



Navigating the journey to culturally responsive teaching: Lessons from the success and struggles of one first-year, Black female teacher of Black students in an urban school



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HIGHLIGHTS

- We explore how one first year teacher navigates culturally responsive teaching.
- Findings indicate that Black teacher of Black students must evaluate perspectives of culturally responsive teaching.
- Novice teachers must learn to bridge the gap between theory and practice.
- Teachers from rural/suburban backgrounds might explore the lived experiences of urban students to be more effective.

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ABSTRACT

This exploratory case study examines the experiences of one first-year, Black female English language arts teacher and her Advanced Placement Language and Composition students. Through an exploration of her relationship with her Black students, the data reveal how she faced challenges when finding balance in her classroom management style, encountered cultural dissonance, developed teacher-student relationships, and struggled with how White, middle-class values may have shaped her classroom interactions with her students. The results of this study inform the field of teacher education and have potential implications for pre-service and inservice teachers worldwide working with students from diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds.

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1. Introduction

Every year, teacher preparation programs send candidates into the field to become teachers. After years of readings, discussions, observations, and even student teaching, novice teachers begin their first days in the classroom with stars in their eyes, digital portfolios of lesson plans, and just the “right” outfit for that first day of school. However, when the time comes to actually meet that first group of students, many novice educators are seldom prepared to simultaneously make impactful connections with students and families, while developing a classroom environment of high expectations and incorporation of students’ diverse cultural backgrounds into pedagogical practices (Clark, 2012).

As Ingersoll (2012) suggests, teacher preparation is seldom

comprehensive enough to provide “all the knowledge and skill necessary to successful teaching” (p. 47) and that on-the-job-training is really the only sufficient way to learn the significant amount of knowledge and skills required by the profession. Furthermore all teachers, regardless of racial and ethnic identification, face challenges when navigating the complex terrain of the classroom. In this paper, we discuss the experiences of one first-year, Black female teacher who struggled to implement culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2002) strategies learned during her teacher education program with predominantly African American/Black students enrolled in her Advanced Placement (AP)¹ English language arts course.

Considering the deplorable experiences of many Black students

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¹ Advanced Placement enabled students to take college-level courses and exams and earn college credit or placement while still in high school (The College Board, 2016).

in today's American education system (Kozol, 2012), what are the effective pedagogical practices behaviors of teachers who engender social and academic achievement among their Black students? How can we learn from these teachers and their struggles? While educational researchers and sociologists have sought to better understand the pedagogical and curricular decision-making skills of successful Black teachers of Black students (Delpit, 2006; Foster, 1994, 1998; hooks, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Lynn, 2006; Milner, 2006), this line of inquiry remains pertinent in today's educational terrain. This current study contributes to the existing body of research on effective Black teachers of Black students, as well as expounds on the ways in which teacher educators might improve the practices of all pre-and in-service teachers of students from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds.

Although research suggests that Black students who are taught by Black teachers (Bone & Slate, 2011; Easton-Brooks, 2014; Haycock, 2001) are often more successful than their counterparts who are taught by teachers from different ethnic² backgrounds, Gay (2000) cautions against presuming that “membership in a [racial] group is necessary or sufficient to enable teachers to do culturally competent pedagogy. This assumption is as ludicrous as assuming that one automatically knows how to teach English to others simply because one is a native speaker ...” (p. 205). Similarly, Milner (2006) suggests it is dangerous to expect Black teachers to “carry all the knowledge, skills, and commitments necessary to successfully teach African American students” (p. 90). We assert that it is important to learn how both the achievements and challenges experienced by Black teachers of Black students might have implications for the social and academic advancement of *all* students, as well as the improvement of teacher education programs preparing educators to work with students from a variety of backgrounds.

Taking up the charge to explore what we know about successful Black teachers of Black students (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Dixon, 2003; Foster, 1994; Howard, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1990; Lynn, 2006; Milner, 2006), one researcher, a self-identified White, former middle and secondary English language arts teacher, observed Tracie, a self-identified Black female teacher from a rural background, as she navigated her first-year teaching in an urban high school setting. This project commenced in order to develop a clearer understanding of the ways in which novice teachers might bridge the gap between theory learned in teacher education programs and the practice of a first teaching experience.

1.1. Research questions

Originally developed as a dissertation study, the purpose of this qualitative project was to explore the ways in which membership in a racial and ethnic group similar to that of one's students may influence one first-year teacher's experience with those students. The guiding research questions included:

1. How does one Black female teacher navigate the development of culturally responsive teaching practices in her first year of teaching?
2. How might membership in a racial and ethnic group influence the ways in which a teacher interacts with and develops culturally responsive expectations for students?

² Ethnicity is defined as the real or imagined features of group membership, typically in terms of one or other combination of language, collective memory, culture, ritual, dress and religion, amongst other features (Meer, 2014).

3. In what ways might novice teachers receive better support in their first years of teaching while implementing researched best practices for teaching?

In both the United States and internationally, this work has implications for teachers who will work with the hundreds of thousands of refugee children who experience displacement from their home countries because of civil war, famine, and economic instability. Undoubtedly, teachers working with students with backgrounds dissimilar to their own will face challenges and will negotiate the cultural and experiential dissonance of immigrant children in their classes. We suggest that by using the tenets of culturally responsive teaching, educators around the world might develop classroom communities in which diverse student populations will feel welcomed and appreciated in ways that support their social and academic progress.

