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CULTURALLY RELEVANT PEDAGOGY IN PUBLIC LIBRARIES: AN EXPLORATORY CASE STUDY OF A LIBRARY SYSTEM IN A MAJORITY-BLACK, SUBURBAN DISTRICT

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CULTURALLY RELEVANT PEDAGOGY IN PUBLIC LIBRARIES:

AN EXPLORATORY CASE STUDY OF A LIBRARY SYSTEM

IN A MAJORITY-BLACK, SUBURBAN DISTRICT

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ABSTRACT

CULTURALLY RELEVANT PEDAGOGY IN PUBLIC LIBRARIES:

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Sarah M. Garifo

The theory of culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) (Ladson-Billings, 1995) has been applied primarily in K-12 settings to help educators engage with learners from diverse cultural backgrounds. I argue that public librarians are also educators whose practice is grounded in the need for cultural relevance. However, a review of the literature indicates that CRP has not been applied to the work of public librarianship. I conducted an exploratory case study in order to address this gap in the literature. The population for this study was the staff of "Green County Public Library" (GCPL), a public library system in a majority-Black, suburban county in the northeastern U.S. ($n = 30$). I conducted virtual, semi-structured interviews and reviewed secondary data to: (a) determine where the criteria of CRP and traits of culturally relevant educators were evident within this setting and (b) examine how study participants perceived the importance of culturally relevant practices in their work. In this study, I found that: (a) CRP may provide a framework for describing the work of public librarianship; (b) CRP should be advanced through a library staff that reflects its community; and (c) GCPL serves as an example of imperfect progress on the path to becoming more culturally relevant.

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hundreds of pages because you care so deeply about your work—and believe so strongly

in the potential of public libraries to forever become more culturally relevant—that we

talked for hours, and could have gone on for hours more. I hope you feel that I

represented you well.

PREFACE

Various style guides offer different recommendations on the capitalization of racial identities such as *Black* and *white*. The Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association, 7th Edition (2020) recommends the capitalization of both terms. However, I have chosen to adopt the model of the Columbia Journalism Review (2020), which recommends the capitalization of *Black* in recognition of "a shared identity and community" among members of the African diaspora and recommends against the capitalization of *white* in order to denote a lack of shared culture and history among white persons and combat the perpetuation of white hegemony.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

I would like to begin by telling you the story of my favorite professional mistake. I was in my first few months in a new role as a youth services librarian in a suburban public library. I had worked in many other library settings over the past ten years, including government, academic, non-profit, and public-school libraries, so I was confident in my technical knowledge and wide range of experience.

The public library branch to which I was first assigned is adjacent to a large public high school with almost 2,500 students and 90% minority enrollment. The accessibility of this location made it a popular hangout spot for students during and after school. On any given school day, as many as two hundred teenagers would come through the doors, lending a unique, boisterous energy to the space, often to the dismay of other patrons who expected a more "traditional" library experience: a quiet place to read or study. However, these teenagers are equal members of their community, and we wanted them to feel welcome within our walls. Long gone is the stereotype of the harsh, shushing librarian (Barone, 2017; Daily, 2009; Pew Research Center, 2013b); we want to engage all of our patrons in new and exciting ways, especially our teenagers, and that means embracing their noise.

I designed a plan that in conjunction with Black History Month, I would host a program for the teenagers called "Living Black History." I would select snippets of speeches and writings from notable Black Americans that would take approximately five minutes to read aloud. About a month before the date of the program, interested teens would come to an orientation session to select the passage they wanted to perform, spend the next few weeks becoming familiar with the text, and then perform their piece in front

of an audience. This performance would be open to all members of the community.

At this point, you will not be surprised to learn that this program was a bust. Not a single person attended, not even the orientation. For myriad reasons, it is not uncommon for a public library program to have no attendees, so this was by no means a disaster, but it did present an invaluable learning opportunity. When I sat down later with some of my favorite teen patrons to hear their thoughts on this program idea, I heard a few common responses (in addition to some snickers and eyerolls, their *lingua franca*). First: "hell, no! Sorry, Miss Sarah, but I have stage fright. There's no way I could get up there and perform." Second: "you know... that might have been cool, but I have a million things to do after school most days. I come in here to hang out for a few minutes, but after that, I have no time." Third: "nah, man... I don't come to the library for all that. I'm just tryna see my friends."

My program failed because it was not culturally relevant to my audience. I had not spent enough time getting to know these specific teenagers, learning their wants, needs, and how they interacted and communicated with each other and with their community. I did not allow them to take authentic ownership of this program idea. I knew only that they could often be loud—a descriptor I knew even then was historically steeped in racist connotations (Fordham, 1997)—but I simply wanted to embrace and celebrate that energy. However, I did not consider the nuances of when, where, and how they willingly exercised this loudness; performing for and among friends is far different from performing on a literal stage. Because I assumed that they liked to bring attention to themselves, or that they were at least nonchalant about the attention they did draw, those stage fright comments surprised me. What I had not understood is that a very specific

type of *loud* belonged to them as a texture of their language (Kirkland, 2013); it was not a problem that needed to be solved.

As I reflected on this experience, I wondered: how many stories existed within the field that were just like mine? Who is grappling—and who is succeeding—with providing culturally relevant programs and services to their communities? To what extent are these successes and failures a product of individual effort, and to what extent are they shaped by the existing cultures within library systems and communities? Was there a way for me to compile these stories and present a better way forward? Those are the curiosities that brought me to this research.

Background

Although the American Library Association (ALA) (2019) claims diversity as a core value of librarianship, this value is not adequately reflected in history or practice; even today, the vast majority of librarians in the U.S.—myself included—are white women (Data USA, 2020). The lack of racial diversity in the profession has real consequences for library staff and users. In June 2020, a cohort of Black library workers at The Free Library of Philadelphia (PA) wrote an open letter expressing their grievances over their mistreatment, including: (a) they regularly experienced racism in the workplace; (b) they earned significantly less than the median salary in their workplace (especially when compared to white library workers, who earned significantly more than the median salary); (c) being required to physically report to work in a public service role during a pandemic, when Black Americans were 260% more likely to contract COVID-19, 470% more likely to be hospitalized with COVID-19, and 210% more likely to die from COVID-19 than white Americans (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention,

2020), subjected them to undue harm; and (d) being required to physically report to work amidst racist violence and threats of violence within their city subjected them to undue harm (Concerned Black workers of The Free Library of Philadelphia, 2020; Crimmins, 2020).

While the social and public health crises of 2020 shone an unflinching light on racism in America (Greenhouse, 2020; Laurencin & Walker, 2020; Mills, 2020), these racial disparities—even and especially within public libraries—are not new. Most practicing white librarians are neither aware that many public libraries in the U.S. were segregated until the mid-1960s (Knowlton, 2017), nor that the integration of public libraries was won not by the political capital or collective protest of library professionals and ALA leadership (whose responses ranged from lukewarm at best to active opposition at worst), but by the brave persistence of Black protestors and civil rights activists at a grassroots level (Wiegand, 2017a). Unfortunately, this means that "the library profession as a whole does not appear to have internalized into its collective memory the deeply painful experiences desegregating public libraries" (Wiegand, 2017a, p. 16). Therefore, we still have far to go within our profession to repair the effects of systemic racism woven into our legacy (Velez & Villa-Nicholas, 2017) and fulfill our mission to all public library users and professionals in the U.S. in the twenty-first century.

Public librarians are not the only group within the profession as a whole who continue to struggle with properly addressing contemporary issues of racial inequity. Recently, the February 2021 cover of *School Library Journal* (SLJ)—a professional periodical for K-12 school librarians in the U.S.—attracted a firestorm on social media with its headline "Why white children need diverse books" and the accompanying image.

In the image, a cartoon rendering of a white girl holds up a book with a Black/brown character on the cover in such a way that half of a white face and half of a Black/brown face put together to make one whole. The intended race or ethnicity of the character on the book cover is unclear; they appear to possibly be Black—and many critics clearly saw it this way—but the book cover also includes greetings in both Spanish (*hola*) and Samoan (*talofa*). It seems that this choice may have been an attempt to represent multiple minority identities simultaneously.

Critics derided this imagery as a form of "digital Blackface" (Haugan, 2020) and questioned SLJ's choice to run the cover during Black History Month, as they considered it an inappropriately white-centered depiction of Rudine Sims Bishop's (1990) foundational "mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors" theory of multicultural children's literature (see Chapter 2). Perhaps even more troubling than the initial controversy was SLJ's response. All traces of the image were quickly removed from their social media accounts, many commenters believed that their criticisms were being quickly deleted, and in a February 5 letter to readers, the editor doubled down on the controversial choice without meaningfully responding to readers' concerns (Ishizuka, 2021). This is just one example of where librarians—especially those in higher realms of influence, such as administrators, directors, and journal editors—need to expand our capacity to view our privileges through lenses other than our own and challenge our professional practices accordingly.

In 2021, as the Black Lives Matter movement takes on increased momentum and support following the deaths of countless Black men and women throughout the U.S. (Del Real et al., 2020; Demby, 2020), librarians must be vocal and active in our social

responsibilities. We must critically examine our roles as members of a ubiquitous public institution, as advocates for social justice, and as equal-opportunity educators throughout the country. As the Black Caucus of the ALA (2020) recently stated: "the systemic machinery of racism does not sleep and neither should we in our efforts to counter it." As public servants and educators, how can we be more strategic, more self-critical, more adaptable, and more vulnerable—that is, open to uncertainty and learning from our inevitable mistakes (B. Brown, 2019)—in order to improve our service to diverse populations and advance social and racial equity in our communities?

Present Study

In an effort to respond to some of these questions, I conducted an exploratory case study of a library system in a majority-Black, suburban district in the northeastern U.S., pseudonymously referred to as Green County Public Library (GCPL). I wanted to learn more about what cultural relevance means to these library professionals in the course of their work, especially in the context of their particular communities. In doing so, I examined the potential of culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) (Ladson-Billings, 1995) as a theoretical framework for advancing the scholarship and professional practice of public librarianship.

Research Site

First, I will offer context for the population and human geography of the site for this study. In 2021, Green County was home to approximately 900,000 residents, about two-thirds of whom were active library cardholders (defined by GCPL as those who had used their library cards within the past three years). As of 2019, the three most populous racial/ethnic groups in Green County were Black (64%), white, (27%), and

Hispanic/Latino (19%). However, at the time of this study, the racial/ethnic makeup of Green County was continually in flux. According to a 2018 report by the George Mason University Institute for Immigration Research, immigrants comprised approximately 23% of the Green County population, and the number of immigrants in Green County had grown an estimated 39% over the past ten years (and was continuing to trend upward). According to this same report, the majority of immigrants in Green County were originally from Central America and only about half were proficient in English. Additionally, according to the most recent available data from the state's office for refugees and asylees (from FY 2016), Green County was home to approximately 800 refugees and persons with special immigration visas (SIVs), the second-highest number of refugees/SIVs in the state by district.

At the time of this study, much of Green County was nationally recognized for its affluence: in 2018, the median household income in Green County was approximately $83,000, a 2.21% increase from the previous year and about 34% higher than the U.S. median household income ($61,937) during the same year. However, the cost of living in Green County was more than 20% higher than the national average, and income inequality in Green County remained a pervasive concern. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, at the time of this study, almost nine percent of Green County residents were living below the poverty line: less than the national rate at the time (about 13.4%), but still significant. At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in mid-2020, the unemployment rate in Green County was over ten percent and was one percent higher than that of the state overall. Also, a 2015 joint report by divisions of the state and county governments found that in the most urbanized areas of Green County (those closest to the

neighboring major city), residents faced significant difficulties in accessing quality, nutritious, affordable, and culturally appropriate food within a reasonable distance from their homes. Areas facing this lack of food accessibility were once known as "food deserts"; however, due to subsequent criticisms of that term, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) now refers to these as "low-income and low-access" (LI/LA) areas (Food Empowerment Project, 2021; Rhone et al., 2019). Based on USDA definitions, almost all GCPL branches were located in LI/LA areas where a significant number of residents lived more than one mile (in urban communities) or ten miles (in rural communities) from the nearest supermarket.

At the time of this study, GCPL was comprised of 364 staff members across 19 community branch libraries and a law library that served detainees at the Green County Jail (though jail library operations were not considered within the scope of this study). These 19 branches were divided into five geographic areas: north, south, east, west, and central. This division by area reflected further evidence of income inequality in Green County: the mean household income of residents served by east-area branches was twice that of residents served by west-area branches (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Mean Incomes by GCPL Service Area, Green County, and U.S.
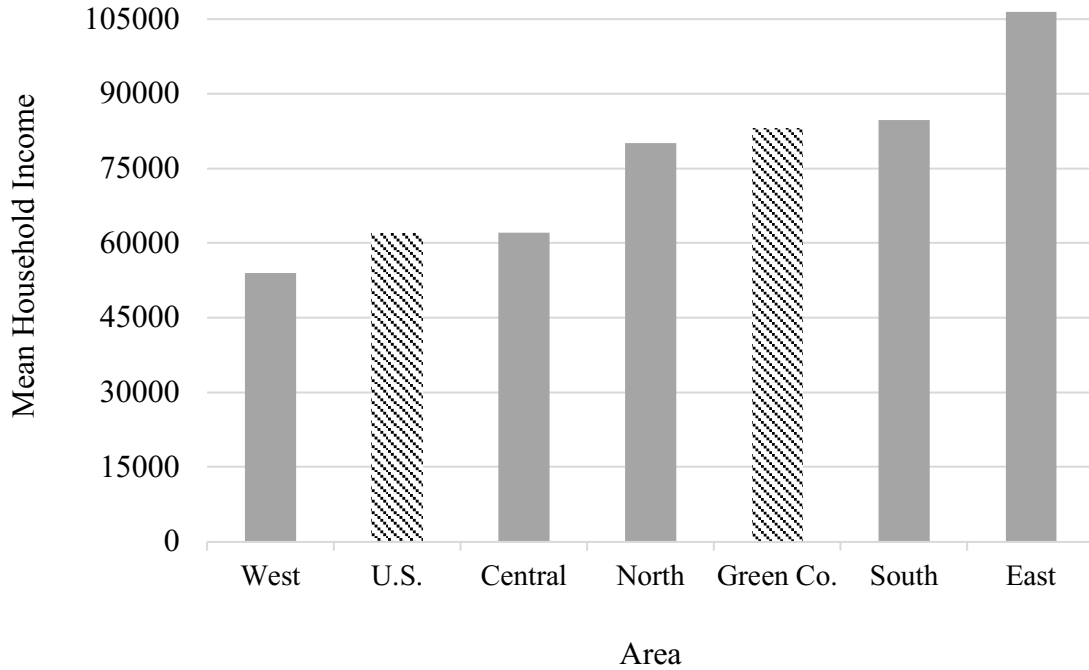
Note. Data source: University of Michigan Population Studies Center (2020). Figure created by the author.

As of FY 2019, GCPL operated with an annual budget of approximately $36 million, a per-capita annual library spending of about forty dollars. This operating budget represented the third-lowest per-capita annual library spending in the state, even though Green County is the state's second-highest populated county. At the time of this study, three nearby counties operated with an approximate per-capita annual library spending of forty-three dollars, fifty dollars, and fifty-five dollars, respectively.

Due to these unique features of Green County (including: its majority-minority population; significant growth in the population of immigrants, refugees, and English language learners; and the contrast between its high- and low-income areas), I felt that

this would provide a valuable setting for an exploration of culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) in public libraries.

Expanding a Theory

CRP is an educational theory which holds that the authentic incorporation of "ecological factors, such as prior experiences, community settings, cultural backgrounds, and ethnic identities of teachers and students" (Gay, 2010, p. 22) is essential for effective teaching and learning, especially for students who are Black, Indigenous, or people of color (BIPOC). As defined by Ladson-Billings (1995), the three criteria of culturally relevant pedagogy are: (a) student achievement (when students learn better because the content is framed in a relatable context); (b) cultural competence (when teachers allow authentic opportunities for students to teach their peers by embracing and sharing their own cultural values and styles); and (c) cultural critique (when teachers recognize, comprehend, and critique social inequities and guide their students to do the same). Additionally, the three traits of culturally relevant educators (CRE) are: (a) positive conceptions of self and others (when teachers maintain high expectations for their practice and their students and reject notions of teaching as saviorism), (b) equitable social relations (when teachers develop communities of learners and foster authentic collaboration), and (c) dynamic conceptions of knowledge (when teachers view knowledge as dynamic and socially constructed and employ multiple means of assessing students' learning) (Ladson-Billings, 1995) (see Chapter 2).

To date, CRP has been examined primarily in the extant literature as a strategy for improving K-12 educational outcomes for students and educators (Borrero & Yeh, 2011; Gay, 2010; Gunn et al., 2013; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2014; Nganga, 2015; Perry, 2008).

However, because public libraries are deeply embedded in their communities and have the unique potential to reflect cultural influences on a micro-level (Biando Edwards et al., 2011; Cartwright, 2017; Pew Research Center, 2013a; Urban Libraries Council, n.d.), I believe that there is untapped potential to apply this theory to public librarianship. There is evidence that this connection is beginning to be made in professional practice, such as in the curriculum of Project READY, a free online professional development program for school and public youth services librarians and library administrators to learn more about combatting racism, advancing racial equity, and adopting a culturally sustaining pedagogy (Institute of Museum and Library Services et al., 2021).

Purpose and Significance

This research is significant because it addresses a gap in the extant literature: CRP has not been previously used as a theoretical framework for describing public librarianship. This research is practically significant because CRP holds great potential for evaluating and improving the cultural relevance and efficacy of public libraries, especially those that serve culturally diverse communities.

Rationale

My logical basis for applying the theory of culturally relevant pedagogy to the environment of public libraries is as follows: because CRP practices benefit educators and students and public librarians are educators (Nastasi, 2013; Rawson, 2018), then CRP practices can benefit public librarians and their patrons.

This research is valuable and timely because the divide between the ideals and reality of diversity and antiracism in public libraries needs to be addressed and corrected (Black Caucus of the American Library Association, 2020; Concerned Black workers of

The Free Library of Philadelphia, 2020). By examining this divide within a particular

corner of professional practice, we may begin to untangle the strings of power and

privilege woven into libraries as ubiquitous community spaces. What are public librarians

learning as we strive for cultural relevance in our work? What can we learn from our

successes and failures?

Definition of Terms

The following are operational definitions of terms used within this study,

especially as they exist in the context of public libraries overall and in my research site.

Library Collection

In a public library, the collection is the entirety of physical and digital offerings

held for public use. This may include (but is not limited to): books; periodicals; movies;

music; non-circulating special collections; recording equipment; research databases;

board games; video games; WiFi hotspots; museum and state park passes; home and

gardening supplies; tools; STEM materials; and camping gear.

Library Programs

Library programs are comprised of a wide range of events and courses offered

freely to the public through public libraries. These programs may be planned and hosted

by library staff or by partner organizations in the community, but do not include the use

of public libraries as rental spaces for external or private events. The types of programs

offered by a particular library system, including the topics covered and the intended

audiences, are a reflection of which community members and perspectives are being

valued and supported by that library system (American Library Association, 2018a).

Social distancing guidelines in effect due to the COVID-19 pandemic have required

public librarians to be creative and adaptable in our programming strategies, increasing our social media engagement and providing virtual programs through online streaming platforms (Melko, 2020).

Patrons and Customers

At the time of this study and in the years prior, there was an ongoing debate among public librarians in the U.S. about which term was most appropriate to describe their users (Molaro, 2012). Known terms used by librarians for their users included *patrons, customers, members,* and *students* (Pundsack, 2015), with *patrons* and *customers* used most frequently. There were strong opinions on all sides of the debate, often reflecting each librarian's philosophy of librarianship and how they regarded the power balances in interactions between librarians and library users (Barrett, 2012). According to study participants, GCPL administration officially referred to its users as *customers* in all internal and external correspondence.

Public Library System

A public library system is a group of publicly-funded library branches which operate under the same administration and serve a shared jurisdiction (municipality, county, district, etc.). The size, structure, budget, and governance of each public library system varies widely throughout the U.S. (Owens, 1996). On average, public library systems in the U.S. have an annual operating budget of approximately thirty-five dollars per capita (American Library Association, 2015a); by comparison, public schools in the U.S. have an annual operating budget of approximately $13,000 per student (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020).

Readers' Advisory

Readers' advisory (RA) is the practice of recommending books to readers of all ages and is a foundational skill of public librarianship (Crowley, 2005). In order to be highly effective at providing RA, library staff must be well-read, well-connected with colleagues who are also well-read, and highly familiar with the titles that are available in their own library's collection (Vnuk, 2013). Librarians must also be familiar with their patrons and communities in order to make culturally appropriate RA recommendations.

Reference Interview

A reference interview is the transaction that takes place when a customer asks a question and the librarian helps locate the best resources to answer that question (Bopp & Smith, 1995). A librarian's ability to properly identify their customers' information needs is also informed by their degree of cultural awareness. As librarians from the Illinois University Library (2020) describe, differences in cultural communication styles or language barriers may affect how a customer asks for information (especially about potentially sensitive topics) and what standard of service or degree of deference they expect from the librarian in return.

Weeding

Weeding is the process through which librarians select items to be removed from their collection. Items may be weeded if their content is out-of-date or irrelevant, they are no longer circulating after a given period of time, or they are in poor condition (in which case, they may be replaced by new or similar titles if the demand is high).

Positionality

In order to remain transparent, self-reflective, and self-critical in my own work as I seek to answer these questions, I must disclose that I have pre-existing professional relationships with the staff of GCPL, and many GCPL branches are geographically close to my home. I chose to research this library system because of my familiarity with my potential respondents, as well as the logistical convenience and ease of access this site afforded me as a researcher.

In obvious ways, I am an insider of the culture that I explored in this study. Like my participants, I am a public librarian, so I understand the jargon and intricacies of the profession. When I asked participants to share their stories of professional struggles, philosophies, and achievements, I was often able to relate directly to their experiences. However, I made sure to frame our existing relationships carefully; even if I was familiar with a participant's story, I encouraged them to tell it as if I were hearing it for the first time, so that I would not make any assumptions that clouded my understanding of their full meaning. There were also times when my opinions about our roles and responsibilities as public librarians—or about GCPL's degree of cultural relevance— differed significantly from those of my participants. It was necessary for me to maintain appropriate boundaries between myself and my participants in order to encourage a productive dialogue within our interviews and allow them to share their stories freely. I believe that my reporting ultimately reflects a careful balance between rapport and critical examination of my participant's responses.

Privilege

As a researcher-practitioner working with a diverse population, I must

acknowledge my intersectional sociocultural privileges and examine how they inevitably impact my perspective on matters of race and class. Privilege is defined by the National Conference for Community and Justice (2020) as:

> Unearned access to resources and social power that are only readily available to some people because of their social group membership; an advantage or immunity granted to or enjoyed by one societal group above and beyond the common advantage of all other groups.

