

**“I Want to Protect My Children”:
Considerations that Lead to Culturally Relevant Collaborations**

Natasha A. Thornton

Kennesaw State University

nthornt6@kennesaw.edu

“They already have to deal with that in the outside world and I want to protect my kids when they are with me.”

This statement from Brenda stayed on my mind all day. All day.

Brenda is a first-grade teacher, with whom I was collaborating with as a part of a cohort of teachers and teacher educators to implement culturally relevant literacy practices in elementary classrooms. Our goal was to draw from culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogies (Gay, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Paris & Alim, 2014), to implement reading and writing engagements that value and build upon the students’ lives. In our initial conversations, Brenda was interested in pursuing the topic of self-love with her students, which I thought was a timely and important topic. Her class was comprised of Black and Latinx students and I felt this would provide a space to affirm their cultural identities, while countering stereotypes and ideologies that negate contributions and brilliance of people of color in our society. However, as we continued conversations to determine the focus of our project, Brenda decided on the topic of kindness. She began to notice how students would exclude each other during group work and engage in name-calling.

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In the school district where Brenda teaches, mandated curricula units provide little space for addressing topics that are not within those units. However, Social Emotional Learning (SEL) is a focus in the district where teachers are given lessons to connect to students' lives. Brenda decided to use the SEL meeting time in her class to read and write about kindness. One morning I was in her classroom, eagerly waiting the day's read aloud. She planned to read *Each Kindness*, by Jacqueline Woodson. This was a book that I suggested Brenda read. She had read a number of books on kindness that provided stories and examples about the importance of being kind. I wanted Brenda to try a more critical text, as Jacqueline Woodson approached the topic of kindness differently from the other the texts that were read; this book touched on poverty, accepting others, and courage. As the students were beginning to transition to their SEL meeting, I looked up from the table and saw Brenda walking over to me with *Each Kindness* in her hand. I was excited to hear Brenda's thoughts on the book, but I noticed she had a concerned look on her face. Before I could ask what was wrong, she began...

"I don't want to read this book."

"Why? What's the matter?" I asked.

"It's not warm and fuzzy and I worry about my kids who come to school not dressed nicely. It will put a spotlight on them. They already have to deal with that outside this classroom, in the world...and I want to protect my kids when they are with me".

Brenda was clearly emotional as she spoke. Many teachers are protective of their students and feel responsible for their well-being. As she spoke I became emotional. In all my years in education I had never seen a teacher respond to any text or instructional engagement in that way. I can imagine that if she came across this book independently,

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she would read it as she prepared for class and simply make the decision not to read it to her students. However, due to my suggestion, she was in a difficult space that had her weighing the pros and cons of reading the book to her students. I was trying to figure out how to respond. I had never read about this in any articles or books on critical literacy. I know that teachers may have hesitations because they feel that some topics are not be appropriate or too difficult for young students to understand. I have read about teachers who want to take up controversial topics that relate directly to their students' lives, but I have never read about a teacher who was reluctant because the topic did in fact directly address their students and I was fearful of saying the wrong thing.

“You are right, and I understand where you are coming from... but, the reason why you have to read this book is because of how much you care for your students. During this story, you can discuss the fact that people who wear hand-me-downs deserve kindness and it doesn't make them less than anyone. So those students in your class will know they are valued, validated and their clothing does not make them who they are. So when they walk out into the real world, and someone does that, what they believe about themselves will not be impacted negatively, because of the work that was done in this class, other kids will treat each other kinder because of reading these kinds of books and having discussions around them.”

“I see... but I don't know If I want to read it. Do you want to read it?”

“I will, but I want you to. It is up to you”. Noticing her hesitation, “We have a couple of options though. You can try to read it today or you can read something else today and we can think through the book a little more until you feel ready”.

“I don't know”.

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“I do want you to push yourself though”.

“Okay... I guess I will”.

“You got thisdo have any questions that you plan to ask the students?”. She laughs...

“Yes, standard based questions: Who are the main characters? Who is the narrator? What is the plot of the story? etc.” I join in her laughter.

“Well I have a couple of questions that we can ask afterwards too”, I said, still laughing.

Each time I heard Brenda read a story, she made connections to her class and individual students, so I was very curious to see how she would address the part of the book that highlighted the mistreatment of the character who wore older clothing. When she got to that part of the story, Brenda tackled that conversation head on with her students and did not gloss over it. “Why did Maya treat her that way?” she asked her students. “How did that make her feel?” “I have heard some of you do that in here haven’t I?” “No, we never make anyone feel less than.” “I wear my aunt’s clothes sometimes. Who wears hand-me downs from older siblings?” The students responded and talked about the old clothes that they wear and how they are proud of them. They shared why it was not right to treat people mean because of what they wear. After that discussion about the clothes, Brenda was only halfway through the book, but she told the class that I would finish reading the book and she walked out the classroom with tears in her eyes.

