

Talking Respect: Classroom Discourse Analysis of One White First-Year Teacher's Developing Cultural and Communication Competence

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Abstract

To teach today's increasingly racially, linguistically, and culturally diverse students successfully, new teachers, the majority of whom are still White and monolingual (Sleeter, 2008; Villegas & Lucas, 2002b), must develop communication (Cazden, 2001) and cultural (Ladson-Billings, 2001, 2009, 2017) competence. Teachers' language use in the classroom is of paramount importance in this process. In this study, class discussions about respect were a prime opportunity for the author, in her dual role as researcher and supervisor, to assess a White first-year teacher's progress toward communication and cultural competence. Findings derived through classroom discourse analysis of the teacher's language use in these discussions suggest culturally responsive intentions to prioritize student voices undermined by struggles in facilitating discussion and failure to acknowledge the influence of culture on views of respect. Implications and responsibilities for culturally responsive instructional supervisors, teacher educators, and classroom teachers are discussed.

Keywords

culturally responsive instructional supervision; classroom discourse; teacher talk; white teachers; cultural competence; communication competence; instructional supervision; supervision

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Introduction

When I reluctantly left the classroom after almost a decade, I intended to provide the kind of support I had not received as a White novice teacher who jumped into a diverse urban classroom with the hope that my best intentions and bachelor's degree would be sufficient to bridge the sociocultural gap (Gay, 1993) between my students and me. However, as a new supervisor of curriculum and instruction, I found myself again left to figure things out on my own. As is common in the field, my supervision graduate courses had focused on curriculum development, assessment, and teacher evaluation, providing little information about culturally responsive teaching, let alone culturally responsive instructional leadership (Cotman et al., 2023; Guerra et al., 2022).

As in my first years in the classroom, I followed my instincts, particularly in coaching teachers new to the school, by drawing on my experience of learning the hard way what makes a successful teacher: the willingness to listen to and learn from our students. I often shared two incidents that exemplify such growing pains: one in which a student in my English class asked why I couldn't "use words that we know," and the other in which I backed off from what I thought would be a rewarding dialogue about Chris Rock's documentary *Good Hair* (Stilson, 2009). My initial response in the first anecdote was that it was my job to teach students words they don't know, but I soon came to realize that if I didn't meet them where they were, they weren't likely to learn much with me. In the second incident, I learned not to initiate discussions I was not prepared for. As wearing their hair "natural" had become a contentious trend among my Black students, I thought Rock's documentary would provide the basis for a mutually instructive conversation. However, my students' silence conveyed that they weren't ready to have such a discussion with each other, let alone me: a White teacher who clearly didn't know much about the subject.

Leaning on my instincts only got me so far. Recognizing that I had a lot to learn, I began my doctoral studies, building upon my fledgling instincts with the indispensable scholarship of Ladson-Billings (1994, 2009) and others (Alim & Paris, 2017; Gay 2018, 2023; Villegas & Lucas, 2002a) on the characteristics of successful teachers of Students of Color. I learned that meeting students where they are and finding a common language were features of "communication competence" (Cazden, 2001, p. 3), and that my students had known I lacked the "cultural competence" (Ladson-Billings, 2009, 2017) to guide a constructive conversation through the cultural politics of "good hair" in the Black community. Moving forward, I learned about not only culturally responsive teaching but also culturally responsive school leadership. Taking up the call of Khalifa et al. (2016) for culturally responsive school leaders to engage in critical self-reflection, I endeavored to put what I had learned into practice by examining cultural and communication competence in my school, starting in the classroom of a new White teacher I hoped I was supporting in becoming a successful art teacher for our students.

Informally observing class presentations in which the majority Black and Latine students shared personal details, I was pleased by what seemed to be a new teacher "get[ing] it right" (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. vii), i.e., embracing students' background knowledge as a valuable resource for learning. I decided to formally examine this teacher's practice, seeking to produce research-driven guidance for not only this novice teacher but our whole faculty. To that end, I designed a

small-scale study—taking ethical considerations related to my position as the teacher’s supervisor into account—asking: In what ways does a White, first-year teacher’s language use in a culturally, racially, and linguistically diverse secondary classroom reflect her developing cultural and communication competence?

