

Critical talk moves in critical conversations: examining power and privilege in an English Language Arts classroom

By: [Amy Vetter](#), Melissa Schieble, and Kahdeidra Monét Martin

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Abstract:

Critical conversations take on heightened importance with current tensions about issues involving race, income inequality, sexual orientation, and gender identity, both locally and globally. These tensions demonstrate a dire need for classroom discussions about literature to serve as a space where youth engage in rigorous, critical conversations about institutionalised forms of privilege and oppression and learn how to act as agents of change. To address that need, this study explored how teacher talk moves shaped critical conversations in one U.S. secondary English Language Arts (ELA) classroom. Findings illustrate that the teacher engaged in the following four families of critical talk moves to foster critical conversations: inquiry, inclusion, disruption, and action. Implications remind teachers that using critical talk moves to foster critical conversations involves the consistent practice of critical self-reflection, vulnerability, and knowledge about critical theories and pedagogies.

Keywords: critical conversations | racial literacy | critical literacy | classroom discussion

Article:

Fostering critical conversations in secondary English language arts classrooms is a complex and important teaching practice. The word “critical” in critical conversations stems from the overarching goal of critical theory, which is to confront issues of power, privilege and hegemony as oppressive forces (Kinchloe and McLaren 2011). We define critical conversations as discussions about power and privilege that help students think critically about the world and their place in it. In the English Language Arts (ELA) classroom, for example, teachers might engage in conversation about how the main character, Pecola (*The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison), is oppressed by a society that idealises White Western culture’s ideas of beauty. As a result, Pecola is conditioned to believe that she is not beautiful and worthy. As a class, then, ELA teachers would disrupt those commonplace notions about what beauty is and discuss ways that

individuals might push back against those beliefs. Such interactions are intimidating, however, because teachers are not always able to predict or plan for how students might react.

To foster critical conversations, teachers must have knowledge about how to help students engage in a critical stance with challenging texts (Chisholm and Whitmore 2017). That kind of facilitation can be difficult because teachers might struggle to foster discussion that is more dialogic and student-centred (Juzwik et al. 2013; Nystrand 2006). In addition, many teachers are uncomfortable talking about race (Bonilla-Silva 2013), have nascent racial literacy skills (Sealey-Ruiz 2013; Skerrett 2011), and/or are concerned about how parents and administrators will support this work (Thein 2013). Thus, this research examines the kind of talk moves that one secondary English teacher used to foster critical conversations in his classroom.

Literature review

We recognise that critical conversations involve complex pedagogical practices that require critical mindsets from the teacher and students. In previous research, we discussed the following five interrelated concepts and practices of teachers that are related to generating critical conversations in classrooms (Schieble, Vetter, & Martin, 2020): (a) knowledge about power (Foucault 2012; Janks et al. 2013), (b) critical self-reflection (Gay and Kirkland 2003; Sensoy and DiAngelo 2017), (c) critical pedagogy (Freire 1970; Lankshear & McLaren, 1993), (d) vulnerability (Sensoy and DiAngelo 2017), and (e) critical talk moves (Thomas, 2013; 2015). With this in mind, teachers who utilise critical talk moves, for example, are also engaging in critical self-reflection with students and practicing vulnerability. For this paper, however, we focus our literature review on what research says about how critical talk moves have been used in classrooms to learn more about this one aspect of critical conversations. We follow that with a review focused on the tensions of critical conversations, which can inform how talk moves are taken up or resisted in discussions.

Critical talk moves

We use the term “critical talk moves” to refer to specific interactional patterns that have been shown to foster critical conversations in the classroom (Schieble, Vetter, & Martin, 2020). We know that classroom discourse is important; it is the medium by which most teaching and learning occurs (Cazden 2001; Mercer 2000). Teachers are responsible for navigating talk, both positively and negatively, to “enhance the purposes of education” (Cazden 2001, 2; see also Applebee, 1996; Erickson 1986). Classroom interactions play a large part in how students fashion themselves within a classroom (Bloome et al. 2005; Rex 2006). Classroom talk is complex, however, and requires both planning and improvisational practices from the teacher and students (Vetter, 2010; Cazden 2001). Although teachers tend to facilitate and lead classroom interactions, discussions occur as a collective of individual performances of students who have various views about how to have classroom discussion. A classroom conversation is also shaped by broader discourses (such as the belief that discussion does not support learning) and/or factors within the school (such as scripted curriculum) that shape how individuals interact and what they talk about. To facilitate critical conversations, then, teachers must learn how to navigate spontaneous social interactions with sophistication and criticality.

There has been much research about specific discursive strategies or sets of talk moves that have been generative for teachers as they facilitate dialogue in ELA classrooms and other disciplines (Michaels and O'Connor 2015; Applebee et al. 2003; Langer 2001; Nystrand 2006; Juzwik et al. 2013), such as building on student comments and/or connecting comments to cohesive topics (Alexander 2008; Mercer 2000). Talk moves are defined as “families of conversational moves” that help students explore an essential question or problem-solve potential solutions (Michaels and O'Connor 2015). For example, the “say more” family of talk moves includes questions that encourage students to elaborate on statements, extend ideas, and engage in higher order thinking (McElhone 2012; Michaels and O'Connor 2015). Researchers debate about the best ways to use such talk moves. For example, research argues for authentic questions that come from a sincere interest in a topic, which can be powerful for making connections between texts, the world, and personal lives (Juzwik et al. 2013). Teacher questions with some degree of control can also be helpful, particularly when structured as a way to scaffold for responses that foster learning (Hynds 1992; Wells and Chang Wells 1992). Likewise, Boyd and Rubin (2006) found that open or closed ended questions mattered less, and contingency on previous student utterances mattered more. Thus, research on talk moves illustrates the complexity of how they work in the classroom, depending on the context and purpose.

Critics of talk moves warn that focusing on specific discursive strategies can be “a potentially mindless routine that teachers can follow without thinking about the content” (Michaels and O'Connor 2015, 336.). We recognise that utterances at the talk-move level, and the interactions that follow, are shaped by local and global discourses (Sfard 2008; Wells 2007). In this paper, then, we do not just highlight a talk move out of context. Instead, we illustrate how that utterance at the talk-move level functioned to engage (or not) students in critical conversations in one classroom. Thus, it is not enough for a teacher to simply ask a question about oppression and expect students to unpack privilege and power in their lives and the world. Teachers must know what to do before, during, and after these talk moves and to support critical conversations.

