

Culturally relevant pedagogy and critical literacy in diverse English classrooms: A case study of a secondary English teacher's activism and agency

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ABSTRACT: As classrooms become more diverse, not only in North America, but in most Western Countries, calls for more culturally relevant pedagogies that centre the lived experiences of diverse students have taken on greater importance and significance. This is in response to the need for increased engagement and educational success for all learners. I argue that there is need to support teachers who are willing to take on this complex task by providing examples of ways culturally relevant teaching can be implemented in their classrooms. I present the common elements of culturally relevant pedagogy and critical literacy through performance poetry in a grade 12 English class. I conclude with a discussion of the complexities of this kind of teaching praxis and what might be some insights not only for English teachers, but educators who are seeking to find ways of better understanding how to implement culturally relevant practices in their classrooms.

KEYWORDS: Culturally relevant pedagogy, critical literacy, diversity, cross-cultural understanding, social justice education, teacher agency.

INTRODUCTION

Teachers who embrace the belief that schools are important in creating a socially just society must teach in culturally relevant ways that take into consideration how all students experience the curriculum. There is no higher social calling than to teach critical approaches to the consumption and production of language and it is no accident that English is a core subject required by millions of students enrolled in primary, secondary and tertiary educations across North America (Morrell, 2005). "Students must learn to be critical, understand each other and appreciate other forms of knowledge." This is how Meriah,¹ a secondary school teacher in Southern Ontario, Canada, describes her role as an English teacher. Her description captures the complexities of teaching English, given the current social trends and demographic shifts that is the reality in many classrooms not only in Southern Ontario (which includes the Greater Toronto Area) but most Western countries. Within a context of immigration, globalisation and colonisation, students' identities are transnational, fluid and emerging (Au, 2009). Given this social reality, it is imperative that teachers engage in teaching approaches that are effective in educating today's diverse student population (Howard, 2003). The research shows that diverse students, particularly students of colour, are not achieving the success in schools that they should, and this has increased calls for teachers to examine the curricula and their teaching practices. Culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995a; 1995b; Howard, 2003) has been proven to be an effective set of principles upon which teachers can base their instruction of diverse and students.

¹ The name of the teacher and school are pseudonyms

The new demographic and social realities in schools across North America have turned a critical gaze on the curricula taught in classrooms, and English classrooms are no exception. All students take English in secondary schools. This provides a unique opportunity for reaching and impacting a large number of students. Morrell (2005) suggests that what is needed for students in secondary classrooms is an increased emphasis on a critical English education that is explicit about the role of language and literacy in disrupting existing power relations, deconstructing dominant texts and assisting students in constructing their own critical texts that can be used in the struggle for social justice. This article is about one teacher's (Meriah's) agency and activism in a secondary English classroom in Southern Ontario, Canada to critically re-conceptualise her grade 12 Writer's Craft class to build cross-cultural understandings and increase student engagement through culturally relevant pedagogy and critical literacy. Engaging in culturally relevant teaching practices does not happen by chance and requires teachers to be critically aware and agentive in their classrooms, drawing on relevant socio-cultural theories and creating their own purposeful praxis.

This research seeks to make explicit the connections between culturally relevant pedagogy and critical literacy. Fisher (2005) suggests that critical literacy provides an avenue for teachers who are seeking to develop culturally relevant and socially just pedagogies. I believe that it is not enough to understand the theoretical underpinnings of culturally relevant and culturally responsive pedagogies; teachers must be able to answer for themselves the question of what does this look like and feel like in my classroom? Through the use of performance poetry, Meriah took the students in her diverse multicultural classroom on a journey of deconstructing and reconstructing how they view different forms of poetry, knowledge that is privileged and not privileged, and their own understanding of people who do not look like them. By doing so she offers an example of how culturally relevant teaching can be enacted in diverse English classrooms.

Few empirical studies of culturally relevant teachers' practices with diverse student populations are available in the research (Cochran-Smith, Davis & Fries, 2004). Freire and Macedo (1987) suggest that critical literacy should engage students in developing a critical consciousness that interrogates the discursive structures they come to understand the world by. Developing critical consciousness is also an underlying principle of culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Gay, 2000).

I analyze Meriah's tensions to be agentive within current Ministry of Ontario policies for Grade 12 English and classroom teaching by digressing from the traditional within a framework of culturally relevant pedagogy, that seeks to develop cultural competence, academic excellence and socio-political consciousness in students (Ladson-Billings, 1995a; 1995b). According to the Ontario Ministry of Education (2009), it is important that the English curriculum recognises the central importance of language and literature in learning and everyday life and prepares students for the literacy demands they will face as Canadians and members of the global community. It also states that "there is no single correct way to teach or learn English; it is assumed that the strategies and resources used will vary according to the object of the learning and the needs of the students" (p. 3). This mandate gives English teachers the space to search for alternative ways of teaching English and develop agency to disrupt the dominant and Eurocentric forms of knowledge and discourses that are still

prevalent in many schools. From teachers' agency we can learn how to inform a critical teaching and learning process that is responsive to the needs of diverse students.

