

Schooling culturally relevant pedagogy: One story about tension and transformation

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Ann Mogush Mason

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Dedication

To Moises, my original trickster. You hold up the mirror when you turn your office sign to *closed* and take notebooks with you on bike rides. Hard work pays off; you read, interpret, and theorize like a person four times your size. There's nothing like a Momo.

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Abstract

The need for multifaceted analyses of the relationship between how the United States acknowledges racism and how schooling can be structured to mitigate its negative impacts has never been greater, especially given the rising and often simplistic attention to the racial “achievement gap.” In suburban, elite Pioneer City, a series of initiatives I refer to as “the transformation” aimed to eliminate the racial achievement gap in that school district through simultaneous efforts to redistribute students from a racially and economically isolated elementary school and to train all district staff in a particular brand of culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

In this yearlong study, I used critical ethnographic methods to explore some tensions between a goal of systemic change and the reproductive forces at play in schools. My findings complicate preexisting ways of theorizing how CRP can be part of practical efforts to transform schooling and they identify new possibilities for CRP as a way to reenvision teaching and teacher education toward deep and enduring change.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Working with children often involves finding ways to craft narratives that satisfy the curious mind or calm the traumatized heart. Yet, the craving to explain ourselves via story extends beyond the individual: families, communities, and nations continually retell stories that attempt to explain why things are the way they are. The gradual release of complexity in bible stories offers one example of how Christian families negotiate this process in ways that they consider developmentally appropriate. In Sunday school classes when I was a child, we read stories featuring a white-skinned Jesus washing his disciples' feet; it was not until I was an adolescent that I learned that my parents and their pastors believed there were cracks in that simple version of the story. Jesus probably had dark skin, they told me, and historical accounts have been through so many translations and interpretations that my parents chose to view bible stories with an eye toward broad, not literal, lessons. For countless Sunday school children, though, bible stories are broken down into digestible chunks, the thornier elements earmarked to be revisited later by the theologically curious. This leaves only the simpler, immediately relatable story for the rest of us.

Unfortunately, the stories that find their way into classroom teaching too often end up simplified in a similar way, and are never returned to for added depth or clarity. When this happens with history lessons, the results can be disastrous. My son Emmanuel is a kindergartener this year. Along with other children across the country, his racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse class learned about Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in

January. Crayon portraits of Dr. King and “hopes and dreams” worksheets came home from school, and my son seemed to have memorized a few phrases about how, as he said it, “it doesn't matter, skin color.”

I saw an opportunity to go beyond the kindergarten lessons, and so we watched a few YouTube videos of Dr. King's more impassioned speeches. Then my son asked more questions, bringing his own interpretations of what he saw and heard (Rosenblatt, 1983). Knowing that I wanted to continue complicating my son's understanding of these important civil rights stories, and not totally sure how to do so, I kept my copy of Herbert Kohl's *She would not be moved* (2005) in plain view, like bait. A photo on the cover of the book shows Ms. Parks being fingerprinted after the infamous incident that, after months of education and organizing, initiated the Montgomery Bus Boycott. All decked out in his penguin hat and snowpants one morning before catching his own bus to school, Emmanuel picked up the book and said to me, “I know who that is, Mom. It's Rosa Parks and she was a tough lady and she was smart and she started it all.” A couple of days after that, we had what started as an unrelated conversation about how the police are community helpers. When his brother, already a boundary-disturber, suggested that the police do not always help people, Emmanuel was quiet. He asked later, “but why would the police put Rosa Parks in jail?” Emmanuel's and my conversation about our country's racial histories has only just begun, but I feel good about the space we have started to carve out for complexity.

Without a sense for the deeper story, Emmanuel might have continued through school and life believing that only a handful of notorious African-Americans have made

important contributions in this country, that those contributions only demand celebrating during their designated “months,” or that meaningful social change can be as simple as tired feet and an open bus seat. He certainly would not see himself, as a boy with Mexican heritage adopted into a white family, represented in these tales about who and what is most important. Perhaps even more significantly, the simplified stories of people like Rosa Parks and Dr. King, repeated to us time and again through popular media and school curricula, take all of us out of the story altogether; these characters are so singularly remarkable, so firmly rooted in history, that there must not be a place for us in their struggles.

In other words, the simple, relatable stories are not enough. They do not allow us to enter, to engage, or to learn. To do those things, we need to go both broader and deeper, which in the case of this dissertation means looking at one classroom in one school in one school district that made bold moves to tell a different story about how race might work in U.S. schools. I introduce you to the setting as it looked in April of 2012, two months before the end of the school year I spent immersed in Room 103: The students in Mary Jacobs’¹ third grade class at Harris Creek Elementary in Pioneer City, Minnesota had completed MCA (Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment, or the state standardized test) math testing and were on spring break. Two had traveled from Pioneer City to Mexico for beach vacations with their families and neighbors. One, who is originally from Mexico, was staying home and told me he hoped to work on the comic book he had been drawing since the month before. Others visited family in North Dakota

¹ All proper nouns related to “Pioneer City” are pseudonyms, and the details of several events, identities, and historical situations are composites, in order to maintain anonymity.

and Wisconsin, and still others attended YMCA programming while their parents worked. Several of the girls were attending a sleepover party, where they listened to Justin Bieber, watched PG-13 movies, and wrote each other notes in tiny notepads they traded back and forth. Another girl had been invited, but her parents told her she was too young for sleepovers or movies rated PG-13. Two of the boys played outside together at one of their houses and drew pictures of the animals they found in the backyard.

All of these eight and nine-year-olds traveled through everyday lives that may seem to have little connection to the national issues and histories that inform the policies and practices in Pioneer City Schools. This study explores the relationships between broader discourses about race and achievement in schools and one school district's policy and practice aimed toward racial equity. Such exploration helps to illuminate the tensions that arise when we attempt to address such a painful piece of our nation's story within one single institution: the school. Again, using a single classroom as the entry point allows for my exploration of these stories to go deeper as I also attend to broader connections between Room 103 and its contexts.

Indeed, concern around the racial "achievement gap," and the need for multifaceted analyses of the relationships between how the U.S. acknowledges racism and how schooling can be structured to mitigate its negative impacts, has never been greater. In suburban, elite Pioneer City, a series of initiatives I refer to as "the transformation" aimed to eliminate the racial achievement gap through simultaneous efforts to redistribute students from a racially and economically isolated elementary school and to train all district staff in a particular brand of culturally relevant pedagogy

(CRP). Gaining a clear view of such entangled phenomena is a complex endeavor that is best done through multiple, and multidisciplinary, lenses. In the coming pages, I tell one story about a community that strives for the coexistence of excellence and equity in its public schools. This one story attempts to capture what happened in a particular local context when our nation's long and painful history of racial relations came to the forefront in public debates over schooling, calling out broader questions asking how we should "do" schooling, how we should "do" community, and how those schools and communities should respond to inequities whose histories and futures span far beyond the local purview. Framed in literature around social reproduction and culturally relevant pedagogy, my central argument is that Pioneer City School District was unable to address the transformative goals of CRP. This occurred in part because of irresolvable tensions between a transformative theory and reproductive forces like the institutional racism that still quietly shapes the ways that schools operate.

When told in retrospect, tales of transformation too easily slide into seamlessness, or what I describe here as the fairytale version. This is an understandable narrative tool; we want the stories we tell to make sense and to help us present coherent arguments. Understandably, colloquially told fairytales rarely include contradictory or complicated details. For example, for the story to "work," we do not need to know that, after their abrupt wedding, perhaps it was hard for Cinderella to adjust to living with the prince. After all, the prince had probably never done his own dishes. Nevertheless, I argue that this impulse for clarity in storytelling shortchanges readers of complexities that can point to where we need to problem-solve.

As a critical ethnographer, my goals are connected to social change as much as to fidelity to any “truths” I might illustrate through my findings. Thus, as I felt struck by the heavy brushstrokes used to tell the fairytale-like story of Pioneer City’s transformation in local newspapers, in internal documents, and in my interviews with some district administrators, I asked myself to consider why we have fairytales in the first place. It seems to me that we have fairytales for two main reasons: to tell cultural stories that explain why things are the way they are (here I am thinking about folktales like the *anansi* tales and the many creation stories; e.g., McDermott, 1999; Zetlein, 2000), and, similarly, to explain complex things in simple ways. So then, why fracture, or complicate, those fairytales? My answer here is also twofold. First, looking beneath the simple version can help to shift the center in how we tell cultural stories about schools and schooling in the United States. The United States cultural experience is no monolith, yet the official story about United States education remains too often rooted in the perspective of middle-class white educators. Acknowledging and problematizing my own identity as a middle-class white educator, I position this research within decolonizing perspectives (e.g., Jaramillo, 2012) and thus seek to make productive use of the many tensions between my social locations and the aims of my work. Second, in response to the second purpose of fairytales, I want to fracture these stories in order to remind readers about what *is* complex. In other words, I want to re-tangle what has been untangled, or so oversimplified we forget that when we talk about kids in schools, we are talking about some of the most complicated, difficult things that arise among humans in interaction with one another.

The fairytale version of what occurred in the name of “equity” in Pioneer City Schools between 2010 and 2012 seems to operate within the following logic: first, race matters in schooling. Second, “achievement” (standardized test scores) is a good way to determine how we are doing regarding addressing the impact of a student's race in schooling. Finally, if students of color can do better on standard achievement measures, then they, and the school system supporting them, have succeeded.

Fracturing that fairytale demands that we ask what has been lost in the process. Namely, whose knowledges, experiences, and cultural selves have been valued, and whose have not? Who has changed, and how, in order to reach a new level of success? What does learning look like, and what does “not learning” look like within this construct of achievement? Who defines the terms for “success,” and what is the price of “success” for marginalized students and families? When this story is couched within the pursuit of CRP as a route to racial equity in schools, how do we know whether the goal has been realized? Fractured and then retold, we see that people in interaction with each other and people in interaction with institutions are simply too messy for linear stories. In addition, fracturing the fairytale of how one classroom in one school district has experienced multiple shifts in policy and practice around racial equity allows us to see how every story is partial and could thus be told an infinite number of ways (Ellsworth, 1997; Thomas, 1992). Critical ethnographic methods help me to capture as many possible stories as I can by giving attention to both the fairytale and its fracture, helping us see the folly of oversimplification.

Following this introduction, Chapter 2 contextualizes my study within research

literature on culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP), focusing on the processes and challenges teachers identify in the process of trying to “become” culturally relevant. Chapter 3 outlines my research methodology and my study's context and participants, paying special attention to the transformative goals and politics of researcher positionality in critical ethnography. I provide a portrait of Pioneer City's transformation in Chapter 4, telling the story through the lens of social drama (Turner, 1974) to highlight the tensions that I explore more deeply in Chapters 5 and 6. Specifically, I argue that the professional development training in “equity discourse” left Pioneer City teachers like Mrs. Jacobs in a liminal space, stuck between the supportive scenario of professional development and a future-vision of their own classrooms as culturally relevant spaces. Chapter 5 zooms in to Mrs. Jacobs' third grade classroom and describes instances when the macro-level goals of CRP and the district's meso-level articulation of those goals can be sometimes seen, sometimes not seen at the micro level through language and actions. In other words, despite limitations, some CRP leaked out anyway. In Chapter 6 I argue that deeper considerations of dynamics related to race and racialization might help us move closer to CRP; before CRP can be fully realized, we must address the inevitable tensions between a transformative theory and a reproductive institution. To conclude, Chapter 7 describes a vision for long-term, embedded teacher education and professional development that begins with intensive study of the teachers' selves as cultural beings to address conflicts between common sense and CRP that clashed in Pioneer City Schools. Ideas for additional research and activism are embedded within this description.

One of the hardest things about conducting this research was my understanding

that, despite my often intense disagreement, most everyone involved in the story believed that they were doing what is best for all children. Multiple versions of what is best for all children coexisted in Pioneer City during the year and a half I spent immersed there, and even the prevailing notions seemed to shift with changes in leadership². In order to continue in our pursuit of culturally relevant pedagogy as a viable theory to guide practice, we must be able to analyze our missteps with as much attention as we celebrate our successes; this is yet another reason I chose to illuminate the tensions that complicate a seamless tale of transformation in Pioneer City.

Thus, the story you are about to read does not always cast characters in an entirely favorable light. In addition, I place myself within the story as often as I can to challenge the notion that my observer's stance protects me from critique. I find it important to remember that the adults in this story have been brave enough to embark on a journey of doing things differently; particularly in a place like suburban, elite Pioneer City, people like Superintendent Kelly and Mrs. Jacobs could have continued to enjoy the uninterrogated spoils of their success. By striving to integrate their equity-related goals with their previous work as educators with reputations for serving all students well, they have made themselves newly vulnerable to critique—in the same way that I do as I write these words. None of us have it “figured out” yet, and that is why we struggle in our daily work and on the page. I aim to be honest and kind so that lessons can be gleaned from the tensions at play in this particular context where racial justice was a genuine, albeit ever elusive, goal.

² Superintendent Kelly left the district unexpectedly in September 2011 amid a contentious relationship between her office and the school board. Since the equity discourse and goals came primarily from her, her departure caused a series of shifts in how the equity discourse was taken up in the district.

Finally, a third component to my fractured fairytale will not appear in these pages, yet is important for designing research that both engages its intended audience and leads to social change. That component is the readers' responses (Rosenblatt, 1938). I have provided the stories and my analyses, yet what comes next involves more than just me. Like I did with my son, I am leaving this book out, like bait, for readers to interact with. So I ask you to engage with the coming pages as an active reader and consider the following questions: Where does this story take you? What are you compelled to do, think, or say in your local contexts because of what you have read here? After reading, how might we put this particular story back together in a way that recognizes its complexities and helps us all do a better, less partial job of working toward racial justice in United States education? Ultimately, I argue, we cannot have culturally relevant pedagogies if we cannot reconsider the ways we tell, and the scenes in which we set, our stories.

Chapter 2

Relevant literature

After a summer fellowship spent working among social workers at a homeless shelter, I returned for my senior year at Grinnell College with a backpack full of notes about theories and experiences that would lead to a senior paper connecting Pierre Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction to homelessness and education in the United States. In that context, the link between theory and practice seemed clear. Theories, as I understood them then and understand them now, are tools that help us explain the world to ourselves. There was a lapse in this understanding, though, when, several years later, I chose to become a teacher. After much deliberation, I had decided on teaching elementary school as the most intellectually rigorous and personally satisfying way I could do good in the world. It had been that way for my mother, who described herself as an "everyday activist" in her career as an elementary school teacher. Teaching had also been described that way during my education courses at Grinnell; there, professors encouraged me to teach because it was hard, but I would enjoy the challenge, and it could change things for the better.

A generation apart, my mother and I entered teaching with similar goals, yet had very different experiences. The climate around public education changed so quickly that my classmates and I, considering careers just before the 2001 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, hardly saw it coming. Thus, after beginning my teaching career with what I thought was an unshakeable commitment to a career in the classroom, I found myself shaken. Returning to the United States after teaching third

grade in Guatemala, I now had notebooks full of unanswered questions that my new position as an early childhood teacher was not affording me the time or intellectual space to explore. I was deeply troubled by how global and domestic injustices played out in classrooms and communities everywhere, yet it seemed no mechanism existed to help me explore answers to my questions. Meanwhile, I felt the popular shift in perceptions about teaching shape the ways we talked about ourselves as educators; I felt like I was among the last of a dying breed.

Looking back with new eyes, of course I can see the story differently. I left my teacher preparation program with a sense that I was ready for anything: so well prepared, in fact, that the arrogance of moving to work in a foreign country where I was only a beginner in the dominant language was lost on me. Armed with a social justice orientation and the “best practices” in fashion at the time, I felt certain I could meet the social and academic needs of twenty-six eight and nine-year-olds whose daily lives bore striking differences to my own. I was lucky that the school community was a forgiving one, or had seen my type enough times to know that eventually I would come around. As I see it today, guided by those teachers and families, I stumbled across some of the basic building blocks of culturally relevant pedagogy.

Acknowledging the inequitable patterns in how society shapes us with regard to dimensions of identity such as race, class, gender, sexuality, and religion, culturally relevant pedagogy attempts to interrupt the reproduction of inequities via schooling by inviting educators to approach curriculum and teaching with students and their realities at the center. The need for such interruptions, particularly in the face of an overwhelmingly

monolingual, monocultural, white female teaching force entering an increasingly diverse school system, is exhaustively documented (e.g., Abbate-Vaughn, 2008; K. Au, et al., 2008; Nieto, 2009) and thus accepted as a given in this dissertation. This predominately white middle-class teaching force tends to share similar historical memories of white and middle-class school experiences that are no longer the norm in U.S. public schools.

My theoretical guides in the design and analysis of this dissertation research contribute to our understanding of contextual factors that can be missed in the study of discrete classroom practices. Beginning with my own intellectual roots in educational anthropology and sociology, I draw from a theoretical framework that helps me harness the particular to gain a clearer view of the general. Specifically, with support from sociologists concerned with culture (Bourdieu, 1977; 1984), educational anthropology has advanced deeper understandings of the relationships between culture and schooling (e.g., K. Au & Jordan, 1981; Erickson & Mohatt, 1982; Vogt, Jordan, & Tharp, 1987). This work provides the foundation for discussions of how culturally relevant pedagogy (e.g., Ladson-Billings 1995a; Delpit, 1988; Gay, 2002), a theory that is unique in its efforts to engage with the space between theory and practice, can serve transformative goals through education. Thus, I begin the literature review with a description of CRP's theoretical underpinnings in sociology and anthropology of education, followed by a description of CRP itself and then discussions of literature explicating (1) how teachers *develop* CRP and (2) the *challenges* faced by teachers as they engage with this work. This review establishes grounding for the interpretive work to come in the following chapters, in which CRP figures in two distinct ways: as the theoretical backdrop to Pioneer City's

transformation and as the body of work I aim to push forward in teacher education and professional development.

What research says about culture and schools that led to the theory of CRP

As I suggested in the introduction to this chapter, CRP is a way of thinking about teaching and learning that cannot be “discovered” or created in isolation. Aside from those basic building blocks I can see myself, in retrospect, having used in my Guatemalan classroom, CRP draws on, expands, and sometimes challenges a rich tradition of sociological and anthropological research on the relationship between culture and schooling. What follows are brief introductions to important concepts in the historical development of CRP.

Social reproduction. Anthropologists and sociologists of education are tasked with unraveling the complicated ways that cultures interact with schooling (Pollock, 2008). Concepts that are foundational to this discussion include social reproduction and cultural capital. A body of theory on social reproduction (e.g., Bourdieu, 1984) applied to educational settings makes the case that we are sorted through schooling according to a raced and classed taxonomy that is incompatible with notions of equal opportunity or schooling as a social equalizer. Cultural capital, one among four forms of capital that Bourdieu first described (the others include economic, social, and symbolic capital), can be described as resources people possess and can draw on to advance their contextualized status positions (Bourdieu, 1977). Schools offer a compelling setting to explore questions about the flow of cultural capital because of the school’s role as part of an institutional network “through which social groups are given legitimacy and through which social and

cultural ideologies are built, recreated, and maintained” (Apple & Weis, 1983, p. 5).

Bourdieu's descriptions focused specifically on the reproduction of social class, but the arguments fit smoothly into discussions of advantages based on race, as well. While all children come to school with vast knowledge that is valued in their home and community environments, the fact that white middle-class children are more likely to experience home lives that are congruent with the expectations of school results in what Lareau (2003) calls the “transmission of differential advantages” (p. 5). These advantages exist in society at large and are continually reinforced through schooling. In other words, students with cultural capital (Lareau, 1987) know how to navigate the unwritten codes and expectations for their conduct in school. This means that students who do not possess this cultural capital need to engage in an extra layer of learning, first mastering the rules of school in order to access academic content. Building on this work, Lewis (2003) describes social reproduction as “a set of interactions in which the racialized social system is reproduced at least partly through processes of schooling” (p.156).

However, school-based learning is only a piece of the whole picture of a child's intellectual life. In her ethnography *Unequal Childhoods*, Lareau (2003) identified two “cultural logics of child rearing” (p. 3) that begin at home and impact how children might experience their relationships with institutions such as the school. Lareau's work provides an example of how social reproduction can work in schools when the institution is not attentive to how its practices and policies are oriented toward the habitus, or typical ways of being and acting, of the dominant group.

The maps for understanding social life provided by theories of social reproduction

are incomplete, however. For example, resistance theories from educational anthropology (e.g., Fordham & Ogbu, 1986, discussed further below) have critiqued their social determinism. Indeed, if we accepted social reproduction at face value, structural constraints on individuals would inevitably stunt their growth. For example, a strict reading of Lareau's (2003) work might lead one to frame a working-class third grader as irreversibly constrained by class status, and therefore unable to attain the cultural capital that her middle-class peers gathered via their upbringing. Such a deterministic stance would impede movement within social positions, and could cause or bolster teachers' negative attitudes about marginalized students' behaviors and potentials. Without the possibility of movement, education would serve as nothing but an instrument of the status quo.

Li's work adds depth to the body of work on social reproduction through schooling because she recognizes that individuals and institutions interact in multidirectional relationships. In *Culturally contested pedagogies* (2008), Li explains her central assumption that access to cultural capital predicts a student's ability to succeed in school, where middle and upper-middle class cultural values and behaviors are privileged. Thus, social inequality endures. Li's work brings often unheard voices from the margin to the center by examining how literacies expressed in home life intersect with school experiences, and by exposing the role that powerful institutions (such as schools) play in shaping families' choices and opportunities.

The failure to acknowledge that a growing number of students have to make cultural shifts to succeed in school devalues these students' experiences and

communicates to them that it is their fault if they cannot devise a way to succeed in that system. Meanwhile, dominance becomes further entrenched as we continue to reproduce inequitable power relationships. As described later in this chapter, CRP's view that school is often structured in a way that normalizes the rules and discourses of dominant society goes beyond just acknowledging the extra work marginalized students must undertake to negotiate a coherent identity among home, community, and school.

Roots in anthropology of education. The work of educational anthropologists underpins CRP, beginning in the early 1980s with various studies of how educators might address “mismatches” between home and school culture (e.g., K. Au & Jordan, 1981; Erickson & Mohatt, 1982; Vogt, Jordan, & Tharp, 1987). In what looks like a linguistic tornado, in retrospect, the key descriptors used in these anthropologists' work shifted significantly, but the strategies themselves primarily and consistently focused on incorporating students' home languages in academic instruction: Kathy Au and Jordan (1981) described their work with native Hawaiian students as *culturally appropriate*, while Mohatt and Erickson (1981) referred to similar strategies with Native American students as *cultural congruence*. All of these approaches have since been criticized for the way they privilege dominant perspectives and seem to imply that teachers must shift their work in the direction of difference only to a limited extent (Ladson-Billings, 1995b). *Culturally compatible* teaching (Vogt, Jordan, & Tharp, 1987) works from a similar model, inviting educators to recognize students' backgrounds in order to bring “culturally different” students closer to the mainstream. Stretching these ideas somewhat, Erickson and Mohatt (1982) introduced a new way of viewing the relationship between schooling and culture

with *culturally responsive* teaching, which implies that educators must at least position themselves in response to cultural messages they learn to recognize in their students.

In another development in the “mismatch” theories of educational anthropology, the “funds of knowledge” approach challenges teachers of young culturally and linguistically diverse students to view themselves as students of their students’ backgrounds. By conducting home visits and interviews with family members, elementary teachers can learn about the knowledge their students bring from home to the classroom, and classroom activities can then be planned to create a better match between home and school learning (Moll, et. al, 1991). Dworin (2006) exemplifies this in his work with bilingual Latino fourth graders. He describes a shift in power that results when teachers give students space to begin with their own stories and use their native languages and cultures as a way to connect with, and contribute to, the expectations of school.

A more complex view. Like Ladson-Billings (1995b), Villegas (1988), and Irvine (1990), I am concerned with the loss of contextualization when ethnographic work is limited to either micro or macro-level interactions only. As I discussed in the introduction to this dissertation, the simplest version of a story can be perilously incomplete. Similarly, in Pollock's (2008) description of how popular descriptions of culture “dangerously oversimplify the social processes, interactions, and practices that create disparate outcomes for children” (p. 369), she emphasizes educational anthropology's goal of avoiding generalized, concrete, or static descriptions of how certain categories of students typically approach school:

Shallow analyses of 'culture' that purport to describe only how a 'group's' parents

train its children blame a reduced set of actors, behaviors, and processes for educational outcomes, and they include a reduced set of actors and actions in a reduced set of projects for educational improvement” (Pollock, 2008, p. 369).

Later, she continues:

Anthropologists of education know that patterns in the distribution of opportunity to children [in schools and classrooms] are human-made (and in that sense, cultural) rather than natural or random. We know too that the opportunities provided and denied in schools often align with existing inequalities in the surrounding society” (Pollock, 2008, p. 374).

Thus, studies concerned primarily with either schools or their contexts must be able to shift between and draw from observations at micro, meso, and macro levels.

As the next sections will show, culturally relevant teachers see all students as possessing great potential, while acknowledging that society does not always reward marginalized people for their hard work. This view marks a step beyond explanations for racial variation in academic outcomes that either over-emphasize structural barriers (e.g., Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Ogbu, 1987) or focus too intently on the role of individuals in working around barriers without addressing the structure itself (e.g. K. Au, 1980). More recently, Darling-Hammond and Bransford (2005), among others, advocate “adaptive expertise,” which offers a construct of the flexible and responsive classroom teacher. This construct does not challenge the inequities upon which it relies; in other words, an adaptive expert is always ready to respond when a student deviates from the norm, but the norm is accepted as such in the form of “best practices” or a sense of the routine work

of teaching. Adaptive expertise may be a helpful move in this direction, but at present it fails to disrupt hegemony in teaching and teacher education, much in the way that early educational anthropology perspectives did before CRP.

Again, reflecting common assumptions about who and what is normal in school settings, there is still literature in the field that frames culture as something that white teachers must study in order to better connect with students of color. For example, Brown-Jeffy and Cooper (2011) continue pointing to “cultural discontinuity” (p. 66) between teachers and their students as the primary barrier to cultural competence. In this conception, cultural competence would matter less for a white teacher working with white students, because as a racial insider, the white teacher would already possess the cultural toolkit to connect with white students. In contrast, Kathy Au (2006), who conducts literacy research with native Hawaiian elementary school students, tells in her more recent work of white teachers making space for changes in the discursive style used in whole-class instruction. When they adapt to the conversation patterns from students’ home communities, Au argues, culturally relevant pedagogues combat cultural discontinuity by acknowledging differences between school and home cultures while also validating both. Au extends this notion to language use as a whole, suggesting that learning and language acquisition are enhanced if students receive native language support along with instruction in the second language (K. Au, 2006). CRP offers opportunities to acknowledge conceptions about cultural discontinuity such as these, but also moves beyond them by decentering dominant perspectives about, and attempting to disrupt socially reproductive processes through, schooling.

“Success” is key among the layers of school life that can be difficult for marginalized students to access. This notion is rooted in theories of social reproduction that describe a self-perpetuating cycle that continually regenerates patterns of dominance and marginalization (e.g., Bourdieu, 1984; Lareau, 1999). Disrupting this reproductive process by identifying strategies for supporting marginalized students is particularly important at the elementary school level, considering that the formative nature of school experiences at this stage can shape lifelong attitudes and trajectories (Li, 2005). Within this social and cultural context comes the basic fact that students who find their community norms and discourses underrepresented in school life are also unlikely to see their personal interests reflected in curriculum and pedagogy. In the following section, I describe how CRP grew from this research critiquing the ways that schools privilege dominant culture and thus deepen the marginalization of the cultures, voices, and experiences of students of color.

