

## **“Making the Readings Come to Life”: Expanding Notions of Language Arts at Freedom School**

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*The Children’s Defense Fund Freedom Schools provide literacy-rich, summer experiences for both the K-12 children they serve and the servant-leader interns who serve as teachers. In this article, the author expands upon the scholarship of preparing teachers to be culturally responsive pedagogues of language arts instruction by illuminating components of the Freedom Schools’ curriculum, teacher-activist preparation, and the servant-leader interns’ perceptions of language arts. The preparation of the interns as teacher-activists provided opportunities that allowed for the cultivation of knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to use language arts as a transformative vehicle for social, cultural, and historical awareness as well as social action.*

The International Reading Association and the National Council of Teachers of English (1996) proposed standards for what students should know and be able to do in the English language arts. These standards include notions such as students should “read a wide range of print and non-print texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world.” The organizations are clear to note that these standards are not prescriptive for curricula or instructional approaches, but merely serve as guidelines. However, in this era of accountability measured solely by high-stakes testing, language arts instruction in schools is guided by state standards rigidly categorized around monocultural notions of reading, writing,

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speaking, and listening. Often, such narrowed notions of language arts do not allow children of color to read a wide range of texts to build an understanding of themselves. While national statistics show that the majority of U.S. fourth graders cannot read at grade level, these numbers are even more daunting for African American, Hispanic/Latino/a, and American Indian children (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002). For example, only 11% of African American fourth graders read at or above grade level. While these statistics are alarming, culturally responsive teaching has shown promise for raising academic achievement in general and literacy achievement in particular for students of color. With this in mind, it is imperative for teacher educators to prepare culturally responsive language arts teachers.

In this article, I offer a glimpse into Freedom School teachers' experiences learning about and through a culturally responsive literacy curriculum. My story is guided by the following questions: How and in what ways are servant-leader interns supported in their development as culturally responsive language arts teachers? What are the interns' interpretations of those experiences and how do they inform their understandings about language arts? First, I provide background information about Freedom Schools, culturally responsive teacher preparation, and the research study. Next, I describe the curriculum of the Freedom Schools' national training institute, which focuses primarily on how interns are taught to deliver culturally responsive language arts instruction. This is followed by the interns' perceptions and reflections on how they learn to teach language arts. The article concludes with pedagogical and curricular implications for teacher educators.

## FREEDOM SCHOOLS

The original Freedom School project took place in Mississippi in 1964 and was an important milestone of the Civil Rights Movement. The 1964 Mississippi Freedom Schools were envisioned as a counter-narrative to Mississippi's impoverished education for Black students. The history of the Mississippi Freedom Schools and their significance as a model of schooling for social change has been documented (Payne, 1997; Perlstein, 1990; Rothschild, 1982). Furthermore, connections have been made between the 1964 Freedom Schools' model, pedagogical tenets, and curriculum to current schooling and curriculum reform efforts (Chilcoat & Ligon, 1999; Chilcoat & Ligon, 2001). Since 1991, a new wave of Freedom Schools created by the Children's Defense Fund has reinvigorated and re-imagined a "Freedom Schools movement."

The Children's Defense Fund Freedom Schools are modeled after the 1964 Mississippi Freedom Schools. The CDF Freedom Schools grew out of the Civil Rights Movement and are committed to providing quality educational experiences for all children, particularly children of color. Children's Defense Fund Freedom Schools programs are partnerships between the Children's Defense Fund and

community organizations, churches, colleges, universities, and public and private schools to provide culturally relevant literacy summer programs in communities where those opportunities are limited or nonexistent. Freedom Schools serve children in grades K-12 operating a full day (8 am–3 pm) for five to eight weeks and integrate reading, conflict resolution, and social action in an activity-based curriculum that promotes social, cultural, and historical awareness.

College-aged young adults known as “servant-leader interns” are the teachers in this context. Having background experience in teaching is not a prerequisite for their teaching at Freedom Schools. Nor are they required to be education majors in college or any other teaching-related field. At the national training institute and throughout the Freedom Schools program at their local sites, interns are a part of various training and learning opportunities centered on engaging their students in the Freedom Schools curriculum (Jackson, 2006). The interns come to clearly understand their purpose as teacher-activists and the purpose of using culturally responsive curriculum. In order to understand their purpose, they first learn about the conditions of schooling for the children in which they serve and how more than fifty years after *Brown vs. The Board of Education* schools remain segregated offering unequal educational opportunities for many poor children and children of color.