Culturally relevant pedagogy has emerged as an effective way of centring the cultures, languages and experiences that diverse students bring to classrooms so as to increase their engagement and academic achievement (Irvine & Armento, 2001; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). How this is manifested in English classrooms is complex, given that canonical texts still hold dominant positions in the curriculum. There is need for more research on how teachers frame culturally relevant approaches to literacy teaching, particularly in multicultural settings such as Canada.

I view critical literacy as a way of understanding and engaging in culturally relevant pedagogy in English classrooms. While the study focuses on the Ontario context, the findings have broader implications for classrooms elsewhere in the context of globalisation and population shifts. Below, I discuss the common elements of culturally relevant pedagogy and critical literacy, the research setting and methodology. I then follow with a description and analysis of performance poetry as a form of critical literacy in Meriah's English classroom and conclude with a discussion of what might be some "take aways" from the research, not only for English teachers, but teachers who are seeking to find ways of better understanding how to implement culturally relevant practices in their classrooms.

This work within the context of Canada's multiculturalism² adds to the research on the implementation of culturally relevant practices outside of all African-American or Latina/o classrooms. Morrison, Robbins and Rose (2008), in their synthesis of classroom-based research on the implementation of culturally relevant pedagogy, highlighted what they describe as a "research conundrum". They found that many of the classroom-based studies on culturally relevant pedagogy are about homogenous, or nearly homogenous classes of students – all African American classes, all Latino/a. They suggest that while this is very useful for teachers in those settings, more research is needed on the implementation of culturally relevant pedagogy in more heterogeneous and "truly multi-cultural classrooms" (p. 444). Case studies that reveal the nuances of implementing culturally relevant pedagogy with diverse students will help the educational community to understand practices that work and do not work in these contexts. This article is part of a larger study and draws on previous publication of some these findings in Rolheiser, Evans & Gambhir (2011).

CULTURALLY RELEVANT PEDAGOGY AND CRITICAL LITERACY

Culturally relevant pedagogy builds on the understanding of "how people are expected to go about learning may differ across cultures, and in order to maximise learning opportunities, teachers must gain knowledge of the cultures represented in their classrooms, then translate this knowledge into instructional practice" (Villegas,

² The Canadian Multiculturalism Act, for the preservation and enhancement of multiculturalism in Canada, became law on July 21, 1988. The Act acknowledges the contributions of Canadians of all origins and their communities to the building of Canada, and reminds us of the rights and responsibilities of citizenship set out in Canadian legislation. It encourages all of us to work together to build a society in which the principles of multiculturalism are fully realised in practice.

1991, p. 13). Ladson-Billings (1995a) positions culturally relevant pedagogy as a “pedagogy of opposition...committed to collective, not merely individual empowerment” (p. 160). Critical literacy in much the same way encourages the deconstructing of power, values and attitudes in texts and positions texts as a form of empowerment for some social groups, all of which places it in direct opposition to the established traditions in English classrooms. According to Ladson-Billings (1992) “the primary goal of culturally relevant pedagogy is to empower students to examine critically the society in which they live and to work for social change. In order to do this, students must possess a variety of literacies” (p. 314). Critical literacy gives practical expression in English classrooms to the theory of culturally relevant pedagogy, whether through counter texts, social action, performance poetry, dance, music and other expressive forms. It is about having a critical voice that is heard, felt and understood, while communicating transformative ideas in ways that change others (Camangian, 2008).

Ladson-Billings (1995a; 1995b) identified three principles of culturally relevant teaching. First, students must experience academic success and intellectual growth by engaging in activities that require them to pose and solve higher-order problems. Second, students must develop cultural competence as a vehicle for learning, and see their identities and cultures as strengths. Thirdly, students must develop socio-political and critical consciousness that allows them to critique the cultural norms, values and institutions that produce and maintain social inequities. These principles of culturally relevant pedagogy are often complicated in classrooms, where teachers struggle with the tensions of implementing the ideas in their classrooms. Freire (1970) in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, provided an example of how critical literacy can be used to raise the social consciousness of students and suggested that students be given the opportunity to explore and construct knowledge. Teachers who engage in critical literacy do not view their students as empty vessels to be filled; they instead create experiences that offer students opportunities to actively construct knowledge – what he referred to as a “problem-posing “ methodology. In this model, classrooms become spaces where students interrogate social conditions through dialogue about issues significant to their lives. Freire, suggested that “knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world and with each other” (1970, p. 72).

