

# CONFRONTING MANDATED CURRICULUM: BEING A TRANSGRESSIVE TEACHER AND MEETING THE NEEDS OF OUR URBAN LEARNERS

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## **Abstract:**

Teachers in urban schools often struggle with being micro-managed by administration, especially when vertical alignment and assessment policies are heavily enforced. This study explores a culturally responsive teaching (CRT) approach to mandated curriculum within an urban classroom. By examining the teacher's use of 19th century British literature, this study illustrates how educators can move beyond superficial cultural additives and be responsive to the needs of their learners. This study offers a unique perspective on a teacher willing to challenge the mandated curriculum by utilizing CRT with British Literature in an urban high school.

**Keywords:** culturally responsive teaching, urban education, curriculum, literature

In *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks (1994) discusses teachers who take risks and adapt to the needs of their learners. Praising educators who are willing to confront superficial constraints, she states "I celebrate teaching that enables transgressions—a movement against and beyond boundaries. It is that movement which makes education the practice of freedom" (p. 12). She calls these courageous teachers, who are willing to transgress, "catalysts" for learning (p. 11). Inspired by catalysts for learning, this article is meant to be a celebration of teachers who are willing to transgress, the teachers who are willing to value their students in the classroom more than they value the content of the classroom. This article explores the experience of one teacher who confronted the constraints of mandated curriculum.

Carla, the teacher described in this study, faces mandated curriculum and content that conflicts with what she knows is relevant for her students. While she would rather teach literature that reflects the culture of her students, she is instead required to teach British literature. As an alternative to traditional approaches, she prefers to be culturally responsive. Geneva Gay (2000) defines culturally responsive teaching (CRT) as "using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them" (p. 29). While CRT seems like a natural fit for many teachers working in underserved urban school districts, it is not typically employed because a CRT approach in many public schools requires teachers to become risk-takers. Despite the risks of administrative backlash, Carla courageously confronts the text *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* in a way that brings her students' lived experiences into a literature which often seems a world away from their own community.

This case study concentrates on the conflict of CRT within an urban district that mandates British Literature be the only literature taught in senior year English. The study addresses the following research question: "What is the experience of an urban teacher trying to maintain culturally responsive teaching in a course required to focus on British literature?" While there is substantial research that shows CRT's positive effects with students, there is limited research on teachers employing CRT who are required to teach a specific content area, such as British literature. The purpose of this study is to explore the teacher's experience in order to develop a better understanding of how to support teachers serving urban high school students.

## **Review of Literature**

Culturally responsive teaching (CRT), also referred to as culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP), is a pedagogical approach that has the ability to strengthen relationships between teachers and create a sense of community (Antrop-González & De Jesús, 2006; Gay, 2000; Irizarry & Raible, 2011; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Nieto, 2010). In addition, evidence shows that CRT has a direct association with increased academic gains (Aronson & Laughter, 2016; Bui & Fagan, 2013; Howard & Terry, 2011). However, in her review of CRT research, Sleeter (2012) argues that the lack of more defined discussions potentially places CRT/CRP on the periphery of teacher education. Sleeter emphasizes the need for more discussions about what CRT looks like in the classroom in order to educate teachers (p. 578).

Following Sleeter's review, an emphasis has been placed on discipline specific CRT practices, making it easier for educators to see CRT in action within focused content areas. For example, the case study completed by Muhammad (2015) provides an example for educators practicing in areas of literacy and English Language Arts (ELA). This study examines one way an

educator used mentor texts from female African-American authors to assist with literacy practices of young African-American girls. The study found that the use of mentor texts from African-American women was not only empowering to the students in their identity as readers, but also in their identity as writers.

While literature is a major component in any ELA classroom, it is not always implemented in the same way. Bomer (2017) considers how approaches to literature in ELA classrooms are vastly different by examining various approaches to literature and placing them on a scale. The scale ranges from “culturally colonizing,” to “culturally restrictive,” to “culturally tolerant,” and ends with “culturally sustaining” (p. 13). Unfortunately, in many high school and university classrooms, students are often exposed to culturally colonizing approaches to literature. The elements of culturally colonizing approaches include:

- Monuments of literature for their own sake,
- Writing assigned arguments about literary elements or themes for teacher grading,
- Minimal attention to processes of reading and writing, and
- Prescriptive grammar.

