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In Real Time: From Theory to Practice in a Critical Race Pedagogy Classroom

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From Theory to Practice in a Critical Race Pedagogy Classroom

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Introduction

I enter this teacher action research project with an interest in studying how I, as a high school teacher, developed a critical race pedagogy (CRP) curriculum for students in an out-of-school context. My intrigue with race started at an early age growing up in Oakland, California, where my classmates were primarily of African American, Central American, and Southeast Asian descent. As a Southeast Asian student in Oakland schools, even with 100% students of color in my classes, my teachers in school rarely talked about race or racism. Prior to my graduate studies, I taught in Richmond, California for almost a decade, working exclusively with low-income students of color. I walked away from the teaching profession dissatisfied with the fixation on standardized testing at the peak of No Child Left Behind. I entered my doctoral program haunted by the limitations I encountered as an educator for social justice. Signing on as a graduate student instructor teaching historically marginalized youth in a teacher pipeline program, I envisioned this as a redemptive opportunity for me to develop a curriculum that bolstered racial consciousness in students.

My motivation for creating a course on racial consciousness for students interested in the teaching profession centers on three core principles:

1. We live in a highly racialized society, starting from the landing of the first settler-colonists on North American soil to the ways in which race continues to shape outcomes and opportunities across multiple strata in our society.
2. As an educator, I feel a sense of responsibility to prepare my students to engage in democracy for the liberation of oppressed groups. To do so, students must be equipped with the language, tools, and knowledge to think and act in an informed manner about social issues. I see developing a racial consciousness in young people as an imperative part of preparing students to engage and to seek change in a diverse, multicultural society wrought with racial inequality and injustices.
3. Furthermore, for students of color interested in becoming future teachers in underresourced schools, I feel the utmost responsibility to nurture their racial consciousness, so they can develop the dispositions of critical educators seeking to

disrupt the status quo and become change agents in their communities. The purpose of this teacher action research study is to examine how I planned, prepared and executed a CRP curriculum for historically marginalized youth in a teacher pipeline program.

Literature on Teaching Race and Racism

A segment of educational research has focused on how to prepare educators to work in diverse school settings to close the opportunity gap often shaped by race (Brooks, Arnold, & Brooks, 2013; Okun, 2010; Pollock, 2008; Singleton, 2014). A body of studies also highlights the ways reluctant White educators resist learning about the form and function of institutionalized racism and how it operates in schools (Bates & Pardo, 2010; Carr & Klassen, 1997; McIntyre, 2002; Rogers & Mosley, 2006; Sealey-Ruiz, 2011).

Scholars theorize that when teachers negate race or racism in their curriculum, it represents a symbolic violence to students of color and endangers the well-being of all students (Hardie & Tyson, 2013; Milner, 2012; Pollock, 2001). Silence can serve as a weapon for White students and faculty members to disengage from critical conversations about race; the root reasons for the silence must be interrogated rather than assumed (Ladson-Billings, 1996). Leonardo and Porter (2010) warn against educators procuring a "safe" space, given that schools as institutions have historically served as hostile and harmful environments for students of color. Rather, scholars emphasize reflexivity for educators who seek to facilitate these critical conversations regarding race and racism, a constant awareness and critique regarding one's own practice (Ladson-Billings, 1996; Leonardo & Porter, 2010; Pollock, 2008).

The scant empirical studies available on how to teach about race and racism to students highlight the possibilities and limitations. Social sciences and humanities courses offered at the high school level pose as potential sites to weave in curriculum centered on issues of race (Blum, 2012; Brown & Brown, 2011; Howard, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 2003). The research indicates that students of color welcome opportunities to talk about race in schools with their teachers and classmates (Howard, 2004; Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2006; Stovall, 2006b). Working across different racial, ethnic, and class groups to develop an intergroup dialogue proves fruitful for students who engage in these experiences (Blum, 2012; Griffin, Brown, & Warren, 2012; Madden, 2015; Nagda & Gurin, 2007; Welton, Harris, La Londe, & Moyer, 2015). However, a combination of racially segregated housing and tracked courses, even in desegregated schools, deeply constrains young people from engaging in intergroup dialogue (Kozol, 2006; Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Oakes, 2005; Orfield, Frankenberg, Ee, & Kuscera, 2014).

The point emerges across multiple studies that discussions on race without adequate attention to root causes of racism and White supremacy create limitations on how students conceptualize and understand issues regarding race and racism. Studies illuminate that

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relegating conversations about race to a superficial level without acknowledging how race represents a social construct with palpable and material consequences leaves students merely scratching the surface in developing a racial consciousness (Griffin et al., 2012; Howard, 2004; Sassi & Thomas, 2008). A thin body of empirical studies highlights how teachers build a structural analysis with young people through antiracist education and critical pedagogy (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Stovall, 2006b; Welton et al., 2015); however, very few studies have adopted a teacher action research methodology to study how teachers teach race and racism in schools (Husband, 2015; Lamont Hill, 2009). Employing a teacher action research methodology, I situated my role as a teacher-researcher to systematically investigate how I planned, prepared, and executed a CRP curriculum (Brydon-Miller, Greenwood, & Maguire, 2003). I grounded my study in the following research question: What teaching practices can develop and strengthen racial consciousness in youth from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds?

