

## Teacher Proof: The Intersection of Scripted Curriculum and Culturally Relevant Pedagogy for English Learners

Michelle Benegas\*  
Hamline University

\*Corresponding Author: [mbenegas01@hamline.edu](mailto:mbenegas01@hamline.edu)

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### Abstract

This study examines the experience of four student teachers in an intentional community of practice focused on culturally relevant pedagogy for ELs who learn of the implementation of a newly adopted scripted literacy curriculum in their ethnically diverse elementary school. As students are more motivated to learn when curricula are relevant to their lived experiences (Howard, 2003), it is incumbent upon teachers and district leaders to consider ways in which to tailor pedagogy to their unique student populations. In the current sociopolitical educational climate of accountability and standardization, this goal is increasingly more difficult for educators to achieve. With 10 percent of the United States student population made up of English learners (ELs), amounting to 4.6 million students (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2017), it is imperative that school systems shift to support culturally relevant practices.

Keywords: Culturally Relevant, Standardized, Curriculum, English Learners

### Introduction

In the United States, 10 percent of the student population is made up of English learners (ELs). This amounts to 4.6 million students, and the number increases every year (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). As students are more motivated to learn when curricula are relevant to their lived experiences (Howard, 2003), it is incumbent upon teachers and district leaders to consider ways in which to tailor pedagogy to their unique student populations. Culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) was conceived in response to the climate of U.S. schools exemplifying and reifying white middle-class norms and marginalizing students of color (Ladson-Billings, 1995a, 1995b). In regions of the United States where white privilege is particularly strong and the opportunity gap is notably wide (such as the Midwestern state in which this research was conducted), teachers, school administrators, teacher educators, and researchers are compelled to move beyond the status quo.

In the current educational climate of accountability and standardization, this goal is increasingly more difficult for educators to achieve. The present study examines the experience of four student teachers in an intentional community of practice focused on culturally relevant pedagogy for English Learners who learn of the implementation of a newly adopted scripted literacy curriculum in their ethnically diverse elementary school. This mismatch of the value of culturally relevant learning spaces and the realities of the current educational climate of standardization illuminates the heated political position in which teachers find themselves. In order for teachers to bridge teaching theories and strategies presented in teacher education coursework in the K-12 sociopolitical sphere, they must be able to situate said theories and strategies in real classrooms, with real students, under current constraints that affect teachers and their students.

Researchers assert that culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) (Ladson Billings, 1995a, 1995b) is an essential element in closing the opportunity gap, as it recognizes the central role of students' cultures in all aspects of teaching and learning and it acknowledges and responds to the current schooling climate that places students from diverse cultural backgrounds in learning environments that do not mirror their home cultures and values (Langer, 1987; Petchauer, 2011; Price-Dennis & Souto-Manning, 2011). CRP calls teachers to become aware that students' identities, beliefs, and behaviors are shaped by their cultures (Gollnick & Chinn, 1998), and it presents a unique challenge to teachers in that they cannot use relevant pedagogies without first knowing their students. Phuntsog (2001) considers that the true test of CRP "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).

There are several studies that examine how teachers respond to apparent opportunity gaps by tailoring instruction to reflect African American students' lived experiences. Price-Dennis and Souto-Manning (2011) conducted an investigation that examined how a white teacher candidate tailored pedagogy to her African American middle school students, and Hill's (2012) research demonstrated how the inclusion of texts that were culturally relevant to African American students' lived experiences generated critical dialogue about race and injustice. While there is a wide range of studies that investigate how CRP can be enacted for African American students, there is a dearth of literature that examines how CRP can be enacted for ELs. The limited studies that examine the role of CRP for ELs (Orosco & O'Connor, 2013; Salazar, 2010; Wortham & Contreras, 2002) support increased professional development for teachers in the area of CRP and call for additional research.