1.2. Navigating race, culture, and class in the first year

1.2.1. First-year teacher

First-year teachers face numerous challenges, from navigating a new school environment to organizing their classroom and subsequently impacting student achievement (Clark, 2012; Friedman, 1996; Gavish & Friedman, 2010; Lortie, 1975). These teachers are thrust into a “sink or swim” scenario in which school bureaucracy, classroom management, student discipline, curriculum and instruction, and numerous other skills must be mastered expediently. Within this stressful and often challenging climate, novice teachers quickly “burnout,” (Haberman, 2005) leaving the classroom within the first five years, or sooner (Brill & McCartney, 2008; Donaldson, 2012; Ingersoll, 2002). With little professional support in a traditionally autonomous profession, many first-year teachers realize that they will experience successes and failures in isolation (Gavish & Friedman, 2010). Moving beyond the collaborative confines of teacher education programs, the solitary nature of teaching becomes increasingly apparent.

1.2.2. The dilemma of teacher education

Most teacher education programs do not thoroughly address the obstacles beginning teachers encounter their first year, such as how to navigate school politics, the hidden curriculum, effective methods for co-teaching in an inclusive classroom, and teaching a class of students with completely different backgrounds than the teacher. Although many traditional and alternative teacher education programs attempt to prepare highly-qualified teachers, equipping them with the requisite skills and competencies to enhance students' learning and achievement, research (Cochran-Smith, 2004; Darling-Hammond, 2000, 2013; Oakes, Lipton, Anderson, & Stillman, 2012) suggests lack of time and in-depth coursework often exacerbates the adequate preparation of future teachers.

While certain skills are best learned during on-the-job-training (Feiman-Nemser, 2001), teacher education programs must address the needs of diverse student populations (Anderson & Stillman, 2010; Cochran-Smith, 1995; Landsman & Lewis, 2011; Siwatu & Starker, 2014). The literature is rife with discussions of the importance of White teachers examining their own privilege (Delpit, 1988; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Landsman & Lewis, 2011; Sleeter, 2001), non-White teachers from middle-class backgrounds, as well as those who speak English as their first language and those who have never endured a learning or physical disability must also critically examine the role of their own privilege based on skin color, socio-economic status, language proficiency, and able-mindedness/body (Case & Hemmings, 2005; Ferguson, 2003; Grant & Sleeter, 1993; Jenks, Lee, & Kanpol, 2001; Klug, Luckey, Wilkins, & Whitfield, 2006).

1.2.3. Teachers of color and students of color

An existing argument suggests that teachers of color³ are more suited to educate students of color because of their understanding of students' cultural experiences, which make these particular educators better equipped to implement culturally responsive teaching strategies (Berlak & Moyenda, 2001; Dillard, 1994; Irvine, 1988). While teachers of color may be successful with students of color, we argue that simply pairing a student and teacher who share the same race, but not the same socio-cultural background, will not ensure student progress (Dilworth, 2012). Teachers, regardless of their racial and ethnic identification, must have knowledge and familiarity with their students' cultural backgrounds in order to be successful in classroom instruction. Though research suggests that "racial pairing" (Dee, 2004) does positively influence academic outcomes for students (Dee, 2004; Evans, 1992; Pitts, 2007), implicitly inferred is the idea of cultural awareness, which suggests that culture and class, not race,⁴ impacts student success. Achinstein and Aguirre (2008) illustrate the socio-cultural issues novice teachers of color sometimes encounter with their students of color. Perceived as cultural suspects, these new teachers are questioned and forced to negotiate unforeseen challenges and redirect their classroom instruction. This work demonstrates that a teacher's level of cultural competency, not racial and ethnic identification, is most crucial when educating diverse students.

1.2.4. Conceptual framework: culturally responsive teaching

Gay (2002) suggests that "cultural characteristics provide the criteria for determining how instructional strategies should be modified for ethnically diverse students" (p. 112), asserting that a one-size-fits-all approach must be abandoned. Instead, teachers must learn and incorporate culturally responsive teaching into their classroom instruction (Burbank, Ramirez, & Bates, 2012; Irvine, 1992; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). With a focus on classroom practice, Gay (2002) defines culturally responsive teaching as a process of "using the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively" (p. 106). Further, Gay (2010) notes that the academic for ethnically diverse students will improve when taught through their own cultural lens. Gay (2002) recommends teacher implementation of the following components of culturally responsive teaching:

- Participation in the design of culturally relevant curricula
- Demonstration of cultural caring and development of a learning community
- Cross-cultural communications
- Use of culturally congruent instructional practices

With a focus on Tracie's classroom experiences and interactions with students, this study used culturally responsive teaching as an analytic tool to critically examine Tracie's classroom strategies and practices. We propose that sharing a racial and ethnic identification with students alone does not guarantee successful outcomes for students, but that determining the appropriate cultural strategies and methods for engaging and challenging all students requires unpacking and developing culturally responsive teaching practices.

³ Teachers of color are teachers who self-identify as belonging to one or more of the following racial/ethnic groups: Black, Hispanic, Asian, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, American Indian/Alaska Native, and Two or More Races (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014).

⁴ Race is a social construction that nonetheless has very real implications and outcomes (Meer, 2014).

2. Method

This exploratory case study, approved by the Institutional Review Board at a large Research I public university in the southeastern United States, was conducted at a Title I high school over the course of one academic year from September–June 2007–08. During regular classroom observations, the first author observed Tracie, a first-year, Black female teacher as she taught AP English language and composition, a course composed mainly of Black students from an urban city with a population of over 250,000, in the southeastern United States. Early in the study, the first author visited Tracie's 90-min second block class 1–2 times per week; however, in February Tracie discovered she was pregnant and invited the first author to increase her observation and participation with the class. These observations occurred 4–5 times per week to both relieve and support Tracie during the challenging first trimester of her pregnancy. Over the course of the school year, the first author spent approximately 110 h observing and participating in Tracie's class.

