This chapter outlines my reflection and self-discovery about the ills of my classroom management during my early years in the profession as an inner-city teacher in the United States. The chapter looks specifically at Lisa Delpit’s (1995) theoretical work on the culture of power and silenced dialogue, and how Delpit’s work assisted in bridging the missing gaps in my student interactions and pedagogical practice. Moreover, the chapter discusses becoming aware of my own culture of power, while experiencing cultural miscommunications with one student named Raheem. The narrative is encapsulated by an experience ten years later with an in-service teacher experiencing the same issues as I once did in the classroom; while also reflecting on the globalization and how teacher education students will experience more cultural differences in the classroom than ever before.

Keywords: teacher narrative; teacher reflection; cultural reflexivity; silenced dialogue, culture of power in teaching.

1. Introduction

Ah. Oh. Don’t do that! Oh boy! This is all I can think to myself as I frantically pat my pockets for tissues to no avail. I am sitting in a small room in an inner city high school with my student teacher, Claresha (all names are pseudonyms), who spontaneously starts to cry.

She pauses slightly before a high-pitched sob leaves her throat. As she wipes her eyes with the back of her hand, she manages to say, “Dr. Mawhinney, Dante is really a problem child. He just doesn’t respond to anything I tell him. I’m so frustrated!”

It is hard for me to look at her cry, as I see so much of myself in Claresha when I was a novice teacher. As I continue to avert my eyes from Claresha and I am now checking my purse for tissues, I reflect on what I just witnessed in Claresha’s classroom. Quite simply,
Claresha has been experiencing a major cultural clash with Dante that is being interpreted as disruptive behavior. I know this from experience, as it was the same mistake I made my second year of teaching with my ninth grader, Raheem.

“You’ve got to be kidding me!” This was the immediate thought that went through my head as I saw my student Raheem sitting quietly in Ms. Williams’ class. Ms. Williams’ ninth grade science classroom was adjoined to my ninth grade English classroom. As I was in my classroom grading papers on my prep period, Ms. Williams opened our adjoining door and exclaimed, “Lynnette, I can’t hold it any more. I really have to go to the bathroom! Can you watch my students real quick?”

“Sure,” I stated as I put down my pen and walk toward her classroom. As I stood in the doorway, I saw Raheem working diligently on his work. His 5’10 frame hunkered over his worksheet with his eyes squinting with great concentration as he was carefully writing out his answers. The class was so quiet and hard at work that it was almost an eerie feeling of silence.

I was so shocked by Raheem’s meticulousness. I stood there, my arms crossed angrily over my curvy body, as questions started to flood my head: Why does Raheem listen to Ms. Williams but not me? What is wrong with him? The logical conclusion, I thought, was that he doesn’t like me. He must have problems in English but not in Science.

Raheem and I had many clashes in the classroom over the school year. This was my second year teaching, my first year in the School District of Philadelphia. I am a bi-racial woman (African-American and Caucasian) that was raised in a white, lower middle-class rural home. I always wanted to teach in the inner city with students that looked like myself, and my new job in Philadelphia was my opportunity to fulfill this vision. My vision immediately turned into frustration because Raheem was the student that I struggled with on a daily basis. This story of ongoing struggle between Raheem and I is a classic case in many urban classrooms. As the teacher, I blamed Raheem for all the struggles we had. It was not until more than half way through the school year that I discovered I was the one at fault.

This chapter discusses the journey of how educational research helped to inform my pedagogy and work with the classroom management struggle I had with Raheem. Specifically, the chapter overviews how Lisa Delpit’s work (1995) helped me to reflect and revolutionize my pedagogy and interactions with students.
2.1. The Beginning of My Journey

It was the second day of the school year. This is the day when everyone’s personality starts to come forth. Raheem walked through the door with his usual attire. The students had to wear white-colored shirts, navy blue pants, and a navy blue tie. Raheem always wore a white shirt two sizes too big tucked haphazardly into his saggy Dickies brand navy blue pants. The outfit was accessorized with a large belt that hung around his buttocks than his waist, with a loosely made tie around his cocoa-brown neck. A slightly overweight boy for 5’10, he always looked frumpy in his oversized attire.