Theoretical Framework

This study is framed by the principles of culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2018; Villegas & Lucas, 2002a) and analytical concepts of sociolinguistics (Gee, 2015). The goal of sociolinguistic analysis is to surface and scrutinize the underlying economies of power and authority that shape language use to promote more “ethical human discourse” (Gee, 2015, p. 7). In a classroom, ethical discourse promotes equitable learning experiences for all students. The principles of culturally responsive teaching and related theories—i.e., culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1994, 2009) and sustaining (Alim & Paris, 2017) pedagogies—outline the actions, skills, knowledge, and dispositions exhibited by successful teachers of culturally, racially, and linguistically diverse students. These principles provide underutilized lenses for examining classroom discourse. While a great deal of research, practitioner literature (e.g., Emdin, 2016; Muhammad, 2020, 2023) and policy debate (e.g., Griffith, 2024; Mezzacappa, 2024) have focused on the curricular aspects of culturally responsive teaching, little attention has been paid to whether teacher talk in the classroom—a central means through which teaching and learning happen—is culturally responsive (Thomas, 2013). This study addresses this omission by connecting the principles of culturally responsive teaching with the analytical concepts of sociolinguistics to examine how a first-year teacher’s language use reflects her developing communication and cultural competence.

The Language of Culturally Responsive Teaching

Culturally responsive teaching calls upon educators to foreground the diverse backgrounds students bring into the classroom. Though the term “culturally responsive teaching” will be used in this study, it is intended to invoke the overlapping sets of principles (Aronson & Laughter, 2016; Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011; Chenelle, 2024) promoted by culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1994, 2009) and sustaining (Alim & Paris, 2017) pedagogies as well. The principles most relevant to this study are those stipulating that students’ knowledge derived from their families, communities, and personal experiences should be recognized as valuable resources for learning (Banks, 1993; Yosso, 2005). Teachers enact these principles when they draw upon their cultural competence², i.e., knowledge of students’ intersecting identities (Alim & Paris, 2017), in making curricular decisions (Gay, 2023), designing lesson activities (Muhammad, 2020, 2023), and cultivating interactions with and between students (Hammond, 2014). Culturally responsive teaching also focuses on how teachers enact their sociocultural identities (Douglas & Nganga, 2017; Sleeter, 2001, 2008) through their expectations of and dispositions toward (Gay, 1993, 2018; Villegas & Lucas, 2002b) their students.

² Though Ladson-Billings (2009, 2017) uses the term “cultural competence” to refer to knowledge students should acquire about their own cultures in school, here it is used to refer to teachers’ knowledge of their students’ cultures (c.f., Milner, 2010).

Much research and practitioner literature over the last 30 years has outlined strategies for culturally responsive teaching. However, looking back on this work, Ladson-Billings (2021) observed that culturally responsive professional development is often superficial and not well-grounded in theory, falling short in shifting teachers' social biases and assumptions (Carter Andrews et al., 2021). Ladson-Billings (2021) further argued that even teacher educators inconsistently demonstrate culturally responsive competencies, leaving novice teachers ill-equipped to enact them. However, Gay (2018) argued that teachers should not be held solely responsible for culturally responsive teaching, calling upon school leaders to cultivate culturally responsive schools. Building upon the work of culturally responsive leadership scholars (e.g., Khalifa et al., 2016), Cormier et al. (2024) outline the tasks incumbent upon culturally responsive instructional supervisors. This study brings these principles together to examine one teacher's language use as a valuable focal point for assessing and developing culturally responsive teaching.

The Sociolinguistics of Culturally Responsive Teacher Talk

The success of any utterance in a classroom depends on not just whether the statement is factual or relevant but also on the discourses invoked by the utterance itself, the classroom setting in which it occurred, and the participants involved. Such discourses include both of what Gee (2015) called big "D" and little "d" discourses, i.e., the larger racial, sociocultural, institutional, and historical expectations or Discourses that teachers and students bring into the classroom, as well as the interpersonal discourses that shape how an utterance lands.

Communication competence (Cazden, 2001) is the measure of how a teacher uses big "D" and little "d" discourses to maximize learning for all students. As such, a teacher's communication competence, especially in a socioculturally diverse classroom, is inherently intertwined with her cultural competence. She must know who her students are as individuals as well as learners to communicate with them effectively. This means using language to get to know her students and in ways they can relate to and understand. Schools are often the first large institution where children from diverse families and neighborhoods come together expecting to perform "individually and publicly" (Cazden, 2001, p. 2) and language is the medium through which they learn to do so. Language is also a primary way teachers establish their competence in the classroom (Bieler, 2018; Rymes, 2016), often the first place a White, monolingual teacher must use language competently in a diverse setting (Sleeter, 2008).