Culturally relevant pedagogy

Conceptions of social reproduction and cultural capital come into sharp relief when a marginalized child enters any institution of the dominant culture: in the case of this dissertation, *school*. To study school through these lenses, we need to be able to maneuver between the schooling process and its context, viewing school as embedded within the social structures surrounding it. Culturally relevant pedagogy offers one such framework. Following this introduction to the development of CRP itself, I provide brief illustrations of how its three components (academic achievement, cultural competence, and sociopolitical consciousness) have been addressed in literature related to elementary

schools, leading toward a discussion of successes and some challenges in developing CRP in schools and classrooms with young children.

Theorists of CRP, like their predecessors and colleagues in the previous section, acknowledge that generations of power imbalances have created constraints that marginalized³ children face every day. CRP, as described by Ladson-Billings and summarized above, has three aims: to “produce students who can achieve academically, produce students who demonstrate cultural competence, and develop students who can both understand and critique the existing social order” (Ladson-Billings, 1995b, p. 474). Educators who acknowledge the political nature of teaching are making pedagogical shifts toward granting students “the right to grapple with learning challenges from the point of strength and relevance found in their own cultural frames of references” (Gay, 2000, p. 114).

Ladson-Billings began with Hill Collins’ *Black feminist epistemology* (1990) as a lens through which to view effective teachers of African American elementary school students, and from there built the foundation for her theory of culturally relevant pedagogy. Collins summarizes the four dimensions of black feminist epistemology as follows:

- Lived experience as criterion of meaning
- The use of dialogue in assessing knowledge claims
- The ethics of caring
- The ethic of personal accountability

³ Because of the complexity of social life explored in this study, I chose the term “marginalized students” instead of “students of color,” or an explicitly racial term, to include the other dimensions of identity that can marginalize elementary school students.

(Collins, 1990, p. 275)

Both Ladson-Billings (1995a; 1995b) and Delpit (1988) were trained in anthropology and thus see race and culture as important factors in children's school experiences. Ladson-Billings (1995a) argues that efforts toward culturally relevant pedagogy should be viewed as a way of *being* as opposed to a way of *doing* education. It is important, then, for culturally relevant pedagogues to resist the urge to "strategize" our way into CRP and instead take on CRP as an ethical position. This important distinction has often been missed in translation to research and practice. For example, one CRP study concludes with a 19-item checklist that describes helpful strategies for building community in elementary school classrooms (Sanchez, 2008). Other studies rely on rating scales or measurement instruments that purport to determine whether or how well a teacher is *doing* CRP (e.g., Mueller & O'Connor, 2007). While many educators will understand the allure of an easy-to-digest model, approaches like this miss the mark in framing a checklist as a replicable way to *do* CRP (see Sleeter, 2012, for a similar critique). In fact, coming to *be* culturally relevant is a far more personal, iterative, long-term, and difficult-to-define process: "because of the centrality of context to culturally responsive pedagogy, researchers can not skip over the task of grounding what it means in the context being studied" (Sleeter, 2012, p. 15).

According to Ladson-Billings (1995a), suggesting that teachers use the same strategies regardless of cultural context is undemocratic, and we should prepare new teachers to address this injustice via culturally relevant pedagogy. Delpit (1988) agrees that society is antagonistic toward students of color, describing how a culture of power

maintains and reproduces this antagonism. These scholars illustrate that the status quo—teaching students that anyone can succeed if they work hard enough—reproduces a system that was already set up in ways that advantage white children and marginalize students of color. This is a particularly salient concern in a socially reproductive (Bourdieu, 1977) education system that continually confuses equality (providing identical resources regardless of context) with equity (providing particular resources depending upon context; Nieto, 2006). Meanwhile, these practices are subtractive, as they devalue students' out-of-school selves (Valenzuela, 1999). Implied in each of these messages is a belief that teaching and learning are not politically neutral endeavors (Giroux, 1988). One way CRP moves beyond these critiques is by placing students' interests, lives, histories, and cultures at the center of their school experiences, making school relevant while showing that all knowledges matter.

Academic achievement. Many CRP scholars acknowledge the flaws of using achievement test data to assess student learning. Ladson-Billings herself has lamented that she wishes she would have chosen *student learning* instead of academic achievement because of how, since her initial publications (1995a; 1995b), achievement has been taken up so narrowly and defined in relation to standardized test scores. Nevertheless, academic success is complicated to measure without straightforward data from achievement tests. CRP scholars, like our colleagues in critical pedagogy (e.g., Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008), thus face the difficult task of often having to rely on measures we know to be faulty in order to build the arguments we want to make (see Schultz, 2008 and Chapter 4 for further analysis). Thus, much of the literature on CRP that addresses

academic success takes a long-range view. Brown-Jeffy and Cooper (2011), for example, argue that CRP is about changing the learning environment to better reflect students' cultural orientations, and that this will, *in time*, amount to increased academic achievement. They refer to "high expectations for all" (2011, p. 72), thus acknowledging a *goal* of academic success but not describing what it looks like for young children whose school experiences have been shaped by the education debt. Likewise, Howard (2003) suggests that CRP can be difficult to argue for in data-driven environments because its academic outcomes may not be immediate. This focus on the long term can make the specifics of academic achievement via CRP difficult to define, yet it is important for CRP to not get swept up by the achievement discourse that is so antithetical to its transformative aims.

Nonetheless, when researchers working with elementary school students and teachers focus on within-classroom measures, they can often attribute increases in marginalized students' academic achievement to culturally relevant approaches to teaching and learning. For example, Kathy Au (2001) describes increases in native Hawaiian elementary school students' literacy levels when their teachers devised activities that drew from students' home values and activities. Schultz's (2008) students scored considerably better on standardized achievement tests during a year of culturally relevant curriculum and pedagogy, even though they spent no time at all preparing explicitly for those tests.

A deeper view of CRP encourages us to view academic achievement as the result of *interactions between* the individual student and his contexts. Also, since academic

rigor contributes to achievement, culturally relevant curriculum design is more than a series of single, disconnected lessons. As Ullucci writes, “potentially trite activities gain richness when they are embedded in extended studies of a topic, and that study goes beyond coverage and addresses issues of equity, fairness, justice, and/or bias” (Ullucci, 2011, p. 396).

Cultural competence. CRP requires teachers to work with students as they cultivate abilities to navigate the culture of power without compromising their cultural identities (Delpit, 2002). This way of viewing cultural competence rejects static definitions of culture, acknowledges the fluid nature of both culture and identity, and welcomes differences as resources on which to capitalize in the classroom (Lee, 2010). Metzger (2011) remarks that, “culture is about experiences and community and therefore CRP begins with understanding what the experiences of our students are like and the communities from which they come” (p. 7). Building cultural competence via CRP, then, involves individual work on the part of the teacher as well as pedagogical work to be carried out in classrooms and communities. Buehler, Gore, Dallavis, and Haviland (2009) suggest that in order to keep students at the center of CRP, cultural competence requires much more attention in teacher preparation and professional development.

Sociopolitical consciousness. Sociopolitical consciousness involves one's awareness of the social injustices that pervade our lives because of unequal power relations. People who are sociopolitically conscious take a complicated view of life in society, recognizing the social and the political in every aspect. Freire's work around sociopolitical

consciousness⁴ reminds us of two things: that the oppressors and the oppressed are engaged in the same struggle for liberation (1970), and that with sociopolitical consciousness comes the ability to transform the reality within which we all struggle (1974).

Sociopolitical consciousness offers a way for marginalized students to view themselves as thinkers and leaders, rather than only as future workers (Freire, 1974). Esposito and Swain (2009) define sociopolitical consciousness as an “awareness of the symbiotic relationship between the social and political factors that affect society” (p. 38). When we locate ourselves in those social and political contexts via CRP, sociopolitical consciousness carries with it a demand that we work beyond the too common approach of simply raising awareness about the unjust workings of the world (McKinley, 2006) and actually encourage students (and ourselves) to be agents of change. Sociopolitical consciousness is particularly complicated because it is an individual endeavor that also involves a deep engagement with other individuals and with society.

CRP successes

A review of literature describing ways that individuals and groups of educators have developed culturally relevant pedagogy in their settings helps to situate this study. Specifically, I am interested in teachers' successes and challenges in the process of bringing this theory to classrooms and schools. This section primarily includes studies that refer directly to CRP as the teachers' goal, but also includes several that draw more broadly on critical approaches to teaching and learning. All of the studies reviewed here

⁴ Freire's terminology is translated to English as *critical consciousness*. I do not take issue with this translation, but simply prefer the nods to social life and politics in the term used in this dissertation.

share a focus on critical, creative thinking by both the students and the teachers.

Interestingly, while I wanted to review literature at both the micro (classroom) and meso (district) levels of interaction with CRP, very few studies have considered CRP at the district level (e.g., Patton, 2011).

Ladson-Billings (2001) states that, “In the classroom of a culturally relevant teacher, the students know exactly what success entails. They receive a variety of information from the teacher about what matters academically” (p. 75). From this angle, academic success can be measured in multiple ways, including work samples, exams, performance assessments, or informal assessments. For example, in a description of how culturally relevant teachers promote academic success for working class African American students in *The Dreamkeepers* (1994), Ladson-Billings tells of one second grade teacher who bookends the daily schedule with conversations about how each child was successful at school that day. Sometimes a student will share a social skill they felt good about that day, and another day the same child might tell about doing well on a math assignment. With support from their teacher, these young people learn to frame, and claim ownership of, their academic and nonacademic successes.

CRP can be viewed as a move toward conceiving of elementary school children as knowers who not only consume, but can also produce new knowledge. For example, the African American boys in Boutte and Hille's (2006) study showed academic gains when their third grade teacher put them in charge of a long-term unit based on black barbershops. When success is viewed through the lens of academic autonomy, we can encourage students to more fully inhabit themselves by making choices about when and

how to take responsibility for their school learning (Ladson-Billings, 2001).

Katrina Jocson (2008) documented June Jordan's "Poetry for the People," or "P4P," after-school literacy program. P4P's pedagogical strategies provided urban high school students with a venue to express and further develop social consciousness. The program's practice-process-product framework allowed students to view what may have begun as personal revelations through poetry as something that, through publication and/or performance, might connect with others' experiences. This extension of the personal to the social had varying effects; for some students it remained a private forum that reflected their engagements with the social world, while for others it became a medium through which they engaged outward. For one student in particular, social consciousness flowed through and beyond his poetry, and his performances became an avenue to invite others to join in a call to action. Whether it served as the reflection or the reflector, poetry through P4P seems to have activated the social consciousness of each of the focal students. While this work was conducted with high school students, the question of the best scenarios for developing sociopolitical consciousness is similarly relevant in elementary settings.

In their study of Canadian elementary and secondary teachers, Parhar and Sensoy (2011) found that those who were identified as culturally relevant "used the curriculum as an entry point to instilling a sense of critical awareness" (p. 198). They worked *with* the mandated curriculum to make it relevant to their students. This study sought to confirm and extend the original tenets of CRP, and determined that CRP demands that teachers allow for shared ownership of school-related decisions with families and other school

staff, and requires ongoing professional development to support teachers (Parhar & Sensoy, 2011).

Teachers in these studies framed critical thinking as a primary goal of activating their students' sociopolitical consciousness, especially regarding how school curricula can reflect social injustices. In their profiles of elementary school teachers who self-identified as social justice educators, Esposito and Swain (2009) describe a process of interrupting the messages of social reproduction that convince dominant and marginalized students of their rightful places in society. Silva (2010) found that a first grade teacher's transgressive approach to teaching sociopolitical consciousness permitted her students to take on identity orientations aimed toward social change.

Siedl (2007) found that engaging preservice teachers in an intensive community experience contributed to their developing bicultural identities, which she determined is necessary for teachers to develop culturally relevant pedagogy. The preservice teachers' immersion in an African-American community context was coupled with intensive and interactive reflection, through which the teacher educator and a small number of students worked together to read, review, and revise their stories about working toward their personalized versions of culturally relevant pedagogy.

The power of such intensive and supportive relationships between teacher educators and teachers learning to develop CRP is clear in Hefflin's (2002) work. Through conversation and study with Hefflin, a colleague finds new ways to engage students by making literature and discussion choices based on her students' knowledges and experience as African-Americans. This study is also, however, an example of CRP

that does not attend to sociopolitical consciousness, but instead focuses more simply on increasing engagement and achievement by de-centering white and middle-class perspectives in school curricula.

Schultz and his fifth graders from the Cabrini Green housing projects in Chicago offer an illuminating example of CRP, where the drive for justice comes first and other goals fall into place as a result (Schultz, 2007; 2008). For this to happen, Schultz (2008) describes plainly, “the role of the teacher is to provide opportunity and space to students” (p. 4). In his case, this meant introducing his class to the idea that they could design a project aimed at improving something in their school community. After brainstorming, the class realized that many of their ideas were connected to a need to replace their dilapidated school building, and so this became the focus of an all-encompassing yearlong effort. As Schultz learned to step back and reconsider his role as a guide to his students, meaningfulness grew from students' control and ownership of the curriculum (Schultz, 2008). The authenticity of the project's tasks, rooted completely in the children's lives, allowed them to progress beyond grade-level expectations. Test scores and attendance rates increased, and the need for discipline decreased (Schultz, 2008). Actual *change* was at the root of these students' goals, not charity. It is important to note, as well, that Schultz drew from the intellectual and social resources provided to him as a graduate student while he and his students engaged in this project (Schultz, 2008); CRP requires time, commitment, reflection, and support.

Culturally relevant teachers also create space within standards and mandates to place students' perspectives at the center of the curriculum. Schultz emphasizes that

viewing curricula and teaching this way requires teachers to see themselves as constantly theorizing their practice. Indeed, he notes that, as he took on this student-centered approach to teaching, he had to reconsider the role of lesson planning. While he went in to every lesson with countless ideas for how things might go, Schultz describes having to let go of the idea that his lesson plan would actually dictate how things would go. To be truly student-centered, he had to be prepared for any number of scenarios, and he wrote up detailed and reflective “lesson plans” to submit to school administration after the fact. By widening the available routes to academic achievement, his students developed a remarkable sense of ownership of their school experiences while still demonstrating formally-measurable achievement gains (Schultz, 2008). Sociopolitical consciousness was at the absolute root of this work.

Challenges in pursuit of CRP

CRP’s instrumental role in increasing academic outcomes for students of color is a slippery target, which may also help to explain the dearth of evidence linking CRP to measurable increases in elementary school student achievement. This is a primary challenge that educators seem to face in their efforts to develop CRP. The studies reviewed here tend to measure success by formative and informal assessment measures rather than by attempting to link the students’ experiences with CRP to standardized test scores. In addition, because CRP tends to be enacted on an individual classroom level and elementary school students tend to have the same teacher for only one year, it would be difficult to isolate the relationship between a culturally relevant approach to teaching and learning and increases in standardized student achievement.

When approached too shallowly, CRP can present dangers. For example, Abbate-Vaughn (2008) describes a teacher education program that uses children's literature to initiate discussions about the experiences of culturally and linguistically diverse students. While the preservice teachers do gain exposure to multicultural literature, the text choices feature individual success stories but fail to situate the individuals within a sociocultural context; thus, the message can be misconstrued as evidence that anyone can succeed, so our education system must be equitable.

The white elementary school teacher in Hyland's (2009) study learned to frame knowledge in innovative ways and to diminish the fallacy of the omniscient teacher by acknowledging her own instances of not-knowing. She also, however, struggled to connect with black parents and became defensive of her attempts at making meaningful connections in the African-American community. While these authentic relationships in and with communities are more frequently described in CRP literature about high school and community settings (e.g., Duncan-Andrade, 2004; 2010), Schultz's work is one notable exception. After one year of teaching fifth grade at an elementary school in Chicago's Cabrini Green housing projects, Schultz, a white man, realized he was not connecting with his African American students or their families (Schultz, 2007; 2008). The project described in the previous section was initiated by Schultz's realization that it was *him* and his approach to curriculum and pedagogy that needed to change.

Dutro, Kazemi, Balf, and Lin (2008), a team comprised of researchers and an elementary school teacher, investigated how cultural relevance was pursued in one diverse classroom. These authors highlight an extended unit during which fourth and fifth

graders conducted interviews and other forms of research to create displays of their cultural identities. The assignment required students to identify themselves with a single cultural identity (if the student was both African-American and white, for example, she would choose to focus on either her African or European ancestry), which, the teacher noted later, led to the mistaken conflation of *culture* and *country*. Nonetheless, the authors defined the project as reinforcing cultural competence because “children were asked to bring their home experiences and cultural backgrounds explicitly into a classroom” (Dutro et al., 2008, p. 270). We must consider, though, what a lesson like this truly communicated to students about culture and what it means to be culturally competent. For example, choosing a single culture and representing it visually may reinforce messages that culture is unitary and fixed, or that one's daily life is necessarily shaped by one's historical ancestry.

CRP scholars frequently acknowledge the risks associated with developing CRP. Epstein and Oyler (2008) tell of a first grade teacher's complicated work managing an accountability-focused mandated curriculum while working toward building sociopolitical consciousness among young children. This is promising because, despite being criticized for making what were construed as overly political moves in the classroom, the teacher acknowledges the limitations of the present system while working to change it. Further studies should look more deeply at how CRP can be both politically progressive and work from within to transform the mainstream.

On the other hand, risk can also refer to the culturally relevant educator's ability to interrogate his or her own work around sociopolitical consciousness. Young (2010)

found that several of the elementary educators in her study struggled to integrate sociopolitical consciousness into their understanding of a pedagogical framework that emphasizes academic achievement. One white teacher in particular demonstrated reluctance to discuss social injustice with her racially diverse elementary school students, citing what she perceived as young children's limited ability to perceive oppression. Importantly, Howard (2003) makes a case for teacher education and professional development to do a better job addressing these issues throughout teachers' careers; indeed, sociopolitical consciousness cannot be developed in students if their teachers have not done this work themselves.

Because of its local situatedness, we cannot rely on one success story to provide a road map for how to "do" CRP in other contexts (e.g., McKinley, 2006). Likewise, it is important to note that sociopolitical consciousness is going to have different faces in different communities. Epstein and Oyler (2008) describe the coming-to-consciousness of a group of middle-class, white elementary school students who learned big lessons about global injustice. In their case, the authors believed that unjust aspects of life in society had to be brought into the classroom to make them real for the students, who had not previously seen themselves in such struggles.

Sociopolitical consciousness tends to be the least-studied component of CRP (Morrison, Robbins, & Rose, 2008). Like CRP's other two tenets, much of the work around CRP and sociopolitical consciousness frames it as something that students from the dominant society can develop in order to understand what life is like for marginalized people. For example, in Epstein and Oyler's (2008) discussion of building solidarity

among first graders, a teacher and her students designed “social action” projects that grew organically from discussions about academic content. While the goal of this study is explicitly critical, the language around dominance so easily slips toward being focused primarily outward, from the benevolent toward the disenfranchised, and sociopolitical consciousness is positioned as only visible through social action. Certainly, building empathy for the plight of some “Other” can be an important component of CRP, and the study does demonstrate that empathy can be developed in young children through an awakening of sociopolitical consciousness via academic curriculum (Epstein & Oyler, 2008). However, a focus on the Other fails to engage with Freire’s (1970) claim that the oppressor and the oppressed are engaged in the same struggle for liberation. This notion of entangled struggles needs particular emphasis in predominately white settings where colorblind discourse dominates and community members may be suspicious of the relevance of race in the first place (Lewis, 2003).

Students of color and other marginalized students need to be walked through this stage of consciousness-raising less frequently, however. Milner (2010) shares one white teacher’s process of coming to know what his middle school students already knew about their positioning within dominant society. The teacher needed to rewrite his own scripts in order to honor his students’ lived experiences. Here again, CRP shows itself as difficult to both define and enact.

While the white teacher in Milner's study made quick changes to become more culturally relevant, the challenge is not always so easily recognized in communities unaccustomed to racial and other forms of diversity. Describing how this can happen,

Garza and Crawford (2005) introduce the term *hegemonic multiculturalism*:

The result of dissonance between a school's desire to promote an inclusive and welcoming learning environment for their culturally and linguistically diverse students and the pervasive, yet persuasive, assimilation agenda that underlies instructional practices and programs designed to educate them. (p. 601)

In the prestigious suburban district they studied, Garza and Crawford determined that English learners there were "disciplined to emulate and internalize this [hegemonic multicultural] ideology" (p. 600). In other words, this study found dissonance between professed ideology and assimilationist practice among teachers.

Sleeter (2012) suggests that this agenda may be linked to broader trends in U.S. politics and education. Expressing concern with the role of neoliberal reforms in diminishing the presence and impact of culturally relevant approaches in United States schools, she suggests "political work to combat its marginalization due to persistent simplistic conceptions of what it means, and backlash prompted by fear of its potential to transform the existing social order" (p. 2).

Tying the educational process to the marketplace has implications that are antithetical to the aims of CRP. In particular, this leads us to value students based on their ability to *contribute* in a purely economic sense, which then ties curriculum and assessment too tightly to a way of thinking and being, with less space for creative problem solving or true engagement with the people, places, and ideas that make up our worlds. In addition, Sleeter (2012) argues that even when education reforms focus on reducing racial achievement gaps, the solutions they rely on still attempt to use a

“context-blind” (p. 4) approach to curriculum and instruction that was designed from a white, English-speaking perspective.

Ullucci (2011) investigated what she refers to as the translation process that occurs when new teachers attempt to draw on teacher education coursework in CRP. While I agree with her concern about engaging gaps between theory and practice, I argue that when this content is new to teachers (whether in-service or pre-service), the translation process may be premature. Just like we argue with CRP for younger students, teachers need a “hook” to place the tenets of CRP within their own understandings and experiences first, and then they can think about bringing those new understandings into their work in schools.

Finally, moving beyond the anthropological roots discussed above, Paris (2012) has most recently offered an astute critique of the terms *relevant* and *responsive* in these traditions, offering “culturally sustaining pedagogy” as a new development in the CRP literature:

The term *culturally sustaining* requires that our pedagogies be more than responsive of or relevant to the cultural experiences and practices of young people—it requires that they support young people in sustaining the cultural and linguistic competence of their communities while simultaneously offering access to dominant cultural competence. (p. 95)

Paris' proposal, while not adequately attending to a critique of the social order, remains an important reminder that CRP's ultimate goal is to decenter dominant narratives about what it means to succeed in school and society.

The present study within CRP literature

To engage with CRP among elementary school students, their teachers need to be able to take risks, as the white, female teacher in Hyland's (2009) study did by acknowledging her need to understand her own racial identity better as she tried to improve her relationships with families of color. Perhaps more importantly, this fourth grade teacher reflected that teachers who want to ignite their students' sociopolitical consciousness must be prepared and willing to take risks in the sense that CRP in general, and sociopolitical consciousness in particular, consists of transgressive acts toward dominant school culture. Novice teachers like the one in Hyland's study may have the belief and motivation to build sociopolitical consciousness, but they may not feel they can take professional risks by modifying their curriculum and pedagogy.

As a whole, the present literature on developing CRP in elementary settings is clear about the risks of engaging with CRP, but less clear on how these struggles play out in real settings, particularly in contexts where teachers in more than one classroom are trying to develop CRP at the same time. Perhaps this is because it is simply too hard a task to manage in the present educational climate, as Young (2010) suggests in her statement that sociopolitical consciousness can be raised in individual classrooms, but not on a systemic level when the education system already operates from what could be considered a sociopolitically dysconscious paradigm. Indeed, this concept undergirds the step that Pioneer City Schools took when they attempted to make aspects of CRP a part of their organizing framework for policy and practice. However, they reached an impasse in the process of institutionalizing something that is critical of institutions. This leaves

two options: Change the institution in response to the critique offered by CRP, or soften the critique so it fits within the constraints of the institution.

This dissertation makes contributions that address two key needs for additional scholarship around CRP in elementary school settings. First, on a broad and basic level, we need more studies that consider the relationship between CRP as a theoretical model and CRP as conceived and developed in real elementary school classrooms. Second, the theoretical model remains incomplete without a more robust consideration of what happens in the process of translation when a transformative theory meets a reproductive institution. Thus, I have paid particular attention to what may have contributed to this missing, critical element of CRP literature. I argue that a genuine culturally relevant pedagogy eluded them from the beginning because of the irresolvable tension between ideologies of excellence and equity, rooted in an unchanging notion of what success is and can be in public schooling and aided by an incomplete process of teacher education that addresses the contexts of school and society. In response, I see two primary areas of need: additional and deeper work toward helping teachers understand how oppression works in society, followed by work among educators at all levels toward making curriculum and teaching decisions that are informed by those understandings (Ullucci, 2011).

The perspective that U.S. society offers a level playing field for academic and other forms of success tends to hold tightly to its conception of democracy as dependent upon a shared set of information. In this view, education can be a great equalizer (e.g., Hirsch, 1987). Those of *us* who succeed have only ourselves to thank, and those who fail

have only themselves to blame. Such a claim, pervasive in the meritocratic structure and functioning of U.S. schooling, is dismissive of the ever-present effects of the systematic and systemic racism that have been part of the United States since its beginning.

Culturally relevant pedagogy can and should be positioned as a transformative effort to reshape the role of education in society toward one that is liberatory for all students. As I discuss in Chapter 5, the need for these transformative efforts is just as great in predominately dominant communities as it is in predominately marginalized ones.

Conclusion

Culturally relevant pedagogy is about power. Acknowledging and seeking to dismantle the many ways that power relationships structure life in school and society flies in the face of much public discourse around education, where success is marked by scores, and relationships rendered virtually irrelevant. While this makes CRP difficult to argue for and enact in schools, it is also what makes CRP worthwhile.

Along with power, CRP is about hope for equitable education. Borrowing from Duncan-Andrade (2010), my hope is a critical hope, or one to which I hold tightly as I recognize the struggle ahead. I take as my own point of hope a conversation I had with a faculty member in May 2011. At a curriculum development meeting for teacher education programs, I sat at a table with a group of faculty members. My task was to respond to their questions about proposed curriculum changes that would require teacher education candidates to engage in intensive writing and discussion to investigate several dimensions of their identities. This faculty member, with whom I had enjoyed a friendly, hello-in-the-mailroom sort of relationship for several years, seemed to clam up the moment I started

talking about race and justice. When I asked about how his program area curriculum addresses race, he said that there is one textbook devoted to “multiculturalism” that some people use, but that he has never come across himself. Near the end of what had felt, until then, like a stunted conversation about addressing race and justice in teacher preparation, he suddenly opened up and said something along the lines of, “you know, we just need you to help us do this. I’m a [content area] person, and this hasn’t been part of my training or experience. It’s hard to give up what you know you’re good at to try something new, even when you know it will help us teach all students better.”

This conversation flooded my memory at a surprising moment later that summer on a woody drive with my husband and sons. To our left, the forest was hauntingly decimated, aside from some low-lying new growth hardly visible through the car windows. From the passenger’s side, though, was a verdant view of a storybook forest: a thick canopy teasing us with near-views of wildlife and purple, yellow, and red flora dotting the forest floor. The contrast confused and delighted our sons. Soon enough, my husband and I found ourselves stumbling to respond to some very detailed questions about the differences between forest fires and controlled burning, and why you would ever have to burn something down to make it come back stronger. After some fits and starts, I finally landed on a response. It is confusing, I told the boys, but when we want the whole forest to look strong, fresh, and green, it actually needs to be carefully burned down, unlocking the good nutrients that will find their way back into the soil while the others burn or float away in the air. We have to temporarily give up some of the beauty and life above the surface in order to gain something even better and deeper. Giving up

what you know “works,” whether it be the visual appeal of a lush forest or the automaticity of a tried-and-true approach to pedagogy, is never easy. But nothing worthwhile ever is.