In contrast, at the opposite end of the scale, is culturally sustaining approaches to literature. According to Bomer, this type of approach should be the goal of ELA teachers and include:

- Purposeful dialogue about advancing disadvantaged groups;
- Study of strategies for literate practices for advocacy and uplift of the community;
- Focus on community and audience as source of writing agendas, with use of most effective languages and varieties of English for those audiences; and
- Analysis of language as an instance of power, with emphasis on valuing heritage language and flexibility of language practices.

Many teachers are required to teach literature that is vastly different than the students in the classroom. Bomer’s scale allows educators to analyze and compare their own approaches to teaching literature in order to reflect on their place on the spectrum of approaches.

Most significantly, the work of Bissonnette (2016) conducted over 40 interviews and examined how teachers perform CRT practices when addressing required readings in canonical British literature classrooms. Based on her findings, Bissonnette argues that analyzing British literature is possibly the most suitable opportunity to engage in cultural responsiveness and sharpen students’ critical consciousness due to British literature’s “racially exclusionary curriculum” and “marginalizing properties” (p. 227). She elicits a call to action for researchers, claiming “Scholars would do well to document these generative practices—What forms do they take? What benefits do they afford? What resistances do they create?” (p. 239). Further, Bissonnette emphasizes the importance for scholars to continue telling the stories of teachers’ attempts to be responsive to their diverse learners, despite required canonical British readings.

Dyches (2017) further highlights the need for CRT when studying British canonical texts. Dyches’ ethnographic study examines one teacher’s approach to canonical British literature when required to cover specific texts, such as *The Importance of Being Earnest*, *Macbeth*, *Frankenstein*, *The Canterbury Tales*, and *Beowulf*. Based upon her observations in this high school classroom, Dyches (2017) argues:

Teacher educators should invite their students to consider the ways their sociocultural realities and biographical experiences—both those privileged and marginalized in nature—function as cultural assets that can be leveraged in powerful ways to effect culturally responsive teaching practices. (p. 322)

Dyches found that the teacher, a White male serving a predominately Black student population, was successfully responsive to his students by creating a community, fostering students’ sociopolitical consciousness, and re-storying the literature. Addressing his approach to teaching *Beowulf*, the teacher verbalizes his aims:

If a kid leaves knowing the plot of *Beowulf* or the archetype character, great. But more importantly, I want them to leave my room feeling a sense of pride and empowerment in themselves in who they are and their abilities to confront life and its challenges. (p.316)

In this case, the teacher specifically utilized the concept of re-storying when approaching *Beowulf*. Students re-story *Beowulf* first through an essay comparing their own religion with the Christian foundations found within the text. Then, they deepen this concept of re-storying by participating in a project called “The *Beowulf* in Me.” One of the writing components of this project is for students to write poems where they consider themselves as heroes in the archetypal model set by *Beowulf*. Despite the

teacher's success in being culturally responsive to his students, Dyches identifies several obstacles faced by the teacher: sociocultural tensions, fear of punitive backlash, and time. This is another example of teachers as risk-takers when they employ CRT without institutional support (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2012; Burke & Adler 2013; Houchen, 2013).

While CRT research has started to focus more intentionally on content areas within the past five years, there still remains a large gap, especially in regards to specific literary pieces or genres. Currently, there are really only two studies that examine CRT in direct relationship to British literature in a high school setting. The work developed by Bissonnette (2016) and Dyches (2017) provides valuable insight for teachers facing mandated British literature curriculum and also provides a starting point for future research. This study furthers the discussion and offers additional insight into a culturally responsive approach to British texts required in the curriculum.