Little "d" Discourses: Dialogic v. Monologic Discourse Practices

Communication competence includes not only how a teacher's language use reflects their cultural competence, but also how they use language in instruction. The expectations of culturally responsive teaching imply that teachers should avoid what Freire (1970) described as the banking model of teaching, instead using dialogic, rather than monologic, teaching practices and discourses (Aukerman et al., 2017; Boyd & Markarian, 2015). Aukerman et al. (2017) stipulate that dialogic discourse practices involve "opportunities to struggle with another's discourse" and "treat meaning as emergent and multiple rather than predetermined and singular" (p. 4). Conversely, monologic pedagogy does not encourage the voicing of students' different views and tends to privilege the view of the teacher (Aukerman et al., 2017). As such, I examine

teacher talk to surface patterns in teacher monologic and dialogic discourse practices that seem to reflect disposition toward student ideas.

Big “D” Discourses: Languages of Curriculum, Control, and Identity

This study also examined how the teacher used three functions of language derived from classroom discourse analysis literature. These three functions—the languages of curriculum, control, and identity (Cazden, 2001)—encompass three Discourses of authority that teachers must learn to draw upon in their classroom. The language of curriculum includes how the teacher structures class discussion (Cazden, 2001; Michaels, 1981), incorporates knowledge from different sources, and makes learning relevant to students’ lives (Dewey, 1939). The language of control articulates rules, asserts teacher authority, or attempts to establish more equitable norms (Cazden, 2001). Finally, the language of identity expresses the “speaker’s identity and attitudes” (Cazden, 2001, p. 3). This expressive function is evident when a teacher shares aspects of her identity or elicits and/or conveys her disposition toward that of her students based on her own cultural background and experience. This study examines how a new teacher seems to use these three Discourses of authority through dialogic and monologic discourse practices, and what those patterns suggest about her cultural and communication competence.

Table 1 presents a heuristic of how the concepts described above—Discourses of Curriculum, Language, and Control, culturally responsive teaching, cultural competence, communication competence, and dialogic and monologic discourse practices—were used to analyze the participant’s teacher talk. Rather than contrasting culturally responsive teaching with non-examples or examples of “un-responsive” teaching, I invoke Gramsci’s (1975) concept of “cultural hegemony” to emphasize that pedagogy is never neutral and always operates within a power relationship. This distinction is important given the tendency for White individuals to view culture as something other people have (Sleeter, 2008), elevating their own perspective as objectively correct, rather than part of the normalizing Discourse of Whiteness that pervades schooling in the U.S. (Cormier et al., 2024; Jay, 2003).

Table 1. Theoretical Framework Matrix

Discourses	Cultural Competence		Communication Competence	
	<i>Culturally Responsive</i>	<i>Culturally Hegemonic</i>	<i>Dialogic Teacher Talk</i>	<i>Monologic Teacher Talk</i>
<i>Language of Curriculum</i>	Draws upon and values students' diverse cultural, racial, and linguistic backgrounds and communities	Prioritizes knowledge that exemplifies a White Eurocentric, patriarchal, heterocentric, individualistic worldview	Co-constructs curriculum through dialogue and feedback between teacher, students, and diverse outside resources	Transmits a prescribed, predetermined set of knowledge to students
<i>Language of Control</i>	Ensures that diverse voices are equitably included; encourages social/communal learning	Enforces White Eurocentric, patriarchal, heterocentric norms in terms of student behavior, individual achievement, and teacher authority	Facilitates learning by preserving equitable speaking rights; invites student ideas through open-ended questions; encourages students to wrestle with others' ideas	Limits student responses to display of expected knowledge subject to teacher evaluation; teacher controls speaking rights
<i>Language of Identity</i>	Knowledge of/respect for students' diverse, intersecting, evolving identities (inclusive of culture, race, ethnicity, language, gender, sexual orientation, economic class, etc.)	Prioritizes White Eurocentric, patriarchal, heterocentric norms regarding culture, race, ethnicity, language, gender, sexual orientation, economic class, etc.	Invites students to connect academic learning with their diverse, intersecting, evolving identities; teacher may share aspects of their identity as one of the diverse voices included in discussions	Invites only expressions of identity that coincide with prescribed curriculum and/or reinforce a White Eurocentric, patriarchal, heterocentric, individualistic worldview

Literature Review

Classroom discourse analysis has been used extensively to examine how teacher language use shapes student learning, particularly in second-language and elementary education (see Cullen, 1998, 2002; Hicks, 1995; O'Connor & Michaels, 2007, etc.). Though much of this research highlights how White teachers' linguistic expectations shape their discourse in relation to culturally and linguistically diverse students, very little has explicitly connected discourse analysis to culturally responsive teaching (Aziz, 2024). This section reviews sociolinguistics research on teacher talk and classroom discourse studies that examine how teacher discourse practices illustrate communication and cultural competence.

