A Teacher Educator’s Journey: Reflections on the Challenges of Teaching Culturally Relevant Classroom Management

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Demographic data indicate that our population of elementary and secondary students continues to grow more diverse every year. In contrast, about 90% of the teaching force is White, middle class, and monolingual. As a result of this “cultural mismatch,” classroom management difficulties faced by both novice and experienced teachers can be exacerbated. Although there has been a push for culturally responsive pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1994) to help minimize cultural conflicts in the classroom, issues of classroom management are often neglected in these discussions. Just recently, some researchers have begun to address classroom management in relation to culture, and this new area has become known as culturally responsive classroom management. The purposes of this paper are to share a unique teaching experience, document the particular challenges involved when teaching about culturally responsive classroom management to two different populations of preservice teachers, and reflect upon the lessons learned.

Demographic data indicate that our population of elementary and secondary school students continues to grow more diverse every year. For example, approximately 40% of school-age children are students of color, one in five lives in poverty, and almost one in ten has limited proficiency in English (Ryan & Cooper, 2007). In contrast, about 90% of the teaching force is White, middle class, and monolingual. As a result of this “cultural mismatch,” the classroom management difficulties faced by both novice and experienced teachers can be exacerbated.

The book Teaching Other People’s Children: Literacy and Learning in a Bilingual Classroom (1999) clearly illustrates the managerial difficulties the book’s author, Cynthia Ballanger, encounters as a result of the cultural mismatch between her and her students. Through observations and discussions, Ballanger discovers differences in the American and Haitian teachers’ classroom management styles that are culturally influenced. For example, a major difference between American and Haitian teachers is their use of consequences. Frequently, American teachers present the particular consequences of a piece of misbehavior, whereas Haitian teachers are less likely to differentiate among particular kinds of misbehavior. Instead, the Haitian teachers are more likely to condemn them all as examples of bad behavior and with reference to the shame it will bring on the family.

Lisa Delpit’s book, Other People’s Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom (1995), offers more examples of how cultural conflicts exacerbate behavior issues in the classroom. For example, Delpit tells of an elementary school principal who reported he had a lot of difficulty with Black children placed in White teachers’ classrooms because the teachers often sent the Black children to the office for disobeying the teacher. Delpit explains that these difficulties might be attributed to the differences in the speech of parents. According to Delpit, African American parents use more explicit directives when speaking with their children than do White parents. As a result of the differences in speech patterns, upon entering school, the African American child who is accustomed to the use of explicit directives (“Raise your hand and wait for your turn.”) from authority figures may not understand the indirect statements sometimes referred to as “politeness formulas” (Manke, 1997) (“Don’t you think it is a good idea to raise your hand and wait for your turn?”) from the White teacher as direct commands. Unfortunately, African American children often ignore these indirect commands and the child is labeled as a behavior problem.
In addition to different speech styles, Delpit (1995) explained that another factor that may produce misbehavior is the way children view authority figures. Delpit explained that Black children expect an authority figure to act with authority. Sometimes White, middle class teachers are not comfortable in the authority figure role and try to take on the role of a “chum.” The Black child may perceive this middle class teacher as weak, ineffectual, and incapable of being the teacher. If the child perceives the teacher this way, he or she feels there is no need to follow her directives. The end result is that the teacher perceives the student as misbehaving.

Cultural conflicts like those depicted by Ballanger and Delpit are probably not uncommon since our K-12 population grows increasingly diverse each year while our teaching force does not. According to Powell, McLaughlin, Savage, and Zehn (2001), the majority of teachers in the United States are drawn from generally the same social class and are predominantly White, middle class, and female. As a result of their culture, these individuals have developed a sense of what it means to be a teacher and what is appropriate behavior, which is often in contrast with the diverse cultures of their students.

To help minimize these cultural conflicts in the classroom, over the years there has been a push for culturally responsive pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1994); but issues of classroom management were often neglected in these discussions. Just recently, some researchers have begun to address issues of classroom management in relation to culture, and this new area is known as culturally responsive classroom management.