As practicing teachers in this setting, servant-leader interns are engaged in culturally responsive teaching practice consistent with visions of effective teaching for students of color (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994). Participation in CDF Freedom Schools has yielded increased achievement on standardized reading tests and positive character development for students (Philliber Research Associates, 2008). This article aims to extend the scholarship of preparing culturally responsive language arts teachers by illuminating salient components of the Freedom Schools’ training curriculum through thick description and reflections of the servant-leader interns. Insight into the preparation of Freedom School teachers and their reflections on their learning experiences yield lessons for preservice literacy educators on how to better prepare preservice teachers in traditional teacher education programs for culturally responsive language arts teaching.

## CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE TEACHER PREPARATION

Culturally responsive teaching and pedagogy have been well theorized and documented (Au, 1993; Boutte & Hill, 2006; Gay, 2000; Irvine, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Lipman, 1995). This theory suggests that the cultural mismatch between school and home experienced by many students of color and low-income students is a factor in their academic achievement. Ladson-Billings (1994) describes culturally relevant teaching as:

A pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart

knowledge, skills, and attitudes. These cultural referents are not merely vehicles for bridging or explaining the dominant culture; they are aspects of the curriculum in their own right. (pp. 17–18)

She further asserts that culturally relevant teachers embody particular kinds of knowledge, skills, and dispositions through their (a) conceptions of themselves and others (e.g., teachers help students make connections between their community, national, and global identities versus homogenizing students into one “American” identity); (b) their social relations with students, families, and communities (e.g., teachers encourage students to learn collaboratively and expect students to teach each other and be responsible for each other versus encouraging competitive achievement and isolated, individual learning); and (c) their conceptions of knowledge (e.g., teachers view knowledge as not being static or unchanging but rather as continuously recreated, recycled, and shared versus knowledge passed in only one direction, from teacher to student). Thus, culturally responsive teaching is validating, comprehensive, multidimensional, empowering, transformative, and emancipatory (Gay, 2000; see Table 1).

Despite the fact that over a decade of research has demonstrated that culturally responsive practices improve achievement for students of color, such practices are still relatively few in classrooms (Gay, 2000). Scholars have suggested that teacher preparation programs need to move beyond fragmented and superficial treatment of diversity and increase their commitment to restructuring their programs and faculty composition to reflect the needs of a growing diverse student population (Irvine, 2003; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Conceptual and empirical works have examined curriculum revisioning that puts cultural diversity at the center of teacher preparation and proposes that culturally responsive principles must frame and guide the program (Irvine, 2003; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). However, “articulating the vision is only the first step; weaving the vision throughout the teacher education curriculum and developing the local capacity to implement that curriculum are ongoing and collaborative processes” (Villegas & Lucas, 2002, p. 30). As evidenced in a study conducted by Cross (2003), providing curriculum inclusive of diverse field placements and literature does not necessarily result in concrete understandings for new teachers. Implementing such curriculum has to provide teachers with opportunities that focus on learning and experimenting with effective culturally sensitive and contextualized instructional strategies (Irvine, 2003). There has to be an explicit connection between the desired characteristics of a culturally responsive teacher and the courses and field experiences offered to preservice teachers. It is not enough to sprinkle elements of diversity throughout a program and hope that preservice teachers make the connections for themselves, but rather programs and teacher educators have to create learning opportunities that specifically foster the development of teachers’ conceptions of themselves and others; social relation with students, families, and communities; and conceptions of knowledge.

## Freedom Schools and Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

Freedom Schools have long recognized this need and make culturally responsive pedagogy integral to preparing its servant-leader interns. The Freedom Schools national training institute is intended to be a very formal program with a set of planned learning opportunities for interns centered on preparing interns to be activists as well as teachers in their community. The Freedom Schools program describes itself as being a culturally relevant literacy based program. While this is a given assumption in this article (because my intent for this project was not to evaluate this claim, but rather to understand how interns learned to become culturally relevant pedagogues and were supported in their teaching practice), it is important to note that African American culture is at the center of the program. Like their predecessors, the CDF Freedom Schools serve as a counter-narrative to the deficit-based, inferior educational experience that too many children of color, particularly African American children, receive in our public schools. Through community involvement, intergenerational leadership, and culturally responsive teaching, CDF Freedom Schools are providing a culturally relevant schooling experience for students, parents, communities, and teachers (see Table 2 for examples of experiences).