Traditional Teacher Talk vs. Academically Productive Teacher Talk Moves

A key component of the language of curriculum, teacher talk constructs or forecloses student learning opportunities (O'Connor & Michaels, 2007; Rymes, 2016). As many researchers have observed, instruction is commonly marked by a monologic structure: teacher Initiation, student Response, and teacher Evaluation (Hicks, 1995; O'Connor & Michaels, 2007). This structure has been criticized for limiting student opportunities to co-construct knowledge by validating only those responses predetermined as valuable by the teacher.

Examining the types of questions teachers ask, Cullen (1998) identified referential questions, those which the teacher does not already have an answer to, as particularly "communicative" in a second-language classroom (p. 181). Rather than asking students to state an expected answer, referential questions—ranging from "what did you do over the weekend?" to "what do you think this artist was trying to convey in this painting?"—require students to articulate a complete thought in their own words. Other discourse studies have focused on teachers' responses to students. For example, in "revoicing" (O'Connor & Michaels, 1993, 2007), a teacher repeats or rephrases part of a student's statement and offers the next turn of talk to a student to agree or disagree with or clarify the teacher's rephrasing. Such feedback is supportive of student learning, when teachers ask follow-up questions to negotiate meaning with students (Cullen, 2002). As Michaels (1981) and others (e.g., Cummins, 2000; Heath, 1982; Sleeter, 2008, etc.) found, sociocultural mismatches between a teacher's desired discursive practices and those a student brings to the classroom can result in teacher feedback that inhibits the child's discourse, limiting their learning opportunities.

Aukerman et al. (2017) illustrate the differential influence of two teachers' questions and feedback on student discourse opportunities. While one teacher used "convergent questions" (p. 13) to check student understanding and limit student responses to a display of requested information, the other asked open-ended "authentic questions" (p. 18), prompting students to explain their interpretations of a story and wrestle with those of their peers. Indeed, Thompson et al. (2016) argued that high levels of academic rigor are not possible in classrooms where teachers are not responsive to and do not build upon student ideas.

While such dialogic instructional practices articulate the language of curriculum, they also reflect the "language of control" (Cazden, 2001, p. 3). Wallace et al. (2014) found that autonomy-supportive teachers' classroom management discursive practices were "less about maintaining

control of students and more about establishing, preserving, and protecting student opportunities to learn content” (p. 39) and equitable distribution of speaking rights (Shepherd, 2014).

Culturally Responsive Classroom Discourse Analysis

While sociolinguists have described the influence of teacher feedback on student learning across sociocultural differences, some classroom discourse researchers have specifically examined the discourse practices of White teachers in relation to their culturally, racially, and linguistically diverse students more broadly. Thomas (2013) examined an experienced White, monolingual English teacher’s struggles to align herself in solidarity with her Students of Color in discussions of racially sensitive topics. Conversely, Godley and Loretto (2013) found that a White English teacher used dialogic practices to support her Black students in constructing counter-narratives about race, language, and identity, establish discussion norms that ensured everyone would be heard, and position herself as a learner of African American Vernacular English. Holmes (2023) described how a White teacher’s discourse practices validated the knowledge, ideas, and vocabulary of her English Language Learners.

While the above studies largely focused on White teachers’ use of the languages of curriculum and control in interactions with Students of Color, Schieble et al. (2015) used classroom discourse analysis to examine teacher identity. Using video to analyze her classroom discourse, a teacher candidate observed that her language use often did not reflect her desired teacher identities of facilitator of learning and advocate for her majority African American and Latine students. Though the participant critically analyzed how she positioned students and vice versa during classroom interactions, she framed her decision-making as negotiation among competing professional and institutional constraints, giving minimal consideration to how her personal identity (i.e., race, culture, language, gender, etc.) may have influenced her discourse.

Ladson-Billings (1994, 2009) and others (e.g., Emdin, 2021; Jones-Walker, 2015) have demonstrated the importance of teachers’ personal identities and how teachers express them in diverse classrooms. However, aside from the studies mentioned above, research on teacher identity in the classroom, tends to rely on self-reflections (e.g., Gomez et al., 2007; Ticknor, 2014), interviews, and/or classroom observations (Jones-Walker, 2015), rather than classroom discourse analysis. While providing valuable insight, self-reflections and interviews are mediated by the teacher’s interpretation and memory (Schieble, 2015), while observations inherently consider the entire classroom dynamic, obscuring the influence of teacher discourse.