Weinstein, Curran, and Tomlinson-Clarke (2003) define culturally relevant classroom management as an ongoing, long-term, and often disconcerting process, in which cultural diversity becomes a lens through which teachers view the tasks of classroom management. These tasks include: (1) creating a physical setting that supports academic and social goals; (2) establishing expectations for behavior; (3) communicating with students in culturally consistent ways; (4) developing a caring classroom environment; (5) working with families; and (6) using appropriate interventions to assist students with behavior problems. (p. 270)

Weinstein et al. (2003) also suggest that there are three preconditions that must be met before one can enact culturally relevant classroom management. These include:

- Recognizing that we are all cultural beings, with our own beliefs, biases, and assumptions about human behavior,
- Acknowledging the cultural, racial, ethnic, and class differences that exist among people, and
- Understanding the ways that schools reflect and perpetuate discriminatory practices of the larger society.

Over the years, there have been a few studies that illustrate strategies enacted by culturally relevant classroom managers. For example, Brown (2003) examined the classroom management strategies used by elementary and high school teachers in a variety of urban settings. Results indicated that all the teachers used some culturally relevant strategies, which included demonstrating care for students, acting with authority and assertiveness, and using congruent communication patterns to establish an effective learning environment.

In another study, Monroe and Obidah (2004) examined if and how the concept of “cultural synchronization” relates to an African American middle school teacher’s responses to student disruption. They found that the “cultural synchronization” between the teacher and her students contributed to an effective style of classroom management that differs from traditional models. Specifically, the teacher drew on “referents such as speech patterns, voice tones, facial expressions, and word choices that conveyed her behavioral expectations to students in familiar and meaningful ways” (p. 266).

In addition, Irvine and Fraser (1998) described one African American teacher’s classroom management approach by borrowing James Vasquez’s notion of “warm demanders,” a description of
teachers of color who “provide a tough-minded, no-nonsense, structured and disciplined classroom environment for kids who society has psychologically and physically abandoned” (p. 56).

Given the growing number of cultural mismatches in the classroom, culturally relevant pedagogy and management continue to be “hot topics” within the field of teacher education. However, due to the lack of research that exists, teacher educators have little guidance with respect to how to best educate and sensitize preservice teachers to the concept of culturally relevant classroom management. The purposes of this paper are to document my journey learning and teaching about culturally relevant classroom management, share the particular challenges I encountered when teaching about culturally relevant classroom management to two very different populations of preservice teachers, and reflect upon the lessons I learned in an attempt to inform teacher education.

Beginning the Journey

I was first exposed to the idea of culturally relevant classroom management after I had finished seven years of teaching elementary school (grades 3-5) and was in the middle of my doctoral program. Initially, I was not at all receptive to these ideas because I found the information stereotypical and in contrast with the colorblind mentality to which I was exposed during my upbringing.

With the support of thought-provoking professors, I was encouraged to reflect more deeply about culturally relevant classroom management and my prior teaching experiences and beliefs. I vividly remember what I now call my “aha moment.” I was thinking about my elementary teaching experiences and creating a mental list of the students who stood out in my mind as being particularly challenging. I was shocked to realize that five out of the six children who came to mind immediately were African American boys! That was my humbling “aha moment” because I realized that I was one of the stereotypical White, middle class, monolingual teachers described in the literature. Now it seemed that there was more to this idea of culturally relevant pedagogy and classroom management than I originally wanted to believe.

As I reflected upon my seven years in the elementary classroom, I remembered a variety of incidents that had been exacerbated by a cultural mismatch. For example, the majority of the teaching staff was White, middle class, and female with the exception of a few African American females. One year in particular stands out because there were four sections of fifth grade, three taught by White females (me included) and one by an African American woman. Due to the location of the classrooms, all four teachers heard what was going on in each other’s classrooms. The three White teachers were often shocked by the tone of voice and teaching style that we heard from the African American female teacher’s room. All three of us felt that her style was wrong and even possibly harmful to the children, which, unfortunately, prevented us from developing a close working relationship with her. Now I realize that her style of teaching reflected some key aspects of culturally relevant teaching and management (i.e., different discourse styles, warm demanders) and worked for many students.