To be privileged in this way is not to live without personal hardships and struggles; it is to live without personal hardships and struggles that are unduly linked to my social membership within an oppressed minority group (McIntosh, 1988). For example, though a bank may decide to deny me the loan I would need in order to buy a new home, they would not deny me that loan—or hike up the interest rate exorbitantly—because of my skin color (Boehm et al., 2006).

My privilege is manifested in many of my identities: I am a white, cisgender, queer but "straight-passing" (Hayfield et al., 2013), highly-educated, upper-middle class woman working in a professional field comprised mostly in the U.S. of other white, cisgender, college-educated women (Data USA, 2020a; Schlesselman-Tarango, 2016). I am not, as an individual, the best arbiter of which resources are most culturally relevant for each person who utilizes library resources in Green County, especially people of color, people experiencing food and home insecurity, English language learners, and people with disabilities. However, this research allowed me to access a broad set of perspectives from a diverse group of colleagues who contributed their ideas and experiences to the larger conversation about cultural relevance in public libraries.

Epistemology

My theoretical framework, personal history, and commitment to social justice and

equity in public libraries informed my data collection, analysis, and conclusions. My own philosophies of knowledge and interpretations of reality are essential components which framed the specific context of this study (de Gialdino, 2009). I believe that reality is formed and understood through the messiness of lived experiences. Because each person experiences a unique set of life experiences, choices, and intersections of identity, there are as many true realities as there are people. The ethnographic method, which informed my case study design (see Chapter 3), is aligned with this epistemological view because it allows for the uncovering and examining of multiple realities, analyzing where features of individuals' narratives overlap or diverge (Mattingly & Lawlor, 2000).

Drawing from both schema theory (Anderson, 1977) and social constructivist theory (Vygotsky, 1930–1934/1978), I believe that each knower is constantly building and revealing their own understandings of reality by forming connections between knowledge claims within their own minds and in interaction with other knowers around them. Therefore, knowledge is neither singular, objective, nor fixed (Piaget, 1968), but is nonetheless real for each person who creates it. What is true for one may not be true for another, and by sharing our stories, we shape our lives.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, I describe the elements of the theoretical framework for this study, share essential theoretical perspectives on the professional practice of public librarianship, and provide a brief review of the relevant literature on my research topic, including qualitative and quantitative studies on the efficacy of culturally relevant pedagogy and other teaching approaches developed to support students of color.

Theoretical Framework

This case study is based on the theory of culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Here, I present this theoretical framework in further detail.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Ladson-Billings (1995) blazed a trail in the scholarship of teacher education when she presented her grounded theory of CRP. Her objective was to present recommendations for how educators could best support Black students in communities facing poverty and help them achieve academic excellence. However, she simultaneously critiqued the concept of "academic excellence," as the term has been historically defined and maintained by structural white supremacist structures in education (Kendi, 2019). Ladson-Billings (2014) found that the extant literature continually referred to Black students as *at-risk*, *disadvantaged*, or *underachieving*. This language is problematic because it positions Black students as inferior to their white peers, rather than placing the onus on the teachers to provide equitable education.

In the 1980s, such theories as "culturally congruent" (Mohatt & Erickson, 1981, p. 110), "culturally responsive" (Cazden & Leggett, 1981; Erickson & Mohatt, 1982, p. 167), and "culturally compatible" (Jordan, 1985, p. 110; Vogt et al., 1987, p. 281)

pedagogies were being discussed in scholarship and practice. Ladson-Billings (1995) argued that these pedagogies perpetuated assimilationism in the classroom, extending familiar cultural references to students but ultimately asking students to shed their cultural knowledge and unique ways of communicating in order to "succeed" within a homogenized, meritocratic curriculum. Kendi (2019) likewise cautions against the tendency to perpetuate assimilationism when striving for racial justice and equity in education—that is, wanting students of color to strive for acceptance by meeting white standards. Antiracist, culturally relevant educators incorporate many different kinds of knowledge, recognize which types of knowledge are most valid and valuable within each environment, and advocate for standardizing the quality of opportunities for all students, rather than standardizing the curriculum itself (Kendi, 2019).

Over the course of two years, Ladson-Billings (1995) conducted an in-depth study of eight exemplary teachers in a majority-Black, low-income school district in Northern California. These teachers were identified as exemplary by members of their community (e.g., parents, principals, and peers) based on criteria such as: mutual respect fostered in the classroom, students' positive perceptions and experiences, classroom management and classroom teaching skills and strategies, and standardized test scores. Ladson-Billings (1995) collected data in the form of ethnographic interviews with her participants, classroom observations and video recordings, and focus groups wherein the teachers watched portions of each other's teaching videos and analyzed and interpreted their classroom practices as a collaborative.

Criteria of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy. In her research, Ladson-Billings (1995) identified three criteria of culturally relevant teaching: student achievement,

cultural competence, and cultural critique.

   Student Achievement. When evaluating student achievement, scholars and practitioners must be mindful when describing a so-called racial "achievement gap." As Kendi (2019) describes, some of the first IQ tests—and even the SAT—were developed by eugenicists who wanted to prove that white people were innately intellectually superior. Therefore, any appearance of a racial "achievement gap" on standardized assessments is entirely by design, not by nature (Gay, 2018). Readers may be familiar with the Jim Crow-era literacy tests administered to keep people of color from voting (National Museum of American History, 2017). This idea of an academic "achievement gap" is precisely the same: it creates and then exploits illusions of discrepancies in intellectual aptitude and ability between white people and people of color. As Kirkland (2013, p. 126) states clearly: "this tendency toward racial determinism has always been bullshit." While a student's race is not indicative of his or her ability to achieve academically, his or her access to adequate educational resources absolutely is. Due to racist school districting and funding derived from property taxes, students of color in the U.S. are far less likely to receive the access to adequate educational resources that they need (Gross, 2017; U.S. Census Bureau, 2019).

   Kendi (2019), Kirkland (2013), and Ladson-Billings (1995) all promote a more complex, nurturing, humanist idea that all students should be recognized for their different types of achievement, rather than for their different levels of achievement. Ladson-Billings (1995) found that student achievement—measured in many formative and summative ways, and not strictly through standardized measures—was both an indicator and a positive consequence of culturally relevant teaching. Her subjects

recognized and appreciated the inherent value of their students as individual beings and also saw their potential and successes as being far more nuanced and qualitative than could be expressed by a standardized test score. However, these teachers also conceded that standardized assessments are a necessary evil of sorts. Whether or not they believed in the use of standardized assessments as decision-making tools, they still prepared and pushed their students to achieve to their highest ability so they could demonstrate their prowess and swiftly move on to more meaningful work. As a result of this holistic preparation and encouragement, the students in these classes did perform at higher levels on standardized tests than other cohorts in their district, but the teachers still supplemented these gains by deploying well-rounded classroom assessment strategies that allowed students to demonstrate their higher-order thinking skills in reading, writing, speaking, computation, and problem-solving in authentic, engaging, and culturally relevant ways (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Public libraries are uniquely situated to support this criterion of CRP precisely because they are not bound by the demands of high-stakes testing. Public library programs allow students opportunities to express themselves and learn in a community-centered environment free of grades and assessments, which can open their minds to learn about topics they are interested in and at a pace that is just right for them. Future qualitative research may be able to reveal interesting correlations between participation in library programs and higher levels of academic "achievement."

Cultural Competence. Arguably, cultural competence may be the most nuanced—and most commonly misunderstood—criterion of CRP. Ladson-Billings (1995) defines cultural competence as "providing a way for students to maintain their

cultural integrity while succeeding academically" (p. 476). One example she cites is of a teacher in her study who incorporated rap lyrics in her lessons as a way to engage students in poetry. However, in the intervening years, many white educators have latched on to this particular example without further investigation of their own cultural competence, leading to a cheap tokenization of students' cultures with little real impact on the quality of their education (Ladson-Billings, 2014). In order for cultural competence to be true and effective, teachers must allow authentic opportunities for students to teach their peers by embracing and sharing their own cultural values and styles, being mindful not to clumsily assume what those values and styles may be (Ladson-Billings, 1995). One of the most concrete ways to achieve cultural competence in a classroom—and, I propose, in a public library system—is to hire professionals who come from similar racial and cultural backgrounds as their students (and patrons) and who are drawn from the very communities they serve.

  Cultural Critique. Culturally relevant educators help students recognize, understand, and critique social inequities (Ladson-Billings, 1995). In order to do so, they must first be able to recognize, understand, and critique these inequities themselves. As with cultural competence, this is more likely to occur when educators are members of the communities in which they teach, both culturally and geographically. There is a clear positive benefit when Black students are taught by Black teachers (Gershenson et al., 2018); representation is an essential component of highly-effective teaching, cultural communication, and cultural critique (Papageorge et al., 2018). This is not to say that white teachers are unable to develop this skill set—three of the eight exemplary teachers studied by Ladson-Billings were white—but it must be done thoughtfully and through

continued professional development and training (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

   Traits of Culturally Relevant Educators. In describing her theory, Ladson-Billings (1995) identified three categories of traits shared by culturally relevant educators (CRE): (a) positive conceptions of self and others; (b) equitable social relations; and (c) dynamic conceptions of knowledge.

   Conceptions of Self and Others. First, there are at least five ways in which CRE hold high conceptions of themselves and others: (a) believing all learners are capable of success; (b) viewing their own pedagogy as a constantly-evolving art (Gay, 2018); (c) regarding themselves as members of communities in which they teach, rather than as outsiders—or worse, "saviors" (Kirkland, 2013); (d) viewing teaching as a way to give back to their communities; and (e) believing in a mining model of education, rather than a banking model (i.e., pulling out knowledge, rather than depositing it) (Freire, 1968; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

   Social Relations. Second, there are at least four ways in which CRE foster positive social relations within their pedagogical practices: (a) connecting with students; (b) building dynamic, reciprocal relationships; (c) developing a community of learners; and (d) encouraging collaborative learning and shared responsibility between students.

   Conceptions of Knowledge. Finally, CRE hold five essential conceptions of knowledge: (a) viewing knowledge as dynamic and socially constructed; (b) critiquing knowledge claims; (c) having a passion for teaching and learning; (d) using scaffolding strategies to facilitate teaching and learning; and (e) employing multiple means of assessment.

   Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain. Hammond (2015) presents

evidence from neuroscientific research to underscore the necessity of CRP as a foundation for supporting culturally and linguistically diverse students. The research she reviewed shows that educational inequities can actually alter learners' brain function over time, because learners who are not exposed to the same level of engagement and rigor in the classroom as their more privileged peers are less likely to be pushed to grow and become independent, critical thinkers (Boykin & Noguera, 2011; Jackson, 2011). This explanation is just a brief simplification of a complicated set of intertwining phenomena that Hammond (2015) describes over an entire book and comprehensive professional development resources (Hammond, 2021). Therefore, in my brief summary of her work, I do not mean to suggest that culturally and linguistically diverse students are inherently less capable than white students, to whom educational practices are often implicitly or explicitly calibrated (Kozol, 2006; Oakes, 2005).

For example, Hammond (2015) describes the compounding effects of educational inequities between students from majority and minority cultural groups. For example, multiple reports show that in K-12 schools, students of color—especially Black girls— are far more likely than their white peers to be severely punished for minor behavioral infractions (Crenshaw et al., 2015; Green et al., 2020; Nowicki, 2018; Rhor, 2019). The more time that these students spend out of the classroom—whether suspended, expelled, or in police custody—the less time they are receiving valuable instruction (and a basic level of care from their educators) and the further they fall behind in their academic performance. The justified frustration these students experience at this blatantly racist mistreatment too often fuels a self-perpetuating, damaging cycle that becomes a step in the school-to-prison pipeline (Alexander, 2010).

The Culture Tree. Hammond (2015) writes that rather than picturing culture as an iceberg (where what we can see on the surface is just a small percentage of the whole), she pictures culture as a tree. First, she points out that a tree is part of a larger ecosystem that "shapes and impacts its growth and development" (Hammond, 2015, p. 23), rather than an iceberg, which is isolated and inert. Second, she describes how the anatomy of a tree represents three levels of cultural influences: surface, shallow, and deep. In this analogy: (a) surface culture is the leaves and fruit of the tree, what our eyes are first drawn to; (b) shallow culture is the trunk and branches of the tree, what provides the tree structure and stability; and (c) deep culture is the roots of the tree, which nourish the whole (and are usually invisible to the naked eye). Hammond (2015) provides the following examples of each level of culture: (a) surface: music, art, food, and clothing; (b) shallow: eye contact, limits of personal space, and other non-verbal communication; and (c) deep: concepts of self, spirituality, and worldview.

Theory and Practice in Public Libraries

Librarians are Educators. The unifying factor between my theoretical framework, research curiosities, and research site is the informed belief that public librarians are educators (albeit in a less formal, traditional sense than K-12 classroom teachers). Librarians teach information literacy skills, plan their programs for a specific audience, set clear objectives for their participants, may be trained in the developmental stages of their young learners, assess participants' learning progress, and collaborate with local schools to provide increased curricular support . Rawson (2018) asserts that the skills and activities librarians present to their patrons should be shared in culturally meaningful and relevant ways. Many adults—especially renowned writers—regularly

share stories of the librarians who changed their lives and helped them love reading and writing by connecting them with the perfect book at the perfect time (Nastasi, 2013; The New York Times, 2018). When we view the role of librarians through a pedagogical lens, we begin to see their influence far beyond the simple transaction of checking out and returning books, and librarians can plan and shape their work for more long-term results. Patrons benefit from this perspective because in the U.S., they have unconditional access to this venue of free public education throughout their whole lives. Librarians benefit from this perspective because it can provide us with a shared language for continually improving our professional practice.

Whiteness in Libraries. In public libraries across the country, white librarians continually fail to recognize and name the predominance of whiteness within the profession, neglecting key opportunities to build solutions for advancing diversity and equity (Espinal et al., 2018; Wiegand, 2017a). As a result, white librarians continue to implicitly and explicitly commit microaggressions against their colleagues and customers of color, reap the social and economic privileges of whiteness, and uphold the institution of the public library in the U.S. as a "white public space" (Espinal et al., 2018, p. 148), particularly by policing the presence of customers of color and customers experiencing homelessness (Rawson, 2018).

White library professionals must continue to dig deeper into their own biases and privileges order to uproot this deleterious *status quo*. To begin healing the pervasive trauma of racism against colleagues in professional practice, Espinal and colleagues (2018) offer a detailed list of recommendations for how to decenter whiteness in public libraries, including: (a) increasing funding for librarians of color to attend library schools

and professional conferences and participate in ethnic caucuses; (b) financially and systematically re-envisioning the field; (c) developing "programs for the veterans of the racial battles of whiteness" (p. 157); (d) improving hiring practices; and (e) providing advanced and ongoing trainings on stopping micro- and macroaggressions and advancing antiracism.

Staffing. Culturally relevant educators resemble and are recruited from the communities they serve (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Also, Gohr (2017) cautions against the use of "organizational fit" as a criterion for hiring library staff, as this tends to lead—implicitly or explicitly—to white administrators hiring more white employees, regardless of the needs of the community and the organization. This is not to say that white educators and librarians are not capable of practicing CRP to a high standard (Nevarez et al., 2019). However, where white librarians are employed, especially in majority-minority communities, they have a moral responsibility to act as allies for colleagues and customers of color (Miller & Harris, 2018); this requires constant introspection and action on an individual level and deliberate training on the part of library systems (Gay, 2018; Gohr, 2017).

In keeping with Ladson-Billings' (1995) call for cultural critique, Gohr (2017) urges librarians to challenge longstanding traditions of political neutrality within the profession. Librarians' continued silence on issues of racial inequity does not serve a greater good; rather, it perpetuates racial and social inequities (Wiegand, 2017b). Culturally relevant pedagogy in public libraries requires taking a vocal and active stance against racism, hosting diverse programs in collaboration with community leaders and activists, and intentionally directing funds to community members with the greatest levels

of need. Prendergast (2011) reminds librarians of the need to take culturally responsive programs outside of the four walls of the library in order to serve community members with chronic barriers to access.

Library Collections. CRP can provide a valuable and relevant framework for upending white librarianship, in large part because it underscores that stories change significantly depending on the storytellers, and teaching changes significantly depending on the teachers (Adichie, 2009; Gay, 2018). Consider the insidious myth that Christopher Columbus "discovered" a land that was already inhabited by sovereign, Indigenous peoples, or the Declaration of Independence—written by owners of enslaved persons— which famously and hypocritically proclaimed that "all men are created equal." Our nation's white founding stories are enshrined in classrooms, textbooks, and libraries (Bowers et al., 2017). However, when students only hear from white voices, they are told to only imagine the world through a white lens (Adichie, 2009). Within the implicit and explicit rules of a white, cisheteronormative patriarchy, every person that exists outside the confines of what is perceived to be "normal" is considered *other* and is valued less than their socio-politically privileged counterparts (Taylor, 2018).

CRP requires students to have access and exposure to culturally relevant and responsive texts from a wide range of authors and provenances. In a public library, this facet of CRP would be represented in its collection. Sims Bishop (1990) coined the term "mirrors, windows, and sliding doors" to refer to the role that multicultural literature plays in a child's life: literature serves as a mirror in which they can see their own lived experiences, a window through which they can learn about the lived experiences of others, and a sliding door through which they can enter other worlds, have new

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experiences, and gain newfound empathy and emotional intelligence. Therefore, a culturally responsive library collection should reflect all three facets of multicultural literature and materials for all ages. Moreillon (2013) reminds librarians that it is not enough merely for these titles to exist on the shelves; they also must be highlighted and used intentionally in library programs.

Review of Relevant Literature

Evidence for the benefits of CRP for teachers and students in K-12 classrooms is well-documented in the literature from the past twenty-five years. In this review, I have provided several examples of studies which indicate the importance and complexities of CRP and suggest its applicability in ancillary educational settings (such as public libraries).While it has been proposed that CRP can be a highly effective strategy when situated within any set of cultural practices (Ladson-Billings, 1995), to address the majority-Black and growing Latinx population of Green County, I paid special attention in this literature review to discussions of lifting Black and Latinx voices in libraries. There are also important discussions taking place in the literature and in professional practice about the need to lift Native, Indigenous, and First Nations voices in libraries (Bowers et al., 2017; Lee, 2011); in fact, Ladson-Billings' (1995) theory of CRP was largely informed by research on classrooms of Native American and Native Hawaiian students. I endorse the need for additional studies outside of the proposed research in order to better meet the unique needs of Indigenous library users through CRP.

Qualitative Studies

Wanting to understand teachers' perspectives of CRP and believing that "teachers' voices are missing in the national discourse about educational success,"

Borrero et al. (2018, p. 36) conducted focus group interviews with thirteen pre- and in-service teachers who were completing their credentialing process or finishing their first year of teaching. The authors found the following: (a) respondents considered CRP to be a valuable framework because it can help correct common misperceptions that one's culture is comprised only of one's racial and ethnic background; (b) respondents recognized that academic success is "often [equated] to assimilation into the dominant culture" (p. 28) and that CRP can be used as a tool to challenge these deep-seated racist notions; (c) CRP is valuable because it introduces counternarratives into the curriculum, allowing students to assess multiple perspectives for greater empathy and critical thinking; (d) CRP "authentically [centers] students' lived experiences" (p. 29) in a way that supports everyone in the classroom, including teachers; and (e) CRP helps build strong classroom communities and a foundation of trust between teachers and students. These teachers also identified what they considered to be some of the challenges of implementing CRP, including: (a) not knowing how to integrate CRP while still meeting seemingly endless administrative demands and constant assessment cycles; and (b) not having access to experienced mentors and role models who could demonstrate how CRP works within a daily teaching practice. This study is limited due to: (a) its small sample size; (b) the fact that all of the respondents were brand-new to their teaching practice (so they had little professional experience to draw from when sharing their concerns about attempting CRP); and (c) as with other studies in this review, it does not examine the professional practice of librarians. However, it does illustrate that there is still work to be done to make CRP accessible to new educators, not as a fad or trend but as an essential component of their work.

In an ethnographic case study of a diverse early childhood education program (comprised of twenty-eight students, nine parents, and fifty-one teachers) in the Midwest U.S., Durden et al. (2015) found through a series of surveys, interviews, and program observations that CRP can be a viable and valuable framework for teaching children as young as two years old. These teachers used a variety of media, toys, games, and student-made artwork to expose students to diverse cultures and family backgrounds, brought in guests from the community to share different cultural experiences, and encouraged students' unique expressions and approaches to language. The authors also found that the teachers were constantly learning new culturally relevant practices and approaches from their students, just as their students were learning from them. The authors specifically address the need for more quantitative inquiries into CRP in order to further validate their findings; they also suggest the need for research on CRP across diverse educational settings, including after-school programs, private and charter schools, and community educational programs (such as those provided by public libraries).

In a qualitative case study of one white middle school science teacher in the southeast U.S. over two school years (comprised of multiple teaching observations and semi-structured interviews), Milner (2011) found that his subject, "Mr. Hall," demonstrated many of the traits of a culturally relevant educator. Mr. Hall maintained high expectations for his students, fostered respect and caring connections in his classroom and within the community, and recognized multiple types of academic success (including participation and engagement). Critically, Mr. Hall recognized that as a white man teaching in a racially diverse school, he had to address this power dynamic head-on: he could not pretend to be "color-blind" (Wingfield, 2015). At times when his students

accused him of being racist, he reflected on that feedback personally as well as incorporating it into the constant improvement of his practice. In these moments, he modeled cultural competence for his students by telling them more about his own personal background, so that they might find common ground and feel more comfortable opening up to him in similar ways. Likewise, in a targeted training intervention with preservice teachers, Gunn et al. (2013) found that when educators intentionally reflect on their cultural backgrounds and privileges in the process of developing a culturally relevant pedagogy, they become more self-aware of their own teaching behaviors and more responsive to the learning needs of their individual students.

However, due to a number of complex internal and external factors, not all white educators are as successful as Mr. Hall in their CRP implementation. For example, in a case study of a white elementary school teacher in the Midwest U.S. over two school years, Hyland (2009) found that her subject, "Andrea," wanted to be a great teacher and exhibited many of the traits of a culturally relevant educator, but she struggled to build meaningful relationships with her students' families and within the community. In reading back transcripts of her own words to the researcher, Andrea realized that despite her best intentions, she was struggling with a deficit mindset (e.g., assuming that only certain types of parents were capable of or willing to read to their children at home). She was highly self-conscious of being a white teacher in a majority-Black community, and instead of leveraging that discomfort into growth, as Mr. Hall did (Milner, 2011), she remained insulated from the community and kept struggling to connect. This struggle hardened into a damaging mindset, as she began to wonder aloud why she was being expected to spend her limited time forging relationships with families in the first place.

