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# "It's Not Intentional": Contradictions in Culturally Responsive Teaching

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## Abstract

Culturally responsive instruction scholarship often presents a binary standard that teachers either satisfy or do not, a determination largely based on perceptions of observed practice. Yet, conclusions about teachers' cultural responsiveness are dubious when researchers do not account for teachers' intent. Conceptualizing cultural responsiveness as a continuum of dispositions, knowledges, and skills, this study asks: are certain culturally responsive characteristics more easily embodied and acted upon than others, and what accounts for these incongruences? Drawing on five months of data collection, this case study follows Margaret, a decorated English language arts teacher, and uncovers her culturally responsive characteristics based on her articulated instructional intent. Layers of deductive analysis across data sources (which include classroom observations of Margaret's teaching, transcripts from post-observation semi-structured interviews, and researcher notes) reveal that Margaret more readily embodied and enacted certain culturally responsive characteristics than others. Although she worked to promote student success and create a classroom environment embracing all students, Margaret insisted her provocative pedagogical choices–such as melding conversations of canonical literature with patriarchal critique–were not intended to foster students' sociopolitical consciousness or reflect her commitment to modifying

curricula for equity. Tensions between Margaret's culturally responsive characteristics lie in her belief that "good" teachers assume ideological neutrality. Margaret's case asks stakeholders to centralize teachers' instructional intent and, in doing so, complicate culturally responsive teaching.

*Keywords*: culturally responsive teaching, curriculum, secondary, literacy

Having folded myself into an impossibly narrow student desk, I waited for Margaret, the twelfth grade English teacher I had just observed, to finish a conversation with a pair of her[1] students. My waiting was impatient – minutes ago, Margaret delivered a brilliant lesson that melded conversations around gender inequity, patriarchal thinking, and Chaucer's "The Wife of Bath's Tale," and I was anxious to discuss the observation. To my observer's eye, she had seamlessly combined disciplinary literacy instruction specific to English language arts with culturally responsive pedagogy. The questions she asked her students were difficult, both in disciplinary rigor and in critical, socially conscious capacities.

When Margaret sat down across from me, I wasted no time.

*Margaret, what did you do today that was culturally responsive?*

She paused, smoothed a crease in her dress, then slightly shook her head.

*I don't know that I did anything today that I could say was culturally responsive. I just picked texts I thought the students would like.*

I sat back slightly in my seat, trying to cover my surprise. Was she being modest?

[1] We acknowledge, and celebrate, the fluidity of gender identity. In this paper, we use the pronouns folx use when describing themselves.

Was my question poorly worded? I tried a different approach.

*You opened up some pretty powerful conversations today around gender and sexuality. You asked the kids to do some difficult work. Why did you choose these texts, and this conversation, for your students?*

Margaret folded her hands in her lap, collecting her thoughts before she spoke.

*I just know that the students like Miley Cyrus, and I think reading materials that they like, and that they know, can help them engage more deeply with older texts. I want them to love* "The Wife of Bath" *as much as I do. The Miley Cyrus conversation is just a way to help them access the canonical texts. I didn't have any ulterior motive.*

For decades, scholars have offered varied depictions and analyses of culturally responsive English language arts (ELA) teachers. Though the studies rely on similar phrasing, they present an assortment of culturally responsive teacher qualities and enactments (Aronson & Laughter, 2016). Scholars might consider teachers culturally responsive because they demonstrate sociocultural awareness (Brownell, 2017; Matias, 2013); honor and build on students' experiential knowledges (Villegas & Lucas, 2002); design and implement a diverse, equity-focused curriculum (Dyches, 2017; Gay, 2010; Vickery, 2020); tailor classroom management practices (Johnson & Gonzalez, 2014); articulate high expectations for their students (Ladson-Billings, 2006); validate students' home languages (Delpit, 2006; Gay, 2010; Lucas, Villegas, & Freedson-Gonzalez, 2008); engage in reciprocal learning and teaching with their students (Bacchus, Colvin, Knight, & Ritter, 2019; Kim & Pulido, 2015); and/or incorporate sociopolitical conversations into the content (Dyches, 2018b; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Leonard, Napp,

& Adeleke, 2009; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Although teachers demonstrating these characteristics may be presented as culturally responsive, the intent behind their pedagogical movements often goes unexamined.

