in getting to know his students and developing relationship capital through care, respect, and humor.

Care

Developing relationships was the key reason Al decided to become a teacher. He thought his previous experiences in journalism supported his work as a teacher and helped in developing relationship capital with the students. He explained,

> I think just having been in the work world . . . I had a family . . . had a steady job, coming to teach from the work world rather than straight out of school I think . . . makes a big

> difference in the perspective of the teacher. . . . I think it really adds to, not just in how you teach, but how you relate to people and get along with families and rapport with kids.

Throughout the year, Al showed numerous ways in which he cared for, invested in, and developed strong relationships with students, and they responded well to him. However, at the start of the year, he did face difficulties with classroom management.

For example, in mid-August, Al was facilitating a discussion after a read-aloud of a story in which the main character's father was absent from his child's life. Some students were engaged and making connections to experiences with their own fathers, but there were times Al paused and waited for students to settle down and get back to the discussion. Shortly afterward, more students were distracted by drawing in one another's books and dragging their chairs very loudly.

At this point, Al calmly stopped the lesson and said,

> All right, you have obviously shown, 12 to 13 of you are looking like students, but there are three to four students that have shown us that they cannot handle it.

Al was quite upset and felt that there was nothing more he could do. He believed that there was no point in continuing with the lesson when a number of students were being disrespectful and not following expectations. However, he never raised his voice, focused on the students that were following along, and did not call out or berate those who were distracted.

Respect

Al treated the students with respect and made an effort to understand their perspectives. A few minutes after stopping the lesson described earlier, he asked the class to write a letter to him if they thought he was being "unfair or unreasonable." He said,

> Try to imagine what it's like to be in someone's shoes. If you're thinking how awful this is and that you shouldn't be treated like this . . . if you're thinking like this, put yourself in my shoes. When I was trying to read the story, trying to ask questions, after doing that, if you think I'm treating you unfairly, I'd like you to write a note and tell me that.

He maintained a calm demeanor and stayed patient even when he was upset and frustrated. Throughout the next weeks and months, the students started to see Al's genuine care for them as they developed relationships.

It was unheard of for Al to raise his voice or speak in a demeaning way to students—he not only expressed the golden rule with students but actually practiced it in his relationships with adults and children alike. He did not expect the students just to do as he said; he asked them to do as he did.

Traditionally, teachers tend to demand respect, yet Al first showed his students respect before he expected respect from his students. He asked for their feedback and comments so they could inform his teaching. He also approached his teaching through discussion and conversation, and the students knew they could express themselves freely. Mutual trust was established because Al respected the students as smart and independent individuals who had much to offer to the classroom learning that was taking place.

Humor

As he got to know the students, Al established trust and rapport with them by using humor. He had a playful and joking side to him that made students feel comfortable around him and eventually helped them to trust him. This next excerpt was from a guided reading session with his cadre, where Al was practicing reading strategies and working on point of view. It demonstrates Al's sense of humor and strong relationship capital with students.

Al asked if any of the students could make connections to the main character, and Markus humorously pointed out Al's ability to laugh at his own jokes:

> AL: Do you know anyone that laughs at their own jokes?
>
> KENNY: That's creepy.
>
> TIMMY: My granddad.
>
> AL: Who's someone who laughs at their own jokes, is it because other people—
>
> KENNY: Don't.
>
> MARKUS: You laugh at your own jokes. (*everyone laughs*)
>
> AL: I do? Are you saying my jokes—
>
> MARKUS: Well, I'm not—
>
> AL, *in a joking tone*: Well then what exactly are you saying?
>
> MARKUS: I'm not saying your jokes are bad, it makes everybody laugh, but you do laugh at your own jokes. It is funny.
>
> AL: Well, I'm glad you finished up that way. What are you trying to say about my jokes?
>
> MARKUS: They is funny.

Al appreciated Markus's humor and laughed at his comments about his humor. The students felt comfortable with Al, and because Al too used friendly sarcasm to develop relationships with the students, this type of banter was commonplace in the classroom culture. Al inserted jokes and had a jovial spirit throughout discussions, which strengthened his relationships with his students.

Inquiry-based and Discussion-based Learning

When Al discussed his philosophy of teaching, he mentioned a high school teacher who used an inquiry-based approach:

> Very hands off, as far as student-generated, inquiry-based learning; if I had to describe it where they were responsible, it was a history class . . . researching those topics, presenting and teaching to the rest of the class. So I think that was very *intriguing* to me, that format . . . that style of teaching and so, that's something I've always remembered.

Al's literacy block was typified by discussion from the start of the school year as he encouraged discussion and conversation about various topics (e.g., setting up routines, getting-to-know-you activities, discussing vocabulary words). Al often read aloud to students, and he chose engaging and interesting texts that would draw out discussion.