Hyland (2009) suggests that had Andrea known that she did not need to attempt this relationship-building on her own—in other words, if she had administrative and collegial support and the philosophies of culturally relevant pedagogy were embraced and enacted schoolwide—she may have felt less overwhelmed and had more success connecting with her students' families and diving into the deep work of CRP. This study suggests that more research is needed on the efficacy of institutional implementations of CRP (such as schoolwide, districtwide, or in public libraries), as opposed to single case studies which are illuminating but beg further context.

In a review of the literature, Nevarez et al. (2019) found that the presence of a diverse teaching staff, which is essential to the criteria of cultural competence and cultural critique (Ladson-Billings, 1995), enhances social justice through civic engagement, develops an inclusive school culture, provides role models for students of color, and even supports white students by expanding their perspectives and points of reference. Similarly, in a qualitative study of pre-service teachers in a rural U.S. state, Nganga (2015) found that CRP-based training increased cultural self-awareness and effective application of anti-bias curricula among respondents.

In summary, while none of the qualitative studies reviewed here focus on the role of CRP in public libraries (as that connection is the basis of my original research), they are still valuable as a foundation for the proposed study because they help explicate why CRP is important and useful, how practitioners approach the application of CRP (including where they succeed and where they may struggle), and under what circumstances CRP can be most successful.

Quantitative Studies

To date, quantitative evidence supporting the efficacy of CRP is still rather limited (Aceves & Orosco, 2014); however, there are at least two notable examples. In a quantitative survey of 315 secondary students nationwide, Byrd (2011) found that culturally relevant teaching practices were correlated with better academic outcomes and positive student self-concepts. In this study, Byrd (2011) also found that teachers must remain mindful and measured in their approaches to CRP in order to promote feelings of inclusion and acceptance for their students of diverse backgrounds, rather than alienation and otherness. In a multiple regression analysis of survey responses from almost two hundred urban high school students of color, Perry (2008) found that a "positively internalized racial self-concept" (p. 403) (i.e., high self-esteem of one's racial and cultural backgrounds) is positively correlated with school engagement (both in attitudes and behaviors), student achievement, and educational attainment. Likewise, in a series of meta-analyses of forty-six studies of child development, Rivas-Drake et al. (2014) found that this construct of racial self-concept—which they call "positive ethnic-racial affect"— is associated with positive social relationships, academic achievement, academic attitudes, and overall well-being. Such racial and cultural self-esteem is developed in part through the practices of culturally relevant educators (Borrero & Yeh, 2011; Gay, 2018), including: maintaining high expectations of all students; fostering authentic engagement; critiquing the knowledge claims of the majority; making meaningful connections; and building a community of learners.

As illustrated above, it is clear in the extant literature that while culturally relevant pedagogy is still a constant topic of conversation in educational theory and in

professional practice, there is still much we need to learn about how it operates in various

settings, whether the educators who believe they are being faithful to the theory actually

are, and how far we may be able to extend the theory outside of traditional classrooms.

Therefore, I believe that my proposed research is well-suited to fill a clear gap in the

literature and present new and exciting possibilities for how we can explore an existing

theory for the benefit of culturally diverse communities through the public libraries

embedded within.

CHAPTER 3: METHOD

In this chapter, I present my two primary research questions, discuss how my research questions informed my methodological approach, and describe the steps I took to collect and analyze the data.

Research Questions

My two guiding research questions were:

1) Which criteria of culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) (i.e., learner achievement, cultural competence, and cultural critique) and which traits of culturally relevant educators (CRE) (i.e., positive conceptions of self and others, equitable social relations, and dynamic conceptions of knowledge) are evident in the staffing, services, and structure of a public library system in a diverse service area?

2) How does the staff of this public library system perceive the importance of culturally relevant practices and apply these practices in their work?

Research Design

In order to address these questions, I employed a qualitative case study design, conducting my data collection and analysis through an ethnographic lens. The population of this study was the staff of Green County Public Library (GCPL), a suburban library system serving a majority-Black county in the northeastern U.S.. On September 18. 2020, GCPL's Chief Executive Officer (CEO), Chief Operating Officers (COOs), and Human Resources Director (HRD) approved my request to conduct a case study of this population. Primary data were collected through interviews and member checks with a sample of GCPL staff; secondary data were collected from supplemental sources shared by members of GCPL administration.

The Ethnographic Lens

Ethnography is the qualitative study of a particular culture or set of cultural practices through participant observation and engagement (Crang & Cook, 2007). Because culture is the focal point in ethnography and in my theoretical framework, I originally intended to conduct this study as an ethnography. However, ethnographies are typically the result of extensive, longitudinal fieldwork. Current guidelines in place to protect library staff, the general public, and research participants from exposure to COVID-19 prevented me from being able to conduct research in this way. Therefore, I allowed features of ethnography to inform my research design, but this is ultimately a qualitative case study.

Ideal v. Manifest. One of the main roles of the ethnographer is to identify, from their perspective as observer, where a cultural group's stated ideals coincide or conflict with their actual behaviors (Heath and Street, 2008). For example, while an organization may claim to be committed to diversity, equity, and inclusion, the actual demographic makeup of their staff or clientele—or attitudes and practices within the organization— may tell a much different story. Ethnographers are also interested in tracing how the ideals and practices of a cultural group may have changed over time without the members of the group even being aware that those changes had occurred (Heath and Street, 2008). This investigation of ideals and practices requires hearing from a wide range of perspectives within a group, which is why I attempted to draw a large, broad sample for this study.

Power and Politics. Because cultural groups are constantly shaped and acted upon by internal and external forces and conditions (Crang & Cook, 2007), the study of

cultural practices through ethnography commonly focuses on the effects of power and politics on marginalized and disenfranchised populations. As discussed in Chapter 2, librarians must reckon with the racist histories of our profession and examine where and how we perpetuate whiteness within our institutions. This interplay of power and politics is also highly relevant to public librarians because our primary source of funding—tax revenue—is inextricably tied to political bodies and processes.

Population

At the time of this study, GCPL had 364 staff members on its payroll, including full-time, part-time, salaried, and hourly employees (all of whom were considered to be a part of this population). Descriptive data for the study population (see Table 1) were drawn from GCPL employees' responses to the Employer Information Report EEO-1 (EEO-1), a survey instrument federally mandated by the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (2020) and completed at each employee's time of hire. At my request, and with permission from the CEO, a selection of anonymized EEO-1 data were shared with me by the HRD. What these data do not account for is whether each demographic group is equitably represented in each level of the organization (i.e., whether higher-paid positions are more likely to be staffed by white employees, or whether employees of color are more likely to be employed in support positions rather than in professional or paraprofessional positions).

Table 1

Demographics of Study Sample and Population

Factor	Sample	Population (Specified)	Population (All)
Gender			
n	30	358	364
% female	76.7	66.2	65.1
% male	23.3	33.8	33.2
% unspecified	--	--	1.7
Race/Ethnicity			
n	30	260	364
% Black/African American	43.3	48.0	34.3
% white	46.7	27.3	19.5
% Hispanic or Latino	3.33	17.7	12.6
% two or more races	3.33	5.4	3.9
% Asian	3.33	1.2	0.8
% American Indian/Alaska Native	0.0	0.4	0.3
% unspecified	--	--	28.6
Gender x Race/Ethnicity			
n	30	258	364
% Black/African American female	40.0	34.5	24.5
% Black/African American male	3.33	14.0	9.9
% white female	30.0	18.6	13.2
% white male	16.68	8.1	5.8
% Hispanic or Latino female	3.33	12.4	8.8
% Hispanic or Latino male	3.33	5.4	3.8
% two or more races – female	0.0	3.5	2.5
% two or more races – male	0.0	1.9	1.4
% Asian female	3.33	0.0	0.0
% Asian male	0.0	1.2	0.8
% American Indian/Alaska native female	0.0	0.0	0.0
% American Indian/Alaska native male	0.0	0.4	0.3
% unspecified (gender or race/ethnicity)	--	--	29.0

Note. Population (Specified) denotes those members of the study population who

identified their gender and/or race/ethnicity on the EEO-1, as well as the proportions of

this subtotal represented by each self-identified demographic category. Population (All)

denotes all members of the study population, as well as the proportions of this grand total represented by each self-identified demographic category.

Sample

From my population, I drew a sample of thirty participants to interview. I believe that drawing such a sizable sample allowed me to collect a wide range of perspectives from the population and helped me achieve saturation of common themes discussed across respondents. Descriptive data for the study sample were collected through a demographic survey completed by each participant (Appendix A).

There was one notable discrepancy between my demographic survey and the EEO-1 report. In my survey, I asked participants to describe their ethnicity (Hispanic/Latino or not Hispanic/Latino) separately from their race; therefore, one could self-identify as white, Black, etc., and also as Hispanic or Latino. However, the EEO-1 data provided to me by GCPL measure race and ethnicity within one category. While my survey data offer a more nuanced description of my sample, for the purpose of determining how well my sample represents my population, I chose to likewise combine race and ethnicity into one category. If a participant self-identified as Hispanic or Latino on my survey, I classified them as such in my analysis, rather than by their racial self-identification. This is an imperfect solution to the problems inherent in identifying one's racial and cultural backgrounds through limited survey responses.

Ultimately, because over one-quarter of GCPL employees elected not to self-identify their race/ethnicity or gender on the EEO-1, it is difficult to say with certainty whether my sample adequately represents the GCPL population (see Table 1). However, anecdotal accounts suggest that the sample is generally representative of the population. I

conducted member checks with approximately half of my sample, and the majority of this

subset agreed with the statement *the demographics of the study sample (by gender and*

race) adequately represent the population of GCPL staff. One respondent felt that there

were not enough data available for them to form an opinion, but none disagreed or

strongly disagreed with the statement.

 Recruitment. After receiving approval from the St. John's University

Institutional Review Board (IRB) (Appendix B), I employed a multi-tiered approach to

recruiting study participants. First, I emailed GCPL branch managers, department heads,

executives, and other members of the population with whom I had existing relationships.

I invited them to participate in this research study and asked them to share the invitation

with any employees in their departments whom they felt would be interested in

participating. Cooperation from GCPL administration allowed me to access lists of email

addresses to easily reach out to large groups of GCPL staff at one time. I gathered

approximately half of my sample from responses to these emails alone.

 Second, GCPL management maintains a weekly internal bulletin that is required

to be read by all staff; this bulletin is hosted on a password-protected cloud platform. I

contacted GCPL's Office of Media Relations and asked them to share the recruitment

flyer (Appendix C) and a link to a recruitment letter in the staff bulletin for the week of

January 11, 2021. GCPL administration approved this strategy in our initial discussions

about my request to conduct this research. I received a few email responses from staff in

response to this phase of recruitment.

 Third, I asked for permission from supervisors and department heads to attend

two supervisors' meetings: one for branch managers and one for the supervisors of

circulation departments at each branch. I was allowed a few minutes at the start of each meeting to share my call for participation and ask supervisors to encourage their staff to participate. Staff were to be informed that this request was outside the scope of their job duties and that their supervisors held no implicit or explicit expectations for them to volunteer their time.

Fourth, I sent follow-up targeted emails to the CEO and COOs, asking if they would like to share their perspectives on the cultural relevance of GCPL's staffing, services, and structure from an administrative perspective. In order to protect the privacy of my participants, I am unable to disclose how many of these executives agreed to be interviewed for this research (as this may make them more easily identifiable by a reader familiar with GCPL).

Finally, as I was nearing the end of sample collection, I reviewed the demographic surveys completed by my respondents and found that men and Hispanic or Latino staff were significantly underrepresented in my sample compared to their representation within the GCPL population. I asked staff members with whom I had pre-existing professional relationships to provide specific recommendations for colleagues I might interview from these demographic categories. I received several positive responses with this approach, but ultimately, these two groups are still not strongly represented within my sample.

Instruments

Primary Data. I utilized three instruments for primary data collection: (1) a participant demographic survey (Appendix A); (2) a semi-structured interview protocol (Appendix D); and (3) myself as the researcher.

Researcher as Instrument. One unique feature of ethnography, which I borrowed for this case study, is that the researcher intentionally and visibly acts as an instrument of data collection and analysis (Heath & Street, 2008). Some ethnographers describe how this visible presence of the researcher in the work reflects a more feminist approach to scholarship, in contrast to a masculinist, objectivist approach which suggests that the researcher is somehow detached from their own motivations and interpretations (Crang & Cook, 2007). Ethnographers contend that the tradition of social scientists claiming to be bearers of objective truths has always been false (Ladson-Billings, 1995); such a positionality attempts to bestow the researcher with undue authority over the life experiences of another. Instead, the researcher is like a photographer taking a snapshot of their subject. One might claim that there is no subjectivity in a photograph—that it is simply a reflection of what the inanimate lens captured—but that is simply not true. The photographer frames the shot, decides which subjects will be included or excluded from the image, chooses which elements of the scene will be rendered in hard or soft focus, and directs the overall composition. What that means in the context of this case study is that I, from within my own positionality, developed my interview protocol, brought my professional experiences and biases to the research, and shaped the course of the study by articulating research questions that described my own curiosities.

Secondary Data. Additionally, I utilized reports from three sources for secondary data collection: (1) the EEO-1*,* with select data provided to me by GCPL's HRD; (2) the Diverse BookFinder Collection Analysis Tool (DBF CAT) (Aronson, 2019), with data provided to me by GCPL's Director of Collection Development (DCO); and (3) internal

GCPL accounting of library program attendance, with data provided to me in cooperation with members of GCPL administration.

Data Collection

I collected data between January and March 2021. It is important to place this study in context by saying that the world was contending with the traumatic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to social distancing guidelines, interviews took place and were recorded on Zoom.

Interviews

I conducted semi-structured virtual interviews with GCPL staff who responded to the call for participation. Due to scheduling conflicts, one participant provided written responses to interview questions via email, rather than meeting for a one-on-one conversation. I conducted member checks via email for clarification on recurring or complex themes. Because I have positive relationships and rapport with colleagues throughout GCPL, I believe that my participants felt comfortable speaking openly and honestly during our interviews, allowing me to gather rich, reliable data. However, I do recognize the risk for several biases in this approach.

Protocol. I developed my interview protocol (Appendix D) through a careful reading of my theoretical framework and my own professional experiences as a public librarian, developing prompts that would help provide answers to my primary research questions. Hammond's (2015) metaphor of a "culture tree" for conceptualizing and classifying the various aspects of culture (see Chapter 2) also provided an essential guide for my interviews. First, it challenged me to center a more nuanced concept of culture and break the habit of equating *culture* with *race*, both for myself and for my research

participants. Second, it helped me direct my participants to provide deeper self-reflection in their responses. In order to fully understand the cultural values of other groups, we must first be able to understand and articulate our own (U.S. Department of State, 2021). Therefore, I often asked participants to first describe their own cultural practices and beliefs, using Hammond's (2015) "culture tree" as a guide and encouraging them to think beyond the most visible elements of surface culture.

Privacy. In order to protect my participants' privacy and confidentiality, I stored all consent documents, demographic surveys, recordings of Zoom meetings, and interview transcripts on a password-protected hard drive. In order to protect the anonymity of all parties, I redacted or disguised all personal identifying information and allusions to other people inside or outside of the study. I chose not to use pseudonyms in this manuscript—simply providing direct quotations without any names—so that readers would not be able to connect details across responses that might make certain participants more easily identifiable. In order to avoid identifying the gender of any participant (in most cases), I used the singular *they* when referring to individuals, a style choice endorsed by the American Psychological Association (APA Style, 2019).

Procedure. Each interested participant contacted me directly in order to schedule an interview on Zoom. Per the conditions set by GCPL administration, all interviews took place outside of scheduled work hours. After we confirmed the appointed time for our interviews, I asked my respondents to complete and return the participant consent form (Appendix E) and demographic survey (Appendix A) prior to our meeting.

During our interviews, I began by reminding my participants of the nature and scope of the study, saying that I wanted to hear their perspectives on the cultural

relevance of GCPL's staffing, services, and structure. I used my interview protocol as a guideline, but I also allowed my respondents to lead our conversations based on which questions were most relevant to their own experiences. I allowed time at the end of each interview for participants to ask questions and share additional thoughts or clarifying details to support any of their previous responses. Each interview lasted from one to two hours, with the average interview lasting about 75 minutes.

Library Collection Assessment

In the course of my interviews, multiple participants shared that GCPL's Collection Development Office (CDO) is conducting an ongoing, systemwide diversity audit of its collection. In the first stage of this auditing process, the CDO utilized a research-based instrument—the Diverse BookFinder Collection Analysis Tool (DBF CAT) (Aronson, 2019)—to help evaluate the diversity and representation within their collection of children's picture books. At my request, GCPL's Director of Collection Development shared the findings from the DBF CAT report for consideration in this study.

Program Attendance

In order to maintain continuous funding from the state, other local government agencies, and various grants, GCPL administration retains a highly-detailed account of program attendance for every program at every branch, going back at least five years. These historical data help evaluate effective program strategies, target community outreach efforts, and illustrate the usage of the library system throughout Green County.

Prior to the shift to virtual library programming in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, these data were collected manually: at the end of each program, library staff

responsible for coordinating each program within each branch would complete a Google

Form that listed the name of the program, the intended audience by age, and the number

of children and adults in attendance. These data were sent directly to GCPL's Business

Analytics Manager (BAM), who runs statistical analyses on these data to present to

community leaders, stakeholders, and the GCPL Board of Trustees. After the shift to

virtual library programming in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, GCPL's data

collection strategy for program attendance changed drastically. Now, the BAM is able to

collect engagement data directly from the back end of GCPL's online platforms,

including Facebook, YouTube, Crowdcast, and Eventbrite. Because these online

platforms allow staff to reach customers around the world (and not just those who can

physically attend at a particular branch), GCPL's virtual programs are considered to be

systemwide initiatives and reflective of the system's performance as a whole, rather than

that of any one particular branch.

With cooperation from GCPL administration, I was granted access to view all

GCPL historical program attendance data for in-person and virtual programs. I was given

permission to log in to the graphical user interface for their cloud-based data management

service and explore the variables as needed. I have used these data to paint a broad

picture of programming throughout the system and provide context for a variety of

interview responses. However, a thorough, qualitative examination of the cultural

relevance of GCPL's programming falls outside the scope of this study.

Data Analysis

Transcription

I acquired a verbatim transcript of each interview by uploading the audio files to the cloud-based transcription service Otter (www.otter.ai). To maintain efficiency, I conducted interviews and transcriptions concurrently. Otter produced relatively accurate transcriptions, but did not always reliably identify professional jargon, proper names, or varying dialects, particularly among my Black respondents. This phenomenon of racial bias in artificial intelligence and automated speech recognition (ASR) systems is becoming more widely-recognized. A recent study found that the five most prominent ASRs (those developed by Amazon, Apple, Google, IBM, and Microsoft) were almost twice as likely to misidentify the words of Black speakers than those of white speakers (Koenecke et al., 2020), especially when Black speakers used linguistic features of African-American Vernacular English such as the habitual/invariant *be* (Zanuttini & Martin, 2017). Therefore, I reviewed and edited each transcript while replaying each recording in order to ensure accuracy and fidelity to the original audio. After verifying the accuracy of each transcript, I downloaded the texts as Microsoft Word documents.

Coding

Because the purpose of this research study was to examine an existing theory in a new context, I used the criteria of CRP to create a deductive, top-down coding scheme for my data. Before I began coding my interview transcripts, I identified three *a priori* categories: (a) perceptions of cultural relevance; (b) criteria of culturally relevant pedagogy (subcategories: learner achievement, cultural competence, and cultural critique); and (c) traits of culturally relevant educators (subcategories: positive

conceptions of self and others, equitable social relations, and dynamic conceptions of

knowledge). As I reviewed each transcript, I coded each piece of data that was relevant to

my research questions and/or represented a recurring theme among participants. The

distinctions between themes were not always immediately apparent: topics of

conversation occasionally overlapped or shared features across multiple themes. When

this ambiguity occurred, I used my discretion as a researcher-practitioner to classify the

data using the most appropriate code. For example, participants' statements about

GCPL's responses to the Black Lives Matter Movement were coded as *racial inequity*.

Other codes I used in my analysis included: *relationships with patrons; professional*

development; and *materials/collections.* I examined each code to determine which

category provided the best fit. I repeated the process of categorization for each code I

assigned to my data.

I then created a planning document for each interview transcript. I copied and

pasted all coded excerpts from the transcripts into the corresponding planning documents,

nesting each excerpt under the appropriate category and subcategory. I also highlighted

all passages where I intended to quote my participants directly in the final report. Next, I

created a spreadsheet in Microsoft Excel to gather the data from these planning

documents in one location. Each column was labeled by category and subcategory, and

each row was labeled with the initials of a participant. I copied and pasted the coded

excerpts from the planning documents into the appropriate cells. This allowed me to

easily read down each column and see all of the interview data clearly separated by topic.

It also allowed me to easily see which topics were discussed most and least frequently

and where participants' responses converged or diverged within each topic. These

similarities and differences formed the basis of my narrative summaries for each element of the theoretical framework.

Reporting

If I had conducted a proper ethnography, I might have chosen to present each participant's responses within a larger social context by weaving demographic descriptors (such as their gender, age, race/ethnicity, and tenure in GCPL) into the report of my findings. However, given my existing relationships with my study participants—and the possibility that those relationships could make participants more easily identifiable by readers within my professional community—I determined that describing individual participants, even in such basic terms, could jeopardize their confidentiality and anonymity as members of this study. I only highlighted the racial identity of certain participants in the specific context of conversations about the Black Lives Matter movement, in order to uplift Black voices.

When reporting data collected during interviews, I had to consider how my inclusion of a participant's exact phrasing had the capacity to represent (or misrepresent) their intended messages. For example, multiple meanings can be suggested through wordplay or sarcasm, which can then be difficult to capture on paper. Therefore, I followed two of Crang and Cook's (2007) recommendations for creating valid and reliable representations of my data: (a) I allowed for longer passages of direct quotations, offering the speakers space on the page to express their personalities and tell as much of their stories as possible; and (b) I often represented my interviews as mutual conversations between me and my respondents, maintaining transparency by including my own words where I felt that they provided necessary context or meaningfully guided

the flow of conversation. It is important for the reader to see where I as the researcher chose to bring my own perspective to these interviews; for example, I cannot claim to hold a neutral stance on the need for public library staff to be antiracist leaders in their communities.

When including participants' responses verbatim, I did so to the fullest extent possible while still protecting their anonymity and maintaining readability (e.g., editing excerpts for clarity by combining sentence fragments and removing filler words). Where common phrases were repeated across multiple respondents or fragments of stories were not fully developed, I determined that direct transcriptions were not necessary in reporting my data. In these cases, I paraphrased, summarized, and combined responses that all addressed the same theme.