Similarly, I remember a third grade African American boy who constantly presented me with managerial challenges. After many attempts to contact his mother, I was able to schedule a conference between the student, mother, and myself. After explaining the situation to the mother and demonstrating some of the inappropriate behaviors frequently exhibited by the boy, I remember being stunned because his mother spoke to him in such an explicit and direct tone. I was positive that I had made a mistake by calling her because, in my mind, this was no way to speak with a child. Again, this incident reflects my lack of knowledge about culturally influenced behavior and, specifically, differences in discourse styles.

Thinking back on my teaching experiences, I wish that I had been exposed to culturally relevant pedagogy and classroom management before I began my teaching career. I believe that I would have been less judgmental of other teachers and parents and more effective with my diverse student population. As a teacher educator, I felt an obligation to ensure that my preservice teachers’ experiences did not mimic mine as a result of their lack of awareness about the impact that cultural differences have on the overall classroom dynamic. Based on my teaching experiences and conviction that a cultural mismatch is a major contributing factor in many teachers’ struggles with classroom management, I incorporated
information about culturally responsive classroom management into the classroom management course I taught.

**Teaching About Culturally Relevant Classroom Management**

Given that the Weinstein et al. (2003) framework for thinking about culturally relevant classroom management was consistent with how I conceptualized and taught classroom management, I incorporated information about cultural responsiveness into the course syllabus with relative ease. Drawing on my former elementary teaching experience and current work with preservice and inservice teachers, my goal was to identify some specific concepts and/or skills that I believed were most relevant and applicable to elementary teachers’ practice. Toward this end, I incorporated many readings, video clips, simulation scenarios, and discussions that focused on different culturally relevant concepts such as the differences in discourse styles, the role of authority figures, and warm demanders. Over the last few years, I had the opportunity to teach a culturally responsive classroom management course at two universities to drastically different populations of preservice teachers.

**Context #1**

My first opportunity to teach a culturally responsive classroom management course arose during the university’s professional education sequence. As part of their five-year joint bachelor’s degree/master’s degree/initial certification program, students complete a one-credit classroom management course called *Classroom Organization*, which is taken either the semester or summer before student teaching or simultaneously with their student teaching.

Over the course of four years, I taught four sections of the one-credit culturally responsive classroom management course. Although the university is located in an urban area of New Jersey and draws a diverse student body, the teacher education program was mostly comprised of White, middle class, monolingual females. In four sections of the course, I taught 69 preservice teachers; six were people of color (8.7%) and only two were male (2.9%). The average class size was 17.

**Context #2**

The second opportunity to teach my culturally responsive classroom management course transpired when I accepted a faculty position at a new college. The college offered a one year, three semester, forty-eight credit Master of Childhood Education degree. Each semester students earned sixteen credits, which included 120 hours of field observation and participation in the first semester and a thirty-two day practicum for each of the second and third semesters. As part of this program, students were required to complete a three-credit course called *Teaching Strategies and Classroom Management* during their final semester.

Over the course of one year, I had the opportunity to teach three sections of *Teaching Strategies and Classroom Management*, all of which placed strong emphasis on cultural responsiveness. Although this was a three-credit course, the key concepts of culturally relevant classroom management were taught in essentially the same manner as they were in the one-credit class. The college was located in New York City and primarily attracted preservice teachers of color. In the three sections of the course, I taught a total of 30 preservice teachers; 26 (86.6%) were people of color and 3 were male (8.2%). The average class size was 10.

