Using their Own Stories:

A Culturally Relevant Response to Intervention

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Abstract **—** Driven by sociocultural theories, First Author, Maggie conducted a critical action research study of her attempts to enact culturally relevant practices in a Response to Intervention (RtI) reading group. A grounded theory approach informed the analysis of her data. In this paper, we theorize three themes that were generated from the data analysis. We assert that in order to prevent RtI from becoming another unsuccessful, de-contextualized, large-scale effort, teachers and students would benefit from a *culturally relevant response to intervention*—a commitment to locate the contextual contingencies in which RtI is being implemented; to pay attention to what happens in the "down time" outside of the scripted parts of RtI lessons; and to make explicit efforts to use children's own stories as the RtI texts.

During the closing of a Response to Intervention (RtI), Tier 2, Reading Group, Maggie asks the three third graders in the group, "Why do you think we are using your own stories?" Chana raises her hand and excitedly exclaims, "Because it's about our life!" Issac lifts his hands off the table, sits up straight, and chimes in as his elbows make a thud on the table in front of him, **"**It's more fun to read our stories." James' pencil stops twirling as he lays his head down on the table, his left arm is outstretched, and the tip of his pencil lightly brushes Maggie's right arm. He sighs, and then states, "Because they're my stories. I like them. They are good. I use details."

Although efforts to help students who are not reading at grade level, often labeled "struggling" readers, tend to center around the use of standardized leveled texts designed to meet the reader's needs, this interaction reveals something presumably obvious and long understood by educators—yet notably absent from large-scale remediation efforts. Students (readers in this case) tend to do better when they are allowed to work with something meaningful to them—their own stories.

This excerpt presents one glimpse of an action-research study designed to situate students' cultural and social ways of being at the forefront of literacy instruction. As the appointed literacy instructor for this small group of students, Maggie desired to do something different. Instead of positioning the students as lacking specific literacy skills and deeming them deficit, Maggie attempted to use the students' cultural and social ways of being to *drive* the learning and instruction that happened within this RtI group. This study illustrates how Cultural Relevant Pedagogy (CRP) (Ladson-Billings, 1995) can be used to guide RtI instruction. It illuminates ways in which teachers can move into culturally relevant ways of being. We believe by marrying CRP to RtI, teachers and students can *take hold of* the processes of making learning happen through and within a *culturally relevant response to intervention*.

RESPONSE TO INTERVENTION MODEL IN SCHOOLS

Response to Intervention (RtI) is a process of academic intervention used in K-12 educational settings in the United States. Introduced as an alternative method to the IQ-achievement discrepancy model, it emerged as part of the Individuals and Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA, 2004) and was used to identify students with learning disabilities (LD). It was initiated as a way of providing early intervention to all students who needed instructional assistance with specific literacy and math skills (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006).

Hallmarks of RtI include: early intervention, multi-tiered models, frequent progress measurement, and quantitative data driven decision-making (Coleman, Buysse, & Neitzel, 2006). Since 2004, and amid the current sphere of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and national educational reform movements focused on student achievement and literacy, RtI as school-wide pedagogy is being implemented in many school districts in the United States and is often esteemed as the best model to close the achievement gap **(**Batsche et al., 2005; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). The undergirding philosophy of RtI is that targeted interventions will improve students' technical skills in

reading and therefore decrease the literacy achievement gap and minimize referrals to Special Education services (Fuchs and Fuchs, 2006).

However, many scholars assert that if the RtI framework is being used as the model to close the achievement gap then the infusion of critical/culturally relevant pedagogies is vital (Ahram, Stembridge, Fergus & Noguera, 2011; Morales-James, Lopez, Wilkins and Fergus, 2012; Klinger & Edwards, 2006; Orosco, 2010; Vaughn & Fuchs, 2003). Despite the existing body of research, many RtI models do not include practices based on the tenets of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995), a concern that animated the ways in which Maggie interacted with her group of "struggling" readers.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

We are particularly drawn to Ladson-Billings' (1995) early conception of CRP as "the pedagogy of opposition, not unlike critical pedagogy but specifically committed to collective, not merely individual, empowerment" (p. 160). Based on this conception, CRP is characterized by ways of *being*, not necessarily ways of *doing*. That is, the focus is not on a specific set of instructional methods teachers need to abide by, but rather on an ethos of who the teacher is in relationship to her students and what attributes and commitments she and her students will embody. Ladson-Billings (1995) asserts that culturally relevant classrooms are marked by the following propositions:

> (a) Students must experience academic success;
> (b) Students must develop and/or maintain cultural competence; and
> (c) Students must develop a crucial consciousness through which they challenge the status quo of the current social order (p.160).

