

Critical conversations in English education: discursive strategies for examining how teacher and student identities shape classroom discourse

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Abstract:

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Keywords: teacher education | English education | identity | critical conversation

Article:

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Critical Conversations in English Education: Discursive Strategies for Examining How Teacher and Student Identities Shape Classroom Discourse

Amy Vetter, Melissa Schieble, and Mark Meacham

This research examined how preservice teachers in a university classroom used discourse analysis of video-recorded lessons to explore how identity markers such as race shaped classroom interactions. Findings from the study indicated that preservice teachers employed 10 different discursive strategies to engage in critical conversations. Identifying these discursive strategies offered insight into preservice teachers' entry points for engaging in such dialogue. From that information, we offer potential narrative starters and questions that educators could use to deepen critical conversations in their English education courses.

I believe that most educators want their students to be successful, both for their students' futures and for their own sense of accomplishment and satisfaction. But, I also believe that most educators do not know enough about how race and culture impact everyone's lives—the students, their parents, the community, and the educators. Lacking that understanding typically leads to a series of missteps that result in a lack of trust and ability to work together. Having the courageous and yes, hard conversations, is where we begin.

—Gloria Ladson-Billings (2014b, p. xv)

Like Ladson-Billings, we—three White English educators—recognized early in our collaborative work together that our preservice teachers struggled to understand how identity markers such as race shaped learning and instruction in a classroom. To develop that understanding in our teacher education courses, we fostered critical conversations about students' video-recorded lessons during student teaching to help preservice teachers examine classroom interactions with peers. After five years of fostering such dialogue through a video assignment, we recognized that preservice teachers grew more comfortable and confident talking about identity markers in relation to their teaching practices. At the same time, we often ended conversations wondering what we could have done to help preservice teachers be more

courageous (Singleton, 2014) and critical. To help us grow in this area, we wanted to learn more about how preservice teachers engaged in such dialogue. As a result, we conducted this study to explore how preservice teachers in a university classroom used discursive strategies to engage in critical conversations about how identity markers shaped classroom interactions. By *discursive strategies* we mean the spoken words that preservice teachers used during classroom conversations to explore critical issues related to teaching (Rex & Schiller, 2009). By examining such strategies, we learned more about how preservice teachers entered such conversations. That work helped us to identify four areas for entering dialogue that instructors and students could focus on to foster deeper and more complex critical conversations.

Educational researchers have widely documented the need for preservice teachers to critically examine their personal identities related to curricular approaches including multiculturalism (Banks, 2003; Grant & Sleeter, 2006; Nieto, 2004; Sleeter, 2001), critical pedagogy (Giroux & McLaren, 1994), and culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogy (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2014a; Paris & Alim, 2014). Despite that need, Gay and Kirkland (2005) state that, in many instances, preservice teachers do not have a clear articulation of what constitutes reflection and receive “few opportunities for guided practice [from their instructors] in self-reflection” (p. 182). This article in part answers this call to develop stronger teacher education practices around critical and racial literacy instruction, which takes on heightened importance with current national political tensions about issues involving race, immigration, income inequality, sexual orientation, and gender identity. To us, these tensions demonstrate a dire need for preservice teachers to engage in rigorous, critical conversations about institutionalized forms of privilege and oppression and learn how to act as agents of change. Sealy-Ruiz (2017) urges a need for this work, noting that “most teacher education graduates complete their programs without having experienced deep and sustaining conversations about race [and, we would argue, other identity markers] and how it impacts the teaching and learning process” (p. 150). Such work is especially important given recent scholarship about culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris & Alim, 2014) that seeks to “perpetuate and foster—to sustain—linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling” (p. 88). The imperative is clear, then, for research to address how teacher educators and preservice teachers engage in critical conversations about identity and teaching practices in high school English classrooms.

Discourses, Identities, and Classroom Talk

Educational scholars suggest that teachers benefit from exploring the discourses that influence their actions and reflections in relation to teaching and learning (Gay & Kirkland, 2003; Johnson, 2008; Vinz, 1996). In an article about unpacking tensions of identity in education, Asher (2007) contends:

When both discourse *and* practice [emphasis original] consistently, explicitly, and critically interrogate the historical and present-day intersections of race, culture, gender, and foster a self-reflexive engagement with difference, teachers can open up more meaningful, situated ways of knowing self and other and rethinking extant relations of power. (p. 66)

Asher's described analytic work about identity is what we call *critical conversations* in this article. Critical conversations involve tensions in perspective and aim to critique how power affects people's social, material, and psychological lives (Fecho, Collier, Friese, & Wilson, 2010). Smith (2001) claims that teachers who create spaces for critical conversations "ask [their] students to interrogate ways that social systems such as race privilege" (p. 156) have an impact on society. For our study, we applied these concepts to facilitate critical conversations about identity and classroom discourse with English preservice teachers. This topic is significant in the field of English education with much research illustrating a commitment to facilitate critical conversations about literature from English teachers (Berchini, 2014; Fecho et al., 2010; Knight, 2011; Smith, 2001). Research, however, shows that few opportunities exist for students to contribute and engage in multiple perspectives (Juzwik, Borsheim-Black, Caughlan, & Heintz, 2013) and that teachers sometimes unknowingly reinforce stereotypes or avoid difficult topics (Schieble, 2012).

Our belief that classroom talk, or discourse, can play a role in enacting social and material changes in students' lives shapes our definition of critical conversations. We define discourse as naturally occurring talk and nonverbal communication in the context of any communicative event. Research about language and discourse tells us that talk (and nonverbal communication) "changes the material circumstances in the world as discourse moves back and forth between reflecting and constructing the social world" (Rogers & Wetzell, 2013, p. 51). Thus, we subscribe to an epistemological stance that altering, revising, or reinstating discourse holds potential for changing or sustaining people's material circumstances. Gee (1991) uses capitalization of the letter D to distinguish between the moment-to-moment structures of language ("discourses") and the ideologies or storylines evoked about people, places, and events in the world through language and other

sign systems (“Discourses”). Our structural choices about language (e.g., pronoun choices such as “we”) circulate the narratives or ideologies we believe and the actions we take in the world, including how we position ourselves in relation to others. Rogers and Wetzel (2013) note, “Discourses play many roles in the classroom. They sustain, build, resist, or transform

