

Shut up and listen: applied critical race theory in the classroom

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This paper demonstrates that applying critical race theory to the classroom dramatically shifts the nature and scope of schooling for students of color in urban schools. In focusing on students, applied critical race theory centers the development of voice and expression, and de-centers the high-stakes pressures that limit student engagement. This overview of a writing class at a continuation high school clarifies the importance of student voice, but also of knowing how to engage in dialogue with students about the social context they navigate daily. Understanding how to foster critical voice in students provides educators the tools to create engaging classrooms, and acknowledges the intense emotional experiences that students bring (from home contexts) to the classroom. Without such acknowledgement at the core of schooling, educators are likely to reinforce the very stereotypes that lead students to reject what they often see as demeaning education. The article demonstrates instructional techniques that encourage student voice as a foundation for academic excellence, and argues that applying critical race theory ultimately requires re-visioning the entire US educational system.

Keywords: Critical Race Theory; racism in education; student voice; urban education; multicultural education

Introduction

I'm saying that the situation of their lives evokes in them an almost unconscious tendency to hide their deepest reactions from those who they fear would penalize them if they suspected what they really felt. (Richard Wright 1957, in *White man, listen!*)

Two months into the school year, Raquel shared her voice. I had just written a two-page response to her in-class and out-of-class journals, which had moved me with her rage-filled honest attempts at capturing her world. In my response, I urged her to take her voice even more seriously. And after 18 55-minute classes, her typically bold voice shook for the first time, despite reading aloud daily. She expressed her pain: 'I have been molested. I repeat this so you cannot deny me: I have been molested'. Raquel went into details; what her cousins did to her, what her mother did to her, things no one protected her from. She talked about how teachers always seemed afraid to ask how she was really feeling: 'They'd ask and walk on, not waiting for a response'. Raquel captured specific experiences in precise language as she shared pieces of her story. She expressed the pain of seeing her mother abused and demonstrated the mental instability such violence causes. She argued that she had 'no foundation to love'.

After reading her four pages out loud, the class erupted into applause. We congratulated her. Students told her she was brave and thanked her for trusting us. I asked her

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how she felt: 'My hands are still shaking', she replied, 'but really good. Thank you all for listening. I've been needing to get that off my chest'. 'For how long?' I asked. 'Since birth', she replied. The conversation went on, as we wrestled with the importance of speaking our voices, but also of being heard. The conversation ended a few minutes after the usual class-scattering bell when Lucinda remarked: 'Damn, Chris, school should be like this all the time'.

Mirrored reflections

My own experiences have shaped my insight as an educator, and as such, I share my experiences with students. I spent hours waiting for the principal, who yelled at me to stop being a disturbance, before giving me a packet of worksheets for classes I was not enrolled in. I was required to meet weekly with interchangeable school counselors 'because I was angry', and my required counselors gave me articles about anger (but since I did not do my homework, I obviously did not do their homework). I remember multiple counselors pleading for me to calm down, but no one ever asked if I was being beat by my father. No one ever asked if I was being molested. None of my educators gave me the space to talk about what I was reacting to. In essence, I was disciplined rather than taught how to deal with my pain. As a poor White student, and as an educator in rural, suburban, and urban schools for over a decade, I have come to see school as designed to keep personal experiences as far outside the classroom as possible.

Students are often punished for reacting to the personal violence that school curriculum ignores. Indeed, students that cause in-class disturbances are often sent out of the classroom, kept from the lessons they will later be tested on. In *The evidence of things not seen*, James Baldwin argued that 'what one does not remember contains the key to one's tantrums or one's poise' (Baldwin 1985, xii). In many ways, schools urge students to forget the very circumstances that shape what students will react to as they mature. And this constant pressure to deny the social context of violence is what leads many students to disregard school as irrelevant, dismissive, and disrespectful. Students should be learning exactly the skills to navigate the world we live in, yet in my experience, schools often deny the conditions that lead students to develop such life-saving skills.

This article demonstrates how critical race theory can be applied to a high school writing class, and offers insight into my own personal intentions, pathways, and ways of interacting with students. I apply critical race theory to illuminate how curriculum and instruction can center on students in race-conscious ways that develop student voice. Developing such voice, in conjunction with developing critical writing and thinking skills, ultimately deepens student engagement and shows students how school can be relevant to their lives. This writing does not attempt to capture student voice on its own; I do that elsewhere in much greater detail (Knaus 2006). Instead, this article frames how applying critical race theory results in self-reflective teaching that develops classroom structures to enable students to express critical, culturally-rooted voice, and emphasizes how to listen to students as part of framing a classroom.

The school and the students

The students I worked with over the course of a semester were enrolled in an urban continuation high school in California's Bay Area. Most of the predominantly African-American and Latino students in the class spent considerable time in juvenile

hall or on probation and many of their parents made an effort for not enough. They had in their entire lives. I came up with three.

I turned this discussion into how many teachers were in the total number were present. They were identified as 'good' in many schools, and I learned a powerful lesson through sixth grade through ninth and tenth grade.

- (1) $20 \times 42 = 900$
920 total teachers
- (2) 3 'good' teachers
3 divided by

The second lesson was to get the class to define 'good' as an answer, as many students were back teacher was being pleaded, 'Care about your teacher let you know down during class:

Things A Teacher

- (1) Ask about a
- (2) Know how to
- (3) Know how to
- (4) Be themselves
- (5) Does not get
- (6) Does not take
- (7) Does not take
- (8) Knows when
- (9) Trusts us!

While the students were 'good', very few were 'Behind's' definition of themselves' or anger. In abstract, many educators listen to their students.¹

With a background of trying to create a positive learning, and developing music I listen to, but joking around, doing

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hall or on probation. These students argued that their schools had given up on them, and many of their previous teachers seemed to have agreed that they were too much effort for not enough potential. Indeed, when asked how many 'good' teachers they had in their entire educational experience prior to their current school, the entire class came up with three.

I turned this discussion into two interrelated lessons. The first was a math lesson: how many teachers had the entire class been exposed to, and what percentage of that total number were positive teachers? In a class of 20 students, only three total teachers were identified as 'good'. Students estimated the number of teachers they had at their many schools, and then multiplied that by the number of students in our class. It was a powerful lesson for me as well: students averaged 12 teachers for Kindergarten through sixth grade, 14 teachers for seventh and eighth grades, and 20 teachers for ninth and tenth grade, for a total of 46 teachers per student.

- (1) $20 \times 42 = 920$.
920 total teachers.
- (2) 3 'good' teachers.
3 divided by 920 = .3% of teachers were 'good'.

The second lesson was centered on breaking down what we had just done: I pushed the class to define exactly what makes a teacher 'good'. The class struggled with this answer, as many students disagreed with whether or not a rigid teacher or a more laid-back teacher was best. But what they did agree on was clear: 'Good teachers', Raquel pleaded, 'Care about us'. Everyone agreed, and I pushed on: 'How does a good teacher let you know they care about you?' The class generated a quick list that I jotted down during class:

Things A Teacher Does To Care:

- (1) Ask about and remember us.
- (2) Know how to calm me down.
- (3) Know how to calm my friends down.
- (4) Be themselves.
- (5) Does not get angry at me.
- (6) Does not take bullshit from other students.
- (7) Does not take bullshit from other teachers or the principal.
- (8) Knows when I come to the class bleeding on the inside.
- (9) Trusts us!

