

A Bumpy Journey to Culturally Relevant Pedagogy in an Urban Middle School: Are We There Yet?

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Abstract

Culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) offers the promise of increased success for underserved students in urban schools. This qualitative case study examines a middle school reading teacher's understandings and implementation of CRP and the researcher's supportive role over a three-semester collaboration. Two categories of results are described: evidence of the teacher's increasing CRP and tensions in the collaboration. Increased CRP was evidenced by the teacher's enhanced emphasis on high expectations, metacognitive strategies, critical literacy, and units connected to students' cultures. Tensions included sporadic meetings, overlooked prerequisite instruction, ignored supportive materials, and problematic classroom management. Implications are included.

Keywords: Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, Teacher-Researcher Collaboration, Urban Schools, Middle Schools

Teachers and researchers, especially those practicing in urban schools, are aware of the achievement gap between students of color and white students, and between students with less and more economic resources. There is a narrowing of the achievement gap

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in reading for 9 and 14-year-olds, but not for 17-year-olds (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2009). In the state in which this research was conducted, the gap between White and African American students' reading was the ninth-largest in the United States (Vanneman, Hamilton, Anderson, & Rahman, 2009). In her Presidential Address, then AERA-President Gloria Ladson-Billings (2006) challenged members to move beyond the plethora of studies describing the achievement gap to applied research that contributes to eliminating it.

Culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) offers the promise of increased success for students who have been historically marginalized by inequitable educational systems (Ladson-Billings, 1995). CRP is a research-based construct that melds the cultural knowledge and ways of being of marginalized students, particularly African Americans, with teachers' pedagogical understandings and behaviors. Within this perspective, a student's culture is not an impediment to learning but a strength.

Many teachers with a disposition for CRP do not implement it, do not implement it effectively, or do not know how to implement it in their classrooms. Camille (a pseudonym) was an eighth-grade reading teacher in an urban school with a large percentage of students of color and in poverty, and with high achievement gaps. She and I believed that CRP would lead to increased student achievement. However, we first needed to understand what it could look like in her classroom.

Theoretical Framework and Related Research

Pedagogy denotes the multi-layered reality of teaching. This study is based on two compatible views of pedagogy: critical pedagogy and culturally relevant pedagogy.

Critical Pedagogy

The foundation of critical pedagogy is the view that schooling is not neutral (McLaren, 2007) because it distributes power

unequally and inequitably to students (Kincheloe, 2004). Through conscientization (Freire, 1993), i.e., critical consciousness, educators with a critical stance identify the educational practices and structures that privilege certain ways of knowing, knowledge, and demonstrations of academic success over others. In their work in universities and PreK-12 schools, critical educators point out how historical and pervasive educational practices cause inequitable opportunities and oppressive conditions for particular groups of students, most typically students who live in poverty and students of color.

Many educators do not recognize the inequities of public education, instead believing that meritocracy exists (Oakes & Lipton, 2003). Critical pedagogy has the potential to provide educators with the theoretical knowledge they can translate into practices that promote anti-oppressive (Kumashiro, 2000), democratic, socially just, and equitable education. Critical pedagogy speaks to “teachers...who are weary of being clerks or technocrats” (Greene, 1995, p. 2). It challenges teachers to develop “an antimethod pedagogy that refuses the rigidity of models and methodological paradigms” (Macedo & Freire, 1998, xvii). Camille was often expected to enact the role of technocrat and implement prepackaged programs.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Culturally relevant pedagogy is praxis; it is critical pedagogy in action. Its purposes are to develop students’ academic success, cultural competency, and critical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 1995). To effectively teach children of color, teachers must often teach in ways that are different from and may contradict what they learned in teacher education programs, from professional development, and from administrators (Ladson-Billings, 1994).

Students’ low test scores and teachers’ misunderstandings of cultural behaviors often lead to teachers’ underestimation of the academic achievements and potential of students of color, and thus to placement in low-level tracks with low-level instruction (Hilliard, 1992). This perpetuates the cycle of teachers’ low

expectations, students' low achievement (Oakes & Lipton, 2003), and students' decreased opportunities for personal accomplishment and goal attainment. In contrast, teachers who practice CRP have high expectations of all of their students (Ladson-Billings, 1995). They respect them, their parents, and the communities in which they teach. They relate to their students as human beings, not as objects who need to demonstrate knowledge that is based on hegemonic practices such as standardized testing (McLaren, 2007). They provide more, not fewer, opportunities to these underserved students (Delpit, 2006).

Purpose of the Study

My work as a university faculty is framed in critical social justice, meaning that I believe it is essential to analyze education from a critical perspective (conscientization), and to expose and act on the inequities that I find. Camille had a beginning understanding of critical pedagogy and of CRP. She agreed to work with me in this exploratory, qualitative study. My research questions were:

1. What did CRP look like in Camille's class over the three semesters of the study? How, if at all, did her understandings of CRP evolve?
2. What types of supports did I implement? How did Camille perceive these? How did I perceive these?