### **Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and the Sociopolitical Climate of Schools**

A critical examination of the teaching context is necessary in order to fully understand the challenges relating to CRP enactment for ELs in a given school. In order to be aware of and to respond to obstacles to CRP enactment, discourse around CRP for ELs must always take into consideration the sociopolitical climate of schools.

A commonly noted obstacle to CRP enactment for ELs is school or district policy. Parhar and Sensoy (2011), in their qualitative study of teachers who practice CRP in a Canadian school,

argue that CRP enactment is largely impeded by existing school structures. In the study, teachers had limited control in determining their pedagogies, showing “deep cracks that add complexity to participant’s agency to enact culturally responsive pedagogies” (p. 214); the majority of the challenges that teacher participants faced were the result of structural or institutional constraints. Examples of such constraints were: the hierarchical design of school decision-making, mandatory standardized testing that hinders student creativity and critical thinking, limited resources to guide teachers in best practices for working with culturally diverse students and families, limited time, and a lack of administrator support for continuous opportunities for professional development. As Parhar and Sensoy (2011) posit, “Teaching practice is structured fundamentally by the institutional structures that support or interfere with at least some of the tenets of culturally responsive pedagogy” (p. 215). Given this bleak perspective, K-12 school policy must evolve in order for CRP to be fully incorporated into mainstream teaching. In addition, knowledge of this disconnect is essential, as teacher educators may prepare teacher candidates with methodologies that are not supported in their future school environment.

Paris (2012) developed a concept similar to CRP called *culturally sustaining pedagogy*. In his writing about culturally sustaining pedagogy, he notes that the languages, literacies, and cultures should be pedagogically supported by the teacher. The focus on language is a critical dimension in the teaching of diverse learners, especially English learners. Paris agrees with Parhar and Sensoy but takes a more critical stance by asking what the purpose of schooling is, in light of policies that marginalize non-white, multilingual learners. He writes, “As we consider the need for culturally sustaining pedagogies, we must once again ask ourselves that age-old question: What is the purpose of schooling in a pluralistic society? It is brutally clear that current policies are not interested in sustaining the languages and cultures of longstanding and newcomer communities of color in the United States” (p. 94). Ladson-Billings (2001) explains that CRP “[asks] teachers to function as change agents in a society that is deeply divided along racial, ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and class lines” (p. 104).

CRP and culturally responsive teaching were conceived in response to the climate of U.S. schools exemplifying and reifying white middle-class norms and marginalizing students of color (Ladson-Billings, 1995a, 1995b). In regions of the United States where white privilege is particularly strong and the opportunity gap is notably wide (such as the Midwestern state in which this research was conducted), teachers, school administrators, teacher educators, and researchers are compelled to reconsider the status quo. Unfortunately, little is known about the role of school administrators in the development of culturally relevant pedagogies, as “the role of administrators typically is not explored in the literature on culturally responsive teaching” (Riehl, 2000, p. 64). The often disparate beliefs of teacher educators and school administrators translate into a vexed nexus of ideologies about how the opportunity gap can best be closed.

Since No Child Left Behind’s inception in 2001 and the resulting increase in standardized testing, many educational researchers have deemed the implementation of a standardized curriculum inevitable (Milosovic, 2007; Taylor, 2012). The type of standardized curriculum adopted by the school in which this study took place was “scripted curriculum” (i.e., curriculum scripting), which is a standardized, highly prescriptivist form of pre-packaged curriculum, most commonly

implemented in urban and high-poverty schools, that grossly impedes teacher professional autonomy in the interest of providing schools with “teacher proof” curricula (Curwin, 2012).

## Theoretical Framework

Culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) (Ladson-Billings, 1995a, 1995b) is a predominant framework that has the potential to contribute to closing educational opportunity gaps. CRP was conceived of in response to a need for schooling to be more relevant to the lives of African American students. Ladson-Billings (1995b) 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” (p. 469).