Chapter 3

Research methods: Details and dilemmas

An early-morning conversation in September 2009 marks the moment I came to terms with how I could be both critical and an ethnographer. That morning, I rode in the backseat of a University-owned minivan along an unmarked dirt road on a northern Minnesota Native American reservation. The van transported two canoes and the day's guest of honor, an Ojibwe elder called Len who was going to teach my colleagues and me about the wild rice harvesting process. At the time, I worked as a Graduate Research Assistant on a grant-funded project aiming to work with teachers toward developing culturally relevant math and science curricula for Head Start students on the reservation. Much of our work was collaborative, but my official "professional development" label, my association with the local university, and my whiteness remained in the foreground for most of my interactions with reservation teachers and community members. En route to the lake, Len talked to me in an unusually candid way about the many interactions his community has had with people from the university. He had, for example, been instrumental in conversations with food scientists around genetically modified wild rice. Corn, another grain with historical and cultural significance to Ojibwe communities, has also come under contest between tribes and university researchers. Len explained the dizzying rules of ownership that can allow corporate farmers to seize corn grown on family farms if the crop has been tainted by corporate-owned seeds blowing in from nearby fields. These are dramatic examples, through which divergent perspectives vie for the same cultural and economic space. One might expect a person like Len to express

anger or disengagement from any sort of research negotiations with the university, especially considering the history of real and symbolic violence between U.S. institutions and American Indian tribes. Len took a different approach. As we started unloading canoes from the van, he told me that he saw hope for decolonizing research in and about education. At the end of the conversation, we agreed that the train had long ago left the proverbial station; universities hold knowledge in a different way than communities do, yet we retain some agency in shaping the power dynamics that result when universities engage with other institutions. To Len, the key is that relationships remain central. If we maintain the sense of humanity that drove our research interests in the first place, then perhaps there is hope for a just research methodology.

Theorizing and defining critical ethnography

As I describe how a critical ethnographic methodology manifested in this study, I want to be clear that methodology, distinct from data collection methods, refers to the theoretical orientation that guides and shapes a research project (Lather, 1992). The actual methods I employed while carrying out my dissertation study are informed by the methodological stance discussed in this section. I make this statement to guard against the potential for research methods to be viewed from a “how to” instead of “why should” mentality. Beginning with “why should” helps orient my research in a local social and cultural context. As Len’s story above illustrates, applying standardized research methods without considering local contexts can be yet another way for academic research to serve itself while brushing over the needs and interests of marginalized communities. When the “how to” is contextualized, as Quantz (1992) suggests, “method is fully embedded in

theory and theory is expressed in method” (p. 449). Such synergy between theory and method can generate forward motion. Underlying this paradigm is a view of structure as a force that constrains, but does not determine, social behavior. This implies a critical realist stance, one in which we recognize the role of structure in shaping action while also allowing for agentive human creativity (Coupland & Jaworski, 2009). Or, as Kincheloe and McLaren (2005) put it, “a pragmatics of hope in an age of cynical reason” (p. 321).

I came to critical ethnography with a view of research as something that should be *active*. In other words, it should be part of processes of change (Apple, 2006; Thomas, 1993). This notion of action grows from Gramsci’s (1971) call for scholars to play the role of “organic intellectual,” which involves engaging in the movements taken up on paper. Likewise, Apple challenges our academic critiques of institutions to move beyond simply *imagining* a new world order, and instead aim to affect what we *do* toward achieving it (Apple, 2009). These goals necessitate a critique of the research setting as it is, with eyes and ears on how things could be (Fine, 2006). Action is a necessary component of this vision of the possible. Nevertheless, immersing oneself in ethnographic work in a school makes it easy to become caught up in the day-to-day. Remembering to take note of the space between what is and what could be was a constant challenge during the data generation phase of this project; alternate paths toward organic intellectualism are a frustrating undercurrent to my data analysis, as each way I read my own stories shows another set of “could-have-beens.”

Kincheloe and McLaren (2005) describe social theory as map or guide to the social sphere. With this image, I can envision theory as the foundation for action; as I grappled

with dilemmas in the field, I continually returned to my theoretical foundations, particularly those built by critical scholars who help me maintain grounding in a sincere notion of praxis. As defined by Freire, one of its most noted champions, praxis comprises, “the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it” (1979, p. 79). Making the link to educational settings, Apple (2009) urges scholars to maintain a sense for the actual locations where theories are lived out, so that our thinking about how life works *in schools* is the thinking we apply to our analyses of school settings. As bell hooks (1994) suggests, when theory and practice work in tandem, we never really step out of one and into the other:

When our lived experience of theorizing is fundamentally linked to processes of self-recovery, of collective liberation, no gap exists between theory and practice. Indeed, what such experience makes more evident is the bond between the two—that ultimately reciprocal process wherein one enables the other. (p. 61)

These comments recall my note about culturally relevant pedagogy as an *ethical position* in the previous chapter.

The above is not meant to imply that I achieved some sort of synergistic rhythm in this study early, easily, or really ever. Early in the school year, when I felt so excited about spending my time in a school again, when my obsession over the lives of these third graders could be interrupted only by my own children waking up from a nap and asking for a snack, I remember asking a friend if she had ever had a “reading phase” during data collection. She laughed and responded that the reading phase never ended. I had been so immersed in the first few weeks of life in school that I had forgotten I would

need to come up for air, to immerse myself anew in other scholars' work to find where my own interpretations fit within the history of ideas. This conversation initiated my first cycle of praxis; awakened by my friend's laughter, I read through my field notes from the previous week and returned to texts I had already read, beginning to weave my early experiences in the field together with their words. As I continued to read, talk, and observe, I found new texts to engage with in the same way. This became my pattern.

Critical ethnography is rooted in poststructural theories. Growing from a critique of the Enlightenment, these perspectives have in common a belief that perceptions of "truth" can never be guaranteed (Thomas, 1993). The role of power in negotiating what is accepted as "true" is central to these critical perspectives, as is Derrida's foundational notion that language (signs and symbols) has a stronger role than presence alone as the basis of an object's truth. In other words, language, power, and truth travel an intersecting and contested terrain. Madison's (2005) description of postcritical ethnography also adds the contextualizing of positionality to render the researcher accessible, transparent, and vulnerable in the articulation and exploration of these theories through research. This offers a step beyond earlier postmodern approaches to ethnography that have been criticized as "armchair radical" (Thomas, 1993, p. 23) because the researcher is now recognized as a participant in the study. At times, I felt dizzy trying to recognize all these layers of complexity in the field, especially because when I was actually at the school, it was sometimes hard to remember that I was there to do more than enjoy the third graders. As I became more sophisticated in my role as a researcher, though, I saw the consequences of *not* attending to complexity on a regular basis; full and uncritical

immersion in the lives of my third grade friends would mean ignoring, among other things, the power dynamics at play in the school, thus missing important layers of analysis. I had to develop a more nuanced approach.

Applying Derrida's "metaphysics of presence" through a critical lens, Kincheloe and McLaren (2005) discuss how the very meaning of symbols is negotiated via power relations. If signs and symbols reinforce our perceptions of objects, repeating "white" to describe the color of frozen water falling from the sky is what assigns meaning to the notion that white signifies snow, not any inborn characteristic of the snow itself. If nothing is certain or standard, then we cannot claim that the symbols we use continue to signify the same thing over time. The notion of an objective reality is incompatible here (Carspecken, 1996).

"Truth" and rigor

Another consequence of de-privileging objectivity is that the pursuit of truth becomes complicated. Viewing "truth" as multifaceted and multi-perspectived blows open possibilities for collaborative relationships, and praxis, to emerge through the research process. As researcher subjectivity entered the conversation around ethnographic methods, ethnographers could no longer be seen as speaking for anyone but themselves; nor could the work be considered "uncontestable" by participants (Angrosino, 2005, p. 731) or representative of an objective Truth.

Space opens up for a reframing of validity when we reject objectivity as a criterion for rigor. Lather (1993) invites us to move forward in the poststructuralist project by interrupting the idea that validity is achievable as an "epistemic guarantee" (p. 675),

instead describing validity as “multiple, partial, endlessly deferred” (p. 675). Proposing “consciousness-raising” as a validity criterion, Dennis (2009, p. 70) takes an approach to validity that is concerned with ethics, as opposed to the more common concerns around the sensitivity of the research instrument. A focus on ethics flips “validity” on its head, suggesting that instead of asking whether our results are on target, we consider the goodness of the target itself. Lather’s notion of “catalytic validity” (cited in Dennis, 2009, p. 70) brings us back to the goal of praxis, asking researchers to pay careful attention to what their work does beyond the page. This means becoming aware of both negative and positive consequences of one's work. Critical ethnography, as I conceive of it here, is more than an intellectual endeavor that *describes* injustices; a critical ethnographer is not satisfied with description, but suggests and commits to some sort of social action as the result of her work. These perspectives invite a reframing of critical qualitative research that, instead of justifying itself in the shadows of quantitative research, works from its own set of commitments and frames.

Locating commitments

In discussions about how to locate and respond to oppression, much attention is given to debates about which injustices to privilege. In Spring 2011, I heard Hill Collins address this concern with contempt for arguments that amount to what she called “my oppression is worse than your oppression” (P. H. Collins, public lecture, April 7, 2011). The entanglement of race and social class inspires particular vitriol, despite statements like this one from Kincheloe and McLaren (2005): “Economic factors can never be separated from other axes of oppression” (p. 308).

Like these scholars, I view oppressions as too multiple to completely disentangle any one completely from any other. Nonetheless, the central concerns and theoretical foundation of my study arise from the ways that race and racialization work in U.S. schools and society; thus, I primarily address those entanglements that emanate from issues related to race. For example, as I discuss further in Chapter 4, social class was often used as a stand-in for race in the district's public conversations about their transformation, whereas the motivation described to me behind closed doors was always racial justice. At the same time, I see capitalism as a political and economic system too insidiously molding of our thoughts and behavior to be left out of any analysis of schools and schooling.

Thus, to work toward a broader, intersectional approach to investigating questions about schooling, I work from a definition of education that encompasses both school and society (Lawrence, 2009). The image of bricolage helps me navigate the complexity of studying one institution that is so tied up in the fabric of social life: "Bricoleurs attempt to understand this fabric and the processes that shape it in as thick a way as possible" (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005, p. 320). For example, as I will discuss further in Chapter 6, focal student Dalmar could easily be framed in a simple way as a low-achieving, Somali-American student; viewing this student through a lens of bricolage reveals the intersecting impacts of Dalmar's special education diagnoses, family situation, and social class (among others).

Educational sociologists Becker and Gouldner debated questions of perspective-taking, or sympathetic orientations toward the "underdog," when the lines between super-

and subordinate are unclear. Indeed, this study never had clear fairy-tale heroes nor villains. Aiming for argumentative clarity by only orienting myself toward the interests of the underdog would undermine the presence of structural barriers that played a role in shaping those dynamics in the first place (Quantz, 1992). In addition, I argue that relationships in general, including those between institutions and individuals, are far too complex and problematic to be reduced to dichotomized fairytale versions. Indeed, district leaders and staff were my initial informants, professional connections, and in several cases, even old family friends. These same people drove the district's focus on racial equity to begin with. Likewise, emancipation is a deeper and more inclusive process than simply pulling marginalized people out of their various oppressive circumstances; true emancipation involves the oppressor as much as the oppressed (Freire, 1970).

In spite of this mutual entanglement, a key component of critical ethnography is its political stance. Critical ethnographers identify and take aim at aspects of the broader project of decolonizing academic research by privileging the interests and perspectives of the marginalized (Apple, 2009). In other words, I encourage a shift of the center typically occupied by the perspective of those in power. In the case of my study, I chose to place race at the center in an unjust educational, social, economic, and political climate. As Elie Wiesel declared in his 1986 Nobel Peace Prize lecture:

We must take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim.

Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented. Sometimes we must interfere. When human lives are endangered, when human dignity is in

jeopardy, national borders and sensitivities become irrelevant. Wherever men and women are persecuted because of their race, religion, or political views, that place must—at that moment—become the center of the universe.

My study

Michelle Fine (2006) writes that contesting researchers “dare to tell a story that must be told, from a small, hot space in hell, about possibility” (p. 163). Ever the optimist, I traveled, instead, to a place that its first European settlers reportedly called heaven. Through this study, I engaged in a homecoming to a place I never expected to revisit: my two brothers and I attended suburban Pioneer City schools for most of our K-12 educations, and my mother both taught and served as an administrator in the district’s elementary schools from 1976-2005.

As Fine (1994) also noted, “Othering protects us from what’s inside our homes” (p. 74). My former hometown offered me fewer places to hide in this sense than, say, the urban high school closer to my current home, because there I could build up ways to observe from a distance. As I discussed in Chapter 2, the white, female teacher/researcher's presence in an urban school is a familiar trope and would have come as no surprise to the predominately Latino/a, African American, and African immigrant students at my neighborhood high school. However, as I re-entered the familiar physical and social world of Pioneer City Schools, notions of the Other often felt more blurry, especially when temporal space was considered; for example, while I may be able to draw on the “insider” status in Pioneer City that comes from having been part of that community in the past, I have consistently made choices as an adult that distance me

from much of what constitutes suburban life. For example, my transracial family and I live in the city, we bike, walk, and take public transportation whenever we can, and diversity is both a goal and a reality in our regular interactions. In my notes one morning at Harris Creek, I noted the following:

I wouldn't know who to "other" if I had a choice: I view school so differently than the adults here seem to, and the students of color differ from me on all demographic markers yet seem more like my own children than anyone else here.

(Field note, October 12, 2011)

This blurring of positionality can be an asset as I seek to actively deconstruct commonly held values about what, and whose, knowledge matters (Smith, 1999).

Site

In the twelve years between when I left Pioneer City as a high school graduate and when I returned as a graduate student researcher, more students of color and English learners began to enroll in the district, changing the demographics of the formerly 99% white and native English-speaking population. By 2009, 75% of Pioneer City's students were white, 10% were Asian American, 11% were African American (including black and African immigrant students), and 4% were Latino/a students. 95% of Pioneer City High School's graduates go on to college, bolstered by \$5 million in scholarships and grant money. 12.7% of all Pioneer City students receive free or reduced price lunch. Milner (2012) would classify Pioneer City as an "urban characteristic" setting, since it remains geographically and organizationally distinct from the nearby urban center but has seen increases in English learners and students of color.

Signs for several different neighborhoods are visible from the center lane as you enter Pioneer City via its northernmost freeway exit. Names like “Whistler Creek” and “Fox Meadow” carved into regal stone or wood structures rest in islands of landscaping rock, denoting the end of a public thoroughfare and the beginning of something both private and exclusive. Pioneer City’s recent high-profile awards—one national magazine’s “best place to live” designation and a local newspaper’s “best suburb” in an annual readers’ choice contest—both cite this sense of manicured allure. Beginning with the very entrance to this community, a sense of discipline through enclosure is evident. Whereas the streets in my own urban neighborhood feel and are treated like public space, making a left turn into the Fox Meadows neighborhood in Pioneer City means entering somebody else’s territory. The enclosure provided by these neighborhood signs can imply exclusion to the rest of us as much as they communicate exclusivity to those who live there (Smith, 1999).

Harris Creek Elementary emerges as the road curves between a small residential neighborhood and a lake split in half by the same road, which seems dangerously close to disappearing underwater. When I began the pilot for this study, Harris Creek Elementary was one of four elementary schools in Pioneer City, but it became one of five as part of a district wide transformation in the 2011-2012 school year⁵. This transformation included, among other changes, the introduction of a fifth elementary school as the district changed from elementary schools serving kindergarten through grade four to kindergarten through grade six. At the same time, the elementary school boundary map in the district was

⁵ These changes are described in greater detail in Chapter 4.

redrawn in order to balance the placement of marginalized students in schools throughout the district. Approximately fifty students who attended other schools the previous year attended Harris Creek beginning in Fall 2011, and vice versa. Each Harris Creek teacher was told to expect her or his class to include approximately 25% new students. Most of the students who were new to Harris Creek in 2011 came from Village Woods Elementary, the elementary school with the highest population of students of color, immigrant students, and students receiving free or reduced-price lunches.

Research questions

I began with the following research questions: *How are the experiences of elementary school students and their families shaped by efforts to address institutional racism through culturally relevant pedagogy? How does a district wide focus on race either bring or fail to bring race "to the table" in the everyday lives of students and their families?*

Over the course of the 2011-2012 school year, the focus of this study shifted in response to changes within the research setting (such as the superintendent's departure) and my findings. Importantly, my understanding of the powerful presence of dominant discourses in Pioneer City in particular and throughout U.S. education in general made it increasingly difficult to see the individual classroom as the singular entry point for a study addressing issues of this magnitude. In addition, I grew less sure that students' experiences *were* consistently shaped by an explicit focus on CRP as I saw the social drama unfold (see Chapter 4).

The questions that ultimately guided this study, then, are as follows: *What can the*

experiences in one classroom teach us about the school district's efforts to place culturally relevant pedagogy at the forefront of changes in policy and practice? How can the lessons learned in this district and classroom be applied toward deeper understandings of CRP, race, and schooling?

Shifts in my research questions occurred along with changes in Pioneer City: the aforementioned demographic changes also changed the work of educators in Pioneer City. Dr. Anna Kelly was Superintendent of Pioneer City Schools from 2002 until September 2011. Upon the transition to Superintendent Kelly's leadership in 2002, Pioneer City faculty and staff began taking up notions of racial equity as central to their work toward serving all students. Much of this work emanated directly from Superintendent Kelly's office; indeed, district leaders have described Kelly's work as a "personal mission" for which she was ultimately willing to "put her own career on the line."⁶ Thus, rather than growing organically from classroom experiences, the emerging discourse of culturally relevant pedagogy—translated as *equity* in Pioneer City—was a top-down imposition from district leadership to classroom teachers and other education professionals. By the time this discourse made its way through the administrative staff and to the school level, it looked and sounded different. As one example, an administrator told me in an interview that, during this initial period of change, teachers shifted toward saying things like, "I'm not meeting the needs of that student' instead of saying 'that student isn't performing'" (Interview, March 23, 2011).

⁶ Pioneer City's approach to instituting culturally relevant policies and practices was rooted in a belief that change should spread from the top down. The sentiment that Dr. Kelly put her career on the line for the sake of her mission refers to the fact that she did, in September 2011, leave her position in Pioneer City Schools after significant tension with the school board that originated with her efforts toward the transformation.

The official discourse in Pioneer City Schools prior to the “transformation” stated that all students would do better by formal achievement measures (e.g., the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments, or MCAs) if students and resources were spread more evenly among the elementary schools. Through its language around equity, the professional development discourse stated (as I did in Chapter 2) that CRP offers a route to sociopolitical consciousness, academic success, and cultural competence, and that administrators and classroom teachers should strive to incorporate its tenets. I frame what district leaders initiated as “contesting pedagogy” (Fine, 2006) because their work involved a rearticulation of how things had tended to work for marginalized students in this changing school district.

The contestation met resistance: Beginning in 2010, a small but vocal opposition group organized protests, sent emails, and utilized Facebook as a forum to express their disagreement with the Superintendent’s mission. A small number of families enrolled in private schools or moved to other districts and a potentially significant lawsuit was brought against the district by an anonymous group of parents (the lawsuit was dropped shortly after Superintendent Kelly’s departure), both in protest of the changes in Pioneer City. Much of this resistance targeted Superintendent Kelly and/or the cost and perceived radical politics of the “Seeking Educational Equity” professional development program (described in Chapter 4). Local radio, television, and newspaper outlets took an interest in these events, providing a rich document trail as well as forums for public debate.

Participants

In Spring 2011, I conducted a pilot study to gain familiarity with people in the

school district and begin to understand their primary concerns. Through this process, I developed relationships with several key participants: then-Superintendent Anna Kelly, three other members of the district's executive cabinet, Harris Creek Elementary School principal Carmen Hanson, and Harris Creek third grade teacher Mary Jacobs. After I shared my plans for the pilot project with Superintendent Kelly, she described a funnel: the big-picture information-gathering of the pilot study would flow through the wide part of the funnel before narrowing in focus and clarity. The funnel image helped me visualize the shifting of attention toward the more specific research questions that I identified during the pilot study.

Superintendent Kelly served a funnel role, herself, when I first approached her about conducting this study, by asking one of her cabinet members to send out a request to each of the four elementary school principals in Pioneer City to solicit interest in my study. Two principals responded, and I was encouraged to move forward with Carmen Hanson at Harris Creek. Carmen and I then began communicating on a regular basis, and she took over the final stage of funneling by inviting all members of the Harris Creek "equity team" to consider participating in the study. Mrs. Jacobs and one other teacher expressed interest, and Carmen and I agreed that Mrs. Jacobs and I sounded like a good fit: I had hoped to be in a primary grade classroom, and Mrs. Jacobs had both a stated commitment to racial equity and a self-conscious concern that she had much more learning to do. One October morning before the school day started, Mrs. Jacobs told me that one reason she agreed to the study was that while she had completed her Master's degree several years earlier and knew she would not go on toward another degree, she

still wanted to find ways to continue learning.

While I maintained contact with district-level administration to follow the shaping effects of their decisions, my daily interactions in Pioneer City were primarily with Mrs. Jacobs and the students in her classroom. All of the third graders placed in Mrs. Jacobs' classroom (which included twenty white students and six immigrant students of color) were invited to participate in my study during a welcome meeting on a Thursday evening in mid-September 2011. General participation in the study entailed allowing me to be present in the classroom approximately two days per week throughout the school year and to document what I saw and heard. As I got to know the students during the fall semester, I identified seven third graders to ask to be focal participants, of whom six agreed to participate. This relationship involved additional one-on-one and group recorded interviews and some sharing of the students' academic work. To obtain consent from focal participants, I sent letters home to all seven students in early December 2011. The following day, three of the seven returned the signed letter and consent forms. A fourth student returned his forms in January, immediately after winter break. By the third week of January, when I had not yet heard from the remaining three focal participants, I sent home another copy of the letter. Two of the three students returned their signed forms the following day. When I did not hear back from the final student, I chose not to pursue his participation further.

Data sources and research procedures

As Lather (1992) describes, research science as long ago as Galileo was meant to be emancipatory, although it did not take long for the rules and order of method to

overburden any broader goals. Thus, I articulate the influences, goals, and bounds of my research stance with some trepidation. The last thing I want is for the emancipatory potential of critical ethnography and other forms of critical research to be similarly swallowed by academic processes.

Such decisions as methodology, notetaking techniques, and descriptions of research settings all reflect the ways of knowing that influence how I interpret what I see and hear (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). Thus, the findings I demonstrate through this work may be driven as much by the circumstances they represent as by the epistemological beliefs underlying the methods I use (Tillema et al., 2008). These methods included participant observation, formal and informal interviews, reflective journaling, and document analysis. I began collecting public documents, such as newspaper articles and notes from school board meetings, when I began the pilot study in January 2011. These documents offer a rich source of historical perspective as well as insight into how Pioneer City Schools projects itself and is portrayed by others. I conducted participant observation approximately two days per week throughout the 2011-2012 school year. Most of these observations took place in Mrs. Jacobs's third grade classroom, the lunchroom, and the playground. I also made occasional visits to other classrooms, whole school events, and meetings with other school and district personnel, and I had conversations with families and community members.

During each participant observation session, I took handwritten notes and then typed them into elaborated field notes. In addition to the elaborated field notes, I conducted ongoing and summative analyses. For example, I completed weekly field logs

that include preliminary analytic and reflective memos. In the early stages, these served as guideposts to help me track and seek out more elaborated data themes. As my process became more focused toward the primary themes explored in Chapters 4, 5, and 6, my documentation techniques evolved to include more integrative writing instead of regular fieldlogs. Still, I maintained extensive records of each visit to Harris Creek, numbering each visit so that any scratch notes, field notes, analytic memos, documents, interviews, or other information I documented could be traced back to their origins.

I used interviews in different ways as the year progressed. At the beginning of the year, interviews were part of relationship-building and information-gathering processes. I interviewed four key adult participants in early Fall 2011, with additional informal interviews with Mrs. Jacobs as we both considered how her efforts toward equity-oriented teaching were taking shape in light of the district changes. Beginning in January 2012, I changed my routine from eating lunch in the cafeteria on Wednesdays to inviting focal students, individually and in groups, to eat lunch with me in Mrs. Jacobs's classroom. This served as a social space for the focal students and me, and also provided a forum for interviews that did not interfere with the students' academic schedule. From what I could tell, lunch meetings with Ms. Mason soon became a coveted experience among Mrs. Jacobs's third graders.

I paid careful attention to social and linguistic dynamics at play in all aspects of the research setting. The concept of interview as social practice, which contrasts with a more typical image of the interview as a research instrument (Talmy, 2010), was helpful here. By viewing the interview as a social occurrence, I acknowledge the interview event as

both performative and co-constructed (Talmy, 2012). From this angle, an interview can only be seen as one possible version or account, rather than as a report of the event. This understanding was especially important to consider in my interactions with the focal students around difficult questions that they did not usually discuss with other adults at school—they quickly came to know that I often wanted to talk with them about serious things, and so they often came to me with serious things to discuss. I sometimes felt that my very presence in the classroom served as a frame for talking about racial identity, school success, and friendship. However, other students' perceptions of me never seemed to shift from that of a nice lady who visits every once in awhile. Up until the afternoon of the last day of school, Neil confused me with Mrs. Ostlund, a paraprofessional who had left Harris Creek to have a baby in April. "I forget," he asked me, "were you the one who had a baby, or was that Mrs. Ostlund?"

I also paid particular attention to language during observations. The way we talk, especially the way we talk about things that matter deeply to us, can say much about the social and cultural "webs of significance" (Geertz, 1973, p. 5) in which we are suspended. Likewise, since children are socialized to and through language (Ochs, 1979), the way we talk about these topics in elementary school contexts has tremendous impact in the work that teachers do with their students.

Research participants co-construct reality by shaping the process and product of research (Islam, 2000). Regardless of which form we choose, the representation of this "reality" has consequences (Madison, 2005, p. 4). When a researcher transcribes and analyzes, she does what Briggs (2007) refers to as "recontextualization" (p. 562). In other

words, the way I choose to package a conversation that has occurred in the field, “shaping how it draws on other discourses and contexts” (Briggs, 2007, p. 562), affects what is available for others to interpret. The opportunity to recontextualize tends to be one-directional, adding to the colonizing potential of writing up ethnographic work. As mentioned above, no one can truly speak *for* someone else (Freire, 1970).

To strengthen my interpretations, I developed a form of member-checking by sharing my emerging themes with key adult participants (Mrs. Jacobs, Harris Creek principal Carmen Hanson, district administrator John McGlynn, and former superintendent Anna Kelly) during informal interviews and asking them to share their reactions to the ideas I was considering for inclusion in the final write-up of this study. This approach satisfied my desire to allow multiple perspectives to be heard, while acknowledging the impossibility of pleasing everyone involved in the study (Marshall & Rossman, 2006).

Analytic processes

Near the middle of the school year, a growing and uncomfortable feeling that my study was not explicitly about the kids in Room 103 limited my earlier analyses to what I can see now as naïvely tied to one analytic level or another. Even so, I still strived to gather extensive data from each level of analysis (macro, meso, and micro) in order to gain a complex view of the interactions among them. At that stage, my analytic memos would start out with a story about a conversation with a student, but before I knew it, I would be writing sweeping analyses about the need for changes in teacher education. My own struggle to navigate that terrain serves as further evidence that we need better

mechanisms for recognizing relationships across analytic levels or, as I wrote in Chapter 2, for harnessing the particular to gain a clearer view of the general.