For example, in September, Al read the book *Mary on Horseback* by Rosemary Wells. The book was about Mary Breckenridge, a twentieth-century nurse and heroine who helped many families that were sick in rural Appalachia during the 1920s and 1930s.

He elicited deep discussion by asking students questions and contrasting their current day-to-day lives to the experiences of these people from earlier decades.

In the following excerpt, Al had reviewed the question-answer relationship (QAR) strategy developed by Raphael (1986) with students as they distinguished various types of questions (e.g., right there, think and search, author and me, on my own). This strategy teaches students to be consciously aware of whether they are likely to find the answer to comprehension questions directly in the text, between the lines, or beyond the information provided in the text (Raphael, 1986). Al read parts of the book aloud, and he paused to pose questions and get responses from students:

> AL: OK, get ready to go . . . all right now, if you remember we were talking about a place long ago, that you probably wouldn't want to live there in the 1920s. Why was it a place that you . . . there were some things going on there that might want you not to live there. Yes, what were they?
>
> S: No roads.
>
> AL: Oh my gosh, there weren't any roads! How could there not be roads? What else was going on there that would make you not want to live there? Bri?
>
> BRI: There ain't no hospitals!
>
> AL: Right, there's no hospitals, no doctors or nurses, and there's no electricity, I don't even know if there is running water, for God's sake. You have your questions sheet. So, now, remember when we are asking questions about reading, what have we been saying about the kinds of answers to your questions? You're coming up with questions where the answer is—right—where?
>
> S: Right there.
>
> AL: Right there, meaning right on the—
>
> S: Page.
>
> AL: Of the book. Right, where the answer is right in the book. Or you can come up with a question where the answer is *not* on the page, the answer is more in your noggin, your coconut, brain, 'K? All right, but they are all good questions, doesn't matter what kind you come up with. So you're going to need to come up with two questions, OK, if your question has an answer that is right there on the page, what are you going to put on your sheet?
>
> S: In the right there.
>
> AL: If you have a question where the answer is more from your noggin, your coconut, your bowling ball, your head, then—where are you going to put that question?
>
> S: You put it in author and you.
>
> AL: Right, you are going to put it in the author and you or author and me section.
>
> (*Al continued reading where they left off*)
>
> AL, *reading*: "When mama saw four men carry Pa home with his leg crushed . . . the men tried to put Pa down, one of them got the horse doctor down in Crypton . . . we'll have to the take the leg off!"
>
> AL: A bone saw, meaning that's a saw that's used a lot for what?
>
> S: Cutting bones.
>
> AL: Cutting bones off, arms, legs . . .
>
> S: Eeehhh, yuck!

Al had a nonthreatening and welcoming way of asking questions and getting the students engaged and interested. His responses tended to be nonjudgmental, elaborative, and humorous (e.g., "Oh my gosh, there weren't any roads! How could there not be roads?"; "I don't even know if there is running water, for God's sake"; "If you have a question where the answer is more from your noggin, your coconut, your bowling ball, your head, then—where are you going to put that question?"). He also offered the students affirmation (e.g., "Ahhh, great question. How do they know how to use a bone saw?"). Although he was using the initiate–respond–evaluate sequence in the discussion, the students were actively engaged and participated in the discussion.

It was also common for Al not to focus on or correct a student's dialect; he stayed focused on the conversation. For instance, when Bri says "There ain't no hospitals!" Al responds, "Right, there's no hospitals, no doctors or nurses, and there's no electricity, I don't even know if there is running water, for God's sake."

In the earlier excerpt, Markus said "They is funny," and again, Al didn't comment on or correct Markus's dialect. This was common where Al would allow students to use African American Language (AAL) in discussion and in writing. He saw students' language as their form of expression, and he was flexible with how students used language in the classroom space.

Developing Relationship Capital With His Cadre

Previously, when Al had volunteered as a hockey coach, he'd valued getting to know his hockey players on a deeper level, which allowed him to better coach, model, and demonstrate hockey techniques. Al was vulnerable and honest with the students, as demonstrated in the excerpt where he was frank about the class making disrespectful choices. He also welcomed the students to respond and write to him if they felt that this was unfair.

This is an example of how Al tried to create a democratic classroom. The students recognized that he did not just tell them what to do but rather wanted to hear their perspectives and was willing to change if they offered suggestions. Since Al met with his cadre more frequently, he had deep and layered relationships with them individually and as a group. They got to know each other on multiple levels.

Addressing the Needs of His Cadre

Al was working with his cadre of Black students that he was progress-monitoring on making "I wonder" statements for a *Time for Kids* article on training dogs:

> AL: Do you know what I'm already seeing a good job of? What's important when we're reading a story? What do you see Javon doing? What do you see him doing that is so important?
>
> S: He's looking at the dog.
>
> AL: He's looking ahead. Has he started reading the story? No, but he's looking at the important parts of the story. What's an important part of the story?
>
> S: The name of the dog.