While the students created a powerful list of qualities that make a teacher 'good', very few teachers receive any sort of training on this list. *No Child Left Behind's* definition of highly qualified teacher does not include teachers 'being themselves' or anger management, and while the focus on knowing students may be abstract, many educators have long argued for ensuring teachers care and know their students.¹

With a backdrop of so few students able to recall 'good' teachers, I dove into trying to create a positive classroom environment where students could direct their learning, and develop their voices. I strove to be myself in the classroom, bringing in music I listen to, baking cookies and banana bread, bringing in Satsuma Mandarins, joking around, doing essentially many of the things I do when I am at home or with

my own friends. The difference was that I continued to remind the students of our purpose there: to develop voice and create a classroom space of meaning and purpose.

Yet the school and our class were not well-resourced by any means. Despite California's *Williams v. California* settlement,² I was unable to order books, and students finally received their required journals three weeks after the year began. There was no overhead machine, no Internet access, no dry-erase pens, and no way for students to type up their papers at school unless they skipped another class. The gates around the school were also locked throughout the day, which many students wrote about in reference to their time in juvenile hall.

The students were behind in credits. Their English and math assessments were low. They were in severe danger of not graduating because they had not passed enough classes and because many had not passed the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE). In order to graduate on time and pass the required exit exam, these students realistically needed two math classes, two English classes, two science classes, and social studies. But since these students barely tolerated a curriculum they felt demeans them, the school offered them up to two classes in math and English, either science or social studies, and a creative, intended-to-be-relevant elective (such as furniture art, hip hop journalism, or a men's focused or women's focused class). This narrowed curriculum – with one elective as the exception – reflects national movements that standardize math and English and shift away from history, geography, language, and art (see McMurrer 2007). This limited curriculum has been demonstrated to promote drop out rates and teacher apathy, but also leads to further student disengagement, particularly amongst students who have a history of absenteeism.³ Without space to voice their conflicting experiences and feelings, academic engagement seems a distant hope.

Students who attend such under-resourced urban schools are increasingly provided with standards-based education, young teachers with little prior experience, often no stated dedication to their communities, and no real training or tools to address the violent emotional trauma that has limited their presence and academic engagement. Against this backdrop, the continuation high school I worked at was unique because its staff were predominantly teachers and volunteers of color. Yet the staff were still very young; most teachers and staff had graduated college within two years (some were still in college), and few had relevant training to address continuation high school students. Many of the well-intentioned teachers stood in the front of the classroom lecturing or handing out worksheets regardless of very low student engagement. As I observed the teaching staff, I soon realized that most of the full-time teachers presented their curriculum aware of general student apathy, yet unaware of how to meaningfully engage students.

Many of the students praised the school as 'warm' and 'much better than previous high schools'. They attributed the improvement to their relatively new principal, who had instituted a number of dramatic changes, including increased access to nearby colleges, historically Black colleges and universities, and community-based educators who bonded much more with the students than had most previous teachers.⁴ While students voiced dozens of heart-wrenching stories of educators dismissing them from their previous schools, they contrasted these stories with those of their current teachers. A few students spoke of how their lives have been saved by their current educators. Marcus clarified a popular sentiment: 'The teachers teach the same boring stuff, but they also notice if I don't show up, and that means a lot'. As the district and school increased pressure on students to pass the CAHSEE, however, increasing

numbers of students development, on school grumbled about how about year-long subjects. Yet as a whole, the classes and educator negatives was encouraged.

Context of student

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numbers of students noticed that fewer resources were being spent on their personal development, on school trips and enrichment activities. As the year went on, students grumbled about how the school was increasingly similar to their previous schools, about year-long substitute teachers, and lamented about missing art and dance classes. Yet as a whole, there was agreement that this school at least offered the types of classes and educators where the very discussion they were having about positives and negatives was encouraged.

Context of student disengagement

Most of these students reject rote-and-drill educational approaches (which have been thoroughly dismissed in many studies; see Gay 2000; Ladson-Billings 1994). Their rejection comes in the extreme form of dropping out, but can also be seen in hands glued to cell phones, to stepping in and out of class, to in-class disruptions, or to simple glazed over eyes as a student 'checks out'. This rejection stems from a curriculum that rewards students for being quiet and not critically questioning lessons, despite the fact that they most often see their lessons as irrelevant to their lives. In a democratic society, educators should embrace the responsibility students take in such rejections: surely we want an educated populace to reject demeaning top-down curriculum that denies personal context. Instead, as students increasingly fail to meet tests used to measure *No Child Left Behind's* adequate yearly progress, they are provided increased tutorial support (which often consists of hours spent with volunteer tutors who are just as well-intentioned as they are untrained; see Knaus 2007). As a result, students attending low achieving schools are penalized for not learning in a way they repeatedly demonstrate does not work by having their curricular choices limited (see Jennings and Rentner 2006; Lynch 2006).

This increasingly limited curriculum reflects critical race theory's argument that the official school curriculum is culturally designed to maintain White supremacy through focusing on what works well for many White people (though certainly not all). In essence, mainstream curriculum:

... silences multiple voices and perspectives, primarily legitimizing dominant, White, upper-class, male voicings as the 'standard' knowledge students need to know. All other accounts and perspectives are omitted from the master script unless they can be disempowered through misrepresentation. (Swartz 1992, 341, also quoted in Ladson-Billings 1999)

In such a system of White dominated knowledge construction, students are taught about Malcolm X in relation to how he was not like Dr Martin Luther King Jr. Freddie, a student in my class demonstrated this false choice of heroes: 'Dr King is OK, but I like Malcolm X'. In the same light, students knew about Helen Keller as a symbol of someone who overcame her disabilities, but none knew of her anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist advocacy (see Davis 2003). These are the types of misrepresentations the students have learned, been tested on, and largely rejected because they, as José argued, 'ain't interested in learning about a boring MLK who sang nice White songs instead of the revolutionary things he really did'. Being taught and tested on 'White history' led these students to negatively associate with much of schooling, and several argued that they 'cannot trust teachers who teach them lies about how great White people are'.

These students have been offered an increasingly standards-based curriculum that comes nowhere near recognizing or addressing their social contexts of poverty, violence, and personal struggle. Students often wrote about the irrelevance of their curriculum, but also that they learned 'things that don't tell us about our people' and 'stuff that might matter to rich White people, but ignores us'. Students questioned that if schools wanted their attendance, then their teachers should relate curriculum to what they need to learn given that they live in violent, drug-addicted communities.

One student clarified what would bring her peers to class: 'Give us a reason to come to school and we will'. When asked what would bring them to school, the class wrote a list on the board that included:

- (1) Daily skills relevant to our survival.
- (2) Self-defense.
- (3) Anger management.
- (4) Drug and alcohol counseling.
- (5) Respect for us and our families.
- (6) Provide a safe place for us to learn.
- (7) Nice teachers.
- (8) Good books.
- (9) Include us regardless of the languages we speak.

