2024

Inquiry into Equity Practice in a "White Space": Student-Led Discussions and Academic Discourse

CARAN MULLINS
University of North Florida, mullinsc@duvalschools.org

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Abstract:

In this study I used teacher inquiry to explore how to better engage my Black and Brown elementary students in student-led discussions that could enhance academic discourse. The research questions driving my work emerged at the intersection of my beliefs and commitment to creating an equitable learning environment. Specifically, I wanted to know: (1) How do I scaffold my minority students to increase participation in academic discourse? (2) How might these scaffolds support their development of metacognition, reading comprehension, and deeper critical thinking? and (3) How do these scaffolds contribute to student feelings about their voice and place in my primarily white classroom? Through this inquiry, I identified teacher-student power and compliance-agency continua existing in my classroom which I sought to break down by providing students with increased opportunities for student academic discourse leadership. The inquiry positioned me to realize that my own beliefs about student abilities perpetuated a lack of opportunity to engage with content, explain their thinking and connections, and engage in academic leadership. By intentionally centering my target student group, they have had access to critical thinking and leadership opportunities through student-led, student-centered discourse that they otherwise would not have been afforded. By shifting teacher-student power, students developed agency in place of compliance, to regulate their own understanding of concepts and offered critique of classroom structures to improve effectiveness. Implications suggest that the opportunity gap for Black and Brown students within white spaces goes much deeper than lack of access to grade-level work and depth of assignments but rather emphasizes shifting power from teachers to students or students with high social capital to students with lower social capital.

The concept of "Silencing" is the problem of practice that drives my inquiry. As I entered this predominantly white classroom space, I focused on establishing a structured, student-centered discussion approach to standard mastery with me, the teacher, leading. However, as the year progressed, I increasingly noticed low participation and engagement among my minority students. The discourse was teacher-led with students using white boards to demonstrate active cognitive engagement (McKenzie & Skrla, 2011). Additionally, during specified discussion times, students were utilizing green, yellow, and red color-coded cards with sentence stems as tools for scaffolding participation. Although these tools facilitated the teacher-led discussion, I felt like the discussion was compliance-driven which may potentially reduce authenticity. I wanted my minority students

to be fully engaged, participate verbally, and share with the class. I wanted to figure out how I could better support their learning and participation within this discourse framework. I wanted my classroom to not be silencing to my Black and Brown students. Further, I wondered how my actions as the sole facilitator contributed to this problem.

My work was driven by the work of Milner (2010) who wrote *Start Where You Are, But Don't Stay There*. His work emphasizes the responsibility teachers have to examine their own practice through student feedback to engage in opportunity-centered teaching. Motivated by this text and the needs of my students, I developed my inquiry question to focus on understanding and confronting my own white bias that may indeed be influencing my students' engagement in academic discourse. I have familiarity with multiple types of pedagogical discourses and have utilized them in my own discussion. I have seen how Initiation-Response-Evaluation discourse (Mehan, 1979), also known as triadic dialogue (Lemke, 1990), limits critical thinking and silences student voice by positioning the teacher to pose questions, choose a student to respond, and then assess the quality and accuracy of the response. To better understand bias in relation to academic discourse, I also explored Baker-Bell's (2020) work *Linguistic Justice: Black Language, Literacy, Identity, and Pedagogy.* Her work encouraged me to evaluate my own anti-black beliefs related to language and helped me develop an awareness of access to learning related to language for my Black students. As a white woman, I was detrimentally unaware of the complexities of language in white academic spaces, and how these complexities may contribute to how some students are silenced in academic discussions. Prior to this work, I accepted White Mainstream English (WME) as the standard and accepted the narrative that WME is synonymous with academic language. At times I believed the false idea that academic language created an equal playing field for all students. Through Baker-Bell, I recognized the inequities created in classroom discourse for my Black students. Although important work has been completed around this topic, as I continued my search related to academic discourse, I noticed that missing from the literature was research related to minority student participation in discourse in elementary classrooms. Particularly absent was research related to minority student participation in predominantly white spaces in the elementary setting.

Situating My Inquiry in the Literature

Academic discourse, metacognition, and student voice are concepts that contributed to my understanding of how to strengthen reading comprehension and deepen critical thinking in my classroom.

Academic Discourse

Academic discourse provides students with an opportunity to practice talking about what they are learning, how they are learning it, and the connections they are making. Discourse allows students to receive feedback from peers, while also simultaneously evaluating the responses of others (Elizabeth et. al, 2012). Unlike traditional classroom communication patterns like initiation-response-evaluation (IRE), quality academic discussion enables students to construct otherwise untapped knowledge (Elizabeth et. al, 2012). Students are able to do this through sense-making of the connections their peers are making and relating those connections and ideas back to their own understanding of the concept being discussed. According to Larson (2000, as cited in Elizabeth et al., 2012), "the very act of discussing allows students to connect what they learn in school to their own life in ways other methods of instruction may not" (p. 667). For the purpose of this inquiry, academic discourse was used to provide students the opportunity to make connections to the content at varying levels of complexity. This framework was meant to support active cognitive engagement and shift away from compliance-centered participation.