Teachers need to be critically aware of how their language choices, and how the Discourses to which they subscribe and circulate, operate to privilege some students over others and play a major factor in students’ opportunities and material experiences in school and beyond.

existing narratives and ideologies” (p. 38). While Discourses are neither fixed nor stable, when evoked as a familiar narrative by many actors and signs over time they can take on a form of habitus in the social imagination (Bourdieu, 1977) and thus also shape material conditions. For example, researchers have shown deficit language (e.g., “my students lack basic skills”) about students of color in schools has contributed over time to low expectations for achievement (a Discourse about race and class as relational to ability) and disproportionate referrals to special education (a material outcome) (Ahram, Fergus, & Noguera,

2011; Ladson-Billings, 2007; Valencia, 2012). Therefore, teachers need to be critically aware of how their language choices, and how the Discourses to which they subscribe and circulate, operate to privilege some students over others and play a major factor in students’ opportunities and material experiences in school and beyond.

English educators, then, must strive to engage preservice and inservice teachers in critical conversations about how classroom talk and actions shape and are shaped by Discourses related to personal identity markers. For this article, we use the term *identity markers* over others such as *identities* or *subjectivities* because we believe it highlights the social construction and discursive influence, rather than preexisting truth, of race, gender, and other constructed identity categories on classroom discourse. Skin color, dress, dialect, and the physical way people carry themselves, for instance, mark how individuals perceive and are perceived by others. Identity markers may shape the way a teacher addresses a student and the response she anticipates receiving from that student (Vetter, Meacham, & Schieble, 2013). As a result, those assumptions and interactions might affect student participation and achievement in the classroom, as we describe below.

Self-reflective identity work through critical conversations is one way for teachers to examine how identity markers shaped classroom interactions (Asher, 2007). Decades of scholarship on self-reflection illustrate the importance of telling stories, linking current experiences to previous learn-

ing, and applying what we learn to other contexts (Schön, 1984; Yancey, 2016). Some research suggests generating a language of reflective inquiry, such as narrative starters (e.g., I remember; I wonder; What if), to foster various kinds of reflection that help teachers think about past, present, and future teaching practices (Vinz, 1996). Research into preparing teachers for diverse learners encourages reflection in which “teachers knowing who they are as people, understanding the contexts in which they teach, and questioning their knowledge and assumptions are as important as the mastery of techniques for instructional effectiveness” (Gay & Kirkland, 2003, p. 181). Preparing English teachers who are mostly White, female, middle-class, and English-monolingual (Haddix, 2015) to facilitate critical classroom conversations about racism in literature, for example, must be coupled with locating their own multiple identity positions within a situated context. A White, middle-class, female teacher’s understanding of racism (e.g., as interpersonal versus structural) is influenced by the Discourses she has been socialized into through the home, community, schools, and other institutions (Mosley, 2010). Without a fully conceived understanding of their own identity positions, English teachers may shape critical conversations in ELA classrooms in ways that are representative of unintended stereotypes or limited understandings about structural forms of privilege and oppression (Schieble, 2012). Engaging in and fostering critical conversations involves a constant process of self-reflective identity work for everyone involved.

Discourse Analysis as a Tool for Teacher Identity Work

Discourse analysis can be used as a tool for the reflective identity work described above. In education research, discourse analysis has been primarily applied as an analytic method for examining teacher and student talk through analysis of classroom transcripts and ethnographic methods (Bloome et al., 2004; Cazden, 2001; Rex & Schiller, 2009; Rogers, 2005). We define discourse analysis as the study of how people use discourse for a purpose and to position themselves in strategic ways to belong to a particular social group. This broad term is typically used to describe methods of study about how language is used in texts and contexts (Cazden & Beck, 2003; Fairclough, 2013; Rex & Schiller, 2009). Because discourse analysis is concerned with language as a social phenomenon, it can be used to help people reflect and engage in conversations (Rex & Schiller, 2009). To date, research is relatively scarce about how and to what effect discourse analysis is used as a tool in the preparation and support of preservice and inservice teachers, though a few studies have documented how applying discourse analysis builds preservice teachers’

understandings (Pimentel, 2010; Rex & Schiller, 2009; Schieble, Vetter, & Meacham, 2015). Pimentel (2010) introduced critical discourse analysis (CDA) in a graduate multicultural education course to help preservice teachers explore race talk in two Hollywood films portrayed as antiracist: *Stand and Deliver* and *Freedom Writers*. She found the graduate students used CDA to uncover ways that these films portrayed problematic discourses about race and class, including defeatist ideas about Latinos/Latinas and achievement, White race and class superiority, and discourses about White teachers as saviors. Pimentel also found that her former preservice teachers contacted her after the course was completed to share other ways they saw racist discourses operating in texts and other films.

In another study with classroom teachers, Rex and Schiller (2009) argued that encouraging teachers to study their own classroom discourse in a teacher research group increased awareness about interactions related to their practice. For instance, one inservice teacher used discourse analysis to reframe situations from student behaviors to teacher action. Such an approach shifted language from a “kids can’t” to a “let’s try” approach. To extend this work, we engaged in a study using discourse analysis, coupled with an identity framework, to help preservice English teachers in a student teaching seminar examine videos of their practice to determine how their practice matched with their desired teaching identities (Schieble et al., 2015). This study found preservice teachers struggled with alignment and revealed discourse analytic tools were generative in helping them reflect on and analyze their practice and develop strategies to match who they desired to be in the classroom with what they did in practice.

We build on this work by exploring how preservice English teachers used discursive strategies to critically examine their identity positions and the influence of these positions in the classroom. We are interested in the content of such conversations—the Discourses about race or class that surface (e.g., colorblind Discourses about race)—but more so in the discursive strategies that preservice teachers exhibit during such critical conversations. By identifying discursive strategies, teacher educators can better understand how participants enter and sustain a critical conversation. With that information, teacher educators can become better facilitators of such dialogue.

