

## **Abstract**

Title of Dissertation: INVESTIGATING TWO TEACHERS TEACHING OF MULTICULTURAL LITERATURE TO DIVERSE STUDENTS: PERSPECTIVES AND PRACTICES

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This study investigates how two teachers teach multicultural literature to diverse students using culturally relevant teaching practices. The student demographic is becoming increasingly diverse and alternative teaching methods of students of color must be explored to increase student participation and student achievement. During a three week period observations, anecdotal notes, interviews, and teacher created supplements were gathered to explore teacher practices as it relates to culturally relevant teaching. The results showed that a teacher of color was more able to demonstrate culturally relevant teaching strategies due to similar experiences of the students and characters in the text as well as having extensive teaching experience as part of her background. The other teacher who was not a person of color demonstrated fewer of the culturally relevant strategies due to more limited capacity to relate to her students and the characters in the text as well as having only a few years of teaching experience. The results of the study are discussed with regard to race, teacher experience, and staff development and education.

Investigating Two Teachers Teaching of  
Multicultural Literature to Diverse Students: Perspectives and Practices

by

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## Chapter 1

### Framing the Study

#### Introduction

To begin, I situate this study within a piece of my own personal history. That history allows me to cross paths with a fellow teacher whose example still resonates with me--some years later. The example relates directly to how I conceptualized this study.

In the early years of my teaching career I met Sheila Rogers Johnson. Sheila possessed the ability to teach and reach every student of color who entered through her classroom doors. After some observation and reflection later in my career, I came to the idea that Sheila's practice could be thought of as an excellent example of culturally relevant teaching (CRT).

She held a bachelor's and master's degree, and in more recent years, she had acquired a Ph.D. In addition, she held credentials that certified her as highly qualified according to the *No Child Left Behind Act*. Her highly qualified status meant that she held a bachelor's degree, was fully certified, and had extensive content knowledge (King-Sears, 1995). Although she no longer serves in the elementary classroom, she continued to do research on teacher strategies in the classroom.

Sheila took great care to create a strong learning environment for her students. She began with the philosophy that you couldn't teach students you didn't know--you have to know their home, their family, their joys and fears, and the culture they live in on a daily basis. That knowledge enabled her to engage her students. Although Sheila

was not aware at the time how research supported the need for personalizing the school experience, particularly for minority students, it was clear that her relationship building was important (Edwards, 2001; Katz, 1999; Kester, 1994).

Sheila made the culture and experiences of her students relevant to their learning. One of the ways she was able to do this was by inundating students with multicultural literature on almost a daily basis. She canvassed libraries so that she could incorporate multicultural literature into Social Studies and Reading. Sheila was always looking for ways to make connections between students and literature in the hopes that students would see themselves and understand better the context of the lessons.

As a result of Sheila's efforts, students in her class excelled. The standardized test scores reflected the growth and learning of her students. Her work was always highlighted by the principal and on occasion the school system. However, I came to know that her students learned because they told me. When I occasionally visited her classroom to see what she was doing, her students seemed clear and straightforward in their academic talk and were clear on how the content related to who they were as people. Students appeared able to verbalize what they were learning and how it seemed valuable to them academically. They could relate their learnings to their cultural experiences.

Through the course of my career, I have wondered how I could inform teachers of the strategies that Sheila had embraced and taught. More specifically, I knew that the strategies used by Sheila were akin to what I was reading in relationship to culturally relevant teaching strategies. How could these strategies be

translated to other teachers who taught similar students? Thus, this study was born out of a desire and curiosity to determine how teachers could implement such strategies to reach diverse student groups.

Ultimately, educators must seek to educate all students and have them be successful in their academic performance. For the purposes of this study, I thought of success as defined by *all* students performing on grade level and scoring proficient or above on standardized testing. This became clearer when considering the achievement gap between majority and minority students.

In 2004, at all levels, White 9 year-old students scored higher than Black and Hispanic students by 26 percentage points (NCES, 2004). This only increased the need for inquiry into what made teachers successful in closing the achievement gap. In addition, because the successes of teachers like Sheila were not fully understood, specific aspects of their success were underspecified and under-researched. Without knowing more about these specific teaching practices and documenting them carefully, we could not fully know the nuances of culturally relevant teaching practices and how to appropriately implement them. This area of scholarship remained rather heavy on CRT theory and advocacy, and light on actual empirical illustrations of teachers employing CRT in their classrooms. We needed to know more about what understandings of teaching these teachers, such as Sheila possessed, and specifically what teaching strategies they employed in order to bring about learning for all their students, but particularly students of color who often needed the greatest assistance.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The need for culturally relevant teaching came with the simultaneous trend of a growing number of U.S.-born ethnic minorities and a large increase in immigrants flowing into the United States. The implication for schools and more importantly, classroom teachers was significant. Students of color compromised one-third of the students in classrooms. The U.S. Department of Commerce (1996) projected that by the year 2050, African-American, Asian, and Latino students could make-up 57% of the school population.

According to researcher, Geneva Gay (1995), educational quality and excellence for children of color, from economically impoverished backgrounds, recent immigrants, and Limited-English speakers were tied together in many complex ways. This is important because students from these backgrounds share in the need for culturally sensitive instruction (I am using culturally sensitive instruction and CRT synonymously here). Culturally sensitive instruction is a way to address the unequal educational outcomes between Whites and students who are disadvantaged by race, economics, and language. Gay (1995) stated that, “Pedagogical equality that reflects culturally sensitive instructional strategies is a precondition for and a means of achieving maximal academic outcomes for culturally diverse students” (p. 94). Some teachers have used culturally relevant teaching as a framework for shaping the curriculum, ideas, messages, values, and personal and social experiences to help reach a broad cross-section of students in the classroom. The following figure related the principles of culturally relevant teaching as described by Ladson-Billings (1994).

**Figure 1.1. Principles for Culturally Relevant Instruction (Ladson-Billings,**

1994)

- Positive perspectives on parents and families
- Communication of high expectations
- Learning within the context of culture
- Student-centered instruction
- Culturally-mediated instruction
- Reshaping, transforming the curriculum
- Teachers as facilitators (rather than merely knowledge transmitters)

In this study, I proposed to seek out and study two teachers who would provide their best culturally relevant practices in a diverse student group. I hoped to find teachers who utilized such practices in guided reading group settings, which could be part of a reading block. If I located such teachers, I anticipated that the guided reading groups would meet daily for 20-30 minutes. During guided reading, a teacher would meet with a small group of students who shared a similar reading level and the teacher coached students on using effective strategies for processing texts with comprehension. The format of guided reading was that the teacher would read pieces of the text with students, scaffold their understanding as needed, serve as a facilitator of discussion, and engage them in critical thinking activities.

I hoped that with careful sample selections, the teachers would read with students for a period of two to three weeks. Initially, the teachers built background knowledge, introduce the author and characters, create the setting, and make predictions. Guided reading was a means for students to discuss their own thinking

about the text, the ways in which they related it to themselves, the world, and other texts. The teachers then encouraged the conversation and found ways to push students in their thinking. One example of a discussion prompt was students envisioning that they were the main character and responded to certain situations that occurred in the story, or rewriting a section of the story as if it were set in the present day. Generally, after the reading of the text, students were given assignments to extend meaning and engage in critical thinking capabilities such as writing or text analysis. This process was designed to give students opportunities to probe the text and engage in a meaningful experience with it. To enhance the likelihood of witnessing and documenting teachers employing such culturally relevant teaching practices, I sought out two teachers who were teaching a multicultural text.

### **Multicultural Texts in the Classroom**

One key way, Sheila made connections with her students was by using multicultural literature. This suggested that such literature needed to be central to this study. Therefore, literature was given significant focus as the study unfolded. I sought, therefore, to give, multicultural literature a significant role as the subject matter of focus. In many classrooms, the traditional literary canon of the classics by ‘dead white men’ was still quite pervasive (Gallo, 2001). What had frequently been missing was multicultural literature, despite the changing face of students in public school classrooms. Such literature is defined as stories with different world views or cultural referents that were considered outside the traditional canon (Mikkelesen, 1998). There have been relatively few additions of diverse literature added to classrooms, even though many state standards required that students have knowledge

and experience with multicultural texts (Robinson, 2001). Although the teaching of multicultural literature is part of the standards in Maryland, for example, the implementation remains far from complete as evidenced by practices in the school district that were involved in this study.

To illustrate, the Voluntary State Curriculum (VSC) of the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) indicates that students in the fifth grade are to listen to, read, and discuss a variety of literary texts representing diverse cultures, ethnicities, perspectives, and time periods. The school district targeted in this study had aligned its curriculum with that of the VSC. Teachers generally have the VSC attached to the school district's curriculum guides to make sure they are providing aligned instruction. Ironically, the school district has only three approved texts, for example, featuring an African-American protagonist for use in the fifth grade. This is out of approximately 30 approved texts, which resulted in 10% of texts featuring such a protagonist. Likewise, there are two novels featuring Asian protagonists and two novels featuring Native American or Pacific Islander protagonists, which is 13% of the approved texts in the collection. There were no novels featuring a Latino or Latina protagonist approved for the upper elementary grades.

As a result, the opportunities for students to be exposed to diverse texts were limited. All teachers, including the ones in this study, were bound to these texts because of the approval process for all literature taught in the classroom. This process was designed to ensure consistency and fidelity to the school district curriculum. My own experience as a former reading specialist in this school system had been that many teachers found a limited number of novels featuring minority characters

available. I also had found that teachers (and reading specialists) had little influence on what novels were approved for purchase. Therefore, there was a two-fold issue. The first was the limited number of multicultural novels available. The other was the process for getting these books into the classrooms and into the hands of students. The approval process included a book being selected by the reading department; review and approval of the book by a board that includes reading specialists and parents; a second review and approval by a board that includes only reading department members, and a final approval from the executive board of the school system. The process often left out valuable stakeholders--classroom teachers and students.

In this study, there was a limited range of possible multicultural texts teachers could select from. Because there are three approved texts with African-American protagonists for use in fifth grade and no texts with Latino/a protagonists, and because these two minority groups represent the largest contingent of students of color in the district, my goal was to identify two teachers who would be teaching the same text with an African-American protagonist.

As Sheila's case suggested, introducing multicultural texts into classrooms could be crucial. If taught relevantly, multicultural texts could create awareness for students about the lives of people of other cultural backgrounds, with which all students would undoubtedly have experiences at some point in their lives, especially in a nation whose population is increasingly ethnically diverse. In a debate about the purpose of multicultural literature in the classroom, Thompson and Woodard (1972), for example, discussed how these texts, specifically for those that focus on African-

Americans, provided “meaningful identification for black children, as well as real insight for white children into the historical, ethnic, and cultural characteristics of black Americans” (p. 14-15). This likely would be the case for other minority children as well. Teachers could provide for students multicultural literature as part of the curriculum or as part of their classroom library so that they could gain a greater insight to those who differed from them (Miller, 1997; Robinson, 2001).

Barbara Rollock (1988) framed well the importance of putting multicultural literature in the hands of students stating that:

Literature is fundamental to children’s literacy and literary development, and it provides an excellent medium for children to explore, understand and strengthen their identities. Literature also provides the means for children to reach out beyond their own world to explore the worlds of others. Multicultural literature plays a major role in the process of supporting self-awareness and an appreciation of cultural and ethnic diversity (p. xv).

The sharing of multicultural literature allows for discussion that can lead to the construction of knowledge. However, researchers need to learn more about what it means to teach multi-cultural literature from a culturally relevant perspective before this can happen (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Because of the often limited amount of multicultural literature available to teachers they, therefore, typically have few experiences incorporating this literature into their teaching practices. A culturally relevant perspective suggests a pedagogy that can empower students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using specific cultural referents to impart

knowledge, skills, and attitudes (Ladson-Billing, 1994).

### **Planning the Study**

Given my literature-based assessment of what we needed to know and my interest in this research area, I was led to the following primary research question: What do elementary teachers in diverse teaching contexts (two teachers in the case of this study) do to make literature relevant to their students? There are six subsidiary questions that flow from this larger question:

- What was the cultural background/experience of the teachers?
- How did the teachers' cultural backgrounds and teaching philosophies influence how they teach?
- What types of literature did they commonly choose to use and what were their goals for choosing these texts?
- What teaching strategies did they employ when they taught such texts?
- If it was apparent, what did culturally relevant teaching look like in their classrooms?
- How did the teachers interact with their students and how did their students interact with each other when discussing and learning about this literature?

Case studies appeared to be one of the more powerful ways of addressing my research questions. Comparative cases I reasoned would add additional power. However, it was important to note that detailed case studies generate large amounts of data.

Because of this, I chose to study more than one teacher, but no more than two.

With this in mind, I undertook a comparative case study design that would be conducted in two actual school settings. This required the selection of two teachers (I chose fifth grade as the target setting), who would work in two different urban school settings in the same district. These two teachers would teach the same multicultural text. Under these circumstances each teacher would likely teach a diverse student group of 5 to 10 students, which was the typical range for a guided reading group. As was common to the teaching of such texts, the period of teaching would likely range from two to three weeks.

The data for this study was collected through three sources: interviews, observations, and documents. At the outset of the study, I interviewed each teacher. This was followed by two subsequent interviews, one during the middle of the teaching of the text and the other at the conclusion of the teaching of the text. The interview questions, as some of my research questions suggest, focused on each teacher's teaching experience and use of culturally relevant teaching practices. I also conducted additional informal interviews would be used to gather more information. In addition to the interviews, I observed the two teachers for the duration of the teaching period of the text. During the observation I took detailed field notes and collected relevant documents used in the classroom with students. I provide more specific details of the conduct of the study in Chapter 3.

The study was designed to address some of the important, but seldom investigated issues surrounding multicultural literature and multiculturally sensitive/relevant teaching practices. The text selection, diverse teacher selection, urban school setting, interview questions, document collection and observation

questions were all designed to be directed at exploring the culturally relevant teaching practices of two case study teachers teaching multicultural literature to a diverse group of students. To maximize the opportunity to gather strong data to address the research questions, I was purposeful in selecting two teachers who taught multicultural literature on the premise that in doing so they would also draw from culturally relevant strategies, ensure that a multicultural text was taught, and pay close attention to the teaching-learning context, including who the students were.

### **Importance of the Study**

The rationale for this study has many layers. As I have tried to show, there is a connection between the amounts of literature typically available featuring minorities, how students see themselves in that literature, and a teacher's presentation of that literature. As I have discussed, there were few multicultural titles available to bring into the classroom primarily because of the lack of volume. The multicultural literature that was available needed to be questioned for its connections to cultural/ethnic groups. Once students had this literature in their hands, I presumed that it would have the ability to influence their thinking about particular ethnic groups and could act as a mirror of their own lives and development. Teachers could use the same literature to paint historical pictures, create new and old ideas and thoughts regarding economics, family, social interactions, language, and cultural traditions. The nature of a teacher's teaching, then, would impact student engagement and student learning as well.

In designing the study, I worked from the idea that the use of such literature would invoke culturally relevant teaching practices that can reach those students who

were diverse in ethnicity, language, heritage, culture, and perspective. Therefore, more clearly defining these practices through the data collected could provide for new knowledge about how to prepare in-service programs for novice and more experienced teachers who would be teaching changing student demographics, and indicate strategies that could be powerful for the growing population of ethnic minorities in public education.

### **Definition of Terms**

Often terms are framed in different ways and their meaning can sometimes change depending upon experiences, context, and thinking processes. As a way to guide this study, I provided three definitions of terms that tend to vary within the educational field.

Multicultural Literature: Literature with different (non-Eurocentric) world views or cultural references that are built into the texture of the book itself--its focus, its emphasis, its subject matter (Mikkelsen, 1998).

Culturally Relevant Teaching (CRT): Culturally relevant teaching is defined as a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes (Ladson-Billing, 1994). I use it here synonymously with culturally-responsive and culturally sensitive teaching.

Culture: It is a group's design for living that includes shared knowledge, consciousness, skills, values, expressive forms, social institutions, and behavior that enables their survival (Nobles, 1985).

### **Summary**

Like Sheila, many teachers face the challenge of trying to academically reach a diverse student population. Using case studies, this study aimed to address pedagogical tools teachers could use to effectively meet the needs of diverse students when teaching multicultural literature. More specifically, the use of culturally relevant teaching practices was explored among the two teachers to determine how other teachers might reach diverse students in their classrooms. The study sought to contribute not only to theory, but the actual practice of teaching. In the next chapter, I turn to the existing literature base on multicultural literature, teacher preparation for teaching diverse students, the nature of student engagement, teacher practice using culturally relevant pedagogy to demonstrate a need for more of this preparation and practice in the field, and to help provide additional frameworks that guided the study.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Reviewing Relevant Literature**

In education, we are facing a demographic divide (Gay & Howard, 2001), in which teachers are increasingly coming into contact with students who differ from them socio-culturally, linguistically, and economically. An example of this divide is as simple as noting the growing diversity of students within the school system versus the lack of diversity among teachers. As of the late 1990's, in large city schools the student demographics were 17% Black, 7.41% Asian, 1% Native American, and 26% Hispanic (National Center for Education Statistics, 1997). At the same time, the teacher population lacked diversity with a makeup of 7.4% Black, 4.2% Hispanic, and 1.9% Other (National Center for Education Statistics, 1997). In short, we have a predominantly white teaching force, while students arrive from increasingly diverse backgrounds and all indicators point to this trend continuing. This imbalance is one of the reasons we will need to be diligent in giving pre-service teachers as well as veteran teachers of all backgrounds a strong introduction to teaching diverse students.

Culturally-responsive teaching practices hold out such a promise. At the elementary school level, one of the key areas in which this can occur is in literacy education, a central prerequisite for children becoming better educated as they develop academically. Strong literacy education requires at a minimum (a) balanced literacy and (b) exposure to multicultural literature. The latter particularly is important for culturally relevant teaching. In the following, I review relevant research in each of these areas. Then I turn to the research on teaching and teacher preparation. I conclude by attempting to synthesize the foregoing literature under the heading, Race, Culturally Relevant Teaching, and Students.

### **Research on Reading Practices**

## **Balanced Literacy**

Balanced literacy is at the heart of the instructional practices used by the teachers who participated in this study. Balanced literacy is not a formalized reading program (Allington & Cunningham, 1996; Fountas & Pinnell, 2001). However, it is a “balanced” instructional program of reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Ideally, students would receive equal instruction in these areas. The components of the program are flexible enough to meet the needs of a range of students. Balanced literacy is designed to have students immersed in literature that is on their reading level. Balanced literacy focuses on reading and writing, which are meant to complement one another. Balanced literacy encompasses teacher-directed reading, daily guided reading, word study, and self-selected reading and writing. There is an emphasis on having students participate in all of these components to ensure student achievement gains. Teachers who utilize more than one approach to reading and writing are more likely to have success with students. Therefore, teachers could use a wide range of strategies available through guided reading (Allington & Cunningham, 1996; Fountas & Pinnell, 2001).

Teacher-directed guided reading is a part of balanced literacy. Teacher directed guided reading is generally presented as a whole lesson to the entire class. The goal of this part of the lesson is to teach comprehension skills using a piece of fiction or non-fiction literature. The lessons are theme based or literature based. Typically, a text is read to the students and then a comprehension skill such as identifying character traits or story elements is taught. The whole group instruction is generally limited to 25 minutes of instruction and could appear at the beginning,

middle, or end of the guided reading block. Theme-based lessons relate to the units of content. Literature based lessons are based on “real” books and an array of genres. The exposure to literature is meant to deepen students’ understanding of the world, experiences, and people who are outside of their typical realm of knowledge. The guided reading lessons are provided in a small group setting where the teacher acts as the facilitator. This instruction takes place at the student’s reading level. The area of student weakness determines where the teacher will focus the lesson. This could include, but is not to be limited to, comprehension, vocabulary, or higher-order thinking skills. Guided reading groups are generally held daily for 20-25 minutes. Saunders-Smith (2003) describes guided reading as an opportunity to guide the student’s thinking. This process of offering support and teaching problem-solving skills leads to independent reading by the student (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996).

Word study is another important component of balanced literacy. The purpose of word study is to help students read fluently and develop skills for recognizing and “attacking” difficult words. Word study can be done in small or large groups and is developed around the needs of the students. The words studied are identified from the reading and writing of the students. The lessons can focus on vocabulary building, spelling patterns, phonemic awareness, and/or high frequency words (Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, & Johnston, 2004). This process develops the reading and writing skills of students. This is an area in which challenging students is of great value.

Self-selected reading involves students reading books they choose at their independent reading level. This requires a teacher to have an extensive student library

available in order for it to be effective. Students who read often become better readers (Allington, 1977). An important part of self-selected reading is the weekly conferences between the student and teacher. This allows the teacher to check on what students are reading and to make connections between their interests and the lessons facilitated by the teacher. The self-selected reading can take place at any level that students are reading on given that teachers have ample book levels available for a range of students.

The value of guided reading involves flexibility in meeting the needs of students where they are academically and in connecting with their interests. While teachers seek to increase student achievement among diverse students, they must be conscious in adapting the curriculum and strategies to that of their students. Guided reading gives teachers the means to potentially engage students meaningfully in the act of reading.

In this study, guided reading was important because it was the method by which the teachers were most apt to use as their primary instructional practice. Guided reading is the only prescribed instructional reading method that the targeted school district provides for elementary teachers and students. Although teachers may have been prepared in other reading methods, each new teacher to this school district receives training on guided reading. Furthermore, building-level reading specialists provide on-going training on guided reading. Therefore, the teachers in this study have extensive practice in guided reading and used the format for teaching the selected text. Guided reading is also important because it can provide opportunities to engage students in culturally relevant teaching practices.

## **The Need for Multicultural Literature**

Teachers who teach diverse students need to consider the literature they choose to engage students. Therefore, teachers observe who their students are and inquire about their interests. Teachers like Sheila consider their students needs as well when choosing literature. Generally, this leads to teachers considering multicultural literature for teaching diverse students. However, this in itself involves teachers in a journey.

Because this study had a strong focus on a multicultural text with an African-American protagonist, I reviewed research literature that dealt principally with the role of African-American characters in multicultural texts. That research supported the findings that there is a dearth of African-American, as well as other minority characters in literature.

From a historical perspective, this has been a highly researched issue for well over 43 years. For example, Larrick (1965), in her landmark critique of children's literature, find that over a three-year span from 1962-1964 there was 5,206 children's trade books published. Out of those books, only 349 include one or more black characters. The quantity of books featuring African-American females also is an issue (Clark & Morris 1993; Grauerholz & Pescosolido 1989; Kolbe & Voie 1981). In an in depth study by Grauerholz, Pescosolido, and Milkie (1997), research shows three sets of books (Caldecott, Children's Books Catalog, and Little Golden Books) through the 1930's to the 1950's, then through the late 1950's and 1960's, and from 1975 and beyond. These researchers find that, in the Caldecott award books, 19% of them

feature at least one Black character and 9% feature all Black characters, drawing on a sample of 200 books. The statistics in the Children's Books Catalog show 20.8% of the books showing at least one Black character and 2.5 % feature all Black characters using a sample of 970 books. Lastly, the Little Golden books feature 15.4 % texts with at least one Black character and only 0.1% with all Black characters using a sample of 797 books. This information is important because, in my elementary teaching experience, teachers are likely to read and share such award winning literature with their students. This is often encouraged by school reading specialists as well as media center specialists, who frequently highlight the Caldecott Award winners.

There are also gaps in young adult literature as well. In the middle school arena, Agosto, Hassell, and Clough (2003), find in an analysis of 4,225 reviews of fiction that only 661 (15%) books have lead characters of color. This means that less than one-sixth of the books have leading minority characters, despite the fact that in urban public schools, minority students often represent more than half the population. In Washington, D.C. for example, 80% of public school students are Black.

Given the documented history of this issue, it seems likely that the most up-to-date count of lead minority characters in young adult literature will show little improvement. Again, this suggests the unlikelihood that students, particularly those of color, will encounter protagonists who resemble them in language, ethnicity, or culture as they journeyed through school. The lack of minority characters affords students from diverse backgrounds little opportunity to see themselves in the literature world. Likewise, it does not allow students to learn the culture of others. It

is likely, the extent to which any student might be exposed to multicultural literature between elementary and middle school is limited.

In my personal experience, I have been frustrated as a teacher and reading specialist teaching in an urban school, where almost all of the students are minority, and they have not been able to see themselves in literature. As a result, I found myself along with other teachers looking for alternative avenues of introducing multicultural literature, such as having literature studies around a particular ethnic author. This was done with the approval of my principal, but yet under the distant radar of the curriculum central office.

The quality of the African-American children's books in particular receives considerable scrutiny. African-American children's books that are published often lack positive representations of those children (Harris, 1990; Johnson & Lewis, 1998; Larrick, 1965; Sims, 1982). Researcher Violet Harris (1990) has written extensively on the representation of African-Americans in children's literature. Her findings confirm that, while the representations of African-Americans are scarce in children's and young adult literature, it is clear that these representations often have been inauthentic in physical appearance and social/cultural behaviors. For example, in the text of focus in this study, *Words by Heart*, the young black female protagonist is asked by her father to save a young white rival instead of saving his life (I say more about this text in Chapter 3). The girl obeys her father and saves the young white boy and allows her own father to die. This concept is difficult to understand, especially since the boy is portrayed as a racist. However, the author of this text has us believe that this is a normal social behavior.

Nina Mikkelsen (1998) suggests that authentic representations of African-Americans are few. Mikkelsen attributes the lack of authenticity to an effort (or lack of) on the part of white authors to write stories featuring positive representations of African-Americans. She observes that,

writers will attend to surface features (observable details, facts, and idioms) but miss the bigger picture—the values, beliefs, and world view of the insider that can so easily be subsumed, usurped, or crowded out entirely by an outsider’s pervasive thinking (p. 38).

It is paramount to understand that these interpretations are not only conveyed to the teacher, but to the students in the classroom through the teaching processes. For example, I have observed teachers trying to represent the voice of the challenged female character in *Words by Heart*, although their own experiences does not allow them to completely understand the nuances of what it means to be female and black in the rural south in 1910.

As a result, assumptions are made, stereotypes are often over pronounced, and even the historical nature of particular scenes are distorted, which can culminate in a lack of fidelity with the African-American experience. Regardless of their race/ethnicity, teachers’ cultural experiences may be different from those expressed in the literature they are asked to teach. For example, in the preface of *Black Literature for High School Students*, Barbara Dodd Stanford (1978), a white teacher states:

When I first heard challenges to a white teacher’s ability to interpret black literature, I was upset and angry, but I have since recognized the validity of the statement that white people do not interpret black

literature the same way black people do. It is now obvious to me that my reaction to the works of Amiri Baraka is very likely not the same as a black person's reaction and is probably not the same as a black author intended (p. ix).