## **Conceptual Framework**

Initially, CRT formed from the multiculturalism movement which developed shortly after the Civil Rights Movement (Banks, 1979). Towards the end of the 20th century, teachers and theorists began to research and integrate CRT in secondary curriculum (Delpit, 2006; Gay, 2000; Nieto, 1999; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). The theoretical foundation of CRT was coined by Ladson-Billings (1995) and her three broad propositions of cultural relevancy: relationship to self, relationship to knowledge, and relationship to society. More recently Brown-Jeffy and Cooper (2011) synthesized the original theoretical works of Ladson-Billings (1994), Gay (2000), and Nieto (1999). Brown-Jeffy and Cooper found that each theoretical perspective in their synthesis had a several correlations with critical race theory (Irvine 2001; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solorzano & Yosso, 2000). Through this synthesis of various CRT studies and an analysis of CRT's connections to critical race theory, Brown-Jeffy and Cooper developed a CRT framework. This framework establishes five corresponding principles found in the works of seminal CRT theorists:

- Identity and achievement,
- Equity and excellence,
- Developmental appropriateness,
- Teaching whole child, and
- Student teacher relationships.

The framework created by Brown-Jeffy and Cooper is a valuable resource for exploring the overlapping components of CRT that can be found within the work of seminal theorists and researchers. This framework also serves as a reminder that CRT is not just about multicultural texts; CRT requires educators to know their students as much as they know their content.

## **Methodology**

### **Research Context**

This case study developed out of a teacher curriculum committee that focused on required subject areas and skills for secondary English. The teacher curriculum committee functions within a large, urban district with approximately 46,000 students. The district enrollment is approximately 53% Latinx, 24% African-American, 17% Caucasian, 4% Native American, 3% Multiracial, and 2% Asian.

One teacher in particular struggled with the required content area of British literature. Carla self-identifies as a female of Caribbean descent and has been teaching in the United States for eight years. Carla felt that it was difficult to relate to the literature due to her own cultural background and childhood growing up in a British post-colonial nation. Based on her racial identity and economic experiences, Carla understood the frustrations her students exhibited when reading British literature. Carla teaches a 10th and 12th grade English in a school that serves a student population that is 97% economically disadvantaged, 62% African-American, and 21% Latinx.

### **Positionality**

My interaction with the district began through a federal grant that I helped secure and facilitate. The grant allowed me to work collaboratively with teachers and offer resources and support as needed. I partnered with the curriculum department and worked closely with the English Language Arts director. Through this collaborative partnership, I received an invitation to work with secondary English teachers. Our purpose during this meeting was to map out units per grade level, 9th-12th, which the entire district would use to scaffold content and skills in ELA classrooms. My role during this study became that of participant researcher. It was during this collaboration that I had the opportunity to build a relationship with teachers and listen to their

frustrations. By working collaboratively, we proposed real-world applicable themes for each unit in the curriculum map based upon voiced concerns and interests of students.

As a student who formerly attended this same urban district and as a woman who comes from a similar background as the students, I recognize my own potential for bias. However, this same background and connection with the district drives my intrinsic interest in being responsive to students in urban schools. Additionally, my years as a secondary public-school teacher need to be recognized. As a past English Language Arts teacher, I relate with teachers who are required to cover content that feels disconnected to our student populations. In an attempt to engage in reflexivity during the study, I kept a researcher's notebook to reflect upon the data gathered and my perceptions that were influenced by own experiences as a student and public-school teacher. Through reflections in the researcher's journal, I recognized my stance of power for while I felt a connection to the school due to my background, I acknowledged my current position as a researcher at a university. This process of reflexivity was imperative to understanding the weight of my interaction with the teacher and her students.

## Research Design and Analysis

The purpose of this study is to gain a deeper understanding rather than draw generalizations. Therefore, particularistic case study was chosen (Stake, 1995). Through a focus on naturalistic and ordinary experiences that shape complex concepts, this case study explores one teacher's behavior in a classroom for a unique understanding of the teacher's experience over time.

For purposes of triangulation, three sources of data were collected over six months during the school year. Four semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted with Carla. Initial questions were asked with a heuristic approach in mind and further exploratory and probing questions, as well as subsequent questions, were asked as needed. Next, field notes were taken during three observations to not only assist with triangulation, but also to contextualize the study. Field notes were first written as jottings in a notebook, then later developed into reflective narratives. The third source of data was classroom artifacts, which included lesson plans, district documents, classroom data sheets, classroom wall décor, and student work. Artifacts proved to be an integral part in the triangulation and contextualization of the study. All sources of data were collected over a period of time: before the teaching unit, during the teaching unit, and after the teaching unit.