Though at first blush RtI and CRP might appear incommensurate, in this paper we suggest that it is imperative for them to be thoughtfully placed in dialogue with one another. We share the National Center for Culturally Responsive Education Systems' (NCCREST) (2005) concern that if dialogue does not occur about how "culture mediates learning," then RtI will just become another "deficit-based approach to sorting students, particularly students from marginalized communities" (2005, p.2). Moreover, we find compelling NCCREST's suggestion that a culturally responsive model of RtI must be supported by research that "account[s] for how contextual contingencies and irregularities across contexts challenge ecological validity" (p.4)

To further resist the RtI model becoming a deficit-based approach as it is enacted in urban classrooms, we use Second Author, Mark Vagle's (2012) call for educators to embrace a "contingently and recursively relational vision" of their learning (p.17). We use the contingent (profoundly contextual) and recursive (over and over, in and across time) conception of growth and change, Mark advocates in order to theorize some of Maggie's attempts to enact what we are calling a *culturally relevant response to intervention*.

Contingent, Recursive Conception of Growth and Change

In Mark's (2012) admonition of stage developmental conceptions of growth and change he suggests that a *contingently and recursively relational* conception has the potential to:

> Free up educators to spend less time seeing [youth] in a developmental (natural) frame and more time seeing [youth] in innumerable, lived (de-naturalized) contexts…that, in practice, it may not matter what a list of developmental characteristics says a boy or a girl should or should not be able to do at a particular time — especially when the list is not implicated as being based on a raced (white), classed (middle), gendered (male), and sexed (heteronormative)[i] developmental stage. What does matter is how adults and [youth] find themselves in relation to one another as they struggle (mightily perhaps) to continually learn and grow with and from one another. (p. 20)

In this way, pedagogical spaces can come to honor and utilize the plural ways in which students exist and identify themselves. From a culturally-relevant perspective, this stance moves educators away from a notion of culture as static and monolithic, and instead gives voice and respect to culture as active, fluid, and discursive--not something that you have but something that you do.

Sociocultural Views of Literacy and Learning

The same holds when one begins to imagine literacies as sociocultural practices, Brian Street (1995) explores literacy as a "social practice." Under this framework, Street rejects the idea that literacy is a collection of "neutral, technical skills," instead understanding it to be an ideological practice, "implicated in power relations and embedded in specific cultural meaning and practices" (1995, p.1). Literacy, then, is rooted in discourse communities shaped by differing ideologies, including cultural knowledge bases, practices, and values (Gee, 2000). Moreover, because discourse communities are situated within sociocultural and political contexts, access and engagement in discourse communities is not neutral and the role of power is imbedded in the relational dynamics among members. If literacy learning is situated within discourse communities, then "one must acknowledge that learning is shaped by and mired in power

relations" (Moje and Lewis, 2007, p.17). Thus, academic success is dependent upon one's access to and position within the discourse communities in elementary classrooms. How much or how little cultural factors from the home, such as language and literacy practices, complement language and literacy practices in the school impacts students' literacy acquisition (Au, 1993).

Additionally, the ways that young people make meaning from texts are influenced by many different cultural, linguistic and psychological funds of knowledge acquired through interactions with family, peers, and community members (Moll, Amanti, Neff & Gonzalez, 1992). It is instrumental that these funds of knowledge are utilized and acknowledged in classroom settings. It is the responsibility of educators to open up spaces of learning where students can make use of their everyday funds of knowledge. Together, students and teachers can draw on multiple funds to create more generative, hybrid spaces of learning within educational settings. A way to recognize the community and home cultures of students and integrate students' cultural ways of being into the everyday classroom is through a commitment to CRP (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

METHODOLOGY

Inspired by socio-cultural theories of literacy and learning, Maggie conducted a four-month critical action research study (Carr & Kemmis, 1986) of an RtI reading group and her attempts to enact culturally relevant practices in a Tier Two lesson. Her work was guided by the following questions:

> 1) How do I begin to develop culturally relevant practices that will engage students at Pleasant Elementary?
> 2) What previous pedagogical content knowledge do I bring to my teaching that is helpful? and
> 3) How do I use the praxis (action research) model to enact culturally relevant pedagogy during literacy intervention lessons?

Data Sources

Maggie met with three third grade students for 25 minutes, two times a week at a Midwestern urban elementary school (Pleasant Elementary). Data sources included observation field notes; reflexive journal entries; semi-structured interviews with the students and the classroom teacher; and student artifacts from the classroom (e.g., pieces of writing, reading logs, quantitative test scores). Data were collected and analyzed in a cyclical manner, following Freire's (1970) conception of praxis. This fluid and iterative process included five components: identify, plan, act/collect, analyze, and review/reflect (each described below in the context of Maggie's first praxis cycle). Maggie cycled through the praxis process four times.

