In Retrospect: Navigating Culturally Responsive Pedagogy in Teacher Education

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Abstract
In lieu of an abstract, here is the chapter's first paragraph:

This chapter discusses my attempt to implement culturally relevant teaching in a graduate literacy course to increase my teaching effectiveness and to better my relationship with my students. The discourse on culturally responsive teaching (CRT) has centered on preparing mostly White, middle-class teachers to teach in highly diverse urban classrooms (Cochran-Smith, Davis, & Fries, 2004; Gay, 2010). However, what has not been addressed in the research literature is how foreign-born teacher educators negotiate culturally responsive teaching, especially in predominately White teaching colleges. Foreign-born scholars of color may add the needed enrichment and learning opportunities necessary for novice and in-service teachers to adopt culturally responsive teaching because of their diverse life experiences and global knowledge perspective, which may help bring to the fore salient issues pertaining to cultural education (Amobi, 2004; Florence, 2010; Skerrett, 2006). However, they also face some challenges. Difference in educational backgrounds, as well as cultural and linguistic disparities can create environments fraught with misunderstanding and conflict (Amobi, 2004; Florence, 2010; Gay, 2010; Ifedi, 2009; Obiakor & Gordon, 2003. Worse still, teacher candidates might view foreign-born professors from a deficit perspective (Amobi, 2004; Florence, 2010).

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Chapter 3

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Introduction

This chapter discusses my attempt to implement culturally relevant teaching in a graduate literacy course to increase my teaching effectiveness and to better my relationship with my students. The discourse on culturally responsive teaching (CRT) has centered on preparing mostly White, middle-class teachers to teach in highly diverse urban classrooms (Cochran-Smith, Davis, & Fries, 2004; Gay, 2010). However, what has not been addressed in the research literature is how foreign-born teacher educators negotiate culturally responsive teaching, especially in predominantly White teaching colleges. Foreign-born scholars of color may add the needed enrichment and learning opportunities necessary for novice and in-service teachers to adopt culturally responsive teaching because of their diverse life experiences and global knowledge perspective, which may help bring to the fore salient issues pertaining to cultural education (Amobi, 2004; Florence, 2010; Skerrett, 2006). However, they also face some challenges. Differences in educational backgrounds, as well as cultural and linguistic disparities can create environments fraught with misunderstanding and conflict (Amobi, 2004; Florence, 2010; Gay, 2010; Ifedi, 2009; Obiakor & Gordon, 2003). Worse still, teacher candidates might view for-
eign-born professors from a deficit perspective (Amobi, 2004; Florence, 2010).

Although I was new to teaching in U.S. institutions of higher education, my background as a former high school English teacher and college instructor in Nigeria had prepared me for my job as an assistant professor in a teaching college and gave me much-needed confidence. However, as an immigrant whose formative life experiences were grounded in a different culture, I was apprehensive about what to expect in the classroom. Prior studies indicate that race matters in terms of how faculty of color experience the classroom and students' perception of their teaching effectiveness (Dixson & Dingus, 2007). Other studies (de Oliveira, Carlson, & de Oliveira, 2009) suggest that foreign-born professors can gain the trust and confidence of students when they communicate effectively, display a mastery of content, and implement a responsive pedagogy.

The need for a culturally responsive teacher education curriculum cannot be overemphasized (Arias, Garcia, Harris Murri, & Serna, 2010; Chicola, 2007; Cochran-Smith et al., 2004; Gay, 2001, 2010; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). The question of what should be the curricula focus and knowledge base for CRT has also been a subject of much discussion. All stakeholders agree that multicultural teacher education should be one of the major areas in the CRT framework. This line of thinking is consistent with Chicola's (2007) finding in her study of preservice teachers. She noted that the most widely cited problem by the preservice teachers was a "lack of cultural knowledge and the difficulty in creating a plan for applying that knowledge in their own practice" (p. 217). Arias and colleagues (2010) suggest dividing culturally responsive teaching into two broad categories: (1) working on the beliefs and values of teachers, and (2) implementing responsive teaching practices.

