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## **Praxis : dialogue, reflection, and action toward a more empowering pedagogy**

Genvieve Nicole Dorsey  
*San Jose State University*

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PRAXIS: DIALOGUE, REFLECTION, AND ACTION TOWARD A MORE  
EMPOWERING PEDAGOGY

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Elementary Education

San José State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Genvieve Nicole Dorsey

August 2009

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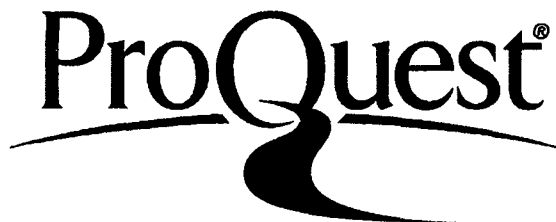
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The Undersigned Thesis Committee Approves the Thesis Titled  
PRAXIS: DIALOGUE, REFLECTION, AND ACTION TOWARD A MORE  
EMPOWERING PEDAGOGY

by

Genvieve Nicole Dorsey

APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF ELEMENTARY EDUCATION

Colette Rabin 5/27/09  
Dr. Colette Rabin, Department of Elementary Education Date

Kristeen Pemberton 5/27/09  
Dr. Kristeen Pemberton, Department of Elementary Education Date

Carolyn Nelson 5/27/09  
Dr. Carolyn Nelson, Department of Elementary Education Date

APPROVED FOR THE UNIVERSITY

David K. Paul 9/12/09  
Associate Dean Office of Graduate Studies and Research Date

## ABSTRACT

### PRAXIS: DIALOGUE, REFLECTION, AND ACTION TOWARD A MORE EMPOWERING PEDAGOGY

by Genvieve Dorsey

This study explores the role of dialogue, a key component of critical pedagogy, in a sixth grade classroom. Other aims of critical pedagogy, such as changing oppressive structures, are explored by examining the notions of power, language, and authority. To investigate these notions, the teacher researcher found it necessary to engage in critical reflection upon the roles and practices as a classroom teacher. In fact, dialogue with students often prompted these critical reflections. This in turn led to the employment of more participatory, dialogical, and culturally responsive teaching practices. This phenomenological study led the teacher researcher to conclude that these practices helped to build students' communicative competence, empowering them to conceptualize their experiences using academic themes and language.

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## CHAPTER I

### Introduction

During a post-conference following a guided reading observation, a district hired equity coach asked me to describe my overall goals for my students. I told him, and the eight other observers, that I wanted my students to articulate reasons for their judgments, opinions, and inferences without prompting. With further inquiry by the equity coach, I cited Lisa Delpit (1995) and C. A. Bowers (1984) stating that I wanted my students to be verbally competent enough to enable them to successfully negotiate challenging situations such as job and college interviews as well as conflicts with others. I wanted my students to use sophisticated language and reasoning skills. The equity coach then noted that this enduring understanding seemed similar to “noting main ideas and details,” the English Language Arts standard that I was attempting to teach during the guided reading lesson. The coach then challenged me more by asking whether or not my students were achieving the level of competence that I aspired for them. I said that I thought students were approaching this level, but I didn’t think they were there yet, to which the equity coach responded, “Suppose you were the last teacher these students had that cared for them in this way. Suppose they didn’t get this information from any other teacher. How could you get them there? How could you get them to that level of competence and sophistication that you expect from them?” I thought about this for a while, which seemed like an eternity with eight other people watching. Finally, I said that I would have to make these enduring goals explicit to these students. I would have to let them know my expectations and perhaps the reasons for these expectations. I

reasoned that they had the skills that it took to engage in such interaction, since students regularly provided appropriate reasoning when I prompted them. However, they rarely provided these reasons unless they were asked. To this the coach responded, “We’re done!”

Through the coach’s inquiry, I was able to reach a deeper more explicit understanding of my own goals for education and what I needed to teach my students. He helped me to understand how the standards can relate to the enduring goals I had for my students. He prompted me to reflect more deeply about my goals, practices, and students. Through this dialogue, he also helped me to see that equity and dialogue are not strategies; rather they are habits of mind to be used in conjunction with appropriate strategies, such as guided reading. Stated differently, being a culturally conscious teacher is a habit of mind, whereas being a culturally responsive teacher is the action resulting from that mindset. Referring to the themes presented in this study, dialogue leads to critical reflection – the first stage of praxis (Freire, 1970). This stage helps one to build his/her cultural and situational consciousness. Through critical reflection, one can decide on and conduct an appropriate action – the second stage of praxis. This stage requires a level of cultural consciousness in order to foster an appropriate response; that is, one that is influenced by the culture of the participants. At a school and district as diverse as the one in which this study took place, these concepts and ideas were extremely powerful and resonated deeply within me, especially at a time when standards-based assessments were used to identify gaps in teaching and learning. Particular to my district and classroom,

assessments indicate the achievement of Black and Hispanic students does not match the achievement scores of their White and Asian counterparts.

### Context of Study

The school in which this study took place had an Academic Performance Index (API) of 866 with an Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) of 69.1% in Language Arts and 73% in Mathematics in 2008. This means that as a school, 73% of the students score proficient or above in Math and 69.1% of students are proficient or above in Language Arts. The California Standards Test (CST) consists of five proficiency ratings based on the percent correct earned by students. These ratings are: advanced, proficient, basic, below basic, and far below basic. When the data is disaggregated by race, the racial achievement gap becomes evident. In Language Arts, 75.5% of White students, 83.7% of Asian students, and 75% of Filipino students scored in the proficient range or above, while only 50.5% of Hispanic students scored proficient or above. A similar gap holds true when the data is disaggregated for Math.

The classroom in which this study took place was a sixth-grade, self-contained classroom. However, students did have a different teacher for Math. As a participant researcher, I was also the teacher. The class consisted of thirty-five students: 24 girls and 11 boys. Of these thirty-five students, 27 chose to participate in this study. Sixty-seven percent of this study's participants were girls. The racial make up of the class as well as the students' performance on the CST mirrored that of the school.

## Literature Review

### *The Racial Achievement Gap:*

#### *A problem of institutionalized power plays, not cultural deprivation*

Singham (1998) notes that the achievement gap is not a simple problem to deal with; rather the problem exists on educational, social, and psychological levels. Citing John Ogbu and other researchers' work; Singham (1998) concludes that the test results indicate that "the performance of any given minority depends on a complex interplay of factors ..." (p.12). Further, Singham notes that the achievement gap is a very real issue rooted in and stemming from "complex and historically rooted ethnic relationships and characteristics" (p. 15). Although the achievement gap seems to be institutionalized on some levels, Singham cites research indicating that active learning methods have served to close the achievement gap in many instances and challenges educators to start looking at the problem in new and deeper ways.

In *Class and Schools: Using Social, Economic, and Educational Reform to Close the Black-White Achievement Gap*, Richard Rothstein (2004) discusses the numerous factors that may lead to the racial achievement gap, or as Rothstein terms it, the "test score gap" (p.13) in schools. He notes that while schools affect how well students perform on these standardized tests, numerous other factors influence achievement. He suggests the following factors may also play a role in contributing to the racial achievement gap: differences in health, housing, student mobility, and childrearing. It is important to note that Rothstein emphasizes that the trends described in his book are group averages. He cautions against applying his analyses to any given individual of a

group. Rothstein presents three caveats in his interpretations. First, while there are larger systemic issues that contribute to the achievement gap, schools do make a significant difference in the level of achievement for all students. Second, in comparing low-level proficiencies across race, socioeconomic differences are less of a contributing factor than race. Third, as with all averages, some students seem to perform relatively higher or lower than others in their social class. With the description of these common misunderstandings, Rothstein begins to describe the nature of several of the other systemic factors that contribute to the achievement gap.

In his discussion of the factors that contribute to the racial achievement gap, Rothstein carefully explains that differences in child rearing and cultural influences have complex causes. In discussing cultural differences in child rearing, he cites differences in the educational level between groups of parents from differing social classes, noting that most parents with college degrees read to their children more regularly before they begin kindergarten. This practice gives these students an advantage upon entering the literacy-based school system. Rothstein also notes differences in technological resources and uses between the two groups of students. He contends, however, that just giving resources to families will not overcome the achievement gap. Also, how parents read to and interact with their children differ starkly between the social classes. Parents of working-class families tend to read aloud to their children without interruptions and ask mostly factual questions. Conversely, more literate parents are likely to stop reading to point out different structures of the book and pose more interpretive, creative, and connective questions.

Rothstein examines many other differences in child rearing and cultural influences, connecting them to the institutional factors that render these differences a matter of survival. Using an historical approach with modern-day examples, Rothstein clarifies for the reader how this country has continually marginalized people of color. Many jobs held by lower-income parents require no questioning of policy, practice or management. The penalty for doing so could result in losing the job. Consequently, many of these parents teach their children not to question “the boss.” This translates to students not asking questions of their teachers in school as a sign of respect. Again, I note these factors because they indicate that larger systemic factors beyond just the quality of instruction may be at work. However, as mentioned earlier, Rothstein notes that good schools can make a difference. What power does a teacher have either in marginalizing or in empowering students?

In Crystal Kuykendall’s (1991) *From Rage to Hope: Strategies for Reclaiming Our Black and Hispanic Students*, she discusses school-related obstacles to achievement. She contends that institutional racism can serve to reinforce low-motivation and underachievement in African American and Hispanic children. Kuykendall (1991) recognizes that institutional racism is pervasive and is often “covert, indirect, and sometimes unconscious” (p. 31) with its origins in our most respected norms and societal values. She sites several factors that serve as obstacles to the achievement of Black and Hispanic youth including lack of pluralistic curricula, instructional strategies that are incompatible with student learning styles, and test bias. Because of the depth with which institutionalized racism is discussed throughout the literature (Bennet deMarrais &

LeCompte, 1999; Delpit, 1995; Lindsey, 1999; Teitelbaum, 1988), I will not debate its existence here.

Along these lines, Giroux and Schmidt (2004) argue that the policy that prompted the testing from which the achievement gap data has been obtained, the *No Child Left Behind Act* (2001), seems to be more concerned with the demands of the marketplace and less concerned with its original claims of promoting equality, justice, and social citizenship. In their efforts to problematize reform efforts and the extent to which these efforts benefit children, especially disadvantaged children, Giroux et al. (2004) argue that assessments provide valuable feedback for students and teachers. Citing research, they claim that positive effects such as a well-defined curriculum, an emphasis on writing across the curriculum, access to more accurate data, and teachers' beliefs that student skills are improving have all been observed.

Nevertheless, when the state tests are viewed as the sole indicator of student success, problems begin to arise. Giroux et al. argue that the cultural bias of tests, suggested by Labaree (1997) (cited in Giroux et al., 2004) serve to place underprivileged students, in this case, students of color, in educational settings whereby they experience alienating social relations and poor teaching. Giroux et al. claim that this might actually promote a higher drop-out rate among these students. These authors claim that assessments are important because they get students to reflect on their work and the work of others. However, Giroux et al. (2004) argue that the tendencies for educational policy to develop "standardized curricula that ignore cultural diversity by defining knowledge narrowly in terms of discrete skills and decontextualized bodies of information and

ruthlessly expunging the language of ethics from the broader purpose of teaching and schooling...” (p.220), along with the narrowing of instructional practices are not conditions which promote student achievement.

Ultimately, the existence of the racial achievement gap suggests that our schools may not be meeting the needs of all of our students. While schools play an important role in the achievement of all students (Kuykendall, 1991), there may be other societal factors affecting the achievement of racially diverse students (Rothstein, 2004). Research suggests that employing more pluralistic curricula (Kuykendall, 1991) and expanding instructional practices (Giroux et al., 2004) to incorporate a variety of cultures and learning styles will close the achievement gap. While using a wide variety of instructional practices addresses one aspect of the achievement gap, the following authors, teachers, and theorists suggest that the problem goes even deeper.

#### *The Culture and Language of Power*

Bowers (1984) uses the schema of social learning theory to help the reader understand how one develops functional, or experiential knowledge (Dewey, 1938). He contrasts this form of knowledge garnered from life-experience with the more abstract form of tacit knowledge learned in schools. Generally, schools provide a standard or normative set of conceptual vocabulary with which students learn to conceptualize their experiences. However, often the set of vocabulary, which is systemically developed throughout schooling, reflects a set of normative ideas, rules, and values generally held by the dominant culture. Those vocabularies can represent the taken-for-granted beliefs of that dominant culture.



However, in the case of diverse, multicultural classrooms and schools, these dominant ideologies, reflected in the vocabulary and language used by schools and teachers, do not often reflect the experiences or the functional knowledge of various minority groups. When this disconnection occurs, students do not develop the language needed for the expression of their experiences because the teacher's conceptualizations may not be internalized by these students. As a result of learning these taken-for-granted beliefs, both groups of students, those of the dominant and minority groups, are left with limited capacities for learning and negotiating new understandings and definitions. Bowers (1984) suggests that when students are not taught to problematize language, they do not learn to acknowledge and value the diversity of experience. Consequently, when taken-for-granted beliefs and language are the only representations of reality presented in the classroom, students who cannot relate to these representations may feel alienated. Furthermore, they do not learn the language which conceptualizes their experiences.

Using Paulo Freire's phrase, Bowers (1984) explains that students "are being socialized to a 'culture of silence' where existence will be defined by external sources they will not understand or be able to challenge" (p.58). In Vygotsky's view, language precedes thought (cited in Bowers, 1984), so schools, as the only institutions which actively promote vocabulary building systematically, have enormous power to socialize students to a particular set of conceptual frameworks. Namely, public schools as socializing institutions (Bowers, 1984; Shor, 1992) can serve to simply reinforce the taken-for-granted beliefs held by those in power, by the dominant cultural group.

Bowers explains that schools often indirectly socialize students on how to think about their culture, rather than teaching through direct experience. In this way, teachers perform the function of the gatekeeper. To explain further, Bowers cites sociological studies of the relationship between language and social stratification done by Basil Bernstein and Pierre Bourdieu (cited in Bowers, 1984). Essentially, these studies show that a direct connection exists between language and social class. Even further, by citing these studies, Bowers (1984) concludes, “the schools use language facility as the basis of deciding which students will be given access to the credentials necessary for higher status jobs” (p.54). Arguing that schools do not provide equality of opportunity, Bowers contends that students start off with an unequal facility for understanding the medium used by teachers to determine success. That is, since the schools’ promotion of a set of conceptual vocabularies does not often match student experience, some students are left out of gaining this language code. But before I consider what this means for students, and the type of educational experience that follows, the idea of gatekeeper must be considered further.