Theoretical Framework

I employed CRP (Lynn, 1999, 2004) as a theoretical framework for this research project: CRP encompasses the liberatory teaching practices of critical pedagogy with the tenets of critical race theory. Considered the forefather of critical pedagogy, Paulo Freire, a Brazilian adult literacy worker and educator, delineated a pedagogy that sought to liberate oppressed populations. Freire believed that the purpose of education included raising the critical consciousness of oppressed groups. He claimed that members of oppressed groups should understand the broader structures and systems present in society that perpetuate inequality and injustice. Only when pupils grow conscious of the inequitable historical, social, political, and economic policies, norms, and values that have shaped and determined their place in society can they truly be in an empowered position to be agents of change in their community (Freire, 1970).

Within a critical pedagogy framework, Freire (1970) contrasts a problem-posing classroom to what he coined *the banking model* of education. In a banking model, teachers assume students enter classrooms as empty vessels—receptacles for educators to pour knowledge into; students rarely contribute their insights or perspectives, but merely soak up facts and information from the teacher. Freire urges that in a liberatory classroom, both students and teachers enter the learning environment with valuable insights, skills, and lived experiences. At the center of a problem-posing classroom, teachers and students engage in reflection and action, a process also known as praxis. Freire concluded, "To exist, humanly, is to *name* the world, to change it. Once named, the world in its turn reappears to the namers as a problem and requires of them a new *naming*. Human beings are not built in silence, but in word, in work, in action-reflection" (1970, p. 88). A key tenet in critical pedagogy encompasses giving students an opportunity to use dialogue as a vehicle to ultimately engage in praxis; although dialogue alone will not transform societies, it often represents the first step toward a student's personal transformation.

However, a prominent critique of critical pedagogy is that it lends insufficient attention to race (Sleeter & Delgado-Bernal, 2004). Scholars assert that critical race theory (CRT) should be used as an analytical tool to examine educational inequality in our society (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006; Parker & Stovall, 2004). Dissatisfied with critical legal studies

often devoid of race in the analysis of legal cases, CRT scholars offered a counter legal scholarship that centralized race. The central tenets of CRT include the following: (a) Racism is endemic in the United States rather than an aberration; (b) the intersectionality of race, class, gender, and sexuality should be central in the analysis of inequality; (c) the lived experiences of People of Color enduring racism represent counterstories and a source of legitimate knowledge; and lastly, (d) Whiteness represents a form of property, historically and presently, in our society as a mechanism that perpetuates inequality (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000). Ladson-Billings (1998) elaborates on the function of institutionalized racism and educational inequality:

> Perhaps no area of schooling underscores inequity and racism better than school funding. CRT argues that inequality in school funding is a function of institutional and structural racism. The inability of African Americans to qualify for educational advancements, jobs, and mortgages creates a cycle of low educational achievement, underemployment and unemployment, and standard housing. Without suffering a single act of personal racism, most African Americans suffer the consequence of systemic and structural racism. (p. 20)

Ladson-Billings' assertion highlights the cyclical nature of inequality, as the consequences of it fundamentally affect every facet of life for Black people in the United States. As CRT scholars argue, the analysis of structural inequality without adequate attention to the endemic nature of race and racism in this country is naive and incomplete, at best (Parker & Stovall, 2004; Stovall, 2006a). Jennings and Lynn (2005), furthermore, critique the inadequacies of critical pedagogy and offer CRP as a more robust and dynamic framework for educators to consider. In Lynn's (1999) study of African American educators concerned with social justice, he documents how these teachers' dispositions, perspectives, and approaches to teaching illuminate the tenets of CRP. Teachers in Lynn's study acknowledge the pervasive nature of racism, value their students' African American identity and heritage, recognize intersectionality in oppression, and practice a liberatory pedagogy. Although Lynn begins to address how CRP can function as a theoretical framework for educators to consider, his articulation of how this theoretical perspective plays out in practice remains underdeveloped.

To actualize CRP from theory to practice, I adopted CRP as a theoretical framework by employing the emancipatory practices of critical pedagogy coupled with the principles of CRT. I organized my class by applying the structures of critical pedagogy, encouraging problem-posing classrooms centered on dialogue where teachers and students together coconstruct knowledge and engage in praxis. However, the learning goals for my course centered on the following CRT tenets: (a) Racism is endemic to American life; (b) Whiteness as property advantages White students in U.S. schools; and lastly, (c) counternarratives represent a source of legitimate knowledge for teachers and students of color in naming their realities (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Present in this study of CRP, I constructed my classroom focused on the liberatory goals of critical pedagogy and shaped the content in my curriculum according to the maxims of CRT.