These differences can affect how culturally sensitive and relevant a teacher's interpretation of the text is for his or her students, and therefore how students relate to a text. However, I suggest that every reader has individual experiences with the text. Shared common experiences based on culture and ethnicity can and often do result in common interactions with the texts. For example, as a fifth grade teacher I taught *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (1976) by Mildred Taylor with a team of two white teachers and another African-American teacher. In our planning discussions, it was clear that the two black teachers could make more connections to the young African-American female protagonist, while the white teachers noted that they had limited real-life connections to the character.

Historically, because African-American literature has often been distorted, it creates a difficult teaching task. Vivian Gadsden sheds light on how student engagement in literature may be problematic. Gadsden (1993) contends: "For African-American learners, in particular, literacy has been an especially tenuous struggle, from outright denial during slavery, to limited access in the early 1900's, to segregated schools with often outdated textbooks well into the 1960's, to, many might argue, marginal acceptance of their culture and capacity as learners even into the 1990's" (p. 5). I would argue that other ethnic groups might have parallel experiences; therefore, the presentation of such literature by teachers could benefit

students in a variety of ways if taught in a culturally sensitive manner. This increases the importance of better understanding culturally relevant teaching practices.

There are several issues in multicultural literature such as quality, quantity, and representations. Consequently, these relationships raise questions about the cultural sensitivity and responsiveness of how teachers deal with the characters and themes in a text. The issues regarding the limited quantity of minority characters in children's literature combined with the issue of poor representations has been problematic in teaching multicultural literature. Therefore, there is the increased need to have teachers teaching this diverse literature, and teaching it well, so that it can have the most significant impact possible on students.

If indeed, part of the educational goal is to provide education that enhances and builds positive images for students, then we need to do more research into teaching practices regarding multicultural texts. Several of these issues could be addressed through the idea of culturally relevant teaching. What does culturally relevant teaching offer to the teaching practices of beginning and experienced teachers?

### **Teaching and Teacher Preparation**

Banks (1998) states that, "teachers must become internal outsiders who are able to understand, appreciate, and use the knowledge from within the community to engage students and successfully educate them (p. 29)." Au (1998) echoes this sentiment stating that, "as schools become more diverse, teachers will have to incorporate knowledge of their students' background and design literacy instruction that is culturally responsive" (p. 34). The example of Sheila's student success

provided in Chapter One shows what can take place when teachers embrace the cultural ethnicities of their students and allow them to learn through their cultural experiences. I, along with researchers such as Gloria Ladson Billings (1994) and Lisa Delpit (1995) have observed and experienced this type of transformative classroom. Billings and Delpit has researched how teachers use culturally relevant teaching strategies to effectively teach students. Their research yields evidence that when teachers encompass culturally relevant practices into their teaching the students are engaged, make personal connections to learning, and take ownership for their learning. Each believes that instituting this type of teaching is what is needed to teach our changing student population.

*Theories about Teacher Preparation.* When talking with my peer and friend, Sheila, she let it be known that did not only her own life experiences not prepare her for teaching diverse students, but neither did her undergraduate or master's level work. She learned in the field from her mostly black counterparts. I understood her teacher education preparation program because we shared similar experiences. We were taught subject/content areas, physical and psychological child development, a single course on special education, and a single course in multicultural education. While there was an attempt to inform us of cultural diversity, it was not enough to address the challenges that often come with teaching in a diverse school that has poverty, non-English speakers, cultural, social, and economic differences, lack of parent involvement, and limited access to rigorous academic programs. A single course could not have prepared us to engage students with these differences and more.

Ladson-Billings (1999) argues the shift in student demographics creates a reactive response in teacher education programs, which results in minimal changes in teaching practices. Billings (1999) explains that there are four types of pre-service teacher preparations--(a) the *academic tradition* views the teacher as a scholar; (b) the *social efficiency* tradition in teacher education focuses on the scientific study of teaching as a discipline; (c) the *developmentalist tradition* is rooted in the natural development of the child, which in turn determines what should be taught; and (d) the *social reconstructionist tradition* defines teacher education as part of a culture component that pursues a just and equitable life for all people. Whatever the type of tradition one is exposed to does not seem to be the specific issue, but rather that each tradition has been based on Eurocentric thinking and ways of life, with the possible exception of the social reconstructionist tradition. Because they hold Eurocentric orientations, these pre-service traditions have difficulty meeting the needs of teachers in training who will be teaching diverse student populations.

Late in the 1990's, teacher education programs began addressing teacher needs by adding courses, workshops, and internships in diverse school settings. This brings light to the issues of teaching using the culture of the students as a reference point. However, that only serves to be the beginning point, not the end. Since that time, interest in the subject of cultural diversity in relationship to teaching has grown among teachers and researchers.

New ideas revolve around being reflective, transformative, and experiential. This is evident in the work of researcher, Marilyn Cochran-Smith (1995), who believes that teachers should do away with traditional lesson plans with objectives

and activities and embrace the idea of reconsidering and exploring their own assumptions, attempt to understand the practices and values of those who are different from their own culture, and (re)constructed pedagogy that recognizes this and applies it in culturally sensitive ways. Likewise, Joyce E. King (1991) calls for pre-service teachers who can be critical transformers with a passion for social advocacy and change. Additionally, King states that, “Teachers must also possess an understanding of social reconstructivism as it relates to schooling and its inequities and be willing to be self-reflective and have transformative, growth experiences (p. 9).” The question then becomes: where can teachers receive this kind of education so they can effectively teach in urban education settings?

*Teacher Preparation Programs.* There are several teacher preparation programs that understand that teachers need more intensive study in culturally-sensitive pedagogy to be successful with changing student demographics. Ladson-Billings (1999) gives an in-depth review of teacher preparation programs that focuses on cultural sensitivity and pedagogy. The programs reviews are unique and exceptional in nature. These programs seem to have had a significant impact on preparing teachers to teach diverse students. For example, in the study by Ladson-Billings, Santa Clara University is described as having social justice at the center of the education program. The focus of the program is to have prospective teachers feel and experience life through the lives of those who are different from them. As part of the experience, students spend one week before school starts immersed in a difficult setting (i.e. soup kitchen, homeless shelter) so that they can have a better understanding of these difficulties and the impact they have on peoples lives. Then,

this is followed by a year-long journey of exploring and understanding social inequity.

The University of Wisconsin-Madison is a large university with a nationally acclaimed teacher preparation program. As a way to increase the cultural awareness of pre-service teachers, the program, Teach for Diversity, was established. In this program teachers are part of a year-long endeavor that was rooted in the community. Students are required to spend six weeks in a community-based program such as a YMCA camp, city youth program, or enrichment program. After this immersion process students are required to take an eight-week class on debriefing and analyzing their community-based experience. Through this process students discover and explore issues of inequity, marginalization, and social justice. This program has been discontinued due to financial strains of supporting its expenses.

From 1994 to 1999 Jacqueline Jordan Irvine directed The Center for Urban Learning/Teaching and Urban Research in Education and Schools (CULTURES) Program at Emory University. According to Ladson-Billings (1999), Irvine rooted this program in the idea of “cultural synchronization,” which intersected the interpersonal contexts of teachers and their students. This program provides 40 clock hours of professional development for teachers with at least three years of teaching experience, satisfactory performance evaluations, and references from a parent, peer, and their principal. During this program students are taught researched-based teaching strategies, immerse themselves in cultural experiences, visit classrooms of expert teachers, and create action research projects. This program is not designed to change teacher attitudes, but to equip them with a skill set and information on

connecting home to school for students. Ultimately, the goal is to develop teacher competence and professionalism.

Although, multicultural courses are often available to students, they are not always well received. In the University of Wisconsin program many students withdrew from the program, perhaps because of its intensity. Irvine (2000) noted, that student's sometimes seem uninterested or resistant to coursework from a multicultural perspective. Teacher educators characterized their attitudes by saying "they were not ready" (Zeichner, 1994) or they "just didn't get it" (Martin, 1995). However, the recognition of how multicultural classes are sometimes received is only more evidence of why they are important.

These programs recognize that teaching requires a component of cultural awareness if teachers are to effectively teach students of color. Linda Darling-Hammond (2006) emphasizes the growing cultural diversity of students, acknowledges the diversity standards many educational boards have promoted, and the lack of sufficient preparation of teachers, particularly those at the undergraduate level. Yet, there seems to be little in the way of implementing change in the programs. Darling Hammond implies that there needs to be continued acknowledgement that courses and instruction on cultural pedagogy are very much needed for the current and future practices in education.

*Research on Teacher Practices.* Ladson-Billings (1992, 1994, 1995) led an extensive in-depth research project on the culturally relevant teaching practices of eight teachers (3 White and 5 African-American) who taught in largely African-American schools. These teachers were studied over the course of three years through

observations, video-taping, and interviews. These teachers were identified as exemplary by parents and the school administration. These were the teachers that the students wanted to have and the parents loved. Ladson-Billings discussed in several articles two of the teachers, one white and the other black, who were more alike than different in their background and teaching styles. Each shared a passion for teaching, were proud of his/her career choice, had a strong commitment to the African-American community, situated themselves in that community, acted as a member of the community, and formed relationships that helped them to understand the community as well as their students. From observing the teacher's culturally relevant practices, Ladson-Billings (1995) found that the students were made into intellectual leaders, their real life experiences valued, a broad conception literature embraced, and the teachers and students battled inequitable mainstream ideas. Ladson-Billings acknowledged how important it was to repeat this work as to further develop theories, gain insight into real teaching situations, and build this body of work for the advancement of teacher development.

Pauline Lipman (1995) briefly documented the practices of three African-American teachers whose practices closely aligned with culturally relevant teaching. These teachers taught in schools that combined African-American and White students. Each was hailed as being a successful teacher by students and administration. These teachers believed their students could learn, had high expectations of them, introduced a culturally sensitive curriculum, and built relationships with the students. More specifically, one teacher built relationships by visiting students at home, church, and phoned home regularly after school. Another

teacher promoted a curriculum that focused on the day-to-day pressures for the students. The teacher incorporated items into their learning that were needed for their survival such as tax forms, government agency forms, and driver license manuals. Lipman (1995) explained that the teachers were successful because they celebrated and embraced the language, culture, and experiences of the students. The teachers asked the students to challenge the status quo and seek racial equity.

Educator, Marva Collins, is often noted for her success with students of color. Her students moved from performing *basic* to *proficient* or *advanced* on standardized testing. Although she attributes much of her success to the use of phonics, it is also important to recognize that the structure of her classroom added to the success of the students (Foster, 1989). A traditional format of the classroom usually began with a teacher initiated act, a student response was given, and a teacher evaluation provided (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988). However, this was not what was used to engage students in the classroom of Marva Collins. Her class discussions included equal turn taking between student and teacher, descriptions of personal experiences, active vocal audience responses, and cooperative learning (Foster, 1989). In essence, Collins embraces who the students are and value their culture, language, and experiences. She uses the traditions of African-American culture as a way to reach her students. For example, she uses a call-and-response communication pattern during discussions to engage students. Collins knows that this is a communication pattern that her students understand and appreciate. The environment created by Collins corresponded directly with that of culturally relevant pedagogy.

Carol Lee (2001) studied an all African-American high school group of

students and their interaction with an African-American novel entitled *Rattlebones*. This study took place in a school where most of the students were under-achieving. Therefore, the teachers were seeking new ways to engage students and educate them. The teachers used cultural modeling as a way to teach students. The teachers in this study embraced the informal black vernacular of the students and used their understanding of the language to make connections and promote cultural understanding. The students were encouraged to ask questions and use their background knowledge to better understand the characters and nuances of the text. Furthermore, the teachers guided the students in the areas where they had difficulty and scaffolded information for them. The teachers actively planned to the strengths of the students to help them be successful in the classroom.

The Kamehameha Early Education Program (KEEP), located in Hawaii, has been led by a talented group of diverse teachers. Collectively, these teachers have diverse ethnicities, ranging from White to Hispanic to Hawaiian. To increase the learning among these students, teachers created more cooperative learning opportunities and placed student experiences at the center of instruction. For example, the beginning of the reading lesson opened with a narrative that was jointly created between the students and teacher (Au, 1980; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988). As a result, student participation increased and student performance on standardized tests improved. Again, the structure of the classroom and the changes to curriculum valued the culture of the students.

Another example of culturally relevant pedagogy at work was in a primarily Hispanic school where a sixth grade teacher incorporated the skills of the parents into

the lessons (Moll, Velez-Ibanez, & Greenberg, 1989). This teacher used the construction of the local barrio to enrich the reading lessons. As the students studied the material the teacher brought in parents who were experts in this field to work with students and share their life experiences building the barrio. Many teachers would have never included the parents because they were not formally educated. However, there was greater value gained by the students and community knowing that the parents were valued and could contribute to their child's education. This teacher's work created a bridge between the school and community, giving students a sense of pride in their family and their talents.

The Native American experience has also been described through the teacher lens. Mohatt and Erickson (1981) observed student-teacher interactions in the Native American community. The students were responsive to the teachers who used a combination of Native American and Anglo speech patterns. This communication style mimicked what students experienced in their homes. As a result, students made academic gains. Again, a part of culturally relevant teaching was embraced to engender student success.

Finally, in Lisa Delpit's (2002) most recent book, *The Skin That We Speak: Thoughts on Language and Culture in the Classroom*, she compiles a collection of essays that speak to how teachers negotiate formal and informal talk in their classrooms. This is not a strong research-based book nor did Delpit mean for it to be. Instead, she wants to provide examples of how teachers create systematic change in their classrooms to build transformative environments. Delpit allows teachers to tell their stories about how the cultural language of their students evolves and contributes

to their classrooms. The teachers often struggle to find a space that supports traditional learning while embracing the linguistic culture of the students. However, each teacher faces the challenges before her and makes choices (sometimes unpopular with administration) that support the real-life language experiences of students. Although the teachers vary in their demographics (Appalachian, African-American, British, and Trinidadian), they all created classrooms that ultimately embrace their student's language. This process engages their students, increases student performance, and provides a two-way avenue of respect.

Teachers realize the benefits of using culturally relevant practices in most communities. The research shows and supports the idea that these practices could be identified, synthesized, and replicated. The success of teaching diverse students is not specific to any particular ethnic group. The research shows that teacher education programs can demonstrate culturally competent strategies and yield success from teachers. However, it is incumbent upon the teacher to actively create a classroom where culturally relevant teaching is benefiting students. Each successful teacher makes a choice to do something that is not yet part of mainstream education and provide a system within their classrooms that allows for cultural awareness, advocacy, and nurturing. Although the stories are not all the same, there does seem to be consistent ways of thinking of the students. Every teacher reports positive understandings of the race, language, culture, and values of the students. What is often made to be challenges in many classrooms are considered gifts in theirs. The question remains, how can teacher education programs further increase the likelihood that teachers choose to see them as gifts rather than a possibly insurmountable

challenges?

### **Race, Culturally-Relevant Teaching, and Students**

As researchers point out, across the nation teachers are not being well prepared to teach in increasingly diverse classrooms. However, some teachers are demonstrating that it is possible to reach diverse students by implementing some culturally relevant practices. Ladson-Billing (1995) defines culturally relevant teaching as pedagogy of opposition, but specifically commits to collective empowerment. Ladson-Billing (1995) further states that through culturally relevant teaching students can experience academic success; students will develop and/or maintain cultural competence; and students can develop a critical consciousness that challenges the status quo. Teachers are able to establish cultural relevance in their classrooms by specifically building relationships, understanding cultural differences as strengths, by empowering students by accepting their language, involving family, and addressing their community needs. The concept of culturally relevant teaching relies on the principles established by Ladson-Billings (1994):

- Positive perspectives on parents and families
- Communication of high expectations
- Learning within the context of culture
- Student-centered instruction
- Culturally-mediated instruction
- Reshaping, transforming the curriculum
- Teachers as facilitators (rather than merely knowledge transmitters)

The definition and principles given by Ladson-Billings are used throughout this study as a way to frame the teaching of a multicultural text by teachers, the response of the students to the text, and the outcomes of the study. This is due to the fact that this definition and set of principles are most often cited by researchers in the field of culturally relevant teaching. However, through research and practice there have been some new ideas generated about culturally relevant teaching.

First, the literature supports that a teacher of any race can successfully implement culturally relevant teaching practices. This notion is supported and confirmed by a series of researchers--Delgado-Gaitan and Trueba (1991), Osborne (1983), and Hornberger (1990). Ladson-Billings (1994, 1995) insists and states throughout her work that the race of the teacher is not a factor for using (or not using) culturally relevant teaching practices. Her work clearly suggests that the White teacher in her study is very self aware of her own culture, but feels comfortable being part of a largely African-American community. Is it possible that she shares this in common with Sheila? This helps her to be successful with the diverse students in her classroom. This offers a strong argument for providing the significantly White teaching force with culturally relevant teaching strategies and ideas. Certainly, culturally relevant teaching is not just beneficial for minority teachers.

Secondly, it is important to use content that is relevant and meaningful to the student's identity and this empowers them to operate successfully within mainstream society. The teachers highlighted in this literature all made curricular provisions to match the experiences and needs of the students. As a result, students were engaged

in the lessons and they had very few discipline referrals. Altering curriculum was often a challenge for teachers, especially since curriculum tended to favor Eurocentric ideas and there was pressure to teach to standardized tests such as those necessitated by the No Child Left Behind law. However, the alignment of the instruction with student experiences created an engaging atmosphere and more intense interest on the part of the students (Clark, 1991; Ladson-Billings, 1992; Williams, 1987). If indeed, engagement is one of our goals in education, then there should be more support for culturally relevant teaching practices as agents of engagement.

Another trend among the teachers studied in the literature was the relationship building that is initiated and nurtured by the teachers. Each of the teachers featured in the previous studies made a serious effort to make and maintain contact with families. Moreover, the teachers generally went beyond telephone communication and became involved with community projects, politics, local agencies, offered tutoring, and attended the community church. These teachers have learned the benefit of building relationships and involving parents and families with the education of their students. Researchers Clark (1991), Delgado-Gaitan and Trueba (1991), and Williams (1987) verify that teachers establishing strong relationships with student families was a benefit to students, their engagement in school, and their subsequent success.

Lastly, a component of the classroom that effective teachers use is the native language that the students brought with them. The languages that teachers embrace range from foreign languages to street slang to English combined with a foreign language. In most cases the teachers allow for the language the students are comfortable with for some parts of the instruction and insist on correct English

grammar for other parts of instruction (Gay, 1978; Ladson-Billings, 1992; McLaughlin, 1989). This gives students a chance to feel empowered and proud of their heritage, while also providing them tools to be successful when they enter mainstream societal situations and the workforce. The use of a student's native language correlates strongly to providing a forum for academic success. Once again, this is a tenet of culturally relevant pedagogy rising to the surface of successful teaching of diverse students.

The aforementioned studies acknowledge that there has been success associated with culturally relevant teaching practices and as a result of its implementation there seems to have been some strategies identifiable in the ways teacher's teacher students of color. I have attempted to establish that teachers can build cultural competency in their classroom through (a) relationship building, (b) understanding cultural differences as strengths, (c) by empowering students by accepting their language, (d) involving family, and (e) addressing their community needs. Teachers can build capacity for culturally relevant teaching in their classroom. Again, a teacher's race does not need to be a factor in the success that is obtained when implementing culturally sensitive practices, yet it is possible that teachers of different ethnicities bring differing capabilities to bear that are worth exploring. I have also tried to emphasize how a tailored educational program about cultural sensitivity can prepare and empower new teachers. With a solid educational foundation they can build on practices by implementing culturally relevant strategies. The reoccurring theme in the research reviewed was that cultural sensitivity could be learned, it could be used to create student success, and it was not tied to a teacher's

race. Having said that, we can still benefit by additional research into what specific actions and activities teachers practiced that enhanced students' classroom successes, and how in turn such practices could be taught.

### **Putting Race on the Table**

Ladson-Billing (1994) claims that race does not matter as it relates to a teachers ability to provide culturally relevant instruction to students. However, this does not mean that teachers do not need education and information to become effective teachers using culturally relevant practices. Researchers (Hyland, 2005; Olmeda, 1997) have found through case studies that many White (as well as some Black) teachers acknowledged some of the principles of CRT such as positive perspectives on families and communication of high expectations. However, the actions of teachers found that the teachers did not truly have high expectations for the students and pitied the students as victims. The reality of their work was a direct contradiction to their stated philosophies about minority students. The other remaining principles were not at all acknowledged by the teachers. This is in part because of the lack of knowledge they have regarding CRT principles and their relationship to students and student achievement.

Beauboef-Lafontant (1999) believes that many teachers understand some of the very basic principles of CRT such as having positive perspectives on families, but there needs to be more than surface level understanding. Beauboef-Lafontant further states that in order to have truly positive perspectives on family then teachers must be engaged with the community in a real and meaningful ways. This could mean being a part of local politics, neighborhood activities, attending the local church, and visiting

with students in their homes. Having an understanding of this concept means being an actual part of the community that one serves instead of observing it from afar. Siegel (1999) found that there are other cases where teachers are indifferent to the impact a teacher's connection has to the students and their lives. This indifference not only extends to positive perspectives on families, but also to the significance of race in their own life and pedagogical responsibilities as an educator (Siegel, 1999). The indifference in these important ideas makes it difficult for teachers to understand the value of their student's culture and to relate to that culture to build students success.

Pre-service teachers have also been studied to determine their practices in diverse classrooms. The findings from pre-service teachers indicated pervasive ideas that exist in diverse classrooms. Researchers, Walker-Dalhouse & Dalhouse (2006), found the following themes emerge from White pre-service teachers:

- Teachers should heavily discipline the unmotivated.
- Pity the students---they are victims of their circumstance.
- Be colorblind---all children are the same.
- The system is the problem; not the teachers.

These themes suggest that pre-service teachers have not received significant education on cultural relevant instruction or how to work in diverse classrooms. However, the greater question becomes: how are students impacted by these ideas held by teachers? Although, these themes are likely connected to their own cultural beings it is possible to reshape these thoughts.

Many teachers believe that there is no need to reshape their thinking patterns when addressing the needs of diverse students. This does not come from a place of

indifference or denial, but rather a belief that they will be employed in their own communities and if needed employers will provide professional development (Dorrington & Ramirez-Smith, 1999). This theme indicates that pre-service teachers would prefer to teach those of a similar culture versus having to learn how to teach and interact with students of other cultures.

The overriding sentiment from these studies is that neither White pre-service nor veteran teachers want to take responsibility for teaching diverse students using a culturally responsive framework. Secondly, teachers are not generally receptive to the notion that culturally relevant practices are needed to address the academic needs of diverse students. Lastly, race does not matter when teaching diverse students. White teachers felt overwhelmed by the task of teaching diverse students and generally felt unprepared to meet their needs or understand their cultural background (Dorrington & Ramirez-Smith, 1999; Walker-Dalhouse & Dalhouse, 2006). How does this feeling of inadequacy by White teachers impact their teaching? Similarly, how do Black teachers relate to diverse students when they share a diverse background and experience? These questions continue to puzzle those who prepare teachers. If possible this study intends to shed some light on the nature of this puzzle. However, it is important to understand the difficulty of definitively addressing these questions in a single study.

### **Summary**

Many classrooms are very traditional places. There is not much room for stories about African-American females or any other minority group for that matter. The Eurocentric traditional canon of literature has been a fixture in the classroom and

the curriculum, a corpus of literature that covets the classics and all that they embody. This has been in part true because of the negative perception that exists about other types and kinds of literature. Any label that precedes the word “literature” signals a demotion to a subgenre--books we study for their novelty but are not worthy of inclusion in the curricular canon (Crowe, 1998). Young adult literature in general has been exiled to the realms of sub-literature, and thus the double-labeled “multicultural young adult literature” was doubly damned in many school situations (Crowe, 1998). Therefore, it is reasonable to think that some teachers might shy away from inviting multicultural literature of any kind into their classrooms. In my own experience, teachers sometimes fear that anything outside the traditional canon lacks quality and depth, and therefore, it is to be ignored.

When teachers bring this literature into their classrooms, they often have little or no background knowledge needed to teach and analyze these texts. They do so in the same fashion as the traditional canon regardless of historical and cultural context (Jupp, 2000). Therefore, the teaching of these texts is done only at the surface level and fosters little extensive knowledge growth among students. Jupp (2000) asserts that,

The multicultural literature that often appears in textbooks and anthologies provides little insight into the literary traditions or histories of the culture in question. Instead the work is read and reflected upon as part of the North American Anglo tradition. (p. 113)

The research indicates that teachers need direction in developing a curriculum and classroom practices that authentically and accurately address multicultural literature

in the classroom, particularly African-American young adult literature (Grobman, 2001; Taxel, 1986).

### **A Conceptual Framework**

The argument for culturally relevant pedagogy in the classroom used by all teachers, especially when teaching diverse student populations, I have tried to make apparent. The arguments for culturally relevant teaching included student engagement and motivation for learning. This connection is made because of the high interest and engagement that is spawned when students connect to the environment and content (Hidi & Harackiewicz, 2000), which is part of what was developed in culturally relevant classrooms. Yet, there needs to be more awareness of (a) why culturally relevant pedagogy was important, (b) the impact it has on student engagement relative to teaching multicultural-literature, and (c) what it looks like in the classroom, specifically needs more study and attention. The present study was designed to address these three aspects crucial to improving academic growth among all students.

The study highlighted the relationship between the multicultural literature, the quality of that literature, teacher presentation of that literature, and the implementation of culturally relevant teaching practices. Consequently, these relationships raised questions about the cultural sensitivity and responsiveness of how teachers dealt with the characters and themes in a multicultural text. The existing research show's that implementing culturally relevant teaching practices into lessons is beneficial to urban and minority students. Furthermore, these practices allows for teachers to fold the curriculum around the cultural strengths of students. In this study,

teachers taught multicultural literature to diverse students using culturally relevant practices. The research contends that part of the value of using culturally relevant practices is providing more powerful and accurate representations of various cultures, and constructing more appropriate ideas of minority characters (as it relates to reading), which in turn results in enhancing self-images for diverse students.

Researching the ways in which accomplished reading teachers teach such literature to diverse students is important in helping the educational field best understand how to improve teaching practices and therefore has implications for the preparation of reading teachers for urban schools.

### **Chapter 3**

#### **Research Questions**

The qualitative study I undertook allowed me to investigate how a young adult novel featuring an African-American protagonist, was taught by two different teachers to a diverse student body. The research was classified as a comparative case study approach. The study was rooted in an effort to better understand how multicultural young adult literature could be taught in culturally relevant and sensitive ways to diverse students in urban school settings.

The primary research question in this study was as follows: What did elementary teachers in diverse teaching contexts (two teachers in the case of this study) do to make literature relevant to their students? There were six subsidiary questions that flowed from this larger question:

- What was the cultural background/experience of the teachers?
- How did the teachers' cultural backgrounds and teaching philosophies influence how they taught?
- What types of literature did they commonly choose to use and what were their goals for choosing these texts (e.g., *Words By Heart*)?
- What teaching strategies did they employ when they taught such texts?
- If it was apparent, what did culturally relevant teaching look like in their classrooms?
- How did the teachers interact with their students and how did their students interact with each other when discussing and learning about this literature?