Due, in part, to the complex nature of exploratory qualitative educational research, the researchers used case study method. Engaging in case study research enables participants to craft their own stories, while also providing the researcher the opportunity to interpret data through a variety of critical lenses (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003).

2.1. Data collection

The authors used qualitative research methods, which include triangulation of multiple data sources, member checking, and examination of data. This triangulation enabled the authors to identify emerging themes related to the guiding research questions and confirm the validity of the processes (Yin, 1984). All data were de-identified and pseudonyms were used for the participating teacher as well as the school, district, and city. Data, in the form of classroom observation notes, lesson plans, emails between the first author and Tracie, and interview transcripts were collected over the course of nine months while the first author interacted with and observed both the teacher and students in this classroom environment. There was no formal observation instrument (i.e. student teaching evaluation tool) used because the first author did not evaluate Tracie according to any type of programmatic requirements. Most interviews were informal conversations recorded by the first author with Tracie's permission. The questions asked during these interviews were structured in order for the author to gain insight into Tracie's educational background and to better understand Tracie's conception of and concerns regarding culturally responsive teaching and critical literacy, about which she learned and discussed in her teacher education program. Upon analysis of data, the first author requested that Tracie review content for accuracy as a means of member checking. Further, during the writing of this article, the authors communicated findings with Tracie, as well as requested an update of her teaching status and perceived areas of growth in her career. Almost eight years after data collection, Tracie reviewed the analysis and provided updates on her teaching experiences.

2.2. Data analysis

In order to contextualize situated meanings of given statements within the larger class discussions focused on issues of power, we used discourse analysis, which "is based on the details of speech or writing that are arguably deemed relevant in the situation and that are relevant to the arguments the analyst is attempting to make" (Gee, 1999, p. 88). Situational meanings within the field of

discourse analysis are “negotiated between people in and through communicative social interaction” (p. 80) and are constructed “on the spot” (p. 80) as people communicate in a given context based on past experiences.

The second author, a graduate research assistant enrolled in a doctoral program focused on Urban Education joined this project during the data analysis phase. The authors inductively analyzed the observations, emails, and interviews for themes related to culturally responsive teaching. The analysis involved multiple readings of the transcripts, identification of keywords, grouping keywords together to form codes (open coding), conceptualizing of related codes to form categories (categorical coding), and subsequent thematic development (thematic coding) that provided cogent explanations of the data.

2.3. Research site and participants

2.3.1. Tracie

Tracie began her Masters of Arts in Teaching program when she enrolled in Introduction to Teaching, a course taught by the first author. The first author was a second-year doctoral student in a PhD program focusing on culture, curriculum, and school reform at the time and taught the course as part of her graduate assistantship. Tracie gained deeper trust in the first author when she also took her English methods course the following semester while student teaching. Tracie emailed the first author when she needed feedback on units and lesson plans. Thus, over the course of one year, the first author and Tracie developed a sort of mentor/protegé relationship founded on trust and common interests in English language arts, critical literacy, and culturally responsive teaching practices.

At the time of the study, Tracie was a self-identified twenty-three-year-old, Black female first-year English teacher, who had just graduated from the Masters of Arts in Teaching program at a large, public Predominantly White Institution (PWI), in the southeastern region of the United States. Tracie was raised middle class, with both parents, who were heavily involved in her emotional and academic growth in a rural town. Tracie had very little exposure to urban life or diverse cultural experiences, as her high school student population was predominantly White and rural. While attending public high school, Tracie enrolled in AP courses and was a teacher assistant for her English class. Tracie excelled in school and admitted that she truly never felt challenged academically throughout her K-12 public schooling experience.

Tracie began attending the PWI on a full academic scholarship for promising teachers and made the commitment to teach in the state for four years upon obtaining her licensure. As a first generation college student, Tracie did not immediately excel in higher education. Although the student population at the university paralleled that of her high school, she felt detached from her peers and under-prepared for the rigor of higher education. In an interview in Tracie's classroom early in the semester, she explained to the first author that she felt very out of place and almost failed out of college in her first year.

Eventually, Tracie made connections with both Black and White students through her scholarship program, her role as a resident advisor, and membership in a service sorority. Through her service, Tracie began tutoring at Crosstown High School, which was located in a medium-sized city next to her small university town. The school, which had a predominantly Black student population, provided Tracie with an opportunity to observe in an environment where both teachers and students were Black. She also decided that she was interested in teaching “[at] a school like Crosstown because it was not as privileged, one that was difficult.” Tracie decided that the challenges that she had faced in college made her stronger; therefore, she wanted a challenge in her first year of teaching.

2.3.2. Crosstown High School: the urban student experience

Located in the southeast quadrant of Bull City between two major highways, Crosstown's student population comes both from the surrounding neighborhoods and from a vein into the middle of the urban landscape. These adolescents face similar life experiences as their peers in larger metropolitan areas throughout the United States. According to testing data for the year of the study, Crosstown High School was a “Low Performing School,” with less than 50 percent of students performing at grade level based on state-mandated academic proficiency tests. The school report card revealed that students in grades 9–12 at Crosstown scored significantly lower than district and state averages on all state mandated end-of-course tests during that academic year. Crosstown's four-year cohort graduation rate was 58.8 percent, and there was only a 49 percent participation rate in the SAT as compared to a district average of 68 percent and a state average of 63 percent. When examining the teaching workforce, 74 percent of teachers held teaching licenses, and the teacher turnover rate was 28 percent.