To better understand that complexity, more research needs to be done to examine talk moves and how they function during critical conversations in ELA classrooms. Some research related to critical discussions has shown that storytelling, either to share another perspective or counternarrative, can disrupt stereotypical ways of thinking (Solórzano and Yosso 2002). Both personal stories and counternarratives can allow individuals to use their voice and perspective to provide alternative points of view and create complex narratives that more accurately present multiple realities (Bamburg, 2004). Teachers, however, must be aware of moments when their narratives might dominate discussion and limit students' own efforts to speak. Thomas's (2013; 2015) research has focused on how English teachers at a hyper-diverse secondary school talked about conflict in interactions related to issues of equity and justice during a professional learning community (PLC). In one study, Thomas (2013) outlined specific linguistic features of culturally relevant discourse (e.g. routines of agreement and involvement; language of appraisal) that one White teacher did and did not use within the aforementioned PLC group to navigate ideological dilemmas of race and difference. Thomas noted that one linguistic feature of culturally relevant discourse included funds of knowledge in which educators integrate the skills and knowledge that have been historically and culturally developed in a child's home into classroom activities to enrich the learning experience of students (González, Moll, and Amanti 2006). The White teacher struggled to use such linguistic features to engage her students due to her lack of

knowledge about students' backgrounds. Educators, then, would benefit from knowing more about how talk moves can be used in ways that support critical conversations in the classroom.

Tensions of critical conversations

Researchers have also documented specific tensions that educators and teachers experience during critical conversations. These include silences and silencing around critical issues (Carter 2007; Haddix 2012; San Pedro 2015), difficulty recognising underlying systems of oppression (DiAngelo 2018; Sealey-Ruiz 2013), and a desire to maintain safe spaces during dialogue (Arao and Clemens 2013; Leonardo and Porter 2010). Understanding common tensions supports teachers to respond in the moment during critical conversations when disagreements or conflicts occur.

Silence during critical conversations

Examples of tensions related to critical dialogue include silencing others and being silenced (Carter 2007; Castagno 2008; Vaccaro 2017), resistance through silence (Hyttén and Warren 2003; Thomas, 2015), and using silence as a form of protection (Haddix 2012; San Pedro 2015). Researchers demonstrate that BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of colour) have more complex and nuanced insights discussing race in critical ways (Anagnostopoulos, Everett, and Carey 2013), but they oftentimes stay silent during critical conversations because they do not feel safe to contest certain “dominant, monocultural knowledges with which they [do not] agree” (San Pedro 2015, 132). Silence also occurs at a systemic level in which specific topics, particularly those related to heterosexism and gender identity (Blackburn and Buckley 2005; Thein 2013), are not discussed or integrated into curriculum for fear of backlash from parents, communities, and administration.

Recognising underlying systems of oppression

Another tension of critical conversations relates to participants' denial that systems of oppression exist. This denial oftentimes occurs when participants take a colorblind approach (Sealey-Ruiz 2013), express beliefs that racial prejudice is a thing of the past, and/or defend current inequities as rooted in individualism and meritocracy (DiAngelo 2018; Schaffer and Skinner 2009). Even when open and engaged in critical conversations, students can find it difficult to articulate the complex systemic issues that underlie oppression. For example, Taber, Woloshyn, and Lane (2013) worked with four girls ages 11–13 who participated in an after-school book club focused on empowering girls to move beyond restrictive ideas about gender. Findings indicated that the girls in this study were able to extend their thinking and begin to question inequities, but had difficulty recognising some of the complexities underlying a system of patriarchy that related to their discussions about the book.

The desire to maintain “safe” spaces

Other tensions relate to the emotional responses and the desire to create safe spaces for all participants (Arao and Clemens 2013; Blackburn and Clark 2011; Leonardo and Porter 2010; Staley and Leonardi 2016). Leonardo and Porter (2010) critique the idea of safety within critical

race dialogue, noting that a desire for safety maintains the comfort zones of White participants and maintains discomfort for BIPOC. For example, Arao and Clemens (2013) describe protests from students when dialogue moved from “polite to provocative” (135) during a classroom discussion. To address this, they prepared students to participate in brave rather than safe spaces that emphasised the importance of taking risks, being vulnerable, and feeling discomfort. With that said, not all students have the privilege of taking on brave positions, which needs to be considered during critical dialogue. Learning more about the critical talk moves of one teacher during moment-to-moment discussions can help educators better understand how to cultivate the metalinguistic awareness needed for fostering generative critical conversations (Buehler et al. 2009; Orellana, Lee, and Martínez 2010).

Theoretical framework

We invoke critical literacy and racial literacy as theoretical frameworks that guide our investigation of teacher talk moves during critical conversations. Our combined framework operates in relationship to conceptual frameworks that centre criticality (Morrell 2005) and race and race-based violence in scholarship and English education pedagogy (e.g. CREE) (Baker-Bell et al. 2017). Janks et al. (2013) describe critical literacy as an approach to textual interpretation to “read both the word and the world in relation to power, identity, difference and access to knowledge, skills, tools and resources” (227). When enacted, critical literacy asks students to examine common perspectives and privileges of their social and cultural worlds, critique systems that perpetuate oppression, and analyse messages inherently present in any form of text.

This article draws on Lewison, Leland, and Harste (2014), who define critical literacy as having the following four dimensions of critical social practice: (a) disrupting the commonplace, (b) considering multiple viewpoints, (c) focusing on the sociopolitical, and (d) taking action to promote social justice. According to this model, as teachers and students engage in critical social practices, they draw on personal and cultural resources to make meaning that at times challenges the authority of another’s perspective. As mentioned in the literature review above, studies have focused on these elements of critical literacy, while using different language. For example, Beach et al.’s (2007) study encouraged alternative and conflicting value stances that prompted students to disrupt the commonplace. Some scholars have taken on a specific focus when engaging in critical literacy with students. Sandretto (2018) encourages educators to take on a queer intent to critical literacy which signals a clear focus for unravelling taken-for-granted norms of gender and sexual orientation.

