

Listening to ESL students' real voice: A case study of multicultural English Language Arts (ELA) classroom

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Abstract

In this case study, the researcher investigates the language used by the classroom teacher, texts, and students within literacy events, and to explore how the interaction in literacy events contributes to shaping racial identities for culturally and linguistically diverse students using critical race theory, cultural identity theory, and racial literacy theory. The researcher also explores the cultural models that are represented in the texts used in the class, the context of the classroom itself, and the effect they have on students' formation of identity and construction of racial relationships.

Keywords: ELA; literacy practices; multicultural education; critical theory; ESL

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1. Introduction

In a mixed-race school environment, racial relationships are complex and are visibly constructed through communication (Bolgatz, 2005). Classroom discussions offer opportunities for talking about race through literature. Interaction with teachers, texts, and classmates builds racial relationships and serves to construct the racial identities of students. Using Critical Race Theory, Cultural Identity Theory, and Racial Literacy theory, the researcher investigates the language used by the classroom teacher, texts, and students within literacy events, and to explore how the interaction in literacy events contributes to shaping racial identities for culturally and linguistically diverse students. The researcher also explores the cultural models that are represented in the texts used in the class, the context of the classroom itself, and the effect they have on students' formation of identity and construction of racial relationships. The findings of this study provide implications on how race and racism can be discussed meaningfully in the classroom, how teachers can help students unpack the individual and institutional racism in the texts and contexts of school, how racial literacy (Bolgatz, 2005) can be cultivated through regular literacy events, and how teachers and students can become potential agents of change.

The following questions guide the current research:

1. How do students, teachers, and texts talk about race and racism within the classroom context, and how do they contribute to notions of race and identity?
2. How do pedagogy and text shape student's understandings of who they are and what they can be?

In this study, the researcher observes and analyzes the ways in which students communicate about race and culture in an English Language Arts (ELA) classroom at a local middle school in Western Massachusetts, with an emphasis on the written and oral communications of students. This site met the needs of this study in several ways.

2. Theoretic Framework

2.1 Critical Race Theory (CRT) and critical pedagogy

CRT, a movement developed by civil rights activists who challenged dominant values of equal opportunity and justice for all by highlighting the realities of race, was introduced into educational research as a theory to examine how education policy and practice increase the racial oppression of people of color (Ladson-Billings, 1995). CRT has the following main tenets. First, CRT recognizes racism as an enduring and pervasive part of life in the United States (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). CRT scholars critique race, racism, and power especially as it is used to support and maintain an ideology of racism, and to work to challenge existing structures that reinforce racial oppression (Orbe & Harries, 2008). Second, CRT rejects dominant legal and social claims of neutrality, objectivity and color blindness as solutions to racism (Orbe & Harries, 2008). Third, CRT contends that working toward the elimination of racial oppression is a part of the broader goal of ending all forms of oppression (gender, class, sexual orientation, ethnicity, language, and immigration right) (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Fourth, CRT insists on recognition of the experiential knowledge of people of color and our communities (Orbe & Harries, 2008). Fifth, Critical Race Theory insists on a contextual/historical analysis of the law (Willis et al., 2008). These tenets are uncovered through the empirical method of "counter-storytelling", which aims to use the experiences of people of color to "cast doubt on the validity of accepted premises or myths especially ones held by the majority" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 144).

CRT acknowledge that there is an interactive relationship between people and their stories in that a person's narrative and voice represent his or her cultural and experiential knowledge, and are used to examined race, racism, and power in society (Willis et al, 2008). In this study there are two distinct stories that interact in classroom literacy events: the stories told by texts, and the stories told by students. Each has its own perspectives, social assumptions, and norms, which become evident during the interaction. The texts include two poems that present the stories of two people of color who struggle with their racial identities and one folktale that present the story of a young black girl growing up in the south in the 1930s. The students engage with the texts and literacy instruction by co-constructing their racial and ethnic identities.