During the year of this study, the school had an estimated enrollment of around 1250 students. According to the School Report Card (2008), approximately 80 percent of Crosstown High School's student population self-identified as African American, while the other 24 percent of students were almost equally classified as Hispanic and Caucasian. Crosstown High School scored below state and local levels in almost every category on the state's report card, which is detrimental to the success of both students and teachers. All of this data supports the argument that Crosstown High School is an “urban” school both due to geography and school characteristics (Milner, 2012).

From September through June, the lead researcher observed and interacted with twenty-three students in Tracie's English language and composition course, a class designed to provide academically advanced students the opportunity to earn college credit through a rigorous course of study. Typically, the curriculum of an AP course challenges learners to develop an understanding of the ways in which authors use rhetorical devices to make meaning and to influence the opinion of the reader. Historically, AP language courses included works of European and White American authors, which may not be as relevant to non-White student groups as they are to the majority White students who predominantly take these courses. At the end of the course, students may opt to take an exam, for which they can earn college credit. Typically, only offered to students in the eleventh grade, sophomores at Crosstown received access to this course in order to increase the number of students of color enrolled in this level of instruction. There were nineteen female and four male students, ranging from ages 14–17-years-old. Racially, fifteen female students self-identified as Black, and four female students identified as White. Of the male participants, one identified as Asian, one as White, and two self-identified as Black.

3. Findings

When Tracie initially invited the first author into her classroom, the relationship had already been developed between the two. The first author was definitely in a position of power as she had served as Tracie's college instructor; however, over the course of the study, the relationship morphed into collegiality and friendship. In this section, we summarize the findings of this nine-month case study with Tracie and her students. Using quotes from emails, interviews, and one-on-one discussions, we describe Tracie's ongoing growth and journey as she came full circle in her analysis and application of culturally responsive teaching. We also discuss how Tracie engaged in power struggles with her students and finally recognized the importance of reinstating culturally responsive teaching in her classroom. In this analysis, we strive to capture her negotiations

with students and her own personal transformation as she attempted to effectively implement culturally responsive teaching. We present these findings chronologically in order to show Tracie's powerful journey through her maturation as a teacher and proponent of culturally responsive teaching.

In the fall semester of 2007, Tracie created a colorful, student-centered learning environment in her first classroom by posting student-made posters and writing samples on the walls beside collages of prominent figures from the Harlem Renaissance and poetry written by Maya Angelou, Nikki Giovanni, and Tupac Shakur. Tracie arranged seats in a "U" formation, where all students could see one another and easily move into collaborative groups. Tracie's classroom developed as a space where students were encouraged to share and discuss their thoughts and feelings about personal and academic experiences.

3.1. *Establishing community in a culturally responsive learning environment*

Tracie's teaching philosophy focused on developing a strong classroom community, a major component of culturally responsive teaching. In the first month of school, when Tracie emailed the first author she explained she was excited to be working at Crosstown, and she had learned the importance of developing this sort of community while she was student teaching. In September, she wrote:

It's [establishing classroom community] always the first thing I like to do ... they are so used to telling you all about their day and life, but it just makes teaching, for me, a lot easier because they are comfortable with me and I'm comfortable with them.

During this early conversation, Tracie recalled bell hooks' text, *Teaching Community* (hooks, 2003), which she read as part of her teacher education program. Tracie remembered that hooks suggested that teachers work together with students to create a space of mutuality and respect in the classroom. Tracie shared in an interview early in September:

I think that by developing community, I develop mutual respect with my students. So, they know something about me, and they offer something to me about themselves. And I think we have common ground, and in a selfish way, it helps me prepare lessons more because I know what they enjoy and what they hate.

During the beginning of each class, Tracie began with "Good News," an activity that encouraged students to share their positive experiences with classmates. Students talked about family matters, relationship issues, and altercations with other teachers. Even with an outside visitor in the class, the majority of the students openly expressed emotions of excitement, love, and exasperation. Tracie explained that this was a part of her lesson every day, her way of "keeping up with what's going on in their lives." In a personal conversation with the first author in late September, Tracie said, "If students did not feel comfortable in my class, then they may not take academic risks or discuss controversial topics."

When questioned why she spent so much instructional time with the community building activity, Tracie responded, "I thought about that, but I wanted to make sure I was able to talk to the students and hear about their lives before I ran out of time for the day." At the time, Tracie defined community building as, "the exchanging of who you are. Where you come from, what your hopes are, what your dreams are, where you want to be, what you think you are now, where you think you'll be."

As the school year progressed, Tracie fostered trust with her students by sharing her own high school and college experiences. In a conversation with the first author in October Tracie explained, "I was not the best student in the world, nor was I the best person in the world." She disclosed students found it "hilarious" that she told them the truth about her academic experience. Tracie also considered how her own approach to schooling differed from that of her students when she explained that she disliked group work and often opted to do projects by herself:

I think that because I grew up as an only child, I always liked individual work, I was never a group-work fan ... when given an assignment that made me think on my own, I always gravitated to those more so than getting up in front of the class and acting something out or getting into groups to do group project or something.

Tracie's rationale for being honest with her students was that even though she excelled in high school, she failed miserably in her first year of college. In high school, she explained, "my grades were pretty good, but I never learned to study because high school was easy." She wanted her students to understand that, "they're not perfect, and they're not going to be perfect, and part of it is by knowing someone who is older who is willing to say 'I screwed up. I made mistakes, and I almost lost my college scholarship.'" She considered herself a success story and felt that if students could identify with someone who made mistakes, but still was able to graduate from college and earn a Master's degree, they might be encouraged to do the same.

