Black, White, and Other: Educator Case Studies Exploring Cultural Influences on ESL Pedagogy in Louisiana

Danielle M. Butcher

Louisiana State University, Louisiana, USA

This case study research explores the experiences of high school English teachers in a Louisiana school district and their perspectives on teaching English learners (ELs). The purpose of this study is to assess the perspectives of secondary English teachers in meeting the needs of ELs and to determine the impact of race and culture on Louisiana ESL education. Interpreting the interviews and open-ended discussion questions through the frameworks of culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995; McGee Banks & Banks, 1995; Gay, 2004; 2010; Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011) and critical race theory of education (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Sleeter, 2017), this research sheds light on the state of ESL education for teachers in Louisiana as well as its implications for the ever-increasing population of ELs in this area.

Keywords: ESL, Louisiana, case study, teacher training, critical race theory

Introduction

The social and political structures in the state of Louisiana often fall within a Black-versus-White dichotomy, reflecting the ongoing racial tensions that pervade many areas throughout the state. Public schools are no exception. Although they are not segregated by law, schools are often segregated by unwritten social contract. In Fleur de Lis Parish (name changed to protect anonymity), the railroad tracks divide the district act as a line of demarcation between the poverty-stricken majority Black neighborhoods of the north and the more affluent White neighborhoods of the south. While many public schools and public magnet programs attempt a ratio of "50/50 Black and White", this ratio is actually a measure of 50% Black and 50% *other*, lumping non-Black minority students into the same category as White students. In doing so, Fleur de Lis Parish "white-washes" the students' identities (Barrera, 2017). For the growing population of English learners (ELs) in this district, this hegemonic erasure of their identities leads to academic and psychosocial neglect in institutions which should be providing culturally responsive pedagogy.

Research shows that educational systems throughout the United States are not prepared to teach ELs (Durgonoglu & Hughes, 2010). Indeed, the majority of school districts in the state of Louisiana are only beginning to establish the infrastructure to meet the needs of ELs, and many teachers in Louisiana do not have extensive background knowledge in ESL literacy practices. In the high school setting, teachers of ELs must help them navigate not only functional and social English, but also content knowledge, academic terminology, and metaphorical meaning (Bohon, McKelvey, Rhodes, & Robnolt, 2017). However, as school systems in

Danielle M. Butcher, Doctoral candidate, Ed.S., Department of Education—Curriculum and Instruction, Louisiana State University, Louisiana, USA.

Louisiana continue to fight for Black and White equity in academic achievement, they often fail to consider the needs of ELs.

Founded in the theoretical frameworks of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011; Gay, 2004; 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995; McGee Banks & Banks, 1995) and Critical Race Theory of Education (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Sleeter, 2017), this case study research investigates the academic cultural landscape of a Louisiana school district through the experiences of secondary English teachers. The cultural factors at play define equitable education as that which addresses the Black/White dichotomy of the area, thus silencing the voices of growing Hispanic, Arabic, and Asian student populations, particularly those of ELs. The purpose of this research is (1) to explore the experiences of high school teachers in Fleur de Lis Parish who instruct ELs—whether in a self-contained environment or within an integrated, mainstream classroom, (2) to understand their perspectives on their ESL training and using culturally-responsive literacy practices, (3) to determine the implications regarding the quality of education for the ELs they serve, and (4) to examine the influence of racial and ethnic bias on ELs' educational opportunities.