### **Case Study Design**

A case study offers the best design for this type of descriptive study. From the outset, this study's questions favored criteria for a comparative case study. Although case studies are not the most widely used methodology for research in the social sciences, they do seem to fit well with the objectives of this particular study. The very nature of case studies is to illuminate a *decision* (e.g. to teach a particular piece of multicultural-literature) or set of *decisions* and then ask why they were taken, how they were implemented, and with what result (Schramm, 1971). Furthermore, the technical definition of a case study is inquiry that (a) investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when (b) the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident (c) cope with the technically distinctive situation in which there were many more variables of interest than data points, and as one result (d) rely on multiple sources of evidence, with data needing to converge in a triangulating fashion, and as another result (e) benefit from the prior development of theoretical propositions to guide data collection and analysis (Yin, 2003).

These definitions correlated with the design of this study as it was set in the real-life context of classrooms where teachers chose a text and taught it to diverse student learners. The study included multiple sources, observation of and interviews with two teachers, observation of students, and various documents, had many variables of interest (teacher implementation and student engagement), and was based on a prior body of work and was designed to contribute to the existing research. The data collected was also analyzed in relation to existing research. The implications of this study are pertinent to educational concerns that exist in the urban classroom.

Yin (2003) described a typical case study design, which mirrored the components of this study. According to Yin (2003), a case study follows the sequence of developing a theory, selecting cases, conducting the first case, conducting the second case, writing an individual report for each case study, drawing cross-case conclusions, modifying theories, developing policy implications, and writing a cross-case report. This study generally followed the case study design as outlined by Yin (2003). However the two teacher observations were done simultaneously. In this study, a small-theory (or framework) had been developed about the importance of the implementation of instructional practices around multicultural literature with the possible use culturally relevant ideas. Therefore, the design called for pre-selecting two highly qualified teachers who had met these criteria.

Yin (2003) completed the outline for case study design by highlighting the following five components: “1) a study’s question, which should emphasize who, what, where, how, and why; 2) its proposition, which focused on the how and why questions (what lead the researcher to the study?); 3) its unit(s) of analysis (e.g. two teachers); 4) the logic linking the data to the propositions; and 5) the criteria for interpreting the findings” (p. 21). These five components were met and are elaborated in more detail in what follows.

### **Research Context**

Initial groundwork for this study had to be taken to ensure its viability. For this process, I first identified the possible schools, teachers, and a text. I was able to make these determinations by communicating with principals, central office and

school-based reading specialists, and teachers. The data collection structure for this study was driven by the research questions.

### **School District and School Selection**

After the questions for this study were determined, school selections (i.e. student population), teacher selections, and text selection followed. At the outset, I made student population characteristics essential.

Therefore, I sought to situate the study in a large, diverse urbanized school district in the mid-Atlantic region. The district of interest enrolled approximately 145,000 students, which made it the 16<sup>th</sup> largest school district in the country at the time of this study. The district's demographic make-up is exceptionally diverse: 20.7% were Hispanic, 22.0% were African-American, 41.3% were White, 14.8% were Asian American, 0.3% were American Indian, and 25.8% received free and reduced meals (FARMS). There are 130 elementary schools, 38 middle schools, 25 high schools, and 7 special or alternative schools, in the system.

As I searched for a school, I pursued significant student diversity as a central focus. Consequently, I was led to Title I schools (those receiving U.S. government title assistance in the form of extra resources) that were the most diverse in the school district. There were 28 Title I schools in the school district where this study took place. Once the school selection was narrowed to the 28, I appealed to principals about this study. About half were open to having such a study conducted in their schools. Of this half, I then selected the two schools with the most similar student population demographics.

Specifically, one school's demographics was 39.2% Hispanic, 37.2% African-

American, 12.9% White, 10.5% Asian, and 0.2% American Indian and had a 59.6% FARMS rate. The second school almost mirrored the first with demographics of 48.7% Hispanic, 32% African-American, 13.1% White, and 6.2% Asian. The FARMS rate was 67.1%. The reason for the school selection was because of the racial/ethnic diversity among the students and, in part, my own personal experience of witnessing teachers in these schools being more inclined to consider the diversity of the students when developing their teaching approaches and therefore, more likely to have thought about culturally relevant and sensitive pedagogy.

The nature of the school district's policies allowed for principals in schools with high FARMS rates to have the first opportunity to hire teachers. Therefore, these schools often acquired the most qualified and experienced teachers. Choosing these two schools helped ensure that I collected data from such teachers that in turn shed light on their pedagogical practices. This was directly related to the significance of the study as I have described in the foregoing.

### **Teacher Selection**

Once the school selections were made, I consulted with the two principals on possible reading teachers who would be open to participating in the study. I also consulted briefly with reading specialists in these schools. As I have noted the primary research question required a form of selective sampling. Criteria included (a) both should hold a master's degree, (b) both should be accomplished teachers in view of expert school reading specialists, (c) both should be Highly Qualified under the guidelines of *No Child Left Behind*, and (d) both should teach in schools with diverse students.

With the help of the school principals and reading specialists, I narrowed the list to two teachers who indicated willingness to participate in the study and met most of the sampling criteria. Additionally, according to the principals, both were established school leaders and accomplished literature teachers. As the demographic breakdowns indicate, these teachers both taught in schools with diverse, disadvantaged student bodies. It is also important to note that neither of these teachers was under my supervision or direction. Both saw the study as an opportunity to understand more about who they were as literature teachers and to add to their professional development and growth as practitioners.

### **Text Selection**

As school and teacher selection evolved, I was simultaneously searching for a text the teachers would use in the study. The number of approved texts that were appropriate for this study was limited due to few minority characters in the available texts. Finally, I found three possible choices with the help of central office reading specialists. The choice was further narrowed by what texts were available in the selected schools.

In selecting the primary literary text to be studied, six criteria were employed. The criteria were developed primarily to offer the possibility that if the text met all or most of them, I would be more likely to witness CRT principles employed by the teachers. The criteria similarly used to increase the likelihood that issues of diversity would be addressed in the classroom, therefore allowing a comparison of how the teachers studied, conceived and taught the text. The criteria were that the text:

- a) was approved by the school system.

- b) was appropriate to the grade level to which it is targeted.
- c) was a genre of historical fiction for young adults.
- d) dealt with characters who were from disadvantaged groups.
- e) featured an African-American protagonist.
- f) was often taught by teachers.

Through consultation with the district's reading department and in conversation with several reading specialists in the elementary schools, I initially identified three texts that met these criteria, as I alluded to in the preceding chapter. These texts were *Roll of Thunder* by Mildred Taylor, *Zeely* by Virginia Hamilton, and *Words by Heart* by Ouida Sebestyen.

All of the texts, however, were not suitable for this study. The first text, *Roll of Thunder* by Mildred Taylor, met most of the criteria. However, this book was rarely taught in the classroom due to its age according to a brief survey I did of about a dozen teachers. As a result, this book was not a part of their stocked reading books making it unavailable. The book was published in 1976, which made it outdated in the opinion of many teachers, and teachers in this district hold discretion over which approved books they teach. The second book, *Zeely* by Virginia Hamilton, also met most of the criteria. Yet, it was not taught in the classroom due to its similar vintage stigma. It was published in 1967. This text was stocked on the shelves of teachers, but not in use. Many teachers had not taught it in quite some time. The third book, *Words by Heart* by Ouida Sebestyen, was regularly taught to more advanced students. Although this book was published in 1968, it was seldom regarded as outdated by teachers, according to reading specialists consulted. It was on the shelf of every

reading specialist and teacher to whom I inquired. Although *Words by Heart* shared a publication date within the time frame of the other book choices, teachers used it consistently. Within the limited availability of approved book choices, the one that best fit the criteria for this study was *Words by Heart*.

*Words by Heart* was a novel that highlighted the pain of racism. The racism was represented through the voice of an African-American girl who moved to a small northern, farming town in 1910 with her father, stepmother, and siblings. The community reacted to this newly arrived African-American family when the father took work on the farm of a soft-hearted but stern elderly white woman and the father's daughter wins a local Bible-verse contest, out-competing a local white boy. The plot thickened as relationships, good and bad, were established between the African-American family and other white characters in the novel. The content of this novel was ideal for this study because it required that both teacher and student readers think about racism, and make connections to the lead African-American female protagonist.

The text was part of the reading list for those students who participated in an above- grade-level reading program, originating at the College of William & Mary. Although the primary text of the program featured European characters and setting, several of the approved independent reading texts in the program, such as those noted above, represented a range of ethnicities. The William & Mary reading program was specifically designed for more advanced learners, although the school district encouraged teachers to use pieces of William & Mary with below, on, and above grade level readers. The degree to which teachers implemented the program with

below and on grade level readers was left to the discretion of the teacher. Generally, this intensive reading program involved extensive research and reading of a variety of genres to include poems, short stories, essays, and novels. As a part of the program, students were sometimes asked to keep response journals to clarify, organize, and reflect on their thinking about the study of such texts. The goal of the William & Mary reading program was to have each student accomplish the following: To develop (a) literary analysis and interpretation skills, (b) persuasive writing skills, (c) linguistic competency, (d) listening and oral communication skills, (e) reasoning skills, and (f) an understanding of the concept of chapter change.

These goals were to be met through instruction that focused on active learning, problem solving, research, and critical thinking as well as assessments through the perspectives of self, peer, and teacher. Yet the goals remain silent about how to treat literature on the approved independent reading lists that contained non-white characters and protagonists, leaving teachers to their own devices about how to deal with these matters in classrooms of diverse learners. However, I expected that the two teachers in the study would incorporate some, if not all, of the goals of the William & Mary program into their teaching. In addition to reading *Words by Heart*, the teachers were likely to have students keep a journal and use writing webs as a way to organize their thoughts. This would be a general expectation by the reading department, although teachers have a great deal of flexibility in their presentations. The flexibility would come in how the teachers incorporate William & Mary principles into the guided reading structure. There are no specific lessons or foci that had to be taught as part of the program. Studying how two accomplished teachers of different ethnicities

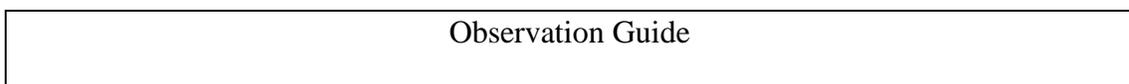
handled such literature and made decisions about how to teach it, I reasoned it would shed light on practices that potentially promoted better understandings of culturally relevant approaches. I anticipated that I would be able to contrast their selected foci of the guided reading groups and their teaching approaches.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

#### **Observations**

I observed the two selected classroom teachers teaching the text, *Words by Heart* to their students. Typically, this text is taught after students have some exposure to the William & Mary lesson structures. The teaching time frame for the book was approximately two to three weeks. The observations occurred daily for the two-three week period, which culminated into approximately 10-15 observations. During the observation, I took field notes on how teachers taught the book. Studying classroom interactions and collecting field notes was framed by an observation guide (see Figure 3.1), which was developed to identify and understand the practices that the teachers employed. These issues outlined in the guide were likely to be reflected in the goals and objectives of guided reading, which was when I observed teachers. Furthermore, this guide corresponded with the case study design of gathering data that could be applied to the research questions. This observation guide was used to examine the type of rapport established by the teacher and the teaching strategies used, determine depth of text analysis, the level of student engagement, and the portrayal of characters in the story.

**Figure 3.1. Facsimile of the Observation Guide.**



- 1) How do the teachers discuss the characters in the text (e.g. positively or disparagingly)?
- 2) What historical information relative to the text was provided (e.g. enrichment materials, contextual framework)?
- 3) What personal connections did the teacher make to the text and characters (e.g. establishing a favorite character, more empathy towards one character versus another, connecting to the experiences of the characters)?
- 4) What teaching strategies were employed? In what ways might they be described as culturally relevant (or not)?
- 5) What inferences did the teacher make into the nature of the plot and characters?
- 6) Did the teacher engage the students (e.g. reflective, participation in discussion)?
- 7) What specific elements or features of the text did the teacher call attention to (e.g. vocabulary, irony, themes of gender and/or race)?
- 8) What was the focus of the lesson?
- 9) At what level do students show learning engagement (e.g. pay attention, show persistence, and ask and answer questions)?

This particular observation guide was designed to provide a common basis for focus in the observational data-collection process with each of the teachers and to prevent undue differentiations. These questions also provided a basis for some of the interview questions to be asked. I asked many “why” questions relating to the observation guide allowing for descriptive explanations from the teachers. Observation field notes were written up in narrative form within 24 hours of the

observations.

## **Interviews**

I conducted audio-taped interviews with each of the teachers at different stages of the research process: a) during the initial planning for teaching the text, b) mid-way through the teaching of the text, and c) at the conclusion of the teaching process. However, I considered that there might be the need for additional informal interviews throughout the course of the data collection process, especially if there were significant or unexpected teaching and/or classroom interaction moments. The interviews consisted of semi-structured, open-ended questions that allowed for details to emerge (see Appendix A). The questions in the first interview were designed to build rapport with the teachers. I expected teachers to be able to answer these questions with relative ease since many referred to their planning processes.

The questions in the second and third interviews were more specific to the research questions that guide this study. Anthropologist James Spradley (1979) would label these as grand tour questions, which means the teacher's can give a tour of a topic they know well. The purpose of grand tour questions was to promote conversation, but to also keep the conversation focused. The questions can be described as structural questions, which should be asked concurrently with descriptive questions (Spradley, 1979). These types of questions sought to understand the teacher's organization and understanding of the implementation of the lesson. I provided contextual information when sharing the responses to these questions as it would help to provide the reader with a better understanding of the teacher decisions and student responses.

The interviews were designed to gather understandings of how the teachers each thought about their teaching practices, the role of the text in educating their diverse students, and how the teachers understood the text itself. Appendix A contains a list of questions I used in the three scheduled interviews. Directly after each interview, I detailed notes about my interpretations of what teachers said as a means of documenting it for my records. Audio tapes of all interviews were transcribed verbatim.

### Documents

In addition to the observations and interviews, I collected documents (e.g. comprehension worksheets, timelines, journal questions) that the teachers used to support their teaching. Doing so assisted in the process of triangulating data on teachers' established rapport and student engagement, teacher understandings, their teaching practices, and the classroom artifacts they used to support how they taught the text.

Table 3.2 on the following page summarize how the research questions, evidence needed, and data sources were aligned.

**Figure 3.2. Table Showing Relations Between Questions, Evidence and Sources.**

<b>Research Question</b>	<b>Evidence</b>	<b>Data Source</b>
What was the cultural background/experience of the teachers?	Information provided by the teachers about their background experiences	Interview with teachers
How did the cultural background/experience of the teachers influence their teaching decisions and interactions with the students?	The ways in which the teachers handles the pivotal parts of the story that involve sensitive issues such as racism, violence, and servitude	Interview with teachers and observation of lessons and students (fieldnotes)
What teaching strategies did the teachers employ?	Teacher demonstration of specific strategies they use in their teaching	Observation of lessons (fieldnotes) Documents
What did culturally relevant teaching look like in their classrooms?	Teachers demonstrate in their teaching some of the components of culturally relevant teaching	Observation of lessons (fieldnotes) Documents

What were the teacher's goals for teaching this text?	Teacher purposely develops goals they have set for the teaching of the text	Interview with teachers Documents
How did the students engage these goals in the classroom?	The physical and oral feedback the students demonstrate	Observation of students

### **Data Analysis Process**

Following Yin (2003), I built an individual case for each teacher study, using primarily observation fieldnotes and any supporting documents that were collected. This allowed me to build an initial understanding of the strategies that each teacher employed, how they engaged students, and presented the text. Once a rough case had been constructed for each teacher, I used an inductive analytical approach to the data collected (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, Chapter 8). The cases were analyzed to show how the two teachers were similar and different in their perspectives, theme and character understanding, and approach to the teaching the text to students. Each of the sub-research questions guided this analysis process.

For example, the cases were open coded to highlight similarities and differences between the two teachers in the study along lines framed by those research questions and the related observation guide. I sought to understand how the teachers compared in their understanding of the theme of the book, their individual teaching strategies, their connections to the book, their teaching experiences, and their goals for the book. I also looked for similarities and/or differences between the two teachers' understanding of the text: characters, plot, issues treated in the text; and their planning and instructional practices. The interview data were coded by the same process as the field notes, using the research questions as framing categories. The

documents that were collected were analyzed to the extent to which they triangulated (or not) with each teacher's perspectives on the text and observed pedagogical practices, and provided additional understandings as to how teachers reached diverse students.

Once the process of open coding was completed and initial categories of understanding were identified in the data, I undertook a process of axial coding (following Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In the process of axial coding, data was reconfigured into new ways, using the concepts identified in the open coding process. Following Strauss & Corbin (1998, 127-135), this allowed me to identify (a) a central phenomenon (e.g. a teacher's understanding of multicultural literature), (b) explore the casual conditions (e.g. the origins of that view and their influences on the teacher's understandings), explore specific strategies (e.g. teaching actions and classroom interactions that explain the teacher's understandings), (d) or identify the content and intervening conditions (e.g. the text being taught and the decisions the teacher makes about teaching strategies, the classroom context, and so on), and (e) delineate the consequences (e.g. how the teacher goes about teaching the students and with apparent results).

Following this process, I reconfigured my account of each case through integrating the relationship between understandings, conditions, and strategies/actions indicated in the axial coding model and specified through actual coding. This served to further link and define the relationship between the concepts (examples of possible concepts for a coding scheme were identified earlier) and helped me to draw clearer evidence-based comparisons between the teachers. Doing so allowed me to generate

comparative assertions about the teachers' understanding of multicultural texts and culturally-relevant practices.

As I recounted the lessons of each case through observational fieldnotes, I coded entries for the six components of culturally relevant teaching. Then, while reviewing each case, I was able to tabulate frequency counts as to how often a culturally relevant principle was employed by each teacher. Throughout this process, I referred strictly to my observational fieldnotes. To count, I used individual lesson structures and recorded each time each teacher offered an example from the list of six components. One frequency tabulation equaled one example and multiple examples could occur within a lesson or even various sequences within a lesson. As a result of this process, I was able to formulate a clearer picture of each teacher's strengths and weaknesses as it related to the integration of culturally relevant principles in her teaching. In addition, this allowed me to construct a rough comparison between the two teachers.

### **Member Checking**

The study relied heavily on the perspective of the teachers with respect to how they understood the text they were teaching and how they thought about their teaching practices. The study also depended on my efforts to collect field notes and the perspective that the process embeds in how the teachers were described. In an effort to enhance the validity of my work, I engaged the teachers in a member-checking process. Member checking was a validation procedure that is used in case studies and other forms of qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this procedure, a researcher submits draft materials such as notes from observations and

interviews to the people who were the original sources so that their perspectives can be integrated into the analysis as necessary (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For the purposes of this study, I shared the transcribed interviews with the teachers so that they could validate that the transcript as well as my interpretations of the audio recordings were accurate. This required several meetings with the two teachers. This process was crucial to establishing a degree of credibility for the way I cast the findings.

What follows is a detailed description of the case of each teacher. The first teacher's case is described in the next chapter, while the second teacher's case follows that of the first teacher. There is a single chapter dedicated to each teacher so that I can provide a thorough insight to each case. After each teacher's individual case description there is a comparison between the two teachers. In addition, there are conclusions drawn about each teacher's use of cultural relevant strategies and the implications for education.

## **Chapter Four**

### **A Novice Teacher's Perspective on and Approach to Teaching Multicultural**

## **Literature**

Jenny (a pseudonym) was a twenty-something teacher who was in her fifth year of teaching elementary school students. However, this was only her third year in this particular school. She taught a full schedule of reading, math, social studies, and science daily to fifth grade students. She had a vibrant personality and was described by her principal as being one of the best teachers on the school staff.

My first interaction with Jenny was an informal meeting to discuss her participation in the study. She was eager and yet nervous about what participation in the study might entail. I explained that it would allow for as little intrusiveness as possible into her classroom. I wanted to see how she taught a multicultural text to her students during a 3-4 week period, but I was not planning to interfere in her instruction in any way, nor was this to be part of an evaluation process. I merely wanted to see her teach the text and witness how students responded to her instruction. With this view of the study, Jenny enthusiastically agreed to participate.

### **Who Is Jenny?**

#### **Background**

During the first interview with Jenny, she shared her education and teaching background. She stated that she had attended Mercyhurst College in Erie, Pennsylvania, where she majored in elementary education with a minor in special education and received her B.A degree. Jenny had not yet begun her master's degree, although she expected to begin pursuing one in the near future. During her five year teaching tenure, she had only taught fifth grade. Jenny noted with a beaming smile that she loved teaching fifth grade. Throughout her teaching experience she had

taught in diverse classrooms. Her students included Asians, Latino/as, and African-Americans across high- and low-achieving socio-economic groups, although her own upbringing and college years were in all mono-cultural settings (European American). Jenny commented that she preferred teaching a diverse demographic. Her interest in her students was evident as she referenced them often throughout the interview.

### **Teaching Philosophy**

For reading, Jenny taught a heterogeneous group of students. She was committed to having different students share their stories and describe who they were as much as possible during the reading time. This was not always possible, but she appreciated literature that brought this opportunity to the forefront because she argued that it was important for her students. When we discussed her role as a teacher of diverse students, Jenny remarked that she found it vital to provide background knowledge for the students about the featured text. This was an area where she saw students struggle and she always tried to fill in gaps or build knowledge so that students could have a better understanding of what they read. Jenny also commented on how important it was to share texts that were of high interest to minority students. Jenny felt her students would be interested in *Words By Heart* because of their studies of the *Amos Fortune* (Yates, 1950) slave story. Jenny was convinced that this would spur their interest. They also had studied short stories around the civil rights movement. Having mentioned that, Jenny concluded that *Words By Heart* would help fill in the history between the era's of slavery and civil rights. According to Jenny, the students often would get very much involved in this kind of multicultural text. As our conversations continued and grew in depth, it became clear that Jenny believed that

her role in teaching *Words By Heart* or any other multicultural text was to build and bridge understanding between the students and the text.

### **Teaching Goals**

*Words By Heart* was new to Jenny. She had never heard of the book nor did she know it was available within the school district. This did not come as a great surprise due to the fact that there are only a few texts featuring African-Americans on the approved list in the school district. I noted this point in Chapter One, where I observed that only 10% of the texts in fifth grade featured African-American protagonists. Consequently, had I not asked Jenny to participate in the study she would have been teaching *The Secret Garden* (Burnett, Frances, 1987) at that point in the year. This book featured a European setting and characters and served as a central text within the school district. Nonetheless, she was excited by the possibility of teaching *Words By Heart*. By our first meeting, Jenny had already found the time to read *Words By Heart* twice. When asked how she thought about the book after reading it for the first time she remarked, “I thought it was a really good book. I love the way the characters were developed. And I love the character changes throughout the book. And I thought there was a really strong message throughout the whole book.” At the outset Jenny had an agenda for what she wanted to share with students around the text. When asked, “What would be the focus of the first couple of lessons?” she responded,

I want them when we are first reading to definitely get the understanding of the setting and what was going on, what time period that we’re dealing with and how things worked. And then I want them to get a good understanding of

how the characters felt about different things that were going on.

She then added,

By the end of the book, I want them to be able to understand how Lena especially has changed. I want them to be able to realize that her family values and family morals caused her to make that change and to do something even though she really didn't want to. And that the family values and character that her father instilled in her was more important than the hatred she felt. Then, at the end I want them to be able to see that development and that change and also the consistency of the father's character. It comes out a lot.

Jenny's primary goal was to have her students understand the characters, family strength, and how people can change for the better, which required a general understanding of the time period, family dynamics, and moral character. She planned instruction that would help the students get to know the characters as a family and as individuals, although as she observed, she had no direct racial experiences that correlated with the characters. Jenny spoke to the connection she was trying to make this way:

...I could make connections to other things that I've read and seen on TV or movies or things like that. It's harder to connect to those things than the actual personal experiences. I can't say that I have experienced racism. There wasn't a whole lot of those things in my experience, because I lived in a well funded area and there wasn't really any situations like that. I do know a lot about family dynamics and I think the kids will relate to that.

Jenny may not have had experiences with racism, but that was only part of the story.

There was much to learn about family, honesty, and relationships. It was clear Jenny had more personal experience with the family and relationship dynamics. I would learn later that what she didn't know about racial injustices, she would find out.

When contemplating Jenny's readiness to teach the content of *Words By Heart*, it was equally as important to assess her readiness and knowledge of CRT principles. Through our conversations, I gathered that Jenny was not completely prepared to teach *Words By Heart*, especially as it related to CRT. She was not aware of the CRT principles and as a result could not knowingly connect CRT principles to the teaching of a multicultural text. Although this was an area where she did not have direct knowledge, as I will show, she did work with some CRT principles, without describing them in those terms.

### **Teacher Preparation**

In our initial talks, I asked Jenny what kind of staff development or classes she had experienced that might assist her in teaching diverse texts and engaging in culturally relevant teaching practices. I also asked her what she learned from teaching such texts in the past? She commented,

Well, kind of a little bit of both I guess. We had an urban education class in college, but that was very early on in my classes and it was more about teaching. It was more about scaffolding different things and I did not feel it was very culturally based or anything like that. In the [school] building, we had a couple of exchanges, conversations, workshops, and culturally-diverse classroom discussions. And because I just did my [school system] professional portfolio, I had to write reflections. We talked a lot about

different stereotypes with different races and things that are common to certain races. It was interesting to me, but at the same time I felt like they didn't have to use so many stereotype characteristics. I felt like it was telling me that an Asian boy should do this thing and an African-American should do this thing and the Caucasians do this. To me it's more about dealing with each individual kid and not so much the stereotype.

Jenny knew it was not necessarily stereotypes she wanted or needed to focus on to provide good learning opportunities to students. She tended to focus on making connections between the instruction and her students, which meant knowing who they were and developing personal relationships with them. She continued on in this conversation to speak to her experiences in diverse classrooms:

Where I grew up, I had some diverse teaching experiences. In my senior year in high school, I taught in the assistance program where I went into a classroom and it was a diverse. I was able to go two or three days a week for a half day. And just help out the teacher and do small groups.

Jenny had experience with diverse classrooms early and this continued when she entered the teaching profession. She had worked with many races and ethnicities and had learned from her classroom experience primarily how to make instruction engaging and employ some culturally relevant teaching practices (again without referring to them by that name specifically).

### **Teaching Words By Heart**

Even before Jenny engaged her students in *Words By Heart*, she had begun the teaching process. Jenny noted that when she did the second reading of the text

before she began teaching it, she underlined difficult vocabulary words, important events, and sensitive language and scenes. This, she said, would direct her to where she wanted to lead the discussion with the students. She also indicated that she would open the first lesson by having the students review the cover page, which contained a picture and the title of the text. This way the students could predict what the text would be about. The outline emerged for the first guided reading group using *Words By Heart*.