In November, after building her classroom into a community (Gay, 2002), Tracie focused on the curriculum in preparation for the AP exam that would take place in May. She assigned the first of many formal writing assignments, an analysis of an Emily Dickinson poem, and she engaged students in reading and discussion of the Puritan work ethic in *The Crucible* (Miller, 1953). Upon assessment of these papers, Tracie quickly abandoned the "Good News" part of the day and opted for a more rigorous approach to writing instruction. Tracie became exasperated—an emotion that was met with frustration and apathy from her students.

3.2. *Abandoning a student-centered, culture of community for standards-based instruction*

Tracie's teaching practice changed drastically. Similar to the personal teaching experience Delpit (1996) describes in *Skills and Other Dilemmas*, Tracie recognized that her students were not writing clear, organized essays and did not know how to express their thoughts in a manner that would benefit them on the AP exam. Tracie acknowledged that her students needed much more writing instruction, and her lessons became much more teacher-centered. She replaced the daily "Good News" sessions with grammar mini-lessons four days per week. Now students began class quietly by correcting mechanically and grammatically incorrect statements from the grammar workbook transparencies that Tracie displayed on the whiteboard in hopes of improving their writing skills.

From the end of October until the end of the academic term, Tracie's teaching style became more authoritarian, and her students rebelled against this change. In early January, Tracie explained that she altered the format of her lessons and classroom climate because, "I'm afraid the other members in the all-White English department will judge me if my students don't pass the AP exam." After observing other AP classes, she realized how much more structured and focused on the tests these teachers were. She moved around the classroom more often asking questions when

student groups ventured away from the assignments, instead of allowing activities to move at the pace of students.

Tracie began to wonder if her students were actually qualified to be in an AP course and began searching through their records; she discovered that the counselor recommended many of these students for the course in order to fill a quota for students of color enrolled in advanced courses. Tracie hypothesized that in order to fulfill an “administrative quota for the inclusion of minority students in AP courses, this group of students was placed in this course. These students were set up to fail. They are not prepared to take this course.” Tracie protested, “I did not receive proper training, administrative support, or curriculum materials to enable me or my students to be successful in achieving the goals of this course.” Thus, she admitted that she felt defeated.

3.3. *Struggling with power dynamics*

Around the middle of that first semester, Tracie also began to recognize power struggles that had developed between the female students in her classroom during whole group discussions; they had abandoned the respectful manner of discussion in which they had started the school year. Their frustration with the change in Tracie’s pedagogy meant less time to socialize and more “time on task,” which created rift between Tracie and these adolescent females. After breaking up a “very intense verbal argument” Tracie reflected in an email:

I made every student write a pledge/contract and sign it explaining how they would behave in class ... I run a much tighter ship. I ignore their complaining, and they work non-stop. They are rebelling by falling asleep, talking bad about the class, and doing poor work. It’s hurting them more than me ... I love them to death, but they have not been taught how to perform in schools.

Tracie’s statement suggests that although she shared the same racial and ethnic identification as a majority of her students, the lack of congruence between Tracie’s own educational experiences and those of her students emerged. Tracie struggled with the realization that her students may not have the same attitude toward schooling and education as herself.

3.4. *Culturally responsive teaching revisited*

In the middle of the year, Tracie moved into the community where the majority of her students lived to gain a clearer understanding of the experiences of her students. She also attended the church located in the neighborhood across the street from the school and patronized the locally owned businesses and farmer’s market where many of her students worked. Thus, Tracie was learning the cultural practices of her community through observations of parents and guardians interacting with and disciplining their children, which according to [Achinstein and Aguirre \(2008\)](#), is an essential component of better understanding of her students’ motives for behavior and learning. Although it took several months, she was eventually able to both talk with her students in the authoritative manner ([Delpit, 1996](#)) and bond with them based on a shared lived experience.

At the beginning of the second semester in late January, Tracie also thought more about how to introduce texts that would counter the White, male, dominated canon of literature. She explained that because she taught *The Crucible* (Miller, 1951) and *The Great Gatsby* ([Fitzgerald, 1925](#)) in the fall, she was no longer sure she wanted her students to read *Death of a Salesman* (Miller, 1949), which was also part of the approved reading list. During a planning session with

the first author, Tracie explained,

I’m now looking at *A Raisin in the Sun* (Hansberry, 1959); I just don’t want to drill the American Dream from the White perspective when I know we’ve been over it before. With *Raisin in the Sun*, they would explore the American Dream from the African American perspective ...

To introduce the unit, she selected supplementary texts including a slideshow of images from the Civil Rights Movement, an analysis of Langston Hughes’ poem, “Harlem” (1994) and Sam Cooke’s song “A Change is Gonna Come” (1963), all of which expressed the hopes of Black Americans throughout the 20th Century. Additionally, she implemented book clubs using multicultural reading materials featuring African American, Latino American, Chinese American, and Mexican American, male and female authors. These curricular and pedagogical decisions not only exposed her students to the counter-narrative of the American dream, but also challenged her students to see how the text positioned them. During these literary studies, students also honed their writing skills for the AP exam.

In an email sent in late January of that first year, Tracie had begun to sort out her vision for the remainder of the school year; her email demonstrated her excitement about the possibilities about using documentary film as a counter-narrative text:

Remember that wonderful documentary I mentioned called “When the Levees Broke” by Spike Lee? Using the film, students will interact in small group and large group discussions. Handouts have also been provided that include a map of New Orleans, and different plans and layouts ... I’m thinking that I could structure a research project around it where they could gather sources and write about their own viewpoints (who’s at fault, could it have been prevented, would it happen again, was the government responsible, etc.) ... This is something I’m extremely passionate about that I think the kids would benefit from researching with a critical eye!