Theoretical Framework

We draw from the interrelated theoretical perspectives of critical literacy and racial literacy to help us define, recognize, and analyze the critical conversations in this study. Critical literacy is an evolving concept that

opens opportunities for people “to read both the word and the world in relation to power, identity, difference and access to knowledge, skills, tools and resources” (Janks, 2013, p. 227). This framework asks students to analyze messages inherently present in any form of text, to critique themes of power and oppression, and to develop a broader perspective of their social and cultural world (Freire, 1970; Street, 1984). For this study, we draw from Lewison, Leland, and Harste (2015) who define critical literacy as having the following four dimensions of critical social practice: (a) disrupting the commonplace, (b) considering multiple viewpoints, (c) focusing on the sociopolitical, and (d) taking action to promote social justice. We use Lewison et al.’s four dimensions as a lens to interpret the ways preservice teachers engage in dialogue about how markers of difference shaped classroom talk and events.

Racial literacy, also an evolving concept, fosters occasions for students to develop literacy related to the ways in which racism pervades our social, cultural, material, and political worlds (Guinier, 2004; Rogers & Mosley, 2006; Sealy-Ruiz, 2011; Skerrett, 2011). We build notions of racial literacy into our framework because of explicit attention this concept provides to interpreting the structural and economic conditions within a critical social practice. Theories of racial literacy focus on race while also recognizing the intersectionality and fluidity of race, class, gender identity, sexual orientation, and other markers of difference, which is our focus. To practice racial literacy, individuals engage in the following practices (Bolgatz, 2005): (a) hear and appreciate diverse and unfamiliar experiences, (b) recognize how to ask questions, (c) view racism as structural rather than individual, (d) engage in talk even when it is difficult or awkward, (e) challenge undemocratic practices, (f) understand that racial identities are learned, and (g) facilitate problem-solving within the community (Twine, 2004).

Methodology

We used both elements of critical and racial literacy to answer the following question: What kinds of discursive strategies did preservice teachers use in a university seminar to examine how identity markers shaped classroom interactions during student teaching? We were particularly interested in specific discursive strategies that the preservice teachers used to enter critical conversations and anticipated that such knowledge would help us as teacher educators facilitate deeper critical conversations in our university classrooms.

Participants and Context

We conducted a qualitative study with 12 English preservice teachers enrolled in a university-based teacher education undergraduate program in the southeast United States. Ten of those preservice teachers were White and two were African American; nine were female and three were male. Most came from a middle-class background based on the information they shared with us during discussions. We were not knowledgeable about preservice teachers' sexual orientation. Most preservice teachers grew up in the surrounding area, and approximately 80 percent remained in the area after graduation. All preservice teachers completed a video analysis assignment for the class that required them to use discourse analysis of transcribed classroom interactions to make sense of their identity positions as educators during a student teaching seminar that Amy and Mark taught. For example, preservice teachers were asked to take note of how they positioned themselves as teachers, how they positioned their students as readers/writers, and how students positioned them. Participants were expected to discuss this written analysis in small groups during the weekly seminar meetings (see Vetter & Schieble, 2016, for the assignment). The course occurred during preservice teachers' final semester and included a 10-week student teaching experience in rural, urban, and/or suburban schools. As one White middle-class female and one White middle-class male, we recognize that our identity markers shape these interpretations. In an attempt to make students feel more comfortable engaging in critical conversations about their teaching practices, Amy and Mark video recorded, transcribed, and analyzed their classroom discussions and engaged in a dialogue with preservice teachers using the same protocol that they were expected to use.¹

Data Collection and Analysis

Data sources for the study, collected by Amy and Mark, were culled from one weekly meeting during the seminar course and the collection of aforementioned assignments. The focus of the weekly meeting was for preservice teachers to analyze what their transcripts revealed about the ways their personal identity markers shaped and were shaped by classroom talk. To set up critical conversations for this class meeting, Amy and Mark asked preservice teachers to read and discuss "Interacting and Positioning" in Rex and Schiller's (2009) *Using Discourse Analysis to Improve Classroom Interaction* for class the week before. Amy and Mark then asked preservice teachers to set guidelines for their critical conversation. The class created a list of discussion expectations that included behaviors such as "give constructive feedback and respect multiple perspectives." We also used Singleton's (2014) four agreements for

talking about race: stay engaged, speak your truth, experience discomfort, and expect and accept non-closure. After discussing what those behaviors might look like in a discussion, Amy shared a few examples of transcripts from critical conversations in her past classes (Vetter & Schieble, 2016). As a whole group, preservice teachers had the opportunity to explore how other preservice teachers talked about the ways in which identity markers shaped classroom interactions. Finally, Amy shared a transcript from her teaching and modeled what a critical conversation might look like with Mark according to the guidelines that the class set.

Preservice teachers then organized into small groups of two or three and watched 5–10 minutes of each other’s video-recorded lesson that coincided with the transcript. After watching each excerpt, they discussed their written analysis and reflection, which included the following questions: In what ways did your race, class, gender identity, and sexual orientation shape your teaching and interactions with students? How did these identity markers relate to how you positioned students (considering their identity markers), how students positioned you, and how you positioned yourself? To end, they regrouped as a whole class and debriefed, based on the expectations that students would listen, share multiple perspectives, and collectively provide possible solutions to proposed dilemmas.

Data sources included (a) four audio-recorded small-group conversations (45 minutes each), (b) one audio-recorded whole-group conversation (60 minutes), and (c) 12 video assignments with transcripts that asked preservice teachers to engage in discourse analysis about identity positions (video, reflection, and transcript). For the study reported on in this article, the small- and whole-group conversations were the primary sources of data and the assignments served to triangulate how participants constructed their identity positions and how they reflected on their experiences. Amy transcribed all conversations.

After data were collected, Amy collaborated with Melissa for qualitative data analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Together, we used discourse analysis (Bloome et al., 2004; Rex & Schiller, 2009; Rogers, 2005) to analyze the transcripts, which occurred in three phases. For the first phase of analysis, Amy identified segments of talk in the transcripts that aligned with our definition of critical conversations. This coding meant that preservice teachers were engaged in sustained conversation (at least one minute) about how one or more identity markers influenced the context of classroom discourse and shaped their reflections about the event. For example, one preservice teacher engaged in a critical conversation about how gender norms in her home community influenced her perception of power with a male student who she felt challenged her authority in the classroom. She reflected that

traditional norms she learned about being a woman and being passive influenced how she positioned herself in relation to male students who she felt devalued her position of authority.