For the first lesson and while her other students did independent work, Jenny began a guided-reading group with six students. There were three females and three males in the group. In terms of ethnicity, there were two African-Americans (AA), one Caucasian (C), one Hispanic (H), one Asian (A), and one Indian (I) student. The students were as follows: AA female named Crystal, C female named Renee, H female named Maria, AA male named Steven, A male named Chris, I male named Richard. In the first lesson, Jenny previewed the book with the students by reflecting on the title and cover. They also reviewed the back cover of the book. Following the making of predictions, students were assigned the reading of chapters one and two and Jenny asked them to use sticky notes to identify traits of the characters. Jenny also asked the students to pay close attention to the characters' responses.

In the second lesson, Jenny began by asking her students about their homework assignment.

Jenny: What did you come up with for the homework? [Identify a character and describe his/her character traits.]

Crystal: Lena is very modest.

Steven: Miss Chism is Papa's boss and has a lot of control.

Richard: Jaybird Kelsey is uppity!

Jenny: What does it mean to be uppity?

Chris: To think well of yourself. Jaybird Kelsey is holding the contest because he thinks he is the best.

Jenny: In the contest you have to recite words out of the *Bible*.

Chris: Oh...*Words By Heart* [A connection is made by the student].

Jenny: I see a light bulb went off.

Crystal: She [Lena] is holding a book in her hand on the cover...maybe it's a *Bible*.

Jenny: Lena feels confident! She really wants to win. How does Jaybird Kelsey feel about the contest?

Maria: He thinks he is going to win.

Jenny: So we have two people who think they are going to win. Who are the other kids in the contest going to be?

Steven: Kids from her school.

Jenny: Will they be like her?

Crystal: No...she will be the only Black.

Jenny: Why is this contest important to her?

Chris: She wants to prove how smart she is. She wants to show others that she is just as good as they are.

Jenny: There is another reason...do you know what it is? Read this paragraph [pointing to the text, page 8].

Richard: She wants to make Papa proud. Papa just says hi and bye to her.

Crystal: I think Lena is a daddy's girl. I'm a daddy's girl. She likes to make her daddy happy.

Jenny: You are right. She does want too make her Papa proud. That is something many sons and daughters want to do in their family. Good connection. In the competition it is between Lena and Starnes. They are going back and forth. Go to page 10 [Jenny reads a paragraph].

Steven: That part of the story is messed up. It shows that he is a racist.

Because Lena's next verse would have been her 51<sup>st</sup>.

Jenny: So we can guess that Lena is going to have some trouble. What about Mr. Kelsey? Do you think he is a good man?

Richard: Well--everybody in the town is white. He judges white people by what they are wearing. He judges Lena by her skin tone. He judges her harder.

Jenny: Reads a paragraph from the text. Do you think he [Jaybird Kelsey] is showing prejudice or favoritism?

Chris: Both. Jaybird Kelsey could know Starnes' parents or their families could know one another.

Jenny: Lena wants to continue. Why?

Maria: She wants to win.

Jenny: That's a good place to end. Tonight you need to [be sure to] read Chapter 2 and 3. I want you to focus on Papa, Lena, and Claudie. How do they react to the results of the contest?

Later, Jenny and I discussed the "Daddy's girl" connection that Crystal made. Jenny

noted that students were able to relate to the basic nature of the kids in the book, even if it was difficult for them to understand the time period. This was the kind of connection Jenny said she had hoped students would make while reading *Words By Heart*.

There were several other strategies from that first lesson that were repeated in subsequent lessons and some of them were linked to the CRT principles. First, Jenny set high expectations for her students. She expected every student to participate in the reading and discussion of the lesson. If a student had not spoken in the course of a discussion, for example, then she cued them through eye contact that they should participate. Students appeared to respond to this positively by making an effort to participate in the conversation. Another way she set high expectations was through the daily homework assignments. Without exception, there were chapter(s) to read and an assignment each night which would serve as the opening of the next day's lesson. In this way students knew how each day's lesson would begin.

Secondly, Jenny made efforts to underscore the cultural context of the book by facilitating conversation about it. She did this by providing a back drop for the reading to be discussed. She was diligent in speaking to the time period and having students use all possible cues to help them understand it. For example in the first lesson, students guessed that the text's story took place in the early 1900's. Jenny confirmed that conjecture and she clarified that it was not the period of slavery, but that the civil rights movement had not yet taken place either. So there was a short discussion about racism, segregation, and Jim Crow. Jenny made sure that she was more facilitator than director of the lesson by asking what each student knew of those

pieces of history. Finally, Jenny made an effort to keep the instruction student centered. She discovered early that students connected to the children in the book. Therefore, she asked questions that were centered around those children rather than focus more time on the historical context. She expected that this would help maintain their interest in the text.

Several lessons later, the term Sambo appeared in the text followed by the term nigger. It was a tense scene in the book and came during a climax. The scene reads as follows:

Papa drew a long breath. "Since we can't agree on this thing, why don't

we go see Miss Chism? I'm on my way over now and you're welcome to ride." Mr. Haney's chin suddenly jutted with pride. "I have my own mount," he said. "I don't have to ride with Sambos." Lena took her breath silently and looked at Papa. His face was still mild. Untroubled, like a wall that an arrow had bounced off. Papa stand up to him, she begged him in her mind. Smudge him right into the ground like Miss Chism did. (Sebestyn, 1968, p. 69)

Papa opened the door of a built-on shed and looked in. "I'm seeing if you have Miss Chism's wire and posts."

"You can't do that," Tater protested. Lena stood up in the wagon, anxiously watching. "This ain't your place."

"It's Miss Chism's place," Papa said. "And I need to have some facts to tell her. I need to know I'm not being fooled again." He started to

open one of the saggy barn doors.

Redness flashed into Tater's face. He threw himself against the door.

“Listen, nigger, you stay out of the barn. My pap, he'll kill you as quick as he would a bug.” (Sebestyen, 1968, p.72)

The students read this part of the text with a bitter anxiousness. Jenny and the students addressed the term Sambo in the lesson:

Jenny: It is a racial slur. It is a derogatory term with a history of origination in London and Africa. It is when people are a mix of different indigenous tribes. It was used to make people not feel good about themselves. So Mr. Haney is making an outright racist remark. Lena wants Papa to get revenge, but Papa keeps a cool head. Read page 68. What is Lena noticing?

Renee: That Papa is a good, fair person.

Jenny: Why is Papa not getting angry with Mr. Haney?

Crystal: Because he is fair.

Jenny: Papa sees Mr. Haney as a person. He is a father and Papa hopes there is some good in him.

Richard: How does that make you patient?

Jenny: Because he is taking such abuse, but he never does anything bad to Mr. Haney. He wants Mr. Haney to see someone be kind to him. Papa is being patient by being kind.

Richard: He didn't do any thing when Mr. Haney talked down to him. He wasn't standing up for himself.

Jenny: Would it do any good to call Mr. Haney a racial slur?

Maria: No.

Jenny: Papa chose to take the good road. He treated Mr. Haney with respect. It might not make a difference right now, but maybe later it will.

During a later interview, I asked Jenny about her thoughts when she read the text and discussed it with students. She observed:

Well, the only time I was uncomfortable was when the word Sambo was used in the book. And that's just a word that has always made me uncomfortable (along with others) and it was hard for me to talk about that with the kids and the kids didn't want to say it either. Even when we were reading through and they kind of paused and didn't want to say it...they were all very standoffish. We talked about it. How it was meant to be derogatory and it's something people said. And so we discussed it in that way. I had looked up the word so I would be ready to talk about it.

As we continued in the interview she revisited the subject several times, indicating it was very much on her mind. She stated later,

I wanted to include the racism aspect of it into the lesson, but I also wanted to focus on the character aspect of it as well. There has probably been more of the character talk in the lessons than it has been with the racism issue. But I know it has come up quite a bit in dealing with how people deal with things. I want to look at different viewpoints about the same situation where things are this way or another way, and Mr. Haney is another way or the Haney boys or the Haney family and how Lena is...just all the different vantage points and viewpoints of the same issue and situation.

Jenny knew that the word Sambo had to be discussed. To ignore it would have been to diminish the tension between races during that time period and not effectively educate the students on how racial slurs had been used. Although uncomfortable, Jenny was prepared to speak to the terminology to give it some context and bring background to the term. However, her discussion about the term encouraged very little feedback. The students gave little input about their working knowledge of the term and they did not personalize their experience with racial slurs. There was no acknowledgement of the term nigger in the text although the scene was intense. There was no deep discussion of the derogatory term nigger, although the students wrote a short reflection of how each character might have felt during that interchange. In this way, Jenny tried to speak to different aspects of situations to include the black and white adults as well as the black and white children in the story. She wanted all voices to be heard for the benefit of her students. The way Jenny dealt with these derogatory slurs suggested that she was interested especially in how the terms affected the characters in the story and how the students responded to those efforts.

Near the end of teaching the text, Jenny began to hand over more of the direction of the lessons to the students. She employed some new strategies, which seemed to be standard for the students, but ones I had not yet observed in Jenny's teaching. As with every lesson, she began this one with a question from the previous night's homework. That homework involved the student's (acting as Lena) writing an apology letter to Miss Chism for taking books she did not ask to borrow.

Jenny: You should have written your letter to Miss Chism from Lena apologizing for taking the book. Tell me one thing you think Lena learned

from taking the book?

Chris: That stealing is wrong.

Crystal: That Lena did not want to disappoint her father.

Richard: Apologizing takes a lot of courage.

Jenny: [to a non-responding student] Have you two finished your letter?

Renee: No...

Jenny: You can finish your letter at recess and share tomorrow.

Jenny: What is Papa doing at the beginning of this chapter?

Steven: Papa is apologizing to Mrs. Haney and the children.

Jenny: Not quite. Let's read on page 73 and 74. What does he mean by 'master yourself'?

Chris: To think before you speak or act.

Jenny: Let's finish page 74. Do you think Lena will change?

Richard: She will after her father's death.

Jenny: We don't know yet if Papa dies. Let's do some of our reading together--beginning on page 75. We'll do some popcorn reading. Jenny calls on a student to read.

Richard [Reads page 75]:

“Well,” Papa said, blandly clicking up the team, “lucky you don’t. You have to remember how it is, Lena. It’s hard, sharecropping. Like running in a squirrel cage, knowing you can’t stop. Each year you go into debt to keep your family alive, and while you’re working the whole next year to pay back, it happens all over again. With us, we’re

different. We pay rent out of what we make, and if we can't, we move on--to a new place, new ways. We have some hope in our lives, enough to be a little proud and choosy. Folks like the Haney's, they can't leave. It's like a prison, and you get to feeling like your guilty of something just because you can't ever come out ahead. And you itch to take revenge on somebody. Anybody. Because of the way you have to live." (Sebestyen, 1968, p.75)

Jenny: What does Papa mean about the sharecropping?

Chris: They have to pay debts and get more money to plant again.

Jenny: The sharecropping process is a prison for those who do that. I think Papa is seeing the Haney's point of view.

Jenny [Reading]:

"I never told you, Lena." Papa said in a softer voice. "You would have had a brother, older than you, if he had lived. He would have been nearly Tater's age now. I think about him when I see Tater."

A big brother. She couldn't imagine it. Someone tall to run to. "What was his name?"

"Your mother wanted to him to be called Ben, too. And then there was another baby after him, born dead. Then you came, the year before your mother took sick--so now you're all I've got from that time."

(Sebestyen, 1968, p.76)

Maria: My mom had a stillborn baby [making a connection to the text].

Jenny: That happens sometimes, but they had other children and had a close

family.

Jenny: Popcorn [students raise their hands asking to be called on to read].

Chris [Reading the next passage]:

She didn't know what to say. She knew he didn't expect her to fill the places of all those others he had lost, but she wanted to try, for his sake. She would have to find a way, as he had found a way to endure losing them. (Sebestyen, 1968, p.76)

Chris called on Steven to read.

Steven [Reads passage]:

"I'm sorry I hit Tater," she murmured. It seemed like something she could do for the brother she wished she had known. And the little baby. And her mother. (Sebestyen, 1968, p. 76)

Steven called on Maria to read.

Maria [Reads passage]:

Papa put his hand on her knee. "I know you are." He handed her the reins and lifted her satchel up into the seat between them. Gingerly he lifted out the book. Or meant to. What came out was the cover, torn loose from the rest. Lena gulped. He reached in again and brought out a packet of pages trailing the threads that once held them to the rest of the book. Then another sheaf, crushed, and bits of shredded canvas from the spine. "I think Miss Chism's Pearls got pretty well scattered before the swine," he said. (Sebestyen, 1968, p. 77)

Jenny: What does Papa mean by that 'before the swine'?

[Students are silent.]

Jenny: He means before its time to kill the swine. What are snickers?

Crystal: Little laughs or candy.

Jenny: I like the candy better, although they mean laughing.

Renee [Reads passage. Student calls on another student to read].

Richard [Reads passage].

Jenny: Ok. Your homework is to read chapters 7 and 8. Focus on Miss Chism.

What do we learn about her?

As Jenny reviewed the homework assignment the next day, it was apparent that not all had completed it. She gave a simple directive that they would stay in from recess, complete the assignment, and share with the group tomorrow. The students did not disagree or resist her direction about how the assignment would be completed. Here Jenny, again appeared to be conveying high expectations for her students. In conversing with Jenny immediately after that lesson, she commented that some of her students needed structure at school to get the homework done. She seemed glad to offer the support the students needed. She noted that she often allowed students to do their classwork and/or homework at recess. Often it was a decision that the students made and not Jenny.

A strategy she employed during the lesson was having students do popcorn reading. This strategy involved having a student read and then that student called on another student to read. What was interesting about this strategy was that each student decided how much or little he/she would read. Jenny did not designate the stopping point. The students took advantage of this opportunity, generally reading a paragraph

or two. Students also called on others who had not read. The students appeared to take the responsibility associated with popcorn-style reading seriously. In addition to the popcorn reading, Jenny had directed students to ask questions about pieces of the text that confused them. For the first half of the book, she had anticipated confusing sections and offered students prior ideas for clarification. Later, she would ask students to identify where they were confused and ask a question that would help them figure out the meaning. The students were somewhat responsive by asking what particular words meant. However, it was not altogether clear that the student's strategic capabilities allowed them to effectively know how to ask the right question to clarify their confusion. Jenny seemed to be working on building those strategic capabilities.

Yet another strategy that Jenny exhibited was making positive comments on parents and families in the lesson. This seemed especially important to her and appeared linked to her focus on character development and change. Midway through the lesson, two of her students connected to Claudie having a still-born baby. This was a sensitive topic, but as always, Jenny confronted it immediately and with delicacy. Jenny acknowledged the life-death cycle, but immediately confirmed that families often go on to have other children and can be close because of or despite these occurrences. Students nodded in agreement with Jenny. Throughout the lessons, Jenny acknowledged the strength and love of the family in the novel. She also connected that goodness to the lives of her students.

In the final scenes of the book, the most climactic point takes place. The students and Jenny had been anticipating what would happen to the characters,

particularly Lena and Papa. In this scene, Papa has been shot and is dying. He shares some of his final moments with Lena. Many students had suspected this point would come. The students followed in complete silence as Jenny read the following passage:

They went back through the brush. She understood why Papa had sent her away. This part was between him and the Lord. They didn't need her. She walked forward in her shell of numbness, parting the silence that surged around her. She could taste the pennies. At the fallen tree, she tied the horse to one of the finger roots.

The final shred of smoke from the untended fire rose through the branches, silver in the low sunlight. Lingered. Leaving.

She said, "Forgive me Papa. I couldn't say last things."

She went to the end of the wagon, into a silence where her heart pounded. He had coughed up blood at the last. She wet the hem of her skirt from the jug and wiped his face, and laid the green grass over it. The dirty bandage on his thumb was trailing loose. She took it off. The cut had started to heal--all of the life-loving power in him had been trustfully making him as good as new. Her numbness broke, and she threw back her head in one long final wail of grief. (Sebestyn, 1968, p.147)

Some of the students had read ahead and were anticipating this occurrence. Their responses were more heartfelt than anything. They shared in the discussion with emotion brimming:

Jenny: What does Papa say to [Lena]?

Maria: Not to cry...that everything will be okay...and she is to take him home. Papa says to take Tater first and then come back and get him.

Crystal: I couldn't have done that. I would have been crying the whole time.

Chris: Lena had a lot of courage. When things get hard, we all find courage.

Jenny: What does Lena do?

Chris: She's upset, but she takes Tater.

[Jenny gives a sequence of events.]

Jenny: What does Lena say to Claudie about going back to Scatter Creek?

Richard: Papa brought them there to grow up.

Chris: At first she wanted to go back, but now she wants to stay and face the problems there.

Crystal: I bet she's scared, but I would have stayed too. She's becoming like Papa.

Richard: She is the one who changes the most. She knows how to forgive.

Jenny: I agree. What else? How has Lena changed? If that had happened to me then I'm not sure I could have been that nice to the Haney's.

Steven: She forgives Winslow. He should have went to jail. When someone does something wrong that is what should happen.

Chris: Yea. We never really find out what happens to him.

Maria: I don't think I would be nice to the Haney's either. I would have been mad if someone hurt my Dad.

Crystal: Or anybody in my family.

Crystal: At first she hated the Haney's, but now she is helping them and

caring for them.

Jenny: Is the future hopeful?

Chris: Kind of...in between...when Lena's attitude begins to change her father didn't live to see it.

Steven: Yes...I think things will get better [all students nod in agreement].

Maria: Just like they are better now, but more change needs to happen.

In this final text discussion Jenny encouraged students to express their opinions (reader/self to text connection) by giving her own. Throughout this conversation more than the others, she gave more wait time so students would speak their thoughts. She continued to focus on her original goal of having the students look at the change of the characters. Jenny implemented the strategy of teacher acting as a facilitator continuously in this lesson. Throughout this 35-minute lesson, Jenny did not answer a single question. She asked questions and offered her ideas, but she didn't intervene in the thoughts or comments of the students. Undoubtedly, this was difficult given that she could have pressed other issues, but her focus was on change of the characters and letting students express themselves around that element.

### **Strategies for Interacting with Students**

Observing Jenny in class revealed that she had a strong, positive relationship with her students. Her classroom was filled with student work and the students sat in clusters of four or five, rather than in rows. Repeated observations confirmed the nature of their relationship. On the first day of observations, I found Jenny working at the computer center with two students who were finishing a project. Jenny seldom spent time at her desk. Most of the time, she was working with individual students or

with a small group. During interviews, Jenny would shuffle papers to make room for us to sit at her desk. She casually mentioned that her desk was most useful for accumulating papers, not necessarily for sitting and working. Her commitment during the day was to be *with* her students, not working separately at her desk.

Jenny appeared to have a patient and kind spirit. Even when students were not performing or behaving up to her expectations, she made that observation and then offered a solution. At two different guided-reading lessons, not all of the students understood what they had read. Jenny attributed their lack of understanding to their not having read carefully. She provided the following feedback at one of the lessons, “The conversation has only been between a few people because some of you aren’t reading carefully. If you need to take notes while you are reading, you can take them in your journal.” It was not clear whether the students followed up on her advice, but they seemed better prepared during future lessons. This became evident as Jenny decided to test how carefully students were reading. In a follow-up lesson Jenny handed students white boards and markers so they could respond to some questions about the previous night’s reading. Jenny asked only three explicit questions:

- 1) Why is Lena going to miss school?
- 2) Who is Miss Chism?
- 3) What does Lena get really excited about?

Students answered the first and second questions correctly and the third question was answered correctly by all of the students except one. The students responded with some excitement about being quizzed with the white boards. However, Jenny did not grade this quiz.

During some of the guided-reading lessons, students wanted to blurt out information or interrupt someone else to share additional information, clarify a comment, or offer another point of view. The students brought a significant enthusiasm to the group, especially as the climax neared in the book. Jenny was always careful to ensure fair participation, but she made sure not to quash their excitement. She reminded students to be respectful, but prefaced her comments with a remark that let them know what they had to say was welcomed. For example, during one such lesson, a student said, “I want to tell what happened to Papa. I already know.” Jenny responded, “Well, I know you have something good to share, but we are not there yet. But you can tell me once the group is dismissed so you won’t tell everyone.” She encouraged them to get their perspectives out even if she exceeded the 25 minutes she set aside for the group. She wanted them to learn to share respectfully and consistently reiterated the message that their sharing was important and valued, which was linked to her view of the importance of reader response when considering literature.

The interaction between Jenny and her students was one that allowed for considerable praise. During the lessons Jenny often verbally rewarded students for their intellectual accomplishments. Like her problem-solving remarks, her praise comments were two fold. When praising a student she explained why. Midway through the book, one of the students made a connection to the cover of the book. The student said, “There’s a picture on the front of Mr. Haney with a shotgun, and Papa and Lena. Jenny responded, “Good, you are using the pictures to make sense of the characters.” Jenny encouraged students to employ reading strategies to help them

make connections and better understand the story. Jenny was generous with her praise especially when it was warranted, and those warrants were linked to the ways in which students employed reading strategies that allowed them to better comprehend the text and make connections to it and its characters.

The interactions between Jenny and her students were designed to monitor students' reading comprehension, ensure equitable participation, and encourage continued engagement through verbal praise and reward for responsiveness to the text. These strategies allowed her to get to know her students and build rapport with them. She believed this relationship building to be a central feature of an engaged classroom culture. At the core of her effort was her desire to engender mutual respect between students and to understand and respect the characters in *Words By Heart*. Because of the way Lena and her father showed respect and care to the Haney's, despite their racism, allowed Jenny to use the text to support several goals that reflected CRT principles, namely pursuing respectful, participatory structures and setting and reinforcing high expectations.

### **Student-to-Student Interactions**

The guided reading group had a balance of race and gender. The small number of students in the group also allowed for close observations of their interaction with Jenny as well as with each other. One general observation was that the students all appeared to be on friendly terms with each other, except for one student (Renee) who seemed to be quiet and often the least prepared in the group. No one was ever disrespectful to this particular student, but rarely did she engage in conversations with the others. When Jenny and I discussed Renee, Jenny noted that she was a bright

student, but her challenging home life kept her from completing her homework and she did not seem as motivated as the other students. Still, Jenny was always persistent in helping her complete her assignments and spent extra time with her. Despite Renee's reticence, the students let her intermingle as much or as little as she desired. Moreover, Renee seemed to be the most concerned about my presence, as she often focused her attention on me rather than on the activity of the reading group.

During the reading lesson, the students regularly commented to each other on the progress of the book or their feelings. Perhaps the most vivid commentary came in just a few sentences in one of the last sessions. At the end of the lesson, the Asian male student, Chris, commented to his African-American male peer Steven, "I thought we were going to read *The Secret Garden*." Steven responded, "Yeah....but we don't have to read that...this is much better than *Secret Garden*...anything's better than that book." This conversation was not directed at Jenny. I just happened to overhear these two boys. The two boys seemed to be good friends. They always sat next to one another. I did not over hear any more of their conversation, but it appeared to at least one of them that *Words By Heart* proved to be a more interesting text to them than *Secret Garden*. The boys seemed comfortable enough with one another to offer up such feelings.

In the final session, Jenny asked the students if they liked the book. Crystal responded, "I liked it. It seemed spiritual. It brought faith to me." Another student, Maria, responded, "I like the action...it was a nail biter." Steven countered, "I liked chapters 12, 13, and 14. The beginning was slow." Chris remarked, "In the beginning it was boring, then it got better. Overall, it was good." Students appeared to play off

each other's comments on the book. Their intellectual capacity surfaced as they went on to more clearly discuss how they thought the book should have ended, what they would have done, and in their discussion of the author's authenticity of events. The students were not only connected by their relatively high reading capacities, but also by their friendships and their interest in similar topics.

The students seemed to be quite concerned about their ability to keep up with the assignments, again, a testament in part to Jenny's high expectations. Before Jenny would begin, the group of students would ask each other if they had read and completed the assignments. This seemed to be less of a rivalry and more of a confirmation that everyone had done their reading so as to demonstrate group cohesion. I would also attribute this to the high expectations that Jenny had set for the group. Jenny noted that these students had been together in a guided-reading group since the beginning of the school year. Therefore, they had developing relationships that extended beyond being in this assigned group together.

As a group, the students repeatedly found ways to support one another. For example, if a student struggled to decode a word, another student would offer a pronunciation. Jenny often executed wait time here, so that she was not the first to offer the pronunciation. Only if students were wrong, would she correct the missed pronunciation. The students seemed comfortable receiving this kind of support from their peers. Another example involved assignments. If Jenny gave an assignment to be completed in the group, the students frequently asked if they could work on it cooperatively. They seemed to prefer working as a unit as opposed to individually. However, I could not determine if the students were more or less successful

completing the assignments as a group versus working alone.

Finally, it became apparent over time that the students trusted one another in sharing what some might consider confidential information. An example of this was demonstrated when two of the girls mentioned that their mothers had give birth to still- born children. When this occurred, an immediate response from another student was, “I’m sorry.” The response was so automatic and quiet that I am not sure who heard it. His sentiment was not directly acknowledged. As another example, in one guided reading lesson, a student shared her academic insecurity. The lesson was focused on Lena participating in the Bible-verse contest, which was a difficult task. When the group discussed the contest, Maria stated, “I could never do that. To say all those verses would be scary. I think I would have quit.” Other students assured her that she was quite capable of performing such a task, but her comments conveyed her judgments of her own abilities. To someone who had come to know her as one who excels academically, her comments might have sounded strange. But her peers quickly uplifted her and tried to build her confidence.

### **Applications of Culturally Relevant Teaching Principles**

Throughout Jenny’s teaching of *Words By Heart* the employment of culturally relevant teaching practices varied. Jenny consistently demonstrated the following:

- Communication of high expectations (Ladson Billings, 1994)
- Teachers as facilitators (rather than merely knowledge transmitters) (Ladson Billings, 1994)

I also found that Jenny used the following two culturally relevant strategies on a regular basis, but not as consistently as the preceding two:

- Student-centered instruction (Ladson Billings, 1994)
- Positive perspectives on parents and families (Ladson Billings, 1994)

Rarely did Jenny draw on the following culturally relevant strategy:

- Learning within the context of the culture (Ladson Billings, 1994)

I did not observe the following strategies applied during any of the lessons:

- Reshaping, transforming the curriculum (Ladson Billings, 1994)
- Culturally-mediated instruction (Ladson Billings, 1994)

The frequency counts in Figure 4.1 below are a rough indicator of the degree to which I observed Jenny’s reliance on CRT principles during the teaching of the text. I obtained these counts by doing a careful analysis of my field notes, noting each time Jenny’s instruction could be characterized by one or more of the seven CRT principles suggested by Ladson-Billings (1994).

