

## **Teachers Learning Together to Enact Culturally Relevant Pedagogy for English Learners: A Call to Reclaim PLCs**

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*PLCs can serve as communities of practice for educators who are invested in teaching English learners in culturally relevant ways.*

**Tags:** Elementary, Middle School, High School, Teacher Education, SLIFE

### **Closing the opportunity gap**

*“I felt like I was in the shadows.”*

*-Study participant, Nina, about her experience as an EL in middle school*

In the United States, ten percent of our nation’s students are English learners (ELs). This amounts to 4.7 million students, and the number increases every year (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). In the past two decades, the state of Minnesota has seen a 300% increase in the number of ELs served, making them the fastest growing student population in the state. Currently, as Minnesota schools educate 67,000 English learners, teachers and school administrators are called to consider how to best meet the needs of this changing demographic.

Given the longstanding opportunity gap between white students and students of color in the state, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (2009) identified this challenge as particularly urgent (Note: “opportunity gap” is a term that replaces the “achievement gap” by positioning society as the subject of the problem, rather than learners. See Carter & Welner, 2013). According to the Minnesota Department of Education (2013), less than half of the state’s ELs graduate from high school, which is not only a loss of linguistic and cultural capacity, it is a human rights crisis. The purpose of this research is to improve the educational experience of English learners in mainstream classrooms through the efforts of educators who are committed to enacting pedagogies that are relevant to students’ diverse home cultures.

### **What is Culturally Relevant Pedagogy?**

Culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) is a theoretical framework that seeks to close the opportunity gap. It was originally conceived of in response to a need for schooling to be more relevant to the lives of African American students. Ladson-Billings (1995) defines CRP as:

A theoretical model that not only addresses student achievement but also helps students to accept and affirm their cultural identity while developing critical perspectives that challenge inequities that schools (and other institutions) perpetuate. (1995, p. 469)

Ladson-Billings asserts that culturally relevant pedagogy does not exist to “exoticize diverse students as ‘other’” (p. 483); rather it seeks to consider the relationships amongst students, teachers, the school curriculum, and society as a whole.

CRP recognizes the central role of students’ cultures in all aspects of teaching and learning. It acknowledges and responds to the current schooling climate that places students from diverse cultural backgrounds in learning environments that don’t mirror their home cultures and values (Langer, 1987). Phuntsog (2001) asserts that “the real test of culturally responsive teaching may lie in its ability to create classrooms where race, culture, and ethnicity are not seen as barriers to overcome but are sources of enrichment for all” (p. 63).

Unfortunately, even teachers who are supportive of culturally relevant teaching may struggle to enact it in their pedagogy (Black, 2010). Compounding this problem is that little is known about how teachers can be prepared to enact CRP. Goodwin (2002) writes that this problem “must galvanize teacher preparation programs to rethink how their curriculum prepares pre-service teachers to work effectively with diverse students” (p. 157).

### **Teacher education and Culturally Relevant Pedagogy**

A review of the literature reveals that the following facets are present in teacher education programs that actively seek to produce culturally relevant pedagogues: developing a self-social-cultural consciousness (Evans & Gunn, 2011; Fuller, Miller & Domingues, 2006; Schussler, Stooksberry & Bercaw, 2010; Shepel & Elina, 1995; Villegas, 2007; Villegas & Lucas, 2002; Zygmunt-Fillwalk & Clark, 2007), promoting cultural competency (Huang, 2002; Keengwe, 2010; Morton & Bennett, 2010; Bode & Nieto, 2008), engaging in critical conversations about equity (Barry & Lechner, 1995; Evans & Gunn, 2011; Gere, Buehler, Dallavis, & Haviland, 2009; Lynn & Smith-Maddox, 2007), designing holistic teacher preparation programs (Fitchett, Starker & Salyers, 2012; Frye, Button & Kelly, 2010; Noordhoff & Kleinfeld, 1993; Zeichner, Grant, Gay, Gillette, Valli, & Villegas, 1998), and opportunities for CRP praxis (Hill, 2012; Petchauer, 2011; Price-Dennis & Souto-Mannin, 2011).

Such a nexus of educational theory, cultural competency, and thorough support of teachers is the recipe for continuous teacher education that fosters the enactment of CRP. However, advocating for the preparation of culturally relevant teachers is crucial yet precarious, because teacher education programs graduate teachers into workplaces that often do not honor their commitment to culturally relevant teaching. For this reason, it is essential that teacher educators establish a strong and sustaining bridge from the ivory tower to the classroom.

Price-Dennis and Souto-Manning (2011) suggest that there is a “need to invite pre-service teachers to engage in fostering pedagogical third spaces which syncretically bring together mentor teacher academic expectations and student interests and cultural repertoires” (p. 236). While this suggestion refers to pre-service teacher learning, the same holds true for practicing teachers. A collaborative learning environment, whether it is known as a third space, Community of Practice, or Professional Learning Community, is a critical component in the development of teaching as a craft that is tailored to the unique population that a school serves.

