What Would It Mean for English Language Arts to Become More Culturally Responsive and Sustaining?

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Let’s begin by noting that literacy education is always culturally responsive—times two. Literacy is culturally responsive and education is culturally responsive. That is, all teaching and learning are shaped by culture. By “culture,” I mean a group of people’s way of life, all of their patterns of communication, systems of valuing, habits of being, and understandings of expression—a group’s ways of signaling membership and belonging through both minute and large-scale interactions. From their own cultural experiences, teachers plan instruction with certain predictions about how students will respond, and those predictions have to do with patterns the teacher has internalized from her own social life. That’s culture. Inescapably, her instruction is planned in response to a projection of her own culture onto the students. And literacy education is especially responsive to culture because literacy itself, as subject matter, is defined by the ways reading, writing, and other sign uses are situated in the things people in a culture do together. So both the literacy part of “literacy education” and the education part are wholly shaped by the social doings that educators have become accustomed to. We expect our students to have minds and habits like our people. But there are more different cultures at work in classrooms than we sometimes realize, so our instruction is pitched toward the students most like the dominant group that teachers have historically come from.

And see, I’ve already messed up. At the end of the previous (first!) paragraph, I started assuming that teachers were White people of the particular sort that dominate US culture—that’s who I assumed “we” to be in that next to the last sentence. A Black teacher with White students would not expect his students to have minds like his people. If he were teaching Hmong students, though, he might think they would have minds like his people or else like White people—all of whose responses he’s used to anticipating. He would, in other words, plan in response to his own expectations of culture. To be culturally responsive to his actual students, the Hmong kids, would require a shift, one he would have to learn as he teaches. That’s part of the dynamic challenge of culturally responsive teaching—a planned flexibility and a learning stance on the teacher’s part and in the ways the curriculum is conceptualized.

To be sure, the current educational culture of testing and accountability, of schools on curriculum lock-down, may make the challenge seem insurmountable in some places. That is a political problem as well as a curriculum problem, one that will not let us rest comfortably, but it shouldn’t keep us from exploring and learning about the forms of education we need. Students of color, students who have recently arrived in the United States, students who, for a range of reasons, do not match the people in the minds of curriculum planners—these students deserve to see themselves in academic content, deserve to have a curriculum that is inclusive of their cultures.

So, though literacy and education are both responsive to culture, the problem is whose culture. We know that it has rarely been responsive to that of students from cultures that differ from the White mainstream—what Urrieta (2009) calls the whitestream. For that matter, English class
has not always even been responsive to youth culture of any kind. Rather, the subject English often imposes on young people is the culture, values, practices, and thinking of an adult culture already in the process of becoming a past culture. English disciplines. And it disciplines most severely and subtractively those students who bring the richness of communities of color, of linguistic diversity, of repertoires of practice that could expand everyone’s—even the teacher’s—social and linguistic resources. Those are the students whose rights are most clearly violated by the absence of culturally responsive pedagogy. There is an inescapable agenda in traditional English Language Arts to replace students’ language patterns, aesthetic tastes, literacy practices, and composing practices with those of a dominating culture. Where syntactic patterns differ, they are taken as errors that need to be replaced with correctness. Neologisms are taken as slang and banned from the premises. If a student responds to lyrics in emerging musical idioms, those are preferences that need to be replaced with forms of poetry their teacher views as possessing higher literary merit. A student has a practice of keeping a friendship notebook with a close friend, and that practice is brushed aside, counted irrelevant in the focus on writing in response to a prompt for a judging audience. The teaching of English Language Arts can be, at its worst, an enforcement of Whiteness, a staunch insistence that all students comply and bend their affiliations to a culture not their own. Language Arts can be, at its worst, an enforcement of Whiteness, a staunch insistence that all students comply and bend their affiliations to a culture not their own. But such a colonizing agenda does not work, and it is not ethical. How much evidence do we need?

Before we zoom in on some practices that might be more inviting of students’ existing cultures in all their complexity, it might help to clarify some terms that have circulated in education over the past few decades. In their naming of the theme for this issue of Voices from the Middle, the editors have chosen the term culturally responsive teaching, and for that reason, it’s the term I’ve used so far. It’s a term that originated, along with culturally sensitive, congruent, appropriate, and compatible, in the 1970s to name attempts mostly to restructure school lessons so that they were more congruent with the folkways, participation structures, and conversation patterns of microcultures local to a particular school (Cazden & Leggett, 1981; Erickson & Mohatt, 1982). Gay (2010) has continued to use the term culturally responsive, and its meaning for her is broader, encompassing the following:

- Seeing cultural differences as assets; creating caring learning communities where culturally different individuals and heritages are valued; using cultural knowledge of ethnically diverse cultures, families, and communities to guide curriculum development, classroom climates, instructional strategies, and relationships with students; challenging racial and cultural stereotypes, prejudices, racism, and other forms of intolerance, injustice, and oppression; being change agents for social justice and academic equity; mediating power imbalances in classrooms based on race, culture, ethnicity, and class; and accepting cultural responsiveness as endemic to educational effectiveness in all areas of learning for students from all ethnic groups. (p. 31)

The terminology has also, however, branched in different directions. Ladson-Billings (1995) thought that a new term was needed, one 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” (p. 469), and she preferred the term culturally relevant pedagogy. Still later, Paris (2012) advocated for the term culturally sustaining pedagogy, arguing that much of what occurs under the other terms does not guarantee in stance or meaning that one goal of an educational program is to maintain heritage ways and to value cultural and linguistic sharing across difference, to sustain and support bi- and multilingualism and bi- and multiculturalism. They do not explicitly enough support the linguistic and cultural dexterity and plurality . . . necessary for success and access in our demographically changing U.S. and global schools and communities. . . . It is quite possible to be relevant to something or responsive to it without ensuring its continued presence in a student’s repertoires of practice . . . and so its presence in our classrooms and communities. (p. 95)

Of course, though naming is important, the term is not the most important thing; it’s the difference it makes in teacher-student relationships, the ways teachers regard student knowledge and competence, and the stance that students are asked to take to existing knowledge and power structures in the world. And the agenda of a curriculum and a pedagogy that helps students perpetuate their existing literacy practices, sustain their heritage languages, even as they expand into new domains and projects to advance their lives, would make a substantial difference in English Language Arts—a difference many of us have been pursuing for some time.

To help clarify my thinking, I’ve designed Table 1, which attempts to identify several points on a continuum.
As you move across the columns from left to right, the degree of dominant culture imposition decreases and the degree of opening to plural cultures increases. From what we can tell from large-scale looks at the teaching of English, the left column has always been most common. In the era of the Common Core Standards, the second column has become the curriculum that is sanctioned by the system. For the minority of us who have been emphasizing student choice and individual intention in our classrooms, the third column would seem most accurate. I would think that a truly culturally sustaining curriculum and pedagogy would require the additional differences in that fourth column, and for many, that means a journey of learning will be in order; it asks us for further transformations. In the space I have left, I would like to name some of the ways I and others have so far attempted to articulate curricula that might be called culturally sustaining, while also identifying some of the challenges still before us. Though the headings that follow don’t correspond tidily to Table 1, they provide a little more description of what a move into the fourth column might entail.

Table 1. English Language Arts Curricula—Varied Possible Responses to Culture

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Culturally colonizing</th>
<th>Culturally restricted</th>
<th>Culturally tolerant</th>
<th>Culturally sustaining</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Whole-class texts: monuments of literature as objectives for their own sake</td>
<td>Whole-class texts: skills as the objective; text types matched to tests</td>
<td>Whole-class texts: limited and inclusive</td>
<td>Whole-class texts: purposeful about advancing disadvantaged groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent reading: little or none</td>
<td>Independent reading: skill practice</td>
<td>Independent reading: student choice</td>
<td>Independent reading: explicit encouragement to seek out texts that represent students’ own groups and language practices, as well as those of different groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minimal attention to processes of reading and writing</td>
<td>Assertions about what good readers and writers do</td>
<td>Inquiry into difference among the readers and writers in the class</td>
<td>Study of strategies for literate practices for advocacy and uplift of the community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing assigned arguments about literary elements or themes for teacher grading</td>
<td>Writing about texts; other genres as appropriate for testing</td>
<td>Writing, largely personal, in varied genres for real audiences</td>
<td>Focus on community and audience as source of writing agendas, use of most effective languages and varieties of English for those audiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prescriptive grammar</td>
<td>Prescriptive grammar as structured on testing</td>
<td>Sentence and word study—in context of use—as needed for expression</td>
<td>Analysis of language as an instance of power; valuing of heritage language and flexibility of language practices</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Appreciative Instead of Deficit Perspectives

Too often, educators tend to think of students of color, especially when they are from low-income communities, in terms of perceived deficiencies, lacks, or problems. Culturally sustaining pedagogy requires instead that we take an appreciative stance (R. Bomer, 2011; K. Bomer, 2010)—finding and foregrounding the resources they already have, such as their language and what they can do with it, their knowledge of stories and characters, their expanding expertise about varied things in the world, and the wealth of relationships that both sustain and challenge them. A teacher who is not continually taking stock of a student’s strengths, assets, and resources really cannot enter into a teaching relationship with that student.