In the next phase of analysis, Amy and Melissa engaged in a process of collaborative coding (Smagorinsky, 2008) of each critical conversation. Collaborative coding involves researchers working in tandem to “reach agreement on each code through collaborative discussion rather than independent corroboration” (p. 401). Smagorinsky suggests that collaborative coding allows for researchers’ knowledge and expertise to emerge in the coding process and produces a more generative and in-depth reading of the data. We read and reread each line of talk and assigned codes brought to the data set informed by critical and racial literacy. To do this, we used characteristics of critical and racial literacy to better understand both the content of the conversations and how people engaged in those conversations. For example, we noted when students engaged in critical literacy by considering multiple viewpoints and/or focusing on sociopolitical issues (Lewison et al., 2015). We also noted when preservice teachers engaged in racial literacy by expressing how racism is structural rather than individual and/or challenged undemocratic practices (Bolgatz, 2005). Across the transcript data set of classroom conversations with the preservice teachers, we identified a total of six critical conversations.

At this point, we had a thorough understanding of the content of the critical conversations, but we wanted to know more about the discursive strategies students used. In other words, *how* did students enter these conversations? For the third phase, we analyzed for specific discursive strategies, using the codes described above, that preservice teachers were using to enter critical conversations. To determine these strategies, we took note of the active ways teachers entered conversations. For example, we noted that in many places preservice teachers *articulated* how an identity marker shaped a classroom interaction (“Working at Stuart High School, I have to think often about how my identity as a White person affects their learning”). From this analysis, we collapsed the list of discursive strategies based on the general frequency or pattern of each discursive strategy. We applied more than one code in some instances when the talk represented multiple discursive strategies. This analysis helped us to clearly define each discursive strategy that resulted in the 10 that we illustrate in Table 1. There we note the frequency in which preservice teachers used the discursive strategies during both small- and whole-group discussions and include an example illustrative and typical of the data we collected. These strategies are *gerunds*, which suggests the active and improvisational nature of classroom interactions.

Table 1. Discursive Strategies of Critical Conversations

| Discursive strategies | Description | Example |
|---|---|--|
| Noticing and Naming (8 instances) | Acknowledging that identity markers shape classroom interactions. Identifying a particular identity marker that is shaping an event. | Amy: For him, there was some sort of connection. He was making the assumption that kids were going to respect males more. Evan: That's what they tell you at school. I'm sure that you've all heard that, but that is what they tell me. And I'm not sure that I like that statement. |
| Relating (3 instances) | Making sense of how identity markers shape teaching practices and interactions through personal experience and resources. | Tori: It's strange because from my own schooling experience it was always the girls who were willing to talk and the boys who want the one-on-one attention yet in my classes now it has always been the girls will not speak up and the boys are the ones who answer. |
| Connecting to teaching experiences (10 instances) | Sharing teaching experiences to make sense of how identity markers shape teaching practices and interactions. | Elaine: I think that it's sounding true of your observation, from what you've seen. Because I've observed similar things. I only have CP kids. And I had honors last semester. I see that the CP kids are not interested in community building. They are not interested in getting high achieving, and I think that is a stigma that we have about that type of student who is in that class. |
| Expressing dilemma (6 instances) | Expressing a dilemma related to identity markers shaping classroom interactions. | Detrek: There was a big push for AA achievement. All of my honors classes are dominated by African Americans. Um, and it has been a struggle for Ms. L. and myself to make them successful while still maintaining rigor because this is an honors English class. |
| Monitoring (3 instances) | Being mindful of language used and how it positions students' identities and communities. Not just responding, but thoughtfully deciding how to respond (Lewison et al., 2015). | Maggie: One time, we were talking about going to a grocery store and watching what kind of words we say. And they asked me what kind of grocery store that I go to. Do you go to a ghetto grocery store? And I said that I didn't know what a ghetto grocery store was. I mean I didn't want to throw out a grocery store, like I go to the [Good Food Grocery Store] by the [Stadium]. And then they say oh that's nice, what do you mean that's ghetto? |
| Strategizing (4 instances) | Talking about how to make changes toward equity based on the discussed dilemmas. | Amy: So what can you do to try to fix that? Evan: Pay attention more but also with setting up the classroom for more facilitation. She has her classroom set up so that we can see all of their faces. |
| Articulating (6 instances) | Articulating thoughts outside of what is commonly viewed as natural and recognizing commonsense power relationships that privilege certain people over others (Fairclough, 1989; Lewison et al., 2015). | Emmie: It's something that you realize that society has placed on you. It's like you said. You are born a White person, but you also learn to be a White person. Working at Stuart I have to think often about how my identity as a White person affects their learning. |
| Questioning (6 instances) | Posing questions that help foster critical conversations. This includes questions about how and why identity issues are structural rather than individual. | Elaine: Are most of your students in your honors class similar to you? |
| Sharing and listening (10 instances) | Sharing and listening to multiple perspectives from each other in ways that help them make sense of identity markers. | Mary: And I have realized that girls are more willing to talk with me if it is on a one-on-one level rather than in front of the whole class, which I can identify with. |
| Hedging (6 instances) | Hesitate and/or qualify statements to indicate discomfort and/or uncertainty. | Maggie: So in my reflection I talked about how race and class have more of an impact in my CP class than in my honors class. So, I don't know if that is a really bad thing to say, but . . . |

Findings

Findings from the study indicated that preservice teachers employed 10 discursive strategies to engage in critical conversations: (a) noticing and naming, (b) relating, (c) connecting to teacher experiences, (d) monitoring, (e) strategizing, (f) articulating, (g) questioning, (h) sharing and listening, (i) expressing dilemmas, and (j) hedging. Identifying these 10 strategies gave us insight into how English preservice teachers entered critical conversations, which helped us determine what is needed to potentially support and better facilitate such dialogue in teacher education courses. Below, we discuss three excerpts from critical conversations that illustrate how preservice teachers used all of the above discursive strategies to enter dialogue and develop critical

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understanding, noting places where we felt there were missed opportunities to explore structural inequalities. In the discussion section, we develop those missed opportunities into recommendations for fostering more complex critical dialogue.