For students to experience academic success, their learning must be relevant to their lives and experiences. Critical literacy enables students to make meaning of their learning, raises their critical thinking skills, and makes learning “fun”, as one of Meriah’s students said. Becoming critically literate means that students have mastered the ability to read and critique messages, and learn to “read” in a reflective manner (Coffey, 2011). By reading alternative texts and producing counter-texts, students can begin to examine how their cultures and identities are represented or mis-represented. These kinds of activities increase engagement and participation, and ultimately improve grades. In English classrooms, this type of curriculum and pedagogy offers students opportunities to speak from their point of view and on behalf of those who are often silenced or marginalized (Behrman, 2006). Culturally relevant pedagogy and critical literacy empower students and teachers to be risk-takers. Ladson-Billings (1992), in theorising on ways that culturally relevant pedagogy can inform literacy practices, suggested a more critical approach to literacy that includes the cultural

experiences of African-American students, premised on the notion that literacy happens in social, historical and political contexts. Ladson-Billings' work at the time focused on African-American children. I have extended this notion in the current context to students in multicultural settings.

THE RESEARCH CONTEXT

The research was conducted as part of a series of research projects by a local university with various field partners that examined ways that collaboration with classroom teachers could support their efforts at becoming more inclusive in their practices. The teachers involved in the research identified their area of need that formed the basis for the collaborative action research. This research project had the support of the school administration where it was conducted, but administration was not directly involved in the research. My own background as a former classroom teacher positioned me as researcher not only to engage with the data, but also to take on the role of "critical friend" to the teacher participants. By forming groups of "critical friends", teachers can assist one another through listening, questioning and collaboration (Sagor, 1992). This article represents part of a larger research project that I conducted that examined the impact of culturally relevant pedagogy on student engagement in diverse English classrooms. The following questions guided the research:

1. How does culturally relevant pedagogy nurture student learning, engagement and achievement in diverse English classrooms?
2. How do culturally relevant practices inform teachers' professional learning?
3. In what ways might critical literacy open up spaces for student engagement in diverse English classrooms?

SETTING AND PARTICIPANTS

The research was conducted at Millridge Secondary School in South-Western Ontario, Canada. Millridge at the time of the study was a large, sub-urban, multi-racial, multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, multi-faith secondary school with over 1600 students in a large and growing suburban community of over 500,000 people. Millridge is one of many public secondary schools serving the community.³ The school had a very diverse student population made up mainly of South Asians (Pakistan, India), West Indians (Jamaican, Guyanese, Trinidadian), Asians, Filipinos and whites. The Jamaican students were largely black, while the students from Trinidad and Guyana were black and South Asian. The school board where the research was completed does not collect statistics on school enrolment according to demographic data.

Millridge Secondary is known as a strong academic school with a large percentage of students going on to university and college. Notwithstanding this, there are a number of students who require additional support, and there have been issues around

³ The school board and features that might identify the school are not included for anonymity.

discipline, particularly among the racialised⁴ student body. Students at Millridge, in keeping with the streaming policy in Ontario, are placed in three pathways: academic, that prepares students to enter university; applied, that prepares students to enter college; and workplace, that prepares students to enter the workforce after graduation. Students in the academic classes tend to be more academically advanced, while students in applied and workplace classes, as described in the Ontario Ministry of Education curriculum, prefer a more hands-on approach to teaching and learning. At Millridge, like many schools in Southern Ontario, applied classes tend to have a larger percentage of racialised youths and the general discourse among the predominantly white teaching staff is that there tend to be more classroom management issues in applied classrooms. Noguera (2008) in his work noted that students of colour tend to be disciplined more often than white students for minor infractions and suggested that some teachers' approach to discipline and students of colour might be based on biased and stereotypical views.

The research reported on this article was conducted in an academic or university bound (as the academic classes are sometimes described), Writer's Craft, Grade Twelve English class. This article is about Meriah, who used performance poetry as a way of implementing culturally relevant pedagogy in the curriculum. Meriah had taught at Millridge Secondary for over five years and had over ten years experience as an English teacher. She was African-Canadian with a family history going back several generations in Canada. Meriah was not satisfied with the "level of engagement of her students" and the "cross-racial tensions" that she sometimes witnessed in her classroom and the school at large. It was for these reasons and her desire to learn more about implementing culturally relevant pedagogy that prompted her to examine more closely critical literacy in the Writer's Craft curriculum.

Prior to going to Millridge, Meriah taught at an elementary school in the same school board for a number of years. She lived in the community and attended secondary school in the community. Meriah had a long history of social justice work and participated in several professional development courses that focused on ways to make the curriculum more relevant to students. Over the years she taught many of the applied English classes, which many teachers described as "challenging". She felt that her style of teaching and educational philosophy resonated well with students in applied classrooms and developed a reputation around the school of "looking out for the kids", particularly those that were marginalised and felt disconnected and disengaged from the system. Prior to the study, Meriah had done some reading on culturally relevant pedagogy and critical literacy, but had not consciously thought about how to implement it in her teaching practice, even though she might have been doing it intuitively. It is conscious action and a sense of agency, however, that prompts reflection, transformation and growth. At the start of the research I provided Meriah with several articles by some of the leading scholars on culturally relevant pedagogy, while she researched on her own notions of critical literacy in the classroom.

