

## **What Am I Burning? Reflections from a first-grade teacher on culturally relevant teaching and the intersections of social unrest and virtual teaching**

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I began teaching three years ago, and I have been fortunate to spend a few days each summer collaborating with the best teachers and teacher educators that are committed to social justice and anti-racist and culturally relevant pedagogy. I'm able to share and feel validated in my celebrations and concerns as a classroom teacher with educators that share the same values. The most rewarding part of this is that I'm able to come home and use this new knowledge in my classroom. I attribute my growth as an educator mostly to these summer meetings. This past summer, due to the pandemic, I used my time differently. I decided to use my journey thus far in teaching and what I've learned through the ongoing pandemic and fight for equity and justice, as my guiding research on how I plan to shift my current classroom practices for the upcoming school year.

In 2015, I started a transition to teaching program at a university in downtown Indianapolis. Through courses and the protests of the death of Mike Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, I started to explore my role as an educator and scholar activist. The unjust deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Sean Reed that led to world-wide protest against police brutality and racial injustice against Black people, have since sparked a sense of urgency. In his BET Humanitarian Award acceptance speech, actor/activist Jesse

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Williams (2016) stated, “Now, freedom is always coming in the hereafter. But you know what, though? The hereafter is a hustle. We want it now.” Covid-19 and social unrest have propelled the urgency of teaching with critical cultural consciousness. In order to change the status quo and further commit to educational equity, we must face the fear and do the action (Sealey-Ruiz, 2020), and I believe the time is now.

My philosophy as an educator is rooted in antiracist education while focusing on the three tenets of culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP): students must achieve academic success; students must develop and/or maintain cultural competence, and students must develop a critical consciousness to challenge the status quo (Ladson-Billings, 1994). I believe that my positionality as a Black woman educator aligns with the tenets of CRP. Research suggests the positive effect that Black Women Educators (BWE) can have on Black students. Acosta (2018) discusses the historical impact and importance of BWE.

They entered the profession as part of a Black feminist tradition dedicated to the maintenance of African American cultural practices, resistance to racial and economic oppression, and development of youth (Dixson & Dingus, 2008; Hill-Collins, 2000). This growing literature base features qualitative snapshots that describe the beliefs and practices of BWEs who consistently bolster the learning and development of students.

(p. 27)

My school administrators and 46.1% of the teachers in the school are Black and POC, and 92% of the student population is Black and POC, yet there is no strong institutional commitment to culturally relevant teaching, especially through the mandatory curriculum. This is not a critique on my colleagues as individuals, but rather a critique of

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a system that does not value the cultural experiences of teachers of Color. While I am committed to being a team player and believe in teacher collaboration, upon which our curriculum is heavily based, I believe more in making sure that all my students' needs are being met using practices that center them. Culturally responsive teaching, which uses students' cultural knowledge and ways of being in the world to support learning, "empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes" (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p.18).

I believe a critical piece of CRP is culturally relevant literacy instruction. "In culturally relevant teaching, teachers build on students' language and background by making connections to extend their literacy development (Neuman, 1999a). Ladson-Billings (1994) and Delpit (1995) reported that when children's real-life experiences were legitimized and when the curriculum was connected to their backgrounds, they were able to understand complex ideas even beyond their reading level" (Conrad et al., 2004, p 188). In 2018, a mentor and I collaborated on lesson plans to incorporate culturally relevant read-alouds and text in my classroom as the focus of required literacy centers. Using the same routine in 2019, I also began practicing a culturally relevant teaching strategy for phonics rooted in "touching the spirit", developed by a Black educator for small and whole group literacy instruction (Mann, 2019).

In March 2020 when schools prepared to close for COVID-19, my district put together a team of educators across the district to create lessons district-wide for each grade level K-8. The lessons were available weekly, online through an app/website made for distance learning. The lessons followed the standards and pacing guides for English Language Arts, STEM, and socio-emotional learning. With the quick transition to

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distance learning, many teachers, myself included, went into survival mode. My main concerns were that all my students were safe and were able to access all or at least most of their normal day to day resources. The school year ended unexpectedly, and I knew it was my responsibility as an educator to take this summer to become better and prepare myself for whatever the fall may bring.