**Figure 4.1. Frequency of Applied CRT Principles in Jenny’s Teaching of *Words By Heart***

CRT Principle	Number of times CRT Principle was demonstrated
Communication of high expectations	16
Teachers as facilitators (rather than merely knowledge transmitters)	10
Positive perspectives on parents and families	5
Student-centered instruction	4

Learning within the context of the culture	2
Reshaping, transforming the curriculum	0
Culturally mediated instruction	0

As the frequencies indicate, Jenny employed high expectations as a typical part of her classroom structure. At almost all times students were on task and engaged in the lesson. This was an indication of how Jenny held students accountable for their work completion. During my visits to Jenny’s classroom, her students were generally well-behaved and demonstrated engaged classroom interaction patterns. On four occasions she stopped instruction to redirect the entire class or individuals to make sure they were on task in their centers. In our informal conversations, Jenny spoke to how she does several things to set high expectations. She modeled the behaviors she expected from students, set ground rules for the class with her students, and enforced the idea that *all* work was to be completed. Jenny’s standards were accepted and acted on by her students. On each occasion where Jenny redirected a student or had someone stay in for recess to complete work, she was met with an agreeable response. Her high expectations were well received and it seemed to provide the classroom context with a measure of stability. In addition, nightly homework was regularly assigned and was almost always completed by students with only a few exceptions.

As the foregoing classroom vignettes indicate, Jenny routinely served as the facilitator during lessons. She asked many open-ended questions, which gave students an opportunity to express themselves without concern over there being a distinctly wrong or right answer. She also often sought the opinion of the students. She wanted

to know their feelings on the personality of the characters, the climax moments, the changes in the characters, and the ending. She looked for ways to make the lessons reflective. One of the assignments involved reflecting on Lena's stealing a book from Miss Chism. Jenny pushed students to be introspective and empathetic, putting themselves in the shoes of the characters. This often resulted in the students making connections to the text and being able to respond accordingly. In addition, Jenny allowed students equal talking time during the lessons. Rarely, was the conversation dominated by Jenny. The students gave reflections, asked questions, and guided conversation throughout the lessons, which added considerable value to the quality of the discussion. Jenny's heavy facilitator role was welcomed by the students and reading-group interactions indicated this role was constructive.

The culturally relevant strategy of positive perspectives on parents and families was also a strong part of Jenny's pedagogical repertoire. On a regular basis, while teaching *Words By Heart*, Jenny promoted the strength of the family unit. On occasion she would confirm or state directly the importance of family. She helped the students to see how family structure was important in the character's life, her own life, and their own lives. Perhaps the nature of the text, which centered on family, produced a natural conversation around family life, relationships, and connections. However, Jenny always made positive connections when she had the students reflect on their own families. At one point in the book, it was clear that a character, Miss Chism, was without family and friends when no one attended a lavish party she had organized. Jenny asked, "Can you name someone in your family who cares about you?" Every student gave an answer and Jenny responded to each student. Her direct

acknowledgement of family members indicated that she had personal knowledge of them. In the same lesson, a female student remarked on how they would have felt if she were Miss Chism and no one cared for her. The student said, “If that happened to one of us, then we’d be sad.” In such moments, the students appeared to recognize the importance of family/friend connections. Likewise, students related to how much Lena wanted to please Papa and make him proud. At the end of the book one student remarked, “I’m going to be like Lena and make my parents proud of me one day.” This remark came after weeks of Jenny attempting to capture how the character, Lena, changed over time and became more like her father. Jenny stated how we all wanted to make our parents proud. The students appeared welcoming of the positive perspectives of family and parents. Jenny’s attention to the positive parent aspects was tightly integrated into her instruction. In a number of ways, it might be described as a central characteristic of her efforts to teach *Words By Heart*, consistent with her focus on Lena’s character’s change as tied to her family circumstance.

Jenny also made a concerted effort to make her instruction student-centered. For example, on one occasion Jenny went so far as to ask the students how they wanted to start the lesson. When possible, she offered choices to the students as to how the lesson would unfold. Jenny also gave the students opportunities to insert themselves into the story and to speak from the viewpoint of a character. This was of great interest to the students and they often took on the persona of the characters, while interjecting pieces of their own personality. Although, such approaches were not a consistent or daily part of Jenny’s teaching, they were noticeably present, and appeared to be linked to her efforts to foster her readers’ responsiveness to the text.

The frequency counts indicated that Jenny did not or minimally employed other culturally relevant strategies. For example, Jenny seemed to be transforming instruction by bringing sensitive issues (although in little depth) to the surface, but there was no concrete evidence of her making efforts to reshape the curriculum. Nor was it apparent that instruction was being culturally mediated in the ways Ladson-Billings (1994) advocates. However, there was the occasional demonstration of learning within the context of the culture. The areas where Jenny did not demonstrate CRT principles are an indication of where she might continue to grow and learn as to more effectively engage her diverse students. However, it is important to note that in a group as diverse as Jenny's, cultural mediation that takes into consideration the full range of the diversity could be very time consuming because of the variations it would entail. I say more about this in chapter 6.

Although Jenny expressed no extensive formal training in the area of culturally- responsive teaching, she had developed a tool that allowed her to connect instruction to her students. What was clear was her continuous thinking about what her students needed, asking questions about what they could connect to, looking for topics of interest to them, confirming their family life, and creating a willingness on the part of the students and her to engage in teaching and learning around the focal text.

When I asked whether or not she would teach *Words By Heart* in the future, she responded with an adamant, "Definitely!" She based this decision on how much students enjoyed the book. She reflected, "Because of the kids--they said it was slow at first for them, but they ended up really enjoying it. They really liked it. I think

there's a lot of good values that came from it." As a result, Jenny considered adding more multicultural literature to her repertoire and developing a somewhat deeper comfort level for culturally-sensitive topics such as race and race conflict that texts such as *Words By Heart* surface.

### **Summary**

Overall, Jenny had portions of culturally relevant principles in place when teaching multicultural literature to diverse students. Those teachings were supported by practices that she built on a daily basis. Jenny was transparent in her goals of relationship building, communicating high expectations, and encouraging positive perspectives on families and parents. Jenny demonstrated processes that allowed all students to contribute and participate in the lessons. She also showed her willingness to develop her own skills in areas where she was not certain. Generally speaking, Jenny presented a reasonable exemplar of culturally relevant instruction when teaching multicultural literature to diverse students. However, it may be more reasonable to conclude that Jenny represented a teacher who was quite skilled at fostering participation, whether it can be classified as fully CRT-principle driven or not.

## **Chapter Five**

### **A Veteran's Teacher's Perspective on and Approach to Teaching Multicultural Literature**

The second teacher I observed teaching *Words By Heart* to a group of diverse students was Naomi (a pseudonym). Naomi also taught 5th grade, but in a different elementary school located within the same school district. Not surprisingly, there were similarities as well as differences to be found between the two teacher's experiences. Unlike Jenny who tended to be more demure, Naomi had a vivacious personality. She presented herself as the kind of person who had never met a stranger. When I approached her to be a part of this study, she immediately agreed. At no point was there any hesitation about her willingness to participate in the study. She would be teaching the selected text to a group of 10 diverse fifth graders, including 3 Black students, 4 White students, 2 Latino students, and 1 Asian student. Later, I would discover that this was not the first study she had agreed to be a part of. In the past, she had participated in at least one other research study and she was familiar with what it might require.

In our initial conversation, Naomi and I talked about what the research required. I became aware that Naomi had only recently read *Words By Heart*. She found the text to be compelling, which spurred her interest in it. In our first interview she explained, "I had seen the book for several years having taught [the] William and Mary [program]. I had never read it. I've had kids that read it but we never had a chance to really talk about it. I love the book. I love the story."

### **Who is Naomi?**

#### **Background**

At the time of the study, Naomi who is African-American, had been teaching

for 30 years, 23 of which had been at her current school site. Early in her career she taught in Pennsylvania and New York. Over the course of her career she had taught first, third, fourth, and fifth grade in the elementary school and seventh and eighth grade in middle school, but she said she enjoyed fifth grade the most, which she had been teaching for nearly 20 years. Naomi received her bachelor's degree from Adelphi University and her master's from Hofstra University. She had continued her education and had 60 credits beyond her masters. In addition, she had mentored several novice teachers and had been viewed by the principal and staff as a school leader.

Naomi had slowly developed her teaching repertoire over time. She had taught in predominantly white schools as well as in schools with diverse populations. Her range of teaching experiences had allowed her to become knowledgeable about teaching practices and teaching texts that allowed her to focus on her students.

### **Teaching Philosophy**

Reading had been a focus for Naomi for the last several years. The school where she works had been departmentalized and she had dedicated her efforts to refining her teaching of reading because this was one of two subjects she was assigned. This concentration provided Naomi the idea that reading should be meaningful, interesting, and connected to students' lives. Naomi said often throughout our meetings that she wanted her students to know and enjoy the characters. Not unlike Jenny, this was the beginning of her focus when she taught a text.

Naomi believed that, when students enjoyed a text, they took greater care to

connect to the story. Naomi centered her teaching on helping students understand what they were reading and providing a strong foundation from which they could enjoy the story and make those personal connections. Naomi had established herself as a teacher who took time to develop understanding, to push students to appreciate the texts, and make reading an enjoyable part of school. Naomi's principal described her as a teacher that pushed her kids academically. Naomi had taken her responsibility for fulfilling this notion of her teaching seriously and was deeply committed to it.

### **Teaching Goals**

Naomi taught in a profoundly diverse classroom that included students from many cultures and socioeconomic backgrounds. In our conversations, Naomi discussed how she always put her students at the center of planning lessons and providing instruction. From the beginning Naomi knew she would have to teach the students the culture of the time period in *Words By Heart*, as this was not a topic about which they had much knowledge. She was interested in helping them *understand* the time period and the nature of the characters. In one of our first interviews, she shared not only her feelings about the book, but also something else she found intriguing: "I think there is really good character development. There are places where you can really try to get kids to think." She went on to comment on the layout of the first few lessons saying,

The first couple of lessons will be some on author's purpose, the figurative language, get the kids used to that, the character's relationships to one another, get them to know who the characters are....also the character's

personalities, to get them clear on that, the kind of person Papa is, the kind of person Lena is, as we continue in the story to see if they stay true to that personality.

She continued to explain her thinking about the teaching of the text:

I found this book to be written in a very sophisticated manner with the figurative language, with the description, and also with some of the issues. So, I felt that I needed to talk a lot about the characters and their relationships to one another because kids get caught up in characters and who's related to whom and what is this character with this character. So I wanted to spend time on that. The whole idea of the contest in the beginning was around biblical scripture. I wanted to spend some time on that. I also wanted to spend a lot of time because it's very flowery and there's figurative language. I wanted to spend time on that as we read the story, so that the kids would see some of the deeper meanings in some of the text, but not heavily rely on it so that they're bored. So as I read it, I've made constant notes in the book to highlight certain key things, figurative language, characters, and relationships.

This would be Naomi's lead into her guided-reading lessons. But there was also the question of where she wanted her students to be after reading the text. In the end, Naomi wanted the students to leave the story enriched. Her role would be to open that door for the students. Although she felt that her students were not very sophisticated readers, she wanted the story to be real to them. She explained in these words,

My end goal, I want the kids to enjoy the book. After I read it, I thought it is a wonderful story and I want the kids to like Lena. I want the kids to appreciate

Papa. I want the kids to understand the time.

She continued to elaborate, “Now is a very different time. Kids don’t have nearly the kinds of experiences that Lena’s family has. So, I wonder, it’s going to be fun to see what the kids would think about it.” In the same conversation, she noted that she did not want to focus on what might be typical in a guided-reading lesson such as story elements. She felt this would make the text too mundane and not steer towards the truly important issues both personal and historical that are raised in the text. She wanted to lead the students on a road to understanding the characters *and* the time period. In turn, she wanted to hear their thinking and words regarding how they would have felt and responded if they were in similar situations. Essentially, her work would always be geared to building an understanding, and somewhat unlike Jenny, with a view toward building understanding around the time period in particular.

### **Teacher Preparation**

As with Jenny, I asked Naomi what kind of professional development or classes she had taken to teach diverse texts or to employ strategies about culturally relevant teaching practices? Or given her veteran status, had she learned on the job? She observed,

I think because of the complex issues, there’s no development that could really prepare you for this. It’s just life...living life. I think I am able to predict and this is because of experience, not professional development, but just having taught so long. I can anticipate places where the kids will get stuck. I can anticipate parts that will go over their heads. So, I think I will be able to hit on those places especially when it comes to author’s purpose and

also find a gentle way of approaching some of these issues without making them cynical, without giving them any thought to how I might feel about some of these issues because I don't want to color their impression with my own feelings. So, I do have to be thoughtful about that.

As Naomi read *Words By Heart*, she conveyed that, "The author did a marvelous job of getting you to know the characters." As Naomi prepared for the teaching of the text she thought of how she could build upon the personality of each character. She wanted to give the students a chance to know the characters and connect with them. She felt that this would allow students to see into the nature of the characters, thus, better understand the choices they made and the impact of the relationships among them, given the time period in which they were situated.

### **Teaching Words By Heart**

Naomi taught the text to a group of 10 students. There were five boys and five girls in the group. In terms of ethnicity, there were three African-Americans (AA), four Whites (W), two Hispanics (H), and one Asian (A) student. They were as follows: The girls in the group were Tracie (AA), Amanda, (H), Sonya (H), Leslie (W), and Kim (A). The boys were Jacob (AA), Sean (AA), Greg (W), Alex (W), and Jay (W).

Watching Naomi teach brought some surprises, especially regarding some of her strategies. Several were unexpected, while others were direct and seemed uncharacteristically straightforward given my interview with her. During the first observation, Naomi opened the lesson with an anticipation guide (See Appendix B). The guide consisted of two parts--agree/disagree questions and a vocabulary section.

There were seven simple statements that the students were asked to fill in as agree or disagree and five vocabulary terms they were asked to define. The introductory lesson evolved as follows:

Naomi: I'm giving you an anticipation guide. Read these seven statements and put whether you agree or disagree. This is even before you read the story. This will not be graded.

Leslie: So you want us to read the statements and fill in the answers?

Naomi: I will read the statements and you decide as a group whether or not you agree or disagree.

[Naomi read the statements one by one and the students answered them.]

Naomi: We will come back and review these answers after we read chapter five. Let's go over some of the vocabulary. Go to your sheet.

[The students read the pages where a word was used and guessed at the definitions. Naomi affirmed some answers and corrected others.]

Naomi: There's a huge clue to the time period...

Sonya: The outhouse.

Naomi: Let's read the third paragraph (page 1). [Naomi read]:

Her Papa and step-mama rode on the wagon seat. Lena sat in the back with the little kids, jouncing like a meal sack while her stiff-starched dress mashed to smithers. Bethel Springs Schoolhouse, where they were going for the contest, was used for grade school on weekdays and for church on Sundays, now that the dance hall was gone. Before that, folks had gone to church in the big solid-floored

Melodyland with a real piano up front. But the congregation prayed mightily every Sunday that this blight on the community would be banished, and one afternoon during an electrical storm, it was. Of course, they didn't have church either after that, and had to use the schoolhouse. Papa said God taught us a lesson sometimes by giving us what we asked for. (Sebestyen, 1968, p. 2)

All Students: They are in a wagon.

Naomi: So this would have taken place before cars were invented. Where are they off to?

Sean: We don't know yet.

Naomi: [Continues to read at the bottom of page 2]:

When they turned out into the main road they had to ease around two of the redheaded Haney boys sitting double on their daddy's cutting horse. They were planted firmly in the middle of the road like the statue of a two-headed general. The little head belonged to Sammy, the one the kids laughed at in school because he brought a turnip for his lunch. He peeped out at them from behind his nearly grown brother Tater, but Tater stared out over their heads, ignoring Papa's nod even though his daddy worked for Miss Chism the same as Papa did. As he dwindled away he held his marble pose. (Sebestyen, 1968, p. 2)

Naomi: Papa nods to the Haney boys. What does that mean?

Kim: To respect them.

Tracie: To say hello.

Naomi: Do the Haney boys nod back?

Alex: No.

Naomi: Well, do they know each other?

Amanda: The Haney boys, their dad, and Papa all work together.

Naomi: So they do know each other.

Amanda: Yes--but because the Haney boys are white they think they are better.

Alex: [Reading page 3]:

“Lena,” Claudie said quickly, having put off what she meant to say until it was almost too late, “Lena, this kind of game--can’t everybody win. So you mustn’t take hard if you don’t. Second place, or third place--?”

Lena pulled away as though the hand had scorched her. I’m going to win, she said inside. It’s not a game and I’m going to win. But she couldn’t say that to Claudie--she couldn’t say, I’m going to show you and Papa, and Winslow Starnes, and everybody! Because deep in her heart she wasn’t sure she could win, in spite of all her praying.

(Sebetyen, 1968, p. 3)

Naomi: Lena is all dressed up. Where is she going?

Greg: To the competition.

Naomi: What would you feel if your mom told you it was OK if you don’t win, but come in 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> place?

Kim: I’d be angry.

Naomi: Was Lena angry?

Sonya: Yes.

Naomi: Let's remember who we've met.

[Naomi wrote the names Lena, Claudia, Papa—Ben Sills, Bullet (the dog), Roy, Amelia, the baby, Tater & Sammy (Haney boys), Mr. Haney, and Miss Chism on the board. Naomi briefly reviewed who each character was and their relationship to one another.]

Naomi: You have to read one chapter a day. You will need to have 1-3 read by Monday and I'll give you time in class to read Chapter 4.

In this lesson Naomi employed several reading strategies. She opened with an anticipation guide to build background and clarify terminology for students (see Appendix B). This also helped guide the students reading for the first five chapters and helped them to focus on critical points and understand the text. She removed pressure from the students by not using the anticipation guide for a grade and allowed students to work together. The other half of the lesson was used to discuss character traits and students impressions of who the characters were. Naomi reviewed character traits often at the end of lessons. She used this strategy at least four other times. At the conclusion of this particular lesson, Naomi gave reading assignments and offered support by letting students know they would also have time to read in class. Throughout the lesson students appeared engaged and focused their attention on Naomi and the text.

In the subsequent lesson, Naomi continued with the anticipation guide. She opened the lesson with some background knowledge for the students. This was her

opening statement:

We were talking about blacks not being allowed to swear on the same Bibles as whites when they were in court. That is just like blacks not being able to use the same water fountains, blacks not being able to use the same bathrooms, blacks not being able to go into certain restaurants. After slavery, this is some background knowledge for you because there may be some references to it in *Words By Heart*. After slavery, it didn't end racism, and prejudice, and discrimination. It simply meant that slaves were no longer property. Blacks still continued to face incredible odds. They still weren't given the same freedoms as everyone else. They even began passing laws in the South called Jim Crow laws. I won't go into where the name started, but Jim Crow laws were meant to keep blacks and whites separate. It was the start of segregation. Blacks could only drink out of certain water fountains and couldn't go to the same school that whites could. Blacks couldn't even go into a restaurant and sit down to eat; they'd have to go to the back door and get their food and take it home. Those were part of Jim Crow laws, and they were actual laws. If you went into a restaurant and there was a law against blacks eating in the restaurant, you'd go to jail. They were actual laws. So this is part of the whole Jim Crow thinking.

This opening statement gave students a sense of the historical period in the text and gave them a framework to make associations and ask questions as they went over the anticipation guide. Naomi often used the first few minutes of many guided reading-lessons to provide a glimpse into the historical context. She made her commentary

relevant by connecting it to particular events in the story. Sometimes the students would ask questions. Naomi found that the students had difficulty separating slavery from segregation. In the minds of the students, it was all the same era; not two different ones. Therefore, Naomi concentrated on highlighting the differences between the two. She continued to build their understanding of the period.

As she had promised, Naomi provided time for students to read chapter four in class. She also gave this assignment:

Your job today is to read chapter four. While you are reading chapter four, try to find at least one example of figurative language imagery, at least one example. Write it at the bottom here. And if you have any questions, I'm going to give you post-its, if you have any questions, or comments, or something that makes you go, "oh my gosh" or "wow or that's sad", or something funny. Write down the page number and your feelings.

Naomi encouraged students to share how they felt in a reader-response vein. In every lesson Naomi asked a question to the students about how they were feeling in response to the text. By pursuing this part of the lesson, it was easy for students to recall their first thoughts during the reading. This appeared to foster considerable engagement on the part of the students.

In another lesson, Naomi was confronted with how to address the racial slurs (i.e. Sambo and nigger) in the text with the students. She chose to confront it head on with another opening commentary on the terms. On this day, Naomi began the guided-reading groups by letting the students know they would read chapter six by doing a reader's theater (Naomi provided an excerpt from the text: see Appendix C).

Immediately following this announcement she gave some background information by using Wikipedia. In this way, students were able to see visual depictions of Sambo and the derogatory projection of the caricature. The students were acutely engaged with this visual by becoming silent and staring at the image intensely. Naomi went on to explain the other term--nigger. She began with a question.

The next racial slur is the n--word. The word nigger. Do you know the word?

[Students nodded.] I am talking about a very derogatory word. It's a word they don't use on television because it is filled with so much hate.

Jacob: It is a word everybody knows but nobody says it.

Naomi: I just want to be sure we all understand what a hateful term it is.

Naomi did not elaborate further on the term, but appeared compelled to interject it into the discussion. She transitioned into continuing with chapter seven as a second reader's theater (Naomi provided an excerpt from the text: see Appendix D). Naomi used reader's theater a third time while teaching *Words By Heart* in a later chapter. She found that the role playing engaged the students and allowed them to become better connected to the characters. In addition to the reader's theater, Naomi used Internet technology to put a visual depiction with a virtually unknown term (Sambo) in front of the students.

As I noted earlier, Naomi recognized that the students seemed confused with the difference between slavery and segregation, more specifically the aspects between a slave and a sharecropping economy. In the subsequent lesson, Naomi continued to emphasize the difference between the two by creating a comparison chart.

**Figure 5.1. Facsimile of Naomi's "Difference Chart"**

<b>Sharecropping</b>	<b>Slavery</b>
Grew crops to sell and eat	Forced labor
Hard work	Hard work; physical abuse
Paid off debt with money earned	No pay/No debt
Moved if needed, when they wanted	Trapped; sold by owner at will

Naomi discussed these aspects of sharecropping and slavery with the students. Some of the students responded by saying they could see the difference now better between the two. Following her showing of the chart, Naomi used the Internet again to depict photos of sharecroppers. Students responded by asking questions and making comments.

Greg: They don't look happy. That looks like hard work.

Amanda: Did they *have* to sharecrop?

Naomi: There wasn't much for them to do after slaves were set free in 1865.

Sean: Did they have an overseer?

Naomi: No, but they had to pay the owner of the land.

Amanda: I couldn't imagine doing that everyday.

Naomi: It was a very hard life.

Leslie: After slavery, where did they go?

Naomi: Wherever they were able find work. Some moved north where they thought there might be some opportunities. Others started sharecropping.

The students seemed amazed at the pictures on the Internet. They stared at them quietly and intently as Naomi read the captions that accompanied the pictures. The

demeanor of the students could be characterized as one of deep engagement because of the pictures. Then it quickly turned to mild shock as they examined them more closely. Naomi consciously shared the lives of sharecroppers and immediately connected that life to that of Papa's and Lena's. Naomi encouraged the students to look at the faces, clothes, material belongings, and homes of the sharecroppers. The students asked all the questions during this interaction with Naomi responding. Naomi completed the lesson by providing students with another guide for chapters 5-10 (see Appendix E). In informal comments to me, Naomi noted that the anticipation guides helped to keep the students focused on the sequence of events, the time period, and clarify difficult historical vocabulary.

At this point, Naomi was into the third week of the guided-reading group. Given that *Words By Heart* had only 14 chapters, she began thinking about how to bring the text study to a close, especially knowing that there was the troubling climatic point towards the end of the text to examine. With that thought in mind, Naomi shifted some of the focus of the lessons to the mood of the text and interactions between characters. Naomi did this by having the students pay attention to specific details. One such lesson that dealt with chapter 9 went as follows:

Naomi: Do you get a sense of the tension here?

All Students: Yes.

Naomi: Go to page 82. Start at the top of the page.

[Students read quietly to themselves for several minutes.]

Naomi: Is this mood like the two others we looked at?

Tracie: It's different--calm, silly, a little funny.

Naomi: Tell me the words that make you think that.

Sonya [Reads the following]:

“And don’t yell for me just because you’re lonesome.”

“For snakes?” Roy asked.

“A snake’s not going to walk up and bother you.” He looked so little hopping up and down beside the pile that she relented. “All right. For snakes.” (Sebestyen, 1968, p. 82)

Naomi: Any other pages where we want to talk about mood?

Alex: At the end of page 85.

Naomi: So that is another tense moment in the story. Let’s go to page 86 and 87. As I was reading this page, I thought about Papa and Claudie. Lena knows something that Claudie doesn’t. What does Lena know? What has Papa told Lena that he hasn’t told Claudie?

Naomi [Reads]:

Claudie said, “Miss Chism says your daddy’s going to be gone a while, mending fence.” Lena tried not to look surprised. Papa hadn’t told Claudie. It seemed strange--she would have had to know soon.

“He told he wouldn’t,” Claudie said. Her tired mouth turned down like Armilla’s did when her feelings were hurt. She picked off the grass burrs that had caught in her skirt. Lena struggled to think of something to answer. He probably hadn’t told her what happened at the Haney’s, either. It felt odd, having a secret with Papa that Claudie didn’t know. (Sebestyen, 1968, p. 86)

Kim: That Papa is going to Hawk Hill to fix the posts.

Naomi: Why hasn't Papa told Claudie? And we talked about this a little bit before. Yeah?

Sean: Because she will be upset and scared.

Naomi: Right. And I believe Claudie even said something to Lena about it.

And does Lena admit that Papa is going to Hawk Hill or does he keep it quiet?

Alex: Keeps it quiet.

Naomi: She keeps it quiet absolutely. Now go to page 87. There is a different mood. I'd like you to read all of page 87 and tell me what mood this is for you. The students read quietly:

“Oh Lord,” Claudie said. “I cleaned that famous bathroom.”

“But I already cleaned that famous bathroom.”

“But you didn't wash the soap,” said Claudie.

“I didn't wash the soap?” The spoon of pea juice that Lena was feeding Brother missed his mouth by two inches.

Claudie threw back her head in a laugh. “Somebody might come in there tomorrow and found fingerprints, or the Lord forbid, even a hair on that pretty buttermilk soap from Paris, France---don't you know anything? You're supposed to wipe it with a wet cloth and put it right side up in the dish with the angel on it.” (Sebestyen, 1968, p. 87)

Naomi: When you're done just look up at me. Okay. So this is a funny moment at the dinner table with the whole family. There are not a lot of those funny times in the house, but this is certainly one of them.

[Naomi switches to yet another moment in the text where the mood changes. A few pages later Naomi asks the students to share their reactions again.]

Naomi: Let me read this to you and see what you think. [Naomi reads]:

“Claudie closed the Bible and put brother into the banana box at the side of the bed. When she turned back to Papa, she was crying and he reached his arms around her and held her tight.” (Sebestyen, 1968, p. 89)

I’m going to give you two different responses to this text, and I want you to tell me which one seems to be the most appropriate. Here’s, your first response for this text: “Oh, you’ve got to be kidding [sarcastic tone]”. That’s response number one. Response number two is, “Awww.” Which response do you think is most appropriate? Raise your hand. Response number one, “Oh, you’ve got to be kidding” or response number two, “Awww.” Most of the students chose the second response as the most appropriate.