Methods

This research incorporates teacher action research (TAR) as a methodology. In the field of teacher education, TAR has a long history of offering teacher-researchers opportunities to study

empirically the pedagogy in their classrooms; teaching and learning are often framed in terms of issues of equity (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2010; Lather, 1986; Lieberman & Miller, 2001). In examining the implementation of a CRP curriculum, TAR as a research approach centers reflection and action as key components in guiding how a teacher might approach teaching and learning in their classroom (Brydon-Miller et al., 2003). Epistemologically, the tenets of TAR situate the classroom teacher with the expert knowledge to shape and inform his or her practice through a process of reflexivity (Herr & Anderson, 2005; Pine, 2008). TAR encompasses praxis as a crucial component to action research, where the process of action and reflection is a requirement. No studies to date have adopted TAR as a methodology to study how a teacher plans and executes a CRP curriculum. In this study, I seek to contribute to the field of CRP as a classroom teacher in several ways: (a) acknowledging the role of practitioners as insiders, (b) situating educators as experts in their own classrooms, and (c) describing the daily practices that promote racial consciousness in students.

Curriculum Development

A confluence of resources, research, and life experiences shaped the development of this curriculum. My greatest challenge involved winnowing the curriculum to fit into an intensive 45-hour course that spanned three weeks. I grounded the course within the context of this study: a school district struggling to close an acute opportunity gap between Black and White students. I provided students with statistical reports regarding attendance, graduation rates, standardized testing, and demographic information about our district. I framed our course with the following essential question: How does race and class shape the opportunity gap in our district? I read existing literature on how practitioners have guided high school students in conversations about race (Blum, 2012; Bolgatz, 2005; Pollock, 2008; Singleton, 2014); the scant empirical studies of educators teaching about race and racism to students served more as a "what-not-to-do" than a guide or a resource. I relied heavily on readings and concepts I learned in graduate school courses from distinguished scholars such as Dr. John B. Diamond and Dr. Gloria Ladson-Billings; however, I still had to find age-appropriate texts and resources that would be accessible and engaging to high school students.

Context of Study

Couched within a larger dissertation study, this research project focuses on my experiences leading a summer seminar with a group of 11 high school students participating in a teacher-pipeline program entitled the Future Teachers Program (FTP)[1]. The purpose of FTP is to promote the teaching profession to historically marginalized youth who have expressed an interest in becoming teachers. FTP grew from a university and school district partnership to close the disparate opportunity gap present in Eagle Creek between Black and White students. The multipronged approach to address the opportunity gap included increasing workforce diversity in the school district through this teacher pipeline program for high school students.

Students had to apply to FTP and participate in an interview; to be eligible, applicants had to meet a minimum 2.7 grade point average based on the first semester of their freshmen year. The program prioritized applicants from historically marginalized backgrounds, including African

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[1] Pseudonyms are used for the location of the study and the program name.

American, non-White Latino, and Southeast Asian students, along with students who qualified for free and/or reduced lunch. However, several White female students from low-income backgrounds were also accepted into the program. Students came from the four major high schools across the school district. Students admitted into FTP committed to participating in a three-week summer session, and then during the school year, they attended a weekly seminar held after school where students conducted a youth participatory action research project.

Data Collection
Data collection for this study started in June and stretched until the end of August. I began to develop the curriculum, such as identifying the learning goals and determining the texts for the course, at the start of summer. Throughout our summer session, I employed a range of qualitative methods to collect my data. I relied heavily on my teacher journal to document my entire experience, from planning the course to executing the lessons with students in the classroom. Teacher journals offer a central location to systematically document teacher actions, reflect on practices, and interrogate the challenges that surface in the classroom (Herr & Anderson, 2005; Pine, 2008). After each class session, I wrote in my teacher journal and used this space to exercise reflexivity.

Student journals also served as an important tool in the data collection process. For each convening session, we started with silent journal writing time for students to think about a particular topic or reflect on a conversation we had in a previous class. Student journals functioned as a method of inquiry, a site to reflect and interrogate ideas and concepts as students related to themselves, each other, and the world around them (Richardson, 2003). The daily use of journals documented how students responded to cross-racial dialogues, and captured their thinking on issues such as racism over a period of time.

My field notes played an important role in data collection as well: I printed my daily lesson plan and typically placed it on a clipboard. I carried this clipboard around during class. When a noteworthy incident took place, I jotted down a word or two on my lesson plan to trigger my memory later. After class, I immediately wrote out my field notes in detail, using the lesson plan and jottings as a guide. Field notes allow researchers to capture moments in class with descriptive detail (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011). I used field notes to verbally distill the events in class, paying heed to body language and interactions that might be difficult to capture in a digital recording.

Lastly, concerned that students might not be forthcoming with their answers considering my role as their teacher, I made the decision not to use semistructured interviews. Rather, students were given an anonymous reflection survey to answer at the end of the summer course. The questions focused on the content of the course and sought to capture how students experienced the pedagogy of the summer institute. On the last day of instruction, I provided students with a list of open-ended questions and a digital recorder; I advised students to find a quiet space in the building to answer these questions. The recordings were uploaded by a teaching assistant and sent to a third-party transcription company to transcribe. I was given access to the transcriptions a month later.