Raheem immediately walked in and squeezed himself into a desk in the back of my tiny, closet-like classroom. Instantly, Raheem placed his backpack on the floor, removed a pencil and journal, and placed them on his desk. He proceeded to sit quietly as I explained today’s task. “Alright, we have a lot to do today. We are going to start off by doing a writing sample so I can see your writing style. There is a writing prompt on the board, and I would like you to write two or three paragraphs responding to the prompt.”

Almost like a synchronized dance routine, everyone cracked open their newly bought journals for the school year, picked up their pencils, and began to write. That is, everyone except Raheem. I assumed he was still processing the writing prompt. After two minutes, Raheem was just sitting at his desk quietly starring out of the only tiny window in my classroom. Assuming that the view of the abandoned brick building across the street was not of that much interest, I went quietly over to Raheem’s desk. I leaned over facing Raheem, as my long curls flopped into my face. I whispered, “Can you get started with your journal?”

He replied, “I don’t really feel like it.” My first thought was that Raheem was very defiant. I never had a student react like that after, what I thought, was a directive.

“I really need you to get started on this work.” Raheem just looked at me, slowly picked up this pencil, and began to write the only two sentences he provided me in this writing prompt. This was the first time Raheem and I interacted. We would have many more interactions like that over the course of the school year, but they would start to become more escalated over time.

Raheem was the student I would constantly think about after school hours. I did not understand why he was so insubordinate. Why did he not listen to me? I knew that it was a problem when other students acknowledged Raheem’s apparent ill-behavior toward me two months into the school year. During lunch, some of my students would come up to eat in my classroom. At one of the lunches, I sat at my desk grading. Sara, Chris, and Shawna sat near
the back of the classroom in the desks with their “freebee” lunches (free lunches provided by the school district) of a thick, congealed chicken noodle soup. Often times the students came to my classroom to eat lunch and talk amongst themselves outside of the awkward social element of the cafeteria. Also, it would give me an opportunity to get to know my students better. Randomly, Shawna broke my concentration while I was grading and randomly stated “Ms. Mawhinney, Raheem only acts up in your class and Mr. Shan’s. He don’t act like that wit’ the otha teachers. I don’t get it.”

Chris added, “He needs to get his mind right and stop actin’ so Joe (slang term meaning “stupid” or “ignorant”)!” Shawna prompted this conversation, which made it evident that the students were sensing my level of frustration with Raheem. Shawna’s words solidified my thoughts but made me all the more upset. First, I didn’t know that Mr. Shan was having similar problems with Raheem as myself, but why were we the only teachers struggling with Raheem. I then started to personalize this new, found information. Why does Raheem give me a hard time and not the other three teachers? What is Raheem’s issue with me? Why does Raheem hate me so much?

About a month after this enlightening conversation, the interactions between Raheem and I escalated to the point that I would often talk to his mother on the phone. As an elementary teacher in Philadelphia herself, Ms. Jones was often pleasant and understanding of my perspective of Raheem’s defiance. Often times, our conversations would end with, “I’m gonna talk with him and make sure he gets his work done. I have NO tolerance for his behavior.” This was often followed by apologies of “I don’t understand this boy. I didn’t raise him like this,” or promises of “Ms. Mawhinney, this will NOT happen again!” The next day, Raheem and I would fall back into our normal routine of: teacher wants, student doesn’t want, teacher and student both get upset.