I made the deliberate choice in reflecting my participants' speech patterns to not use the notation [*sic*], which typically indicates what the writer to believes to be another's error or misuse of language. I agree with contemporary criticisms that the use of [*sic*] when transcribing an individual's speech or writing is not only obtrusive, but also unnecessarily pedantic and elitist (Carey, 2014). A person's dialect and word choices are unique expressions of their identity and experiences. I followed Heath's (1983) example of presenting vernacular speech without applying value judgments, which I believe ultimately leads to a more faithful and respectful presentation of the data.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

In this chapter, I present the findings from my data collection and analysis within the structure of my theoretical framework. First, I provide a brief overview of what the term *culture* meant to participants in this study. Then, I establish evidence for my claim that public librarians are educators, including relevant data from my field site and interviews with research participants. This claim provides the logical basis for my argument that culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) can be used as a framework to describe and improve the professional practice of public librarianship. Next, I share my respondents' perceptions of culturally relevant practices and the importance of these practices in their work. I order the findings of my data analysis thematically based on the three criteria of CRP (learner achievement, cultural competence, and cultural critique) and the three categories of traits of culturally relevant educators (CRE) (positive conceptions of self and others, equitable social relations, and dynamic conceptions of knowledge), further categorizing the data into the subtopics defined by Ladson-Billings (1995).

Culture is Multi-Faceted

During our interviews, participants discussed many possible definitions and interpretations of the term *culture*. As Hammond (2015) describes, culture is multi-faceted and exists on several levels of consciousness. Although cultures are often informed by racial and ethnic influences, they also go far beyond these. Many participants were quick to share that they did not want the word *culture* to be seen as synonymous with *race*, just as the words *diverse* and *urban* are too often used as a sloppy shorthand for *Black* or *brown* (Watson, 2011). Participants also recognized the subtleties

and differences that exist within each cultural group and how those affect their

professional practice. For example, one participant said:

> As library staff, we have to know what works best for each group. But let's say
> we train our staff about the cultural norms of a particular group that doesn't
> believe in making direct eye contact because they consider it to be disrespectful.
> And then here comes someone walking into the library who looks exactly like
> they belong to that cultural group, but they're the children or grandchildren of
> immigrants, they were born here, and they consider themselves to be 100%
> American. Their cultural needs might not necessarily align with what we as staff
> were trained for. So that learning process is always fluid. How do you
> successfully interact with each person, remain useful to them, and get them to see
> your value? It requires lots of creativity. And you definitely make some mistakes
> along the way.

Participants' understanding of the many similarities, differences, and intersections

that occur within and between cultural groups were insightful and expansive. They

discussed all of the following in terms of their impacts on a person's cultural background

and how that background is expressed: sexuality; gender identity; immigrant status;

native language; upbringing (including multi-generational living, family structure, and

time spent living in a single community); age; education level; and political affiliation.

As one participant explained:

> In the part of Green County where I work, we have true diversity in every sense
> of the word: socioeconomic, education levels, race, ethnicity... so there's an
> interesting spectrum in terms of what the needs are and how to meet those needs.
> We also have the highest percentage in the county of immigrants, first-generation
> kids, and speakers of other languages. The majority of households in our area are
> majority non-English speaking. So that's another sort of wrinkle to things. And all
> but one of the 30 elementary schools in our area [there are 123 elementary schools
> in the county overall] are Title I schools. So you've got a lot of things going on.
> Sometimes a person's country of origin is in conflict with the country of origin of
> the person they live next door to, or who they're sitting next to in the library. We
> have to be aware of all of these cultural facets and not treat any community as a
> monolith. If I were to ask people "what does it mean to be American?," I don't
> think you could have two people agree on what that means, culturally.

Participants also discussed how a person's cultural background might influence their perceptions of the roles of public servants, particularly in libraries. For example, several participants discussed their experiences working with immigrants from countries in western Africa. Six participants felt that these patrons were more likely to attempt to haggle or demand to have their fined and fees or reduced or to have library rules bent in their favor. Participants also believed that these patrons were more likely to view librarians as personal servants, rather than as educators, in ways participants often perceived as brusque and demeaning. While I did not collect enough data to corroborate these broad claims (and I therefore hesitate to endorse them), it is important to note where participants' responses converged on this topic, because it represents a broader theme within this study. That is, participants recognized how patrons' cultural backgrounds can affect how they approach their library experiences and expectations, as well as how library staff approach their needs.

Because culture is such an expansive and complex topic, many participants discussed the need for library staff to be continually well-trained in cultural relevance and responsiveness, a theme I address further later in this chapter. Most importantly, all participants agreed that Green County is too large and the population so diverse on any number of measures to be seen as having one defining culture. Said one participant: "you always hear Green County described as majority-Black, and that's statistically true. But even that only tells you so much, because no two Black people think and act the same, or need the same things."

Public libraries are uniquely equipped to support these many facets and intersections of culture within communities (McGuire, 2020). They are "third spaces"

(Elmborg, 2011; Montgomery & Miller, 2011) that are meant to exist for everyone, regardless of race/ethnicity, cultural background, income, physical ability, religion, or political affiliation (American Library Association, 2015b). Said one participant: "public libraries are one of the only remaining places where you can go and just *be*. You don't have to spend any money, and on principle, it's really hard for you to get kicked out." Therefore, because we intend to attract and serve wide audiences with a range of cultural backgrounds and influences, I believe that public librarians should adopt a culturally relevant pedagogy in order to best serve all members of our communities. I believe my informed suggestion that public librarians adopt a particular pedagogy also suggests the potential for us to view public librarians as educators.

Public Librarians are Educators

Some scholars and practitioners may argue that because public librarians do not follow prescribed curricula in their programming, are not universally required to be trained in human development or pedagogical methods, and do not formally assess their patrons' learning progress, then they should not be considered educators. However, as discussed in Chapter 2, the professional literature describes public librarians' essential functions of teaching and sharing information with their patrons. Supported by this literature, I maintain—both from my own experience in the field and detailed responses from my research participants—that public librarians play an important role as educators in their communities.

However, the extent to which public librarians actually are recognized as educators in their communities may vary widely by region, or even by individual library system. The state where this research took place takes an official stance on the matter: it

certifies public librarians throughout the state under the same governing body which certifies its K-12 educators. Therefore, it could be assumed that the state recognizes the role of public librarians as educators, even if individual citizens have differing opinions.

Additionally, GCPL recently adopted a strategic framework for 2021-2024 that includes five focus areas, including one called *Literacy and Learning.* Therefore, it can be assumed that the organization of GCPL recognizes its role as an educational institution, even if individual staff members may have differing opinions on how that mission is to be achieved. According to the strategic framework, GCPL envisions that it will be a place for teaching and learning critical thinking, communication, and literacy, and a place for patrons to access educational tools and resources to be equipped for the 21st-century economy. The strategic framework also describes the system's vision of becoming a place for community partners to convene in support of multi-disciplinary, intergenerational, and project-based learning.

The majority of the members of my sample recognized and embraced their role as educators, though the definition of "educator" in this context varied between professionals. Twenty-nine of my study participants (~97%) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement *public librarians are educators*. A few of these respondents had previous classroom teaching experience to draw from as a basis for comparison. It is important to consider that these responses may reflect a self-selection bias; those members of my population who were motivated to volunteer their time for my study and who recognized that I was researching a topic in the field of education may have already been more likely to connect with the idea of public librarians being educators.

When asked to elaborate on their responses (both in an open-ended question on

the demographic survey and in conversation during our interviews), participants

repeatedly used words such as *lifelong learning, engaging, evaluating, exploring,*

inspiring, providing access, serving, facilitating, assisting, and *building relationships.*

Participants shared several examples of specific teaching moments in their work,

including leading STEM programs for K-12 students, facilitating book discussions,

teaching customers how to use computers, and showing customers how to find and

evaluate resources online and in the library collection. Said one participant: "Public

librarians educate customers every day. We offer ways for people who want to learn and

better themselves to come together in one place." Several participants mentioned key

differences between public librarians and classroom educators, acknowledging that public

librarians do not formally assess their learners' performance, do not follow a standardized

curriculum, and do not regularly deliver formalized lessons. However, they still

expressed the belief that they serve an important educational role in their communities.

Said one participant: "teaching may not be everything we do, but it is a huge part of what

we do." Said another: "although the work we do as librarians is not formalized in the

same manner as teachers, our work is similar to that of classroom teachers in its

importance to society at large."

One participant who had previous classroom teaching experience strongly

disagreed that public librarians are educators. When I acknowledged that it may not be

prudent to draw a direct 1:1 comparison between classroom teaching and public

librarianship, they said:

> I still don't think that librarians approach reference interviews with an objective in
> mind to teach something specific, the way teachers do when they write lesson
> plans. In libraries, it's really more customer-driven, isn't it? They tell us what
> they need and we help them find it.

I explained that culturally relevant pedagogy embraces a more learner-driven experience that challenges traditional power dynamics in education (in this case, letting customers steer their learning), but I could see that they still strongly disagreed with my premise. When I asked as a follow-up, "would you agree that when we plan a program, we have a specific objective in mind for what our customers will learn or be able to do as a result of attending that program?," they replied, "no, I just don't see it that way." Their response illustrates the need for future research to explore the range of public librarians' beliefs on this topic and examine how their beliefs may inform their practice.

Perceptions of Cultural Relevance

In order to frame our conversations and ensure that we were discussing a common construct, I started my interviews with my participants by asking them to describe what the term *cultural relevance* meant to them, especially within their profession. Their responses centered around two main themes: (a) culturally relevant libraries respond to the wants and needs of their communities; and (b) cultural relevance is an ongoing process—it cannot be achieved through standalone initiatives or token gestures.

Responding to Communities

I consistently heard from participants that in order to be culturally relevant, library professionals must listen and adapt to the needs of their communities and provide programs, services, and resources that resonate with the needs of their patrons. [Connect to CRP.] Said one participant: "we want to know what people who use the library need, care about, talk about, and are excited about." Participants discussed how library professionals' perceptions of their communities can be informed by quantitative data (e.g., program attendance, circulation statistics, and door counts) as well as qualitative

data (e.g., open-ended satisfaction surveys, comments on social media, and feedback shared during reference interviews and during checkout). Participants discussed these opportunities for data collection across many themes, which you will see incorporated throughout this chapter.

Participants reported a clear example of community responsiveness: in July 2020, GCPL officially became "fine free," meaning that patrons are no longer charged late fees for overdue materials and all existing fines were waived from their accounts. In enacting this change, GCPL joined the ranks of over 200 library systems throughout the U.S. who have eliminated fines as a way to increase equity and reduce barriers to information access in their communities (Urban Libraries Council, 2021). According to several participants, patrons who had existing fines on their accounts often felt afraid to even walk into a library branch, either feeling ashamed for their debts or thinking that their debts barred them from accessing library spaces entirely. One participant said: "you know when you walk into a convenience store and you see that 'wall of shame,' full of photos of customers labeled NO SERVICE: BAD CHECKS? Unfortunately, lots of patrons think that's how we operate." In my own professional practice, I have also heard these stories and sentiments from my patrons. Fines create points of friction between patrons and library staff and perpetuate the myth that libraries demand repayment of fines in order to remain operational (Ross, 2019). In our interviews, members of GCPL administration shared that before GCPL eliminated late fees, that revenue stream only accounted for approximately 0.67% of GCPL's operating budget. Therefore, participants reported that members of the administration—backed by the library's Board of Trustees and elected officials in the county—rightly felt that it made fiscal, philosophical, and

practical sense to eliminate this barrier entirely.

Library fines are similar to regressive taxes in that they are applied at the same rate for everyone, disproportionately burdening households with lower incomes. Given that the median household income of Green County is lower than that of two neighboring counties by 12% and 31%, respectively, GCPL's decision to eliminate this fiscally regressive policy makes an important political statement about reducing financial inequities and does so with a negligible effect on their bottom line. The decision also came at a crucial time for Green County because in July 2020, the unemployment rate in the county was almost 10% (largely due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic), which was 1% higher than the unemployment rate in the state overall. In short, eliminating late fees was a culturally relevant decision in that it allowed GCPL to respond to the immediate needs of its communities. Patrons can now feel encouraged to consume library resources—at a time when they need them most—without fear of shame or financial burden.

Cultural Relevance is Ongoing

Several participants spoke to the fact that cultural relevance is an ongoing process; there is never a time at which an individual or organization reaches a goal of cultural relevance and can rest in that place forever. Said one participant:

> There is no perfect formula, no strategy that is guaranteed to work. You learn as you go along, you make mistakes, and you have to be ready to adapt and change quickly. You have to be open-minded and committed to learning as much as you can each day and recovering from each mistake.

According to participants, the idea of cultural relevance being an ongoing effort also meant that culturally relevant education cannot be relegated to limited, specific times of the year. For example, participants said that Black stories and Black voices should be

elevated year-round, not just during February for Black History Month. Said one

participant:

> I think that we [in GCPL] are trying to be culturally relevant, but there is a lot
> more that we need to do. We can't just celebrate Black History Month or Hispanic
> Heritage Month once a year and be done with it. That's not good enough. There
> are so many more cultures out there, and we could be doing more culturally
> specific programs throughout the year.

Participants also believed that culturally relevant educators and administrators must be

willing to learn and grow in their practice and be proactive in celebrating the cultural

backgrounds of their audiences. One participant shared that despite Green County having

been a majority-Black district for decades, GCPL administration had continually rejected

proposals for Juneteenth programming to celebrate the emancipation of enslaved persons

in the U.S. According to participants, GCPL finally hosted its first program about

Juneteenth in 2020 and now has an educational page about Juneteenth permanently

posted on its website. One participant said about these improvements: "we still have a lot

of catching up to do."

In summary, although study participants did not always use the exact language of

CRP to frame their perceptions of cultural relevance in libraries, they recognized that

cultural relevance is an all-encompassing approach that is about continually improving,

reflecting the cultural makeup of learning communities, and providing meaningful

experiences for the needs of their audiences.

Culturally Relevant Practices

According to Ladson-Billings (1995), the three criteria of culturally relevant

pedagogy are: (a) learner achievement; (b) cultural competence; and (c) cultural critique.

Each criterion is further explained by two subtopics. In this section, I present evidence of

where GCPL's staffing, services, and structure reflect each of these six components of CRP. I also describe how scholars and practitioners may need to rethink these components when evaluating the cultural relevance of public libraries, since their primary mission and functions differ significantly from traditional classroom environments.

Learner Achievement

First, the criterion of learner achievement means that CRE: (a) identify the unique needs and dispositions of each learner and (b) go beyond simple quantitative data in their assessments.

Knowing Each Learner. Culturally relevant educators develop relationships with each learner in order to determine their wants, needs, and the resources and approaches that will suit them best (Ladson-Billings, 1995). In libraries, these relationships often begin during reference interviews, where librarians are trained to carefully identify their patrons' information needs through conversation and directed questioning (Jennerich & Jennerich, 1997; Reitz, 2014). Several participants said that even after just one reference interview, patrons often develop preferences for working with specific library staff, to the point that patrons will ask for help from their favorite staff members by name every time they come into the library. Participants said that these rapports often lead to lasting relationships that help library staff better understand the specific needs, interests, and skills of each learner over time.

In the context of public libraries, this criterion also means that library professionals must be aware of which needs are continually made apparent in their communities. For example, many research participants described how their duties often extend far beyond helping customers locate particular materials within the collection. In

my interviews, I learned that GCPL branches regularly operate as sites for: (a) students to receive free lunches during the summer; (b) families to receive free winter coats for their children; (c) community members to receive free legal aid or attend expungement fairs to help clear their criminal records; or (d) patrons to use the libraries' computers almost exclusively for job-seeking, especially in neighborhoods of high unemployment. Culturally relevant librarians recognize these trends in their communities, advocate for the necessary resources to adequately meet these needs, and proactively form new connections with community organizations who are equipped to assist with these initiatives. Said one participant:

> I see myself as a link between the branch, the system, and the community. If I hear that the system is starting a new initiative, it's my responsibility to see if there's an opportunity to build new partnerships or collaborations. I try to make sure that we're visible at public events: literacy festivals, food drives, whatever's going on around town. Everywhere that people go, I want them to see that the library is here for them.

Going Beyond Quantitative Data. Highly-effective educators share the belief that meaningful assessments are comprehensive and incorporate both quantitative and qualitative data (Bresciani et al., 2009). This is especially true when practicing CRP, as CRE recognize the racial and cultural biases perpetuated by the use of quantitative assessments alone.

What might the criterion of leveraging multiple data sources look like in terms of CRP in public libraries? It bears repeating that public librarians differ from classroom educators—perhaps most significantly—in that they do not formally assess their patrons' learning. However, they must regularly self-assess their own collections, programs, services, and professional performance in order to ensure that they are effectively serving all members of their communities. Traditionally, assessments of library engagement have

been based on quantitative data such as door counts (i.e., how many people walk into a particular branch during each operating hour), program attendance, circulation statistics, and online resource usage. It is easy to recognize how this is an incomplete approach. Just as counting the number of days a student attends school does not tell us what that student learns while they are there, counting the number of people who attend a library program does not tell us the actual value or efficacy of that program. As one participant explained:

> Two million people came through our doors last year. That's awesome. But what happened to 'em when they went through the door? Was there a behavioral change? Was there an impact on their life? Was there an impact on their child's life? Did they continue their learning? For so long, we've followed this traditional model where we just count. So we know how many people checked out how many books, but what does that mean? What are they checking out? Why are they checking it out? What do they need that we don't have? All of that is really relevant to me, so it's really important that we start diving into that sort of data.

In its strategic framework for 2021-2024, GCPL presents its intention to collect this qualitative data through needs-assessment surveys, community conversations, and building deeper interpersonal relationships with patrons. It remains to be seen how effective and sustainable this approach will be and how it may improve GCPL's cultural relevance in the long term.

Cultural Competence

Second, the criterion of cultural competence means that CRE must: (a) provide engaging learning environments and materials for their learners and (b) reflect the cultural backgrounds of the communities in which they teach.

Providing Engaging Environments and Materials. The first aspect of this criterion means that library staff are responsible for advancing cultural relevance in the physical appearance of their branches and the diversity of materials available within their

collections.

Physical Spaces. Researchers have found that well-designed learning spaces increase engagement and support students' learning (Hunley & Schaler, 2006; Jankowska & Atlay, 2008; Rands & Gansemer-Topf, 2017; Whiteside & Fitzgerald, 2005). This does not just mean that a learning space should be bright and attractive; it also means that details should be thoughtfully considered and arranged so that the space can serve all of its intended purposes and learners can meaningfully interact with each other.

One participant provided an example of how they felt that GCPL had adapted their branches to become more culturally relevant:

> Our study rooms were originally typewriter rooms. That was what people needed at the time, so it was culturally relevant. But once typewriters were gone, the new thing that people wanted was study rooms, so that's what we gave them. In the time that I've been working in libraries, we've really changed and tried to become more inclusive.

However, this particular example refers to a change that is now decades old. I argue that public library staff should be thinking critically not just of the changes they have already ushered in, but also of the equity and effectiveness of those changes over time, as well as their plans for the future of their systems.

Additionally, several participants were critical of GCPL's aesthetic standards when designing and renovating library branches, which they believe emphasized austerity over authentic opportunities for culturally relevant community connections. One participant explained that because appearance standards in their branch were so strictly enforced, staff and patrons were prevented from engaging creatively in the space, leaving the branch feeling stark and sterilized. Several participants concurred that on the whole, the system regularly missed vital opportunities to reflect the personalities of the staff and

communities in its branches. Said one participant: "The walls in our building are very blank. We need to introduce more vibrancy and display local artwork." That same participant described how the overall design of the branch was not relevant to the lived experiences of the community: "I work in a very urban area. We're so close to the city, and our children's area looks like a barn. Who thought of that?" Similar sentiments were shared by multiple participants. They expressed that large-scale branch re-designs and renovations in GCPL were often conducted without any input from the staff or patrons and were spearheaded by a single executive who is not originally from Green County, ultimately leading to design choices that they felt were not culturally relevant.

Another issue of concern is that many respondents felt that certain branches continually received preferential treatment from administration, not just in being beautifully renovated, but also in the priority of their essential repairs and upkeep. What is especially concerning is that those branches which were perceived as not being cared for as well—and which have gone many years without significant renovations—were often those in communities with the highest levels of poverty and greatest need. Said one participant: "We've had to watch all of these other branches get award-winning renovations while we sit here in a building that's partially condemned. This branch has been promised a renovation for as long as I have been working here." The particular branch this participant referred to serves a region with a median household income that is 50% lower than the median household income of Green County overall, furthering the common perception among study participants that communities experiencing greater levels of poverty were being neglected by GCPL administration. Another participant spoke to their concerns with regards to that same branch:

Right now, I happen to work at one of the more privileged branches. But that branch that is literally falling apart was my neighborhood branch when I was growing up, and it has been in that condition for as long as I can remember. Why has it taken so long when other branches have been redone?

This participant believed that capital improvement funds were being prioritized for branches with higher door counts, without taking into account the dire structural needs of branches which were visited less frequently. However, this participant identified the inherent fallacy of such an approach: "I'm pretty sure if they had renovated that branch much sooner, then more people would have come." This statement reflects an awareness of the need for educators and administrators to go beyond quantitative data and adopt a more holistic approach when making culturally relevant decisions, a tenet of CRP discussed earlier in this chapter.

To further address these concerns mentioned by participants, I interviewed a GCPL staff member who could speak to the process of determining which branches were prioritized for cosmetic updates, full renovations, or new construction. The full details of our conversation spanned beyond the scope of this study, but essentially, this respondent explained that GCPL's capital improvement budget—which is funded through sales of investment bonds—exists separately from the operating budget. Therefore, all money spent on updating or renovating the branches does not impact the allocations for funding salaries and purchasing library materials. Beyond that, the process is increasingly complicated and political, but this participant provided clear evidence that historically, wealthy community members had held an inordinate amount of sway in shaping their local libraries to their specifications, even if those demands did not coincide at all with the library's long-term vision.

In the early 2000s, the county told us that we were going to build [Branch A], even though we didn't want it or need it. This is a real example of the "haves" getting it. We already had [Branch B] just a few miles up the street, but the people down there—who are very wealthy—said "well, we want a library, too." So they organized themselves and they went to every county council meeting, every county executive meeting, and they kept bringing it up. They wanted it, they wanted it, they wanted it. So it was finally put in the capital improvement plan, even though GCPL didn't want it there. And here's this other branch over in another part of the county that had been in the capital improvement plan since 1988. This community had pushed Branch A to the front of the line over all these other projects.

This respondent also shared that despite these unexpected or unwanted changes to the capital improvement plan, GCPL does have a long-term plan in place to address the physical upkeep of each branch:

Most of our branches were built in the 1960s and 1970s, and most of them are huge, so they're hard to maintain, and they need a lot of preventative maintenance that wasn't originally done. Our goal is to renovate as many of them as we can, and we've created a renovation schedule. Here in 2021, all of the branches have had at least one renovation. Now, we're trying to go back and revisit all the branches again, replacing furniture, replacing carpets, replacing shelving. It's not like we're giving preference to communities with more wealth. There's just a schedule we have to follow—for example, a roof lasts about 20 years, so when that 20 years is up, you're on the list for a new roof. And those projects will take priority.

