Creating Relational Space to Support Explorations of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy with Prospective Teachers

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Abstract: This article describes a Black woman faculty member's self-study of her teaching practices with undergraduate preservice teachers at a predominantly White institution. Drawing on data gathered over a period of three years, and utilizing strategies of practitioner inquiry and narrative inquiry, this study focused on the author's attempts to build relational capacity to support culturally relevant pedagogy within her class. The article describes the author's approaches to self-study and highlights three instructional moments that shed light on how she supported herself and her students in (1) feeling seen and known and (2) sitting in relationship with challenging ideas without needing to judge, fix, or dispel them. These moments, referred to as types of space, emphasize mindfulness, time, curiosity, and empathy as openings for deeper engagement with culturally relevant teaching.

Dear Reader,

Before I tell you about my self-study, I need you to know something about my life experiences as a Black woman in America. Claudia Rankine (2014) captured it poignantly in "Citizen: An American Lyric":

> Certain moments send adrenaline to the heart, dry out the tongue, and clog the lungs. Like thunder they drown you in sound, no, like lightening they strike you across the larynx. (p. 7)

Rankine's description of this moment in the life of a young Black girl resonates deeply with me. So many memories of having the wind knocked out of me—by a racial slur, a threatening stare, the nightly news. This has also happened in my classroom, such as in the split second after a student makes a blanket generalization based on a racial stereotype or the split second when a student says, "Just because I'm white, doesn't mean I'm privileged." As a Black woman standing in front of 24 young, White faces I have often felt discomfort in these moments—these split seconds when I have been silent; these split seconds when opportunities came, and went---a door swung wide, or opened just a crack, was closed.

> *What are the moments that strike us mute? Render us paralyzed?*
> *And how can I, along with my students, walk forward when the traumas*
> *of our racialized world show up in the classroom?*

These questions are at the core of the self-study reported in this article.
-Susan

Origins and Purpose of My Inquiry

As described in the article introducing this special issue (Theado, 2022), our Cincinnati Critical Friends group has thought together about we can enact culturally relevant pedagogies in our courses (Ladson-Billings, 1996; 2021). Through shared readings and engagement with each other's pedagogical dilemmas, we found ourselves circling back to the critical role of learning relationships in this work. For me, this meant probing the silence that too often shrouded my teaching and constricted my students' opportunities to learn. Black women at Predominantly White Institutions (PWI) have reported that silence often feels (and, in fact, is) safer than the alternative, since hostility toward Black women faculty at PWIs is a documented phenomenon (Sanders, 2022). Beyond this specific experience of silence, there is another, collective experience of silence represented in the knee-jerk response so many Americans have to issues of race and culture.

Even with the understanding that race is not a matter of biology, but instead "a political construct that comes out of histories of domination and exploitation" (Walker, 2020, p. 48), we may not fully understand the personal and collective tolls that come of living in a racialized society. Psychologists have described this toll as trauma (Menakem, 2017; Ward, 2020). According to Ward (2020):

> . . .our minds have been conditioned to see race as real. This racialized awareness permeates us like a disease . . . cementing our minds to a system of social worth and value by skin pigmentation. It animates our thinking, speech, and behavior . . .[and] our attitudes, emotional states, habitual dispositions, and social organization. (p. 3-4)

Since each of our individual experiences—both historical and current—occurs within (and is shaped by) this larger context, our racialized experiences impact our relational experiences. According to Walker (2020), this relational dynamic "is a dynamic constituted by institutional and ideological practices that function to rank order human worth" (p. 12-13), and therefore relational distortions are inevitable. She writes, "Because we live in a culture shaped by a legacy of race-based stratification, disconnection often seems the most expedient course as we navigate through our everyday lives" (p. 101). Or, put another way, "The sine qua non of a racially stratified society is chronic disconnection" (Walker, 2020, p. 28).