⁴ Term used to describe students of colour (black and South Asian). In Canada South Asian students also claim the term brown to describe themselves

METHODOLOGY

The research used a qualitative, collaborative action research approach grounded in the notion that research should be a tool for social change, empowerment and transformation (Carspecken, 1996; Kincheloe & McLaren, 1998). The goal of collaborative action research is to create an understanding of the problem, issues and practices of teachers in authentic settings creating praxis (Stringer, 1996). In collaborative action research, teachers are involved in researching the relationship between their theories, methods of instructions and their teaching practices (Mitchell, Reilly & Logue, 2009).

This research was in keeping with Sagor's (2005) notion that that action research is a way for teachers to improve student learning, improve their own practice, contribute to their professional learning and overcome the isolation commonly experienced by classrooms teachers. Data sources included journals, classroom observations and dialogue. Dialoguing became an important data source in teasing out and deconstructing Meriah's teaching. Burbules and Bruce (2001) suggest that dialogue involves questions and answers, challenges and responses, and is part of a dialectical process of thinking based on conjecture and reconstruction of ideas.

Dialogue took place informally and formally during inquiry-group meetings. The inquiry group meetings were an important aspect of data collection and analysis. At these meetings Meriah was able to talk through and reflect on the tensions in her classroom. It was also a safe space to critically deconstruct the impact of the research on the students and her practice as well as herself. This process allowed for the complexities and tensions of implementing culturally relevant pedagogy to be examined in a safe space. I describe this kind of learning space as a *critical learning community*. In this *critical learning community* ideas are probed that create discomfort and are worked through by critical dialogue, a 'back and forthness' that disrupts and acknowledges tensions. I see this as space and community, not only to talk about the craft knowledge of teaching, but to acknowledge the complexities and tensions in teaching.

PERFORMANCE POETRY AND A CRITICAL ENGLISH CURRICULUM IN A DIVERSE ENGLISH CLASSROOM

"I have to struggle to get some of my students to see the value and become interested in some of the books we are reading... I need to make it connect more to their lives" is how Meriah described her class. This was not the first time that Meriah was teaching the Writer's Craft class and saw the collaborative action research project as a way of "looking deeply at the curriculum and trying new ideas". In other words, developing some agency within the curriculum guidelines so as to be more inclusive and socially aware. In her research on critical literacy, she found the work of Camangian (2008) and was inspired by his example of performance poetry in his English class. Meriah felt that the curriculum for the Writer's Craft course "provided a space for that kind of teaching".

The Ontario Curriculum guidelines describe the Writer's Craft course as one that "emphasizes knowledge and skills related to the craft of writing. Students will analyse

models of effective writing; use a workshop approach to produce a range of works; identify and use techniques required for specialised forms of writing; and identify effective ways to improve the quality of their writing. They will also complete a major paper as part of a creative or analytical independent study project and investigate opportunities for publication and for writing careers” (2009, p. 93). Meriah’s goal for the unit was to “make it relevant and challenge the students to think critically about issues of concern”. For her the following three questions were important to answer: 1) *How do I ensure the success of my students?* 2) *How do I ensure that all students are included?* 3) *How do I recognise my students as individuals and include their uniqueness in the lesson?* Meriah said she kept these questions in mind when she was planning the unit and felt that performance poetry would “bring out the creative juices of the students”.

Meriah’s class was diverse and multicultural. The majority of students in the class were white; there were some black and South Asian students – not the typical classroom associated with performance poetry and culturally relevant teaching. These were uncharted waters for Meriah. Not only was she engaging in an alternative form of teaching; she had never done performance poetry with predominantly white students. The make-up of the class was unique in that it did not represent the make-up of the student population at Millridge Secondary that was predominantly from racialised communities, meaning students of colour. This is, however, the reality in schools across Ontario, where racialised students are more likely to be the majority in applied and workplace bound classes.

Keeping in mind that the Ontario curriculum suggests that “there is no single correct way to teach or learn English” and assumes that the strategies and resources used will vary according to the object of the learning and the needs of the students Meriah saw this is an opportunity to be agentive and thought this would be a new and interesting way of meeting the course expectations, which included analysing “a variety of forms of writing, including poems, personal essays, narratives, stories, plays...” (2009, p. 94). This genre of writing had never been used before in the Writer’s Craft course and Meriah did not know how this was “going to play with the predominantly white students in the class” but did not tell the students the type of poetry. Instead of talking to her students about understanding “those who do not look like them” and raising their “awareness of the plight of others”, Meriah felt that performance poetry would “engage the students in critical discussions while examining the conventions of different poetic forms”.

Borrowing from Camangian (2008) and local spoken word⁵ artists, Meriah introduced the unit on performance poetry by asking students to read spoken word poetry written mainly by youths. She told the students that the “poetry would be different from the kind of poetry they were used to reading in other English classes” but she did not explain the type of poetry. She thought about using an anticipation guide ahead of the students reading the poetry, but changed her mind as she “wanted to get their raw emotions and responses”. Their task included reading the poems and critiquing against the poetic devices they had learned, and writing down their responses in their journals. The work by Camangian contained some graphic pieces such as “On the Corner”, “Weapons of Mass Destruction”, “TKO” and “We’ve Got a Gun to Our

⁵ Spoken word and performance poetry are used interchangeably in the paper.