Placing CRT in literacy education requires the practice of Critical Pedagogy. Critical Pedagogy suggest teaching methods and curricula that are "culturally responsive" (Gay, 2000) and teach students to question the ideologies that shape the texts they read, write and discuss (Willis et al., 2008). According to Freire (1987), teaching is a political act, one that should represent and respect multiple reading/writing of the world. He believe that consciously reading and writing the world help educate people about their reality, and support social change (Willis et al., 2008). In literacy class, critical pedagogy can be put into practice by (a) creating interdisciplinary knowledge, (b) raise questions about the relationships between marginalized and dominant groups, and (c) make curriculum responsive to the everyday knowledge and life stories (Willis et al., 2008). In this study, I will unpack how literacy learning in a middle school class uncovers the tenets of critical race theory and critical pedagogy, and help students construct their cultural identities.

2.2 Cultural Identity Theory (CIT)

Identity, according to Gee (2000), is being recognized as a certain "kind of person" in a given context. The "kind of person" one is recognized as being, at a given time and place, can change from moment to moment in the interaction, and can change from context to context. The ambiguous and unstable existence of identities is more salient in schools in the 21st century because of increasing complexity caused by the large numbers of people who have transnational experience or status, and possess multiple cultural identities. Cultural identity theory (CIT) provides a productive framework for acknowledging the existence and impact of the complexities of cultural identity. The central premise of the theory is that each individual has multiple cultural identities that are formed through discourse with others (Collier, 2000). For CIT theorists, cultural identities are "*negotiated, co-created, reinforced, and challenged through communication*" (Collier, 2002, p. 31). In this sense, a person's cultural identities are an integral part of that person's performance in society (Gee, 2000), which including finding appropriate names and labels that locate the self in socially recognizable categories (Orbe & Harris, 2008). Most often, I gain my self-identity through a process of contrasting ingroup and outgroup characteristics. In other words, I come to understand who I am as I compare and contrast myself with others. By using cultural identity theory, this study examines how middle school students define who they are by responding to literature and by interacting with teachers and classmates in literacy events.

2.3 Racial literacy

Literacy is often viewed as a context-free and value-neutral skill (Moje & Lewis, 2007). Literacy education in public schools usually avoids addressing "taboo" issues such as race and racism. Teachers often silence themselves and decide not to take risk to have conversation on race and racism with their students even when they are presenting a literature dealing with racial issues to students. Literacy lessons usually simply comprise linguistic elements, such as vocabulary, grammar, sequence of events, rhetoric figures, etc. Literacy tests continue to function as a replacement of property as a means of preserving the rights of citizenship for whites or those who are considered to own Standard English literacy skills (Rogers, Mosley, 2006). As a result, literacy, according to Ladson-Billings (2003) from a critical race theory perspective, represents a form of property. It is "property that was traditionally owned and used by whites in the society" (p. ix). Bolgatz (2005) argues the need for racial literacy, which is a set of social competencies that allow people to "*view racial issues through a critical lens that attends to current and institutional aspects of racism*" (p. 2). Bring racially literate enables people to

interact with others to break the taboos of talking about race, to challenge practice of oppression, and to appreciate diverse and unfamiliar experiences. Becoming racially literate, according to Bolgatz (2005), involves learning how to engage in talk. Carlson and Schramm-Pate's (2005) argues that talk or dialogue is an important means for discovering racism in America and for understanding that various forms of racism have developed historically. In their study on a high school class in which the teacher engaged students in risky dialogue on the Confederate Flag controversy, Carlson and Schramm-Pate (2005) found that a democratic dialogue and public debate in class can open up possibilities for rethinking the world and reconstructing the self in relation to others. Their work suggests a framework of talking about race and racism in class.

Dialogue begins with a critical, deconstructive reading of various cultural texts...the objective is to demystify these cultural texts, to reveal how they either support or context structured systems of social and economic inequality...progressive teachers and educators need to talk a fine line. One the other hand, they need to affirm the importance of certain transcendent values (equity, social justice, and human freedom, for example); and they need to actively take a stand against racism, sexism, homophobia, classism, and other forms of domination. On the other hands, progressive teachers need to resist a doctrinaire "politically correct" form of pedagogical authority, the kind that insist everyone agree on one set of truths (p. 230).