The three central tenets of CRP are: social critique, academic success, and cultural competence (Ladson Billings, 1995a). That is, in order to enact CRP, a teacher must demonstrate pedagogies that: engage students in critical examination of content, provide students with rigorous academic tasks, and take into account students’ home cultures.

## Research Design

In this collective case study on teacher learning and CRP, each of the four participants serves as a bounded unit. Given that the undergirding theoretical framework of Communities of Practice (CoP) (Lave & Wenger, 1991) assumes all learning to be socially situated, collective case study is an appropriate methodology to examine how teachers experience structural barriers to CRP enactment. This perspective is particularly relevant to this research because of how the greater sociopolitical climate, in addition to the local hierarchy of student teacher-teacher-administrator, mediate teacher candidates’ abilities to enact CRP for ELs. Data were collected with a range of methods including digital journaling, field observations, recorded CoP meetings, and interviews.

## Participants

Purposive sampling of participants was conducted due to my interest in teacher learning about the enactment of CRP for ELs. Potential study participants had the following qualities:

1. An educational background in the cultural and linguistic needs of ELs in the mainstream classroom
2. Interest in learning more about CRP for ELs
3. Experience teaching in the classroom but still in a teacher preparation program
4. Willingness to participate in the study during student teaching

### *Adriana*

Adriana is bilingual/biliterate in English and Spanish. She is a teacher candidate of Mexican descent who moved to the United States at the age of five. Adriana graduated from Chapman

Hills Elementary School and she reflected on her time there fondly. She recounted that there was one teacher who believed in her when she had little faith in her own abilities. She attributes her success, in part, to the influence of this teacher, who is still on the faculty at Chapman Hills. Adriana expressed that she felt tremendous empathy for immigrant students and that she wants to help them have positive schooling experiences in their new home.

### *Ann*

Ann is a monolingual white teacher candidate from a middle-class suburb about 10 miles away from Chapman Hills. She recalls very little exposure to ethnic and linguistic diversity in her upbringing. In one of her practicum placements, she recalled teaching in a high-poverty urban school with only one white student. She shared, "... I'd leave and get in my car and start crying because... I don't want to be angry at these kids for their situation that they're in and that's why they're acting this way because they're kids. But at the same time I'm really angry because I want to be able to matter. So that was really frustrating and that's when I realized that I need to get better at this" (Pre-Study Interview, 4/17/14).

Ann's mother is a teacher and was a source of support for her as she succeeded and struggled through the lessons of working with students from backgrounds that were very different from her own. Ann considers herself to be a lifelong learner and she is committed to learning more about the needs of immigrant learners in public schools.

### *Alex*

Alex is a monolingual white teacher candidate from an affluent suburb of a large metropolitan city. She recalled little exposure to diversity in her upbringing and shared that one of the reasons that she chose to attend the large metropolitan university is because she was interested in meeting people from diverse backgrounds. She shared that one of her first experiences with immigrant families was when she volunteered to build houses for a non-profit organization and got to know East African families. She was energized to meet other newcomer families and she became interested in the newcomer experience and their struggle to recreate home far from their homeland. She started to become aware of bigotry in her home community toward immigrants, and at the time of data collection she was actively seeking a job in a school with immigrant learners.

### *Amina*

Amina is bilingual/biliterate in English and Arabic. She is a teacher candidate of Tunisian descent. She was born in the United States after her parents met and married in Tunisia. She is proficient in Arabic and a practicing Muslim. Prior to beginning kindergarten, her education was very home-based. She didn't attend daycare or preschool and her only language was Arabic. She recalled that her first exposure to different cultures was when she entered a public school for kindergarten. She shared that there was "a huge gap between home and school life" and that "The whole representation of the American culture was so overwhelming in the class that it made me just feel so different... Every book that I read was about these white families or

these white people who had pets or had these jokes that I didn't understand—just the whole image of white culture was very prominent. I think it was a lot easier for me to communicate with the teachers because they were just so welcoming and nice to us" (Pre-Study Interview, 4/17/14). The following year, Amina's parents decided to move across the country so that their children could attend an Islamic school. She mentioned that the townhome community that her family moved into was like "a mini Muslim village," as her neighbors were Muslims from Pakistan, Jordan, and Syria. She remembers that her community felt like a tight-knit family. Because Amina's education from first grade on took place in an Islamic school, she noted that she didn't experience a cultural mismatch between home and school.

