

Narrative of Events	What I Was Thinking	Context for Actions Taken	Reflection on Changes in Practice	Relation to Research and Writings
<p>2.3.04</p> <p>"I hate you," Demarcus yells, "I hate you."</p> <p>I am giving directions for a writing task; we are reading for the Reading Retelling test given to all third grade students in Marin County in late March.</p> <p>"I hate you!" he says again loudly. "I'm not doing it!"</p> <p>To keep myself calm, to keep myself from over-reacting and becoming engaged in an argument with him, I pick up my journal, sit down and begin writing (as everyone in the class has been instructed to do). I write down what Demarcus is saying. Most of the rest of the class settles to the task. Demarcus keeps talking, but he is no longer yelling, not even speaking particularly loudly.</p> <p>"I don't care. I'm not listening to you. I want to chop off your head with a chain saw..."</p> <p>I look up from my writing and comment that I'm sorry he's feeling this way, but that he'll need to complete this writing before he goes home today.</p> <p>"I'll leave when I want to!" he says loudly, then over turns his desk. It hits the floor hard. Most of the class looks up, but then goes back to writing. I write "boom!" for the sound of the desk hitting the floor, in my journal.</p> <p>Demarcus picks up the desk and rights it. The next time I look up, I describe it upside down on the floor again, although I have not heard it go over. He's sitting with his feet on the desk's bottom, holding two of his legs, as though driving away as fast as he can.</p> <p>He begins to talk again. "I should just write 'blah, blah, blah on every page in this stupid book... Sometimes, I really wish this was a person so I could rip its head off... I would break everything, including the teacher's." He trails off, sits quietly for a moment, drives the desk.</p> <p>Damon, who sits at the same table, is now becoming engaged in what Demarcus is doing; he's beginning to say that he's not going to do the work either. I stand up, walk over to Demarcus and, without saying anything, carefully pull the desk out from under his feet (he holds on to the desk legs for a moment but then lets go). I slide it away from him. He gets up, walks toward the door, throws himself at it (Boom!), and is gone.</p> <p>A student gasps, "Ms. Franz, he just threw the blue chair!" I look out the window. Sure enough, the chair we keep just outside the door is sitting upside down on the middle hillside adjacent to our classroom.</p> <p>Demarcus spends about an hour in the office after this. He talks with the principal; he works on some mathematics papers I bring for him. At lunch time Damon and I walk down to check on him. Damon has worked with me to do the retelling task, and he is now very cheery. He smiles broadly when I suggest that he and I go check in on Demarcus, and he practically skips down the ramp toward the office. Once we get there, Damon pops down in the chair next to Demarcus, while I stand just in front of him. Damon speaks first, asking how he's doing, asking if he's ready to come back yet. I notice Demarcus' face soften noticeably as Damon speaks to him. I'm glad that I didn't speak first, that I stood quietly while this interchange takes place. While he's done very little of the work I gave him to do, I note that Demarcus is calm and collected. He says that he's ready to come back now. I remind him that he'll need to complete both the writing and the mathematics before he goes home today, and he nods his head. The three of us walk back up to class together, Demarcus pausing outside the door just long enough to go and pick up the blue chair still lying on the hillside.</p> <p>The end of the day is approaching. "Do I really have to do that writing?" he asks me, maybe ten minutes before the bell is going to ring.</p> <p>"Yes, Demarcus, you know that you do." He grumbles some, but I see him about five minutes later sitting at his desk, journal out, writing. I tell the class it's time to get their backpacks and jackets and we line up to walk down to the bus. I tell Demarcus that he'll get the bus on its second run.</p> <p>"No!" he cries, "I'm finished! I'm finished!" He slams his pencil down, lifts up his journal so that I can see it.</p> <p>"It's okay, Demarcus. You know I have to look over the writing, and I can't do that now. Come on, walk down with us, and then we'll look at it together."</p> <p>"No!" he yells, throwing the journal, knocking over a book box on another student's desk, the contents of which spill over the floor.</p> <p>I head out the door to walk the class down to the bus. Demarcus trails after us. I see him standing behind a tree on the embankment above the bus loading area.</p> <p>I get on the bus, help get everyone seated and settled, get the bus and talk with a teacher who wants to tell me something. When I call Demarcus after I've finished talking, there's no answer, no tell-tale movement from behind the trees. He's gone.</p> <p>Since Demarcus has never left school before, I walk around the grounds looking for him. He's nowhere to be found. I get in my car and drive over to the apartments where he lives. At first, no one is home, but when I return about twenty minutes later, Demarcus shows off, opens the door. His mouth drops open when he sees me.</p> <p>"Get your shoes on," I say. "You need to come back to school, clean up the mess that you made, and go over the writing with me." His mom looks out the door. I'd thought she was still in Washington, where she's been the last several days. I leave, but she has just walked in the door from the airport not five minutes ago.</p> <p>"What did you do?" she asks him. He doesn't respond.</p> <p>I say, quietly, "Demarcus left school without permission. He walked home on his own, and he left quite a mess behind him. I'd like to take him back to school to clean up."