

Critical Race Practice in the Era of Standards-based Reform: The Story of One Elementary School

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Introduction

I worked as an English-as-second-language (ESL) teacher at Southern Elementary (a pseudonym), a racially diverse school in a small, largely affluent district in suburban, central North Carolina during the 2006-2007 school year. Like much of the region, the district had experienced a rapid increase in its Latino immigrant population and thus an increased number of English language learners (ELLs) in schools. Perhaps the most striking phenomena in the district for me, however, was not the increased number of ELLs in the schools but rather the increased energy placed on standardized forms of assessment. I had taught in the district 5 years earlier, before the federal enactment of No Child Left Behind (NCLB). After going back to graduate school, I returned to teach public school, this time after NCLB. I had studied racial disparity from critical race, sociological and ethnographic standpoints and was now returning to be a full participant in public schools; and I was returning highly attuned to the way in which racial disparity played out in schools. Very quickly I became aware of the barriers to an equal education, particularly for my Latino ELL students. I report on those barriers in another publication (Blaisdell, forthcoming), where I make the overarching argument that the increased standardization of curriculum and assessment can lead to school practices that marginalize Latino ELLs by increasingly segregating and remediating the education that these students receive.

In this article, I employ a critical race analysis to describe how schools that respond uncritically to standards-based reform create a school culture that perpetuates institutional racism. My analysis focuses on how this culture of standardization

creates and/or bolsters racialized systems of categorization that affect students' access to an equitably rich and rigorous education. My understanding of the concept of systems of categorization comes from Delgado and Stefancic's (2000, 2001) discussions of structural determinism in law, where they describe how the categories that are created and used within social institutions function to maintain the status quo of those institutions. In education, like in law, current systems of categorization have limited educators in how they see both the causes of and solutions to racial disparity and have caused them to rely on practices that actually perpetuate that disparity. Just as Delgado and Stefancic (2000) believe that understanding these categories can us "escape their sway" (p. 213), I also describe how CRT enabled me to both see the marginalizing nature of these categorization practices and to begin to resist them. Perhaps more importantly, I use CRT—and particularly the analysis of property—to describe the efforts of two teachers who were even better able to resist those marginalizing practices. I end with a discussion how CRT helped these teachers and me discuss how to promote more racially conscious practices in a standards-based reform context.

Political and Critical Race Analyses

In their description of political race theory, Guinier and Torres (2002) describe how the effects of institutional racism on people of color can highlight social, institutional subjugation of people of all races. In an educational context, this can mean that analyzing the institutional marginalizing effects of certain school practice on students of color can actually point out how those practices actually harm all students. Toward that end, I use the analysis of the effects of standards-based reform on Latino English language learners (ELLs) at one elementary school to bring to light the detrimental effects of standards based reform more broadly. To focus on how this reform can particularly affect Latino ELLs, I use CRT. Specifically, property analysis helps me expose how institutional school practices that stem from a culture of standardization limit the access of Latinos ELLs to rigorous curricula.

Harris (1995/1993) discusses that one of the characteristics of property is that it bestows on people the right to use and enjoy certain privileges. Historically, the ownership of land afforded people certain rights of citizenship, such as the right to vote. These rights give people privileges and power that help them more easily acquire more property, a process that favors those with property over those without. When we look at curriculum as property, a similar process occurs. Students who score higher scores on standardized assessments are viewed to have acquired a certain "amount" of curriculum, i.e., a certain amount of property. This ownership gives them the right to use and enjoy more rigorous curricula. They have better access to more property because they are given better texts and complex learning activities, put into higher-level classes, and given gifted education services. Students like my ELL students, on the other hand, have not done well on those

assessments. In turn, they do not have the right to use and enjoy more rigorous curricula. In fact, the school has a “right to exclude” (Harris, 1995/1993) those students from such activities. Since they have not acquired certain amount of curriculum as determined by the standardized assessments, the school—following the institutionalized practices of the district—only gives them to a more limited type of curricula, a less valuable form of property.

The acquisition of curricular property is linked to whiteness. Harris’ (1995/1993) article lays out how whiteness has the characteristics of property. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) summarize that article and describe that one characteristic of property is its alienability, or transferability. “When students are awarded only for perceived ‘white norms’ or sanctioned for cultural practices (e.g., dress, speech patterns, unauthorized conceptions of knowledge), white property is being rendered alienable” (Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995, 59). Those who “possess” whiteness have the rights to use and enjoy and to exclude; i.e., those who are either white or at least who adhere to white norms can access its privileges. Because of their racial privilege, whites have easier access to that curricular knowledge. Schools use systems of categorization that privilege white ways of knowing and white cultural practices, creating a “official knowledge” (Apple 2000) that is based on white culture, experiences and privilege and that fail to recognize the “funds of knowledge” (Moll, Amanti, Neff, and Gonzalez 1992) that non-white students bring to school. Furthermore, these “unauthorized conceptions of knowledge” (Apple 2000) that Latino ELLs, for example, bring to school are not acknowledged by standardized assessments. The reliance on standardized assessments to gauge student knowledge compounds both the advantages whites have and the limitations put on non-whites. Below I use an analysis of curriculum as property that draws on the concepts of whiteness as property to show how Southern Elementary limited the access of Latino ELLs to an equitably rigorous and meaningful curriculum.

Such analysis can illuminate how some teachers effectively resist institutionalized racial inequity. By telling the story of two culturally responsive teachers at Southern, I show how CRT can highlight what is effective about teacher resistance to standardization. In addition to briefly describing how it helped me revision my own teaching practice during the school year, I show how CRT helped me talk with teachers about how to better resist a culture of standardization. In my interviews with the two teachers in this study, I used language from CRT to help identify and analyze both the barriers to racial equity and the practices that teachers can employ to promote racial equity. I make the conclusion that from such inquiry, education scholars can then work with teachers to construct counter-practices, practices that challenge the status quo of curricular distribution and racial disparity.

The data and quotes in this article come from three sources. First are my fieldnotes. During the school year, I carried a notebook to document my experience at Southern. I compiled these fieldnotes weekly. Second, I journaled several times a week, using both my fieldnotes and further reflections on what I experienced at school as a white, male teachers of Latino ELLs. This journal was shared and

revised with a colleague (a teacher and fellow academic) each week or two. Third, after the school year was over, I conducted a series of interviews with two teachers at Southern who I identified as being culturally responsive teachers. These interviews focused on what these teachers saw to be the barriers to racial equity, the impact of standardization, and the ways they were still able to work towards racial equity.

A Culture of Standardization

I started working at Southern in the Fall of 2006, four and a half years after the No Child Left Behind Act was signed into law. North Carolina schools had had a standardized assessment system¹ in place, and I remember many of the regulations in place when I had taught at high school in the same district 5 years earlier. However, I was shocked (maybe naively) by the increased presence that standardized assessment had when I got to Southern. For the students this meant that many instructional activities were centered on specific curricular goals—often in isolation—from the standard course of study and were in the format closely linked to the state-wide end-of-grade (EOG) test. For my students, instruction was even more limited by those practices than the majority of their peers.