Becoming activists and learning about their role in this national movement for social justice is a top priority of their training. Key components of the training are centered on inducting the interns into a social justice movement by providing them with an understanding of the sociohistorical and sociopolitical contexts of the Freedom Schools movement as well as establishing high expectations of commitment, service, and leadership (Jackson, 2006). Teaching is a means of activism in this movement. Therefore, central tasks of the training institute also include opportunities that contribute to the practices of learning to teach the Integrated Reading Curriculum.

## THE RESEARCH STUDY

This article emanates from a larger study that examined how program interns participating in a Children's Defense Fund Freedom School learned to teach through their participation in the national Freedom Schools training institute and their local teacher-learning community. This study investigates the process of learning to teach at Freedom Schools as it happened for the participants and how the interns interpreted and gave meaning to their experience. Using ethnographic methods, I employed an interpretive paradigm. In interpretive research, the interest is in social construction of reality as individuals interact in social scenes (Geertz, 1973; Merriam, 1998). The participants in the study are the ones who made meaning of the Freedom Schools' training context and its practices, and it was my objective to understand how they made meaning and what meaning they made regarding

culturally responsive language arts. My main objective was to understand how and in what ways they were supported in their development as culturally responsive teachers.

## Context and Participants

This study was conducted at two locations: the national training institute held in Tennessee and a Freedom School site located in the Southeastern United States. The focus of the study was on six servant-leader interns, a site coordinator, and the national trainers because they were the ones who were consistently involved in the CDF training and local site activities. Servant-leader interns were responsible for teaching the curriculum at Freedom Schools in addition to serving as leaders and facilitators of afternoon activities and other special events. The six interns at the Freedom School site in this study were all African American and included three females (Jaichelle<sup>1</sup>, Kyndall, and Sydney) and three males (Martin, Tim, and Cornel) who ranged in age from 19 to 26. The site coordinator was responsible for managing the daily operations of the site and ensuring that interns have necessary materials and support for the classroom and students. National trainers trained local Children's Defense Fund Freedom Schools staff by providing programmatic and technical support at the ten-day national training institute. Some of the trainers were a group of Freedom Schools consultants and others were Ella Baker Trainers (EBTs). Consultants may have served in other areas of the CDF movement (such as serving on boards and committees) or may have been former interns and site coordinators. Ella Baker Trainers were current or former servant-leader interns selected by the national staff (through an application process) to assist in Freedom Schools training.

## Data Collection and Analysis

In order to understand ways in which the interns were supported to develop into culturally responsive teachers and the meaning the interns made of these experiences, I collected data that included fieldnotes of training sessions and daily debriefings, audio-taped conversations from the daily debriefings, two individual interviews with each intern and the site coordinator, a questionnaire from a national trainer, and national training and site documents and artifacts. The interns were interviewed twice (following the national training institute and again at the end of the six week program), and I asked specific questions about their understanding and thoughts on teaching language arts through the Integrated Reading Curriculum (IRC). All collected data were labeled and organized by date and by activity type.

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<sup>1</sup> Names of all participants are pseudonyms.

Analysis consisted of continuous scrutiny of emergent codes as data were collected, thus providing the closest fit between data and analytic themes. For example, fieldnotes were probed for ways in which the interns were trained and informed about their roles and responsibilities as Freedom School teachers; documents and artifacts collected at the national training were reviewed for goals and objectives of the national training, definitions and stances of social justice, and explicit explanations of the purposes of the training sessions; the questionnaire and the interviews were transcribed and analyzed for various information such as interns', site coordinators', and trainers' perspectives on their perceived roles and responsibilities within the program and their background experiences with children and teaching.

## CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE LANGUAGE ARTS AT FREEDOM SCHOOL

The Integrated Reading Curriculum (IRC) is the crux of the Freedom Schools program. The IRC is designed as a culturally relevant literacy curriculum that stands in stark contrast to the kinds of literature and literacy experiences most African American children historically and currently receive in public schools. As described by the program

The IRC is meant to be an activity-oriented curriculum. It is designed to excite, motivate, stimulate, arouse, expose, inspire, delight, enchant, and rejuvenate! It is not designed to teach the mechanics of reading. The goal set forth in the guide is to help readers and non-readers fall in love with the books: the stories, the characters, the pictures, the ideas, and the values; and to give non-readers an overwhelming desire to read—which is a basic step to doing it. (Children's Defense Fund Freedom Schools Ella Baker Child Policy Training Institute Manual and Action Guide, 2005, p. 30)

The books selected for the IRC include over 80 titles for children grades K-12 in which the majority of texts focus on African American culture. The books portray various aspects of African American culture allowing African American students to have a mirror of and window into social, cultural, and historical awareness with their culture at the center, not as an additive or referent, worthy of serving as curriculum in its own right. This use of African American children's literature honors the significance of a text that

(1) celebrate the strengths of the Black family as a cultural institution and vehicle for survival; (2) bear witness to Black people's determined struggle for freedom, equality, and dignity; (3) nurture the souls of Black children by reflecting back to them, both visually and verbally,

the beauty and competencies that we as adults see in them; (4) situate itself through its language and its content, within African American literary and cultural contexts; and (5) honor the tradition of story as a way of teaching and as a way of knowing. (Bishop, 2007, p. 273)

Over a third of the time that the interns are at the national training institute is devoted to experiencing, learning, and implementing the IRC. Interns learn how to be teachers in Freedom Schools through a program of study that includes interactive symposiums, foundation workshops, and IRC Labs. Since a more complete description of the major components of the IRC as they relate to the CDF Freedom Schools vision has been documented elsewhere (see Clayton-Robinson & Sally, 2001), I will briefly summarize significant elements and key ideas necessary to understanding the interns' experiences with learning to teach the IRC.

The overall theme of the IRC is *I Can and Must Make a Difference*. From this overall theme, weekly subthemes consist of "I Can and Must Make a Difference" in my *Self, Family, Community, Country, and World*. In classrooms of no more than ten students children engage in reading and theme-based hands-on activities for at least two and a half hours each day during the five to eight weeks that their Freedom School is in operation. Each Freedom Schools classroom has a reading circle, work stations for cooperative groups activities, a welcome sign, a posted daily schedule, posted weekly themes, cooperation contract (class expectations), lyrics to the theme song, displayed children's work, displayed books, a daily lesson agenda, and a variety of graphic organizers. At the national training institute, the interns not only learn about creating a classroom environment inclusive of the above elements, they also experience learning *in* such an environment. Interns are trained in model classrooms that encompass all these elements. Furthermore, the interns learn the purpose of each specific component of the Freedom Schools classroom and have the opportunity to create various components for use at the training and back at their local sites.

The daily IRC lessons consist of five major components:

- **Opening Activity:** This component serves as an introduction to the lesson. Its purpose is to motivate the students and stimulate their interest in the book under study
- **Main Activity:** The purpose of the main activity is to engage children in reading and discussing the book under study.
- **Cooperative Group Activities:** Cooperative Group Activities allow students to work in groups at work stations. These activities should be related to the book and/or theme.
- **Conflict Resolution/Social Action Activity:** The conflict resolution and social action activities give students the opportunity to apply decision-making strategies to practical situations in their lives and communities.
- **Closing Activity:** This offers closure to the day's lesson. (Children's Defense Fund Freedom Schools Ella Baker Child Policy Training Institute Manual and Action Guide, 2005, pp. 31–32)

Interns are taught how to plan daily lessons organized around these five components with selected books from the IRC. At the national training institute, interns have the opportunity to learn how to teach the IRC by first living it as learners.

### Learning through living: A scene from the IRC Lab

The sessions in which the interns were trained to deliver the reading curriculum are called IRC Labs. The IRC Labs were facilitated by the Ella Baker trainers and consultants. The IRC Labs were informative and interactive by design. The lab sessions that the interns in this study were involved in also included interns from another Freedom Schools site. So, there were approximately 18 interns in the session including their site coordinators.

The trainer, Holly, began the first IRC Lab session by showing the interns how to use their training manuals and curriculum guides as resources. She introduced and defined the key components of a Freedom Schools classroom and the IRC. During this time interns were free to ask questions. She answered some immediately while others she asked to be put on hold and promised to return to them at another time. Holly stressed the importance of the interns asking questions. She told them that they should encourage their students' question-posing, and so she modeled that for them. As Holly guided them through the contents of the training manual and curriculum guide, she underscored the fact that everything they do in Freedom Schools has a purpose.