</p> <p>His mother's mouth drops open. "You told me you missed the bus! You get your shoes on right now!"</p> <p>Demarcus says nothing but turns to get his shoes. We all walk out to the parking lot together. I tell his mom that I'm sorry this is happening the moment she's gotten back, but that it seems important for Demarcus to know that if he leaves, I'll simply come and get him. She smiles, nods her head. We agree that I'll bring him back in about an hour, which gives her time to run an errand she was just leaving to do.</p> <p>Demarcus and I are quiet in the car. As we arrive back at school, I tell him he'll need to first clean up the things on the floor in the classroom and that after that we'll talk about the writing and about what happened today. He nods, and begins to pick up the books and papers lying on the floor as soon as we enter the room.</p> <p>We talk for about fifteen minutes. I do much more talking than he does. It dawns on me while talking with him that perhaps part of the reason for his anger this morning was simply that he didn't expect there to be two writing assignments. I realize that I hadn't written both tasks—the quotation mark work and the retelling—on the schedule. The retelling work was a surprise to him, an unwelcome surprise given how much he dislikes writing. I ask him about this. He agrees that it was, along with the fact that he was tired and hungry.</p> <p>After we finish talking, he goes out to clean off the muddy blue chair, and then we start work on a new engineering project—constructing a marble track run—until it's time to take him home.</p> <p>As we're getting ready to go, Demarcus says, "Ms. Franz, can I stay after school on Tuesday..." he pauses for a moment, "and Thursday?"</p>	<p>When I am fairly sure at this point in the incident, given previous experiences, that something about this writing task has caused deep frustration for Demarcus, I can think of nothing in particular that would have brought about such a strong reaction.</p> <p>The fact that, after I sit down, Demarcus lowers his voice significantly tells me that he is on his way to working through his feelings, despite the words that he uses here.</p> <p>I choose to look up at Demarcus at this point and speak to him. I'm hoping that, if I calmly remind him that the work he is not doing will need to be finished before he can leave for the day, it will help him get started.</p> <p>While I speak in a calm voice and use words that Demarcus has often heard me speak before, I wonder what would have happened if I had simply continued my own writing, rather than speak to him at this point.</p> <p>When I see that another student is beginning to be influenced by Demarcus' behavior, I decide to intervene. I choose not to respond to Damon's words and, as well, choose not to say anything to Demarcus as I move toward him and put my hands on the desk; to say anything to either of them at this point, I am sure, will not help to de-escalate what is going on. I move slowly and pay attention to my breathing, wanting to be careful to move the desk without seeming to yank it. I am not sure if Demarcus will try to prevent my moving the desk away from him. I notice how quickly he lets go of the desk and think, again, that there is a good chance that he will still work his way through this situation with only a small amount of support/intervention from me.</p> <p>I ask Damon to come with me because he is Demarcus' best friend; as well, Damon has, with support from me, completed the writing task. My hope is that Damon's presence with me will help Demarcus's mood, his willingness to return with us to class, and his eventual finishing up of the writing task.</p> <p>I note that Demarcus picks up the chair without my telling him to do so.</p>	<p>Demarcus is near the front of the room sitting at his desk. He is African American and tall for his age, especially tall for a third grade class; he was retained at the end of his first grade year. He has eyes that burrow into you, by turns serious, sad, angry, interested, thoughtful. Strength emanates from him. He has made strong academic gains, particularly in reading, during the year and a half we have been working together.</p> <p>Demarcus does not like to write, does not see himself as a good writer. His mother and I spent a good deal of time last year, when Demarcus was in the second grade, helping him figure out ways in which he could complete writing tasks that he didn't himself seem to believe he could complete. At the beginning of his second grade year, Demarcus rarely completed a writing task and often, during writing times, behaved in ways certain to cause him to be excluded from the class. Now, as a third grade student, Demarcus regularly completes all writing assignments.</p> <p>I have learned that Demarcus will make comments such as these when he is unsure of what to do with an assignment, particularly if the assignment involves writing. I know that Demarcus has learned to work through these reactions and he almost always does so on his own. Hence, and in general, I choose to ignore the comments, in this instance by sitting down to write during the beginning of this incident; given that the rest of the class was able to continue working, I choose not to respond as an attempt to de-escalate the situation, thereby offering Demarcus the opportunity to work through his feelings on his own.</p> <p>Demarcus' mother and I agreed to an arrangement last year (when she and I both believed that Demarcus was choosing to behave in ways that would cause him to be suspended, thereby not having to complete assigned tasks); we agreed that Demarcus would not leave school until all assigned tasks were complete. I would bring him home after he'd finished all of the tasks he'd not yet completed during the school day. The first three days after his mother and I agreed to try this approach, Demarcus didn't finish assigned work until approximately 5:30, at which point I drove him home. After these three days, Demarcus began to complete all assigned tasks during the school day.