This list reflects the immediate circumstances that shape student lives and demonstrates how they are interested in managing their most pressing issues. Students wanted to experience teaching methods and approaches that reflect the cultures of all students, but also wanted to be recognized individually. Students wanted safe spaces to be themselves, to temporarily let down their guards so they can make sense of the reality they live in, assess the effectiveness of their survival strategies, and make changes in their daily actions to achieve the goals they set out for themselves. One student, Ermalinda, clarified the need for schools to not perpetuate what they live at home: 'I get enough violence and argument at home. I don't need more of that in school'. Yet students at this continuation high school felt they often faced more of the same violence, silencing, and dismissal they received at home and their surrounding community, despite positive intentions from their educators and peers.

Rather than continue to evaluate failure, educators must learn and then address what is happening to students, since educator realities often do not mirror student realities. José clarified what academic failure meant to him:

Listen, if I fail a test that asks me questions I have never seen, that judges me based on courses I did not take, is that my fault? Is it my responsibility to learn what a teacher don't teach? If so, then give me my rights as an adult. But if not, then don't test me on things I don't know. I can tell you what I don't know without having to sit through your test. But let me ask teachers this: can you survive on my block? Can you raise two children, work 30 hours a week, take care of a dying mother with cancer, and avoid getting jumped in my neighborhood? Cause to fail at that means to die.

There is much written about the policies and practices of urban schooling, and the increasing national focus on standards seems to have taken a clear stand: student perspectives have no role in shaping federal, state, or local standards (Public Education Network 2004). The purpose of schooling seems increasingly to keep students out of the conversations about how to educate them in the rush to evaluate student learning.

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Yet as drop out rates increase, as schools fail almost half of African-American and Latino students across the US, as teachers continually drop out of the profession within their first three years, educators must recognize that we are failing (see Alliance for Excellent Education 2005; McCoy 2003; *Dropouts in America: Confronting the graduation rate crisis*). As poverty rates increase, as incarceration rates for African-American and Latino men and women increase, we are seeing a corresponding trend in school drop outs (see US Department of Education, National Center for Educational Statistics 2006; Mauer and King 2007). Ermalinda argued this point well in a class discussion about the causes of dropping out of school: 'If we are failed for getting 50% of the questions right, shouldn't educators be fired if only 50% of us graduate?'

Educators must remember how students live before, during and after school. To fail to consider students' personal context is to ensure that what we teach is irrelevant to their daily survival. Indeed, I argue that in a democratic society, educators have no greater task than to equip youth for speaking the realities they see so that we can then begin to address, with youth, these realities. For far too many people, the realities of urban life for these students are represented by media stereotypes, not by the voices of those living in such conditions. And what sort of a democracy do we live in if we do not develop in all students the ability to participate in shaping (and not just being shaped by) society? Yet many students at this school live complex, violent, oppressive realities that are ignored by educators. Listen:

An uncomfortable alarm clock

Rasheedah, an 18-year-old African-American high school junior, clarified her before-school routine several times in her journals. She wakes up at 4am to tend to her mother, who will have just returned from her night shift cleaning job. Some nights, her mother returns enveloped in a musty, lingering cloud; the familiar smell of unfamiliar men who rented her mother's body for still not enough money to pay rent. Rasheedah then wakes the still too-tiny baby, feeds her formula, and makes her mother dinner: scrambled eggs, freezer-burned sausage, and canned orange juice from the food bank. Her mother replaces Rasheedah's still warm outline in the bed they sleep in at opposite hours, and slips into an immediate deep sleep. Rasheedah then rouses her younger brother and sister, hurrying them into the shower, readying them for their school day. She fixes their breakfast – bowls of cereal topped with heaped spoonfuls of sugar. Just after 6am, she's rushing them out the door, always just barely catching the rusty public bus. The bumpy 45-minute ride takes them deep through a blighted urban neighborhood, where she sleepily reflects on how the litter looks like what she imagines huge snow flakes skittering across barren still dark streets, but she has never seen snow. She corrals her siblings and heads them into their school, which opens never a minute before 7am. Once they are safely at school, she crosses the street and waits for the return bus. She now has a 45-minute ride back to where she can transfer to another 45-minute ride to her school. Rasheedah usually makes it to school on time, but often falls asleep in her first period class.

Free or reduced lunch program?

Lucinda is a junior attending her fourth high school, and identifies as 'Latina, Filipina, and sometimes Superstar'. She comes into her first class after lunch looking exhausted, smelling pungent. Her eyes covered by sunglasses, despite the classroom

already being relatively dark, she plops heavily into her desk, tired and spent. I ask her if she is all right, and she nods her head sideways on her desk, but for the rest of the period, she raises her head only a few times. Each time, she looks around the room bewildered, as if lost in a dream, only to lay her head back down on the desk, arms at her side. After class, I ask her to write what she had just gone through to make her so tired. She responds: 'You don't want to know that', but the next day, gives me a note:

Chris,

I'm stuck. I don't like him, but I do. I can't be without him. He used to be so sweet, and we would smoke together during lunch. Then, sometimes, I would watch him play X-Box. Then, sometimes, we had S_X. But now, he smokes and then we have S_X and then he's done. We don't talk anymore. It's like I don't exist. I want things back to how they were. That's why I'm late back to school. I don't know what to do. I love him, but I don't, too. Yesterday, he didn't even let me smoke. So I snuck some when he went pee. I don't know what to do.

Hungry with no dinner

Darnell is an 18-year-old African-American high school senior with a slight build. He is attending his third high school, and writes about watching 'imaginary sunsets from within my mom's white-walled mental health facility room'. The bed takes up most of the space in her windowless room, so he sits at her side, as she drifts in and out of sleep. He isn't sure what's wrong with her, but for the past five years, she's been living in a home run by the county health department, and he's been at her side as often as he can be. His older sisters no longer visit, and his younger brother has been in juvenile hall for the past six months. He has worked upwards of 30 hours a week for the past two years to pay for his (and his brother, before he was incarcerated) tiny apartment. He rents out a room to a friend of his uncle's, who pays rent with money he makes selling marijuana. Darnell is tired, but tries to stay awake until the nurse will come to feed his mother.

After she is fed, he hops on the bus and returns home. He writes: 'The memorized bus stops slowly tick by as my belly rumbles out my waiting hunger'. It is roughly 7pm by the time he unlocks his front door, and he walks into a thick cloud of smoke. Darnell went into drug rehabilitation several years ago, and while he is comfortable around drug use, he has not used in over a year. He is soon talking with three of his roommate's friends, who already ate the package of hot dogs that would have been his dinner. 'I order pepperoni pizza, try to settle down and write the short paper due in tomorrow's English class'. His hunt-and-peck pointer finger takes forever to fill the screen, and after what seems like an hour, he comes out of his bedroom, hoping the pizza will be here soon so he can return to his paper. His roommate had come home and went, 'taking my friends and my pizza with them'. All that remains is the now-empty pizza box. He erupts in anger, punching the wall and cursing up a storm: 'Anger pours out, Fuck! Fuck! Fuck! and I think of nothing but the pizza I aint got'. Darnell grabs his cell phone, and tries to order another pizza. After being on hold for six minutes, he bitterly hangs up, knowing the pizza would take another hour anyway. He puts on his coat and heads outside to Kentucky Fried Chicken, a five-block walk in the rain. When he finally returns, he plops on the couch, spending the rest of the night watching re-runs, remembering the English paper only when his teacher asks for it during class the next day.