In the class I get the feeling that [two of the Mexican immigrant ELL boys] could really benefit from integrated, project-based activities. So much of their time scheduled for literacy is focused on reading out loud (guided reading), decoding words, answering pre-selected comprehension questions and making limited observations about the plot and characters of books. From my perspective there is little chance for them to think more globally or holistically about stories. What would really benefit these kids is gifted education. Because of being below grade level in reading, neither kid would test into gifted services. – Journal Entry, 12/7/06

When I contrasted those reading activities with those that students in higher level reading groups, I saw that those higher-level students not only read more difficult books, but that in their groups they had the chance to discuss the text more openly, make personal connections to the content, and have their book be linked more closely to other projects in the class, all practices that would actually benefit ELLs (Ovando, Combs and Collier 2006; Garcia 2002; Gibbons 2002). The teachers did not intentionally want to limit the time these two boys spent on more interactive activities that promoted higher-level thinking. However, by feeling the constraints of getting these students to perform well on the standardized assessments, they limited the students' access to such activities and to more rigorous curricula. As I

¹ This accountability system was called the ABCs. It was started in 1995 but was developed and delineated over the next several years (North Carolina's Department of Education website, accessed on June 17, 2008 from: <http://www.ncpublicschools.org/docs/accountability/reporting/abc/2006-07/abcevolution.pdf>).

have written about in another piece (Blaisdell, forthcoming[a]), such a response to standardization can have the effect of categorizing Latino ELL students as remedial.

I fear that these boys are being ghetto-ized by the school—mostly unintentionally. What I mean by this is that they receive remedial (versus “gifted”) instruction a lot of the time and the specialists and resource teachers that work with them work on basic skills. They are pulled from class to work on shorter reading passages that are not connected thematically or contextually to the rest of his instruction. In addition, they are in a more basic level math class... I feel that the instructional approach they receive unintentionally positions them as remedial students. Journal Entry, 1/7/07

By being categorized as remedial students—or “fragile learners”—my Latino ELL students were in essence denied the right to use and enjoy the privileges that those students categorized as higher-level readers could.

The Categorization of Students as “Fragile Learners”

The reliance on standardized assessments had a particularly negative affect on my students, as these tests did not adequately measure the academic abilities of ELLs. The teachers and administrators used the testing system to categorize my students as below grade-level. Furthermore, based on test scores, teachers at Southern often talked about both the Latino ELL students and the African American students as “fragile learners,” a euphemistic term used by teachers at the school to describe students who did not do well academically.² This type of categorization practice does not take into consideration how the institution itself prevents certain students from succeeding academically and perpetuates the further marginalization of students of color (Delgado and Stefancic 2001) because it influences teachers to limit the quality of education they are given access to. The students who were categorized as fragile learners at Southern received a markedly different education than their classmates did.³

I do not disagree that curricular standards can be used as a guide to help assure that students have access to an equitable education. However, I also believe there is a difference between having high standards and an over-reliance on standardization, especially when standardization is linked closely with high-stakes testing. By allowing academic rigor to be interpreted only as standardized lists of standards and indicators that can be quantifiably measured, educators participate in the creation in institutionalized practices that limit a more holistic view of quality education and make it easier for standardized high-stakes testing to be implemented. For example,

² Throughout the rest of the article I use the term without quotes but maintain an understanding of it as a highly problematic label.

³ While I discuss the educational practices for the Latino ELLs, many of the African American students received the same practices, particularly in terms of segregated and remediated instruction.

early in the school year at Southern, I received training in the standardized test that the district used to assess the English language proficiency of the ELL students, tests that were increasingly being used to make decisions about the ELL students' right to receive accommodations on end-of-grade tests and to track their academic progress.

In the training, we [teachers] were told that the test is valid because it has been researched. I believe the actual language used in the training meeting was "research shows"... Why is it that we—the ESL teachers and supposedly the experts on ESL teaching and assessment—do not also get access to the research that was used to make that determination. "Research" here is used as a tool of control. In a similar way, the word "expert" is used. "The tests were evaluated by a team of experts." We—apparently not the experts—are supposed to take this at face value. Journal Entry, 9/7/06

When such logic prevents teacher from being allowed to critically examine the standardization process, institutional practices can be put in place that negatively effect already marginalized students. Though not designed as summative assessments, these tests were being used more and more as indicators of the ELL's progress in the acquisition of English. When they did not make a certain amount of progress on those tests, the students were seen as fragile learners and the scores were often used as justification to place the students in lower level math classes and reading groups. This was just one example of how regulating access to curricula based on scores on standardized assessments can have a particularly negative effect on students who have not done well academically. In other words, these students, because they were categorized as fragile learners, received instruction that further limited their access to equitable curriculum and instruction.

Such practices did nothing to alleviate the academic achievement gap at Southern. A school with a little over 500 students, Southern had moderate racial diversity. 54% of the students were White, 23% African American, 16% Latino, and 4% Asian. In addition, 36% of the students were on free and reduced lunch. The ELL population was roughly 20%. The racial achievement gap on the EOG tests was large, especially in math. On the reading test 99% of the white students, 82% of the African American, and 80% of the ELL students passed, and on the math EOG 90% of the white students, only 33% of the African American students, and 52% of the ELL students passed. The following year, the percentage of ELL students passing the both the reading and math tests decreased significantly the, to 62% and 33% respectively. While not the only cause, I believe the over-reliance on standardized assessments did contribute to this academic disparity.

The negative effects of over-relying on standardized assessments were not just evident in the EOG tests. The report cards used for quarterly grades had become standardized as well, and there was a similar disparity in grades. All of the elementary schools in the district, including Southern, used a standardized report card. The structure of the report card did not easily allow the English language

proficiency of ELLs to be taken into consideration in assigning grades. For each content area that could affect grade level retention—reading, writing, and math at the time of the study—a student could receive a score from 1 to 4, with 3 and 4 being passing grades. For a student to get a 3 or 4 they would have to show mastery or near mastery of a list of skills. Teachers often used district-wide standardized assessments to determine the students’ levels of mastery. As with the EOG tests, report card grades showed a substantial racial achievement gap, with it again being particularly acute in math. In reading, over 95% of white students were at or above grade level based on report card grades, while only 79% of African American, 78% of Latino, and 80% of ELL students were at or above grade level. In math, 88.0 of white students were at or above grade level, but only 33% of African American, 47% of Latino, and 52% of ELL students were at or above grade level.

Many ELLs, even though they might have improved dramatically throughout the grading period and might have shown the ability to perform those skills in contexts that were adequately and appropriately modified for the needs of ELLs, could not show mastery on the standardized assessments which were decontextualized and on which only basic accommodations were provided. Furthermore, they could not show mastery in the same way that the non-ELL population could. As was shown above, the report card results of the ELL students were substantially lower than those for the white students.

When I brought up this issue of the report cards with the principal, she told me that she understood the dilemma but that the district wanted to use the standardized grading practice so that they could tell where the students “actually are” in the skills as compared to other students and that it would not be used punitively against the students. However, when promotion decisions came around, the ELL students’ low scores in fact were used punitively when classroom teachers, using the report card scores, would not recommend those students for promotion to then next grade level, and the principal herself often supported those decisions based on the same scores.