Of course, the theory of CRP is not prescriptive about minutiae like sales of investment bonds and roof replacements, *per se*. However, these details are important representations of a larger context, because they can help illuminate: (a) the role of power and politics in ensuring equitable library services; and (b) where there are tensions between the ideal and the manifest in the work of advancing equity in public libraries.

First, the above responses indicate that communities with more wealth and political capital do have the power to significantly alter the creation or renovation of library spaces, which presents a blatant equity issue. Second, even if a library's administration has designed what they believe to be a fair and equitable plan for

construction and renovations, the perception of that plan among staff and community members is equally important. If patrons believe that branches in communities with less wealth are left to crumble while new ones are continually being built in the most privileged neighborhoods, then the library's administration needs to act on that information immediately, because one of two realities is highly likely. Either the administration is: (a) distributing capital improvement funds equitably, but not being fully transparent in their processes, allowing false assumptions to go unchecked; or (b) only considering their plan from a limited perspective, thereby failing to identify the implicit classism or racism in their approach. Based on the data available to me in this case study, I cannot speculate on which of these scenarios better explains the continued perceptions of inequity in library spaces in GCPL.

  Virtual Programs. As we consider the engaging environments being fostered by public librarians, we must consider how the form and functions of these environments have changed drastically in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. In particular, I reviewed attendance data from virtual programs to see how they compared to in-person program attendance from the previous year. Although I previously described the need for researchers and practitioners to look beyond quantitative data when evaluating the efficacy and cultural relevance of public-library programs and operations, I also recognize that within this case study, various limitations (e.g., COVID-19 safety protocols) prevented me from being able to collect robust qualitative data to describe customers' experiences when attending these programs. Therefore, I used attendance data collected by GCPL administration to illustrate how mean program attendance has grown

significantly under a virtual programming model (see Figure 2, suggesting that GCPL is providing programming that the community finds relevant, engaging, and exciting.

Figure 2

Mean GCPL Program Attendance by Type, 7/19-2/20 & 7/20-2/21
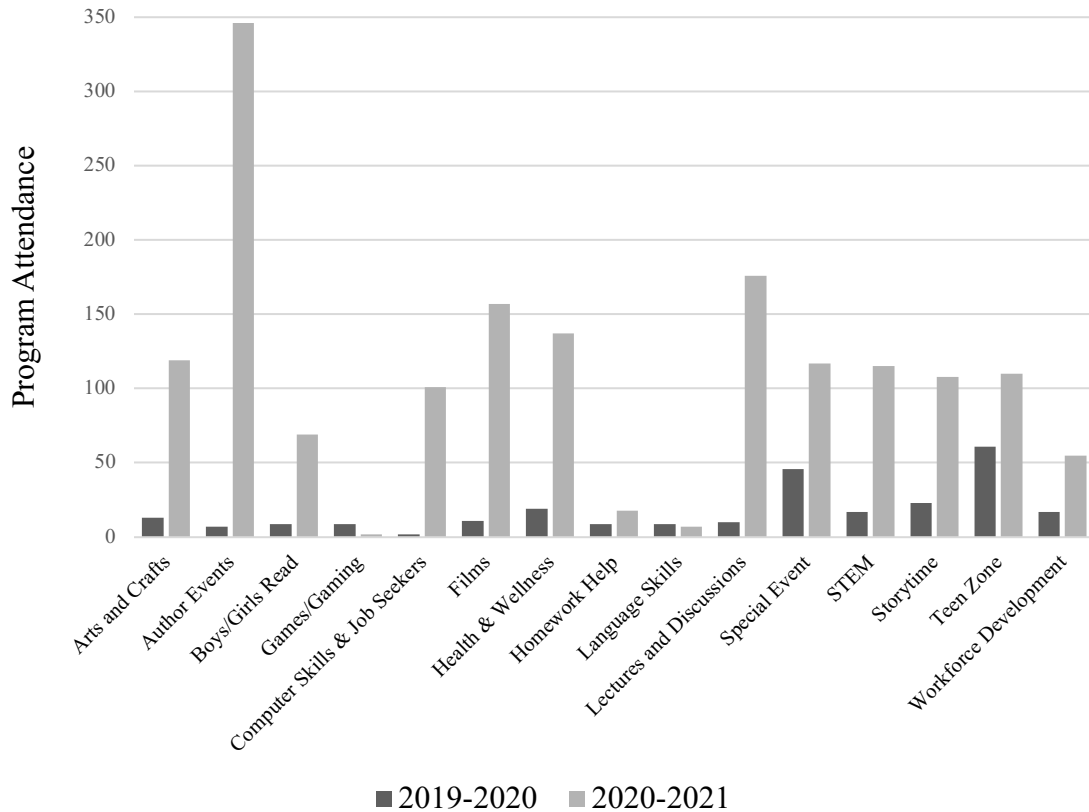
Note. All attendance data from 7/19-2/20 refer to in-person programs; all attendance data from 7/20-2/21 refer to virtual programs. In order to provide a direct year-over-year comparison, program types which were not represented in both FY19 and FY20 were not included here. This figure excludes one outlying value in order to provide a more accurate representation of mean GCPL program attendance: an author event on antiracism in 2020 drew a worldwide, virtual audience of over 230,000 viewers.

In the beginning of FY2020, the mean attendance for all in-person programs at all branches throughout GCPL was approximately 17 people. In the beginning of FY2021,

the mean attendance for all GCPL virtual programs was approximately 109 people,

representing an increase of over 600%. Participants shared that while some in-person and

virtual programs required pre-registration (due to limited physical space or the need for

GCPL administration to monitor the safety of virtual meeting rooms), all programs in

both years were open to all members of the general public, whether or not attendees lived

in Green County or had a GCPL library card. Several participants said that the system's

evolution to a virtual programming model was long overdue in allowing them to reach a

significantly larger audience on a regular basis, including: homebound patrons; patrons

who do not have reliable transportation to visit library branches; and working parents

without the luxury of time to attend in-person programs. Said one participant:

> Libraries have been talking about doing something like this for years, but it was
> really easy to be complacent and say "the programming we're doing now is just
> fine." This pandemic has been a case of what I call "pressurized innovation,"
> where we were given the push we needed to think about our work in a new way.

Based on Ladson-Billings' (1995) premise that learners respond positively to culturally

relevant teaching, the attendance data illustrated in Figure 1 indicate that GCPL staff are

embodying cultural relevance in their virtual programming by embracing new ways of

serving their communities and creating engaging learning environments on their digital

platforms.

One participant provided an illustrative example of culturally relevant virtual

programming in GCPL and how it leveraged and furthered community connections:

> We have an ELL Program Coordinator in our administrative offices who does
> incredible work for the Spanish-speaking community. She does the job of at least
> ten staff members all rolled into one. She has been gaining local and national
> attention for the work she is doing to serve this growing population. Ever since
> we had to switch to virtual programming because of COVID-19, so for almost a
> year now, she has put out a program in Spanish where she talks with community
> representatives and leaders who can share information and resources that are vital

to members of the Spanish-speaking community. She has hardly missed a week. And those videos are consistently bringing in over 200 views apiece, which is really incredible.

At the time of this study, GCPL's virtual programming model clearly resonated with the ways members of the community wanted and needed to engage with their libraries.

Collections. For as much as public libraries truly have evolved over generations and continue to provide access to new services and technologies, their collections—specifically their books—remain a primary image in people's minds when they envision libraries (De Rosa et al., 2011). Said one participant, "our collection will always be our bread and butter." Therefore, when we examine the cultural relevance of a public library system, it is essential that we evaluate the representation within its collection.

First, a brief overview of how the collection development process operates in GCPL, as each library system practices its own methods for curating the best collection for its community. In GCPL, all materials are purchased through the CDO, staffed by a small team of library professionals who each specialize in purchasing for a specific part of the collection (e.g., picture books, adult nonfiction, etc.). Several respondents noted that the CDO has made a conscious shift over the past two decades to curate a popular collection. This means that they prioritize purchasing items which will be frequently circulated, rather than classic, academic, or esoteric texts. This shift represents huge strides in making the collection more culturally relevant. Two participants described how the system's decision to curate a popular collection was met with resistance by some library staff at the time who had more traditional views of what a public library should offer. Said one participant:

> In the early 2000s, the director of [a nearby library system] was well-known for saying "give them what they want." This was a new attitude in librarianship, for

us to accept that we are not the people who should tell you what to read. We're the people who say, "hey, what are you interested in?" So we started to rely less on professional reviews when looking for new materials to purchase, especially for adult fiction. We were starting to get a lot of requests for urban fiction and self-published books. This is what our readers wanted. If you have an adult who's saying, "hey, I'm interested in this," who am I to tell them what they want to read is trash? Because it's not trash. It's information that is relevant to them, written by someone who comes from their same culture, and therefore knows what they're talking about.

This participant's response reflects several aspects of culturally relevant pedagogy: (a) knowing the needs of each learner (e.g., "hey, what are you interested in?"); (b) reflecting the backgrounds of their communities (e.g., purchasing materials "written by someone who comes from [the patrons'] same culture"); and (c) intercultural communication (responding meaningfully to feedback from community members who have a specific vision for their library's collection, even—and especially—when that feedback represents diverse cultural viewpoints and differs from traditional professional practices).

In addition to purchasing popular titles, GCPL describes its collection as "floating": that is, all items are shared freely among all branches (excepting a special collection of materials about Black history and culture, which are held in a designated reading room and do not circulate). If a patron is looking for an item at Branch A but it is currently on the shelf at Branch B, library staff can easily arrange for the patron to pick up the item at Branch B the same day, or wait approximately two days for the item to be shipped via an internal delivery service and then picked up at Branch A. Some participants appreciated that a floating collection allowed patrons to more easily access a wide range of materials from throughout the county. In theory, this approach may also be more cost-efficient, because the CDO does not need to purchase quite as many copies for consistent availability at each branch (depending on the demand for a specific title).

However, some participants believed that a floating collection is antithetical to cultural relevance. Said one participant:

> I just really hate floating. It goes against what we're taught in library school, how to cultivate a collection for your people. It just completely goes against it. And I think it has a negative effect. Well, it has the positive effect of getting books to people quickly. But I think it has an adverse effect in that it doesn't allow librarians to create unique, browsable collections for their communities, based on what each community wants and needs.

In addition to floating, GCPL also participates in a statewide interlibrary loan service, so if a patron requests an item that is not owned by GCPL at all, library staff can easily arrange a request for the item to be shipped from any other county in the state where it is available; this shipment process typically takes between one to two weeks. The patron is able to check out and return the material as normal on their GCPL account.

Then, there is the process of weeding. In GCPL, all Information staff (librarians and library associates) at each branch share responsibility for weeding the collection. If an item is not circulating and is still in good condition, Information staff are encouraged to review circulation records throughout the system to see if the item can be sent to another branch where it is more likely to fit the needs of that community. If the chances for circulation elsewhere are low or the material is outdated, Information staff are advised to weed the material to make room on the shelf for something potentially more valuable and culturally relevant to patrons. If a title is still popular but a particular item is in poor condition, Information staff are advised to weed the material and request a replacement purchase from the CDO. Additionally, there are policies in place to ensure that each weeding decision is carefully considered. For example, it is essential—especially in GCPL—to have titles available in languages besides English in order to maintain cultural relevance and best serve members of the community from a range of cultural and

linguistic backgrounds. These particular titles may not circulate as regularly as the newest

bestseller, so it is important to consider their unique importance and relative rarity in the

collection, rather than removing them based on low circulation statistics alone.

As for the makeup of the collection as a whole, many participants addressed the

ongoing lack of diversity in the publishing industry and how this affects librarians' ability

to participate in developing representative collections for their communities. In 2019, Lee

and Low Books, a minority-owned publisher of multicultural children's literature,

released the results of its Diversity Baseline Survey 2.0 (DBS 2.0), a follow-up to its

original survey from 2015. Using data from DBS 2.0, researchers found that publishing

professionals (including executives, editors, sellers, marketers, publicists, reviewers, and

agents) were 76% white, 74% cisgender women, 81% straight, and 89% non-disabled

(Jiménez & Beckert, 2020). These values represented only minor (three to seven percent)

increases in non-majority representation within each category from four years prior

(Dahlen & Catlin, 2016). Historically, this homogeneity has meant that stories by

majority authors and featuring majority characters are published at much higher rates

(and with much larger advances) than those which are more culturally diverse (So &

Wezerek, 2020).

Despite this persistent problem in publishing, all participants who discussed

GCPL's collection shared the belief that the system does its best to purchase the widest

variety of titles based on what is currently available in the market. Many participants

mentioned that they have begun to see a noticeable (albeit long-overdue) positive shift in

diversity among new releases; they all commented that the CDO continually purchases

high-quality titles to keep up with this shift. Participants also described their personal

efforts as practitioners to consistently highlight diverse books, whether by displaying

them in the branches for patrons to find easily or using them during programs (such as

storytimes) to make sure that all attendees can see the library as a mirror of their lived

experiences. Said one participant:

> When I plan my storytimes, I'm always cognizant of picking out the right books. I am Black, and I prefer books that *happen* to have a Black character, not necessarily books where it's like, "here is this little Black boy with his little Black family, and they're going to the Black grocery store." I'd rather it just be a matter of fact, and not this huge deal. Because then we're still seen as the "other."

Other participants who were Black of people of color shared this mindset; they reported

that they were deliberate in highlighting resources in their programs that celebrated

positive representations of characters from diverse backgrounds, especially those that

reflected the cultural backgrounds of themselves and their audiences.

In order to support library staff's ability to continue choosing "mirror and

window" books (Sims Bishop, 1990), as described in Chapter 3, the CDO recently

commenced the complex, years-long process of auditing its collection to ensure that the

available titles are truly diverse and representative of the community. In the first phase of

this audit, the CDO utilized the collection development resource Diverse BookFinder

(DBF). The searchable DBF database aims to list every single children's picture book

featuring BIPOC characters that was published and distributed in the U.S. since 2002.

However, the DBF does not actively recommend all of the titles in its database; rather,

the DBF research team uses all available data to track how diversity and positive

representation in children's publishing may be improving over time. As such, it is clearly

noted in the database when a title has been critiqued for misrepresentation or other

problematic traits by one or more experts who belong to the racial/cultural group(s)

portrayed in the book; links to those critical discussions are provided.

In order to use the DBF Collection Analysis Tool (DBF CAT), the CDO uploaded its list of catalog records for children's books by unique title to the DBF web portal and received a detailed analysis based on the DBF CAT instrumentation. Findings from this data comparison were generally positive: they indicate that GCPL's representation of BIPOC characters in children's picture books (by quantity/proportions alone) reflects almost identically the proportional representation of BIPOC characters in children's picture books available in the U.S. since 2002. This is a strong indication that the CDO has continually made concerted efforts to acquire a balanced sample of what is available in the market.

Finally, it is important to talk about how patrons interact with the collection in order to find what they want and need—specifically, through the catalog. Without going into great detail here about how library cataloging operates, each item in a library's collection is connected to a digital bibliographic record containing all relevant data, such as the author, title, publication date, circulation statistics, call numbers, and descriptive keywords. These call numbers and keywords—which are assigned by catalogers who are trained in the process of describing and sorting library materials—usually follow the rules of a specific cataloging convention. The most widely-used cataloging convention in public libraries is the Dewey Decimal System. However, the keywords and phrases used by a cataloging convention can be esoteric, outdated, or difficult for a layperson to parse, especially since many library catalogs rely on Boolean logic for data retrieval. The CDO has recognized that this approach to cataloging can present an accessibility issue for patrons who want to peruse the catalog themselves but may not know the exact keywords

or process to describe what they are looking for. Multiple study participants told me that the CDO is beginning the arduous process of reviewing each cataloging record to ensure that natural-language keywords are added for each item, with the intention that patrons can practice more independence when searching for materials. This effort reflects a culturally relevant approach to librarianship.

Reflecting the Community. Just as Ladson-Billings' (1995) theory explains how learning spaces and materials should reflect each learning community, it also describes how CRE themselves should reflect their learning communities. This essentially means that educators and their learners should share common cultural backgrounds. For example, multiple studies have shown that Black students have higher graduation rates and college aspirations (Gershenson et al., 2018), higher levels of engagement (Griffin & Tackie, 2016), and fewer behavioral referrals (A. Wright et al., 2017; A. C. Wright, 2015) when they are taught by Black teachers.

Staffing. Overwhelmingly, participants described the uniqueness of GCPL's overall demographic makeup in reflecting the members of the Green County community, especially compared to the degree of representation in other library systems where they had worked throughout the state and across the U.S. As discussed in Chapter 1, while more than 81% of public library professionals in the U.S. are white, approximately 81% of GCPL staff are Black or people of color. When asked to describe where GCPL succeeds in terms of cultural relevance, almost all participants enthusiastically described this uniqueness of their staff. Said one participant:

> When I go to state meetings and national meetings, I can see that we have such a more diverse staff than so many others. Even compared to other large majority-Black districts in our state, we are much more diverse, and it's been that way for a long time. Our library system was never segregated. And even going back to the

1950s, we've had Black community members on our Board of Trustees. So we've always been leaders there.

Another participant shared a similar sentiment:

We actually look like we represent the people that we serve. Now, "look" is not enough. But we do. When I talk to other people in other library systems, they say, "I went to one of your branches, and I've never seen that many Black librarians in one place." And I'm like, *really?* 'Cause I didn't know any different.

The latter response highlights two important points. First, "look is not enough": while diverse hiring and affirmative action are essential, cultural relevance requires deep work that goes beyond filling staffing quotas. Second, GCPL stood out from library systems with majority-white staffs, and colleagues throughout the state recognized that difference.

Several Black participants openly described their feelings and experiences as visible representations of Blackness within their communities. One participant described Black patrons' positive attention to their presence:

Right now, I am a Black person working in a majority-Black community. But I have also worked at branches where I was the only Black librarian. I actually had Black customers come up to me directly and say, "I'm so glad you're here." Or they would intentionally wait in line to be served by me, instead of by a white coworker—especially if they were looking for recommendations for titles for their Black children, for example. Black customers notice if a library branch has no Black staff. They may not say anything, but they do notice.

Another participant described her self-concept of being a Black woman and a Black librarian in great detail. I have included an extended excerpt of our interview here because she shared invaluable insight into many parts of her personal story that reflect multiple tenets of CRP:

Even though the diversity in our profession is getting better, I still can't say "I'm a Black librarian" without someone going, "really?! I didn't know those existed." It especially means a lot to me to be a Black librarian in my home county, because I didn't see a Black librarian in any of my local branches until I was in college. And maybe that's just the part of the county I was from. When I started working at the branch where I am now, where we have more white patrons than other

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places, I really saw how important that representation is and what it means to the community. I'm not trying to be "the Black librarian" just for the Black kids. I try to be a librarian who *happens* to be Black. The kids I see in storytime, I'm connecting with them, we're forming a bond. And for some of them, I may be the first Black person they've met. So I try to be such a positive representation for them, and I cherish that role.

I then asked her: "the fact that you're carrying the weight of that role, does that feel more like a blessing or a burden?" She replied:

It's kind of both. It's just one of those things, and a lot of it just has to do with being Black in America, period. I cannot get angry about anything, I cannot yell, because if I do, I automatically become the Angry Black Woman. So I'm used to knowing that I represent more than just myself. But I have so much pride in my Blackness, and I want to share my culture with everyone. So I don't look at it as a burden to bear, because it means I'm special. If someone doesn't know something, I'd rather give them the opportunity to ask me before they decide to be ignorant and stereotype and make assumptions. And I don't speak for everybody, but overall I see it as a positive, because it's necessary. I don't want anyone to be able to look me and say, "that Black librarian didn't help me." And no matter what you want to think about me, when we're in storytime, I'm gonna have a great time with your kids.

These responses reflect my primary motivation for selecting GCPL as the subject of this case study: I wanted to find out more about how a majority-minority staff responded to the needs of a majority-Black community and how they interrogated their racial and cultural self-concepts *vis-à-vis* their professional roles in order to provide culturally relevant education to their patrons.

However, there are two provisos to consider when discussing the diversity of GCPL staff. First, many respondents perceived that the makeup of the staff became increasingly whiter at each higher level of the system's hierarchy. Second (and closely related to the first), several respondents described ongoing inequities in GCPL's approach to filling leadership positions, saying that GCPL has consistently been more likely to hire external candidates than promote internal ones. Previously, this could be largely

attributed to the practice of only allowing library staff with a Master of Library Science (MLS) degree to advance to supervisory roles at the branch level. Thus, library associates—often with decades of experience, job descriptions that are identical to librarians', and wide acclaim by their colleagues—were never eligible for advancement. This practice prevents equal representation and perpetuates racial inequities in the field; in 2017, almost 74 percent of MLS graduates in the U.S. were white, and only about five percent were Black (Data USA, 2020b).

Moreover, as one participant described, "according to [state] law, the only staff member in the library system who *needs* to have an MLS is the director. The only one. Every other restriction, we're only doing that to ourselves." This was a known issue within GCPL prior to this study. In early 2020, before the COVID-19 pandemic drastically altered GCPL's operating status and budget priorities, administrators were close to adopting an official agreement that would remove the MLS requirement for most branch-level leadership positions, finally working to rectify this racism and classism within their system. While such an agreement has not yet been formalized or widely announced, some participants reported that the MLS requirement is being quietly dropped from certain position descriptions.

Culture is Local. Additionally, when discussing the need for culturally relevant libraries to reflect the makeup and needs of the community, all respondents unanimously agreed that in terms of library services, we must consider culture to be a highly-local phenomenon. As described earlier, all respondents agreed that there is no singular, definitive culture of Green County. While the administration of GCPL works to serve a broad geographic region and ideally provides resources in the most equitable way

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possible, staff at the branch level focus on creating programs, providing services, and cultivating collections that reflect people in their neighborhood to the greatest extent possible within system policies and procedures. Multiple study participants made statements akin to: *what they are doing in that part of the system, we could not do that here at our branch successfully, or we would not choose that for our customers.* For example, some library staff serve droves of teenagers who pour in from neighboring schools after dismissal (and therefore must adapt their programming and collections accordingly), while others find that they hardly see any teenagers at all.