A modified constant comparison method of analysis was utilized. Once all data was documented and compared, it was mined through categorical aggregation for emerging patterns and themes (Stake, 2005). While CRT served at the conceptual framework for the study, emergent design was used in order to examine how the teacher participant organically engaged with students and the mandated curriculum. Categories and themes were constructed from open and axially coded data. The coding scheme emerged from the data as it was reviewed (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The multiple perspectives gradually collected allowed for a holistic picture to emerge from the data and develop themes. These themes were cross-analyzed with all the data sources to clarify meaning. Member checking was made throughout the data analysis process to ensure trustworthiness and dependability of the data (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 1998).

## Findings

Carla is teaching various British texts, but this study captures her unit that specifically focuses on *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* by Robert Louis Stevenson. In the beginning, Carla shares that she is struggling with trying to balance district expectations and requirements with what she feels is best for her students. However, her determination is apparent when she declares, "I have to adapt it and coach it and put lipstick on it—like a pig." If British Literature is the "pig," then Carla is willing to dress it up in order for her students to make connections. A key finding to this study is that Carla's process for being culturally responsive is *not* linear. There is no lock-step teaching method or curriculum progression. Rather, Carla's approach to the literature is a continuous movement in and out of the students' lived experiences. Like waves coming in and out on the beach, Carla manages to touch the shore of her students' perspectives and then slowly pull those perspectives back out in the ocean of texts—ebbing and flowing to meet the learning needs of her students. Since CRT allows for teachers to focus on process just as much as they do on content, the following exemplifies Carla's process for meeting the needs of her learners.

## Connecting to shared space

Carla feels that her classroom environment needs to be an extension of students' community and family. Before she even begins to engage with the literature curriculum, she spends time getting to know her students. This sense of community is displayed throughout the classroom. There are no grammar rules or writing checklists. There are no posters donning the faces of canonical authors. Rather, Carla decks the classroom walls with artifacts from her learners. Gay (2002) calls this the "symbolic curriculum," which can be developed through "visual images, mottos, awards, celebrations and other artifacts" (p. 108). Through the symbolic curriculum students can "see" themselves as valuable assets and sources of knowledge in the

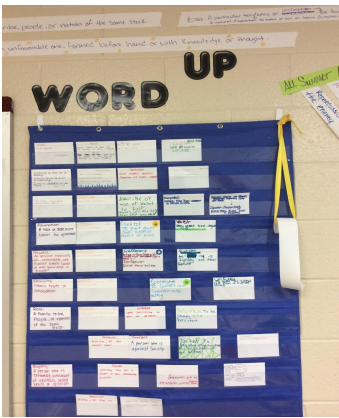
classroom. The walls in Carla's classroom are almost entirely covered with visuals that act as an outspoken advocate and agent.

One entire wall, labeled "Our Work," is covered in a colorful patchwork of student projects (see Image 1). This area overshadows the board where student data is kept. Student data boards are required in every classroom and expected to be posted in clear sight. The district requires teachers to post the latest scores in order to track students' progress. Rather than making numbers the focus of her students' progress, Carla has decided to showcase the knowledge developed by her students. She hopes that their past work will inspire future work.



*Image 1: Student Work*

In addition, Carla is required to cover certain vocabulary lists mandated to her school by an external consultant, who was brought in by the district due to the school's "failing" status. Rather than exclusively focusing on the superficial list dictated to her by the consultants, Carla created a board she calls "Word Up" (see Image 2). On this section of the wall, she allows students to choose vocabulary words they would like to conquer from the readings. She has them place the word on a note card, along with the definition in their own words and why they chose the word. Carla is meeting district requirements, but these requirements are eclipsed by the vividness of student voice.