Identify. During the first cycle, Maggie identified her purpose to document and analyze the processes of an adaptive, culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) based on her teaching practices in the reading group, and created the research questions. Next, with the help of the classroom teacher, she selected Chanha, Issac, and James to participate in this study. For the last three cycles during this stage, Maggie- identified the ways in which she shaped and modified the lesson plans for each subsequent reading intervention.

Plan. Using CRP (Ladson-Billings, 1995) and literacy pedagogical content knowledge (Shulman, 1987), the comprehension Tier Two intervention lesson, and what she learned from the previous lessons, Maggie, scrutinized her data sources and planned each subsequent reading intervention lesson.

Act/Collect. The students and Maggie participated together in a 25-minute reading intervention two times per week. Maggie collected formative data during the instructional time period via observations, questions, group discussion, graphic organizers and other student work related to the lesson, student's verbal feedback, and students' non-verbal cues. The formative data collected was used to adjust instructional practices in an effort to enact culturally relevant practices and literacy instruction.

Analyze. Data analysis procedures helped Maggie understand the complexity and nuances of the literacy practices of her students each week during the RtI reading lessons. Throughout the two months, she implemented culturally relevant practices during the RtI lessons by means of teacher instructional practices, student-centered lessons, multicultural texts, and use of the students' own writing as text.

Using standard qualitative data analysis techniques (Patton, 1990), Maggie examined her formative data from week to week. Following each RtI reading lesson, she listened to the audio recording of the lesson, took notes in her reflexive journal, transcribed audio recordings, and analyzed data across her other data sources (e.g., observation fieldnotes and student artifacts) Maggie analyzed these data sources to learn more about her enactment of CRP (Ladson-Billing, 1995) throughout the RtI reading lessons.

Revise/Reflect. Maggie reflected on the praxis process (Freire, 1970) of this critical action research study each week by writing reflexive memos, which included insights she gleaned from the reading lessons, her analysis of the data from the week, conversations with others, and ideas that she gathered from her careful readings of research and theory on

culturally relevant practices and pedagogies. Lastly, she returned to her lesson plan and revised it for the upcoming week.

Final Data Analysis

Throughout the cyclical process, Maggie remained committed to being reflexive (e.g., MacBeth, 2001) by consistently identifying her own biases and assumptions about the students' cultural, social, historical, and linguistic identities and her own ideological influences on pedagogy and practice. In addition, at various times throughout the study and after multiple readings of the transcripts and field notes to search for themes and patterns, she met with the third grade classroom teacher-- Mrs. Winters, colleagues, and professors to engage in critical discussions about the findings.

She triangulated findings from her multiple data collection strategies in an effort to accurately represent thematic findings within the study (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Using the method of open coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), she re-listened to the audio recordings of the lessons and student interviews, read through the transcripts, reflexive journal entries, field notes, and artifacts, and identified themes and patterns. Then, she met with a critical friend (Kember, Ha, Lam, Lee, Ng, Yan, & Yum, 1997) to discuss her initial coding and categorization of the ways she enacted culturally relevant practices. Next, she moved on to axial coding (Corbin &Strauss, 2008) by selecting the categories that resonated the most and also had saturation of data. She met with another critical friend and a professor to discuss the categories and questions that arose from this round of coding. Finally, she completed selective coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) of the identified focal categories (e.g. using student generated texts) to complicate and flesh out her key themes and select the data pieces to highlight in her write-up.

ENACTING A CULTURALLY RELEVANT RESPONSE TO INTERVENTION

In the remainder of this paper, we theorize three of the key themes (described as commitments) that Maggie generated in her analysis of the data. We assert that in order for RtI to avoid falling prey to becoming yet another de-contextualized and technocratic large-scale effort, elementary school teachers and their students would be well served by what we are terming a *culturally relevant response to intervention*. This approach is marked by a commitment to carefully locate the contextual contingencies in which RtI is being implemented; to pay close attention to what happens in the "down time" before, during, and after the scripted parts of RtI intervention lessons; and to make explicit efforts to use the children's own stories as the "RtI texts" whenever possible.

Cultivating Cultural Relevance by Locating Contextual Contingencies

In his final of three pleas for a contingent, recursive conception of growth and change, Mark (2012) advocates for what he terms a *difference* curriculum instead of a *sameness* (standardized) curriculum—"which does not dismiss standards, but does take hold of the standards. [He uses] *take hold* here to signal that the agency be displaced from outside authority and (re)placed into the hands of [youth] and their teachers" (p. 29).