Research Design and Methodology

This qualitative case study is an "*instrumental case study* [italics in original], a particular case [that] is examined to provide insight into an issue..." (Stake, 1994, p. 237). It is also critical research, which "generally focuses on the rationale, the design, and the implementation of curricula and pedagogies that will produce excellence and empowerment for all students" (Morrell, 2009, p. 98). In the end, we did not reach the goal of critical research but we certainly moved closer to it.

Context of the Study

Camille and I had a professional relationship prior to this study. I taught three of her courses in her masters/reading endorsement program including a course entitled Critical Pedagogy: Teaching for Social Justice. We had also worked together in the prior year on a research study about mediating her students' critical literacy through Boal's (1979) liberatory theatre. She described that experience as "life-changing." Because she had a developing understanding of critical pedagogy, CRP, and research-based reading instruction, she looked forward to reconsidering and possibly disrupting her teaching practices to increase her effectiveness as a reading teacher of low-achieving, high-poverty, racially diverse, urban students. This case study attempted to increase Camille's understandings and implementations of more expansive praxis, and inform me about ways in which I could support that praxis.

This study took place in three sections of Camille's eighth-grade reading classes over three semesters in 2008 and 2009. I visited her classroom, on average, one and a half class periods per week. Each visit typically lasted the entire class period of 90 minutes. She often asked me to work with a group or to help individual students.

Camille selected focus classrooms that were the "most difficult," meaning that these students were behaviorally difficult, thus making it tough for her to teach. The students had been placed in these reading classes based on low scores on reading tests. There were 8-15 students per class, most of whom were African American, with a few Latino and White students. Eighty percent of the schools' population qualified for free or reduced-priced lunch.

Data Sources and Analysis

The data consisted of four categories that allowed me to triangulate and to pay attention to both Camille's and my understandings of our interactions.

- I took field notes of Camille's words and actions on a template with Ladson-Billings' three CRP criteria to analyze her pedagogy when it occurred (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). I included a general sense of students' words and actions and collected handouts for context.
- I wrote retrospective reactions to my observations (field notes).
- I wrote retrospective notes about conversations we had after class and collected our emails.
- I wrote notes about our discussions about my role in supporting her CRP.

I used systematic qualitative methodology and inductive analysis, namely, grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1994), to answer my research questions and verify my real time CRP category identification (Huberman & Miles, 1994). To accomplish this, I read and re-read the data, applying the constant comparative method (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992) to inductively develop themes from these data that provided insight into Camille's implementation of CRP and my role in the process.

Results

In general, Camille demonstrated increased understandings and applications of CRP over the three semesters of this study. Many of her applications of CRP were sabotaged, however, by classroom management issues and vague, confusing directions.

I learned that it was often difficult to provide feedback or suggestions without appearing critical. Also, it was not unusual for Camille to be proud of the instruction that I found troubling. On the other hand, my modeling and our conversations often lead to altered pedagogy that moved her closer to CRP.

For the purposes of this paper, I report on two categories of results: evidence of Camille's increasing CRP and our tensions about our interactions, though these often overlapped.

Evidence of Camille's Increasing Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Culturally relevant pedagogy was evident in many ways. Camille always honored the students' prior experiences, which were mainly couched in poverty and race. She showed this, for example, by encouraging general conversations, through asking about school events, and by giving students opportunities to talk about personal tragedy, such as when a student's cousin was recently shot and killed by a police officer. On the other hand, she rarely connected these conversations to curriculum or used them to generate new lessons.

In the early stages of the study, Camille demonstrated low academic expectations. For example, the students were more likely to read aloud than silently, she often read to them more than they read, and students frequently avoided silent reading time by searching for a book in the library that they rarely read. However, after I modeled the process of encouraging students I worked with to read to themselves and then discuss the text, as well as discussing this instructional practice in face-to-face and email conversations, Camille began to expect students to read silently more often. After several conversations between us about a district-required computer-assisted reading program that she believed was minimally contributing to her students' literacy, she de-emphasized it. She explained that she felt empowered to make these changes because of our collaboration.

Sometimes Camille encouraged critical literacy (McLaughlin, & DeVogd, 2004) by bringing in current events articles that connected to her students and described situations of unfairness, lack of opportunity, or other types of oppression. Her directions, however, were often confusing, and students became frustrated with the tasks. After I volunteered to conduct one such lesson that clearly identified expectations and carefully organized materials, she noticed students' engagement and learning, and used my lesson as a model for subsequent readings of critical, current events.