My Students – Remediation and Segregation

Let me briefly describe a typical day for my 3rd grade students so I can point out how they received less access to meaningful and rigorous curricula.⁴ The school day officially started at 7:50. For the first 10 minutes the students got their bags and folders organized, worked on worksheets and listened to morning announcements. At 8:00, they went to their specials classes (art, music, Spanish, or physical education depending on the day). At 9:00, they returned to their classroom and did individual work for an hour. Most often, this consisted of worksheets on literacy activities, usually reading. Occasionally they would write about a picture they drew

⁴ I focus on the students on the third grade here because I had the largest number of Latino ELLs in that grade (I also worked with grade two through five) and it is in that grade where the biggest gap in achievement between the my students and the white students occurred.

using a sentence format presented by the teacher. At 10:00, all 3rd grade students went to leveled math classes for one hour. The levels of each class were determined by district-wide standardized tests (in English) on material that they would learn in the upcoming quarter (i.e., the students had not seen this material in class, yet). All of my Latino ELLs were in the lowest level math class. After math class, at 11:00, the students had break, returned to their regular classes to continue their individual work and got ready for lunch. They had lunch at 11:30 and then recess at 12:00. At 12:30, the 2-hour literacy block was supposed to start but the students rarely got to class before 12:45 and rarely started work until close to 1:00. It was during the literacy block where I was supposed to work with the students. I will describe their literacy activities more a little later on, but in addition to me working with the students at this time, the students who scored low on standardized reading tests were pulled out of class individually or in small groups (depending on their test scores) to work with a reading specialist, usually for 20 to 30 minutes. At 2:00, the students had either social studies or science for about 20 minutes.⁵ Then the students packed up their things and cleaned up for dismissal at 2:30.

Even though I have not given any detail on what occurred during the students' math class, literacy block or reading pull-out time, it should already be evident that the instruction my students received was limited in rigor. In effect, my students (and particularly my Latino students, who had lower test scores) did not have access to the same curriculum as most of the other students in class. None of the third grade teachers intentionally remediated instruction for these students. However, except for one teacher, they did rely heavily on standardized classroom assessments of their reading to determine what the students would read, what individual skills they would focus on, and the activities that they deemed the students were capable of handling.

In one class in particular, the class where I had a cluster of 7 Latino ELLs, this reliance on test-prep reading activities dominated the Latino ELLs' literacy block time in class. The usual routine was that the students completed worksheets connected to word-building textbook. After they completed these exercises—which used rhyming activities, guessing games, and fill in the blank passages to help kids recognize the new words for the chapter—the students could move to their book groups or independent reading. My Latino ELL students were either placed in their own book groups or in groups for students with the lower level scores on the periodic class assessments. In either case, they read easier books and were grouped with students who were less proficient readers according to test scores. In these groups, they completed activities that addressed basic, rather than advanced, literacy skills. These activities helped them advance their reading at a slow pace but they did not involve more integrated tasks—such as making connections between the texts and their lives or completing projects that would allow them to extend

⁵ In the class with the biggest cluster of ELLs, the teacher assistant was put in charge of social studies because the teacher did not like the subject area.

their understand of the text⁶—and they did not help the students catch up to their white peers.

In contrast, the higher-level reading groups often had more open-ended discussions and more difficult questions about character motivation and author intention, and they often worked with a gifted education teacher on projects that connected their reading to other subject areas. Even when those higher-level groups had similar worksheets with basic questions, they often completed those worksheets quickly and were allowed to go onto independent reading of books of their choice. When my students had independent reading, they, too, were allowed to select their own books, but—as was the practice of the district-wide literacy program—their choice was controlled by the teachers, who only let them read books that matched the level they received on the periodic assessments. Research has been done about the need for ELLs to be challenged by higher-order thinking skills to learn best and about the importance of context-embedded text in to best scaffold their learning (Walqui 2006; Gibbons 2002; Cummins 2001). The leveled reading groups and the limited types of exercises that my students participated in did not follow this research. Rather, my students were, in effect, segregated from the rest of the class because they were categorized as lower-level readers, or fragile learners, based on standardized assessments.

As I mentioned above, the school did have reading teachers who worked with the readers who scored lower on the reading tests, and the stated goal of these teachers was to help students like mine catch up with their higher-scoring peers. While these teachers employed methods that have had success with ELLs (e.g., reading recovery), how they were employed in the school fed the culture of standardization and positioned the Latino ELLs as remedial. They worked with students who they and the classroom teachers determined to need the most help because they were either below grade level or because they were behind the other students in their classes. Again, this determination was made primarily based on the students' scores on standardized in-class assessments. While I believe it is commendable that a school would provide extra resources to help students who have had less success to improve, these reading teachers were not integrated into the classrooms in way that helped most of the ELLs to close the gap between themselves and their peers.

First of all, the students were pulled from class, often to work on books separate from what they rest of the class was working on. Secondly, the reading teachers commonly only worked on skills in isolation. While those skills are necessary to become better readers, they were not practiced within the context of the students' other classroom activities and projects. As I mentioned above, contextualization is key in ELLs acquiring language and literacy skills (Gibbons 2002; Cummins 2001). Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, this segregation and decontextualization perpetuated the categorization of the Latino ELL students in negative ways. As they were already categorized as below grade-level and needing remediation by the

⁶ For example, Walqui (2006) discusses how ELLs benefit from being able to re-present text in multiple formats.

classroom teachers (based on their scores on standardized assessments), they were further and similarly categorized as low-level readers by the reading teachers. Both the reading and classroom teachers would even meet once every quarter to use the students' assigned reading levels to compare students within each class. Those students who had the low-level reading scores each quarter would be the ones that would receive extra attention from the reading teachers. While it is good that they would receive extra attention, the strategies proposed in these meetings almost always involved working with those students individually on skills and never included any restructuring of the class to make those students' experiences and background knowledge central to the curriculum, a practice that is an important aspect of being successful with culturally and linguistically diverse students (Garcia 2002; Gibbons 2002).

“Accommodating” English Language Learners

Many of the teachers I worked with, including the third grade teachers I discuss above, wanted their Latino ELL students to be successful. They did not start off the year thinking these students were less intelligent or capable, and certainly they cared for these students. However, what teachers were doing for their Latino ELL students to be successful academically was not sufficient to enable them to close the gap with their white peers. One of the biggest problems was that most of these teachers did not take a critical approach to the curricular and instructional choices they made. That is to say, they focused much of their attention—particularly in reading and math—on teaching to the lists of goals and objectives that were in the standard course of study. The needs of Latino ELL students were usually incorporated after these curricular decisions were made. As I stated above, making the students' experiences and background knowledge central to the curriculum—a necessity for Latino ELLs (Walqui 2006; Ovando, Combs and Collier 2006; Garcia 2002)—was not done.