Lisa Delpit (1995) also recognizes the existence of gatekeeping points in society. She acknowledges that to promote change, one must be fluent in the styles and codes of the gatekeepers if they are to open their doors. Delpit (1995) calls on educators “to provide for students who do not already possess them, the additional codes of power” (p.40). Further, she states that to pretend that these gatekeeping points do not exist is to ensure that many students will not pass through them and that the power structures as they exist now will remain the same. But, Delpit does not suggest that educators should

teach students to passively adopt the code of the gatekeeper. Rather, she suggests that educators encourage students to appreciate how unique and beautiful their own cultural styles are. In addition, she proposes that teachers also teach them the existence of the political power game and how to negotiate it.

What are the moves in the political power game? How is it characterized? In this section, I will relate the five aspects of power that Delpit (1995) describes and Bowers' (1984) notion of moves in the language game. To start with the former, Delpit (1995) explains that issues of power are enacted in classrooms in many ways including:

...the power of the teacher over the students; the power of the publishers of textbooks and of the developers of the curriculum to determine the view of the world presented; the power of the state in enforcing compulsory schooling; and the power of an individual or group to determine another's intelligence or "normalcy." (p.24-25)

It is the power of the teacher over the students which frames Bowers' discussion of how the moves in the language game serve to legitimize the teacher's stance on an idea when challenged by students. Bowers (1984) elucidates, "many of the 'moves' in the language game of socialization are carried out unconsciously by the teacher" (p. 66), especially if they come from the dominant power group of the middle and upper classes. He explains that in their attempts to define authority in the face of questioning students, it is likely that teachers will use different levels of legitimization to ensure their explanations are validated. Bowers clarifies that teachers most likely use the following levels of legitimization to make certain their explanations endure because of how they were socialized. Bowers clarifies that a teacher's self-concept and notions of authority are

often developed in their university training programs. As a result, teachers often use higher levels of legitimization reflected in their programs' ideological orientations.

The first level of legitimizing authority begins when the teacher gives the vocabulary for naming "what is." Delpit (1995) might argue that this is also the first level of gate-keeping used by the textbook publishers and curriculum developers. As students question or challenge the teacher's explanation of "what is," due to differences in perspective or conceptual frameworks, the teacher often moves from her culture's taken-for-granted beliefs to the next level of legitimization, that of appealing to "folk tradition" (Bowers, 1984, p. 67).

Folk tradition is where the teacher uses the authority of the folk tradition to overwhelm or silence an independent perspective by appealing to the "consensus." Bowers does not discuss consensus in terms of the traditional definition, meaning everyone coming to agreement; rather, he cites consensus to mean something more like its illusion. In other words, he refers to consensus as one's taken-for-granted belief that everyone believes a certain way. This may sound something like, "Everybody knows there are 365 days in a year." This move delegitimizes any claim to the contrary. However, students might be thinking about the days in a leap year or may be less familiar with what western, industrialized societies consider a calendar year. Throughout history different cultures have developed different ways of acknowledging the passage of time.

If the student continues to reject the teacher's claims, the teacher moves to the level of theory. At this level, the teacher invokes a more sophisticated language code that students are unlikely to possess. If the student still persists in challenging the teacher's

theoretical foundations of authority, the teacher can move to the fourth and highest level of legitimation by invoking either religions or secular based mythologies. This move makes a student's objection to the teacher's naming of "what is" heresy. A move, Bowers explains, that the student is unlikely capable of committing or defending. Bowers (1987) provides the following example to explain legitimation by mythology:

...the highest level of legitimation involving either religious or secular based mythologies. At this level resistance to the teacher's explanations of "what is" becomes and act of heresy that few students are capable of committing or defending. For example, when "progress" or "rationalism" are invoked to justify thinking in a certain way, few students will possess sufficient knowledge or the language competency to challenge the teacher on either intellectual or moral grounds. (p.67)

Bowers argues that these moves in the language game, used to legitimize a teacher's authority, undermine the development of the students' communicative competence, which the educational process ought to cultivate. Bowers argues that these moves represent a misuse of a teacher's power. Delpit (1995) might argue that they are proof of the existence of the culture of power that exists in the classroom.

Delpit explains that there are rules or codes for participating in power. In other words, there is a "culture of power." She cites linguistic codes and communicative strategies, among others, as components of the culture of power. I believe Delpit would argue that it should be the goal of the teacher to unpack the language moves outlined by Bowers (1984), as they are codes for participating in the culture of power. Bowers calls this process problematizing taken-for-granted beliefs. Delpit (1995) explains that these taken-for-granted beliefs, these rules of the culture of power, reflect the culture of those who have power. For example, schools that require students to sit in rows, listen and

learn what the teacher says, and silently complete the assigned task result from a culture that embraces those rules. One might be able to trace this assembly line and management style of education to the values imparted by the Industrial Revolution. For example, just as a worker in a factory is assigned a specific job mechanically, students are assigned tasks to be memorized and completed. This idea also resonates with Rothstein's (2004) portrayal of the lower-class job market. Delpit argues that success in our systemic institutions, such as schools and workplaces, depends on how well one can negotiate these rules. Furthermore, she cites that children who come from middle-class homes tend to do better in these institutions because school and workplace cultures embody that of the upper and middle classes, those in power.

Delpit's fourth aspect of power suggests that being told the rules of the power culture explicitly makes acquiring power easier. By unpacking or problematizing these rules, students may begin to develop their communicative competence, thereby gaining the codes necessary for accessing certain gate-keeping points. Delpit contends that systemic change will not come from a grassroots level; rather, it will come from the top down. Therefore, she argues that we need to teach students who do not already possess the codes of power to not only appreciate and understand the value of the codes they already possess, but also to understand the power codes as well.

Paternalism, as described by David Whitman (2008), is one way to view rendering culture explicit. Whitman describes the modern paternalistic schools' assumption that disadvantaged students excel when structure and expectations are clarified, rather than presuming students should learn to figure things out for themselves.

I interpret this notion with the Kuykendall (1992) lens that schools often serve to perpetuate the White, middle-class status quo. If students are not socialized by this dominant ideological system and need to participate and succeed in it, teachers need to teach the rules and expectations governing that system. Whitman describes school cultures that differ dramatically from the communities from which these students originate. While on one level, paternalistic schools do not seek to change the conditions which perpetuate the culture of power, Whitman says that new paternalism is infused with social activism. Paternalistic schools impose a traditional set of virtues; however, they are explicit about doing so.

Delpit's (1995) final aspect of power is that those with power are usually the least aware of its existence whereas those with less power are most often aware of its existence. To support her position, Delpit (1995) recalls conversations between liberal and radical instructors and how they used "their position, their numbers, or their access to that particular code of power of calling upon research to validate one's position" (p.26). Delpit's comments mirror Bowers' (1984) discussion of naming "what is," consensus, or folk knowledge, and appeal to theory.

As noted earlier, Bowers suggests that educators problematize the taken-for-granted beliefs embedded within the curriculum and the language game as it plays out in the classroom. He suggests that teachers reflect on whether or not the vocabulary and conceptual schema are complex enough to communicate to students the complexity of what is studied. Additionally, it needs to be presented at a level at which the student can understand so that their levels of communicative competence become more developed.

Bowers suggests that educators and curriculum developers also ask themselves whether or not the language presented reveals the human authorship or the social perspective of the person who wrote or presented the material. Bowers calls the process of attributing human authorship to material “dereification.” Conversely, reification refers to when human authorship of material or ideas is not present or acknowledged rendering an appearance of knowledge that is universally accepted as factual. Bowers argues that the student’s power to understand is enhanced if he or she can understand important aspects of socialization that contribute to the development of taken-for-granted beliefs and the codes of power.

Thus, Delpit (1995) and Bowers (1984) recognize the culture of power that exists both in the classroom as well as in the larger society. Many times, in the effort to legitimize their perspectives, teachers, or those in power, employ various language codes or moves to outmaneuver those who question their stance. Delpit argues that children need to be taught the beauty and validity of their own cultures, but they also need to be explicitly taught about the culture of power in order to successfully negotiate certain gate-keeping points in society. In agreement, Bowers suggests that teachers problematize and dereify important aspects of the curriculum, such as the vocabulary, in order to help students to build their communicative competence. It is with increased levels of communicative competence that students can develop an understanding of the rules of the language game and the culture of power, enabling them to negotiate these with greater success.



*Problematizing: A call to dialogue*

Mirroring Bowers' (1987) and Delpit's (1995) positions that the "truths" provided by education should be dissected and assessed for their relations to and effect on social life, Burbules (1993) draws on a post-modern critique of education and adds to the argument. Burbules argues that these "truths" can be political, epistemological, ethical, or aesthetic in nature. For example, in today's society thinness is often seen and depicted as beautiful whereas obesity is seen as unattractive. Another example might be the notion of a family consisting of a mother, father, and children. These commonly held constructions do not allow for the acceptance of the diversity of beliefs and values present in our society. Assuming what Bowers and Delpit posit is valid, whatever the nature of these beliefs reinforced by education, they usually represent a singular point-of-view held by the dominant power culture. Burbules discusses three general issues of education stressed in post-modern writing. The first is the analysis of power and hierarchy – that is, studying how power relations are infused into culture, language, sexuality, and other aspects of human life that are not usually seen as areas of domination and oppression. Second, Burbules stresses emphasizing the "irreducible plurality of cultural world views" (p.3) that are held by marginalized (non-power holding) groups. These groups are now gaining a sense of voice and insisting on the uniqueness and worth of their own ways of thinking, valuing, and speaking in contrast to traditional standards. Finally, he notes that the attempt to systematize thought ignores legitimate alternatives and forces.

To reduce the impact these forces have on students, Burbules calls on dialogue. Burbules (1995) describes the dialogic stance as consisting of the give-and-take between “provisional hypotheses” and “skeptical questioning” (p.4). Stated another way, dialogue consists of building relationships with one another (Noddings, 1995) through a concern for and inquiry into another’s beliefs. Willingness to suspend one’s disbelief in what the other says long enough to inquire and imagine what the other holds true characterizes this dialogic stance. Burbules (1993) notes that dialogue involves two or more interlocutors, marked by a climate of open participation (questioning, responding, redirecting, and building statements), and guided by a spirit of discovery. Its typical tone is exploratory and inquisitive. Dialogue tends toward a non-authoritarian view of learning.

In Burbules’ view, a dialogical classroom not only lends itself to learning about subject matter, but its participants also learn how to express themselves more clearly to others. They learn to regulate their discussions by taking turns, listening, and learning about other people. Citing cognitive psychology, Burbules acknowledges that knowledge is structured in memory by schema. Therefore, understanding involves incorporating new learning to existing schema, and/or altering the schema based on new information. So, dialogue and inquiry in the classroom might be used to determine how students conceive of the object of discussion thereby facilitating opportunities for making connections. However, Burbules notes that dialogue, sometimes known as reciprocal teaching, is concerned with fostering an explicit understanding of how knowledge is made – not just providing new information.

Burbules explains that dialogue is communicative, drawing upon one's language codes, reasoning, morality and schemas of social organization. Focusing on the language aspect of dialogue, Burbules cites Bakhtin (1981) who states that we use and create language by speaking with others. Additionally, the uses of language have new and old implications in that each use of an utterance is entwined with previous uses. In other words, words and utterances are associated with a whole network of connotations. However, for different cultures and different generations, these utterances may have completely different meanings. For example, the use of idioms in the classroom can often create confusion for second language learners unless they are problematized. Additionally phrases coined by different generations may have starkly different connotations for the following or preceding generations.

Drawing on Bowers' (1984) notion that language is also socially and culturally constructed, different cultures might have widely variant notions of what these connotations mean and represent. Burbules (1993) argues that an utterance comes with a long history of agreements and disagreements of past conversations. Burbules refers to Gadamer (1982) to inform the reader that, "The literary form of the dialogue places language and concept back within the original movement of the conversation' (p. 332)...therefore, we find in dialogue 'a hermeneutics of all discourse' (Swearingen, 1990, p. 48)" (Burbules, 1993, p. 11). This suggests that language use is subjective, therefore possibly contributing to misunderstandings of meaning in dialogue. Therefore, when schools present a set of predetermined vocabularies, these vocabularies represent a political, ideological and cultural orientation. This may result in negating numerous

points of view. I suggest that understanding how language is used and constructed within different cultural groups and across generations through critical hermeneutic reflection might aid in understanding the intent of the speaker.

Before I begin a discussion of the subjectivity involved in any attempt at dialogue (Ellsworth, 1989), it is important to consider Freire's notion of dialogue. As Paulo Freire (Freire, 1970; Freire & Macedo, 1987; Freire 1995) continually reminds us throughout his works, dialogue, especially that which takes place within the realm of empowering education, should begin with the experience of the students, the oppressed. In Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), he reminds the reader that a refusal to begin with the experience of the student results in the "banking" (p.72) of the educator's point of view or knowledge about the object of study. In this view, Freire explains that students are perceived as receptacles for information and knowledge, rather than participants in the creation of it. Freire (1970) explains that "In the banking concept of education, knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing" (p.72). While he acknowledges that the expertise of the teacher differs from the expertise of the student, Freire urges those who would consider themselves liberatory educators to take into account the importance of the local knowledge held by the students (Freire, 1995). Through inquiry, by "mining" for information (Ladson-Billings, 1994), the educator can determine themes (Shor, 1992) or "universal minimal vocabulary" (Freire, 1995, p.86). Freire argues that on the basis of these themes, educators should set up their literacy programs. For Freire and Macedo (1987) "Reading the world always precedes reading the word, and reading the word

implies continually reading the world” (p. 35). Freire (1995) believes that worldwide themes come from continental and national themes, which derive from regional and local themes. For example, when I attempt to teach students the notion of identifying cause and effect in a text, I try to relate this more global notion to how they experience it in their daily lives. I often ask them to outline a chain of events that has recently taken place or provide examples that resonate with them. Since my sixth grade students are highly motivated by social relationships, we often discuss the causes and outcomes of misunderstandings, arguments, and rumors. The notion of local themes connecting to global themes supports the contention that starting with the experience of the student is fundamental to education (Bruner, 1960; Dewey, 1916; Dewey, 1938; Freire, 1970; Freire, 1995).

In summary, Burbules (1993) contends that dialogue is guided by the spirit of inquiry and discovery. He recognizes that subjectivities come into play when people enter this dialogic stance. Dialogue is communicative in nature and draws upon the speakers’ language codes. Through dialogue, students learn how to better express themselves with others. While Freire’s views on dialogue informs Burbules’ discussion, Freire (1970 & 1995) reminds his readers that in education, dialogue must start with the student’s experience. He cautions against ignoring the experience and expertise of the learner, especially when it differs from that of the educator. While Freire acknowledges the teacher’s level of expertise, he explains that education must start with the local knowledge of the student. It is from this point that the educator can determine themes and areas of local knowledge and help the learner to draw connections to the more global

themes behind their experiences. However, as noted by Gadamer (cited in Burbules, 1993), communication and language are subjective. This subjectivity might cause misunderstanding and miscommunications.

