

Culturally Relevant Practices and Management of an ELA Teacher: A Tale of Two Classrooms

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Abstract—A culturally relevant pedagogical stance requires a complex understanding of content and culture. For English Language Arts (ELA) teachers, that complex understanding includes recognizing, valuing, and centering content from diverse authors and realizing the possible impact of that content may have on the lives of students. Teachers with such a stance use culturally relevant teaching consistently and effectively with diverse learners. Additionally, they are able to customize standards, practices, and tools based on the needs of their students—not just at the planning stages of curriculum implementation, but during implicit or explicit instruction and classroom management. Thus, this study utilizes qualitative methodology in order to profile Ms. Steck, a culturally relevant teacher, by examining the ways in which she uses culturally relevant pedagogy to inform her daily instruction and classroom management choices in two diverse learning spaces — Blocks A and D.

As classrooms mirror society, power is an inevitable force that seeks to corrupt the essence of learning communities (Foucault, 1965). The dynamic between teacher and student demonstrates that the exchange of power is part of a complex relationship in which teaching is used as a way to free students from the societal constraints of power, and to create a positive learning experience for students (hooks, 1994). Classrooms serve a paradoxical purpose in preparing all students to succeed in society, yet in many cases ignore the power dynamics that have laid the foundation for a capitalist culture. Teachers are charged with exposing students to particular content and also need to make sure every student has the chance to thrive. In order to create equitable classroom spaces, teachers need to understand, recognize, and utilize students' funds of knowledge to generate an environment where all students can benefit and thrive (Moll et al., 1994). For English Language Arts (ELA) teachers, this means knowing who your students are and creating reading, writing, performing, discussing, etc. opportunities and forging classroom environments where students function as a community of learners. Understanding the cultural foundations of people brings a relevance to

curriculum constructed by their unique backgrounds and personal expectations (Ladson-Billings, 1995). In practice, a culturally relevant pedagogy can impact the behavior of students, enabling teachers to manage the learning space in a more productive way (Gay, 2010). In addition, a culturally relevant pedagogical stance can equip ELA teachers with ways to engage students (about content and/or behavior) using languages and practices that connect with their lived experiences.

Culturally relevant teaching has been described in numerous studies as being an effective approach to facilitate the learning of African American students (Berliner, 1989; Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1992, 1994, 1995; Shulman, 1987). In addition, more recent scholarship argues that culturally relevant pedagogy is not just for African American students (Winn & Johnson, 2011). Winn and Johnson (2011) describe the potential and promise of culturally relevant pedagogy as it relates to the literacy participation for all students as humanizing, respecting, and considering the histories, perspectives, and experiences of all students as it relates to their academic success, cultural competence, and critical consciousness — outcomes to culturally relevant teaching outlined by Ladson-Billings (1995). In addition, they expand the definition in order to discuss how teachers, spaces, practices, and curriculum can be “culturally relevant” in order to provide a template for implementing this practice in literacy classrooms.

In this study, we view culturally relevant teachers as pedagogues who use culturally relevant/responsive pedagogies as part of their daily classroom practice and incorporate culturally relevant content as a part of the regular curriculum (Gay, 2010; Winn & Johnson, 2011). Identifying culturally relevant teachers can be difficult due to the dynamic nature of culturally relevant teaching and because the process of implementing and analyzing culturally relevant practice is dependent upon the stories that inform and shape practice (Gay, 2010; Rosaldo, 1989). Through stories, we learn how culturally relevant teachers act as cultural organizers, cultural mediators, and orchestrators of social contexts of learning (Diamond and Moore, 1995).