**Deconstructing the Experience**

Although I had the opportunity to teach a culturally responsive classroom management course in two different settings and covered essentially the same core concepts using the same teaching strategies, I had drastically different experiences in the two settings, which subsequently caused me to reflect on my practice. My reflection was guided by the question: How and why does the teaching experience differ when teaching about culturally relevant classroom management to a primarily White preservice teacher population compared to a population of primarily preservice teachers of color?
How the Teaching Experience Differs

Although I was excited and felt confident in my ability to educate my primarily White, middle class, female preservice teachers about this important topic, to my surprise, there were two problems. First, while I am normally a very confident teacher, I found that I was overly cautious with my language and came off sounding awkward and self-conscious. I hesitated and overthought what I wanted to say, which resulted in a much less natural style of teaching than I usually possess.

The second problem was that the information about cultural responsiveness such as differences in discourse style, the concept of warm demanders, and different views of authority figures was not well received by the White preservice teachers. I was shocked at how close-minded they were to the ideas presented, such as differences in discourse styles, the concept of warm demanders, and different views of authority figures. For example, after viewing a videotape of a teacher who would be considered a warm demander setting her classroom rules at the beginning of the year, students were asked for their reactions. One White, female student responded, “I don’t like her or think that she is a caring teacher. She is bringing her own ‘stuff’ into the classroom with her and I would be afraid of her.”

I had the opportunity to teach this course four times with its new emphasis on cultural responsiveness. Each semester I definitely improved with respect to my comfort level in teaching these topics and eventually felt that my teaching about this topic was more reflective of the natural ease and comfort level that I usually possess in the classroom. However, each semester I continued to struggle with the White preservice teachers’ openness to learn about ideas that are central to culturally responsive classroom management.

Shortly after the experience described above, my second opportunity to teach a course about culturally responsive classroom management arose. Although excited about my new job, I was extremely apprehensive about teaching my classroom management course to a preservice teacher population consisting primarily of women of color. If I had such a struggle with these concepts in my first setting, how could I possibly be effective in this setting? My foremost concern was that my race would prevent me from being an effective teacher educator.

In direct contrast to my experience with White preservice teachers, however, the experience was drastically different than anticipated. To my bewilderment, the conversation with preservice teachers of color was comfortable and natural from the beginning. In general, the preservice teachers of color absolutely cherished talking about concepts central to culturally relevant classroom management. They were passionate in their beliefs that many of the issues that we discussed were at the heart of why so many teachers, especially White teachers, have trouble managing their classrooms with students of color. Furthermore, they spoke about how they felt validated because someone, especially a White person, was talking about these issues.

Why the Teaching Experience Differs

These drastically different experiences may cause any educator to reflect upon why these experiences were so incredibly different. Some may speculate that the differences I experienced can be attributed to gaining experience and growing more comfortable with respect to teaching the topic. However, after fourteen years of teaching, I believe these differences were attributed to more than just gaining experience and other common contextual factors that influence our classes (class size, time of day, time of year, etc.).

Rather, I believe there were three primary reasons that these two teaching experiences were so different. First, there are certain cognitive barriers that exist in a population of primarily White preservice teachers that impact their ability to challenge their existing beliefs about appropriate behavior and accept some of the concepts that are at the core of culturally responsive pedagogy and classroom management. For example, the majority of White teachers grew up believing that they should act colorblind so the idea of recognizing differences in the classroom and then adapting one’s managerial strategies for different students was contrary to everything they were exposed to when growing up.
Therefore, the concept of using a more direct and controlling style of discourse for some students was a concept that was not frequently embraced and often associated with racist behavior.