One particular facet of culture as a local phenomenon came up repeatedly during my interviews: many respondents discussed their roles and responsibilities in serving their patrons who are immigrants, refugees, and/or English language learners (ELLs), especially native Spanish speakers. In Green County, the population of Spanish-speaking immigrants and refugees is growing exponentially but appears to be highly concentrated in specific areas; participants reported that certain branches required almost all of their staff to be fluent in both English and Spanish, while other branches hardly served any Spanish-speaking customers at all. However, multiple participants discussed how the branches that served few to no Spanish-speaking customers did so not because of a complete lack of Spanish speakers in their communities, but because they were not providing culturally relevant programs, services, and collections for those who were there. Said one participant:

> Staff constantly get the impression that if they aren't regularly seeing Spanish-speaking customers visiting their branches, it's because they don't have any Spanish speakers living in their neighborhoods. From what we know of the demographics in this area, that's just not true. Some branches may have a lot more Spanish-speaking customers than others, sure. But at this point, if you aren't

seeing them in your branch, it means you haven't done a good enough job of reaching out and telling them you're there and what you have for them.

Another participant elaborated on this point, describing their ongoing efforts in attracting immigrants, refugees, and ELLs to their programs and services:

A lot of our immigrants and refugees, they're coming from places around the world where the idea of a free public lending library is completely foreign. They often think that they need to pay to become a member or to use any of our resources, and that keeps them away. There's also a lot of fear there, especially if they or any of their family members are undocumented and we start asking them for the information we need to get them a library card. To them, we just look like government agents. And even though we're not, and we very strictly don't share their personal information with anyone—especially the government—the risk is just too high for them, so they shy away. That means it's our responsibility to meet them exactly where they are: in the churches, in the community centers, in the schools. We need to be able to talk to them and say, "this is what we're here for, and this is what we can give to you, and we are a safe space for you." Don't just assume when it comes to libraries that "if you build it, they will come."

This re-envisioning of the library as an outreach-focused entity that exists outside the four walls of a branch is discussed later in this chapter in terms of advancing equitable social relations by identifying and developing a community of learners.

Participants reported that the most significant impediment to GCPL being able to fully serve its population of immigrants, refugees, and ELLs is a lack of institutional support through funding and resources. Said one participant:

We want to operate like a big system in serving everyone, but we just don't have the support in terms of human capital, just from a bandwidth perspective. We are hiring people who have the skills and expertise, especially when it comes to bilingual services, but we just don't have nearly enough of them. And so we're doing a piecemeal job of translating certain informational materials, for example, but it's incredibly time-consuming and beyond our capacity to maintain. We are decades behind where we need to be in terms of fully serving our community. And financially-speaking, it may take us decades longer to even start catching up.

Participants also described how the system's services to non-English speakers overall had often felt like a piecemeal effort over the years, and that while individual

bilingual staff were highly dedicated to their work (and in being bilingual, were each

regularly performing the duties of at least two staff members at once), their long-term

success was dependent on the level of administrative support they received. Participants

reported that this level of support historically fluctuated depending on the priorities of the

administration as set by different CEOs and COOs. Said one Spanish-speaking

participant, who had been working in GCPL for almost 20 years:

> In the time I have worked in this system, our success has been mixed. When I first
> started here, we didn't have a lot of programs for Spanish speakers, except for
> bilingual storytimes. But throughout the years, we have been doing more outreach
> to community organizations and schools. So as far as programs go, we have been
> doing better than when I started. As far as the collection of materials in other
> languages, again, we have had periods when it was better, and other ones when it
> wasn't so good. And that wasn't always linked to budget issues, either. I think it
> was more linked to how interested and committed the administration was to
> serving this particular population. When I first started here, the Spanish section
> was double, or maybe even triple, what we have in our branch today, let alone in
> the entire system. It will take us years to recover from the slashing that happened
> to our collection of books in Spanish.

One participant who had been involved in systemwide collection development practices

also spoke to the changing nature of the system's approach to collecting materials for

non-English speakers:

> We used to buy in an incredible variety of languages. There was a whole
> committee that just worked on suggestions for purchases of foreign-language
> materials. But this was decades ago. In the '90s, we had to rethink our approach,
> because the county was going through a recession. So a lot of the languages fell
> by the wayside. But we've been trying to respond to the trends of the county as
> they've continued to change,. We're currently looking into getting more
> languages, like Arabic and Farsi, especially for our growing refugee population.
> We're always trying to look at who is living in Green County and what the need.
> So I guess that's a type of cultural relevance.

In summary, participants reported that effective and culturally relevant library service to

immigrants, refugees, and ELLs requires sufficient staffing and funding, which are the

results of a concerted effort by a library administration to serve these populations.

Outside of multilingualism and immigration, other examples of differing cultural experiences include: (a) varying concentrations of people experiencing home insecurity throughout the county—some branches hardly see any customers who are visibly experiencing homelessness, while others exist as spaces for many people visibly experiencing homelessness to gather safely during the day; (b) varying concentrations of people experiencing food insecurity throughout the county—some branches arrange food giveaways and free meals for families in their communities, while others are more likely to serve patrons who have the means to regularly donate to food pantries and other local charities; and (c) varying levels of customer engagement—some branches regularly assist customers who are well-connected and have the time and resources to advocate for greater library funding, while others regularly assist customers who are facing significantly higher levels of unemployment and are therefore less likely to use their limited time and resources to be politically active. This is where the roles and responsibilities of public library administrators in advancing equity and cultural relevance are most apparent: they need to ensure that it is not just the squeaky wheels who get the grease, so to speak.

Cultural Critique

This conversation around equity in culturally responsive services leads directly into the third criterion of CRP: cultural critique. According to Ladson-Billings (1995), CRE should be equipped to respond to social inequities and become experts in intercultural communication, thereby guiding their learners to do the same.

Responding to Social Inequities. CRE have a responsibility to respond to the larger social contexts surrounding their learning environments, especially as those

contexts directly impact the well-being of their learners. Here, I provide a brief overview of the debate over the theory/myth of political neutrality in public libraries. Next, I describe how GCPL has evolved in its cultural relevance, becoming more engaged in social justice advocacy by responding to three crucial issues of social inequity: (a) the digital divide; (b) LGBTQIA+ rights and advocacy; and (c) the fight to affirm that Black Lives Matter.

    Libraries Are Not Neutral. In previous generations, many public librarians maintained that their work should be politically neutral, and that in order to serve all members of the community equally, they needed to provide materials and programs on all topics that were relevant to the community without taking a clear stance on any one issue (American Libraries, 2018). However, as more education professionals and public servants have begun to recognize the distinction between *equal* services and *equitable* services, especially in terms of combatting systemic racism in the U.S. (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2020), 21st-century librarians are increasingly rejecting the claim that their work and spaces can be, should be, or ever were politically neutral (Gibson et al., 2017; Sendaula, 2017; Williams, 2017). As Chancellor (2019, p. 50) argues, the very fact that many public libraries were once racially segregated (as discussed in Chapter 1) negates any claims that the profession has historically been neutral: "the library as an institution reflects mainstream society and the profession has chosen to take partisan positions, whether it is by remaining silent or otherwise."

    Several respondents spoke to this debate over neutrality in their profession, describing the need for librarians to openly practice non-neutrality in an era of increased

violence against Black and Asian Americans (Nuyen, 2021; Philimon, 2020). Said one

participant:

> We've never been neutral. We have never given all sides equal time in libraries,
> sometimes for the better and sometimes for the worse. For example, a public
> library shouldn't give equal space to like, a KKK circular, as we would to a
> community newsletter. That's not necessarily a political stance, that's just saying
> that we're not going to propagate information that is inherently false, dangerous
> propaganda. Just like we don't keep science books on the shelves from the 1940s,
> or keep medical books about bloodletting to remove bad humors. There are places
> for materials like that, but those are archives or historical collections, not our
> popular collection. We can try to always be objective, but objectivity and
> neutrality are not the same. And we don't have unlimited budgets, either. So we
> are always evaluating and making choices about what we're putting out there, and
> those are individual human beings making choices based on their own thoughts,
> experiences, and biases.

Another participant likewise discussed the careful balancing act between developing a

library collection that appeals to all members of the community and efficiently utilizing a

limited budget without practicing censorship:

> Librarians have never been neutral. We try to be fair and make sure that we have
> materials that represent all viewpoints, but we need to justify our purchases, too.
> If people want something, that's what we'll try to buy. I think we do owe it to our
> patrons to get whatever might be out there. It's not for us to tell someone what to
> read or not read, because then we cross the line into censorship. But we have a
> responsibility to advocate for the people in our communities who need us most.

In summary, culturally relevant librarians actively examine their own theories

about their practice, clearly articulate what constructs like *neutrality* and *equity* mean to

them, and participate in the evolution of their assumptions and practices in order to best

support their communities.

The Digital Divide. Public libraries have long responded to the call to bridge the

digital divide by providing free access to computers and the Internet, especially during

times of crisis (Bertot & Palmer, 2021; Willcox, 2020). Some library systems, including

GCPL, have embraced this call even further by providing access to rentable devices and

WiFi hotspots for home use and expanding their WiFi coverage into their parking lots so patrons can access the Internet while maintaining a safe social distance. As discussed previously in reference to programming, the need for libraries to adapt their service models to keep staff and patrons safe during the COVID-19 pandemic has caused a sudden evolution in library practices, but also further highlights the persistence of the digital divide. Patrons who cannot afford personal devices and do not have reliable Internet access—and who therefore may need public-library services the most— experience greater barriers to interacting with the library. Even though GCPL's phone lines are open for patrons to speak directly with library staff for reference assistance and to request library materials, that phone number is listed primarily on the GCPL web site. How else might community members be able to access that information? Several GCPL staff reported that they have been working non-stop to try to find solutions to these problems, but are restricted by the operating budget, COVID-19 safety regulations, and the very purview of their work. In other words, public library staff obviously do not have the means, skills, expertise, or authority to outfit homes in their communities with reliable, high-speed Internet access. However, they do regularly advocate to their local, state, and federal legislators for expanded broadband service and having the Internet be classified as an essential public utility (Clark & Visser, 2020; Cranz & Kahn, 2020; Lazarus, 2020).

LGBTQIA+ Rights and Advocacy. When it comes to LGBTQIA+ rights and advocacy, it is important for me to again address my positionality here. As a person who identifies as queer, I view this as an issue of particular personal relevance to me. In my work as a librarian, I always pay careful attention to which library systems are openly

embracing patrons and staff across the queer spectrum and providing culturally relevant

opportunities for their personal development and safe self-expression.

I interviewed several respondents who were generous in sharing their experiences

as queer and queer-allied members of the GCPL staff, especially in discussing when they

have not felt fully welcomed and supported in the workplace. Some participants felt that

because they work in a majority-Black county—and there is a prevailing public

perception that Black Americans are disproportionately homophobic (Hill, 2013)—the

administration had historically shied away from embracing LGBTQIA+ programs and

initiatives because they were overly concerned about alienating social conservatives and

inciting homophobic responses. Said one participant:

> When I first started working here, I looked around and said, "where are all the
> rainbows?" Now, obviously I'm being a little facetious, but still. As a member of
> the LGBTQ community, I notice when places aren't making me feel welcome.
> Was it because they were afraid of upsetting the religious conservatives in Green
> County? When I tried to plan LGBTQ-friendly programs for teenagers, the
> reticence from administration sent a clear message: we will avoid attracting
> controversty at all costs.

> Another participant shared a similar sentiment:

> I think it's sort of like the way our administration handled Black Lives Matter—
> like it's a situation that's potentially polarizing, and we don't want to rock the
> boat and upset anyone in the community. But you end up having the opposite
> result, because then everybody who needs to hear the message of "we're
> inclusive, we truly are for everybody" hears loud and clear who we're actually
> for. We know what it means when there's no Pride programming.

Additionally, multiple participants spoke about an internal controversy within

GCPL regarding an LGBTQIA+ program suggestion. Recently, drag queen storytimes—

which are exactly what the name suggests—have been growing in popularity throughout

the U.S. and have been hosted by many public libraries (American Library Association,

2018b). In 2018, a neighboring county to GCPL hosted its first drag queen storytime,

drawing both public acclaim and criticism (police removed several disruptive protestors

from the event). In response, GCPL officially ruled that it would not be hosting any drag

queen storytimes for children. Several participants spoke about their disappointment over

this decision. Said one participant:

> The system says they're open to LGBTQ programming, but the idea of drag
> storytime got shot down really quick. And I think they were afraid of getting bad
> publicity, which is what happened in [a neighboring county] when they put on
> that program. But that program was really successful, despite the protestors that
> came. Why wouldn't you want to do a program like that? Out of fear? Because
> you can't say "we're so open-minded, we're so diverse!" but then not do a
> program like drag storytime because you're afraid of the drama.

I spoke with a GCPL staff member who shared why the system took a stance against

hosting drag queen storytimes. This participant believed that library storytimes should be,

above all else, opportunities to support early literacy for children, and they want the

children to remain the focus of these programs at all times. The respondent said:

> I don't feel like drag queens are the best representation of the LGBTQ community
> for young children. They are entertainers for adults. There are better ways to
> introduce children to this concept and this community. I don't think it's an
> anathema, or evil, or anything like that. I do think the parents love it! So I think it
> would be a fun program for teens or adults. I just want us to always be thinking
> about who our audience is. When I get the opportunity to explain that to staff one-
> on-one, they usually understand where I'm coming from.

> Although there are still some debates between GCPL staff about this particular

programming decision, several participants said that on the whole, LGBTQIA+ allyship

and visibility in GCPL had noticeably improved in the past three to five years prior to this

study. Said one participant:

> I have not always felt comfortable being out at work. But it has gotten a little
> better just in the past year, as we've started to hire more people who are very
> visibly out, and we're getting that representation at higher levels within the
> organization.

Another participant described the system's recent move to recommend that all staff add

their personal pronouns to their GCPL email signatures. They described how the

administration arrived at that recommendation through a series of challenging

conversations. This participant said they were pleasantly surprised by both the relatively

minor pushback from staff and the overwhelming positive adoption rate of the

recommendation. However, one participant shared that they think GCPL administration

still needed to do a better job in training and educating their staff on sensitively and

appropriately serving members of the LGBTQIA+ community, specifically trans and

gender-nonconforming individuals. Said one participant:

> I specifically remember one time when I helped a trans customer, and several
> minutes later, I overheard two staff members making derogatory comments about
> that customer. I went back and forth in my head about whether they were being
> intentionally malicious or just completely ignorant. I did try to break through a bit
> and explain to them why what they were saying was incorrect and hurtful. They
> sort of acknowledged what I was saying, but ultimately I think they just went
> back to their own corners to continue to feel like they were better than this person
> by virtue of their very existence.

> One participant described how they were personally committed to increasing

LGBTQIA+ visibility in GCPL's programs, services, and staff:

> I have tried to make sure that we have a lot of high-profile programming that
> features queer authors, especially Black queer authors. I do think there has been a
> lot of progress, generally. I think the fact that the Green County government is
> moving to a better place with LGBTQ issues is helpful. Since I've gotten here,
> we've started to go all in on fixing this.

However, this participant also spoke to the need for LGBTQIA+ advocacy in the system

to be more intersectional and include the voices of queer staff members of color:

> I have concerns about who we're not seeing represented in our internal work. I've
> gone to certain meetings where it's literally all white queer people, and that's fine
> and good, but we can do better. Are queer people of color choosing not to
> participate because the space feels too white, or are there other reasons why they
> don't feel welcome? If so, what are those reasons, and how can we fix them? And

I think sometimes there are people who would rather not take on that burden for themselves, which is understandable, but it would be really amazing if we could get to a place where everyone could feel comfortable contributing on queer issues, even if they would rather do so confidentially in order to protect their privacy. Whenever we create advertising materials for the system, whether that's videos or social media posts, I want to make sure that we're representing the full spectrum of our community, but that can become really problematic, because we never want anyone to feel like they're only being included as a token gesture. So how do we get beyond the basic recognition of where our gaps are and actually start addressing them? And there's no way we'll ever reach a victory point with it, because our community is constantly changing and evolving.

The latter portion of this participant's response—that there is never a "victory point" in serving minority or disenfranchised populations because the makeup of the community is always changing—calls back to the shared perception of cultural relevance among participants that was discussed earlier in this chapter: that is, cultural relevance is an ever-evolving process.

Overall, the belief from respondents who discussed the level of queer representation in the programs, services, and structure of GCPL is that it has improved significantly in just a few short years, but there is still a lot of work to do in order for LGBTQIA+ members of the Green County community and GCPL staff to feel that the library is truly culturally relevant in holding unconditional space for them.

Black Lives Matter. In order for a public library system in the U.S. to be a place of culturally relevant education at this point in time, *especially* if that system serves a majority-Black jurisdiction, it needs to affirm publicly and assertively—both in words and actions—that Black Lives Matter. Here, I detail GCPL's rocky journey to fulfilling that call for affirmation from May 2020 to the time of this study in early 2021.

George Perry Floyd, Jr. was killed by officer Derek Chauvin of the Minneapolis Police Department (MPD) on May 25, 2020, while officers Tou Thao, J. Alexander

Kueng, and Thomas Lane were present at the scene and did not intervene to protect Floyd

(Higgins & Mangan, 2020; Shammas et al., 2020). The following day, all four officers

were fired from MPD; as of early 2021, they all faced charges for his murder (Andone et

al., 2020; Higgins & Mangan, 2020; KSTP Minneapolis, 2020). On April 20, 2021,

Chauvin was convicted of second-degree unintentional murder, third-degree murder, and

second-degree manslaughter (Olorunnipa & Samuels, 2021). Floyd's death marked a

significant turning point in the Black Lives Matter movement of grassroots antiracist

advocacy and sparked a massive public outcry (Buchanan et al., 2020; Burch et al.,

2020); protestors gathered in cities around the world to express their anger and grief over

his senseless death, along with the deaths of countless Black men and women in the U.S.

(Cave et al., 2020; Cheung, 2020).

Exactly one week after Floyd's death, on June 1, 2020, the CEO of GCPL

responded in a public statement to the Green County community. This statement

noticeably does not include the words "Black Lives Matter"; several of my respondents

openly discussed their feelings about this omission. Following extensive discussions with

stakeholders (including the Green County community, select members of GCPL staff, the

GCPL Board of Trustees, and local legislators), on June 5, 2020, the CEO and COOs

released a longer, more comprehensive joint public statement that begins with the words

"Black Lives Matter." Both statements were shared in emails to GCPL staff, library

stakeholders, and library cardholders. Prior to these press releases, GCPL had not

publicly responded to the Black Lives Matter movement since the phrase became part of

the national conversation in 2013. On June 9 and June 24, 2020, GCPL executives hosted

two mandatory, virtual all-staff town hall forums to discuss combatting racism against

Black Americans. These town halls were facilitated by members of the Green County Human Relations Commission. Additionally, the administration convened an internal work group to address matters of racial and social equity within GCPL, participants referred to this work group as "RSE."

While I had not prepared specific interview questions about Black Lives Matter when I originally designed my interview protocol, GCPL's internal and external reactions to Floyd's death and the Black Lives Matter movement came up naturally in most conversations with my participants. Because GCPL staff work in a majority-Black county and almost half of them are Black themselves, they are hyper-aware of the negative impacts of anti-Black racism against themselves or their neighbors. The tenor of my participants' responses ranged widely: some described GCPL executives' efforts to address anti-Black racism as *good*, *helpful, healing,* and *fantastic*, while others described them as *slow, frustrating, performative*, *invalidating*, and *dismaying*. Some found themselves conflicted: they recognized what they described as the executives' good intentions, but still felt that the organization's leadership ultimately failed in a time of great need. The overall variation in my participants' answers did not follow any observable patterns based on the race/ethnicity, gender, or age of each participant. This further reflects what we already know to be true: no demographic group is a monolith, and within each group, there are a wide range of feelings and opinions on all topics (Heath & Street, 2008).

Some participants discussed GCPL's continued use of local police officers as security support within library branches. A few participants reported that they had developed positive relationships with their local police departments and relied on law

enforcement officers to act as deterrents to "foolishness" (in the words of one participant) from their patrons—such as drug use, assault, or disorderly conduct. However, others were deeply concerned about maintaining a regular police presence in public libraries, especially when working at branches in majority-Black neighborhoods. White library staff in particular did not want to be seen as perpetuating the over-policing and brutality against Black Americans who are simply existing in public spaces. This debate over police presence in libraries has gained increased attention within the profession in recent years (Balzer, 2020; Chancellor, 2019; Oliver, 2020). Further research is needed to explore this topic in more detail.

Several participants said that patrons' reactions to GCPL supporting Black Lives Matter were mostly positive. Said one participant: "a lot of people said [in social media comments and emails], 'I love my library for saying this. My library cares about me.'" One participant shared the public's sentiment on a personal level, saying, "I'm actually pretty proud of this system for actually having a voice, and being willing to make signs and pins and increasing the books about anti-racism." Some participants did note that there were a handful of negative responses from the public, including, "don't all lives matter?" and "why don't you stay out of politics and stick to library work?" One participant said they initially saw the merit in the latter argument, saying:

> I was kind of on the fence at first. I know it's important, but as a business, I didn't know how far we should go. But after a while, I was glad we did put something on our website about it, and I was glad we had a discussion about it.

I found two aspects of this response particularly noteworthy: (a) this was the only participant who referred to GCPL as a business, rather than as a nonprofit or an educational institution; and (b) this was the only response from a Black participant who

expressed any hesitation in GCPL potentially courting controversy by supporting Black Lives Matter. Both of these points open up interesting avenues for future research.

However, other participants were quick to point out that they fundamentally disagreed with the belief that Black Lives Matter is a political statement. Said one participant, "this is a human rights issue. This is not about right or left, red or blue; this is about people needing to be acknowledged." On the other hand, one participant pointed out that the initial delay in GCPL's response seemed to indicate that the administration felt otherwise. This participant said that many members of the public were reaching out to GCPL on social media immediately after George Floyd's death to ask, "why haven't you said anything about this yet?" and "what are you waiting for?"

Among participants, this was one of the biggest criticisms of GCPL's response to Black Lives Matter, that it seemingly took so long for them to deliver a public response at all. Several participants felt that by the time the system took a clear stance on the issue, it felt white-centered and performative. Said one participant:

> When George Floyd died, everybody suddenly started saying, "oh, Black Lives Matter! Let's put it on the website, let's make these pins for everyone to wear at work." And there were town hall meetings, and now there's this committee on racial and social equity being formed. But we want to see something actually being done. And I guess that's happening. But I think there's a disconnect. It just feels like they're checking off boxes to say they're doing the right thing.

Another participant also believed that GCPL administration, while saying the right words, was simply jumping on the bandwagon:

> It felt like performative activism a little bit. Because some people were saying [Black Lives Matter] with their chests way back in 2014. But then all of a sudden, everyone's doing it. That can be invalidating in a way, because it's like, all right, cool, people are validating my right to breathe. But why are you just doing it now? You could have been done it. What stopped you before?