This research also draws from racial literacy theory to define how critical conversations examine the ways racism pervades our social, cultural, material, and political worlds (Guinier 2004; Rogers and Mosley 2006; Skerrett 2011; Sealey-Ruiz, 2017). Racial literacy is a set of practices individuals use to recognise, respond to and counter forms of everyday racism (Guinier 2004; Twine 2004). Bolgatz’s (2005) work on talking about race in the classroom found the following practices to be examples of individuals practising racial literacy: (a) hear and appreciate diverse and unfamiliar experiences, (b) recognise how to ask questions, (c) view race as a structural rather than individual problem, (d) engage in talk even when it is difficult or awkward, (e) challenge undemocratic practices, (f) understand that racial identities are learned, and (g) facilitate problem-solving within the community. These elements of a critical and racial literacy

framework provided theoretical grounding for investigating their enactment through teacher talk moves during critical conversations.

Methodology

We draw from qualitative methods (Merriam and Tisdell 2015) to explore the following questions in this study: What talk moves did Carson use to foster critical conversations in his classroom? In what ways did those talk moves facilitate critical discussions?

Participants and context

This article draws on data from a larger qualitative study of how two teacher inquiry groups used discourse analysis to study their facilitation of critical conversations. The data reported on in this article were collected during a one-year teacher inquiry group in the Southeast U.S. in 2016. Three teachers met monthly with Amy to explore how they facilitated critical conversations in their secondary ELA classrooms. The group included one Black male, one Latinx male, and one White male. Roger, the White male, was in the beginning phases of critical self-reflection and in fostering critical conversations with his students. Jose, the Latinx male, was successful at developing curriculum that engaged students in critical conversations about personal experiences.

We focused on one teacher, Carson, because he consistently used patterns of talk moves that fostered and sustained critical conversations over time. We wanted to learn more about how his patterns of talk moves mapped onto critical and racial literacy practices during the critical conversations he facilitated. We believed these practices would give us greater insight into the tensions and successes identified in the research literature about critical conversations, and what that information might reveal to us about the role of teacher talk in shaping critical dialogue.

Carson identifies as a Black male from a lower to middle-class background. He grew up in the surrounding area of the school where he teaches and attended the local university, where he received a degree in English with a teaching licence for the secondary level. Carson was Amy student four years prior to the study. Carson taught ninth and tenth grade (equivalent to UK Years 10 and 11) ELA at an early college in a rural town. An early college is a school in which secondary students can receive a diploma and up to two years of university-level credit. To get into this school, students needed to be at a specific reading level, but Carson shared in his interview that students were first generation to attend university and struggled to fit into more traditional secondary schools in the area. Carson often described himself in the same way, and, as a result connected well with his students. Carson also said that his classes were smaller (15–20 students and consisted of a majority of females). Students were 70% White, 15% African American and 15% Latinx.

During interviews and group discussions, Carson defined a critical conversation as:

A dialogue between people that truly helps them define and discuss their own perceptions of the world and how that works, and how that functions in their own life.

He joined the teacher inquiry group to become better at fostering what he called important skills for the 21st century. He wanted his students to take on a “global view” since many of them had never “been outside the county”. He encouraged students to “have an opinion” as long as it was informed. Carson felt strongly about the need to teach students how to have a dialogue and listen to multiple perspectives in order to develop more complex understandings of themselves and the world around them. Over the year, Carson grew more comfortable by making himself vulnerable with students, while having high expectations for their dialogic practices. His major goal was to help students dig deeper during critical conversations because he knew “that they are smart and very aware of how society works.”

The teacher inquiry group

The teacher inquiry group met for approximately one hour, four times during the year. During the first meeting, we met to discuss readings about critical dialogue and to define what we meant by critical conversations. We also developed guidelines for our own conversations, which included Singleton’s (2014) four agreements for talking about race: stay engaged, speak your truth, experience discomfort, and expect and accept non-closure. Amy shared her own transcript from a critical conversation with undergraduates to model what they were doing in the meetings. Each teacher audio-recorded three one-hour lessons where critical conversations took place in their classrooms. Amy transcribed those recordings. During the remaining six meetings, we explored those transcripts using aspects of discourse analysis to discuss what was working and what teachers wanted to improve (Bloome et al., 2004; Rex and Schiller 2009). To do that, Amy gave the group a list of characteristics of critical conversations (Table 1). We entered the conversation by talking about moments when students did or did not engage in those characteristics. Amy also asked the teachers to take note of how often they talked, how often students talked, the overall talk pattern, and other talk moves they noticed (Table 2). This allowed us to talk about how the group entered and sustained such dialogue.

Table 1. Characteristics of critical conversations

Characteristics of racism, classism, sexism, and heterosexism	Characteristics of critical conversations
Essentializing race, class, gender, or sexual orientation	Challenging undemocratic practices
Denying that race, class, gender, or sexual orientation matters (e.g. colorblindness)	Hearing and appreciating diverse or unfamiliar experiences and multiple perspectives
Viewing racism, feminism, classism, or heterosexism as outdated	Recognising how to ask questions related to identity markers
Treating racism, feminism, classism, or heterosexism as extreme actions or words	Understanding that identities are learned
Considering racism, feminism, classism, or heterosexism as personal	Engaging in difficult and awkward talk
Regarding racism, feminism, classism, and heterosexism, within the myth of individualism	Recognising identities as a structural rather than individual problem Disrupting commonplace notions

Modified from Bolgatz, J. (2005). *Talking race in the classroom*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

NOTE: See updated version in Schieble et al, 2020.

Table 2. Talk patterns

Teacher Moves
Student Moves
Length of teacher turns
How many students participated?
What students participated?
What were the participation patterns?
How did the teacher participate?
How did students participate?

(Juzwik et al. 2013).