To cite another example of a cognitive barrier, research suggests that many preservice teachers possess a relatively narrow dichotomous view of caring and order (Weinstein, 1998). For many preservice teachers “achieving order seems akin to authoritarianism, meanness and bitchiness, while caring is defined in terms of nurturance, warmth and empathy” (p. 155). This tension between wanting to care and needing to establish order in the classroom seemed to be exceptionally compelling for the White preservice teachers. Since so many of these students adopted this dichotomous view of caring, it was nearly impossible for them to embrace the concept of warm demanders. In contrast, the African American preservice teachers did not seem to subscribe to this same dichotomous view. In fact, after I discussed this tension between wanting to care and needing to establish order, one African American preservice teacher stated, “Are you kidding? Establishing control is a way to show my students I care about them,” and many of her classmates nodded in agreement. Reconciling the goals between wanting to care and establishing order never seemed to be a pressing issue for my preservice teachers of color and they felt confident in their ability to balance the two.

Another primary reason that my teaching experiences differed so drastically was that these two populations of preservice teachers brought with them different sets of life experiences that facilitated or hindered their ability to relate to and enact some of the core concepts of culturally relevant classroom management. For example, many of the preservice teachers of color spoke about opportunities in their personal lives where they were placed in the role of “primary caregiver” and therefore were the authority figure in various situations. Far fewer of the White preservice teachers spoke of these experiences. Interestingly, when discussing one’s ability to adopt the role of the authority figure in the classroom, the preservice teachers of color were not intimidated or uncomfortable with that idea. One can only speculate that this difference in their life experiences may have contributed to the ability of the preservice teachers of color to adopt the role of authority figure with more ease than the White preservice teachers.

Another life experience that differed for the two populations of preservice teachers was related to how they were parented while growing up. The majority of preservice teachers of color had experienced the explicit, direct, and more controlling style of discourse rather than the politeness formulas from their parents and other authority figures in their lives, whereas the situation was the opposite for the White preservice teachers. Therefore, when discussing authoritative styles of discourse with White preservice teachers, they had no frame of reference. This makes it difficult to relate to, much less envision themselves enacting it.

The final reason these teaching experiences differed so dramatically can be attributed to my race. Originally, I did not give much thought to the role my race would play in the teaching process to White preservice teachers. In contrast, I was very self-conscious about my whiteness when preparing to teach my preservice teachers of color. I feared that my race would make me less credible with the preservice teachers of color. To my surprise, the preservice teachers of color never questioned my credibility. In fact, in that particular setting, my race seemed to be an asset for two reasons. First, since the students and I had such different life experiences with respect to culturally relevant classroom management concepts, their openness and willingness to share and educate me led to rich, meaningful discussions. On the flip side, my ability to share personal experiences with these concepts from a White, middle class, female perspective facilitated their ability to understand how unfamiliar and difficult to implement these concepts are for many White teachers. Since I was representative of the majority of their future colleagues, they were appreciative of insight into a White, middle class mindset. In fact, they looked forward to the opportunity to educate their future colleagues about these issues now that they had a better understanding of many White teachers’ frames of reference.

In contrast, my whiteness may have been a detriment when working with White preservice teachers. Since the White preservice teachers and I, too, bring with us very similar life experiences with respect to culturally relevant classroom management concepts, the discussion rarely progressed past a surface level. Our similarly limited frames of reference served as a roadblock.
Bringing It All Together

Although I enjoyed working with preservice teachers of color tremendously, personal and career goals have landed me at another institution where I find myself, once again, teaching primarily White, middle class, preservice teachers. Therefore, it is imperative that I reflect upon the lesson I learned while working with preservice teachers of color in an attempt to inform teacher education and improve my practice in settings comprised of primarily White, middle class, preservice teachers.

The most important lesson that I learned is that Weinstein, Tomlinson-Clarke, and Curran’s (2004) contention that culturally relevant classroom management is a “frame of mind, more than a set of strategies or practices, that guides the management decisions that teachers make” (p. 27) is correct. This was a powerful lesson because I had mistakenly assumed that culturally responsive classroom management could be approached solely as a skill set that students could rely upon as they addressed the different classroom management tasks (i.e., designing the physical setting, establishing expectations for behavior, communicating with students in culturally consistent ways, etc.) and that if I taught this skill set to my White preservice teachers, they would not experience problems as a result of a cultural mismatch. Although I still believe there are some culturally relevant skills and specific strategies that can be taught to preservice teachers, they are of secondary importance to the development of a culturally responsive frame of mind. I was reluctant to admit this lesson because, as an educator, I often attempt to break things down into discrete skills.