*Limitations to Coming to Understanding in Dialogue – Interpreting Dialogue*

Jürgen Habermas (1998) explores how participants in communication come to a common understanding. He argues that reaching agreement, or understanding the other, is dependent on the intersubjective relationship between the two interlocutors, or speakers. He argues that the people engaged in conversation need to recognize each other as reciprocally accountable subjects. The interlocutors are accountable to one another for orienting themselves to validity claims. Connecting back to the Freirean notion of dialogue, this might mean that participants in communication should try to imagine or inquire into the circumstances that render an utterance valid, especially if one does not understand the utterance to be true. For example, when a student responds to my question in a way that does not make sense to me, I might ask that student to explain further. In doing so, the student might uncover assumptions or contexts that he or she implied by the statement. This new learning might give information that I can connect or relate to, making his or her initial statement more valid to me. Habermas (1998) explains that reaching understanding both requires and socializes a certain point of view, noting that “Language, worldview, and form of life are entwined” (p.187). Like Bowers (1984), Habermas (1998) acknowledges that for any utterance, for any sentence, “there are innumerable context-dependent ways of using it” (p. 196). Habermas provides a brief history of the theory of language to illustrate that understanding linguistic expressions

includes an orientation toward validity claims, and that these claims must be understood as rational. However, Habermas suggests that what is deemed rational may be socially or culturally constructed. Therefore, understanding a speech act depends on knowing the conditions for which the claim is true. So, understanding depends on the hearer's acceptance of the validity of the speech act.

In my classroom, I address speech acts in several ways. For example, when I say, "clear your desks," I tell the students that I mean put away their books and their work. However, since we have tables, not traditional desks, I allow pencil cases and other small items to remain on the desk. But, "clear your desks one-hundred percent," means to take everything off the desk. The students and I have constructed these meanings together as we learn to interact with each other throughout the year. If I give a direction or command to the class, or if I make a statement which does not produce the results I intended, the students and I problematize and co-create the meaning behind the utterance. Ideally, this co-creation of meaning would be done on behalf of misunderstood student utterances as well.

As Habermas (1998) explains, claims need to be authorized or backed up with "some kind of normative background..." (p.200). He maintains, however, that there are cases in which validity claims are replaced by power claims. Habermas provides the example of a robber holding a gun and yelling, "Hands up!" to illustrate this point. In this example, the robber's will is imposed over the will of the hearer because the imperative statement is understood as a factual expression of will. As suggested by Delpit (1995) and Bowers (1984) classrooms reproduce language structures and power

claims found in the larger, dominant society. For example, teachers often impose their will on the students. When I tell a student to “refocus” or “get on task,” a wide range of consequences for not following my directions are implied in these statements. Habermas (1998) acknowledges, as do Delpit and Bowers, that language features have become culturally habitualized for participants in communication. He claims that pre-understandings, or schemas, of utterances are socialized. As in the previous example, the implied consequence may not be a result of our classroom dialogue or norms. The perceived consequences might be contrived by the student’s past experience with other teachers or adults whose authority needs to be obeyed.

In his discussion of imperatives and illocutionary forces, Habermas discusses their immediate and more far-reaching aims. As an illocutionary force is an act performed in saying something, the most immediate aim is for the hearer to understand the utterance. The hearer’s acceptance and action upon the utterance is the more far-reaching aim. Because the more far-reaching aim of an illocutionary act requires the listener to act upon the utterance, Habermas recognizes that the acceptance of these acts is obtained cooperatively.

Noddings (2006) suggests that we listen to people we like and respect. Although, as Noddings proposes, we do not always have to agree with the people we like, we have a certain tolerance for disagreement, and we will listen to what they have to say. As the previous authors have suggested, Noddings also notes that we are subject to strong socialization, arguing that most people listen to those who are considered official authorities like teachers and police officers. She argues that sometimes people are



socialized to listen so uncritically to those in authority that their moral identity becomes bound up with obeying authority. However, as Singham (1998) suggests, not all cultures are impressed with the virtues of those in the position of authority; therefore, they feel no need to emulate them. Additionally, as Habermas (1995) and Bowers (1984) propose, the meaning of any particular utterance comes with a barrage of socially constructed meanings. This suggests that an utterance spoken by a teacher of one cultural or ethnic identity is understood in an entirely different way by a student of a different cultural identity. And, if what Noddings (1995) writes is true, the questioning, the refusal to believe, or the misunderstanding on the part of the student might be perceived as a moral short-coming by those in the position of authority, or those who have not been taught to be critical of authority. What impact might this have on a student in the classroom, where the teacher holds the position of authority as well as the language moves to maintain that position?

Critical hermeneutics “calls for a special and suspicious interpretation of those ideologies and institutions” (Gallagher, 1992, p. 240) within which institutionalized racism is embedded. Seeking to shed light on and explore the constraints of reproduction and hegemony, radical, critical hermeneutics employs the principles of critical reflection and application. Gallagher explains that in critical hermeneutics, reproduction is an “unconscious, unreflective transmission of the authority and power structures of tradition” (p. 241). The second principle of uncritical interpretation is hegemony. Critical hermeneutics aims at problematizing (Bowers, 1987) the distortion of normal interpretation by extra-linguistic and hegemonic factors such as economic status and

social class. Through critical reflection, critical hermeneutics reveals the forces that “deform and systematically distort communication” (p. 243). Critical reflection brings the language, traditions, and extra linguistic forces to the forefront. It can serve to lift the constraints of communication and interpretation so we may see the situation more objectively. As I reflect on classroom interactions and the communication of my students, I try to understand the contexts from which I am forming my judgment of the situation. For example, if a student does not respond to a request in the way that I expect from him or her, I might interpret this act as an act of defiance. However, upon further reflection and dialogue, I might determine other forces at work. The student may not understand what I meant by an utterance or they may not feel comfortable doing what I have asked them to do. Or, the student may be embarrassed by what I have said or how I said it, so he or she reacts in a self-preserving way. The fourth principle of critical hermeneutics described by Gallagher, application, refers to what Habermas (cited in Gallagher) calls enlightenment. That is, when interpretation is critical enough, one can move more toward the possibility of unconstrained communication and autonomy.

Stephen Brookfield (1995) discusses how teachers can become more critically reflective. In *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher*, Brookfield (1995) notes:

The cultural, psychological, and political complexities of learning, and the ways in which power complicates all human relationships (including those between students and teachers) means that teaching can never be innocent. (p.1)

Therefore, Brookfield suggests that the critically reflective teacher needs to focus on “hunting assumptions.” A component of critical hermeneutics, Brookfield argues that critical reflection helps us to become aware of the implicit assumptions that frame how

we think and act, opening doors for meaningful and caring dialogue. Brookfield argues that there are two distinct purposes in critical reflections; first, teachers should understand how power relationships frame and distort many interactions, and second they should question assumptions and practices that are hegemonic. In doing so, teachers can explore how dominating power relationships might become sharing power relationships. Brookfield discusses several of teachers' common assumptions and offers an alternative perspective using critical reflection. One of these assumptions was particularly relevant to this study: students like group discussion since they feel involved and respected. However, Brookfield (1995) suggests that democratic discourse can serve to perpetuate "inequalities of race, class and gender that are inevitably imported into the group from the wider society" (p.3). The importation of inequalities also leads Brookfield to suggest teachers participate in critical reflection.

How might a teacher pick out issues of hegemony and reproduction if he or she is socialized toward them? Steele (cited in Packer & Addison, 1989) suggests that to read or think critically, one must begin looking at texts and situations from odd angles, from perspectives that do not represent conventional views. Steele suggests raising our consciousness, our awareness, of perspectives that have been traditionally marginalized, such as psychoanalysis, structuralism, deconstruction, feminism, Marxism, and phenomenology. Steele argues that understanding these and other frameworks provides different lenses through which to interpret various situations and texts. As highlighted throughout this discussion, by several other authors and theorists, Steele also notes that

human perspectives are culturally created. In his discussion of critical interpretation, Steele (1989) claims:

All texts participate in the culture in which they are composed; they articulate societal structures within the field of language. Structuralism has long studied this, and post-structuralist deconstruction has advanced this program in an attempt to uncover what lies beneath the façade of texts and cultures (p. 231).

Steele advises that the interpreter should be aware that traditional misunderstandings and biases may distort his or her judgments. He argues that these need to be analyzed as closely as the text or situation itself.

Therefore, because of the subjectivities involved in understanding and interpreting a particular utterance (Gallagher, 1992; Habermas, 1995), Steele argues that teachers should begin to become critically reflective of their interpretations. Brookfield (1995) maintains that in becoming critically reflective, teachers should take on a “hunting assumptions” approach. In doing so, the teacher can look for hegemonic reproductions in their interpretations and language. However, Steele (1989) also notes, one might also begin to look at utterances, texts, and interpretations through various lenses such as Marxism, feminism, and structuralism. These lenses help the interpreter to understand a text or utterance from “odd angles.” In so doing, the interpreter – or relating back to the dialogue discussion, the participants in dialogue – may come closer to understanding the intent of the speaker as well as the situations which created these perspectives. Because my students and I represent a diverse range of cultures and experiences, as the authority in the classroom, I feel an obligation to my students to make interpretations to uncover their true intents in communication. Also, since I am the authority, and students rarely

question that position, I feel that I need to check my own interpretive lenses from an equity perspective, so that I do not perpetuate unchecked hegemonic schemas.

*Empowering Student Perspectives*

Dialogue and exploring/changing power dynamics are components of critical pedagogy as described in Freire's (1970) discussion of liberatory education. Ellsworth (1989) problematizes these and other goals of critical pedagogy as she aims to implement its practices in a college course. In her review of the literature, she came across assumptions and vague language about what an empowering classroom should look like. Citing Shor and Freire, Ellsworth discusses their suggestion that in empowering education the teacher selects an object of study. They contend that as the course begins, the teacher knows these objects better than the students. However, as the course proceeds, the teacher relearns these objects with her students. As Ellsworth proceeds in her implementation of critical curriculum, problematizing racism on the college's campus, she finds that she did not understand racism better than her students. In fact, she found that as a White teacher, she knew far less about the issue than her students of color who have lived their whole lives experiencing and struggling with racism. In the following quote, Ellsworth (1989) explores her own limitations as a White, middle-class person:

My understanding and experience of racism will always be constrained by my white skin and middle-class privilege. Indeed, it is impossible for anyone to be free from these oppressive formations at this historical moment. Furthermore, while I had the institutional power and authority in the classroom to enforce "reflective examination" of the plurality of moral and political positions before us in a way that supposedly gave my own assessments equal weight with those of students, in fact my institutional role as professor would always weight my statements differently from those of students. (p. 308)

Here, Ellsworth not only acknowledges her own limitations, but recognizes that despite implementation of certain pedagogical practices, the systems of authority and power remain unchanged.

Along these lines, Cook-Sather (2002) writes on authorizing student perspectives, explaining that at the root of discussions of authority is power. Her article outlines and critiques efforts to listen to students including constructivist and critical pedagogies. Citing numerous studies, Cook-Sather contends that when teachers listen to and authorize student perspectives, they can begin to see the world from the students' point of view, which can help teachers render what they teach more accessible to students. Additionally, she notes that authorizing student perspectives can make education a more collaborative process.

However, Cook-Sather (2002) recognizes that, "Authorizing student perspectives means ensuring that there are legitimate and valued spaces within which students can speak re-tuning our ears so that we can hear what they say, and redirecting our actions in response to what we hear" (p.4). She recognizes the challenges associated with teacher subjectivities in attempting to do this kind of work, namely that it requires us to change the schemas that render us disinclined to authorize student perspectives, as well as the structures in educational relationships and institutions that have supported this disinclination. As Cook-Sather explores the different structures which facilitate authorizing student perspectives, she presents findings which illustrate complications in dialogue. One participant, upon reflecting on her frustration with her dialogue partner, realized that she was expecting her partner to use her language. In other words, asking

questions which elicit student language, not the teacher's, was a challenge. Additionally, efforts to more fully collaborate with students were complicated by the complex issues of power and authority. Mirroring Burbules' (1993) discussion of dialogue, Cook-Sather maintains that authorizing student perspectives means being willing to negotiate. Listening means having to respond. Cook-Sather notes that listening does not always mean doing what we are told, but it means being open to the possibility of changing thoughts and actions.

## CHAPTER II

### Research Questions

The literature suggests a myriad of problems associated with communication in the classroom. As the authority in the classroom, I believe that the teacher has an obligation to understand the complexities and schemas involved in what she is communicating to her students. Because her language patterns are often more sophisticated than those of her students, and because this language reflects certain ideological viewpoints, the teacher should be aware of how these issues affect her students.

Thus, my question for research is what happens to student and teacher dialogue when a teacher critically reflects on her role? How might dialogue change the traditional power structures in the classroom, if at all? This study sets out to explore key components of critical pedagogy: dialogue, reflection, and action towards change. By reflecting on how I use my authority in the classroom as well as student responses and reactions to that implementation, I hope to come to a clearer understanding of the role of dialogue and critical pedagogy in the elementary classroom. To examine dialogue and my role as a teacher, I draw upon the following set of notions presented in Freire's (1970) and Shor's (1992) discussions of critical pedagogy.

### Conceptual Framework

Critical theory and pedagogy guides this inquiry into the power plays and the modes of authority enacted in my classroom. Two intentions of critical pedagogy, as described by Freire (1970) inspire this work: (1) praxis - critical reflection and action to



change dehumanizing power structures; (2) moving toward becoming more human. My interpretation of these notions as well as how I perceive their importance in the classroom inform my analysis.

To begin with the latter notion of becoming more human, Freire (1970) describes the process of humanization as the people's vocation. Freire contrasts the process of humanization with oppression or dehumanization. Oppression occurs when humans are objectified in some way. In other words, whenever a person is considered just a laborer, an instrument to be used or manipulated, his or her humanity is stolen. Freire (1970) notes, "Dehumanization, which marks not only those whose humanity has been stolen, but also (though in a different way) those who have stolen it, is a *distortion* of the vocation of becoming more fully human" (p.44). Thus, when people ignore the humanity of another, they become oppressed as well. By denying the humanity of others, oppressors also deny their own humanity in a significant way. For example, if I choose to view a student as a being placed in my classroom whose sole purpose is to learn what I am teaching, I am not acknowledging her humanity. In not acknowledging who she is and what she brings to the classroom or to my life, I am limiting myself to the object of teacher. However, when I attempt to understand that student as a human being, I begin to make personal connections with her. In doing so, we begin to see one another as people whose role might be that of teacher and student (or sometimes both). Since knowledge is socially constructed, this understanding of relationality explored by Freire becomes crucial for problematizing the language and situations which preserve dehumanizing institutionalized power dynamics.