Data Analysis

I used a qualitative analysis software program called MaxQDA to store all my data. To start data analysis, I read the data multiple times and wrote research memos based on concerns or issues that surfaced. Memos as a form of writing can help researchers reflect on the data (Maxwell, 2012). I engaged in first cycle coding (Saldaña, 2012), although I paid heed to concepts in my theoretical framework, such as praxis, democratic practices, and problem-posing classroom. Based on second cycle coding, certain categories surfaced in the data: critical texts, dialogue, and White privilege. After coding the data multiple times, I looked across all the categories and developed themes, such as building classroom community and selecting critical texts. I wrote analytic memos for the themes as a way to make sense of the data.

Trustworthiness

I implemented a multipronged approach to ensure the trustworthiness of my data. I triangulated my data using field notes, teacher and student journal entries, and anonymous surveys. Striving for honesty and accuracy in my observations and interpretations, I exercised reflexivity through teacher journals and research memos (Herr & Anderson, 2005). I considered my positionality as a researcher in terms of how students received the information I provided and how they might perceive me as their teacher. I accounted for how my lived experiences as a Person of Color, female, mother, and PhD candidate shaped and informed how I looked at the data.

Findings

For the findings, I highlight the classroom practices and approaches I used to strengthen and build on students' racial consciousness. My intent is not to extensively outline the curriculum I created. Rather, I seek to elevate the practices in creating a CRP curriculum, such as building a classroom community, selecting a range of critical texts, and elaborating on my rationale behind teacher actions.

Building a Classroom Community Fosters Necessary Trust

Knowing that students entered the program primarily as strangers, I created multiple opportunities throughout the summer institute and especially during the first week to nurture a respectful learning community. Without developing trust among each other and with me, I knew we could not go very far or very deep in our racial consciousness development. At the start of most classes, I led students through team building activities, such as icebreakers, as a way for students to learn more about each other. Although icebreakers have the potential to be trite, I chose activities that would allow students to learn about each other's lives and lived experiences. Having students learn one another's names was an important first step for our class to break the anonymity of being in a group; I wanted students to avoid saying, "Hey you!" or "What's your name again?"

During the start of our second week together, I had students participate in *Roots and Leaves*. This activity started with students drawing a tree; they were then instructed to write words or create symbols on the leaves to represent the ostensibly visible parts of their lives, such as favorite hobbies, foods, or music genres. The roots were supposed to represent less visible aspects about their identity that may not be readily apparent. The following excerpt is from my

field notes for that class session:

> I started the presentation sharing my tree first as a way to also open myself up to my students; I shared my leaves, pointing to images of a yoga mat, running shoes, baby bottle, and books. For my roots, I revealed a diploma to highlight my aspirations to obtain a doctorate one day and become a professor. I informed students that they were not required to share and could opt out. As more and more students started to share their trees, something I did not expect happened: Their presentations revealed deeply personal and traumatic experiences. The activity ended with every single student in tears or on the verge of crying. (Field notes, August 10, 2015)

I am reminded that even this group of students—considered successful by all traditional measures of school—carries the weight of challenge and trauma rooted in issues related to poverty, domestic violence, mental illness, homophobia, and racism.

Reflecting on that scene in class, I am humbled at what I witnessed. As the teacher in class that day, I also cried along with my students. I prompted students, shortly after the activity, to write in their journals as a therapeutic outlet about what they had just experienced. This event in class made me realize a few crucial aspects about teaching: I am reminded that even this group of students—considered successful by all traditional measures of school—carries the weight of challenge and trauma rooted in issues related to poverty, domestic violence, mental illness, homophobia, and racism. This incident in class also reaffirmed for me that teaching is an act of love—a deeply relational endeavor that requires all parties, teachers and students alike, to recognize everyone's humanity (Freire, 1970).

Democratic Practices Promote Student Inclusion

Whenever possible, I wanted students to be included in important aspects of the decision-making process. In line with Freire's notion of a problem-posing classroom, I wanted students to feel that their insights and experiences were included in our building of a classroom community. In order to have deep and honest conversations about issues related to race and class, I wanted students to be a part of developing norms for our group. Building on John Singleton's work in *Courageous Conversations* (2014), on the first day of class I shared with students four important agreements that I thought were foundational to our work together during the summer institute. The following comments were included in my field notes for that day:

> We went through the syllabus next and focused on developing norms together…A few common norms included confidentiality. I brought up the Las Vegas rule of what happens in Vegas should stay in Vegas. One student noted that we should remain confidential regarding the information but take back the "souvenirs" to share with the outside world. (Field notes, August 3, 2015)

This student in my field notes extended my Las Vegas metaphor; she added nuance to my statement by capturing the idea that we should share our takeaways from class with our families and friends while respecting the privacy of our classmates. The exercise illustrates how students

have the capacity to think and share knowledge that the teacher did not consider. Although most suggestions listed in our norms represented ideas typically listed for group norms, such as students monitoring their airtime and being respectful to peers, the act of building the norms together showed students, perhaps, that their voices and opinions in this class mattered.