As cultural organizers, teachers understand that the inclusion of students' cultural experiences during instruction facilitate high academic achievement for all students; thus, cultivating a classroom community where learners embrace and affirm not only

their cultural differences, but those of their peers (Ladson-Billings, 2001; Nieto, 2000; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). As orchestrators of social contexts for learning, teachers recognize the influence culture has on learning by making pedagogical and management choices that are consistent with the sociocultural contexts of ethnically diverse students. For culturally relevant teachers, the classroom space and the pedagogical and management choices are based on pluralism and relationships. By enacting culturally relevant practices, ELA teachers especially are able to translate their students' cultural competencies, experiences, and knowledge into learning opportunities which supports their language and literacy development (Michaels, 1981, Moll et al., 1994, Morrell, 2008, Winn & Johnson, 2011).

NOTES ON METHODOLOGY

In order to create ethnographic narratives that described Ms. Steck's culturally relevant practice and management during two separate classes, we observed and recorded classes, took field notes, and conducted interviews. Specifically, the study was designed in order to profile Ms. Steck, a culturally relevant educator, in order to have her describe how her own identity and experiences informed her practice. We explored and analyzed the culturally relevant pedagogical and management practices of Ms. Steck in different classrooms because of the complex and dynamic nature of her culturally relevant practice and classroom management style. We observed two separate classes (Block A and Block D) nine times each over the course of the first semester of the school year. We recorded each class session and took field notes using an iPad application called "Notability". We conducted one formal interview and one follow-up interview with Ms. Steck. Each interview was transcribed in its entirety and recordings of the classroom instruction were transcribed when relevant. We coded the interview transcripts and observation protocols around culturally relevant practice and related themes

Introducing Ms. Steck and her Students

Ms. Steck is a second year teacher at Eastgate Middle School. This school serves predominantly African-American and low-income families in a small town in the south. Ms. Steck had a similar educational experience to the students she now teaches. She grew up attending Title I schools in a nearby city. She and her classmates shared similar socioeconomic backgrounds, and were of similar ethnicity. Ms. Steck remembers school being very easy for her. She could easily acquire above average grades on assignments and assessments that required rote memorization of skills over authentic thinking. Ms. Steck was placed into the Honors and Advanced Placement (AP) classes,

and was a model student in her young academic career because she was disciplined and complied with school policies. When she was in high school, she was recommended to attend a nearby magnet school that would engage her in a more rigorous college preparatory curriculum. At the magnet school, she joined the debate team for an extra-curricular activity. While on the debate team, she realized that other perspectives (from different cultures, classes, and types of people) held value and relevance in society. She learned to research and analyze perspectives outside of her own, and use their arguments to strengthen and understand her own. These experiences encouraged her to contemplate issues from a critical perspective, as she pursued her dream of becoming a teacher; she attended a local state university. Her training was traditional in subject matter and content. Like most teacher education programs, it did very little to prepare her to work with students of color and offered one multicultural education course (Phuntsog, 1999). In addition, it did not introduce her to the power of culturally relevant pedagogy in classrooms. However, she found this pedagogy through the voices of her mentors in the field and her own personal learning experiences. Ms. Steck is now at a local middle school, teaching eighth grade English Language Arts to students who share her background. She strives to give them more thought-provoking content, and make classroom instruction relevant to their lives. She has adopted a culturally relevant pedagogy to guide her teaching practice and classroom management (Ladson-Billings, 1995). She continues to pursue education (currently working on a Master's Degree) to develop her understanding and knowledge of research practices as an educator.

In an effort to include and affirm the cultural identities of her students, Ms. Steck concerned herself with the academic achievement and social well being of her students. Ms. Steck was not an ordinary teacher. She considered herself a "surrogate mother to 94 students" during the school year. Most of the students in Ms. Steck's classes were African American. In fact, she taught only one White student who was in Block A with 18 other more advanced learners — all of whom were African American.

