

Writing Instruction in the Culturally Relevant Classroom



MAISHA T. WINN AND
LATRISE P. JOHNSON

Principles
in Practice

WRITING IN TODAY'S
CLASSROOMS

Manuscript Editor: Lisa McAvoy

Staff Editor: Bonny Graham

Imprint Editor: Cathy Fleischer

Interior Design: Victoria Pohlmann

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From Mis-education to Re-education: Our Journey

Latrise's Journey

When my twin sister, Denise, and I played school, it was a considerable production. We rounded up dolls and stuffed animals and gave them names to include on a class roll. We collected pencils, pens, paper, and created miniature versions of spelling, math, English, social studies, and science books, taking the time to include questions or problems on each page for our “students” to complete. We gathered books to read to them, thought of songs to sing, and even planned what to have for lunch. Only after we were prepared did we line the “students” up and commence to transform our bedroom into a classroom. I wanted to be a teacher. I loved the idea of school and wanted to have a desk stacked with paper, read books to eager listeners, and draw smiley faces on students’ papers. I was nine years old then and, as I reflect on my own schooling and the make-believe schooling that was happening in the bedroom I shared with my sister, I can remember having fun in both spaces. However, as I transitioned to middle and high school, my experiences shifted, school changed, and I departed from my childhood dream of becoming a teacher.

My middle and high school experiences were mediocre, to say the least. From the teachers to the lessons, nothing stands out to me as being particularly meaningful or memorable. For most of my secondary education, I sat quietly at my desk, completed assignments on worksheets or from textbooks, and was passed along without really being let in on the joke that was supposed to be my education. After that rather uninspiring middle school and high school experience, I attended Morris Brown College, where my desire to teach was reignited. My first year, I remember reading and discussing Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, and listening to my English 101 professor talk about the novel. I was captivated. We discussed a little black girl, Pecola Breedlove, with an abusive father and an indifferent mother who had to go and live with friends because her family was "put out." I remember asking myself, "Why didn't we read stuff like this in high school?" That is, books with little black girls in them who struggled with some of the same things I struggled with, or those that were set in places where I had been. Perhaps, if the teacher had provided literature that I connected with, maybe I would have finished a novel, participated more, or even earned better grades. I was inspired in my college English and literature classes to teach literature to students in a way that would help them connect to the writings in books and have a more meaningful and rich learning experience—one that would be the opposite of my own. There was a longing inside me to hear the voices and experiences from the literature that followed me after high school, one that inspired me to include culturally relevant pedagogy in my own classroom.

I was hired in Southeastern Urban District¹ at a time when there was an influx of scripted reading and math programs and classroom management initiatives, and when the Core Curriculum Tenets (CCT) were being replaced with State Performance Standards (SPS). There was limited acknowledgment of culturally relevant pedagogy and teaching. Instead, I was bombarded with professional development workshops, meetings, and seminars that centered on increasing student achievement through standardized testing. At the time, there was an increase in accountability discourse at every turn. While this accountability discourse played like a song on repeat in the corners of my mind, I was a new teacher with a desire to offer my students something I had not experienced as a student. I wanted students in this large urban school district that housed elementary, middle, and high schools to have a fun, meaningful education. I wanted my students to relate to the literature I taught and the writing I assigned. Little did I know that I would in many ways look back to my childhood to tap two of the most important skills that Denise and I practiced for hours as children in our classroom—planning and preparation—in order to create and present relevant, meaningful, and fun lessons to middle and high school students fifteen years later.

Perhaps one of the most memorable curricular units that I created as a public school teacher was a unit on poetry for ninth graders at Ellis High School. A great deal of planning went into this particular unit because I wanted my students to be able to connect with the content as well as find value in the activities related to learning poetic elements. In my previous experiences I found that students were not always receptive to concepts related to poetry despite the fact that they lived poetry daily through the tongues of their mothers, music in their headphones, and rhythms of their cosmopolitan city.

While brainstorming for this unit, I thought about how I could get the students in this school—more than 90 percent African American students and urban dwellers—interested in poetry. What would happen, I wondered, if I included some of that poetry of their lives, specifically songs and raps, alongside the poetry that was suggested by the state? As I began to plan, I searched for those songs and raps as well as many of my personal favorites gathered from poetry books I had around my house and choice picks from the bookstore. And when I thought about what to do for the unit project, one of my own college textbooks, *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, inspired me; I decided to engage the young people in my ninth-grade literature class in creating their own anthology of poetry. This inquiry-driven project would allow students to explore different forms of poetry as well as connect with poems by numerous writers related to a variety of content. Perhaps most important, I would have an opportunity to learn from their “funds of knowledge” (González, Moll, & Amante, 2005) and experience what was important to them.