Carlson and Schramm-Pate's framework provided a foundation for this study which observes and analyzes how classroom literature discussion fosters middle school students uncover and talk race and racism. As Bolgatz (2005) argued, cultivating students' racial literacy is an ongoing process. Literacy discussions offer opportunities for teachers and students co-develop racial literacy in daily moment-to-moment dialogue.

3. Methodology

3.1 Setting

The research took place in Miltown, Massachusetts, a small urban city in the Western Massachusetts. It neighbors the largest city in Western Massachusetts, as well as a few suburban communities. Formally a mill town, this city has been rebuilt as a current urban community. The city has a predominately white population (89.82%). Other races are represented in smaller numbers respectively. The median income for a household in Miltown was \$35,672 in the 2010 census. The researcher chose one of the two middle schools in the city to conduct a study. This school caters to the grade levels 6-8 and observations were focused on an eighth grade ELA (English language arts) classroom. In a class of 21 students, I decided to study five of the students reactions, orally and written, to the curriculum and teaching style of the ELA classroom.

The participants in this study were chosen because of the ways they self-identify. I wanted to choose participants that had different racial and ethnic backgrounds to see if their responses to the literature would be similar or different from one another. The students in the study have been in the same classroom together from the beginning of this school year, but some had known each other from previous years. They were also chosen because they returned consent forms to be active participants.

3.2 Data collection

Over the course of 2 weeks, the researcher took notes on the students' discussions during class, and also prompted students with questions that would be related to the research. The researcher also collected samples of students work on the packets that were to be completed each week. Having an insider in the classroom put observations at an advantage because the researcher was able to collect honest open results from the students, as opposed to an outsider whom the students are afraid to share their feelings and narratives with.

3.3 Data analysis and discussion

The thematic unit the researcher examined in this study included four texts: two poems *Who Can be Born Black*, and *Saying Yes*, one autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, and one African-American folktale *The People Who Could Fly*. In the following section, the researcher examined these four texts by using the tenets of CRT: (a) racism as an integral part of the United States, (b) critique of color blindness, and (c) storytelling for recognition of the experiential knowledge of people of color.

3.3.1 Racism as an integral part of the United States

CRT recognizes that racism is an ordinary, ingrained feature in the United States (Orbe & Harris, 2008). It rejects a false assumption that racism exist in the past (Bonilla-Silva, 2003). I examined the four texts in this thematic unit and found that three of them present a racial binary of Black and White with no reference to other non-White ethnicities or their struggle to gain acceptance in American society (except for the poem about Asian-American identities). Also, the autobiography and folktale deal with racism and injustice as a historical concept. One of them describes racism during slavery time, and the other illustrates Southern racial relations during 1930s. The unit ignored current racial issues and segregated practice, and overlooked the ordinary, permanence of racism in policy, institutional practice, and daily interactions (Bonilla-Silva, 2003). In this unit, racism was treated as a historical construct that was predicated on the exclusion of African Americans from White (Anglo-American) institutions. By focusing on historical construct of racism and Black-White struggle, the unit left out many of the bilingual or multilingual students in the classroom. Some of the Spanish students, when asking them to identify with the characters in the poems or stories did not find themselves represented in the text. By this way they were constructed as passive recipients of equality.

3.3.2 Critique of color blindness

CRT challenges the dominant social ideology of color-blindness (Orbe & Harris, 2008). According to Bonilla-Silva (2003), race neutrality and the myth of equal opportunity ignore the reality of the deeply embedded racial stratification in the United States. Colorblind people disregard the racial characteristics and employ the "sameness as fairness" policies and practices (Bolgatz, 2005). One example of colorblind practices is that instead of attributing minorities' social standing as a result of biological and moral inferiority, the colorblind practice intends to rationalize minorities' social status as the cultural limitations or natural tendency. For instance, it suggests that Latino's lagging behind in economic status is because their relaxed work attitudes. The ideology of color-blindness seems like "non-racism" or "racism lite", but it actually perpetuates inequality that already exists (Bonilla-Silva, 2003).