Critical Conversations: Teacher Beliefs about Students' Social Class and Achievement

The following excerpt is from a small-group discussion that involved Maggie and Elaine (all names are pseudonyms), both White females student teaching in a suburban school, and Detrek, an African American male student teaching in a suburban school. Elaine used four discursive strategies, described below, to enter a critical conversation about how socioeconomic class played a part in a specific classroom interaction. She said:

I have several students who are from Iraq or Palestine whose first language is Arabic. I have a few students who come from Asian countries, one who is a second language learner, and then I have African American students and I have White students. So, it's a fairly diverse mix. So in terms of socioeconomic status, most of them are in the lower status. We haven't really talked about it but one time, we were talking about going to a grocery store and watching what kind of words we say. And they asked me what kind of grocery store that I go to. "Do you go to a ghetto grocery store?" And I said that I didn't know what a ghetto grocery store was. I mean I didn't want to throw out a grocery store, like I go to the [Good Food Grocery Store] by the [Stadium]. And then they say, "Oh that's nice! What do you mean that's ghetto?" I don't know if that has anything to do with it, but it definitely could.

In this excerpt, Elaine used the discursive strategy of *connecting to a teaching experience* (a time when her students asked her if she went to a “ghetto” grocery store) to make sense of how social class shaped an interaction. The students’ question (“Do you go to a ghetto grocery store?”) reflects the structural condition of low-income communities that often do not have access to fresh or abundant food supplies compared with affluent communities. Elaine, then, described how she *monitored* her talk, a discursive strategy, so that she did not position herself and her students in negative ways. Rather than naming a particular grocery store located in a community where her students may live or be familiar with as “ghetto,” the discursive strategy of *monitoring* allowed her to be mindful of how her language might position students’ identities and communities. By telling this story, she also used the discursive strategy of *noticing and naming* how issues of class divided her and her students, with her being part of a higher socioeconomic status. Through this talk, Elaine practiced critical literacy in the university classroom by engaging in difficult talk about social class with her peers and attempting to raise questions about how to handle such interactions. With that said, Elaine used the discursive strategy *hedging* by saying she was not sure if her interaction with students had anything to do with issues of class. Such hedging indicated her hesitation and uncertainty about recognizing and articulating such interactions. Having the space, however, to hedge allowed Elaine to engage in the difficult and sometimes awkward talk of a critical conversation.

We recognize that Elaine’s discursive strategies do not come easy and they illustrate her engagement in critical and racial awareness. We wonder what we could do in the future to foster even richer critical conversations. We plan to strategize with preservice teachers about possible ways they could have more nuanced discussions about issues of class. For example, we could use this transcript to ask questions, such as, “What are some other possible responses to the students’ question about attending a ‘ghetto’ grocery store?” and/or “What kind of learning opportunities might this open?” While Elaine was self-reflective in sensitive ways about not positioning students’ social class or communities negatively, her hesitancy about how to address the question also prevented an opportunity for the class to explore structural conditions in the community that link social class and food access. We could also follow up with information about the history of the word *ghetto* and how such language is used to represent the divisiveness of social class.

As the small-group conversation progressed to Maggie’s lesson, Maggie and Elaine used eight discursive strategies to discuss reasons behind perceived differences between honors and CP (College Prep) classes. At

Maggie's school, CP classes included students who were at grade level but were not in advanced courses.

MAGGIE: So in my reflection I talked about how race and class have more of an impact in my CP class than in my honors class. So, I don't know if that is a really bad thing to say, but—

ELAINE: Are most of your students in your honors class similar to you?

MAGGIE: No, I think that the main difference is their dedication to school. Or the drive to want to get good grades. I feel like the honors classes are more focused on developing a community and learning. I don't know—is this sounding bad?

ELAINE: I think that it's sounding true of your observation, from what you've seen. Because I've observed similar things. I only have CP kids. And I had honors last semester. I see that the CP kids are not interested in community building. They are not interested in achieving, and I think that is a stigma that we have about that type of student who is in that class—but I do think that there is a culture of, of teachers believing that CP students are of lower social class and that they don't want to achieve. Maybe there is more to it than that. But I have definitely gone through the same thing of seeing this huge difference of CP students depending on the class. Not necessarily dependent on race or class, because in this class I have students who are from White privileged backgrounds and yet are some of the students who do the least work.

Throughout the conversation, Elaine and Maggie used the discursive strategy *sharing and listening* to discuss multiple perspectives that helped them make sense of how identity markers (their own and their students) shaped classroom interactions. This strategy allowed them to validate (“I think that it's sounding true”) each other's comments. Maggie and Elaine both used the discursive strategy *expressing dilemmas* by discussing their perceived divide between honors and CP students. Maggie also used the discursive strategy of *noticing and naming* (“race and class have more of an impact”) to acknowledge how race and class influenced her CP class more than her honors class. Next, she used *monitoring* as a discursive strategy to question the statements she was making about honors students (“I don't know—is this sounding bad?”). By being mindful of the language she used and how it could potentially position students, she opened opportunities for Elaine to share

another perspective. For Maggie, this was one way to engage in difficult talk about stereotypical perceptions of CP and honors students. Such statements and short pauses, indicated by dashes in the transcript, are also an example of the discursive strategy *hedging* (“So, I don’t know if that is a really bad thing to say”), which Maggie used to illustrate her discomfort and uncertainty about talking about issues of race and class. In particular, both preservice teachers talked around race by asking “Are most of your students in your honors class similar to you?” rather than directly asking how race shaped her classroom interactions. This uncertainty continues, as described below.

Elaine responded by using the discursive strategy of *connecting to a teaching experience* (“I’ve observed similar things”). Next, she used two discursive strategies, *articulating* and *questioning*, to disrupt some commonplace notions about CP students as less dedicated because teachers have low expectations for them (“they don’t want to achieve”). By raising this point, Elaine recognized that the system of leveling students in schools causes some educators to privilege certain students over others based on assumptions teachers have about them. Here, Elaine recognized the ways identity markers influence material conditions for students in schools, a deeper and more critical understanding of the issue as structural rather than individual, problematizing in some ways their conversation about student motivation to achieve.

Toward the end of her discussion, however, she shared a teaching experience that appeared to validate the perception that she questioned above (that CP students do not want to achieve). From her experience, she saw a “huge difference of CP students.” She then commented that she did not think race or class shaped students’ drive to achieve in her classroom based on her observations (“Not necessarily dependent on race or class”). Here, Elaine appeared to go back and forth between taking a colorblind approach and focusing on the deficits of students (e.g., not interested in achieving) to recognizing that a teacher’s perspective plays a part in that dilemma (e.g., power of teacher assumptions) and that socioeconomic class shapes those assumptions (“teachers believing that CP students are of lower social class and that they don’t want to achieve”). That uncertainty is amplified by her shift between “we” (indicating that she is complicit) to othering the assumptions to “teachers.” She appeared to be struggling with taking ownership of her assumptions about the students she teaches.