In the early stages of my study, I conducted several rounds of open coding to fulfill two purposes: to begin identifying salient themes in the data, and to confirm that my methodological choices were giving me the sorts of information that might help me address my research questions. Ultimately, I built a hierarchical set of codes based on the appearance and relative importance of particular themes. For example, I saw that gender, in particular, became a fascinating element of life in Mrs. Jacobs' classroom. I continued to document and code that data when it arose, but I began to focus my observations and interview questions more tightly on the “final” research questions. I used Dedoose, a qualitative data analysis program, to track and code my data in the early stages, but this ultimately became a place for data storage and security, as I found hand-coding to be more suitable to my thought and organizational processes (apologies to the City of Minneapolis recycling program).

The story told through this dissertation is almost as much a reflection of my writing process as it is about Pioneer City's work toward racial equity. While I would not be lying to say that my analytic memos helped me narrow the focus of the study to its core themes, the full truth is much messier and more human. I came to deeper understandings of how I might weave my data, memos, and experiences in Pioneer City and elsewhere into a dissertation by writing (Richardson, 2000) and talking about my dissertation. I have joked that I took the *constant* in constant comparative analysis more seriously than Corbin and Strauss (1990) may have intended.

Position as researcher

Since the researcher is the primary instrument of qualitative research (Merriam, 2009), Peshkin (1988) argues that researchers should constantly consider how their multiple subjectivities shape the ways they interpret data. Positioning the researcher in terms of her subjectivity allows the reader to form a more complete judgment about the researcher's interpretation of events (Bonilla-Silva & Zuberi, 2008). In this study, my "subjective I's" (Peshkin, 1988, p. 18), such as white, female, middle-class, parent, former teacher, and former Pioneer City resident, undoubtedly shape how I read and interpreted the research setting. In addition, I engage with Talmy's (2010) extension of the "subjective I" concept, which criticizes limiting the discussion of subjectivity only to the methods section of a research report, by also considering it as a key part of the analysis.

It is important to situate the researcher as a subjective person who interprets new experiences based on cumulative impressions of the world. When we encounter an unfamiliar situation, we thus construct a whole new reality in our attempts to interpret it (Islam, 2000). As our understandings of the world are shaped by the perspectives we bring to new experiences, so are those new experiences shaped by the spaces in which we encounter them; as someone moves through a day, she sees and experiences her subjectivities differently on the street, at work, school, home, etc. (Gallagher, 2000). This explanation is complicated when applied to new situations that occur in a familiar setting. For example, as an educator conducting research in a classroom, my gaze is fixed on certain things and informed by theory, experience, and assumptions that would not be so

complex or developed in other settings. This insider status affords me a level of *entrée* into school settings as well as a more complicated perspective, because my own identities are entangled in my perceptions of the research setting (Schweber, 1997; Brayboy, 2000).

In my case, this means that biases, expectations, and connections to past experiences rush to the surface when I observe teachers in action. “Teacher” is a part of my identity, like white, female, middle-class, and heterosexual, which I must interrogate as I conduct research in schools. Other elements of my researcher positionality are articulated through my ontological and epistemological perspectives, both of which have implications for my decisions about methodology. I view the following components of my identity as salient enough to bear discussion in this study: my whiteness and middle class social status; being a heterosexual, married female, mother, and former classroom teacher; and my personal history and familial involvement in the Pioneer City school district. These categorizations shaped how I was able to negotiate entry and relationships, and continue to impact my work in both predictable and unforeseen ways. However, while the “researcher’s identity might bear on meaning and truth, it does not determine meaning and truth” (Young, 2000, p. 641). Thus, I toe a line that might mark an inflated sense of how the researcher’s identity shapes interactions in the field.

Nonetheless, even with the purest intentions, an unexamined researcher identity can have devastating consequences for the community involved in the study. I acknowledge that epistemological perspectives must be viewed as bound up in culture (Lather, 1992). Epistemological racism, of particular concern to me as a white woman studying issues around race in a predominately white school district, occurs when we use

methodologies that reflect the white sociohistorical experience to the exclusion of other ways of knowing (Scheurich & Young, 1997). I aimed to challenge this possibility through critical reflections and by soliciting honest feedback from critical friends at the University and in Pioneer City. Here again, I maintained my footing in the field by continuing to read and consider new theoretical perspectives. For example, I participated in three critical friend groups during my dissertation data collection and writing phases, each fulfilling a unique function related to workshopping our academic writing, providing accountability, and engaging in challenging discussions about our own and others' scholastic work. These relationships not only provided support and structure, but also kept me sharp, ensuring that I maintained focus on the emancipatory goals of critical ethnographic research.

A researcher's identity can be a source of power to observe and write about certain things with authority, but it also can complicate one's relationships with and within research settings (Griffin, 2007; Schweber, 2007; Sikes, 2006). As a budding white researcher, I can now describe several situations in which a sense of perceived camaraderie, usually racial, has allowed me entrée into a conversation that may have been closed, or different, to a researcher of color (Islam, 2000). On the other hand, I had several meetings with a community leader for an organization where I wanted to conduct a small study for a graduate school course. Multiple tensions arose in the process of negotiating entry, such as the community leader's overt concern for how the American Indian youth in her programs might react to a white woman they had never met before. Although she granted me permission to conduct the study, I continued to feel uncertain.

A few days later, we shared an honest conversation about how her site was probably not the best place to conduct such a short-term project, largely because of the baggage I brought as an unknown white researcher.

While I do not share this story as an argument for the white researcher “staying home” (Haw, 1996), I do acknowledge that race and power are always at play. How I make sense of the relationship between my whiteness and the type of access this grants me is a critical issue for me to grapple with in any research setting (Milner, 2007; Twine, 2000). In addition to this, of course, the outcomes of a research project can be shaped by the researcher’s ability or inability to negotiate a mutually agreeable role with participants (Blee, 2000). Were I to have conducted the study at the American Indian youth program, I am afraid that dynamics of power and privilege would have overshadowed any transformative possibilities, and that the risk of my work serving as a sort of culture collecting (Clifford, 1986; see below) was too great to continue.

This tension played out differently as I interacted with educators in Pioneer City, because of the ease I felt negotiating access. My identity, or my perceived identity, carried me into this study from the moment I first contacted the district superintendent in November 2010. At the end of her first email to me, she added, “AND say hello to your mom” (Personal communication, November 2, 2010). Before we even met, the professional relationships my mother had built as a teacher and administrator in the same district were opening doors for me and shaping people’s ideas about how I might act as a researcher and professional. As I initially negotiated entry, I felt three aspects of my identity working to make space for me in the district: my gender, my whiteness, and the

perception that I “fit in,” which was fueled as much by the other two dimensions of identity as by my personal and family history in the district.

As much as I can problematize the ease with which I was able to carve a space for my project, I also want to argue that there was a reason for my choice. Because of my history in the school district and my surface-level similarities to the white and female district leaders who allowed me to conduct my study there, I was granted not only access, but candid takes on their personal and professional thinking about racism, as well as thoughtful responses to my interview questions. Thus, these seemingly uncomplicated relationships served as the groundwork for deeper work than I perhaps could have done otherwise. However, I did not continue to feel the level of ease I felt upon those initial discussions in 2010; by the time I completed data compilation in June 2012, changes in district and school board personnel, professional development priorities, the efforts of the aforementioned opposition group, and the absence of Superintendent Kelly’s leadership had changed the level of attention that “equity” received on a district level, and I felt that district and community members’ responses to me had changed accordingly.

No matter the setting, our multiple identities are socially situated (Gee, 2005). Therefore, we access different parts of ourselves and different discourses depending on the situation. With these various forms and uses of language at our disposal, we use social language to “enact and recognize different identities in different settings” (Gee, 2005, p. 20). We not only shift language use according to the setting, but the *value* of language as a resource can differ according to context. In the midst of conversations in which multiple aspects of our identities are at play, such as when I respond to the school

principal's questions about how my mother is enjoying her retirement or swap funny stories about our children with Mrs. Jacobs, we make what Lewis and Ketter (2004, p. 132) call "subtle shifts" in social identity.

In other words, we make constant and often subconscious moves that serve to situate us within each new social interaction. For example, I noted in several interview transcripts how my tone and demeanor with students (and theirs with me) shifted when Mrs. Jacobs entered the room during our lunch conversations. Schweber (2007) probed for the significance of her comparative connectedness to Judaism and detachment from Christianity when she conducted research in settings dominated by members of each religion. In a similar way, I remained attentive to the shifting significance of my whiteness, female identification, and positioning as a daughter and educator during my work in this suburban school district; these varied aspects of my identity are "dynamic, contextual, and situational" (Brayboy, 2000, p. 419).

Schweber (2007, p. 78) discusses the complexity of attempting to "tame" one's subjectivity for the purposes of research. If, however, subjectivity were something that could be "tamed," then I feel qualitative researchers would push ourselves into a corner: the word "tame" seems to reinscribe objectivity as a goal. A tamed subjectivity would also be one that does not leave room for a complex and multi-faceted identity. Thus, I resist the notion of a subjectivity that can be tamed because I prefer seeing it as something that must be interrogated. Choosing the term "discipline" instead of "tame," while admitting that it too is a loaded term, makes this idea more palatable. According to Van Maanen (1998, p. 74), a "fieldwork confessional" in which the researcher reflects on

previous fieldwork can serve to “discipline the undisciplined” by staying focused on questions of subjectivity while maintaining forward motion.

Tensions and limitations of critical ethnography

The connection between ethnographic research methods and colonialism has been well established by critical scholars. Linguistic anthropologist Hymes acknowledged this link as early as 1969 (Schlee, 2010). In response to this critique, critical ethnographic methods reject the concept of knowledge as something to be “discovered” (Smith, 1999, p. 58), as if marginalized epistemologies only exist when they enter the domain of dominant culture. Remnants of this unsettling history remain, however, not the least of which include the objectification of participants as subjects of research and newer, less blatantly articulated research conducted on indigenous communities to determine their “educability” (Smith, 1999, p. 60).

Ethnography can also serve as what Clifford (1986) has described as culture collecting. Using the cover photo of *Writing culture* (Clifford & Marcus, 1986) as an example, Clifford illustrates how the detached style of early ethnographic writing allows the ethnographer to “disappear,” further emphasizing the sense of collection or discovery of lands and people unknown to the “civilized” Western reader. There were days at Harris Creek when I felt exactly like this, and there were also days when I wondered whether I should have just been a journalist, chronicling the same story on a tighter timetable and packaging it for public viewing without having to trouble with my own role in all of it.

Critical ethnography, done responsibly, positions participants as the owners of their

own stories (Winkle-Wagner, 2009). Along with this, the critical ethnographer's opportunity to engage in deep, genuine relationships with participants can contribute to a more thorough sense of story than can be achieved through other research methodologies. Critical ethnographers acknowledge that everything we experience is contextual (Carspecken, 1996); thus, the methodology allows a level of depth and sensitivity to context uncommon in academic research. Nevertheless, critical ethnography cannot be the sole and complete answer to society's ills. As implied above, one limitation that plagued me as I designed this study was that the pace of critical ethnography may outlast any instrumental change that its findings might suggest. In other words, can my work in Pioneer City "do" anything there, or will the findings need to be extrapolated to other contexts?

I entered the realm of critical ethnographic research late enough to avoid, I hope, too much resistance to the postmodern critique of such standards as objectivity and validity (Angrosino, 2005). However, with this critique come new responsibilities that I take seriously: in particular, to attend to the ethical challenge posed by an un-critical Institutional Review Board process as well as the ever-present potential for re-colonizing in my efforts to de-colonize.

Western cultural assumptions are inherent in Institutional Review Board practices (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Undergoing the review process for this study brought my ethical convictions into new perspective, as the feedback I received from the reviewer seemed to ask me to justify the goodness of a critical approach, with an implied assumption that the goals of traditional research can go unquestioned. And then, a year

and a half later when I applied for a continuation of approval, I received “access” to my participants for another entire year without being required to ask anything of my participants themselves. In addition, as I conducted my pilot study, I began to sense a disconnection between the words I used to describe my project and how participants articulated it back to me. The language of critical research is an esoteric one that I am learning to carefully recontextualize for various audiences.

Not doing so could pose real risks in the emancipatory goals of this work in the form of symbolic violence, like the studies described in the vignette about Len that opened this chapter. Oftentimes, such research both problematizes and places the onus on individuals and communities, rather than on social or structural barriers or the complex relationships between people, institutions, and the contexts in which they are situated. Thus, I avoid language that frames my observations in Pioneer City as problems among the participants that my research will help solve. I see my positionality as both a blessing and a burden in this sense; while historically, socially, and professionally entangled, I can also claim the unique preparation to read the research setting from a critical ethnographic perspective.

Critical ethnography engages a tension between craft and practicality that deserves some discussion. In the introductory chapter to Winkle-Wagner, Ortloff, and Hunter’s *Bridging the gap between theory and practice in educational research* (2009), the editors propose privileging the views and experiences of marginalized communities. Here, my sense was that the authors’ suggestions about “shifting the center” were being framed as a task for dominant researchers to “do better by” marginalized people, and not an actual

paradigm shift. The assumption that researchers are and will always be representatives of dominant culture troubles me as much as the notion that critical research should be “of service” to marginalized communities.

I note all of this with recognition of inevitable imperfection. For example, Valenzuela’s *Subtractive schooling* (1999), Pollock’s *Colormute* (2005), and Jaramillo’s *Immigration and the challenge of education: A social drama analysis in South Central Los Angeles* (2012) are book-length ethnographic studies that I consider touchstones in my development as a researcher. Nevertheless, all three make what I view as missteps in their research methods, particularly regarding the ways they record and re-voice participants’ dialogue with one another, and how their multiple roles (e.g., confidante, school adult, researcher) are negotiated with various participants. Recognizing these limitations helps me develop a sense of methodological conviction and personal ethnographic style.

Conclusion

Writing about critical ethnography and justifying the role it can play in social change means staking a claim on a perspective and laying out a series of expectations of myself as a scholar. This task requires deep self-reflection. In a more troubling way, though, while choosing critical ethnography came easily to me long ago, it comes with the territory that I still experience uncertainty. Without a doubt, conducting critical research carries with it a necessary amount of skepticism about why a critical thinker would even *try* to make change from the academy, when so much of the damage done to marginalized communities originated here. Is it too problematic to even move forward?

Then, I remember the power of language, and what a difference a critical perspective can make in framing the thinking that contributes to action. Critical perspectives interrupt the dominant narratives that frame public thinking on everything from who I should suspect of stealing my bike to what profession would suit my level of intelligence. Taking critical research out of the academy would mean erasing these de-centering narratives. Critical ethnography offers a place in the academy where we might “retain a vision of the not-yet” (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005, p. 309) and remain steadfast in refusing to accept the world as it is presented to us.

Chapter 4

Storying this social drama: People, policies, and practices in pursuit of transformation

The memory of my first ride to Pioneer City will be with me always. It was hot and dry in August of 1987, and I counted the minutes as we sped too fast down an unfamiliar highway, wanting to know just how much time was going to separate me from the cousins, friends, and neighbors who made my world. Maybe it was the long ride in the middle seat or the swirling gusts of unpacked soil recently separated from the roots of pine trees that had grown there, but something about this empty lot did not sit right with me. There is a photograph somewhere of my brothers and me perched on the pile of soil that would one day be our home: Paul and John knobby-kneed and indifferent, I with a bowl cut and a scowl.

Two months later, I am a first grader. I have recently turned seven. My family now lives in the new house built where a Christmas tree farm used to stand. My new friend, who raised her hand when the teacher asked someone to show me to the school library, is coming over for the first time. When I open the door, she turns to her mom and says, “see, I told you she was rich.” Our moms share embarrassed glances and introductions (it is important to note that in my mother’s version of the story, the friend and her mom drove up in a fancy Cadillac, at which point my mom thought to herself that we would never fit in in suburbia). I look at this new house with fresh eyes, unsure how to make sense of what my friend just said. My parents had described the move as a logical choice: from our old house near the lakes and creeks of the city, both my parents had

commuted to opposite sides of the metropolitan area every day, but this way, my brothers and I could attend school in the same district where our mother was a teacher. The house was modest by today's standards in Pioneer City, yet it was brand new and much larger than our previous home. My friend lived in "old" Pioneer City, where middle-class families lived in split-level houses, many adjacent to farmland (for a few more years, at least). The community was changing, and my family was a harbinger of what was to come. I remember trying to fall asleep the first night, wondering when the new house would stop smelling like paint and sheetrock and start smelling like a home.

My friend brought pink nail polish with her and snuck it downstairs to our unfinished basement. She hid the bottle from my mom, open, behind the red wooden chest where we kept our dress-up clothes. The bottle fell over sometime that day, leaving a mess that had already dried by the time I saw it. Pink pools stained the concrete there for years, each time reminding me of what she had said that first day. I, white, upper-middle-class and unaware of the new advantages conferred with our arrival in Pioneer City, of course had no idea what this move had set in motion for me. From my standpoint as a critical ethnographer, the seeds for my interpretation of the social drama I describe in this chapter were planted that day in 1987, when I received my initiation into Pioneer City's brand of excellence.

Transformations are always occurring, everywhere; my family's arrival in Pioneer City was part of an early wave of development that hit its stride in the mid-1990s, marking a period of major change as residential patterns shifted throughout the United States (Orfield, Frankenberg, & Lee, 2002). In particular, migration of white

families from urban centers to suburban enclaves, popularly termed “white flight,” was at its apex when my white family upgraded to our newly constructed two-story home with the vaulted ceilings and wooded backyard. The community we joined, Pioneer City, had a burgeoning elementary school population that literally busted at the seams; when construction of a new school could not keep pace with growth, some of us attended classes in a building borrowed from a neighboring district. My classmates elected me to the student council, which meant I got to be part of the team of students who wrote a “school song” for that yet-to-be-built building. I was an observer then, too, and I remember not saying much during the meetings when we brainstormed lyrics. Recalling the song, I cannot help being struck by its verbiage: here we sat in a borrowed school, children of a school district with not much of a reputation and an unknown future, yet the words in our song seemed to assert us as already exceptional.

The transformation that I analyze in this dissertation took aim at the very tropes that initially made a name for Pioneer City. Indeed, in the planning stages of the transformation, Superintendent Kelly consulted with groups of regional and national experts on topics like housing desegregation—experts who want to reverse patterns that include families like mine moving from urban centers to suburban enclaves. As I mentioned in Chapter 2, Pioneer City's population was almost entirely white in those years, and by 2009 the school district included 25% students of color. (For comparative purposes, the nearby urban school district reports close to the opposite proportions: about 30% white students and 70% students of color attended school in that district in Fall 2012.) In their response to changes like this via the “transformation,” Pioneer City

Schools administrators and teachers challenged the everyday dynamics that had, for a generation, allowed the district to be viewed as a haven for white, upper-middle-class exceptionalism. While Chapter 2 situated this study within CRP literature, this chapter shifts attention to Turner's (1974) concept of social drama as a way to frame my story of the irresolvable tensions that resulted from the school district's challenge to the status quo.

In general, social drama allows us to explore collective responses to a conflict situation. Specifically, it is a helpful mechanism for considering what transpired in the years leading up to and including Pioneer City's transformation. A social drama (Turner, 1974) occurs in four acts: a *breach*, or a break in the way things usually work, jolts the community in question out of its regular way of doing things. Next come *crisis*, *redress*, and then either *reintegration*, as in a return to the status quo in which the community carries on as if nothing happened, or the *recognition of schism*, a clear alteration to the phenomenon in question. As a whole, in this dissertation I analyze the impacts of the threat to "the way things were" posed by Pioneer City's transformation. This chapter treats Pioneer City's transformation as a social drama for the specific purposes of argument and storytelling: I offer my interpretations of the transformation and argue that Pioneer City Schools eventually *reintegrated* to a state not significantly different from where it started. Making use of social drama as a storyteller's frame, as well, allows me to organize a complicated story into readable chunks of action and analysis without sacrificing the story's complexity. This way of telling the story is important because we need to take a close look at what did and did not change in Pioneer City in order to

understand how CRP might be a less elusive goal in the future. Since the first stage of a social drama, the *breach*, involves a shift in the way things have been, I begin with historical perspectives on Pioneer City, particularly highlighting the competing stories of *excellence* and *equity* at play in the community.

Backdrop: Pioneer City's stories of excellence and equity

Texts, conversations, visual displays, and other forms of public discourse in Pioneer City tend to position the community and its inhabitants as exceptional. I found the sense of excellence emanating from all directions particularly salient as this research project brought me back to Pioneer City specifically, and suburban life in general, for the first time in twelve years. Serving as a textual window into the community, in Spring and Summer 2011 the Pioneer City Schools website described the upcoming district-wide changes with phrases like, "strong schools made stronger" and "continued excellence through transformation." These statements suggest that Pioneer City has been, and will continue to be, a special place. In contrast, the nearby urban school district had recently retired the tag line "every child college ready," a motto that positioned the district in a hopeful relationship with the future. Pioneer City Schools' motto implies that they do not need to convey a sense of hope; rather, their message is that things are working, and they will only get better.

I often observed people in Pioneer City talking in ways that contributed to the story of excellence and reflected the authoritativeness of this discourse. For example, at the April 2011 school board meeting, then-Superintendent Anna Kelly presented a PowerPoint slideshow entitled "Spotlight on Success." The slideshow celebrated Pioneer

City's high numbers of exceptional achievers that year: Among approximately 750 graduates were 17 National Merit finalists, 26 National Merit commended scholars, 12 National Advanced Placement scholars, 33 Advanced Placement scholars with distinction, 21 Advanced Placement scholars with honors, and 48 Advanced Placement scholars. At the end of the slideshow, Superintendent Kelly stated to the audience, "it's pretty remarkable... it takes an experience in our school system to get to this point" (Public meeting, April 8, 2011). Here we see the key actor in Pioneer City's work toward equity offering language that positions the district as exceptional, with an implicit comparison to other districts that would not be able to boast the same results.

Similar stories can be heard in how students talk about themselves and their school experiences. At the school board meeting described above, a Pioneer City fifth grade student read from an essay: "Education is the key and each day is another chance to add a building block." Here, she has described school as a site for the transmission and reception of capital (Lareau & Horvat, 1999). This student is collecting resources on a daily basis, poising herself to build toward the sorts of accolades her older peers received from the superintendent.

Excellence was conveyed in more subtle ways, as well. For example, Thomas, a white, middle-class focal student, often wore black Pioneer City football t-shirts that used words like "domination" and "exclusive" to describe the winning football program, and Harris Creek's school rap describes "Harris Creek kids" as the smartest of all. Such self-descriptions may be relatively common in U.S. school districts, but claims of superiority take on a different tone when they are buttressed by test scores and sports

teams that are actually as dominant as these examples claim them to be.

The descriptions above demonstrate how convincing the story of “excellence” was in Pioneer City. Pioneer City's excellence is an example of Bakhtin’s (1981) conception of authoritative discourse⁷. An authoritative discourse refers to a way of communicating about a concept that is both established and accepted by dominant society through a process of transmission: “We encounter it with its authority already fused to it” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 342). This is *the way things are*, the common sense or dominant story of a community. Thus, as they go unquestioned, authoritative discourses can contribute to social reproduction.

The key difference between authoritative discourse and its opposite, internally persuasive discourse, lies in the power associated with each. In *Discourse and the novel*, Bakhtin likens authoritative discourse to the school task of “reciting by heart,” and internally persuasive discourse as “telling in one’s own words.” When we recite by heart, the words come from someone else and may not be totally our own; alternatively, one cannot say something in one's own words without coming to a deeper relationship with the idea. In short, an internally persuasive discourse must be personally integrated, is connected to ideologies, and can shift along with one’s beliefs (Bakhtin, 1981). Developing an internally persuasive discourse thus also constitutes a personalized shift in consciousness.

The equity story. The district’s efforts to find internal persuasion in the equity discourse

⁷ Disagreement has emerged among Bakhtinian scholars around whether the field of education has misappropriated Bakhtin (described in Matusov, 2007). Like Matusov, I argue that the purpose of theory is to help us explain our worlds, and it is up to the readers of theory to harness others’ ideas for use in the contexts that pertain to us.

that their leaders wanted to take up dates back to the first years of the 21st century. As several Harris Creek Elementary staff described it to me, equity became something that this highly successful school district could no longer ignore after the No Child Left Behind Act required them to separate out the achievement test scores of students from different racial groups, economic strata, and need areas. Principal Carmen Hanson said in our first interview, “you know I think that a couple years back, we knew there was a gap in... the results between black kids and other kids, and as much as some people don’t like No Child Left Behind, it was the thing that made people aware of the gap” (Interview, March 23, 2011). Over the next year and a half, I heard this statement echoed in public presentations and private interviews with school and district leaders alike. It had been easy to hide behind aggregate data showing the high success rates of the district’s white students, but it was no longer possible or palatable to present Pioneer City as uniquely excellent when it had become so clear that racial predictability in standardized test scores was an absolute fact.

Among some district leaders, Pioneer City’s equity story grew convincing enough to be treated as a new common sense. However, since internally persuasive discourse is related to one’s ideological beliefs, there is hard work and deep thought involved in accepting it as fully convincing. Even if it matches one's ideological beliefs, if an internally persuasive discourse runs counter to an authoritative one, there is bound to be some complication. Since, again, taking on a new internally persuasive discourse requires a shift in consciousness, the change cannot happen overnight. As Kumashiro (2008) describes common sense, we could view it as shortcut logic that allows us to see the way

things are as the way things should be. A discourse cannot be incorporated into one's common sense without the investigation of one's ideological beliefs, or the experiences and understandings that have caused us to believe some things and not others. An important piece of this process involves coming to *see* the authoritative discourses that constitute the air we breathe (Bakhtin, 1981).

Blending stories. John McGlynn, the district's only black male district administrator, has carried the banner of the equity discourse since Superintendent Kelly's departure.

McGlynn often talked to me about how certain parents in the district express surprise when they hear him speaking out in support of strengthening Pioneer City's gifted and talented programs instead of only speaking out about racial equity. "They're surprised to see me as the guy proposing better [gifted and talented] services, but to me, that's equity... that's equity" (Interview, June 19, 2012).

In McGlynn's view, there is no contradiction in a drive for both excellence and equity, because each depends on the other to exist. My initial interpretation of McGlynn's statement here and Kelly's words at the school board meeting described above was that they demonstrated the administrators' inconsistency on "equity" messaging. However, a closer look shows that instead these examples can demonstrate the often competing goals of a district leader: while their reliance on a construct of "excellence" in these statements could be read as a turn of the nose away from the equity goals they celebrate in other contexts, this judgment would miss an opportunity to understand how a school leader might be attempting to achieve both at the same time. In other words, these examples illustrate Pioneer City's simultaneous pursuit of excellence and equity via discourses that

are often at odds with one another. This tension is an important component of my argument, later in this chapter, for why the transformation social drama ended in reintegration instead of a recognition of schism.

The stories of excellence and equity are being told through discourses that exist in tension with one another. Can an authoritative discourse such as Pioneer City's excellence be disrupted enough to incorporate a new idea within it? If excellence implies things like academic superiority and athletic dominance, can there also be room for the idea that there is enough excellence to go around? What happens if the new discourse—equity—is incompatible with what is already there?

“SEE” ventriloquism. Equity discourse in Pioneer City, already constrained by the authoritative discourse of excellence, faced an additional difficulty in the sense that much of the language that the district's “equity leaders” used to articulate their work was not yet their own. Not surprisingly, other district staff members were just being exposed to the story of equity for the first time, so the leaders faced a complicated process of trying to engage in their own learning while igniting the same process in others.