In contrast, a mindset or frame of mind is a much more complex issue. Accepting that culturally relevant classroom management is more a frame of mind than a set of skills poses a much more difficult dilemma for teacher educators and begs the question, “Can a mindset be taught?” I posed this question to my preservice teachers of color and think one young African-American woman said it best:

I don’t know. Hmm. There are a lot of people who choose to go into teaching because they think they are going to change a kid’s life, especially when they think about urban areas. Unfortunately, their frame of mind about how to change a kid’s life is usually thinking about what they as a teacher can bring to their student to change his or her life. Many teachers never have the frame of mind that encourages them to think about what their student brings to them. Like, what can I learn about their culture and who they are? That is the problem. I don’t know if you can change that.

Personally, I do not think that a mindset can be taught. Rather, I think it is developed as a result of your life experiences. Therefore, I do believe that teacher educators need to reflect on the design of their own courses and ask whether or not they facilitate the development of a culturally responsive mindset. Some questions I pose for other teacher educators include: Do my assignments enable students to increase their knowledge about other cultures? Can I identify cooperating teachers whom I believe implement a culturally responsive classroom management approach and have students complete their fieldwork in those classrooms? Am I modeling a culturally responsive mindset? Finally, what can I do to continue to increase my own frame of reference and develop a better understanding of other cultures?

In addition to reflecting on the design of our own courses, it is important for teacher educators to encourage their departments to reflect on the design of their teacher education programs and evaluate whether or not the current design of their programs assists in the development of a culturally responsive mindset. In other words, does the program afford a variety of experiences that enable students to broaden their frames of reference?

Some potential questions to stimulate departmental discussions include: Are there experiences for students to study abroad or participate in other international experiences? This is a powerful method for preservice teachers to develop a better understanding of other cultures. Yet, many teacher education programs have a very strict design and leave little opportunity for international experiences. Maybe with some creative program designs students can still have this wonderful opportunity without missing out on crucial coursework at their original institution. Another question to consider is does the program require courses focusing explicitly on individual and cultural diversity? Many programs seem to approach this
topic as an ongoing thread throughout all coursework, which may not be as effective as having courses that focus explicitly on these topics, which are taught by experts in the field. Finally, is the program actively recruiting preservice teachers of color? When preservice teachers of color and White preservice teachers are in the same course, there are many potential opportunities for both populations to gain different perspectives as my preservice teachers of color and I did from working with one another.

Looking to the Future

Given that our student population continues to grow more and more diverse while our teaching force does not, there is an increasing need to educate preservice teachers about culturally relevant classroom management. Yet, there is little research that addresses how to effectively educate and sensitize preservice teachers about this topic and, therefore, teacher educators have little guidance with how to approach this task. The purposes of this paper were to document my journey learning and teaching about culturally relevant classroom management, share the particular challenges I encountered when teaching about culturally relevant classroom management to two different populations of preservice teachers, and reflect upon the lessons I learned in an attempt to inform teacher education and improve my practice. Although this was not a traditional research study and the results do not provide guidance in terms of specific answers about how to educate and sensitize preservice teachers, it does highlight some of the particular challenges involved in the task. Hopefully, this sharing of my unique experience can provide a springboard for teacher educators to begin a conversation about a compelling topic. For example, two questions that I am anxious to debate with other teacher educators include: (1) Is part of culturally relevant classroom management also to explicitly teach students of color to respond to “politeness formulas?” and (2) Is part of culturally relevant classroom management also teaching preservice teachers of color how to effectively work with White students? It is imperative that teacher educators develop an aggressive research agenda for this area in order to identify some specific steps that can be taken which will increase our ability to educate preservice teachers who can enact culturally relevant classroom management.

References


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