Four months into the school year, after no progress from Raheem, I asked Ms. Jones to come in for a conference with Raheem, herself, and me. In the conference, she stressed how upset she was with Raheem’s behavior, but she was also perplexed. Ms. Jones said to me, “I don’t understand why he is acting like this. If I tell Raheem to do something, he does it. You just have to tell him what you want, and he will do it. Otherwise, you can call me and I will handle the problem.” Little did I know at the time that Ms. Jones’ advice about being direct was pinnacle in my journey in recognizing my errors with classroom management. The answer would be solidified for me with my discovery of Lisa Delpit’s work two-months after my conversation with Ms. Jones.
2.2. It’s Not You, It’s Me

At night, once a week, I would attend classes toward my Masters degree in Urban Education. While teaching Raheem, I was taking a course that introduced the graduate students to important pieces of literature in urban education. One night the professor assigned the chapter called “The Silenced Dialogue” from Lisa Delpit’s book entitled *Other People’s Children* (1995). The silenced dialogue refers to Delpit’s discussion about the majority (middle and upper class) ways of speaking, and its cultural and communicative clash with the working class.

This was the start to the spring semester, and this was the first reading selection we were presented in the class. It was a cold, Saturday evening in January when I decided to crawl into bed and start reading the assignment due next week. I got to a point in the chapter where Delpit (1995: 34) explains,

> Working-class mothers use more directives to their children than do middle- and upper-class parents. Middle-class parents are likely to give the directive to a child to take his bath as, “Isn’t it time for your bath?” Even though the utterance is couched as a question, both child and adult understand it as a directive . . . By contrast, a black mother, in whose house I was recently a guest, said to her eight-year-old son, “Boy, get your rusty behind in that bathtub” (Delpit 1995: 34).

It was in this paragraph that I started to recognize myself. Raised in a lower middle-class white home and community, I often approached and interacted with the students in the same way my parents interacted with me. Every directive in my home was phrased in a soft-spoken manner as a question – what Delpit calls “the silenced dialogue.” Unaware, I transferred these same rules to my classroom of African-American working-class students.

It was in this paragraph that I started to question my approach to the students in that my “silenced dialogue” may negatively impact my interactions with the students. This is exactly why, as Delpit (1995) discusses, the previous research has shown that white and black working-class students have misinterpretations and misunderstandings since there is not clarity of the unstated rules within the silenced dialogue. This silenced dialogue is found in the “culture of power,” as the middle and upper-class interactions are generated from their positionality as the majority in the United States.

This reading all started to bring awareness to my approach at classroom management. I had many hidden rules in my dialogue, which pushed against what students like Raheem were used to. Mr. Shan, a white, middle-aged Math teacher, and I were both asking Raheem
questions. All of the other teachers Raheem encountered were African-American from working-class backgrounds. As I reflected, I realized they all used directives when they spoke to the students, which is why they had more success than Mr. Shan and me. I often saw the science teacher, Ms. Williams, say to students when they were unfocused, “Get to work,” and they would immediately get back on task. On the contrary, I would say, “Don’t you think you should be doing your work?” Sometimes students would get back on task, but sometimes they did not change their stance.

Moreover, a zenith moment in the reading was when Delpit’s (1995: 34) work further explains that the silenced dialogue are “those veiled commands, nonetheless, representing true power, and with true consequences for disobedience. If veiled commands are ignored, the child will be labeled a behavior problem and possibly officially classified as behavior disordered.” Instantaneously, I reached over to my nightstand to grab a tissue. Tears started to well up in my eyes the more I started to recognize my mistakes. All of this time I thought that Raheem was purposefully trying to be defiant toward me. I realized that Raheem was interpreting my question just as that, a question. Meanwhile, I was operating under different terms with the “culture of power.” Delpit (1995: 36) explains that often times, “the teacher may not view the problem as residing in herself but in the student.” A wave of guilt rushed over me upon realizing that I often pointed the finger at Raheem and not on myself. Often in my pedagogy, I have contemplated what I need to improve and constantly try to be self-reflective. I never even contemplated my faults in the situation with Raheem. From the beginning, I automatically blamed him. Quite simply, it was never Raheem’s fault, but it was my fault for our flawed interactions.