Observing and reporting on teachers' actions provides essential data. Culturally responsive teaching, however, relies foundationally on understanding teachers' commitments to naming and disrupting inequity (Cherry-McDaniel, 2019; Ladson-Billings, 2006/2014; Matias, 2013; Morrell, 2015; Sleeter, 2011). Because of the multidimensionality of culturally responsive teaching, examining teachers' intent moves scholarly discourse away from static, dichotomous views of its enactments, and instead allows for nuanced investigation into the *ways* in which teachers are culturally responsive. Understanding teachers' intent allows for analysis that authenticates teachers' motivations, successes, and challenges. Given that culturally responsive teaching is not uniform but instead an intent-bound orientation to instruction that spans a myriad of dispositions, knowledges, and skills, this study asks: *are certain culturally responsive characteristics more easily embodied and performed than others, and what accounts for these tensions?*

In this paper, we present Margaret, a beloved and expert ELA teacher, and distill the ways in which she discusses and reflects on her teaching. To understand the complexities of Margaret's case, our analysis turns to theories of culturally responsive pedagogies to articulate the tensions between her culturally responsive characteristics. Findings reveal that Margaret felt more comfortable acting on certain culturally responsive characteristics compared to others, due largely to her desire to remain ideologically neutral. Margaret's case underlines the role of intent when understanding

teachers' culturally responsive strengths and shortcomings. We conclude with a discussion of how literacy stakeholders have come to conceptualize culturally responsive teaching, and how this presentation is both complicated and merits further complication.

## Theoretical Framework

### Culturally Responsive Pedagogies

In the mid-1990s, critical race theorists asserted the inequitable treatment of students of Color in U.S. Schools (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Since then, scholars have offered several conceptual and pedagogical models intended to redress these conditions. Culturally relevant teachers articulate high expectations, develop students' cultural competencies, and enrich students' sociopolitical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Gay (2010) writes that culturally responsive teachers are validating, comprehensive, multidimensional, empowering, transformative, and emancipatory. In their culturally sustaining pedagogy model, Paris and Alim (2014) describe students' ability to disrupt hegemony while also being mindful that youth culture can reproduce hegemony. Although these pedagogies assume various labels, they share a commonality: to create more equitable conditions and futures for students.

While these pedagogical forms have similar missions, defining "culturally responsive pedagogies" helps stakeholders better understand teachers' practices and identify what is *not* culturally responsive practice. Culturally responsive teaching is more than just a collection of generic teaching strategies (Aronson & Laughter, 2016). We rely on the phrase *culturally responsive* to signal an assortment of intentionally applied, contextually-bound dispositions, knowledges, and skills (Cain, 2015; Gay, 2010; Hayes

& Juarez, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 2014; Laughter & Aronson, 2016). We understand culturally responsive pedagogies as one form of social justice teaching–that is, instruction that aims to name and disrupt systems of oppression, such as racism, sexism, and heteronormativity.

Like other scholars (Ladson-Billings, 2006/2014; Matias, 2013; Matias, Montoya, & Nishi, 2016; Morrell, 2005; Sleeter, 2011), we understand that an explicit, intentional commitment to disrupting oppression and inequity is a foundational component of culturally responsive teaching. In her critique of what she perceives to be inauthentic scholarly representations of culturally relevant teaching, Ladson-Billings (2014) writes that teachers' "good intentions" (p. 77) have often wrongly been conflated with culturally relevant pedagogies – that is, "teaching practices that *explicitly* engage questions of equity and justice" (p. 74, emphasis added). Schmeichel (2012) critiques research around culturally responsive teaching as focusing on what teachers can "do" rather than a stance that they take. Culturally relevant teaching demands that teachers operate from an "ethical position" (Ladson-Billings, 2006, p. 40), and that teachers must understand the "asymmetrical (even antagonistic)" disconnects between society and their marginalized students in order to be culturally responsive to their students (p. 30). Like Sleeter (2011), we believe that "culturally responsive pedagogy is not only about teaching but is also a political endeavor directed toward equity and justice" (p. 19). Without a commitment to naming and addressing educational inequities, culturally responsive English teaching cannot exist (Johnson & Gonzalez, 2014; Kim & Slepac, 2015; Morrell, 2005). Thusly, scholarship that focuses solely on teachers' actions, rather than the intent behind their actions, cannot fully distill teachers' cultural responsiveness.

If socially just teaching depends on educators' "acts of cognition" (Freire, 1970, p. 79), then the intent behind these instructional maneuvers must matter. Understanding a teacher's intent distills the motivation behind a seemingly culturally responsive action because they either wish to disrupt oppression, attempt to remain "neutral," or operate from a White savior positionality (Matias, 2013; Matias, Montoya, & Nishi, 2016). Specifically, this study distills culturally responsive teaching as the eleven characteristics of the Multicultural Teacher Capacity Scale (Cain, 2015), a decision further explained in the analysis section below.

## Review of the Literature

### Culturally Responsive Teaching in ELA Classrooms

Scholars have long examined how ELA teachers have employed culturally responsive pedagogies. In what follows, we outline several broad conceptual categories of culturally responsive English teaching. We conclude the section by discussing omissions from this body of literature.

