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# Navigating the journey to culturally responsive teaching: Lessons from the success and struggles of one first-year, Black female teacher of Black students in an urban school

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## HIGHLIGHTS

- We explore how one first year teacher navigates culturally responsive teaching.
- Findings indicate that Black teacher of Black students must evaluate perspectives of culturally responsive teaching.
- Novice teachers must learn to bridge the gap between theory and practice.
- Teachers from rural/suburban backgrounds might explore the lived experiences of urban students to be more effective.

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## ABSTRACT

This exploratory case study examines the experiences of one first-year, Black female English language arts teacher and her Advanced Placement Language and Composition students. Through an exploration of her relationship with her Black students, the data reveal how she faced challenges when finding balance in her classroom management style, encountered cultural dissonance, developed teacher-student relationships, and struggled with how White, middle-class values may have shaped her classroom interactions with her students. The results of this study inform the field of teacher education and have potential implications for pre-service and inservice teachers worldwide working with students from diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds.

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## 1. Introduction

Every year, teacher preparation programs send candidates into the field to become teachers. After years of readings, discussions, observations, and even student teaching, novice teachers begin their first days in the classroom with stars in their eyes, digital portfolios of lesson plans, and just the “right” outfit for that first day of school. However, when the time comes to actually meet that first group of students, many novice educators are seldom prepared to simultaneously make impactful connections with students and families, while developing a classroom environment of high expectations and incorporation of students’ diverse cultural backgrounds into pedagogical practices (Clark, 2012).

As Ingersoll (2012) suggests, teacher preparation is seldom

comprehensive enough to provide “all the knowledge and skill necessary to successful teaching” (p. 47) and that on-the-job-training is really the only sufficient way to learn the significant amount of knowledge and skills required by the profession. Furthermore all teachers, regardless of racial and ethnic identification, face challenges when navigating the complex terrain of the classroom. In this paper, we discuss the experiences of one first-year, Black female teacher who struggled to implement culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2002) strategies learned during her teacher education program with predominantly African American/Black students enrolled in her Advanced Placement (AP)<sup>1</sup> English language arts course.

Considering the deplorable experiences of many Black students

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in today's American education system (Kozol, 2012), what are the effective pedagogical practices behaviors of teachers who engender social and academic achievement among their Black students? How can we learn from these teachers and their struggles? While educational researchers and sociologists have sought to better understand the pedagogical and curricular decision-making skills of successful Black teachers of Black students (Delpit, 2006; Foster, 1994, 1998; hooks, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Lynn, 2006; Milner, 2006), this line of inquiry remains pertinent in today's educational terrain. This current study contributes to the existing body of research on effective Black teachers of Black students, as well as expounds on the ways in which teacher educators might improve the practices of all pre-and in-service teachers of students from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds.

Although research suggests that Black students who are taught by Black teachers (Bone & Slate, 2011; Easton-Brooks, 2014; Haycock, 2001) are often more successful than their counterparts who are taught by teachers from different ethnic<sup>2</sup> backgrounds, Gay (2000) cautions against presuming that “membership in a [racial] group is necessary or sufficient to enable teachers to do culturally competent pedagogy. This assumption is as ludicrous as assuming that one automatically knows how to teach English to others simply because one is a native speaker ...” (p. 205). Similarly, Milner (2006) suggests it is dangerous to expect Black teachers to “carry all the knowledge, skills, and commitments necessary to successfully teach African American students” (p. 90). We assert that it is important to learn how both the achievements and challenges experienced by Black teachers of Black students might have implications for the social and academic advancement of *all* students, as well as the improvement of teacher education programs preparing educators to work with students from a variety of backgrounds.

Taking up the charge to explore what we know about successful Black teachers of Black students (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Dixon, 2003; Foster, 1994; Howard, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1990; Lynn, 2006; Milner, 2006), one researcher, a self-identified White, former middle and secondary English language arts teacher, observed Tracie, a self-identified Black female teacher from a rural background, as she navigated her first-year teaching in an urban high school setting. This project commenced in order to develop a clearer understanding of the ways in which novice teachers might bridge the gap between theory learned in teacher education programs and the practice of a first teaching experience.