I started by introducing one of my favorite songs, Lauryn Hill’s “The Mis-education of Lauryn Hill” (1998), to introduce poetic elements to the class. I found lyrics to the song in *Powerful Words: More Than 200 Years of Extraordinary Writing by African Americans* (Hudson, 2004), a book that featured these coveted lyrics from my generation. Coupled with the fact that I wanted a variety of texts in my classroom that featured African American writers—both historical and contemporary—I purchased the text for the beautiful sketches of featured writers illustrated by Marian Wright Edelman. (I copied, laminated, framed, and hung each portrait in the classroom.) I read the poem/lyrics to the students first and together we listened to the song on CD. After a second listening, we analyzed its content and structure.

As I assigned the poetry anthology project, I explained to the students that they would encounter many poems over the next few weeks and would compile a collection in their very own anthology. And I was amazed to discover how receptive my students were to reading and researching poetry on their own. As a part of the unit, we read and discussed many poems, rap and song lyrics, and a novel entitled *Love That Dog* by Sharon Creech. Students used the Internet as well as resources from the class library to collect material for their anthologies. Some

students included original pieces they created for other assignments during the unit. A small fraction of class time was provided for students to conduct research for their anthologies; however, most was spent engaging classic and contemporary poets, listening to lyrics, discussing form and poetic elements, and sharing.

The poetry unit sparked something in me as well. I realized that while many of my lessons throughout my teaching journey had been good, this unit was different. Not only was it student-centered and inquiry-driven, the students could relate to the content they had to learn. I wanted to ensure they learned poetic elements, read a few poems, and, most important, discovered at least one thing about poetry that inspired them. Through this lesson, my students connected with a poet, a poem, or even a line of poetry that they found relevant to their lives.

Maisha's Journey

A familiar melody lured me into Latrise's ninth-grade literature class at Ellis High School. I agreed to work with classroom teachers in this small learning community (SLC) in the urban southeast. My role was to support teachers in their efforts to integrate inquiry into their curriculum and provide students with meaningful writing opportunities. As I got closer to the classroom where the music was playing, I quickly recognized the voice of singer-songwriter Lauryn Hill. When I peeked in the doorway, I was welcomed and ushered to a seat by Latrise. Students barely noticed me as they sat still, listening to the song. Secretly, I was thrilled to see students engaged in a song I considered to be a part of my generation's music since I found myself having to work harder to stay current with the new musical trends. After one listening, Latrise handed out copies of the lyrics to "The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill" from her album sharing this title. "This is one of my favorite songs," Latrise declared while holding up a book entitled *Powerful Words: More Than 200 Years of Extraordinary Writing by African Americans* (Hudson, 2004) featuring Hill's lyrics alongside famous poems, speeches, and other texts. After the second listening with lyrics in hand, Latrise asked her students to explicate the lyrics and discuss the literary devices when and where relevant. It would have been difficult not to notice that all of Latrise's students were African American and mostly male, especially given American public schools' well-documented failure to support black children, and boys in particular, academically (Irvine, 1991; Noguera, 2008). It would also have been difficult not to notice the students' passion for this class, which I had not observed in their other classes; hands were raised and students were squirming in their chairs for the opportunity to be heard. Latrise respectfully addressed students as "Mr." or "Ms." followed by their last names. Latrise's commitment to her students began with her own experiences sitting exactly where they sat; as she explains earlier in her story, she was a product of the same public school system and had life experiences that mirrored their own.

When it was time for Latrise's students to begin writing their poetry anthology projects, there were no moans, groans, or complaints. Latrise's students were prepared. An array of books were displayed on the dry erase marker tray to inspire students for this upcoming poetry unit, including *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, R&B singer-actor Jill Scott's "Paint Me Like I Am," Emily Dickinson's *Final Harvest*, Walter Dean Myers's *Blues Journey*, and *Selected Poems of Langston Hughes* (see the annotated bibliography at the end of the book for summaries of these and other books we have found important for culturally relevant teaching). With the class Blackboard site beaming on the Promethean board, students journeyed through a wealth of resources including websites for poetry, additional readings, a guide to literary devices, elements of poetry, and links to audio recordings of poets reading their own work. This virtual roadmap would guide students through creating their own poetry anthology projects that had to include an introduction, analysis of poems, and synthesis of ideas.