This was often visible through language. During the 2010-2012 school years when the transformation was at its apex, and teacher learning about the theories underlying the transformation were at varying early stages, the internally persuasive discourse of equity was often ventriloquized (Schechner, 2012) from the work of popular black male equity trainer Bill Howard into the voices of these primarily white female administrators (aside from McGlynn, the leadership cabinet for Pioneer City Schools included only white women). This was not immediately clear to me in initial observations

of and interviews with district leaders, because I had not yet participated in the “SEE” (Seeking Educational Equity) workshops that each of the Pioneer City administrators and teachers had attended. Bill Howard is the Executive Director of SEE, a professional development organization that offers anti-racism trainings to school districts around the United States. When I began reading materials used in the SEE workshops, though, I realized that the equity story I had heard as uniquely Pioneer City's was more like a local version of the discourse that characterized the SEE trainings and related literature. Even much of the language in the letter (described below) that set this social drama in motion came from the SEE training packet. With this realization, I also came to a new understanding of the uncertainty in Harris Creek Principal Carmen Hanson’s voice when she made statements like:

“Well, it, it (race) matters a lot, I think it’s, if I look at student population over the years, um people can see special ed(ucation) students, they know what’s getting in the way of their learning and they have some strategies. It’s, it’s really obvious to people. Being of another race, it’s a lot, it’s not as obvious to people in a white culture what things might get in the way... after I’ve been going through equity work and things I see things that I didn’t notice before I took that [SEE] training” (Interview, March 3, 2011).

While Principal Hanson was, as she said, beginning to recognize things she had not seen before, the excerpt above makes it clear that she is not claiming the expert status that might be expected of a school leader in a district making a name for itself around racial equity. In particular, language around racial isolation (Tatum, 2003) seems to be

translated directly from the SEE training workshops into Pioneer City administrators' thinking about equity in their schools. Carmen Hanson told me several stories about doing "equity walks" in the Harris Creek lunchroom and finding students of color sitting alone. As we walked through the hallway during one visit, she told, me, "if I go through a cafeteria I'll notice kids left or isolated from the white kids, if I go on the playground I see more; I guess I never noticed those things before I started doing more equity work" (Interview, March 3, 2011).

When I probed for how these observations connected to changes in how teachers approached and articulated their pedagogy, the conversation seemed to stay, discursively, in the lunchroom. I wrote:

Carmen Hanson told a few stories about teachers inviting students to work with a different partner or using cooperative learning strategies (Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 2008) to avoid racial isolation in the classroom (Blumer & Tatum, 1999), but still I have lots of questions about how teachers here will make changes in how they approach their work with students of color when the district changes remain constrained to a sense of fighting racial isolation with more racial mixing. (Reflective note, March 13, 2011)

Within the above examples from Carmen Hanson is evidence of her effort to take on an internally persuasive equity discourse in phrases like "white culture," "equity work," and "racial isolation," which are all phrases used in SEE training and that appear in distinct contradiction to the authoritative excellence discourse that paints a much less complicated picture of life in Pioneer City Schools.

Calling this change in *language* a shift in consciousness would be premature, however. In my work as a teacher educator at a regional university in the midwest, I see this in my students regularly; for some, there comes a point in the semester when their writing and speaking changes from primarily drawing on language from course readings and from me toward building their own. The shift in consciousness that this demonstrates is subtle, but it eventually grows clearer through the students' words, actions, and convictions. In the case of Pioneer City, the leaders who wanted to engage an internally persuasive equity discourse to improve how students of color experience and succeed in school were continually constrained by the authoritative discourse that marks this community as a place of excellence, as well as by the task of taking on as internally persuasive a discourse that came to them through authoritative means in such a short time frame.

Breach: “The letter”

Turner (1974, p. 38) describes breach as the following:

A symbolic trigger of confrontation or encounter. A dramatic breach may be made by an individual, certainly, but [s]he always acts, or believes [s]he acts, on behalf of other parties, whether they are aware of it or not. [S]he sees [her/]himself as a representative, not as a lone hand.

In this social drama, the breach is credited to Superintendent Kelly's construction of the equity story, but, like Turner describes above, her work was done with colleagues and on behalf of the community.

When they apply for jobs, teachers are usually asked questions about their

educational philosophies and their strategies in the classroom. While important to building schools with strong teachers, these typical questions may not address the injustices targeted by Pioneer City's transformation (e.g., segregation and institutional racism). Pioneer City sought to establish a stronger presence for equity work through their hiring practices. In 2010, the district mandated that prospective student teachers answer an essay question describing to what degree they believe that institutional racism contributes to the “diminished capacity of all children, especially Black and Brown children, to achieve at the highest levels and leads to the fracturing of the communities that support and nurture them” (see Appendix E). In addition to the policy described in the letter, Pioneer City Schools required district staff, including bus drivers, administrators, and paraprofessionals, to address similar questions during the interview process. The essay questions were described to me as an early effort to require all new hires in the district to do something similar in writing before they were considered for an interview. This breach served as a message that legitimized the urgency of fighting racism, and identified it as a problem that must be addressed at all levels within the school district. It alerted everyone seeking to work in Pioneer City Schools that educational equity was a top priority and that working there meant being part of this struggle; this impacted the district's reputation among educators.

The present scenario can be seen as picking up where Lewis (2001, p. 805) left off over a decade ago (even with some foreshadowing in her use of the word *transformation*):

We must ask ourselves, can much change if the educational experiences of White

middle-class children do not undergo some transformations? Ironically, any movement toward a real and substantial color-blind world, one in which all children have truly equal opportunities to realize their dreams and to live dignified lives, is limited if not halted in its tracks by the dominance of color-blind ideology within a context in which race clearly still shapes access to resources and opportunities.

As I experienced it, the letter was the initial breach. This was the way in to the story for me, as well. At the time the letter was distributed to teacher educators throughout the region, I was a third year graduate student, living with my spouse and children in the urban area near Pioneer City and in many ways still trying to distance myself from the things that had made my adolescent self uncomfortable with Pioneer City and its excellence discourse. I was chatting with a faculty mentor in her office, and she showed me the letter after it arrived in her email inbox. We agreed that the letter was a surprise, and even a bit confusing. Pioneer City did not seem like the place where a letter like this, with its incendiary language about institutional racism and culturally relevant pedagogy, would originate. The breach jarred me, and made me reconsider my story about the community that had once been my home. I had been studying CRP for several years at that point and had been frustrated by the shallow ways it can be taken up. In addition, like others in the field, I had not yet seen its tenets be “taken to scale” in a large district, particularly a district not previously known for its concern with racism or inequities.

Of course, the same story from another observer might focus on either more external or more internal matters, and so the breach could be described as having taken place before my time via contextual changes such as the No Child Left Behind Act, shifts in subsidized housing zones in Pioneer City, and/or the immigration and community patterns of, for example, Somali, Indian, and Mexican families in the Midwest. A final angle that could tell a different version of the breach could be the personal shift in consciousness that was occurring for Superintendent Anna Kelly, which contributed to the ultimate disruption in routine that set the transformation drama in motion (Public presentation, November 3, 2011).

Crisis

While a breach serves as an initial shift in the way things work, the crisis phase of a social drama “is much more dynamic and forceful... it is a decisive and uncommon break from routine and mundane activity” (Jaramillo, 2012, p. 33). The crisis phase included a longer period of resistance and tension around the transformation in Pioneer City Schools and its surrounding community. The letter that served as the breach in my interpretation was really mid-stream in the district's preparation for transformation. If we compare this to the Rosa Parks story my son learned, the breach tells a moment-in-time tale like Mrs. Parks on the bus, while the crisis phase fills us in on more nuance and context (Kohl, 2005).

Resistance and tensions in Pioneer City. The community was ripe with anticipation, in various forms, for the changes to come. The major local newspapers and several radio stations featured Pioneer City's upcoming changes on a consistent basis, and

Superintendent Kelly seemed to be framed as either a hero or a villain, depending on the journalist telling the story. Incontestable, however, were the results of Kelly's leadership around racial equity: during her administration, the racial achievement gap all but disappeared, with no significant drop in scores for Pioneer City's white students (see Appendix F).

Lortie's *apprenticeship of observation* (2002; discussed further in Chapter 5) refers to the tendency for teachers to recreate the discrete pedagogical practices we experienced as students more than it does to the ways we think about teaching, learning, and society. Yet, much of what we observe and come to believe about schooling involves our perceptions about *who* and *what* schooling is really for. Pioneer City community members who were frustrated with the district's transformation efforts organized rallies in 2010 when Superintendent Kelly unveiled the elementary school attendance boundary changes. The ways these community members expressed their discontent offers a window into their answers to the questions of who and what school is for, and this can be expressed as "norming suburban" (Watson, 2012; discussed further below).

Pioneer City district administrators faced the daunting task of attempting to make shifts toward a better future while also maintaining ties with those who would rather things stay closer to one version of how things had been in the past. Complicating matters even further, in 2007 the United States Supreme Court ruled that public school districts may not make internal school assignment decisions based on race (551 U.S. 701, 2007). Such changes may only be made on the basis of free or reduced price lunch status, and so in many cases family income is being used as a stand-in for race. This decision negates

any explicit focus that communities like Pioneer City may want to bring to racial inequities, not to mention failing to acknowledge the United States' long and painful history of racial segregation.

Un-norming suburban. A personal history as a student, teacher, and community member forms an educator or community member's normative reference group, or the subconscious “ideal” to which all students are compared (Rist, 2000). The normative reference group in Pioneer City follows these patterns, and persisted relatively undisrupted for several decades leading up to the transformation. One former Pioneer City Schools teacher told me, “I honestly only remember a few students of color, mostly Asian students, being 'cared for' by others in the class. ... As you know, diversity in the community increased dramatically over the years [between the 1990s and the late 2000s], with the student population along with it” (Interview, August 26, 2012). In other words, the normative reference group kept a comfortable position in the popular imagination for the years when Pioneer City remained largely homogeneous. As demographics changed, however, and school district leaders dared to point out that norms might have to shift along with the population, some of those who fit within the normative reference group resisted.

Resistance to the transformation was multifaceted and represented a range of discontent. For example, some parents expressed mounting anger over the former superintendent's choice to return to a K-6 elementary school model after one generation of a more complicated arrangement that garnered equal dissent in the 1990s. This reaction was nothing, however, when compared to the simultaneous vitriol aimed directly

at the former superintendent for her advocacy of culturally relevant pedagogy as an orientation toward harnessing the resources of school districts and communities to address racial injustice. This reaction to Superintendent Kelly's leadership was most publicly visible online, in places such as the “comments” section underneath newspaper reports about her work. Groups also organized email listservs, the aforementioned Facebook group, and even a few picket lines before decisions about the transformation were considered to be official.

The positioning of white students figured prominently in demonstrations of resistance to the district's transformation. For example, in the “gap data,” as the data displays of the shrinking achievement gap are popularly called among district administrators, and also in public presentations and media portrayals, there is an ever-present emphasis on the continuing and *rising* success of Pioneer City's white students. In this frame, the message is more than simply success for all; the message is that despite the rhetoric about white privilege and racial equity that has begun to weave its way through the district, Pioneer City's white families need not give up a single thing in order to make space for the success of students of color. The pie is simply going to get bigger, and *everyone* will achieve according to an unchanging definition of success. The message seems to be, again, that Pioneer City can please its constituents who are concerned with equity while simultaneously appeasing those concerned with maintaining the historical sense of excellence. Here is where the discourse in Pioneer City has failed to shift into its new historical location: while a scene change has clearly occurred, too many real and symbolic barriers remain to truly flip the script from histories into the present.

At the same time as the transformation unfolded, much of the discourse in Pioneer City Schools could be described as norming suburban, with hints of colorblind discourse (Watson, 2012). When educators norm suburban, their speech and attitudes about students reflect a subconscious belief that white, middle-class students are the norm by which all students should be measured. Since this belief tends to remain subconscious, conversations about deviance from this norm tend to leave out the descriptors. For example, in interviews and observations, I heard phrases like the following to describe students of color or working class students: “You know how hard it is to connect with those families via phone;” “he’s more... he’s more like the urban kids;” and “parent involvement is such a challenge with certain communities.”

In his inaugural issue as editor of *Urban Education*, Milner (2012) also attempted to bring these usually unexamined classifications up to the surface, inviting scholars to join him in defining the characteristics of schools that make them urban. In so doing, he has addressed two problems that are relevant to Pioneer City's transformation: first, Milner is inviting scholars to *broaden* their definitions of urban schooling to include schools, like those in Pioneer City, that are not located in an urban setting but whose student populations include increasing racial or socioeconomic diversity. Second, Milner encourages us to avoid “norming suburban” (Watson, 2012) by inviting scholars into a conversation that would help us be specific about what we mean when we use race-related terms in conversations about schools.

The discursive funnel that forms from a public requirement to deemphasize race despite the privately stated desire to place race at the center brings us back to the image

of the ventriloquist, but this time the ventriloquist's doll is talking out of both sides of his mouth. In other words, the equity discourse is not internally persuasive at the same time as its primary purposes are being talked about and understood differently in different contexts. All of this adds up, to borrow from Pollock (2005), to a "colormute" approach to equity, albeit with the added dimension of an imperturbable authoritative excellence discourse that already has a hold on the community. All of these factors contribute to a situation where a school district is trying to address racial inequity through CRP without always talking about race. Thus, the brand of CRP I referred to earlier also looked and sounded different in different settings. While district administrators and the SEE professional development program were clear that the equity work in Pioneer City Schools grew directly out of culturally relevant pedagogy, the goals and central ideas of CRP were not part of the equity discourse taken up at the school level. A crisis, indeed.

Redress

On the first day of school, Harris Creek Principal Carmen Hanson came down the hall during our lunchtime, flanked by the district's top two administrators: Superintendent Anna Kelly and Assistant Superintendent John McGlynn. The visitors stood out from everyone else in the hallway for several reasons, as they were not only taller than the children, but they were also traveling in a cluster and were dressed in the sort of polished business attire not often seen in elementary schools. The cluster of adults stopped in front of Room 103 and Mrs. Jacobs invited me to join her as they all greeted one another. Because I had met recently with Superintendent Kelly, she did not need to be reintroduced and immediately shared how pleased she was that I had ended up in Mrs.

Jacobs' classroom for my dissertation research. When John McGlynn joined the conversation, he jokingly asked me what my findings were so far, and added that we all had problems to solve together. Mrs. Jacobs and I returned to finish our lunches at the kidney table in the corner of her classroom, and I remember feeling a new excitement about what this dissertation work could mean in the Pioneer City community.

Redress in a social drama constitutes an effort to solve, or at least mediate, the crisis (Jaramillo, 2012). Ultimately, various forms of resistance to the transformation formed the heart of the crisis phase, including the use of social networks to organize opposition, the threatened lawsuit against the district, and a series of closed-door meetings that ultimately led to the redress: Anna Kelly's surprise departure from her post. In September 2011, mere weeks after the transformation officially went into effect, the school board bought out Kelly's contract, leaving the district with an interim Superintendent and no clear direction on the equity work that had previously seemed to be so central. Pioneer City was left, unexpectedly, in a liminal space between sameness and change (Van Gennep, 1960) where the final stage of social drama was unpredictable; the question remained whether everything would return to normal or the equity discourse would really lead to the changes that were intended.

Return to status quo

After Superintendent Kelly left the district, Pioneer City Schools' transformation was in a dubious position. Similar to the options I described in Chapter 2 for CRP's viability as a pedagogical theory, it seemed that the district could either carry forward with its original goals and a lack of either consensus or clear leadership, or “wash out”

(Zeichner & Liston, 1987) the very goals at the foundation of the transformation. My analysis shows that, for the most part and for various reasons, washout did occur, and the transformation ultimately amounted to a minimal shift in “how things work” in Pioneer City.

Beyond the visible changes in the racial and ethnic makeup of their classrooms, life did not change much for students in Pioneer City. This seems to be in part because of the problems of enactment, rooted in the apprenticeships of observation that began when today's teachers were students in elementary school. Through those apprenticeships, each teacher built a "common sense" about teaching and learning that was continually supported in teacher education and teaching settings that operated by the same logic. The demographic changes in Pioneer City and concomitant shifts in policy and practice imposed by the district were too distinct from that common sense to be integrated without something more intensive than what was available to the teachers and staff of Pioneer City Schools.

Barriers to a recognition of schism

While I alluded above to some ways that the story of equity in Pioneer City was not strong enough in the face of an authoritative discourse of excellence, this challenge also extends beyond the immediate context of Pioneer City Schools. The story of whiteness in the United States, a key part of any story of equity, extends far beyond the boundaries of this suburban community; the muzzle on white people's understandings of how race impacts life in this country affects educators and citizens everywhere (Lensmire, 2010). In an effort to explain why Pioneer City's transformation seems to have

ended in a return to the status quo, I describe below one example of how a new way of thinking about race was challenging for Harris Creek teachers, and then how this challenge left the district in a persistent liminal phase (Van Gennep, 1960).

Survey surprise. The failure of Pioneer City's equity discourse to become internally persuasive beyond these key district leaders was perhaps most surprisingly apparent when I reviewed the responses from a survey I distributed to Harris Creek staff in April 2012. Nineteen staff members returned the survey and consent form (several returned the survey without the consent form at the end of the year and I was unable to locate them in time to ask them to also sign a consent form). In the open-ended demographics section of the survey (see Appendix D), twelve of the nineteen respondents described their racial backgrounds as "Caucasian." This response might have surprised me in any racially conscious school setting, but it was particularly striking at Harris Creek because I knew that all school staff members had by then received the initial SEE training, which includes an extensive lesson in the historical problematics of describing white people this way, and trainers equate the use of the term "Caucasian" to describe a racially white person with using the term "Mongoloid" to describe someone with Down Syndrome. These discussions had continued back at Harris Creek.

From this example, it seems that, even with well-described and intentional attempts to subvert them, long-held ways of viewing and naming the world run deep in our understandings, and we need time to work with those new ideas if they are to become our own. We know this in the form of countless sayings: *you can't teach an old dog new tricks*, and *you can't change the spots on a leopard*. This calls to mind basic questions

about the differences that can arise between what is intended and what is received in the process of teaching and learning, and of the need for both time and checks for understanding when we are working to learn something new and fundamental.

On the other hand, as discussed above, other district staff and administration members seemed to be parroting language borrowed from the SEE trainings when they talked about race. In my estimation, this parroting, or ventriloquism (Vološinov, 1973), of the SEE language was an unintended result of the professional development style that SEE uses in its trainings. At a SEE training, a facilitator (in my experience, a Latino man dressed in a polished business suit) provides activities including cloze, or fill-in-the-blank, questions intended to demonstrate comprehension of topics around the history of racism in the United States. The facilitator wears a microphone clip, maneuvering around a banquet-style room populated by casually dressed teachers and other school staff who occasionally, when they are called on, stand up and borrow the microphone to explain their answers to the large group. Signals like these create an authoritative image: the divisions between those who *know* and those who *do not know* are clear (Freire, 1974).

Freire (1974) would surely characterize the SEE workshop as banking education; the facilitator holds the information about how to *be* an anti-racist teacher and thereby increase academic achievement among students of color, and there is a clear path for attendees to take if they wish to receive that information. One problem with this approach is that ownership of the lessons learned or reinforced during the professional development session never transfers from the facilitator to the participants. Participants leave the second day of this two-part workshop with a certificate that documents their

continuing education credits and declares them “equity leaders” in their schools, yet the next day all attendees receive an email inviting them to the intermediate phase of the training.

During a follow-up session held at Harris Creek in December 2011, the authoritative nature of the SEE workshops was evident to me when I saw how the school’s Equity Team members responded to Bill Howard. We had taken a walk around the school carrying clipboards with a list of things to look for that might indicate what SEE has identified as equitable teaching practices: visible evidence of teachers “doing” CRP. It was clear to me on this walk that “the school's structure and culture did not seem to directly mirror the school's multicultural goals” (Lewis, 2001, p. 200). When we returned to the conference room to talk about what we had observed, nobody (myself included) offered a single interpretive comment until after Howard had spoken. We understand too much about the social and embodied nature of learning (e.g., Vygotsky, 1978; Walkerdine, 1997) to expect teachers to experience that sort of authoritative professional development and then make the leap to owning the attendant thoughts and behaviors in their own teaching.

In the end, without the space and time for consciousness-raising in the process of taking up an equity discourse, teachers like Mrs. Jacobs were left saddled with an awareness of and concern for racial equity, yet not enough infrastructure or support to attain it. The liminal space (Van Gennep, 1960) between a professional development experience like SEE and the shift in consciousness that would mark a teacher's acceptance of a new discourse as internally persuasive became, instead, a liminal space of

indefinite length. Students, then, experienced their school district's pursuit of transformative goals without the attendant recognition for the power of dominant discourse. In other words, the professional development offered understandings about the nature of the problem, but not necessarily any tools to combat it. The components of CRP that were addressed in professional development and expressed in district administration members' goals could not be pursued in Pioneer City classrooms. The return to status quo can be compared to the washout effect (Zeichner & Liston, 1987), aided, again, by Lortie's concept of the *apprenticeship of observation* (2002).

Persistent liminality. The story of equity in Pioneer City seems to be not strong or convincing enough to become internalized. If the messages implied via the equity discourse cannot get to the core of staff members' ways of thinking and acting, then the district's transformative goals cannot be fully realized. Borrowing from Jaramillo's (2012) take on social drama analysis, I argue that the return to the status quo following the tensions that arose between systemic change and dominant discourse was largely unavoidable. Transformative changes were not accompanied by the necessary shifts in cognition that would have made Pioneer City's ventriloquized equity discourse actually its own.

Jaramillo (2012) profiled Mexican immigrant women who staged various forms of protest against the conditions at the school where they provided often uncompensated labor; for them, a shift in consciousness led to shifts in behavior. When they learned new ways to advocate for themselves, subtle changes occurred in their relationships with other people at and around the school (Jaramillo, 2012). Similar shifts in consciousness did not

occur among the many players in Pioneer City, and so this liminal phase persisted.

Without the shift in consciousness, the discourse is not taken up in a meaningful way, and so CRP remains unrealized and sometimes tokenized.

Along with shifts in consciousness, definite transformation would probably have been more likely with a similar reconsideration of the role of *achievement* in the district's self-assessment of whether the transformation had been successful. A truly culturally relevant transformation would not rely on achievement measures that are known to be skewed in favor of white middle-class students (Kohn, 2000). With this statement, I acknowledge the possible irony in my description of standardized achievement gains as evidence of "success" in Pioneer City's efforts to reduce the racial achievement gap, since my perspective is critical of both the construction of the "achievement gap" itself (Ladson-Billings, 2006) and standardized tests as a valid measure of what students know and can do (Kohn, 2000). Indeed:

These tests do not measure intelligence, nor attitudes, nor qualities of character. Furthermore they are not, nor are they intended, to be "culture free." Quite the reverse: they are culture bound. What they measure are the skills which are among the most important in our society for getting a good job and moving to a better one, and for full participation in an increasingly technical world (Coleman, 1966, n.p.)

Unfortunately, without other formal measures available to us, we must still take note of remarkable change, even within a broken system. Rather than dwell on the growth

in achievement among Pioneer City's marginalized students, however, I mention it as one sort of indicator, but then I focus, instead, on the more nuanced successes and struggles I observed in Mrs. Jacobs' classroom. As Schultz (2008) writes, “significant student achievement (albeit on a poorly designed and improperly used indicator) cannot be overlooked” (p. 116). Indeed, I have continually struggled with the notion that the example my work provides is of an oversimplified conception of CRP that *does* improve student learning, but not beyond these faulty measures; the successes we celebrate are dubious ones. In part because of this tension, I have summarized the “gap data” in Appendix F instead of including them within this text. This is also important because while the quantifiable aspects of the district's transformation were successful, the district's publicly stated goal of transforming from racial predictability in standardized test scores to racial equity in multiple arenas bumps up against an encroaching dominant discourse that seems to be too thick to penetrate.

In a similar vein, analyses of the “achievement gap” tend to draw on shallow analyses of culture, as discussed in Chapter 2. Individual students' motivations to “succeed,” access and quality of instruction notwithstanding, are rooted in a complex set of interactions between their ideas about themselves and others' projected ideas *about* them (Pollock, 2008).

There is more to it than all of this, however. Not only did individual teachers not receive the support they needed to find their own voices and relevance in CRP, but the pieces that they were able to implement in their own work were also met by barriers and tensions. The following two chapters investigate specific ways that Pioneer City's

transformation fell short of a *recognition of schism*, or the enduring change that could have grown from this social drama. Chapter 5 does this by explicating some of the complexities of trying to create space for true transformation, even as bits of CRP did find their way into classroom life. The absence of deep work around race and racialization hinder CRP, and in Chapter 6 I explore the ways that this can hurt the children CRP was primarily intended to help. It is my hope that, by pointing out and exploring the tensions between a transformative goal and the reproductive institution of schooling, we can begin to reconceptualize CRP in a way that remains true to its critical aims while recognizing the ways that those aims have been silenced. Without these efforts, CRP seems doomed to either continue to be articulated in shallow ways, or capitulate entirely to those silencing voices, pressures, and mandates.

Chapter 5

Being, doing, not being, and not doing CRP

When something counter-cultural becomes popular, it invariably loses some of its edge at the price of broader allure. My first experience with this concept came in the 1990s when indie rocker Elliott Smith gained notoriety after performing at the Oscars. I had been listening to him on cassette in my Toyota Camry for months; how could I relish in his (and my own) brooding sentiments when it seemed like every kid in my high school suddenly had the CD? Today, I feel less emotionally attached to my musical “discoveries” and can observe the commodification of edginess as more of a cultural and economic issue. For example, college students sing along to revolutionary hip-hop lyrics while wearing Che Guevara t-shirts without necessarily attending to the stories behind these products. Subversive messages have been repackaged for popular consumption, losing the sharp edges that made them unique in the first place.

The same goes for ideas. As theories of culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) gain ground in education research and practice, those of us committed to CRP’s transformative aims must attend to the critical details that may get lost in translation to more popular discourse, and to more mainstream settings such as Pioneer City Schools. In this chapter, I give examples of the ways that some aspects of CRP were visible in individual moments in Room 103, but I also explain that these examples did not resemble the theory’s transformative vision. More broadly, this chapter offers one view of how Mrs. Jacobs navigated some of the tensions between a transformative approach to teaching and the reproductive forces at work in U.S. schooling. Truly coming to *be*

culturally relevant would require a commitment to persistent liminality that was not part of the Pioneer City Schools particular brand of CRP.

Broadening definitions of intelligence

Mrs. Jacobs' classroom was a place where every student's "smarts" were identified and valued. On the second day of school, we all (the students, Mrs. Jacobs, the ELL teacher, and I; the paraprofessional in the room at the time did not participate) completed an activity designed to identify which of eight intelligences we considered most salient about ourselves. After student volunteers helped Mrs. Jacobs read and describe small posters about each of the "smarts," we each wrote our name on three post-it notes passed out before the lesson and walked around the room to identify our top three smarts by sticking our post-it notes around the corresponding posters.

Mrs. Jacobs made it clear that it is important to know what kinds of smarts we have so that we can take advantage of the areas where we excel and learn to manage those where we struggle. She used herself and her own children as examples, saying that when her son was learning his phone number before kindergarten, she knew it would not work to use flash cards as it had for her daughter. Because her son is "body smart," she made up a song with movements to help him remember the number. Mrs. Jacobs strived toward, and in this instance succeeded at, allowing official knowledge and knowledges valued outside of school to coexist in her classroom, implying lower-case definitions of knowledge and truth (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Valenzuela, 1999). Indeed, literature tells us that this sort of community-building sets the stage for developing CRP (Ladson-Billings, 1995a).