Teacher educators have been called upon to address the beliefs and wide-spread misconceptions that teachers have developed about diverse students and their learning (Klecka, Lin, Odell, Spalding, & Wang, 2010) by facilitating the development of sociocultural consciousness. Gay (2010) argues that a culturally responsive teacher educator should impact teacher candidates by helping them to not only become aware of cultural differences, but also to take culturally responsive educational actions and to become both advocates and activists for a socially just society. However, CRT is not restricted to multicultural teacher education. From a broader perspective, it is a multidimensional, transformative, and empowering pedagogy (Gay, 2001; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). It encompasses the learning context, classroom climate, student-teacher relationships, instructional techniques, communication, and caring. In this chapter, the term culturally responsive teaching
(CRT) refers to a comprehensive and responsive pedagogy that "encompasses practical, contextual and empirical knowledge" (Arias et al., 2010, p. 138), one in which teacher candidates join to negotiate their academic experiences and evolving world views through meaningful interaction with their professors. To implement CRT, teacher educators, like their K–12 counterparts, need to build on interests and cultural strengths of teacher candidates and understand their lives outside of school, as well as their perceptions of subject matter (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Teacher educators also need to help teacher candidates (TCs) understand the critical perspective on teaching and learning, so that they can examine the content of the curriculum from multiple perspectives and critique much of the hegemony that dominates the curriculum (Ladson-Billings, 1992).

**Background and the Teaching Context**

I came to my current position as an assistant professor with years of teaching experience at the high school and college levels in Nigeria. While teaching in Nigeria, I enjoyed the respect and admiration of my students. My first teaching appointment was in a college when I was just 21 years old. I was recruited by the college as part of a required National Youth Service, in which new college graduates are posted to different parts of the country to work for a year. I was subsequently employed by the college with the understanding that they would sponsor my master’s and doctoral programs. My students, though mesmerized at the sight of a very young teacher, were full of respect. I never encountered any problem in the few years I spent at the college, which I left when my family relocated to the southern part of Nigeria. There I taught English in a prestigious Nigerian federal government-owned high school for girls. Each academic year, as I introduced myself to a new class, the students usually erupted in dancing and singing, much to my embarrassment. My students thought I was the best and looked forward to taking classes with me. My family and I later moved to the United States, and I completed my doctoral degree in literacy education at a U.S. research university. I was subsequently employed in the literacy department of a liberal arts college, where I currently teach mostly graduate courses in literacy.

During my first semester in the college, I successfully co-taught a course with a White colleague. The course, an introductory theory, was a prerequisite for the majority of courses in the graduate literacy program, and it was dominated by sociocultural perspectives and diversity issues. When I took over the teaching of this course, I used the same syllabus, course readings, and instructional approach that my colleague and I had worked with. However, my course evaluation numbers were well below departmental and college averages,
and the qualitative comments were mostly uncomplimentary. Statements that drew my attention included: “She did not connect with her students”; “she is hard to understand”; and “the course is too theory-based and no connection to real life.” I was described by a student as the “worst professor” he had ever had. I was shocked to discover that when I taught the course alone, the outcome became quite different. It appeared that the way in which the message was perceived or received depended on who the messenger was. Ironically, during the semester, these students seemed happy and participated actively in the class, yet they dished out a vote of “no confidence” through the course evaluation. I felt as though I had been stabbed in the back. The comments and low evaluation numbers spurred me to systematically examine my beliefs, assumptions, practices, and students’ learning. At the same time, I was quick to accept that context plays an important role in a teacher’s life. It not only can create a unique teaching challenge but also serves as a background against which the teacher’s experiences must be interpreted. I quickly initiated a 14-month study to document my interactions with my students and to better understand my teaching practice.

