The Dialogue that Might be Silencing

By Janine Remillard

This case focuses on issues of race and culture in mathematics education reform. Set in the author’s first grade classroom, the case raises questions about students’ cultural differences in a discussion-intensive mathematics class. While most of the students were from working-class families, three were African American students bussed to the school from the inner city. Even though the other students seemed to gradually appropriate the tools that allowed them to participate in class discussions, the three inner-city students struggled. The author’s concerns for these three students were further heightened when she read “The Silenced Dialogue” by Lisa Delpit1 in a graduate course. Delpit’s claim that teachers must explicitly teach African American children the cultural tools for participating in mainstream society led her to question the appropriateness of her social constructivist-oriented goals for her students.

Janine looked up from the pages of the article she had just finished and out the window at the quiet, neighborhood street. It was a sunny, mid-fall afternoon. Brilliant red and orange leaves dropped to the ground from the arms of the giant oak tree that shaded her yard. Janine did not see the leaves; instead she saw the faces of Jackson, LaTisha, and Dante, three students in her first grade class. Her mind raced between the words she had just read, her students, and her goals as a math teacher, as she wondered whether she was making a tragic mistake in her teaching.

Although math was the only subject she taught to this class of first graders, her teaching frequently occupied her thoughts. Even though she had given up full-time teaching to become a graduate student in mathematics education, she wanted to maintain contact with children and schools. Furthermore, her graduate studies had prompted her to consider new goals and approaches for teaching math and she believed it was important to try them out in an classroom. So she arranged to take daily responsibility for math in a first grade classroom in a local public school.

The school was situated in a working-class neighborhood in a city dominated by manufacturing plants. Only a third of the students, however, came from the immediate neighborhood. Because the school district had instituted a bussing program in order to desegregate the schools, about a third of the students rode busses to school from a low-income, inner-city neighborhood. These students were predominately African American. Another third of the students lived in a trailer park a few miles from the school. The students in the neighborhood and those from the trailer park were mostly Caucasian and came from working class families.

In her dual role as math teacher and graduate student of mathematics education, Janine was very deliberate in her choices. She wanted to establish a community of learners in which the students’ knowledge really counted. She hoped that her students could develop what she called “authority for knowing,” that is, she did not want them to look to her for right answers. Rather, she wanted them to think their answers through themselves and with others to decide whether they made sense. Thus, she knew it was important to establish particular routines in the class for how she and her students talked to one another and the roles that each played. For example, she did not want to be the one asking all the questions. If she gave the students a problem to work on that had many possible solutions, and two students were sharing their solutions with the class, it was her goal that classmates would ask them questions about their solution. Perhaps they would even disagree or suggest an alternative way to look at it. Her role,

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as she saw it, was to facilitate discussion by posing problems and asking questions that continued to push the class in mathematically productive directions.

Janine knew that establishing these norms in the class was likely to involve a lengthy and careful process. She was certain that she could not just "tell" these six year olds the new norms and have them comply. Although they were relatively inexperienced school-goers, they already had firm ideas about what math should be like and how teachers and students should interact, that conflicted with her ideas. Her plan was to cultivate a collaborative, sense-making environment by subtly communicating the message that doing math was a group process and she did not have all the answers. For example, after a student shared a solution to a problem, Janine planned to ask the class if anyone had comments, or who agreed, who disagreed, and who was not sure. She planned to get other children to explain why they agreed or disagreed and to ask the question "why" a lot.

She started the year by giving the students a fairly open-ended problem to work on in their notebooks each day. While the students worked either alone or in pairs, Janine walked around the room, interacting with them about the problem. After giving them a substantial amount of time to work, she led a whole-class discussion, during which she called on students to share their solutions. She intentionally called on students who she knew from observing their work had different solutions. While she wanted her students to arrive at an answer that was defensible and accurate, her main purpose was to use these discussions to help them learn to reason for themselves.

Although it was slow going, these norms did gradually become part of the class culture during math. Some students readily embraced them. Anxious to contribute, these students became good at providing reasons for their answers and scrutinizing the approaches of others. Other students were reluctant for the first few months. It seemed to Janine that they understood the norms, but they—mostly girls—were afraid of being wrong, so they only raised their hands when they were as close to certain as they could be. Much to her delight, even these students began to participate more consistently in the class discussions as the weeks wore on. It seemed that she could almost watch the confidence of the students grow as they ventured into the class discussions and met some success.

Overall, Janine was impressed with how seriously this group of six year olds took their responsibilities as members of the class and with how sophisticated their conversation became. She was not surprised that a few students, whose behavior was inconsistent during the class, tended to float in and out of the discussions, being highly engaged one day and crawling on the floor or scribbling in their journals the next. She also had two students who wanted to be in control of the conversation all the time. With these students, she made efforts to help them participate in the discussions productively, sometimes helping a student prepare a solution to present to the others, other times explicitly reminding a student that "an important part of doing math in this class is figuring out whether other people's solutions make sense." She found that many problems with student behavior could be addressed by taking the students and their ideas very seriously, as they, in turn, seemed to take themselves and their work seriously. She viewed these problems as a matter of helping the students learn new classroom norms.