Culturally responsive ELA teachers often create opportunities for students to share and apply their lived experiences within the context of the classroom. In Lopez's (2011) study, students expressed increased agency through selecting and exploring the personal and sociopolitical issues important to them when they engaged in a culturally responsive performance poetry project. Price-Dennis (2016) explored possibilities for modifying curriculum and pedagogy in order to support Black girls' development of critical literacy skills in digital spaces, which empowered and affirmed their many knowledges and identities. Culturally responsive teachers confront issues of inequity and challenge their students to do the same. For example, an African American teacher

in Thomas's (2015) study used current events as well as his knowledge of students' biracial identities to engage reluctant students in conversations around race. Across these studies, teachers worked to validate their students' varied cultural capital (Yosso, 2005) by honoring students' lived experiences as powerful assets that supported ELA learning.

Culturally responsive teachers understand that the ideological nature of curricula means that disciplines often affirm students from mainstream groups while dismissing students from marginalized communities (Dyches, 2018a; Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Because some ELA teachers view canonical curriculum as a malleable entity, they are able to make it more responsive to culturally and linguistically diverse students. For example, teachers may invite students to repurpose canonical curriculum, restorying texts to be more inclusive of and responsive to race, time, and sexuality (Thomas & Stornaiuolo, 2016). Borsheim-Black, Macaluso, and Petrone (2014) found that when students analyzed gendered stereotypes in *Of Mice and Men*, they were able to more confidently read canonical literature through a critical literacy lens. Johnson and Gonzalez (2014) suggest possibilities for culturally responsive differentiation in the ELA classroom, which include tailoring textual selections and classroom management plans to students' individual needs. In these studies, rather than pledge allegiance to their ELA canon, teachers work to craft curricula that respond to their students unique lived realities and biographical experiences.

Still other teachers find ways to supplement traditional curriculum to help students access relevant sociopolitical issues. Morrell (2015) offers teaching popular culture, as well as critical media literacy, as important components of culturally

responsive teaching. Other teachers may turn to young adult literature to break open the curricular expectations of their classrooms. Colantonio-Yurko, Miller, and Cheveallier (2018) connect YA literature, such as *Speak* and *Sold,* to canonical texts (*Taming of the Shrew* and *To Kill a Mockingbird*) to engage ELA students in conversations around sexual violence. Feeling encumbered by her White male curriculum, an African American teacher of British literature used news articles about police brutality to open up conversation with her students (Dyches, 2018b). This intentionally subversive approach to canonical instruction helped her highlight thematic connections between the articles and *Macbeth.*

Present but less prominent in the literature, culturally responsive ELA teachers examine their own positionalities—their "ways of being in the world" (Gee, 2014, p. 3). o effectively examine one's positionality, teachers must engage in iterative moments of critical reflection, which occurs when teachers explore the ways in which their nuanced positionalities impact their students' learning experiences (Sams & Dyches, 2016; Howard, 2003; Kim & Slapac, 2015). Matias (2013) writes that teachers who do not investigate their positionalities through critical reflection processes cannot truly engage in culturally responsive teaching. In his pedagogical daybook, one English teacher kept accounts of his critical reflections of Whiteness, enabling him to acknowledge how his identities shaped his pedagogical moves (Sams & Love, 2014). Teachers in Boyd's (2017) collective case study recognized how their sociocultural positionalities informed their text choices and pedagogical decisions; these acknowledgements helped them discuss the contradictions in their ELA instruction. Still other teachers have worked

through their Whiteness *with* their students, admitting that their privileged identities prevented them from noticing certain facets of oppression (Berchini, 2019).

This brief review offers broad conceptual categories to classify culturally responsive ELA instruction. Despite scholarship that notes the central role intent plays in culturally responsive teaching (Johnson & Gonzalez; 2014; Ladson-Billings, 2014; Matias, 2013; Morrell, 2005), teachers' articulated intentions are largely missing from scholarship. Accordingly, these articles do not complicate the tensions between and across teachers' *many* culturally responsive dispositions, knowledges, and skills. They neither explore the idea that some culturally responsive characteristics are more easily implemented than others nor the reasons behind these successes and shortcomings. This study speaks to fill this void by relying on a teacher's articulated intentions in order to understand and nuance her culturally responsive instruction, a move that complicates understandings of culturally responsive ELA teaching.

## Methodology

### Research Design

Case study methodology distills the tensions and synergies between Margaret's culturally responsive characteristics. Case studies involve a study of phenomena that occur in their natural context (Yin, 2013); they privilege depth and time spent with participants in order to understand patterned behaviors that occur or are absent relative to a particular bounded system (Stake, 2005). We favored an ethnographic case study (Gallant, 2008) that spanned five months of data collection in order to authentically understand how Margaret's identities, attitudes, beliefs, and values shape her instructional practices. The ethnographic case study affords researchers multiple forms

of data across a shorter amount of time than a typical ethnography, while still contextualizing the phenomenon in and across wider contexts – an essential element of an ethnographic approach (Parthasarathy, 2008).