Metacognition

Metacognition strategies are used to support academic discourse in this inquiry by providing opportunities for students to think about their thinking and how their thinking or understanding of a topic evolves over time. Flavell (1976) described metacognition as "the active monitoring and consequent regulation and orchestration of the processes in relation to the cognitive objectives on which they bear" (p. 232). Students use metacognitive strategies as a comprehension tool to evaluate their own understanding through the learning process. Cobb (2017) noted in her review of the literature that metacognition in a literacy context is a thinking and processing construct that also influences affective elements and emotional responses during reading. In an article by Ozturk (2020):

> Metacognition pertains to thinking about thinking and it involves metacognitive knowledge, metacognitive strategies, and metacognitive experiences (Flavell, 1979). Metacognitive readers have knowledge about themselves, genres, topics, task demands, and strategies. They can also employ metacognitive strategies, i.e. planning, monitoring, regulating, and evaluating (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000; Pintrich, Wolters, & Baxter, 2000; Pintrich, 2002) for various task demands. Metacognitive experiences, on the other hand, occur when readers actively engage in higher-order thinking (i.e. strategic reading). That is, strategic reading

occurs when individuals think about the text and strategies purposefully, manage task demands and goals actively, and building comprehension, successfully (p. 309).

Metacognition tools allow students to be able to successfully respond to a peers' evaluation or inquiry into their response during an academic discourse session. Students use their reflections on how they have arrived at a conclusion to support their thinking, and this gives them the words to describe their thought process in a way that others can understand. Students are also equipped with strategies during academic discourse sessions to evaluate their own understanding of the conversation and points their peers are making. When students are able to evaluate their own understanding of a conversation, they are also able to participate in the conversation by evaluating and inquiring into their peer's responses as well. This creates a student-led discussion that centers on students doing the cognitive work.

Student Voice

To benefit student engagement and learning, educators have identified student voice as a key instructional tool. Student voice is a term used within educational research to describe a teacher's efforts to incorporate student perspectives into the shaping of educational experiences (Cook-Sather, 2006). To enhance voice, students are invited to dialogue and collaborate with teachers as they shape and enact curriculum (Rodriguez & Wasserberg, 2010; Rubin & Silva, 2003). Evidence suggests that heightening student voice enhances engagement (Mitra, 2004), strengthens student-teacher relationships (Bragg, 2007), and creates a sense of student agency, belonging, and competence (Mitra, 2004). Although examples exist focused on raising student voice and engagement in middle and high school classrooms (Mitra, 2004; Wilson & Corbett, 2007), it is difficult to identify research that illustrates how student voice becomes a central component of an elementary classroom (Mitra & Serriere, 2012). According to Wasserberg (2018), research on student voice is "particularly limited with respect to African American elementary school students" (p. 182), however Howard (2002) found that African American elementary students prefer more engaging instruction and teachers who create a family-like feeling characterized by caring relationships.

Working at the intersection of these concepts–discourse, metacognition and voice–I sought to explore how I might create a sense of place in my classroom that shifted my classroom from silencing these students to a space that empowered them as learners.

Method

This study utilized teacher research as defined by Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993) to explore how I might improve my Black and Brown students' sense of voice and place in a way that would empower their academic discourse during student-led discussions. They refer to teacher inquiry as a systematic, intentional study by teachers at their own school or classroom practice where the primary goal is to improve one's own practice and to share with one's school or community. Consistent with Cochran-Smith and Lytle, the purpose of this inquiry was to help me improve my practice by inquiring into my classroom context, my minority students, and myself as their teacher. Since teacher inquiry involves self-study and reflection as a part of my own professional practice, my ethical considerations included a commitment to self-reflection (researcher reflexivity) to understand how the research impacted me, my students, and my teaching practices, as well as maintaining confidentiality and respecting the rights and dignity of the students involved.

For methodological support, I utilized Dana and Yendol-Hoppey's (2020) text to guide me through the inquiry process–developing my research questions and determining how to collect and analyze my data. The research questions that guided my inquiry included: (1) What is the nature of my minority student participation in my classroom? (2) What happens when I intentionally scaffold the development of metacognition, reading comprehension, and deeper critical thinking? And (3) How did these scaffolds contribute to their learning and feelings about their voice and place in my primarily white classroom?

My School Context

My school is a "white space" and rated an A school by the Florida Department of Education. By white space, I mean that although I teach in a large urban district that has a majority-minority population, the school I teach in today is not in the urban core and not Title One. The student population is predominantly white and privileged economically. The landscape is challenging politically as political views are split among families at the school and this split presents some challenges. There is a large PTA presence that is run by the white parents at the school. Minority parents are largely not involved in the PTA. The teaching staff is 100% white. We have two male teachers. The principal is white, and the assistant principal is Black. Due to completed renovations of the government housing community that feeds the student body at my school, there has been an influx of low-income and minority students transferring to the school. As educators, I believe

that we will need to make important shifts if we are to provide our Black and Brown students moving to our school community a high-quality education.

My Students

My class has 18 students. There are two Black students, four Hispanic students, two of which are Multi Language Learners (MLL), and twelve white students. There is a sense of "whiteness as normal" and everything else as different. The majority of my students come from high-income families. A subset of my students are bussed to school or live in a small government housing community in a historically Black neighborhood down the road from the school. There is a clear distinction between the haves and have-nots in the school that our students and teachers recognize, but all may not understand the implications of this on student well-being.