In addition, the teachers looked for solutions to each student's lack of academic success on an individual basis. For example, and as I briefly stated above, when students were identified as below-grade-level because of their scores on periodic literacy assessments, a team of grade-level and reading teachers would meet together to brainstorm on strategies to use with each of those children. In those meetings, the teachers would go through each identified child one by one. The team brainstormed a bunch of strategies to use with the student and the classroom teacher chose a few to use with the identified student. I was involved in several of these meetings and almost every suggested activity was one that was easily integrated into the teachers' existing classroom structures. For example, some of the strategies were to use index cards to help build vocabulary, to attach pre-printed messages to the student to get him or her to focus on silent reading, or using a timer to let the student know how long he or she had to read for. Rarely did a strategy arise that suggested the teacher change his or her teaching in any dramatic way. When I tried

to get teachers to make the students' lives central to the curricula of their classes or integrate the students who scored low on their tests the same access to class projects (with my guidance), the teachers either never chose those approaches or the suggestions were put down by teachers who said the students were not ready for that type of material.

This individual attention to structural inequity was also evident in the somewhat standardized way that was in place to accommodate⁷ for ELLs' English language proficiency on both in-class assignment and end-of-grade tests. For example, a few of the sanctioned accommodations for official tests included ELLs being allowed to have extra time on the test, being allowed to take the test in a different room, or being allowed to take the test in more than one sitting. Accommodations for in-class assignments were a little more involved. The most common ones used by teachers included being allowed to answer fewer problems, being allowed to use a dictionary, and being allowed to receive help from a teacher or peer (though assignments with this last accommodation could not be used in their end-of-grade portfolios). However, even these accommodations were only marginally effective at getting the students to score on par with their non-ELL peers. None of the accommodations had an effect on altering the overall curriculum and pedagogy of the classroom in any substantial way. In addition, most sanctioned accommodations for ELLs do not actually address the linguistic need of ELLs (Holmes, Hedlund and Nickerson 2000; Menken 2000). Furthermore, when the accommodations might address the students' linguistic needs, they often left the assignments devoid of the critical and higher order thinking skills that these students needed to catch up to their peers. Therefore, this student-by-student accommodation system failed to give the Latino ELL students access to a curriculum as rigorous and meaningful as most of the non-ELL students.

Furthermore, except for the two teachers I discuss later, few of the teachers worked from a culturally responsive framework. This is not to say that all of their teaching was bad. Many classroom practices drew on cooperative learning and often the teachers tried to be at least culturally competent⁸ in their use of texts and materials. However, as their curriculum centered on the standard course of study and their goals for student achievement focused too heavily on standardized assessments, the overall instructional styles and core curricula were not culturally competent. Using the standards and indicators as guides, the teachers relied on a pre-determined definition of a quality education. What was lacking from most of the teachers was a critical consciousness regarding school norms, particularly as they pertained to less academically successful students. Ladson-Billings (1995) describes critical consciousness as a "broader sociopolitical consciousness that allows [students] to critique the cultural values, norms, mores, and institutions that produce and

⁷ Based on their scores on the aforementioned English language proficiency test and their length of time in U.S. schools, ELLs could receive official "accommodations" and "modifications" both in class and on standardized tests.

⁸ I borrow the term culturally competent from Ladson-Billings (1995), who describes it as one of the three necessary components to culturally responsive teaching.

maintain social inequities” (162) and as one of the three keys to culturally responsive teaching. While many of the teachers openly disdained the high-stakes testing system in place, they were unaware of their complicity in reifying the culture of standardization that such a system promoted. They often did not make the link to how an over-reliance on homogeneous reading groups, pull-out skills work, and separate math classes help sustain the racial achievement gap. Therefore, most of the teachers could not develop a critical consciousness in their students because they had not developed it in themselves.

Property Analysis Revisited

Liberalism dominates the ideology of schools (Apple 2004), especially with regard to how school personnel perceive and respond to racial disparity (Blaisdell 2009; Blaisdell forthcoming). Liberal interpretations of the cause of racism in school contexts frame it an individual phenomenon, as mainly coming from the actual victims of racism—i.e., people of color—and as stemming from sources outside of the school itself (Kailin 1999; Blaisdell 2009; Apple 2004). Such interpretations tend limit responses to racial disparity to those that involve working with individual students who are seen as having problems. The culture of standardization at Southern conformed with and perpetuated a liberal account of the racial disparity at the school. The students who were not successful on standardized tests were disproportionately students of color and ELLs. Teachers and administrators interpreted their lack of success as stemming from some kind of deficiency—either cultural or experiential—that the students came to school with. So, because they did not do as well on their tests as compared to their white and English language dominant classmates, they were categorized as fragile learners. The designation of fragile learners placed the cause of their lack of academic success on them, their families, and their home environments⁹ and diverted the responsibility for academic disparity away from the institution itself. Therefore, the primary responses to this problem were individualistic as well. As the principal said at one faculty meeting, “We are a very good school district. If we have to give our teachers strategies to work with the students who aren’t working well, then we’ll do that.” Those strategies involved teaching the students “who aren’t working well” apart from other students, focusing on the skills the students were not able to accomplish in comparison to their classmates (versus recognizing what abilities they did bring to the class).

In this way, the majority of the teachers at Southern employed systems of categorization that contributed to their Latino ELL students’ lack of access to rigorous curriculum and instruction. The culture of standardization that these teachers adhered to set up a competitive system (based on assessments) that

⁹ It was common in faculty meetings and one-on-one conversations for me to hear about the Latino ELL students as not caring about their education, not having supportive families or not having in favorable home lives that were conducive to being good students.

disadvantaged culturally and linguistically diverse students, whose education was then remediated and segregated and whose access to an equally rigorous and meaningful curriculum was restricted. Rogers and Mosley (2006) discuss standardized assessments, especially literacy tests, “continue to function as a replacement of property as a means of preserving the rights of citizenship for whites” (462). In fact, these tests function as institutionalized means to represent what type of curricular property students have acquired. Because most of the Latino ELLs have not had the same access to curriculum that would enable them to do well on those tests, they in fact do more poorly than their white peers. Then, once these students do not score well, their status as fragile learners did not give them the right to use and enjoy the privileges of such a curriculum to enable them to succeed in the future. Teachers even had the right to exclude them from such curricula because of the students did not own the same “rights of citizenship” (e.g., the same skill set, background knowledge and cultural capital) as students from the dominant white culture.

HOPE: Racially Conscious Teachers

As I mentioned early in this paper, two teachers at Southern were able to overcome the barriers to the pursuit of racial equity. While the two I focus on here did so in different ways and to what I would consider varying degrees of success, they each pursued racial equity at some point in their practice. In addition, both made headway in addressing the racial achievement gap in their classrooms. As I discuss these two teachers, I highlight some of the characteristics that I believe made their accomplishments possible. First, they had a complex and critical understanding of race and institutional racism, an understanding that was not limited by liberalism. Second, they maintained a critical consciousness of how students of color were positioned in school and were able to communicate that consciousness to their students. Third, they created and sustained academically rigorous classrooms. These characteristics line up closely to Ladson-Billings’ (1995) qualities of culturally responsive teachers. As I discuss how the teachers portrayed these characteristics, I will also explain how they helped the teachers positively affect their students’ access to quality curricula.