In this email, Tracie suggested that she wanted students to understand not only the “visual and written rhetoric,” but she also hoped to engage students in a resistive reading of a more socially acceptable text: the popular news channels. Tracie challenged students to think about why the media blamed Black citizens of New Orleans for their helplessness and whether prior action could have prevented the devastating outcomes of Hurricane Katrina. When actually planning the unit in late February for implementation after the AP exam, she explained,

The unit will be centered on dialogue about the events and how the events were portrayed to the public. [They can] explore the opinions and experiences of their classmates and give them the opportunity to see their “place” in society; what changes can they make; what power they have; how can they promote change; etc., equipping students with the necessary tools to explore texts from different angles and viewpoints that they may be able to connect their personal experiences to their classroom lessons.

Then, in mid-May, after the students had taken the AP exam, Tracie introduced the curriculum for *When the Levees Broke*. After showing students the first part of the documentary film, Tracie emailed the first author to describe what transpired,

Today has been interesting so far. I simply put on the movie, didn’t say a word, and let the images speak for themselves. Many

of the kids had to leave the room, some shed a lot of tears, and still I didn't say anything. I wanted them to experience the power of the documentary without any comment from me.

Students were obviously impacted by the horrific images that many of them had not seen prior to viewing the documentary. Moved to explore why their news stations did not include the graphic images that Spike Lee infused into his story, students were given the freedom to decide how they wanted to proceed with “talking back” to the popular media's coverage of the disaster. Tracie gave students the freedom to self-select groups and the manner in which they wanted to present their thoughts and questions. The students chose to develop presentations related to the media, government and policy, and the aftermath in New Orleans post-Katrina.

Tracie ended the school year with this project that challenged her students to present their understanding of the ways the media often portrays African Americans and other minority groups. In small groups, these tenth-grade students wrote counter-narratives to the mass media presentation of Hurricane Katrina, which they performed for their peers and parents. They wrote scripts to short plays, talk show type interviews, and monologues that presented African American and impoverished citizens of New Orleans, Louisiana after the devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina. In these presentations, they did not victimize or criminalize those affected by the deadly natural disaster; instead, they evaluated the ways in which the media crafted a story of violence and provided the counter-narrative of survival. They questioned the government's delayed response to the needs of this community and challenged national and local leaders, such as President George Bush, FEMA Director Michael Brown, Governor, Kathleen Blanco, and Mayor Ray Nagin, all characters in their plays, about negligence and urgency. Tracie also invited families to the final class presentations and encouraged them to provide feedback on students' work. Overall, the presentations were powerful examples of how high school students, when given the opportunity to participate in a curriculum relevant to their moment in history, can challenge the dominant narrative presented by canonical texts and mainstream media.

3.5. Reflecting on developing culturally responsive practice

Looking back on Tracie's first year of teaching, we deduce that Tracie expected to connect with her students from the beginning because they were members of the same racial and ethnic group. Almost ten years after this initial project, Tracie reflected on her first year of teaching in a personal email, “... being Black and teaching Black students [might] help me get my foot in the door, but it pretty much stop[s] there.” Tracie recounted that her experience of being raised middle class, with both parents heavily involved in her emotional and academic growth made her lived experience vastly different from many of her students that first year. She wrote,

My students at [Crosstown], many of them at least, did not come from that background. I initially thought that my, I guess, perseverance through life as a black woman would help build and sustain a connection with students of color, but that wasn't so much the case. Past my blackness, we didn't necessarily come from a shared experience, at least not one that they could easily see.

During that first school year, when Tracie acknowledged the cultural incongruence, rural versus urban, that existed between she and her students, she was able to act. With newly discovered

awareness that influenced her interactions and responses to student behavior, Tracie incorporated supplemental critical texts and honed her ability to better implement culturally responsive teaching and classroom management.

4. Discussion

Building on the framework for culturally responsive teaching as identified by Gay (2002), we analyze Tracie's pedagogy for her first year of teaching around the following effective practices of successful teachers of Black students: Designing culturally relevant curricula; Developing culturally informed relationships and making connections with families; Cultural congruity in classroom instruction.

4.1. Designing culturally relevant curricula

In the first few months of Tracie's teaching career, she focused on traditional texts written by American authors who were mostly White. When her non-White students did not respond to these texts with interest and excitement, she decided it was time for a change.

When developing the unit around Lee's (2006) *When the Levees Broke*, Tracie envisioned an opportunity to challenge students to develop critical literacy, which in turn would help them realize that narratives counter to the dominant, media-driven stories actually existed. Milner (2006) suggests that presenting counter-narratives that legitimize the experiences of Black students validates their realities and perspectives. Tracie developed an especially keen sense of this component of successfully teaching Black students. Giroux (1985) writes that in order to expose and resist “hegemonic” (Giroux, 1985, p. 26) social structures, schools must be places where students are given the “theoretical tools” (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1985, p. 132) to examine their own socialization in the context of the greater society. Tracie used the documentary film as a text to empower students to participate in critical pedagogy in a way that engaged them in questioning social ideology, inequality, and oppressive relationships (McGregor, 2000).

Because she taught this course for a full academic year, Tracie had an entire semester to implement and practice culturally responsive strategies. Through these curricular choices, Tracie demonstrated that she understood the value of designing culturally responsive curriculum that would facilitate conversations about cultural expectations and maximize the importance of her students' backgrounds (Gay, 2002). In essence, she created a space where issues of race, class, ethnicity, gender, and culture existed and encouraged her students to conceptualize, engage, and connect with these social concepts.