Using the book *Joshua's Masai Mask* (Hru, 1993)<sup>2</sup> as the focus of her lesson, she then began modeling the components of the IRC lessons (opening activity, main activity, etc.) putting the interns in the position of learners. To begin her lesson, Holly asked each intern to complete the following sentence: "I am special because...". As the interns shared their responses she recorded them on chart paper. After each intern had shared something special about themselves, Holly asked them how they shared their unique qualities with others. A brief discussion ensued about whether or not everyone *should* share their unique qualities with others. Some interns stated that they had not shared their unique qualities with others because they had never been encouraged to do so and were not sure how they would begin. Other interns responded by assuring them that through their work as Freedom School teachers they would have the opportunity to do so and to also encourage their students to do the same. Holly praised the interns for their insight and dialogue. She asked interns how they felt about sharing personal information with the group. Interns said they felt vulnerable, like they may be judged, comfortable after seeing that others were accepted and comfortable because their peers understood them.

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<sup>2</sup> Fearing that his classmates will ridicule his playing the kalimba (an African musical instrument) in the school talent show, Joshua uses a magical Masai mask to transform himself into different people he thinks are more interesting, before realizing that his own identity is one of value.

Holly then told them how important it is for them to listen and encourage one another during the training. She said that by doing this in the IRC Lab, they would be better positioned to assist their students to listen and encourage each other.

This was the beginning of the pattern for the remaining IRC Lab sessions. Holly would model a component for the interns, putting them in the position of learner and allowing them to live the IRC; debrief the experience; and then they would divide up into groups and model-back that same component to everyone using different books from the curriculum. The interns experienced each component of the IRC lesson and then saw it modeled at least five times from each small group. As the interns modeled the components of the lesson, Holly and the site coordinators were observing and taking notes on their teaching. After a group had finished modeling, Holly, the site coordinators, and other interns would provide immediate feedback to the group members.

The IRC is more than a curriculum guide; it also includes guidance on the classroom environment, on how to realize high expectations for teaching for social justice in culturally responsive ways, on making connections with young people, and on building relationships. The IRC is not just an integration of content or subject matter, but an integration of all that it means to be a literate individual. The IRC was not simply modeled *for* the interns, but rather, it was *through* the modeling that they had the opportunity to experience culturally responsive language arts teaching to live it. Through their engagement as learners experiencing the IRC they were developing their conceptions of themselves and others; their social relations with each other learning about one another's families and communities; and their conceptions of knowledge. They lived culturally responsive pedagogy by becoming a community of learners responsible for each other's learning in the training sessions. Knowledge was not static and passed in one direction from the trainer to the interns. They were not allowed to be passive receivers of knowledge. They had to participate in their learning and collaboratively teach other. Furthermore, by living the IRC interns were able to make connections between the books and their multiple identities. As they read the books, they considered who they were as individuals and their relationships with others, their families, their communities, and the world. Hence, by living the IRC, the interns were then better positioned to, in turn, offer the same kind of opportunity to the children they would teach.

## REFLECTIONS ON LEARNING AND LIVING THE IRC

As I collected and analyzed data, it became evident that the interns' thinking and reflection about their teaching, particularly about teaching language arts, changed over the course of their experiences with Freedom School. As previously noted, the interns had to engage in the IRC in order to learn how to teach it. In what follows, I provide a glimpse of their perceptions about participation in this program

and about what these mean for teacher education. While some of the interns had prior experiences working with children, all six of the interns indicated that this was their first time teaching language arts and they felt as though their perceptions of language arts and the teaching of language arts had either changed or been expanded as a result of working in the Freedom Schools program. Three themes resonated from the interns' interview responses: purpose, perspective, and pedagogy and curriculum.

### Purpose: Developing Conceptions of Themselves and Others

The ways in which the interns were supported at the national training institute (living the model) gave them insights into their past and present motivations and purpose for their work as Freedom School teachers. For example, when responding to a question on what he learned about teaching language arts from the national training institute, Martin noted

I think it [national training] helped me more to understand why I was teaching. And it helped me to check my motivation for teaching... I think a willingness to teach is something that national training equips you with. Because it's almost like a shake-down process. I would imagine that a lot of the interns who were just in it for a paycheck probably would quit after national training.... At national training [I] learned that you have to have the same paradigm for yourself that you're trying to pass on to the kids.