Language is the central mechanism through which a teacher navigates the social languages in any classroom (Gee, 2015; Rymes, 2016), and the ways in which she does so are especially consequential for student learning across cultural, racial, and linguistic differences. However, little research has examined teachers’ language use in the classroom through the lens of culturally responsive teaching (Thomas, 2013). Bringing the concepts of sociolinguistics and culturally responsive teaching together, as depicted in Table 1, this study contributes to the literature by examining how a novice teacher’s discourse practices reflect her developing cultural and communication competence.

Methods

In this study, I examined a first-year teacher's spoken language in relation to the principles of culturally responsive teaching. In doing so, I identified patterns in her use of the languages of curriculum, control, and identity through monologic and dialogic discourse practices.

Data comprised transcripts of two digital audio recordings the teacher made during two class sessions. Questions developed from classroom discourse research (Cazden, 2001; Rymes, 2016) were applied to transcript excerpts to examine how teacher talk reflected the languages of curriculum, control, and identity. To highlight the novice teacher's language use, the teacher's speech was the sole focus, rather than complete teacher-student interactions. A member-checking interview followed initial data collection and analysis.

Context

This first-year teacher's classes took place in a small charter high school in a mid-sized city in the mid-Atlantic United States. Data were collected in October of the teacher's first year as an art teacher at the school, when classroom routines, or "shared history" (Hicks, 1995, p. 52), had only begun to emerge.

The teacher recorded her classes during a week-long, state-mandated focus on respect. As a result, the definition of respect was the focus of the recorded lessons, rather than concepts or skills related to art. The teacher chose to record these classes as they involved more discussion than a typical class during which students would have been working on art projects. Though teachers were required to focus on respect in their lessons, they were provided little guidance on how to do so. The two class sessions examined represent the initiation and conclusion of this teacher's approach to this mandate.

At the time of data collection, the student body consisted of 435 students in grades 9–12, of whom 58% identified as Black, 30% as Hispanic, 8% as Asian, and 3% as White; 76% qualified for free and reduced lunch status. The teacher's classes were similarly diverse.

Participant

The participant in this study—Raquel Burgos (a pseudonym)—was a White, monolingual woman in her mid-twenties in her first year of teaching art. I invited Burgos to participate in the study based on my informal observation of her positive rapport with her students. After Burgos accepted my invitation, I arranged for her to be evaluated by other administrators, instead of me, during the school year in which the study was conducted to mitigate any sense of coercion.³

Data Collection

Data collected consisted of audio recordings of two different lessons with two different classes. The first recording featured a discussion about the meaning of respect. The second recording

³ Concerns about the power dynamic involved in the supervisory relationship were also addressed by the data collection methods.

centered upon a referential question (Cullen, 1998): “What respectful thing do you plan to do this weekend?” Burgos recorded her classes using her cellphone without me present. This approach was taken to: 1) minimize researcher intrusiveness (Aukerman et al., 2017); 2) shift the “locus of control” (Herr & Anderson, 2005, p. 2) from researcher to participant, in keeping with the aims of action research (i.e., giving the teacher the option to choose which classes to record and to discard a recording); 3) avoid confusion about whether my presence in the room was evaluative. I transcribed the recordings in their entirety, including all audible speech by the teacher and students (see Appendix A for transcription procedures). The speech of each individual was transcribed as faithfully as possible (cf., advice in Rymes, 2016), though only the teacher’s discursive practices were examined.

Data Analysis

Teacher talk moves were the unit of analysis examined in terms of several analytical questions (see Table 2) constructed to study teacher discourse in relation to the languages of curriculum, control, and identity. Questions related to the language of curriculum highlighted how monologic or dialogic teacher talk moves positioned student knowledge, while language of control questions analyzed directives and invitations to contribute to discussion, and language of identity questions examined instances in which the teacher shared personal experiences and views or seemed to express her disposition toward students’ identities.

Table 2. *Analytical Questions*

Language of Curriculum	Language of Control	Language of Identity
In what ways do the teacher’s discourse practices frame ideas about respect?	In what ways do the teacher’s discourse practices establish and enforce discussion norms?	In what ways do the teacher’s discourse practices articulate her identity?
In what ways do the teacher’s discourse practices seem to value student knowledge or ideas?	In what ways do the teacher’s discourse practices articulate school rules and curricular mandates?	In what ways do the teacher’s discourse practices articulate her disposition toward her students’ identities?