Research Methodology

In four semesters, a total of 65 TCs, of whom 98% were European Americans, participated in the study. I collected data from online surveys, students’ reflective papers, my reflective journal, and students’ course evaluation. The most important tool was my reflective journal, in which I analyzed my sense-making of the teaching and learning process for each class session. Entry into this journal generally followed Hiebert, Morris, Berk, and Jansen’s (2007) four-step framework for analyzing each teaching session, which included setting learning goals, assessing if the goals were achieved, developing a hypothesis about why the lesson did or did not work well, and revising the lesson on the basis of the hypothesis.

For each lesson, I analyzed the classroom climate, interaction patterns, students’ questions, and the nature of their response to my own questions. Summary statements were usually entered in my journal. The same evaluation process was applied to each topic covered and each semester completed. In addition, the students’ end-of-semester reflection papers provided data about their perception of their learning and interaction with me for the entire semester. The reflection required the TCs to discuss how the course shaped, changed, or did not change their thinking, beliefs, and knowledge about literacy, diversity, and culture. They were also asked to discuss readings, activities, or projects that had had the most impact on their learning, the challenges they faced, and suggestions for improvement. Finally, the students’
course evaluation at the end of each semester provided some quantitative and qualitative data about their opinion of the effectiveness of instruction and their learning experiences, and this helped me to assess my teaching and students’ learning in the course.

In implementing the CRT, I employed a self-study methodology (Loughran, 2007). This involved going beyond thinking about my dilemma to asking questions about my work as a teacher educator. It also involved recognizing the politically regulated educational spaces, subjectivities, contradictions, and conflicts (Brunner, 1994) that teacher educators face. Teacher educators are increasingly using self-study to examine and improve their beliefs about teaching and the learning process in both K–12 and college contexts, including inquiry into issues of diversity and cross-cultural teaching and learning (Skerrett, 2006). The self-study perspective helped me to generate questions that are pertinent to this study, such as: How do I improve my teaching practice to make it responsive to the needs of the candidates? How can I help my TCs acquire cultural knowledge? What role, if any, do my race, gender and prior experiences play in my pedagogy and students’ perception of my teaching effectiveness? How can these identifiers be used positively in my teaching?

In studying my practice, I was involved in a cyclical process of inquiry, awareness, reflection, and refinement. By asking questions, I became more aware of the impact of my instructional decisions and interactions with students. In analyzing the data, I read through all the information I collected including the surveys, students’ reflections, and my reflective journal to determine both the perspective of the TCs and my own interpretation of the data. The findings were synthesized and themes were deduced, as discussed in the next section.

Making Sense of the Puzzle

The findings from this study suggest that implementing culturally responsive teaching in a graduate literacy education course hinged on the following: (1) understanding students’ backgrounds and perspectives; (2) using my biography as a teaching tool; and (3) implementing dynamic pedagogy with emphasis on content relevancy.

Understanding students and Their Perspectives

Culturally responsive teaching may not be effective without an insight into learners’ backgrounds and their worldviews. I agree with Brunner’s (1994) argument that the best educators can do is to be “aware of our perspectives and those of others when we make our claims of rightness and wrongness” (p. 25). The major finding, based on students’ perceptions of the course and instruction, revealed a mismatch between the candidates’ assumptions/expectations
about the course and the actual course objectives. While the course was designed to give students a broad perspective on various theoretical models and issues in literacy acquisition, the teacher candidates wanted to learn and, in fact, assumed that the course would equip them with practical teaching tips and strategies that they would use immediately in their classrooms. In addition, the TCs were concerned about the theoretical nature of the course and the academic writing requirements. Some were uncomfortable that their essay grades were based on multiple criteria including grammar, mechanics, and use of English. Further, because participants were mainly full-time and substitute teachers, their greatest challenge was meeting the demands of personal, professional, and academic life. Finally, there was a general feeling that the course was too theoretical and boring. The TCs wanted a more student-centered, hands-on course, and to be able to connect theory to practice.