“Smarts” are viewed in many different ways. As John McGlynn described in Chapter 4, gifted and talented programming is a centerpiece for Pioneer City Schools. For him, it even fits within a conception of equity in that gifted classes offer the differentiated instruction that allows these students to get the most out of school. However, our ways of viewing assessment and student placement in programs like Pioneer City's gifted and talented classes remain rooted in the same system that allows certain students' resources to translate to capital while constraining that process for others (Watson, 2012). We can see an example of this rootedness in the fact that the research study providing the basis for gifted and talented education programs nationwide was conducted with an entirely white participant sample and was authored by a known eugenicist (W. Au, 2009).

Sadly, then, the racial demographics of the gifted and talented programs at Harris Creek, in Pioneer City, and in Minnesota as a whole should come as little surprise: In Fall 2011, Harris Creek had 104 third graders enrolled, of whom 12% (8 females and 4 males) were identified as “gifted and talented⁸.” Of these students, one was identified as “Hispanic,” one as “Black, non-Hispanic,” and the remainder were identified as “White, non-Hispanic.” In other words, 83% of the Harris Creek third graders who were identified as Gifted and Talented in the 2011-2012 school year were white, compared to an overall rate of 75% white students across the district in that year.

In Minnesota, 8.1% of all students were identified as Gifted and Talented in 2004, compared to 6.7% nationally (National Council for Educational Statistics, 2004). The representation of students of color in Pioneer City's gifted and talented program is

⁸ All district data were obtained via the Pioneer City Schools website or via internal documents shared with me by school and district administrators. Citations have been removed for the sake of anonymity.

consistent with state and national patterns; for example, also in 2004, 8.3% of all white students, compared to 5.2% of black students and 4.5% of Hispanic students, were identified as Gifted and Talented. These percentages are an important reminder of the historical patterns that continue to be repeated in the ways we identify and support students' intelligences.

Mrs. Jacobs told me several times that she was concerned with the underrepresentation of students of color in her school's gifted program, but emphasized that she would be more pleased if the district simply did away with such programs and focused on more equitable and relevant pedagogies for all students. Indeed, as I saw it, the version of equity that she advanced in her classroom did not bear the crest of the “new racism” (Cross, 2005) that typical pull-out gifted programs tend to perpetuate. The clear message that “smart” was going to be defined in multiple ways was one indication that all students could negotiate cultural capital, even if they were not part of Mrs. Jacobs' normative reference group (Watson, 2012). Additionally, by placing herself in the milieu of the post-it note identifiers, Mrs. Jacobs showed that she, too, learns and struggles.

Like Mrs. Jacobs does, culturally relevant pedagogues put themselves “in the story” of their classrooms (Garza & Crawford, 2005) and challenge notions that there is only one way to be smart (Delpit, 2002). This work not only sets the stage for CRP, as I argued earlier, it also challenges the singular and pervasive ways of viewing “smart” that locks out marginalized students from the best of what “excellent” schools have to offer.

The many constructions of Eve

As part of the district's boundary changes, Eve moved from Village Woods

Elementary to Harris Creek when she began third grade. Five other students in Mrs. Jacobs' class also came from Village Woods, which was historically viewed as a less desirable school than Harris Creek. Village Woods reported lower standardized test scores than the district's other elementary schools, and included more racial and economic diversity. Contributing to its reputation, the building itself is older and has not been remodeled, so it lacks the bright and airy feel that characterizes the Pioneer City school buildings built or renovated in the 1990s.

Eve often took several slow and deep breaths before beginning to talk. Just as often, she would speak with a full-faced smile, as if thrilled to have earned the attention. I smile just thinking about Eve. She dressed more conservatively than most third grade girls at Harris Creek. During the colder months, there were several days when Eve and another focal student, Ally, were the only two girls in the class *not* wearing tall fur-lined boots over their pants or tights; on these days, both girls wore casual white tennis shoes. Eve often pinned back her thick, jet-black, chin-length hair with a single barrette behind either ear. Her clothes tended to be pink or purple, often including a t-shirt with graphics and a phrase printed on it; whereas many of her classmates had begun putting together their own outfits, the orderliness of Eve's ensembles made them look as if they were neatly folded and laid out for her the night before. Indeed, she told me that her mom and dad usually chose what she wore to school. She wore the same dressy outfit—black leggings, black tulle tiered skirt and a white t-shirt with black lace overlay—on at least three special days when I was visiting: her birthday, the music concert, and the day she shared her “Superstar Eve” poster with the class.

Eve performed near the average level in all academic subjects. Her spelling was phonetic and tended to be inconsistent. Within the same retelling of *Charlotte's Web* that she shared with me, for example, she spelled "Charlotte" three different ways. Her interest in reading and writing, however, was voracious. Eve seemed to always be working on a story, carrying her writing notebook back and forth between home and school. At the beginning of the year, most of Eve's writing was based on other stories she had read or movies she had seen. Around February, this consistent practice paid off in what I viewed as a creative explosion: suddenly, her stories were original, action-packed, and so fun to read. Many mornings, Eve bounced into the classroom with her backpack still hanging from her shoulders, clutching a stapled pile of pages to share first with Mrs. Jacobs, and then with me. One story was the retelling of *Charlotte's Web*; another was a dramatized playground tale that appeared to be based on recent disputes among the girls in class. It is important to note that, for Eve, writing did not seem to be a social, or socially mediated, medium (Dyson, 1997). Her work was insular and self-fulfilling. Mrs. Jacobs matched Eve's enthusiasm for creative writing, allowing her (and all students) to choose to work on a writing project instead of reading during Drop Everything And Read time. During read-alouds, Mrs. Jacobs would often pause to make comments like: "I like it when authors..." Writing, and the development of each student's unique authorial voice, permeated Mrs. Jacobs' teaching, and this aspect of her work was particularly supportive for Eve.

Eve's reserved personality, along with her status as the only girl in her class who was born in India, puts her at risk of feeling "singled out." This risk increases when our

approach to “culture” in CRP stays rooted in its earliest iterations from educational anthropology. The example below shows one way that teachers try to develop CRP in classrooms with a variety of cultural backgrounds represented.

Making a space for Eve

Knowing that Eve was one of my focal students, Mrs. Jacobs regularly brought up her progress in our informal conversations. We acknowledged together that Eve's growth during third grade, while noticeable to us through her writing and reading comprehension, was still not as visible in her interactions with classmates. She rarely spoke up in class and did not seem to have a strong social presence among the other students. Mrs. Jacobs wondered if she needed to consider more ways to use aspects of Eve's background as a jumping-off point for lessons. She explored this possibility by using two Indian languages, Bengali and Malayalam (Eve's family speaks Malayalam at home) in her introduction to a lesson on analogies in math. Sitting on their “special squares” on the classroom carpet, each student held an orange sheet of paper that included a table displaying the numbers 1-10 in English, Bengali, and Malayalam.

“In your writing notebook, create bridge maps to show analogies—how something is related—between the U.S. number system and another number system used in the world. This means you will find a similarity between the U.S. number system and the number system in another country or language. The blank number system is similar to the U.S. number system because...”

Mrs. Jacobs continued, holding an index finger to her forehead to signal that she was thinking aloud: “USA zero is to Bengali zero as... I am looking at the Bengali

number system and I'm noticing that they have another number that looks like one of ours... Eve, you'll have to help me out with that one."

Hayley, a spirited white student with long blond hair that was usually messy and often in chunks in her mouth, spoke up, louder than the rest of the class, to volunteer to help Mrs. Jacobs pronounce "Malayalam." Mrs. Jacobs looked at Eve and said, "I'll do my best, Eve." Eve nodded with a slight smile. When the whole class repeated the analogy using the word "Malayalam," she smiled wide. Mrs. Jacobs then asked her where a Malayalam speaker would start writing the number two, and she said, "on the top, just like how people in the United States write the number two" (Field note, March 28, 2012).

Moment-to-moment CRP

In these pedagogical choices, Mrs. Jacobs did something that most of us who strive toward culturally relevant pedagogies try to do. She centered a math lesson around a piece of Eve's identity that often went unacknowledged at school: her family's home language, Malayalam. For the duration of this math lesson, Eve's home language was given both academic and social value in the classroom. With her home language highlighted in the curricular content, Eve occupied a position of authority and received attention. Monolingual English speaking students were invited to re-view English in the context of Bengali and Malayalam, instead of the other way around. Not only was something from Eve's out-of-school experiences given top billing in the official curriculum, the lesson also enforced the notion that all languages have value while offering a way in to a deeper sense of both numeracy and analogy—for all students. In this

moment, then, the official and hidden curricula (Apple, 2006) aligned in a way that is absolutely consistent with CRP.

However, this example also brings up several complications. As I have emphasized, culturally relevant pedagogy involves placing students' experiences and identities at the center of school life (Ladson-Billings, 1995a). But when teachers have limited preparation for changes in student demographics, their inclusion of multicultural perspectives can suffer. In *Culturally contested pedagogy*, Li (2008) describes multicultural education at Rainbow Elementary as teaching a limited view of culture as sets of customs and traditions that ultimately reinforced deficit perspectives toward immigrant students. Similarly, at this early stage in the process of transformation, the particular brand of CRP employed in Pioneer City Schools tended to emphasize primarily, as Ullucci called it, “technical components of diversity, such as having multicultural materials” (2011, p. 402). Taking this critique a step farther, Schaffer and Skinner (2009) write about the focal elementary school in their study:

Although a model school in some respects, Arbor Heights was not exempt from dominant social inequalities that hinder egalitarian education nationwide. The school's curriculum did not cover the forms of racism that made such racial inequalities possible; thus, it did not prepare students (or teachers) to challenge the myriad forms of oppression at play on school grounds. (p. 281)

While the moment described above goes beyond the technical to some extent, there is still distance between this example and a deep development of CRP. The focus on

language use more closely resembles early educational anthropological approaches than it does more present-day conceptions of CRP. Additionally, demographic differences are a barrier to CRP that can be particularly salient in classrooms like Mrs. Jacobs'. CRP, as my undergraduate teacher education students often point out, is even more complex when students' differences exist across multiple categories but whiteness remains predominant. Recall that Mrs. Jacobs' 2011-2012 class of third graders included 20 white students who were native to the United States and 6 immigrant students of color. This dynamic has implications for how “singled out” students might feel when their identities are pointed out to the class, especially in cases where the student is the only one of her racial or ethnic group represented in the class (this was true for Eve most of the time, as her Indian-American classmate Anil spent significant parts of the day in special education classrooms).

It remains important to note, though, that CRP can be successful at developing critical consciousness even when the curriculum content does not reflect the demographics of the classroom. Indeed, “all children need to learn from themselves, and about a wide array of 'others'” (Ullucci, 2011, p. 396). Before this math lesson, it seemed that Eve had not necessarily waited with bated breath for her teacher to integrate her Indianness into everyday discussion in this predominately white classroom. She often resisted, quietly, the singling-out that sometimes occurred because of her position as one of two Indian-American students in Room 103, and as the only Indian-American girl. It became clearer to me in the data analysis process that Eve worked harder to blend in than to stand out for any reason.

Seeing Eve

My lunchtime conversations with focal students often brought social class differences, in particular, into sharp relief. Eve's family could be classified in Li's (2008) conception of the "rainbow underclass." Li differentiates the rainbow underclass from simpler socioeconomic categories by describing it as a group that includes recent immigrants and working class white families. Such a frame, Li explains, leaves room for nuances in individual family experiences, such as when middle-class families become refugees and must resettle in low-skilled professions in the United States. In the context of Li's research in Buffalo, New York, the "rainbow underclass" included Vietnamese immigrants, Sudanese refugees, and white working-class families. In Pioneer City, this group could consist of primarily Somali-American, Mexican-American, and Indian-American families.

One day, Eve talked about a girl who had been her best friend at Village Woods Elementary in kindergarten, but who had moved away in first grade. Maddie suggested that if her parents have an iPad or an iPhone, Eve could FaceTime with her friend. Eve responded, "I don't really have those things in my family." Relatedly, Mrs. Jacobs talked to me several times about Eve's apartment life, sharing that she remembered having lived in apartments herself as a child and this made her feel concerned for how different things are for Eve compared with her more affluent classmates.

Eve remained quietly resistant to clear markers of her differences until late winter, about three-fourths of the way through the school year. She opened up to me about language and culture around the same time that she began sharing more of her social

personality in class, shortly before Mrs. Jacobs made the pedagogical move to facilitate the English-Bengali-Malayalam language lesson. As our relationship became more familiar, I spoke often with Eve about how she felt moving to Harris Creek, especially as a child who already felt shy at school sometimes.

Nevertheless, Eve was a well-liked child, if not a full participant in the social world of Mrs. Jacob's classroom. This brief story illustrates Eve's social positioning: one morning in the computer lab during Spanish class, the students took a quiz and were allowed to sit on the floor and read, write, or draw when they finished. Eve finished right around the same time as most other students, and then sat alone while several of the other girls formed a small circle and began passing out invitations to join "the cupcake club" at recess. Cloey seemed to be the ringleader and, at first, had only invited four of the most socially connected girls in the class. Maddie got out her own notebook and copied what Cloey had written on her "cupcake club" invitation before passing it to Eve, who smiled and joined the outer ring of their little circle. Several weeks later, when I had lunch in the classroom with Eve and Maddie, they discovered that they have common interests in reading and writing, which served as a catalyst for a deeper school-based friendship:

When Eve told Maddie that those [reading and writing] are her two favorite activities, Maddie walked to the whiteboard and pulled a chapter book off the ledge, bringing it back to show me that Eve had donated that book to the classroom library. The girls listed their closest friends in the class (Maddie said Ally and Emma and Eve said Carrie and Abby). This is when I made the segue to long-term friendships, asking if they'd had the same friends since they were

younger. Eve shared that she'd changed friends when she came from Village Woods, and Maddie said that she has made new friends each year to add to her older friends—"like Eve!" (Fieldnote, March 14, 2012)

Eve's burgeoning friendships with classmates like Maddie co-occurred with her growing willingness to talk about who she was outside of school. Perhaps she felt more willing to stand out for the things that make her unique as she developed a more firm position in the social world of her classroom. Nevertheless, she continued to show ambivalence about how she might express her differences at school. As we walked to the cafeteria to return our lunch trays one day, Eve began to open up to me about her background. We had recently talked about jobs and the tension between Eve's interest in becoming a teacher compared to her mom's hope that her only daughter becomes a doctor.

Annie: What is your mom's job?

Eve: My mom makes sandwiches for work.

Annie: At a restaurant?

Eve: No, at Fresh and Fast [a local factory that makes sandwiches sold at gas stations and convenience stores].

Annie: Does your mom like working there?

Eve: I don't like it because they speak lots of different languages there. It's really loud at Fresh and Fast because of all the different languages (Interview, February 8, 2012).

While I knew that her family spoke an Indian language at home, Eve had not

previously shared anything with me about it, so I asked her to tell me about the languages she and her parents speak. She said that her family's language is called Malayalam, and she spelled it aloud: "M-a-l-i-a-l-m." She explained that her home language is from India and that she likes to speak it sometimes, but that her mom speaks English, not Malayalam, at work. Eve felt ambivalent about how her first language fit into her social and intellectual life at Harris Creek Elementary.

An Eve-specific CRP?

In her acknowledgment of Eve's home language, Mrs. Jacobs pointed out a significant difference between Eve and all but five of her twenty-five classmates (Pedro, who speaks Spanish at home; David, who speaks Thai; Hong, who speaks Cambodian; Anil, who speaks Bengali; and Dalmar, who speaks Somali). The dominance of English in a setting like this is unsurprising, and the need to disrupt that with messages about the assets of linguistic diversity is clear. However, while explicitly incorporating this aspect of Eve's identity earlier in the year may have made Mrs. Jacobs *look* more culturally relevant, it also would have betrayed Eve's burgeoning comfort in her own skin by pointing out the very differences she had, however problematically, been trying to quiet in order to fit in. Thus, this calls up important questions about how much the classroom context matters in making choices about the curricular aspects of CRP, and whether a child has to be "ready" to engage with it.

Indeed, CRP is situation-specific and rooted in authentic relationships. This aspect of CRP seems almost impossible to embody in diverse classrooms without the sort of intensive one-on-one relationship that Mrs. Jacobs was able to develop with Eve, but that

has become difficult to cultivate in today's schools because of constraints like larger class sizes and the creeping dominance of standardized tests.

The question remains, as well, whether Mrs. Jacobs' integration of Eve's home language in a lesson served as mere “celebration” or whether it was “sufficiently utilized as a resource for [her] own learning” (Nykiel-Herbert, 2010, n.p.). In addition, policing social boundaries through popular culture affiliations, or marking who is and is not part of an exclusive social group like the cupcake club, tends to occur in the less structured parts of a school day (Schaffer & Skinner, 2009). While they may seem peripheral to some professionals, these social dynamics contribute to things like Eve's willingness to share aspects of her out-of-school self in class, and so teachers must find ways to understand the social worlds of their own classrooms.

However, CRP has to involve more than just creating *space* for students to claim authorship of their own experiences. While Schultz (2008) tells us that meaningful experiences in students' everyday lives are the fodder for engaging curriculum, Eve conveyed a sense of uncertainty or ambivalence about her experiences. Aspects of the things that made Eve different from her classmates were important access points for Eve's unique identity, but they were also pieces of herself that she seemed to want to protect from view; not only was Eve a working-class student in an affluent community, she was a child with brown skin in a sea of whiteness, an apartment dweller who rode a school bus that also stopped in a gated community, and an immigrant who visits her grandparents in India while some classmates take beach vacations to Florida and Mexico. While focusing on Eve's “culture” in a way that relies on these categorical differences between her and

her classmates is one way to value her background through the curriculum, CRP asks us to view culture in a more complicated way (see, for example, Ngo, 2010).

Fracturing Eve

Had I chosen to focus solely on either Eve's happy receptions of or subtle resistances to Mrs. Jacobs' efforts at giving her lived experiences a more prominent place in her life at school, the story would be deceptively simple, and also not helpful in my efforts toward deeper theorizations of CRP as a route to justice. In addition, with only the simple story available for interpretation, Eve would be difficult to place within Pioneer City's equity discourse because she did not always operate the way the discourse suggests that she would as a middle-achieving, working-class immigrant student of color. While she grew academically and socially during the 2011-2012 school year, other dimensions of Eve's identity were interacting with school dynamics in ways that make a simple rendering of her achievements impossible.

Instead of telling stories about how the district's transformation paved the way for Eve's growth at school, we need to acknowledge the cracks and fissures in such a clean tale, understanding that when we accept this level of complexity, we can begin to find our way out of problems and toward solutions. Teachers, teacher educators, and students in pursuit of CRP should be granted the space, time, and trust to "fall forward" (Schultz, 2008, p. 51) and find new ways out of our mistakes.

Indeed, I argue that discrete aspects of CRP were in similar shares visible and not visible in Room 103 during the 2011-2012 school year. Through illustrations of both, I suggest that this is perhaps the farthest CRP should be expected to go, both in the midst

of such significant change for Pioneer City Schools and in the absence of the revolutionary structural change that would have characterized a *recognition of schism* following the breach, crisis, and redress of this social drama. In the next section, I turn attention to power: how it was distributed, enacted, and sometimes contested in Mrs. Jacobs' classroom.

Blending student-centeredness and teacher authority

Today is the day before the March MCA (Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment) test, but the tension that comes with standardized achievement tests is already in the air. We have gathered in the computer lab, where the computer tables form a U-shape facing a SmartBoard. The students are sitting criss-cross in clumps of friends, necks stretched to 100-degree angles so they can look up to their teacher in the tight space. Mrs. Jacobs told the class how when she took a practice test to understand what the third graders would experience, she came across the word “perpendicular.” She asked Hong to stand up and give a physical demonstration of the meaning of perpendicular. I had made a note to observe how authority was shared and not shared in the class that day, so this moment was striking in Mrs. Jacobs' clear focus on the authority of the concept itself, rather than on its meaning only within the context of the upcoming test. Still, there was no mistaking that the day's math lesson was devoted to test preparation. Recalling the “smarts” we had all identified about ourselves at the beginning of the year, Mrs. Jacobs explained that Hong's demonstration showed her “picture smarts,” and that using our picture smarts can be a good way to understand what a word means in math.

Culturally relevant pedagogues position students as knowers whose experiences

and ways of knowing are valued (Ladson-Billings, 1995b). While in the scene described above, knowledge and authority were somewhat distributed between the teacher and a student, the physical arrangement of this scene tells a different story. The message was clear that Mrs. Jacobs held the information students needed to successfully complete the activity. She stood at the SmartBoard giving directions, while paraprofessionals Mrs. Ostlund and Abdi⁹ stood behind a row of computers, watching, and I sat with students on the floor. None of us made an effort to expand definitions or understandings of the term “perpendicular,” even as Hong gave a clear physical description of the term's meaning by holding her arms out in front of her, crossed at the forearms. The sense of authority conveyed here reminded me of the SEE professional development sessions I described in Chapter 4, where constructivist learning goals were stunted by an authoritarian physical arrangement.

Lortie's (2002) “apprenticeship of observation” is broadly understood as the subtle process through which we internalize a view of teaching and learning based on our years spent in the student's desk. It is important to see the back-and-forth relationships at play in these apprenticeships; for example, as a teacher struggles to reconcile her apprenticeship of observation with a daily reality that is different from what she experienced in school, so are her students engaging in their own apprenticeship as they observe her living the teacher role. More specifically, Mrs. Jacobs' classroom attempted in various ways to shift her own thinking about being a teacher in Pioneer City, while at the very same time, her students struggled to take in those new ways of thinking in the

⁹ While I view it as problematic that Abdi was referred to by his first name, I have chosen pseudonyms that are consistent with how all participants were referred to at Harris Creek. Most paraprofessionals were referred to in this way.

midst of competing norms and discourses.

Darling-Hammond and Baratz-Snowden (2005) expand on this by introducing the “problem of enactment.” The problem of enactment, they explain, arises when we learn and begin to believe something new about teaching and learning, but struggle to integrate the new learning with what we have come to know via our own apprenticeships of observation. The radical reconsideration that CRP calls for of how power and authority are distributed in learning spaces would require more than one single teacher's shifts in daily practice.

The moment-to-moment sharing of authority, as when Hong gave a kinesthetic demonstration of how she understands “perpendicular,” demonstrates Mrs. Jacobs’ willingness to consider multiple routes to the same goal, and possibly even to challenge the ultimate authority of the standardized test, but it does not change the constraints of that ultimate authority over Mrs. Jacobs’ efforts to ground her teaching in students’ lived experiences. This adds yet another complicated layer to the apprenticeship of observation in that even when we want to reconceptualize teaching and learning, the forces of “accountability” hinder the daily practice and measurement of those would-be transformations.

In addition, knowing is merely a precondition to actually doing something different, and due to the power of our prior experiences to shape our current thinking, enacting a new way of being as a teacher would require intensive support that is not typically part of teacher education and professional development. Thus, the new learning gets stuck in the space between theory and practice. We saw this in Chapter 4 when I

described Pioneer City's "return to status quo" following the social drama of its transformation.

Being, doing, not being, and not doing: Toward repositioning culture and whiteness in CRP

In April, Mrs. Jacobs' third graders completed a "biography project" that involved library and internet research and culminated in a poster display in the school library. On the day Mrs. Jacobs introduced the project, she explained that students would be able to choose a person they considered to be an "important public figure." Ella raised her hand and declared that she would write her project about the most important public figure in her life, Justin Bieber. Mrs. Jacobs told Ella and Hayley, who had added that she, too, would like to research the pop sensation, that Justin Bieber is not an option; they had to choose a historical figure who has contributed to society or done something to make the world a better place. Chris, who often antagonized the girls in the class, added, "and besides, not that many people even like Justin Bieber."

Mrs. Jacobs responded:

Actually, lots of people do like Justin Bieber, and I want students to learn about someone they don't already know a lot about. Ella, you already know so much about Justin Bieber, I want you and Hayley to learn new things. You also need to be able to find a book about the person because part of the assignment is to learn how to take biographical information from a book and write about what you've learned in your own words. (Field note, April 10, 2012)

In service of her grander vision for the assignment, Mrs. Jacobs missed an opportunity here to allow students to draw on their interests and out-of-school experiences to frame their academic work. Centering a school curriculum around things that already matter to students (Ladson-Billings, 1995b; Schultz, 2008) means doing so no matter who the students are. While Mrs. Jacobs made some careful moves to place several immigrant students' out-of-school selves closer to the center of classroom life, this challenge did not get taken up in the same way through her work with the white students. While an easy mistake that I can see myself having made, this could also be seen as an unintentional reinforcement of old “culture-less,” or colorblind and colormute (Pollock, 2005) patterns and discourses, which tell us that white people can only understand race in the context of a racialized “other” (Lensmire, forthcoming). In addition, with Eve and other immigrant students of color, things that really matter to students were viewed within a definition of culture as country and language of origin.

In an early analytic memo, I wrote:

I wonder about the notion of “completeness” when it comes to working toward equity in one’s practice. For example, Mrs. Jacobs described a fellow teacher as “good” on equity issues because he “makes time for it.” I wonder what this looks like in his practice, and how she distinguishes it from her own work as a member of the school’s equity team. (Analytic memo, March 15, 2011)

Similarly, my work with white teachers on a Northern Minnesota Native American reservation demonstrates how easily we can slip into discourse that frames culture as an object (Mason et al., 2011). As part of my professional development and research work

on the reservation, I conducted a discourse analysis of interviews I had done with Head Start teachers there. As we sought to develop deeper frames for culture in the context of teaching, it concerned me how easily, through conversation, the teachers and I began using language that de-contextualized culture and treated it like something static and definable. In that context, “it” became a signifier for “culture,” much in the way I described “norming suburban” in Chapter 4 (Watson, 2012). When we do this, we risk losing the deeper story.

Indeed, the *doing* of CRP, or the occasional discrete choices in activities, topics, and modes of delivery, seems to be the sort of curricular change that teachers can take on in the short term. This is a theory-to-practice move that is both digestible and visible. My observations of Mrs. Jacobs' work remind me of my own realizations, retrospectively, that my work as a third grade teacher showed some of the same visible components of CRP.

The problem is, these *doings* are not CRP. They may be early steps toward pedagogy that is culturally relevant, but CRP is a process, it is an ethical position, and in the case of Pioneer City Schools, it involved reconsidering the pervasive discourse of *excellence* as the district pursued *equity*. The taking-on of a whole new discourse, by which I imply the embodiment, through both language and actions, of a whole new way of thinking about the world, is much more difficult (Bahktin, 1981). Coming to *be* culturally relevant is a far more complicated and ongoing process, and to fully grapple with it we have to allow ourselves to exist, uncomfortably, in a much longer state of liminality (Miele, 2013), or in-betweenness. This may begin to explain how the return to

status quo that *could* mark the end of this social drama was, with hope, actually a second beginning.

Chapter 6

Before CRP: A demand to un-cover race and racialization

I learned of Dalmar's Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) diagnosis on the first day of school. Dalmar is one of a growing number of children wearing a patch at school that slowly emits the medication he has been prescribed to manage his ADHD. Ever the jokester, Dalmar plays with the adults who monitor his medication, moving the patch around his body or telling them he has moved the patch to a different body part when he has not actually done so. It is not lost on Dalmar that his educational assistants seem to ask him about his patch only when they notice that he seems hyperactive. For example, one morning as the class lined up for art (a class during which Dalmar typically clashes with the teacher), Dalmar started poking his pencil into a classmate's back. His morning educational assistant, Mae, held him by the shoulders and asked him if he was wearing his patch. "Yes," he said with one eyebrow reaching for his hairline, "but I can't show you because I'm not allowed to show my butt at school." In fact, Dalmar showed me later that he was wearing the patch at his hip, where his physician recommends it should stay. During one three-hour observation of Dalmar and his classmates, I counted zero utterances directed toward Dalmar by his educational assistants that were not reprimands or redirections.