Literature Review

The primary concerns in this study are the extent to which multicultural pedagogy is employed in the high school English classroom and the effects of racism and racially-driven policies on ESL education. The two are closely related, as progressive steps have been taken in Louisiana education systems to combat racism through desegregation policies, integrative methods, and culturally responsive pedagogy; however, the racial focus of this approach leans heavily on the Black population, often to the disadvantage of ELs and other racial/ethnic minority students.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Multiculturalism in education is an ever-changing theory, moving from isolated surface-culture celebrations to profound cultural studies to fully-integrated multicultural environments. From this broad, concept of diversity and social justice came the theories of culturally relevant pedagogy and culturally responsive teaching. Ladson-Billings's (1995) culturally relevant pedagogy established the need for a paradigm shift in education that can "provide a way for students to maintain their cultural integrity while succeeding academically" (p. 476). Gay's (2010) culturally responsive teaching included all aspects that encompass an individual's culture, encouraging reflective practice among educators to consider their own cultures and how they might interact with their students' cultural backgrounds. Furthering the element of social justice in culturally relevant pedagogy, Nieto (1999) examined how traditional educational approaches and many well-meant though nonproductive stances on race-based education do a disservice to students from non-privileged backgrounds. Similarly, McGee Banks and Banks (1995) called for equity pedagogy to transform school culture, employing "teaching strategies and classroom environments that help students from diverse racial, ethnic, and cultural groups attain the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to function effectively within, and help create and perpetuate, a just, humane, and democratic society" (p. 152). Finally, the conceptual framework of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011) combined the evolution of culturally relevant pedagogy (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011; Gay, 2004; 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995; McGee Banks & Banks, 1995) with the tenets of critical race theory of education (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) into a testable model which identifies the following best teaching practices: "identity and achievement,

equity and excellence, developmental appropriateness, teaching the whole child, and student-teacher relationships" (p. 72).

Critical Race Theory of Education

Building upon the tenets of critical race theory, Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) developed the concept of critical race theory in education, which is founded on the conceptual intersection of race and property leading to social inequity (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

Because racism is endemic to American life, it has a strong effect on the quality of education in public schools (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Lomotey and Staley (1990) found the success of a school, whether it is a magnet program or a desegregated neighborhood high school, depends largely on whether the White student population is happy and does not leave the system, while the Black and Latino students continue to be poorly served and suffer increasing suspension, expulsion, and dropout rates (as cited in Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). This is only one example of the greater construct of Whites being the sole owners and dispensers of property—which Harris (1993) argues is a remnant of slavery—thereby privileging Whites in academic systems and subordinating Blacks and other minority groups (as cited in Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Thus, critical race theory in education critiques the current paradigm of multiculturalism reforms as one that "attempts to be everything to everyone and consequently becomes nothing for anyone, allowing the status quo to prevail" (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 62).

Apart from the social constructs that encourage White hegemony in education, the racial composition of K-12 teachers and the faculty involved in teacher education programs is majority White (Sleeter, 2017). In 2012, 82% of United States teachers identified as White, and in 2016, approximately 80% of the teaching cohorts in universities were White (Sleeter, 2017). Under the guidance of a teacher education faculty that is predominantly White, these cohorts prepare to serve a student population that is racially and ethnically diverse by taking "a course or two (often a foundation course) on multicultural education, culturally responsive pedagogy, teaching English language learners, or social justice teaching" (Sleeter, 2017, p. 156). The Whiteness of education and teacher education in particular, reflect the tenet of critical race theory in education that racial inequity is endemic, institutional, and systematic.

Methodology

Design

This study extends the findings of a pilot study conducted in one "Fleur de Lis Parish" school (name changed to protect anonymity of subjects). The research questions guiding the pilot study were: (1) How do secondary English teachers in Fleur de Lis Parish address the needs of their ELs? (2) What support do these teachers receive in teaching ESL students? and (3) What are these teachers' thoughts on teacher preparation for ESL instruction? The participants were "Rachel", a veteran teacher who possessed Louisiana ESL add-on certification and taught in a self-contained ESL class, and "Elizabeth", a first year teacher without ESL certification who taught a handful of ELs in a mainstream class. An emergent theme arising from this study was the issue of race and multiculturalism. This theme redirected the research to examine the effect of race on Louisiana ESL education in Fleur de Lis Parish.

In conducting exploratory research on the experiences of high school teachers of ELs in Fleur de Lis Parish, this study followed Yin's (2014) framework for multiple case studies, collecting interview data from

five separate ESL contexts in an effort to determine the similarities and differences between them. The participating educators in this study came from varying educational backgrounds and possessed differing levels of experience. Participants took part in semi-structured interview sessions based on a teacher self-efficacy survey conducted by Durgonoglu and Hughes (2010). Other sources of information from these case studies included archival data, newspaper articles, educational artifacts, and direct observations during interviews. Interviews were transcribed the same day, and member checking conducted within the week. Analysis of each case was completed within two weeks of the interview. All names of participants, schools, and districts were changed in the transcripts and reports to protect anonymity.

