

The Struggle

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This essay identifies some of the challenges staff development providers may encounter and identifies ways to approach the work to ensure the greatest impact on students. This includes clearly defining the boundaries and permeability of the work, looking for various entry points, and explicitly addressing adults' mindsets. For teacher educators who support teachers and administrators looking to dismantle or challenge white supremacy in schools, the work can feel overwhelming but, through deliberate strategies, the work is always possible.

Near the end of the first stanza in his song, "The Struggle," Afro-Caribbean artist Bunji Garlin (2019) says, "The incorrect part of speech could make yuh end up inna d Gulf of Paria" (0:44 - 0:45). A skillful lyricist and musician who crosses multiple genres, most notably soca (modern Calypso music) and reggae, Garlin layers his lyrics with allusions, couplets, and assonance. His songs often capture the complexity of finding one's space and place in contexts that prioritize white-dominant narratives. The quoted lyric captures a contradiction I've often seen when working with groups of teachers, administrators, and educational support staff; Garlin wants to express himself in a particular way, but if he uses "incorrect" English when speaking to someone in power, he risks getting in trouble, perhaps even killed. Educators, especially educators of color, want to orient themselves towards Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Education (CR-SE) practices but are confined to white supremacist standards for learning, pedagogy, and how to "do" school. Developing ways to negotiate that tension has been a driving force in my work as a teacher educator.

I am a first-generation American and a woman of color. I've made the commitment to habitually speak from and about my experiences and purposefully center students when working with schools. Administrators at School "A" need a system to create quality assessments? Great! How will we make connections to students' lives in meaningful, and not just superficial, ways? How will we ensure the tasks reflect a wide breadth of talents? Teacher teams at School "B" need help analyzing data? No problem! How will we ensure these numbers are never disassociated from names and faces? How will we use asset-based language to infer what students know versus what they don't? How will we adults ensure we are educating towards what

can be, not to what was? I model what it looks like to embody the philosophy and advocate for student voice in everything I do with educators, including asking lots of questions that challenge the white supremacy of schools.

I've found, through trial and error, that one subversive way of challenging the white-centric norms of school is to bring every conversation back to CR-SE practices and pedagogy. I consistently, almost repetitively, ask questions related to CR-SE even when the conversation is about something else. If expectations come up, I ask questions like, "Who sets these expectations? Why are they mandated? What purpose do they serve? Which students do they serve?" Same for other topics like homework, assessments, or reading logs. I've learned that the process of engaging schools and their constituents, especially those comfortable with white-centric norms, requires profound adjustments in:

- understanding the nuances of CR-SE
- considering the implications for authentic execution in the context of standardization
- addressing white supremacy
- confronting the smog (Tatum, 2017) educators implicitly espouse
- legitimizing and prioritizing student voices

In this article, I share how I navigate supporting the use of CR-SE and how my professional struggles have helped me understand the critical need to focus on adults' mindsets and the actions they take as a way to bring about sustainable, foundational change.

Stepping into the Struggle by Defining the Boundaries of My Work

Dr. Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz often talks about Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Education (CR-SE) as "doing the work." To engage in "the work" it is imperative to create

student-centered spaces that affirm students’ linguistic, cultural, and racial identities from an asset-based standpoint (Kirkland, 2014; Paris, 2012). The affirmation of these identity attributes acknowledges the legitimacy and value said elements bring to the classroom. When I step into a school as a professional development provider who is a woman of color, I share my mental models and establish boundaries that are non-negotiable in my work with educators, regardless of their role or level of interactions with children. I maintain:

- We should love students but refrain from trying to save them. We need to see and respect students’ full humanity (Love, 2019).
- We will validate and affirm students’ lives even when systems and structures make it challenging to do so.
- We will support and encourage students to question rules and routines and treat student resistance to tasks or work as more than misbehavior and have a ready answer to the question, “why do I need to learn/do this?”
- We will select and design curricular materials that provide students with “windows, mirrors, and sliding doors” (Bishop, 1990) as well as a variety of ways of expressing their understanding of the content (Lalor, 2016).
- We will conceptualize equity as being more than success on externally-mandated, standardized tests and exams.
- Educators have a moral obligation, especially white educators, to confront systems that emphasize and prioritize white supremacy.
- We trust students to identify how their voices create affirming spaces.
- We view students as co-conspirators and collaborators; we show and tell them teachers do not hold all the knowledge and power.
- We all possess and should act on, our socio-political consciousness. That is, we all have critical thinking, skills, and community-grounded capital to act on societal problems and issues (Seider, et al., 2017).
- Critical pedagogy is responsive pedagogy.
- Codes of power (Delpit, 1997) are helpful but not at the expense of assimilation and identity homicide¹. One should not silence him/her/their selves at the expense of belonging to a society that does not value authenticity.

My boundaries for doing the work of CR-SE are shaped by the research and literature and informed by my own experiences as a student and educator that were minoritized by the American school system. American public education emerged from a need to serve the non-disabled sons of men with access to power and I see one of my professional responsibilities as a teacher educator to name and describe a supremacist ideology that uses education as a vehicle for maintaining the status quo. When I model for teachers how to question our decisions, they can do the same for students.

Stepping into the Struggle by Recognizing Who Holds Power

As a former teacher, and now a parent, I encourage children to stay true to themselves. I am painfully aware, though, that for children to gain access to institutions that further stimulate intellectual and social growth, they must do school in a way that may conflict with who they are as a person. They must use the “incorrect part of speech” to avoid negative consequences (Garlin, 2019, 0:44). American public education has little tolerance for differences and seems to hold little regard for students’ eclectic skills and talents, despite generations of children who have struggled within its parameters. Recognizing that the language that is prioritized, codified, and emphasized is an academic one that has little regard for students’ authentic selves is key. Furthermore, we must acknowledge how educational policies and practices such as mandated standardized tests and seat time requirements have capitalized on supremacist notions to mandate what’s worth learning.

School reform advocates, such as E.D. Hirsch, assert that instruction has become romanticized. According to Hirsch (2006), teachers and schools of education need to provide students with the skills and exposure necessary to become critical thinkers like those of the Enlightenment period. Hirsch does not explicitly reject the idea of including non-mainstream literature (e.g., Afrofuturism) in school, but believes that teaching students the mechanical aspects of literacy are crucial to their learning experiences. This sentiment is reminiscent of the claims found in *A Nation at Risk* (1983). The argument is that such instruction allows students to attain an equitable playing field. In practice though, centering American education traditions, such

as the canon, delegitimizes cultural modes of thinking that present as other in the face of white supremacy.

In addition to understanding the language that operates in schools, students don't experience the same level of autonomy within the system. My work allows me to toggle between schools with large and small populations of historically marginalized students. I've worked with well-resourced schools with predominantly white student bodies and schools with limited resources and predominately Brown and Black students. In most cases, however, the faculty is overwhelmingly white. These experiences have allowed me to witness firsthand how the rules of school can be bent based on a student's, or their parent's, access to power. As an example, a small, mostly white, district in northeast New York State has created a work-around for the state exams that allows children to pursue courses of interest or take advanced courses without prerequisite courses. Teachers are discouraged from teaching to the test and instead are given the necessary tools needed to design complex and authentic tasks such as auto-ethnographies. Meanwhile, high school students just 40 miles south in the Bronx take several different Regents exams, often multiple times. They are unable to graduate without passing a minimum number of assessments. In those schools, teachers tell me they want to provide authentic assessment but feel beholden to state exams.