In enacting a culturally relevant response to intervention, the Common Core State Standards and the RtI process, then, move from serving as the overarching framework for what is taught and learned to, instead, serving as a particular set of knowledge that is tied to the stories, interests, lived experiences, and contexts that students bring to their pedagogical interactions with their teachers. With this theoretical assumption in mind, we suggest that the first commitment those interested in enacting a culturally relevant response to intervention can make is to explicitly locate their RtI implementations in the multiple contexts and contingencies in which they and their students reside. To illustrate, we briefly describe some of the important ways in which Maggie contextualized her study.

Setting

Pleasant Elementary (PES) is a bustling and dynamic building full of learning, a neighborhood school located in an urban mid-western community. The hallway walls of PES are splattered with colorful murals, student work and posters, declaring, "Pleasant Elementary Pride," or espousing different positive learning affirmations such as "Never, ever, ever give up." The leadership of the principal at PES is spoken favorably of in the district. She is highly visible and it is common to see her in classrooms or walking through the hallways, and often talking with students. Many of the teachers Maggie worked with at PES are veteran teachers, and have taught at PES for multiple years. When asked about the longevity of their career at PES, they spoke to the leadership of the principal, their love for the students, and the strong community bond of teachers and staff at that school. Like its name, the school is a pleasant atmosphere in which to teach and learn.

A culturally diverse group of 585 make up the student population at PES, where it is common to hear multiple languages spoken. PES receives school wide Title 1 funding, as 84% of the students qualify for free/reduced lunch. Forty-six percent of the student population is African American, 3% is Native American, 33% is Hispanic, 3% is Asian, and 16% is White. In addition, 53% of the population is classified as English Language Learners (ELL's), from predominantly native Somali and Spanish speaking homes and 17% of the students at PES have been given an

Individual Education Program (IEP) and are enrolled in special education.

This study took place in multiple spaces within Mrs. Winters' third grade classroom. Mrs. Winters is an African-American veteran teacher. She has been teaching for 22 years and states very adamantly, "the reason I am still here is for the kids," (Reflexive Journal: 9/13/12). Mrs. Winters started teaching in a suburb and came to this urban district because; "I wanted more than just all white kids and a few black kids in my classroom," (Reflexive Journal 9/23/12). She followed the leadership of the current principal to PES from another elementary school in the district. Mrs. Winters often commented on her current teaching position in the "Special Education Academy" which meant that all of the third grade special education students were placed in her homeroom class. Mrs. Winters stated, "I like the low kids, I want to be here with them" (Reflexive Journal: 9/13/12). It was in the context of this "Special Education Academy," that Maggie worked with Mrs. Winters' students in reading intervention groups.

The 24 students in Mrs. Winters' classroom are diverse in many ways, including but not limited to race, class, and gender. This critical action research study took place on Thursdays and Fridays during the 90-minute literacy block in Mrs. Winters classroom. There were an average of four adults besides Maggie in the room: a female Special Education teacher, a female Reading Specialist, a female student teacher from a local University, and a male volunteer, Mr. C, who is Mrs. Winter's husband and comes every day to help out. Maggie's role was to provide instructional support to teachers and to work with small groups of students in Tier Two intervention groups. Throughout the study, Maggie spent approximately five months working with students in Mrs. Winters' classroom. From the beginning, Maggie felt warmly welcomed into Mrs. Winters' classroom. However, Maggie was acutely aware of her position in the classroom as a white, middle class, female graduate student from the local University.

After working in Mrs. Winters' classroom for a few weeks, Maggie approached Mrs. Winters about her interest in conducting research in the classroom. Mrs. Winters was supportive and enthusiastic about the study. Based on students' scores on the Measure of Academic Progress (MAP) test (Northwest Evaluation Association, 2003) that the school district uses to measure students skill levels in reading and writing, Chanha, Isaac and James were identified by Mrs. Winters as students who would benefit from a Tier Two reading comprehension intervention group.

Chanha

Chanha is an 8-year-old student in Mrs. Winters' homeroom class. She frequently has a smile on her face and a hug to share—she is full of joy. Her parents are both from India and her name means "happy," in her native language, a dialect of Hindi. She speaks Hindi and English at home. She has one older brother who goes to the middle school in the neighborhood and is in the same grade and class as Isaac's brother. Chanha enjoys playing with Barbie dolls, watching movies on her laptop, and writing in her diary. She always keeps her diary at home because it is private to her. Chanha likes to read non-fiction texts about technology, science, and healthcare. She is interested in how things work in different ways, and how to help other people and the earth. She enjoys reading poetry and expressing her talents through writing poems. She goes to the afterschool program at PES. It is her first year in the afterschool program and she really likes it. At the afterschool program, Chanha does her homework, reads, or does science projects. She knows a lot about healthcare and helping others with math.