**Positionality**

Important to the ethnographic case study design was Jeanne's (Author 1) role as participant-observer (Brewer, 2000). Jeanne spent five months in Margaret's classroom, visiting for a 90-minute class period at least once a week. Jeanne, who collected the data presented in this study, participated in classroom discussions, talked with students, and assisted students or Margaret when possible. Jeanne's goal was to become a member of the classroom community in order to honor the instructional moments observed. In short, it was important to not just observe and collect data, but to also meaningfully contribute to Margaret's classroom. Jeanne identifies as a straight, cisgendered, White female; she spent six years as a high school English teacher and literacy coach in the southeastern United States.

**Participant and Setting**

Purposeful sampling was used to identify participants. Jeanne reached out to educational stakeholders – administrators, teachers, literacy coaches, department chairs, and central office coordinators – for recommendations of culturally responsive ELA teachers. Stakeholders were asked to identify secondary ELA teachers who were committed to building relationships with students, supporting students' academic successes, and modifying curricula to open up sociopolitical conversations. The description criteria, which pulled from culturally responsive teaching scholarship (Cain, 2015; Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2006), was broad to capture as many culturally

responsive teachers as possible. Stakeholders mentioned Margaret's name several times. During a preliminary interview prior to the study, Margaret stated her self-identification as a culturally responsive teacher. Margaret had been a teacher for seven years at the time of the study, spending the last five years at Oak High School. Margaret identified as a White, cisgendered, heterosexual female.

Located in the southeastern United States in one of the nation's largest districts, 50% of Oak High School students identified as White, 30% as Black, 12% as Hispanic, 4% as Asian, and 4% as two or more races. At the time of the study, of its 2,600 students, 29% qualified for free or reduced lunch. A recent national survey listed Oak High School as one of the nation's best, noting its International Baccalaureate (IB) and Advanced Placement (AP) programs as touchstones. Jeanne observed Margaret's second and third period English IV IB classes for five months. Thirty-four students identified as White, twelve as Black, three as Asian, and two as Hispanic.

**Data Sources**

Notes from lesson observations played an important role in data collection. Jeanne took extensive field notes of Margaret's instructional movements and interactions with students during instructional time. Jeanne chose to focus exclusively on Margaret, rather than her students, because her culturally responsive instructional practices, and the intent behind them, were foregrounded in the study.

Transcripts from post-observation interviews served as the second data source. Following each observation, Margaret and Jeanne met to discuss the lesson. In these weekly semi-structured interviews, Jeanne asked Margaret three questions: a) what did you do today that was culturally responsive?; b) what successes did you face today

teaching your material?; and c) what challenges did you face today teaching your material? Additional questions specific to the lesson observed (e.g., "why did you elect to teach [text]?") were added. The semi-structured interviews helped ensure that researchers were not projecting interpretations and allowed Margaret to vocalize her instructional intent.

**Analysis**

At this point in the study, because of their research and teaching expertise in culturally responsive pedagogies, Jeanne asked Brandon (Author 2) and Deani (Author 3) to join the research team. Brandon identifies as a White, cisgender, heterosexual male, while Deani identifies as a White, cisgender, heterosexual female. Jeanne and Brandon research and teach at a large research university in the U.S. midwest; Deani is a doctoral student and mentee of Jeanne and Brandon's. All authors are former classroom teachers with research expertise in culturally responsive scholarship and analysis.

Deductive analysis (Gilgun, 2010), a theory-driven approach to understanding data, helped untangle Margaret's culturally responsive characteristics. The approach depends on *a priori* codes to make sense of phenomena. To understand Margaret's culturally responsive teaching, we turned to Cain's (2015) Multicultural Teacher Capacity Scale (MTCS). Cain's (2015) eleven characteristics of culturally responsive pedagogies supports a nuanced analysis of Margaret's work, highlighting the degree to which Margaret's teaching might be described as culturally responsive. The nationally validated tool (.89) synergizes research around culturally relevant, responsive, and sustaining pedagogies by offering multicultural teaching as eleven characteristics, each

understood as a disposition, knowledge, or skill. The characteristics are as follows: demonstrates sociocultural awareness; affirms students' cultural assets; shows commitment to students' success; acts as an agent of change (dispositions); understands sociopolitical contexts of schools; understands impact of context and culture; demonstrates experiential knowledge of school and students' communities (knowledges); creates a classroom that embraces students; engages in critical reflection to guide practice; fosters students' sociopolitical consciousness; and modifies curriculum and pedagogy to confront issues of equity (skills).

Each characteristic of the MTCS exists along a progressing five-tiered continuum of nascent, emerging, progressing, advancing, and transformational levels. This feature rejects dichotomous views of culturally responsive teaching and honors teaching for equity and social justice as a multidimensional growth process. Certain patterns exist across all MTCS levels. The *nascent* level indicates that a teacher has little to no understanding or development of the characteristic. *Emerging* indicates that a teacher recognizes a particular aspect of culturally responsive instruction but does not necessarily work toward realizing its goals. A *progressing* level reveals a movement toward action or implementation. The *advancing* teacher invites student feedback to create more socially just conditions. *Transformational* teachers work alongside students to acknowledge and disrupt inequities in and out of the classroom.