CULTURALLY RELEVANT PRACTICE AND THE FRUITS OF LABOR

In order to facilitate high academic achievement and social understandings for all her students, Ms. Steck recognized the need to include her students' cultural experiences and understandings into her daily instruction and classroom management. Her choices looked different for Blocks A and D because the classroom culture, academic levels, and social awareness varied. Ms. Steck described Blocks A and D as "polar opposites." The students in Block A worked independently and were engaged with most class activities. Each student read at or above grade level and

participated in classwork, homework, and discussion at high rates. Students in Block D were similar to the “problem child” who kept making the same mistake repeatedly, no matter how hard the parent tried to correct it. Block D was Ms. Steck’s last class, and half of the students were well below grade level in reading/writing skills; while the other half were at grade level or above. However, as a culturally relevant teacher, she had high expectations for all of her students, no matter which class or achievement level.

In an interview with Ms. Steck, she described the achievement gap as not an achievement gap at all, but a “vocabulary and opportunity gap ... that hurt them in terms of writing and communicating with people who come from different backgrounds.” In both Blocks A and D, Ms. Steck worked on building students’ vocabulary using *Words Their Way* spelling assessments and taking the time to explain words (and allowing students to explain words) using student friendly definitions. She explains, “[the] struggle is getting them to not necessarily rid themselves of the way that they speak, but learn a new way of speaking.” Ms. Steck understood the complex relationship of language, culture, and learning and used students’ knowledge, language, and ability as an instructional resource (Delpit, 1995; Gaye, 2012; Smitherman, 2000).

Establishing a Plan for Culturally Relevant Practice

As a second year teacher motivated to manage and engage students in her classroom on her terms that were both positive and meaningful, Ms. Steck exhibited self-efficacy when working with her students. Her intentions were to make learning “real” and engaging which took a lot of planning and preparation. She used culturally relevant teaching in order to facilitate instruction and motivate her students on a daily basis. For example, once a week, Ms. Steck used stations (centers) that focused on independently engaging students in various learning activities. Block A had no problem with the structure of stations. They would work independently or in partnerships—seeking help from each other or Ms. Steck when needed. However, for the students in Block D, stations were not an option at first. In fact, using some of the eighth grade literature texts was not either. Due to the varied academic levels of many of the students in Block D, found it easier to misbehave than to contribute to or engage in the development of their learning community. Typically, learning communities are established to encourage student motivation and sense of responsibility for themselves and their peers, in Ms. Steck’s Block D class, learning communities were deliberately created in an effort to empower each student to hold one another accountable for learning and participation (Gay, 2010).

At first, the majority of the students initiated behaviors that disrupted the academic environment. Specifically, two students

with Individual Education Plan’s (IEP) embellished their “low” academic ability to gain attention from peers. The two boys seemed to thrive when others laughed about their failures. It appeared as if they wanted attention, especially from the young teacher, but did not know how to achieve this desire in positive ways, which reflected their true academic abilities. To combat the limited motivation of some of her students, Ms. Steck engaged the students in organized whole group discussion at first. She controlled and directed students’ participation in classroom activities to meet specific learning targets using her classroom instruction. However, she made a conscious choice to differentiate the content of the course from Block A. While Block A read “The Cask of Amontillado” by Edgar Allan Poe, Block D read “Thank You Ma’am” by Langston Hughes from the literature textbook. When asked about this choice, Ms. Steck discussed her desire to establish a foundation for critical thinking and identifying literary elements to help her students in Block D to develop their critical thinking skills. Although the assignments for both blocks differed, the goal remained the same for both classes; hence, she would lose Block D if she did not give them familiar reading material. Still, she demanded more academically from the students in Block D, while keeping the content familiar by using short stories she knew they had been exposed to in 7th grade.