A sleepless night

Jasmyne, a high school senior, has to face her Black student body. She writes: 'I aint Black of the Black that she spends almost every relationship too serious. I hope that they would know that she no longer alone, and out of focus. However, she is going to have to consider how

On this particular night, she is lying in bed with her boyfriend. She sometimes, and I have to ring and when it does returned home from school. She is going for something quick. In her room she occasional less food before graduation. She was engrossed in her screams: she was yelping. Her hands shook as she thought about what might happen. She was sleep, yelling at not to be safely out, her. Jasmyne's room. If she could and quietly slip out. She has for the past three years. She is down next to her 17 year old, but some nights throughout the night

'This class is real':

I tell these stories because these students do not. These stories are the most not at first come out. Most importantly, they are from their peers. They should be shared precisely because they can talk through the issues. They can do that while doing it. Why I do what I do is because I, as their teacher, know their parents, siblings, and why these particular lessons, and leave so

A sleepless night

Jasmyne, a high school senior, usually gets home as late as possible, to avoid having to face her Black stepmother, who continually dismisses her because, in Jasmyne's words: 'I aint Black enough, I got too much Native, too much Mexicana, not enough of the Black that she is'. She feels forced into the arms of her boyfriend, whom she spends almost every afternoon and evening with despite her worry that he takes their relationship too seriously. They began dating when Jasmyne was 14, and she used to hope that they would marry and have children. Recently, though, she has begun thinking that she no longer loves him; that she is in the relationship out of fear of being alone, and out of fear of living through her home life. What Jasmyne fears most, however, is going to sleep at her stepmother's house, which she wishes she did not have to consider home.

On this particular night, she was home for dinner only because she had been fighting with her boyfriend, who had not called the previous three nights. 'He don't call sometimes, and I hate that I care, but all I think about is phone ring phone ring phone ring and when it doesn't, I'm stuck where I don't want to be'. Her stepmother had not returned home from work, and she was rummaging through the refrigerator, searching for something quick to cook so she could retreat to the sometimes comfort of the room she occasionally shares with her younger cousin. Jasmyne ate morsels of 'tasteless food before grabbing a book' and lying on her bed, hoping for a rare quiet night. She was engrossed in the book when her quiet was shattered by her stepmother's screams: she was yelling at her father, who was home only every few weeks. 'My hands shook as the words on the page shook' with nervous energy and the fear of what might happen on nights when they fought. Her father might drink himself to sleep, yelling at nothing and everyone before the alcohol passed him out. Once he was safely out, her stepmother, 'a ball of drunken rage', would quietly stumble into Jasmyne's room. If her cousin was staying at the house, her stepmother might curse and quietly slip out of the room. But – and this is the image she replayed every night for the past three years – her stepmother might instead lift back the covers and lay down next to her 17-year-old body. Jasmyne's stepmother had not done this in over a year, but some nights the fearful thoughts would not leave, keeping her awake throughout the night, 'hoping for the phone call that wouldn't come'.

'This class is real': applied critical race theory

I tell these stories because most educators do not know students in this way; most of these students do not share such experiences with their family, friends, or educators. These stories are the result of students working hard to develop voice; their stories do not at first come out smoothly, in easy to follow storytelling formats. But perhaps most importantly, these stories reflect student trust in me as their instructor, and in their peers. They share some of their most traumatic, difficult to live through experiences precisely because they feel such expression is necessary. In short, they need to talk through the issues that shape their lives, and I attempt to create spaces where they can do that while developing academically useful skills. In what follows, I capture why I do what I do in the classroom, and offer insight into how I get to the point where I, as their teacher, know details they might never share with their counselors, teachers, parents, siblings, neighbors, or peers. And it is exactly these experiences that capture why these particular students reject standardized education, dismiss worksheet-based lessons, and leave school when disrespected.

I have applied critical race theory (CRT) to the classroom to frame my efforts to develop voice and narratives that challenge racism and the structures of oppression. Critical race theory centers on the notion of racism as normal, as the typical way in which life in the US is structured in terms of laws, policies, procedures and practices (see Delgado and Stefancic 2001). Critical race theory exposes how mainstream schools promote racism through White-supremacist teaching practices, White-based curriculum, and school designs that privilege White culture by ignoring and/or denying how racism shapes the lives of students of color. Thus, 'merit' is framed by critical race theory as a measure of Whiteness or successful navigation of White values rather than a colorblind and culture-blind measuring stick of academic or intellectual prowess (see Lipsitz 1998).

Along these lines, CRT critiques White liberalism by recognizing that policies and practices shift to support purposefully excluded groups of color only when in the interest of Whites (see Bell 1980; Ladson-Billings 1999). CRT frames the purpose of the US as serving and continuing its capitalistic roots, creating a perpetual need for subservient populations to work menial labor for artificially low wages. As a core function of society, then, education becomes the public process for maintaining the status quo while purposefully not educating large masses (of students of color and low income Whites) that are forced to work as cheap, manual labor (see Brown 2003; Giroux 1983). Such a population is excluded from many of the benefits of living in the US (such as outstanding health care, safe communities, quality food, and transportation) by prohibitive costs set up by the US structural economies. The need for higher education to attain greater wealth and access upward mobility thus closes the gateway for all but a few to navigate through (see Macedo and Bartolomé 2000; Shor 1980). Thus failing students of color serves the interest of a segregated US; to maintain an economy dependent on cheaply paid labor, an unending source of people must be trained and prepared for academic failure.

At the heart of critical race theory is an appreciation for storytelling, for those who are oppressed to express their insight into how society is structured, and how such structures impact their daily lives (see Delgado 1995). What makes critical race theory applied is the focus on expression of voice and narrative by students who are intentionally silenced by the everyday practices of schooling in the US. Applied CRT thus challenges the status quo of mainstream US colonial-based schooling by creating the structures through which student voice, particularly the voice of students of color, can develop, thrive, and express in culturally affirming and relevant ways. Applied CRT argues that what educators need to know about why schooling fails can be found in listening to students (see Knaus 2006). Schooling, then, is applied critical race theory's foundation because schools are where communities of color have historically been told they are less intelligent and provided documentation of less economic worth than those who successfully navigate racialized academic barriers (see Giroux 1983; Ladson-Billings 1999). The purpose of education, according to applied CRT, must be to de-center Whiteness as a means of de-centering racism.

By creating the structures through which voice can emerge, students can begin to develop their own understandings of knowledge to contradict the negative impacts of learning through a White-dominant form of knowledge that denies experiences that do not fit (see Macedo and Bartolomé 2000; Freire 1970). Applied CRT thus frames knowledge as an intricate, multi-faceted set of stories that create our contested understanding of what happened and whom it happened to (rather than a simplistic notion of 'his story'). Student voice, centered on personal experiences, told from the

perspective that or central purpose of student knowledge ing how to fost populations.

