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TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES: CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE PEDAGOGY, STUDENT ENGAGEMENT, AND GROWTH ACHIEVEMENT

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

to the faculty of the

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION SPECIALTIES

of

THE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

at
ST. JOHN'S UNIVERSITY

New York
by
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Date Submitted 3/14/2022 Date Approved 5/17/2022

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ABSTRACT

TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES: CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE PEDAGOGY, STUDENT ENGAGEMENT, AND GROWTH ACHIEVEMENT

Suzanne R. Brooks

The goal in this qualitative phenomenological study was to discover the experiences of middle school teachers as they pertain to culturally responsive pedagogy, student engagement, and student growth. Participants who taught culturally diverse students in Grades 6–8 were recruited from public charter middle schools in an urban district in the mid-Atlantic region. The study was guided by three research questions focused on teachers' knowledge of culturally responsive pedagogy and its impact on student engagement and achievement within the classroom. The research questions were answered using a combination of instruments, including a short-answer demographic questionnaire, open-ended interviews, follow-up interviews, a researcher journal, field notes, audio recordings, and video recordings designed to gain rich data about the lived experiences of the participants in relation to the nature of the study. Research findings indicate building student relationships, curriculum autonomy or flexibility, and providing students with exposure were the emergent concepts for the culturally responsive teacher participants. Implications are that culturally responsive pedagogy can support student engagement and achievement among culturally diverse learners.

Keywords: culturally responsive pedagogy, culturally diverse, student engagement, achievement

DEDICATION

To my loving sons, Zaki and Kaya, thank you for giving me the opportunity as your mother to explore my interests and find my passion. Being your mother is the most important role I will ever have. Continue to find happiness and fulfillment in all you do—it is worth it.

Remember, “Education is one thing that no one can ever take from you”

– Ruth Revere Webb

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge that this achievement has taken me on a journey that included many paths. On each path there have been family, friends, colleagues, professors, and classmates who have made the journey interesting, exciting, and motivating.

Thank you to all of those who supported and pushed me along on this journey. Your belief in me encouraged me and led me down the paths to where I am today.

I appreciate my professors at St. John's University for sharing their knowledge and expertise. A special thank you to my mentor Dr. Michael Sampson for sticking with me until I finished, and for his prompt and thoughtful responses. I must also acknowledge Dr. Lisa Bajor for providing me with insight, feedback, and support throughout the process.

I would also like to thank the special friends in my cohort at St. John's that pushed me along the way. The text message thread was truly a motivator.

To my family, my mother, Sandra Ellis—I hope I am making you proud in heaven. To my father, Tony Brooks—thank you for encouragement. To my sisters, Pam and Angie—thank you for always being there for me. Linda, I appreciate all that you do. Thank you, Sule, for taking such good care of our sons. There is nothing like the love and support of family.

Thank you, Dr. Elizabeth Torres, for imparting your knowledge and support on this long journey. I would like to acknowledge my friend Dr. Arto Woodley for demystifying this process at the beginning. Dr. Kimberly Jones, I appreciated your sound advice, it worked. Thank you, Jeneen Stewart, for your research assistance. Garfield

Swaby, you have been in my corner since my graduate school journey began years ago, I appreciate you.

I would also like to thank my dear friends, Joi Jackson, Terri Scott, Terri Sutton, and Kharon Works for always giving me a reason to laugh and being a listening ear. Also, I would like to give a heartfelt thank you to all my hidden figures.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The achievement gap for Black and Hispanic students in relation to White students supports the need for a transformative educational approach to literacy instruction for culturally diverse learners. Standardized reading scores have shown negligible progress between 2009–2019 for this student population and the reading scores for culturally diverse students have been significantly lower than those of White students during this same period (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2020). Researchers in the field of education have developed a culturally responsive pedagogy framework that integrates culturally relevant methodologies, curricula, and instruction to support the literacy development of culturally diverse learners in a social environment (Milner, 2010). Gist (2017) described culturally responsive pedagogy as "teachers' ability to incorporate knowledge of students' background and culture in their instructional practice to enhance student learning" (p. 289). It is imperative that the hegemonic approach in teaching and learning be considered when determining the cause for the achievement disparity among culturally diverse students; in doing so, teachers must prepare students of diverse cultures to achieve in an equitable learning environment that motivates and engages them to learn. Scholars (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2016; Milner, 2020) have suggested Black students are often not prepared to meet standardized literacy levels because they are not motivated and engaged in a hegemonic curriculum. Because the interests of these students, like those of students of other races and ethnicities, are complex and meaningful, systemic structures should support multicultural curriculum. Milner (2020) concluded the following:

> I have observed that Black students become motivated to read when they are introduced, encouraged, and/or allowed to read texts that are meaningful to them, resonate with their experiences and worldview, and get them excited about finding meaning from and through the story-lines. Thus, it can be argued that reading, building meaning, and motivation are deeply interconnected. (p. 252)

As it relates to learning and student achievement, the focus in this qualitative study was on teachers' lived experiences with developing and using culturally responsive pedagogy in their daily practice as a means to positively influence the engagement and achievement of culturally diverse students.