While the languages of curriculum, control, and identity, as big “D” Discourses, served as a priori analytical categories, the patterns in little “d” discourse practices described below emerged through application of each of the analytical questions in inductive line-by-line analysis (Gee, 2015; Rymes, 2016). The analytical questions guided several readings of the transcripts in which discursive objects highlighted by the questions, often consisting of multiple utterances (Adger & Wright, 2015), were identified and later grouped into emergent patterns (Ingram & Elliott, 2020).

Findings

Three patterns emerged during transcript analysis: shared curriculum/expertise, teacher-moderated discussion, and reconceptualization of respect. Together, these patterns describe one White novice teacher's developing cultural and communication competence. The shared curriculum/expertise pattern demonstrated Burgos' efforts to co-construct the curriculum in the recorded lessons by eliciting her students' ideas, asking "what does respect mean to you?", rather than presenting outside authorities on the subject. However, the teacher-moderated discussion pattern illustrates her limited success in doing so, as she repeatedly positioned herself as the final authority on "respect" and moderator of classroom talk (Hicks, 1995; O'Connor & Michaels, 2019). These findings describe the third theme, reconceptualization of respect, as it encompasses Burgos' struggles with both cultural and communication competence.

Challenging Divergent Views of Respect

In the first recording, Burgos revoiced but challenged the idea that respect had to be earned: "OK, so if you were disrespectful to somebody, then you don't deserve respect from them./ What if somebody was disrespectful to you? Do they deserve respect from you?" She then repeated the hypothetical scenario, this time casting herself as being disrespectful to a student: "So I'm being disrespectful to C _____./ ... Do I deserve (inaudible) from C _____?" This discursive move appears as an attempt by Burgos to place herself on the same social playing field as the student and bring other students into the discussion on one side or the other. This egalitarian gesture seems like it could have prompted a more dialogic discussion; however, in the end, it served as part of an effort apparent through Burgos' repeated evaluation of student responses to push students to adopt a view of respect (see Table 3) more in line with her own.

Burgos expressed her view of respect implicitly by prompting students to think about different viewpoints through dialogic questions, rather than directly stating what she perceived as a more correct view. She later asserted herself as a more knowledgeable authority about forgiveness (see Table 4), but even that speech occurred in dialogue with a student. It is also important to note that she may have discussed her own beliefs more than intended due to the difficulties she encountered in getting the students to share theirs.

In closing the discussion, Burgos acknowledged that students' ideas about respect were derived from their life experiences but also urged them to "give yourself the chance to decide if you want to keep that pattern/Or if you want to choose a different way to respond." Instead of asking students about the origins of their beliefs, i.e., the values learned from their families and communities, she marginalized them and suggested that other views might be better. Asking students where their beliefs about respect came from could have prompted students to think more deeply about respect, as well as possible conflicts between their family and cultural values and their personal experiences. At the same time, it could have been an opportunity for this novice teacher to learn a great deal about her students.

Table 3. *Reconceptualizing Respect Through the Languages of Curriculum and Control*

Teacher Discourse Practices	Examples of Teacher Talk
Challenging student view through hypothetical scenario	“OK, so if you were disrespectful to somebody, then you don’t deserve respect from them. What if somebody was disrespectful to you? Do they deserve respect from you?” “So, how come, if I’m disrespectful, that I don’t deserve respect? Just cause there was one time, I was disrespectful, I don’t deserve any respect now?”
Refuting student view of forgiveness	“to say that they forgive that person but I’ll never treat them the same, our friendship will never be the same, that’s not forgiveness. Forgiveness is I will let it go, as if it never happened. That is true forgiveness.” “Think about how important your own self is before you decide to retaliate even though you really think you should.”
Acknowledging student views of respect derived from their experience	“So, for me, just to put it into your world, whatever has happened in your world, in your life, has taught you that this is the way you view respect, and how you choose to interact with other people, I cannot tell you, that’s the way that’s got you here. You keep going with that, if that works for you, give yourself the chance to decide if you want to keep that pattern, Or if you want to choose a different way to respond.”

Modeling Respect in Daily Life

In the second recording, Burgos initiated a discussion to close out their week-long focus on respect with a more specific question: “What respectful thing do you plan to do this weekend?” Though this question appeared to connect classroom curriculum with students’ lives, the discussion remained monologic, with Burgos repeatedly asking the same initial question of individual students and evaluating their responses. Ironically, the discussion became more dialogic when students began asking Burgos about the respectful thing she would do over the weekend. Burgos’ initial responses referenced respect, but, as students’ questions focused more on what she was doing, rather than how it was respectful, she also shared details about her camping trip (see Table 4).