Voice class

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perspective that only one who lives the actual experiences can tell, thus becomes a central purpose of applied critical race theory-based education. In such schooling, student knowledge is framed as key to understanding oppression and to understanding how to foster democratic participation amongst systematically excluded populations.

Voice class

Class began the first day of the school year, and I introduced myself to the students. I shared that I stopped teaching college to work with them on their writing and voice. I shared poetry about my troubled experiences in school (see Knaus 2006, chapter 3). I provided the class with a two-page syllabus, and outlined expectations of daily presence and engagement, grading procedures, and the purpose of the class. I argued that 'the class would be as deep as you all take us', and that I was there to help them develop and express who they are in ways that are 'beautiful, powerful, and rooted in the world' they see. The purpose, I argued, was to help students develop their voices, and to say exactly what they want to, in their words. The first week was spent with students writing self-introductions and reading their introductions aloud to the class. Each day began with a 5–10 minute freewrite, and I encouraged students to choose the topic. We often then spent the class discussing what the students had written in response to the topic or prompt.

I also spent a lot of time setting and holding clear expectations about student behavior: if they wanted to sit in a circle, it was up to them to move the chairs each day (which they soon began to do each class). I stressed that I do not require any student to share what pains them; instead I stressed that I wanted students to share their voices on whatever is most important to them. Some days we focused on close writing assignments, where students practice capturing feelings, items, experiences in thick, descriptive details. Other days the class would center on a highly charged topic that was at the forefront of many students' minds. During these discussions, I joined in to ask critical questions and continue the dialogue, but for the most part, I only jumped in when the dialogue went entirely off track. Sometimes students became deeply emotional, and only when I noticed someone bordering on rage would I step in to provide space to let the rage out safely (often by having students freewrite on how they were feeling at that particular moment). Students began to pick up that they were to shape the nature and purpose of dialogues; I was there to ensure they respected each other. I rarely jumped in, but when I did, I did so forcefully so that students understood that I would not allow anyone to be disrespected.

After weeks of intense discussion, powerful readings, poetry, films, and music that directly captured first-hand experiences with abuse, dismissal, and structural oppression, students began to put their deepest fears onto the page (and into the air of our classroom). I constantly asked students to push deeper, to clarify exactly what they wished to share. I demanded that students share their life circumstances in exactly the way they feel; in the raw, unedited words that they believe captured the depth, intricacies, and complexities they wanted to write about. I reminded students that I was there to help their stories come out, to help edit the words they used, to never to judge their experiences, but to help them work through the issues they wanted to express. And I also shared my own voice every day, sharing insight into the violence I lived, into the rage I have built up about the oppression of communities of color and poor White people.

While students initially resisted taking leadership over their classroom spaces, they soon caught on that without their leadership, we would sit in a circle staring at each other. I reminded them that their voices were the focus, and brought in music, poetry, and films that demonstrated the power of voice through creative ways. At the beginning of each week, the class checked in about what we had been talking about, how our discussions went, and how their personal writing was going. Within a month, students began to share very personal details about their lives regularly, and would read aloud their reflections and freewrites. Students would then ask clarifying questions or provide feedback (such as 'I feel you because my mom is like that, too', or 'Why did you respond to her like that?'). I continually brought in guests (including musicians, a comedian, artists and poets, and a wide range of college students, professors, and educators), all of whom shared why they express their voices. This part was key; seeing, hearing, and feeling artists and educators express critical poetry or music and discuss why they dedicate their lives to expression helped model making a living off of creativity, but also normalized critical expression.

I also was very clear throughout the year that what was read aloud or discussed in our class remained in our class. Students were not to talk about people in the class, but could discuss the topics we shared outside of class. The only way to fail the class, short of not doing the work, was to share information from the class outside our room or to dismiss someone in the class. And I made several clear examples of students in the beginning of the year to demonstrate that I was serious: several students were given the choice to leave our class or stay in and fail the course because they had broken the shared agreement of confidentiality and respect. This point was essential to the class, because students have been punished their entire lives for sharing their realities, and in order to shift this, students needed the support and freedom to create the classroom they wanted.

Students wanted their voices to be heard as much as they wanted to write. This is not to say they did not resist writing (or that every student wrote when I asked them to); the impact of a lifetime of demeaning education cannot be shed by one class, no matter the intent or effectiveness of the educator. Indeed, there were many frustrating days when students slipped back into their traditional student roles, and I'd struggle to urge students to write or share aloud. For every powerful explosion of voice into the classroom, there were two examples of what students began to call 'words on a page': writing without much meaning. Students were engaged from the beginning, but that does not mean this was easy work for them. Remember, they only identified .3% of their previous teachers as 'good' and found little reason to engage before this class.

Responsive teaching

What teachers need to know most is this: stop making me do stupid shit! I get shot at. Cops fuck with me. I have no real home. So let me blow up creatively. (Freddie)

Freddie rarely attended school; in one seven-week stretch, he came only four days. When he did come, he told me he was often 'told to sit quietly and do worksheets'. What incentive, he asked, does he have to attend school that he sees as well-intentioned, but irrelevant? 'I like the teachers here', he clarified, 'but they don't live the bullshit I do. And they teach me to go to college. Which I need. But that does not help me get home alive. And it don't help my addictions'.

Freddie left measure abilities to express math to Freddie's pre mama's rent m after school to

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Freddie left me wondering how anyone can justify using standardized tests to measure abilities that may simply be irrelevant at this stage in his life. Knowing how to express math and English in standardized ways may be important, but not compared to Freddie's pressing need to dodge real life-taking bullets. 'Algebra don't compare to mama's rent money, commas and periods don't raise my baby brothers who be home after school today, tomorrow, yesterday'.

These students were simply not concerned with standardized math and English skill measurements. While economic and social mobility were tangible goals for these students, the things they need to do to survive each day created barriers to economic mobility. They noticed that their educators have not valued the skills that keep students alive. They noticed that they scored poorly on standardized tests that ignore the tangible conflict negotiation skills they use to arrive at school daily. Students continually complained that their other classes had nice teachers, but were teaching things that would not help them in their immediate needs. My urging them to work both towards the future by jumping seemingly irrelevant academic hoops while simultaneously developing real world survival skills often was ignored because they were, as Raquel stated angrily: 'com-fucking-pletely over-fucking-whelmed just trying to fucking survive each day'. Our class then continually returned to capturing the everyday as a way to (1) develop and express voice; and (2) demonstrate the overwhelming nature of racism, poverty, and violence that shapes everyday life; and (3) develop the tools to survive.

Sara, an undergraduate student who assisted with the course, argued that 'students do not value the types of knowledge they need to learn to do well' on standardized tests, and the students were clear that this is partially because those types of knowledge deny how they exist. Listening to students exposes this clashing of values that must be addressed if students are to be engaged in school. These students realized the futility of knowledge unrelated to their sheer survival; this is what they most often wrote about. Listening and validating voice shows students that they too can create knowledge, but also that they already have a solid foundation from which to build. Educators have to begin to hear student experiences as knowledge, to begin to frame personal and cultural knowledge as relevant to already entrenched curricula. As Geneva Gay argued in *Culturally responsive teaching*, 'while school failure is an experience of too many ethnically diverse students, it is not the *identity* of any' (see Gay 2000, xx).