Isaac

Isaac is an eight-year-old student in Mrs. Winters' homeroom class. He considers himself a writer and loves to write about the books he reads. In the classroom, Maggie has often observed Isaac so engrossed in his reading or writing that he doesn't even realize when the rest of the class is transitioning to the next activity. He is assertive with his feelings and has a warm smile. Isaac likes to play games outside with his family. They often play tag, jump rope, and baseball. He has four older brothers and two younger twin sisters. He gets along with everyone in his family. He speaks Somali and English; he does not think he speaks Somali that well, but he understands it good. He speaks mostly English with his siblings and his parents. At home, his dad gives him newspapers to read and he reads books on his iPad. He likes to read books about animals—specifically lions, bald eagles, hummingbirds and lizards. He gets annoyed when people mispronounce his name, because it sounds a lot like his brother's name and people often call him that.

James

James is an eight-year-old student in Mrs. Winters' third grade class. James is a quick talker, lively, and often will break into song when he is talking. He likes to play the Lego-Batman and Lego-Star Wars video games. His two good friends, Kamarie and Jermaine live in the apartment building close to his house. The three of them play together, often with the Skylander toys. James is very knowledgeable about Skylanders and loves to talk, think and write about them. James is an author. He wrote a book about porcupines in second grade. He is currently working on a book about fish. He likes to read books about animals. He does not like to read magazines or newspapers and he does not have a lot

of books at home. James lives with his grandmother, grandfather, and his younger sister. He refers to his grandparents as his parents and has lived with them since he was a baby. He is white and a native English speaker. He takes the bus to school. He knows a lot about creatures.

First Author

Maggie is a graduate student of Literacy Education in the department of Curriculum and Instruction at a Research One Mid-Western University. Part of her graduate assistantship work involves working as a Literacy Assistant (LA) at PES. Maggie grew up in a white, middle class family in Iowa. Both of her parents are educators and still live in Iowa. Maggie lives with her partner Elizabeth, their dog and three cats. Maggie was a fifth grade teacher for seven years. Her interests include culturally relevant pedagogy, sociocultural literacy theories, critical literacy, multicultural children's literature, new media literacies and critical participatory action research. Her rich and varied experiences in elementary classrooms in Texas and Minnesota provide her with both an understanding of and appreciation for diversity, and shape her current endeavors in graduate school.

Situating some of the contextual contingencies of those students and teachers who live and experience the RtI process is incredibly important. The RtI process itself cannot account for particulars. It needs to be contextualized in ways that resist turning reading and comprehension into something that is "applied to" individuals. Starting with contextualizing contingencies can help the students and the teacher begin to take hold of the RtI process—again, not being a receptacle for the RtI scripts, but being active meaning-makers "in and through" the process. Maggie intentionally started the teaching/learning processes of the RtI intervention group by attempting to get to know the lived experiences of the students first. The details from their social and cultural personal lives drove her instructional practices during the RtI reading group. Instead of beginning from an abstract universally based location (the RtI Tier Two script) she began from the particular by observing the students in their classroom, interviewing them, and paying attention to the specific details that make up the socio-cultural factors of their individual lives. Moreover, by paying attention to the continual interplay of these factors, Maggie guided her instructional practice throughout the praxis process, reinforcing Ladson-Billings' (1995) second proposition: "students must develop and/or maintain cultural competence" (p. 160) by establishing students' cultures and funds of knowledge as central in their experience of learning literacy.

CULTIVATING CULTURALLY RELEVANT PEDAGOGY DURING "DOWN TIME"

A second, and equally important, commitment those interested in enacting a culturally relevant response to intervention can make is to pay careful attention to moments *not* part of the formal RtI process. Many of the Tier Two RtI interventions that Maggie facilitated with younger students were created and implemented by graduate students and professors from the Reading Research Center of the local Research One university, and were, indeed, scripted. The scripted nature of the interventions proved problematic for Maggie, as she felt pulled between the scripted instructional strategies and her own beliefs that literacy methods should be responsive to the particular lived experiences and contexts young people experience and lead to equity-oriented opportunities for all.