### *Setting*

The Chapman Hills school district is located in a first ring suburb of a large metropolitan city in the Midwestern United States. The district enrolls 26% white students, 39% black students, 20% Hispanic students, 14% Asian students, and 1% American Indian students. Chapman Hills Elementary School is located in an ethnically and linguistically diverse working-class neighborhood. Although it is technically located in a suburb, many teachers consider it to be an urban school given its proximity to a large city. Thirty-one percent of the student population receives ESL services and 82% of the student body receives free or reduced-price lunch (Minnesota Department of Education, 2015). The Title 1 classified school enrolls approximately 1,000 students, with 41 mainstream teachers and four ESL teachers.

### *The Problem: "We Got a Really Awesome Grant"*

At the start of the academic year, the school hired a new principal who was outwardly committed to meeting the diverse needs of the student body. After learning of a substantial grant that had been offered to the school, the principal asked the faculty to vote on whether they wanted to adopt the new Milestone literacy curriculum, complete with books, manipulatives, posters, and lesson planning suggestions. The faculty voted to adopt the new curriculum.

Among the participants in this study, perceptions about a new scripted literacy curriculum changed quickly. During the first week of data collection, the teachers (who had recently voted to implement the curriculum) appeared to be pleased. The teacher candidate participants echoed their enthusiasm. In the pre-study interview, Ann shared: "We got a really awesome grant" (Pre-Study Interview, 4/7/15). When further asked about it in the same interview, she recounted, "I think a lot of teachers were misled how it was going to be used. I think that they were told when they voted for [it]... that it would be a tool and I think that a lot of people are feeling that it's been implemented very rigidly... people were kind of taken aback... it takes up every moment of my day that's not math."

Many teachers were surprised by the rigidity with which the principal required teachers to adhere to the Milestone curriculum. Teachers reported that they were required to read from scripts to ensure standardization of their lessons. Some expressed fear that the administrator

walking down the hall might catch them failing to hold to the “non-negotiables” or the timing on the script provided by the curriculum company.

Student teacher participants in this study reported that faculty meetings were emotional and heated. Three weeks into the 10-week data collection period, the participants learned that the teachers had succeeded in ousting the principal. She had resigned and was escorted out of the building by the district’s human resource department. Because participants were student teachers, they weren’t privy to all of the details, but they surmised that the rigid implementation of the standardized curriculum was one of a series of issues that the faculty had with their new principal. After she left the school, teachers cautiously continued to use the Milestone materials at their own discretion; however, the use of the curriculum was not policed, as it had been prior to the principal’s departure. This was a turning point for the study participants, as they had to decide to what extent they would comply with the curricular policies now that the administrator overseeing the implementation was gone.

## Findings

### *Scripted Literacy Lessons are Seldom Culturally Relevant*

The participants found the Milestone curriculum to be largely incompatible with CRP. The following is an example of teacher enactment of the curriculum. Ann began her kindergarten lesson by attaching a large, colorful poster to the board with a poem on it. She read the poem, “Pet Parade,” aloud. One line from the poem read: “Pandas and parrots, pink bows on dogs, and a big pot filled with tiny frogs.” She proceeded to read the poem a second time, this time asking students to tap their heads when they heard a word that starts with the letter P. The third time, she did a choral reading of the poem with the class. She then pulled out large flash cards that illustrated the nouns from the poem. The students helped her organize them on the board under the first letters of each word. Words included were: pumpkin, plant, pear, panda, frogs, pet. She passed out white papers in plastic sleeves (used as whiteboards) so that the students could practice writing the vocabulary words. Students needed many reminders to “be principled,” as many of them were off task and not engaged. Similar lessons were observed in Amina’s kindergarten class. The participants concluded that they believed that student engagement was poor because the lessons were not relevant to their lived experiences.