Investigations into Existing Literacies

To foreground the fact that each student already possesses multiple forms of literacy, some teachers have
engaged students in deliberate inquiry into everyday, unofficial literacies (R. Bomer, 2011; Skerrett, 2015).

Everyone has them—that has to be an article of faith for a literacy educator. It involves, of course, taking a broad view of what counts as literacy—and persuading students of that view, too—so that the net is big enough to catch students’ existing intelligent and purposeful practices. Understanding students’ voluntary everyday community-based literacies allows new learning to be framed as just an extension of the motives and practices a kid already has.

Curriculum Permeable Enough to Import Multiple Cultural Starting Places

If students are bringing their lives into the curriculum through practices like writing in writers’ notebooks, choosing their topics for pieces written for real readers, responding to literature with material from their own experience, then they trail with them into the curriculum their kitchens, their celebrations, their language, and their relationships. Many teachers already see students’ descriptions of out-of-school realities as places where the details of culture become visible, though sometimes perhaps we think of this material as purely personal and individualistic, rather than highlighting it as culture, discussing differences, and regarding students’ lives in communities with the honor they deserve. Perhaps foregrounding and underscoring the “personal” as cultural inquiry can take the school as whitestream bureaucracy out of the spotlight.

Audiences in Home Cultures and Languages

When students write, make documentaries, or compose multimedia events, the school default position is typically to assume that the audience is school itself: the student writing as student for teacher. If instead, the student is recognized as a member of a community and that world outside the school is understood as the audience for text-designing, then the text would probably need to look different, sound different, encode different details of relationship, and be composed in different language. Design choices then are oriented toward a dynamic cultural space, and the designer is positioned as needing to be expert about those people out there, rather than these professionals in here.

Conversations That Identify Groups, Critique Power Relations, and Advance The Disadvantaged

Rather than assuming a universality that is really White dominance in disguise, a literacy curriculum—for writing, reading, literature, language—should be explicit about the varied groups in society—the ways gender, race, class, language, sexuality, and other groupings fuel specific investments, desires, responses, and experiences. In order for diverse cultures to be sustained in concert with schooling, they have to be recognized as existing. We are all going to have to develop gracious, open, respectful ways of inquiring out loud about race and other forms of difference, and to be good at it, we will need to become more informed. Furthermore, it is important to foreground the reality that groups do not have equal degrees of social power and to analyze how groups with more and less power are working through stories, language norms, and texts. As much as possible, in order to pursue social justice, we should be making curricular decisions that advance the interests and well-being of groups that have been historically disadvantaged, and we should be teaching students how to reason about such decisions (Bomer & Bomer, 2001).

Decentering White English: Centering Racial/Linguistic/Cultural Difference

A literacy classroom needs to take up the study of language—not to force students to conform to prescriptions about correct grammatical forms but in order to examine everyday language practices: the ways they live in specific communities, the ways they change, and the ways they differ from one another. The purpose is not just to salute difference on the way to making everyone write and speak properly. The educational purpose is to increase language democracy by investigating how language really works. This will mean inviting more Spanish in the English classroom, as well as more African American English, more Asian writing systems, and more local mixtures of languages. I’m not suggesting that the teacher attempt to “teach Ebonics,” but that language in its variety becomes the focus of inquiry in language arts, rather than a policing of a very narrow kind of Whiteness.
Literacy as Action to Alter the World

To loosen the paralyzing hold that a dominant culture working through a state sponsored institution like school can have on the free expression of other cultures, it is crucial that we convince ourselves and our students that the world is unfinished. Culturally sustaining pedagogies require that we hold onto hope, that we believe that change is coming, that it’s on its way right now and needs our action. As an enactment of hope, at least some of the writing curriculum should be devoted to investigating how people use literacy to try to change social givens—to advocate for policies, to educate the public, to get others to care, to inspire more passion and action among people who already do care. At least some of the time, students’ reading should enable them to imagine the lives of disadvantaged people, maybe like their group or maybe like others, and they should have a sense that their reading lives, their reading choices as individuals and as groups, add up to deeper understandings about the world and how it should be improved.

My hope is that with strategies like these, we can fracture the cultural monolith that schooling usually becomes, interrupt the constant leveling and averaging of experience, and allow for more forms of excellence, more pied beauty, and more pathways to lifelong, energetic well-being for our students.

References