Apart from the concerns about the course, the TCs harbored certain perceptions about the instructor based on linguistic, cultural, and racial issues. From the moment I introduced myself, many assumptions were made. For example, one participant commented that when she heard me speak on the first day of class, her initial reaction was “How can someone with an accent teach me about my language or how to read and write?” It appeared that my background and accent created an initial feeling of discomfort and skepticism among many of the TCs about my ability to teach the course. This lack of trust meant that when students encountered cognitive conflict or challenging content, they questioned my legitimacy and assumed that my White colleagues would have done better in that circumstance. This was complicated by the fact that the TCs nurtured a sense of entitlement or ownership of the English language. By this measure, there is only one standard English and one acceptable English accent. This perception led to a cascade of other problems. Some resisted my authority by questioning every decision I took concerning the course; others challenged their grades, or easily reported me to colleagues based on irrelevant or trivial complaints.

I remember the case of a student who wrote me 15 emails contesting her grade of B in this particular course. I invited her to my office and went through her paper with her. At that point she admitted that her paper did not measure up to that of the A students, yet the emails kept coming. She only stopped writing to me when I informed her that her actions amounted to harassment and that I would take the matter to a committee for disciplinary action. In a similar incident, a student rejected her mid-term essay grade because she believed she deserved a higher grade than was awarded to her. I quickly read over some sections of her paper and was convinced that her grade was correct. The student was still not satisfied with my explanation, so I told her to leave the paper with
me so that I could take time to reread it to ensure that she did not lose any points. But the student later snatched the paper from me and disappeared, and I assumed that she had decided to withdraw her challenge. To my greatest surprise, she emailed me the next day informing me that she had taken the matter to my program director. Unfortunately for her, my director referred her back to me. I then went through the paper with her, line by line. Only then was she convinced that her original grade was correct. There were several cases like this where I was reported to my director for very trivial reasons or in regard to issues that I could have easily discussed and settled with the student concerned. I could not help but wonder if this was a cultural thing, or a form of resistance to me as the “other” teacher. It was obvious that some of the TCs were still imprisoned within the Eurocentric, normative, and class-based particularity of their own experiences (Seidl & Conley, 2009), in which mainstream cultural discourse is the only acceptable way to speak or act, and any variation is viewed as deficiency rather than difference.

Furthermore, differences in cultural backgrounds created some misunderstandings. My educational and cultural backgrounds influenced my expectations for academic performance and students’ behavior. In some of my interactions with students, my instinctual frame of reference was that of my native country. I grew up in a more conservative culture where teachers were highly respected and professors adhered to strict academic standards. Make-up work, incompletes, and bonus points were not often part of the bargain. However, in my new context, an institutionalized culture of student empowerment meant that students not only felt entitled to these privileges but also were bold and sometimes assertive.

Cultural and linguistic differences also led to miscommunication. I once drew the wrath of a group of students when I referred to them as “you people” instead of “you guys,” which they indicated was the normal expression. I stopped using the phrase “a good attempt” in response to some not-so-good or off-tangent students’ responses when I learned that some students were infuriated with the phrase. These were expressions that were perfectly normal in the culture that I grew up in but considered inappropriate in the present context. Furthermore, my occasional interruption during students’ presentations was considered rude, even though such interruptions were used for teachable moments. Interestingly, a colleague told me she also interrupted students’ presentations, but they never complained about it. While my colleague had “White privilege,” my attempt at border crossing met with resistance that consistently marked me as an outsider (Amobi, 2004). It was obvious that teaching literacy courses as a foreign-born faculty member of color meant walking a tightrope to create a delicate balance between sensitiv-
ility to students’ needs and maintaining my authority and credibility without losing the very essence of my individuality. In doing so, my background provided some talking points.

Using Self as a Teaching Tool

My background as a Black woman of African descent not only impacted my pedagogy but also made the course content more relevant to the needs of the TCs. I was able to bring all my personal and professional experiences into classroom interactions. First, while introducing myself, I generously discussed my bilingual and English-speaking backgrounds, as well as my cultural profile. Similarities between my students’ current experience of being taught by a foreign-born professor and my earlier college experience were discussed. When I was a freshman at a Nigerian university several years before, most of my professors were British and American born. Though it was, ironically, my first contact with a foreign accent, I tried to understand my professors’ accents without stereotyping or looking down on them.