Relational-Cultural Theory (RCT) centers connected relationships as the primary mechanism of human development and views disconnection—from oneself and from others—as a primary source of human suffering (Jordan, 2004). However, Jordan (2004) argues, "Self-empathy and empathy for others can help transform these disconnections and lead to a compassionate attitude in the struggle to stay connected. Essential to the transformation of disconnection is an openness to being moved by the other person. . .[and] an openness to being seen by the other person" (p. 55-56). Relational-cultural theory assumes that conflict in

relationship is natural, inevitable, and provides tremendous opportunities for growth. Walker (2004) states, "What we learn from RCT is that healing and reconnection are active possibilities when we make ourselves available to the experience of challenge and the complexities of conflict, as well as the opportunities for resilience and expanded empathy that multicultural connections can bring" (p. 101).

When I began this self-study, it was clear to me that there are many barriers to building the kinds of relational competence necessary to enact culturally relevant pedagogy. My own personal history (and presumably my students' as well) includes many instances of relational disconnection, especially around race. When I reflected on my teaching from this perspective, I realized there were conversations about race and social justice I simply did not engage in with my students, because I didn't feel safe. I wondered, also, about what my students didn't say. This led me to focus my inquiry on cultivating authentic connections and relational presence within my class. The questions guiding my inquiry were:

1. In what ways do I support myself and my students in feeling seen and known?
2. In what ways do I support myself and my students in being able to sit in relationship with a person or idea that challenges us, without needing to judge it, fix it, or dispel it?

I pursued these questions in hopes of freeing myself, and my students, from interactional patterns that left too many critical topics untouched, and too many doorways to growth and change closed.

The Course, the Students, and Me:
The Focus of the Course and Its Relationship to Critical Relevant Pedagogy (CRP)

This self-study focuses on my teaching in a course entitled *Foundations and Assessment of Reading and Writing for Intervention Specialists,* which is required for students seeking a bachelor's degree in Special Education and state licensure as an Intervention Specialist for grades K-12. As stated in the course syllabus,

> This course is designed to assist teacher candidates in developing the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to become successful facilitators of literacy learning for students with disabilities (K-12) and other students experiencing difficulty with reading and writing. Through course readings, class activities, and required course assignments, teacher candidates will gain an understanding of literacy assessments and instructional methods as well as gain practical experience in administering assessments and providing literacy instruction within the context of students' individual differences.

As this is one of their first literacy courses, students often report feeling overwhelmed with the content and specialized language, especially during the first half of the term. However, what they need to know for purposes of state licensure will not necessarily prepare them to teach in culturally relevant ways.

As defined by Ladson-Billings (1995; 2021) CRP includes three elements: *academic achievement* [i.e., all students learn and grow, including and especially those from groups with historically low academic outcomes]; *cultural competence* [i.e., students' cultural and linguistic heritages are integral to classroom learning experiences and are taken up by teachers as assets rather than deficits], and *socio-political/critical consciousness* [i.e., teaching supports inquiry and critique around established cultural norms including the ways in which literacy and language are culturally, politically, and racially situated (Baker-Bell, 2020; Delpit, 2002)]. Embracing CRP in its fullness challenges literacy teachers to actively consider what, why, and how they encourage K-12 students to read and write, what counts as demonstrations of competency, what requires us to re-think commonly held notions of what students already know and can do when they enter the K-12 classroom, and who will achieve high levels of literacy.

Structure and Delivery Format

In recent years, there have been changes in the delivery format for the course, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Table 1 provides an overview of course delivery during the self-study.