The researchers

Amy is a White female who is a professor in English education at a university in the Southeast. Melissa Schieble is a White female who is a professor in English education at a university in the Northeast. Kahdeidra Monét Martin is a Black female who is a doctoral student in Urban Education at a university in the Northeast. When Amy and Melissa began this work, they engaged in critical self-reflection about their positions as White teacher educators and researchers. They came into this research because they wanted to learn how to become better at fostering critical conversations in their classrooms. After five years of engaging in this research, they understand that taking on a critical stance as a White person is a constant process that, as Michael (2015) says, “must be earned day in and day out” (11). During data collection and analysis, they told critical narratives about what brought them to this research, shared moments when they maintained and/or disrupted the status quo, and challenged each other with questions about commonplace assumptions.

Kahdeidra Monét Martin became involved in data collection and the teacher inquiry group in the Northeast during year two of the larger study. She came to the research study with a background in African and African American Studies, pedagogy in teaching adolescents with disabilities, critical sociolinguistics, and English Composition and an interest in learning more about critical conversations. Because data were already collected in the Southeast, she became involved in this part of the study during preliminary analysis and engaged in collaborative coding of the data. As a team, we looked across interviews, classroom transcripts, and group transcripts to confirm interpretations from both locations.

Data collection and analysis

All data reported in this paper were collected by Amy. Data sources included (a) four audio-recorded teacher inquiry group conversations (60 minutes each), (b) two audio-recorded interviews with each participant (60 minutes), and (c) three (total of nine) audio recorded and transcribed critical conversations from each participant’s classroom (30–45 minutes each). Because this study focused on critical conversations in one classroom, we engaged in in-depth analysis of the three classroom transcripts. We used the interviews and inquiry group discussions to confirm or disconfirm our analysis and provide context.

After data were collected, Amy collaborated with Melissa and Kahdeidra to analyse the transcripts. To identify critical conversations, we first began by individually identifying

characteristics of critical conversations (Schieble et al, 2020) (Table 1) in the three transcripts. For example, we noted moments when the teacher and students considered multiple perspectives about a topic. Next, we met to code the data together and come to consensus about the characteristics of critical conversations occurring in the three transcripts. This first step of analysis helped us better understand the content of the critical conversations.

To answer the first research question (What talk moves did Carson use to foster critical conversations in his classroom?), we analysed the transcripts for specific talk moves that Carson used during the critical conversations. To do this, we engaged in a combination of deductive and inductive coding (Merriam & Tisdale, 2015) individually, focusing on the utterance level tool, such as a question or comment. Specifically, we coded for talk moves found in previous studies and remained open to new codes that emerged from the data. We took note individually of those talk moves and then met together to discuss the codes. For example, we noted that Carson asked open-ended questions related to the same topic sequence in multiple ways. Other talk moves included facilitating multiple perspectives, sharing personal stories, clarifying critical perspectives for students, drawing on knowledge of community practices, redirecting topics during critical conversations, and providing closing remarks to the critical content and structure of the conversation. Next, we created descriptions of the talk moves we found and created data tables with evidence from the transcripts.

To answer our second research question (In what ways did those talk moves facilitate critical discussions?), we engaged in axial coding (Corbin and Strauss 2014) in which we discussed relationships between the codes and critical conversation characteristics. Once those relationships were established, we collapsed several codes into four families of critical talk moves (inquiry, inclusion, disruption, and action). For example, to expand on the example mentioned earlier, we took note that Carson asked questions in multiple ways within the same topic sequence to help students disrupt gender stereotypes. We then reread the transcripts and selectively coded any data that related to those four families of critical talk moves discussed in our findings.

Findings

Data illustrated that Carson used the following four families of critical talk moves during critical conversations in his classrooms: 1) inquiry talk moves; 2) disruptive talk moves; 3) inclusive talk moves and 4) action talk moves (Table 3). We discuss those findings through examples from one critical conversation so that readers understand how and why Carson and his students moved from one idea to the next. These examples, however, are reflective of the patterns of critical talk moves that we found in the data from Carson and one other teacher in our inquiry group. These patterns are counter to the findings from one of our three teachers who had more difficulty sustaining critical conversations with his students (Schieble et al, 2020). Before we discuss those critical talk moves, however, we provide an overall description of how Carson prepared his students for these conversations.

Table 3. Families of critical talk moves

Talk Moves	Number of Times Used
Inquiry Talk Moves	T1 = 15
Ask open-ended questions that help students examine power and privilege in their lives and world around them.	T2 = 18 T3 = 14
Disruptive Talk Moves	T1 = 13
Ask questions that interrupt stereotypes and prejudices	T2 = 16 T3 = 12
Disruptive Talk Moves	T1 = 1
Share personal stories that disrupt dominant ideologies or racism, sexism, etc.	T2 = 3 T3 = 2
Disruptive Talk Moves	T1 = 5
Share examples or theories that disrupt dominant ideologies or racism, sexism, etc.	T2 = 4 T3 = 5
Inclusive Talk Moves	T1 = 10
Ask questions that invite multiple perspectives and marginalised voices	T2 = 11 T3 = 8
Inclusive Talk Moves	T1 = 6
Draw on students' backgrounds to build knowledge	T2 = 4 T3 = 7
Action Talk Moves	T1 = 1
Share personal reflection about power and privilege	T2 = 3 T3 = 2
Action Talk Moves	T1 = 1
Invite students to engage in critical reflection	T2 = 0 T3 = 1

Critical conversations in Carson's classroom

To prepare students for critical conversations, Carson created curriculum that was framed around a critical approach to pedagogy. For this unit plan, Carson asked students to explore the overarching topic of systemic oppression in relation to their own research on an oppressed group in preparation for reading and discussing *The Yellow Wallpaper* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman (a story about the oppression of women in marriage during the 1890s). Carson's objectives for this unit focused on understanding the complex topic of oppression in literature and current events. He also wanted to support students' speaking and listening skills, specifically related to building on each other's arguments and making connections to evidence from texts (research and class readings) in ways that also built their critical and racial literacies.

Critical conversations occurred at least three times during one six-week unit in Carson's classroom. To prepare students for critical conversations, he did the following: (a) prepared students to engage in critical conversations related to literature, and (b) provided specific guidance for the critical conversations.