Table 4. *Reconceptualizing Respect Through the Language of Identity*

Teacher Discursive Practices	Examples of Teacher Talk
Giving example of enacting respect in her daily life	“I’m gonna make the packing list today, of all the food and stuff we need, so that tomorrow, we just go, and we don’t have to pack anything last minute. That’s what I’m doing that’s respectful to me and my best friend.”
Describing travel plans	“I’m going [location] to stay in a teepee. ... It’s basically like a tent, except you could have a fireplace in it. So, no. It’s a big teepee, like you know the Native American people make? ... Like I’m not layin’ on the gr-. It’s like glamor camping. So, like, you’re not really laying on the ground in a tent.”
Sharing life knowledge with students	“So, like, when you get older, they just become, your best friends become your only friends. You don’t keep those friends that you’re not really tight with, because it’s just a waste of time and energy. You only stay with people who actually are your best friend, because you can actually talk to them about re-. They’re actually there to support you.”

Though Burgos seemed willing to answer students’ questions, she also asserted her teacher role by sharing life knowledge about adult friendships (see Table 4). Using the language of identity, Burgos appeared to claim to be more expert on respect and life than the students based on their differences in age, while not acknowledging the influence of her cultural background on her perspective.

Examination of the participant’s language use illustrates how this first-year teacher shifted between monologic and dialogic discourse practices within the languages of curriculum, control, and identity in her attempts to facilitate discussion about the topic of respect. Though she encouraged students to share their thoughts, her repeated assertion of her own views on respect demonstrates the limitations of her cultural and communication competence. In comparison to the examples presented in Table 1, this novice teacher’s discourse, recorded in her first months in the classroom, appears more culturally hegemonic than responsive, and more monologic than dialogic. The next section discusses implications of these findings for supervisor-researchers aiming to cultivate culturally responsive teaching in their schools.

Discussion

Several D/discourses converge in any classroom discussion. In this study, a first-year, White, monolingual teacher enters a culturally, linguistically, and racially diverse secondary classroom. Bringing with her D/discourses of authority derived from her identity, knowledge, and experience, she must choose which to employ and how to successfully communicate with students (Gee, 2015).

For the teacher, this process involves drawing upon Discourses of authority ranging from content standards to school rules to state or national mandates. The discursive shifts described here represent the teacher choosing which authorities to draw from and how—in this case, excluding outside authorities on the definition of respect in favor of the expertise she and her students could bring to the discussions. These choices reflect this teacher’s developing communication and cultural competence.

Amid these D/discourses, a first-year teacher must choose how to navigate the moment-to-moment dynamics of a classroom discussion (O’Connor & Michaels, 2019). I chose to examine this teacher’s discourse based on my informal observance of what appeared to be her “getting it right” with our students. Given what I knew of Burgos’ teacher preparation program and her disposition, I expected to identify discourse practices that would exemplify her quickly developing cultural and communication competence. Instead, findings suggest that she sometimes fell back on culturally hegemonic and monologic discourse practices.

While her initial intention seemed to be centering student knowledge, Burgos often fused the languages of curriculum and control to evaluate student views of respect. These data cannot speak to why the teacher and students had different conceptualizations of respect, as Burgos did not ask students what might have contributed to their beliefs about respect (cf. Mackenzie & Wallace, 2011). She may not have asked students about the origins of their conceptualizations of respect because she believed hers to be “correct” or “universally good,” rather than informed by her own sociocultural background. These missteps seem attributable not only to lack of experience but to lack of preparation for a discussion about respect across sociocultural differences, rather than a topic related to art.

These findings bear implications beyond one novice teacher’s shortcomings. Many scholars have considered the standards of Whiteness embedded in teacher education programs (Carter Andrews et al., 2021; Lynch, 2018). Ladson-Billings’ (2021) critique that teacher educators rarely demonstrate culturally responsive teaching in their own courses seems salient here. As Aziz (2024) found, culturally responsive discourse practices by instructors can foster culturally responsive dispositions in students. While this teacher may have intended to be culturally responsive in these discussions, she clearly struggled to do so. These findings suggest that an explicit focus on culturally responsive discourse practices could be an important addition to teacher education. The small but growing body of culturally responsive classroom discourse literature (e.g., Godley & Loretto, 2013; Holmes, 2023; Schieble et al., 2015; Thomas, 2013) can support this work.