Table 1

Overview of Course Delivery Format

Fall 2019	Fall 2020	Fall 2021
On Campus Full Class Meetings	Virtual Small Group Meetings (6 – 7 students via Teams)	On Campus Small Group Meetings (11 or 14 students)
80 minutes, 2 times per week	40 minutes, 1 time per week	80 minutes, 1 time per week
No online instruction	Asynchronous online instruction between class meetings	Asynchronous online instruction between class meetings

Each semester, the class met in-person—either on campus or virtually; beginning In Fall 2020, in-person meetings were balanced with asynchronous online content delivery. In Fall, 2019, in-class meetings included a combination of mini-lectures, video clips illustrating specific techniques for instruction and assessment, small group applications/practice of specific approaches, and small group and whole class discussions. When I reconfigured the class in Fall 2020, I shifted all mini-lectures and video examples to the online, asynchronous dimension of the class, and used the in-class meetings for discussion only. During that Fall term, my first priority

was student well-being and connection to community, as we all were navigating the new territory and related stress of working in isolation. Our discussions were aimed at establishing and reinforcing peer-connections, discussing questions about the content presented online, and guided practice of specific approaches to instruction or assessment.
I retained this general format in Fall 2021, even though we resumed on-campus class meetings, though I divided the class into two groups instead of four and met with each group for 80 minutes instead of 40 minutes.

Asynchronous online instruction served as preparation for in-class meetings (whether they were virtual or on-campus). Each week, students completed a Weekly Response which captured their understandings of key content in the online instructional materials. These responses were submitted by noon the day before their in-class meetings, which allowed me time to view trends and tailor our in-class meetings to address common questions, or to use student ideas as a take-off point for conversation.

Student Demographics

Across the last three terms, the number of males enrolled were 3, 4, and 3, respectively, and except for 2 Asian students in Fall 2020 and 1 Black/African American student in Fall 2021, all students were White. These demographics reflect the demographics within our teacher education program and the teaching profession more broadly (Irwin et al., 2021). Most students were in their junior year, though each Fall there were anywhere from 1 to 3 students who were returning to school after having pursued other careers or interests. Most students self-reported that their own K-12 education occurred in predominantly White, middle-class, suburban schools.

Instructor Positionality

I began my career as a Special Education teacher in the late 1980's, in Buffalo, NY. I then became a Reading Specialist, working with students across the K-12 spectrum in clinical and school-based settings. My career in higher education began at the University of Minnesota, where I was tenured before moving into faculty positions at the University of New Hampshire, and then at the University of Cincinnati, where I've been since 2009. I teach and advise students in undergraduate, master's, and doctoral programs of study.

I grew up in Buffalo, NY, where I attended racially diverse public schools. However, I had only two teachers of color during my K-12 education, one professor of color during my undergraduate years, and two professors of color across my master's and doctoral coursework combined. When I was hired at the University of Minnesota, I was the first person of color ever hired in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction and, within the Critical Friends group, I am currently the only person of color.

My racialized experiences are many and varied. For example, as the only Black student in class, I have experienced being singled out to answer questions in ways that my peers were not and in work settings, employers have asked me to engage in work around diversity, equity, and

inclusion without asking, or holding accountable, my White colleagues to do the same. I have been called the n-word (as a child, a teen, and as an adult), I've also been told, "I didn't know you were Black," upon meeting someone I had only talked with on the phone, and I've been asked by complete strangers to explain my race/ethnicity (e.g., "What are you?").

When I was very young, my family moved to a first-ring, predominantly white suburb of Buffalo, New York, the city in which my father was born and raised. Its homes were newly constructed, with large backyards, and my father was happy to have the financial means to move us there. Within a few weeks of moving in, my parents began to receive threatening anonymous phone calls from individuals who told them to, "Get out," that we didn't belong there. Written threats soon followed. One day a small package arrived. Inside was a pig's ear.
I learned at an early age to do better than those around me in order to be considered equal to those around me, and also to be wary in a White world.

Self-Study Methods

My approach was guided by several who have written about practitioner inquiry (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Marshall, 2016) and self-study methodologies (Milner, 2007; Samaras & Freese, 2006). Data gathering extended beyond the specific terms during which the course was taught. In particular, because my ultimate aim was to more fully explain and enact culturally relevant pedagogy, it was impossible (and not at all desirable) for me to compartmentalize my inquiry. Further, since my inquiry is continuous, this article reflects a point in time—current as of this writing—in my ongoing journey.