Prepared students to engage in critical conversations

Before Carson attempted to foster critical conversations in his classroom, he made sure that they came to class prepared to have a dialogue. First, he gave students the questions at least one day

before the discussion. Some of those questions required that students do research on the topic. Carson explained:

I give them the discussion question beforehand. And that has been successful. Last time, they had time to actually look up some additional resources and some notes so they had multiple things to talk about. Because you need to be prepared when you come to the discussion. So, make sure you read this chapter and then come to class ready to talk.

Carson stated that he not only gave students time to prepare for the discussion, but he also gave them specific ways that they need to prepare (i.e. additional resources and notes). He ended by explicitly stating that all students need to come prepared to talk. This is an important element of critical conversations. Not every conversation in a classroom needs to have full participation; however, a critical conversation needs to be student-driven in order for students to share multiple perspectives and construct knowledge about a critical issue. By giving them specific directions, he is teaching them how to prepare for a dialogue and ensuring that they share those various viewpoints.

As mentioned in the beginning of the article, Carson asked students to “define oppression and discuss why it occurs” and also “address references to your own independent research as well as draw from the text, *The Yellow Wallpaper* and *The Raven*.” Here, Carson stated the overarching purpose of the critical conversation – *to define oppression and discuss why it occurs*. He continued to explain that students need to make connections to the research students did in preparation for the discussion and to the literature they have read in class. These directions gave students explicit guidelines for the critical conversation. Carson ended his oral discussion with “Thank you for participating and you may begin.” This polite and formal language showed students that this discussion is serious and important. By doing this, Carson set students up for a rich dialogue about oppression related to current issues and literature.

Provided specific guidance for the critical conversations

Carson was also explicit about what he expected from the conversations. He used a rubric to assess the discussions. He explained aspects of that rubric in an interview:

My next category goes to textual reference or resources. You want to be able to back up your argument, so you want to go back. “Oh, this happened in this text,” or, “This happened in this story we looked at,” or, “I found this statistic.”

Carson explained how he used a rubric about speaking and listening to guide his students towards success in having a critical conversation. He reviewed the rubric with his students and discussed what his expectations by giving specific examples (i.e. “I found this statistic.”). These high expectations and guiding specifics made it clear to students what was expected of them.

Carson also gave ongoing feedback to students in regard to their critical conversation practices. At the beginning of the year, Carson asked students to engage in small-group discussion. During these “practice” conversations, Carson met with individual students in conferences to discuss what was going well and what needed to improve. He explained:

In my former assessment, I have a mini conference and I write notes about each student and then I call them back and I say, “This is what I noticed in there, so next time in there try to do this or if you’re confused maybe write down some points before you get in the conversation.”

Students were aware of and had practice with critical conversations before doing them in a large group. Carson did the work needed to teach them how to come prepared to talk and how to talk within the moment-to-moment dialogue. He also provided them with feedback about their performance during the conversation, thereby alerting his students to the importance of *how* to engage in dialogue. Next, we discuss the four families of talk moves that Carson used, starting with inquiry talk moves.

Inquiry talk moves

Carson utilised the “inquiry” family of talk moves when he asked open-ended questions to students that helped them examine power and privilege in their lives and the world around them. This talk move was critical in Carson’s classroom because it opened opportunities for students to consider underlying messages or ideologies that circulate in a text, and who or what benefits from the text. As described, Carson began the critical conversation with an inquiry talk move that opened up spaces for students to adopt a critical stance, unpack dominant norms and question the structural nature of oppression:

Carson: Today, you all will be discussing our essential question: What is oppression, and what is its root cause? During this discussion, you will not only be expected to define oppression and discuss why it occurs, but also address references to your own independent research as well as draw from the text, *The Yellow Wallpaper*. Thank you for participating, and you may begin.

Samuel: Well, okay, the definition of oppression is unjust or cruel exercise of authority in power. It is an unjust exercise of power.

Wendy: It happens all of the time. Like, I found this example and it is a woman named Grace ... And after a few months of marriage, [her husband] started beating her and threatening to kill her and their child. And she got out of the situation with an organisation that helps people get out of abusive relationships ... and then I thought of *The Yellow Wallpaper* because Jane, she is slowly losing her mind in that yellow room. And she is being oppressed by her husband who is keeping her in that room. He is like putting her down and oppressing all of her imagination, thoughts and creativity.

Jaden: What you [Wendy] said about oppression being about a lot of different things. People say that, like I read, that it’s not like one punch in the face. It’s like a thousand paper cuts every day.

Carson’s essential question that framed the critical conversation was broad and debatable, and opened opportunities for students to make intertextual connections to their own research and the

short story to deepen their critical thinking and conceptual knowledge. In response to this inquiry talk move, Sam shared a definition of oppression that he had prepared prior to class. Sam's definition offers opportunities for him and his classmates to examine how and why identities, such as race, are related to deeper structural and institutional conditions that are unjust exercises of power (critical conversation characteristic).

In response, Wendy shared information from her research about women who face oppression in abusive relationships. She made relevant connections between the concept of oppression, current events in her research, and to Jane, the female character in the *Yellow Wallpaper*. Through these connections, she added to Samuel's definition of oppression by saying that oppression "happens all the time." This added point offers more opportunities for students to unpack how and why identities such as race are related to deeper structural and institutional conditions that are unjust exercises of power (critical conversation characteristic).

Next, Jaden built on Wendy's comment about oppression occurring every day. Specifically, she used figurative language to help the group think about oppression as a "thousand paper cuts every day" – a powerful expression of how microaggressions and oppression are interrelated and operate to make an unjust exercise of power a normalised part of everyday experience. Overall, Carson's initial inquiry talk move helped students make intertextual connections to their research and feminist interpretations of their texts propelled students to move towards more complex critical conversations about how oppression becomes normalised in daily life, but not unseen.

Inclusive talk moves

For Carson, inclusive talk moves occurred when he asked questions that invited multiple perspectives and marginalised voices and made comments that drew on students' backgrounds to build knowledge. An important function of inclusive talk moves is to ensure balance of participation and perspectives without maintaining dominant norms to minimise discomfort.

As mentioned, Carson made it clear in his instruction and rubric that everyone was expected to participate and listen in a constructive way. Thus, Carson often inserted questions or comments that opened the floor to otherwise silent students, as seen here:

Carson: Thomas, what were you saying?