Katherine

Katherine was a white woman in her late 20s who had been teaching for five years. She had taught exceptional children and 1st grade but was a 4th grade teacher at the time of the study. She was also licensed to teach ESL, though she only had three ELLs in her class the year I worked at Southern (the classes with largest numbers had eight). That she had ELLs in her class, however, gave me the opportunity to work in her class and observe her teaching. As I have often commented to my friends, Katherine is perhaps the most culturally responsive teacher I had ever seen. She foregrounded cultural and racial equity in almost all aspects of her practice. She

thought about, reflected on, and even took courses on culturally responsive teaching; and she always pushed herself to be more culturally responsive.

Katherine: ...what I've noticed when I started focusing on really incorporating more really culturally relevant strategies in my teaching three years ago, there's some strategies that you feel are easier to incorporate, and some of them are just not who you are as a teacher. And then reflecting over last years classes, and coming up with a list of things that I don't naturally do and things that may not be as easy or can potentially be more uncomfortable for me as a teacher, that's the list that I came up with to choose from when I'm designing my lessons. Again, it's trying to force myself to step outside of that comfort zone. And to continually keep improving.

Katherine also had a complex understanding of race. One of the ways this manifested itself was in her ability to challenge herself on how she viewed and subsequently worked with her non-white students.

Katherine: Looking at that famous question, "What is culturally relevant teaching?" and looking at my kids...and what they bring to the classroom. You know I have these two Latino boys and they love army figures and I taught perimeter using the army figures... So we talked about if you're patrolling the outside of this rectangle, how many steps is this army figure going to take to get around the rectangle. And at that point they were really careful about making sure that they hit both sides of that corner cube. And they loved it! Now is an army figure necessarily a Latino male culturally relevant strategy? No, but it was my kids' culture in the classroom. It's their culture. And trying to incorporate that in there instead of my preset ideas of making sure I include their culture into the lessons. That was an interesting growing point for me.

Part of cultural competence in culturally responsive teaching is "utilizing students' culture as a vehicle for learning" (Ladson-Billings 1995, 161). By seeing beyond essentialized notions of race and culture allowed Katherine to move past simple or individual understandings of how to address racial disparity.

Katherine: It's interesting because when I first started to do a lot of the equity work through the school system, [at first it was] having that idea of finding the perfect thing for each kid, that's how it started, but after working with it and doing a lot of reading and talking to other teachers, it's not necessarily... there's not a fix-it-all. And that's how my teaching's evolved. It's even more...the ability to examine everything that happens the classroom, every interaction, every textbook, every article, every time that a volunteer interacts with a kid, every time a kid interacts with a kid, there's not going to be necessarily one answer. But to me race in the classroom is when you're going to be able to address all those individual little things that happen. It's a constant process in the classroom. There is no endpoint.

By going beyond looking for simple solutions to the issue of race, Katherine was able to address the issue much more broadly. Culturally responsiveness was part of the “philosophical and ideological underpinning of [her] practice” (Ladson-Billings 1995, 162), so she was not hindered by any obsession to find the one right teaching method or an easy fix.

Katherine’s understanding of race fit into her critical consciousness about how the school positioned her students of color as fragile learners. She was able to see that it was not the students but rather institutional barriers that prevented her students of color from receiving an equal education. When I talked to Katherine about what she believed the main barriers to racial equity to be, her comments immediately focused on the administration.

Katherine: It is the administration...and the fear of standards. A lot of the reason the administration is the way they are is the fear of being judged. I understand that they have a job and they have two years to prove themselves before their contract is renewed.

Her assessment of and frustration with the administration stemmed from the fact that they not only feared being judged but that they used the standard policies in an uncritical, unreflective way. In addition, when Katherine was judged negatively by the administrators, it was often precisely because of her overtly culturally responsive approach. On two of her reviews from the administrators she had been written up as being too “informal” in her interactions with the students and as lacking professionalism in her discourse style. As Katherine explained to me, she often used what appeared to be a relaxed style in her class in part because she thought teaching was fun and she wanted to share that enthusiasm with her students but also largely because she was consciously trying to communicate in ways that would help her get to know her students better and that would help them be able to work in interactive, cooperative groups, an approach that she actually studied both in school and at district-organized professional development focused on teaching for racial equity.

Katherine: What’s so interesting is that they [the administrators] are the leaders of the school equity team and they really don’t encourage what they go to conferences and sit and hear about. They’ll think it’s a good idea when they hear it, but when it comes down to it and you try to take what you learn and make it work in the classroom, what you need to do is not very accepted by them.

In this way, Katherine was very astute about how the administration’s adherence to standardized practices prevented them from supporting the practices that would help promote the racial equity they actually believed in.

In addition to her issue with the administration, Katherine talked extensively about the affect of standardized tests on her students and her teaching.

Katherine: I think about things that work well as far as racial differences in the classroom keep getting put up or juxtaposed against all of the testing... So here you are in a classroom and the kids are making great progress and you spend a lot of time with a group that hasn't necessarily seen a lot of success...and you're making progress and they're feeling good about themselves and then you turn around and give them a standardized test that may not exactly address their needs or address their writing/learning styles, and then you're held accountable... So it's this constant you're feeling good and the kids are feeling good and then this test shows up and it's—you're both being judged on it...and you have that hope and faith that what you are doing in the classroom and the kids that are making progress that at the end of the year that it's going to be enough to let them shine on those tests, because ultimately they still will be judged by those tests no matter what happens. You know you get the kids for 180 days they start feeling good about themselves...

Ben: And at the end of those 180 days?

Katherine: They're given a number based on a test.

This shows how standards-based reform can negatively influence the practice of teachers' daily practices. However, Katherine was able to limit this negative influence. For example, she did spend some time on test preparation because she thought the students would need that exposure, but she spent more time on what she thought was more meaningful learning.

Katherine: ...whenever I plan my lessons, I do an hour and 15 minutes of math everyday, the first 15, 20, 25 minutes is dedicated to problem-solving in the style that they see on the end-of-grade test because I feel it's still my responsibility to expose them to that style of question and answer. And then after that, in my mind I say that's when the real math starts...the kids are able to talk together, work together, the materials are on the table, or if they need to hop up on the computer and do something there that's fine, using big paper, just really enjoying it. I'm enjoying it, the kids are enjoying it, and really learning stuff.

In addition, not only was the majority of her teaching time spent on activities that were more interactive—when the students were “really learning stuff”—she adapted the content of many of those activities on topics that were reflective of the cultural, family and experiential backgrounds of her students. Furthermore, she continually tried to learn what that type of incorporation meant and to do it in a way that did not work from essentialized notions of her students of color.

Katherine: ...as aware as I wanted to be, the [culturally responsive] strategies that I was coming up with subconsciously were really stereotypical...Like with doing double digit math, you know I could talk about pesos and whatnot [she laughs], and I realized that this is not really my students. So, in writing and really trying to figure out how I was going to take these strategies and incorporate the kids' culture into my classroom, it was a growing point for me that whenever I saw that I was

including stereotypical cultural points into my lessons. That's what I had come up with and I realized that this is not going to address my kids. You really need to get to know the kids.

Ladson-Billings (1995) describes the culturally relevant teachers she studied as being able to adapt to their students and not assume that they knew everything about them: "The teachers kept the relations between themselves and their students fluid and equitable. They encouraged the students to act as teachers and they, themselves, often functioned as learners in the classroom" (163). In a similar way, Katherine put herself in the learner position. She gave up her own assumptions so she could better know, care for, and teach her students. As she said to me once, "A culturally sensitive teacher is someone who will shut up and listen."