Data Sources

I gathered a variety of data sources both during my teaching terms (e.g., lesson plans and artifacts) and outside of my teaching terms (e.g., Critical Friends meeting notes and memos). In this section, I provide a brief description of these data sources.

Lesson Plans, Artifacts, Notes, and Memos

Lesson plans were written in advance of each lesson using a self-designed template, which captured learning objectives, materials, specific class activities, and formative assessment opportunities related to learning objectives. Lesson artifacts were the materials constructed, either in advance or during the lesson itself, to facilitate learning. These artifacts included the PowerPoints and handouts shared during class and photos of the white board containing our class construction of ideas around particular topics. These artifacts, along with quick notes I made on my hard copy of each lesson plan, serve as a record of both planned and unplanned instruction. My notes captured what was said and done during lessons, which was not captured within the lesson plan. Each week, I spent about 20 minutes capturing researcher memos in a small journal. These memos included thoughts, ideas, feelings, and reflections sparked by my review of the week's lesson plans and instructional notes. Some memos took the form of short phrases or bullet points, and others took the form of complete sentences or paragraphs.

Critical Friends Meeting Notes and Memos

I made notes and memos during our monthly Critical Friends meetings, and I generally spent 15 to 30 minutes between meetings reviewing these notes and jotting down any additional ideas that came to me. Notes included ideas discussed in the meetings, specific comments made by group members that I wanted to remember, and mutually agreed upon plans for upcoming meetings. Memos included connections I saw between the content and/or process of our group meetings and my self-study, as well as questions that came to mind.

Self-Study Journal

I used a separate journal to write longer narratives about my teaching, and about myself in relation to my teaching. This journal included notes, quotes, and reflections from myriad sources including professional development experiences outside of the Critical Friends group (e.g., readings, workshops), teaching conversations I had with other colleagues, including Black faculty at UC and at other institutions, as well as pieces of creative writing drawn from a personal journal.

My creative writing included personal essays and poetry, much of which was prompted by the police brutality, hate crimes, and acts of domestic terrorism in 2020 and 2021. These creative pieces spoke intimately to the cumulative impact of racism on me, including its emotional impact. Several of my memos also referenced the *feelings* evoked from specific instructional interactions. The longer I engaged in this self-study, the more closely I paid attention to how I felt in various situations—physically, mentally, and emotionally. Narratives played a key role as both a source of data and a way of understanding my data, or as both a method of analysis and an additional object of analysis (Milner, 2007).

Coming to Understand My Data

The process of understanding my data reflected principles of narrative inquiry and interpretive analysis (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). My quick, weekly researcher memos contributed to ongoing analysis, and became an additional source of data; thus, data analysis and data gathering worked in an integrated fashion, rather than as separate and distinct processes (Maxwell, 2013). I think of this ongoing analysis as a type of "micro-analysis," which worked in tandem with three distinct periods of "macro-analysis." During periods of macro-analysis, I spent several weeks reading through all the data gathered to date, looking for themes related to my guiding questions. I considered as themes the ideas that were apparent across more than one source of data, such as a journal entry that seemed to align with my actual classroom practice, as reflected in the instructional artifacts or field notes.

This process of cross-checking data sources was important in discerning how my feelings and experiences outside of teaching (e.g., historical and current life experiences) were interacting

with my actions within the classroom. This process helped me to see that in some cases my feelings did not reflect my practice. For example, I might have expressed regret over feelings of silence in my journal, only to find that my notes revealed having attended to the very thing I thought I had been silent about. I suspect my feelings in such cases were more tightly tied to past actions/inactions, and perhaps ongoing fears, but not actually tied to my current practice. Conversely, there were also instances where I expressed knowledge or feelings related to a topic of conversation in class—counter-narrative to the prevailing student narrative—and my instructional notes revealed that I had not said or done anything reflecting this knowledge or these feelings.