Over the next several lessons, Naomi pressed the students to pay attention to how the characters felt using a character traits reflection sheet (see Appendix F). She continued by focusing on the text as illustrated in the previous lesson and the mood. She went through all the major characters to address their mood and she asked the students to find text to support their answers. The students sometimes needed cueing to the mood, but were forthcoming with answers to Naomi’s questions. When students seemed off target Naomi quickly redirected them. Naomi expected students to support their answers with text excerpts and she consistently encouraged them to defend their answers in such a manner.

Naomi simultaneously focused on the relationship between the characters. She was getting into details that perhaps students might have overlooked, and she wanted them to see how the characters connected, particularly in chapters 8 through 10. She had the students visit the relationship between two characters, Lena and Winslow. She was preparing them for the troubling climax. Here is a portion of this discussion:

Naomi: Well something happened. I'm going to take you way back to something else. Go back to chapter eight. Chapter eight was kind of interesting to me. I think it was eight. Who is in the tree? Who is sitting in the tree eating their lunch? Now we're really switching moods.

Jacob: Lena.

Naomi: Lena and Winslow.

Jacob: That's a funny name.

Naomi: Lena and Winslow. What's up with that? Are they enemies?

Greg: No.

Naomi: Did you get any feeling that they were enemies? They're sitting in the tree eating.

All Students: Before.

Naomi: Before, but now it's a very different relationship. In fact, take a look at page 78. I thought this was really interesting. They're actually having a nice conversation. Where is it? Where is it? I'm going to start reading with "That's the trouble, she says." Kind of three-quarters of the page down on 78. "That's the trouble, she said. I just stood there. I didn't do anything." She's talking about the kid being teased. Remember when Sammy was being teased? "He

leaned back against the limb and looked at her. Suddenly he made that laugh that lit his face.” What does that mean “that lit his face.”?

Amanda: Made him turn red.

Leslie: A glow.

Naomi: Yes, a glow. He’s really happy. “You’re a strange one, Lena, you know that? He studied her and his smile faded. Maybe leaf buds were opening in her hair. Maybe her mouth was unfolding into a flower. Maybe he had never watched anyone blooming in his warmth.”

All Students in unison: Ewww.

Alex: I think they like each other.

Naomi: Okay. Did anybody else think that?

All Students in unison: Yes.

Naomi and the students continued to examine the interactions between the Lena and Winslow. Naomi pushed them to see how things were changing between the characters and began to open the door for the final conversation of how people can change just like characters can in a story. This discussion was rooted in the book and the groups continued to read excerpts that went to the core of character change. Sean confirmed this in the final words of the lesson:

Naomi: Did any of you predict a relationship budding here?

All Students: No.

Sean: Well, I thought there would be because I remember that Papa told Lena to love your enemies, and she took it to the next level.

At least one of the students was beginning to develop a sense of the subtle shifts in

mood and a concept of change in the characters.

Near the end of this lesson, Naomi gave her students more ownership in the story in a different way. Students were asked to provide chapter titles from Chapter 8 to the end of the book. The students were to create titles they believed were most appropriate given their understanding of the focus of these chapters. In Sebastyen's, book there are no chapter titles. However, Naomi did not make this assignment until half way through the text. I can only imagine that she doubted students were familiar enough with the story up until this point to create appropriate titles. Students took to this assignment eagerly and all 10 completed the task.

Naomi: Starting with chapter eight. I want you to start titling the chapters.

What might we title chapter seven?

Greg: The Tree.

Tracie: Love.

Naomi: The Tree or Feeling the Love.

Sonya: A New Beginning.

Naomi: A New Beginning.

Jacob: The Moment.

Naomi: All right. So starting with eight, and then we'll share chapters eight and nine tomorrow because you've already done seven. So I want you to title eight and nine and ten because tomorrow you have to read Chapter 10. Don't read 11, even though I know some of you are going to because it's getting better and better. And then, you have an assignment that is due Wednesday, so you have plenty of time. Plenty of time. I'll go over this.

The new Wednesday assignment Naomi was referring to was a drawing task. Naomi gave the students still other opportunities to identify mood by drawing pictures of scenes that resonated with them. In this assignment (see Appendix G) students were given freedom to choose what parts of the story they connected to and could portray with a drawing. This gave the students another way to express their impressions of the text. Naomi did not give many parameters to this assignment. Students were given the option to choose their scene and provide a drawing based on the way they saw it; not the way Naomi interpreted it.

In a subsequent lesson, Naomi introduced a new strategy she had not yet used in the guided-reading group. She asked the students to visualize parts of the book. She approached it in this manner:

Naomi: Okay. All right. Let's talk about visualizing because there are a couple of places in here where I was able to draw pictures so clearly. And one we just read. It was where Claudie threw her head back and laughed. Have you ever seen anybody laugh really hard and they just kind of throw their head back? There's a couple of more places where I thought the author really helps you to draw a clear picture. Go to page 81. One is the first paragraph on page 81. Would you read it please? First paragraph. Stop at the end of the first paragraph.

Amanda [Reading]:

She started off, a hunchbacked princess dragging her sack behind her like a lop-sided train. The sprung cotton burrs snagged her fingers as she twitched the white fluff out of them and stuffed it into her sack. By

the time she really got tired, the sack would be heavy and she could lean a little against its weight. Later she would tie up her skirt and strap on Claudie's kneepads, and walk down the rows on her knees to give her back a chance to straighten out. (Sebestyen, 1968, p. 81)

Naomi: What are they describing here?

Alex: Cotton picking.

Naomi: Right, cotton picking. Keep going. It really gives you a sense of what?

Sonya: That she likes to pick cotton.

Sean: She calls herself a princess, a hunchback princess.

Tracie: And then she'll let her back straighten out.

Naomi: Do you get the feeling that she likes doing this?

All Students: No.

Naomi: Not at all. A hunchback princess. In other words, she's hunched over. It makes her dress really long because you have to bend down. Well, those plants are about like this [motioning about waist high], so you're always stooping down digging in these burrs and cutting your fingers because the burrs in the cotton pricks you. It's like thorns. She's got the sack on her back. And as she picks she puts the things into her sack. A princess is beautiful not because her dress is long, not because she is feeling grand or glorious.

Naomi continued to use visualization (e.g. of the stoops of cotton pickers) as a means of having the students connect to the story. She continued to use this strategy until the end of the text. She appeared to use this technique to prepare students for the climatic ending that she knows is fast approaching. She wanted students to have plenty of

experience with visualizing. Although, Naomi painted colorful images around cotton picking, students were not able to easily imagine this given that they had no such experience.

The most tense, climatic moment came around Papa's death in Chapter 11. It was a sobering moment for the entire group. Although the group seemed to anticipate that something dire would happen, it was still filled with emotion for Naomi and her students. In order to build up to this moment, Naomi had the students look for clues of Papa's coming death. The students responded:

Alex: What she [Lena] thought was mud on him was really dried blood.

Kim: Lena saw the dark smoke against the sky, and it was like smoke coming from the gunshot.

Leslie: He [Papa] kept passing out on page 120.

Kim: On page 120--"I have so much I wanted to tell you, all the things I thought we'd have time later."

As the students prepared to read the most difficult process of Papa's slow death, they also acknowledged Lena's pain.

Naomi: So Papa is dying and he is concerned about Tater? He's dying and he's concerned about Tater. What does that tell you about Papa?

Sean: That he is concerned about others and he's loving his enemies.

Naomi: So let's go back to the traits that we listed. More proof? Yes.

Tracie: He's always thinking about others.

Sonya: Well, this is kind of against it. I think that Lena only did it was because it was for her father.

Naomi: So let's talk about Lena. How is she handling all of this?

Sonya: She was kind of mad.

Alex: Disbelief.

Naomi: What does Papa want her to do?

Jacob: Make a bed of grass for Tater.

Tracie: Help the person who killed him.

Naomi: Right. Exactly. Help Tater. Yet, Tater is the one that killed her father, shot her father. Papa's dead. And now she's going to do what for Tater?

Kim: Help him.

Naomi: Help him. Get him in the wagon and get him where?

Alex: Save his life to go home.

Naomi: Yeah. Basically, save his life. Now some of you mentioned in the summary of the story about Lena being vengeful and how hard this must have been for her because what does Lena believe in?

Greg: Revenge.

Naomi: Payback. Revenge. And now Papa is asking Lena to take care of the person that killed him.

Sean: That would be hard to do, take care of the person that killed my family or something.

At this point, students appeared to empathize with Lena and how difficult it would be to do what Papa was asking. Naomi pushed the group to understand what Lena was faced with and what she needed to do at her father's request [take care of Tater].

Naomi also connected it to how Lena had changed through the course of the text.

Finally, the students moved to discussion about Tater's fate and what it should be. The students were not kind in their punishment and connected it to Lena's loss. This left the students in some ways in a quandary given that they had also developed a deep respect for Papa. Naomi encouraged the students to search their own hearts about what justice would be. She attempted to remain nonjudgmental and refrained from stating her opinion about what justice might look like. Naomi seemed pleased to hear the students voicing their own opinions.

### **Analyzing Naomi's Case**

#### **Strategies for Interacting with Students**

Naomi has a reputation in her school for being able to manage difficult students and developing strong connections to those who enter her classroom. Naomi was personable and easy to like and her students stated in passing that they liked her. She tended to speak clearly, firmly, and lovingly all at the same time. As a result, students followed her direction without hesitation and understood her position on behavior, class work, and communication. Naomi's classroom was a reflection of her personable nature. She had a classroom library, student desks clustered together, a large semi-circle table for reading groups, and an uncommon orderliness. Her students appeared to conform to the orderliness of the environment.

Within the guided-reading group, observational data suggests that students generally interacted with Naomi in a serious manner. Yet there was little hesitation to be comical when it seemed appropriate. The students seemed comfortable to present who they were in the guided-reading group. They brought their own character to the group, which ranged from sarcastic to humorous to quiet to extroverted. Naomi never

reprimanded students for interjecting their individual character into the group. She always responded with a smile, a quick response, or an inquiry to what she thought they intended. When the group was short on time, she would seamlessly redirect the students to the task. Overall, she created an atmosphere that allowed students to be themselves, while simultaneously focusing their energies on her goal.

During the lessons, there was a regular, steady interaction between Naomi and the students. Throughout the lessons, students seemed consistently engaged. This was in part due to at least four different strategies that Naomi employed regularly: (a) connecting historical context to the story, (b) working from reader's theater, (c) using the Internet, and (d) structuring lessons with anticipation guides. These strategies appeared to cause students to give their attention over to Naomi and they generated interest in her commentary, especially when it came to the more sensitive topics such as slavery, racial slurs, and Papa's death. As the data suggest, when Naomi presented pictures on sharecropping, for example, students broached the conversation by asking many questions. Naomi patiently responded to all of their questions. She seemed comfortable that students were leading and generating this part of the conversation. At the midpoint in the book, Naomi consciously began giving students more power over the direction of conversations as a way of getting them to express themselves. As the study of the text progressed, it was apparent that student talk (versus teacher) increased. Naomi gave assignments that encouraged the students to share even when they seemed somewhat reluctant to do so.

Like Jenny, Naomi seldom seemed to sit at her desk, at least in the days that I observed. I never came into her classroom and saw her sitting at her desk. Most days

she was just calling the group as I arrived. She opened each lesson differently. She began with a review of the homework, a commentary on an upcoming event, a review of terminology, a question posed to the group, or a few minutes to allow students to prepare for the reader's theater. The changes in the opening of the lessons did not seem to bother the students or Naomi. Students seemed accustomed to the variety. Naomi implemented a range of approaches with the goal of using them to keep students engaged. Students responded with immediacy and eagerness. Having watched her teach *Words By Heart*, I would argue that Naomi was a master at keeping students engaged and involved in learning about and from their interaction with the text.

### **Student-to-Student Interactions**

Student-to-student connections during observations in Naomi's classroom were noticeable and frequent. Students were asked to work together on multiple occasions during the lessons. At these points, I observed students supporting one another and making sure they were on task. For example, Naomi asked the students to share their reactions with one another regarding the scene when Lena was with her dying father in his final moments. The students worked in pairs sharing their fears and pain. In listening to two different pairs, I found that the students showed excellent turn taking. They listened to one another and shared openly. This trust seemed to have been cultivated through experience and time. The students were not shy about sharing their feelings, although they were being asked to respond to very sensitive topics for fifth graders. One particular conversation went as follows:

Leslie: I think I would have run away. Since Papa is her [Lena's] only real

parent.

Sonya: Running away wouldn't have helped. She [Lena] needed somebody to help her and she probably had to help the family now.

Leslie: That might happen, but who knows what you can do when your Dad dies. Things couldn't be the same.

Sonya: Well, no. I guess they wouldn't be. I would have helped Tater and then tried to help my family. I would have done what Papa wanted and tried to do right.

I observed a number of examples in which trust between the students, despite different reactions, appeared to be the norm in how they engaged the text and each other around the text.

The students also appeared astute at being nonjudgmental of one another. The students were never observed to belittle the responses of their peers. In one of the exchanges, the students discussed Miss Chism:

Naomi: We really don't meet her [Miss Chism] until chapter 4. What would you think of Miss Chism if she were your neighbor?

Alex: Not nice...a psycho.

Naomi: That's strong. Why would you say that?

Tracie: Because she is mean to kids.

Naomi: Does anyone agree?

Jacob: No, she's not psycho. She is rude and nasty.

Kim: Yeah, that sounds more like her.

Jacob and Kim disagreed with Alex and Tracie, but respectfully shared their positions

after they had listened to their peers. This was even more powerful given that Naomi showed her disagreement openly when the student called Miss Chism a psycho. The classroom culture Naomi had established afforded students positive and shared ways of communicating with one another, even when their views diverged.

The group consisted of 10 students, which generally speaking is large as guided reading groups go. The students routinely sat in the same seat at almost every gathering. This appeared to symbolize their established roles and connections to one another. It seemed that the students sat next to those who they determined were good working partners or friends. It was a function of them selecting a place of comfort. I generally sat in the same spot when I observed and I found that I was always surrounded by the same students. I soon discovered there was an unspoken seating chart developed and maintained by the students. This empowered the students and affirmed their place within the walls of the classroom and more importantly in this particular group.

Overall, the students were quite supportive of one another. This was likely a function of Naomi's creation of an environment that fostered mutual trust and respect. The students made the size of the group a non-issue as it related to them being supportive and connected to one another. They demonstrated that working together effectively required a willingness and understanding of one another.

### **Culturally Relevant Teaching Principles**

Naomi used CRT principles to varying degrees. She implemented some of the principles consistently, while others were used less frequently. The following chart

shows how frequently she used the CRT principles, based on my coding of her lesson activities as represented in my field notes.

**Figure 4.2. Frequency of Applied CRT Principles in Naomi’s Teaching of *Words By Heart***

CRT Principle	Number of times CRT Principle was demonstrated
Communication of high expectations	19
Teacher as facilitator (rather than merely knowledge transmitter)	14
Positive perspectives on parents and families	3
Student centered instruction	8
Learning within the context of the culture	0
Reshaping, transforming the curriculum	6
Culturally mediated instruction	3

Naomi used two culturally relevant teaching strategies on a consistent basis during her instruction of *Words By Heart*. These were:

- Communication of high expectations (Ladson Billings, 1994)
- Teacher as facilitator (rather than merely knowledge transmitter) (Ladson Billings, 1994)

I also found that Naomi used the following culturally relevant strategies on a regular basis, but not as consistently:

- Student-centered instruction (Ladson Billings, 1994)
- Reshaping, transforming the curriculum (Ladson Billings, 1994)

On a less frequent basis Naomi implemented two additional culturally relevant strategies:

- Positive perspectives on parents and families (Ladson Billings, 1994)
- Culturally mediated instruction (Ladson Billings, 1994)

I did not see her use the strategy of:

- Learning within the context of the culture (Ladson Billings, 1994). Naomi did however focus on portions of her lessons on exploring the historical context of slavery and segregation and the use of racial slurs. This might be construed to be examples of learning within cultural context, but it does not appear to me to be what Ladson-Billing had in mind.

Naomi consistently set high expectations for the students (for those inside and outside the group). For example, her classroom expectations were so clear that in the course of three weeks not a single student interrupted the guided reading group while in session. Nor did she have to stop to redirect students to their task. In addition, the students within in the group were always assembled quickly and instruction began promptly. Naomi gave clear assignments and expected students to complete them. Another way Naomi demonstrated her belief in high expectations involved creating lessons that encouraged (and sometimes demanded) student participation. Although, Naomi had a large guided-reading group, no one was allowed to avoid being part of the lesson. All students read at some point in each lesson. Naomi managed this by being persistent in asking for responses from everyone.

The discourse patterns fostered between students and Naomi lead me to determine that Naomi was primarily a facilitator of the guided reading lessons rather than solely a transmitter of knowledge, even though on occasion she could be quite explicit in the understanding she was after (e.g. regarding historical context). She was adept at introducing interesting questions to the group and using the anticipation guides so that students could see the depth of their own knowledge (or lack thereof). Naomi filled in gaps with knowledge that the students did not have, especially in the areas of the sharecropping versus slavery economics, segregation, and fair versus unfair cultural circumstances in general during the book's era. However, she took great care not to dominate the discussion and allowed for equal student talk time. She also created situations where there was frequent student-to-student talk during the lessons. She regularly allowed for partner sharing in which students exchanged ideas and ways of thinking about the text. Students were encouraged to make connections as they read and build a basis for the scenery and details of the story. Naomi consistently built bridges for students and acted as a guide for those lessons.

Naomi also worked to have instruction be student centered. For example, her use of reader's theater was well received by students and helped them connect to the story. Many of the students read with expression and altered their voices to sound like characters in the story. The students were intrigued by the opportunity to play off one another and interject themselves into the story. She also gave students power in the instruction by assigning them the task of developing titles for the chapters. Students used the content of each chapter to develop their ideas and it was apparent that they connected themselves to the titles. In addition, Naomi had students do visualizing and

mental “movie making” as part of the instruction. During these times, she would ask students to visualize scenes or make it into a “movie” and report what they saw. In this way, students were able to develop and add their impressions to the story. The students participated and displayed interest in the roles.

Naomi took part in transforming the language arts curriculum simply by teaching *Words By Heart*. Now that Naomi had taught the book, she claimed that she would teach it in future years. She believed the book had a great deal to offer students. She also transformed the curriculum by confronting sensitive language in the book head on. She was frank in the meaning of the terms Sambo and nigger and she explored what they meant in the setting of the book and present day. She presented these issues in depth and provided new ideas to the students. Naomi shared Sambo depictions via the Internet and provided a reasonably extensive history. In this way, she additionally transformed the curriculum by infusing technology supports into the lessons. She presented the lifestyle of sharecropping through the Internet and allowed students to see visuals and read the accompanied texts. She also discussed the influence of the Bible in the book and gave it a prominent stage. The topic of the Bible often scares teachers, but she matter-of-factly discussed its value to the characters and its role in Papa’s and Lena’s life. This was crucial in the way she developed the central characters. The depth that she gave to each of the topics was seldom parallel to that of other teachers and the extent of the conversations gave notions to the text that were far beyond the concept of change, which was the focus of the William & Mary curriculum.

Unlike in Jenny’s case, an emphasis on parents and families was demonstrated

only occasionally. *Words By Heart* lent itself to discussing family perspectives and the characters and the plot made it easy to highlight positive family structures. There were also opportunities to demonstrate negative family structures as well with some of the secondary characters such as the Haneys. Naomi gave time to each, but this did not appear to be the primary focus of her lessons. Her original goal was to have the students enjoy the book, appreciate the characters, understand the historical context and be enriched by their story. Naomi pointed to how family structures functioned when it supported one of her goals, but this was not one of her primary foci.

Naomi worked to present the text in the culture of the characters. She appeared to hold a strong understanding of the Black characters and a particular connection to Papa. In an interview, Naomi stated that she liked “that Papa was a man of service.” She connected to his good heart. However, her connection to some of the secondary characters was less evident. She continually revisited Papa’s character and often that of Lena’s, but limited some of her attention to other characters. Naomi mediated the cultures of the characters, but did not always balance that with the culture of the students who were from other non-black groups, perhaps because she was African-American herself, and/or because she more readily identified with them as story protagonists.

Naomi did not address learning within the context of all the cultural differences represented in her reading group of 10 students. Given that there were five to six cultures evident in this group, it would have been a difficult task, especially given the relatively short amount of time allotted to teach the text. Naomi made no specific connections between the race and ethnicity of her students and of those

characters in the story, but did make references to common experiences among people living typical lives in America during that older historical period. The basis of family, the need to work, the power of education, and the ability of people to change were several key connections she made and appeared tied to her key goals. Her historical focus augmented that process.

### **Summary**

Naomi had several pieces of culturally relevant teaching principles in place in her classroom. The principles she exemplified most frequently seemed to come naturally and very much a part of the everyday routines of her teaching. Her 10 students were participatory as a result of these efforts. In our final conversation, Naomi made it clear that she wanted to continue to refine her teaching around *Words By Heart*. She felt that her students could benefit from more exploration about issues of change and a better understanding of the power of the story. The culturally relevant teaching principles that Naomi did not demonstrate daily were ones that she could cultivate over time with additional study and repeated efforts with *Words By Heart*, or other such multicultural texts. Naomi was an experienced reflective teacher with a desire to raise the awareness of students. She made every effort to do just that with *Words By Heart*.

## **Chapter Six**

### **In Pursuit of Making Literature Relevant to Diverse Students**

In this study, I observed two teachers providing instruction to two groups of diverse students around what would be classified as a multicultural piece of literature. These two teachers agreed to be part of a study in which I would observe them teach and they would develop what they believed to be the most optimal instruction for their students using a variety of strategies and tools in a guided reading format.

One key aspect of this study turned on analyzing the two teachers' teaching practice with a view to discussing and comparing their background experiences and racial identities, the student focus set by the teachers, literature preferences, and instructional decision making. That analysis, which I take up in this chapter, allows for making sense of how differences that arise from those comparisons influence students as they engage in studying and learning about the focal text, *Words By Heart* (Sebestyn, 1968).

How did two teachers, such as Jenny and Naomi, teach a piece of multicultural literature in culturally relevant ways in diverse educational context? This question has become a significant educational concern as the dynamics and demographics of public schools continue to change. The study took place in an urban school district where the number of ethnic minority students has steadily increased each year for the past decade. Likewise, the number of students who have received FARMS (Free and Reduced Meals) has increased each year as well. Educators are pushed to grapple with the ways in which a more relevant education can be provided to the growing segment of poor and ethnic minority students. In a policy context, NCLB has forced educators, if nothing more, to reckon with this issue as testing data disaggregates results by race/ethnicity and FARMS. The data continues to show

achievement gaps between minority students and their White peers. For many concerned about reading and understanding literature, the quest has been to close this achievement gap through culturally relevant and engaging instruction to students (Gay, 1995).

In order to attend to this key issue, the study also involved gauging how these two teachers drew from CRT principles in their instruction. The analysis of these principle applications allows for making claims about the degree to which the teachers relied upon them, and when so, in what ways. Some have argued that CRT is simply good teaching and therefore should not necessarily be thought of as a separate teaching methodology that would best benefit students (Au, 2010). This argument is further examined in this chapter and the implications of it are discussed.

## **Comparing Cases**

### **A Novice Teacher's Strengths**

At the time of the study, Jenny was in her fifth year of teaching. Relative to Naomi, she was still a novice. Prior to teaching, Jenny had attended all white schools. Her suburban upbringing had exposed her to a traditional education. In the suburbs where she attended, the schools were homogeneous racially and ethnically. Jenny stated that she grew up in a middle to upper middle class home. She had not known poverty or much diversity in her life. During her teaching career, she has taught only fifth grade and worked in only one school.

Following the structure of the district-adopted William and Mary curriculum, Jenny chose to have the text's character changes as the primary focus of her instruction for the students. This appeared to be a straightforward goal given that

*Words By Heart* lends itself to the goal of studying character change. This focus was comfortable for Jenny and in her initial reading of the text she believed this was a reasonable and meaningful goal for the text. She fully expected that the students would be able to use the text to achieve this curricular objective.

Jenny had developed a reasonably strong set of teaching capabilities, but continues to learn and experiment with new teaching strategies. Despite her relatively short teaching tenure, Jenny has developed a number of teaching strengths, which she exhibited during my observations of her teaching of *Words By Heart*. Specifically, Jenny implemented some of the practices related to guided-reading as she taught her students on a daily basis. There were three facets of guided-reading that Jenny clearly demonstrated: 1) she acted as the facilitator, 2) while she guided student thinking, and 3) she encouraged student problem solving. These core guided-reading elements were a part of Jenny's daily lessons. I elaborate on each of these elements.

A key strength Jenny demonstrated was serving as a facilitator rather than merely a transmitter of knowledge. Classroom observations indicated a balance in the discussion between Jenny and her students. Frequently, students led discussions and asked questions that directed lessons. However, Jenny would try to steer the focus to character change. Yet, she demonstrated responsiveness to student-driven discussion by allowing students to pursue their thinking and asking probing questions as it related to the central focus of the lessons. As a result, Jenny did not always lead the lesson directly or strictly dictate its flow. She would open the discussion with a question that allowed students to begin sharing their ideas about the characters. Her role as facilitator set the stage for enhancing discussions among the students and

created an environment where they were comfortable sharing their thoughts. At the same time, she attempted to keep those thoughts in contact with the text and its changing characters, as she followed the curriculum's goals.

Overall, Jenny's practice of guided-reading was connected to the goals she set for the students when reading *Words By Heart* (Sebestyn, 1968). Jenny always used guided-reading as the principle format for her lessons. Every lesson I observed used some form of guided-reading. Jenny relied on these practices, while using the curriculum focus of character change as her pivotal primary goal for the students. More specifically, Jenny wanted the students to identify and understand character change in *Words By Heart*. The focus of "change" was outlined as the central focus for the text in the curriculum (William and Mary program) and guided teachers to solicit responses (in a reader response manner) from students where understanding the concept of change was central.

Jenny also consistently communicated high expectations to her students during almost every lesson. She not only communicated high expectations to all her students, she provided structures that supported their needs to meet those expectations. As a result of her high expectations, students almost always completed the reading and homework assignments. Jenny's ability to effectively communicate high expectations was likely her greatest strength.

Jenny's capacities to set high expectations while operating as a facilitating guide were practices that she had most deeply imbedded in her teaching repertoire. For her, they seemed to come fluidly. In Jenny's short career, she had already incorporated these two elements into her teaching efforts. Other practices of interest

in this study were not nearly as evident. However, the guided-reading format and curriculum goals appeared to have a strong hold on Jenny's lessons.