A Range of Critical Texts Facilitates Analysis of Racism
A primary goal for my course included offering students a range of texts and developing their critical perspectives. In the increasing digital age where sources of information can originate from different media, I sought to provide students with a range of texts and media from academic articles, documentary films, short videos, poetry, and statistics. I also wanted to convey to students that what qualifies as a text and legitimate source of knowledge can go beyond a traditional essay, article, or book.

A major hurdle in planning the curriculum for this course included narrowing the scope and the content of course. In particular, I had difficulty finding academic texts that would be accessible to and appropriate for high school students in focusing on the endemic nature of institutionalized racism—a core principle of CRT. I stumbled across Beverly Tatum's (2007) book *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria.* I read an excerpt and appreciated how she explained institutionalized racism, making a distinction between racial prejudice versus racism. Even though racism is tied to power, Tatum notes that there are poor Whites that do not feel they have any power in this country. Tatum contends that institutionalized racism entails a dominant group who benefits from an unjust system. Framing institutionalized racism in terms of the systematic ways the dominant group often implicitly benefits represented an accessible way for my students to understand the concept of institutionalized racism (Tatum, 2007).

In thinking about this notion of institutionalized racism, I decided to couple Tatum's (2007) readings with a documentary film that aired on PBS entitled *RACE: The Power of Illusion,* Episode 3: "The House We Live In" (Smith, 2003). My students and I viewed the documentary together, answering study guide questions along the way. I stopped the film every 15-20 minutes to ask questions. The film laid out the notion that race is a social construct; however, it also outlined the ways public policies have historically excluded People of Color from access to rights and privileges afforded only to Whites, from courts determining who is considered White to federal housing policies that promoted redlining. More importantly, the film emphasized how the policies of the past continue to shape the inequities of our society today, further reifying CRT scholars' assertion about the pervasive nature of racism and how Whiteness operates as property (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006; Parker & Stovall, 2004).

After exposing students to these various texts on institutionalized racism, I had them answer the following prompt: "Before this institute, how did you define racism? Based on Tatum's readings, how does she define racism vs. racial prejudice? Do you believe her statement to be true: 'Only Whites can be racist in a system that benefits them but any person of any background can hold racial prejudice' (Tatum, 2007)?"

Utilizing Kinesthetic Activities to Teach About White Privilege and Racism
After our lesson on institutionalized racism and the notion that some groups benefit more than

others in our society, I searched for a kinesthetic activity that would place students in scenarios that would ask them to reflect on this notion of White privilege. I wanted a lesson where students could experience firsthand how White privilege operates within a fictional game and then give students time to reflect on the larger implications in society. Adapted from an icebreaker activity that typically involves building a tower out of various objects, I tailored the activity to fit the goals of my lesson.

For my White privilege lesson, I bought six 7-ounce bags of gummy bears, a box of 1000 toothpicks, and one 16-ounce and one 5-ounce cup. I divided the supplies into three paper bags, one each for Team Purple, Team Red, and Team Green. Team Purple received three bags of gummy bears, roughly 500 toothpicks, and the 16-ounce cup. Team Red had two bags of gummy bears, the 5-ounce cup, and approximately 300 toothpicks. Team Green had one bag of gummy bears, about 100 toothpicks, and no cup. The morning of our activity, I randomly selected students for each team. I set up the rules of the game and explained that the goal was to build the tallest gummy bear tower with the supplies available. I also made sure to include the following rule: The teacher can change the rules at any time. When the activity started, Team Green immediately noticed they were missing a cup. I informed them that they had to work with the supplies given to them. A few minutes into the game, I projected different messages on the whiteboard for different groups: Team Purple is the best! Team Red: You, too, can win!! Team Green: Are you sure you can do this?

Once students got situated into the game, I pulled out the two most active participants from Team Green and one student from Team Red. I walked around the room and offered differential feedback to each group. I praised Team Purple for their efforts; I told Team Red they had a chance at success. For Team Green, I discouraged them with condescending comments about their gummy bear structure. My field notes highlight the next few moments of the lesson:

> At one point in the activity, all members of Team Green stopped working on the activity. I said something along the lines of why are they quitting; they need to try harder. Team Red built a scaffold from the toothpicks with the gummies as the endpoints that connected the toothpicks. Team Purple built a shorter scaffold than Team Red. With a few minutes left to spare, most teams were wrapping up. Team Purple did not know what to do with the cup, so I suggested using it as a base. Team Red put their cup on top of their scaffold. Prior to the teaching assistant measuring their sculpture, the cup fell off and Team Red was disqualified. (Field notes, August 11, 2015)

After we measured all the towers, Team Purple prevailed, unsurprisingly, considering they had the most resources and support. I had students debrief on the activity in their journals, posing the following journal prompt: "How did your group perform on this task? How was this game structured? Which group was advantaged? Which group was disadvantaged? How did it feel having messages posted on the board about your group? How is this a larger example of racism in our society?" In their journal reflections, students made connections between our gummy bears activity and ideas centered on institutionalized racism:

> This experiment was structured in order to demonstrate the amount of privilege and

opportunities one receives, which in the real world [is] due to our race, class, financial status, and many more. We all know that Whites, the group that had the best outcome, receive more encouragement and opportunities like the large cup that was given to them in the experiment. (Student journal #8)

Student journal #8 illustrates the ways the dominant group in our society benefits and receives privilege because of their Whiteness, reinforcing a tenet in CRT that Whiteness is property (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000). In another example, a member from Team Green articulates her frustrations participating in the activity as someone who did not receive advantages in this inequitable game in the following journal entry:

It was hard to keep trying when we weren't receiving support and when we saw the other groups' towers. This relates to racism and classism because it is an example of privilege. The purple team was privileged by having a cup; all team members and positive remarks—just like how Whites and [the] upper class are privileged. Not having a cup can represent a lack of resources and opportunity. (Student journal #3)

Student journal #3 shares the challenge "to keep trying," even though she knew the game was rigged. This student also highlights the parallels between the simulation and how White privilege operates in real life.

During our debrief, a member of Team Red who had been removed from the game observed how I had given Team Purple the advice to place their big red cup on top of their tower, thereby giving them the advantage and the win. He further connected how I had represented the federal government because certain policies and practices benefit those with privilege. I noticed at one point during our discussion that the body language of students looked different, and it appeared to correlate with their respective group memberships. Team Purple appeared upbeat and chipper. Team Green had their shoulders slouched and looked defeated.

I wrapped up the conversation by suggesting that there are students sitting in their classes who feel marginalized and discouraged every day. The purpose of this simulation was to create a microcosm of inequality in my classroom: I wanted students to consider the larger implications of being positioned and born into (dis)advantage and its effects on educational outcomes for students. Unequivocally, a trusting classroom environment among everyone, including the students, teaching assistant, and teacher, afforded us the opportunity to examine White privilege and racism in a critical and caring manner.

Students Use Dialogue to Coconstruct Knowledge
The tenets of critical pedagogy encompass providing students with the opportunity to engage in dialogue. Freire (1970) asserts, "Critical and liberating dialogue, which presupposes action, must be carried on with the oppressed at whatever the stage of their struggle for liberation" (p. 65). In a critical pedagogy classroom, students and teachers use dialogue as a centerpiece of teaching and learning. Every day I wanted to give students opportunities to reflect on their thinking through writing in their journals and dialoguing with classmates about these issues. The following represents a journal prompt I used during a class based on the thematic topic of the

day: "What is your racial identity? In other words, what racial group do you identify with? How does your racial background affect your life? How does your racial background impact how others treat you? Please explain."

I often started class with what I called a launch activity, a quiet time when students could write in their journals and reflect on an occurrence from yesterday's class or think about an idea from today's class. With the journal topic typically projected on the whiteboard when students entered class, I usually expected students to write quietly for 5-10 minutes, depending on the topic. After each journal writing, I gave students the opportunity to share their thinking in partners through a think-pair-share or as a whole class through the "golden line" (a sentence or two that they felt comfortable reading to the whole class). Prior to sharing time, I made a concerted effort to mention that students were not obligated to share anything they did not feel comfortable revealing to the class. Often times, a student would read their golden line, and it would elicit comments or feedback from other students, launching us into a whole-class discussion. One survey respondent shared their perspective on centering dialogue in our classroom:

> I really like how [the teacher] had us discuss with our partner after we would read an article or learn something new. And I like how she made sure that each day we were paired up with a different person, so we got to know and talk to someone different each day. I really like how we all felt comfortable sharing our thoughts, and what we had to say. (Anonymous surveyor #11)

In general, students seemed to appreciate opportunities to talk with each other about these important social issues, partly because there appeared to be very few opportunities for students to do so in their traditional schooling experiences. As one student mentioned in our class, "We rarely talk about race in schools."

Teachers Do Not Operate Under Neutrality

Freire (1970) unequivocally asserts that there is no such thing as neutrality in education: "What is my neutrality, if not a comfortable and perhaps hypocritical way of avoiding any choice or even hiding my fear of denouncing injustice. To wash my hands in the face of oppression" (p.101). Remaining silent in the face of injustice implies that we, as educators, have landed on the side of the oppressor. In my work with young people, I am open and honest about my perspectives on injustices. Navigating the terrain of sharing my perspectives while also offering a space for all voices and perspectives to be heard can be tricky at times. Rather than reverting to the banking model (Freire, 1970) of pouring into my students' minds how they should think and respond to the issues from our class, I used dialogue as a vehicle to get students to share their experiences, to be open to hearing others' perspectives, and more importantly, to pose questions to their classmates and themselves that might challenge their worldview on an issue. The following represents a memo I wrote after the second day of class, documenting a moment I had with students in class:

> Remaining silent in the face of injustice implies that we, as educators, have landed on the side of the oppressor.