During periods of macro-analysis, I wrote longer analytic memos and I shared ideas from these memos in conversations with my Critical Friends. Their questions and comments, as well as connections they wondered about between my ideas and some of our readings, supported me in considering multiple interpretations of my data. Further, the practice of speaking about my own observations, feelings, and ideas supported my inquiry. Marshall (2016) notes that much like writing, speaking allows researchers to make sense of their data in new ways. I also paid attention to what my body told me about my ideas when I made them public, even within a community I trusted. Often, how I felt in my body (e.g., a knot in my stomach, increased heart rate, clenched muscles) was an indicator to investigate a particular idea more fully.

What I'm Learning through This Self-Study

I'll now turn to share 3 instructional moments that taught me something about the ways in which I (1) supported myself and my students in feeling seen and known and (2) supported myself and my students in being able to sit in relationship with a person or idea that challenged us, without needing to judge it, fix it, or dispel it. I refer to these moments as types of space, or openings, in which to feel seen and known, and be able to sit in relationship with people and ideas.

Mindfulness as Space: Two Minutes for the Mind and Checking-In

Each class began with Two Minutes for the Mind set to YouTube quiet music and video of a nature scene, with lights dim and students quiet. [1] This was a time to transition into class and be intentional with our presence. Afterward, we moved to our check-in. One word or phrase to describe how a person was feeling, always with the option to pass. Overwhelmed, anxious, stressed, behind, confused, tired were commonly shared sentiments, even before COVID. Students often expanded on their single word or phrase, extending their response to say, for example, "This is how I feel, and I feel this way because ____." or "I can't explain how I feel, because _____." But students rarely passed; they almost always said something. Additionally, I

[1] Students had the option to close their eyes or keep them open and could sit still or move quietly in their chairs. Some students let me know that keeping their bodies still made it difficult for them to quiet their minds. I am also aware that closing the eyes in a public space can trigger fear and anxiety in some individuals.

shared a word or phrase for how I was feeling, varying whether I shared at the beginning, the end, or somewhere in the middle of the larger group sharing. From two minutes and a check in, we learned how to sit together without speaking, and then we learned to sit together with each other's words, without judging, fixing, or dispelling.

I began this practice in conjunction with a faculty study group on mindfulness in Fall 2019 offered by the University's Center for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning.
Prior to that, I had always attempted a connection with the class by asking, for example, "How's everybody doing?" Invariably, a few students would respond, and those responses then shaped my relational engagement with the entire group. So, if I heard "overwhelmed," or "tired" from the few who responded, my response circled those ideas. What this did not do was allow for (1) hearing each person's individual voice and (2) considering a range of responses. Further, when we engaged in Two Minutes for the Mind before connecting with each other, we came to our interactions with each other differently. Two Minutes slowed things down and re-centered us so that we were better able to hold different feelings and experiences.

For my part, instead of making one response to the group based on the dominant responses, I began to differentiate my quick comments. For example: "Jason, I'm sorry to hear your laptop crashed. I can appreciate how stressful that is," or "Some of you have expressed feeling engaged today. What do you think is making you feel particularly engaged today?" I also learned to simply listen and receive, so my comment might simply be, "Thanks everyone for sharing how you're feeling today. I appreciate having a sense of how we're all doing."

Time as Space: Hold That Thought

Our topic was vocabulary instruction. Students worked in small groups with chart paper to share their understandings of the readings and then we worked together on a larger graphic organizer. One group asked "What about inner city kids? How can we raise them up to their peers in the suburbs with vocabulary?" The embedded deficit narrative didn't seem to connect to the synthesis we were building, which included heritage cultures and languages; nor did it seem to connect to a previous discussion in which I problematized sound bites like "Most children from low SES backgrounds. . . "children from language-deprived backgrounds" and "the vocabulary gap." So, what did this question mean? What did it have to say? And how to respond?