### **An Experienced Teacher's Strengths**

In Naomi's 30-year teaching career, she had carefully crafted her guided reading practices. Over the course of her career, she has taught a range of grades from elementary to middle school. In her upbringing, she attended segregated schools and lived in an urban community. However, her teaching career exposed to her many diverse students, especially in the last decade. Naomi came from a working class home and her surroundings were quite modest. Her background gave her insight to the students she currently serves.

Naomi differed from Jenny in that she did not draw from the curriculum as the primary tool for setting the curricular goals for the students. Naomi ventured into the teaching of *Words By Heart* (Sebestyen, 1968) by setting her own goal of understanding the historical context with the characters as the central focus of that context. Having students explore and understand the historical backdrop, however, was always connected to other themes such as changes in the characters, the connections between the characters, and the important events of the story. Although Naomi would set the goal of the lessons, the students were allowed to speak freely about their feelings, and their responses to the text were encouraged by Naomi and other students.

Naomi had many years of experience with balanced literacy and guided reading. As I outlined in Chapter 5, Naomi had demonstrated her proficiency in guided reading: 1) she created a positive teaching/learning environment; 2) she acted

as a facilitator; 3) she guided student thinking and clarified misunderstandings; and 4) she guided students towards independent reading.

As an observer, it was apparent that Naomi's classroom was a place of learning. The desk cluster arrangement allowed for student collaboration and support. In addition, the students were almost always on task whenever I was present. Naomi created an environment where learning was always in motion. The students had knowledge of their tasks, in and outside of the reading group. The students were focused and could converse candidly about their immediate instructional objectives and the text they were reading. This led to the classroom being a place focused on learning.

Naomi exhibited the capacity to act as a facilitator rather than a transmitter of information. Naomi carefully planned lessons for the guided reading group. Naomi's role of facilitator was used primarily to continually clarify the historical context of the story. As a facilitator, she was deeply focused in her efforts to meet this goal. As the facilitator, Naomi encouraged student talk by having them share their homework assignments or answer an opinion question to open the lesson. She continuously guided the students to focus on how the historical context of the story played a role in the events and the decisions of the characters. She often referred students to the text or read a quote from the book to help them question what was happening, why it was important, and how the structures of class, race, and privilege, or lack thereof, influenced the characters and their decisions during the time period.

Naomi frequently made time in class for independent reading. The students were given a specific amount of time they could read daily in class in the event they

needed her support or the support of their peers. Sometimes she would allow the students to “whisper read” in pairs if they desired. The students seemed to benefit from the in-class reading as they always came to the guided-reading group well prepared. In addition, Naomi often had the students read during group time. This was done through reader’s theater, appointed reading or when it was time to clarify a point. Naomi often gave the students the responsibility of reading the text and deciphering its meaning.

Naomi’s teaching of *Words By Heart* also showed her commitment to communicating high expectations to students. Naomi consistently communicated the expectations for completing assignments and participating in the group discussion. She often offered verbal and non-verbal praise to her students. She regularly applauded students when they excelled and she encouraged them when they struggled with the content. Doing so seemed to be a natural and effortless part of the classroom environment she had structured. Students were responsive to the high expectations set by Naomi. Students completed their assignments daily and came to the group well prepared to participate in the lessons. On occasion, Naomi offered supports to the students by allowing them to complete assignments or begin their writing exercise in class. As a result, the discussions in the lessons explained, clarified, and opened up new learnings for Naomi and the students.

Finally, in addition to facilitating the lessons, Naomi planned lessons that stimulated the students and held their interest. For example, Naomi presented questions to her students that allowed them to explore their own feelings and empathize with the characters. She also gave students an opportunity to express

themselves as they participated in reader's theater. Students read parts of the story with their own emotional input and responded to the text using their own insight. The students were responsive to being active participants in the lessons and seemed to appreciate their teacher's willingness to allow a great deal of student interjection. As a result, Naomi's role as a facilitator led to fruitful and productive discussions and encouraged independent student thinking.

### **Assessing Commonalities and Differences**

Jenny and Naomi displayed two common practices. First, they both shared in the idea of communicating high learning expectations to students and declared their expectations daily during the lessons. A second similarity between Jenny and Naomi involved their roles as facilitators. These two similarities were evident in their teaching practices and can be correlated to the summary of their teaching and student responses in chapters 4 and 5.

From a teaching standpoint, Naomi and Jenny were quite different although these differences may not be as apparent in the summaries of the last two chapters. In this area, the most significant difference was the teaching goal that each teacher set for the students. Naomi had a self selected focus of having the students understand the historical perspective of the text, while Jenny pursued a focus on character change as the primary understanding for the students. This difference in the goals would lead to different teaching techniques and consequential experiences for the students. In short, Jenny seemed more comfortable sticking with the curricular goals for teaching the text focused on character change, whereas Naomi expanded on that goal.

Throughout guided-reading lessons, there were differences in how they

approached the content of the text. Naomi took many opportunities to construct historical understanding for the students. Naomi continually built background knowledge for the students and checked their understanding about the time period. In contrast, Jenny was concerned primarily with character change independent of the historical context. She focused on the feelings of the characters in the story and who they were emotionally and developmentally. As a result, each teacher chose different focusing activities and reinforcements that helped them meet their objectives. However, Naomi's two part goal framework tended to make her lessons more complex and also produced somewhat more explicit direction on her part.

Another difference was the level of student participation. Perhaps because of her dual focus, Naomi directed higher levels of participation from her students. She expected each student to contribute daily in some way. Naomi incorporated engagement strategies such as incorporating reader's theater, drawing from the Internet, and requiring student created visuals. This was less the case in Jenny's reading group. She would occasionally allow some students to go through a lesson without saying anything.

The differences continued with the visuals provided by each teacher. Naomi offered handouts (see Appendices A-G), charts, and pictures for her students. Jenny did not provide such visuals for her students when they were in the guided-reading group. This appeared to influence the amount of participation and engagement of the students as well as their understanding of the text, as was suggested by how they responded to the text in discussion.

Although, I have claimed that Jenny and Naomi both had students that

participated, that level of participation was higher in Naomi’s class than Jenny’s class. A summary of the similarities and differences in Jenny’s and Naomi’s teaching practices, goals, and background are depicted in Figure 6.1. This chart outlines how they shared some practices, but differed on others.

**Figure 6.1. Similarities and Differences between Jenny and Naomi**

	<b>Jenny</b>	<b>Naomi</b>
Setting high expectations	Conveyed strongly to students.	Sent strong message to students.
Act as a facilitator	Began each lesson with an opening question to students.	Permitted students. to generate questions
Background	Non-segregated schools; suburban neighborhood	Segregated schools, inner city
Teaching experience	5 years	30 years
Teaching format	Guided reading, reader response	Guided-reading, incorporated technology, reader’s theater, reader response
Teaching objective	Have students. recognize the change in characters	Have students. understand the time period as well as change in the characters
Student participation	High student participation	Very high student participation

### **Comparing and Contrasting Application of CRT Principles**

Jenny and Naomi were similar on drawing from some CRT principles.

However, evidence of their use was more frequent in Naomi’s case than in Jenny’s in

all categories except for positive perspectives on parents and families and learning within the context of the culture. However, the most significant differences displayed in Figure 6.2 hinge on student-centered instruction, reshaping the curriculum, and culturally-mediated instruction. These areas suggest that Naomi was more deeply invested in these areas. Jenny seemed more interested in sticking to her commitment of facilitating students' responses to the characters and communicating high expectations around that goal. Given her dual-goal focus, Naomi appeared more concerned about using the text to transform the literacy curriculum to meet those goals. One might ask why such major differences were observed. I would argue that one key difference tied to Naomi's advantage was teaching experience and perhaps race that allowed her to focus more comfortably and expertly on her dual goal frameworks.

**Figure 6.2. Frequency Count Comparisons of CRT Principles Applied By Teacher**

<b>CRT Principle</b>	<b>Jenny</b>	<b>Naomi</b>
Communication of high expectations	16	19
Teachers as facilitators (rather than merely knowledge transmitters)	10	14
Positive perspectives on parents and families	5	3
<b>Student-centered instruction</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Learning within the context of the culture</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>Reshaping, transforming the curriculum</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Culturally mediated instruction</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>3</b>

The goal of having CRT principles as part of instruction is to bring the culture of students to the forefront of learning. According to CRT, the culture of the students

should be considered at all points of teaching and learning, to include, during text selection, lesson planning, assessments, development of discussion questions, homework considerations, and curriculum implementation. However, working from generally agreed upon good teaching strategies does not necessarily result in the depth that CRT principles suggest. CRT principles fundamentally have the race/ethnicity of students at their core and relevance of the culture of the students as the centerpiece for teaching and learning.

While good teaching practices are expected to be part of every classroom and taught to teachers as part of their preparation, those practices are not isomorphic with the principles of CRT. The following statement from Geneva Gay (2010) elaborates on this notion:

Many educators still believe that good teaching transcends place, people, time, and context. They contend it has nothing to do with class, race, gender, ethnicity, or culture of students and teachers. This attitude is manifested in the expression “Good teachers anywhere are good teachers everywhere.” Individuals who subscribe to this belief fail to realize that their standards of “goodness” in teaching and learning are culturally determined and are not the same for all ethnic groups. (p.22)

While glimpses of CRT principles were observed in Jenny’s classroom, it became apparent that Naomi displayed them more consistently and perhaps more effectively in her teaching. Jenny’s teaching was fairly traditional, while Naomi’s teaching

tended to be more innovative and explorative.

I would argue that the principles of a teacher acting as facilitator, being positive about parents and families, and communicating high expectations are a part of what many educators mean by being a “good teacher”. These are principles I would expect to see daily in any classroom I entered from a novice or experienced teacher. These practices are repeatedly emphasized to teachers during pre-service and throughout their teaching career. Interestingly, Naomi and Jenny were comparable in these areas. Jenny registered 31 frequency counts in these combined areas, while Naomi had 36 frequency counts. This seems to suggest that teachers of varying experience, backgrounds, and philosophies are able to fairly easily adopt these practices into their classroom.

However, I would argue that the CRT principles of reshaping the curriculum, learning within the context of the culture, student-centered instruction, and culturally-mediated instruction (bolded in Figure 6.2) go beyond “good teaching,” and represent core aspects that distinguish CRT’s focus on cultural connections. Naomi’s practices in these areas indicated that she had developed several key CRT principles that transcend the idea of “good teaching practice.” Looking closely at the data, Naomi accumulated 17 frequency counts in the areas of transforming the curriculum, learning within the context, student-centered instruction, and culturally mediated instruction. While Jenny accumulated six frequency counts in these combined areas. This difference suggests the strength of Naomi’s CRT in her teaching as compared to Jenny. It also suggests that a novice teacher, of mainstream ethnicity, privileged background, and narrow teaching philosophies may have a difficult time

incorporating these aspects of CRT into their practice.

CRT appears to require knowledge about particular cultures, an open-ness toward student identification with their own culture, and a re-shaping of a White-oriented curriculum to reflect more non-White cultural assumptions and beliefs. To explain the text, *Words By Heart*, Naomi used the relationship between white and black culture, as well as each cultures' independent but inter-related nature. Her goal of having students understand the historical context of the story pushed beyond the school district's William and Mary curriculum and delved into serious issues of race relationships, economics, family dynamics, and the question of racial and cultural privilege. Naomi's dual goals gave prominence to the ones she believed connected best to the diversity of her students. Jenny, by contrast, let the William and Mary curriculum guide operate as the primary determiner of what the students would learn. Jenny's narrower curricular goal focus operated to create limits for her students. Naomi's addition of the historical-understanding goal broadened the scope of the novel and provided for new layers for meaning and understanding to emerge. The depth of Naomi's exploration created richness in classroom learning opportunities that was not as apparent in Jenny's. In addition, Naomi demonstrated greater proficiency in the more complex CRT areas, which suggests she had more connection to the cultural context of her students. Consequently, I would argue that the data suggests that these additional opportunities for student learning in Naomi's classroom brought her closer to affecting culturally-responsive teaching practices.

### **Revisiting the Research Questions**

How do the foregoing descriptions, comparisons, and contrasts address the

primary question this study asked: What do two fifth grade teachers who teach diverse students do to make literature relevant to their students? As they were displayed in the opening chapter, there were six subsidiary questions that followed from this larger question:

- What is the cultural background/experience of the teachers?
- How do the teachers' cultural backgrounds and teaching philosophies influence how they teach?
- What types of literature do they commonly choose to use and what are their goals for choosing these texts?
- What teaching strategies do they employ when they teach such texts?
- If it's apparent, what does culturally relevant teaching look like in their classrooms?
- How do the teachers interact with their students and how do their students interact with each other when discussing and learning about this literature?

Each of these subsidiary questions were designed to shed further light on the central research question.

In re-examining these questions, I chose to re-order them slightly to better facilitate an understanding of the data gathered and analyzed. The first three questions were directly related to the two teacher's background's and their teaching philosophies and goals.

- What is the cultural background/experience of the teachers?
- How do the teachers' cultural backgrounds and teaching philosophies influence how they teach?

- What types of literature do they commonly choose to use and what are their goals for choosing these texts?

To ensure that I addressed these three questions, I reviewed each teacher’s case and carefully studied their comparisons, contrasts, and background differences. The following chart serves as a comparison of the teachers along the lines laid out by the three questions just noted. Drawing from the chart, I then offer additional summative analysis. I do the same for summative analysis for each remaining cluster of questions.

**Figure 6.3. Cultural Background, Teaching Philosophy, and Goals of Jenny and Naomi**

<b>Research Questions</b>	<b>Jenny</b>	<b>Naomi</b>
Cultural and Educational Background	Twenty-something; 5 years in the same school	Fifty-something; 30 years with 25 in the same school
	Bachelor’s degree; Beginning master’s degree	Bachelor’s, master’s degree, plus an additional 60 credits
	Mono-ethnic educational experience; few minorities	Segregated school system; all Black school experience
	Middle to upper class	Working class
Literature Preference	Approved district literature; connects picture books to chapter books	Approved district literature; seeks out historical literature
Teaching Philosophy	All students can go to college; provide strong foundation	All students can achieve with hard work; there are no excuses
Teaching Goals for the Text	Follow the goal structure of the William & Mary	Follow William & Mary; focusing on character

	curriculum, focusing on character change in the text	change, but historically contextualize the novel and characters
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Although they came from different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds, Jenny and Naomi have worked almost their entire careers in similar Title I schools. They each had interest in working with students with diverse backgrounds. Although they shared a desire to work with diverse students, they have traveled different paths. Jenny sought to venture out on a path of diversity because her own experience was so mono-ethnic and she had always harbored desires to teach in a community different than her own up-bringing. Naomi’s path matched closely to what she had known in her up-bringing, but she found new challenges in reaching African-American, Latino/a, and Asian-American students.

*Words By Heart* was new to both Jenny and Naomi. They each embraced the book, and in the preview, found it to be a strong match for their students in experience and culture, although a number of their students were not African-American or Caucasian as were the protagonists and antagonists in the story. In teaching the text, as previously noted, Jenny’s principal goal was to press students to understand how the characters changed from the beginning of the story to the end. Naomi pushed dual goals, first having the students understand the historical time period and the lives people led, and the second, using that context to show how it impacted the characters’ their decision making, and interconnectedness and changes. Although their objectives were different, their ideas and points occasionally overlapped.

Jenny and Naomi have had introductions and experiences with school-based staff development, educational practices, and district level courses. As a result, they presented a similar format for guided-reading instruction. Noting this leads toward addressing the following subsidiary research question:

- What teaching strategies do they employ when they teach such texts?

As the preceding sections make clear, Jenny and Naomi carefully pursued a guided-reading format as they taught *Words By Heart*. The goal of guided reading was to develop independent readers and thinkers by the school system. The teachers worked to create a balance between reading, writing, speaking, and comprehension to meet guided-reading objectives. However, this balance was not completely achieved. As a part of each lesson, the teachers sought to implement reading, writing, speaking, and comprehension. There was a daily focus on reading and speaking and an occasional writing assignment. Yet, there was not an equal balance of reading, writing, and speaking due to the difficulty of the text. Naomi and I, for example, discussed why there was less focus on writing. She had decided that because the language and concepts of the text were difficult, she did not want to frustrate the students by having them write extensive reader responses. Therefore, almost all the writing assignments were comprised of a single paragraph and were generally fulfilled through homework assignments. She wanted there to be more focus on having the students understand *what* they were reading. Through the discussions it was apparent that the students were able to comprehend the text, despite some initial confusions regarding events. Students were generally expected to participate by reading a part of the text, sharing their thoughts during the discussion, and verbally

reflecting on the text to demonstrate understanding.

Jenny did not offer many written assignments either, but for reasons different than Naomi. Jenny had initially planned for the students to write a final paper on character development at the end of the text. Therefore, she limited the writing assignments in the guided-reading sessions. However, at the conclusion of the text, the two-page written assignment about character development was not given due to time restrictions.

Did each teacher meet the guided reading goal of having the students become independent readers and thinkers? Jenny said that she believed she had met this goal. Often, students would read ahead because they were anxious to find out that happened next. Jenny never discouraged this behavior, but always asked that the students to refrain from sharing what they had read until the appropriate time. In addition, she often asked the students to recount the events, not for the sake of sequencing, but in order to explain the changes in the characters, which the students would do much better by the end of the text she believed. Therefore, she thought she had contributed to the students' ability to think more independently. Naomi agreed that she also had effectively contributed to students thinking independently as the students demonstrated strong opinions about what justice should be at the end of the text and expressed their predictions about what would happen to the black family after Papa had died based on their understanding of the time period. Although the teachers used different barometers for judging success, they each established independent thinking related to the goals they had set.

In the final cluster of subsidiary research questions there was focus on

student-to- student and teacher-to-student interactions in relationship to CRT. These questions sought to locate evidence of CRT principles in action and interactions (verbal and non-verbal) that related to *Words By Heart*. The following questions framed that search:

- How do the teachers interact with their students and how do their students interact with each other when discussing and learning about this literature?
- If it's apparent, what does culturally relevant teaching look like in their classrooms?

As reported earlier, relationships were strong in each classroom. Jenny and Naomi both had a caring approach to their students. They each seemed to know their students academically and personally. Each teacher used this knowledge about their students to draw them into the texts and make connections. As a result, students spoke candidly in the discussions and shared personal stories as they related to the text. This indicated a trust between the students and teachers as well as among the students themselves.

Although, both teachers were caring, Jenny seemed to favor a soft caring relationship with the students, whereas Naomi offered a tougher no-nonsense form of caring to her students. Appropriately, their different ways of caring were representative of their teaching philosophies and were displayed in their teaching. Jenny tended to dote on her students, while Naomi more openly challenged her students' thinking and understanding, especially as it related to making sense of the characters within the racialized historical context framing the story. The nature of the relationship between Naomi and her students reflected her philosophy about teaching.

Naomi pursued a direct and challenging approach to teaching the text and students tended to reflect that same approach back.

### **Discussing the Results**

Earlier, I used Figure 6.2 to show how CRT principles were utilized in each teacher's instruction. Overall, Naomi demonstrated higher frequencies in the combined CRT principles than Jenny and considerably more so in the complex CRT principles (bolded in Figure 6.2). I would attribute this largely to the difference in teaching and life experiences as well as race. Naomi possessed many more experiences with guided reading, literacy staff development, mentoring of prospective teachers and serving as a school leader. However, Naomi's edge in use of CRT principles with respect to Jenny only tells part of the story.

As previously mentioned, the CRT principles such as student-centered instruction, learning within the context of the culture, culturally-mediated instruction, and reshaping the curriculum are more essential to CRT practices than other principles such as positive perspective on families, high expectations, and teachers as facilitators. This study suggests that the CRT principles are not all equal and should be weighted to separate further CRT practices and "good teaching" practices. Clearly Naomi and Jenny had established the "good teaching" of CRT into their instruction. However, the divide in their handling of the texts, teaching, and interactions were illuminated in the more complex principles of CRT. Therefore, to more accurately describe CRT in a classroom the principles should be weighted. The principles of student-centered instruction, learning within the context, culturally-mediated instruction, and reshaping the curriculum need to be valued more heavily in order to

provide a clearer sense of what directly addresses the definition of CRT and influences students in their ability to develop cultural competence and become critically conscious challengers of the status quo. Naomi's use of CRT in her instruction led students to be challengers of the text and be more aware of how race and culture impacted historical settings. This awareness was only minimally developed for Jenny's students.

One cannot ignore the question of whether race/ethnicity had an impact on Naomi's stronger reliance on CRT principles in her classroom. Did race/ethnicity play a role in Naomi's ability to more strongly connect *Words By Heart* to her students? Did race/ethnicity lead to Naomi and Jenny determining different teaching goals and styles? Naomi and Jenny have different backgrounds and experiences based on race/ethnicity and their implicit and explicit cultural influences. It is hard not to argue that these factors contributed to some degree to their reasons for wanting to teach and the ways in which they did.

Initially, I noted that differences between Naomi and Jenny as they related to the implementation of CRT principles appeared largely related to experience and background. In informal conversations with Jenny and Naomi they both felt they could adequately teach *Words By Heart*, regardless of their backgrounds. Jenny said that she was using race/ethnicity as a point of empathy, while Naomi explained that she used her race/ethnicity as a point of perspective. When I probed further to understand Jenny's use of the term empathy, she conveyed that she could attempt to understand the challenges of the Black characters, but these were not her own experiences, thus her connection would be limited. In contrast, Naomi felt that her

perspective aligned with that of the Black characters and she could speak to racism from a first hand standpoint.

One could argue that Naomi's consideration use of race/ethnicity made her teaching stronger. Jenny's use of race/ethnicity was sometimes presented in a distanced form as though she was attempting to achieve colorblindness. This meant, that when she was confronted with highly charged racial issue she sometimes skirted race as it related to the impact it may have had on her students and sometimes she ignored her own race as it related to empowerment and how that is displayed in society. Furthermore, her colorblindness seemed to assume that student experiences did not include racism or racial injustice. Jenny sometimes expressed in words and actions the characteristics of the White teachers profiled in case studies at the end of Chapter 2 (Siegel, 1999). Jenny did not seem to be aware of the full pedagogical responsibilities implied by CRT and ignoring certain events that made her uncomfortable. For example, when Papa was called a racial slur by Mr. Haney and did not retaliate, Jenny skipped over the derogatory word "nigger". She did not explore the inception of the word, why it is demeaning, and what could have been other possible outcomes of the altercation. Likewise, when Jenny gave the students the assignment to write a letter apologizing to Ms. Chism for stealing (as Claudie did), Jenny passed on the issue of a black girl stealing from a White woman and the racial implications behind this issue that made it significant. Jenny was more inclined to study the sincerity of the letter versus the issue of racial tension found in the book.

During the climax of the story when Papa was shot by a white boy and the tough decision that Claudie made to forgive him was likewise left unacknowledged

by Jenny. During the course of instruction, Jenny kept distance from the sensitive issue of race. As a result, her students were not offered instruction on the fullness of the story, which is in large part driven by racial tension. Jenny's ostensible fear of acknowledging race and the implications it had for her and her students further promotes dynamics of a color-blind classroom. Fear of dealing with charged, controversial issues such as race is not uncommon among white elementary teachers, even among those who otherwise are described as "good teachers."

The data does not exactly allow me to explain how race/ethnicity factored into Naomi's ability to implement CRT principles. However, I am reasonably certain that because of Naomi's more direct attention to race/ethnicity in *Words By Heart* and her socio-economic background allowed her to draw on experiences that related to the characters and highlight how history impacted the story being told in the text. Naomi was aggressive in addressing racial issues in the text. She did not appear to miss a single opportunity to address race relative to the time period and how it impacted the events in the story. For example, Naomi addressed issues of race when Claudie won the Bible verse contest and how Claudie's race enraged the other participants. She also addressed race in the communications between Mr. Haney and Papa. Naomi focused on how Mr. Haney belittled Papa to demonstrate his superiority over him. This was solely an issue of race that fueled tension and hate. Naomi wanted her students to understand these issues and be able to make sense of them for their own decision making. She empowered students to understand race and react to it at the story's end climax around the shooting of Papa. Race was at the forefront of Naomi's teaching, perhaps largely because it was at the forefront of her life experience. Her

ability to relate her race to the text and the students allowed her to more fully address the complex issues of the text and empower her students' understanding of it. Jenny chose to side step these issues limiting her students' chance to better make sense of them.

I would suggest that this study points to a teacher's racial/ethnic experiences as a shaping influence that affects her/his teaching perspectives and connection to multicultural texts such as *Words By Heart*. Jenny's whiteness and her apparent discomfort with racism made teaching the text a greater challenge. Naomi's race allowed her to connect and relate to the text. In some ways, this gave Naomi freedom to be her self, while it challenged Jenny to search for an understanding and comfort level that she had not had to seek before, one that the data suggest she was unable to find.

Nonetheless, I believe that CRT principles can be acquired and implemented once they are explored, learned, and refined by teachers of any race/ethnicity. Race/ethnicity does not determine teaching ability nor does it necessarily determine understanding of cultural relevance. However, in order to enrich the learning opportunities she provides for her diverse students, Jenny needs to embrace responsibility for learning the meaning and power of race in her classroom. Once she has accepted the role of race (hers and that of her students), she can begin to make more strides to incorporate culturally-relevant, race- conscious approaches into her classroom. How this change is to occur and by what specific motivational trigger eludes me and the reach of this study's data. However, the study's teachers' opinions may light on it.

## **Implications for Teachers and Students**

### **Teachers**

The student demographics in public school systems have changed and will continue to change. As I described in Chapter 1, the U.S. Department of Commerce (1996) projected that by the year 2050, African-American, Asian, and Latino/a students could make-up 57% of the school population. With that in mind, we educators must consider what teaching practices will serve this changing student demographic best. Using CRT principles in schools and classrooms is one option we must look at more closely as we contemplate revising curriculums, choosing student texts, and implementing powerful literacy strategies.

In discussions with Naomi and Jenny, both noted to having little or no knowledge of CRT. The term had been mentioned in recent trainings as the school district introduced a race and equity agenda. But neither had studied CRT in any depth. In a follow-up interview, I discussed with Naomi how CRT was present in her classroom. She was anxious at learning more about this agenda, since she did not have great knowledge of it. Naomi offered the insight that, in order for her and other teachers to consciously utilize CRT principles in their teaching, they would need some direct instruction and modeling in this area. Jenny was not surprised that she tended to lack a number of culturally relevant teaching practices. She acknowledged her lack of knowledge on the topic and she felt it would be impossible to implement such complex principles unless she had more instruction about them, possibly suggesting her fear of dealing with such controversial issues without more concrete guidance.

Such observations are linked to the research discussed in Chapter 2 on how few colleges and universities provide education on CRT principles and their incorporation into the classroom. However, it must be noted that when looking at Naomi and Jenny, the principles of positive perspective on families, high expectations, and teachers as facilitators have been addressed by colleges and universities. These practices are widely accepted and therefore, taught by many professors. The more complex principles of CRT such as student-centered instruction, learning within the context of the culture, culturally-mediated instruction, and reshaping the curriculum do not seem to have been addressed as much.