Freire describes how society socializes or prescribes modes of oppression. Freire (1970) notes that, “Every prescription represents the imposition of one individual’s choice upon another, transforming the consciousness of the person prescribed to into one that conforms with the prescriber’s consciousness” (p. 47). The oppressed begin to internalize the prescribed image and adopt the oppressor’s point of view. However, as Freire notes, in their fight for freedom, the oppressed must reject these prescriptions and replace them with notions of autonomy and responsibility. Freire cautions that this quest for freedom must be pursued constantly and responsibly. If in the pursuit of freedom, the oppressed become the oppressors, humanity is not restored for either group.

It is with this notion of humanization in mind that Freire forges the pedagogy of the oppressed. In order for pedagogy to be liberatory, it must be built with, not for the oppressed in their struggle to regain humanity. In humanizing education, oppression and its causes are objects of reflection by the oppressed. Freire argues that it is from that reflection that the oppressed become engaged in their struggle for liberation. It is through this critical reflection that the oppressed discover that both themselves and their oppressors are expressions of dehumanization.

Perhaps because the language that we use to name and objectify our world is often used to name one another, I believe that oppression and dehumanization exists in our very language, at the very core of our thoughts. When we name ourselves and others as this or that, we tend to ignore all the subjectivities, all of the contexts that have made us who we are. Perhaps it’s because language is so ingrained, because it constitutes how we think about our world, that Freire (1970) recognizes that *becoming* more fully human is a

continuous, never-ending process. Freire argues that those who commit themselves to more humanizing practices must re-examine themselves constantly. Here I assume that language in itself is oppressive, especially when it names and classifies people as teacher, student, laborer, politician, etc. All of these labels strip the person of their humanity in some way and place them into an objective role. Freire (1970) argues that:

The oppressor consciousness tends to transform everything surrounding it into an object of its domination. The earth, property, production, the creations of people, people themselves, time - everything is reduced to the status of objects at its disposal. (p. 58)

However, I believe that Freire would argue that through dialogue with another we begin to recognize and see the more humanized individual.

Freire's notion of dialogue, touched on in my review of the literature, means more than merely talking. Critical dialogue is the first step in Freire's notion of praxis. Praxis involves serious reflection as well as action upon that reflection. Reflection without action results in a purely intellectual discovery, whereas action without reflection is merely activism. Freire (1970) notes that, "Critical and liberating dialogue, which presupposes action, must be carried on with the oppressed at whatever the stage of their struggle for liberation" (p. 65). Freire contends that to proceed otherwise is to treat the oppressed as if they were objects to be saved, thereby dehumanizing them. Therefore, as Freire often notes, this type of education needs to be carried out with the oppressed not for them; they need to be active participants in critical reflection as well as the action that serve to liberate. Freire states that achieving praxis depends on the educator's trust in the oppressed and their ability to reason. It is through this trust that dialogue, reflection, communication, and liberatory action can take place. Freire argues that without this trust,

these actions become slogans and instructions, carrying with them superficial conversions of liberation.

Shor (1992) might contend that classroom teachers can facilitate a form of liberatory education in a more participatory classroom. Shor describes a participatory classroom as one in which the teacher provides chances to hear the often silenced voices of the students. In doing so, teachers learn how to integrate subject-matter with the existing knowledge held by the students. By problem-posing and through dialogue, Shor argues that power relations in the classroom change. When the power dynamics change, students are less likely to resist learning. For Shor (1992), “Critical-democratic pedagogy situates curriculum in issues and language from everyday life” (p. 55). In other words, critical-democratic pedagogy draws on the experiences and lives of the students, which Shor terms generative themes. As the teacher develops the curriculum, she looks for topical themes, or themes of enduring importance, as well as academic themes, or themes with roots in formal bodies of knowledge, usually studied by a specialist in a particular field. Shor (1992) argues that in a participatory, problem-posing class, a topical theme, “fits when it is relevant to the work in progress, when it is introduced as a problem for cooperative study in class, and when it is in an idiom students can understand” (p. 55). When these conditions are not met, Shor argues that the experience can become teacher-centered.

Shor explains key components of critical dialogue in the participatory classroom. Shor (1992) explains that dialogue is “a meeting ground to reconcile students and teachers separated by the unilateral authority of the teacher in traditional education” (p.

87). Shor outlines specific qualities of classroom dialogue. A few qualities particularly relevant to my analysis in this study include:

- a formal learning group directed by a critical teacher who has leadership responsibilities but who codevelops the class, negotiates the curriculum, and shares decision making with the students, using her or his authority in a cooperative manner;...
- a critical consciousness of self received knowledge, and society is a goal in a learning experience which questions the status quo;
- an interactive, mutual discourse considering action outcomes beyond the classroom;...
- situated in the conditions and cultures of the students so that their language, themes, understandings, levels of development, and needs are the starting points;
- frontloads student expression and backloads teacher expertise and bodies of knowledge. (p.87)

These points reiterate some of Freire's (1970, 1995) notions such as his argument that while the teacher has specific responsibilities and roles that differ from the students, dialogue begins with student experience and language and moves toward a more general or global understanding of the object of study.

Dialogue situates the learning experience in the conditions, language, and culture of the students. It is interactive in nature. The teacher listens to and reflects upon students' experiences and conceptions of knowledge and reworks this knowledge as a starting point for negotiating a curriculum. Freire (1970) might argue that this is a form of praxis wherein the teacher, through dialogue, reflects upon classroom structures, instructional practices, and the curriculum, and makes changes to create a more liberating, participatory educational environment. To do so, Shor (1992) suggests that he or she invites students to write and speak about their experiences and learning in their own words. The teacher then "mines" (Shor, 1992, p. 172) this material to construct the

curriculum. Before asking the students to engage in the curriculum, Shor explains that the teacher asks the students to pull out from these texts key themes and questions. In these instances, students can reflect on these themes in questions in their own words prior to meeting them in the curricular texts. According to Shor, this framework facilitates student and teacher connections to the deep meaning of social consequences, and personal implications of the material to be studied.

Shor (1992) varies the form of dialogue from whole group to small group conversation. He asks students to consult with neighbors sitting nearby before reporting to the reconvened class. As students report, Shor takes notes, listens, and responds briefly, without making corrections to each student as he or she reports. He then rereads and reviews the classes' statements and asks questions which help students to conceptualize their work. For example, Shor might ask if there are any commonalities or contradictions among student ideas. After this process, Shor reads his definition and asks the class how it compares with their definitions. This process helps to situate the curriculum within the realm of student experiences.

Although Ladson-Billings (1994) does not specifically use the term dialogue to explain successful participatory methods, she nevertheless describes dialogical components as she discusses culturally responsive teaching. Ladson-Billings (1994) notes that the culturally relevant teacher “sees teaching as ‘pulling knowledge out’ – ‘like mining’” (p. 34). She posits that a culturally relevant teacher builds trusting, fluid and humanely equitable relationships with her students, encourages a community of learners. She notes that building these kinds of relationships and facilitating this style of learning

helps to reconcile the dichotomous student-teacher relationship. In other words, Ladson-Billings recognizes that the teacher in many classrooms is seen as an all-knowing authority figure, whereas the students are regarded as having little or no knowledge. In building a collaborative classroom where cooperative relationships are forged, these roles and perceptions which can hinder learning, and therefore a student's ability to succeed, become more equitable and cooperative in nature. Additionally, Ladson-Billings explains, the culturally-relevant teacher conceives of knowledge as critical and fluid. The culturally-relevant teacher recognizes that students and teachers continuously recreate and share knowledge. While Ladson-Billings situates her arguments for teaching in a culturally diverse classroom, Freire (1970) and Shor (1992) might argue that critical pedagogy serves all who are disenfranchised.

Because I am interested in checking my attitudes, assumptions, verbal and personal interactions with my students, I needed to find ways to capture these. Within the course of a school day, I can become overwhelmed by the tasks and interruptions in the daily functioning of the classroom. I needed to find a way, to "slow down" the day to make sure that I attune myself to the various levels of language, communication, interactions, and interpretations occurring in our classroom. The following methods outline my attempt to do so.

## CHAPTER III

### Methods

I conducted this study between the months of November 2008 and March 2009 in my sixth grade classroom. In this qualitative research project, I used several methods to gather my data. I employed dialogue journals (Ellis, 1998), interviewed students, and videotaped various lessons, class and small group discussions (Glesne, 2006; Hubbard & Power, 2003). Additionally, I collected and analyzed student writing samples, student assessments, and kept my own reflective journal. Throughout the data collection, I employed various teaching and dialogue strategies.

#### *Reflective – Dialogue (Interactive) Journals*

Interactive/dialogue journals are a strategy that I learned in my action research class during my graduate studies in education. As a student, I was given the opportunity to reflect on and ask questions about new learning, ideas, and confusions. Interactive journals alone gave me opportunities to articulate my thoughts. The instructors then replied to these journals with their various comments and questions. For them, I believe, the journals gave an opportunity to connect with their students as well as assess their learning.

Judith McIntyre (cited in Ellis, 1998) did a study of the role of student-teacher dialogue journals in her classroom. She cited their benefits in building language and establishing community. McIntyre found that teachers employed journals for a variety of reasons including providing opportunities for academic writing as well as modes of communicating. In the former, teachers looked for improvement in mechanics and



responded to student entries by writing something positive or nothing at all. When teachers used journals for communicating with students, teachers tended to focus on what was written, rather than the mechanics of the writing. Teacher responses led the researcher to conclude that the teachers enjoyed reading the students' writing. The students in this study perceived their journals as an opportunity to talk to their teachers about what was important to them.

In her review of the literature, McIntyre found that the adult's role in responding to journals provided a scaffold for developing the student's language skills. By repeating key words and phrases, asking thoughtful questions, and providing supportive comments, teachers let the students take the lead. As the children take the initiative, teachers use the aforementioned techniques to support and extend the student's topic. According to McIntyre in citing Vygotsky (1962), responding to student journals was a mode of social interaction, thereby promoting language development

As I began the interactive journals with my students, my primary goal was communication. I wanted to provide a safe space for my students to respond openly and honestly with me regarding classroom practices, their feelings, and whatever else they felt they wanted to talk about. Because I felt that my students would be motivated by earning a grade for their efforts, I provided a basic four point rubric for "scoring" their journal entries. I afforded one point for providing the date of entry; another for titling the entry; one point for neatness; and the last point for thoughtful, detailed, honest, reflective responses. While I gave most responses a "4," I also attempted to respond to each journal

entry in some way. I asked questions, made connections, commented, and complimented what the students had to say.

Students completed journals everyday. I provided a variety of prompts including quote responses, requests for evaluating learning and classroom practices, free write assignments, and hypothetical questions. I responded to each individual's journal at least once a week, collecting seven to eight journals daily for the duration of this study. I collected journals in a systematic fashion. In other words, I collected the same students' journals on the same day every week. As the study proceeded however, some students began spontaneously turning in their journals, flagged with sticky notes, even on days not assigned to them. I tried to honor these requests for dialogue.

#### *Student Interviews*

I conducted student interviews periodically throughout the study with four focal students. I chose these four students using the school district's criterion for selecting focal students. The criterion states that selected students must score in the Basic range on the California Standards test and must be students of African American or Hispanic descent. I believe the district's rationale behind these criteria is traceable back to the existence of the racial achievement gap. Since my class consisted of 24 girls and 11 boys, all four of my focal students happened to be female students of color.

Although the majority of these interviews took place with these four girls, I also periodically interviewed other students in the class, especially including boys in order to get their perspectives, which might be overwhelmed by a class full of girls, led by a female teacher. I rarely planned interviews with students. They took place as an issue

arose in the classroom, or when I felt I particularly needed feedback from students.

When interviews took place, I usually led with a few guiding questions, and tried to let the dialogue flow from there. As per Glesne's (2006) suggestion, I composed interview questions that were open-ended, allowing for a variety of student responses (See Appendix A). Additionally, as Ellis (2007) notes, I composed questions that cited student language and responses. For example, in trying to ascertain the students' conceptions of authority and power in the classroom, I led with the question, "Who's in charge in the classroom?" I followed that question with, "Why do you think so? What does it mean to be in charge? Are you in charge of anything in the class?" Since I was constantly building relationships with my students, through in-class dialogue, asking their opinions about lessons, connecting curriculum to students' lives, forging personal connections through social and team building activities, and through their interactive journals, I perceived that students were generally forth-coming in their interview responses. Student interviews were not recorded. With the students' permission, I took notes about what they said, and read back to them what I had, to see if I had gotten their point (Glesne, 2006). I did record some student responses verbatim at the time in which they were said. After each interview, I took a few minutes to think about and record what I had learned (Glesne, 2006; Hubbard & Power, 2003).

#### *Video-recorded Lessons*

I videotaped several whole class lessons. Some of the lessons I planned and reflected upon in great detail, while other lessons were not as processed. As I analyzed and transcribed the videotape, I looked for how I used dialogue and various plays in the

language game, as described by Bowers (1984). After viewing the videotapes, I reflected on what I perceived to go well in the lesson as well as the aspects that I thought I could improve.

I also video-recorded small group and whole group discussions. In some discussions I was a participant, and in others I was not. Literature circles or book talks were the format of some of the small group discussions. These discussions were relatively open-ended where students shared the literacy task they completed before the book. They also discussed confusing, interesting, powerful, important, parts of the book or selection. For the most part, the students directed these conversations. “Bloom’s Cubes” was another task which I recorded. “Bloom’s Cubes” is a way to discuss a text. I posted questions reflecting each level of Bloom’s Taxonomy (1956); knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. The students in the group took turns rolling a cube and discussing the question that was assigned to the side of the cube on which they landed. For example, if one student rolled “analyze it,” they would be the first person to attempt to discuss the “analyze it” question. If they felt they needed help or wanted to discuss the question further, they asked group-mates for their opinions. The person who rolled the cube also took the pen and recorded responses as well as the group’s responses to that question. I recorded the whole group lessons in an attempt to recap what each group discussed in the small group lessons to determine common themes, if any. I also asked the group to evaluate their experience in these small group lessons with the whole group as well as in written form in their journals. This process provided me with immediate feedback so that I could better scaffold the

experience for next time. It also served the purpose of offering the students an opportunity to evaluate themselves and their learning and participation in the group.

While the activities and strategies outlined above provided an opportunity for me to reflect on instructional practices, personal viewpoints, relationships with students, and student learning, I felt that there were several limitations involved in collecting, analyzing, and interpreting the data.