My five minority students, Sam, Aalayah, Chase, Nick, and Pauline (pseudonyms) were of most interest to me in this study and each brings unique assets to their learning and our classroom community.

Sam- 9, Black-Hispanic Male, Low-Income

Sam is a quiet boy who works hard on all assignments. He has two brothers, one younger and one in middle school. He participates in lessons. Sometimes he takes longer to process and find his words. His mother is a native Spanish speaker and although Sam says he can no longer speak Spanish, he started kindergarten as a Multi Language Learner. He is a deep and creative thinker. He is sometimes interrupted or talked over due to his quiet and calm nature.

Aalayah- 9, Black Female, Low-Income

Aalayah is a kind and helpful girl who works hard on her assignments. She has a little sister who is not yet in school. She lives in a single-parent household with her mom who has a chronic illness. She typically misses school at least two days a week. She is a capable and clever girl, but due to her absences is academically behind her peers. She is timid and shy in school, and it seems like she doesn't feel a part of the class because of her low participation. I have attributed this to her absences. Aalayah will never participate verbally in class unless she is asked directly. However, when we use white boards, she does participate.

Chase- 10, Hispanic Male ELL, Low-Income

Chase entered our class in December. He transferred from another county and was retained in 3rd grade last year. It is unclear why he was retained. His MLL status should have cautioned his previous school against retention. Chase is bi-lingual and bi-literate in English and Spanish. His engagement and motivation has decreased in the past couple months and his focus is largely on peer approval. He is currently identified as working at an early third-grade level. Although hesitant to participate in class discussions, he does actively participate in discussions when using white boards.

Nick- 9, Black Male, Low-Income

Nick is a clever and bright student. Nick has an ADHD diagnosis along with experiencing serious family trauma. His brother was injured by gunfire in the past year and his mother is battling cancer. Nick is mostly cared for by his older sister as his mother is very ill. Nick experiences debilitating episodes of fear and rage in the classroom and at home. His mom communicates well and works with his teachers to find ways to support Nick and his success. Nick's anger is directed inward. His classmates love him dearly and all step in to help any chance they can. Nick says that he enjoys school, but sometimes is too angry. Nick rarely participates in class lessons in the same way as his peers. He often sits at his desk instead of the carpet by choice. He is most engaged and successful at academic tasks that he can spend 20 minutes working on and then take a short break. This type of work-break schedule has been utilized for Nick to be successful in both reading and math since the end of the second quarter.

Pauline- 9, Hispanic Female, Low-Income (Moved)

Pauline is a very shy, quiet girl. She rarely talks above a whisper. She is caring, kind, and very unsure of herself. In class she has difficulty forming words for her thoughts and it is sometimes hard to understand what she is trying to communicate. She reads at a third-grade level but is in possible need of further interventions and support. While she is fluent, she has more difficulty with comprehension of what she is reading. Unfortunately, Pauline moved to a different school during my inquiry work.

Teacher Researcher Positionality

I am a white teacher who is committed to learning more about how to create a more equitable classroom for my Black and Brown students in this predominantly

white learning space. This is my sixth year teaching, but my first year in a non-Title I school. Prior to this position, I taught at a Title I school that was also an ESOL center in my district. In addition, the school was a Spanish dual-language magnet, although only about half of the MLL's were Spanish-speaking. In my last position, I had the opportunity to teach MLL students and loop with these students from K-3. My teaching experience, coupled with my graduate coursework, has provided me with a unique set of experiences and learning opportunities.

I strongly believe my role and responsibility as a teacher is to provide access to success for all students in my classroom, and I am especially focused on how to center the strengths and skills of my high-poverty and minority students in a way that positions them for that success. I believe that I am the deciding factor in my classroom and that it is up to me to learn, grow, and change my practice continuously to meet the needs of diverse learners. During a summer *White Fragility* (DiAngelo, 2018) Book Club I participated in, I mentioned that I was thinking about changing schools to be closer to my home and that I was concerned about leaving my school for a more highly resourced school with a less diverse student body. Another participant suggested that I might make more of a difference working in the white space than I made in the contexts where I had spent the last five years. Exploring this idea, this year I chose to work within the community where I live, and my children go to school. As I entered this new context, my colleague's comment resonated with me and made me wonder about what it would look like to make equity shifts within this predominantly white space.
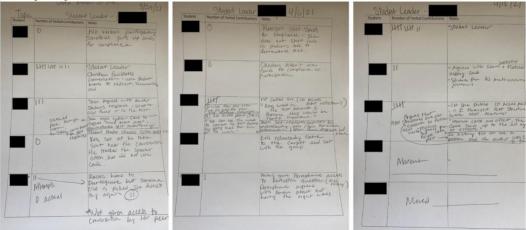
Data Collection

To explore these questions, data collection occurred in two phases. The first phase of this study utilized student pre-surveys and field notes. The second phase of the study included post-surveys, student check-ins, social capital data, field notes, metacognition journals, and student evaluation discussion tools. Although student academic performance data was also collected, the student performance data was primarily used to make sure that shifts in practice did not inhibit or hurt student performance on mandated measures during the inquiry period. This is particularly important given that shifts away from routine district practices are sometimes discouraged given the risks associated with student performance on mandated assessments. Table 1 provides an overview of the data sources.