During the study, Camille increased her modeling of metacognitive strategies, including oral and written think alouds. She frequently told students about the importance of connecting their background knowledge to text. Over the course of this study, she modeled additional metacognitive strategies and reminded students that these would help them succeed in high school and college. It was common to hear her tell students that they were as smart as other students.

Tensions in our Collaboration

Though there were many positive outcomes of our collaboration, there were tensions as well. An overriding tension for me was the lack of fidelity to our agreed-upon process. We agreed to communicate on a regular basis through emails; short, informal meetings after her class; time to develop culturally relevant units; and meetings to analyze and evaluate our collaboration and students' academic learning, cultural competence, and critical consciousness. I imagined that remarkable things would happen: that we would develop powerful units that clearly demonstrated CRP, that I would greatly enhance my ability to effectively work with teachers in urban schools, and that she would greatly enhance her ability to effectively work with her urban students. Instead, our interactions were sporadic and our results, though valuable, were not what I had imagined. When I asked Camille about her general sense of our collaboration, she always responded positively and often commented on how much she appreciated my ideas. In fact, she told her students several times that she tried to "challenge you just like Dr. Rozansky challenges me."

A recurring tension was Camille's failure to recognize that students needed certain skills to successfully complete tasks that could have been effective instances of CRP. For example, she developed new units connected to students' cultures, such as a Motown music unit. Her high expectations were manifested in an assignment to create a PowerPoint presentation about a Motown musician. However, she neglected to teach students the skills they needed to succeed. This resulted in several unproductive days as students erratically surfed the web and created PowerPoints that

mainly consisted of pictures and random text copied and pasted from the internet.

Sometimes when I believed I was being supportive, Camille did not seem to want or have time for my idea. For example, at the end of the first semester, I gave her a copy of Ladson-Billings' (1994) book about CRP. Surprisingly, she did not read any of it for several months and then only a few pages. This caused tension for me because I thought it would promote useful and challenging dialogue, and for Camille because she felt guilty whenever I asked about the book.

Classroom management was another source of tension. I offered to give her some articles about management in urban classrooms that she indicated would be useful. She did not read them and misplaced them. Classroom management became so problematic that, at one point during the third semester, Camille asked me to start visiting a different class. She had become embarrassed by the frequent management difficulties and did not want me in the classroom to witness them.

Vocabulary instruction was another area of tension. Camille demonstrated high expectations by teaching students Greek and Latin derivatives. However, students rarely remembered what the terms meant, were rarely able to apply this strategy, and the words Camille provided lacked context and semantic connections. However, she was proud of these lessons, emphasizing the similarities between these lessons and lessons high-tracked students experienced. I was also frustrated because I knew that she had learned about effective vocabulary instruction in her masters program.

Discussion

When this study began, Camille occasionally implemented CRP. As time went on, she became more conscious about whether or not her units and lessons connected with students' cultures. She seemed more purposeful in deciding what and how to teach. She increased the number of lessons that promoted students' critical literacy, focusing more on the racial and ethnic backgrounds of the

characters and the oppressive situations described in the texts. She expanded the Motown unit, continued to teach students reading strategies to help them be independent and successful readers, and always treated students with respect. Her words and lessons reflected higher expectations. Most of her CRP fell into the category of academic achievement and critical analysis of the social order. There was little that explicitly addressed students' cultural competence. And the impact of her academic achievement focus was questionable.

Camille's unclear directions and ineffective vocabulary instruction, for example, contributed to students' lack of engagement and inappropriate behaviors. She rarely identified these as obstacles, however, since she had often spent hours preparing guiding worksheets and other materials without realizing that she had inadvertently omitted important information or steps.

Prior to the study, we agreed to have regular meetings to share how things were going. However, we met infrequently, which did not provide enough time to deconstruct what was happening in her classroom, discuss readings, or plan units together.

Conclusions/Implications

Because human beings have the mental capacity to make choices, they must intervene in the world (Freire, 1998). Thus, we need to move from conscientization to praxis (Darder & Mirón, 2006), i.e., from critical observation to action.

CRP has been described in multiple contexts by several researchers. However, a profound question exists: How can this stance be developed in teachers who do not already demonstrate such a perspective or perhaps display just the beginnings, yet voice or demonstrate a proclivity or disposition for such pedagogy?

Though this study provides one example of some forward motion along the path to CRP with one teacher, I neglected to consider the school context. CRP challenges the hegemony of

traditional schooling. Successful school change occurs in schools in which administrators and teachers share goals, meet regularly to problem-solve, and develop a collegial, community-like atmosphere (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Hord, 2009). Camille was operating independently of her colleagues. Though her principal approved of our collaboration, I was her only support. A challenge is to increase understandings of how CRP can be the focus of school-based learning communities while also supporting the dedication of individual teachers who are committed to their culturally diverse students through culturally relevant pedagogy.

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