Above, Elaine and Maggie certainly engaged in a critical conversation; however, both struggled to talk about the systemic ways in which leveled classes are related to the identity markers of students. To help students think more critically about these interactions, a practice that we recognize

is difficult, we would provide more guided reflection (Gay & Kirkland, 2005) in the future. For example, as instructors, we could use this transcript to model the discursive strategy of questioning to build on Elaine's comment, "Maybe there is more to it than that." Questions such as, "What could be the 'more to it' that you are referring to? What is the history of the school community? What are the economic or political conditions that might have influenced circumstances related to race or class?" Such questions, in both small and large groups, could help students make sense of how institutions constrain and enable students' opportunities to learn that seem unclear to them at that moment.

We also recognize that Detrek, an African American male, did not participate in this portion of the conversation with Maggie and Elaine even though he was part of the small group. We are unsure of the reasons behind his silence; however, his behavior was out of the ordinary. As a person who

Seeing myself with him on the video and me apologizing to him, I was like *what is going on?* He is the homecoming king and he is a senior and he looks like he is in his mid-20s. And I grew up in a very strict Christian environment and I was taught that I should defer to men.

was typically talkative and opinionated during classroom discussion, we wondered what was keeping Detrek quiet during this particular conversation. Although we do not have data to support an interpretation, we can speculate that he was uncomfortable contributing to a conversation that focused on the perceptions of two White preservice females, an experience very different from his own. We understand the complex social and cultural dynamics involved in such a dialogue. In the future, we will strive

to talk more openly about the direction the discussions are going. In other words, we want to make sure that one student is not asked to represent the experiences of an entire group and/or that most of the discussion is not spent on the experience of one particular group (e.g., the experience of White teachers).

Critical Conversations: "My Upbringing Influences My Classroom"

During a whole-class conversation, Amy asked the class what they learned about how specific identity markers shaped classroom interactions. Lori, a White female who student taught at a rural school, said the following:

I have a student who challenges me each and every day. He challenged me in my video and I did not handle it appropriately. And the very next day I was observed and he did a lot of ridiculous things while Ms. P. was there. And she told me that I needed to be more authoritative with him and the class as a whole. And it was something that I knew I needed to work on

but seeing myself with him on the video and me apologizing to him, I was like *what is going on?* He is the homecoming king and he is a senior and he looks like he is in his mid-20s. And I grew up in a very strict Christian environment and I was taught that I should defer to men. And I don't feel like I do that with all of my students . . . I mean he hasn't been disrespectful, or he hasn't stopped other people's learning but he controls things that he shouldn't control. And it made me realize that my upbringing influences my classroom because I'm letting him guide the learning environment.

In this excerpt, Lori used six discursive strategies to engage in a critical conversation. First, she entered the conversation by using the discursive strategy of *connecting to a teaching experience* (“I have a student who challenges me”). By doing this, she was *expressing a dilemma*, another discursive strategy, for the listeners (“He challenged me . . . and I did not handle it appropriately”). Next, Lori used the discursive strategy of *relating* by making sense of gendered discourses through a personal experience. Specifically, she described her interactions with a male student whom she found challenging to be related to her upbringing in a “strict Christian” background that taught her to “defer to men.” When Lori self-reflected by asking herself, “what is going on?” she answered by *noticing and naming* gender Discourses as shaping her teaching practices. Lori also used the discursive strategy *articulating* to recognize how a commonsense power relationship within her culture privileged males over females (“my upbringing influences my classroom”). This strategy allowed her to verbalize how her identity as a woman was learned from her cultural background.

As seen in the next excerpt, Lori strategized about how to take on a new position of authority in front of this male student. To further facilitate dialogue, Amy asked Lori if she developed any ways to solve her dilemma. Lori answered:

After Ms. P.'s observation, I made a list of classroom expectations, which I should have done at the beginning of the semester but I did not. And he has hated me since then because he doesn't run the room. And the expectations were worded appropriately with a positive spin but he recognized what they were and he doesn't like it and he doesn't participate in class at all right now. But it's just a transition right now.

In this example, Lori used the discursive strategy *strategizing* to discuss possible ways to develop a more authoritative relationship with the male student. We noted by doing so, she attempted to position herself in a new way (i.e., as an authoritative female) within this context. Thus, she redefined what it meant to enact gender identities within her classroom space by invoking traditional Discourses about power that exist between a teacher and

student. Perhaps this is a first step in retheorizing her assumptions about what it means to be a female within this context and how that identity intersects with the traditional identity of teacher as authority figure, which is difficult and sophisticated work. Lori took on a critical stance, then, by entertaining what Lewison et al. (2015) would call “alternate ways of being.” She recognized that this new position had consequences (“he doesn’t participate in class right now”) but was hopeful that this would change (“it’s just a transition right now”). Through informal conversations later in the semester, Lori shared that during her last few weeks of student teaching that this student did eventually participate again in class, although minimally, and did so respectfully.

Because this topic of conversation stopped here, we realized this was a missed opportunity for more students to share their perspective on how to solve such a dilemma. For example, using questions such as “How do gender dynamics influence teacher and student interactions?” or “How might we interrupt gender norms in the classroom to create a more inclusive and equitable environment?” would have supported preservice teachers to consider the structural complexities of gender and power within a variety of experiences.