Table 1

List of Data Sources

Data Source	Description
Student surveys pre (Phase 1) and post (Phase 2)	Students pre- and post-surveys assessed their feelings of the class, their teacher, discussions and classroom spaces.
Social Capital Data (Phase 2)	Students then earned a bi-weekly score based on an anonymous survey which I called their social capital score based on how many people put their name down to sit with.
Field notes on participation and type of participation (Phases 1 and 2)	(See Figure 1) During discussions, I recorded participation of my target group students using tally marks of the number of times they participated and anecdotal notes.
Weekly check ins with students not participating in sessions. (Phase 2)	I checked in with all students that were not participating, both inside and outside my target groups to determine comfort levels, confidence, and needs.
Metacognition journals (Phase 2)	Students used metacognition journals to engage with content individually with private feedback from the teacher prior to engaging in dialogue with their peers.
Student evaluation of discussion tools (Phase 2)	Students were given space throughout the inquiry cycle to share how the discussion format and the tools that they were given were working to inform planning.

Figure 1
Example of Field Notes

Data Analysis

Data analysis for this study was also organized into two phases. I began with the pre-survey data, field notes, and my continued reading. During this exploratory first phase, I analyzed memos that captured what I was noticing and the pre-survey data. I did this analysis in tandem with continued reading of the related literature (e.g., Baker-Bell, 2020; Milner, 2010; Moore & Penick-Parks, 2020). Three themes emerged: teacher power, teacher approval, and lack of student ownership. In a second level of phase one coding, I recognized the connections between these initially viewed as independent themes. The interconnections led me to combine the themes to create two continuums. After completing phase one, phase two focused on studying the shifts that I was making in the way I scaffold students to participate in academic discourse. Using the field notes, weekly check-ins, student evaluation of the discussion tools, social capital data, post-survey results, and the metacognition journals, I reviewed to better understand student participation and then I coded to understand the nature of the student participation. Those codes when combined revealed a set of student and teacher moves that were both empowering as well as potentially disempowering. The findings are presented for both phases of the study. As a part of my inquiry analysis process, I worked through each phase with a critical friend who served as an inquiry coach, enhancing the trustworthiness of the study. As I shared my emerging findings, this critical friend provided me with constructive feedback, challenged my assumptions, and prompted me with questions to puzzle over leading to new perspectives. This collaboration fostered a sense of reflexivity and accountability, contributing to the overall trustworthiness of the findings.

Findings

Through this inquiry, I responded to each of the three research questions. In response to research question one, in the first phase of my research I identified a *teacher-student power* and a *compliance-agency* continuum existing in my classroom which I sought to break down by providing students with increased opportunities for student academic discourse leadership. This phase of the inquiry positioned me to realize that my own beliefs about student abilities may be perpetuating a lack of opportunity to engage with content, explain their thinking and connections, and engage in academic leadership. In the second phase of the inquiry, I explored the research question "What happens when I intentionally scaffold the development of metacognition, reading comprehension, and deeper critical thinking?" and as a result offer three critical incidents representing my learning: (1) the Role of Social Capital in Student Discussions, (2) Collaborative Thinking as a Pathway to Critical Thinking, and (3) Teacher Beliefs and Power Contributing to Opportunity Gaps. Finally, in phase three, I respond to research question three by using the classroom data story to suggest shifts in learning and feelings related to voice in the classroom.

Phase One - Identification of a *Teacher-Student Power Continuum* and *Compliance-Agency Continuum*

As a result of analyzing my data, I wanted to understand how my students conceive of my role in facilitating my minority students' success in navigating and participating in student academic discourse. During Phase One of the study, I identified two continua that appeared in my classroom as I sought to enhance academic discourse and the participation of my minority students. These continua included a *teacher-student power* continuum and a *compliance-agency* continuum.

The *teacher-student power* continuum was evidenced in responses such as: "When I raise my hand, I get called on a lot and I like that" (Alison), "She calls on me a lot" (Mason), "Yes-because she helps everyone. Even me," (Pauline), "My teacher cares about me when she helps us fix problems on our work," (Chase), "Yes because she helps me, and she reads to us," (Aalayah), and "Yes, because she gives us compliments," (Chase). In each of the cases, the students pointed to the recognition they received from the teacher and indicated that makes them feel cared for and successful. This continuum made me wonder about the power that the teacher yields and how that might limit student participation in important areas such as academic discourse which often relies on the teacher leading the discussion. Although I felt reassured by the fact that they seemed to recognize I cared for them

and would help them, their responses pointed towards the central role that I play in leading discussions.

Given that role, I believed it warranted further investigation. In addition to identifying the *teacher-student power continuum*, I also identified a related set of dimensions occurring on a continuum. A *compliance-agency* continuum also emerged within my classroom. Using the survey, I asked my students what I could do differently to make them feel comfortable participating in class discussions. Interestingly, most of them said nothing should be changed. For example, "No" (Sam), "Nothing" (Chase), and "It is good" (Pauline). Aalayah mentioned that she would like to have a "calm classroom." The fact that only Aalayah shared a way that the class could improve made me wonder if the students felt a lack of ownership and agency within the classroom. From the student responses I noticed a pattern of compliance. It is possible that students were not able to come up with ways to change the class even though they didn't like some things. It is also possible that students did not feel safe enough to share how they felt or were acting in learned compliance to satisfy their teacher. This was something I knew I needed to shift.