*Image 2: Vocabulary Wall*

Another wall is full of posters with positive quotes or sayings such as, "I am in competition with no one. I have no desire to play the game of being better than anyone. I am simply trying to be better than the person I was yesterday" and "Haters are like crickets." (See Image 3). In addition to the positive quotes, Carla has a portion of the wall with "love" letters from students. These are notes left by previous students at the end of the school year, or former students who have returned to visit Carla. One of these notes reads, "Thank you for listening when I needed help. Thank you very much for showing me to never give up and always look forward. I liked your class even though it was hard." Another love note reads, "You always know the right thing to say like if you look in our eyes and see what we are going through." The classroom is not only a refuge for Carla but also her students. Carla is willing to become a risk-taker in order to make her classroom a refuge for students and teachers who are being labeled as failures based on test scores.

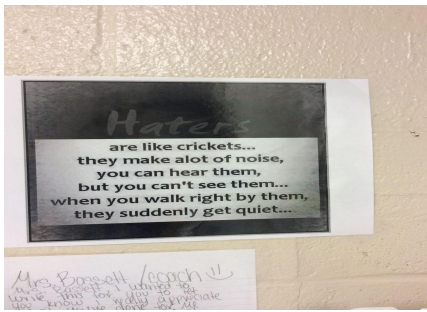


Image 3: Haters Message

Wanting to foster a community environment, Carla does not shy away from allowing her students to connect to her. She shares aspects of her life with her students. On the wall next to her desk resides a personal memorial of liberation and change (see Image 4). On the left is a picture of Carla in her native St. Croix—young, covered in a plastic shopping bag, and squatting on a bucket while cleaning fish. She lived with her single mother until she left for the United States as a young adult. This image is juxtaposed with another picture that shows a young Carla confidently holding her college diploma. Between the two images is a quotation that states, “It’s not where you come from that matters. It’s what you BECOME in this life that does.” While the state might say the students are failing, Carla sees the victories. She has gotten to know her students and when asked to describe them her first response is to say, “They are all ready to make a change in this world. Someone just needs to tell them how to do it. Or at least show them a picture of what it looks like, and they can expand on that. My kids are great.”

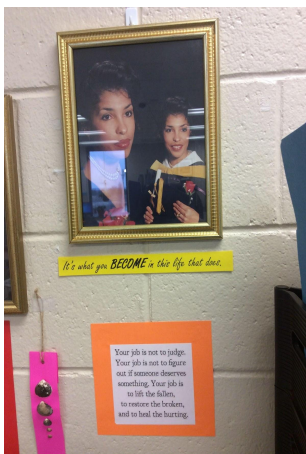


Image 4: Carla’s Personal Memorial

## Connecting with allies

The obstacles Carla faces often leave her feeling weary. Her weariness is evident in her tears as she shares that school data will not shape who she is, but she will keep adjusting her practice to balance administrative expectations and make classroom learning relevant.

Carla decides to seek out collaboration with another teacher, John, who works at a different school. This collaboration between Carla and John was one of her goals for many months and both teachers had spoken multiple times about working together. However, finding the time to make it happen was a big obstacle. Neither school offers much opportunity to collaborate within the constraints of the site, much less to collaborate with a person with a different perspective from a different school. When this collaboration finally took place, Carla called it “an extremely beautiful thing.” Both teachers were able to share their frustration with the content, but with a constructive, problem-solving aim.

Carla also shared that she was surprised by how productive the collaboration was because she began with assumptions. She shared that John, her collaborator, is a young White male and when she met him the first time, she thought to herself, “Well, this is going to be interesting.” Carla shares this because she has a very strong perspective on race, socioeconomic class, and life experience. However, Carla says that the collaborations were incredibly “refreshing.” When I ask her to reflect on her collaboration with John, Carla responds, “He turned out to be a very well-rounded, supportive individual who just happens to be

White and young.” She acknowledges John’s desire to connect and understand his students; describing him as “aware,” Carla says his teaching begins at a very basic, human level that prioritizes getting to know his students as individuals. She claims, “The type of person that he is, is so perfect for education.” Carla knows her students, and she also sees the need to have more teachers who know their students—“If you don’t recognize the environment and don’t understand them, how will you give them a place in this world to grow?” Carla says that student buy-in is important, but teacher buy-in is equally important. She claims in the past she has had little collaboration with other teachers due to “no time, no energy, no interest, distrust, mistrust.” Thus, John’s willingness to collaborate and become an ally with Carla rejuvenated her determination to confront British literature through a culturally responsive approach.