Stepping into the work of CR-SE in the suburban New York district means that when I'm working with teachers, regardless of the content or topic, I advocate for centering marginalized voices or provide ways for the mostly white teaching faculty to reflect on their racial identities and how it impacts their pedagogy. In the Bronx school, I help teachers address dual goals: teaching children the academic knowledge they need to pass the exam and providing units that feed their intellectual curiosity (Hammond, 2014). The more willing we are to describe those differences and talk openly about power with students and adults, the more likely we are to move the work of CR-SE forward.

Confronting the Language of the Struggle

The New York State high school exit exams emerged from a push in the late-1800s to standardize education across the state. Every five to ten years, in each of the various subject areas, the State Education Department

has adopted, revised, or updated outcome expectations, described as the New York State Learning Standards. In each iteration, content shaped by the mostly white, mostly male, mostly non-disabled school leaders has informed the demands placed on students and teachers. This white, ableist, hetero-normative curriculum does not account for the nuances that present in educative topics and the lives of its learners. If anything, it prioritizes and further empowers voices that have been a part of the dominant narrative. It also leverages an elitist perspective on what constitutes appropriate educational experiences.

Take, for example, a sixth grade New York State Next Generation English Language Arts standard adopted in 2017:

[D]etermine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative and connotative meanings. Analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning, tone, and mood, including words with multiple meanings. (6.R.4)

Implicitly, students are told that their interpretation is not accurate unless it reflects a larger understanding of the author's craft. Even a cursory review of most schools' curriculum shows patterns around which authors are considered worthy of craft analysis.

Following the latest rounds of revisions to the Learning Standards, NYS education leaders collaborated with luminaries in the field (Paris, Sealey-Ruiz, Kirkland, Ladson-Billings, etc.) to create a framework for CR-SE that was finalized in January 2018. The framework includes four pillars that, if actualized, would make a place where student voice is non-negotiable. The four pillars are:

1. A welcome and affirming environment
2. High expectations and rigorous instruction
3. Inclusive curriculum and assessment
4. Ongoing professional learning for adults aligned with the tenets of CR-SE.

The fact the CR-SE standards exist makes me hopeful. The intense focus on the Learning Standards via state-mandated tests and exams, though, makes me fear we'll never operationalize them. Absent accountability measures, the framework becomes more of a suggestion and less of a mandate to aspire to, thereby prompting the concern that CR-SE



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ago, I sat on a call with a district administrator outside the capital region of New York. When explaining the importance of CR-SE to the district’s goals, the administrator replied, “No, thanks. Our priority is only on curriculum design and assessment.” In that moment I was unable to find the words to persuade her that quality, engaging curricula simply won’t happen without embracing CR-SE.

Leaning Fully into the Struggle

I remain optimistic because I know it’s possible to work within the system while challenging white-dominant ideology to ensure students are truly centered in schools. Adults committed to CR-SE can do that by considering the connection of the skill in relation to culture and reflecting on:

- What is the real-world relationship between the skill and my students’ lives?
- How does the standard or skill dismantle supremacist practices?
- In what ways will my practice need to change?
- What asset-based language is needed?

Using the example of standard 6.R.4, and keeping in mind these questions, we can reconceptualize the standard as:

Students can use their social and linguistic background to examine the language used by an author in a text. Using their linguistic funds of knowledge analysis of the text’s terminology should reflect a personalized understanding of the concepts of mood, tone, and theme.

If differences between the author’s methodology and student practice arise, space should be afforded to reconcile the two. In restructuring the standard, the emphasis is placed on student voice in the interpretation of the concept. Coupled with this, there is attention

will eventually become a peripheral thought for those who are not immensely invested. The implication is again that technical, white-dominant knowledge that’s assessed on the Regents exams is what is most worthy of students’ time and energy. Several years

on explicitly including students’ socio-linguistic heritage – a key attribute for literary analysis (Rosenblatt, 1995) and one that ensures that students can be producers of knowledge.