To make matters worse, since I believed Raheem to be insubordinate, I started to question his academic ability. I figured that if he was “acting up” and “talking back” in my class that he must struggle with English. I thought that this must be Raheem’s way of avoiding work that he thought was a struggle. Looking back, this was a dangerous path of thinking. This kind of thinking is where young, black men can accidentally become classified into special education due to teachers’ misinterpretations of their behavior and not necessarily their academic ability. When I had this notion, I provided more scaffolds for Raheem’s learning in the classroom, but he did not seem to need them. He was able to do the work fine. I know now that all stemmed from the silenced dialogue and the culture of power.

2.3. Realizing my Culture of Power
Part of my journey to connecting Delpit’s theory (1995) to my practice was to understand my role in the culture of power. Delpit (1995: 24) argues that there are five sections of power:

1. Issues of power are enacted in classroom;
2. There are codes or rules for participating in power; that is, there is a “culture of power;”
3. The rules of the culture of power are a reflection of the rules of the culture of those who have power;
4. If you are not already a participant in the culture of power, being told explicitly the rules that culture makes acquiring power easier;
5. Those with power are frequently least aware of – or least willing to acknowledge – its existence. Those with less power are often most aware of its existence.

My first acknowledgement was that power is always enacted in the classroom. Due to the misunderstanding in communication, there was a power struggle. As a teacher, I was struggling for control of power in my classroom. Raheem, not understanding my hidden codes, was struggling against a system about which he was unaware. This leads to Delpit’s second aspect, where there are codes to the silenced dialogue. My way of talking and interacting had set rules that were not clear to all of my students.

The third aspect of power solidifies that the school institution is a place were the culture of the middle and upper class power is the accepted norm (Delpit 1995). Since this was the culture that Raheem was not aware, it was my responsibility to understand his culture of communication, but I would need to find a way for Raheem and others to understand the culture of power. Lastly, Delpit’s work was of great importance because it was the first time that I became aware of my own culture of power. This was important for me to acknowledge, but the question was, how was I to bridge the gap between Raheem and myself? So, here I was, acknowledging my culture of power, but feeling guilty for blaming Raheem for our mishaps. Yet, I was empowered with new information in the hopes that I could make some progress with our relationship. I woke up that Monday, hopeful with the idea that Raheem and I could interact more effectively.

After lunch on Monday, Raheem’s class came in for English. The students always entered my classroom after lunch like a tornado of adolescents. Loud and energized from the cafeteria, it took the students a little longer to settle into their seats. I was taking attendance quietly as the students were talking and taking out their journals to do their designated pre-class work on the board. Just as the bell rang, all the students were quietly in their work mode, doing their synchronized dance of writing.
As I walked to the classroom door to close it to signify the start of the period, Raheem was standing up by the door talking to a student at his desk. Everyone else was diligently working on his or her journal entries, and I was surprised that Raheem didn’t sit yet. As I walked to the door and approached Raheem, I looked up at him and stated nicely, “Raheem, can you have a seat?” Immediately he replied in the same nice manner, “No!” My first thought was, He’s just so rude. My next thought was sarcastically, Great way to apply your new knowledge, Lynnette. I realized quickly that I was, once again, using the silenced dialogue. I rephrased the question as a statement, “Raheem, have a seat.” Raheem looked at me and stated, “Oh, okay.” He quietly sat down and did his work.

This simple and small moment was pinnacle in my teaching and classroom management, and forever changed my teaching approach. I was clear with my directives with Raheem, and he easily complied. I needed to understand his language and cultural differentials. From that moment, Raheem was not a behavior issue in my class. I was direct in what I wanted, and he easily complied. As Raheem’s mother said, I just learned to tell Raheem exactly what I wanted and he would do it.

2.4. Sharing the Culture of Power

My relationship with Raheem had an opportunity to repair and strengthen itself over the last five months of the school year. It was never Raheem’s fault, but my lack of understanding of the cultural differences in how we communicated. Raheem and Delpit’s work taught me an important lesson about the culture of power with the silenced dialogue. Yet, my journey did not stop there.