Maintaining High Expectations from All Students

Culturally relevant pedagogy facilitates high academic achievement and social understandings for diverse learners when teachers consistently hold students accountable for meeting academic and classroom expectations (Delpit, 1995; Irvine, 2003). Early in the school year, a young boy refused to share his grammar corrections with the class, which was an unacceptable option in Ms. Steck’s class. She quietly processed his refusal, and kept moving forward with the class. As her lesson progressed, she moved to her desk, looked up something on her computer, and grabbed her phone while simultaneously taking the rest of the students through the grammar exercises. At one point, she assigned the students independent work, and stepped into the hallway with her phone. As soon as she left, the class giggled and looked at the young man who had dared to refuse Ms. Steck. When she returned to the classroom and the snickering ceased. The lesson proceeded for a few minutes, then her cell phone began to vibrate on the desk, and Ms. Steck politely excused herself and stepped into the hallway. She emerged a second later, and asked the boy who had refused her to step into the hallway because “someone wanted to speak with him.” She held out her phone to him. The entire class appeared to understand the message she was trying to send which was that participation was an expectation, not a choice. In a quiet act of discipline, Ms. Steck managed not to embarrass the young man by sharing

specifics with the class, but made him an example to everyone by reinforcing her expectations. She did this while transforming the classroom space into one that is partnered with the home community. This boy's decisions in the classroom were ones that he would suffer the consequences for at home and vice versa. School was not an isolated space, but one that interacted and had value in the real world.

Enjoying the Fruits of Labor—The Class as Community

Transforming the purpose of the classroom spoke to these students. Two weeks later, the class had already formed more of a community. We observed students passing out papers, keeping other students on track during activities, and collecting assignments at the end of the period. Ms. Steck ensured through her facilitation of instruction that the students were emancipated from some of the mundane daily classroom tasks that could lead to re-disengagement. For example, she started splitting the class into groups. One group had students who were at or above grade level, while the other group had students who needed academic and behavioral supports. In the same classroom space, Ms. Steck directed the students in the grade-level group in an activity that she facilitated, but did not provide them with direct instruction. The larger group's activity was student-centered and choice selected for implementation by Ms. Steck to keep them engaged in reading and writing. The co-teacher in the room instructed the other group and their activity was teacher-directed. From time to time, Ms. Steck stepped away from the grade-level group to allow them to assume ownership of their learning environment and to monitor the other groups' activity. At one point, after the students in the smaller group failed to follow directions she said, "Listen, a teacher might not always be there to point this out." She described to the students the connection between the groups and focused on the appropriate behavior of the other group in the same space. Her points were direct, yet relevant to students' social understanding about learning and who is responsible for that learning.

THE PROMISE OF CULTURALLY RELEVANT TEACHING

The benefits of a culturally relevant pedagogy with regards to classroom management are inherent for teachers. If this pedagogical stance is truly to be implemented by teachers the role of the teacher and student will need to be redefined in a typical classroom situation. For example, to illustrate, a culturally relevant pedagogy empowers students, and make it the job of their learning community to enforce discipline and learning standards (Gay, 2010). The teacher is the facilitator of that learning community, but it is the duty of all students to

make sure that the learning environment is rigorous and challenging. Specifically, bell hooks conveys a positive message about empowering students to own classroom settings. hooks (2003) believes that teachers and students should connect on a more personal level linked by love and understanding, which can help students feel invested in the classroom and manage their own behavior. By changing the dynamics of student-teacher relationships, a culturally relevant pedagogy places the responsibility for managing their one behavior and learning outcomes on the student (Schmeidel, 2012).

In addition, student initiated management leads to more individualized instruction opportunities, which may include more personalized behavior plans for students with emotional/special needs (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011). Furthermore, by adopting a culturally relevant pedagogy, instruction relates to the students' lives on a personal level (Irvine, 2010). A pedagogical stance which promotes academic rigor and student engagement in a classroom, manages student behavior in a manner that truly puts the individual needs of every student at the forefront of education (Paris, 2012; Weinstein, et al., 2004). Therefore, a culturally relevant pedagogy can emancipate students and teachers from the traditional roles of classroom management, individualize learning instruction, and promote student engagement, which puts the learning of each child first.