Through Tracie's encouragement and purposeful development of this project, students sought to replicate the counter-narratives Lee (2006) portrayed in the film and challenge the class- and racially-imposed norms of media positioning. With the hope of restoring culturally responsive teaching to her classroom, Tracie engaged her students in examination of documentary film as a text and as a mentor text that countered the narrative presented by the major news networks.

Further, by revising the approved curriculum for her school and including this documentary film, Tracie challenged the formal plans for instruction within her school. Instead of avoiding the controversy of the topic of racism and the media, she addressed it head-on with her students, highlighting a pertinent component of culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2002). She implemented this four-week unit steeped in the development of critical literacy toward the end of the school year, only after students had taken the AP exam. This decision might indicate that while Tracie was moving toward a

more culturally responsive teaching practice, she still felt confined by the mandates and pressure of standardized testing, which does not employ cultural responsiveness.

After teaching at Crosstown for three more years, Tracie transitioned to a position at a magnet high school within the same district. Now an instructional facilitator with the school system, Tracie demonstrates for other teachers how to implement culturally responsive teaching strategies into a variety of content classrooms. When asked to recall her development as a culturally responsive teacher, almost 10 years later, Tracie reflects:

In subsequent years of teaching, by far my most dynamic lessons stemmed from texts that were culturally responsive—*Their Eyes Were Watching God*, *The Time of the Butterflies*, *Kite Runner*, *Night*, and *Native Son* and *Black Boy* were extremely dynamic lessons. For where I was teaching and who I was teaching, it was these texts and the fact that we could dialogue openly on culturally responsive texts that made my teaching so rewarding

She explains that her own implementation of culturally responsive teaching strategies “took me all types of places from discrimination, to broken families, to women’s rights and stereotypes against women.” Tracie let the experiences and backgrounds of her students guide her instructional and curricular decision-making, and she and her students reaped the reward.

4.2. Developing culturally informed relationships and making connections with families

Tracie’s realization that she had a different family structure and K-12 academic experience than her students exposed a gap in sociocultural congruity. Tracie grew up in a two-parent home and attended predominantly White schools in a rural part of the state; whereas, the majority of her students in this class were raised in single-parent homes and had almost exclusively attended schools with mostly Black students in an urban environment. Despite an existing sociocultural dissonance, Tracie understood the need for culturally informed relationships and helped her students develop trust in her by listening to stories about their personal lives. Initially, by developing a safe space where most students appeared to feel comfortable discussing private matters and not fearing judgment, Tracie fostered a sense of connectedness, community, and collaboration (Nieto, 2000).

As mentioned, during the second academic term, Tracie moved to the community in which many of her students resided. Research conducted by Boyd, Lankford, Loeb, and Wyckoff (2005) suggests that teachers typically prefer to live and teach close to their hometowns, a factor which presents challenges for urban schools as the majority of American public school teachers are White females who come from suburban and rural backgrounds (Glazier, 2003). Tracie’s decision to move to this urban school district and live among her students and their families might well have enabled her to build cultural competence she otherwise may not have developed so rapidly. Moving to her students’ neighborhood and revising her curriculum, she centered her teaching practice at the intersections of students’ home lives and school lives (Milner, 2015), an act that was responsive to the needs of her students.

Furthermore, by inviting families into the classroom for informal conversations and observations of their children, Tracie earned the trust of her students’ families. Milner (2006) suggests that cultivating these types of relationships with parents and family members helps develop a relationship of mutual respect, whereby both parents and teachers work for the benefit of the students. Tracie’s pedagogical action bridged school and home, impacting student learning.

4.3. Cultural congruity in classroom instruction

Using culturally responsive classroom management strategies and preparing rigorous instruction requires quite a balancing act. When students began to rebel against her authoritarian approach to classroom management, Tracie explained that students “have not been taught how to perform in schools,” which supports the traditional banking model that radical education activist Paulo Freire (1970) warned against in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Upset by her students’ behavior, Tracie reverted to the traditional banking model, which perpetuates the image of the teacher who assumes a didactic role at the front of the classroom and turns students “into receptacles to be ‘filled’ by the teacher,” (Freire, 1970, p. 72). This type of educational environment supports the dominant, White, middle-class ideology that is pervasive in many American public schools (Boykin, 1994; Delpit, 1988; Marx & Larson, 2012). Tracie’s own description of her schooling experience at predominantly White K-12 public schools and a public university provided a foundation for academic experience along the White mainstream paradigm, which undoubtedly affected her own perceptions of “appropriate” schooling and learning. As literature suggests, children from diverse cultural backgrounds possess different learning styles (Hale, 2016). With mounting tension between herself and her students regarding classroom instruction and practices, Tracie began reconciling her preferred learning style and the learning style of her students.

Tracie developed a greater sense of how her classroom management style was directly related to her own experiences as a product of a mostly White and middle class schooling environment. The tension created by her expectations, of students’ behavior and learning outcomes, which were products of her schooling and the reality of the behaviors and learning styles of students raised in an urban, non-White schooling environment required finding a balance somewhere in between. This process took her through several necessary steps: (a) recognition of her own biases in relation to her students’ participation in school; (b) development of knowledge of students’ cultural backgrounds; (c) engagement with texts that challenged her to develop an understanding of the broader social, economic, and political context of the educational system; (d) ability and willingness to use culturally appropriate classroom management strategies; and (e) commitment to building caring classroom communities (Weinstein, Tomlinson-Clarke, & Curran, 2004, p. 27).