### 1.1. Research questions

Originally developed as a dissertation study, the purpose of this qualitative project was to explore the ways in which membership in a racial and ethnic group similar to that of one's students may influence one first-year teacher's experience with those students. The guiding research questions included:

1. How does one Black female teacher navigate the development of culturally responsive teaching practices in her first year of teaching?
2. How might membership in a racial and ethnic group influence the ways in which a teacher interacts with and develops culturally responsive expectations for students?

3. In what ways might novice teachers receive better support in their first years of teaching while implementing researched best practices for teaching?

In both the United States and internationally, this work has implications for teachers who will work with the hundreds of thousands of refugee children who experience displacement from their home countries because of civil war, famine, and economic instability. Undoubtedly, teachers working with students with backgrounds dissimilar to their own will face challenges and will negotiate the cultural and experiential dissonance of immigrant children in their classes. We suggest that by using the tenets of culturally responsive teaching, educators around the world might develop classroom communities in which diverse student populations will feel welcomed and appreciated in ways that support their social and academic progress.

### 1.2. Navigating race, culture, and class in the first year

#### 1.2.1. First-year teacher

First-year teachers face numerous challenges, from navigating a new school environment to organizing their classroom and subsequently impacting student achievement (Clark, 2012; Friedman, 1996; Gavish & Friedman, 2010; Lortie, 1975). These teachers are thrust into a “sink or swim” scenario in which school bureaucracy, classroom management, student discipline, curriculum and instruction, and numerous other skills must be mastered expediently. Within this stressful and often challenging climate, novice teachers quickly “burnout,” (Haberman, 2005) leaving the classroom within the first five years, or sooner (Brill & McCartney, 2008; Donaldson, 2012; Ingersoll, 2002). With little professional support in a traditionally autonomous profession, many first-year teachers realize that they will experience successes and failures in isolation (Gavish & Friedman, 2010). Moving beyond the collaborative confines of teacher education programs, the solitary nature of teaching becomes increasingly apparent.

#### 1.2.2. The dilemma of teacher education

Most teacher education programs do not thoroughly address the obstacles beginning teachers encounter their first year, such as how to navigate school politics, the hidden curriculum, effective methods for co-teaching in an inclusive classroom, and teaching a class of students with completely different backgrounds than the teacher. Although many traditional and alternative teacher education programs attempt to prepare highly-qualified teachers, equipping them with the requisite skills and competencies to enhance students' learning and achievement, research (Cochran-Smith, 2004; Darling-Hammond, 2000, 2013; Oakes, Lipton, Anderson, & Stillman, 2012) suggests lack of time and in-depth coursework often exacerbates the adequate preparation of future teachers.

While certain skills are best learned during on-the-job-training (Feiman-Nemser, 2001), teacher education programs must address the needs of diverse student populations (Anderson & Stillman, 2010; Cochran-Smith, 1995; Landsman & Lewis, 2011; Siwatu & Starker, 2014). The literature is rife with discussions of the importance of White teachers examining their own privilege (Delpit, 1988; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Landsman & Lewis, 2011; Sleeter, 2001), non-White teachers from middle-class backgrounds, as well as those who speak English as their first language and those who have never endured a learning or physical disability must also critically examine the role of their own privilege based on skin color, socio-economic status, language proficiency, and able-mindedness/body (Case & Hemmings, 2005; Ferguson, 2003; Grant & Sleeter, 1993; Jenks, Lee, & Kanpol, 2001; Klug, Luckey, Wilkins, & Whitfield, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> Ethnicity is defined as the real or imagined features of group membership, typically in terms of one or other combination of language, collective memory, culture, ritual, dress and religion, amongst other features (Meer, 2014).

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