In order to work through this tension (between scripted-ness and responsive-ness), Maggie began her work in Mrs. Winters' classroom simply observing (60-90 minutes, two days per week during the literacy block) the moment-to-moment pedagogical flow. During the first three weeks of the school year, Maggie did not meet individually with RtI groups; instead she assisted more generally on an as needed basis engaging in literacy events with students. These events included assisting with partner reading, book discussions, phonics word sorts, and reading logs and journals, and talking with students during snack time. Every day before the literacy block began the students took a 10-minute break between math and language arts to eat their healthy snack (a fruit or vegetable), and have a little bit of informal social time—*down time*. These times of break and "transition," were really important to Mrs. Winters. She recognized that her students needed time to socialize informally with each other and move around. Throughout the duration of this project, Maggie continued to come in early each day for snack time. This down time proved to be one of the most generative spaces to cultivate culturally relevant literacy practices—even though it was not "designed" or "scripted" to do so. One day, the following interaction happened as Maggie joined the class for snack time:

> **James:** I need to tell you that the green apples and the yellow apples are good. Hey guys, I forgot, what ones are the sour ones, I don't know.
> **Chanha:** I don't know, mine is the sweetest.
> **Isaac:** No, yellow is [the sourest].
> **Chanha:** Each of the apples are sweet, but some of them taste the same.
> **Maria** (another student from Mrs. Winter class in a RtI Tier Two reading fluency group with Maggie): But the ones that are really, you know, I don't know the word.
> **Maggie:** It's ok, describe it. Do you know the word in Spanish?
> **Maria:** *Agrio,* It's the one that James said.
> **James:** Sour
> **Maggie:** *Agrio* means sour in Spanish. Cool. I like these ones better too.
> **Maria:** The ones that are sour…. The sour ones make me laugh, 'cause (crunches up her face) of how your face is!

> **Maggie:** Oh, I get it, cause of how your face is.
> **Maria:** And I make mine go like this. (Maria over exaggerates what her face does when she eats a sour apple).
> *The whole group laughs.*
> **Chanha:** Your brain gets bigger and bigger. You get energy from this.
> **Maria:** Sometimes you get really hungry, and your stomach purrs, and then we get snack.
> **Maggie**: Yes, my stomach was just doing that, and Mr. C was like, do you want an apple, and my stomach was like, Yesssss! [Laughter]

In this conversation the students are actively articulating, communicating and negotiating their ideas about the taste of apples. And like many deeply meaningful literacy events (Street, 1995), the content of and motivation behind the event came from the learners and was *not scripted* ahead of time. In particular, this event involved Maria thinking about language, specifically the English language and how to use it in an appropriate literate way. This literacy event involved literate "ways of thinking" (Langer, 1991, p.13). As Judith Langer (1991) asserts:

> Literacy is the culturally appropriate way of thinking, not the act of reading or writing, that is most important in the development of literacy. Literacy thinking manifests itself in different ways in oral and written language in different societies, and educators need to understand these ways of thinking if they are to build bridges and facilitate transitions among ways of thinking. (p. 13)

Maria wanted to learn the word *sour* in English; she learned it and then used it in a relevant context. In an attempt to understand and legitimate Maria's literate "way of thinking" (Langer, 1991, p.13), Maggie validated her native language by allowing it to be a part of the curricular experience. The other students were learning the word *agrio* in Spanish and she was learning the word *sour* in English. This reciprocity of teaching and learning is a relevant part of what we do as literacy learners. If Maggie had not been a part of this conversation, she would not have been able to facilitate the entry of Maria's home language into this space. It was through being a part of the social literacy event of "snack time," that Maggie was able to cultivate culturally relevant pedagogy and seize this generative literacy learning moment.

We also suggest that the growth and change that students and Maggie experienced during this brief moment during down time is not, necessarily, attributable to a clean and linear conception of development. Instead, it represents one of an innumerable number of micro-contexts that these, and all students, experience as *blizzards of social factors* (Lesko, 2001) which contribute to their contingent, recursive growth and change—and more importantly represent a student-initiated interaction in which the students hold the important culturally linguistic knowledge. Maggie, then, became a facilitator of the ongoing understandings of not only the words themselves but also the lived and felt literacies the students associate with these words.

We also see this particular interaction as a poignant example of cultural relevance in action. That is, it demonstrates Ladson-Billings' (1995) desire to empower children individually and collectively. The RtI process, while ostensibly well suited to help students grow in their understanding and comprehensions of texts, runs the risk of dis-empowering students and de-valuing students lived experiences if pedagogical attention is only given during the reading intervention time, through the lens of the scripted RtI lessons. Maggie's commitment to pay pedagogical attention during down time did the opposite. It valued students' funds of knowledge about language and empowered them to learn with and from one another during a time—down time—not even designed for explicit teaching and learning. Yet, it arguably deepened and widened the students' comprehension.