The only Somali-American student in Mrs. Jacobs' class, Dalmar has been discursively and historically constructed as deviant from various norms in Pioneer City. Not only is he an immigrant child of color whose family is working class and lives in an apartment, he faces diagnoses of learning disabilities and emotional-behavioral

disorders as well as ADHD. Mrs. Jacobs wrote her master's degree thesis about the overmedication of black boys, and not surprisingly devoted significant intellectual and professional energy to supporting Dalmar. Though she ended up being hindered by licensure requirements, she even asked her principal about taking on a third and fourth grade multi-aged class for the 2012-2013 school year in order to have another year with Dalmar. That environment, Mrs. Jacobs suggested, could have provided him with academic support via another year of third grade curriculum, as well as more time with a patient and nurturing teacher who had already worked hard to develop a relationship with Dalmar and his mother.

Even a school aiming to live out an equity-focused agenda can discipline the difference out of marginalized students in the name of reducing the “achievement gap.” Already suspended within a set of complexities unique to his positioning as the only Somali-American student in his class at a school aiming to decrease the gap in standardized test scores between students of color and white students (also described in Chapters 4 and 5), Dalmar is further entangled in our constructions of race and achievement by the expectation of “covering” (Goffman, 1963; Yoshino, 2006) that it seems nobody *intended* to place upon him. Yoshino (2006), who is a legal scholar, borrows from Goffman's (1963) concept of “covering” to extend the way we view demands to assimilate in United States society. Mrs. Jacobs recognized some of these demands on Dalmar, and often disagreed with many of the district's decision-making policies about the sort of academic and behavioral interventions that were appropriate for him. Just as often, Mrs. Jacobs described feeling unable to do what she wanted or hoped

to do to help make school better for him.

Chapter 4 presented my interpretation of Pioneer City's transformation as a social drama, which I argue is a helpful tool for understanding both the chronological tale of transformation and its attendant complexities and dilemmas. In Chapter 5, I zoomed in on Mrs. Jacobs' classroom as a specific site that provides a view of the strengths and weaknesses in how the district has articulated its approach to CRP. Now, I describe Dalmar as a carrier of the tensions that inhibit Pioneer City and U.S. public schools from deeper engagement with culturally relevant pedagogy. To contextualize the story, I begin by framing Dalmar as a trickster who both aids and complicates our understandings of the tensions at play in Pioneer City Schools. These tensions originate in national dynamics far beyond the walls of Room 103, yet they travel in and through all of our classrooms and communities as we struggle to become a more just society.

This chapter looks closely at Dalmar's experiences to illustrate tensions that arise when ideas about systemic change make that trip around immediate, local, and national milieu. Even with good intentions that were grounded in research, lived experience, and support from official avenues, deep and enduring change meets barriers. Two key concepts will contribute to deeper understandings of Dalmar's positioning within the tensions I have described as barriers to systemic change via schools: demands on individuals to cover their differences in school and the racialization of African immigrant youth. As I stated earlier, I focus on challenges not to dwell on them or place blame for their existence, but to pursue opportunities for improvement over time.

In this study, challenges presented themselves as tensions that render elusive the

realization of systemic change via “transformation.” My analysis suggests that the aspects of CRP circulating in Pioneer City have put the figurative cart before the horse: we cannot use CRP to eliminate racial disparities in educational achievement among elementary school students without *first, also* and *deeply* addressing the roles and impacts of race itself in school and society. This requires intensive work both within and outside of the elementary school classroom, and focused looks at how young children “do” race in an environment that craves and sometimes contains real conversations around the role of race in everyday life (Schaffer & Skinner, 2009). Mrs. Jacobs described this succinctly in an interview:

[There are] many things teachers need to change in their practices and it has to be work ongoing all the time, and very reflective, and very purposeful. Like you can't just attend a [Seeking Educational Equity] course and then yeah, I'm looking through an equitable lens. It's ongoing all the time. I find myself all the time, it's like four steps forward and then three steps back, or vice versa (Interview, March 20, 2012).

As this makes clear, Mrs. Jacobs knows very well that the process of becoming a culturally relevant educator is ongoing, recursive, and deeply personal. She most consistently discussed the limitations on her ability to engage fully in this process of becoming in relation to her work with Dalmar.

With his collection of diagnoses, particularly the combination of behavioral and academic concerns, and his marginalized status as the only Somali-American student in the class, Dalmar proved to be a challenge in both Mrs. Jacobs' and my efforts; her

efforts to reach and teach this child, and mine to see, understand, and analyze. Thus, in order to explicate the roles of “covering” and racialization in holding back the deeper work of CRP, I have chosen to describe Dalmar as a trickster, a term that comes from literary studies. In the next section, I explain how, as a trickster character, Dalmar disturbs the boundaries of “how things are” in Pioneer City and demands that we look at his circumstances in new ways.

Dalmar the trickster

Raven the trickster is said to have turned himself into a pine needle. The Sky Chief's daughter drank the pine needle and it implanted in her womb as a human child, who eventually revealed himself as the raven and brought the sun to the land (McDermott, 1993). A more commonly referenced trickster is Coyote, who comes to us through various American Indian stories and usually suffers as a sort of wise fool. Coyote is curious and bold, so he makes mistakes. In the end, these mistakes are wisdom-enhancing instead of simply foolish. Through the narrative portrayal of a single character like the raven or coyote, we can see the folly of accepting the way things are, or seem to be: “The origins, liveliness, and durability of cultures requires that there be space for figures whose function is to uncover and disrupt the very things that cultures are based on” (Hyde, 1998, p. 9).

Trickster tales have historically been present in ritual and polytheistic settings (Hyde, 1998). Given this observation, upon first glance, United States schools and schooling may seem unlikely venues to argue for the presence of a trickster character. However, we can make the leap to the ritual setting of schools by viewing the trickster as

follows:

He needs at least a relationship to other powers, to people and institutions and traditions that can manage the odd double attitude of both insisting that their boundaries be respected and recognizing that in the long run their liveliness depends on having those boundaries regularly disturbed. (Hyde, 1993, p.13)

Trickster Dalmar is that boundary-disturber, wedded deeply to the institution of school and yet suffering in its lack of self-awareness. If we read them closely enough, tricksters show us to ourselves; schools today are a ripe location for this sort of unveiling. In an environment characterized by rule and order, standardized tests and content coverage requirements, there seems to be less and less space in classrooms for these culturally creative personalities, yet our very sustenance could depend on them. As Clifford and colleagues (2008) describe it, “through interpretive readings (of trickster characters) we might come, in however grudging a way, to honor those who live on the margins as essential to the life and vigor at the center” (p. 51).

Trickster characters have been referred to in other ways in various traditions, including as “transformer,” which is apt in this setting because Dalmar can be viewed as a representative of Pioneer City's transformation itself. Specifically, Dalmar is predicted to be an example of the rising test scores among students of color in Pioneer City, and he is the recipient of daily and multiple interventions designed to increase his academic achievement. The transformation's various elements were all designed with students like him in mind. But while the traditional trickster is viewed as a cultural creator, Dalmar the

trickster cannot yet be seen that way because it remains uncertain whether the presence of students like Dalmar in school districts like Pioneer City will come to occupy more central positions in their official stories. Dalmar is liminal. He remains stuck in the creases: perhaps a sign of what is to come, and yet perhaps not (Schechner, 2012). His very characterizations represent so much of the middle space between the ways we have tried to see ourselves and the new challenges before us.

Dalmar and achievement

This school was simply not designed for children like Dalmar. When he arrives each morning, Dalmar usually has about five minutes to settle in at his desk before the first of many educational assistants comes to retrieve him. Most days, these five minutes are the only time Dalmar is free to engage with the social world of elementary school. This nine-year-old Somali-American boy then leaves his classmates for a parade of educational interventions that are designed to enhance his performance on standardized math and reading tests. These interventions are supported by mainstream educational research and will probably help improve Dalmar's scores. His scores will be combined with those of the district's other students of African descent and used to make arguments about how the district's efforts have reduced the racial achievement gap. However, despite any possible gains in test scores, Dalmar's teacher is troubled by how constrained his experience at school seems to be.

Mrs. Jacobs laments that she can count on her hands the number of times she has seen Dalmar smile in a genuine, social way. Beyond that, Dalmar can feel almost impossible to characterize because the stories he tells about himself at school vary to such

an incredible extent. When his teacher and I talked at lunch or during her prep hour, we would occasionally end up trying to decode contradictory stories we had both heard from Dalmar that day, such as when he came to school wearing a paper bracelet from an amusement park. He told me that he got the bracelet when his dad took him to the mall over the weekend and announced that he was going to buy Dalmar a motorcycle when he turned thirteen. He told Mrs. Jacobs a completely different story that included neither the father nor the motorcycle. Luckily, unraveling any “truth” from these stories is not the task here. Instead, I share examples that illustrate connections between Dalmar's particular experiences and the barriers to systemic change in schooling that extend far beyond Pioneer City.

In particular, the obsession with “achievement” for students like Dalmar poses a distraction from these young people's far more pressing human needs. Placing a demand of achievement via standardized tests on marginalized students seems to contribute to broader problems with over-referral to special education (Skiba et al., 2006) and growing demands on teachers to prioritize test-related skill development (Kumashiro, 2008). Abdi Jama, the educational assistant charged with providing English Language support for Dalmar and other English Learners at Harris Creek, told me that he often saw his students' language needs being misread as evidence of learning disabilities or struggles with behavior:

Actually... I always wonder if the student is struggling, or if they're having difficulties in academics, that the teacher not automatically think about the special education. Like if a kid is struggling and they don't understand, and they're not

doing well in academics, they should not attribute it to special ed. That's evaluated too fast. So I think instead of looking for the quick fix, it would have been wonderful if they could understand the specific, actual situation of that child. If you have been in Vietnam or in China or in Africa, and you're sitting in class with a bunch of kids speaking [an] entirely different language, and came from entirely different background, you're not on-board with them and you don't understand what the teacher is talking about, and they see you as some kind of kid who has a special ed. So what I'm saying is that most of the teachers, they have to actually put themselves in the shoes of that student, and actually understand issues from his angle. It's not always about mental issue(s), medical issue(s). It's about social and cultural background. (Interview, March 6, 2012¹⁰)

In Dalmar's case, the "quick fix" took the form of those multiple daily interventions, so constant that he rarely spent more than those first five minutes of the day engaged in the routine life of Mrs. Jacobs' third grade class. Even his social life was mediated: once a week, rather than go to recess with the rest of the third grade, Dalmar was allowed to invite one or two classmates to "lunch bunch" with the social worker. Aside from his frequent interactions with Abdi, Dalmar's cultural self had even less space available to it. As Abdi says, Dalmar's ability to succeed in school was primarily mitigated by addressing his perceived medical and behavioral needs. While quick to

¹⁰ We conducted this interview in early March after trying for months to find a moment when we were both available to talk. Once Abdi learned more about the nature of my study in January, he showed growing interest and we developed a pattern of chatting briefly when he came in to Room 103 each day shortly after morning announcements. Over time, I saw that Abdi has an ethnographer's eye and ear for nuance. In spite of his often marginalized status in the school even among other paraprofessionals, Abdi brought a wealth of knowledge and experience. His insights about racialization, described further below, were particularly valuable.

remind me that Dalmar received much-needed special education services at Harris Creek and that his was not an instance of race-based over-referral (Skiba et al., 2006), Mrs. Jacobs emphasized that the intersection of special education, race, culture, and achievement was a complicated one:

Mary: They're (black male students) also students that typically get most behavior referrals and often times end up in special ed. So, this is a little tricky for me because Dalmar is in special ed. And so in that respect, it doesn't fit the case very well because we're the – I don't know, target person or child that you would focus on because he, I feel obviously, that he wasn't just shuffled into special ed because of behavior.

Annie: Yeah.

Mary: That it was an absolute need.

Annie: Yeah.

Mary: But... I think that his mother, too, has a lot of struggles within her own community of people. Her family or just the Somali culture, that he is special ed and that she has some difficulties at home with him so I think that there's this pull for her between what the schools want her to do, what's best for Dalmar, and what her family or her culture want what's best for him.

Annie: What do you think, like in her perfect world for Dalmar at school, what would be different as far as you can see?

Mary: I think the [ADHD] medication is probably a really big sore spot for her with her family. However, she is completely on board with it with us. She's been

pretty open about yes, he needs it. She needs help. I don't think that her family necessarily – and I can't be specific about members for sure, but I don't think that they're on board with it and so she I think has that pull back and forth. You know, what's, doing what she thinks is best for her son, but you know, getting influenced by both sides. So I think it's probably really, really hard for her. It's also a blended family and Dalmar lives with his non-biological father and there's other things that are connected in that that affect him. So, he in particular has so many different pieces in his life that you know, make life in general more challenging for him. So it's not just one thing. It's not just because he's a black Somali boy... But he has so many other things stacked up against him. But he has proven to me that with the right programming and the right support, that he can flourish. And he has been. So, we just won't see this growth overnight. It's going to be over time. And unfortunately, you know it's not always viewed upon that way. You know, it's one test score to the next (Interview, October 23, 2011).

In her concern for a deeper sense of context around Dalmar and his struggles at school, Mrs. Jacobs read Dalmar “more generously than the institutionalized discourses of marginality and normality have often allowed” (Clifford et al., 2008, p. 43). Mrs. Jacobs describes Dalmar's mother, too, with recognition of the various concerns demanding consideration in her decisions about what is best for Dalmar: the cultural as much as the pragmatic. Despite all of her understanding of and appreciation for Dalmar as a unique individual in the class, though, the methods Mrs. Jacobs had available to serve him were limited. Dalmar's routes to “achievement” rely on medication to settle his

diagnoses, and “interventions” to focus his mind. Once again, he is the deviant for whom the formats and structures of school do not work quite right.

Thus, even with adults like Mrs. Jacobs and Abdi working so hard to give him what he needs at school, Dalmar still seems suspended inside a beehive of activity that is missing the core elements of what these adults, supported by aspects of the central concepts of CRP, would suggest for him. As the next section will demonstrate, other forces are at play within this beehive.

Racialized identity and Dalmar

Racial identity was a recurring and difficult topic in conversations with Dalmar. While I never heard white racial identity broached explicitly in this classroom outside of my private conversations with focal students, I heard Dalmar being asked, in multiple contexts, to reflect on being Somali-American. For example, Abdi told me that he had frequent conversations with Dalmar about what it means to be from Somalia and living in Pioneer City. Because he and Dalmar had both come to the Pioneer City area via Kenya, Abdi felt that, as the only male of African descent on staff at Harris Creek, he was in a unique position to encourage Dalmar’s positive racial and ethnic identity development. But Dalmar repeatedly asked Abdi to downplay this aspect of their relationship, and of his own identity. One day near the beginning of the school year, Abdi leaned in close as Dalmar worked on a computer-based math activity and spoke softly to him in Somali to help explain a computation error Dalmar had made. Dalmar turned around and asked Abdi to stop speaking in Somali: “I don’t understand it,” he said (Field note, September 14, 2011). However, while Dalmar speaks and comprehends spoken English with ease,

his IEP (Individualized Education Plan) does stipulate that he should have instruction reinforced in Somali when possible.

Schaffer and Skinner (2009) found that black students identified as black in conversation on a regular basis, whereas Dalmar and other immigrant students of color in Mrs. Jacobs' class tended to minimize the salience of their race at school. When Dalmar colored himself white in a self-portrait, Abdi and I both asked him why he had drawn himself with light skin. He told me, “no, I didn’t!” Abdi told me that when he asked Dalmar about the self-portrait, Dalmar gave what Abdi and I agreed was a more chilling answer: “He told me he isn’t black. I showed him my arm and said, ‘put your arm next to mine. Your arm is like mine, you are black’” (Interview, March 6, 2012).

Like Somali elders concerned with cultural loss can also do (Bigelow, 2008), Abdi expressed concern that Dalmar was shirking his Somali self. Dalmar may have been making his own subtle statement of resistance to the binary options of blackness and whiteness in the United States, or he may have been resisting an African identity in the way that Abdi saw it. Abdi told me that he finds it important for all teachers to tell stories about their ethnic histories, especially for the benefit of students like Dalmar who rarely hear stories from school adults that sound anything like their own. Thus, he said he was crushed when the conversation continued and Dalmar told him that he did not want to be black, that black was bad and he wanted to be good. In her 2010 monograph, *Mogadishu on the Mississippi*, Bigelow discusses, and then complicates, some of the common metaphors used to describe youth in migration processes: binary portrayals of us versus them, being “torn” between modern and traditional practices, and the concept of “culture

clash” (p. 95). Indeed, while Suarez-Orozco (2001) describes school as the primary “point of contact” (p. 346) for immigrant students with dominant society, it is not a uni-directional relationship through which society inserts itself into the unassimilated mind. Similarly, in her dissertation research, Leet-Otley (2012) saw Somali-American youth build hybrid identities that did not fit smoothly into racialized categories of whiteness or blackness. This is a decisive departure from the more reductive oppositional theories put forth by Ogbu (1987). Formation of a U.S. racial identity is better framed as something internal, yet shaped by social and cultural contexts as well as by other people. For example, Blackledge (2005) introduced the idea of identities as either imposed, assumed, or negotiable. In school settings—where interactions with people and the setting are sustained over time—society, school, the classroom, and the individual need to be viewed in a more interactive relationship. In our immediate interpretations of Dalmar's resistance to blackness, Abdi and I both tried to impose racialized identities on him, rather than inviting him to invent new ways to characterize himself.

Much more has been said about the dynamic nature of identity development (Hall, 2006; Norton, 2000), so scholars understand that all identities are more complicated below the surface. Here, I suggest another layer of complexity in our view of identity, one that sees the child's presentation of self as a multidimensional filter. This conception adds layers of interaction through which the individual acts *back* on his situations, much in the way Dalmar does by resisting blackness and tricking his teachers. Also not simply receiving culture from either their elders or their black and white American peers, the students in Leet-Otley's (2012) study acted back on their situations by building unique

identities that made use of *aspects* of what was useful to them from each. This is a dynamic cycle of influence in which the environment acts on the student, and the student acts back on himself and the environment. Within a view of identity as a multidimensional filter, we must also recognize the “subtle shifts” that we all make as we interact with different people and contexts (Lewis & Ketter, 2004). Dalmar as a character in this narrative begs us to view him in a more complicated way than he seems to believe that others see him. Halting the analysis here, though, would fail to recognize how an individual living out a complicated racial identity in school is involved in shaping ongoing discourses.

Bigelow (2010) also describes how Somali immigrants can feel racialized as “black.” Understanding the way society tends to place identity markers on youth can illuminate the complicated work that young people do when they try to assume an identity while the world around them is imposing one (Ngo, 2010; Suarez-Orozco, 2001). Bigelow offers some examples of youth fitting into Ogbu’s (1987) “acting white” discourse, in which Somali youth begin to feel that their socially available options are to act either “black” or “white,” again fitting into the ascribed binaries described above. Youth participants in Bigelow's study described feeling this process of racialization from multiple angles, including from police officers. In one example, officers were reported to have dropped off Somali youth in African American neighborhoods to threaten them, also leading the immigrant youth to conclude that race was meant to be the most important component of identity in U.S. society. Likewise, Somali students reported tension with and resistance to “acting black” as they carved out unique identities in a

“Black-White dichotomized discourse” (Bigelow, 2010, p. 108) that did not include ready-made options for acting Somali or Somali-American. Thus, we must challenge these binaries while also acknowledging their symbolic pull on youth identities.

Using a racialization lens to view Dalmar's resistance to marking himself as black gives the matter a different hue; to Abdi, Dalmar's words imply that he has internalized the image of whiteness equating goodness. Reading this as plain resistance to recognizing his assets as a “black” boy may be partially missing the point, though. An important part of understanding something like Dalmar's resistance to labeling himself as black in words and pictures involves trying to determine whether that resistance is complicit with dominant society's subtractive perspectives or is rooted in some other more complicated reason, like racialization. In Dalmar's case, I surmise that both possibilities are at play. Dalmar, from what I could determine in our conversations and my observations of him at school, hated being so noticeably different, in so many noticeable ways, from his classmates at Harris Creek. I do not think that explicitly “acting white” was of interest to Dalmar, but rather that from time to time he tried to take the opportunity to quiet one of the many ways he felt different from and unequal to his mostly white, mostly academically mainstream classmates. In other words, it may have been less about “not Somali-American” or “not black” than it was about Dalmar simply wanting to feel “not so different.”

In sum, the politics and problematics of racialization need to occupy a more central position in our understanding of variations in school “achievement.” Dalmar's development of a sense of self is not only as important as his academic success, but it is

necessary *for* it, especially in a U.S. school system that still marginalizes the needs, experiences, and perspectives of immigrant students (Perez & Solorzano, 2009). Even as early as third grade, Dalmar is clearly concerned with his identity and how it interacts with the environment at his school. Without addressing those dynamics between student identity and academic achievement, there remains a meaningful disconnection between the two, and a barrier to the understanding of students' cultural selves that is key to developing CRP.

Covering racial and cultural difference for achievement. Dalmar is a believable trickster in part because of his often confusing self-representations, as described above. However, the way Dalmar is represented by *others* also begs the trickster read, as much of what happens to and around Dalmar in school is similarly confounding. Lewis Hyde writes: “Trickster is the mythic embodiment of ambiguity and ambivalence, doubleness and duplicity, contradiction and paradox” (1998, p. 7). Yoshino's (2006) application of the term “covering” to discuss the assimilation of difference will help show how trickster ways are neither allowed nor recognized in current conceptions of success in U.S. schooling. But first, to frame the discussion, I will give an illustrative example of ways that difference can hurt students who do not mold quickly to the predominant rules and discourses around them.

Policing the demand to cover. Redirections were a regular source of input during Dalmar's school day. Mrs. Jacobs' redirections were usually sensitive and attuned to Dalmar as a person, as on the morning when Mrs. Jacobs found him pacing by the classroom door. She could tell that he was fixated on waiting for the Occupational

Therapist to take him to the adaptive gym for a “motor break” and asked him to help her look at a new book instead. Unfortunately, many of the other adults whom I observed interacting with Dalmar at school were not so savvy. For Dalmar and Anil, another immigrant student with significant needs, redirections from paraprofessionals and specialists were constant and usually consisted of little more than their names repeated with a punitive tone.

Such demands for Dalmar to conform were made on a regular basis. On the morning of April 13, 2012, I tracked the physical movements of, and words spoken to, Dalmar and two other focal students in this study (a white male and an Indian-American girl). The differences were striking. Again, an adult other than Mrs. Jacobs was the one taking it upon himself to keep Dalmar “in line.” That adult, Mr. Wright, had started co-teaching math lessons with Mrs. Jacobs earlier that month when the former paraprofessional went on leave to have a baby. Mr. Wright looked younger than his thirty years, was white, dressed in a pressed dress shirt tucked in to pressed khaki pants, and wore slim brown leather belt and a silver wedding band. Visually, he fit in seamlessly at Harris Creek. He heard Mrs. Jacobs and me discussing that Dalmar had not yet arrived from breakfast, and responded that Dalmar was roaming the halls “as usual.” In fact, I had greeted Dalmar a few minutes earlier. He was finishing his breakfast when I walked through the cafeteria on my way in to Room 103. A different Somali-American student from another third grade class was the student Mr. Wright had seen wandering the halls. Other days, I heard Mr. Wright explaining to Dalmar that he would start the lesson again “when you are ready to act like a third grader” (Field notes, April 20 and

27, 2012).

In the absence of depth and attention to Dalmar as a person in their teacher-student relationship, Mr. Wright appears unprepared or unwilling to teach Dalmar from a place that recognizes his complexities and humanity. The message this can transmit to a student like Dalmar is that he is not simply different from the norm at Harris Creek, but that those differences are a problem. Importantly, it is then Dalmar who would need to change in order for school to work better for him, and not the school that could somehow meet him in the middle. This approach is antithetical to culturally relevant pedagogy, which aims to shorten the distance between students' cultural selves and the culture of schooling (Gay, 2002). A more supportive alternative could look like what Dennison (1969) describes in *The lives of children*:

Jose used to burst into song, or jump up and do dance steps during our sessions in reading. This had nothing to do with exuberance; it was compulsive and frantic.

But it was essential that he do it. The effort he was putting into his work aroused an intolerable anxiety. He needed to boil it off and feel the vigor of his body so as to reassure himself that he was "all there." (p. 23)

Covering for academic success as a mask for assimilation

Yoshino (2006) took up questions of covering one's difference (whether it be homosexuality, femininity, Muslim religion, or some other deviance from a white heterosexual male norm) specifically regarding the shift in the gay community from what he calls the "demand to pass" as straight. As he describes it, the demand to pass was preceded historically by the demand to convert from homosexuality to heterosexuality,

through either medication, therapy, or overt punishment. Today, Yoshino argues, the demand to pass has shifted into new terrain where it is socially acceptable to be recognized as deviant in one's sexual orientation as long as one follows certain norms of representation. In other words, just be sure you still *appear* to be straight (Yoshino, 2006). While Yoshino's work focuses on civil rights law and narratives about personal experience as a gay Asian-American man, it is also helpful to consider questions about how a demand to cover might be playing out in schools and schooling. For example, to what extent is "succeeding" in school on both qualitative and quantitative measures asking students to cover various and multiple forms of deviance from a heterosexual white male norm? Might increasing academic "success" among a diverse student population actually indicate the success of our school system to discipline the difference out of students? For example, Dalmar experiences countless molding experiences at school, and it could be argued that few of these experiences have been designed to unlock the uniqueness of Dalmar as an individual in the way that Dennison (1969) described Jose, above. Instead, Dalmar receives the services he receives in order to pull him closer to a vision of "normal" in U.S. schooling. Again, the message is: go ahead and be Somali-American, have ADHD, and be confused about your identity, but do not be flamboyant about it. While both Mrs. Jacobs and Abdi have voiced criticism of this arrangement, they also both describe a sense of being locked in to the structures supporting it by the nature of their respective positions at Harris Creek.

Yoshino poses perhaps the most important question about assimilation: whatever our arguments about whether someone needs to assimilate, *who* faces the demand to do

so? Pioneer City Schools has indeed taken admirable steps toward lessening the depth of assimilation required to be successful in the school district, but only in very certain ways. For example, parent information meetings at the district and school level are now held separately for racial, ethnic, or linguistic groups who have requested them (including meetings translated into Somali, Russian, and Spanish), yet these meetings remain separate from the “regular” meeting that is conducted solely in English. As discussed throughout this text, the focus on reducing the racial achievement gap in Pioneer City has resulted in dubious, at best, improvements in the actual school experiences of immigrant students, and this is further evidenced by the separateness of their access to the official “news” of the district via these informational meetings. In addition, families like Eve's, who speak a less common Indian language, must attend the mainstream meetings and request after-the-fact translation from friends, family, or neighbors.

The demand to cover, says Yoshino, should be recognized as being just as dramatic and just as core to the self as the demand to convert. In the same way that the “new racism” (Cross, 2005) works more insidiously than overtly racist policies and practices that make it clear who is being subjugated and who will benefit from unearned power and privilege, the demand to cover works underneath a discursive mask of equity. The demand to cover has several parallels in Pioneer City's work toward racial equity in educational achievement. On a Facebook page devoted to critiquing the transformation and in blog posts authored by affiliated community members, Superintendent Kelly is demonized for being the “real racist” because she advocates identifying students by race as a strategy for understanding the unique needs of particular groups. These posts

commandeer the conversation, so that instead of discussing strategies for supporting all students, community members end up defending the simple fact *that* they truly wish to support all students. By guiding the discussion in this direction, progress is impeded by a case of mutual defensiveness.