In her response to the same question, Kyndall asserted

What I do know is that reading is important... I used to always think that books were so boring, but I guess now from being at national training, and also outside of training [and] just to note from just being older and more mature now... the books that we're reading now are like so interesting from when I was little at that age. I guess national training kind of helped me see [that]... I wish I had an experience [as a child] that did this.

Both Martin and Kyndall's responses highlight how the interns' experiences at the national training institute really helped them to better understand their purpose as teachers at Freedom School. By being put into a learning situation that held explicit goals for improving the educational opportunities and outcomes for children of color, interns had the opportunity to realize the importance of their role as teachers and the importance of the language arts in their own lives and the lives of their students.

As part of developing conceptions of self and others, Ladson-Billings (1994) contends that "teachers with culturally relevant practices see themselves as part of

the community, see teaching as giving back to the community, and encourage their students to do the same” (p. 38). As evidenced in the Freedom School interns’ reflections, being a part of the community also entails having a keen sense of purpose in regards to their work with children of color. Through living the IRC as a learner, the interns realized that in order to teach in culturally responsive ways, they were going to have to be culturally responsive people in their every day lives. In other words, they had to have the same paradigm for themselves that they were trying to pass on to the children. Through their experiences at national training, the interns had opportunities to develop better understandings of who they were—past and present.

### Perspective: Developing Social Relations

In the interviews, interns spoke about how they had learned the importance of developing relationships with their students and establishing a human connection with them. Cornel and Tim both note that learning about what their students needed emotionally helped them develop better relationships with them.

Cornel: I’m very good at communicating with children on a spiritual level and a more social level. And I even know how to get them to do their work... it’s been very effective for me. I already had a sense of trying to improve the person, the self... I knew there was a need for a child to feel needed, to feel a part of something, but I never really understood how deeply these children are not being told certain things... They’re not being hugged. They’re not being told “you can do it”.

Tim: I’ve learned that as you teach more, you realize what things to let go and how to handle situations better like when kids start crying. Sometimes you need to go talk to them and sometimes you just need to let them be by themselves. And it’s different with each situation, and you get better.

Social relations are just as important to culturally responsive teaching as curriculum and teaching strategies. Culturally responsive teachers demonstrate a connectedness with each of their students. “In other words, teachers who really care about students honor their humanity, hold them in high esteem, expect high performance from them, and use strategies to fulfill their expectations” (Gay, 2000, p. 46).

### Pedagogy and Curriculum: Developing Conceptions of Knowledge

Through their learning opportunities and experiences at the national training institute and in their classrooms, interns learned to teach the IRC as well as the content of what they were expected to teach. As the interns developed deeper understandings about themselves and the importance of building social relations with their students, their perspectives about language arts were also changing.

Sydney reported that she learned that language arts instruction goes beyond the book. She said that teaching language arts and literacy is about

...making the readings come to life. Making everything relevant to the child so they understand that books go to so many different places beyond the classroom. Like every book has to do with different aspects of life whether they're fiction or not. Overall you really just learn that language arts, and literacy, and teaching reading, and going through the readings is pretty much life lessons that you're preparing the child for.

Jaichelle talked deeply about how language arts was one of her favorite subjects in school and after going through the national training institute she had a new perspective on language arts and the teaching of language arts. In an interview, Jaichelle reflected on how prior to the national training institute she had viewed language arts as primarily as an individual activity that consisted mainly of reading.

Like I said, prior to this experience, coming in, Language Arts was one of my favorite subjects in elementary school. So for me it was just reading. I loved to read. My mother was a teacher. So, I didn't have an issue with reading a story and answering twelve questions about it or reading a book and doing a book report. Like that was never a problem for me. But I realize now, once again, not all students learn like me. And I could have even had the possibility of learning more and having a better appreciation for literacy and for the art of language arts rather than just reading. And I think that's kind of what this whole thing is about. It's not just reading... So, just all of that were things that I was never taught, but I'm beginning to think outside the box when it comes to language arts and literacy rather than just what I was taught with the reading.