### Limitations

Because of the nature of this project, I did not focus on a particular set of instructional practices or methods of teaching. I relied on instructional practices that I had learned during my eight years of experience teaching in elementary education. While I used some of the practices outlined in the methods and contextual framework section, the main goal of this study was to find ways to make the curriculum and my relationship with the students more dialogic. Since this study was phenomenological in nature, my interpretation of the data is highly subjective. In other words when I interpret a student's statement, I ask questions to help me to clarify my intent. However, because my interpretations are still governed by my own frameworks, I can only imagine what the student is trying to communicate. That is, because of the differences in how the student and I experience and talk about our worlds, I can never fully abandon my schemas when interpreting the words and experiences of the student. Additionally, since I am the classroom teacher as well as the researcher, student responses to my inquiry could be influenced by their perceptions of my authority. In an attempt to ameliorate these issues, I told students that their honest feedback would help me to become a better teacher. I

listened intently to their responses and asked clarifying questions. I often asked for feedback regarding classroom management, social structures, lesson content, and delivery styles. In these ways, I attempted to break down traditional teacher-student barriers to give students a more participatory role in the management of our classroom. As Glesne (2006) notes:

You ask questions of others about the research process and listen carefully to what they say, noting their answers, and perhaps changing the course of inquiry. You listen to the questions asked of you by research participants and consider how the questions may indicate certain concerns or expectations. (p.126)

Other limitations include the fact that I am an educator in the public school system, so while critical pedagogy aims at problematizing and changing oppressive structures, I have a real responsibility to teach and uphold certain institutional structures. In other words, I serve as a “gate-keeper” for student success within the narrow confines of the educational system. It is my job to evaluate student success based solely on academic achievement, progress, and citizenship in a school setting. Report cards and evaluations do not leave room for interpreting a student’s progress within the larger framework of his or her experiences and background. Further, the standards by which students are evaluated reflect an ideology that may be starkly different from, and on some levels, somewhat irrelevant in students’ lives.

#### *Interpretation of Subjectivities*

Although the spirit of dialogue is aimed toward discovery, the nature of dialogue is highly subjective, as I have explored earlier. I aimed to understand the needs, concerns, and understandings of my students; yet, in many cases, we come from highly different backgrounds. Therefore my interpretation of their communications may not

represent their true intent. To a certain extent, my interpretations are confined to my experiences of being a White, middle-class teacher. Additionally, a different history and generation shaped my conceptual frameworks as compared to those of my students. In other words, there is a generational gap between my students and me which may contribute to a difference in understanding. Although hunting assumptions and critical reflection (Brookfield, 1995) regarding interpretation might lend itself to gaining a more accurate interpretation of a student's intent, I am nevertheless restricted to my own understanding of the student's communication. However, dialogue flows in both directions. Thus far, my investigation has focused on my interpretations of the students, but how the students interpret me and my position is also an area of concern.

#### *Students' Conception of My Authority*

A second limitation in this study of student and teacher dialogue is the students' conception of authority. As the literature suggests, engaging in dialogue requires a great deal of trust (Freire, 1970; Noddings, 2006). The teacher's position is a highly recognized position of authority in schools, if not the larger society (Noddings, 2006). Conditioned to provide answers to teachers, students respond in ways that often reflect the student's interpretation of what they think the teacher wants to hear. Student responses to my inquiry might result from socialization. I base this assumption on past experiences and observations in the classroom where student behavior and conversation changes as my proximity to the group drew nearer.

Although I try to enact experiences in the classroom which build relationships and trust between my students and I, the socialization of the teacher/student dichotomy

(Freire, 1970) may be too deep for me to have created conditions that allowed students to let go of in one school year because it is a socialized conception. In other words, I may not have had enough time to establish a solid, caring relationship with my students. Or, the positive rapport that I thought was established may have been perceived differently by my students. Students may also have a difficult time letting go of their notion of what a teacher is and therefore who they perceive me to be. Their responses to my inquiry might reflect the vocabulary and ideas that they think I value. These responses may not reflect their personal truths, beliefs, values, and learning.

#### *Expectations of a Public School Teacher*

Because I am a public school employee, I am expected to teach the California State Standards. Although I engaged dialogue to teach many of these standards, I still felt constrained in some areas to limit some topics of interest that arose. Perhaps this was due to my own fears of maintaining my job. I felt compelled to maintain the pacing of curriculum suggested by the district and my colleagues. I also felt pressure to meet the expectations of the school and parent community which sometimes came in direct conflict to student interests and curiosity. These are real issues that warrant further study, but whatever the case, I felt that these constrictions limited dialogue in some instances. Although, as I encountered these instances, I tried to communicate my concerns and what I perceived as my responsibilities to the students, and often times I received feedback that they understood and respected these concerns.

I recognize my role as a gate-keeper (Delpit, 1995) in our society. Although it is the aim of critical pedagogy to reflect upon and change oppressive systemic structures,



standardized tests remain an important part of how students are judged by the system. In sixth grade, the California Standards Test (CST) plays a central role in which classes the students are placed in middle school. These placements can follow students to high school. Again, while I implemented dialogue and inquiry to help students understand this point, as well as to gain understanding about how and what students were learning, I still struggled with this aspect of education. I have a responsibility to my students to teach them what they need to know in order to perform well on such a test so that they may have greater opportunities down the road, but I also recognize that a standardized test is not the sole indicator of a student's learning or future success. As Delpit (1995) recognizes, success on these standardized tests represent a gate-keeping point. Students' successful negotiation of this test requires that teachers explicitly teach its language, patterns, and agendas.

Regardless of the limitations, this study's findings provide me with greater insight into how to relate with this year's group of students. Attempting to engage my students in dialogue felt empowering. That is, I felt that many students and I began to view each other in a more humanistic light. I did not feel as constrained by the expectations that come along with the teacher role. Many times, my students freely offered various ways of solving problems, different insights to explain phenomena, and even engaged in some light-hearted teasing about my personality or faults. While the recognition of these occurrences resulted more from daily interaction rather than as a result of data collection, as I analyzed the data, I came across other uncoverings and findings which I attribute to the use of dialogue in the classroom.

## CHAPTER IV

### Data, Findings, and Analysis

I have uncovered four main themes as I analyzed the data from this study. Through interviews, my own daily reflection, anecdotal interaction with students, video-recorded lessons and conversations, and student dialogue journals, I found evidence regarding students' perceptions of authority and power in the classroom, independent use of academic language and ideas, and development of communicative competence by the teacher (myself) and the students. Additionally, I recognized situational trends for when I was more dialogical and less dialogical in my lesson delivery.

As in most classrooms, some lessons seem to capture student engagement and interest while others promote lethargy. I attempted to understand some of the characteristics of the lessons that promoted engagement and active learning. What strategies did I use during these lessons? What was my frame of mind during these lessons? Why was I in that frame of mind and what prompted it? In the next section I explore the instances and circumstances in which I drew on more participatory teaching approaches and frames of mind versus when I used a more lecture or "banking" (Freire, 1970) styles of teaching. In Ladson-Billings' (1994) words, when was I culturally responsive versus assimilationist in my teaching?

*"Banking" (Freire, 1970) vs. "Mining" (Ladson-Billings, 1992):*

#### *Non-dialogical vs. Dialogical Lessons*

Reviewing my reflection journal and video-recorded lessons, I found differences in how I approached certain lessons and topics. I noticed the lessons my students and I

deemed more successful, I seemed to be more dialogic in nature. The following example is characteristic of many of my more successful lessons. In one particular video-recorded lesson where students appeared engaged, I asked students to identify key words and themes from the lesson. I determined the students' engagement by their thoughtful completion of the task and their ability to make connections between the curriculum and their lives. In this lesson, I asked students to hypothesize definitions for debate. After giving them some individual think time, I had them pair-share their ideas with a neighbor. I then had them share their responses with the whole class while I charted their responses. I asked students to share whether they recognized any recurring themes from their classmates' responses and recorded these responses. Student responses reflected their connections to past experiences and past class conversations. They connected to the presidential debates that occurred in the fall of that school year as well as to past conversations regarding arguments, disagreements, and perspectives.

In this instance, I felt confident in proceeding via inquiry since I had thought through how I could guide such inquiry. I had pre-identified certain points that I thought were critical to understanding the topic. When students brought up these points, I felt that I could further draw these ideas out by asking questions about what they meant by certain words or by asking them to give examples, or a context, or statements they had made. Although many students made the same points that I had deemed critical in my pre-reflections, some students said things I had not expected. Either because I felt confident, or because the spirit of inquiry was contagious at this moment, I inquired further to draw out their perspectives. As they explained more, I began to understand

students' connections and validity to the topic of discussion. Interested in communicating to students that I was learning from them, I praised them for sharing and informed them that I had previously not thought of the idea or object of study in that way. I explained that their perspectives helped me to understand the topic in a different way. I was surprised at the depths that sixth grade students could plumb with even a little inquiry.

Lessons that particularly engaged my students were also ones in which they used and connected to content vocabulary and understandings. In these lessons my students demonstrated a high-level of social control (Dewey, 1938) and completed their inquiry tasks with enthusiasm. These lessons tended to be inquiry-based and contained elements of dialogue. In these lessons, we recreated knowledge and discovered using teacher and student perspectives, often leading to or questioning the "expert" or textbook opinion. Student perspectives, backgrounds, and interests were other elements involved in successful, dialogical lessons.

Upon reviewing and reflecting upon a particularly unsuccessful set of lessons, I came to recognize that in all of these lessons I exhibited Freire's (1970) banking concept of education. I tried to "deposit" facts and knowledge into students to be recalled later. Many of these lessons occurred in Math or Science classes where I had a difficult time identifying an enduring understanding that also related to student experience and interests. First, let me begin describing how I perceived the lessons as unsuccessful. My reflection logs note that students seemed unengaged during certain lessons. I wrote that I had to continually remind students to listen and stay on task. Additionally, as I tried to

determine student understanding by questioning them during and after these lessons, I found that students did not or could not use the content vocabulary, nor did they make connections to past lessons or their current lives. Furthermore, some of the student reflection logs regarding these lessons also showed their lack of connection to the subject. In some instances when I had my students evaluate these lessons by charting “pluses, deltas, and questions” or positive aspects and aspects to change in their journals, many students responded that they did not see what this lesson had to do with “real life.” Also, some students often requested working with their “clock partners” for help with the lesson. How might the way in which I delivered the lesson affect student responses in this way? Why did students disengage in some of these lessons, but seem to be motivated by and enjoy participating in others? Was it my approach, my way of being? Since my reflection logs report students’ engagement and disengagement across a variety of subject areas, I decided that it was not the inherently disengaging subject, but rather my mentality in approaching the subject.

While reflecting on all of the lessons that seemed to go poorly, I recognized a certain lack of pre-planning and pre-reflection, as well as in some cases what I consider a lack of knowledge or expertise on my part. As a result, I relied on the textbook and my pre-knowledge to tell the students the facts, the vocabulary, and/or the concepts. I tended to lecture more in these lessons. Additionally, I made little, no, or only a superficial attempt to connect the lesson content to my students’ lives or pre-existing knowledge. If I made an attempt, I told them how I thought they would connect with it – dictating rather

than facilitating activities or posing questions, which might engage students in making their own connections.

I found it interesting that I took this more directive stance with topics I did not feel comfortable teaching due to my lack of knowledge or planning. Shouldn't this be a time when I am more dialogical with my students? By engaging in inquiry with my students, I might be able to tap into someone's expertise or insight about the topic. Was it because I felt a certain lack of authority on the topic that I had to assert my authority by becoming more directive in my style? In other words, I may have felt that I needed to compensate for my lack of expertise by employing a more authoritative style of teaching. Perhaps it is because I am not used to asking critical questions that facilitate deeper level thinking. This is a skill that I am still developing as a teacher. Perhaps it is due to my socialization as a teacher and the conception that I must know it all. I noticed that when I had more time to process and think about a topic of study, I was able to compose deeper, critical, more probing questions. I was also able to notice when the students' language reflected that of "expert knowledge." In doing so, I was able to ask questions which might further draw that knowledge out of the student.

*Developing Communicative Competence in Verbal and Written Communication*

Bowers (1984) borrows the phrase communicative competence from Jürgen Habermas. Bowers (1984) notes, "Communicative competence requires, beyond individual facility in speech situations, a knowledge of relevant issues and the conceptual frameworks that influence our way of thinking" (p. 2). In other words, communicative competence entails a knowledge and understanding of cultural traditions and an

understanding of forces that foster changes. Given this notion, teachers should teach a method of thinking that allows students to see their decisions “in terms of relationships, continuities, disjunctions and trade-offs” (Bowers, 1984, p. 2). In the following section, I present a discussion of my findings regarding my attempts to develop my own communicative competence. Through my modeling and explicit teaching of language codes and expectations, my students also developed their own sense of communicative competence.

#### *Opening Space for Dialogue and Dereifying Assumptions*

As my understanding of and capacity for practicing dialogue and inquiry improved, I began recognizing assumptions and attitudes that framed my thinking about my students, our relationships, and the curriculum. As I reflected on my attitudes and my resulting use of language, I noticed that I started adding disclaimers to my assumptions. I verbalized to students that I based my judgments and assumptions on observations rooted in my past experiences and beliefs. Doing so seemed to open the door for dialogue in some instances. In other words, by adding these disclaimers I laid the yoke of my role as the teacher aside and opened the door to my own humanization.

I also noticed students developing their own skill for communicative competence. My personal journals revealed incidents in which I tried to problematize and/or shed light on assumptions, judgments, and gate-keeping points with my students. For example, Rayleen\* wrote a paper in which she tried to leave the ending ambiguous and mysterious. I asked her whether or not this was her intent. I then praised her for her effort, but I told

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\* Student names have been changed to protect anonymity.

her that I, and probably most of her writing teachers, as well as the teachers who would be grading this prompt, would want a little more of a conclusion. We then brainstormed ways that she could include a conclusion but still leave the suspenseful ending. Rayleen was proud of her ending, and she met the “requirement” of having a clear conclusion. This example is typical of how I tried to use dialogue during one-to-one conferencing.

Throughout this study, critical reflection empowered me to attune to my language and the power hierarchies embedded within it. So, during this study, as I tried to refocus students on their assigned task, I would privately say something like, “I noticed that you are (state the action I saw). Past experience tells me that you may be (tell the assumption I made). Is that assumption accurate?” This seemed to open the door for dialogue. My students responded to this type of statement in a less defensive and less argumentative way than if I simply told them to refocus or get on task. Sometimes the students responded with a smile, which I interpreted as an affirmation that my statement was accurate. Other students responded that the statement was accurate and that they would refocus. Still others responded with what they were actually doing. In those cases, according to a student my statement was incorrect. In some of these instances, the students were attempting to do the work by asking a classmate for clarification. This reflected the expectation that we have in our class regarding being responsible for one’s own learning. As a result of shedding light on my assumptions by sharing stipulations which I felt made the judgment valid, I explicitly modeled (Delpit, 1995) the situations which legitimized and dereified those judgments (Bowers, 1984).



Still, on other occasions, I would make judgments or assumptions in class regarding the content. The more I studied critical hermeneutics in the “Critical Studies in Narrative, Language and Culture” course at San José State University, I started to recognize when I was using presumptive language. This course led me to ask critical questions of myself and my perspectives. This course encouraged me to look at the world from odd angles (Steele, 1989). As I began to recognize when I was making these assumptions as well as where these assumptions came from, I tried to articulate these to my students. Rather than reifying these statements, I tried to identify how my socialization led me to identify with these assumptions. Sometimes I was able to do this on the spot, while other presuppositions required deeper reflection.