My takeaway from Phase One really highlighted the need for me to address the Power and Agency Continuums. I wondered: how can I shift my classroom so that I don't hold so much power? And, at the same time, how can I use the power that I do have to create space for minority students in discussions? In addition, how can I best use my power to deepen student understanding as the content expert in the room? I wanted to be sure to pay attention to how I support and scaffold my students toward successfully participating in and navigating academic discourse. White (2007, as cited in White, 2011) emphasized that "teachers' expectations for widespread classroom participation and the power that teachers have to pressure students into participating may adversely affect some minority students, thereby, further silencing minority voices and further alienating these students from their white peers and instructors" (p. 6). I wanted to be sure to position my minority students for success.

Phase Two - Making Academic Discourse Shifts

As a result of Phase One, I moved to Phase Two which required making shifts to my classroom practice, which is the action in my inquiry. My overall attention focused on introducing Student-Led Discussions, but this shift required introducing a variety of pedagogical scaffolds to support student success in Student-Led Discussions. These included introducing Metacognition Journaling, Multiple Access Points Through Varied Questioning, Buddy Up (Social-Emotional Curriculum), as well as Student Resources–charting, journal responses, and

practice activities (see Table 2). Metacognition journaling in this context involved students completing pre-work for the discussion on a variety of questions that they were going to be asked within the academic discourse setting. Students would focus on reflecting and writing down everything they were thinking about a topic, without concern of a right or a wrong answer. Most of the questions were focused on the learning process and not text-specific questions. This practice allowed students independent thinking time outside of the discussion to process what they were learning and what connections they were able to make between the texts we were reading and the comprehension skill we were focused on. These journals were two-way communication tools as well for teacher and student. I would provide feedback in the journals to push them deeper or ask them to clarify or prove their thinking.

Another shift I made was related to the types of questions I posed. In phase one, I recognized the power continuum and sought to break this down. I also recognized how this power dynamic along with social capital hindered students from taking risks in the discourse setting. By adding in a variety of questions, my goal was to provide a low-floor, high-ceiling concept not just related to content, but also risk-taking. For example, the first question would always focus on the learning process and what has changed in their thinking or what they have learned. This allowed students to share wrong answers freely without fear of being wrong. The next question was a specific question that related to the text. Often students found it easier to explain ideas with a specific example, rather than with their own words. The third question required some synthesis of a variety of information and sources and was rooted in making deep connections across texts and concepts. Each type of question increased in risk to provide students entry to the conversation in different capacities. To address the social capital component, I began implementing an activity called Buddy Up from our SEL curriculum. I did this to see if I could shift or balance the social capital in our room by allowing students more opportunities to interact with students outside of their stagnant social circles. Further, I made sure that students had access to all their resources in the discussion. Students brought and utilized their metacognition journals, anchor charts that are stored in their binder, assignments, and texts on the target standard. With these resources, students were able to point their peers back to specific parts of a text or questions that they previously answered to prove their rationale, draw conclusions, and make connections to the discussion questions.

Table 2
Phase Two Shifts in Practice

Pedagogical Practice	Description
Student Led Academic Discourse	Students engage in student-led discussions to make sense of third grade comprehension standards by analyzing their own thinking along with their peers to address misconceptions, make connections, and develop critical thinking skills.
Metacognition Journaling	The journaling was used as a guide for learners to gain a greater level of understanding of what they already understand and what they need to do to reach their own learning goals.
Multiple Access Points Through Varied Questioning	Equity focused access to content discussions through differentiated questioning with varying levels of academic risk associated with each question.
Buddy Up (Social-Emotional Curriculum)	Relationship building among diverse students and peer-to-peer connections create a learning environment of authenticity, vulnerability, and common goals.
Student Resources	Equity focused access to resources to allow students opportunities to go back to examples from classwork as well as teacher or class created content resources.

     As I made these shifts in my classroom practice, I continued to collect data and engaged in ongoing data analysis to better understand how the strategies may have supported my minority students' participation in academic discourse and the degree to which the scaffolding may or may not have contributed to their voice and place in my primarily white classroom. To illustrate what I, and likely other teachers, need to pay attention to in order to enhance minority student participation in academic discourse, I offer three critical incidents: (1) Role of Social Capital in Student Discussions, (2) Collaborative Thinking as a Pathway to Critical Thinking, and (3) Teacher Beliefs and Power Contributing to Opportunity Gaps.

Critical Incident One: Role of Social Capital in Student Discussions

This critical incident illustrates how social capital played out in student discussions. I defined social capital as the amount of power a student holds in the classroom with their peers. This power is accumulated through relationships with their peers and is impacted by a variety of factors. Although I have a perception of each student's social capital, I also collected data from my students to help me better understand the social dynamics and whether there was a hierarchy of social capital in our classroom community. This data helped me notice different moves made within our student-led discussions and allowed me to assess through a different lens, the dynamics at play in discussions that may impact a student's desire to participate, and the risks involved. For example, during a discussion session, my students were working on the question "What is the author's point of view of the text?"