Delpit (1995) argues that students need to be taught the codes of power in order to understand the different realities that exist. Further, she explains that empowering students with these codes, they can have successful communicative endeavors in mainstream society. Thus, Raheem’s lesson assisted my classroom management, but I still had the responsibility as a teacher to share my cultural differences in communication with him to insure his future success.

I was fortunate to have the opportunity to infuse literature of my choice into my curriculum. I decided to place pieces of literature that had the language and codes of the silenced dialogue to discuss the different meanings in what people say and mean. Specifically, I used the memoir Night by Elie Wiesel and the adolescent fiction book named Holes by
Louis Sachar. *Night* outlines Elie Wiesel’s captivity during World War II in Auschwitz, a Nazi death camp. *Holes* is a light-hearted fiction book that concerns a boy named Stanley and his stay at a juvenile detention center. Since both stories have authority figures that use the silenced dialogue, these pieces really assisted in opening up literature discussion about deciphering the mainstream code of communication. This was my way of upholding the idea of cultural reflexivity and critical thinking in my classroom.

3. Conclusion

During Raheem’s junior year in high school, I had an opportunity to pursue my Ph.D. full-time. I had to leave the high school classroom to enter the college classroom. I kept in touch with many of the students in Raheem’s class over the years, and I attended their high school graduation the following year.

The graduation took place at the local community college’s auditorium. The ceremony was beautiful, and I was overwhelmed with joy watching my former students received their diplomas on stage. After the ceremony was completed, all the family and friends gathered in the hallway to congratulate the graduates as they came out. The hallway was very crowded with people and buzzing with cheers and excitement. After talking with a parent, I looked over to see Raheem standing tall and proud in his regalia.

His now 6’1 frame thinned out his baby fat, as he was very fit. I went immediately over to him and stated, “Hey, Raheem. Congratulations!”

“Thanks, Ms. Mawhinney.” There was an awkward pause as we both looked at each other and smiled simultaneously. I was the first to speak what we were both thinking, “We had a long road, didn’t we?”

Raheem laughed and said, “We sure did.” Then both of our laughs synchronized themselves at the thoughts of our long journey. In that smile and laughter, I thank Raheem to this day for the lesson he taught me about cultural differences, communicating, and to reflect on my own practices and approaches to classroom management and pedagogy. It took the struggles that Raheem and I had initially for me to acknowledge my culture of power. Without this self-discovery through Raheem and Delpit’s work, I would have become a teacher who blamed her students for the issues in classroom management, when the issues relied in my lack of understanding and self-reflexivity.
**Found one!** I pull out a half-torn and tattered tissue from the bottom of my purse. After I inspect it to see that it is not encrusted with previous mucus, I hand it over to Claresha. I look at her as wiped at her tears, and I see a mirror of myself ten years prior. During her classroom observation, I saw Claresha constantly question Dante: “Is that the page we are supposed to be on?” and “Why aren’t you doing your work?” Dante, like Raheem, replied to these codes as questions and not as statements with directives. It is at this time that I share my story and learned-wisdom from Raheem and Lisa Delpit to Claresha. I hoped that my story offered more than just a tattered tissue, but it made me reflect on what information is provided to teacher education students.

Simply put, Claresha and the pre-service and in-service teachers of today are going to experience some type of cultural differences in the classroom. They are probably going to experience it even more so then when I started teaching a decade ago. The increase of globalization has caused more cultural groups to interact than before. Our future teachers are going to have different cultural representations in their classroom that vary ethnically, religiously, and linguistically, just to name a few. These differences can push the boundaries of the meaning behind the culture of power.

While pre-service and in-service teachers go through their teacher education, it is more imperative than ever to insure that these differences are reflected on in the college classroom. Literature like Delpit’s (1995) and others focusing on cultural differences in the classroom need to be infused at the undergraduate level. It is my hope for Claresha and other perspective teachers in this place that they can learn to understand the different cultural miscommunications that occur in order to open up dialogue with their students. This way, as teacher educators, we can offer more than just tattered tissues but an arsenal of information.

**References**