Thomas: I was just saying that not all men are oppressive. I don't know ...

Fiona: To build on what Thomas said, about how it could be race, internationality and all of that. Um, in 2013, two transgender people killed themselves because they were refused the right of jobs, home, work. I think that is one of the bigger things going on in America because we just allowed gay marriage which is a great thing for some people and a terrible thing for others. But they are our equals because we were born the same and raised the same, but some people are just different.

Carson: Before we move on, Sarah, do you have a contrasting opinion?

Sarah: Yes, my research says that the LGBTQ community continues to expand despite discrimination and oppression in North America and throughout the world. Despite the surge in legal and political advances that have been marched to grant the LGBTQ people basic rights. The reason it happens is because the disenfranchised get power and then use it against people who were in a position they were just in themselves.

Carson: Teresa, do you have something?

Teresa: I disagree with how Fiona said that everybody was raised the same ... In how people are discriminated against because of their race, nationality, and religion. I think that goes back to how you were raised. I think that a lot of people in the south, like a lot of older people, are really racist. And a lot of people that you see still hold those beliefs, because of how they were raised.

Here, Carson spoke three times and they were all as a facilitator asking if a new voice wanted to be heard. By calling on students to share ideas, Carson elicited multiple perspectives and encouraged students to build on those perspectives – an aspect of critical conversations.

In response, students brought up a different perspective about oppression. For instance, students elaborated on the idea that oppression is related to not only gender, but also an intersection of identities, as Thomas suggested. Specifically, Fiona’s uptake of Thomas’ comment potentially situated him as a valued participant in the conversation. This move was important for Thomas who indicated his discomfort through hedging (“I don’t know ...”).

Students also started talking about the role that religion played in oppression. Although Carson’s question (“Before we move on, Sarah, do you have a contrasting opinion?”) moved the conversation away from Fiona’s specific comments, his questions fostered other ideas related to the topic. As a result, Sarah shared a new perspective and Teresa built on Fiona’s statement by saying that not everyone is raised the same. Teresa questioned a possible circulating discourse associated with a “colorblind” perspective, a characteristic of critical conversations. Thus, Carson’s talk move of facilitating multiple perspectives from various students resulted in two more students building on previous comments and making at least one connection to textual evidence in their research.

With that said, we believe that a question asking Sarah to clarify her point about the disenfranchised using their power against those who had power before them could have fostered more critical dialogue about uses of power within society. Carson’s decision to ask Teresa for her idea seemed to be driven by his goal of fostering student-led conversation and multiple points (inclusion), since that was a stated goal of Carson’s critical conversations mentioned in the inquiry group discussion about this transcript. Perhaps that goal kept him from asking Sarah a follow up question about her controversial point, a missed opportunity for a disruptive talk move that could have helped students unpack a potentially oppressive comment.

Another inclusive talk move that Carson used was drawing on his knowledge of community practices (González, Moll, and Amanti 2006). Carson taught in a rural school with students who came from Christian backgrounds. All of his transcripts involved some discussion about The

Christian Bible and how those values relate to critical issues they discussed. Carson grew up in the same area and also went to church and read The Christian Bible.

Steven: I want to say something to a comment made earlier about how there is nothing explicitly stated in The Bible that gay couples are wrong. It does say that a man and a man or a woman and a woman is an abomination.

Carson: Leviticus 20:13. I know this version. The Bible verse, Leviticus 20:13.

Gordan: Christians also believe that divorce is wrong too. But yet that happens and is accepted. It's just because it is happening so often now. If everything becomes more frequent then it will be more accepted.

Carson: Society changes over time. Things become more accepted.

By considering Steven's comment and acknowledging that The Christian Bible varies depending on the version an individual reads, Carson opened opportunities for students to disrupt common place assumptions about religious beliefs. In addition, Carson's use of "I" and naming the specific verse illustrated his background knowledge about The Bible and signalling a similar lived experience to Steven. This critical talk move portrayed Carson's ability to draw on students' funds of knowledge during a critical conversation. As a result, Gordon shared another perspective about divorce being more accepted in current religious spaces.

During an interview in which he talked about this particular critical conversation, Carson explained his goal of being inclusive and seeking multiple perspectives, especially with his students from rural, Christian backgrounds:

I tried to make it [critical conversations] not judgmental, because even as the discussion gets, they kind of get a little aggressive with the students who are traditionally Christian. I try to make it more of affirming for them like, "Yeah, that is what this says in that religion, and that's how it works there. Even if you don't believe it, you can still understand from another person's perspective."

Thus, this inclusive talk move did not function to shame or shut down the student, but instead kept the issue of oppression in play and allowed for contrasting positions to be shared.

Disruptive talk moves

In Carson's classroom, disruptive talk moves included asking questions that interrupted stereotypes and prejudices, sharing personal stories that disrupt dominant ideologies, and sharing examples or theories that disrupt dominant ideologies. For example, to engage in this family talk move, Carson shared a personal anecdote that reflected on how he had contributed to everyday microaggressions towards women:

I do want to bring it back a bit. You talked about are men naturally oppressive. I didn't consider myself a feminist until I moved in with my roommate who is a really big

feminist. And I thought that I was for equal rights and stuff but little things that you do can offend people. Like, I would be watching a show and I would say why is she wearing that? Why does she look like that? She should be this small. She should be this tall. She's not going to win. It's not your place to determine what somebody should look like. It's those little things that you say, those comments that you don't realize are oppressive.

In this example, Carson shared a personal story that explained a time when he maintained the status quo in relation to beauty standards for women. By doing this, he showed students that he could make himself vulnerable by recognizing a time when he engaged in oppressive actions, a characteristic of critical conversations. The "should" statements that he used represented discourses about standards of beauty in our society that he clearly articulated to his students and attempted to disrupt. After this story, several students shared their own personal stories related to religion, family values, and sexual orientation later in the conversation, which ultimately facilitated a more nuanced understanding of oppression and fostered critical self-awareness.

During our teacher inquiry group discussion, Carson elaborated on the importance of personal stories and making himself vulnerable, specifically within the excerpt above.