When I was able to recognize and problematize my opinions on the spot, I noticed that my students were more willing to share their theories and backgrounds. For example, a student raised the question, “who built the pyramids in ancient Egypt?” First, I asked the class what they thought. When a student asked what I thought, I told them that I have read many different accounts and theories about this. I explained how I read that different authors suggest the presence of slave builders, hired laborers, or even farmers between planting and harvest seasons. I explained that I was more inclined to believe that slaves played an important role in the building of the pyramids, since throughout history we have seen how members of the more elite classes have traditionally used slave labor. I cited our own history of using slave labor, a connection that they could make to their fifth-grade curriculum. I quote my next sentence to give a window into this conversation, “However, that is my opinion. I probably got that opinion

from my family who likes to talk about conspiracy theory.” Most of the students laughed, while others asked about conspiracy theory. I then asked my students to tell their opinions and attempt to back it up with their own personal histories as well as historical and textual evidence. The students responded with a myriad of answers and reasons. While I stated what I held to be true in that instance by providing a contextual background for it, and asking my students what they thought, I provided a space for others to share their personal histories and resulting insights. In these instances, because I gave authorship to my opinions and assumptions, the students and I were able to transcend the traditional student – teacher relationship and explore the idea together.

#### *Students' Perceptions of Authority and Power*

In attempting to change the traditional structures of power and authority and power relations in the classroom in order for more authentic dialogue to occur, I felt it necessary to determine how my students perceived authority and power. The culture of power which clearly exists in the classroom, as well as in the larger society, (Bowers, 1984; Delpit, 1995) and the hierarchies that result from this socialization can serve as an obstacle for participation in dialogue (Burbules, 1993). Student notions of the teacher's authority can serve as a limiting factor for authentic interactions. Additionally, students' responses can also reflect their perceptions of how power is either being shared or abused in the classroom (Bowers, 1984).

In an attempt to understand how I enact my authority in the classroom as well as what students expect from their teachers, I asked my students the following set of questions. Who's in charge of the classroom? I suspected that students might have

mixed answers to this question since we had worked to co-develop rules, expectations, and, on some instances, the curriculum. I had students identify what they thought the purpose of schooling was and should be. They then had to identify whether or not they would attend school if they had a choice as well as predict the consequences of that choice. I believed that these prompts coupled with long- and short-term goal setting would help students identify their personal reasons for being in school and getting an education. I then tried to work students' goals and purposes for schooling into lessons and content by trying to facilitate connections, thereby giving students a sense of power and authority over their educational endeavors.

However, when I posed the journal question, "Who's in charge?" students overwhelmingly said that I, the teacher, was in charge. The follow up question, "Who should be in charge?" yielded similar results. Most students stated that the teacher should be in charge. However, they gave several different reasons for their responses. Several students responded that the "grown-up" in the room was in charge "because they know what we do and how we should do it." Another student stated, "The adults are in charge. Because they are wiser than us kids. We don't know everything." One student, Andy noted that the teacher "is the one that's hired and paid. They're the one that's responsible for [taking charge of the classroom]." A few students responded that although the teacher is in charge of the class, everyone participates in the successful functioning of the class. One student noted, "What I really think is that the teacher is in charge of the class. Even though we students are helping to run the class, we're not in charge. I think this is because the teacher is the responsible adult, but also the teacher is wiser." I interpreted

this to mean that the student understood her participatory role in the classroom, but expects the teacher to maintain control and plan the learning experiences. Another student wrote:

I think we are all in charge of this class, I mean, you [the teacher] make sure we get our work done and you take control, but we also have control, we decide to, do homework, or classwork.... Yes. I'm in charge of my behavior and my actions, and my learning. If I disobey the class rules I'll be punished but I'm in charge of disobeying. I didn't have to [throw] my pencil to Jane or talk to Bell during DEAR. (Sally, Nov. 15, 2008, Journal Entry)

Sally understood purposes for the rules and consequences that we established for the classroom. She also understood the difference between her job as the student and my job as the teacher. Though she expresses differences and possibly notes a hierarchy between the two roles, she recognizes her own autonomy as a learner. A different student noted how she felt that I used my power in the classroom:

Mrs. Dorsey is in charge of the class because she is the teacher. She tells us what to do and gives us ideas about how to make things easier and understandable. Mrs. Dorsey tries to help us in things that we don't understand. She listens to how we feel and tries to change things according to that. (Ginny, Nov. 15, 2008 Journal Entry)

Ginny's point helped me to understand that authority is not necessarily a bad or dehumanizing stance. As Delpit (1995) recognizes, humanization comes an explicit understanding of the rules and roles involved for successful negotiation of the system. It is how that authority is used that makes it limiting or freeing. Additionally, Ginny's journal serves as evidence confirming that she perceives my dialogical efforts when she writes about my attempts to listen to students and change classroom structures. By co-creating the rules, asking for student feedback regarding the effectiveness of lessons and

classroom functioning, some students seemed to feel a greater sense of ownership in the classroom. For example, I used Curwin and Mendler's (1988) *Discipline with Dignity*, to guide our class in creating a social contract. After establishing that the classroom is intended as a place of learning as well as acknowledging that we all have certain responsibilities, the students had the opportunity to create rules for the teacher, the classroom, and themselves. Additionally, we worked together to establish the rewards and consequences for breaking the classroom contract. Also, in discussing how group and team work would be conducted in the classroom, students had the opportunity to discuss their notions of good conversations and bad conversations as well as times they felt successful or unsuccessful when participating in group work. From this conversation, we established norms and jobs for whole group and small group work.

I then asked students to identify what they thought they were in charge of in the classroom. As noted in some of the responses above, the students identified that they were in charge of classroom functioning. That is, they identified that they were in charge of their class job, such as answering the phone, organizing the library, and being the ball monitor. Only a few students responded that they were responsible for their own learning or "doing my work", while others felt that they were not in charge of anything in the classroom. Although I did not inquire further at the time of this study, next time I might interview the students to ask them what "being responsible for learning" meant to them. What sorts of actions does that entail?

As mentioned in the limitations section of this study, the responses to these questions might reflect what the students thought I wanted to hear. I interpreted the

students' responses in several ways. First, these responses could reflect the language that I continually used in the classroom. On many occasions, I reiterated that students are in charge of their own learning and decision making. However, assuming that the students were truthful in their responses, I was surprised by their answers to the first two questions. I interpreted this to mean that the majority of my students expect the teacher to hold the authority and power in the classroom. Do students expect this as a result of their socialization within schools and by adults? Perhaps I interpreted these responses in this way because of the way that I was socialized as a teacher. That is, since I was taught that teachers should hold the power and authority in the classroom, I may have inadvertently directed the question in such a way as to garner these types of responses. Then again, I did not perceive that my students saw authority as a negative. Some of the students' responses acknowledged my attempts to use my authority in the classroom to incorporate their voices. In so far as they did suggest a more shared authority I assumed that we, the students and I, worked together to begin changing the traditional classroom power structures.

While sharing the authority and power in the classroom is a step toward dialogue, it is not the only step to be taken. Dialogue is inquisitive (Burbules, 1993) and respects the experience of the student (Freire, 1970; Freire & Macedo, 1987; Freire, 1995). Dialogue requires trust and a sense of friendship (Noddings, 2006). By problematizing my language patterns and assumptions, I exposed the cultural patterns which developed them.

### *Students Developing Communicative Competence*

Because I interacted with students in such an open way, I believe that we developed a sense of trust in one another (Noddings, 2006). Students began sharing deeply personal insights and issues with me through journal writing and verbal dialogue. The insights students shared with me reflected a certain level of communicative competence in that they were able to identify sources of joy and pain as well as recognizing that those sources affected them in an emotional and behavioral way. Just as Bowers (1984) contends, some students combined academic language and thinking skills to conceptualize and draw connections between past and present experiences. Some even made predictions about how these instances might affect their future actions. Many of my students started displaying an ability to articulate these connections, so I will share a few typical case studies and examples.

Rayleen was one student who predicted how her current experiences and social relationships might affect her future actions. She is the type of student who participates often in class discussions, works diligently, attempts to help others, and is not afraid to speak her mind. I noticed, however, that near the end of January, 2009, she seemed withdrawn. Rayleen asked fewer questions and participated less in class discussion. I also noticed that she was not attempting to help other students as often as she had earlier in the year. I looked to her dialogue journal for insights.

That day, she wrote a three page entry in her allotted twenty minute journal time. The entry told of some problems that she was experiencing at home. She mentioned that she suspected an adult in her life was “up to his old ways.” She said that this person

would often leave at night, not returning until early the next morning. Rayleen mentioned that she often stayed up worrying and that this person's behavior made her "want to give up." Rayleen noted that his behavior made her feel sick. She noted that she felt "like acting out. So, if I do, then you know why. I'm sorry. I just have to let my feelings out." She closed her entry by stating, "That felt great," which I understood to mean that writing about this problem in her journal made her feel better. I did not notice Rayleen "acting out" in class, but I did respond to her journal entry to let her know that I was listening and sympathetic. I also informed her if she felt the need to talk to a professional therapist to help her deal with these issues, I would help her to see the school counselor. I was touched and surprised by the insight and maturity Rayleen showed in this particular journal entry. Rather than reacting to her stressors by "acting out," Rayleen wrote them in her dialogue journal. In doing so, she felt less stressed about her situation. Rayleen was able to describe her context, name her emotions, and predict the outcomes of these, thereby giving her the authority over the situation. Processing her stressors in such a way may have given her a sense of power. Perhaps Rayleen will continue writing and journaling as a way of coping with her problems. Bowers (1984) notes:

...when the rationalization of behavior and social practice breaks down or leads to unanticipated consequences, the people who have accepted the top-down organization of their experience will be less able to understand the problems associated with the failed system because the rationalizing process has disassociated them from their cultural roots. (p. 17)

Rayleen clearly anticipated the consequences of her social context when she said that the situation makes her want to give up and "act out." Once she predicted these behaviors as



a result of her stressful experiences, she may have even predicted the consequences for “acting out” in school since there is no evidence that she behaved in such a way. Further, Rayleen connected to the roots of her problem, identified, and named them easily.

Another focal student, Anna, showed a high degree of trust and communicative competence. In the following illustration, Anna used academic language and concepts to conceptualize (Bowers, 1989) her feelings and understandings about her experiences. Anna regularly comes to talk with me about stressors in her home life. She also writes about these in her journal. However, she was particularly insightful during an interview which occurred the day after the class had a substitute teacher. The day did not go well for the teacher or the students. The substitute teacher left me a terrible report in which she mentioned Anna’s name several times. In my experience, Anna hardly ever exemplified the behaviors the substitute reported, so I decided to interview her to get her side of the story. I chose to do the interview to give Anna some authorship of the situation.

Rather than reacting to the typical teacher and student roles (Freire, 1970), I wanted to understand the factors that may have lead to Anna’s alleged behaviors. I began the interview in the same way I tried to start all my interviews; I asked if I could ask her some questions that would help me to understand her perspective. By this statement, I tried to open the door to participatory and exploratory dialogue (Burbules, 1993; Freire, 1970; Freire, 1995). I also told her that I would be taking notes to write down our main discussion points. In addition, I said that I would share my notes with her to make sure I understood her intentions. I asked her to be honest with me since this would help me to

understand her better and help me to become a better teacher for her and her classmates. As we progressed through our interview, to which I only had two questions to begin with, I learned several important ideas indicative of dialogue and communicative competence.

First, when students can relate to the teacher, they feel more at ease and more willing to learn from them. This notion resonates with Noddings' (2006) contention that student learning is deeply connected with positive teacher-student relationships. In my opinion, it seems Anna has always showed me respect and behaved well in my class. She told me that this was the first year that she ever turned in a reading log and did her homework everyday. Throughout the course of the interview, Anna explained that she felt comfortable around me and wanted to work for me because I was "like a kid." When I asked her what she meant by that, she cited several examples of when I have been able to relate to or enjoy the same music and when I have joked around with them. Since she argued that I was relatable to the students, I believe that trusting relationships were possible to establish. As Shor (1992) and Ladson-Billings (1994) note, in a trusting student-teacher relationship, the student is more willing to do his or her work and take risks in class that might further promote learning. Anna also noted that she felt safe making mistakes because she thought I would help her rather than judge or condemn her.

Second, and also emerging from my case study with Anna, I noticed the importance of the student's conception of the teacher's power and authority. If the student believes that a teacher knows what she is talking about and doing, he or she is more willing to work. Anna cited examples of substitutes who she did not feel knew how

to teach, so she decided to socialize with her friends rather than work. This resonates with Delpit's (1995) contention that:

Many people of color expect authority to be earned by personal efforts and exhibited by personal characteristics...Some members of the middle-class cultures, by contrast, expect one to achieve authority by the acquisition of an authoritative role. (p. 35)

Anna seemed to expect the substitute teacher to behave in a way in order establish herself as an authority rather than expecting it as a consequence of her position. When I asked her if she only did this with substitute teachers, the following conversation occurred:

Anna: Well, no. When Mr. G first started working here, I knew that he was new. So, I kinda didn't do my work to see what he would do. I tested him to see if he knew what he was doing.

Dorsey: I don't remember you testing me.

A: That's because I knew you were strict and you know what you're talking about.

D: How did you know that?

A: Well, you had my brother in your class and he warned me about you. He told me you were strict and you know your stuff.

D: Were there other teachers you've had that you knew not to test?

A: Yes. In third grade. Mrs. R was mean so I knew not to cross her. But in fourth grade I slacked off a little bit.

D: Why?

A: Because I didn't think the teacher was paying attention to me.

Anna's comments reveal several notions about power to me. Power seems to be interconnected with how she perceives the teacher's authority. If the teacher exhibits a strong sense of authority in her relationships, discipline, and/or subject matter, as in Anna's case, students may pick up on that. Additionally, articulating her thoughts as she did showed Anna trusted me with her thoughts and was beginning to develop a deeper sense of communicative competence. With just a little inquiry she could identify the sources that motivated her actions.