Over the summer, I decided to take on a challenge by accepting the opportunity to teach virtual summer school. Summer school is offered district-wide, and I was lucky to have a roster of second grade students from my home school, which offered some familiarity for us. Our online summer program followed the same schedule as past summers. It operated for 4 weeks, Monday -Thursday. We were free to make our own Zoom class schedule and plans. This allowed autonomy, which is limited during the school year. Similar to the end of the school year, a team of educators in the district were assembled to make lessons. Rather than focus solely on academics this summer, the approach was to get students and teachers more acclimated with virtual learning. A device and hotspot were offered to each student enrolled. The challenge, like during the school year, was staying connecting with every family. I contacted them weekly through different sources while also being considerate of new schedules and adjustments. Other challenges included getting families connected to the right app, making sure students and parents understood assignments and point systems, and finding the best time to connect altogether for Zoom classes. Since the lessons were pre-made, I felt the most important task was to fill in the gap in the curriculum where it leaves students out and to ensure lessons were culturally relevant. It took a while for the students and myself to warm up to the idea of our new learning environment. Due to our inability to ensure all students in K-

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4 had technology, we didn't conduct many virtual meetings at the end of the academic school year. It was new for all of us.

By the end of summer school, my students and I had built a positive virtual community. Each week the assignments followed a theme. I started most of our sessions with a read-aloud that shared the theme of the week. The last theme of the summer was "Community". We read three different texts for that week, each book illustrated different views of community that we also see around our community. Before the first read aloud, we each discussed what community meant to us and then came up with a whole class definition to fit us. After each read aloud, we completed an activity together that gave us space to discuss how the community illustrated in the book was similar to ours and how ours has changed due to COVID-19. Part of their directions for an assignment was to "List ways you can stay safe and still be active in our community." We started to brainstorm and started listing all of our ideas. At the end of our meeting, we decided to challenge each other and do at least one idea from our list after finishing the assignment. This encouraged them to think about what they wanted our community to feel like and the importance of the contributions they make to it. They were excited to show me the encouraging notes they crafted to send out to neighborhood heroes, the yard signs they made, and the food, clothes, and toys they were able to donate. My students were able to make connections with these stories. After the summer session, I felt more confident about being able to ensure that the culture my students and I cultivate in my physical classroom also transcends online and creates the space for me to build authentic relationships and learning connections with my students. It also gave them the opportunity to get comfortable with leading and navigating an online class independently.

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I do not believe that we can continue to use practices that ignore the identities, history, and communities in the classrooms of our youngest learners. This should be a priority, especially in a virtual learning community where we aren't able to make face to face connections. In *We've Been Doing It Your Way Long Enough* (Baines, Tisdale, & Long, 2018), the authors discuss the importance of choosing a culturally relevant classroom.

Not only do educators play an important role in raising the next generation of citizens who will respect and value themselves and one another (Asante, 2017), but we have a responsibility to do so by teaching against educational “spirit murdering”, which Love (2016) describes as being just as deadly as murders in the streets. This includes the kind of overt profiling described in... the insidious academic, psychological, and emotional degradation and erasure that occur when students' literacies, histories, heritages, and communities are marginalized, distorted, or ignored in the curriculum. (p. 9)

As I begin planning for the upcoming school year, I often reflect on a Tweet in response to the reaction to the protest of the deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Sean Reed. An educator posed the question, what are you burning?

Educators: what are you burning? Your White-centered curriculum? The Amy Cooper next door? Your anti-Black behavior policies? The school's racist policies? Your racist... principal? The funding for the police in schools vs counselors? WHAT ARE YOU BURNING? (@nenagerman 2020).

It was my call to action. As an educator, am I doing enough to honor my commitment to being a social justice teacher... what am I burning? With ongoing reflection, I decided I

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was burning my silence. I am burning trying to be comfortable with being uncomfortable with a curriculum that's not meant for Black and Brown students. I am burning the stigma about being the novice educator without "enough" experience. I am no longer okay with witnessing educational malpractice at the hands of racist pedagogies and not standing in my confidence as an educator to speak up. I am burning filling in the gap when all lessons should be all encompassing of the cultures in the community. It is my responsibility to ensure that all my students' needs are being met and gaining academic growth. I am starting with my complacency on using a whitewashed curriculum that does not celebrate or cater to academic achievement for the students in my classroom.

This summer gave me more of the tools and confidence I needed to start making a change to the environment of education around me. I believe that being a witness to how Black and Brown students, who already faced many inequities that lie within the classroom, school policies and curriculum, had them intensified during the pandemic is enough motivation to begin making a shift in the education community. "The time to move from a status quo warrior to an equity warrior is now!" (Sealey-Ruiz 2020). I know what am I burning, what are you burning?

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