Even with her culturally responsive approach, Katherine did find the standardized testing system to be a burden. In this aspect, Katherine—like every other teacher at Southern—had few options. The district and school mandated certain skills and content to be taught at certain times and these skills and content lined up with what would be on the end of grade tests. This took on toll on her.

Katherine: One of my African American female students was stressed out about math all year, and she slowly started to really develop mathematical thinking—you know strategies that she would pull out and use to solve problems. I was her cheerleader... She was feeling good about herself, and then she failed the [standardized] test at the end of the year, and she was in absolute tears. So here you are, after cheering a kid on all year saying "you're doing great, you're doing great!" then you have to tell them that they have to retake this test again. So, then they take the test again and they miss it by one point. And they're looking for that validation and you just hope that after all that work that they don't give up the next year and that they really do have resiliency the next year, and even though that one specific girl made a year and a half of progress [in one year], it still wasn't enough to pass that test, and just knowing how far behind she was, it's hard. And you want to know if you had played the game a little more and given them more straight up test prep if it would have been just enough to get them passing, or if knowing that you really helped them develop mathematical sense, that when they get that new information next year they're going to know how to process it. It's the challenge in the classroom that I constantly have as far as doing culturally what's right and doing what you need to help them pass the test.

Yet, despite such frustrations, Katherine was also a successful teacher, both in terms of test scores and more appropriately in terms of the deeper, more holistic learning of her students. In the year I taught with Katherine, the test scores of all of her kids was among the highest two or three teachers in the school. Her students of color made the highest gains on the tests compared to every other teacher. In the year after I left, when she had a cluster of Latino ELLs, these students made an average of a year and half of progress in math and all but one passed both the reading and math tests on the first try. Many of those same students had failed those tests after

two tries the year before. Beyond test scores, Katherine maintained an atmosphere of academic rigor at all times in her class. For example, she always pushed bilingualism for all of her students, not just her ELLs. When I was in her class, she always included Spanish or French (her second language) vocabulary into lessons, no matter the content area. She drew on the native speakers of those two languages to teach the words and expressions to the class, positioning these students not as fragile learners but rather as intelligent, capable learners.

Rather than heading the categories given to her students (based on their reading, writing and math scores), she focused on what the students knew and on how to use it to push them further. For example, with one Latino ELL boy who got in trouble on the bus and then lied to his parents about what happened, she had him use the story he told his parents in one of his writing assignments. This enabled this student, who a semester earlier had difficulty writing complete sentences, to write a complete, coherent story. Similarly, when another Latino ELL boy was deemed by other teachers (like the reading teachers) to be obsessed with drawing and writing about violence, Katherine learned that he was very into video games (albeit somewhat violent ones) and had him use those images and writings to write extended stories using the characters in the games he played. On the 4th-grade writing test, this student—who had only been in the country for about 2 years—scored a four out of four.

The effect Katherine's view of her students and her teaching was that, more than any other class in the school, her students had access to both a rigorous curriculum and a meaningful one. She not only saw the standardized categorizations of students as detrimental to students of color but also resisted following those categorizations in her own practices. Therefore, she did not use them to determine what kind of curriculum and instruction her students would get. We will see a similar practice in Bradley, her colleague and friend.

Bradley

Bradley was a black Caribbean man in his early thirties and had lived a lot of his life in New York City. He came to North Carolina to teach in the district and was in his 5th year. He had taught third and fourth grades. Like Katherine, Bradley was a very culturally responsive teacher, and he also used a lot of the terminology from literature on culturally responsive pedagogy. In fact, one of Bradley's motivations to be interviewed was to try and gain a deeper understanding of what culturally responsive teaching meant. He commented that he often found the literature on the subject vague.

What was clear, however, was that Bradley had thought a lot about what culturally responsive teaching means. A large aspect of it to him involved critical consciousness.

Bradley: For me, a classroom that is culturally responsive should acknowledge that you're in a school; it's an institution. Here's what it represents. Because the community that you're coming from, there are things that you might do in the community that you can share with the school, and some things you leave there. There are things that you can do that home that you can share at school, and there are things that you just can't. Some things you have to just learn how to switch, not in a sense of what is right or wrong, but kind of like that "when in Rome"... So it's developing an understanding for yourself. I think for some students, like a white students coming in, the white student's home life, community life, and school life may be very similar, whereas for some other students they have to negotiate that whole set of boundaries, and I think the culturally responsive teacher will engage some of that as well as their own historical and cultural pieces.

Not only does Bradley have a critical consciousness about the institution of school (and I will discuss that more shortly) but also he thinks it is the teachers' responsibility to impart that consciousness to his students. In addition to a general sense of school as an institution, Bradley was also able to talk about the specifics of how the school promoted and supported white cultural norms.

Bradley: ...there's a set of norms that's unspoken, like how you should dress, how you should walk, and some of them are pretty valid. It is an institution and you should conduct yourself a certain way, but at the same time, you know the kid who comes in with dreadlocks isn't going to be looked at the same way as the kid who comes in with your typical short cut, cropped hair. You know the children in the corner saying "aw-ight" aren't going to be looked at in the same way as the kid who says [putting on "proper" accent] "alright, I'm going to do it this way." They're not things that are completely expressed as "you have to do things this way in the environment." It's just because the teachers come in with their understanding of what things are, and most of teachers are predominantly white female teachers, and the administration is predominantly white.

Bradley saw that when students did not fit into white cultural norms of appearance or discourse styles they were treated differently than the white students. The non-white students who did not conform to white cultural norms were denied the privileges of whiteness, including the same level of respect and care from many of their primarily white teachers.

Bradley: ...the students come into the classroom and they are really proud of their culture, their heritage, and their identity, and then the classroom completely shuts that down. I think when that happens to someone they no longer will be as enthusiastic or perform to their potential. It's like cutting away some of your basic needs of recognizing your identity and validating that you can be who you are and that you can be successful being who you are and...in whatever cultural environment you may enter.

In Bradley's experience, many of his non-white students were devalued by many of their white teachers, even if unintentionally. Furthermore, it was his opinion that it was the teacher's responsibility to resist such practices by consciously trying not to privilege whiteness.

Bradley: So the question that comes up is how much of dominant white culture are you as a teacher conveying to your class. There's that issue that you have to solve while you're trying to be responsive to the other students that come in and create an environment that in some way meets their needs.

He thought that both white and non-white teachers took part in this conveying of dominant white culture and it was the responsibility of both to resist that normalization of whiteness.

One of the main ways Bradley undertook such resistance was to construct a curriculum that represented the cultural backgrounds of all of his students. Often, this meant him going out of his way to find resources and to obtain information that was not easily available. The result that of his efforts was that diversity was not an add-on to what he did but a central aspect of what he taught. Furthermore, it meant that he often taught a knowledge base that did not adhere to dominant interpretations of history. Rather he used an understanding that revisioned American history, for example, from a perspective that validated the contributions and identities of non-whites.