AL: Ahh, a caption, words that go with the story. What's another important part of a story like this? What else do you see that is important?

S: The pictures.

AL: Ahh, the pictures. The pictures. What else do you see?

KENNY: The dude in that back tunnel thing.

AL: What about it?

JAVON: Well, without the dogs they, the people who work, without the dogs, ahh, they wouldn't be—

AL: These people wouldn't be getting the help that they need. Right? What do you call this up here? That's the, what part of the story?

S: Oh, it's the subhead—AL: Subhead or title, right. 'K, who can read the green for us 'cause that's even more important on page 4?

S: That's called the—

AL: The subhead, right there, the baby headlines. Who can read right there where it says "A new school for dogs." Markus, why don't you read that?

MARKUS, *reading*: "A new school for dogs is training their animals to use their smell to save lives."

AL: 'K, does that tell us more information than the big headlines?

S: Yes.

AL: It does, that's why it's so important to read that ahead of time. Reading a few parts before you start the story.

After discussing the text features (e.g., captions, pictures, subheads), the students read the rest of the text independently, and then Al visited each student to have him read quietly to Al while Al also asked questions about the text.

This is an excerpt of his conversation with Timmy about the text:

AL: OK, stop there, see this word here, "identify," so why are these dogs helpful? What can they do for you?

TIMMY: They can find you if you're trapped?

AL: What else?
TIMMY: They can sniff out bombs.

AL: What else can they do?

Al tried to push the students' thinking to delve deeper into the text by asking questions like "What else?" and "What else can they do?" He proceeded to ask Timmy more questions, and he brought the whole group together to share their "I wonder" statements.

Al modeled this by saying, "I wonder how dogs smell peanuts and how this helps kids with allergies?" Markus said, "I wonder if a dog can smell cancer?" Kenny shared, "I wonder if Jake is fully trained or not?" Al ended this session by reviewing why they were practicing asking questions. He explained, "While you're thinking, think about why is it important asking questions while we read? Why is that important?"

Kenny responded, "Because it helps us learn more and understand what we read." Al stressed the importance of students being metacognitive about their reading and not only reading the text but actively pairing both their prior knowledge and funds of knowledge with new information they were gaining through the text and discussion.

Expanding the Definition of Literacy

Al's cadre of Black boys was gifted and demonstrated strengths in oral storytelling and expression. Additionally, Al used conversational and performance-style storytelling during literacy time, so it had become part of the classroom culture. Bakhtin (as quoted in Dyson, 2013) noted, "In literacy practices, children not only enter into locally valued ways of using written language but also of relating to, and being with, other through that medium" (p. 22).

This was true of Al's literacy practices, where literacy could not be reduced to a set of textual features and rules solely based on speed and accuracy. As Dyson wrote, "any official school activity is a situated enactment of a practice, that is, it's a social happening, an event" (p. 22).

The members of Al's cadre were often the students who raised issues and brought up areas of interest with the whole class, drawing from their own diverse resources and experiences. When Timmy was curious about issues related to gun control, he raised this topic during a discussion in writing. This led Al to take a completely different route in his future lesson planning in writer's workshop, because Al felt the query was so authentic and engaging to the class.

Markus frequently had the ability to make the class laugh, and he could make connections with the readings to his own life. In a guided reading lesson, he was the student who made a text-to-self connection using sarcasm in reference to Al's tendency to laugh at his own jokes like the character in the text. He had a way with words that most fourth graders often haven't fully grasped.

Javon was a student who would often tell Al that he needed to read with more emotion and would coach him on how to get into character when reading aloud. He also played adult Martin L. King in a reader's theater where the entire class, including Al and the teacher's assistant, gave him a standing ovation for his elocution and expression.

Kenny was one of the leaders of a collaborative writing activity using comics that students constructed on their own during reading centers and took pride in reading his writing aloud during author's chair.

Al made room for oral storytelling and used the call-and-response format in his literacy instruction. He did not adhere to the narrow definitions of literacy that negated cultural factors, yet he was able to exert agency by allocating time and space. He also showed that he valued their various ways of expressing and responding to literature.

Hybridity: Use of Relationships to Have High Academic Standards and Goals

Kathryn Au (2009) issued a call for teachers to have a diverse worldview in their instructional practices that stems from the importance of working with others and cooperation. She noted,

> In the diverse worldview, cooperation allows challenges to be met more easily, as members of the group all bring their thoughts and efforts to bear. What is important is the well being of the group, especially the family, extended family, or kinship network. (p. 180)

Al's instructional practices embodied a diverse worldview where cooperation and discussion were at the center. They developed their own family and kinship in their classroom culture through hybridity, where there was a creative blending of the students' home

backgrounds and cultures and academic work.