Critical Conversations: “The Big Push for African American Achievement”

During the same whole-group conversation, students used seven discursive strategies to engage in critical conversation about African American male achievement. To begin, Detrek, an African American male, described how his school placed several African American males who were underachieving in all honors classes. The school made this decision based on the belief that students would rise to a challenge if they were positioned as academically advanced. As a result, Detrek struggled to meet the needs of his African American males who were struggling academically with the demands of the honors curriculum. He said:

I was in a group with Elaine and Maggie and we talked about the big push for African American achievement at my school. So, most of my honors classes are dominated by African American students. But it’s been a struggle for me and Ms. L. to make them successful and not, I don’t want to say dumb it down, but teach them the material and have clear expectations for what an honors class is supposed to be like. One requirement for an honors class is to do outside work and reading. We figured out that was not going to make them successful when we did *1984*. And with the senior research paper. When I told one of my kids that the paper has to be 6 or 7 pages, he

just shut down. And it's not his fault. It's the fault of the school for putting him in an honors class. But I even had to go back and tell him that if you turn in 2 to 3 pages to me I will overlook the 6 to 7 page requirement because 2 pages for him would be very challenging. And so things like that. Most of my students are not your typical honors student. That's why we do the creative projects. He was asking me today while we were doing the Renaissance, can we act, can we sing, can we do more projects with this?

When I told one of my kids that the paper has to be 6 or 7 pages, he just shut down. And it's not his fault. It's the fault of the school for putting him in an honors class.

Here, Detrek used the discursive strategies of *expressing a dilemma* (“It’s been a struggle”) and *connecting to a teaching experience* (“Most of my honors classes”) to enter into a critical conversation about the practical issues his students were facing because of the big push for African American achievement at his school. He not only *noticed and named* that race shaped this event by explicitly stating that students are placed in honors because of their race, but he also used the discursive strategy *articulating* to explore the power dynamics related to this issue (“And it’s not his fault. It’s the fault of the school”). In other words, Detrek highlighted a broader issue about how, despite the school’s effort to help African American students achieve, they were failing to provide the support the students needed to be successful. To think about how he might proactively deal with this challenge, Detrek used the discursive strategy of *strategizing* to explain how he and his cooperating teacher supported their students (“That’s why we do the creative projects”) within his classroom. Detrek’s strategy aligns with culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris & Alim, 2014) that argues for classrooms and schools to reframe the ways in which they invite and foster youth to demonstrate the sophisticated linguistic skills that they engage in outside of school (“can we act, can we sing”) and to offer opportunities for students to engage with academic forms of writing in scaffolded and culturally sustaining ways.

In an attempt to foster more conversation about this issue at a systemic level, Amy asked an open-ended question and Bailey (a White female) responded.

AMY: What do you all think about that? What do you think about putting people in honors who may not fit with the traditional way of doing honors?

BAILEY: So, I’m just thinking out loud. I think those labels mean too much in a lot of different ways. Simply putting someone in an

honors class just because of their race and and trying to force them into honors when they aren't ready is negative as well. Maybe labeling a class honors or better or higher is detrimental in and of itself. That rubs me the wrong way. When you said it, I got this unnerving feeling.

DETREK: This week I said that they are actually doing a disservice to some of them. The child said, *this is why I don't care about school. This is why I know I'm not meant to be in school. It is just not the place for me.* They really are doing him a disservice. He is a low performing student, even when he tries. He still makes a [low grade]. If I give him notes, he might make a [higher grade].

After Amy used the discursive strategy of *questioning* to ask others what they thought about the dilemma of putting students in honors classes to raise achievement, Bailey *noticed and named* the ways in which race was shaping how educators make decisions about students' learning. She attempted to challenge commonplace notions of labeling classes in general and attempted to disrupt undemocratic practices by *discussing the dilemma* of placing someone in an honors class just because she or he is African American. Detrek followed up by relating this broad issue back to a *personal teaching experience*, specifically through the use of the student's voice. With that discursive strategy, he illustrated his ability to see this issue from a student's perspective. Here, Bailey, Detrek, and Amy used the discursive strategy of *sharing and listening* to multiple perspectives to make sense of this dilemma.

We recognize, however, that students would have benefitted from more discussion about Bailey's "unnerving feeling." We see this as a missed opportunity to discuss the social, political, and cultural issues related to placing African American males in honors classes to raise achievement. Specifically, the discursive strategy of *questioning* might have helped students understand the systems and structures that shape these everyday interactions. Students might have benefitted from a follow-up class discussion based on readings about how low expectations for academic achievement and rote methods of instruction in lower tracked classes contribute to low performance. Perhaps we could have asked the following questions to help: How does curriculum enable or constrain students' achievement over time? How does labeling or tracking affect students' identities and their sense of self-efficacy? Why do these practices often result in segregating students by race and class? What school, home, and community factors influence academic achievement?

Discussion

We return to a portion of Ladson-Billings's quote that opened the article: "Having the courageous and yes, hard conversations is where we begin." Courageous conversations as an entry point is particularly important when thinking about engaging in culturally sustaining pedagogy that reclaims and restores the diverse cultures that exist in today's classrooms (Ladson-Billings, 2014). For us, this research was a way to not only begin but also to continue fostering critical conversations that engaged preservice teachers in the self-reflective identity work that is needed in teacher education (Berchini, 2014; Fecho et al., 2010; Smith, 2001). Data from this study illustrated that preservice teachers used 10 discursive strategies to help them enter and potentially sustain critical conversations. By weaving together multiple strategies in the small- and large-group discussions, preservice teachers were able to think about their practice at both local and structural levels. Maggie and Elaine's critical conversation highlights how preservice teachers used discursive strategies such as questioning, monitoring, hedging, and sharing and listening to make sense of the ways in which identity markers shaped how teachers, including themselves, viewed students differently because they were in a CP or honors course. Lori's critical conversation is an example of how she used strategies such as relating, noticing and naming, and strategizing to make sense of how her gender identity shaped how she interacted with male students, and how she planned to change that gendered dynamic to improve instruction. Finally, Detrek's critical conversation represents how the utilization of strategies such as connecting to teaching experiences, articulating, and expressing a dilemma helped him communicate how he made sense of his classroom dilemma and what he could do about it to better support his students.

By highlighting the discursive strategies in the critical conversations, we were able to better understand preservice teachers' talk process. We learned more about what strategies helped them enter critical conversations, and we examined missed opportunities to speculate about what strategies we could have used to help them dig deeper. It was apparent that our students needed help in analyzing the structural complexities of educational experiences, which is understandable. Although several of the examples show preservice teachers articulating issues of power and privilege (e.g., Detrek's discussion about honors students at his school), we hoped to help students unpack structural complexities related to educational contexts. More work helping preservice teachers move from sharing personal experiences to

exploring broad social and political issues could better support that kind of reflective identity work.

How can the discursive strategies identified in this article be helpful to other teacher education courses? In the next section, we discuss how we have used this research to inform our work in teacher education.