> Carson: They want us to grow more plants in the city.
> The whole class agrees except Brad.
> Brad: "I disagree. I think that it is kinda right, but I think we could add that planting plants in the city could help the city be healthier and cleaner. This is why the author wants us to do that."
> Class disagrees with Brad and one student starts shouting to defend Carson.

In reflecting on this incident, in light of the social capital data that was collected at the beginning of this inquiry cycle, I knew that Brad received a social capital score of 0 and Carson held a score of 14. Without this data, I would not have identified and understood the invisible structures that were at play. Even though Brad's answer was more detailed and further developed than Carson's original idea, Brad's ideas were rejected by his classmates. As a result, I wondered how many times these invisible social capital plays affect conversation, and more importantly, minority participation in class discussions within white spaces. After this critical incident, I named this student move, *discussion response bias* recognizing the importance of positioning all students to have a sense of voice and place in my primarily white classroom.

Critical Incident Two: Collaborative Thinking as a Pathway to Critical Thinking

In critical incident two, we have the opportunity to make visible the importance of collaborative thinking as a pathway to critical thinking. From the previous critical incident, it is clear that Carson's social capital provides him accessibility to discussion and the ability to leverage himself in conversations with less risk. This leads to an increased opportunity for him to practice critical thinking

within a safe space on a regular basis. In this critical incident, Carson shared his ideas around the question: How do text structures help a reader better understand a text (LAFS.3.RI.3.8)? Carson shared that text structures can help you understand an author's point of view. When probed for context, Carson explained that if an author uses compare and contrast as a text structure then the reader can determine what the author thinks about the things they are comparing. He also explained that the author could use description to give information about a topic. Through the description, the author can lean one way or another. This was a very high-level cognitive exercise for third grade and required Carson to retrieve and utilize information to make connections to standards we had focused on over the past several weeks. I recall being shocked once he explained his thinking about the level of complexity and creativity in his thinking.

After Carson shared, I was not sure how the conversation would continue with such a high-level thought. Then Sam spoke. He shared that text structure is also used to describe a setting in a story. Then he shared that stories have a plot and within the plot there is a problem and solution. This is also a standard (LAFS.3.RL.3.9) we worked on recently. Sam was able to match Carson's creative thinking, by making connections between text structures in non-fiction texts and how they are actually embedded in fiction text as well.

This deep and analytical thinking is a critique of the rigidity of our ELA standards and the constant separation and distinction between nonfiction and fiction. If I had not been engaged in this inquiry cycle, it is possible that I could have shut out Sam's response before he had a chance to explain. This would be even more likely if I perceived Sam to be incapable of higher order thinking skills and did not regularly assess my own biases. This is an example of how traditional initiation-response-evaluation models limit student voice, creativity, and logic. If I immediately evaluated Sam's response without allowing him to further explain his rationale, I would have not only missed his creativity, but I would also have silenced him in an already high-risk setting. Through this critical incident, I was able to see a snapshot of how my students could lead and engage in academic discourse as well as the genius within these young learners. Sam was making deep connections to the text structures within fiction texts and how those structures within the plot (exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution) allow the reader to understand how the events are connected, what a character's motivations may be, and how those motivations impact the story as a whole. Sam was able to see that these structures, although different in fiction and non-fiction texts, are used by good readers to assess understanding of a text. The connections Carson and Sam made in this scenario exemplify the connections that students are

making as learners that I am not privy to as a teacher who has already mastered the content.

In addition, this incident also shows a double-play of student leadership through this exchange of ideas between Sam and Carson. When I stepped out of the role of the discussion facilitator, the students were able to provide a better and more inclusive space to try out their ideas on their peers. Both Carson and Same took on leadership positions within this discussion by listening, evaluating, and responding without a teacher guiding a conversation. The students leveraged each other's thinking and connections to build on the content in the discussion. Without the immediate teacher evaluation of their ideas, the teacher-student power dynamic shifted to provide students more opportunities to engage deeply in the content within the learning process without getting shut down. In reflecting on this incident, I recognize how the connections learners make will be often invisible to me as the teacher who has already mastered a skill. As one person, I only have a very narrow set of experiences and ideas. If I am the only evaluator of these ideas in the classroom, then many students will be shut out of opportunities to be heard and understood for their unique perspectives and connections. After this critical incident, I named this student move *student-led cognitive connectors*. This incident demonstrates how a minority student's voice in a primarily white space is an asset to all students in the class and must be given a space to be heard.

Critical Incident Three: Teacher Beliefs and Power Contributing to Opportunity Gaps

In making the conscious decision to center minority students in the student discussions I realized on an even deeper level how much my beliefs about student abilities impact their reality. I see how years of teacher beliefs about a student's inferiority impact their actual outcomes by not providing the same learning experiences to all students. If I had not had this focus, I would not have chosen Aalayah to lead the discussion. I didn't believe she could do it. I was afraid it would embarrass her, and, in the past, I told myself that I was protecting her by not providing her opportunities to participate. In this inquiry cycle, I chose her anyway. When I did, the first thing that I noticed was that she could do it and did do it. Aalayah naturally took on the role of discourse leader and was able to navigate the conversation with ease. I also noticed that she naturally centered other minority students. Out of all the raised hands, she chose Sam and Chase to start the discussion. This happened on multiple occasions. While I cannot prove a connection, I would be remiss to not mention that Aalayah is habitually absent and has over 50 absences this school year. Since leading this discussion on April 2nd, she has not missed one day of school. It is now April 22nd.