In that moment, these questions swirled in my head, and I felt myself getting nervous. I was upset that in spite of my efforts to the contrary, students defaulted to a deficit mindset, and I was holding the tension of knowing that even our textbook included deficit language requiring a "critical consciousness" (Ladson-Billings, 2021) that the textbook authors, leaders in my field, had not demonstrated. "Hold that Thought," I said as I wrote the question on the whiteboard. "This is an important question, in light of everything we're learning." (Lesson Notes & Whiteboard Photo, Fall 2019)

Twice, as we continued class, I pointed to specific portions of our graphic organizer and asked students to consider how we might think about the question using perspectives within the organizer. I also held the question myself, along with a short list of others, throughout the semester, as a reminder to circle back and encourage us to continue thinking about it, as new course content unfolded. Holding a thought over time helped us to stave off reactionary, conditioned ways of thinking, and to consider alternatives to the pervasive narratives we encounter on a regular basis. In addition to interrupting pervasive narratives about the haves and the have-nots with respect to linguistic resources, this practice interrupted the narrative of silence that too often invaded my teaching. Recurring themes in my instructional reflections centered on dissatisfaction in response when I felt my response to an unexpected teachable moment was inadequate, regretful, inaccurate, unclear, or missing (i.e., I was silent). Conceptually, Hold that Thought reflects relational communication as ongoing, with opportunities to go back and clarify, repair, and add voice where needed, both for me and for my students.

Of course, I didn't always step into this notion of Time as Space. There were still missed opportunities related to my lack of clarity, or my lack of courage, in the moment. But I stepped into these spaces more frequently over time. In Fall 2021, these "Hold that Thought" experiences began to shape my instructional planning, so I more often set the stage for them in advance. For example, when we established class norms for "talking together, learning together, and being together," during the first two weeks of class, I said:

> It would help me if we could agree to be willing to change our minds. We have a lot to learn in this class, and as we learn more our knowledge will change. I know it helps me when I'm able to have a conversation about what I think I know, with the understanding that this may change. Just because I say it out loud doesn't mean it's correct or it's the final thought, I'll have about it. I think this will be especially important when we talk about issues of race and culture, as they relate to literacy, because we each come with our own set of experiences, and we have so much to learn from each other. (Lesson Notes & Whiteboard Photo, 2021)

In some ways, I've shifted from thinking of the course in terms of a schedule of topics and assignments to thinking of it as a semester-long conversation.

Curiosity and Empathy as Space: George Floyd, White Privilege, and a Padlet

These questions were posed by students and posted on a Padlet[2] (Fall 2020) I created for students to anonymously share questions they were pondering about culture, race, language, and literacy, and their role as future teachers. In the instructions to students, I wrote: **"**As we read, think, question, explore, reflect, make mistakes, learn, and grow, let's be compassionate with each other and with ourselves, let's assume good will, and let's be willing to make relational repairs when needed." (Directions for Padlet Posts, Fall 2020)

- Besides choosing authors and texts with different backgrounds and cultures, how best can we create conversations about race and culture?
- How do you handle parents who feel you should not be talking about race or other cultures? How do you handle situations where you are the minority as the teacher and your students say that you will never understand what it is like to be _____?
- Where do you draw the line between accepting different forms of English in the classroom and teaching students the English they will need to pass standardized tests?

We used this Padlet as a conversation starter and we kept it going kind of like kindling for a fire, returning to it with new posts and playing with themes we were seeing. One of the entries read "White people are looked at as privileged, but not all are. Some have gone through things worse than other races. As a teacher, how do you teach that just because you're white doesn't mean you didn't have it hard? Or just because your ancestors had it hard means that you must hold that hurt or hatred also?" A student I'll call Rebecca commented with something like:

> When I see this question about white privilege, I think about the fact that white privilege isn't about one individual's experiences, but more about a whole group of people in history. And how white people, as a group have privileges that other people don't.