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings is an autobiography about the early years of African-American writer and poet Maya Angelou. The book begins when three-year-old Maya and her older brother are sent to Stamps, Arkansas, to live with their grandmother. As a child, Maya struggled with the pain of having been rejected and abandoned by their parents, and encountered a deep-seated southern racism and segregation. Angelou used her autobiography to explore subjects such as identity, rape, racism, and literacy. The title of the story is a metaphor that the author transformed from a victim of racism into a self-possessed, dignified young woman capable of responding to prejudice. The students were only provided one chapter of the story to read for the thematic unit. This chapter is about how Maya made friend with Mrs. Flowers, an aristocrat of Black Stamps. Mrs. Flowers possesses the characteristics that Maya wants to have: graceful, beautiful, educated, and wise. She told Maya to read works of literature out loud, giving her books of poetry that help her to regain her voice. Compared to the other chapters of the story, this chapter is quite neutral in terms of the racial issue. By simply reading the provided chapter, the reader cannot get the idea of what the author attempts to address in this autobiography in terms of race, racism and power relations in society. When I look critically at aspects of curriculum, I can find that in matters of race, silence and evasion often rule the curriculum (Bolgatz, 2005). In this study, the school curriculum that provided students with the chapter that is lite in racial conflicts rather than including significant

parts of race and racism into students' text package demonstrates colorblind practice.

3.3.3 Storytelling for recognition of the experiential knowledge of people of color

CRT insists on recognition of the experiential knowledge of people of color and our communities (Orbe & Harries, 2008). It values insight grounded in the experiences of those racial and ethnic groups that have historically been marginalized. The text "*The People Could Fly*" is an American Black folktale of the slaves who possessed the ancient magic words that enabled them to fly away to escape the abuses of slavery. It also connotes that those who remained slaves and did not have the opportunity to "fly" away use only their imaginations to set them free as they told and retold this tale. The text described the historical scenes of enslaved people who worked on a plantation in the United States during slavery time. In the story, the students heard the voice of the author, Virginia Hamilton – a voice that echoes the slaves and runaways from her own American black ancestry as she tells the stories that keep the culture alive. This story can be used as a narrative of people of color that CRT highlights to help examine race, racism, racialization, and power relations in society, and revisit historical information, experiences, and explanations (Wallis et al, 2008).

However, from the worksheets attached to the story, it was seen that the main focus of them were language features. The pre-read worksheet connected students to the story by asking them to think about how they feel and how they would react if their freedom is taken away and if they are forced to work without pay. The during-read worksheet required students to identify the literary elements of the story, such as setting, characters, mood, and the sequence of events. The after-read worksheet asked students to identify the literary elements that have been mentioned above again, with asking one additional question about how their feeling might change if they heard a story about some people who were enslaved but successfully escaped. One of the functions of stories that CRT highlights is that storytelling challenges racial oppression and the status quo and can be used to "*analyze and dispel myths, assumptions, and unfounded beliefs about people of color*" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000, p. xvii). The stories not only illustrate people's experiences but "*help contextualize experiences of oppression by asking deep and searching questions of the oppressor and the oppressed that cannot be solved by Western-Eurocentric theorizing*" (Wallis et al, 2008, p. 58). At this point, the worksheets attached to the story did not allow students and the teacher to explore the racial issues during the classroom literacy event.

3.3.4 Pre-Lesson strategies

Before conducting a class which focuses on race and racial issues, teachers are need to pay attention to a mix of numerous elements. For instance, a curriculum unit, students' individual academic and social needs, unpredictable group dynamics and so on. Having venues for creating a successful class discussion, it is possible to prepare for and cultivate conversations that provide opportunities for students to critically examine race and racism. Teachers should prepare for conversations about race and racism, and the success depends on the willingness to persist in the process.

In this class, however, the teacher did not lead in-depth discussion or give opportunities to share students' background about their ethnic identities. Like other students of color, non-white students in this class were taught to perceive the dominant culture as better than their own.

However, unfortunately the teacher had no further interaction with students dealing with race and ethnic issues. She did not take further steps to initiate race talk, even though it was expected that she would need to give students room to develop strategies to consciously interrupt race and ethnic identity. After the students commented that labeling people by calling them racial slurs is offensive and a means of looking down on a certain group of people, the teacher did not extend the discussion to engage students to reflect on how I usually misunderstand others or are misled by others by stereotypes associated with labeling.