</p> <p>Demarcus' family and I have worked hard to help him begin to shift from the coping strategies he has used previously, such as tipping over furniture when he is frustrated or upset, to strategies which allow him to deal with his frustration while not disrupting the rest of the class. While this incident shows a return to behaviors he has not used in several months, he lets go of the desk easily and allows me to move it away from him, something which would not have happened when we began working together last year.</p>	<p>When I first began teaching, and for many years after that, working through situations with angry, frustrated students was scary. I was scared that I wouldn't be able to stop the flow of anger, that I wouldn't be able to keep control of the situation. I lacked any sureness that I could withstand the anger. Thus, it was difficult to keep a sense of calm, and of clear expectations, while in the midst of a situation such as described here.</p> <p>As I reflect on this narrative, I see how much my ability to outwardly maintain a sense of calm and of steadfastness in such situations has increased. A good friend of mine once told me to envision myself as a tree with a very long tap root; such a tree will not be knocked over even during an intense storm. Envisioning myself in this way has been helpful. What has helped even more has been learning that the ways in which I've tended to respond in situations of conflict (the insecurities, anxieties and fears with which I've been filled), while not at all unusual in white females, have created a cultural dissonance for many of my students. Learning to remain calm, while firm in my expectations, has been an important shift in becoming a more culturally-relevant teacher.</p> <p>An insistence that he complete the writing tasks assigned him has been one of several important pieces in bringing about the shift that Demarcus has made over the course of the last year. Underlying this insistence is a belief that Demarcus can and will succeed at the task presented him. It has taken me much longer than I wish that it had to understand this point.</p> <p>I now recognize that early in my teaching career I was a much less demanding teacher than I am currently. I often stopped attending to whether a student had completed assigned tasks when he or she was behaving in ways I deemed inappropriate. My attention shifted to working through the behavioral situation at hand; I was not "pushy," as I call myself now, regarding the completing of academic tasks. I am certain that this lack of insistence did my students a disservice in that it communicated that I could be distracted from the task at hand; more importantly, I was also indirectly communicating that these were tasks they may not be fully capable of completing successfully.</p> <p>While insistence has been a useful tool in communicating to Demarcus that he can and will be successful in completing a task, its usefulness exists only in proportion to the strength of my relationship with his family and with him. Demarcus' mother knows that my insistence is in the service of pushing Demarcus to be a strong, academically successful student. She has evidence that he has made, and is continuing to make, academic gains. She supports, and actively participates in, the insistence that Demarcus complete assigned tasks. This has been integral to Demarcus' acceptance of insistence as a tool in supporting his learning.</p>	<p>Thompson; <i>Through Ebony Eyes: What Teachers Need to Know But Are Afraid to Ask About African American Students</i>: "...to have an effective classroom management system, teachers must be firm but not mean. As Delplit noted, African American students are unlikely to respect teachers who appear weak." (pg. 100)</p> <p>Thompson; <i>Through Ebony Eyes: What Teachers Need to Know But Are Afraid to Ask About African American Students</i>: "Many [middle-class white] women are socialized to speak softly and in a nondirect manner, and to adopt a nonassertive persona; they are more likely to be experienced in submitting to authority than in exercising it." (pg. 73)</p> <p>Ladson-Billings; <i>The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children</i>: "Teachers with culturally relevant practices believe that all students can succeed." (pg. 44)</p> <p>Ladson-Billings; <i>The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children</i>: "Culturally relevant teaching encourages cultivation of the relationship beyond the boundaries of the classroom." (pg. 62)</p> <p>Ladson-Billings; <i>The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children</i>: "Culturally relevant teaching encourages students to learn collaboratively and expects them to teach each other and take responsibility for each other." (pg. 70)</p>