### **Connecting with self through themes**

Carla wants her students to start with their lived experiences rather than analyzing the text, and then compare themselves to the content. Since the theme of good vs. evil is a major component of *Jekyll and Hyde*, Carla begins by making space for her students to share their thoughts on what is good and bad. She not only wants them to feel engaged, but also is genuinely interested in learning what they think about this theme in their lives and their society. Believing student voice is important to the curriculum, Carla has students write down aspects of their lives that are good or bad on two different sheets of paper, one labeled “good” and the other “bad.” Rather than having students write individually on their own sheet of paper, Carla has every student write one example on the shared paper. The communal “good” paper is passed from student to student, each writing down an aspect of life they feel is “good”; similarly, the same process is used for the “bad” paper. The communal paper is then used to discuss the theme. Many of the examples the students give are from their own life experiences or aspects of their own community outside of school. Examples of “good” include: having a job, feeding the hungry, making good grades, making your mom happy, running your own local business. Examples of “bad” include: stealing, fighting at school, war, drugs, murder. Carla guides class discourse by asking students to consider multiple perspectives, posing the question, “Do we always have the whole story?” She allows students to problematize the different aspects written on the paper. One student asks her peers, “Does a lady steal from a store because she is evil or has hungry kids at home? Is the store owner just as guilty for letting community members go hungry as the woman who steals?” Another student questions, “Which is worse—the druggie or the drug dealer?” Based upon the conversation about having the whole story, Carla ties it to stereotyping, asking “Can a lack of a well-rounded view of an issue or a person lead to stereotyping?” Critical engagement occurs when the students break into small groups and describe their own experiences being stereotyped. This discourse continues to build knowledge about the philosophical and abstract concepts presented in *Jekyll and Hyde* that many teachers would not approach with urban students.

Once the class developed a foundation of the theme rooted in their own lived experiences and perspectives, Carla recognizes movement towards higher-level thinking in their arguments. She then has students begin reading and applying their previous philosophical understandings to specific characters in the novel. They begin a collaborative activity which asks students to think about human nature and its prevalence towards good or bad. Carla scaffolds discussions of the characters and human nature with small writing activities, in which students can free write about previous interpretations and the novel’s relationship to their lives. Carla achieves student buy-in by creating a space for students to have ownership of the construction of knowledge. Ultimately, this dialogic relationship between teacher and students constructs knowledge at a higher level than mere reading alone.

### **Connecting with previous texts**

Once students illustrate their ideas of the theme and characters in *Jekyll and Hyde*, Carla makes connections to previous texts read in class. For Carla, literature should not be taught in isolation but is interrelated. She brings back Aldous Huxley’s “Words and Behavior” as another layer to the discussions and activities by having students apply concepts from Huxley’s text to *Jekyll and Hyde*.

Additionally, Carla refers back to previous lessons and asks students to think about *Beowulf*. She writes on the board, “Who was really evil? Was it Grendel?” One student points out that he does not feel that Grendel was truly evil, pulling from previous conversations about human nature in their own lives and in *Jekyll and Hyde*. The student concludes that Grendel’s mother is evil. However, another student disagrees, pointing out that the mother only acted that way because she wanted to protect her son. The student argues, “Moms do crazy things when they are protecting their kids!” Both students are asked to defend their case. It is during this portion of Carla’s process that she is moving in and out of student experience, current literature, and past literature. By the end of this process, students have synthesized all three components into a solid argument. Carla shares that the unit of *Jekyll and Hyde* is meant to be a bridge to pull previous texts and concepts from the first semester back together in the second semester. Carla claims she frequently does this because her kids struggle when texts are taught in isolation.

### **Connecting with our literate identities**

In addition to connecting current concepts to past texts, Carla points out that the activities in this unit are meant to scaffold learning towards a group poster project that focuses on ethos, logos and pathos. Students will use what they have learned about argumentation to develop real-world public service announcement posters advocating for a cause they care about. While developing a poster about a personal cause, students are focusing on the academic skills and content of rhetoric. After students have mastered creating posters on a personal level, they make another poster with the same emphasis for *Jekyll and Hyde*.