While Latrise was not the first teacher in an urban public high school to assign this kind of writing project, it bears noting her students coveted the opportunity. Ellis High School's curriculum was moving toward being inquiry-driven; however, many ninth graders arrived from schools that focused on "urban pedagogies." Urban pedagogies, Duncan (2000) argues, focus on controlling and managing Black and Latino children as opposed to creating rigorous learning opportunities. Therefore, the work Latrise and her colleagues tried to do—give students the space to exercise agency by developing projects—was something many students never experienced in their previous years of schooling. According to Duncan (2000), "the main purpose of urban public schools in the lives of students of color has been largely to prepare them to occupy and accept subordinate roles within the U.S. economy and, by extension, society" (p. 29). It soon became clear that this poetry project defied this kind of teaching. In fact, the math, science, and social studies teachers at Ellis High School noticed students writing for their poetry anthologies throughout the day and teased Latrise about their inability to get students interested in anything else. Observing Latrise's work in this SLC, a setting that was initially a comprehensive high school failing half its children, was like watching an educational architect build a bridge over the gaps in achievement among public school students.

Our Journey

As scholars move away from the language of the "achievement gap" and argue that the disparities in American public schools are better characterized as an "educational debt" (Ladson-Billings, 2006), concerns about the differences in student achievement remain of grave importance. While the notion of culturally relevant

teaching has been largely discussed in urban education circles (Irvine, 2002, 2003; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995), this book focuses on culturally relevant teaching in the literacy classroom, particularly in the teaching of writing. During a Leadership Policy Summit in 2005, the Conference on English Education (CEE) created a working group of English educators that focused on this very issue. Grappling with the question “What do we know and believe about supporting linguistically and culturally diverse learners in English education?” the focus group agreed that teachers needed to consider the context of their students’ lives in the ways that ethnographers and anthropologists approach the communities in which they work. Arguing that “real teaching” for “real diversity” views teaching as a political act, the focus group asserted, “educators need to model culturally responsive and socially responsible practices and processes for students” (Boyd et al., 2004), which is a point we underscore throughout this book.

Notions of culturally relevant teaching arise from a strong research base that focuses on the lives and futures of diverse students. Not surprisingly, our efforts to demonstrate the role of culturally relevant teaching in the writing classroom are also undergirded by research into sound pedagogy generally. In particular, in this book we try to connect issues surrounding culturally relevant pedagogy to the *NCTE Beliefs about the Teaching of Writing*.

While all the statements connect in some ways, three in particular relate to our work:

- Everyone has the capacity to write, writing can be taught, and teachers can help students become better writers.
- Writing grows out of many different purposes.
- Literate practices are embedded in complicated social relationships.

Everyone has the capacity to write, writing can be taught, and teachers can help students become better writers. Our early encounters as a literacy coach and classroom teacher in a predominantly African American school located in an economically challenged neighborhood always returned us to the belief that all of our students not only had the capacity to write but their lives depended on the ability to communicate effectively through writing. We support the notion that literacy is indeed a “civil right” and without a critical literacy education, educators are “relegating whole communities to the low-wage, military, and prison prep tracks in our society” (Lipman, 2008, p. 62). Indeed, we both have witnessed middle school teachers who never assigned writing and justified it with explanations such as “the children get too excited” and they could not get them “under control” unless they used book work or worksheets. Our challenge, and one that we welcomed, was to introduce Latrise’s ninth-grade students to blank sheets of paper and writing utensils as opposed to the fill-in-the-blank worksheets they had grown accustomed to in their

elementary and middle school experiences. We both understood teachers had to be “practitioners of the craft” (Fisher, 2005a, 2005b, 2007); that is, English language arts teachers had to be readers and writers who were willing to exchange their voices and writing with their students to cultivate trust and community. We firmly believed in challenging and changing the mindset of students; they first needed to believe they had the potential to write, an idea most of them were hearing for the first time in their academic careers. In previous years, we also experienced teaching in diverse classrooms and predominantly white classrooms. Maisha’s teaching experience in California taught her that all children need exposure to materials that represent alternative views and multiple experiences.

Writing grows out of many different purposes. While the aforementioned Poetry Anthology Project assigned in Latrise’s class was not an expository essay or research paper, it was a way to get students excited about writing. For the purpose of this assignment, students had an opportunity to analyze poems and song lyrics as well as synthesize themes found in the collection of poetry they selected and write critiques to accompany the poems and songs themselves. Furthermore, students were invited to include forms of writing that were not traditionally included in English language arts classrooms. Many students had not imagined this kind of writing was valid or important. However, Latrise’s students learned that an anthology was much more than a collection of work; it was a thoughtful mapping of work bound by a particular set of ideas or themes. We believe that students need to experience multiple writing assignments and assessments (as we talk more about in Chapter Five) in order to decide what kinds of writing will serve them best as they consider their lives beyond high school (see Chapter Three).