### **Communities of Practice: Otherwise known as PLCs**

The second theoretical framework that undergirds this study is Communities of Practice, which Wenger (2006) defines as “groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly” (2006, para. 3). This framework was born of social learning theory, which posits that learning is the result of observing and modeling the attitudes, displays of emotion and behaviors of others. Psychologist Albert Bandura (1997) explains that “Most human behavior is learned observationally through modeling; from observing others, one forms an idea of how new behaviors are performed, and on later occasions this coded information serves as a guide for action” (p. 22). Social learning theory considers learning to be an entirely social phenomenon and the result of one’s lived experience in social environments (p. 3). Hanks (1991) explains that “rather than asking what kind of cognitive processes and conceptual structure are involved, they [Lave and Wenger] ask what kinds of social engagements provide the proper context for learning to take place” (p. 14). The framework of Communities of Practice is complementary to Vygotsky’s (1978) sociocultural theory in that they both argue that social interaction is a fundamental element in cognition.

For the purposes of this research, study participants used the term PLC, or Professional Learning Community, to refer to the Community of Practice in which they participated. PLCs are defined by DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many (2006) as “Educators committed to working collaboratively in ongoing processes of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve.” PLCs are commonplace in schools in the region in which this study was conducted and the term is mutually understood amongst teachers and school administrators.

### **Researching how student teachers enact pedagogies responsive to ELs**

Through examination of an intentional Professional Learning Community (PLC), centered on CRP for ELs in a diverse, urban elementary school, this study examined how student teachers cooperatively learn how to enact pedagogies that are responsive to ELs. The study took place over ten weeks starting in February of 2013. The four volunteer participants – Anna, Amber, Jenny, and Nina - were enrolled in an intensive ten-month post-baccalaureate elementary education licensure program at a large research

university in the Midwest. They were all in student teaching placements at Longview Elementary (school and participant names are pseudonyms), a linguistically and ethnically diverse school in a first ring suburb of a major midwest city. Data collection sources included five digital journal entries from each participant, classroom observations, pre and post interviews with each participant and five bi-weekly PLC gatherings. PLC gatherings took place every other Tuesday afternoon in a conference room at the school where participants were student teaching. Given that discussions about culture and diversity can be sensitive and challenging, PLC meetings were designed to feel like a conversation over dinner. Participants discussed their experiences with CRP for ELs while they enjoyed ethnic meals that are representative of the local immigrant communities.

### **Social learning in the PLC**

The findings from this study show that teacher student teachers' perceptions of their abilities to enact CRP for ELs improved dramatically throughout the course of this study. They attributed their feelings of success to their participation in a low-stakes intentional PLC that offered them opportunities to learn from each other. Following the study, student teacher participants also explained how they understood CRP to be a mindset, rather than a set of strategies.

### **A low-stakes community**

Three of the four study participants noted that the element of a low-stakes community was critical in their learning experience. Nina shared,

At dinner, it just felt more like a community and more like a discussion to talk and learn more, I would say that I took a lot out of it, it wasn't like school, for a grade where I didn't feel like I had to do it to get it done, I felt like I *wanna* do this, this is good because I want to improve my classroom and my teaching. It wasn't like 'Oh, I want to get a certain grade. I felt like I was more proactive, even though there wasn't a grade attached. . .but it was meaningful, it meant more.

Amber and Jenny echoed Nina's sentiment when they commented that the environment felt safe and Amber mentioned that she looked forward to meetings as they were "engaging, fun, and they broadened our perspectives." The finding that student teachers reported that they learned to improve their practice by means of participation in an intentional, low-stakes PLC is in line with the theoretical underpinnings of PLCs, which suggest that social learning takes place amongst practitioners who gather together in order to improve their practice.

### **Teachers learn from each other**

All of the four study participants provided detailed examples of how their colleagues' experiences shaped their own thinking about and enactment of CRP. Amber noted that "Hearing all of their examples really helped me". Anna furthered by saying,

I mean we've all gone through the same teacher preparation program but even just hearing the difference of how people view CRP and what people's perspectives are. . it was so interesting. I mean we all had such different ways of answering your questions and reacting to certain things. Like [Nina] would see one thing in a classroom and I would see something totally different and while we were in community and while we were discussing, I think we all took different things away from the discussions just because we are from different places and we did grow up differently. . .But a lot of it was what happened was in my head, when someone was talking, it would trigger a thought and then I'd share that.

Amber reported that she had a lot to learn from her colleagues, with whom she shared different perspectives and backgrounds. She perceived their differences as a strength and a source of knowledge for all of them.

Nina recalled an occasion when her colleague's pedagogy affected her own thinking about teaching. After Amber shared an anecdote about a challenging student in class, Nina remarked:

I was very intrigued by the things that she shared and how she went about it and I would be like 'Oh, I wonder how I would have went about it when it comes to my students' . . I thought that the way that she approached it was really good and like if this would have happened in my classroom, I would have just froze. I don't know what I would have done.