Within the first two months of school, Tracie learned that she could not be both friend and teacher and that she would have to act with authority in order for her students to treat her with authority (Delpit, 1996). Although Tracie demonstrated most of the components of culturally responsive classroom practices, such as developing a community of learners, acknowledging students’ cultural backgrounds, utilizing cooperative learning groups, providing supplemental materials that highlight the contributions of ethnically diverse people, building a strong teacher-student relationship, and caring about the academic success of each student, she admits that she did not intrinsically recognize how her own educational experiences had potentially biased her against a more communal, classroom environment.

For Tracie, the communal activities that are characteristic of culturally responsive teaching were difficult and when she became a teacher, she did not excel at planning for these types of activities. When her own students began to talk during assignments that she developed for individual completion, Tracie had a difficult time reconciling their interest in sharing ideas and progress with their peers with her own K-12 academic experience of individualized learning. The continuous conversations forced her to pull in the reins in her approach to teaching and communicating with

students, causing a sort of rebellion, which was frustrating and stressful for Tracie. By having “every student write a pledge/contract,” she silenced their voices, and required them to pledge to behave in a manner set forth by her. Instead of continuing the initial practice of developing her classroom as a generative space where students felt empowered to act more independently than traditional schooling models require, Tracie stifled the development of community. The classroom became a hierarchy, where her judgment took priority. Through the adoption of this authoritarian approach to classroom management, for the next few months Tracie impeded the further development of community.

Tracie eventually reconciled her own expectations for students developed through her schooling experiences in predominantly White honors classes in a rural school setting. Although she was not a proponent of collaborative group work at the beginning of the year, she began to appreciate her students’ preference for communal activities where they could discuss what they were learning. Further, she began to build relationships with her students by sharing her own academic and personal experiences, which supported her efforts to build community with her students and their families.

5. Implications

An examination of Tracie’s experiences and interactions with her mostly African American/Black AP students reveals that novice teachers must negotiate their own identity, students’ sociocultural backgrounds, and curriculum in their search for culturally responsive teaching practice. This work establishes implications for teacher preparation and the implementation of authentic and effective culturally responsive teaching for the social and academic advancement of all students whose backgrounds may differ from their teachers.

This research suggests a need for programs that challenge teacher candidates to develop self-awareness and explore biases through extensive prerequisite courses and clinical experiences in culturally, linguistically, economically, and ethnically diverse school settings prior to teaching. Knowledge of culturally responsive teaching alone is insufficient during induction; rather, pre-service teachers must undergo cognitive development and personal experiences that interrupt and dismantle destructive biases before learning and applying culturally responsive teaching. These prerequisite courses and experiences in teacher education should address issues related to race, equity, social justice, and critical theories. Further, pre-service teachers should learn the variety of *isms*—racism, sexism, classism, ableism, anti-Semitism, heterosexism, etc. that exist and how to evaluate their own biases.

We also recommend that novice teachers in urban districts may need to be actively encouraged or educated about the advantages of living in the communities in which they teach. With these types of foundational understandings, perhaps novice teachers, as well as practicing teachers from varying cultural backgrounds, will be better equipped to bridge the classroom cultural divide and more adequately apply culturally responsive teaching.

5.1. Case for strong mentors in culturally responsive teaching

Considering the growing need for more teachers of diverse backgrounds in American public schools (Branch & Kritsonis, 2006), we recommend novice teachers be placed with strong mentors who are competent with culturally responsive teaching. Tracie explained that without having a formal mentor in her school on a daily basis, she often felt like she was failing. However, when the first author, who was her actual English methods instructor, offered to mentor her, she was able to conceptualize the tensions that developed between her personal educational experiences and

her teaching practice. Through mentorship, Tracie learned how to reflect on her practice and strengthened her own culturally responsive teaching abilities, thus redefining classroom success.

The development of an effective, highly qualified teacher who properly utilizes culturally responsive teaching occurs over time, and often with the direction and guidance of a competent, culturally-responsive veteran teacher. Through this mentoring relationship, a novice teacher can hone his or her own teaching craft and observe excellent culturally responsive teaching. Considering this need, we affirm the acknowledgement of the known and unforeseen challenges of first-year teaching and the rendering of immediate and purposeful support before and after entering the classroom, can aid in developing successful teachers of *all* students.

6. Conclusion

In this study, we sought to capture and learn from Tracie’s experiences as she navigated her first year of teaching while also implementing culturally responsive teaching practices. This case study contributes to the larger discussion regarding the need for culturally responsive teaching with students of color. More specifically, we address the dearth in the research regarding the importance of having teachers interrogate how their own educational experiences inform their teaching practices regardless of race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, gender, etc. By acknowledging the cultural dissonance that began permeating her classroom, Tracie became reflective and revised her pedagogy while renegotiating her classroom instruction. To this end, with the aid of a veteran teacher, Tracie became more effective as a culturally responsive educator. In the context of Tracie’s first year teaching experience, we recommend additional research focused on the successes and struggles of Black teachers of Black students. Only through an examination of “what works” and “what does not” can we collectively improve the academic achievement of all students.

6.1. Significance

Empirical analysis reveals how best to prepare and/or support pre-service and practicing teachers as they apply culturally responsive teaching for the purposes of student growth. For teacher educators, this study provides a glimpse into the looking glass, showing how one novice teacher developed rapport and expectations for her students, despite dissonant sociocultural backgrounds. Elements of Tracie’s story are reminiscent of the trials many teachers face inside the classroom. Although teachers possess diverse classroom narratives, there are shared commonalities that need to be represented in the literature and used to shape the future direction of teacher education programs. It is our hope that Tracie’s story stimulates discourse on teacher learning and affirms that in the classroom, sociocultural differences should bond rather than divide.

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