### *Teachers Contend with Non-Negotiables and Fear under a Scripted Curriculum*

Prior to the implementation of the literacy curriculum, the faculty and participants attended a training in which the district superintendent presented the “non-negotiables” of the curriculum. On the list of non-negotiables was the time allocated for each topic. No deviation from the schedule was permitted for any reason, including bathroom breaks. The only parts of the school day that were not scripted were math and guided reading. Ann reflected on what she was told at a training session: “Don’t talk about what kids are saying... If it’s not on topic, if it’s not your question, even if it’s a good comment that is kind of about what you’re talking about, unless it’s an exact answer, [say] ‘That’s not what we’re talking about right now.’ Just move on” (Mid-Study Interview, 4/28/14).

Ann also referenced an email that was sent to all teachers from the school administration letting them know that if they didn't comply with the curriculum and its non-negotiables, they would be "written up," which resulted in a lot of unease among the faculty. (My role as the researcher was precarious at this point, because the school had a relationship with the university where I studied. I was aware that the administration was very supportive of the new curriculum and my research revealed some concerning aspects related to its implementation.)

Adriana's bilingualism benefitted her learners, and it brought an aspect of cultural relevancy into her pedagogy when she spoke Spanish with her learners. Paris (2012) refers to this ability as "linguistic dexterity," which he defines as "the ability to use a range of language practices in a multiethnic society and linguistic plurality as consciousness about why and how to use such dexterity in social and cultural interactions" (p. 96). In my time observing in Adriana's classroom, she used Spanish sparingly, and when she did, she generally whispered. I questioned how English dominance and Adriana's position as a student teacher of color might have resulted in her decision to speak Spanish quietly so that others could not hear.

Amina mentioned that although she enjoyed bringing CRP into guided reading, she was fearful of being penalized. She noted that many of the materials were culturally biased and confusing to her students. During a field observation, I observed Amina giving a phonics lesson to her ethnically diverse kindergarten class. The picture cards that came with the pre-packaged standardized literacy curriculum for that lesson overwhelmingly represented U.S. white middle-class norms. They included, for example, a beach ball, hot dog, baseball cap, cat, house (American-style single family home), baseball bat, cowboy hat, and old-fashioned toy car. This was the first of two incidents that Amina experienced in which the picture cards failed to reflect the lived experiences of her students.

### *Scripted Curricula Can Result in a Cultural Mismatch for Students*

While delivering a packaged kindergarten lesson on different types of homes, Alex and Amina noted a few cultural disjoints. After noticing that Amina's ELs didn't know the word "cabin," she struggled to explain the term to this group of students that she believed were living in poverty and could be confused by the concept of a vacation home. Later, one of her ELs mentioned that he and his EL classmates lived in apartments, but there was no picture card in the curriculum for "apartment." Another group of students heard him and contested whether an apartment was actually a home. Amina shared, "They said 'That's not a home. That's not a home because a lot of people live there'" (Mid-Study Interview, 4/28/14). This interaction reveals how a simple vocabulary lesson can unveil racial divides and socioeconomic stratification in the classroom. Motha (2014) posits that English language teaching can reveal how "school and classroom practices shape meanings of racial formations and provide terrain for the dynamic and continuous construction and renegotiation of racialized identities" (p. 79-80). Amina later reflected on this learning experience, and the next time she taught a similar lesson, she was prepared with images from Google to supplement the curriculum. This strategy was a small way to ensure that students saw their lived experiences in the curriculum; however, it failed to

directly address the monolingual, middle-class, white ideologies of the students in this kindergarten class.