James Banks urged educators to think of knowledge as complicated so as to include all forms. For Banks, knowledge is broken into five interrelated types: personal/cultural knowledge, popular knowledge, mainstream academic knowledge, transformative academic knowledge, and school knowledge (Banks 1993). Popular and mainstream academic knowledge typically frame schools in the US. Absent from the day-to-day operation of many schools is a personal/cultural understanding of knowledge (as seen in the often enormous cultural distance between what happens at school and what happens at home for many students of color and poor Whites) (see Banks 1993; Gordon 1995; Leistyna 1999; Valdes 1996). Absent too from most schools is the larger body of literature and practice that transforms and revises established mainstream canons of western knowledge to include the history of resistance to colonization and imperialism (though this is often presented in ways that deny that actual resistance was taking place; see hooks 1994; Leistyna 1999; Macedo and Bartolomé 2000). What should be clear is that US schools have never equally valued all forms of knowledge; in a society with schools based upon colonization and forced

assimilation, cultural and practical knowledge have simply never been validated system-wide (see Mabee 1979; Marks 1998; Miheuah 2003; Morgan 1995; Trask 1993).

Despite this rarely taught history, these students continually searched for meaningful lessons. These students repeatedly came to schools they felt do not have their best interests in mind because they still hoped to learn and because they wanted to improve their lives. But their critical questions were left unanswered, like this one by Raquel: 'Who tells teachers what we need to know? Do they look or live anything like us?' The gap between the cultural context of teachers and that of the students was enormous, and I continually tried to bridge this gap by making connections between my own growing-up experiences, and through bringing in speakers of color to augment the blinders associated with my own Whiteness. I entered the classroom one day to an ongoing discussion of why I was 'down' and 'just different, not like them teachers who "act Black" to be down'. José said, with disgust: 'Other teachers at [this school] try be all "hood", but its like they learned that shit from MTV. Chris makes us tell why MTV is fucked up'. Miguel argued that 'most teachers don't look me in the eye', while Tanie noted that she 'never had a [White] teacher that knew African history, African music, and could speak Ebonics'. Lucinda said that I was 'too intense', but she 'put up with' me because she knew I knew her and that I 'had her back'.

Much of my interaction with students was spent asking questions about their lives, about what they really meant, and I continually asked them to dig deeper, to push beyond vague answers. In being present to their personal circumstances, I gradually became what Miguel clarified was: 'more of a friend or mentor than a teacher'. While my purpose was not to befriend students, I also blurred the positional lines between teacher and pupil; I could not ask students to be themselves (much less push them to clarify who they are through personal voice) if I was not also being myself. And in being myself, in decreasing the barriers between teacher and student, I also temporarily decreased the colonial, militaristic aspects of urban schooling.

Modeling listening: recognizing anger

On one particular day, as students read their freewrites, one student captured the inside of juvenile hall. She triggered an intense discussion, and I asked students to share their experiences: two-thirds of the class had spent anywhere from one night to nine months in youth facilities. The room was loud as anxious voices shared stories of being physically abused by guards, of hearing 'blood dripping onto cold concrete floors', of hearing 'shouts from a room next door when another kid hung herself'. An almost surreal eagerness to share negative experiences permeated the room. I told the class I was overwhelmed by how much they had experienced, by their expertise and insight, and of their ability to share in public such traumatic experiences. I reminded them that they had direct insight and knowledge about a system that many of their teachers knew very little about. They knew how they were often punished for things that White students were not. As the class filtered out, I noticed a shift in our community; students were serious, somber, but also gave each other a bit more shared respect.

A week later, I facilitated a student-initiated in-class discussion that began with prisons, and shifted to police brutality. Most students shared stories where they had been disrespected or abused by police officers within the past six months. Everyone had a friend or family member who had recent violent experiences with local police. The atmosphere was tense: students shared experiences that triggered student rage at

being mistreated, structures they felt clearer details when Oakland police had students knew (see his desk clean: his class immediately serious, he put his head difficult. The class his obvious anger.

His rage seething
Head phones bum
All the class hears
Does not look up
I call his name
Not even the third

I crowd around him
Say his name again
Dance around eke
Or laughter to release

His rage sends him
The loud hum of
His eyes do not meet
Do not acknowledge

He had been engaged
Listening as students
Relayed stories of
Young bodies slain

And perhaps he had
Perhaps one more
Of police fists bat
Or maybe his father
Or maybe his body
Or perhaps he just
At the rage others

What I do know
His rage
Erupted and he played
Squarely in the high
That allowed him
In class
Full of loud rage
Not violent
What I do know
Is this is not on
A standardized test

The following
class, and asked him
his heart, grinned

being mistreated, at seeing those they loved being mistreated by formal societal structures they felt they could do nothing about. I was pushing students to clarify in clearer details when they said, 'I was beat', or 'They messed me up'. In addition, Oakland police had just shot and killed Gary King, a local resident many of the students knew (see Rayburn 2007). All of a sudden, Michael angrily swiped the top of his desk clean: his journal, sheets of paper, and a pencil flew across the room. The class immediately stopped, and everyone stared at Michael, waiting. Seemingly oblivious, he put his headphones on, and blasted hip-hop, making any further conversation difficult. The class tried to continue the conversation, raising voices to be heard over his obvious anger. I wrote the following immediately after class:

His rage seething to the beat
 Head phones bump bump blam
 All the class hears is Curse Bitch Fuck Damn
 Does not look up when
 I call his name
 Not even the third time

I crowd around his desk
 Say his name again
 Dance around eke out a smile
 Or laughter to release closed tight fists

His rage sends heatwaves across the class
 The loud hum of the air-conditioner kicks on
 His eyes do not move
 Do not acknowledge me 18 inches from his face

He had been engaged in the conversation
 Listening as student after student
 Relayed stories of police brutality
 Young bodies slammed against colonial concrete

And perhaps he heard one too many stories
 Perhaps one more story triggered the rage
 Of police fists batons bullets aimed at his people
 Or maybe his family
 Or maybe his body
 Or perhaps he just shut off
 At the rage others felt

What I do know
 His rage
 Erupted and he placed his rage
 Squarely in the hip music hop
 That allowed him to remain
 In class
 Full of loud rage
 Not violent
 What I do know
 Is this is not on
 A standardized test.

The following day, I asked Michael to read my words silently before beginning class, and asked him how he'd like to conduct class. After reading, he put his fist to his heart, grinned at me, and suggested I take the class from there. After a class

discussion on what works to de-escalate intense situations, he thanked me and told me he'd write a response tomorrow. I asked him how he felt and he replied 'right on, good'. He asked how I knew, and looked me in the eye for several moments, measuring my intent. He did not want what I wrote read aloud to the class, but my validating his unspoken rage did something profound for Michael. He knew that I knew why he was angry. After class, he came up to me and said that 'having you know means a lot cause no one notices'. His attendance and writing presence skyrocketed after this experience, and that day he wrote in his after school journal:

From what you wrote about me yesterday was kinda trust. I did have this big rage. Mad at the world and really didn't care to hear too many more police stories. Once people start to talk about the times when the police harass or did some to them, maybe it was one too many story's and that's so true. The music was slappin, 'Solider boy, in watch me, crank that solider boy that super man the O'. The words of the song I really don't understand but the beat kept my listening...