Martin also reflected how his conception of language arts had broadened as a result of participation in the Freedom Schools program:

I also think it's good that Freedom School has the basic texts and images. Like I'm looking at this book right now, *Getting Through Thursday*- Black people. It's nice to see ideas and themes presented in a way that you can relate to. And characters you can identify with. I think that helps out the learning process. I think that's what the majority structure does. Most of the demographic in this country is White, for lack of better words. And so the curriculum reflects the heroes and the achievements and the breakthroughs and the inventions that they've done. Which is good and well. I think a race of people should do that. But we [African Americans] also have a right to do

that as well. And I think that's what Freedom Schools does. I don't know how that fits with multiculturalism. But I think that pulling different works into the canon helps out a lot. So I think that certain adjustment to what *is* good literature could really expand the possibilities of what's happening and help kids to want to learn more.

The interns' reflections about the pedagogy and curriculum of language arts teaching at Freedom Schools underscore the salience and complexity of culturally responsive pedagogy in regards to developing conceptions of knowledge for new teachers. As noted in their responses, they recognized that the IRC curriculum was powerful in and of itself, and they were also working hard to figure out how to best implement the curriculum in ways that would offer better learning opportunities and achievement outcomes for their students. Simultaneously, they too were learning from the curriculum. They were developing new conceptions of knowledge regarding language arts.

The interns' experiences with the Freedom Schools program, from the national training institute through teaching at their local site, led to expanded notions of the language arts. They were constantly trying to make sense of their previous understandings of language arts with what they were learning and experiencing in the Freedom Schools program. The interns were excited and amazed at their new understandings of language arts and its potential to impact and change lives. The snapshots of their expanded notions of language arts illuminated here are indications of their developmental process of becoming culturally responsive language arts teachers. Understanding their purpose and the purpose of the IRC, figuring out how to do different things, and expanding their conceptions of language arts knowledge were all parts of their process of developing knowledge, skills, and dispositions in alignment with culturally responsive teaching.

## IN CONCLUSION: LESSONS FOR TEACHER PREPARATION

In this article, I provided a brief description of some of the elements of the program of study at the national training institute designed to prepare the interns for teaching language arts at Freedom School and how these were informing their purpose, perspectives, and notions of pedagogy and curriculum. Moreover, I presented the perspectives of the interns through their own words as to how they were making sense of their experiences as language arts teachers at Freedom School. The interns experienced a kind of teacher preparation that focused on developing them as culturally responsive teachers. None of the interns from the Freedom School site in the study were education majors. Yet, in one week the servant-leader interns were trained to teach a powerful culturally relevant curriculum designed to promote social, cultural, and historical awareness. Even though all of the interns at this site were African American, their ethnicity alone doesn't provide for them a culturally

**TABLE 1.** Characteristics of Culturally Responsive Teaching

- 
- Validating
    - It teaches to and through the strengths of students. It is culturally validating and affirming.
    - It incorporates multicultural information, resources, and materials in all subjects and skills.
  - Comprehensive
    - Culturally responsive teachers teach the whole child.
    - Students are held accountable for each other's learning as well as their own.
  - Multidimensional
    - It encompasses curriculum content, learning content, classroom climate, student-teacher relationships, instructional techniques, and performance assessments.
    - Students are held accountable for knowing, thinking, questioning, analyzing, feeling, reflecting, sharing, and acting.
  - Empowering
    - It enables students to be better human beings and more successful learners.
    - Empowerment translates into academic competence, personal confidence, courage, and the will to act.
  - Transformative
    - It is very explicit about respecting cultures and experiences of historically marginalized US minorities, and it uses these as worthwhile resources for teaching and learning.
    - Academic success is a non-negotiable mandate for all students and an accessible goal. It promotes the idea, and develops skills for practicing it, that students are obligated to be productive members of and render service to their respective ethnic communities as well as to the national society.
  - Emancipatory
    - It releases the intellect of students of color from the constraining manacles of mainstream canons of knowledge and ways of knowing. It helps students realize that no single version of "truth" is total and permanent. Nor should it be allowed to exist uncontested.
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(Gay, 2000)

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responsive pedagogy. Many of them recognized that they did not have this kind of experience in their K-12 schooling, so they were learning right alongside the children. The preparation of the interns to be culturally responsive teachers provided opportunities that allowed for the cultivation of knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to use language arts as a transformative vehicle for social, cultural, and historical awareness as well as social action.