The teacher stopped the discussion after the class was in an uproar about one particular student being labeled as a racist. This was an opportunity for meaningful dialogue, if the teacher allowed for complexity, dealt

with students' emotions and encouraged in-depth conversation a powerful discussion about racism could have occurred.

It should be considered that pre service teachers or future teachers have knowledge or information on what they will do in their own classrooms 1) how to deal with these challenging racial topics, 2) how to define race and racism with the whole class, 3) how to have students articulate their arguments with rationale, 4) how to combat and/or prevent the impact of racism on young learners of color. One Puerto Rican participant revealed that her teacher had misconceptions and stereotypes about the Black students she went to school with. In the class, she felt that a great deal of the teachers' negative perceptions was developed through ignorance and a lack of interaction with the actual communities they were teaching in. To break this cycle, she added that it would always good to be able to connect with different people in different communities and get different perspectives. "Once you do that you are able to change your perspective, and then you are able to teach that to others," she said. So, by doing this, the teacher could broaden her outlook, and in turn, would be better prepared to affirm her students' identity within an extremely multicultural society and school.

4. Findings

The students that the researcher observed responded to the text in different ways orally than written. When reviewing observations, four of the five students were open to talks about race and identity when prompted by a teacher, but when asked similar questions by the text, their written answers would be somewhat different. One notable case was a student, Christian, who numerous times proclaimed his race and identity to be Puerto Rican verbally. He identified this way when peers of similar backgrounds would talk about their race and ethnicities, but on paper he identified in a different way.

The poems "Who Can be Born Black" and "Saying Yes", were grouped together along with a folktale "*The People Who Could Fly*" in Unit 1 of the ELA classroom. Every week the students are presented with a packet of questions and reflections that have a connection to the text. As any other week, the students received a packet on the poems and folktales. This packet had caught my attention due to the follow up questions. "What is your cultural background? In what ways do you think it forms your identity"? This brings us back to Christian. When he was prompted verbally he identified specifically as Puerto Rican and nothing else, but when prompted on paper he responded with seven other identities. He states the following, "French, French-Canadian, Finnish, Norse, Puerto Rican, Cherokee Indian, and Jewish". Not only does he identify with many other cultural and racial backgrounds, but he also states, "It makes up who I am".

The one student that wasn't like the others in his responses to the text was Adam. He was silent in verbal discussions of race, and seemed to make him uneasy. He would not express what he thought, until presented with the written material. Adam was a student who represented himself as a white person verbally and on paper he adds to that identity as saying he is Irish and Native American as well. In the question, "In what ways do you think this forms your identity", he said "I don't think it forms my identity in any way". Adam did not participate in the open discussions that happened before the text was presented, but if you sat with him one on one, he would open up on discussions of race.

Bolgatz (2005) had discussed some students' vocabulary issues when discussing race. "*Students fears of offending others often coincided with their lack of language to articulate ideas, and feelings related to race and racism*" (p. 108). In this case a packet that was presented after an excerpt of "Why the Caged Bird Sings" by Maya Angelou. It had an exercise on the back page that Adam answered in a different way than the other participants. The exercise prompted the students to think of the characteristics of Mrs. Flowers, a character in the story described as a black aristocrat in the 1930s. These characteristics were to be listed side by side with the characteristics of an important person in the students' life. When the characteristics of Mrs. Flowers were also a characteristic of the important person, they would be listed in a middle column between. Adam had picked his grandmother as his "important person", and listed characteristics such as nice, old, and crazy, under that column.

He also listed white as a characteristic. When reviewing his response of Mrs. Flowers he has many of the same characteristics but also used the term “colored” to describe her character. When asked about the use of the word colored, Adam responded, “*I thought they liked it better when I use that word*”. The teacher of the classroom then said told Adam to review the first paragraph of the text that describes Mrs. Flowers. He read and said, “*It says black, but I thought it sounded more racist when you say that word*”. The lack of correct vocabulary silenced Adam when it came to race discussions verbally in the classroom, because he did not want to offend anyone by saying something incorrectly.