Furthermore, my experiential reality as an accent-speaking, foreign-born person of color provided a springboard for discussing the impact of linguistic variation on literacy acquisition. I have experienced both subtle and overt discrimination, and those experiences became entry points into class discussions about the experiences of people of color. From the course readings, the TCs know that dialect-speaking people are often stereotyped; several assumptions are often made—albeit wrongly—about them. However, concrete examples helped to drive home this point. For instance, as a graduate student in literacy education, I was almost denied teaching in a reading clinic because the professor in charge believed that White parents would not want me to work with their children. I was later assigned, somewhat reluctantly, to an African American student. It was not until I successfully raised the reading level of the student that my professor admitted that his assumptions about my language proficiency were wrong. He also acknowledged that my written expression exceeded his expectations. I used incidents like these to drive home the point that teachers should not make assumptions about students’ intelligence, capabilities, and character based on race, accent, or perceived oral language proficiency. To be culturally responsive, teachers need to understand the backgrounds and lives of their students beyond the school walls and build on their cultural strengths.

Linguistic variation notwithstanding, cultural variation and its impact on literacy acquisition were major aspects of the course readings. To make this topic more meaningful, I discussed relevant aspects of my cultural heritage and how they impacted my worldview. Through discussions and written reflections, the TCs were challenged to articulate and discuss their own beliefs and cultural
heritage, as well as to confront their cultural biases and perception of others. Altogether, narrating my cultural heritage and immigrant experiences provided a new lens through which the students viewed minorities. At the same time, it provided a global perspective through which candidates learned about the unique practices of diverse cultures (Chicola, 2007). These discussions apparently impacted the TCs’ emerging conception of issues in literacy and diversity, as can be seen in an excerpt from a student’s course reflection:

As I told more people that I was taking this course from Dr. Iklepeze, I was told that I would not be able to understand her at all and that I would have a heck of a time getting through the next 6 weeks. However, I DID learn a lot from this class and I found it funny that these students would take this narrow perspective on learning from a professor who has a different dialect. The issue of linguistic variations was a very important focus for this course and I was able to apply the situation at hand with Dr. Iklepeze. Although it took a class or two to follow her discussions, I had no problem understanding her and I actually learned a great deal from her stories and connections about the material. I was challenged to apply my understanding and compassion for people of different dialects and was able to come to the conclusion that it does NOT matter the dialect, but the message behind what the person is communicating.

This reflection and similar others suggest that my presence did increase students’ multicultural awareness. It was also gladdening to learn that by the end of the course, some TCs regretted having made wrong assumptions about me. This student’s reflection highlighted this:

I was honestly surprised when our professor told the class she had grown up speaking English, because I thought she learned English as a second language and was wondering how she can teach natural speakers of the language. It is not fair to pass judgments before you know someone. Our teacher is proof that linguistic variation or skin color is not an indicator of intelligence. I think this instructor has an advantage to teaching this course because she can relate to the subject matter more and thus can teach it more effectively.

These reflections and others confirmed that some of the TCs did harbor some biased and stereotypical views about me, an observation that had earlier been supported by the experiences of other women faculty of color (Amobi, 2004; Ifedi, 2009; Vargas, 2002). As they pointed out, a woman faculty member is likely to face resistance or triple whammies if she is a person of color, foreign born, or—worse still—an accented speaker. While I worked to understand students’ perspectives and their worldviews, I made extensive changes to the course content to make it more practical and relevant.
Dynamic Pedagogy and Content Relevancy