Nothing is Perfect, but Promise Remains

Productive, individualized instruction was evident in Blocks A and D because of Ms. Steck's culturally relevant pedagogy. She worked tirelessly on managing behavior using patience, setting and enforcing high expectations, and enabling students to feel empowered. Block A made steady gains and continued to grow academically — gradually increasing their content knowledge and increasing their skills in ELA. However, Block D continued in ways that Ms. Steck identified as "best for the community." For instance, when Ms. Steck was not in class, some of her students were tempted to misbehave. One day, a co-teacher who worked with Ms. Steck several days a week, took them to the library. The librarian and co-teacher struggled to keep the students "on task" during an online computer activity. One student, Matt, was threatened with police intervention if he did not display appropriate behavior. At one point, half of the class was banned from the computers and sitting at tables in the library talking with their friends. The students were not engaged in learning because of their choices and because of the teachers' inability to imagine discipline beyond physical isolation (e.g. referring to police, not being permitted to work at the computers). The discipline space reflected the students' disregard for rules, which bound students to traditional school activities and misinterpreted them as individuals. As the class ended, several students voiced their expectations to the community. They stated, "Please tell Ms.

Steck, I was good. I don't want to have to write the class code again. You don't behave that way in Ms. Steck's class."

Finally in November, Block D made it to a point where Ms. Steck felt comfortable introducing and allowing students to use stations. To get to this point, she reminded them that all of the other eighth grade students were doing stations from the beginning of the year. She made it seem like a challenge to them, a rite of passage that they needed to work toward in order to be a credible classroom community in a society of other communities. During their first attempt at stations, the students remained engaged in the task at hand; however, there were off task behaviors exhibited by some of her students. For example, the noise level gradually increased and students talked about unrelated subjects. Ultimately, during the class period, Ms. Steck focused on the positive behaviors and academic achievement when the class was too loud; she took time out to recognize students for their high quiz scores from last week. She refocused students' negative behaviors and gave them a reason to self-correct their actions or she would subtly ask them, "Do you need to move?" She placed the responsibility on the student and enabled them to make their own decision about their behavior. Her focus was not on pointing out their shortcomings, instead Ms. Steck concentrated her attention towards assisting her students in achieving mastery of their daily learning objectives. By giving them freedom and redirecting students, Block D made it through their first class period of stations. Ms. Steck's culturally relevant pedagogy was evident in her expectations and understanding of how her students' engaged in learning and what type of management the class required at that time. There were many instances students were off task in which she allowed them to be for a short period of time before creatively redirecting their attention to their assigned objective. She gave them breaks, but communicated her expectations to them in order to strengthen their learning and behavior in the academic environment.

"Ms. Steck is a good teacher": Matts' Story

One student, Matt, struggled with stations. He had a difficult time with accepting his individual responsibility that Ms. Steck gave him at the time during the small group learning. Matt was a student that needed to find his place in Ms. Steck's classroom. He had an IEP and was described as "disruptive" by other teachers and had been referred to the principal's office several times. Ms. Steck made it a point to not send him out of the class when he misbehaved. Instead, she insisted that he respect class time and dealt with his misbehavior after class—"on his time." If Ms. Steck was not paying close attention, Matt's antics were in full swing. For example, Ms. Steck provided directions to his small group, and he was not focused. As the period progressed, he kept trying to get her attention. He called her over numerous

times before she paid him any attention. When she got to him, he asked her a question and she gave him a simple answer, "Ask your group members." However, he did not. Instead, he sat, waited, looked at the instructions again, and called for Ms. Steck. After several more failed attempts to call her over, he mumbled something under his breath to vent his frustration. He knew at this point that she was deliberately ignoring his calls. Finally, she said, "I'm making my way over there." She answered two more students' questions before reaching him. At that point, he asked her to help him one more time. She said, "Sure" and asked him to do a few steps first before she assisted. The exchange between Matt and Ms. Steck continues:

Matt: But you sat behind everyone else and looked over their shoulder.

Ms. Steck: No, I didn't. I told them to do exactly what I told you to do.

Matt: No, you didn't.

Ms. Steck: Thank you, Matt.