One could argue that New York State has an ethical responsibility for holding all districts responsible for the implementation of the CR-SE framework across districts and that until they do, we’ll continue to see the disparities as we do between Putnam County and the Bronx. Studies have shown that students of *all* ethnic, social, racial, and economic backgrounds benefit from responsive educational practices (Denson & Chang, 2009). Yet, district leaders are given different degrees of slack to pick and choose when or how they will attend to it. We then must persuade school leaders the impetus is on them.

Teachers as the Vehicle for Supremacy

One of the most insidious statements I’ve heard educators make is “I don’t think about kids and their cultures because I see them as the person in front of me. I see them for who they are.” Similar in intent to “I don’t see color,” it discounts all that students bring to the classroom with them. When I am working with a majority white staff, I start by attending to their mindsets. Anecdotally, the most difficult aspect of changing adults’ perspectives is getting them to acknowledge their biases and deficit thinking mental models. Practice indicates that offering educators a rubric, a familiar tool as they likely use them with their students, to assess their mindset can serve as a self-assessment and facilitation tool. Table 1 highlights the most common archetypes I’ve experienced and descriptive attributes. In my experience, an educator’s willingness to implement CR-SE is contingent on where they are along this spectrum. This table is often used as a reference for sorting and creating experiences based on the perceived mindset of educators. When working with schools, preliminary conversations with administrators, teachers, and students in tandem with this spectrum provide context for the most appropriate professional development interventions.

Curriculum and standards aside, schools are designed to perpetuate specific modes of inequity (e.g. producers vs. consumers, blue-collar vs. white-collar laborers, etc.). Educators in these spaces can choose to perpetuate ideas that reinforce the narrative students need to ascribe

Table 1. Culturally Responsive Spectrum for Teacher Mindset

Resistant	Emergent	Activist
Educators in this category are typically passive-aggressive or blatantly aggressive in their disregard for CR-SE.	Educators in this category are just beginning to lift the smog that has influenced their practice. They believe in CR-SE but are either unsure of how to implement or still prioritizes oppressive white dominant ideology	Activist educators are those who intentionally create classroom spaces that question and challenge the status quo; social justice is core to their educational philosophy. The activist educator is not one who encourages students to do school to obtain a job. They encourage students to disrupt - even while in school.
• Uses coded language, phrases, or terminology to engage in racist dialogue. • Blames students, or assumes students have deficits that hinder their learning. • Limited reflection on their practice; hesitant to engage in discourse. • Defensive when questioned on associated behaviors. • Dehumanizes self or those in school (it's just a job). • Subscribes to the banking ideology (Freire, 1971). • Their teaching mirrors how they were taught.	• Attends to surface layer culture (e.g., the inclusion of music, good, dance, etc. in the curriculum). • Sees culture as an engagement tool, rather than a means for authentic learning. • Prioritizes assimilation to white dominant codes of education. Typically emphasizes codes of power (Delpit, 1997) as a method to perpetuate existing power structures. • Attempts to build a rapport and articulate a love for students but may unintentionally dehumanize students or set themselves up as a savior. • For people of color, in particular, education is seen as a means for pulling oneself up.	• Uses intentional and purposeful co-generative dialogue (Emdin, 2016) to reflect and promote student voice. • Continuously reflects on and adjusts language use for instances of white supremacy. Calls in others when they use deficit language. • Intentionally seeks to learn more about students' cultures and the implications for their way of being. • Conscientiously works towards equity and social justice in their personal life • Integrates constructs such as grit and bootstrapping; considers students' contexts and systemic inequality (Love, 2019). • Uses love-based pedagogy to validate and affirm students.

to white dominant ideology to be successful in a paternalistic, capitalist environment. Or they can disrupt the narrative and help students do the same. Educators can move along this spectrum by engaging in continuous reflection and introspection. Coincidentally, this skill is emphasized in teacher education programs but appears to disappear as teachers advance in their careers. Table 2 offers a series of strategies teacher educators can use to help adjust the mindsets of resistant and emergent teachers. This table can be used in tandem with Table 1 as it offers specific strategies for addressing racist pedagogy.