CULTIVATING CULTURALLY RELEVANT PEDAGOGY BY "OWNING OUR OWN STORIES"

The third, and final, commitment we advocate is for teachers to make conscious attempts to draw on students' own stories when implementing formal RtI lessons. We see this as both appropriate and feasible—especially with RtI Tier Two lessons that rely heavily on the use of informational texts, and align with the CCSS (i.e. "Ask and answer questions to demonstrate understanding of a text, referring explicitly to the text as the basis for the answers, " (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.3.1). Here, utilizing the first two propositions of CRP (Ladson-Billings, 1995) by drawing on students' own stories during RtI lessons allows students to apply, dissect and refer back to their own texts and the texts of their peers. This not only enriches their reading comprehension skills but also engages them in learning about the writing styles and lives of themselves and each other. Moreover, use of the discussion-based instructional activity, Reciprocal Teaching (Brown & Palincsar, 1987) weaves the reading, writing, and speaking components of literacy together.

The instructional activity of Reciprocal Teaching has been used frequently in RtI Tier Two reading comprehension settings (Jimerson, Burns, & VanDerHeyden, 2007;Palinscar & Brown, 1986; Rosenshine & Meister, 1994). Maggie used Reciprocal Teaching (Brown & Palincsar, 1987), a discussion-based instructional activity where teachers and students work to comprehend parts of a text. In Reciprocal Teaching, four strategies are used interchangeably throughout the process: predicting, questioning, clarifying and summarizing (Palincsar & Brown, 1986). In the lesson

below, Maggie and students were working on the Predicting strategy—"hypothesizing what the author will discuss next in the text" (Palincsar & Brown, 1986, p.772).

CONTEXTUALIZING THE MOMENT

*Sitting at the orange and black circle table at the back of the room, the students and I are meeting following a ten-minute literacy mini lesson. The last time we met we were working on the comprehension reading strategy of prediction using an expository text about desert animals. I chose the desert animals' book based on the student interviews and conversations I had with students in class. The prediction lesson went well, though Chanha and James were still struggling with the difference between making predictions and asking clarifying questions. For this lesson, I decided to use the students' own narrative writing as the text (*Maggie's Field notes, 10/5/12*).*

Below is part of the discussion that took place around reading the first paragraph of a story written by Chanha about a trip to a local thrift store with her family.

Maggie: As we talked about last time, today we are going to work on making predictions using your personal narratives from Writer's Workshop. The author will read the first paragraph of their story. The three of us who are not reading the story are going to listen carefully and then make predictions about the text and what we think will happen next in the story. Can someone give us an example of what is a prediction? I know you have talked about this during reading this week and in our small group.
Chanha: A prediction is something you want to know.
Isacc: A prediction means that you guess what is going to happen.
Maggie: Ok, you guess about what is going to happen, you make a prediction about what is going to happen next in the text.
James: Sometimes they are not real or true; they are sometimes fake or false.
Maggie: Ok, so they can be real or true, or fake or false. How would you find out if it were true or false?
James: Oh well. You can try to think about if it is real or fake.
Maggie: Totally, James. Chanha is going to read the beginning of her story and then we are going to make some predictions of what we think is going to happen next.
Maggie: Chanha, tell the title of your story.
Chanha: The Bad Ride. *I am six years old. I went to Unique* [thrift store]. *I went with my uncle, my dad, my brother and me. We bought some stuff.*
Maggie: Great. What do we know you guys, what is the title of her story?
Isaac and James: The Bad Ride
Maggie: The Bad Ride. Chanha read the beginning one more time and we are going to make predictions of what we think is going to happen.
Chanha reads the beginning of the story again.
Isaac: I predict she is going to buy more stuff.
James: I went to Unique. I have been in Unique. They sell broken toys.
Maggie: Ok, so now you can even make more predictions.
Chanha: It sells electronics, toys, books, everything. It's a huge store.
Maggie: What do you think she is going to buy?
Isacc: I predict she is going to buy some food.
James: First, what day did this happen?
Maggie: Chanha, he is asking a clarifying question first.
Chanha: It was on Wednesday, 2010.
Maggie: What do you predict is going to happen, think about the title, The Bad Ride.
James: Well, it sounds like a ride in River town.
Maggie: Oh, so you are connecting it to your story about River town. But think about the setting, where is she at with her family?
Chanha: I was in Unique.
Maggie: Have you been there?
Isaac: Yes, I have been there before.
James: Yes!