Indicating their belief that GCPL's responses were purely performative, one participant said: "we're saying some buzzwords, but on a deeper level, we're not supporting Black librarians that want to try new things." In contrast to participants who felt that the reaction was far too slow, one participant felt that the response seemed performative because it was rushed and reactive:

> I think administration responded quickly because there was a sense of urgency about it. Not enough time was given to how it was formulated and expressed, so it defaulted into generic PR-speak. When you try to take the middle path and offend nobody, you've also done nothing.

Another commonly repeated theme within participants' responses was that GCPL's response to Black Lives Matter represented a series of missed opportunities for cultural relevance. Said one participant: "our antiracism programs could have been happening all throughout the year. We had an opportunity and we missed it. We could have been better." This participant also described how GCPL had previously failed to embrace its roles and responsibilities as a public institution in a majority-Black county, saying, "a couple years back, you couldn't even say the word 'Black' in programs. You couldn't say 'Black cultural programs' or 'Black history programs.' We just had our first Juneteenth program in 2020. You know, it just didn't make sense." Other participants were likewise frustrated by how these contradictions between the ideals and manifestation of antiracist advocacy in GCPL had played out over time.

Other participants described their frustrations that Black staff members in GCPL had not been consulted in the drafting of either public statement following George Floyd's death. Said one participant:

> No one on the staff was considering in writing them. And frankly, there's only one Black executive, and their perspective is not enough. That could have easily been remedied by reaching out, sending an email, saying, "we want feedback on

how you would like us to respond." I definitely felt extremely disappointed by the lack of consideration or collaboration with staff. Someone even pointed out that "all" [as in "all lives matter"] had been written a ton of times in that initial statement. It's like, yeah, if you didn't ask nobody, that's what happens!

Several Black participants said they were so upset by what they felt was the system's appropriation and mishandling of their trauma that they openly refused to participate in any more mandatory staff discussions about antiracism against Black Americans. Said another participant:

> The intention was good, but the execution was terrible. I think it did a lot of damage, and that is hard to recover from. I'm not sure that anybody in my area walked away from the town hall meetings feeling like, "hey, that went great!" If nobody walked away thinking that that went well, then I feel like it did more harm than good.

At the time of this study, there was no indication that this perceived harm had been rectified or that any future discussions or trainings had been scheduled.

In contrast to these criticisms, a common response among some white participants was that while they believed GCPL administration made some mistakes in their responses, they ultimately did much better in approaching Black Lives Matter than most other library systems. A few participants said that GCPL was the first library system in the state to publicly support Black Lives Matter, and that at the time of this study, there were still many library systems in the state who remained quiet on the issue altogether. Said one participant, self-aware of the limits of his perspective:

> Well, I think we did fantastic. Were we perfect? I don't think so. Could we have maybe done more? I'm not sure. You know, I don't really know the answer to that. I know there were staff who were vocal about, "well, that's not enough." And I get that. Well, I guess I get it. But here I am, an old white man saying that. I thought it was a fine response. I mean, I am coming in with my own baggage, as we all do.

Said another participant, who also had a generally positive reaction to GCPL's Black

Lives Matter response but recognized that it would require an ongoing process of

improvement:

> While it was a little weird that our response was slow and belated, I'm glad that
> we did it. And once we committed to it, we are now very vocal about it. I think in
> general, I am really appreciative of how much farther along we are than other
> library systems in the state and in most states. We are farther along in terms of
> being inclusive and equitable, but obviously there's a long way to go. But I am a
> little worried that the changes in the system are not going to be substantive.

Several participants said that in order to promote lasting changes, GCPL would need to

focus on better training for its staff and continued educational initiatives for its patrons.

Some participants said that a positive development in educational initiatives by GCPL

was a program series started in 2020 that was referred to as a "diversity dialogue," where

a GCPL executive and a member of the Green County Human Relations Commission

discussed diversity in the workplace with the help of books such as *How to Be an*

Antiracist (Kendi, 2019), *Between the World and Me* (Coates, 2015), and *Why Are All the*

Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria? (Daniel Tatum, 2017).

One participant, tempering their language to indicate that evolution was still in

progress, shared examples of other GCPL reforms that they felt were indicative of

substantive changes:

> The system has made wide-ranging efforts to educate its customers and staff
> about systemic racism in America, and has attempted to consider changes to the
> organization itself. In response to high demand for books on antiracism in the
> summer of 2020, GCPL provided unlimited digital copies of these titles for their
> customers to check out. The system also provided each staff member with a
> personal copy of *How to Be an Antiracist* by Ibram X. Kendi and incorporated
> questions about antiracism into its interview process.

Participants also discussed how George Floyd's death represented an especially

vulnerable moment in American history for Black and white Americans. As several

participants described, Black Americans felt demoralized and afraid as they repeatedly

watched their brothers and sisters murdered in broad daylight and their murderers

acquitted (if they were even charged at all). Said one participant: "making Black

employees talk about our racial trauma was trying. We're exhausted. We're tired. We've

been telling people this stuff forever, and y'all weren't listening before." Another Black

participant talked about how GCPL administration needed to remain open to feedback

and criticism on their antiracism efforts:

> I get being on the defense. Nobody wants to hear that they're not handling the
> issue of racism correctly, right? So you'll hear, "Oh, no! I'm not a racist! We're
> doing all this!" But what you want to hear is, "I didn't even think about that.
> That's a good point." That's all that it takes. And I feel like it is this defensive
> type of thing. Where it's like, no, just let it be. Let people be honest. Give them a
> space to be honest and then go from there, instead of worrying about the scars you
> may get in the process.

Black Americans' feelings of vulnerability and fear in the wake of countless,

senseless deaths of fellow Black men and women are borne of generational grief and a

visceral ache to protect the very lives and well-being of themselves and their loved ones

(Coates, 2015). Therefore, any discomfort that white Americans may have felt in the

wake of George Floyd's death as they began to confront the consequences of their white

privilege and their complicity in white supremacy was enormously insignificant by

comparison (Applebaum, 2017; Holloway, 2020; Oluo, 2019). However, I believe that an

acknowledgement of this discomfort is important precisely because white Americans

must name it and face it in order to actively heal the societal ills that they have created

and perpetuated (Glanton, 2020). Therefore, I have included responses from white

participants who shared how their feelings of vulnerability and discomfort in the wake of

Black Lives Matter contributed to the shortcomings in their responses. Said one

participant:

> We are relying on the antiracism work of one Black executive, but one person
> cannot be the voice for all the Black members of our system. But honestly, I don't
> know how to do it better. If I were in charge, I would feel like, 'I don't want to
> fuck this up.'

Another participant said that white staff in leadership roles must practice deep humility in

order to accept and repair their mistakes:

> There aren't any errors that we can't regroup from. But there has to be an
> acknowledgement of the error. And I think that often falls short, too, when we pat
> ourselves on the back for something that went poorly, instead of saying, "We
> screwed up. That shouldn't have gone like that. And I get that, and I'm gonna do
> better going forward." But if you don't even acknowledge that, that's a problem.

Another participant agreed that GCPL's administration had not properly addressed their

mistakes, saying: "they never acknowledged that they had equivocated in their response.

And I think they deeply betrayed staff. Some of the communications about race have

been so misguided. This was a real example of how not to do something." Said another

participant, openly acknowledging their failures and what could be learned from them:

> This is our wake-up call. We need to do better; we need to figure out how we help
> staff through these difficult times, how we lift them up, how we get them trained
> better, how we promote them... it just covers the full gamut of what we do as a
> system. And it's one of those things where, unfortunately, we [as white people] all
> kind of had in the back of our head, but until it got publicized broadly—and
> unfortunately, violently—did we really just go, oh, my God, we've just failed.
> And so from that failure is, you know, learning forward, and how do we go do a
> better job, and not just for our staff, but for our customers and our community,
> knowing the community that we live in, you know? So I know that failing
> forward was very important for us, because libraries across the country and
> institutions across the country are like, "we failed." And if you didn't feel that
> way, then there's no hope for you.

As Ladson-Billings (1995) describes, culturally relevant educators practice cultural

critique in part by discussing and grappling with their own shortcomings and limitations,

openly soliciting feedback on how they can adapt their approaches to best support the needs of their learners.

Intercultural Communication. As discussed previously in this chapter, culture (and by extension, cultural critique) is multi-faceted and presents in myriad ways. Therefore, effective intercultural communication in diverse learning environments is a complex skill that requires ongoing training and professional development (Cherkowski & Ragoonaden, 2016). Several participants discussed how public librarians must continually learn to improve their intercultural communication skills across a variety of cultural spectra. When asked to describe their thoughts on GCPL's standards of professional development, one participant said:

> No matter how much you do, it's never going to be enough. There's never enough that any system would be able to do in terms of providing all the various types of education that the staff need. I think the system is doing OK, but always needs to go further. That's something we will have to continue to work on. But I would say I'm satisfied with what we've done so far. Perhaps they need to consider mandating that each staff member take so many hours of culturally relevant trainings, in order to make it clear that this is a priority area for us.

As to this participant's suggestion that GCPL mandate trainings on cultural relevance and diversity, two participants who were former social workers strongly agreed. They both said that the renewals of their licenses as social workers were dependent on cultural responsiveness training. They both believed that the work of public librarians was so similar to that of social workers in providing resources and support for community members in crisis that the same training mandate should be applied to public librarians, especially those formally certified by the state, such as those in GCPL.

However, one participant, speaking from her personal experiences as a woman of

color, shared her deep disdain for GCPL's professional development opportunities described as "diversity trainings":

> Honestly, the word diversity makes me want to barf. In a lot of ways, it's become devoid of all meaning. And it's a bit of a trigger word for me, because every time someone has described me as "diverse," they just mean I'm different, I'm not white. It's a very othering word. I'm much more interested in getting to know people better the way you and I are now, in one-on-one conversations. It feels way more personalized and people can share their stories with each other. This needs to be an ongoing learning experience, not just a one-hour seminar that encourages staff to share their racist opinions out in the open. It's important to have uncomfortable conversations, but the onus shouldn't be on the people who have experienced discrimination or racism to constantly educate their peers.

Overall, research participants were conflicted in their feelings about the efficacy of GCPL's approaches to diversity training and professional development. This appears to be a significant area for improvement; in describing best practices for implementing CRP, (Gay, 2018, p. 290) says: "[educators] should be trained in the knowledge and skills of culturally responsive pedagogy for ethnic diversity, systematically supported in their praxis efforts, and held accountable for quality performance within the context of cultural diversity."

Traits of Culturally Relevant Educators

According to Ladson-Billings' (1995) theory, there are three categories of traits of culturally relevant educators (CRE): (a) positive conceptions of self and others; (b) equitable social relations; and (c) dynamic conceptions of knowledge. Each of these categories contains at least four essential traits or dispositions. In this section, I review the evidence I found to suggest where these traits and dispositions are present in the work of GCPL library staff. However, because many of these traits are best exhibited through observable behaviors, rather than through descriptions of attitudes, this study alone is not

sufficient to determine whether members of my research population exhibit most traits of CRE.

Positive Conceptions of Self and Others

The category of positive conceptions of self and others describes the great care and respect that CRE have for their learning communities; CRE foster community pride through their praxis (Ladson-Billings, 1995). CRE believe all learners are capable of success, continually evolve in their practice, view teaching as a way of giving back to their communities, and practice a mining model of education (Freire, 1968).

Believing All Learners Are Capable of Success. CRE hold high standards for their learners, refusing to allow their students to accept defeat and pushing them to grow outside of their comfort zones (Ladson-Billings, 1995). This level of mentorship is perhaps better suited to describe classroom teaching than the teaching that takes place in public libraries, because while moments of teaching and learning in libraries tend to be brief and transactional, classroom teachers spend extended time with their students and can develop deeper, more trusting relationships. Therefore, it is not surprising that in this study, I found little evidence of this belief among my participants. However, that does not mean that it does not exist entirely. Rather, it may suggest that my interview protocol was not adequate in allowing me to explore this facet of CRP, or that focused research is needed in order to explore the processes and outcomes of personal relationship-building between librarians and patrons.

Evolving in Their Practice. CRE recognize that in order to best serve their learners and remain culturally relevant, they must continually evolve and improve their practice. As far as the practice of individual librarians, this need may be best addressed

through training and professional development, as discussed previously in this chapter. However, this evolution should be composed not just of singular, discrete moments of professional development (like completing a checklist of prescribed minimums), but rather of a holistic philosophy of career-long learning, improvement, and growth. There will never come a day when any one educator becomes a master at providing culturally relevant education.

Giving Back to Their Communities. The idea that culturally relevant educators generally work within their home communities or cultures and do so as a way to give back to the systems that raised them came up multiple times in my interviews with respondents. I spoke with several participants who were born and raised in Green County and therefore felt that it was essential for them to serve the communities that raised them. Said one participant:

> I am a product of Green County, a child of this county born and bred. And the funny thing is, libraries are kind of a full-circle thing for me. When I was in high school, I always used to walk to my local branch. And after I met a Black librarian working at that branch when I was in college, it made me want to go work in my campus library. When I graduated, I came back to work for this system. And that's how I found this work that I love so much.

This element of CRP—that teaching is about giving back through reciprocal relationships and respect, not through the lens of wanting to be a "savior" coming from outside the community—is important because it allows educators to easily communicate, build rapport, and connect with the unique needs and environments of their learners. Some respondents added that there should be concerted efforts to recruit all staff—especially executive leadership—from within their home districts as much as possible, in order to mirror this aspect of cultural relevance within the corporate structure.

Practicing a Mining Model of Education. In his seminal text *Pedagogy of the*

Oppressed, Freire (1968) rejects the colonialist, patriarchal banking model of education, wherein educators are seen as depositing knowledge into the empty minds of their learners. Rather, he presents the alternative mining model of education, wherein educators assist learners in extracting existing expertise and knowledge from their own minds, that which has been grown from their own unique lived experiences. Ladson-Billings (1995) theorized that CRE follow this Freirean model.

It is difficult to determine from the data collected in this study if members of this population believe in and practice a mining model of education. Most research participants did not discuss their educational philosophies in our interviews, either because they had not considered the language with which to describe their personal pedagogies or because they focused their responses on the cultural relevance of GCPL's practices as a whole, rather than on themselves as individual practitioners. However, I believe that GCPL's practice of cultivating a popular collection may be indicative of a mining model of librarianship, so to speak. As several research participants described, their collection development philosophy encourages patrons to share what it is that they want to learn, based on their own experiences, preferences, and existing knowledge, rather than accept that anyone else should dictate and define their reading preferences.

Equitable Social Relations

CRE connect with learners, build dynamic relationships, develop communities of learners, and encourage collaborative and cooperative learning (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Overall, these practices best relate to classroom settings, so they may not be directly analogous to the teaching and learning experiences that take place in public libraries. However, I did collect limited data to suggest that GCPL staff exhibit these traits of CRE

in other ways that tie more directly into their own work.

Connecting with Learners. Research participants regularly expressed their deep

care for their patrons. Several participants shared stories of their favorite patrons, ones

they had built relationships with over many years and looked forward to seeing in their

branches almost every day. Others referred to patrons whom they assisted with job

applications or unemployment insurance, often saying, *I still think about her all the time,*

and I really hope she got that job/check. Those library staff who conducted storytimes

talked about watching young children grow each week. As one participant shared, "one

day they come in as newborn babies, and the next thing you know, they're asking me for

the stories and songs they want to hear, and then suddenly they're in Kindergarten!" In

my own personal experience, I have even spoken with colleagues who have attended

patrons' weddings and funerals. Public librarians are essential community members who

create lasting connections with the people they serve; these connections are inherent

reflections of a culturally relevant pedagogy.

Developing a Community of Learners. Because of public librarians' ability to

connect members of a wide audience with the best information and resources to fit their

specific needs, libraries are often regarded as invaluable resource hubs within their

communities (Cabello & Butler, 2017; Corsillo, 2015; Knapp, 2014). As one participant

described:

> Our community partners [small businesses, health services, legal aid, government
> agencies, educational institutions, etc.] see us not only as educators, but also as
> connectors. We collaborate with local universities, vocational schools, community
> colleges... we're even getting kids interested in coding. We are a pipeline to all
> these other great learning opportunities for patrons. We're constantly looking for
> every possible way to get outside of our doors, do outreach, and meet people
> literally where they are.

Said another participant: "I think that our new administration has done a really good job of finding and cultivating community partnerships, identifying the best places to use them, and making sure that they reflect the needs and interests of our communities." Many participants echoed this idea that library work must take place within the community, outside the four walls of a library branch. Said one participant:

> We've gotten better at recognizing our potential in a new way. In the past, I didn't feel like librarians were looking to get out into the community as much and learn about the community. Everything took place within our four walls, and that was pretty much it. Some librarians think that we should just open our doors, and whoever walks in, that's who we'll take care of. And sure, you could do that. But then you're not building on anything. You're just getting the same people who have always come, and are going to continue to come. You're not proving your worth to the community, because there are people who can benefit from what we have to offer but don't know about everything we do. If we're not making an effort to go outside and find them, the whole point is moot.

Encouraging Collaborative Learning. As discussed previously, the 2021-2024 GCPL strategic framework specifically mentions the system's intentions to "embrace effective learning techniques such as project-based, intergenerational, and co-created learning." This strategic framework was ratified prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, so it remains to be seen how this approach to cooperative and collaborative learning may manifest in practice as library operations transition into the clichéd "new normal" of post-pandemic operations (Bibliotheca, 2020; Plagman, 2020; Verma, 2020).

Dynamic Conceptions of Knowledge

According to Ladson-Billings' (1995) theory, the category of dynamic conceptions of knowledge means that CRE view knowledge as dynamic and socially constructed, critique knowledge claims and encourage their learners to do the same, use scaffolding strategies, and employ multiple means of assessment.

Viewing Knowledge as Dynamic and Socially Constructed. The highly-

effective teachers observed by Ladson-Billings (1995) saw knowledge-building as an active process. Students were encouraged to be subject-matter experts in their areas of personal expertise and interest and teach this information to their peers. While I was unable to collect evidentiary data to demonstrate that GCPL staff exhibit this trait when working with patrons, at least one participant did describe their vision for how this dynamic can continue to operate between colleagues in GCPL:

> We are supposed to be about discovery and questions and figuring this out together. And so I believe that all staff members should have a voice in this system and celebrate their voices and talents by using them in new ways. Not everyone may feel comfortable with being on camera for a virtual program, but there are a million roles to play in making each program successful, so there are ways for each person to contribute with what they do best. It's important for us to view ourselves as a system and put our heads together to solve problems as they arise. Staff are engaging in constructive dialogues on our new online forums—they're even sharing recipes with each other! And this is just the beginning.

There should be deeper examinations of how this trait of CRE, when exhibited effectively between colleagues, may translate to more effective learning interactions between library staff and patrons.

Critiquing Knowledge Claims. Another essential trait of CRE is the ability to restructure and reimagine authority inside and outside of the learning space. Ladson-Billings (1995) described the exemplary teachers in her research as taking a critical stance toward the curriculum instead of blindly teaching what they were prescribed. For example, if a school district supplied science reading materials that deny anthropogenic climate change, a culturally relevant teacher would say, "this is what your textbook may be telling you, but it is inaccurate and I am going to tell you why." Likewise, these teachers encouraged their students to challenge and critique not only their learning materials, but also the teachers themselves. In other words, these teachers were willing to

accept that they may be wrong and that their students may be able to provide them with new information or strategies.

The practice of critiquing knowledge claims has been traditionally well-integrated into the work of librarianship. In general, librarians and library associates receive extensive education and training in information literacy, specifically evaluating the accuracy and reliability of various sources (Moran, 2019; Torres & Parker-Hennion, 2019); they then teach these information literacy skills to their patrons as needed during reference interviews (S. W. Brown, 2008). At least one research participant specifically referred to an example of teaching information literacy skills when working with customers:

> It's always disconcerting when a customer asks me to help them find a title or online articles about information that I know is unequivocally false. This happened a lot during the Trump administration. Because of course, I don't always know a person's reasoning for wanting to find this information. Are they genuinely doing it for their own curiosity, or for an educational assignment like a compare-and-contrast paper, or are they falling for this propaganda hook, line, and sinker? And of course I have to maintain that boundary of not judging the customer personally without knowing their whole story. I want to be professional while still guiding people in the right direction, like, "you should look at this source, too! Have you considered this contradictory opinion? Have you thought about it from this perspective?"

Because of the integral role of critiquing knowledge claims in the practice of librarianship, it is generally accepted that library staff regularly exhibit this trait of CRE.

Using Scaffolding Strategies. Because CRE hold dynamic conceptions of knowledge, they recognize learners' ability to grow and attain new information through the use of scaffolding strategies and other strategic methods of engaging the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1930–1934/1978). Whether public library staff are successfully implementing scaffolding strategies when working directly with patrons

in programs or during one-on-one instruction is impossible to determine through this interview-based research design alone. Additionally, because not all public library staff have academic or professional backgrounds in classroom education, they may not have the shared language to explain the pedagogical practices they use when working with learners. However, at least one research participant described an attitude that I believe reflects the practices of scaffolding: "I think a big part of the work we do in the library is empowering our customers to learn. They can see that we're willing to hold their hand in the beginning, but we want them to become more self-sufficient and 'fly out of the nest,' so to speak." Another participant added, "when a patron wants to find something from the catalog, I'll walk them through it the first few times. But then I want them to be able to demonstrate that they learned how to do it on their own for the next time."

Ultimately, further research is needed in order to determine: (a) whether the language of scaffolding might accurately describe how some public library staff help teach their patrons new information; and (b) whether targeted professional development on the language and practices of scaffolding may help public library staff become more effective educators.

Employing Multiple Means of Assessment. In terms of public library operations, the practice of employing multiple means of assessment ties back most directly to the first criterion of CRP: measuring learner achievement by going beyond quantitative data. Again, GCPL is currently embracing a shift in its strategies by conducting more comprehensive, qualitative assessments of patrons' library experiences, but this model will take time to develop and is like swimming upstream against years of

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trends of measuring library performance primarily through attendance and circulation statistics.

Summary

As this was an exploratory case study, I did not examine each facet of CRP in depth. Not every participant was able to speak to each component of CRP in their work, either because a particular component was not germane to their professional role or because we did not have the time to discuss each topic during our interviews. However, I believe that I collected sufficient data to suggest that within this particular population, library staff have a shared perception of culturally relevant education and its importance in their work. Survey data indicated that 97% of the sample believe public librarians are educators, an essential tenet of the argument that CRP may be able to describe the work of public librarianship. Here, I offer a summary of my findings from each criterion of CRP (i.e., learner achievement, cultural competence, and cultural critique) and each category of traits of CRE (i.e., positive conceptions of self and others, equitable social relations, and dynamic conceptions of knowledge), as defined by Ladson-Billings (1995).

Culturally Relevant Criteria

Many participants spoke at length about two of the three criteria of CRP: cultural competence and cultural critique. However, without the structure, materials, training, or mandate to assess their patrons' learning on a wide scale, most members of this population were not able to speak in great detail about how they evaluate learner achievement in their work.