I wanted Michael to feel trusted. But he also demonstrated how his outlet, while it may have worked this time, was not meeting his goal of reducing rage. He thus opened up for conversation for engaged listeners to continue by writing: 'the words of the song I really don't understand'. I began using music in the classroom that focused on rage, and without addressing Michael, had the class wrestle with music as an escape from rage-evoking situations. These are precisely the conversations that help students feel comfortable being vulnerable in class. My reaching out to acknowledge his rage was risky; Michael could have rejected my poetic approach and shut down even further. I likely would have lost his respect even further if I was wrong about why he was angry. Yet instead, he met my challenge and increased engagement partially because he knew that, at least in our class, there was less reason to hide what he felt.

Modeling listening: navigating trauma

Throughout the semester, students shared intense emotional trauma. While we edited to ensure our points were clarified, we also spent entire class sessions on one or two students' pressing trauma. Students read aloud their daily freewrites to start the class, and on days that I gave students written feedback on their assignments (often up to two pages of notes in response to a set of journal entries), students would write about something I pushed them to clarify. Often, students used freewrites to expand upon trauma they touched upon in their at-home journals, and were moved to read such emotionally heavy experiences aloud. On those days, I'd ask the student if they wanted us to come back to their work after others shared. I did this as a way to bring the entire class' focus on one student, but also to ensure adequate focus on intense issues that could trigger other students' emotional responses.⁵

I tried everyday to provide closure to our conversations by reminding students that sharing voice is emotional work. I also reminded students that expression is academic because as students express exactly how oppression impacts them in 'thick detail' they also develop the foundations of solid writing. This expression enhances student articulation, as they receive critical feedback and learn to speak aloud to audiences that may be hostile. Such academic skills are not measured through standardized assessments, yet are invaluable as precursors to engaging academically for students who have dismissed education. When urban students of color recognize and express

why they might be shut down when skills. Students a writings, they be lessons to their p students recogniz community: 'Now sharing, too. Act should also be ex

I often encour experiences as a v as a way of havin student. She bega class was 'boring class until I conv read aloud a poe seconds afterwar her in the way she stated simply: 'L silence (incredibl students agreed, a

What followe expectations that not be allowed l molested, raped, would stand up, a another student v their personal cor other, and develop It also marked a molested. Most st journals, and mar sation I was quick with the class the

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why they might be uncomfortable speaking their hearts (because they are systemically shut down when they do so), they often begin to see how schooling can teach useful skills. Students also learned to edit each other's work, and as they read each others' writings, they began to create forums to listen to each other. As they applied their lessons to their peer relationships, the classroom was also growing closer together as students recognized and came to value other student trauma. Raquel clarified this community: 'Now that I know about José and Tanie and Michael, I feel more safe sharing, too. Actually, I feel like I should because they did. If I want us to be close, I should also be exposed'.

I often encouraged students individually to share difficult to express, often painful experiences as a way of having them be validated and supported by other students, and as a way of having select students deepen the classroom dialogue. Tanie was one such student. She began coming to class midway through the semester because her writing class was 'boring and the teacher disrespects me'. Tanie continued to ditch her other class until I convinced other teachers to let her enroll in ours. After two weeks, she read aloud a poem about being raped at a party. The class was silent for about 30 seconds afterwards, and I asked her to re-read the poem to make sure everyone heard her in the way she wanted to be heard. After finishing the second time, another student stated simply: 'Let's talk about being raped'. After a few minutes of almost total silence (incredibly rare in high school classes, but particularly our class), a few other students agreed, and soon the entire class said they wanted to discuss rape.

What followed was one of our most engaging conversations. After I laid out clear expectations that anyone disrespecting or denying anyone else's experiences would not be allowed back in the class, students dove in. After students shared being molested, raped, assaulted, or their survival through family violence, other students would stand up, ask the student if they wanted a hug, and sit in shared silence. Then another student would join in the sharing, until almost everyone in the class shared their personal connections to such sexualized violence. Students were validating each other, and developing a language to talk about violence that is often seen as shameful. It also marked a very rare instance where men shared their experience with being molested. Most students wrote about how much they needed that conversation in their journals, and many talked to me individually afterwards, thanking me for the conversation I was quick to remind them that they created. I shared what I wrote that evening with the class the following day:

her voice timid she re-read the poem
and now her voice strong, she became the
character in the poem
the young girl raped in the bathroom
molested at 7 years
she owned the class with her pain
and tears we all shared
stories of survival and the loneliness
of family rejection
wounds upon wounds
and of the 8 young women in today's class
7 spoke of being molested
even two young men shared (finally, terribly)
their shared inability to stop memory

as i left the school, i heard Michael
on his cell phone

clarifying between rape and molestation
 initiating a conversation with someone he loves
 loving a conversation into the phone
 and once again
 i'm reminded that standardized tests and
 plot-graphs are simply not the most important
 or slightly relevant chains shaping these
 students
 our future.

Upon hearing me, students launched into a discussion about how they would learn more if school helped them with what they needed to overcome. 'We are looking for answers, but mostly, we can't ask questions or we get sent to the principal's office', argued Raquel. Students, in many ways, are seeking answers to the impossible dilemmas they face, and their teachers are often ill-equipped to provide answers (see Shor 1992). Michael had ongoing conversation with a woman he loved about the pain she felt from being sexually abused. But he did not know how to talk to his friend, and the class helped him understand the impact of sexual abuse, but also his role in helping provide support. Michael applied what he had just learned from an incredibly risky conversation, and had been able to (finally) get his questions answered by women that he was uncomfortable initiating such a conversation with.

Applying critical race theory means supporting a class enough to publicly wrestle with some of the violent, scarring experiences that impact many urban youth of color. The classroom is the only public space available to develop the structures through which such conversation can take place, and students will take with them concrete knowledge that they can apply in ways educators may be unable to imagine. Such conversations are risky; educators must do the work to provide support for students to take such risks, before, during, and after such conversations. And yet in academic settings where students have expressed that they have continually been told they are not good enough, centering students means precisely acknowledging what they survive through daily.