About eight weeks into the school year, Janine began to notice that three students were not picking up on the class norms as well as the others. They seemed to be confronted by barriers that she did not understand. They paid attention during class, worked hard on individual tasks, but could not seem to figure out how to contribute to the discussions. All three frequently raised their hands in response to Janine's questions or invitations to respond to other students, but when she called on them they sat silently. It was as if they could not find the words to explain things that Janine thought they understood from having worked with them one-on-one. They had the most trouble
responding to "why" questions. Even when they could give an answer or say that they disagreed with someone else's answer, they could not say why.

These three students perplexed Janine. She believed that they were as capable as other students in the class. But they did not seem to be catching on to how to participate in the mathematical conversations. Their lack of progress concerned Janine because she believed that communicating one's ideas was an important mathematical ability that they needed to develop. Furthermore, the mathematical conversations the class had were a primary vehicle for the students' mathematical learning. The more they were part of the conversation, the greater number of opportunities they had to learn. What made Janine even more uneasy was that these three students—Jackson, LaTisha, and Dante—were all African American children who were bussed to the school from the inner city.

Janine had been trying to figure out new ways to help these three students for a few weeks, but now, as she gazed outside, she was struggling in her mind to justify her efforts to Lisa Delpit, the author of the article she had just finished. In the article, *The Silenced Dialogue: Power and Pedagogy in Educating Other People's Children*, Delpit suggested that progressive pedagogical approaches can be disabling to African American students. She contrasted teaching approaches that are very directive and behavioral to those in which the teacher's control is less explicit and the children are given more intellectual autonomy. She acknowledged that many "White" educators saw the latter, "progressive" approaches as ways to empower students as thinkers and learners. However, Delpit was concerned that such approaches tended to leave "Black" children even further out of the picture because they required patterns of interaction that were unfamiliar to them. She referred to these patterns of interaction as a language of "the culture of power." They included ways of communicating shared by the dominant culture that most White, middle class children learn in their homes but most lower class, Black children do not. As Delpit put it, "adherents of process approaches to writing create situations in which students ultimately find themselves held accountable for knowing a set of rules about which no one has ever directly informed them" (Delpit, 1988, p. 287). Reading these words made Janine stop short. She saw the faces of Jackson, LaTisha, and Dante, hands raised, but not knowing what to say.

As she looked out the window, Janine began to question her own pedagogical stance. Was she one of those liberal educators Delpit's argument implicated? Looking back down at the page she reread: "Many liberal educators hold that the primary goal for education is for children to become autonomous, to develop fully who they are in the classroom setting without having arbitrary, outside standards forced upon them." This description seemed to fit perfectly with what she was working hard to do in her class. What made her question these goals was Delpit's claim that this was not enough for children of color. Parents of these children, the article stressed, "want to ensure that the school provides their children with discourse patterns, interactional styles, and spoken and written language codes that will allow them success in the larger society" (p. 285) and it is the responsibility of the teacher to explicitly teach these to students who don't learn them at home. Janine fully agreed with the idea that she needed to help her students learn how to participate in the culture of power. In fact, her aim in fostering mathematical discussion was to help all of her students learn to think and develop ways of communicating about their ideas. What made her uncomfortable was that Delpit seemed to be saying that she needed to help African American students develop these abilities through direct instruction.

The idea of directly telling students how to act or what they needed to do made Janine uncomfortable because it seemed opposite to what she believed about learning. She was convinced that students learned through using prior knowledge and experience to make meaning of new experiences. It seemed to her that students would make much more meanings of ways to participate in conversation through taking part in them than they would through being told how.
But, what about her three African American students? They did not seem to be learning these skills through doing. Janine began to wonder whether the learning theory that guided her teaching was culturally grounded. Did it only apply to white middle class people? Although she did not explicitly address theories of learning, Delpit had something to say about culture and the role of the teacher. Delpit provided several examples from research and her own experience that indicated that Black children learn in their homes to look to teachers as authorities and are much more accustomed to receiving direct instructions from authority figures. She contrasted this to the "veiled" commands used in middle-class, White cultures. We often ask a child, "Would you like to sit down now?" when our intent is to communicate to the child to sit down. Children in this culture know how this language works. But African American children who are not part of this culture generally do not. Reading this prompted Janine to wonder whether these three students did not have the cultural tools to make sense of how or what she was asking them to learn. Perhaps these students did not have the interpretive tools they needed?

Janine took a deep breadth and sighed out loud. Once again, her eyes dropped down to the page. After reading and rereading this article, she was convinced that she needed to do something differently. But what? Did Delpit have a valid argument? Should she change her pedagogical approach for the entire class? If so, in what ways and to what extent? Or should she provide Jackson, LaTisha, and Dante with some form of direct instruction on these cultural norms? If so, when and how? How would doing so impact the community she was trying to nurture? Were there other students that she had not noticed who may have been facing similar struggles? Janine felt like she had a new perspective on her teaching and her students, but no answers.