Learner Achievement. Participants described getting to know each patron through reference interviews and continued interactions over time. Participants discussed

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the many ways that GCPL serves the immediate needs of its communities, including

hosting food/clothing drives and partnering with reputable organizations to provide free

legal assistance. Participants also discussed the need to go beyond quantitative data when

assessing patrons' learning and experiences within the library overall. Participants

recognized that usage statistics alone could not provide a complete picture of the efficacy

of library programs, services, and collections.

Cultural Competence. Participants raised concerns that GCPL's library branches

were not designed with cultural relevance in mind and felt that communities with more

wealth were regularly prioritized for branch upgrades and renovations. On the other hand,

GCPL's virtual programming, first implemented in 2020 in response to the COVID-19

pandemic, appeared to be a resounding success, drawing a mean attendance over six

times that of pre-COVID, in-person programs. GCPL's commitment to developing a

popular collection for its patrons also represented a culturally relevant mindset. This

practice was backed up by quantitative data from a recent internal audit of GCPL's

collection of children's picture books (facilitated by a third party), which showed that

GCPL had continually made concerted efforts to acquire a balanced sample of diverse

titles available in the market. Participants were aware of all the ways that culture was a

local phenomenon in Green County, describing how each branch served communities

with distinct needs, wants, and demographics. Participants also felt that GCPL's ongoing

effort to develop a majority-minority workforce—one of the only ones of its kind in U.S.

public libraries—was the most apparent example of cultural competence within the

system.

Cultural Critique. Participants discussed how GCPL staff and administration

practiced cultural critique with varying levels of effectiveness, saying that GCPL needed to strengthen its professional development standards to improve intercultural communication. Most participants agreed that public libraries are not neutral institutions and therefore have a duty to respond to social inequities in their communities. Participants also shared how GCPL was mindful of the digital divide and attempted to bridge this divide by offering amenities to increase home Internet access. However, the COVID-19 pandemic broadened the digital divide in ways that GCPL (or any public library, for that matter) did not have the resources to ameliorate.

Many participants felt that GCPL had previously failed to fully support Black and LGBTQIA+ community members and staff, only beginning to embrace their responsibilities in advocating for these communities (and the intersection between the two) in the few years prior to this study. Participants wanted GCPL to support the creation of more programming on LGBTQIA+ topics for youth and adults. Participants also had mixed feelings about GCPL's public responses to the Black Lives Matter movement; most wanted GCPL administration to consult with more Black staff members before attempting to speak on their behalf and practice open-mindedness and vulnerability when hearing criticisms of their approaches.

Culturally Relevant Traits

The data collected in this study suggest that members of the study population may exhibit components of all three traits of culturally relevant educators. However, without the ability to observe reference interviews or in-person programs (due to COVID-19 restrictions), I was not able to corroborate all of this anecdotal evidence.

Positive Conceptions of Self and Others. In this study, I did not find specific

evidence that members of the study population believe all learners are capable of success, and therefore recommend future research on this topic. Participants did discuss the need to evolve in their practice by participating in regular training and professional development. Participants also discussed how they and their colleagues give back to their communities. In particular, GCPL staff who were born and raised in Green County felt a strong connection and commitment to their communities. They recommended that GCPL continue to recruit and promote staff members who hail from the communities they serve.

Equitable Social Relations. Participants reported building lasting relationships and connections with learners, watching them grow, and rooting for their success. Participants also described the many ways in which GCPL develops a community of learners: through building community partnerships, going outside the four walls of the library, and fostering partnerships with local schools. On the latter point, participants identified the successful LINK initiative (providing easy library access to all K-12 students in local public schools), as well as opportunities for significant improvement.

Dynamic Conceptions of Knowledge. Participants felt that public libraries can and should be places of collaborative learning, and that colleagues can and should collaborate in order to provide the best programs for their patrons. Participants described how they helped develop their patrons' information literacy skills in order to help them critique knowledge claims and find the most reliable, reputable resources for their immediate needs and continuing learning. Participants also mentioned ways that they help their patrons achieve independent mastery of concepts and have begun to consider qualitative data in their professional practice.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

I begin this chapter by discussing the three key findings of this study. Next, I evaluate the validity of this study and discuss its major limitations. Then, I outline the implications of my findings for the professional practice of public librarianship and provide recommendations for future research to further develop the application of CRP in public libraries.

Discussion of Key Findings

The three key findings of this study are: (a) CRP may provide a framework for describing the work of public librarianship; (b) CRP should be advanced through a library staff that reflects its community; and (c) GCPL serves as an example of imperfect progress on the path to becoming more culturally relevant.

CRP and Public Librarianship

Although I was not able to verify the presence of each practice of CRP and each trait of CRE in my research sample, the data in this study are sufficient to suggest that CRP may provide a useful framework for describing the work of public librarianship. This is a critical finding because it directly addresses my impetus for conducting this research as well as the two primary research questions of this study. This also serves to fill the gap I identified in the extant literature: while CRP had been examined extensively in K-12 settings, there was little evidence that it had been examined in public libraries prior to this study.

Reflecting the Community

At the time of this study, GCPL had one of the only known majority-minority public library staffs in the U.S., in a field that is overwhelmingly populated by white

women. GCPL's success in rejecting the *status quo* of whiteness in libraries illustrates the power of developing a library staff that reflects the cultural backgrounds of the communities it serves. To continue this positive trend, GCPL (and other library systems in the U.S.) should continually hire more staff of color, especially staff who are bilingual or are otherwise experienced in supporting English language learners.

Imperfect Progress

As several participants discussed, there is never a point at which an educator or educational system reaches a pinnacle of practicing CRP and can then rest on their proverbial laurels. As cultural groups grow, evolve, migrate, the wants and needs of the individuals within these cultural groups continually change. However, there are exemplary models of culturally relevant practitioners, such as those Ladson-Billings (1995) presented in her research. As I found in the course of this study, we can adapt the traits of these exemplars in new settings.

The data collected in this study paint a complicated picture of a public library system that has made strides to become more culturally relevant, albeit gradually and imperfectly. Many participants were disappointed by GCPL's reticence to adopt assertive stances in support of Black lives and the LGBTQIA+ community, but were cautiously optimistic about progress that had been made on these points in the few years prior to this study. Participants were clear in their recommendations: they wanted GCPL to practice more authentic, inclusive social justice activism, especially by incorporating perspectives from staff members within communities directly affected by racism and bigotry. Participants also felt that GCPL's programs, services, and environments often reflected and perpetuated inequities within the county. Participants believed that branches in areas

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with greater wealth (particular in the northern and eastern parts of the county) habitually received preferential treatment from the system's administration. Therefore, GCPL administration should conduct a thorough and impartial audit of their practices in order to fully identify the sources of these weaknesses and develop a clear plan to address them.

Validity

Given that this qualitative case study is a snapshot of a particular place, population, and time, it is irreplicable by nature and its validity cannot be measured empirically. Instead, Morse and colleagues (2002) present five verification strategies for ensuring the validity of a qualitative inquiry: (a) methodological coherence; (b) appropriate sampling; (c) concurrent data collection and analysis; (d) theoretical thinking; and (e) theory development. Here, I apply these five verification strategies to this study.

First, methodological coherence: my research questions, theoretical framework, data collection, and data analysis remained aligned throughout the completion of this case study. Second, appropriate sampling: as discussed previously in this report, I drew a large and diverse sample of participants with expertise in their field. This allowed me not only to achieve saturation and replication of themes, but also to collect negative cases in which participants' responses differed significantly from the majority (such as with the question of whether public librarians are educators). These negative cases allowed me to paint a more complex picture of the various philosophies and practices exhibited by GCPL staff. Third, I collected and analyzed data concurrently, allowing me to adapt and expand my interview protocol as I learned new information from my participants (such as with the inclusion of questions about GCPL's response to the Black Lives Matter movement). Fourth, theoretical thinking: I continually compared new data to existing data and

ensured that I was understanding and conveying the "big picture" of my themes while also providing sufficient details to illustrate specific instances of these themes. Finally, theory development: the very objective of this study was to interpret an existing theory in a new setting. While this study alone is not sufficient for me to present an adapted theory, what I may eventually term *culturally relevant librarianship*, it does provide the groundwork to begin that process of inquiry.

Research Participation Effects

How do I know that my participants were not just saying what they thought I wanted to hear? This objection refers to research participation effects (RPE), an umbrella term for the phenomena wherein participants provide untrue or unreliable answers to researchers, whether consciously or unconsciously (McCambridge et al., 2014). As discussed previously, I do believe that the existing professional relationships I had with many of my participants allowed for us to build on a true and deep rapport. Therefore, in most cases, I do believe that my participants' answers were as honest as possible. Several times, when I asked a participant a particularly difficult question about their perceptions of cultural relevance in their workplace, they would ask me, "how honest do you want me to be?," suggesting that their answer may not have been entirely flattering to their employer. I would always respond, "you can be as honest as you want to be. Everything you say to me will be held in strict confidence." Usually, after they heard this response, participants would proceed to share a raw, unvarnished account of their experiences and opinions.

There were some instances where I felt that participants only wanted to describe GCPL in the best possible light, especially if their role was higher in the system's

corporate structure. However, I do not think that those responses were invalid or untrue based on that assessment alone. I do believe that there were several participants who truly believed the best of GCPL's trajectory toward cultural relevance, and I did want to hear all possible perspectives from my participants. Therefore, by conducting many thorough interviews, I believe that I was able to achieve saturation and replication of responses, allowing me to place all available data into a meaningful context.

Limitations of the Study

COVID-19

Due to social distancing guidelines and institutional rules in place to prevent participants' risk of exposure to SARS-CoV-2 (the virus that causes COVID-19), I faced unavoidable limitations in my research design. Ideally, I would have interviewed all of my participants in-person, met with them multiple times, and observed their professional processes in action. Instead, given the unprecedented circumstances, I had to gather as much data as possible from single, one-hour Zoom interviews. Therefore, I do concede that vital elements of nuance, context, and corroboration of data may be missing from my findings.

Additionally, due to COVID-19 restrictions, GCPL operated in a strictly limited capacity from March 2020 to April 2021, a time frame that included the entire duration of this study. During this time, GCPL branches were completely closed to the public, meaning that all programs were conducted virtually and all circulation of materials occurred through curbside service or digital formats (e.g., ebooks). Therefore, I did not have any opportunities to interview GCPL patrons or observe their participation in programs, meaning that patrons' accounts of their library experiences are entirely missing

from this study. This is a significant limitation because the very foundation of my theoretical framework is that learners benefit from the practices of culturally relevant pedagogy. Although I collected ample evidence from the point of view of the educators in this environment, I am unable to draw any conclusions about the impact of these educators' practices on their learners. Library patrons offer the best determination of which programs, services, and materials are most culturally relevant to them and their communities. Later in this chapter, I recommend future research to address these particular gaps in this study.

Privilege and Perspective

As discussed in Chapter 1, the effects of my sociocultural privileges inherently limited my perspective as the researcher in this case study. As an individual, I am not the best arbiter of which practices are culturally relevant for each person who utilizes library resources in a given community, especially in a diverse, majority-Black district such as Green County. I believe that I accounted for this limitation to the best of my ability by: (a) addressing it outright and remaining self-reflective throughout my processes of data collection and analysis; (b) interviewing a large and diverse sample; (c) developing trust and rapport with my participants so that they felt comfortable sharing honest truths about their racial and cultural experiences; and (d) continually drawing clear connections between the data and my theoretical framework.

Implications for Practice

The findings of this research are valuable for the professional practice of public librarianship because they offer the beginning of a formalized, unified language for our roles as educators in our communities and our responsibility to provide culturally relevant

education in our programs, services, and spaces. Many of my participants' responses in our interviews reflected that they had a working knowledge of the criteria of CRP and traits of CRE, even if they did not have formal classroom teaching experience or were not already familiar with the specific terminology of this theory. Therefore, I hope that my colleagues throughout the field can look to this study for ways to begin evaluating their own work. I also believe that this research may provide helpful language and resources to help public librarians advocate to their administrations and local governing bodies for the needed funds to provide the best possible education for their patrons. I hope that public librarians who previously did not consider themselves to be educators can read the words of my respondents and see all the ways that they provide valuable educational services to their communities by supporting learner achievement, demonstrating cultural competence, and practicing cultural critique.

Future Research

The data I collected and analyzed in this study raise far more questions than they answer. Therefore, there are numerous possibilities for future research that can be conducted to further this line of inquiry. First, I recommend research that examines patrons' experiences when using their public libraries, especially their perceptions of the education they receive and how well their cultural needs are met. Second, the guiding research questions of this study should be applied in multiple research sites throughout the country in order to provide bases for comparison between library systems. What might an exemplary, culturally relevant library system look like? By comparison, could GCPL actually serve as one such exemplar? Similarly, might we be able to develop a practical rubric to help library systems evaluate and improve the degree to which they

successfully practice CRP? Finally, what might an effective training protocol look like to help librarians and library administrators recognize the value of this theory and identify practical applications that best support their missions in in their own communities?

Conclusion

In summary, I believe that this exploratory case study will shed valuable light on the potential of culturally relevant pedagogy as a valid theoretical framework for the scholarship and professional practice of public librarianship. Through virtual interviews with 30 participants, I discovered where the three criteria of culturally relevant pedagogy (i.e., learner achievement, cultural competence, and cultural critique) and the three categories of traits of culturally relevant educators (i.e., positive conceptions of self and others, equitable social relations, and dynamic conceptions of knowledge) were evident or emerging in Green County Public Library, which serves a diverse population in a suburban district. Future research in various settings, as well as discussions and debates among professional colleagues, will hopefully serve to significantly advance the application of this theory in public libraries across the United States, leading to more focused and culturally responsive library services for all.

Participant Demographic Survey

St. John's University
The School of Education
Tel 718.990.2304
8000 Utopia Parkway
Queens, NY 11439

CULTURAL RELEVANCE IN PUBLIC LIBRARIES: RESEARCH STUDY
PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHIC DATA

This information is being collected as part of a research study on the role of culturally relevant education in public libraries. This data will remain anonymous; it will only be presented in the aggregate and will not be used to identify you or any of your interview responses in any way. For any questions regarding your participation in this research, you can contact the researcher, St. John's University doctoral student, Sarah Garifo, at sarah.garifo18@stjohns.edu, or the dissertation advisor, Dr. Kyle Cook, at cookk@stjohns.edu.

1.   What is your gender?

        _____

        _____ I prefer not to specify

2.   What is your age?
        _____ 18-24
        _____ 25-34
        _____ 35-44
        _____ 45-54
        _____ 55-64
        _____ Over 65

3.   What is your race? (You may select all that apply)
        _____ American Indian or Alaska Native
        _____ Asian
        _____ Black / African American
        _____ Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander
        _____ white
        _____ other (Please specify: _____)
        _____ I prefer not to specify

4.   What is your ethnicity?

_____ Hispanic or Latino

_____ not Hispanic or Latino

5.   What is the highest level of education you have completed?

_____ High school diploma or equivalent

_____ Associate's degree

_____ Bachelor's degree

_____ Master's degree

_____ Doctorate degree

6.   Do you have a Master of Library Science degree or equivalent (MLIS, etc.)?

_____ Yes

_____ No

7.   How many years have you been working in public libraries?

_____ Less than one

_____ 1-5

_____ 6-10

_____ 11-15

_____ 16-20

_____ 21-25

_____ More than 25

8a.   Please rate the degree to which you agree with the following statement:
        Public librarians are educators.

_____ Strongly agree

_____ Agree

_____ Neutral

_____ Disagree

_____ Strongly disagree

8b. Please explain your answer:

_____

_____

_____

Institutional Review Board Approval

ST. JOHN'S UNIVERSITY

Federal Wide Assurance: FWA00009066

Dec 18, 2020 4:16:43 PM EST

PI: Sarah Garifo
CO-PI: Kyle Cook
Dept.:   Education Specialties

Re: Initial - IRB-FY2021-222
          An Ethnography of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy in a Public Library System

_____

Dear Sarah Garifo:

The St John's University Institutional Review Board has rendered the decision below
for *An Ethnography of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy in a Public Library System*.

Decision: **Exempt**

PLEASE NOTE: If you have collected any data prior to this approval date, the data must
be discarded.

Selected Category: Category 1. Research, conducted in established or commonly
accepted educational settings, that specifically involves normal educational practices that
are not likely to adversely impact students' opportunity to learn required educational
content or the assessment of educators who provide instruction. This includes most
research on regular and special education instructional strategies, and research on the
effectiveness of or the comparison among instructional techniques, curricula, or
classroom management methods.

Sincerely,

Raymond DiGiuseppe, PhD, ABPP
Chair, Institutional Review Board
Professor of Psychology

Marie Nitopi, Ed.D.
IRB Coordinator

Participation Recruitment Flyer

CALL FOR VOLUNTEER PARTICIPANTS

Literacy Research Study

Cultural relevance, equity, diversity, and inclusion @ [GCPL]

[GCPL] staff are invited to participate in
Sarah Garifo's doctoral dissertation research.

What's Involved:

- Participation is voluntary and confidential
- One-hour Zoom interview, scheduled outside of work hours for a mutually agreeable date/time
- Findings will be included in a dissertation which will be made available to [GCPL] to assist with ongoing equity, diversity, and inclusion work
- No compensation will be provided

Interested in volunteering? Contact:

st. john's
UNIVERSITY

Sarah Garifo (Librarian III, [Branch name redacted])
sarah.garifo18@stjohns.edu

Participation is confidential and all responses will be anonymous in the dissertation publication.

Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

Introduction

Thank you again for agreeing to meet with me today and participate in this research project. As a reminder, I am examining the concept of cultural relevance in public libraries, particularly here in [GCPL]. I will be asking you questions about what "cultural relevance" means to you and to describe your experiences working with diverse customers in public libraries.

Acknowledgment/Confidentiality

Everything you say to me during this time is completely confidential. While I will incorporate your responses into my findings, I will never identify you by name in the final report. This research is not sponsored or monitored by [GCPL]. You have the right to withdraw your consent to participate at any time. Do you have any questions for me before we begin? Now that I have explained the confidential nature of this interview, I am going to press record and ask you to state your name and that you consent for this interview to be recorded.

All Participants

1. What is your job title, and how would you describe your role within [GCPL]?
2. How many years have you been working in [GCPL]? In libraries overall?
3. What made you want to start working in libraries?
4. If you have worked in other libraries besides [GCPL], how would you describe some of the key differences between [GCPL] and those other libraries?
5. Are you bilingual or multilingual? If so, which languages do you speak, and how is that skill incorporated into your professional role?
6. What would you say is the single most impactful and/or rewarding part of your professional role?
7. What does it mean to you for a library system to be culturally relevant or culturally responsive?
8. How do you address concerns and complaints that you receive about culturally and socially diverse programs and materials?
9. To what extent do your racial and cultural identities impact the ways in which you respond to and serve this community?
10. To what extent do your racial and cultural identities impact the ways in which you interact with your colleagues and vice versa?
11. Where does [GCPL] succeed in terms of cultural relevance and diversity?
12. Where does [GCPL] need to improve in terms of cultural relevance and diversity?

Executive Staff

1. What specific actions (if any) do you take within your role to improve the cultural relevance and diversity of [GCPL] libraries?
2. How do you envision the cultural relevance and diversity of [GCPL] programs, services, and collections improving over the next five years? Can you discuss specific steps being taken within your department to achieve these goals?
3. Do you feel that the diversity of [GCPL] staff adequately represents the diversity of [Green County]? What specific actions are you taking to increase this representation?

Information Staff

1. What types of programs do you plan and deliver?
2. What factors do you consider when planning a new program or revising an existing program?
3. How would you describe the culture(s) of the community you serve in your particular branch?
4. Do you have any classroom teaching experience? If so, can you tell me more about that? Why did you choose to move from teaching to libraries?
5. In this role, do you consider yourself to be an educator? Why or why not?
6. What does it mean to you for a library program to be culturally relevant?
7. How do you address cultural relevance in some or all of your programs? Please provide details from specific programs you have led or co-led.

Selection Staff

1. What resources and tools do you use to find recommendations for new materials to purchase for the [GCPL] collection?
2. To what extent do you consider cultural relevance and diversity in your selection process? What exactly do those considerations look like in practice?
3. What barriers (if any) do you encounter when searching for culturally relevant and diverse titles and authors to add to the collection?

Conclusion

Do you have anything else you would like to share with me at this time, as it relates to the questions we have just discussed? Thank you again for your time and your contribution to my research. Please reach out to me if you have questions at any time. I will be ending this recording now.

Participant Consent Form

St. John's University
The School of Education
Tel 718.990.2304
8000 Utopia Parkway
Queens, NY 11439
www.stjohns.edu

CULTURAL RELEVANCE IN PUBLIC LIBRARIES:
CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

The purpose of this study is to explore the role of culturally relevant education in the programs, services, collection, and staffing of public libraries, specifically within [GCPL]. The researcher is looking to learn more about which elements of culturally relevant education are evident in this library system, as well as how the staff members of this system perceive culturally relevant education and apply it in their work.

Your participation consists of a brief demographic survey and a one-hour, one-on-one interview where we will discuss your experiences and perspectives on this topic. It is anticipated that you will experience no harm as a result of your participation in this research.

For any questions regarding your participation in this research, you can contact the researcher, St. John's University doctoral student, Sarah Garifo, at sarah.garifo18@stjohns.edu, or the dissertation advisor, Dr. Kyle Cook, at cookk@stjohns.edu. If you have questions about your rights in this study, you can email Dr. Raymond DiGiuseppe, Institutional Review Board Chair, digiuser@stjohns.edu or Marie Nitopi, IRB Coordinator at St. John's University, nitopim@stjohns.edu.

I, _____, voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.

I have had the purpose and nature of the study explained to me in writing and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study.

I understand that even if I agree to participate now, I can withdraw my consent at any time or refuse to answer any questions without any consequences of any kind.

I understand that I will not benefit directly from participating in this research, but that my participation may help further scholarly discussions and theories of the library field. This research is not financially sponsored or overseen by [GCPL] and my responses will not be shared directly with [GCPL], nor will they impact my employment status in any way. I consent to my interview being video-recorded. This video recording is solely for the purpose of the researcher; it will not be shared or used to identify me in any way.

I understand that all information I provide for this study will be treated confidentially. In any report on the results of this research, my identity will remain anonymous.

I understand that disguised excerpts from my interview may be quoted in the researcher's doctoral dissertation and subsequent published papers based on this research project.

I understand that signed consent forms and original video recordings will be retained on a password-protected hard drive, which only the researcher will be able to access, until the conclusion of the research project. A transcript of my interview in which all identifying information has been removed will be retained for two years following the conclusion of the research project.

I understand that I am free to contact the researcher at any time to seek further clarification and information.

_____   _____   _____
Signature of Participant   Printed Name of Participant   Date

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