After this critical incident, I named this teacher move *intentional centering*. In reflecting on this incident, I recognized the harm that I have been causing students who I believe are not capable of the work. In the instances where I am intentionally removing students from learning opportunities, my own beliefs and biases are marginalizing already marginalized students' voice and place in my primarily white classroom.

Phase 3: The Classroom Data Story

In addition to the three critical incidents, I also collected student performance data. This finding offers insight into research question three, "How did these scaffolds contribute to their learning and feelings about their voice and place in my primarily white classroom?" Figure Two provides some evidence that after being provided opportunities to engage in academic discourse and academic discourse leadership, my minority students demonstrated a gradual increase in academic discourse participation. Students take a district-mandated assessment through a diagnostic program called i-Ready in the fall, winter, and spring to track their progress across multiple reading domains. Students took their first assessment at the beginning of school, the second in January, and the third at the end of April. The data snapshots of each student from my target group illustrate evidence of large learning gains in vocabulary and comprehension with the majority of the students in the target group moving into grade-level proficiency levels in these domains.

At first glance, it looks like student participation drops after their leadership role in facilitating discourse. However, while their participation jumps when they are facilitating, it also increases from previous levels after they facilitate. For example, after Chase leads the discussion on March 29th, he begins verbally contributing on both April 15th and April 20th. Although I can't suggest causal attribution to the interventions for this growth, this evidence does suggest that the scaffolded academic discourse work likely did not impede student growth as measured on district accountability tools.

Additionally, qualitative evidence suggests that the students engaged in more sophisticated critical thinking and comprehension. This data suggests that these scaffolds may have enhanced their learning and feelings about their voice and place in my primarily white classroom. Many students who had not actively participated previously, like Sam, began to take risks by sharing aloud their own connections to the comprehension questions discussed as a class. As students and the teacher made moves to enhance student voice and place in my primarily white classroom, student learning and participation continued to climb.

Post-survey results and discussions with students also provided evidence of an increase in student voice and place in the classroom through increasing student agency. Many students shared different ideas to improve the academic discourse structures in our classroom. Several students suggested creating different discussion groups based on student comfort level with public speaking. Other student ideas for improving our discourse structure included having silent discussion groups where students charted their responses to the discussion questions. These student critiques of our current classroom discourse structures show a shift from the pre-survey responses where students provided no suggestions to improve our classroom structures, showing a shift in student agency and an interest in using their voice to improve their learning experience.

Figure 2
Target Group Participation

Figures 3-6 offer insight into the academic performance of my students during the inquiry period.

Figure 3
Aalayah Student Growth

Domain	Diagnostic 1	Diagnostic 2	Diagnostic 3
Overall ↑	🔴 **Grade K**	🟡 **Grade 2**	🟢 **Early 3**
Phonological Awareness*	🟢 Tested Out	🟢 Tested Out	🟢 Tested Out
Phonics* ↑	🔴 Grade K	🔴 Grade 1	🟢 Tested Out
High-Frequency Words*	🟢 Tested Out	🟢 Tested Out	🟢 Tested Out
Vocabulary ↑	🔴 Grade K	🔴 Grade 1	🟢 Late 3
Comprehension: Literature ↑	🔴 Grade K	🔴 Grade 1	🟢 Early 3
Comprehension: Informational Text ↑	🔴 Grade K	🟡 Grade 2	🟡 Grade 2

Figure 4
Sam Student Growth

Domain	Diagnostic 1	Diagnostic 2	Diagnostic 3
Overall ↑	🔴 **Grade 1**	🟢 **Early 3**	🟢 **Mid 3**
Phonological Awareness*	🟢 Tested Out	🟢 Tested Out	🟢 Tested Out
Phonics* ↑	🔴 Grade 1	🟢 Tested Out	🟢 Tested Out
High-Frequency Words*	🟢 Tested Out	🟢 Tested Out	🟢 Tested Out
Vocabulary ↑	🟡 Grade 2	🟡 Grade 2	🟢 Early 3
Comprehension: Literature ↑	🔴 Grade 1	🟢 Mid 3	🟢 Late 3
Comprehension: Informational Text ↑	🔴 Grade 1	🟢 Early 3	🟢 Late 3

Figure 5
Chase Student Growth

Domain	Diagnostic 1	Diagnostic 2	Diagnostic 3
Overall ⬆	🔴 **Grade 1**	🟢 **Early 3**	🟢 **Early 3**
Phonological Awareness*	🟢 Tested Out	🟢 Tested Out	🟢 Tested Out
Phonics* ⬆	🔴 Grade 1	🟢 Tested Out	🟢 Tested Out
High-Frequency Words*	🟢 Tested Out	🟢 Tested Out	🟢 Tested Out
Vocabulary	🟡 Grade 2	🟡 Grade 2	🟡 Grade 2
Comprehension: Literature ⬆	🟡 Grade 2	🟢 Early 3	🟢 Early 3
Comprehension: Informational Text ⬆	🔴 Grade 1	🟢 Early 3	🟢 Mid 3