The conversation continued as we considered other questions. A few minutes later, Rebecca said, "I just want to say something else about the comment on white privilege, because whoever said that, I hope I didn't come across like that question was wrong or that this person's circumstances weren't hard." Later, a student commented that seeing the George Floyd video was a wake-up call. He hadn't realized how much he didn't know. (Lesson Notes, Fall 2020)

That particular class was interesting. When it was over, according to the clock, it didn't feel like it was over for several of the students. I invited those who wanted to stay and talk further to do so. Six students stayed, and we sat together in our shared virtual space. I asked whether there were additional thoughts or questions, and there were very few. I shared some of my own thoughts and once again asked for theirs. Again, very little was said. I wasn't quite sure how to

[2] Padlet™ is a digital canvas/bulletin board allowing multiple users to post text, photos, video, and other media in a shared space.

continue the conversation, or what the students wanted in that time. But we stayed there for a good length of time, occupying space together.

More recently, I've prompted students to consider anticipated dilemmas they will face and pose related questions in their Weekly Responses. Reading students' questions and concerns before class meetings allows me time to consider how we might enter conversation during upcoming classes. Referencing the ideas they bring up helps keep the conversation relevant to their concerns and helps us to discuss with one another rather than lecture one another. The goal is to stay with it and this practice of staying is one of relational resilience, which is important both to culturally relevant teaching in my own classroom and the capacity for the culturally relevant teaching my students will enact in their classrooms.

Reflections

As teachers, we invoke, evoke, and activate narratives in our classrooms. Milner (2007) argues that teachers, themselves, are the curriculum and posits, "if teachers are the curriculum, then what they teach, how they live, what they model, what they say, and what they focus on all have the potential to shape students' learning" (p. 587). This view of curriculum centers teachers and their practices, in real-time classroom spaces, as surely as it centers the syllabus, and pre-planned course content. Culturally relevant pedagogy requires us to teach with academic rigor, cultural competence, and critical consciousness. My goal is to enact CRP and equip my future teachers to do so as well; as Sulzer (2022) explains in his article within this volume I, "...imagine my college-level students who will one day teach, interact with, and imagine their middle and secondary ELA students" (p. 70).

In her essay, "Developing a Liberatory Consciousness," Barbara Love (2010) reminds us that a barrier to enacting more equitable, inclusive practices, and building more equitable, inclusive institutional systems, is the fact that we are products of our socialization into inequitable, stratified systems. Both for those who benefit from oppression and those who have been oppressed, we are often pulled into familiar patterns of thinking, speaking, and behaving that simply perpetuate existing systems. For people in historically marginalized groups, this "internalized oppression" (Tatum, 2010) can be a barrier to finding voice and taking action. In my case, those moments that "send adrenaline to the heart, dry out the tongue, and clog the lungs" (Rankine, 2014, p. 7) too often kept me quiet. As a response to my experiences as a Black woman in a White world, silence was safety.

Twenty-six years ago, Ladson-Billings (1996) wrote about her experiences with silence, as a Black professor teaching predominantly White undergraduates in a course focused on multicultural education. She considered students' silence and the impact of these silences on communication and learning within the class. Ladson-Billings found that her students' silences could mean several things, not the least of which was resistance; it could be used "as a weapon or a way to defy and deny the legitimacy of the teacher and/or the knowledge." (p. 82). I've had

experiences like this as well, where silence was coupled with gestures such as folded arms across the chest, aversion of eye contact, or steely stares at the mention of cultural and linguistic diversity. These experiences contributed to my own resistance to engaging conversations that felt unsafe or within which I felt unworthy. Importantly, Ladson-Billings also noted how students who did speak were sometimes silenced by their peers, leading her to realize that certain conversations are risky for students as well as the teacher.