As the students in this study engaged in dialogue and experienced others' attempts at dialogue their own level of communicative competence grew. Repeatedly I found that trust in another person and, to a certain extent, their abilities served as foundations for dialogue with my students. For example, I found that my attempts to make my assumptions clear and problematize my opinions opened the door for students to do the same. Additionally, doing so allowed students to see where and how these opinions developed, illustrating that these were products of my experiences and socialization. Ultimately, I believe that allowing students to see this part of me made me more "human" to them and less "teacher." This idea relates to Freire's (1970) notion of the nature and purpose of dialogue. We began to break down the traditional and constraining roles of teacher and students started to move toward teacher-student and students-teachers relationship. This in turn might promote a deeper level of trust and willingness to engage in dialogue. My willingness and eagerness to learn from (Freire, 1995) and authorize students' perspectives (Cook-Sather, 2002), may have been a model for making it acceptable for students to also learn from, rather than compete with, one another. As Noddings (2006) states:

If we want to encourage critical thinking with respect to socialization, we must periodically return to an examination of everyday behavior – behavior that is not governed by written laws or even explicit rules. Exploration of these behaviors should induce a sense of awe at just how dramatically we are influenced by socialization. (p.101)

This idea also has some interesting implications for studying the nature and impact of competition in the classroom. Might the competition for power and authority between the

teacher and the students also promote competition, rather than collaboration, between the students?

*Independent Use of Academic Language and Co-creating Meaning*

A final theme that I noticed upon reviewing the data was that students began using academic language more regularly and independently to make sense of a text as well as their surroundings. Video recordings of small group book talks served as evidence for the former, while dialogue journals served as evidence for the latter. Although what follows is what was recorded, I found anecdotal evidence of the use of academic language as well. By facilitating experiences which helped to foster the connection between these reading comprehension skills and vocabulary and how they related to relationships and daily life, as suggested by Delpit (1995), the students began using this more sophisticated language to conceptualize their experiences (Bowers, 1984). Additionally, these lessons fostered the development of a common understanding of these academic phrases and ideas (Habermas, 1998) which students could then use to express themselves.

In one diverse group, students used academic language to make sense of a text. This group contained high, medium, and low ability readers. They were racially diverse and had different English language abilities. Two students had been classified as Gifted and Talented (GATE), while two scored basic and below on their district interim Language Arts assessments. As students began to share their completed literature circle tasks, they began to engage in the co-creation of meaning (Burbules, 1993). In other words, they worked together to come to an understanding of the text (Freire & Macedo,

1987). When one student provided his or her insight into the meaning of the text, the other students were able to make connections to his or her experience and communication, fostering a better understanding of the text.

The students often readily related to one another's experiences and opinions while making sense of a difficult text. The following is an example of one such collaboration. Veronica, a second language learner, shared some of the words that she did not understand from the text. Matt, a GATE student, noted that he had trouble with these words as well. Bell, also a GATE student wondered if they should get a dictionary to look up the words, to which Amy responded, "Let's look back in the book to see if we can use [context clues] like Mrs. Dorsey always says." They decided to follow Amy's suggestion. This conversation followed:

B: Okay, what page is that word on? Page 3?

A: I know I looked it up in the dictionary, but I didn't understand it. Oh, it's right there.

*Reads the quote, but not accurately.* So, it sounds like he's reaching into something.

A: Oh, nevermind, it's next to smiled. Like it's a kind of smile, I guess.

M: I think so, I think so.

A: He smiled blevently. [benevolently]

V: *Shows Bianca where it is in the book.*

B: Ohh, you guys might be right.

M: I think it means like proudly, because he's like looking over the audience, hosting like this huge contest.

V: That makes sense.

A: I think that's actually a good answer.

B: I should be writing this down.

While the group may not have arrived at the dictionary definition of 'benevolently,' they came to an understanding of its meaning in the text. Their conversation demonstrated

that they did this by listening to one another, encouraging each other, and visualizing the scene in the book.

Another group showed the use of academic language in yet another way during a “Bloom’s Cubes” book talk discussion. This group consisted of four girls of both diverse ability levels and backgrounds. This video clip showed their completion of a “Bloom’s Cube” activity wherein groups of students had to work together to respond to questions I composed about a selection. Each of the six questions reflected a different level of Bloom’s taxonomy (1956). This group also showed the characteristic willingness to learn from and connect to one another’s ideas that I began to notice emerging in class through my inclusion of dialogic lessons and problematizing assumptions. When simple statements were made, a group member inquired about the meaning or reason behind that statement. For example, in the following dialogue Anna and Michelle helped Heather to clarify her general statements by asking questions:

Heather: I’m going to write about what the problem was and how I would solve it differently.

Anna: What problem?

H: The cat getting ink on its paws and the ink on the invitations...

A: ooh, I know that - why he’s giving out special prizes. Sorry, go ahead.

H: No, its okay, go ahead.

A: Umm, so like, write down the problem.

H: Do I have to write down what that thing says?

Michelle: What’s the problem you guys had?

H: The cat paw prints.

M: The cat’s paws got into the ink and...

Ginny: It walked all over the invitations.

In addition to asking one another questions and trying to connect to each other’s comments, this group also used the academic language “problem” which relates to the conflict in the plot of a story. Throughout the remainder of this group’s discussion, they

clearly used academic language and concepts. The students drew connections to the characters and to one another. Additionally, this group also showed efforts to learn from another's perspective, as Heather seemed to want to learn from Anna's connection above when she wanted Anna to continue even though Anna interrupted her. The possibility of learning from one another is an idea that I continually try to reinforce in the class.

Even if I value students' ability and willingness to learn from one another, trusting relationships need to be established before this can take place. Noddings (2006) maintains, "Encounters are interactions, and the way we treat others has an effect on how they treat us. We learn this not only by direct experience but also as a part of the implicit socialization process" (p.106). This idea leads me to ask what facilitated this group's willingness to learn from one another. Was it that these students already had established a positive relationship or friendship? These students did seem to like one another, but did not necessarily have the same groups of friends. Perhaps their willingness to learn from one another reflected my willingness to learn from them?

While many groups and combinations of students were willing to learn from one another despite their diversity, in some groups this willingness was not displayed. Students in most groups of four or more seemed more willing to learn from the insights of their group members, but in some groups of two or three, some students had a difficult time relating to, trusting, and learning from one another. I wonder if the larger groups provided a greater range of experiences and insights which provided more grounds for trusting and making connections to one another.



Other video recordings of other groups completing a similar task did not show the kind of inquiry in which this group engaged. This leads me to ask the question, what made this group engage in this kind of questioning? Could it be that two of the members of this group were also members of the guided reading group that I met with three days a week? One of the members, Anna was also a focal student for this study. In the guided reading group, I constantly ask students their opinions and understandings about a text as well as asking them to elaborate on their responses. Could frequent exposure to this type of questioning lend itself to an increased ability in those students' ability to question?

While the students regularly used academic language in class conversations and during guided practice, two particular journal entries stood out. These entries were interesting because they were unprompted and applied academic language and concepts independently. In other words, they showed a sense of communicative competence by using academic language and concepts to conceptualize and connect their past, present, and future experiences. Incidentally, they both had to do with the cause and effect concept, but were written about six weeks apart from one another. They did not coincide with the comprehension skills I was teaching those respective weeks.

Elaine composed an action plan for a goal that she had set for herself that week. She expressed how her goal this week would help her with her long term aims of getting into a good college and obtaining a high-paying job. She concluded, "Basically, I think the world is one big Cause and Effect, so we have to try to get a good effect in life!" Here, Elaine made the connection between a Language Arts comprehension skill we discussed and the bigger picture of her life. Whether or not Elaine made this connection

as a result of her own understanding, or my attempts to connect Language Arts skills, such as cause and effect, to more enduring life lessons, I cannot say. It may result from both, since Ana also expressed a cause and effect situation in her journal.

Anna was expressing that she did not feel that she was learning as much or doing as well with her homework the past few months as she had at the beginning of the school year. She was brainstorming reasons for this phenomenon including meeting new people and talking during class lectures and conversations. She stated, "...so when I talk during the time [you] are talking I go home and [realize] I don't know how to do this. Cause and Effect: The cause is I talk. Effect is I don't get the work." Here Anna shows a developed sense of communicative competence in that the language and concept of cause and effect helped her to conceptualize a link between her actions and resulting outcomes. Additionally, the tone of her journal entry seemed to reflect a propensity for connecting this idea to future actions and outcomes. Since I did not prompt Anna to write about this, I assume that her journal entry was the result of true reflection, rather than her telling me what I wanted to hear. I responded by asking her whether or not she wanted me to move her seat so that she could be more focused. She told me that it might help, so I changed her seat that day.

The increased communicative competence I found throughout this study led me to believe that dialogical lessons and interactions may help students to internalize academic language and concepts. As these four examples illustrate, as I developed an open and explicit problematization of my own beliefs and actions, students began to use academic language and concepts to make sense of and express their experiences. While not all

students expressed themselves using academic language independently, others found it useful. One notable caveat of this conclusion is that the use of academic language did not happen automatically for my students. In other words, the ideas and language that students use in class, especially as seen in the examples here, resulted from numerous recurring conversations, lessons, and guided uses of this vocabulary. The use of such sophisticated language patterns and concepts increases a student's level of communicative competence (Bowers, 1987), which may lead to a more level playing field for participating in the "language game."

#### *District Interim Assessments*

The school district uses interim assessments in an attempt to predict CST scores in the spring. While 71% of the students in my classroom scored proficient and above on this Language Arts assessment, only 60% of my Hispanic students scored at these levels. However, three of my four focal students did score in the proficient range. When the data is disaggregated by the standard, 76% of the students that participated in this study and all of my focal students scored in the proficient and above ranges in literary response and analysis. This standard tests a student's ability to analyze and connect to a text.

Because this data reflects a wide range of variables, it is unreasonable to assume that these scores were simply a result of dialogical classroom practices. As Singham (1998) and Rothstein (2004) note, these tests reflect numerous classroom and social factors. Since I cannot compare the students' previous CST scores with their current assessments for this study, it is unfeasible to determine if a participatory classroom worked at all to close the achievement gap, since clearly one still exists. However,

interestingly, students performed particularly well on a section which requires students to make connections to and identify the perspectives of a text, also key components of participatory, dialogical classrooms.

My findings in this study suggest that my way of being and interacting in the classroom had clear impacts on the students' notions of authority, their development of communicative competence, and their conceptualization of life experiences. Changes in my frame of mind and in my teaching came as a result of dialogue with my students and critical self-reflection.

## CHAPTER V

### Implications and Conclusions

In summary, as mentioned in the limitations section of this study, the data presented here are entirely phenomenological. To draw the conclusion that the findings presented here are due solely to dialogic interactions would be misleading. However, the evidence suggests that dialogic lessons and interactions seem to promote communicative competence and facilitate a connection to academic language and concepts. Because, as Freire (1970; 1995) reminds us that dialogue begins with the experiences of those engaged, I can speculate that dialogic lessons and conversations which begin with student experience and opinions might promote deeper connections to the curriculum. Through inquiry, I learned a lot about the lives, experiences, and interests of my students. For example, I discovered how their home experiences might affect their classroom performance. I also learned about their interests and concerns which helped me develop lessons which would promote personal connections to the curriculum. By reflecting on lesson content, checking my own value systems (Brookfield, 1995, Shor, 1992), and asking myself how I might facilitate students' connections to and interest in the curriculum (Dewey, 1938; Ladson-Billings, 1994), I was able to create more dialogical lessons rather than deliver the content via lecture.

#### *Dialogue*

Dialogue promotes communicative competence as indicated by Bowers' (1984) discussion. Successful dialogic encounters require the development of caring, positive relationships wherein authority of statements and perspectives is respected and shared.

(Burbules, 1993; Freire, 1970; Freire, 1995; Noddings 2006). In the matter of pre-existing hierarchical relationships, such as that of the student and teacher, attention must be taken to authorize student perspectives (Cook-Sather, 2002; Freire, 1970; Freire, 1995). In other words, the teacher should be wary of how he or she uses the moves in the language game to legitimize his or her point of view while devaluing students' perspectives (Bowers, 1984).

In this section, I will discuss the theoretical implications found in this study. In the first set of implications I discuss two important aspects of dialogue, communicative competence and authorized student perspectives. Throughout this study, dialogue with my students promoted critical reflection, which led to changing classroom functioning, language codes, and lesson implementation. This resonates with Freire's (1970) notion of praxis: reflection and action. The second set of implications I will discuss is the notion of critical reflection by the teacher. For those who would consider themselves as empowering educators or culturally responsive teachers, it is important that we reflect on how we might reproduce oppressive, hegemonic, cultural practices. Because schools are socializing institutions (Bowers, 1984, Delpit, 1995; Kuykendall, 1991; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Shor, 1992) and teachers are the purveyors of these socialization processes, concepts and vocabularies, critical reflection on the part of the teacher is crucial.

### *Communicative Competence*

While dialogue helps to build relationships, levels of trust need to be established before meaningful dialogue can take place. By problematizing my assumptions and

judgments with my students, I started to become more aware of the culture of power embedded in my language. This resonates with Bowers' (1984) contention that:

...an understanding of how our patterns of thought are acquired will enable the teacher to understand which "moves" in the language game of socialization are likely to bind the student to the world of taken-for-granted belief and which "moves" enable the student to obtain conceptual distance necessary for reflective thought. (p. 50)

While I modeled the more complex "moves" of the language game with my students, I also rendered these moves explicit by sharing the socialization which led me to make my assumptions. The effects of this modeling may have implications for the classroom. First, my students developed an understanding that my opinions resulted from my socialization and experiences. For example, the pyramid illustration above shed light and humor on my socialization and how it affected my personal opinions and inclinations. This, in turn, may have helped students - who are often socialized to see the teacher as an all-knowing authority - to see instead as human. As with Anna's experience with the authoritarian substitute teacher, this socialization may actually serve as a hindrance for learning. Anna stated that she was willing to learn from me because she perceived my expertise in teaching as well as related to my students. My experiences and opinions may be similar or different from my students, but sharing where my perspectives came from helped to establish trust as indicated by Noddings (1984; 2006). Additionally, trusting relationships are critical for dialogue. As Burbules (1993) notes, "...we should consider dialogue as a relation that comprises the parties to it and catches them up in a spirit of interaction that they do not entirely control or direct as individuals" (p.14).

Because the development of communicative competence requires a dialogic relation, it is important to recognize and problematize the language moves and hierarchies involved in these relationships. Learning and understanding how language reflects socialization (Bowers, 1984; Habermas, 1998) is especially important for teachers interested in engaging in dialogue with their students. This is because dialogue requires that individuals maintain the authority of their experiences. But in the hierarchical relationships between students and teachers, teachers can often outmaneuver students in the language game to legitimize their points of view (Bowers, 1984). This means that the teacher must be a learner. (Burbules, 1993; Ellsworth, 1989; Freire, 1970). In other words, the teacher must teach the students to develop their own sense of communicative competence in order to establish and maintain conceptual authority over their experiences and relationships.