By no means does a shift in ideology and mindset occur in a matter of days. The process can often take years. When faced with systems that feel impossible to maneuver, the endeavor is daunting. It is essential to be persistent and

hold teachers accountable for their responsibility to CR-SE and equity in schools. My responsibility as a teacher educator is to provide a way forward and I've found the most reliable, consistent, and the best first step is the simplest: ask the students.

Ask the students – Releasing Power Back to the People

“Why are we trying to bring culture to the classroom when it is already there?” – Matthew Romano, a graduate student at the City College of New York.

At the time this manuscript was written, COVID-19 was ravaging New York City and similarly dense regions across the country. Black and brown communities decimated by systemic racist practices (e.g. gentrification,

Table 2. Adjusting Mindsets

Supporting Resistant Teachers	Supporting Emergent Teachers
• Listen intently for language that implies deficit-oriented beliefs (e.g., “these kids can’t...”). Repeat the language back to the individual (“I heard you say...” and ask for clarity on the meaning (“Can you tell me more about that...?”) • Leverage interpersonal relationships to engage in conversations on how language usage might make colleagues feel. • If empowered, offer to provide modeling of instructional activities that might lend themselves to more responsive practice. This can also include visiting/ collaborating with other educators who are intentionally embedding CR-SE. • Set bite-sized incremental goals for the educator as it relates to Culturally Responsive practices. Create a checklist of what the goal should appear to embody once executed with fidelity • Ask probing questions to ascertain more about the individual’s lived experiences – what makes them tick?	• Engage teachers in frequent and strategic “archeological digs of their identity and self” (Ramkellawan-Arteaga and Bell, 2017). Ask purposeful questions that invite the interrogation and questioning of lived experiences, biases, and privilege. • Create the space for students to provide them preliminary feedback; if not through co-generative dialogues (Emdin, 2016), then through mediums such as Google surveys. • Conduct audits of curricular practices by asking questions such as: - o What attempts are made to include Culturally Responsive practices? - o Are the cultural practices intentionally aligned with the deeper nuances of students’ lives? - o Have students provided input on the cultural attributes they would like to see included?

white flight, food deserts, etc.) have seen the highest rates of mortality. Amongst the chaos, educators have been working to create learning spaces that attended to students’ social, emotional, and cultural needs. Almost without exception, activist teachers all started with the same initial step: They asked their students what they needed.

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We view students as co-conspirators and collaborators; we show and tell them teachers do not hold all the knowledge and power.

Dialogue with students is a low stakes way to begin shifting to a responsive pedagogy. There are three immediate opportunities to engage students in dialogue: feedback, instructional planning, and problems of practice. Table 3 offers an overview of these domains and the various questions one can pose to students to begin the conversational process. Note that the guiding questions were composed in response to the framework offered in Emdin’s (2016) *For White Folks Who Teach in the Hood*.

As a professional developer and professor, I frequently engage in collaborative or co-generative dialogues with my constituents.

The feedback and information garnered yields a dynamic, dialogical shift in learning practices because the individuals I support feel valued and heard. When I encounter particularly resistant teachers, I often engage their students in a co-generative dialogue to provide the teacher with feedback. The feedback typically addresses misconstrued ideas about the teacher’s efficacy as a responsive educator. Hearing straightforward feedback from students can be challenging but after working through the process, teachers are more likely to see them as co-conspirators in the fight against white supremacy and less like passive participants, just doing school.