Connecting with the text seemed to be the most difficult for all of the students observed to understand. In the poem “Saying Yes”, students were to read the poem and try and relate even though they are not Chinese-American. The teacher prompted one of the students Natalie to share her life experience, as she was originally from Puerto Rico, and now lives in the United States. Natalie shared her story but said she cannot relate to the text because she is not Chinese American. The packet then prompted the students to explain a quote from the text, “What do you think the speaker means when she says her identity is ‘not only the homes I’ve had’”. Natalie answered, “This means she lives in two countries”. It is concluded that the teacher and the text did not make the theme clear, as students only thought it was pride in the Chinese American poem.

After observations, the researcher came to the conclusion that students in the classroom observed had difficulty expressing notions of race as it forms their identities and the identities of others. Whether they were expressing verbally what they thought their identity was or writing it in response to a prompt, it proved to be difficult for the students observed to say what they really think they are.

5. Conclusion

Through this study, the researcher has reached several points about how race and racism are perceived and discussed in the classroom. First of all, what was discovered was that curriculum was gauged for a black/white demographic that did not exist in the classroom. The curriculum included three texts about historical black/white issues, and one about Asian American identity. This emphasis on a narrow demographic led to difficulty with identification among Hispanic students- the texts did not speak to their particular experiences being Hispanic. This was made apparent in student discussions of the texts. When Natalie was asked about identify in the poem “Saying Yes” she gave an answered centered not on the issue of identity specifically, but instead answered that the author “Lived in two countries.” While Natalie’s answer begins to approach the issues of identity construction discussed in the poem, it does not address them in a way that relates to her own experience or which fully explores the idea of multiple identities.

The texts regarding the Black American experience framed the discussion of race and racism within in the context of slavery in *The People Who Could Fly*, and the context of the post-slavery 1930s in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Framing the stories in a historical context may have inadvertently promoted the notions of color-blind racism, by painting racism as a thing of the past which had been resolved. A framework of color-blind racism can be seen in the written response of Adam, who wrote of his background “don’t think it forms my identity in any way.”

The lack of in depth discussion of race in Natalie’s written work, and the apparent color-blind framework in Adam’s work suggest that the written curriculum is not sufficiently responsive to the needs of the particular classroom in which it is used. While the teacher did make some effort to accommodate for the particulars of the classroom in discussion before and after reading the texts, the proscribed texts themselves proved a hindrance. If the teacher had been given greater control over curriculum, and had been given suggested poems and narratives that spoke to the Hispanic experience for Hispanic youths the unit may have been a much greater success in discussing notions of race and identity among them.

Another issue with the pedagogy of the classroom was that while race issues were touched upon, they were never discussed in great depth. This can be seen in Adam’s written and verbal response to *I Know Why the*

Caged Bird Sings. In discussing the traits of Ms. Flowers he refers to her as colored, saying he is concerned with sounding racist if he used the term black. He further went on to remain quiet on racial issues in class.

The lack of in depth discussion may have given a mixed message about race that is apparent in the students' verbal and written responses, perhaps even creating a need for multiple identities within the classroom. Both Adam and Christian identified multiple backgrounds when prompted to answer a question on their cultural background, yet maintained to their peers a different identity. Christian chose Puerto Rican to identify with orally to his peers, and Adam chose white.

Thus, it can be concluded from this data that institutional reform was necessary. The teachers in ELA in the classroom also need the training and motivation to create a responsive curriculum that accommodates the particular composition of the classroom in which they are working. Further, the institutions of schooling must allow the teachers the freedom to pursue a responsive curriculum, and encourage the development of skills necessary to create such a curriculum.

Future research could be done in a similar vein with a larger group of students and with different classroom with different demographics. It would be interesting to see how different teachers dealt with the proscribed curriculum and the demographics of their classroom. The study could also be extended to how student's discussions of race outside the classroom contrast with their discussions of race inside the classroom.

Note: All names used in this article are actually pseudonyms, used to protect privacy and identity. Ethnic labels are self-identified by participants in the study.

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