Head". All the poems described urban life in detail in the American and Canadian context.

The initial reaction of the students was mixed. Some felt the poems were "too graphic"; others felt that "it was important to read how others youths felt". Using a "windows and Mirrors" activity (McIntosh & Style, 1997), Meriah asked the students to respond to the following questions: *How did you feel while you were reading the poems? Were you able to relate to the experiences described? If so how? If not why not?* The purpose of the questions was to get the students to think about their own identities and what they might have in common with others. The discussions around the questions were emotionally charged, as "students not only had to talk about race but admit the impact of racism in society....This was difficult for the students, but in particular the white students."

Talking about race can be difficult in the Canadian context, where people are uncomfortable talking about the topic. Lee (2009) suggests that multicultural education within the Canadian context often has come to mean a superficial response to diversity and equity, based around topics such as dances, dress, dialect and food without looking at power relations. Research has shown that lack of socialisation for whites in talking about race makes it difficult, and the same would be true for students (Copenhaver-Johnson, 2006). Initially there was not much talk among the students, particularly the white students, but as the unit progressed there was more dialogue, I imagined, as students felt safer to open up.

The activity involved students writing their responses, first in their journals, share in small groups and then with the class as a whole. Students only shared their responses when they felt comfortable enough to do. Students could respond by asking questions for greater clarification and offering suggestions. It was important to create a safe space in the classroom where students would be open to discussing their feelings, using moments of discomfort as learning without feeling they were being judged personally. Camangian (2008) speaks of the importance of creating critically discursive safe spaces in classrooms so that critically charged issues can be unpacked. In Meriah's class, some students could not "relate from their only body of lived experiences racially and socially". Some students "wrestled with assumptions and stereotypes they held about urban youths, acknowledging that they had these biases, talking about them and unpacking them".

This aspect of the teaching episode was very complex yet transformative for both Meriah and her students and yielded many insights and pedagogical steps for Meriah on how to tackle these issues in her classroom and teaching. While Meriah had regular practice classroom norms, it was important that they were followed in such an atmosphere and she found that it was important to pay special attention to creating a safe space where there would be "no emotional wounding" to her students. It was also important for Meriah to acknowledge the discomfort of some students and she allowed them to have time to reflect. It was also important for the academic aspects of the course to be foregrounded in the activities, so that students did not feel as if they were being short-changed on account of an alternative activity.

I believe that it is important to make explicit the connection between culturally relevant pedagogies and academic success and rigour. It is a process and, when

teachers de-construct, they must re-construct to ensure there is no emotional wounding of students. In one activity, Meriah asked the students to anonymously write down words that described the people and experiences in the performance poetry they had read and place them in a basket in the middle of the room. Descriptions like “gang”, “drop-out”, “criminal”, “social misfit”, “urban”, “low income”, “black”, “single-parent”, “foster home”, “drugs” and “history” were words that were placed in the basket. She then used the following questions to deconstruct the words that the students wrote anonymously. *How are they different from me? How are they like me? What do I need to learn? What do I need to unlearn?* Students talked about emotions that the poetry evoked. It was important to have these guided questions to ensure that the conversation was focused and meaningful and did not essentialise particular groups. The questions also allowed the students to make connections on many levels other than race and class, for example, age and schooling experience. She called these discussions with guided questions facilitated *discussions* and said the “the student voices and experiences became central in the learning and construction of knowledge”. The challenge for Meriah was that it took a big chunk of time from the “official” curriculum to fully address the issues raised and participate in dialogue with her students. This kind of teaching is time-consuming and emotional for some students and must be done within the limits of the curriculum. This meant that even though at times there was the need for more discussion, there just was not enough time to cover all the requirements of the course.

Following learning from the dialogue, the next step was students constructing their own performance poetry “based on their own experiences”. Meriah created the following conceptual model of critical inquiry for deconstructing performance poetry that the students used.