Both of the above examples illustrate pedagogy as direct instruction. In the first example, Amina presented curricular materials that were not relevant to her diverse learners and she did not make any modifications for learners who failed to make connections with the picture cards. In the second example, as Amina experienced the same failure to connect with students, she finished the lesson but recognized its shortcomings and committed to modifying the materials for the next day's lesson.

Like Amina, Ann also student-taught in a kindergarten classroom. In the following excerpt, she shared with her colleagues her experience of complying with the new curriculum and the subsequent reaction of her ELs: "When I was following it, I did it for like a week. I followed it strictly. I read the script. I did it exactly how they wanted me to do it. [My cooperating teacher said], 'The kids are hating this. You're hating this.' It was like, 'Yep, I am. I'm hating it... It's not genuine.' My EL kids are always the first to usually check out. It's not because they're the lowest kids; they're not" (2<sup>nd</sup> CoP Meeting, 4/17/14).

As the participants began to realize that the new curriculum represented white middle-class norms, they noticed that their ELs particularly struggled to make connections with the content. Ann's noticing that the ELs "check out" illustrates the value of CRP for ELs and the challenges that come with curricular standardization in schooling. The incompatibility of the new curriculum and attempts at CRP for ELs became increasingly evident to the participants. Amina and Ann's experiences illustrate the general struggle that the student teachers experienced following the implementation of the literacy curriculum. The disconnect between the lived experiences of their ELs and the norms represented in the curriculum was apparent, and they were concerned about further marginalizing students who could better reach their academic potential with curriculum that was culturally relevant.

Despite the student teacher candidates' concerns about the rigidity and the culturally biased nature of the literacy curriculum, they felt varying degrees of pressure to abide by the policy. Ann furthered, "I hate that you feel bad about kids' social time... especially at the year that we are right now... They don't get any time to talk.... [I say] Hurry up. Eat your snack. Hurry up. Eat your breakfast. Hurry up. Eat your lunch... No talking. Stop talking. This isn't social time... I say that probably like 40 times a day" (3<sup>rd</sup> CoP Meeting, 4/24/14).

Community-building is an important component in any culturally relevant learning space, and the rigidity of the curriculum thwarted otherwise naturally occurring community-building occurrences. Of the four participants, Ann and Amina most often obeyed the non-negotiable policy and they questioned whether their kindergarten curriculum offered less flexibility than their co-participants' fifth grade curriculum. Ann perceived that compliance with the standardization policy was a necessary evil that she needed to endure to gain respect as a teacher. She noted, "I think especially as new teachers, I think we almost just have to play the game. We have to jump through the hoops... I'm gonna play the game until I have enough

respect built up from people for them to be like alright, she knows what she's doing... It sucks" (3<sup>rd</sup> CoP Meeting, 4/24/14).

Ann's perspective of the necessity to participate in a practice that she wasn't philosophically aligned with wasn't shared by all of her colleagues, however. Alex expressed that her cooperating teacher often veered from the curriculum and she frequently opted not to use it at all.

The study participants expressed that the teachers at the school were increasingly angry about the implementation of the curriculum. Some of the participants noted that following the principal's resignation, teachers felt more comfortable enacting CRP for ELs and putting the scripted curriculum aside. Ann shared that people were "less afraid... less walking on eggshells... There was always that threat with people, like 'You better be doing it this way, or [the principal] will hear about it'" (Mid-Study Interview, 4/28/14). However, other participants noted that there was minimal change in their classroom dynamics after the administrative turnover.