<p>2.04.04</p> <p>It is Wednesday, my day after Demarcus' and the conversation after school. I have added the word "retelling" to the schedule, and I see Demarcus look at it when he first comes into the room. When it is time for the retelling work, he has his journal out and his pencil in hand; he participates fully in the exercise, even reading aloud his effort to the class when he doesn't particularly want to.</p> <p>At the end of the day I call his mom to let her know how hard Demarcus worked and what a good day he had.</p>	<p>Internally, I feel the equivalent of my mouth dropping open.</p>	<p>Demarcus and I spent one afternoon a week together last year, sometimes just the two of us, sometimes with another student with whom Demarcus is good friends. We worked on Engineering projects during this time. I did this to build a stronger relationship with Demarcus, so I intentionally chose to work on projects in which Demarcus sees himself as strong and in which he would be interested. These times served us well in that I believe, our relationship did indeed strengthen; we talked often, especially while I was driving him home after our sessions, about how things had gone during the day and how things might go tomorrow. We have only occasionally been spending this kind of time after school this year, for a variety of reasons, so it comes as quite a surprise when Demarcus asks me about it here, especially given the tenor of our day together.</p>	<p>Ladson-Billings; <i>The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children</i>: "Culturally relevant teaching involves cultivation of the relationship beyond the boundaries of the classroom." (pg. 62)</p>	
<p>2.04.04</p> <p>Demarcus says nothing but turns to get his shoes. We all walk out to the parking lot together. I tell his mom that I'm sorry this is happening the moment she's gotten back, but that it seems important for Demarcus to know that if he leaves, I'll simply come and get him. She smiles, nods her head. We agree that I'll bring him back in about an hour, which gives her time to run an errand she was just leaving to do.</p> <p>Demarcus and I are quiet in the car. As we arrive back at school, I tell him he'll need to first clean up the things on the floor in the classroom and that after that we'll talk about the writing and about what happened today. He nods, and begins to pick up the books and papers lying on the floor as soon as we enter the room.</p> <p>We talk for about fifteen minutes. I do much more talking than he does. It dawns on me while talking with him that perhaps part of the reason for his anger this morning was simply that he didn't expect there to be two writing assignments. I realize that I hadn't written both tasks—the quotation mark work and the retelling—on the schedule. The retelling work was a surprise to him, an unwelcome surprise given how much he dislikes writing. I ask him about this. He agrees that it was, along with the fact that he was tired and hungry.</p> <p>After we finish talking, he goes out to clean off the muddy blue chair, and then we start work on a new engineering project—constructing a marble track run—until it's time to take him home.</p> <p>As we're getting ready to go, Demarcus says, "Ms. Franz, can I stay after school on Tuesday..." he pauses for a moment, "and Thursday?"</p>	<p>When I see that another student is beginning to be influenced by Demarcus' behavior, I decide to intervene. I choose not to respond to Damon's words and, as well, choose not to say anything to Demarcus as I move toward him and put my hands on the desk; to say anything to either of them at this point, I am sure, will not help to de-escalate what is going on. I move slowly and pay attention to my breathing, wanting to be careful to move the desk without seeming to yank it. I am not sure if Demarcus will try to prevent my moving the desk away from him. I notice how quickly he lets go of the desk and think, again, that there is a good chance that he will still work his way through this situation with only a small amount of support/intervention from me.</p>	<p>Demarcus' mother and I agreed to an arrangement last year (when she and I both believed that Demarcus was choosing to behave in ways that would cause him to be suspended, thereby not having to complete assigned tasks); we agreed that Demarcus would not leave school until all assigned tasks were complete. I would bring him home after he'd finished all of the tasks he'd not yet completed during the school day. The first three days after his mother and I agreed to try this approach, Demarcus didn't finish assigned work until approximately 5:30, at which point I drove him home. After these three days, Demarcus began to complete all assigned tasks during the school day.</p> <p>Demarcus' family and I have worked hard to help him begin to shift from the coping strategies he has used previously, such as tipping over furniture when he is frustrated or upset, to strategies which allow him to deal with his frustration while not disrupting the rest of the class. While this incident shows a return to behaviors he has not used in several months, he lets go of the desk easily and allows me to move it away from him, something which would not have happened when we began working together last year.</p>	<p>Thompson; <i>Through Ebony Eyes: What Teachers Need to Know But Are Afraid to Ask About African American Students</i>: "...to have an effective classroom management system, teachers must be firm but not mean. As Delplit noted, African American students are unlikely to respect teachers who appear weak." (pg. 100)</p> <p>Thompson; <i>Through Ebony Eyes: What Teachers Need to Know But Are Afraid to Ask About African American Students</i>: "Many [middle-class white] women are socialized to speak softly and in a nondirect manner, and to adopt a nonassertive persona; they are more likely to be experienced in submitting to authority than in exercising it." (pg. 73)</p> <p>Ladson-Billings; <i>The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children</i>: "Teachers with culturally relevant practices believe that all students can succeed." (pg. 44)</p> <p>Ladson-Billings; <i>The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children</i>: "Culturally relevant teaching encourages cultivation of the relationship beyond the boundaries of the classroom." (pg. 62)</p> <p>Ladson-Billings; <i>The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children</i>: "Culturally relevant teaching encourages students to learn collaboratively and expects them to teach each other and take responsibility for each other." (pg. 70)</p>	
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