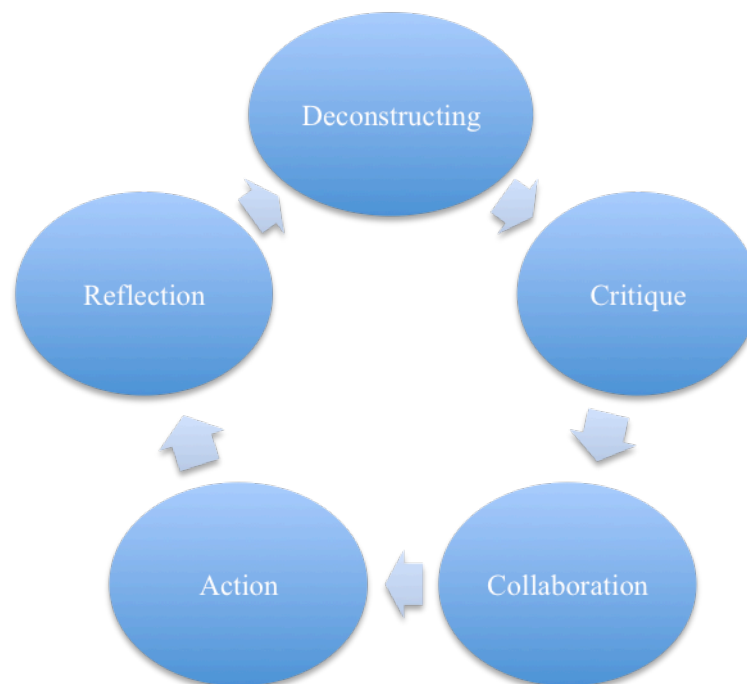


Figure 1. Conceptual model for deconstructing performance poetry

In the *deconstructing* phase, students examined the position of the author, their own biases and assumptions, and relationship to their own experiences. Through *critique*, students discussed the socio-cultural and socio-political contexts of the author and examined multiple perspectives. In *collaborative groups* the students were encouraged to share their ideas and tease out areas of cultural tension among group members, as well as tensions that arose from their own experiences. Through *action*, students developed praxis, ideas to action where they think about issues that they would like to write about in their own work. Through *reflection*, students would think about the process, the insights gained and their learnings. While the process initially created dissonance for some students, they began to make connections about the different ways that youths are marginalised and began to see how this form of writing could be used to express issues that they were facing. They became very “interested” in writing about their own experiences.

Each student was responsible for creating at least one piece of performance poetry as part of their summative assessment. The following performance poem is by Andrea⁶, who wrote about her struggles fitting in as a teenager:

Malfunction

Starts like nothing, waves lapping at an already corroded shore
 It's not like I've never been here before
 With the pressure closing in from all sides
 Compacting
 Feeling like a chemical: can't start reacting
 Feeling like the ceiling is collapsing
 I'm relapsing

It sets in
 Fear and hate at a rapid rate
 Pushing me, can't even breathe
 Suffocation like gray smoke in a red fire
 Asphyxiation, my annihilation
 Lungs working overtime to keep me alive

Terror, like a soldier cut off in enemy territory
 Like a lone explorer lost at sea
 Like a convict in isolation, gagged with tape
 But it's worse
 Can't even talk to *myself*
 Isolation in a crowded room
 On the inside looking out
 People ask me, touching me
 What's wrong
Get over it

Nothing's going through
 Raw feeling, screaming
 The only sound I can make
 Crashing on the tiled floor
 It's not like I've never been here before

⁶ Pseudonym

I've never been here before

Ship's internal; communications are down
 I am floating in the unknown
 Seeds of insanity already sown
 Like a cancer my body has turned against me
 My mind has killed itself
 What's left calls for help.

While some students in the class did not have the same urban experiences of the students in the performance poetry they read, the critical dialogue in the class caused them to start thinking in ways that connected their experiences to the world around them. For example they started to see the connections to issues that they were facing such as addiction, sexual identity, relationships, bullying and other struggles experienced by youths today. It was interesting because in some way they began to see multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination without naming it. Another student Jacinth used her critical voice and poetry to write about being bullied:

It Hurts

It hurts a lot
 And you just don't see it
 I feel weak and sick
 The things you say, the things you do
 It feels worse than you think
 A knife in my chest
 You are tearing me into a million shredded pieces
 You don't stop
 You force flowing rivers from my eyes
 Don't you get it?
 Stop calling me names
 I'm not a stupid bitch
 I'm not a slut
 Stop breaking my things
 Give it back
 Stop yelling at me
 Go away, stop calling me that
 It hurts

The discussions of the performance poetry that the students were introduced to, as Meriah suggested, “gave the students permission to speak out about injustices in their own lives”. This prompted some students to suggest that they would become more actively involved in the student councils at Millridge Secondary so that they could talk about the issues they were facing. Another student, Garfield, wrote about his struggle to belong:

Interlocking Pieces

Society is like a jigsaw puzzle
 We're all puzzle pieces, but where do we fit in
 The choices you make
 Is that your decision?
 Or are you picking out the options you are given?

The pressure of conformity is the infection
 Do not quarantine our true originality
 We have two options
 Fall in place or become an exception
 Instead of falling in your puzzle place
 Learn, search for acceptance
 Search for your place and get in for a cause

Through his poem (below), Manpreet wanted to talk about how he felt about his schooling experience and the dominance of what he describes as the “classics”. Like most of the students before the unit began, he did not feel that he was a writer nor have the skill. It was going to be another elective course, where students go through the motions, read the same “old stuff”, get a good grade for university and move on. Most of the students felt that poetry was “written by someone else, just not them” and it took a longer time for some students to get comfortable with their own writing.