Then we got into some personal stuff. I think they connected with the conversation more because I opened up about my own life story. Then they were able to do the same and they were more comfortable with opening up and being vulnerable about their experiences. I do think adding that personal touch helps foster these kind of conversations. Beyond the kind of superficial like, "This happened in my life," being serious and saying, "This is the reality of the situation. It happened to me. I moved on. I grew from it." I was just saying my truth and that definitely was one of the positive things that helped drive the conversation.

For Carson, the interactional pattern of telling stories in authentic ways ("I was just saying my truth") helped him model vulnerability for students and enrich the critical conversation by promoting personal stories from students.

Carson also used questions as a disruptive talk move to push students to think more deeply about oppression. For example, in the same conversation about oppression, students shared their research and perspectives and Carson continued to press them with questions:

Katie: Going with what Wendy said earlier about how women are oppressed, even in the United States we are oppressed because we do the same work as men in some aspects and we only get paid 77% as much as they do. We do the same work but get paid less and for what reason? Because we are women.

Lisa: In relation to the wage gap, we earn 10% of the world's wages, but do more than 2/3 of the world's work, which I found interesting.

Carson: What is the purpose of males oppressing women? What do they gain from it?

Michael: Seniority

Shane: More money

Brenda: So they can feel more in charge. Without women there would be no world. So, men oppress women as an outlet to have power.

Here, Carson asked two questions related to gender and oppression to sustain a thread of the critical conversation. Specifically, he asked follow-up questions grounded in ideas that students raised, to facilitate deeper thinking about the roots of gender discrimination to help unpack structural complexities. As a result, three students responded with answers related to structures of power and the wage gap (e.g. money). In addition, his use of uptake from Katie and Lisa's focus on the oppression of women was especially important given their use of "we" in their responses. By using that pronoun, both students positioned themselves as part of the wage gap.

In the next turn, a student offered a differing viewpoint:

Thomas: I think that narrowing down the issue of oppression to just women and men narrows the issue down so far that it can restrict you from seeing the bigger picture. You know that it's not just an issue of men and women, that men are oppressive. This seemingly demonisation of men and how they are naturally oppressive, that's not necessarily true in all cases. And by limiting it to such a small viewpoint, you are limiting your view of the different kinds of oppression and oppressive groups that consist of men and women in different countries. It's not just gender. It's internationality and religion and culture and all of these other things and race.

Carson: Are men naturally oppressive?

Thomas: I don't think so. I really don't.

Brenda: Some are and some aren't.

Franklin: They have been taught to be oppressive by society from early history and religions that they had. If you look at early history and the religions that they had they were taught to be stronger and to be the hunters and go get the meat. And the women stayed at home. Even though the women planted and made food at home they were still seen as lesser because they had to stay home and take care of the children.

Thomas disagreed by providing a statement of reason with specific evidence to support his claim. He used the pronoun "I" to express his opinion and then switched to "you" in the second sentence to elaborate his differing point to his classmates. Next, he switched to the use of "they" to distance himself from the argument and then switched back to "you." The use of the strong word *demonisation* with the adverb *seemingly* illustrated his discomfort that men are not naturally oppressive. He then raised the point that oppression is not only a gendered issue, but also one that is related to gender, culture and race.

Next, Carson asked an open-ended question, to help the group unpack dominant ideologies related to gender, a thread they had been unpacking all year. Here, Carson redirected the question back to students to examine if men are naturally oppressive. By doing that, he did not take up Thomas's point about intersectionality, which could be viewed as a missed opportunity (they pick it up later in the discussion). We recognise, however, that Carson's repeated question was used to ensure that gender oppression was not deflected by Thomas's statement and pushed students to consider with more complexity how oppression relates to gender. As a result, students continued to share perspectives and dig deeper.

In an inquiry group discussion about this conversation, Carson explained:

My students don't always go as deep as they could. Someone always shrugs it off with humor or something. Or someone does a counter argument and then the conversation is lost. I find myself saying, okay, let's go back to this idea. Usually, I don't talk as much as I did, but I found them deviating some and not going very deep. I know that they are smart and very aware of how society works, so they can talk about all of these things, like race, privilege, gender, sexual orientation, class. I really want them to explore that and take that with them throughout life.

By pushing students to think more about men being naturally oppressive, students engaged in patterns of interaction that included sharing perspectives about gender oppression ("They have been taught to be oppressive"). Overall, Carson asked questions (those that disrupted commonplace notions about gender) in different ways (open-ended, closed-ended) to build on students' comments and fostered more in-depth discussion about oppression.

Action talk moves

For Carson, action talk moves included sharing personal reflections about power and privilege and inviting students to engage in critical reflection. Carson did not use this talk move often, but we believe this critical talk move is an important aspect of critical conversations and worth mentioning here. For example, Carson closed the discussion with an action talk move by reflecting on a personal experience and inviting students to think about the world from a feminist lens and recognise how oppression operates in everyday life.

Carson: Yeah. And on a final note, I think that oppression comes from what we see. Like for example, I [with friends] was doing a psychology study for Harvard [Project Implicit]. Despite all of us being from different races we all got the results that we naturally have a preference for Whites ... You have to think about all of these subliminal things that you go through in life where you consider one thing is better than another because of what you see on TV or things you hear. Anyway, I want to thank you.

Here, Carson talked about how oppression and privilege play out in everyday events and that one way to "do" something was by being aware of those implicit biases. By using the pronoun "I", Carson expressed his belief about oppression and situated himself as part of the critical conversation. Next, he narrated a personal story to describe actions he took (Project Implicit) that helped him engage in the process of critical self-reflection. He then switched his pronoun usage

to “you”, positioning himself back as a teacher and urging students to “think about all of these subliminal things.” Here, Carson offered a tangible way for students to engage in critical self-reflection without directly assigning them a task. To end, he used respectful talk by thanking students for the discussion to recognise and appreciate their contributions. Such talk has the potential to position students as not only participants in the discussion but also agents who can continue this work outside of class. One way to extend these action talk moves to future critical conversations would have been to ask students to talk about how they might create change within their community and then help facilitate that change through writing workshop and/or critical reading.