> For our launch activity today, I had students write about the opportunity gap and why it

exists in [their] schools. I noted that several students shared about how some students just don't "care" about their education or seem to be "unmotivated." We spent some time thinking about this idea that some educators and adults hold as well. I pushed students to try to think about other reasons that could explain why a student may appear or be observed as appearing "unmotivated." (Teacher journal, August 4, 2015)

I imagined several ways I could have approached hearing students making deficit-oriented comments about their peers in explaining the opportunity gap. Rather than squelch their ideas and tell them that they were flat out wrong, I sought dialogue and questioning as a strategy to get students thinking.

In another instance, I took a clear stance on a particular topic. On the day we viewed *Race: The Power of Illusion* (Smith, 2003), we started talking about the experiences of immigrants in this country and the notion of our nation as a melting pot. I questioned the class as to whether the melting pot as a metaphor fits the experiences of immigrants: Whose culture remains intact once everyone has melted? American culture? White culture? One of my students mentioned her experiences as a second-generation immigrant in this country. She shared that her mother intentionally gave her an American name that could be easy for her teachers to pronounce.

With that story, I added my own anecdote of being an immigrant student in U.S. schools and told the class the following story: *In the first grade, several of my friends with names like Mai or Tuyen wanted to change their names to more American names such as Jenny or Cindy. Even though I was not a part of the name-changing group, my first grade teacher, a Chinese American, turned to me in front of the entire class and asked, "Van, do you want to change your name?" I went home that day and asked my mother if I could change my Vietnamese name. She asked me why I would ever want to change my name, since it was a perfectly fine name.*

As I shared this story with my students, I offered a critique that my 6-year-old self could not. Implicit in my teacher's question to me was the observation that my name was different and less than standard American names. In her mind, I am certain this teacher thought she was doing me a favor by asking if I wanted to change my name. The incident left me feeling that my given Vietnamese name somehow seemed inferior to American names. As I recounted this story to my students, I made no qualms about my perspective on that incident and that it was flat out wrong of this teacher to pose this question to me. I reiterated the idea that teachers do not operate in neutral territory even when posing seemingly innocuous questions. Although I sought to create a classroom that promoted dialogue and pushed against the banking model, as the instructor in the class, I also made a conscious decision to offer suggestions or direct conversations in ways to push students' thinking and to develop their critical consciousness.

Findings from this study illustrate crucial levers to promote racial consciousness in a CRP curriculum: (a) The foundation of a CRP classroom involves building trusting relationships among teachers and students; (b) practices that incorporate student voice and experiences democratize the classroom; (c) intentionality in the critical texts and activities students engage in will shape their analysis of social issues; and (d) neutrality represents a falsehood in education that should be explicitly debunked. However, based on these findings, key challenges and

tensions also surfaced in our daily practices in a CRP classroom.

Discussion

The following discussion highlights the challenges for me as a teacher when moving from theory to practice with CRP. I outline a few tensions that surfaced in building and implementing my curriculum. For instance, I grappled with reconciling authoritative teacher actions within a learning environment that sought to flatten a hierarchical relationship between students and the teacher. I reflect on the unfinished nature of CRP, where the focus on student learning remains an ongoing process *on becoming*, rather than a finite, discrete experience with clearly demarcated standards (Freire, 1970).

Leveling the Power Between Teachers and Students
In his critique of a banking education, Freire (1970) asserts that teachers within this paradigm are positioned at the top of the hierarchy, possessing the knowledge, skills, and experiences necessary to deposit into students. In advocating for a problem-posing classroom, he declares, "Indeed, problem-posing education, which breaks with the vertical patterns characteristic of banking education, can fulfill its function as the practice of freedom only if it can overcome the above contradiction" (Freire, 1970, p. 80). In seeking to establish a problem-posing classroom, I questioned whether every moment represented an egalitarian partnership between my students and me, void of issues related to power or authority. In practice, I strived to engage students in dialogue, establishing a symbiosis with students where our assertions, questions, or concerns propelled us toward exercising praxis.

For me to suggest that every moment in our classroom epitomized a democratic space where students and the teacher operated as equal partners would be disingenuous. For example, prior to even our first day of class, as the teacher, I had already made important decisions about the content of the course and narrowed the curriculum to fit the learning goals of FTP. Specifically, our program sought to develop critical perspectives in students regarding how issues of race and class shape the opportunity gap in our school district. Rather than including the generative themes students may have selected to explore and study, I tailored a curriculum aimed at the goals of FTP. When students did raise an issue or topic not directly related to the central goals of FTP, we explored it together as a class. But clearly, my decision to craft a curriculum absent of student voice or perspectives could be perceived as antidemocratic.

In our daily interactions with one another, I exercised my authority as a teacher to establish structures and routines. For instance, rather than allowing students to choose their own seats, each day I had a new seating chart. My rationale for this pedagogical decision involved wanting students to sit next to and interact with students they otherwise would not. As the teacher, I decided that I wanted students to learn from different partners and gain insights that varied from their own views. In seeking a highly structured class with clear expectations, I monitored students to make sure they were on task, whether that meant telling a student to put away their phone or pulling a student aside to clarify my expectations. Even though Freire's (1970) concern with a banking education centered more on *authoritarian* rather than *authoritative* approaches to teaching, I struggled at times with these two ideas as I moved from theory to practice, leading me

to notice certain tensions and second-guess decisions that might seem antidemocratic at times.