Coding Margaret's culturally responsive-oriented instruction began by reading all data sources and applying one primary code, which reflected one of the 11 MTCS characteristics (e.g., demonstrates sociocultural awareness). Next, we returned to the coded data to determine the appropriate level (e.g., nascent), which acted as subcodes.

After coding all data sources for a particular characteristic's level, we then coded for the next level (e.g., emerging). We extended these approaches across all codes and levels, meaning that across the data, 55 codes were possible.

Data sources included researcher notes from teacher observations as well as transcripts from post-observation interviews. The instructional intent behind the observed practice in the lesson was later confirmed or disproved in the post-observation interview. Data from post-observation interviews independent from the observed lesson but relevant to the study's research questions were coded as well (e.g., "[being culturally responsive] is not intentional").

Margaret's articulations of intention guided the coding of the data. For example, if Margaret said she permitted a conversation on gender inequity because students wanted to discuss it, this was coded as MTCS characteristic "creates a warm classroom environment" because her intent was to affirm and validate students' interests, not facilitate a conversation intended to name and disrupt inequity. Had the latter been her intent, the data would have been coded as "fosters students' sociopolitical consciousness." Periodically, Jeanne shared notes and preliminary findings with Margaret. This iterative member checking (Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2015) allowed Jeanne to honor Margaret's voice, proceed with data collection, and present findings with credibility (Yin, 2013). Because we honored Margaret's understanding of her practice and her self-avowed intent, our analytic processes minimized any essentialization of her work. During the analysis phase, the research team met several times a week to discuss coding processes and reconcile incongruences in data analysis.

### Limitations

Certain limitations mark this study. As researchers serve as the primary tools in qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005), our positionalities inform the study's creation, execution, analysis, and reporting, and leave an indelible mark on the findings presented. To understand Margaret's culturally responsive practices, the research team relied on honoring her reflections on pedagogical intent. Had the study used another theoretical foundation, coding approach, or analytic tool, Margaret likely would have scored significantly differently on indicators of culturally responsive teaching. Analysis that focused on observational data rather than interview data would likely have yielded different results as well. Additionally, certain questions and conversations may have been taken up—or left unexplored—given the research goals of the study.

## Findings

### Margaret's Case

Margaret's descriptions of and reflections on her practice reveal tensions between characteristics of culturally responsive teaching. Her case complicates traditional understandings of culturally responsive ELA teaching by suggesting that certain characteristics are more easily embodied and acted upon, while others should be avoided due to their perceived "political" nature.

### Contradictions in ELA Teacher Identity: Margaret's Case

Margaret won her school's Teacher of the Year award during the duration of this study, an accolade that speaks to her skill and reputation for excellence. While Margaret skillfully sharpens her students' disciplinary literacies, she shows a particular talent for creating engaging opportunities for them to read closely. Margaret understands a

capacious view of "texts," which allows her to bring in multimodal elements for students to analyze: old advertisements, famous paintings, news articles, music videos, tweets, and political cartoons. Seamlessly, she engages students from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds and ability levels in rigorous disciplinary ELA instruction. She is warm, funny, and committed. Her students arrive early to class; they linger when the bell rings. The quality of Margaret's ELA instruction cannot be overstated. In fact, the sophistication of her disciplinary expertise and delivery is in part what makes her case so compelling.

**Culturally Responsive Canonical Instruction**

In order to understand the culturally responsive characteristics Margaret embodied, we turned to post-observation interview data. These interviews revealed Margaret's *intent* behind her instruction, thereby removing our projected interpretations of the culturally responsive teaching we *believed* we saw. In honoring Margaret's descriptions of her intent, we are able to present a more authentic view of how she saw her work as a culturally responsive English teacher. Across Margaret's case, she consistently stated that her instructional movements were intended to help students access the curriculum, frequently sharing that, "for me, the content is always the foundation." Table one illustrates the culturally responsive characteristics Margaret demonstrated across five months of data collection. For readability, we have used a simple code in the columns to denote the five-tiered continuum (nascent=N; emerging=E; progressing=P; advancing=A; transformational=T)

Table 1. *Coded Instances of Margaret's MTCS characteristics August-December.*

| | N | E | P | A | T |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Demonstrate Sociocultural Awareness (n=9) | 1 | 7 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| 2. Affirm Students' Cultural Capital (n=1) | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 3. Committed to Student Success (n= 24) | 1 | 23 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 4. Function as an Agent of Change (n=2) | 0 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 0 |
| 5. Understand Sociopolitical Contexts of Schools (n=2) | 0 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 6. Understand Impact of Content and Culture on Students (n=10) | 10 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 7. Demonstrate Experiential Knowledge of School and Students' Communities (n=2) | 0 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 0 |
| 8. Create Classroom that Embraces Students (n=41) | 1 | 19 | 21 | 0 | 0 |
| 9. Engage in Critical Reflection to Guide Practice (n=1) | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 10. Foster Students' Sociopolitical Consciousness (n= 15) | 7 | 8 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 11. Modify Curriculum and Pedagogy for Equity (n= 5) | 4 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 |