Bradley: Even something like the concept of slavery, which is introduced in fourth grade, you've got the text introducing it as African Americans came over as slaves, and I like to change that idea a little bit because that's not how it started out. African Americans came over as freed men, as indentured servants, and eventually this institution developed. With the stories, traditions or myths, once you start a tradition, it becomes this popular lore and everyone "knows" it and then everyone thinks it's right, but it's not necessarily so. Whenever you hear the talk of African American history, it starts with "slavery." So, most people think African Americans came to this country as slaves and that that it their only history.

Bradley understood how dominant interpretations of history were created. Furthermore, he understood the effect this could have on his students from non-dominant background. So, he attempted to structure a curriculum that was meaningful to his non-white students in way that positioned non-whites culture not as nice additions to the dominant culture but as equally central to the formation of the county.

Bradley: You look at the textbook and you would think that there are no Asians, no Hispanic people at all. But then you look at a map and you start talking about American history, and it's like well, Texas didn't used to be part of the United States or how come you have states with names like Colorado, or cities like Los Angeles, where those things come from.

What was also interesting about Bradley's approach is that he enacted it a way that was meaningful for all of his students. Often the perception of multicultural education is only for students of color (Nieto 1999). However, Bradley showed how when racial and cultural diversity is incorporated in a way that includes critical consciousness that it can reach white and non-white students alike.

Researcher: How does that approach go over with your students?

Bradley: I think the students like it because it fills in a void. In order to have good comprehension of certain things, you need to have background knowledge... You know there are students who may not be interested in science but may be interested in the people behind it, and because they get to understand the person, they may understand the science more.

Ben: When you're speaking of students, you're speaking of both white and non-white students?

Bradley: Yep. Because I think that white students can tend to feel really comfortable with things or completely uncomfortable, and I've seen both. For example, when we're reading the Ruby Bridges book, there are some white girls who come out and have these conversations and they're willing to be bold enough to speak...and there are some people who just clam up. You can see that they are very uncomfortable. It's something that they are interested in understanding but they're just uncomfortable. It's worth the experience in the sense there are people that they are dealing with everyday and they don't understand and they may be doing things which they might think is alright but for someone else it's not. So, how do they go about being able to say, "Well, in my family we do things this way and I didn't know you did it this way and this is disrespectful and maybe we can work out something," as opposed to "This is the way we do it and this is the way it's supposed to be done...?"

In a very nuanced way, Bradley could articulate culturally responsive teaching in a way that attended to the needs of his white students without merely re-centering their experiences and ways of being and without sacrificing the needs of his non-white students. He was able to put together a curriculum that was meaningful to all of his students. In doing so, he was able to give all of his students' access to a rigorous curriculum.

One way he maintained rigor was by making sure all of his students were able to perform the same skills, which he differentiated from content. In other words, students would have to do the same type of work, but they might use different resources to accomplish the tasks involved.

Bradley: The skill thing is how you navigate all those things [teaching of content], and the skill thing is something I will never skip over. The skills are very measurable. Content stuff is measurable too but it's a little bit flakier. I think a strong skill would be: "How do you read a non-fiction textbook?" "How are you able to take notes on that?" The content understanding would be like the big idea of immigration, population change, or social movements. Those are good to understand, but you could

teach NC history in terms of the Native American perspective, African American migration, European settlers, different groups of European settlers...which one are you going to focus on? ... So the content is a little bit more flexible in terms of how you want to approach things, but the skills—reading, research, the ability to answer questions, the ability to ask questions, maybe to present what you’ve learned and how you go about doing that—those are things that develop yearly and grow in depth with students.

So, even if he would adapt the specific details of content depending on student interests and backgrounds, he would make sure all of his students were able to show the same types of skills, which they would be assessed and judged on, and he made sure they covered the same overarching themes. In this way, Bradley did not feel limited by the standard course of study and the standardized assessments.

In addition, like Katherine’s, Bradley’s students did well on their test scores, and his students of color and ELLs closed their achievement gap with white students more quickly than students did in other third grade classes. One reason was that academic rigor was important to him. He made conscious efforts to make sure that his students of color, who had usually received lower scores on their math and reading assessments coming into his class, caught up to their peers. He often did this by not following what was considered best practice for students that had been categorized as below grade-level, who were disproportionately his African American and Latino students. This was most notable in his approach to literacy instruction. For example, here is his response when I asked him if his approach was successful with his students of color.

Bradley: In literacy, yes but they have to work harder. You can’t run at the same pace and think you are going to catch up. You have to run faster. So, for African American students I might choose a book that’s two grade levels above where they are, but it’s a high interest book. They’re really interested in it, so they’re going to want to persevere. In the end, they come out and are like, “Wow I can actually read this thing!” So, I’ll choose another one. And basically I’ll have this guided reading group that I’ll see more frequently. I’ll keep track of how they’re doing a whole lot more to monitor their progress, but at the same time they’re not reading text that’s at their grade level. They’re reading something a grade level or two above, so when they return back to something at their grade level, they think, “Oh, this is not a problem.”

This approach was counter to the school-wide literacy approach advocated by the classroom and reading teachers, the approach where students read text just one step above their current reading level as determined by standardized assessments. It is also an approach that ran against these students’ labels as below-grade-level or fragile learners. Bradley did not adhere to these labels when working with his students and he actively worked against what was considered “best practice” and reifying those categorizations. I even asked him about the normalized reading

approach in the school, where students worked with reading at or just above their current assigned level.

Bradley: I don't think that's going to work. If someone's reading below grade level, you can't teach them below grade level and expect them to get ahead. If you want them to really get ahead, boost them up two or three grade levels. Support their understanding of the text and then test them at that and see how they're doing. To me there's no way around it.

So, Bradley did not deny these students access to a rigorous curriculum because of how they were categorized. In addition, he understood that the normalized practices of teaching reading at the school did just that. Instead, he worked from a sense of equity—of getting all of his students to succeed. In fact, his approach to teaching reading is actually supported by the literature on teaching reading to ELLs, where reading is a social act and where scaffolding is used to expand students zone of proximal development (Walqui 2006). As I stated earlier, Bradley was also successful with his approach. More than any other teacher except Katherine, he closed the achievement gap between his students of color and his white students, and he did so while still maintaining among the highest reading scores in the school for all of his students (debunking any myth that attending to equity will hurt the more successful students).

So, Bradley was able to address the curricular and even assessment standards and not feel limited by them. This is not to say, however, that the culture of standardization did not affect him at all. Bradley often mentioned how he felt the need to go out of his way to pursue a culturally responsive practice. He discussed how he had to go looking for resources that were not available at the school. Furthermore, Bradley felt the need to isolate himself from other teachers, and especially from the administration. He liked to keep his door close and follow the approach he saw best fit the needs of his students. In this way, his portrayed himself very much as an outsider with regards to the school and the other faculty.

Bradley: I don't go advertising saying, "Hey I'm doing this, do you want to come and look?" I don't ask, "Hey, can I do this?" Ill just go ahead and do it. It's one of the detriments of teaching that you've got four walls and yourself. You're isolated. At the same time because you are isolated, you are able to do certain things which you just go ahead and do it as opposed to asking permission to do it.