Dynamism was at the core of my pedagogical practice. I experimented with both the course structure and learning activities that I thought the TCs would find relevant and motivating. The course framework was redesigned to help them understand literacy as a dynamic social, cultural, linguistic, and political practice that depends, to an extent, on the epistemological and pedagogical competence of teachers for its continued evolution and transformation. New and engaging activities were introduced. These included critical reflections, Socratic seminars, autobiographical analysis, and movie or video cases of exemplary teachers pertaining to the course content. Guest teachers were invited to demonstrate certain aspects of their pedagogy that were relevant to some theoretical perspectives discussed in class. Peer and group reviews were used to provide more peer interaction and feedback. In addition, technology was integrated into the course in line with some of the course topics on new literacies and technologies. Students were introduced to various technological tools, including the Interactive White Board (IWB), wikis, blogs, and podcasts. The hands-on experience with these technologies facilitated engagement and motivation. In addition, critical literacy received renewed emphasis. With these changes, many TCs indicated that they were better able to make theory-practice connections. An excerpt from one of the TC’s reflections highlights this thinking:

My expectations for this course have been met by the group discussions and multiple projects that forced me to draw and build on my knowledge of the course material. I was not asked to take a test about the material learned. Instead, I was given real situations with real people who used the strategies and implemented the various literacy theories within their classrooms. Being able to connect classroom practice with the course material allowed me to critically reflect and analyze my real world classroom practice.

Judging from students’ reflections such as this, I was happy that I had succeeded in changing the dynamics of this class for the better. I also initiated similar changes in my other courses and recorded considerable success in building better relationships with the students through the ethics of caring, as well as improving my pedagogy. As the TCs became more satisfied with the course and more comfortable with me, their attitudes toward me became more favorable. This corroborates previous findings (de Oliveira et al., 2009) that suggest that foreign-born professors have to convince students of their competence to gain their confidence.
Final Thoughts: Recounting My Journey and Experiences

Culturally responsive pedagogy in teacher education is a comprehensive, responsive, and dynamic pedagogical framework that integrates the cultural, social, empirical, and affective dimensions of learning—one in which the curriculum is perceived as relevant to the lives of teacher candidates. It involves pedagogical flexibility that aligns with the learning styles of the TCs and their ways of knowing, communicating, and being. Three areas of focus guided my implementation of this framework: (1) self and reflexivity, (2) working on the beliefs and values of the TCs, and (3) culturally responsive and relevant content.

Self and reflexivity involved looking inward to examine the totality of my personal, professional, and course experiences—texts read, ideas considered, and changes made—for their connections with and relationships to my practice. By systematically studying my practice and continually working through a cyclical process of inquiry, awareness, reflection, and refinement, I was able to negotiate a transformative pedagogy. In addition, working on the beliefs and values of the TCs was instrumental to implementing a responsive pedagogy. My theoretical knowledge of culture and diversity, as well as my lived experiences as an immigrant helped me to better relate to the course content and challenge the teacher candidates to critically examine their own biases. Furthermore, understanding students’ interests, backgrounds, and perspectives, as well as using constant communication to clarify misunderstandings and cultural gaps, facilitated a responsive pedagogy. As the TCs acquired a more global knowledge of literacy, culture, and diversity, and as they learned about the variety of English accents across the globe, they were able to debunk certain myths and beliefs about other people and cultures. But, while the CRT framework enhanced my pedagogical effectiveness, relationships with students, and my scores in students’ course evaluations, it did not totally solve all the problems pertaining to those areas. This was not totally surprising, because teaching is an ill-structured activity and varies greatly according to context and situation. In addition, students come with different backgrounds, expectations, and dispositions, and their behaviors can vary greatly from one student group to another.

The challenge of teaching as an African-born educator in the area of language and literacy is real, because students harbor a sense of ownership of the English language. Besides, a deficit perspective about African-born educators of color still persists; their ability is therefore constantly questioned and scrutinized. Thus, in the first few years and beyond, new African-born faculty of color who teach courses in language and literacy need both institutional support and the backing of colleagues to navigate the difficult terrain of teaching. At the same time, in order to overcome markers of difference and to integrate accordingly, they must work very hard, demonstrate academic, profes-
sional, and social competence, and understand their students' and their institution's culture. Maintaining good personal relationships that demonstrate care and respect for students will go a long way toward reducing resistance or cases of bias and racism.

References