After the principal resigned, Adriana's cooperating teacher modeled active resistance for her when she chose to avert policy. After Adriana noted that she sometimes knowingly taught lessons that weren't in the curriculum, she shared, "That really helped me to see that you don't always have to do what is handed down to you and regurgitate it back" (Mid-study Interview, 4/28/14). Following this experience, Adriana's perception about policy compliance changed. In response to an interview question about overcoming obstacles to CRP for ELs, Adriana said, "Those things can just be excuses. I don't have enough time... Well, you make it. All the curriculum is too limiting. Yes, it is but you make it your own... You are the only one that can limit yourself and be that barrier to being a better teacher that implements CRP" (Mid-Study Interview, 4/28/14).

Alex echoed Ann's sentiment about averting policy when it marginalizes ELs. She said, "Definitely [early] challenges... were time and maybe just not... feeling ready to dive in. But I feel like I'm definitely over that and I don't mind at all being like, 'Well, we're not gonna do this from the book, it's crappy'" (Post-Study Interview, 6/13/14).

Similar to the participants in Ladson-Billings' (1995a, 1995b) research, the four participants in this study experienced the implementation of the standardized literacy curriculum in different ways. While all of the participants expressed concern for their ELs' potential for success in light of the scripted standardized curriculum, pressure to comply appeared to be stronger among the student teacher participants in kindergarten than it was among the fifth grade student teacher participants, as kindergarten curricular units included not only scripts and books but also manipulatives and posters that provided less flexibility for teachers to make modifications. Another potential advantage that the fifth grade teachers had was the maturity level of their learners. Ann shared, "Kids are at such different levels that it's hard to have that connection come together where they're thinking about the same thing and really on task. I don't know if that's significantly easier in older grades. I'm sure you still come up against struggles with things like that as well. I think that's my biggest struggle right now is just trying to get the kids all on

the same level and focus and thinking about the same thing and contributing to it” (Post-Study Interview, 6/13/14).

It is possible that the maturity level of the young children and the increased standardization in the kindergarten curriculum led kindergarten student teachers to perceive that their context was a more challenging environment to enact CRP for ELs.

### **Conclusion: Policies That Mandate Standardization Inhibit CRP for ELs**

At the onset of the study, participants were asked to predict potential obstacles to CRP enactment. The predominant assumptions were that time and teacher cultural competency would be the greatest barriers to CRP enactment for ELs. The student teacher participants had yet to find out about how the new curriculum would be implemented. Following the principal’s departure, the participants began incorporating CRP into their lessons and they noted that they no longer perceived time to be a limiting factor to CRP enactment. Policies that mandated curricular standardization proved to be the most significant barrier to CRP enactment, and the study participants responded differently to this challenge.

The findings from this research show that despite teacher candidates’ awareness of the educational disparities in the state’s schools and investment in disrupting those disparities, greater systems hindered their ability to teach students in culturally relevant ways. Researchers agree that the schooling climate is often in conflict with the tenets of CRP (Cochran-Smith, 1995; Langer, 1987; Gollnick & Chinn, 1998; Phuntsog, 2001). I argue that all of the stakeholders named above (teachers, administrators, policymakers, and teacher educators) need to contribute to closing the opportunity gap by supporting and implementing the tenets of CRP. All teaching is situated in sociopolitical spaces, and in-service teachers must not only understand how to enact CRP but also how to maneuver such structures while doing so. Cochran-Smith (1995) writes that, “To alter a system that is deeply dysfunctional, the system needs teachers who regard teaching as a political activity and embrace social change as part of their job—teachers who enter the profession not expecting to carry on business as usual but prepared to join other educators and parents in major reform” (p 494). There is much more work to be done in order to fully understand how CRP praxis is learned because of its situated nature.

Research that seeks to examine how teachers and teacher candidates learn to enact CRP must take place *in schools* so that pre-service and in-service teachers can learn to mitigate sociopolitical barriers that make CRP praxis more complicated than it appears in education coursework. Anderson and Stillman (2012) note that there is a “need for more longitudinal analyses that address the situated and mediated nature of preservice teachers’ learning in the field [as it relates to culture]” (p. 3). The current study seeks to delve into how teacher candidates learn about their students’ cultures and how they modify their pedagogy to be relevant to their lives within the context of a culturally diverse public elementary school.