Conclusion

Had Bunji Garlin (2019) released “The Struggle” while I was in the classroom, I would use the song to teach my students about allusions. I would have to weigh the pros and cons of bringing in text to self-connections about their Caribbean heritage, the references to prominent landmarks of Trinidad and Tobago, and perhaps even emphasize how one might codeswitch the analysis of the song. If I chose the assimilationist pedagogy path and focused on a close read, I would miss the opportunity to explore the migration of people

Table 3. Culturally Responsive Spectrum for Teacher Mindset

Feedback	Instructional Planning	Problem of Practice
• What are some topics or ideas that are important to you right now, that I might not be aware of? • What is one thing that you think I do well? • What do you wish that I did differently? What suggestions do you have for me to improve my practice? • On a scale of 1 to 5, describe your level of comfort in our class. What might I need to do or adjust to make the classroom a more inviting environment? • How might I improve your daily experience and interactions in class or school as a whole?	• What were some aspects of the lesson that you enjoyed? • If I were to teach the lesson again, what could/should I do differently? • On a scale of 1 to 5, indicate how clear the content of the lesson was to you. How might I improve the content of the lesson to be clearer? • Provide students with an overview of upcoming lessons, units, or curricular materials. Ask: Do you feel that these topics might be interesting to you and your peers? How might I change the content to support student interest?	Teachers often encounter situations or dilemmas that cannot be easily resolved. Teachers can present these problems of practice to students and solicit feedback from students – as they would professional peers. This protocol is adapted from the School Reform Institute's Consultancy Protocol. • After presenting the problem to students, teachers can pose the following guiding questions to students: ◦ What are some strategies that have been utilized? Were they successful? Why or why not? ◦ Who needs to change to address the situation? ◦ If the roles were reversed, how would you (the student) respond to the dilemma?

from other Caribbean regions via the Gulf of Paria, Garlin’s (2019) commentary on limited economic opportunities (e.g., “was either music or badness”), or even the false narrative associated with defining wealth (2019, 0:45). The very line of “using the wrong part of speech” is a reflection of the tension all those who speak a non-conventional form of English must navigate (Garlin, 2019, 0:44). Who gets to determine where a verb should be placed? And whether or not it conveys the same idea? Doesn’t “wah going on” convey the same idea as “what’s up”?

When I began my career 15 years ago, I believed that I was a culturally responsive educator. I wrote an undergraduate dissertation about complimenting canonical texts with Indo-Caribbean young adult literature. The members of my committee lauded me for giving insight into literature that was not currently referenced in the traditional classroom context. The problem is that despite these surface level monikers, I had only begun to scratch the surface of what it meant to center students’ voice. As Garlin says, “I come from a different timing” (2019, 0:18). I had yet to probe and unpack my understanding of language and its impact on how I perceived the idea of doing school.

Since then, I’ve learned that I need to be clearer about the language of supremacy in schools. I needed to recognize that centering students requires adults negotiating their own identity and stepping back. Every time I step in front of a group of mostly white teachers at the behest of an administrator who wants me to focus on the quality of the written curriculum, I need to make a judgment call. Will this cohort of educators hear the importance of CR-SE, or will they immediately shut down because they assume I am questioning their character? In what ways can I tap into my own schooling experiences to build empathy and accessibility for CR-SE and most importantly for students’ voices?

In the first stanza of “The Struggle” Garlin (2019) focuses on finding space as a young emcee. Regardless of the circumstances, he says, “but the mic right and the light bright and you fight like a warrior” (Garlin, 2019, 0:47 - 0:48). Our children fight like warriors in spite of the attempts made to nullify learning experiences that connect to their respective lives. They see the brightness of their cultures and know its value. Through supremacist practices and ideology, we mitigate the importance of students’ cultural, linguistic and racial assets. The current state of the nation has forced a

reckoning across many school districts. It is no longer acceptable to engage in pedagogical and curricular microaggressions. Educators are being held accountable. Instead, the space must be made for additional voices at the table. Now, as Garlin says, “we have to celebrate, we have to celebrate” (2019, 3:07 - 3:09). We no longer have to ask for permission to celebrate our full selves in the classroom.

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Endnotes

¹ Identity homicide is a term coined by the author (2020).

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