She finally smiled at him and walked away. He later expressed to us that he felt Ms. Steck was a good teacher, but was often "distracted." At the end of the period, Ms. Steck pulled Matt aside and explained her point to him about listening and trying to do the work independently. He nodded and said, "Yes Ma'am" and proceeded to walk out of the room. Her lesson and point were clear, but whether or not Matt could direct his own academic quests in English was yet to be determined.

The well-oiled Machine—Block D as Community

Through nurturing student voices and holding students responsible for their own work, Ms. Steck transformed Block D into a productive learning environment. By December, the class stations worked like a well-oiled machine. The students came in and obtained their computers, handouts, or novels and began working. In addition, Ms. Steck made it known that it was no longer acceptable to take breaks. She kept raising her expectations for their in-class behavior in order to give them more freedom and control of their learning. With freedom came ownership and investment in the learning environment, as we observed, even students like Matt were engaged in tasks that did not require step-by-step directions from Ms. Steck. Matt was now independently directing his own learning. When he asked her questions, it was to clarify points that he independently read on his own, not to clarify her instructions. She no longer had to dodge his requests in order to make him reflect on his behavior. She quickly responded to his inquiries to keep him engaged and focused on the task at hand. He worked the entire period without disruption. This is just one example of a young man in a room full of students who were previously considered students with behavior problems that inhibited their academic achievement. Through her insistence

and struggle, Ms. Steck empowered herself and her students. Although exceptional, the students' transformation was made possible by a specific pedagogical stance, which understood Block D as a cohesive group and maintained high expectations for their learning and achievement.

DELIMITING CULTURALLY RELEVANT PRACTICE

Teachers with a culturally relevant pedagogical stance grapple with instructional and classroom management choices when working with diverse learners. The rigor of culturally relevant teaching requires that teachers make deliberate instructional decisions based on student need, connected to their lived experiences, and grounded in high expectations for all students. In other words, culturally relevant work is hard work. Ms. Steck's journey to reach this level of teaching so early in her career was not without its struggles. Many times, she expressed concern to us that she felt some of the students in Block D "were not learning." She voiced concerns and sought advice from her administration on ways she could help manage this particular group of students. She was open to any and all suggestions. Ms. Steck struggled with how differentiation of instruction should look between the two classes. She had one planning period per day to prepare for two completely different sets of students, yet both were held to the same standards. Fullan (2007) found that teachers felt they did not have the time in their workday to make changes in their instructional practice because they were asked to do so many other tasks, which kept their instructional practices stagnant. Are we supporting our teachers in developing their professional practice in skill areas such as differentiation of instruction? Or do we just assume that teachers will make time, and figure out how to differentiate curriculum between classes? How do we hold schools and teachers accountable for making the classroom an equitable learning environment?

For Ms. Steck, a culturally relevant practice provided her ways to meet and support the individual needs of students. In order to maintain professional integrity and support our diverse population of students, we must look at the importance of this pedagogical practice and how it can help us solve some of the daily issues every teacher faces.

Although Ms. Steck's experiences were challenging and all classrooms are unique, her narrative may help other teachers learn how to connect with a pedagogical stance, such as a culturally relevant practice, to assist them in managing student behavior. At the university level, we must question how we are preparing our pre-service teachers to support and collaborate with others to aid them in transforming classroom environments that support and nurture diverse learners. According to Johnson and Winn (in press), "English Education must move into a 'restorative' framework; that is, teachers (with the support of

teacher educators) must work hard to eradicate their own monolithic ideas of who youth are and who they can be and use the powerful tools of the English classroom—literature, memoir, poetry, writing, performing writing, etc.—to keep young people engaged, in the room, at the table, and in the 'circle' (see Winn, 2013, p. 128).

Ms. Steck's narrative provides us with an example of how teachers can use culturally relevant pedagogical stances to inform, support, and sustain their daily classroom practice when teaching and managing students. Moreover, with such practice we can begin to even re-imagine "management" and establish classroom communities—that is, nurturing, equitable spaces—where students become invested members and willing participants in the day-to-day teaching and learning.

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