If the participant's teacher preparation program is implicated in the limited cultural and communication competence demonstrated here, I must also acknowledge my responsibility as the instructional supervisor in the school. This novice teacher was left to address respect based on her own beliefs, with little guidance beyond the mandate itself. Resources for teachers on respect are widely available online; however, they tend to prioritize social-emotional learning (SEL), without explicitly mentioning race or culture, the lack of which often leads, as Simmons (2021) critiqued, to "white supremacy with a hug" (p. 30). Given that the school did not sanction any approach, the teacher understandably followed her own instincts. This outcome is instructive for supervisors and teacher educators, highlighting a missed responsibility for school administrators to support teachers in approaching state mandates in culturally responsive ways. Without explicit reinforcement of culturally responsive priorities, novice teachers might believe that a state mandate supplants them, when the incorporation of culturally responsive principles could have made this teacher's efforts more immediately relevant and successful. The heuristic⁴ presented in Table 1 could serve as a tool for reflective, data-centered conversations between teachers and supervisors (Zepeda et al., 2024) and critical examination of teacher talk excerpts in teacher education courses.

This study also speaks to gaps in the growing literature on culturally responsive supervision. While Gay (2018) and others (e.g., Khalifa, 2020, Khalifa et al., 2016) have highlighted supervisors' responsibility to address inequities in their schools, Cormier et al. (2024) note that the culturally responsive school leadership literature "has not fully addressed the specific instructional supervision skills needed to support ongoing development and reflection of teachers through formative feedback structure" (p. 22). In their primer on culturally responsive instructional supervision, Cormier et al. (2024) outline instructional supervisors' responsibilities regarding feedback to teachers. As the present inquiry demonstrates, teacher discourse is where intention and practice intersect and therefore worth examining. Doing so in a small-scale, low-stakes way, can provide the basis for "fault-free problem solving," developmental reflection (Zepeda et al., 2024, p. 173), and critical "perspective-taking" (Cormier et al., 2024, p. 26) that builds transformative empathy and spurs action.

Limitations

This study examined only the teacher's side of these language interactions. As a result, it leaves open questions about students' representations of respect. It is also not possible to determine the extent of equitable opportunity among students to voice their beliefs. Only two lessons selected by the teacher were examined, which makes any generalizations about her practice in the early months of her career only provisional.

Next steps would be to include the students' side of these language interactions and for the teacher to analyze the recordings directly (Schieble et al., 2015). Doing so could identify teacher talk moves that appear more or less academically productive or culturally and/or communicatively competent.

⁴ Though Table 1 contrasts culturally responsive with culturally hegemonic and monologic with dialogic discourse practices, it is intended as a heuristic for guiding reflection and discussion, rather than a rubric for evaluating or rating a teacher's discourse practices.

Involving students in analyzing the transcripts is also an important next step (Rymes, 2016). Such a measure is key to avoiding uncritical analysis that negates the lived experiences of Students of Color (McIntyre, 1997) that could occur when two White educator-researchers analyze language interactions between a White teacher and her racially and culturally diverse students.

Conclusion

While this work is illuminating for researchers, Rymes (2016) and others (see Bieler, 2018; O'Connor & Michaels, 2019; etc.) highlight the value of classroom discourse analysis for teachers in reflecting on their language use and teaching practice. Supervisors and teacher educators should not only conduct such inquiries in collaboration with teachers but also create opportunities for peer teachers or mentor and novice teachers to do so together. Though the involvement of a supervisor introduces ethical concerns, this study's design demonstrates how such issues can be mitigated. Indeed, stepping away from my role as evaluator of this teacher was no small adjustment, and one that may not always be feasible. However, schools should allow supervisors to step away from evaluation responsibilities to undertake targeted inquiry projects like the present study. Understanding the internal dynamics of classrooms, the process by which new teachers develop communication and cultural competence, especially across racial and cultural differences, and the ways that process affects students and their learning are among the many essential questions that supervisors should investigate in collaboration with teachers. Supervisors and schools should pursue ethical opportunities to do so.

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Appendix A

Transcription Procedures

Notation	Meaning
T	Turn of teacher talk
S1, S2, etc.	Turn of student talk, numbers indicate sequence, not a particular student
First initial _____ (i.e., A _____)	Student's name stated by teacher, first initial followed by blank used to protect student anonymity
Bold	Audible emphasis by the speaker
?	Utterances constructed as questions or those that ended in rising intonation followed by a pause (Heath, 1983)
Em dash (—)	Short pause (less than 2 seconds) within a single utterance by a speaker (Heath, 1983; Rymes, 2016)
Timed length of pause in seconds, i.e., (2.5)	Longer pause (2 seconds or more) between utterances (Heath, 1983; Rymes, 2016)
Brackets	Overlapping utterances (Heath, 1983)
Italicized description in parentheses	Description of ambient, inaudible, or non-verbal sound