Hybridity is described as having a strong focus on academic goals that students of diverse backgrounds should meet in and out of school. Hybridity also provides students a comfortable and conducive environment to meet these goals (Au, 2009). Al was able to do this through individual relationships, small-group work, and whole-class discussions.

Blurring of the Lines

During one of our observations in Al's classroom, he mentioned that over the weekend, he had watched a clip of "The Lost Boys" on *60 Minutes* and was touched by how the Sudanese refugees faced and tackled overwhelming hardships and obstacles. He added, "They walked 300 miles to escape." He said that he would like to show this to the students. This exemplifies how Al often used his own interests in politics, social issues, and current events as part of his instruction. He often brought in newspaper clippings and used these as springboards for discussion and written response.

During the school year, the teachers in the district were working without a contract, and Al brought in the newspaper where the teachers were on the cover page picketing; Al and the students had a lively discussion and debate about it. He usually read aloud and discussed *Times for Kids* articles on history and current events (e.g., assassination of John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr., Abraham Lincoln's quest to free the slaves, racial inequities).

In lieu of the gun control debate initiated by Timmy, Al altered the writing curriculum by having the students choose a stance on gun control during an essay unit (Kang, 2016b). Sociopolitical elements of his background seeped into his instruction and were intricately woven together.

As an educator, in his view, part of his responsibility was to ensure that his students were aware of sociopolitical issues and to push them to understand these topics through deep discussion. Al did not limit his students, yet he held them to high academic standards while using topics that were relevant and interesting to his students. They had developed strong relationships with him, as well as with one another, so they were comfortable investigating, researching, and debating these topics.

Discussion

Since the school had mandated that teachers progress-monitor their cadres of students, Al had this responsibility relative to his Black student group. Although the focus of this article is not on the assessments used with Al's cadre, the group did improve in their progress-monitoring and made significant academic gains. The school district saw this as an opportunity to gather hard data on marginalized students, yet Al opened this situation up to the students and explained how, in his opinion, they had used their funds of knowledge, which Al considered educational resources.

However, our findings reveal that teacher-student relationships—in particular, Al's relationships with his cadre—are pivotal in students' academic learning. Although the analysis is limited to a small case study of one classroom, the relationships presented should encourage mainstream White teachers who are outsiders to minority students' cultures to implement CRT.

In response to Cholewa et al.'s (2012) call for more studies to examine the teacher-student relationship (because the majority of teachers are White and students are ethnically and racially diverse), it is imperative for teachers to explore and understand cultural competency and multicultural awareness. Although teachers who share the same cultural backgrounds as their students may have an advantage in understanding their students and developing strong relationships, other teachers can learn to adjust their teaching practices and develop relationship capital.

This study also aimed to address the necessity for teachers to go beyond the classroom walls of content area and curriculum. Al was able to negotiate the curriculum to include students' interests and funds of knowledge during instruction. He not only listened to their responses and feedback but addressed them when moving forward in class. He also provided a variety of classroom structures and groupings for his culturally diverse students to feel comfortable participating. They often had small-group sessions, whole-class discussions, and teacher-led guided reading groups to provide a variety of groupings and interactional patterns where all students could relate and be comfortable.

Numerous implications and lessons are to be learned from effective teachers and their abilities in developing relationship capital with students and implementing CSP practices. Moreover, it is vital to emphasize the necessity of relationship capital between teachers and their students and CSP practices with Black students—particular to this study, Black boys.

Al showed care, respect, and humor to develop strong relationships with his cadre of Black boys and drew from their cultural backgrounds, norms, and strengths. He not only allowed but encouraged them to capitalize on their interests of storytelling, experiential knowledge, and AAL. He saw the cultural resources they brought with them as assets and did not discredit their validity in school.

This speaks to the crucial need for teachers to question their own narrow definitions of teaching and learning practices, as well as to how teachers can become social change agents by questioning dominant cultural norms and practices.

Conclusion

Disney World is one of the ultimate theme parks, distinguished from other theme parks because each attraction tells its own story. In each case the story unravels as you participate in the ride and engage in the attraction, which allows the participant to have a full understanding of the narrative involved.

In a similar way, this is a story of one teacher developing and valuing relationship capital with his students and using CSPs with his culturally diverse students. This particular story is full of complexities particular to the teacher and students, but one thing that is visible is the opportunity for both of them to change and grow. Culturally sustaining pedagogies cannot develop overnight.

However, when teachers are open to growing in their practices by honoring, valuing, and upholding students' backgrounds as assets in the classroom, we will be one step closer to transforming culturally diverse settings.

Notes

[1] All names are pseudonyms.
[2] http://www.aimsweb.com/

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