In considering the lessons offered by Freedom Schools for university-based teacher preparation I suggest that teacher educators ask the following questions of our programs and our practices: Do our preservice teachers understand their purpose as teachers in the lives of children of color? Do they understand the critical need for children of color to learn through culturally responsive curricula? Do we provide opportunities for them to listen, encourage, and learn from each other in our courses? Do we challenge their conceptions of knowledge?

The Freedom School program's model of living and experiencing a culturally relevant curriculum coupled with reflection and action (teaching culturally relevant literacy curriculum) offer insights into ways that preservice teacher education programs may prepare prospective teachers to effectively teach children of color. To ensure better outcomes for children of color in the area of language arts, teacher education programs must develop learning opportunities for preservice teachers to experience and live culturally responsive pedagogy and curriculum, so that they in

**TABLE 2.** Aspects of Culturally Responsive Schooling at CDF Freedom Schools

<b>Validating</b>	The Freedom Schools curriculum promotes social, cultural, and historical awareness. Each day students participate in Harambee; a time of informal sharing when children and staff come together to celebrate themselves and each other. The Integrated Reading Curriculum consists of over 80 titles and offers an outstanding collection of books reflecting a wide variety of experiences, cultures, and characters primarily focused on African American culture.
<b>Comprehensive</b>	Freedom Schools exhibit the mission of the Children's Defense Fund which is to ensure every child a healthy start ( <i>Freedom Schools provide meals to children</i> ), head start ( <i>curriculum promotes literacy skills</i> ), fair start ( <i>all participants engage in social action for their community</i> ), safe start ( <i>local site is a safe haven for children</i> ), moral start ( <i>students have access to positive role models and mentors</i> ) in life and the successful passage into adulthood with the help of caring families and communities ( <i>Freedom Schools train, nurture, link, mobilize, and empower a new generation of servant-leaders to work on behalf of children</i> ).
<b>Multidimensional</b>	Classrooms (the physical environment and management techniques) are designed to be reflective of students' cultures and interests as well as promoting cooperative learning. Servant-leaders are committed to excellence and use creative teaching strategies to engage children in ethical thinking and conflict resolution.
<b>Empowering</b>	A vital component of the CDF Freedom Schools program is regular parent participation. All parents are expected to serve in some capacity at the program site (in the classroom, on field trips, during afternoon activities, etc.). Parents also attend weekly workshops, giving them the opportunity to share and receive valuable information on child care, health care, advocacy, promoting healthy families, financial management, employment, stress reduction, home ownership, entrepreneurship, and other relevant topics.
<b>Transformative</b>	The overarching theme of the curriculum is <i>I Can and Must Make a Difference</i> with subthemes of "I Can and Must Make a Difference in My: Self, Family, Community, Country, and World." Local programs are active in the Children's Defense Fund social justice movement through social action in their community that includes information dissemination and building partnerships with community organizations that support their efforts on behalf of children and families.
<b>Emancipatory</b>	At Freedom Schools children of color have access to quality educational experiences that provide opportunity for them to develop critical thinking and academic skills through the examination of their own lives and the lives of others. They are encouraged to take responsibility and action for social change.

turn can offer such opportunities to their students. When we consider that many of our preservice teachers have not experienced culturally responsive teaching in their own K-12 education, then it seems only logical and imperative that we offer such experiences to them. This is how the Freedom Schools model cultivates and nurtures the interns as culturally responsive language arts teachers. They position the interns as learners of the actual curriculum they will teach. As teacher educators, we should not simply model culturally responsive teaching where our preservice teachers are spectators of our practice, but rather positions them as learners where they are living the experience.

As Dyson (1993) notes, in the teaching of literacy, there is possibility for teachers to allow children and the experiences we have while teaching children to "compose ourselves" and expand our own notions:

For, in answering the children, we are also composing ourselves. In their plurality, in their diversity, our children offer us the opportunity

to widen our own worldview, to see aspects of experience that might otherwise remain invisible to us, to understand better ourselves as situated in a complex world of multiple perspectives. (p. 230)

When teacher educators provide preservice teachers with opportunities to expand their notions, the preservice teachers can, in turn, offer such opportunities to their students.

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