Second, as dialogue became a recurring practice in the classroom, my students began to develop high levels of communicative competence, using academic language to conceptualize their experiences. For example, the journals of Elaine and Anna showed that they used academic language to draw connections between their relationships and their past, present, and future actions when they noted the causes and effects. Although Rayleen did not use academic language to conceptualize her problems at home, she was still able to articulate the connections between her stressors, feelings, and anticipated future actions. In this way, Rayleen maintained authority of her emotions and actions. Although she acknowledged her stressors and predicted her behavior, she decided upon a different course of action as evidenced by her choice not to “act out.” As Bowers (1984)



notes, "...language provides a means of mapping experience but is not the same as the experience" (p. 52). Perhaps reflecting in this way helped her to see these connections, enabling her to choose a different course of action. However, since students are just beginning to develop a higher level of communicative competence, I am concerned that without continual exposure to dialogic, participatory lessons, they may fall back to the more institutionalized or socialized modes of communication. Perhaps, if students continue their education in participatory classrooms, they may become more adept at negotiating the institutionalized power structures (Delpit, 1995) and playing the "language game" (Bowers, 1984).

Assessment data do not show a clear indication that dialogic practices work to closing the achievement gap. However, students did particularly well in the literary response and analysis strand of the test. Because this strand requires a high degree of communicative competence, such as recognizing how settings and character traits influence the plot, particularly the problem and its resolution, one could possibly argue that participatory classroom practices might impact a student's ability to analyze, connect to, and interpret texts. Since dialogue promotes communicative competence and "Dialogue is an activity directed toward discovery and new understanding, which stands to improve the knowledge, insight, or sensitivity of its participants" (Burbules, 1993, p. 8), student success in the literary response and analysis strand seems a natural outcome of this type of work.

In summary, dialogue requires caring relationships characterized by inquiry. In the case of the student-teacher relationship, it is the responsibility of the teacher to

examine hegemonic language and forces that might impede dialogue. Teachers are the gate-keepers (Delpit, 1995) in a system that socializes students. By presenting vocabularies that represent certain ideologies (Bowers, 1984), teachers provide the language and codes that reproduce certain cultural customs. Often, students from outside these cultures do not develop the communicative competence necessary for success in that system (Bowers, 1984; Delpit, 1995). Dialogue and problematizing language might be one way to close this gap. However, since dialogue requires relationships free from hegemony, teachers need to problematize their assumptions, language, and roles. Additionally, teachers need to authorize student perspectives (Cook-Sather, 2002) and take them into account when making decisions regarding the presentation of curriculum, implementation of classroom practices, and reaction to student behaviors.

### *Authority and Dialogue*

I found teacher-student dialogue possible when I made the effort to authorize student perspectives. For example, I reminded students that their perspectives and honesty in their journal responses would help me to become a better teacher. When student perspectives were confusing to me, I inquired further to gain a context to understand what students were saying. I regularly thanked them for their perspectives as well as for giving me new insights. These attempts to authorize student perspectives have theoretical and practical implications.

As Cook-Sather (2002) found in her studies regarding authorizing student perspectives, I found opportunities to value and legitimate student perspectives. While some student comments were confusing for me to relate to or hard for me to hear because

it required me to evaluate myself in critical ways, I valued what students said and adjusted my actions and classroom functioning based on this feedback. Evidence of these actions are illustrated by Ginny's and Sally's November journal entries provided in this study. Although, as Cook-Sather (2002) mentions, authorizing student perspectives does not mean acting on all feedback given by students. It does mean, however, that the teacher values the student's opinion and reflects on its meaning, implications, and the social factors which developed those opinions. It also means that the teacher explicitly recognizes the validity of students' opinions, feedback, and judgments as those are created experience and socialization (Freire, 1970; Freire 1995).

Authorizing student perspectives in education also sheds light on the indoctrination processes students experience in schools. As teachers are often conductors in orchestrating the indoctrination of certain values, Freire argues that these teachers often use the banking concept of education.

For the truly humanist educator...the object of action is the reality to be transformed by them together with other people – not other men and women themselves. The oppressors are the ones who act upon the people to indoctrinate them and adjust them to a reality which must remain untouched. (Freire, 1970, p. 94)

To use Freire's language, without dialogue in the classroom, teachers may act in oppressive ways which indoctrinate students to certain realities. This is the dichotomous struggle of the dialogic teacher. On one hand, one might argue that it is the role of the teacher to socialize the students to behave in certain ways to gain success in the society (Delpit, 1995). On the other hand, the dialogic teacher attempts to problematize and re-present this socialization in ways so that students may study and objectify them (Bowers,

1984; Freire, 1970; Shor, 1992). Therefore, through problem-posing and inquiry, teachers may authorize student perspectives and shed light on the socialization of their assumptions regarding an object of study.

This study found that students were much more responsive to problem-posing and inquiry based lessons. In other words, when student perspectives provided a foundation for connecting to and studying a particular concept, student understanding of and involvement in the concept deepened. In the dialogic lessons described in the findings, students were able to use concept vocabulary in concise, meaningful, and independent ways. Additionally, they used these concepts and vocabularies to conceptualize their individual experiences, as in the cases of Anna's and Elaine's cause and effect journal entries. Dialogic lessons aim to authorize student perspectives. As Ladson-Billings (1994) notes, culturally responsive teaching pulls the existing knowledge out of the students to help them make connections between the curriculum and their community, national, and global identities.

Creating inquiry based lessons requires that teachers reflect and think deeply about lesson planning and implementation. In other words, in order to recognize the plurality of student identities and to understand how each might relate to an object of study requires that the teacher reflects on his or her own orientation toward that concept or object. As Steele (cited in Packer and Addison, 1989) notes, critical reflection should aim at identifying hegemonic and reproductive stances held by an author, or in this case, the author of the curriculum, the teacher.

### *Implications of Critical Reflection*

Teachers are often socialized by their teacher preparation institutions to believe, act, and think in hegemonic ways (Bowers, 1984). Brookfield suggests that teachers hunt for assumptions in order to understand how power relationships frame and distort interactions. He also suggests that teachers question these hegemonic assumptions and practices. By authorizing student perspectives throughout this study and reflecting on their feedback, I learned how and why some of my practices might be considered controlling and dominating. For example, seriously considering student feedback when evaluating successful and unsuccessful lessons helped me to determine that culturally responsive, dialogic, participatory lessons, were more meaningful than the lessons delivered by lecture. It could be easy to blame the students for not mastering lesson content by not paying attention to me as I delivered the lesson. In staff room conversations, poor student behavior is not often attributed to unsuccessful teaching, but the deficiencies of the students. However, the dialogic stance requires teachers to inquire into why students displayed certain behaviors. Doing so authorizes their perspectives (Cook-Sather, 2002) and provides critical feedback about underlying classroom practices.

As Steele (cited in Packer and Addison, 1989) suggests, critical reflection requires that teachers study situations from odd angles to understand the circumstances from different points of view. This act may shed light on hegemonic and reproductive practices, attitudes, and assumptions. Gallagher (1992) notes:

In the case of covert, hidden power relations, or relations with hidden meanings, language, the medium of ideology, law, and the organization of institutions, not only mediates force, but hides it and thereby makes it more powerful (p. 267).

Critical reflection brings these hidden power relations to the forefront. In this study, critical reflection helped me to identify the covert power relations and socialization imbedded within my language, teaching practices and assumptions. As in the findings regarding successful versus unsuccessful lessons, I found that I felt the need to assert my teacher authority to control student behavior when expert authority on subject matter was lacking. In other words, I felt that I needed to compensate for my lack of understanding and reflection regarding the curriculum. Therefore to assert the authority that I felt I needed to maintain as a teacher, I focused instead on trying to control student behavior.

Similar reflections helped me to identify patterns in my language patterns. As Habermas (1998) notes, language reflects a set of cultural codes. Furthermore, Freire (1970) notes, “We must realize that their view of the world, manifested variously in their action, reflects their *situation* in the world” (p. 96). As a White, middle-class teacher, many of my schemas reflect those of the dominant culture. But, by hunting assumptions as suggested by Brookfield (1995), and exploring the possible cultural foundations for these assumptions, I began to explicitly qualify these statements citing the factors that I considered as their source. As the study progressed, I learned how to make my assumptions and their foundations more explicit. For example, upon interpreting a student as off-task, I would address this issue by stating the action that I saw, my conclusion, and the reasons I drew this conclusion. This seemed to open the door to more dialogic encounters. “...true dialogue cannot exist unless the dialoguers engage in critical thinking...thinking which perceives reality as a process, as transformation...” (Freire, 1970, p. 92). By exposing reasoning behind my judgments and then asking

students whether or not my assumptions were accurate, we engaged in critical thinking about our behaviors, opinions, and judgments.

While this study provided the opportunity for me to begin engaging in critical reflection, my socialization runs deep. Reflection has helped me to identify patterns in my thinking and actions and to adjust my actions accordingly. However, I continually find myself making the same mistakes and without continual reflection and self-reminders, I find myself faltering and returning to my more ingrained ways of thinking and doing. Therefore, it might be interesting to do a more longitudinal study regarding the long-term effects of critical reflection. Might I transform myself, my thoughts and actions, through on-going critical reflection? What happens when critical-reflection ceases? What happens when dialogue fails to promote critical reflection? As noted in the introduction, might a dialogue coach promote deeper reflection than dialogue with students?

Another topic for future research might relate to the notion of successful versus unsuccessful lessons, and their relationship to power and dialogue, as this distinction arose in the data and could be a fruitful avenue for inquiry. We might explore other strategies and conceptual frameworks which promote dialogic, participatory learning. Which specific strategies are more dialogic in nature? How might problem-based learning, constructivism, dialogue journals, etc. lead to greater dialogue and participation in classrooms? How do these frameworks authorize student perspectives and build communicative competence?

Finally, one might consider what might happen if students had a longer time to break down the traditional teacher-student hegemonic relationships? Can these hegemonic relationships be broken down completely? Should they? How do the current school structures promote these types of relationships? Are there established practices, such as looping, which deepen caring, reciprocal teacher-student relationships?

### *Conclusion*

This study attempts to authorize student perspectives and draw upon students' lives in order to co-create curriculum involved relationship building and dialogue. As Freire (1970) states, liberatory, humanizing education is a continuous process requiring constant cycles of reflection and action, or praxis. While I first set out to work with my students to change the larger, disempowering systemic issues, the praxis cycle led me to checking equity systems and functioning in my own classroom. Through dialogue, and by trusting my students, I reflected upon my beliefs and value systems and how those may be manifested in my classroom.

As dialogue and reflection clarified instances of how I manifested my beliefs in the classroom, I worked with my students to change classroom practices and altered how I approached and conceived of the curriculum. For example, as evidenced by Ginny's November 15<sup>th</sup> journal entry, I tried to change classroom rules, consequences, and lesson delivery style as I gained feedback from my students. In the matter of approaching curriculum, I found that the more prepared I was to teach an object of study, the more dialogic my teaching. This in turn yielded greater participation by and deeper levels of understanding from the students. Additionally, by opening the doors for dialogue in



Anna's case, I gave her the opportunity to have authority in the substitute teacher situation where in the past I might have reacted by trying to reestablish my authority by punishing students for how they behaved toward the substitute. Instead, I gave my students the opportunity to reflect and critique their own behaviors as well as determine an action plan for the next time. Dialogic relations with my students also served to de-objectify our teacher and student roles; in contrast to these limiting roles, we became people with multiple perspectives and experiences working together to explore issues and solve problems (Burbules, 1993; Noddings, 2006). As Burbules (1993) notes dialogue is:

...a kind of *social relation* that engages its participants. A successful dialogue involves a willing partnership and cooperation in the face of likely disagreements, confusions, failures and misunderstandings. Persisting in this process requires a relation of mutual respect, trust, and concern.... (p.19)

As with the context clues group, students were open to working with one another to co-create the meaning of a text. By sharing experiences, insights, and learning with one another, this group solved the problem of understanding a difficult text.

Dialogue that begins with the students' experiences empowers them to conceptualize these experiences. The teacher, in turn, can frame the curriculum within these experiences and resulting language. Doing so fostered deeper student connections to the concepts and content. Recalling the banking vs. mining examples in the findings section above, dialogue engages students to create their own meaning. When students are engaged in creating connections to and meaning from lessons, they also internalize vocabulary for conceptualizing their ideas. To start this process, Ladson-Billings (1994) cites examples where teachers draw knowledge out of their students to facilitate these discussions. "Rather than treating them as if they do not know anything, their only

purpose being to come to school and learn what she wants to teach, she understands teaching as a reciprocal process” (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 53).

As Freire (1992) reminds, “The ‘universal minimal vocabulary,’ of course, emerges from an investigation that has to be conducted, and it is on the basis of this vocabulary that we set up our literacy programs” (p. 86). The investigation that Freire mentions comes through dialogue with students. With inquiry, students gained interest in the subject and authorship of making meaning. Furthermore, students’ communicative competence in conceptualizing these experiences and connections became more developed, as was the case with Anna and Elaine’s journal entries which used academic language to conceptualize internal conflicts, relationships, and behaviors. As Bowers (1984) suggests, these students internalized a method of thinking about “social life in terms of relationships, continuities, disjunctions and trade-offs” (p.2). Students began to independently use academic language and concepts to make sense of texts and experiences. These increasing competencies fostered their negotiation of new meanings and more sophisticated expression.

Trust and openness to critical reflection are vital to an educator’s role in participatory education. Dialogue requires a shift in the traditional teacher-student authority patterns. Willingness to change one’s practices and critically reflect on one’s long held taken-for-granted beliefs is vital to shifting authority and power in the classroom. However, my experience in this study demonstrates that doing so can open many more doors and expose a great diversity of perspectives. When I was able to recognize this continuous process toward *becoming* more human, I felt suddenly freed

from feeling worried and guilty about making mistakes. Making mistakes and being challenged by other's perspectives now feels inviting since it gives me the opportunity to *become*, to grow.

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## Appendix A –Interview Questions

1. What is your typical schedule when you get home from school?
2. What are some of your responsibilities outside of school?
3. What are some things you do for fun outside of school?
4. If you had to go to school only three days a week what are some things you'd like to do with the extra time? (Ellis, 2007, p.16)
5. Who is someone in your life that you admire? What makes them admirable?
6. Who are some people that you would trust in a scary situation?
7. Are there any adults at school you trust? Who are they?
8. What makes these people trustworthy?
9. Who are some people in your life that you respect? What makes them worthy of your respect?
10. What do you want to do, be, or have by the time you're 25? (Kuykendall, 1991)
11. What steps do you think you'll have to take to accomplish these goals?
12. What attitudes and skills do you possess might help you to reach these goals?
13. What attitudes might hinder you from reaching these goals? What skills might you have to learn?
14. From your perspective, what happened in class yesterday?
15. Why do you think \_\_\_\_\_ bothered or annoyed you so much?
16. What are your opinions and thoughts about \_\_\_\_\_? How do you know this? What are some reasons for these opinions, why do you feel/think this way?  
Can you give me an example?

17. Who's in charge in the classroom? Why do you think so?
18. What does it mean to be "in-charge?"
19. Is there anything that you're in charge of in this class? What are you in charge of?
20. What are some things that you are in charge of at home?