The intersection of CRP for ELs and curricular standardization policies proved to be the obstacle most troubling to the teacher participants, as scripted, standardized literacy curricula leaves no

room for culturally relevant pedagogy. It is interesting to note that Ladson-Billings describes a very similar circumstance in her introduction to the article *Toward a Theory of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy* (1995b). She notes that her study participants took great professional risks in order to pedagogically respond to students' lived experiences. Such risks included defying administrative mandates. One example of this is a teacher who wrote a letter to her administrator asking for permission *not* to implement a standardized literacy program mandated by the school; in doing so, she cited research about literacy from a critical perspective and was granted permission to approach literacy instruction without the standardized program. In subsequent years, this teacher's colleagues were able to do the same.

## Recommendations

Much can be gleaned from the findings of this study. The following are three recommendations that will maximize the potential for ELs to have a culturally relevant schooling experience.

*Recommendation 1. Inform policymakers about the ramifications of standardization policies that inhibit CRP for ELs.*

Input from parents, teachers, administrators, researchers, and teacher educators is needed to convince policymakers such as legislators and school administrators that standardization policies further marginalize ELs and their teachers. When large sums of money are gifted to high-poverty schools for curriculum, questions should be raised about how the curriculum is to be implemented. If there is a requirement that curricular implementation be standardized for all learners, CRP for ELs and indeed for all learners will be inhibited. It is critical that government policymakers be aware of the multiple facets of the corporate education reform movement, in which school standardization is a key element (Slater & Griggs, 2015). Locally, teachers can also keep administrators informed about the ramifications of district and/or school-wide policies that promote standardization practices and consequently marginalize ELs.

*Recommendation 2. Exert caution with private funding opportunities that impose standardization policies.*

In the case of the standardized literacy curriculum implementation at Chapman Hills Elementary, the teacher candidate participants reported that when the teachers voted to approve the new curriculum, they were misled about how it would be implemented. Before presenting any curriculum to faculty, it is critical that administrators ensure that they are receiving all of the facts and that it is flexible enough for CRP enactment.

*Recommendation 3. Promote partnerships between schools and institutions of teacher education.*

Advocating for the preparation of culturally relevant teachers is crucial yet precarious, because teacher preparation programs graduate teachers into schools that often do not honor their commitment to culturally relevant teaching. Price-Dennis and Souto-Manning (2011) assert 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). As such, it is essential that teacher educators establish a strong and sustaining bridge to the K-12 classroom. Through teacher education and school partnerships, not only can schools be better informed about the latest approaches to teaching, but schools of education can also situate their methods instruction within a real context. This reciprocal relationship could prevent mismatches like the one illuminated in this study.

### **Directions for Future Research**

There is a need for further investigation in this area, as the extant research that examines the intersection of teachers learning to enact CRP for ELs and standardization (Baker & Digiovanni, 2005; Conner, 2010; Wei, 2002) focuses on standardized testing rather than scripted and standardized curricula. There is also a need to examine the role of leadership in establishing a culture of CRP. At the onset of data collection for this study, when teachers (including student teachers) more firmly abided by the scripted curriculum, they perceived that CRP for ELs was not achievable. However, after the change in administration, teachers and student teachers began to use the curriculum as a tool rather than a guide.

### **Notes**

At the onset of data collection for this research, it seemed that this study might not be successful. Field note templates remained empty while student teacher participants taught lessons to culturally and linguistically diverse students from scripts. While the context of this research proved initially to be a roadblock, it resulted in providing a critical backdrop that reveals a larger picture for ELs in public schools in the United States. In order for teachers to bridge teaching theories and strategies presented in teacher education coursework in the K-12 sociopolitical sphere, they must be able to situate said theories and strategies in real classrooms, with real students, under current constraints that affect teachers and their students.

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