Implications for English Education

Critical conversations expect preservice teachers to practice critical and racial literacy as they engage in questions about equity and justice in schools. For practice, we do not recommend asking preservice teachers to simply use the discursive strategies we identified to focus their talk without engaging in the reflective work necessary for such dialogue. Critical conversations are messy and complicated. There is no prescribed way to have them. Individuals involved in these conversations need to have deep and complex content knowledge about power, privilege, and oppression, including how identity markers intersect in complex ways and are enacted differently within particular social contexts. In addition to this knowledge, they need some awareness about how their words will position others in the discussion. As facilitators, teacher educators can provide some ways to not only frame the conversation but also help preservice teachers enter and potentially sustain it. From analyzing the discursive strategies, we highlighted four areas that demonstrated deeper access to critical sense-making and created narrative starters and questions that preservice teachers can use to enter such conversations. Before having these conversations, however, we recommend reading and discussing critical issues, analyzing critical conversations together, modeling critical conversations, and developing a protocol to frame the discussion (as described in our methods section) before asking preservice teachers to engage in this kind of conversational identity work. In addition, the video-recorded lessons and transcribed interactions allowed preservice teachers to talk about a concrete interaction rather than an abstract experience, giving students the ability to return to the video and transcript multiple times to engage in discussion. Video-recorded lessons and transcribed interactions, then, are useful when teaching preservice teachers to examine critical conversations.

First, preservice teachers used discursive strategies that helped them tell narratives about their personal experiences, teaching experiences, and specific dilemmas related to teaching and identity markers. Narratives have proven to be a helpful way for preservice teachers to enact and express their agency (Connelly & Clandinin, 1995; Johnson, 2008; Juzwik & Ives, 2010)

and engage in dialogue/reflection related to identity markers (Knight, 2011; Singleton, 2014). To help preservice teachers tell narratives from a critical stance, teacher educators can give them narrative starters, such as, *Race influenced an experience I had when . . .*, *Gender norms affected my classroom during . . .*, or *A dilemma I have regarding identity markers is . . .* as an access point to use experiential knowledge to build critical and racial literacy.

A second way that preservice teachers used discursive strategies for critical conversations was by building understanding together. They did this by sharing tensions related to identity markers, listening to multiple perspectives, and questioning traditional ways of understanding teaching and learning. This collective knowledge building is beneficial because it opens opportunities for preservice teachers to share and hear about occurrences that they might not have had the chance to experience, or to ask each other questions when their experiences challenge prevailing assumptions. Specifically, by building understanding together, preservice teachers shared and listened to diverse and unfamiliar experiences, which are characteristics of racial and critical literacy (Bolgatz, 2005; Lewison et al., 2015). To foster this kind of talk from a critical stance, teacher educators can give preservice teachers narrative starters such as, *Another person might argue . . .*, *What I hear you saying is . . .*, or *From my experience . . .* to help them talk to learn about a variety of school experiences.

Third, preservice teachers used discursive strategies to form interpretations of the narratives they told, which often opened opportunities for our preservice teachers to recognize how power relationships affected social and material conditions in classrooms. To help preservice teachers make interpretations from a critical stance, teacher educators could give the following narrative starters as a resource: *In this example I see how socioeconomic status influenced . . .*; *I recognize how the following circumstances and conditions challenged my school's ability to practice culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogy . . .*; or *In this situation, I understand who benefits and who is harmed . . .* We also think it is important for teacher educators to model their own vulnerabilities and missteps and to have honest conversations with students about how critical conversations can generate a sense of discomfort in a colorblind society (Michael, 2015) and how that discomfort can be productive.

Fourth, preservice teachers used discursive strategies to make predictions when they strategized. Because the preservice teachers' conversations were focused on transcripts that happened in the past, their discussions focused on past dilemmas. We see value, however, in reflective inquiry focused on prospective talk or talk about future events (Vinz, 1996). This relates to

other research about self-reflection that illustrates the importance of telling stories, linking current experiences to previous learnings, and applying what we learn to other contexts (Schön, 1984; Yancey, 2016). To help preservice teachers make predictions about how they situate themselves and their students in classroom interactions, teacher educators could use narrative starters such as *In the future, I can approach this lesson with more interactional awareness by . . .*, *To involve more perspectives in the lesson, I could . . .*, or *In an attempt to ask questions that foster more critical conversations, I will remind myself to . . .* to think about how to problem-solve for future events.

To help students examine structural inequalities, an area in which they struggled, we draw from elements of racial and critical literacy. Both frameworks help educators understand that institutions marginalize particular identities and practices, and that access to economic resources and social capital influences achievement in school and beyond. Narrative starters to help preservice teachers further analyze these underlying structural complexities and how they shape and are shaped by identity markers might include *My cultural expectations and assumptions shaped . . .*, *I see how a school's philosophy, policy, and/or programs contribute to the school experiences of marginalized students by . . .*, or *The norms of this school benefit . . .*. Additional questions to facilitate a more complex stance that examines structural inequities may include the following:

- › How do schools establish norms for ways of using language? Who benefits and what are the long-term implications?
- › How are resources distributed among and within schools? What impact does this have on different populations? Who benefits and what are the long-term implications?
- › In what ways does economic and social segregation affect a school and students? Who benefits and what are the long-term implications?

To foster personal connections to these questions, teachers and students could ask:

- › How has (or hasn't) this phenomenon operated in the school(s) you attended? How about in the school(s) where you currently teach/observe?

Research states that providing support for preservice teachers to analyze the structural complexities of educational contexts has the potential

to help teachers interrupt harmful language and practices in schools and engage in social action (Sealy-Ruiz, 2017). We, along with other scholars in this area (Rex & Schiller, 2009; Rogers & Wetzel, 2013), argue that one way to offer that guidance is by examining discourse practices to make sense of the complicated relationship between language, power, and identities. Discourse analysis can be a powerful tool for examining the complexity of classroom interactions that constitute effective, equitable teaching and learning. This work, then, opens more concrete ways for educators to have the courageous conversations needed to build trust and success with students and school colleagues.

Note

1. For readers who would like to try this strategy but don't (yet) have recorded footage of themselves teaching to model and critique with students, please contact Amy using the information in her bio if you'd like to use our recording.

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