From Racial Consciousness to Critical Race Practice

In fact, both Katherine and Bradley portrayed themselves as outsiders when compared with the rest of the faculty. This perspective came from different sources. For Katherine, her father was a big influence. Even growing up in the rural mountains of North Carolina predominantly surrounded by other whites, she had

often heard him talk about not judging people based on their racial and cultural backgrounds and practices. He had always encouraged her to learn about people for herself. For Bradley, being non-American and non-Southern gave him experiences not common to many white Americans in the district. He spoke a different dialect of English and felt he was still learning the customs of the United States and the U.S. educational system. He used this to identify with his students who did not come from dominant cultural backgrounds and to push a global view of race, culture, and language in the classroom. The trait that both teachers shared, however, was that they used their outsider status to pursue practices that countered institutional norms. Because they both did not like the way they had been categorized had affected them at times in their personal and professional lives, they resisted a similar process of categorization with their students. Both Katherine and Bradley were very slow to come to any judgments about their students. It was extremely rare to here either of them make a comment that was in any way negative about one of their students.

In addition, both Katherine and Bradley resisted as much as possible a culture of standardization that relied on and reified categorizations that denied equitable access to a meaningful and rigorous education for their students of color. Their critical understandings of race helped them develop this resistance to standardization. In addition, their critical awareness of race helped their actual teaching practices to be culturally responsive not only in terms of cultural awareness but also in terms of academic rigor. They understood the ways in which the normalized institutional practices led to racial disparity and developed counter practices, where they were able to both center their students' experiences in class and to attend to the daily skills that the students would need to perform on their assessments.

In fact, being able to work with Katherine and Bradley during the year helped my own teaching. My work with my students early in the year was similar to the approach the reading teachers used, i.e., I worked with my students separately and used texts (usually the same leveled-readers the reading teachers used) and activities not linked to what the students were doing in their regular classrooms. It was not until I began to reflect on my practice and analyze the education they were receiving more broadly and more critically, that I began to change my teaching practice and work towards giving the students better access to rigorous curricula. Seeing the limited access that my students had to interesting, meaningful reading and activities that involved higher-order thinking skills helped me see how I, too, was complicit in categorizing the students as fragile learners.

Teachers have to (or at least think they have to) do so much that they don't have time to critique (in a way that has impact) what is going on around them structurally speaking...But interestingly enough, I have been so caught up with testing and placing students and determining modifications for official purposes that I am falling into the same trap/pattern. I go through the day following the procedures. Journal Entry, 9/7/06

When examined individually and acontextually, the school-wide literacy practices appeared to be the best methods to help my students advance. The CRT analysis of access to property helped me see how these practices in fact helped sustain a system that creates the category of low-level reader based on standardized assessments.

It is not that I didn't have these ideas before when I taught. Rather, now I have a language to help describe the feelings and issues I had before. I have analytical tools. Journal Entry, 9/14/06

My realization of my complicity in this practice enabled me to shift my teaching practice towards an approach that positioned my students as gifted, intelligent learners and that gave them better access to a curriculum that included higher-order thinking skills and more meaningful contextual text.

The [school-wide] approach to literacy ... is too focused on skills. So, I have decided to worry less about those goals—they just end up working towards the tests—and to practice more holistic teaching. I am setting up more project-based activities that focus on interests and life backgrounds of my students. I will not ignore skills but they will be used to support broader goals. I will have to see how this affects the students' academic success and will also have to be sure to document their success in ways that the existing assessments do not. Journal Entry, 1/4/07

A key reason why I was able to refocus my teaching was because of my observations of and discussions with Katherine and Bradley. Even though I did not formally interview them until after the school year was over, during the school year I did see how they were able to give our students access to curriculum in ways that most teachers, including myself, were not. I was able to see how they worked with all students who were marginalized by the institutionalized system of categorization and the standardization process. By interpreting their practices through CRT, I was better able to understand and then articulate how teachers can employ culturally responsive approaches to teaching even in schools dominated by standardization and high-stakes testing.

Implications for Culturally Responsive Teaching in Schools

Since I was introduced to CRT, the field has helped me develop an understanding of how teachers are complicit in the construction of institutionalized racism in their day-to-day practices. Ladson-Billings (1998) has rightfully cautioned educational scholars not to take up the field of CRT for only scholarly purposes and not to actually use it to effect change for students of color. However, CRT helped me develop a more critical perspective on institutional racism, which enabled me to begin to transform my teaching, even if only modestly at first. I was able to uncover how Southern denied access to an equal education for my Latino ELL students via

sanctioned segregation and remediation based on an over-reliance on standardized assessments.

Furthermore, CRT helped me uncover what was particularly effective about culturally responsive teachers who work against complicity in institutional racism. I could tell the story of two teachers who worked in a school dominated by a culture of standardization but who were also able to resist how much that culture marginalized their students of color. CRT has helped me put their approaches in terms systems of categorization and access to curriculum. In this way, CRT can help researchers enhance the discussion about what makes a culturally responsive teacher. Rich literature exists on effective teaching for African American students (Irvine 1991; Delpit 1995; Ladson-Billings 1994; just to reference a few) and for ELLs (Ovando, Combs and Collier 2006; Garcia 2002; Gibbons 2002). CRT can further this type of scholarship by helping to tell the stories of teachers in ways that emphasize their ability to understand and also counter institutional practices. Therefore, along with the critique it offers, CRT can help shed light on practices that work with traditionally marginalized students.

I try to imagine what a school would look like when all the classrooms looked like Katherine's and Bradley's. I can't help but think that my third grade Latino students' days might be dramatically different and more rewarding. I have no illusions that racial disparity would be eradicated completely, but I cannot help but imagine that it would be better than it is now, that it might go a long way to realizing a more substantial form of racial consciousness and equity. CRT can help, and has helped, tell the stories of remediation and segregation in school. It can also tell the stories of culturally responsive teachers. A next step for educational researchers is to develop a more emancipatory research stance by using CRT in alliance with teachers who are attempting to work against racial disparity.

If educational researchers are to operate from epistemologies of emancipation—with frameworks that are transformative (as opposed to accommodative) in nature—and engage in methodologies that encourage participants to challenge and change the world, then the purpose of data collection in educational research would be fundamentally different. Rather than collect data for data's sake, research would become a conscious political, economic, and personal conduit for empowerment. Educational research could then be a catalyst to support and complement larger struggles for liberation. (Tyson 2003, 24).

CRT has just such an emancipatory goal in its exposition of and challenge to institutional racism. In a very small way I have attempted to use the research of this school and these two teachers to help support that larger struggle. From my perspective as a white, male academic I shared my perspectives on the institutionalization of racial disparity with Katherine and Bradley, practicing teachers from different gender and racial backgrounds. I continue to meet with them and other teachers, both to gain a better understanding of how teachers can counter that institutional racism and to help them think through their practices, with the

hope that our conversations will empower them in their pursuit of equity. By analyzing the systems of categorization that work against students of color and by working with teachers to critically challenge that process, educational researchers can use CRT and help work towards its emancipatory goals for students, like my Latino ELLs, who are marginalized by standardized school practices.

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