As I reflected on the day that Brenda read *Each Kindness*, I see it as a critical moment for both us. Brenda had to examine what her love for her students meant for the cultural and critical work that she wanted to do with her students and I had to consider the extent of my role as a collaborator and outsider in her classroom. One may criticize

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her hesitance, as students' access to rich literature and meaningful discussions are key to help shape their understandings of themselves and the world. Yet, I was pushed to think more deeply about the importance of schools' contexts and the different ways beliefs are operationalized in classrooms. It is important to think about factors that should be considered when embarking upon critical topics with teachers in elementary classrooms, in order for collaborations to be truly impactful for not only students, but for teachers as well.

Below, I address a few notions and implications to consider when embarking upon critical topics with teachers in elementary classrooms and implications for researchers in these spaces.

Considerations

Too Close to Home

Many teachers engage in critical and controversial topics with young students, around topics that relate to their lives (Allen, 2015; Laman, 2010; Picower 2012). Allen (2015) engaged her Latinx students in critical multicultural literature related to immigration because some of her students and their families were being impacted by the recent immigration laws. Yet, it is also documented (Wollman-Bonilla, 1998) that some teachers are reluctant to engage in critical topics with young children. For Brenda, her fear was rooted in love and concern. Nieto (1999) discusses how teachers avoid “dangerous discourses”, discussions around topics that challenge underlying social ideologies. For Brenda, this topic was a dangerous discourse as it hit too close to home for her students. It is important to consider the possible “dangers” of such conversations and ways in which some students may feel pinpointed or isolated. Brenda wanted to

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engage in meaningful work with her students, but struggled with not wanting to “put the spotlight” on them, or embarrass them for wearing hand-me-downs.

Consider the Context

As stated earlier, the curricular units developed in Brenda’s district are the rule, and critical pedagogy is the exception. Brenda’s school is considered to be low-performing and therefore, there is a significant focus on improving test scores. In addition, the school district mandated training for a phonics program for primary teachers. These kinds of programs typically do not value multiple ways of speaking and thinking about language. Therefore, many times, teachers’ values and practices are influenced by district instructional mandates and initiatives (Flint, Anderson, Allen, Campbell, Fraser, Hilaski, James, Rodriguez & Thornton, 2011) which typically are not rooted in culturally relevant frameworks. Thereby, some contexts are a bit more difficult to pursue these engagements than others. In collaborative relationships with teachers around areas of cultural and critical pedagogies, how often do we consider their lived experiences and the “complex teaching and learning environments” (Opfer & Pedder, 2011)? Although, Brenda zoomed in on her students’ needs and co-opted her SEL time to address what was happening with her students, contextual factors related to district and schooling practices and her students’ lives, shaped her approach to culturally relevant teaching.

Ingrained Beliefs

Asset-based pedagogies call us to value and affirm student’s cultural and linguistic resources (Gay, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Paris & Alim, 2014), In a conversation we had on Black English (BE), Brenda talked about her experiences

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growing up in the Northern U.S., which shaped her belief about the use of BE in the classroom. For example, growing up in her home, only Standard English (SE) was acceptable. She knows that students of color, deal with greater consequences, socially and economically, if they do not speak SE. Thus, she was adamant about modeling and reiterating the use of SE in her classroom. Again, this was out of concern for students being able to navigate structures that determine one's success in our society. Teachers' beliefs are a significant factor for shaping teaching practices, especially related to students' cultural and linguistic practices during the learning process. In addition, as Brenda was learning about culturally relevant pedagogy during this work, she had no formal training on it. Navigating contexts and ingrained beliefs can be difficult, is a reality for many teachers.

Implications: Culturally Relevant Teacher Development

Sometimes when teacher-educators and teachers collaborate in classrooms focused on culturally relevant literacy practices, the processes and outcomes may not be mirror the most read journal articles on the topic. Yet, what happens is an interesting dynamic of learning and re-learning. If teachers are hesitant or unsure, how do we adjust, in order to start where the teacher is and build from what they are already doing that is rooted in the students' lives and cultures? A teacher who works passionately to foster a classroom climate that operates in compassion and kindness, but also has beliefs about language that do not affirm students' linguistic resources, is not an oxymoron, but rather, an opportunity for mutual learning by embedding principles of cultural relevance within the collaboration process. As a teacher educator, what can you learn from and about the teacher, the students and their communities, and the school and district contexts

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to help bring cultural and critical pedagogy from the ivory tower in elementary classrooms? Consider what is already happening that can be built upon: What kinds of relationships are already built between the teacher the families? What are teachers already doing well that align with culturally relevant tenets? In what ways are identities being confirmed? Do teachers already counter oppressive practices rooted in traditional schooling? In addition, consider what shifts can be made to support more culturally relevant practices: What beliefs do teachers have that could be shifted to be more inclusive? What resources, brief article or informative video clips, can help to start a conversation and chip away at any deficit beliefs? On that day when Brenda hesitantly read *Each Kindness*, it was a moment that reflected strength, as well as a moment to build from. I believe those are the moments that we should look for as we aim for cultural relevance in classrooms, and also in the very collaborations with teachers themselves.

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