I don't Wanna Read no Whack

I don't wanna read the greatest hits
 The classics
 I wanna read something that will change my whole perspective
 Simply so I can grasp it
 Critics they won't call this a poem
 They refuse to believe these are words from a pen
 Nouns, pronouns arrange in such as a manner
 Love and justice are reigned in
 As easy as peanut butter on crackers
 Let me read the truth of my patriots
 I don't wanna read no whack...

The students produced their own performance poetry as part of their summative assessment, after edits and re-writes that involved suggestions by Meriah and other students in the class. They were evaluated on poetic literary devices such as, imagery, voice, structure and organisation. All the students passed the unit, their overall grades well above previous years, with most achieving a level three and above. But most of all, their engagement and participation was greater than Meriah expected. One student wrote in her reflection how much fun the class was and that it was a “fun spin on the curriculum”.

...most of the students come into the school not liking English at all and feel it is useless... once they got to explore a new aspect of it (spoken-word), they found something in it they enjoyed...I also think that it not only put a fun spin on the curriculum, but spoken-word provokes deeper analysis...in regular literature I am limited to relating to the world inside the book, to the experiences of the characters, but in spoken-word poetry there aren't any limits to the characters' experiences...Overall I found that in listening to all of the different perspectives, it gave me a lot of insights for the future and taught me new ways of looking at literature...I felt that this was a very good learning experience and I hope to do it again in the future.

Using performance poetry as a form of critical literacy to engage in culturally relevant teaching in diverse classroom is valuable in building cross-cultural understanding, raising critical consciousness and helping students to understand how oppression works in multiple ways. Another student in her reflection journal wrote:

I never really took time to understand how other youths are feeling. I just used to listen to the news and say to myself those things do not happen in my community. I always felt that everybody could work hard like my parents did and make it...I did not really think about how racism affect people...maybe because we do not talk a lot about racism in Canada...it's like we have this multicultural thing and we are all getting along...cause we have so many people in Toronto from all over the world.

Most of the students in the class could be described as middle-class. A black student wrote in his reflection: “it was hurtful to read all the stuff”...I know that stuff happens in Toronto...but to see it written down by students ...man...made me think...I have never been pulled over by the police...but I have friends who tell me that they have been pulled over.” In one class, there was a tense discussion between South Asian students and black students on ways that they experience racism in school and the community. Meriah said she felt that the discussion, even though emotionally charged at times, helped the white students in the class better understand “how people of colour experience racism in their everyday lives”, and they talked about other issues such as “poverty”. Some of the discussions also focussed on issues such as the “high cost of university education and that some students could not afford it”. Meriah said “they could go on for days talking about the issues”.

Journal writing was a key element of Meriah’s class and it allowed the students to put their ideas down without fear of being judged and share only what they were comfortable with. It became a great tool, not only for data collection, but also for the students to see their growth. While the majority of students enjoyed the performance poetry unit, a few students in their reflection said that they would have “preferred traditional poetry that everybody understands” and felt that “too much time was spent sometimes talking about the issues”.

Within a large school and a large English department there can also be tensions around consistency, particularly when there are common final assessments. Meriah was fortunate that she was the only teacher at Millridge who taught Writer’s Craft class during that semester and that allowed her to take a bold step of presenting a genre of poetry that could be considered outside of the box, as she did not have to worry about creating a common assessment with another teacher. Another area of challenge for teachers taking on this kind of teaching practice is the area of assessment and evaluation. Meriah spent a lot of time creating new assessments and evaluation tools for the course to reflect the process described above – for example, the rubric to evaluate the reflective piece and the final pieces of performance poetry that the students created. While a discussion around the assessment and evaluation process might be useful to practising teachers, it is outside the scope of this article.

The research also had an impact on Meriah. She did not know how her class was going to respond and felt “nervous” at the start, particularly given her own identity as a black woman. She felt that the students would think that she was using this format “because she is black” and not see the “relevance to the their lives and learning”. In one of her reflections, Meriah wrote that maybe “in the end some students might think

that, but I think that is what is necessary in a multicultural country like Canada if we are to have real understanding of each other". She planned to continue with that format for the unit if she taught the course again.

She was heartened when the students performed their pieces for the class and felt that "they had become writers". One student, as a result of the writing experience, gained the courage to reveal his sexual identity to Meriah and talk about "his challenges" in the school. Some students also suggested that they "looked at things differently at the school and were on the lookout for students who bully and harass other students because they were different". According to Meriah, the use of performance poetry "gave the students permission to bring themselves into the writing process":

The use of performance poetry gave the students permission to bring themselves into the writing process in the other sections of the course. It was no longer an exercise, but truly something that mattered to them....They were given permission to speak out and inquire about other cultures...they developed an understanding of racialised youths and dismantled some of the stereotypes they held about other groups.

In many ways, Meriah found engaging her students in critical literacy "rewarding" and "overwhelming" at the same time:

I found the action research rewarding ...all along the way I didn't know what would be the effect and what to expect...when I saw the student's work I was overwhelmed ...they let me in...they learned things about themselves that they were not aware of...there was self discovery... I gained a lot of inspiration from them...it is like nurturing a plant and watch it grow...