With regard to cultivating cultural relevance, this brief excerpt reveals some important considerations for those interested in enacting a culturally relevant response to intervention. It works across a perceived tension between technical pedagogical practices (such as learning what it is to make a prediction when engaging with a text) and the highly relevant lived experiences students bring to and through the text. In this moment, Maggie draws out the students' prior knowledge of making predictions to make sure they enter the next aspect of the lesson prepared to apply the reading strategy they had learned. After students heard Chanha read the beginning of her story, connections with a particular place (Unique—a Thrift Store) emerged—and although the lesson remained "about" making predictions, the text Chanha shared led to much more. It led to a contextualized sharing of what Unique meant to those in the group. The literacies at play were no longer only about making predictions, but also about the social practices (Street, 1995) at play for these particular students at this particular time, in this particular context. The students *knew* this place—had bought broken toys, Barbies, books, and food there. They had lived, smelled, and breathed this physical, material space. The text Chanha offered up for predictions had deeply embedded sociocultural meanings—as another text *about* another thrift store may not have been able to elicit.

Embedding comprehension strategies such as making predictions in culturally relevant contexts is particularly important here as well, because Chanha, Isaac, and James, like most (84%) of students at Pleasant Elementary, do not see themselves and their lived experiences in most texts they are asked to comprehend at school. Meaning that when one is teaching students to comprehend, one is never *only* teaching comprehension. One is teaching students to comprehend particular texts, contexts, assumptions, meanings, power

relations, and social practices. And it is here that we see the great need for a culturally relevant response to intervention.

IMPLICATIONS

> Those who have recently set policy related to language and literacy insist that children and teachers in schools and centers live with a disconnect, with this educational paradox: There is a profusion of human diversity in our schools and an astonishingly narrow offering of curricula. (Genishi & Dyson, 2009, p.10)

Genishi and Dyson's point is particularly concerning as educational discourses have tipped heavily to standardization (e.g., Goals 2000, NCLB, Race to the Top), and even though there have been continuous efforts to tailor or differentiate (Tomlinson, 2004) instruction in order to help all children meet the standards, the default perspective is one of sameness. In one respect, this is to be expected—as the only way to "efficiently" (Kliebard, 2004) educate is to try to standardize what is taught and how it is learned. Unfortunately, teaching the "same" to all students, either through what we observe to be more reasonable standards in the Common Core, or through a concrete system such as RtI, will inevitably lead to some students being privileged (white, middle class students) and others to being marginalized (poor students of color). We have suggested in this paper that in order to avoid this dangerous trap, the cultural lived experiences of the students and the micro-contexts of their learning environments must be located and used as the very "stuff" of classroom practice.

In a culturally relevant response to intervention the aperture of evaluation and what constitutes growth is expanded. This study was based on a RtI Tier Two lesson. There is an explicit measurement of growth that is already included within the RtI model. Our plea towards a culturally relevant response to intervention is not to deconstruct the measurement and evaluation tools used within the RtI model. Our plea is a call for explicitly articulating what the RtI assessments measure and what parts of learning are left out and silenced within that measurement. This study illustrates how CRP can be used to frame and guide RtI instruction. It illuminates ways in which teachers can move into culturally relevant ways of being, and thus widen their conception of growth and change.

By connecting CRP to RtI, teachers and students can *take hold of* the processes of making learning happen through and within the RtI model. By focusing on the personal, the descriptive details, and the contextual contingencies, teachers create habits; ways of being that embody the three propositions of CRP that are put forth by Ladson-Billings (1995). This involves a different way of looking for and at evidence. It is about looking for evidence in interactions, in socio-emotional ways of being, in student-teacher engagement. A culturally relevant response to intervention helps to legitimate these forms of evidence and deems them meaningful. We are advocating for RtI lessons to be relevant from the start. We are employing CRP to see what difference it makes from a growth, relational dynamic.

Moreover, as suggested in this study for students to excel, the RtI practice has to include pieces of students' lives in spaces where their voices can come alive, lead the conversation, and make the connection between the story and themselves. Culturally relevant response to intervention reinforces the important role that teachers play in enabling and constraining discourse communities in literacy lessons through their use of discourses and conception of literacy. When teachers are given a scripted RtI literacy lesson to follow, they need to be challenged to think about how to incorporate culturally relevant practices within the lesson so that their students' backgrounds and experiences are made visible. When teachers value students' counter-narratives, they increase access and inclusivity for students who have been marginalized by school literacy practices. This is possible to do within a Culturally Relevant Response to Intervention model.

If RtI is believed to be the best intervention game in town, then there must be explicit and persistent efforts to make cultural relevance the central focus—and then RtI must serve that end. As we continue to roll out and experience the Common Core and enact large-scale interventions such as RtI, similar tensions will emerge. These standards must be carefully contextualized and used to serve students in context—not the other way around.

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