In what follows, we closely examine one of Margaret's lessons and its subsequent post-observation interview, selected because of the episode's concentrated reflection of the tensions between her culturally responsive characteristics that marked the entire case. Below, we describe four of the characteristics that most defined Margaret's case – an analytic decision based on the prevalence of MTCS characteristic/level combinations. The two culturally responsive characteristics Margaret addressed most frequently, and on the highest levels on the MTCS continuum, were

helping students meet markers of academic success (characteristic three) and creating a warm classroom community (characteristic eight). These characteristics are situated against those she performed most frequently at the lowest levels on the MTCS continuum: fostering students' sociopolitical consciousness (characteristic ten) and modifying curriculum and pedagogy to confront inequity (characteristic eleven). Table two reflects the frequency of the four codes in the lesson analyzed.

**Table 2.** *Coded Instances of Margaret's MTCS characteristics in "The Wife of Bath's Tale"/ Miley Cyrus Lesson.*

| | N | E | P | A | T |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 3. Committed to Student Success (n= 4) | 0 | 0 | 4 | 0 | 0 |
| 8. Create Classroom that Embraces Students (n=6) | 0 | 2 | 4 | 0 | 0 |
| 10. Foster Students' Sociopolitical Consciousness (n=7) | 6 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 11. Modify Curriculum and Pedagogy for Equity (n= 4) | 3 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 |

**Chaucer Meets Miley Cyrus**

Having spent several days studying *The Canterbury Tales* (Chaucer & Ellis, 2014), Margaret and her students began to read, "The Wife of Bath's Tale." Margaret began class with a quick summary of the prologue, sharing that the Wife of Bath, Allison, who boasts marriages to five husbands, believed, "why would God give us the goodies if He didn't want us to use them?" Students laughed, one of them feigning shock by murmuring, "Oh my God!" in delight. Following Margaret's summary, students

moved into groups to discuss questions about the tale, which they had read for homework the evening before.

During small group work, Margaret passed around an open letter from Sinead O'Connor, a pop star of the 1990s, written to a pop star presently at the height of her fame, Miley Cyrus. In the letter, O'Connor (2013) responds to Cyrus' comments that her "Like A Wrecking Ball" music video – in which a naked Cyrus swings on a wrecking ball, licks a sledgehammer, and engages in other sexually suggestive activities – was inspired by O'Connor's hit song and video, "Nothing Compares to U." Favoring a motherly tone – albeit one laced with expletives – O'Connor cautions Cyrus that the music business, and the men at its helm, are "pimping" and "prostitut[ing]" her. She urges Cyrus not to conflate sexual desire with concern about her humanity and challenges Cyrus to surround herself with people who will not encourage her sexual exploitation: "Real empowerment of yourself as a woman would be to in [the] future refuse to exploit your body or your sexuality in order for men to make money from you" (O'Connor, 2013, para. 10).

Margaret encouraged students to draw parallels between the letter and "The Wife of Bath's Tale," paying particular attention to how both O'Connor and Allison use language to make a particular point about gender, inequity, and sexuality. Once students read the letter, a lively conversation ensued. Having observed what appeared to be a lesson richly focused on marrying canonical and modern materials by examining language and patriarchal structures, Jeanne looked forward to interviewing Margaret to learn more about her instructional motivations.

**Showing Commitment to Students' Success**

Margaret shared that much of her lesson's design came from her desire to help students access "The Wife of Bath's Tale," which she saw as a challenging text. In selecting O'Connor's piece, Margaret believed that "modern connections" would help her students better understand how to perform a close reading of Chaucer and examine how language choices impacted both texts. Margaret noted, "[I asked] the questions that I asked [about O'Connor's essay] because I'd given them a guiding question before about looking at the way [Allison] presents things... they're used to looking at language and race or language and gender or language and power and how an author is doing something." Margaret's guided questions helped students forge connections between the two texts and understand the role of language in perpetuating/challenging gender inequity. Having already asked students to examine Allison's rhetoric, Margaret used similar questioning to guide students' analysis of O'Connor's. These questions were designed to help students read closely and understand both texts. Margaret shared that the next class would involve students applying their analysis of language to write a letter from Allison to a celebrity of their choosing, taking care to consider how to use language to authentically represent her characterization. In these ways, Margaret showed her commitment to locating creative ways to promote students' close reading of texts – and, by extension, their disciplinary academic success.