The poster project covering the novel eventually leads to a formal argumentative essay. As students are addressing the expectations for the essay, Carla reminds them of their mantra. She begins to recite it, and most of the class joins in with her word for word:

If you can read it—then you can explain it—then you can defend it; if you can defend it—then you can fight for it; if you can fight for it—then you can win it; if you can win it—you can be successful. (Fieldnotes)

Carla has high expectations for her students. She hopes that the cohesiveness of the year's texts and concepts will help, along with the vigorous scaffolding. Her goal is for them to see themselves as writers in their own realm. Further evidence of this is seen one day after class when a student visits. He has been struggling with his essay and shares his frustration. Carla takes almost a half an hour after class to talk him through the writing process, ending this visit by reminding him to just write because he is a writer. She tells him, "Don't rewrite or reread. Just write. Write the way you talk. We will revise later." She reminds him that his voice is most important. This is the starting point; formalities, like mechanics and style, will come later.

### **Connecting with regained power**

An unexpected outcome of Carla's approach to the literature was her empowerment as an educator. Even though there were many moments where she struggled, Carla wants to maintain her approach, exclaiming, "I don't think I can teach any other way now that the students taught me that this is how they want to learn. They taught me that." Her advice to new teachers or other teachers considering a culturally responsive approach is to focus on connections, saying, "If you can't tie it to real-world connections for our students, you will reach some. But, you will not reach the ones who need it the most."

When asked about her biggest victory during this process, Carla does not hesitate. She has the name of a specific student instantly on her lips. He is one of the students who would not sit still at the beginning of the year; during one class alone he left four times, twice without permission. Carla says she struggled to get him to participate in discussions much less produce work. Carla begins, "To have him take an abstract thought—good vs. evil..." She stops, her voice quivers, she pauses and looks up at the ceiling. Carla gathers herself and, through tears, proclaims, "A prompt that was abstract. He sat still and answered the prompt, in writing! And he followed through! Yes, it's not fully 12th grade writing; yes, it's not the best grammar. But he can take an abstract thought and make it relevant to himself enough to choose a standpoint and explain it. Big ass victory!" Carla's victory, in this moment, is individual. It is one kid. She knows there are more, but she sees her students each as individuals. She feels like there is some type of revolution taking place in her class. She knows she has taken a risk, and each victory is worthy of a celebration. In her final interview, Carla exclaimed, "I am definitely empowered. And I know that I can connect. And when I can't connect, I am strong enough to ask that student why—'Why am I not connecting?' I am ready to hear it, so that we can do it."

### **Discussion**

Carla's experience gives other educators a snapshot of culturally responsive teaching while still addressing the mandated content. British Literature initially stumped Carla, where the required subject area "knocked her into a rut." However, CRT gave Carla a focus and a new way of viewing her own teaching within this restricted content. Her process became a micro-revolution that did not aim for large-scale educational reform, but instead focused on the learning needs of her students. Carla's revolution is founded solidly on her and her students' ability to connect with themselves and the content.

The moments of connectedness reveal themselves through a sense of community, collaboration, and pieces playing part in a whole. Alfred Adler (1998) introduced the concept of "community engagement" as a form of connectedness that can enhance one's life and one's success. While psychology has bolstered the idea of connectedness, Lev Vygotsky (1981) expands the psychological view into education with social constructivism, asserting "It is through others that we develop into ourselves" (p. 161). Carla's experiences with a lack of connection to each other and to learning drives her desire to make connections in the classroom.

Furthermore, this approach empowered both her students and herself. Seth Kreisberg (1992) defines empowerment in its simplest form and discusses the starting point of its development in current literature, stating "empowerment is a process