The above example is one of many that illuminate how student teachers in this PLC used concrete examples shared by their colleagues as case studies to consider how they would respond in similar situations. Participants frequently reported that their pedagogy had been shaped by stories shared by their peers.

### **CRP as a mindset**

Perhaps the most salient finding from this study is that the student teacher participants found CRP to be a mindset, rather than a set of strategies. Davidman and Davidman (1997) agree, as they write that CRP is

much more than simply teaching a culturally/ethnically diverse class. It is an active process of thinking, a state of mind, a way of seeing and learning that is shaped and influenced by the beliefs about the value of cultural relationships and cultural competency (pp. 24-25).

The participants in this study came to notice the ways in which culture intersected with learning. This noticing led to a new conceptualization about the role of the teacher. In

the following excerpt, Nina explained how she engaged differently with her students after she had considered CRP to be a mindset.

After our meetings, I just started to notice things that I really hadn't noticed before. I noticed more every time we had our meetings. I started to notice things that before I didn't think related to culturally relevant pedagogy in my classroom but just having certain conversations with my students I would kind of classify or categorize those things as a part of being a culturally relevant teacher and before I never would have thought of it that way I was just like 'Oh, it's me and my student talking about their weekend or this is just me standing in front of the classroom instructing on a certain subject'. But, it just made me realize the different connections that things have to each other.

Nina's description of classifying or categorizing information about her students shows that she has learned that she must first know who her students are in order to tailor her pedagogy to their unique cultural backgrounds.

Jenny echoed Nina's sentiment but furthered by adding that the experience made her a more empathetic educator. She noted that the experience increased her awareness for her ELs unique needs when she shared,

It's helped me to be more open and respectful about the problems that ELs might have going on in their lives and I think that's made me closer to all of my students by having those conversations with them and making them feel comfortable.

Jenny showed an intentional investment in creating a safe and comfortable community in which home cultures are welcome.

Anna began to see teaching a diverse classroom of learners as a larger responsibility than she previously anticipated. She noted that the experience

...made me more aware of various aspects of teaching... There's so much more to it. There are so many communities that our kids are involved in... It's helped me in a way that I wasn't expecting, just in the classroom and in the way that I think about things.

When the student teacher participants came to the conclusion that CRP was a mindset rather than a set of strategies, their perceptions about their abilities to enact CRP for ELs improved. Nina said "I feel positive and confident about working with ELs going into my first year of teaching after participating in this study."

### **A call to reclaim PLCs**

When I first shared with my participants that we would have PLC meetings, they appeared displeased. I realized that since I left the public school classroom ten years ago, the term PLC has evolved into something very different from what I experienced.

My student teacher participants shared that PLC meetings are often time that is allocated for teachers to plan units and respond to quantitative data. I proceeded with calling our meetings “PLCs,” but with the caveat that our PLCs were intended for reflection and social learning.

Perhaps the most challenging issue when it comes to CRP is that teachers are unclear about what CRP enactment looks like. Participants in this study commented that after a few weeks the confusion around CRP was lifted. Nina remarked,

I had no clue what CRP looked like in the classroom until our meetings and I’m like, ‘Oh, this is what it looks like in an actual classroom and we’re not just reading it in a text. I am actually seeing what it looks like’ and I feel like once you start to identify what it is, it just becomes so much easier to incorporate and to understand.

Jenny shared Nina’s sentiment and compared her experience in the PLC with that of her undergraduate teacher preparation. She explained, “I feel like we learned about this stuff in our undergrad, but it really doesn’t connect until you are *in* the situation”. This observation is a call for teacher educators to consider how (and where) teacher candidates can most effectively learn to enact CRP.

The need for research on how teachers learn to enact CRP for ELs is dire. The existing educational opportunity gap has repercussions that reverberate through all facets of society. In addition, the increasing number of immigrant learners in our schools implores all who are invested in schooling to examine how to envision schools that validate and affirm a spectrum of student backgrounds and knowledges. Without explicit attention to CRP for English learners, their needs are apt to be swept under the rug.

While data analyses can be hugely helpful in curricular planning, number crunching is not the only fruitful function of a PLC. This research points to a need for schools to reclaim PLCs as spaces in which teachers can learn collaboratively about how to best meet the needs of marginalized learners. When it comes to CRP for students, their teachers are the experts (rather than an outside scholar or a textbook). This model positions them as such and gives them an intentional space in which to perfect their craft. CRP for ELs is not only best practice because it allows learners to engage with curriculum, it is also a moral imperative, as teacher understanding of CRP will have a reverberating impact on our greater communities, ultimately diversifying the workforce and fostering future generations of young people from diverse backgrounds who feel valued by our schools and empowered to do great things.

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