Participants

Each participant taught high school English in Fleur de Lis Parish, and all had taught an EL at least once during the previous three years. Beyond this, the participants represented a variety of years of experience and grade levels taught. The participants in the pilot study were re-interviewed to explore the theme of race and multiculturalism in further detail. Rachel had 10 years of experience and was the only participant who possessed the Louisiana ESL add-on certification. She taught in a self-contained L1/L2 ESL class in a suburban school. Elizabeth was a first-year teacher in a non-honors 11th grade class in a suburban school. Melissa was a first-year teacher in a non-honors 10th grade class in an urban school. While she did not hold ESL certification, she was bilingual. John was a teacher with 10 years of experience and taught non-honors English I and II in an urban school. Tom was a teacher with four years of experience who taught English I and Transitional English I in a suburban school. His first language was Spanish, and he did not learn English until first grade. Tom also possessed ESL certification through his home state of Florida.

Findings

Perspectives on Teaching ELs

The educators in these case studies wanted nothing more than to be effective when instructing their students, regardless of the student's place of origin or fluency with the English language. All participants expressed their joy at working with these students.

Rachel said:

> My favorite thing about teaching my ESL students is that I can actually see the growth, desire, and respect from them. It is very rewarding when they come in the class and try to talk to you in English without even thinking about it. Then they get the desire to learn and seem to want to please their teachers. I love seeing the joy in their eyes when they know they have a "real chance in their new life".

In addition, Elizabeth said her ELs were the most respectful, hardest working students, and that she wished she felt more confident that she was effective in her instruction. The participants differed in their concept of "effective" teaching for ELs, however, depending on the teacher's cultural background and teaching philosophy.

Confidence in Teaching Culturally Responsive Literacy Practices

Rachel felt empowered and confident in teaching her students, while each of the other teacher participants expressed confusion or frustration. In her interview, Rachel went into great detail regarding her strategies for addressing the needs of all her students, including teach/reteach, the gradual release method, visuals, developing listening skills, establishing consistent procedures, acting, singing, and dancing. Elizabeth also used

these strategies in her mainstream classes, but she still felt uncertain about her ability to instruct ELs: "Sometimes they just don't know the words, but a lot of the times they just don't get the cultural references. I tried explaining the jokes in Shakespeare once. It didn't help". The contexts of these cases, of course, are different. In Rachel's class, the students were all ELs, so their content and pace was somewhat different from the mainstream English classes. Elizabeth theorized the students in her class might be afraid of making mistakes in front of fluent English speakers, thereby increasing their reticence to participate. Melissa, being a bilingual speaker, knew she could communicate with her Spanish-speaking students if necessary, but she did not know what to do with her Vietnamese- and Mandarin-speaking students. John said he did not know what to do with his few ELs, but the majority of his attention was focused on the low-level learners (most of whom were Black and from an impoverished background) so that he often forgot about addressing his ELs. "They're so quiet, they tend to blend in", he said.

Support for ESL Teachers

Nearly all participants complained of a lack of support for ESL teachers; however, their complaints were lodged at three separate entities. Rachel and Melissa felt their colleagues were not clear on the ESL mission. Rachel said, "This is very different from when I worked at 'Grant High'. There it was a community and all the teachers had training, understanding, and the goal set to do anything they could to help these kids. I think we have the desire at 'Greenville', but the training and understanding is not there yet". Elizabeth and Tom, on the other hand, complained of a lack of administrative support from their ESL coordinators. Because her fellow mainstream teachers shared her struggles, Elizabeth tried to get help from the ESL coordinator, who worked with several schools: "I couldn't find him anywhere. He didn't answer his email. All I got was that 'Rights of English Language Learners' email that he sent to everyone. Couldn't he give us something we could use?" John lodged his complaints at the district and their response to the cultural dynamics of Fleur de Lis Parish. "We bus the Black kids out from this side of the district because the schools over here are so low. We have to fix the test scores. We filter [students] into 'gifted' or 'general population'. And it's all about money. Gotta keep the rich White people happy or they're putting their kids in private school", said John.