To carefully and openly examine these principles would require a paradigm shift in pedagogical practice and a strong examination of race and cultural differences. The notion of exploring these principles is not commonly accepted by colleges and universities (Zeichner, 1994). This study implies a need for direct instruction in these more complex areas of CRT and more opportunities for pre-service teachers to explore them in order to teach a changing demographic. As a result, few educators have been able to access experience with the more complex CRT principles (Martin, 1995).

There was approximately 25 years of teaching difference experience between Naomi and Jenny. Neither had the opportunity to study CRT in their educational experience, even though they attended college during different decades. When I asked Jenny and Naomi about their level of exposure to any kind of multicultural teacher education, they provided similar answers. Jenny had taken a class on multiculturalism applied to teaching. She expressed, however, that this class reinforced stereotypes as

opposed to teaching respect and understanding of different cultures. Naomi had taken a class on multicultural literature several years prior, but found that it did not introduce her to many new diverse literary authors. In addition, Naomi found it surprising that she had not been introduced to CRT given that she had her master's degree and 60 credits beyond it.

By studying the research, this seems to be understandable. For example, Linda Darling-Hammond (2006) has emphasized the growing cultural diversity of students, acknowledged the diversity standards set by educational boards, and observed the lack of sufficient preparation of teachers. Yet, it appears that little has occurred to change teacher preparation programs. The literature seems to suggest that many schools still maintain traditional teaching practices despite the cultural shifts in schools (Irvine, 2000).

My descriptions in Chapter 2 do highlight several colleges and universities that have ventured into transforming their curriculum to introduce more educational pedagogy and teaching practices centered on urban and diverse students. However, these do not appear to be prevalent practices throughout the country in teacher preparation programs. Culturally relevant teaching principles only seem to be being taught at a few select schools.

Naomi and Jenny both see the need for CRT once I retrospectively explained what it was and what it might look like. They were receptive to learning more about it because of what they saw as its potential benefits for students. Based on this, I am suggesting that there needs to be more schools that prepare teacher interns to teach students using (complex) culturally relevant teaching practices. Perhaps this would

have enabled both teachers in the study to use CRT principles more prevalently in their teaching, especially Jenny. Naomi believed that acquiring CRT knowledge and implementing it into her teaching would improve her overall craft. However, this same insight could generally be applied to all teachers teaching in diverse settings.

Although teacher preparation programs have a role in providing CRT knowledge to prospective teachers, there are other educational institutions that could also provide it. For example, Jenny said that she planned to pursue a master's degree in the near future and could select a school that would expand her knowledge of teaching diverse students. On the other hand, Naomi had long since completed her undergraduate and master's degree and was not likely to be pursuing any additional credits she said. Therefore, the school district would need to provide in-house professional development to assist teachers with such teaching practices. Having universities and colleges as well as K-12 school systems teach CRT principles could create a cohesive and meaningful teaching model for educators.

Having said all this, it is important to understand that professional and personal experience as well as a teacher's race and ethnicity are powerful influences on how teachers teach. In this particular case study, race was a major factor in the connection made between the teacher, text, and students. A clear understanding and acceptance of race on the part of the teacher allows for a more expressive and meaningful dialogue about the text for all parties involved. It is difficult to see precisely how teacher preparation programs can affect conversations about race/ethnicity and its connection to education in diverse classrooms. However, it is clear that race and ethnicity often impact diverse students. Although, the path may be

tenuous, colleges and universities, and school systems, need to venture into exploring such educational philosophies and begin to prepare students for a changing demographic.

## **Students**

One of the possible outcomes of pursuing CRT practices in schools would be to help close the achievement gap. The research indicates that White students outperform Black and Hispanic students in all content areas. One statistic reported that in 2004, at all levels, White, 9-year-old students scored higher than Black and Hispanic students by 26 percentage points (NCES, 2004). The achievement gap has continued to be an issue, particularly when put into a race/ethnic context. Although, this study did not focus on closing the achievement gap through CRT practice, it did suggest some implications. For example, before students can show an increase in achievement, they must show a certain level of participation and engagement.

The students who participated in this study were on to above grade-level readers. This fact gave the students a better chance of being engaged in the reading since engagement is dependent on reading level. However, the data indicated that the practices of the teachers were also crucial pieces that determined student participation. Stipek (2002) noted that the following instructional practices promoted student participation and engagement: (a) encouragement of challenging, conceptual thinking that fosters self-efficacy development and interest, (b) emphasis on learning and understanding rather than on simply receiving correct answers, (c) active student participation and control that supports autonomy development, and (d) authenticity and meaningfulness of activities linked to outside of school experiences as recurring

themes. A teacher's expression of high expectations of their student's performance was another factor that encouraged and determined student engagement, according to Guthrie, Wigfield, and Von Secker (2000) and Pressley, Wharton-McDonald, Mistretta-Hampton, and Echevarria (1998). Both teachers executed a high level of the CRT principles--setting high expectations. Thus, students were likely to demonstrate success on the teacher set goals of the texts.

Both teachers worked to incorporate the five strategies for participation and engagement just noted in their lessons. Jenny succeeded in having students engage in thinking that fostered self efficacy development and interests and providing authentic activities for homework. Naomi succeeded in those as well, but additionally incorporated emphasis on learning and understanding the broader historical meaning of the text and fostered student participation that supported autonomy development. In my observations, Naomi met all the criteria of engagement. For both teachers, the level of engagement for the students was relatively high. This was due in part to the fact that each teacher was working from several CRT principles.

For educators, engagement has been important because of the possibility that it might raise student achievement. Students who have been engaged are more likely to internalize the content and respond more positively to achievement tests. Furthermore, students who are engaged also tend to be more participatory in class and express an interest in the content being presented. Naomi and Jenny both worked to engage their students with the potential of increasing minority achievement. Ideally, the more that each student was engaged would correlate to a higher academic performance. Although this cannot be verified through this study, the preliminary

evidence suggests that there would be a high level of success for the students.

Therefore, the value of engagement cannot be highlighted enough.

Each teacher focused on lesson structures that solicited student engagement. Participation was directly invoked by Naomi because of high interest activities she developed for the text. In addition, Naomi assigned authentic and meaningful tasks outside of school. The tasks that were given nightly were consistently related directly to the text and appeared to encourage student thinking. The assignments given were not the standard textbook types, but ones that were designed to fill in knowledge gaps for students and provide them opportunities to think about their own values and opinions as well as help them to meet the goals she had set for understanding the text. Naomi successfully had the students thinking about issues the text generated. Students came to class with new ideas to test out with their peers and teachers and suggested new ways of thinking about the text. Students made their own connections and began to independently interpret the text.

Jenny encouraged engagement by having the students respond to the chapters that they read each night. In this way, students were able to share their thoughts with their peers and Jenny. In addition, Jenny assessed students informally throughout the reading of the text. She sometimes had the students participate in short quizzes that tested their memory of their reading. Furthermore, she encouraged student talk by asking an opening question or by having students respond to a passage. However, being unwilling to deal directly with the racially charged issues in the text, Jenny likely limited levels of engagement she otherwise could have utilized. According to research just noted, these practices, but particularly those of Naomi, further deepened

engagement.

The use of provocative text, *Words By Heart*, in addition to the strategies the teacher's put in place around teaching that text encouraged student interest. The result was groups of students in Title I schools become engrossed in a text. As research studies note, the combination of CRT and engagement practices are directly linked to student achievement (Guthrie, Wigfield, & Von Secker, 2000). The traditional nature of education does not always encourage the use of CRT principles and engagement, but when they are put into practice there are more opportunities to improve the performance of minority students (Banks, McGee, & Cherry, 2001) .

### **Multicultural Literature and Culturally Relevant Teaching**

One of the goals of the school district was for fifth grade students to listen to, read, and discuss a variety of literary texts representing diverse cultures, ethnicities, perspectives, and time periods. Meeting this goal, in part by bringing powerful books like *Words By Heart* into the classroom, can be thought of as holding considerable value given that only 13% of the approved texts in the school district include minority characters. With these small numbers, it is clear that minority students do not typically receive many opportunities to see themselves in the literature they read. Teachers appear to have to work hard to bring multicultural books into their classrooms. However, the apparent payoff of these efforts can be strong student participation, as suggested by the CRT literature (Daniels, 2002). However, the greater payoff might be the increase of student achievement for minority students through a combination of CRT principles, engagement practices, and powerful texts. I am arguing that, in the end, none of these practices stand alone in creating significant

impact on students. They must all work together to create a meaningful teaching and learning process.

It has been argued that the discussion of multicultural literature can bring about the construction of knowledge and new understanding. *Words By Heart* is an intense text that brings controversial issues to light. The text highlighted issues that the students found to be critical to their lives and translatable by their very nature. In addition, the intensity of the lessons garnered a high level of engagement from the students.

Given the intensity of the instruction and the student's ability to complete the assignments, it would be fair to assume that some knowledge of character development, historical time period, and justice was gained on the part of the students (likely more so in Naomi's class, as I have argued). *Words By Heart* was used to engage students and acted as a vessel for carrying CRT principles. The incorporation of all of these factors would likely triangulate to produce higher student achievement for minority students. As Ladson-Billings (1994) points out, researchers need to learn more about what it means to teach multicultural literature from a culturally relevant perspective so educators can learn more about the construction of knowledge for students. Educators are challenged to explore the possibilities of success for minority students through these applications. To ignore what could create high levels of success for minority students using these methods might be considered an injustice.

### **What Makes Sheila Unique?**

The data from this study and their analysis makes it somewhat clearer why Sheila was successful at teaching diverse students. As I stated in Chapter 1. Sheila felt

it was crucial to know a child's home life, their families, joys and fears, and their cultural background. As research (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 1999) has suggested, observing these pieces from the outside, though, is not enough to make it culturally relevant practice. In Sheila's case, she did something that many teachers do not do and I did not recognize fully until now.

Sheila was a part of the community her students lived in (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 1999). Sheila lived on the "Black side of town" because she liked being in the heart of "her community." Her school was only a short drive away from her home, making it possible for her to be a part of every school and community function. Sheila knew where her students played on the weekend, how they spent their free time, often knowing siblings of her students, and giving volunteer time to her community when she had it to spare. Even now, she lives in the heart of Baltimore, where she enjoys the experience of a diverse community. Although she is White, Sheila is comfortable in diverse environments and she prefers it. This enabled her to connect to her students and understand their culture.

Sheila was a master of the more complex CRT principles, such as having student-centered instruction and transforming the curriculum. She incorporated a great deal of multicultural literature into her teaching. She added to the curriculum by making it reflective of her students. She shaped the curriculum to make it friendlier and more engaging for students of color. She was purposeful in crafting curricular lessons to be provide diverse perspectives, include the voices of various ages, genders, and cultures, and she wove this web of diversity through social studies, reading, and writing. Sheila also included positive perspectives on families, had high

expectations, and acting as a facilitator, but it was her ability to provide more depth that made her a culturally relevant teacher.

I believe that Sheila possesses some unique characteristics that allow her to be a culturally relevant teacher. First, Sheila has a strong awareness of who she is as it relates to her race. More specifically, Sheila has explored race at complex levels. Secondly, Sheila had a laser-like focus on making instruction meaningful, comprehensible, and intensive. Sheila's goal was always to have the reading and writing program in her classroom become a part of her student's lives, not a separate, school-only entity. Thirdly, Sheila made her classroom a place where students exercised power and leadership. She empowered students through group work, training sessions, verbal role playing, and accountability for one another. All three of these strengths of Sheila's coordinate with the complex CRT principles. These are not the only strengths of Sheila's, but these stand out to me as I analyze her cultural relevant practices.

I cannot be certain as to why Sheila made changes to her teaching and learning framework, but I believe that at some point in her career she had a transformative experience. Sheila came into the profession with a disposition of honest self-examination and a desire for making significant change with her diverse students. Like Jenny, Sheila sought to work in a diverse environment. She was looking for something different that did not necessarily reflect her own Whiteness. I can only imagine that at some point she discovered that her race and that of students mattered in their interactions, influenced perceptions of reading texts, provided a 'textured' lens as books were analyzed, and contributed to learning styles,

understanding of classroom structures, and student achievement. More importantly, once she made this discovery, she became a risk-taker and found the courage to confront the issues of race head on. The desire that lurked inside of her rose to the surface and had a place to expand and lend itself to academic student success. This venture by Sheila was a personal choice that was nurtured by a pre-disposition for seeking change of those she served and apparently a penchant for risk-taking and cultural openness.

Is it possible to teach someone what Sheila found during her classroom experience? I believe this answer has two sides. It is possible to teach these principles to someone if the pre-disposition for change and an openness to complex racial/ethnic issues exist. The teaching of CRT principles can encourage teachers to further explore their practices and the impact of race/ethnicity in their classroom. They will accept responsibility for race/ethnicity by making it a part of planning, teaching, assessments, and relationships. Accepting this responsibility breeds respect for cultures (Lee, 2001) and guides change within classrooms. On the other hand, the notion of a transformative experience (e.g., the one Sheila likely had) can be minimized by fear, closed thinking, and comfort with the status quo. For some, there is no desire for making a difference with underserved populations. There is no interest in changing the world to create fairer opportunities in education. If this state of mind exists, then teaching CRT principles has less of a chance of enlightening an educator. I would theorize that those who are most self-reflective and therefore develop insight to their racial/ethnic selves are the most likely to become CRT teachers.

Looking closely, Sheila and Naomi seem more alike as teachers than they do

different. Although Sheila is White and Naomi is African-American, they share many of the same teaching principles and understandings of culturally relevant instruction. Their similarities include extensive teaching experience, education beyond a master's degree, teaching of various grades, and the taking on of leadership roles. Furthermore, they share an understanding of the complexities of race/ethnicity and the role of their own race as it relates to their teaching craft, an empowerment of students that promotes the challenging of the status quo, and a classroom that supports a family/team accountability structure versus an individual (every student for him/herself) arrangement. These qualities are linked to the CRT principles of student-centered instruction, culturally-mediated instruction, and reshaping the curriculum. Although, these practices looked different in Sheila's and Naomi's classroom, they were clearly present and well defined.

While Jenny is not easily comparable to Sheila or Naomi, it is my belief that Jenny's practices show some glimmers of moving forward CRT. But she needs to consciously embrace CRT. Jenny does not yet appear to have developed a strong sense of how race/ethnicity (her own and that of her students) defines the structure, relationships, academic needs, and social/emotional influences of teaching and learning. While Jenny is willing to say that she recognizes race/ethnicity, she has not made it an integral part of her daily teaching practices. She has gleaned the idea that it brings different experiences, but has not yet embraced taking responsibility for it and its role in shaping her practices. I believe that Jenny can acquire CRT skills if she chooses to personally explore race/ethnicity and its complex, sensitive issues (as did Naomi and Sheila). Currently, Jenny seems limited by fear and perhaps even the

comfort of the status quo and the privilege it affords her. It is less clear as to whether or not Jenny has the self-reflective nature that supports the courage to commit to the exploration of race/ethnicity. A self-reflective nature and a commitment to understanding the importance of race/ethnicity does not merely come with age or experience, but is a conscious journey of self exploration. Naomi and Sheila both echo the thought that they began with questions about themselves as racial/ethnic beings before they approached making their classroom a place for doing the same.

Carol Lee (2001) suggests that to create a cultural classroom a teacher must understand the complexity of teaching, respect the students they teach, and “believe in the endless possibility for higher academic achievement for all students (p. 140).” Lee (2001) further notes that these changes are tedious and generally occur over long periods of time. Jenny will have to question and examine herself as it relates to all parts of her life--where she lives, her background, friends, community connections, academic experiences, relationships with her students, her teaching methods, etc. She will have to determine that her students can have an even richer academic experience if she chooses to learn more about CRT and develop a long-term goal of how to become a culturally relevant teacher. I believe that a well structured introduction and exploration of CRT might create a spark for Jenny that will encourage her to start down the road toward racial/ethnic exploration of her teaching. This journey is a personal one, but it can be shaped by the teachings of CRT and may even be more powerful if witnessed by teachers as they examine their own teaching practices. Jenny can become more like Sheila and Naomi given the cultivation of a disposition for self-exploration combined with additional CRT knowledge. Jenny’s journey as a

teacher would do well to be supported along the way with powerful professional development experiences so aligned.

### **Conclusion**

I would suggest that complex CRT principles produce stronger levels of connection between students and multicultural literature. The connections between students and the multicultural literature were apparent through observation and data collected in this study. CRT has relevance for diverse as well as the mainstream demographic of students who populate the public school system. Potentially, implementing CRT into the classrooms of public schools could work to diminish the achievement gap between majority and minority students.

This study produced an understanding that for CRT principles to be brought into the classroom teachers need direct instruction on these principles as well as significant experience with minority students, multicultural texts, and curriculum. All these pieces need to be in place and operate coordinately. This instruction could be provided through universities or colleges or through the school district. A large scale implementation of CRT as a consistent, permanent part of teacher readiness would require a paradigm shift. Bringing CRT to the forefront would call for in-depth instruction on CRT, extensive teaching experience in an urban school with diverse students, study of various races and cultures, and knowledge of multicultural literature. I do not believe this serves as an extensive list of what might be needed to implement or create a shift to CRT, but an implementation of the aforementioned experiences would be a powerful beginning.

Lastly, a teacher's race/ethnicity can have a significant impact on a teacher's

ability to connect with a multicultural text and the implications of that text for the students. Race/ethnicity is a complex factor whose role cannot be fully analyzed in this study. However, it seems strongly suggested that race/ethnicity influences how teachers handle multicultural texts, the setting of student goals for the lessons, assessments, and instructional delivery. A non-White teacher may have inherent advantages over a White teacher when teaching a text featuring non-White ethnic groups. A non-White teacher may feel more aligned with the characters and have a perspective that allows for more meaningful insight. They may also be a greater willingness to address difficult racial issues (e.g., Jim Crow, slavery, sharecropping, and general societal racism). Furthermore, teachers who have a full understanding of their race/ethnicity and that of their students, as well as those who make race/ethnicity a central focus of their instruction, are perhaps more likely to produce culturally relevant learning experiences through student-centered instruction, culturally mediated instruction, transforming the curriculum, and learning within the context of a culture. As a result of this case study, I believe that the aforementioned CRT principles are more difficult to understand and implement versus other CRT principles such as teacher as facilitator, high expectations, and positive perspectives on families. That latter may well be merely good teaching practices. The more complex CRT principles should be given greater emphasis when promoting the CRT capabilities among teachers. The notion of weighting CRT principles allows for those with more defined strategies and practices for addressing minority students to surface.

CRT has brought a little change to education to this point, but there continues to be opportunities for growth, understanding, and implementation of CRT. This

study suggests validation for that idea. CRT has the power to impact instruction in a positive manner to nurture student understanding, self-confidence, and likely student achievement. The principles of CRT are worth exploring so that education can better meet the needs of our changing school demographics. However, stressing CRT alone will unlikely be enough to change dispositions toward self-racial/ethnic exploration. Educators will need to find additional avenues for promoting such journeys.

### **Limitations**

As in all studies, this one contains limitations that need to be acknowledged. The first limitation was that the study only included two teachers. The selective sampling approach did not provide a comprehensive view of how all expert teachers teach texts featuring African-American protagonists. Because the study sought depth of understanding over breadth, it can only suggest transferability of results rather than generalizability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In qualitative, naturalistic studies, this trade off is typically considered acceptable (Bodgen & Biklen, 2003).

The second limitation involves a bias towards Naomi's goals and practice that need to be understood as perhaps a consequence of her advanced experience and racial understanding. After many more years of teaching experience and racial exploration, Jenny may look more like Naomi and Sheila. This study offers some insight into what white teachers would need to experience to develop that sensitivity, but these findings are speculative and are limited to the experiences of two teachers in this study.

A third limitation is tied to the lack of data on student achievement. Although, there were some references to student achievement in this study, they were not

supported with direct data. As a result, the study yields no confirmation on the impact of CRT directly increasing literacy achievement or on closing the achievement gap.

A final limitation relates to data collected on teachers and students surrounding the use of only one text. There may have been different or additional findings had the study included the teacher's teaching and student's responding to several pieces of multicultural literature that referenced various ethnicities. This may have created a broader range of connections for the teachers and students, thus yielding additional or different information on both parts. These limitations add to the context under which this study was developed and further create an understanding of how the study was shaped and how it evolved.

## **Appendix A**

### **Interview Questions**

#### **Initial interview questions**

- 1) What did you think of *Words by Heart*?
- 2) What preparation did you do in order to teach this text?
- 3) What was the focus of the first several initial lessons?
- 4) What was your end goal for the students in teaching this text? Why was that?
- 5) Did you build background knowledge for students when teaching a text with such complex issues? If so, how?
- 6) What have been your professional development opportunities (i.e. staff development, education courses, etc.) as it relates to teaching diverse students?
- 7) What were your impressions about a white author writing in the voice of an African-American protagonist?

#### **Middle interview questions**

- 1) Did you deliver lessons in a way that were helping you to reach your end goal? If so, how? If not, how did you change your direction?
- 2) Were you able to make personal connections to the text? If so, what were they?
- 3) Did you feel you are accurately portraying the African-American characters?
- 4) Did you feel you are accurately portraying the white characters in the book?

- 5) What issues relating to the race/ethnicity of the characters and theme affected your teaching of the novel? Explain.

**Final interview questions**

- 1) What do you think was the most prominent theme that was highlighted in your teaching of this book?
- 2) How did your own experiences and background contribute to which theme was focused upon?
- 3) What role did your own feelings and experiences bring to your teachings?
- 4) Do you think you taught the text using culturally sensitive and relevant strategies? If so, how?
- 5) Do you feel as though you met your goals with this text with the students? If so, please explain.

## Appendix B

### Words By Heart

#### Anticipation Guide

Write A (agree) or D (disagree) on the line before the statement. Read chapters 1-5 and come back and revisit your response. Record your new response on the line after each statement.

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. After slavery, many Blacks moved to Liberia in Africa. \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. Blacks were not allowed to swear on the same Bible as Whites in court.  
\_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. The “hoping time” was when people hoped they would have enough to eat each day. \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. Someone’s success could cause problems for their family. \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. “Still smarting” means to know all the right answers. \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. Words by Heart is realistic fiction. \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. To know something by “heart” means to make up a song about it. \_\_\_\_\_

#### Vocabulary

Using context clues, write the definition of each word. If there are no sufficient clues, use a dictionary.

Scripture-

Contestants-

Spry (8)-

Fortitude (22)-

Lynched (25)-

#### Author’s Craft

**Find 3 examples of figurative language.**

## Appendix C

### Reader's Theater

#### Chapter 6

*Papa goes to the Haney's to get the supplies for the fence.*

**Papa**—Is your daddy home?

**Tater**—He might be. Why?

**Papa**—I came to see him on some business.

**Mr. Haney**—What business?

**Papa**—Miss Chism wants me to pick up the wire and posts for the Hawk Hill place.

**Mr. Haney**—Well, I'll tell you, I'm planning to be using them posts and wire myself.

**Papa** (mildly)—Well, Mr. Haney, all I know is she told me to get them, so that's what I'll have to do.

**Mr. Haney**—Well, she must have told you wrong. Or more likely you just heard wrong. Because I done the Hawk Hill fences the last three years and mane to keep on.

**Papa**—Since we can't agree on this thing, why can't we go see Miss Chism? I'm on my way over now and you're welcome to ride.

**Mr. Haney**—I have my own mount. I don't have to ride with Sambos.

**Papa**—Then maybe you'd like to go talk to her about it yourself. I can wait.

**Mr. Haney**—Git!

**Tater**—You want to?

**Mr. Haney**—Sure, I might as well go see her. Since you got so much time.

**Tater**—You want me to saddle up?

**Mr. Haney**—What if I tell her somebody stole her blasted wire and posts?

**Papa**—She wouldn't like to hear that.

**Mr. Haney**—What if I told her you stole her stuff?

**Papa** (smiling)—I wouldn't like to hear that.

**Mr. Haney**—You might as well make yourself comfortable. I might be a while.

**Lena** (whispering)—Papa, he already knew he wasn't going to do the fences. Miss Chism told him.

**Papa**—People don't liked to be pushed.

## Appendix D

### Reader's Theater

#### Chapter 7

*Papa is on the Haney's property and goes to look in their barn after Mr. Haney rode off.*

**Papa**—Well.

**Tater**—Hey! What you think you're doin'?

**Papa**—I'm seeing if you have Miss Chism's wire and posts.

**Tater**—You can't do this. This ain't your place.

**Papa**—It's Miss Chism's place. And I need to have some facts to tell her. I need to know I'm not being fooled again.

**Tater**—Listen, nigger, you stay out of our barn. My pap, he'll kill you as quick as he would a bug.

**Papa** (mildly)—Now, if you don't let me look, I'm going to tell her you all stole all her....

*Tater shoves the door towards Papa and hits him. Papa staggers backwards. Lena swings her satchel and hits Tater.*

**Papa**—Lena! What are you doing? I'm not hurt, baby girl. Are you alright?

**Lena**—Papa, he was...

**Tater**—You lay a hand on me... You lay a hand on me... It is none of your business what we done with them posts.

**Lena** (begging)—Papa, let's go.

**Papa**—I can't leave like this.

**Tater**—You can tell her... your old lady Chism! You can tell her where she can put her barb wire.

**Lena** (pleading)—Papa!

**Papa**—I'm sorry (to the woman).

## Appendix E

### Words By Heart

#### Chapters 5-10

If this story were a play, make a case of characters. How would you identify the role of each character in the play? How are they related to one another?

Lena—

Papa—

Claudie—

Ms. Chsim—

Armillia—

Mr. Haney—

Tater—

Roy—

#### Vocabulary

Flaunt (47)

pert (74)

Sickle (61)

forlornly (74)

Avenging (62)

contemptuous (74)

1. Why wouldn't Miss Chism want Lena to have the books?
2. What is wrong with just "Yes", when Papa or Lena responded to Miss Chism? Why did they need to respond with "Yes, Ma'am"?
3. How are slavery and sharecropping different? Are there similarities?
4. How did it make you feel and what did you think when tater hit Papa? If you were Papa, how would you have responded?
5. Do you agree with what Papa says about service on page 70? Why or why not?
6. Why doesn't Papa tell Claudie everything?

#### Author's Craft

**Find 3 examples of figurative language.**

## **Appendix F**

### **Words By Heart**

### **Character Traits**

**Write two character traits for Lena.**

**1.**

**2.**

**With your partner, defend your thinking with examples/evidence from the text.  
Does your partner agree with you? Talk about why or why not.**

## Appendix G

### Chapter 13

**Visualizing is an important strategy that helps us to understand what we read. In order to grasp the events of Chapter 13, it is crucial to play that “video text” in your head. Choose a scene from Chapter 13 that perhaps you had to reread to grasp what was happening. If that did not happen, choose a scene that was most interesting to you. Use the plain paper to draw that scene. Write a caption describing that action.**

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