Literate practices are embedded in complicated social relationships. Part of creating a community of writers is providing a forum and space for young people to talk and share their ideas. Through our research and teaching experiences, we are still surprised to find that children in urban public schools are seldom given opportunities to know their opinions and ideas are important. Elsewhere, Fisher (2007) found students in urban public high schools believed they were asked to do the “school’s work” that was seemingly unrelated to anything they cared about. We believe that successful teachers of students in largely failing schools and neighborhoods have established a foundation built on respect. This simple yet often taken for granted concept is embedded in important stories about teachers and their students, from Michie’s (1999) experiences teaching *The House on Mango Street*, to Kinloch’s (2010) students rereading gentrification in their Harlem neighborhoods as text, to Morrell’s (2008) students who become ethnographers armed with the tools for analysis and synthesis, to Joe² reciting poetry alongside student poets in his Power Writing seminar in the Bronx (Fisher 2005a, 2005b, 2007). The teachers profiled in this book listened to their students; even if they had

to revisit a lesson plan or curricular unit, they made time to infuse the needs of their students into the curriculum without sacrificing standards or high expectations. Teachers realized that to have students listen to them, they, too, had to listen and hear their students when they were trying to convey their desires in the classroom.

Journeying through This Book

The purpose of this book is to consider the ways in which culturally relevant pedagogy can be used in the English language arts classroom to motivate and inspire an emerging generation of writers. Our work as teachers, teacher educators, and researchers demonstrates the need for socially relevant pedagogical practices in order to develop and support these emerging writers in and beyond our classrooms.

In Chapter 2, “Culturally Relevant Pedagogy: The Remix,” we synthesize the lessons learned from research on culturally relevant teachers and curriculum. We hope that in highlighting the salient findings, classroom teachers will feel supported in their process of becoming culturally and socially relevant in their pedagogical practices. Additionally, we hope our teacher-friendly review challenges teachers who have already implemented culturally relevant pedagogy to think about the process in new ways.

In Chapter 3, “Press Play: Culturally Relevant Pedagogy in Action,” we offer pedagogical portraits of English language arts classrooms where teachers with whom we have worked grapple with ways to introduce and reintroduce culturally relevant pedagogy in their curriculum and practice. We introduce real teachers and students and examine the teaching and learning opportunities that emerged when these teachers chose to open their classroom doors to their students’ world and encouraged students to connect to the experiences of others.

Once we have introduced these teachers and students, we attempt to unpack in some detail the work teachers did in their classrooms with students. In Chapter 4, “Let the Music Play: Culturally Relevant Writing Instruction,” we offer ways to implement some of the strategies used by teachers we worked with as well as our own strategies for how to set the stage for writing opportunities. This chapter provides insight into resources, essential questions, and culminating projects.

In Chapter 5, “From Gold to Platinum: Assessing Student Writing,” we discuss ways in which teachers can assess student writing that emerges from culturally relevant pedagogy. We offer new ways in which students may experience culturally relevant pedagogy that creates meaningful learning opportunities for them.

Finally, in an annotated bibliography we have titled “Latrise and Maisha’s Infinite Playlist,” we share some of our favorite resources that may or may not fall under the typical heading of culturally relevant texts; however, we offer the ways in

which we have made these texts culturally and socially relevant as well as how we use them for writing instruction.

As you read, we invite you to think about your own students, your own experiences, and your own pedagogies and try to imagine how you, too, might create a culturally relevant classroom that will inspire your students' learning.

Notes

1. Southeastern Urban District and Ellis High School are pseudonyms.
2. "Joe," featured in Maisha's book *Writing in Rhythm* (2007), is a teacher who teaches a Power Writing seminar in the Bronx.

How can we reach all of our students—especially those who have been ignored and underserved in America’s classrooms?

Maisha T. Winn and Latrise P. Johnson suggest that culturally relevant pedagogy can make a difference. Although it certainly includes inviting in the voices of those who are generally overlooked in the texts and curricula of US schools, culturally relevant teaching also means recognizing and celebrating those students who show up to our classrooms daily, welcoming their voices, demanding their reflection, and encouraging them toward self-discovery.

Writing Instruction in the Culturally Relevant Classroom offers specific ideas for how to teach writing well and in a culturally relevant way. Drawing on research-based understandings from *NCTE Beliefs about the Teaching of Writing*, Winn and Johnson demonstrate how these principles support an approach to writing instruction that can help *all* students succeed. Through portraits of four thoughtful high school teachers, the authors show how to create an environment for effective learning and teaching in diverse classrooms, helping to answer questions such as:

- How can I honor students’ backgrounds and experiences to help them become better writers?
- How can I teach in a culturally responsive way if I don’t share cultural identities with my students?
- How can I move beyond a “heroes and holidays” approach to culturally relevant pedagogy?
- How can I draw on what I already know about good writing instruction to make my classes more culturally relevant?
- How can I create culturally responsive assessment of writing?

NCTE National Council of
Teachers of English

1111 W. Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801-1096

Phone: 800-369-6283 or 217-328-3870

www.ncte.org