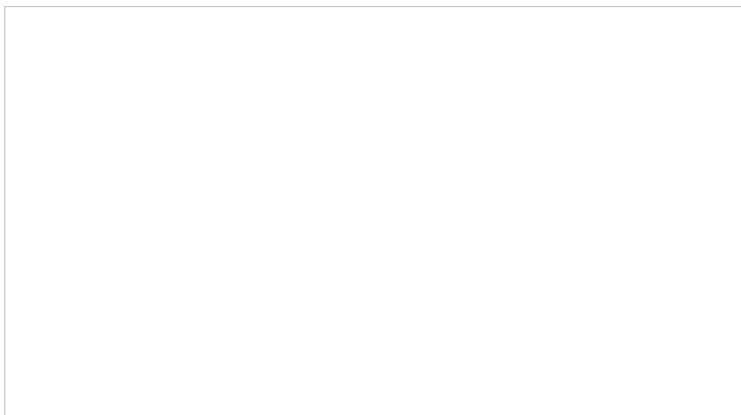
through which people and /or communities increase their control or master of their own lives and the decisions that affect their lives” (p.19). Kreisberg emphasizes the importance of examining empowerment in conjunction with dominance, asserting that dominance must be examined to ensure empowerment. Sonia Nieto (2001) expands upon Kreisberg’s definition by focusing on “relationships of co-agency” (PAGE #). Nieto draws a specific parallel to the definition of empowerment and education, claiming “it is not simply the development of individual consciousness, but a social engagement. In education, empowerment suggests a redefinition of relationships between and among teachers and students, parents, and administrators” (p. 40). In this study, the word *empowerment* was directly used more than any other word in interviews and observations (along with others associated with it, such as *emancipation, power, strength, and confidence*).

Carla’s teaching approach displays that, despite restricted subject matter, teachers can still move their students through a process of culturally relevant understandings and engagement. She chooses connections with her students as her process. Carla’s frustration with the mandates and isolation from peers seems to have only encouraged a drive for community and empowerment in her own classroom. Despite what is happening in her district or within her state board of education, Carla continues to battle for her students and lead a micro-revolution of empowerment and connectedness with them.

The relevancy for secondary teachers lies in CRT’s emphasis on process over content. Since many teachers are required to teach content that they do not necessarily deem relevant to their students, some teachers can adapt the content by “teaching to and through their students” (Gay, 2013, p. 51). While supplemental works from diverse writers are ideal, this is not always a possibility in an age of scripted curriculum, pacing guides, and standardized tests. When educators face these obstacles, Nieto (2010) emphasizes their obligation to become sociocultural mediators between student identities and academic spaces. Educators, who are willing to be risk-takers and transgressors, can utilize CRT as a way to connect with students while still teaching the mandated canonical British texts.

## Implications and Conclusion

Instead of moving through the literature chronologically, there is a non-linear cycle in Carla’s approach to British literature (see Image 5).



*Image 5: Non-linear approach*

Carla prioritizes making a connection through the space her and the student share. She has taken into careful consideration the learning community (both in the physical classroom and outside of it) by recognizing who students are individually, listening to how they interact with their world, and learning what prior knowledge they possess. Another aspect of her approach is to engage with allies outside her school site. She collaborates with teachers who have both fresh and experienced perspectives. A third aspect of Carla’s approach is introducing the literature through student-created themes so students can again engage their lived experiences. The fourth aspect of Carla’s approach includes prior texts. Although she continues engaging students’ lived experiences with the new literature, she wants them to see how the new text is part of a bigger picture. A fifth aspect of Carla’s approach is consistently engaging with student identities as readers and writers. The last aspect of Carla’s approach is reflecting on her own victories throughout the teaching unit and regaining her own power as an educator.

Understanding that CRT is a complex approach, rather than a curriculum, can assist not only in-service urban teachers, but also foster work with preservice teachers. Too often preservice teachers focus on multicultural content or curriculum, but do not have an understanding of dialectical relationships to empower students and develop connections. In *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks (DATE) reminds us:

All students, not just those from marginalized groups, seem more eager to enter energetically into classroom discussion when they perceive it as pertaining directly to them (when nonwhite students talk in class only when they feel connected via experience it is not aberrant behavior). Students may be well-versed in a particular subject and yet be more inclined to speak confidently if that subject directly relates to their experience. (p. 87)

Carla's experiences show that CRT is much more of a process than about changing the content. Meaningful CRT is not merely a multicultural poem or short story arbitrarily inserted as an additive to curriculum. Carla's process has distinct moments, yet they are not separate. Rather, they are continuously connecting and reconnecting; each aspect pulls from another, layering knowledge each time. It is literature wrapped in experience.

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