Discussion

In alignment with scholarship on classroom discourse and equity (Haddix 2008; Rex 2006; & Thomas, 2013; 2015), we argue for the importance of research that names, notices, and attends to classroom interactions that promote critical stances during discussion. As illustrated, Carson used the four families of interrelated critical talk moves for specific purposes as he fostered critical conversations with his students: a) inquiry talk moves to unpack notions of power and privilege; b) disruptive talk moves to interrupt stereotypes and status quo thinking; c) inclusive talk moves to invite marginalised perspectives; and d) action talk moves to emphasise courses for action. These families of talk moves overlap in that the overarching goal is to foster critical conversations. They are distinct, however, in their specific function. For example, a family of inquiry talk moves for Carson included asking open-ended questions that helped students examine power and privilege in their lives and world around them and take on a learner stance, while a family of disruptive talk moves included asking more pointed questions that disrupted prejudices being circulated in the discussion. By exploring these specific discursive strategies with four families of interrelated, yet distinct, critical talk moves, this study contributes to previous work on methods of critical teaching and talk moves related to classroom discussion by layering attention to power and ideology onto more general “talk moves” (e.g. questioning) (Michaels and O’Connor 2015; Applebee et al. 2003; Langer 2001; Nystrand 2006; Juzwik et al. 2013).

As mentioned, critics of talk moves worry that the focus on such utterance level moves fosters script-like practices. This research, then, aims to highlight the complex ways in which Carson used talk moves to foster critical conversations in his classroom. What did we learn from Carson about fostering critical conversations? First, this research illustrates how Carson used specific talk moves to support students as they engaged in a critical conversation. In other words, Carson did not mindlessly follow a script of talk moves. Instead, he used the talk moves as a tool to navigate moment-to-moment interactions. For example, Carson asked open-ended questions in several instances. He asked those questions with different purposes, such as asking students to explore a topic related to power and privilege or purposefully disrupt stereotypes that are being circulated in a conversation. Carson also used a variety of talk moves, such as asking questions that invite multiple perspectives and drawing on students’ background knowledge. Thus, Carson’s data offers insight into how teachers can take a useful tool, such as questioning, and use it in a way that meets a specific critical purpose (include multiple perspectives in a discussion). The goal of these critical talk moves, then, is not to use them as sentence starters that are

assessed on a rubric, but instead to practice using them as a way to enter, maintain, and sustain dialogue.

Second, it is clear that Carson could not have used these talk moves in this way without engaging in the work of a critical teacher. By that, we mean that Carson was consistently doing the work to build knowledge about the historical and contemporary nuances of social constructs such as race and patriarchy. He also used this knowledge to engage in ongoing critical consciousness and self-reflection so that he understood the context in which he taught and could draw on the cultural backgrounds of his students (Brown et al. 2017; Pixley and VanDerPloeg 2000; Sandretto, 2018). He shared this ongoing work with his students (e.g. implicit bias survey) and during our inquiry group meetings. Carson also practiced making himself vulnerable and allowed for emotional responses during critical conversations (Thein 2013).

Third, Carson illustrated how difficult navigating such conversations can be. Inevitably, teachers are going to miss opportunities. For example, Carson missed an opportunity to take up Thomas's point about intersectionality when he appeared to be too focused on one purpose (inclusion) over another (disruption). In addition, Carson missed an opportunity to invite students to take a more critical role in their daily lives (action talk move), which is an inevitable occurrence in these complicated discussions.

This study raises questions, however, about the consequences of fostering critical conversations when a teacher is not yet ready. What work does a teacher need to do in order to be ready to foster such dialogue? How does context shape students' and teachers' readiness to engage in critical conversations? In what ways could these critical conversations cause emotional responses related to traumatic events that adversely affect students? How do participants navigate those tensions? Some research done on Trauma-Informed (TI) teaching offers specific suggestions for teachers, such as guaranteeing safety, demonstrating trustworthiness, forewarning difficult content, and giving frequent verbal or written check-ins with students (Carello & Butler, 2015; Falloot and Harris 2009). More research, however, in this area would benefit from a focus on critical conversations that explore the following questions: What do teachers need to know, and what is the best way to support them? How can professional learning communities attend to the contextual shifts that teachers experience from year to year and sometimes semester to semester? Overall, educators would benefit from seeing more examples of what it looks like to help students critically examine and discuss literature in ways that help them "entertain tensions in their own life" (Beach et al. 2007) and develop empathy for the tensions other individuals experience.

Overall, Carson's work with the inquiry group reminds us that professional learning communities can be a powerful way to validate and challenge teachers' critical talk moves in a supportive space. Thomas (2013) argued in her work with discourse conflicts in professional learning communities: "Teachers who are knowledgeable about language and have the ability to analyse their own discourse are well positioned to not only communicate with their student across cultural differences, but also have the power to reveal to their students linguistic codes of power that matter in academic contexts and in an unequal society" (19). Similar to our group, teacher educators or instructional coaches could work with preservice and inservice teachers to record, transcribe and analyse the conversations they facilitate in the classroom using specific

analytic guides, such as exploring the interactive and reflexive positionings of teacher and students (Schieble et al. 2015). We also recommend including retrospective video analysis (Wetzel et al., 2017), if possible, to open discussion about nonverbal language that could guide teachers in appreciating and understanding their own critical talk moves.

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Notes on contributors

Dr. Amy Vetter is a professor in English education in the School of Education at the University of North Carolina Greensboro, where she teaches undergraduate courses in teaching practices and curriculum of English and literacy in the content area, and graduate courses in youth literacies, teacher research, and qualitative research design. Her areas of research are literacy and identity, critical conversations, and the writing lives of teens.

Melissa Schieble is an associate professor of English education at Hunter College of the City University of New York. She is also a consortial faculty member in Urban Education at The Graduate Center, CUNY. Her research and teaching focus on critical and sociocultural perspectives on language and literacy, young adult literature, and discourse analysis.

Kahdeidra Monét Martin is a doctoral candidate in Urban Education at The Graduate Center, CUNY. Her research foci primarily orbit around adolescent literacy, the spectrum of urban education, social justice pedagogies, and sociolinguistics. Kahdeidra employs critical race theory, Black feminism, social capital, and translanguaging to understand the intersectional and transnational experiences of Black youth in schools and communities.

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