Subtraction and racialization. With the constant intervention and redirection, much of Dalmar's school experiences can be described as subtractive. Valenzuela (1999) defines schooling as subtractive any time that something the student carries into the classroom is either devalued or unrecognized. Valenzuela argues that many instances of subtractive schooling begin with orientations toward caring in student-teacher relationships. When orientations toward caring are different for students and teachers, as they might be in our concern for Dalmar's positive identity as a Somali-American and his resistance to having his dark skin "called out," there can be direct consequences in students' achievement potential (Valenzuela, 1999). In subtractive schooling, there are implicit expectations that students adjust to school as *the teacher* conceives of it. This contrasts with an ethic of care (Noddings, 1996): specific ways of speaking, being, and doing that translate into authentic relationships between teacher and between students and students and students. To truly exemplify authentic (versus surface-level, or aesthetic) caring as Valenzuela frames it, a teacher would learn about her students in order to cultivate the classroom environment and her expectations accordingly. For example, Valenzuela talks about Mexican teachers visiting students in their homes and then explores the implications of this relationship-building in students' orientations toward schooling. This approach to bringing community knowledges and perspectives into the classroom is part of a robust

“funds of knowledge” tradition, pioneered by Moll et al. (1991). This allows teachers to pursue *additive* practices, or schooling that builds upon the assets that students already possess. In large part, though, we unintentionally and continually convey subtractive attitudes that encourage students to assimilate to the institution’s existing definition of schooling and success. A similar thing happens at Harris Creek when Dalmar moves to a special teacher for each part of the school day. The beehive of activity supporting Dalmar through school provides surface-level aesthetic caring (Valenzuela, 1999), aiding in his pursuit of externally defined benchmarks without attending to the core of him, but does not extend to the sort of authentic care we should be seeking for all students. Despite, or even in spite of, Mrs. Jacobs' remarkable care for and commitment to this student, the schooling machine is bigger than she is.

Drawing from Noddings’ scholarship on caring (2010), Valenzuela critiques schooling that asks students “to make sense of schooling when schooling is not attempting to make sense of them” (1999, p. 258). Additionally, by identifying the *context* of schooling as critical to the development of school orientations, Valenzuela complicates the dominant view that success or failure in school is a product of the individual. This helps us go beyond a simple structure/agency view and consider the cumulative roles of capital, subtractive assimilation, and caring in the schooling of young people. This more contextualized approach to analyzing immigrant youth's school experiences helps demonstrate Dalmar's position as an embodiment of tensions in Pioneer City's pursuit of transformation.

Re-viewing success via cultural reciprocity. Cultural reciprocity, which is consistent

with CRP yet relatively unexplored in most “achievement gap” discourse, suggests that schools should be doing more to meet immigrant students partway in their quest to succeed academically (Bigelow, 2010). Without a similar motion from the institution to *shift* instead of just *support*, unfortunately, as these students develop and enact a sense of self-efficacy at school, they are attending school in a system that remains “not designed for them” (Bigelow, 2010, p. 90). The cost of its absence can be seen in the disconnected experience that Dalmar often faces at school. In fact, students engage with multiple literacies and oralities (often more than are recognized by educators), and activate diverse funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1991) as they negotiate the issues of identity, agency, and power that pervade their schooling experiences. Educators gaining a deeper understanding of these funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1991) could be a step toward a stronger form of cultural reciprocity in the education of Dalmar and other immigrant students.

If a move toward cultural reciprocity might improve the schooling experiences and identity development of immigrant youth, what next? How can cultural reciprocity de-center and enhance the “cultural competence” tenet of CRP, while also leading to deeper work toward sociopolitical consciousness? Further work needs to address what this might look like, what it requires, and of whom. Most certainly, cultural reciprocity can be a tool to help us see the costs of subtractive assimilation in the lives of all students.

Dalmar the character—the trickster—begs us to recognize a different kind of assimilation. As a focal student whose experiences I wanted to be able to analyze, he

beguiled me for so long that the logic seemed surprisingly simple when I finally broke it down: Schooling is subtractive when children are asked to mute or quiet a part of themselves upon entrance. Assimilation in the early 21st century largely constitutes a demand to cover that which makes us deviant, thus participating in our own subtraction. Dynamics of racialization, those that conflate Africanness in the United States with blackness, have possibly convinced Dalmar that to be marked as black would be both to subtract and to cover a Somali-American self, leaving him with more uncertainty than he began with.

Stories from Dalmar complicate the celebratory discourse that tells one version of Pioneer City's transformation. Indeed, a closer analysis suggests ways in which increasing academic success can come at the cost of disconnection from social and academic life as well as healthy identity development. Students like Dalmar are marked as "different" in many ways, while their middle-class, white, English-speaking classmates continue to enjoy the invisible dominance associated with being "normal." Thus, while a face-value examination of academic improvements would tell us that policies aimed toward reducing the achievement gap are in the best interests of immigrant students of color, I argue that the scenario is considerably more complex, for those students as well as for their schools and our society. For example, such policies rely on our collective failure to examine race-based norms in schools; as a result, Dalmar and other students who are marked as different receive individual support in pursuit of an unaltered view of success. Instead of the institution making structural changes to better represent the U.S. and local population (e.g., infusing teacher education and professional

development with anti-racist pedagogies like CRP), marginalized students continue to do much of the labor of making school “work” for themselves. Both excellence and equity now appear elusive. At the same time, the complexity of truly “embracing” or “addressing” difference through schooling is clearer than ever. What seems to have happened, then, in the quest for excellence and equity through CRP, is the sometimes subtle, sometimes overt, policing of difference in favor of a smooth appearance and uniform outcomes. This scenario threatens to squelch the trickster. In Chapter 7, I propose some ways that teacher education and professional development might work together to keep him alive.

Chapter 7

Insights and implications

Glossy fairytales have their uses, but when it comes to learning about processes of change, these simple stories are less productive than those that attempt to unearth and understand some of the complexities. To better understand what is complex about the scenario in Pioneer City Schools, I have looked closely at how the goal of systemic change faces tension with the constricting realities of today's schools and the ideologies that shape our activities within them. Both approaches to storytelling include statements about characters and their contexts that could be declared fact or opinion, but my intent is not to incite debates about Truth versus truth. Instead, I hope to clarify the ways that our frames shape the ways we read the world, which, in turn, shape the ways we act and react in social situations. With this narrative structure supporting the more explicit arguments I make using observations and experiences in Pioneer City, I lay the foundation for future work with preservice and practicing teachers that investigates the very ways we hear and tell stories about our lives.

The second, and central, thesis of this dissertation is that CRP cannot be a mechanism for systemic change in school districts without an attendant commitment to unearthing and then addressing the patterns in discourse and history that conflict with the goal of racial justice. I have argued that CRP constituted a new discourse in Pioneer City that was incompatible with the discourse already dominant in that community, and that historical beliefs about “the way things are” in Pioneer City were so deep-seated and unexamined that they formed insurmountable barriers to the school district's

transformative goals.

I have tried to be clear that, while Pioneer City is the vehicle for this story, it could have occurred in thousands of other school districts, and just as easily in my own classroom as in Mrs. Jacobs'. This part of the argument bears restating: *I do not fully live a culturally relevant pedagogy in my work as a teacher educator*. I am constrained, as Mary Jacobs is, by a powerful set of discourses and ideologies that limit the sort of disruptions to the social order that CRP is really calling for. I say what I feel I can say and push what I think I can push, but I stop short of even small revolutions because I love the process of teaching and my family relies on the income. It would take significant shifts to this situation for me to be willing to take the risks necessary for a truly transformative CRP.

Even so, I could have written a version of this story that documents and critiques the insidious ways that new racisms seep in and through Mrs. Jacobs' third grade classroom at Harris Creek. The arguments I could make in a dissertation like that may have been more seamless and tidy than those in the one I did write; they may have fit nicely within recent literature (e.g., Cross, 2005; Watson, 2012), and extended it by carrying the conversation into a district that has received national credit for its strides toward reducing the racial gap in educational achievement. Here is why I chose not to write that study: most simply, a study like the one I just described begs little of me, the critical ethnographer, teacher educator, parent, aunt, and white, middle-class woman who seeks more than to fill or close gaps in either research literature or popular rhetoric.

To be glib, that story has been told and has done little to solve the problem of the

colorline, which I imagine W.E.B. DuBois (1903) would be devastated, if unsurprised, to hear has persisted as a central problem in the 21st century. Most importantly, though, that study could just as well have been about anyone, and I never sought to conduct educational research to either valorize or vilify. To turn the lens on Mrs. Jacobs would be no fairer than to turn the lens on my own loving and progressively committed family, on my colleagues in the teacher education redesign project at my university, or on myself. I could have critiqued Mrs. Jacobs, just as she could have critiqued me.

But that approach would have worked against my goals as an educational researcher: decolonizing the space of academia, building community-school-university partnerships by and for all entities involved, and, above all, *improving school for kids*. In other words, my methodological and analytical choices comprise an explicit decision to turn away from the sort of critical work that tells us only what individual teachers do wrong in pursuit of racial justice. Then again, it would be even more simplistic and less productive to focus only on good intentions or what we are doing right. The situation calls for, yet again, a more complicated view.

Review of findings

For this social drama to have resulted in a recognition of schism, or an outcome that looked as different as the one I began to envision when I first read “the letter” in my mentor's office in 2010, some very different things would have had to happen. As I described in Chapter 4, my analysis of Pioneer City's transformation suggests that teachers like Mrs. Jacobs were left in a liminal space when they received basic information about CRP and anti-racist teaching but not the deep study, time, and

mentorship that might have helped use that work to build toward praxis. Knowing that our ways of being as teachers are shaped and reinforced through apprenticeships of observation (Lortie, 2002) is not enough to orient us toward the dramatic shifts in consciousness it would take to truly develop CRP in classrooms, school districts, and society.

To more fully describe how the recognition of schism proved to be out of reach, Chapter 5 discussed factors in the classroom that complicated even seemingly straightforward moments of CRP. Moments of CRP were sometimes present, but they were shallow without the supports I pointed out as missing in Chapter 4. Delving deeper into the constraints on CRP in the context of deeper understandings of race and racialization, in Chapter 6 Dalmar showed us some of the human costs of an educational environment that favors compliance over creativity.

But given the constraints at the societal level, it seems almost predictable that the social drama of Pioneer City's transformation would end in a return to the status quo. Thus, for this story to have ended differently, the circumstances at each level would have had to be different, as well. For one, in schools organized around the transformative aims of CRP, students like Eve would reap the benefits of teachers like Mrs. Jacobs working in settings and with colleagues supportive of their efforts to shift from a conception of *doing* to *being* CRP. In those schools, tricksters like Dalmar would be alive and well; indeed, their schools would have been designed with them in mind.

A final theme that cut across the chapters regards the tension of trying to live out something one is still learning. This was a challenge for me as a novice critical

ethnographer. It was Mrs. Jacobs' challenge as an educator who wanted to be equity-minded. It was Dalmar's and Eve's as they and their teachers tried to figure out what it meant to *be* an immigrant student of color in Pioneer City School District. I noted in Chapter 4 that transformation is occurring always and everywhere; in other words, we are all and always liminal in some way. Beyond this particular social drama, liminal stages are ever-present. The tension of trying to simultaneously live and learn plagues babies who take their first steps, only to topple back onto the ground. It plagues my son Emmanuel, who reads his simple Spanish books with ease one night and stumbles over sight words the next. In unique ways, we are doing this at every stage, so why not learn to live with liminality?

As I discuss below, I came to, and stuck with, CRP because I was not ready to give up on its possibilities, despite the often tokenized ways it gets taken up in practice. For these findings to have their greatest impact, we need to return to theories of CRP and reimagine them, holding tightly to their transformative aims and even tighter to the lessons learned from Pioneer City. We need to accept the liminal space between theory and practice and engage with it, rather than pushing it one direction or the other.

Reframing CRP

I would not be writing this if I had abandoned all hope of education's role in building a more just society; first, we must return to the theoretical foundations of CRP and reframe it with sociopolitical consciousness (the transformative arm of this transformative theory, if you will) at the center. Second, I propose that CRP will remain stuck in the tired academic back-and-forth until we can build our pursuit of praxis into

long-term, embedded teacher education and professional development (Coffino, 2012).

As the theoretical mechanism for Pioneer City's pursuit of transformative goals, culturally relevant pedagogy was unable to disrupt the discursive and historical currents that resist systemic change. The preceding chapters demonstrated this through stories from and around Mrs. Jacobs' classroom, Pioneer City, and U.S. public education. In this concluding chapter, I propose teacher education, induction, and professional development that would better support teachers working with CRP as they strive toward praxis, and that would contribute to a theoretical shift in CRP that positions it as transformative. Ultimately, however, I argue that the systemic barriers to CRP are beyond anything that can be affected through one school district's decisions about policy and practice. Thus, the local work that we do *must* be coupled with activism at the state and federal level. We have to become more brave.

As Irvine (2010, p. 61) describes it, culturally relevant teachers negotiate the local and systemic dimensions by filling multiple roles: “they are systemic reformers, members of caring communities, reflective practitioners and researchers, pedagogical content specialists, and anti-racist.” Changes within teacher education, including a longer induction process to support new teachers (Hyland, 2009), are critical, yet it is also important for school districts to take leadership in identifying and cultivating school personnel who can develop as culturally relevant pedagogues. This happens, in my experience, through sustained self-study that is grounded in relationships (Mason & Iverson, in progress).

Returning to Young's (2010) suggestion that CRP's days as a viable theory may

be numbered, I argue that, yes, as articulated in recent empirical work that considers CRP in elementary school settings, CRP may have run its course as a possible route to systemic change in education. We see whole strands of work around CRP being devoted to de-politicized versions of the theory that fail to acknowledge either the political nature of life in schools and society or the potential of CRP to engage these politics and orient us toward a better future. As in McKinley's (2006) study that provides empirical support for CRP as a route only to academic success and cultural competence, sociopolitical consciousness is too often pushed aside.

Likewise, my own work as a teacher educator has included similar numbers of heartening and disheartening moments as students demonstrate their budding understandings and misunderstandings of sociopolitical consciousness. CRP can reclaim its transformative power by not only returning to its theoretical origins but also being rearticulated with sociopolitical consciousness as its primary goal, aided and supported by growths in academic achievement and cultural competence. By placing sociopolitical consciousness at the forefront of CRP, it would become more difficult to miss the "fangs" (Casey, 2010), or to become bogged down in the pursuit of sharply defined academic success and cultural competence goals, which can more fruitfully, perhaps, be viewed as results *of* an approach to teaching and learning that aims toward a critique of the social order. As an avenue toward sociopolitical consciousness, CRP opens up the possibility for a shift in how school works, not only for encouraging *individuals* to transgress and push against structural barriers in their communities, but possibly even for re-envisioning the system itself as a mechanism for sorting and training according to identity categories like

race, class, and gender.

Meanwhile, a sociopolitical consciousness-centered CRP would also acknowledge the need for consciousness-raising among all people involved: those of us engaged with CRP as theory, the practitioners seeking to live the theory through classroom practice, and the students populating classrooms where CRP is a goal. This points to the need for CRP to be treated as a key component of long-term, embedded teacher professional development (Coffino, 2012; Darling-Hammond, 2005). Conducted in this way, with continuous support from other educators committed to the ongoing struggle with *being* CRP, teachers could better anticipate, and mitigate, the impacts of discourse and history that constrained Pioneer City.

Teacher identity in teacher education

Asher (2003) writes, “multiculturalism in education has evolved as a discourse about the marginalized 'other' with little examination of the 'self' at the center of the dominant culture” (p. 235). This sentiment matches an emerging trend toward increased attention given to teacher identity in preservice teacher education. Indeed, Flores and Day (2006) found that, while the shaping influence of preservice teacher education can be weak for new teachers, we might strengthen that relationship through “a stronger focus upon opportunities to experience and reflect upon personal biography and the cultural contexts in schools” (p. 230). Rather than focusing simply on easing the transition to teaching through identity work in teacher education, I suggest that we focus on preparing teachers to see the complexity and struggle involved in the process of teaching and work with teachers to face that difficulty with agency and hope. Indeed, scholars of teacher

identity ask us to view identities as something we *use* rather than something fixed and static that we *have* (Flores & Day, 2006).

Recent literature on teacher identity asserts that teachers must examine how power and privilege have worked in their own lives in order to understand the impacts of both in learning and teaching. Because of what we know in general about the socialization experiences of the “typical” teacher compared to today’s “typical” student body, we need to understand how individual identity is formed, how identity shapes our learning processes, and how we take on new knowledge as we become teachers of people who are, inevitably, different from ourselves (Hollins, 2011). Without explicit time and assignments devoted to it during teacher education, many teachers will not consider the impact of personal identity on their work with students, and thus will rely on what they learned about teaching and learning through their own “apprenticeship of observation” (Lortie, 2002). In other words, they will teach in a manner similar to how their teachers taught them. Given, again, the racial, cultural, and socioeconomic differences between many teachers and their students in today's schools, this cycle all but ensures a reproductive process whereby the experiences and worldviews of marginalized students remain underrepresented and ill-considered in the majority of teachers’ conceptions of teaching and learning.

Teacher identity should be viewed as a paradoxical subject that can be difficult to study (Clarke, 2009); identity is simultaneously unitary and multiple, continuous and discontinuous, individual and social (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011). Preservice teachers’ self-studies of identity have to be similarly complex in order to draw from both ends of

these continua. Indeed, productive teacher identity development tends to arise from tensions between theory and practice, or the worlds of University classroom and clinical placement (Mason & Wang, in progress). Teacher education should work with these tensions, helping candidates make use of the shifts in thinking that might lead them toward stronger pedagogy (Horn et al., 2008). This means that teacher educators can encourage depth and self-efficacy by inviting their students to explore the relationship between personal identities and the teacher role.

With the above in mind, perhaps practice can, indeed, make practice (Britzman, 2003). Britzman's choice of "practice" instead of the idiomatic "perfect" to complete the phrase implies the dynamism of a process as complex as teaching. This subtle acknowledgment that becoming an educator is an ongoing and many-layered process signals Britzman's critical stance: "I am interested in the contradictory realities, indeed the conflicts and crisis that structure the work and narratives of learning to teach" (2003, p. 11). The narratives of learning to teach that she outlines in her book are presented as often messy, highly personalized, and always more complicated than an uncritical "best practices" approach would have its readership believe. In other words, Britzman refuses to create a cohesive narrative of what happens when a young person undergoes a process of learning to teach.

Research on teacher identity has addressed the process of understanding oneself as a person-who-teaches. Less attention is given to the return to the teacher education curriculum. With the understanding, for example, that white, middle-class teacher candidates tend to rely on old scripts instead of drawing deeper connections between their

individual experiences and course readings about systemic inequities (Mueller & O'Connor, 2007), we have to revise our forms of questioning, our requirements for writing assignments, and our assessment strategies to better support teacher candidates' learning. Britzman reminds us to consider "whether the teacher is in actuality a static product of an assembly-line socialization, or whether the teacher is continually shaping and being shaped by the dynamics of social practice, social structure, and history" (2003, p. 48-49). Meanwhile, we must build, or revive, partnerships with K-12 teachers and administrators to strengthen induction and professional development support for teachers at all career stages.

This sort of embedded teacher education and teacher professional development *must* involve close work with colleagues and teacher educators (Seidl, 2007), and it must be iterative. By this I mean that when we try to engage with praxis, we have to be able to toggle from theory to experience to reflection and back again, in different orders, all of the time. Making the translation from theory to practice is too complicated a process for the typical professional development-to-classroom practice cycle to be even close to adequate.

Conclusion

The reframed CRP that I have proposed offers an avenue for educators and students to enact a fully articulated approach to dismantling systemic racism in schools without compromising academic rigor. While the responsibility to adapt to dominant cultural norms in school typically falls on marginalized students, CRP offers an opportunity for educators to meet students where they are. This begins with an

understanding of the assets and perspectives that students bring to school from their home and community lives. In its focus on improving academic achievement and cultural competence while helping all students gain the skills to view the world through a critical lens, culturally relevant teaching can be an effective tool to combat systemic injustices.

I began this dissertation with a note about how stories can help to satisfy the curious mind or calm the traumatized heart. Expanding our forms of storytelling, as I have done here, helps us to grapple with the complexities that might lead toward fuller renderings of our nation's histories, present debates, and the actual lives of children in schools. But in the midst of all of this complexity, neither my heart nor my mind feels either satisfied or calmed. I began this dissertation *process* expecting to find examples of how sociopolitical consciousness can be engendered in the settings of a predominately white, upper-middle class school district trying to become more culturally relevant. I faced a difficult lesson in recognizing that I, too, had put the cart before the horse by expecting educators to encourage sociopolitical awareness when they were ill prepared to engage with this complicated work themselves. Indeed, after generating and considering the data described in this dissertation, I feel sure that the essence of CRP will remain visible only in stolen moments as long as teacher education does not commit itself, in earnest, to building mechanisms for this deep study of self-in-society to occur during and beyond formal teacher preparation. While I recognize the audacity of this proposal in the midst of neoliberal threats to public education and teacher preparation (see, for example, Davies & Bansel, 2007; Sleeter, 2012), I do not know what else to do but keep talking, writing, and advocating for as long as this crucial vision remains possible.

To borrow from early 20th century African-American scholar Anna Julia Cooper, “it is not of the dogs and their doings, but of society holding the leash that I shall speak” (Lehmert & Bahn, 1998, p. 93). My goal has been to focus my analysis of the scenario in Pioneer City Schools on the relationships all along that leash, shunting from society to community to individual levels of analysis. I aimed to draw connections and complicate them, to challenge commonsensical ways of viewing the relationships between school and society, and, above all, to harness the stories of two third graders who embody, as much as they do not embody, the narratives so smoothly constructed about them and others “like them.” Through these examples, I present a more complicated version of the relationships between excellence, equity, and the pursuit of culturally relevant pedagogy in a changing community. The students, teachers, and administrators in Pioneer City Schools are carriers of a story that reaches back in history and across the United States. We need more of their bravery and less of the constraints that held up what could have been as we slow down, dwell in liminality, and dare to tell new stories that centralize our tricksters and the stories they have already been telling.

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Appendix A
Sample interview schedule: Administrator

1. From your perspective, where is Pioneer City today in its pursuit of racial equity?
2. Pioneer City has learned some meaningful lessons in its transformation process. What do you see as broadly applicable, and what do you see as locally specific to Pioneer City's success at reducing the racial achievement gap?
3. Can you describe, in your own words, what you would consider the greatest tensions at play in the districts work around racial equity?
4. How would you theorize the process of organizational change around racial justice as you've experienced it, and what have you learned that will change your course in the future?

Appendix B
Sample interview schedule: Focal teacher

1. How would you describe the school climate at Harris Creek?
2. How would you describe the racial demographics in Pioneer City now compared to when you began teaching in the district?
3. Has the content or style of your teaching changed during the same period? If yes, to what would you attribute those changes?
4. How would you describe the prevalence of race in your life as a teacher in Harris Creek?
5. How do you think your students experience their race on a daily basis? Do immigrant students of color experience race in different ways than white students do? If so, how?

Appendix C
Sample discussion guide: Student

1. Who are your friends at school?
2. What does Mrs. Jacobs teach you about being a friend?
3. Is it ever hard to be a friend? How?
4. What is it the best thing about being a 3rd grader in Mrs. Jacobs' class? The hardest thing?
5. (For students who switched schools this year) What is different about Harris Creek compared to Village Woods?
6. (For students who were at Harris Creek in 2nd grade) How have you helped to welcome the new students who came to Harris Creek from Village Woods this year?

Appendix D
Harris Creek teacher survey

Dear [Harris Creek] staff,

As part of the dissertation research I am conducting in [Mary Jacobs'] third grade classroom, I am investigating how everyday life in one [Harris Creek] classroom has been shaped by the district-wide focus on racial equity. The purpose of this survey is to collect stories about equity-related changes you have seen in your own practice and among [Harris Creek] students.

I appreciate your willingness to take the time to respond to the following demographic and open-ended questions. If you are interested in talking with me further, please include your name and email address in the space provided at the end of the survey, or feel free to email me at any time (XXXX).

Ann Mogush Mason

Demographic questions (*if you prefer not to answer, leave any or all items blank. Use back of page if necessary*):

Current position at [Harris Creek]:

Number of years in current position:

Describe any additional years of experience in education:

Highest degree received (if currently pursuing a degree, include that here, as well):

How do you define yourself racially?

Open-ended questions (*if you prefer not to answer, leave any or all items blank*):

1a. How do you define academic achievement?

1b. What is the relationship, if any, between racial equity and academic achievement?

2a. Changes in the racial makeup of social interactions (e.g. white students and students of color sitting together at lunch, playing together on the playground) have often come up in my conversations about racial equity in [Pioneer City] schools. In your experience, how/do these observable changes reflect actual change in students' development of meaningful and sustained relationships with students from other races?

2b. What do you see as the relationship, if any, between stronger inter-racial relationships and academic achievement?

3. Another common theme I've heard in conversations with district staff is that teachers are more likely (today than they would have been ten years ago) to intervene when a student makes a comment that reflects racial bias. Have you observed or participated in a specific example of this that you'd be willing to share?

4. How would you describe changes at [Harris Creek] as a result of the attendance boundary shifts?

5. Use this space to add anything else you would like to say, or ask, about racial equity at [Harris Creek].

Thank you!

Appendix E
Excerpts from “The letter”

September, 2010

Dear Student Teacher Placement Coordinator:

Thank you for your interest in sending your student to [Pioneer City Schools] to gain student teaching experience. [PCA] has a mission of XXXX. In our district we have made it a priority and focus to close the racial disparity in education for our Black and Brown students.

To help us achieve this goal we realize that our students need teachers who not only have high expectations of them, but are also able to make a cultural connection. To help ensure this, PCS seeks to have teaching staff that not only represents our student population; but also demonstrates knowledge and for skills in creating a classroom learning climate conducive to supporting differences in cultural, ethnic, racial, and gender backgrounds where all students are successful.

To ensure that we are consistently offering students the best classroom experience, we have instituted a new approach to placing student teachers in our district. PCS now requires that all student teachers answer the following two essay questions. Their answers to the essay questions must accompany their request for placement within our district.

Essay question 1:

Our district believes that good teaching exists in the delivery of Culturally Relevant Instruction which includes four key factors: Inclusion (Relationships), Attitude (Relevance), Meaning (Rigor), and Competence (Realness). Please describe your understanding of Culturally Relevant Instruction and why these four factors are key.

Essay question 2:

Systemic racism is the most devastating factor contributing to the diminished capacity of all children, especially Black and Brown children, to achieve at the highest levels and leads to the fracturing of the communities that support and nurture them. Please describe to what degree you share this belief? What is your evidence?

Appendix F Excerpts from the “Gap data”

Comparing MCA/MTAS-II Reading Results from 2008 to 2011

Reading	2008 Passing%	2011 Passing%	Diff +/-
Race			
Black	25%	69%	44%
Hispanic	60%	100%	40%
White	86%	91%	5%

Reading	2008 Passing%	2011 Passing%	Diff +/-
Service Category			
LEP	31%	67%	36%
SPED	57%	77%	20%
FRP	43%	82%	39%
White	86%	91%	5%

2008-11 Highlights
■ = 15% or greater increase
■ = 15% or greater decrease
■ = N size 10 or less