Classroom Struggles

All participants complained of their schools' emphasis on standardized testing. Elizabeth, Melissa, and John said they felt pressured to stick to canon literature and avoid multicultural content since it does not appear on the standardized test. One participant mentioned that now that English learners at level 1 and 2 do not have to take high stakes tests, many teachers' keep their attention on the rest of their students, leaving ELs to fade into the background. Other areas of discussion included lack of classroom ESL tools, feelings of unpreparedness, isolation, inadequacy, and failure for teachers, and daily teaching stress leading to forgetting about ESL students.

Cultural Barriers

Cultural barriers to effective ESL education were evident on the administrative level, the instructor level, and the student level. For administrators, school equity focused on the relationship between Black and White. Both John and Tom discussed the desegregation policies that changed the schools from true "neighborhood schools" to attempts to balance Black and White students. The teachers, while caring about their students in a generalized way, held varying viewpoints regarding the level of intervention needed in the classroom. Despite being Hispanic and teaching Transitional English I to a large group of non-native English speakers, Tom did

not feel responsible for incorporating specific ESL strategies into his classroom. Recalling his childhood as a Spanish speaker in an English-speaking U.S. school, Tom said "One day it just clicks. Give them time and they'll figure it out". John didn't understand the need for multicultural literature: "There's nothing wrong with the classics". Finally, the ELs' peers provided the last hurdle to ESL and multicultural instruction. Melissa and Elizabeth tried to incorporate multicultural literature for ethnic minority students (Hispanic, Arab, Asian), but reported their Black/White students were not interested and often questioned why they had to read "Mexican" books or learn about "terrorists".

Teacher Training for ESL

All participants were in agreement that teachers need proper training for ESL students. "At the very least", said John, "They need to have yearly training opportunities for CLUs so we can learn something we'll actually apply". Rachel credited her training as difficult, but "worth it", as she has spent much of her career working with ELs. "It has helped me so much since that first year when I was trying to find answers on the Internet". All stated their current in-service ESL training did not offer practical applications. Training for teachers of ELs was either a minimal explanation of the ESL accommodations sheet or completely non-existent.

Four out of the five teachers reported university coursework did not emphasize multiculturalism. Elizabeth, the most recent graduate, described her coursework as emphasizing the needs of Black students while briefly discussing students of other ethnicities and how their cultures might be "different". All non-ESL certified participants felt their university coursework did not delve specifically into ESL literacy practices. The one teacher who did feel his university coursework adequately prepared him for ELs graduated from a university in Florida. Rachel and Tom both felt their add-on certification helped them with ELs, but Tom reported a sense of losing his effectiveness in ESL because he lacked continued training.

Relationship Between ESL Training and Confidence

Those who are trained in ESL are clearly more confident in their ability to meet their students' needs, and are thus more efficacious in delivering culturally relevant pedagogy. Rachel and Tom, both having ESL certification, reported the highest level of self-efficacy. The other interviewed teachers reported that the potential barriers to their effective teaching were a lack of ongoing training, a lack of support, a lack of appropriate materials, and a general lack of understanding as to developmentally appropriate instruction for their ELs.

Conclusion

Research indicates an achievement gap between ELs and native English speakers as well as accounts from teachers asserting their lack of preparation for ESL education. Indeed, it is not enough to say that teachers are unprepared for ESL services; rather, it is necessary to find out why this is so. Although most research has been conducted on teachers' ESL efficacy and training in states where the EL population is significant and services are well-established, there is very limited research regarding the flourishing language-minority communities in Louisiana. Thus, it is imperative to explore the subjective experiences of educators of ELs in a Louisiana public school system which historically has neglected or oppressed people of color and which is only now laying the groundwork for ESL instruction. This study shows that the cultural emphasis on Black-vs-White influences all aspects of the educational environment in Fleur de Lis Parish, hindering it from developing a truly effective ESL program. The teachers are well-meaning, but they are impeded by undeveloped cultural self-awareness

and almost a complete lack of training in ESL literacy strategies for high school ELs. These educators also operate within a system that brushes ELs into forgotten subcategories under the assumption that addressing White students or Black students will somehow cover the needs of ELs. Although progress is happening, Fleur de Lis Parish must become more aware of its limitations and advocate a shift in administrative oversight and teacher training to adjust understandings of EL needs and improve ESL services.

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