**Creating a Warm Classroom Environment**

Though she consistently made pedagogical choices that helped students access the material, Margaret also expressed a desire for all students to feel a sense of belonging while in her classroom. Margaret frequently mentioned the importance of students feeling capable of "sharing their own perspectives," and believed that her job

involved creating a culture that would allow for dialogic sharing. One of the ways Margaret sought to include her students was through her instructional planning choices. When discussing her planning motivations for "The Wife of Bath" lesson and how she elected to support students' in-class conversation, Margaret stated, "I did try really hard not to make it a man-hating conversation because I think a lot of times when we're talking about gender, I try really hard not to make it man hating, so that everyone feels included." Here, Margaret revealed a desire to make sure that her male students did not feel ostracized and therefore unable to participate in the conversation. In reflecting on the class conversation, she mentioned that, "[students] bring in things from their own lives, things that they watch or things that they read." Margaret wanted to honor and affirm students, which in turn created a classroom community that supported academic growth.

**Fostering Students' Sociopolitical Consciousness**

Tensions between Margaret's observed instruction and her actual intent crystallized in the area of fostering sociopolitical consciousness. Time and again, Margaret resisted the idea that her instruction developed students' sociopolitical consciousness – their ability to recognize and critique oppressive societal structures while also understanding their complicity within oppressive systems (Borsheim-Black, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 2006). When asked about motivations behind pairing O'Connor with Chaucer, Margaret reflected that, "I wanted them to find parallels honestly. I don't necessarily need them to then take it and think about their own actions." When pressed further about the pairing, she insisted that a certain serendipity guided her: "[O'Connor] happened to post that letter at the time when I needed something." Steadfastly,

Margaret maintained that her role involved selecting a text that would help students understand the tale; any conversation around gender inequality, though seemingly the topic of the day's lesson, was unintended.

Margaret also spoke to her role relative to sharpening students' sociopolitical consciousness. "I'm looking at the context, content, and text I'm teaching, and how I can best deliver that to my students," she shared, "not necessarily how can I let them know who I am beyond that." She insisted, "I'm not seeking things that will allow me to bring my personal opinion into class." For Margaret, assuming a "neutral" stance meant that her students had an opportunity to make their own decisions around a certain issue or topic related to a course text. Margaret shared that while she supported conversations around social issues that "can lead into a discussion [...] my job isn't necessarily to voice my own opinions." Her expressed intention centered *not* sharpening students' sociopolitical consciousness. To do so was to subject students to ideology – which was, to Margaret, not the role an ELA teacher should assume.

**Modifying Curriculum and Pedagogy to Confront Equity**

For Margaret, content reigned supreme; her teacher identity was bound to helping students access the curriculum. The supplementary texts she chose advanced students' engagement with and understanding of canonical material. When reflecting on the Chaucer lesson, she mused, "I think about it more in terms of remembering 'The Wife of Bath' not remembering gender equality." Margaret reminded over and again the neutrality of her intent and her avoidance of what she viewed as politically charged conversation. She reflected, "I wasn't like, 'I want to talk about gender and make them

feel empowered,' I did the reverse, 'I want to talk about "The Wife of Bath," how can I do that?'" She went on to share that,

> I think [conversations around gender inequities] naturally happen because of the texts that are selected …I think a good teacher has a love of the content that goes into her students, because...if we're not knowledgeable about our content then what are you? It is a point of pride being knowledgeable about "The Wife of Bath."

Margaret believed strongly in *not* intentionally modifying her curriculum and pedagogy to confront sociopolitical issues – agenda-driven conversations she viewed as incongruent to her work as an ELA teacher. If students wished to take up these conversations, Margaret supported them, but did not actively orchestrate them.

## Discussion and Implications

### Contradictions in Teacher Identity

Foundational to Margaret's identity and classroom practice is a deep desire to teach and illuminate great literature and to remain ideologically removed from the seemingly critical conversations she opens up. As Blau (2003), Holmes (2018), and Scholes (1985) note, ELA teachers may experience their relative greatness and quality as English teachers as linked to teaching material that is culturally revered and respected. In Margaret's case, she persisted in claiming that her primary responsibility was making revered canonical literature accessible to students. She positions understanding the canon as "primary" and critical conversations about social issues a secondary consequence of students' comprehension. Margaret talks of these critical conversations as literacy events that are out of her control, created and sustained

entirely by students, allowing her to claim a politically neutral stance – a position that aligns with her conception of teacherly duty. Although Margaret's teaching is rich in disciplinary content, which standards increasingly demand (McConn & Blaine, 2018), her work falls short of Ladson-Billings' (2014) vision of culturally relevant teaching that intentionally and "explicit[ly] engages questions of equity and justice" (p. 74). The critical conversations around gender equity happened because Margaret stumbled upon an article about Miley Cyrus, not because her choices were grounded in a vision for cultivating sociopolitical consciousness, an essential feature of culturally responsive teaching (Ladson-Billings, 2014; Matias, 2013).

But why does this intentional orientation to culturally responsive ELA instruction matter if, teacher intent aside, the end result is a conversation centralizing a system of oppression? Culturally responsive teaching "requires a complex understanding of content and culture" (Johnson & Gonzalez, 2014, p. 18). Although students can initiate and sustain important conversations related to equity and justice, teachers must play a role in orchestrating these conversations consistently through explicitly and intentionally framing curricular content and instructional decisions around equity and justice (Johnson, 2018; Kim & Slepac, 2015; Metz, 2018). When Morrell (2005) notes that a critical English education "is explicit...in promoting or disrupting existing power relations" (p. 313), he presents an argument for teachers making visible their instructional goals to create a shared mission of empowerment and transformation with students – an orientation missing from Margaret's teaching.