On Becoming

In an era of neoliberal reforms, the assessment of student learning has been reduced to finite, discrete standards where mastery is generally demonstrated through answering multiple choice questions, a process that runs counter to the philosophy imbued in a problem-posing classroom. Freire (1970) echoed the following sentiments regarding learning: "Problem-posing education affirms men and women as beings in the process of *becoming*—as unfinished, uncompleted beings in and with a likewise unfinished reality…The unfinished character of human beings and the transformational character of reality necessitate that education be an ongoing activity" (p. 84). In enacting a problem-posing classroom, findings from student journal responses and survey reflections suggest that they are on a journey to think more critically about the root causes of societal inequities. As a teacher who seeks to enact the principles of CRP, I am unconvinced that students became completely transformed after an intensive three-week seminar with each other and with me. Rather, evident in their work in my class, students demonstrated receptiveness on *becoming* and continuing this journey as a lifelong learner as illustrated through this anonymous surveyor:

> Some of the topics are very hard, and you might even cry. This course leaves you thinking in class and out of class…It keeps you thinking. And then you look at your friends and people around you like, oh, my goodness, this is happening. But you really have to face it. That's the point of this. You're here to fix things and help people and create a future in education. (Anonymous surveyor #7)

The sentiment present in this entry echoes Malcolm X's famous line, "The examined life is painful." This student shares how challenging it can be to study these issues related to institutionalized racism and realize that it is pervasive. Evident in the response, this surveyor recognizes that in order to "fix" the system, it requires acknowledging and confronting the problem.

Even so, there were instances in my data that suggest a few students remained reluctant to completely accept particular worldviews that surfaced from the studies in my class. For example, after our lesson on Tatum's (2007) notion of racism versus racial prejudice, one student made clear she disagreed with the author:

> I thought racism was the act of discriminating against a race, gender, ethnicity, or country based on your own belief. In the end I don't believe in part[s] of Tatum's statement. I don't think it is only White people that can be racist. I think non-White people could discriminate or do/say things against their own race. I do believe the system in the institutional places do cause issues, so we should focus on them. Institutions should be our main focus because they are teaching us to act as individual people, and if there are flaws along the way the outcome will be messed up. (Student journal #9)

This entry shows hesitancy to wholeheartedly accept Tatum's definition. This student focuses on internalized racial oppression within racial groups, a topic we did not have time to broach. The

response remains vague about how institutions "cause issues" without acknowledging to whom it causes issues. I highlight Student 9's response because it surfaces key tensions within CRP. The point of exposing students to these social issues is not for students to blindly agree with the teacher; rather, critical pedagogy allows the student and the teacher to engage in dialogue, the act of toiling and grappling with these heavy social issues (Freire, 1970). Yet, a central tenet of CRT requires acknowledging how institutionalized racism systematically benefits White people in our society. My hope is that our course has laid a foundation for this student—a path that they will take to continually question and reflect on their role as a future teacher who identifies as White, working in culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms.

In summation, this study on CRP surfaced noteworthy challenges when moving from an abstract, theoretical approach into a classroom situated in real time with actual students. The tensions I encountered, from establishing a democratic space to reconciling the unfinished manner on becoming, illustrate a few important points regarding CRP: (a) A flexible, dynamic approach is required when addressing the speed bumps along the way in the CRP classroom; (b) the CRP educator must constantly engage in praxis in their own practice; and (c) it is important to recognize that the tenets and practices of CRP often disembark from current educational reform practices.

Implications for Teachers

Findings from this study illuminate some key issues teachers must contend with when attempting to teach and talk to students about race and racism. For one, there are limited examples of how teachers have taught race and racism to secondary students. Teachers need to see more examples and models of this work and how it is done well. However, I caution against overly prescriptive approaches where teachers rely heavily on canned curriculum or a scripted program. Any given classroom represents a unique ecosystem of students and teachers that operates in a highly contextualized space; students deserve an approach dynamically tailored to their lived experiences and learning needs.

In addition, teachers should ground their antiracist work within a larger structural analysis of race and racism. Solely giving students opportunities to talk about their individualized experiences with racism without teaching the root causes of institutionalized racism is irresponsible (Parker & Stovall, 2004). I do not believe teachers need to get an advanced degree in CRT to become fluent in racial literacy; however, anchoring one's teaching within a framework could guide how educators approach antiracist work. As school districts across the country seek ways to close the opportunity gap, faculty and staff need to be able to have honest and candid conversations about race and racism. Teachers also need time, resources, encouragement, and support from school administrators to engage in this work; however, I recognize that all of this is easier said than done.

Lastly, based on my direct experiences working with secondary students, I believe that young people crave opportunities to talk about issues that are relevant and that matter to them. We, as educators and researchers, have a social responsibility to prepare young people to become well-informed participants to uphold the ideals of our democracy. Racial literacy represents a basic skill all school-aged children should be equipped with because, to put it simply, race matters

(West, 1993).

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