It happened: trusting students

Towards the end of the semester, I gave students a vague freewrite on the prompt 'It happened'. We had already had lessons on avoiding vague words like 'it', and 'happened', so students knew I was asking them to write whatever they wanted. Almost every student chose a powerful topic, and many wrote their most engaging, detailed piece. I asked students how this assignment engaged them, and most responded that they knew I was 'messing' with them because they knew I 'hated those two words'. They also felt like I knew them because I trusted them enough to work out such a vague assignment. In framing an assignment as playful, I gave students space to show what they had learned, and most students jumped at a chance to express their reality, in their voice. Listen to Lucinda's example:

It Happened
 (by Lucinda)

It Happened
 I believed another lie
 another line another black man

shouldn't have be
 thinking my oper

It Happened
 I believed my fat
 another time ano
 I knew he could
 thinking my quie

It Happened
 I believed my 8th
 another line anot
 he told me I was
 thinking I'd be d

It Happened
 I believed my mo
 another time ano
 he told me to shu
 thinking my bed

It Happened
 I young girl soor
 woke up wanting
 still don't say no
 thinking my life

My point in sh
 dously. The fram
 but I did not have
 of not being vague
 thing, etc), I enco
 as they were clea
 ahead of time, if I
 vague term that d
 to write about the
 with issues she fa
 ment was read al
 because most stu

Lucinda also
 room, educators
 intense emotiona
 educator, I felt
 personal, critica
 about their own s
 letters written dir
 class grew togeth
 expressing how c
 violence that mos

Conclusion: shif
 I began with Rich
 the suspected per

shouldn't have been my boyfriend
 thinking my open legs would save him from lock up

It Happened
 I believed my father despite
 another time another brown man
 I knew he could walk out this time I knew his fist
 thinking my quiet would save my mom

It Happened
 I believed my 8th grade counselor
 another line another white man
 he told me I was beautiful then made me take my clothes off
 thinking I'd be dead soon anyhow

It Happened
 I believed my mother's brother
 another time another yellow man
 he told me to shut up or die
 thinking my bedroom was safe for his sick

It Happened
 I young girl soon woman
 woke up wanting more
 still don't say no but now I know
 thinking my life might just be worth.

My point in showing her writing is to demonstrate that assignments matter tremendously. The framing of this assignment told students that I wanted to see their clarity, but I did not have to tell them that explicitly. Having already clarified the importance of not being vague through avoiding such words (it, happened, good, bad, stuff, something, etc), I encouraged students to dance with whatever words they wanted so long as they were clear. This would not have happened if I did not lay out the structures ahead of time, if I did not continually remind students that, for example, 'racism' is a vague term that does not capture what they live, think, and feel. I did not tell Lucinda to write about the violent sexism in her life, but she used the assignment to wrestle with issues she faces daily. I did not urge students to read these aloud, but this assignment was read aloud in class, at school forums, and at a few open-mic performances because most students felt proud of work they initiated.

Lucinda also demonstrated that when critical race theory is applied to the classroom, educators must follow-up with each individual student. Because she shared intense emotional experiences without prompting, and as an applied critical race educator, I felt my responsibility was to provide direct feedback in the form of personal, critical writing. And I did this throughout the course; as students wrote more about their own struggles, I shared with them my insight and personal struggles – in letters written directly to them. And through such written and spoken dialogue, the class grew together in our shared understandings that without acknowledging and expressing how concretely oppression impacts us, we will simply repeat the cycles of violence that most of us live.

Conclusion: shifting toward student voices

I began with Richard Wright's quote because my purpose as an educator is to counter the suspected penalization many students of color expect when they speak out with

passion. But my attempts also partially set students up to fail because they will be punished for speaking their minds, in future classrooms and across society. Yet they should not be punished in a democracy for speaking their experiences, and it is towards that aim that I encourage expression. Yet as critical, outspoken students of color, they know well their chances for economic mobility decrease with their outspokenness. They have heard about Malcolm X and Dr King's assassinations, but have also survived hundreds of real assassinations on their blocks. The seemingly all-out-war they live in has more relevance than the fear of speaking out, but they also recognize what appears to be the futility of speaking out: they often ask me: 'If no one hears you, what is the point of speaking out?' That is the weakness of applying critical race theory to only one class or only one school: educators cannot require anyone to listen and not punish. But educators can share tools to express ourselves without fear, knowing we may be penalized, but that voice is too important to silence. Structurally, that is what critical race theory's application to education requires: to no longer penalize students for speaking their realities, and to instead shift reality by demanding that all voices be included, particularly voices that are silenced by the structures of racism.

Applying critical race theory creates such spaces, particularly for students of color and low income White students. It is with such a framework that I argue the US educational system needs to be entirely re-envisioned. Applied critical race theory does not advocate for not teaching English or math or geography or biology, but instead, to center understandings of racism within a core curriculum that enhances race narratives. Applying critical race theory to a particular school can help reform a school to ensure the population is served, but without also re-centering the district, the county offices of education, state standards, and funding schemes that enhance the economically privileged, it is just theory. Critical race theory must also be applied to predominantly White and all-White schools, because while critical race theory exposes class-based exploitation, sexism, and internal family violence, it is also important to recognize and address the silencing of White students who speak to alternate realities and who illuminate the impact of Whiteness and White racism on White people. Applied critical race theory is an entry-way into redeveloping the system of education towards an equitable, community-centered, democratic process of creating a sustained country of hope. Applied critical race theorist/practitioners begin with race as a foundation to center voice that illuminates realities for people of color, women, gays, lesbians, bisexuals, transgendered people, people with disabilities, all faith-based communities, poor communities, and folks of all body types, shades, and shapes.

I teach passionately because my educational experiences were largely dry, redundant, disrespectful, and White male supremacist. I try to be myself in the classroom because I never had a White teacher (until graduate school) that made it OK to be who I am, with my own personal histories of violent abuse and neglect. Through coming to express my voice, I began to witness how others lived similar lives, and came to realize that I am a survivor of genocide, family violence, poverty, and schools designed to silence my voice about all of these. This is the purpose of developing voice: to have students develop confidence in our lives, in the idea that we may not be able to change society overnight, but we can identify and alter our personal reactions now. Applying critical race theory to the classroom provides one way to ensure the structures are in place to validate student experiences while arming us with the skills needed to transform our own lives.

Notes

1. See Gay (1994), are used in teach how teachers lea effectiveness is i NCLB's highly
2. The Williams se each student has
3. For more on how Rentner (2006),
4. The year I taught
5. I was also clear follow-up conve as a way to exte have these conv trauma to an adu law enforcement most profession: I enforced upor dialogue made s my role was to l

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Notes

1. See Gay (1994), Noddings (1984) and Palmer (1998). Yet despite that some of these texts are used in teacher education programs across the country, it is important to assess if and how teachers learn to be caring and knowing of all students, particularly given that teacher effectiveness is increasingly measured by student scores on standardized tests. For more on NCLB's highly qualified teacher provision, see Darling-Hammond and Berry (2006).
2. The *Williams* settlement, among other things, requires districts and schools to ensure that each student has access to their own textbook, for each course. See www.cde.ca.gov/eo/ce/wc/.
3. For more on how narrowing the curriculum impacts students and teachers, see Jennings and Rentner (2006), Knaus (2007), Lynch (2006) and Oakes (2005).
4. The year I taught at the school was the principal's third year.
5. I was also clear that what students shared was confidential. I reserved the right to have follow-up conversation with all students to ensure their safety, and often used my feedback as a way to extend one-on-one conversations and suggest resources. Creating the safety to have these conversations required that students not be threatened by my reporting their trauma to an adult they did not trust: most shared repeated experiences with counselors and law enforcement personnel who punished them for sharing trauma. Thus, they did not trust most professional adults, and stated that they would not have worked to develop voice had I enforced upon them interactions with school or district counselors. As such, class dialogue made salient details that professional educators are legally required to report, and my role was to help them develop tools to address this trauma.

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**Latina testimonio
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Judith Flores* at

University of Utah

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Introduction

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