**Is Disciplinary Literacy Enough?**

When teachers provide students with disciplinary-rich instruction, students are granted access to traditional knowledges and codes of power necessary for them to meet mainstream markers of success (Delpit, 2006). Margaret's teaching complicates the argument that disciplinary literacy instruction is socially just work because it gives students access to codes of power (Moje, 2015). Margaret has a laudable commitment to teaching canonical texts and supporting students' close reading, comprehension, and interpretation of those texts. But her commitment to the canon is coupled with an active and explicit lack of attention to students' transferring their learning to their everyday lives. When Margaret notes, "I wanted them to find parallels honestly [...] I don't necessarily need them to then take it and think about their own actions," she reveals a limited and limiting view of the purpose of education and the relationship between critical reading, social justice, and transformative action (Behrman, 2006). Ladson-Billings (2014) writes that culturally responsive teachers "push students to consider [...] policies and practices that may have a direct impact on their lives and communities" (p. 77), and positions close reading, reflection, and action as mutually supportive processes. In contrast, Margaret isolates her commitment to teaching disciplinary skills from what students do with those same skills in the world. Although her disciplinary literacy instruction is admirable, Margaret's lack of attention to critical transfer and what students do with literacy in their everyday worlds highlights how her teaching could be improved and, ultimately, more culturally responsive.

**Where's Critical Reflection?**

Critical reflection is a foundational skill of culturally responsive teaching that accounts for the moral, ethical, and political contexts of teaching (Howard, 2003; Kim &

Slapac, 2015; Sams & Dyches, 2016). Critical reflection demands that teachers confront how structures create, sustain, and perpetuate oppressive experiences for certain groups of students while privileging the experiences of others. Howard (2003) writes that, "the formation of a culturally relevant teaching paradigm becomes extremely difficult, if not impossible, without critical reflection" (p. 198). Margaret engaged in only one instance of critical reflection across the data set, which earned a *nascent* code. Considering the data set as a whole, Margaret showed limited sociocultural awareness of how her identities, biography, and lived experiences informed her pedagogical decision making. She attributes key teaching decisions to happenstance (the O'Connor letter) and while this speaks to her improvisational skill, notably absent from Margaret's talk about her work is an enduring commitment to teaching as a moral and political act. Had Margaret performed critical reflection more frequently, she may have viewed and talked about her teaching decisions differently, which would alter the analysis of her actions and decisions. Margaret's case demonstrates the need for teachers to be taught critical reflection explicitly and for critical reflection to be modeled by mentors and colleagues (Howard, 2003). Critical reflection is a skill set that can be learned and practiced to help teachers frame instruction and curriculum selection as political acts that are linked to identities and values. Margaret's commitment to "neutral" teaching and learning can perhaps be linked to her limited practice of critical reflection.

Given Howard's (2003) arguments that critical reflection is a key precursory skill to, and in fact makes possible, culturally responsive instruction, it is necessary that teachers receive numerous opportunities to observe and practice critical reflection in their teaching. The word "reflect" carries myriad connotations and expectations

depending on the context of use (Sams & Dyches, 2016), suggesting that "critical reflection" needs to be modeled by mentors and continually practiced by both pre-service teachers and practitioners and assessed in a supportive community of practice. Margaret's case also suggests that pre-service teachers, practicing teachers, and teacher educators need to better understand curriculum and pedagogy as always and already political (Dyches & Boyd, 2017; Thomas & Dyches, 2019). Given calls in English education scholarship for politically engaged English teaching (e.g., Yagelski, 2006) and Morrell's (2005) argument that a critical English education requires teachers to view themselves (and be viewed as) activists and public intellectuals, teacher educators need to address the potentially harmful implications of an ideologically neutral stance related to teaching and learning.

Margaret's case also problematizes dichotomous, generalized analysis of culturally responsive teaching. If researchers rely solely on observational data to determine ELA teachers' cultural responsiveness, they risk inflicting their own perceptions when sharing teachers' stories. In elevating teachers' voices, researchers can honor the nuances of the successes and challenges teachers face. Margaret's case holds with previous research showing nuance and, at times, contradictions across ELA teachers' justice-oriented teaching (e.g., Dyches, Boyd, & Schulz, 2021). However, findings suggest that even exemplary teachers who identify as culturally responsive – and are identified by the community as culturally responsive – may need additional support in fostering students' sociopolitical consciousness and in modifying their curriculum to promote equity. Research that centers teachers' voices–and asks questions about pedagogical intent–helps distill the complications of culturally

responsive ELA teaching, thereby allowing for more authentic conversation around how to better support teachers and students.

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