Figure 6
Nick Student Growth

Domain	Diagnostic 1	Diagnostic 2	Diagnostic 3
Overall ⬆	🔴 **Grade 1**	🟡 **Grade 2**	🟢 **Early 3**
Phonological Awareness*	🟢 Tested Out	🟢 Tested Out	🟢 Tested Out
Phonics* ⬆	🔴 Grade 1	🔴 Grade K	🟢 Tested Out
High-Frequency Words*	🟢 Tested Out	🟢 Tested Out	🟢 Tested Out
Vocabulary ⬆	🔴 Grade K	🟢 Mid 3	🟢 Early 3
Comprehension: Literature ⬆	🔴 Grade 1	🔴 Grade 1	🟡 Grade 2
Comprehension: Informational Text ⬆	🔴 Grade 1	🔴 Grade 1	🟢 Mid 3

Discussion

Through this inquiry, I have found that the opportunity gap for Black and Brown students was deeper and more complex in my classroom than I believed. Although I believed I enacted equity pedagogy, I found that my pedagogy had to

go beyond assuring access to grade-level work and depth of assignments. Other teachers may also benefit by investigating this within their classrooms. Prior to engaging in this work, it was hard to *see* the dynamics in my own room and understand the teacher-power continuum and opportunities for student academic leadership that existed or did not exist within this white space. Even though I claim an equity stance to my practice and a commitment to social justice, I realized that my own beliefs about student abilities perpetuated a lack of opportunity for minority students to engage with content and engage in academic leadership.

By intentionally centering my gaze on my target student group, they gained access to critical thinking and leadership opportunities. They engaged in student-led, student-centered discourse that I may have not otherwise afforded them. Through this inquiry cycle I have seen a shift in student autonomy and decision-making through student problem-solving. During the presurvey students either did not have any ideas to share, did not think their ideas were important enough to share, or didn't trust their teacher enough to act outside of compliance. In contrast, over time my students began to develop skills in problem-solving, creative solutions, and critiquing institutions and spaces (our classroom) to make sure the structures were working for them. Students began to hold themselves accountable as active participants through their critiques. This inquiry allowed me to intentionally shift teacher-student power, help students develop agency in place of compliance, teach students to regulate their own understanding of concepts, and encourage students to offer critique of classroom structures to improve their participation in academic discourse.

My findings resonate with the literature on student-centered pedagogy (Cook-Sather, 2006), critical thinking (Ozturk, 2020), and the importance of teacher-student collaboration (Rodriguez & Wasserberg, 2010). By intentionally centering my gaze on a specific student group, the study reflected the principles of culturally responsive teaching (Howard, 2002). The emphasis on student-led, student-centered discourse is consistent with constructivist (Bruner, 1966) and socio-cultural theories of learning (Vygotsky, 1978), which highlight the significance of active engagement (Larson, 2000) and collaborative knowledge construction (Elizabeth et al., 2012). My shift from compliance to agency mirrors the literature on empowerment (Baker-Bell, 2020) and student voice (Milner, 2010) in education, emphasizing the value of students' contributions and autonomy. Additionally, the study reinforces the idea that effective teaching involves continuous reflection and adaptation (Milner, 2010; Parsons et al., 2018), acknowledging the uniqueness of each student. This aligns with the broader educational discourse on culturally responsive teaching and the importance of creating inclusive learning environments. Overall, the study's findings illustrate the

significance of listening to students, co-creating learning experiences, and sharing power in the classroom as essential components of effective teaching and learning.

Future inquiry questions include (1) How can I support students in the facilitation of fluid discourse structures? (2) How can I continue to increase the complexity of the discourse while providing differentiated support to students at varying academic levels? These questions provide an opportunity to expand on what I have learned from facilitating student-centered discourse by using student feedback and my own observations to inform my instructional planning. Considering an increase in visual supports, conversation tracking tools, and vocabulary supports are next steps in my work related to creating instructional spaces for student-led academic discourse.

Conclusion

This inquiry work also affirmed the importance of listening to my students. Talking to and learning from students continuously about their learning experience is not optional. It is the only way to know what is working, what they know, and what they need. I learned that by reconceptualizing my role as the discussion facilitator, I can spend valuable time listening and focusing a discussion when necessary. After many years of teaching, sometimes I think that I already know how the students feel about certain things. However, this inquiry showed me that I often do not know how children are feeling, I certainly cannot mindread, and each child's individual experiences within my classroom and outside of it are unique and lead to the development of unique ideas and thoughts. I have noticed that this is a more effective way for me to hear trends and misconceptions allowing me to address them in the moment. The format of student-led discussions with the teacher positioned as a listener and facilitator provides a space for me to hear the logic behind student answers, honor their creativity, and simultaneously reteach complicated concepts. It is my responsibility to co-create a platform with and for them to learn and share authentically in white spaces. I do these by seeking feedback, building trust through acknowledging my whiteness, and intentionally shifting my teacher power to them through leadership opportunities.

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