According to Love (2010), there are four components to developing a liberatory consciousness: awareness, analysis, action, and accountability/ally-ship. *Awareness* involves "developing the capacity to notice, to give our attention to our daily lives, our language, our behaviors, and even our thoughts" (p. 602). My self-study was a journey of noticing. Using principles of mindfulness, I became attuned to my feelings as a pathway to change. Several scholars have discussed the ways in which the impact of generational racism lives within our bodies as well as our minds (Magee, 2019; Menakem, 2017). I discovered that how I felt in my body was more than something to ignore, get over, or be ashamed of; instead, it was a site of important exploration.

Throughout my self-study, and even in the process of writing this article, I have experienced moments of extreme vulnerability. It has been painful to actively engage with the impact of my racialized experiences on my practice, and it has been courageous to walk a path of change that is uncertain. How do students feel about the class, when I challenge their comfort? Will this negatively impact my course evaluations? Do students see me as the stereotypical "angry Black woman"? Or, do they tailor a response to placate me in the moment, without integrating our content into their understandings of effective practice as future teachers? These questions co-existed with questions like, "Why is this so hard? Why do I feel so vulnerable? Shouldn't I be stronger than this?"

During Critical Friends meetings, I very often preceded what I said with, "I'm not sure I really think this yet. . ." or "I reserve the right to change my mind about this, but. . ." These comments further reflected my feelings of profound vulnerability, within my stance of inquiry. Engaging with my Cincinnati Critical Friends community aligned well not only with the process of conducting a self-study but with the particular emphasis of my self-study. One of the things I realized is that it's difficult *to enact* feeling seen, heard, and valued without *tapping into experiences* of feeling seen, heard, and valued.

During Cincinnati Critical Friends meetings, we engaged intentional practices of seeing, hearing, and valuing each other. These practices very much supported the practices I sought to engage in my teaching. The group was a uniquely safe space for idea-sharing and risk-taking, with colleagues who shared the aim of disrupting status quo teaching practices. One could argue that the group itself, merely through its existence, disrupts the status quo. In the acclaimed book, *Teaching to Transgress,* hooks (1994) states "To engage in dialogue is one of the simplest ways we can begin as teachers, scholars, and critical thinkers to cross boundaries, the barriers that

may or may not be erected by race, gender, class, professional standing, and a host of other differences" (hooks, p. 130).

With respect to my practice, I found that specific types of space supported myself and my students in feeling seen and known, and to sit in relationship with challenging ideas. Walker (2020) describes "disruptive empathy" as a process of sitting with the complexities and the discomfort of "the toxic realities of our racialized histories" (p. 72) and suggests our capacity to do this is critical to shifting narratives of disconnection to those of connection. Courageous conversations reflect mindful authenticity; in these conversations "the speaker conveys confidence in the relationship as a space that can hold conflict; a space where people can explore their narratives of difference, identity, and possibility" (Walker, 2020, p. 87).

Together, my students and I cultivated practices around mindfulness, time, curiosity, and empathy that opened relational space in support of culturally relevant pedagogy. This relational space was able to hold deep, courageous conversations about race and social justice while also holding the people who made themselves vulnerable to these conversations. Further, the self-study process allowed me to connect more fully with, and to center, my own truth as a Black woman educator and scholar. I now occupy the spaces of my classroom with greater authenticity. While I have always had the support and encouragement of other Black faculty, I now also have my Cincinnati Critical Friends group as allies and partners. There is tremendous capacity in knowing I am not alone.

In Spring 2021, I wrote the following on the pages of my personal journal.

Hope Like Honey
I want to be with people
Dripping hope like honey
Leaving it in our wakes
Imprinting it on everyone we touch
Sweet sticky hope

I want to be with people
Opening space like a canyon
Round wide space
Expectant, full of possibility
A place to breathe

I want to be with people
Rising optimistic
From the COVID fallows
And the ashes of George Floyd
Expecting more, knowing more, being more

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