DISCUSSION

Culturally relevant pedagogy is pertinent in multicultural classrooms, as students need to learn about experiences and points of view of people from racial groups different from their own, understanding where others are "coming from" and why (Sleeter, 2008). Research has shown that cross-cultural learning and curricula provide students with information about other groups' experiences and have a positive impact both on children of colour and white children, providing a foundation for shared citizenship in a democratic society (Hughes & Bigler, 2007).

Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2008) suggest that "nothing promotes border crossing or tolerance more than helping students arrive at an implicit understanding of what they have in common with those they have been taught to perceive as different" (p. 52). It is important for teachers to find space in the curriculum to develop agency for social justice teaching and other equitable practices that involve new genres and knowledges. Culturally relevant teaching is good teaching for *all* students, increases engagement and academic achievement and, in addition, raises students' critical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 1995a; 1995b). It is complex work within existing school systems that do not necessarily support this kind of teaching, and relies on willing teachers to take up the challenge. For example, at Millridge, Meriah was the only teacher that used performance poetry to talk about culture and ways of understanding the "other".

Culturally relevant pedagogy and critical literacy within a climate of standardisation is challenging and complex. Some teachers in English departments hold fast to the “canons” and see efforts at culturally relevant practices as “watering down” the curriculum and suggest that it is the mastery of dominant forms of writing and English that students need in order to achieve academic success. Dialogic inquiry and critical praxis can be tension-filled (Lopez, 2005; 2011).

An important question emerged from this collaborative action research: *How can this level of work be sustained?* It is important that teachers recognise that this work cannot be done alone and that collaboration is important. Sagor (2005) suggests that by forming groups of “critical friends”, teachers can assist one another through listening, questioning and collaboration. I also argue that teachers engaged in equity work must be provided with support and mentorship, what I refer to as *collaborative mentorship* (Lopez, 2005; 2011), a form of mentorship that supports and creates spaces for tensions to be unpacked outside of the traditional mentoring relationships of protégé and expert. It is also time consuming to plan new lessons, create assessment tasks and evaluation tools and find resources, and this has to be acknowledged. It is important to acknowledge that this is hard work. The research points to the importance of teachers having a critical space to engage in inquiry, and the urgency for centring and foregrounding culturally relevant practices in teacher education programs.

CONCLUSION

Diverse student populations are now one of the distinctive features of schools in North America, and curriculum and teaching practices cannot continue to exclude the experiences of students of colour if we expect all students to be successful. Implementing culturally relevant teaching can be a stormy journey for teachers in schools. It is hard work that occurs on a daily basis in the classrooms of culturally attuned teachers (Ladson-Billings, 2000). Morrell (2005) suggests that English teachers become activists in a shift towards critical English education, that demands a change in curricular content of secondary English classrooms, as well as a change in focus in literacy pedagogy, textual consumption and textual production. We cannot continue to argue for more equitable teaching practices without looking at each curriculum area and examining how changes might be made. For the teaching of English, this includes the texts that are used and how authors who are from the global majority are included in the curriculum. Teacher education and research in the teaching of English must take into account the experiences of classroom teachers like Meriah, and how they navigate the space and the curriculum to find room for literacy methods that involve their students in deep learning experiences and understanding of each other. Performance poetry involves “listening” and “hearing” to understand, and is an important way of building community.

While all students were not affected in the same way, this research aimed to connect culturally relevant pedagogy with critical literacy and provide a way for teachers to answer the question: *What does culturally relevant pedagogy look like and feel like in my English classroom?* It shows the deep learning that can take place and ways that the curriculum can be adjusted and yet remain within Ministry guidelines and policies. This is an example of teacher agency. Students successfully engaged in new forms of

writing poetry and used performance poetry to learn about the lives of others. Culturally relevant pedagogy cannot be reduced to a list of strategies and takes time. Teachers must be supported to look for new ways and multiple entry points to enact these principles and must be encouraged to research and document their experience, success, failures and tensions. It is in the classroom practices of teachers that we will find answers. Teachers must be valued as equal partners with equal voice in the research process for the knowledge that they bring to the table.

Culturally relevant teaching is not a panacea for all societal ills, but can be a starting point for change. This research is an example of how it can be operationalised in multicultural settings through challenging curricula, disrupting existing curricula, foregrounding student success, centring student voices and experiences, creating nurturing and cooperative learning environments, and raising students' critical consciousness through critical literacy. Luke (2000) describes critical literacy as inviting students to question and examine power relations between readers and writers. This kind of research into classroom practices, where we can learn from what works and how it works, is an important "take away" for teachers who need support in finding an entry point that works for them. It is the hope that we see more research on culturally relevant practices in other curricula areas, particularly the sciences. This research highlights the possibilities of engaging in teaching and learning that meets the needs of all students.

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