Purpose of the Study

Educational inequities such as achievement gaps, cultural bias, disproportionate suspension rates, and disproportionate special education referrals manifest in culturally diverse students being viewed through a deficit lens (de Silva et al., 2018; Sulé et al., 2018; Walker & Hutchinson, 2020). This realm of systemic inequities also includes archaic structural norms, teaching practices, and curriculum that are ineffective in supporting the reading achievement of culturally diverse learners (Hammond, 2015; Kibler & Chapman, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2009b; Milner, 2010). These historical inequities are pervasive and indelibly affect the achievement ability of culturally diverse learners.

This study was designed to move beyond quantitative scores that promote a deficit outcome for students who do not meet proficient reading levels (Hammond, 2015; Milner, 2020). Instead, the researcher employed a qualitative approach to collect data related to teacher perceptions of culturally responsive pedagogy, student engagement, and student achievement in theory and practice. Milner (2020) inferred that there is an interrelatedness among reading, expanding upon prior knowledge, and student motivation. If culturally diverse students' motivation and interests are critical components in learning, then "culturally competent" teachers should implement a culturally responsive pedagogical model that supports learning opportunities that are tailored to these students (Ladson-Billings, 2006).

Background/Context of the Study

The curriculum and teaching frameworks practiced in many urban schools are reflective of the post-segregation era (de los Ríos et al., 2015). Educators in the United States have historically adopted a Eurocentric pedagogical framework that incorporates instructional approaches geared toward the mainstream and dominant culture; however, a shift toward a multiliteracy pedagogical structure emerged at the beginning of the 21st century and emphasized incorporating the cultural components and experiences of historically marginalized groups into teaching and learning (Banks, 2006; Irizarry, 2017; Woodard et al., 2017). According to Taylor (2008), the purpose of culturally responsive pedagogy is to "challenge deficit and compensatory models of linguistic assimilation and advocate on building upon language-minority students' wealth of cultural and linguistic capital as academic and sociocultural resources" (p. 90).

Receiving a public-school education was not always considered necessary for most of the population in the United States; in fact, throughout the early 20th century, attending school was largely based on social class and race (J. D. Anderson, 1988). European immigrants were often limited to achieving a high school diploma and many were unable to enroll in postsecondary education during this period due to their religious affiliation, social status, or limited economic resources (J. D. Anderson, 1988). In some areas of the country, mandated school attendance included Black students, though schools for Black students received nominal funding from state governments and Black students were prevented from attending schools with their White peers (Gadsden, 1992). During this period, the “separate but equal” law was enacted, which provided equal access to education to combat racial segregation (*Plessy v. Ferguson*, 1896). Despite the “separate but equal” policy that was meant to secure equitable education opportunities, culturally diverse groups continued to face systemic biases and discriminatory practices that limited their access to equitable education and career opportunities. Efforts to provide Black students with an education were supported by Black-led institutions that included Black families, Black religious organizations, and Black communities (J. D. Anderson, 1988). Curriculum and instruction in these schools were often considered to be substandard and outdated due to a lack of resources and were structured to prepare Black students for jobs that were considered labor intensive and subservient, such as maids and sharecroppers (Gadsden, 1992). The presence of these inequities was evident as Graubard (1990) stated, “While injustice of American law and custom that challenged them in their self-esteem, reducing them all to a sort of second-class citizenship, there was little help to be had from federal, state or local authorities” (p. 269). The long-term effect of inferior access to education for Black people cannot be adequately calculated; however, this historical information becomes relevant when researching and analyzing data related to educational disparities (e.g., standardized reading scores) and generational poverty.

Although judicial decisions related to educational policy, as seen in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), instituted school desegregation policies that eliminated the

Plessy v. Ferguson (1869) “separate but equal” doctrine, school curricula and teaching practices continue today to be based on a Eurocentric approach (de Silva et al., 2018). Sulé et al. (2018) stated “public education, imbued with hegemonic norms and curricula standardization, is constrained in its ability to cultivate academic and personal development of racially marginalized students” (p. 895). The Eurocentric curricula and teaching methodologies that are pervasive in most school districts do not represent the diversity of the student population and limit “cultural and political heterogeneity” (Sulé et al., 2018, p. 895). These teaching ideologies are often rooted in a systematic hierarchy that cannot be dismantled without research-based studies that support the importance of instituting diverse methods of teaching and learning for diverse student populations.

Significance/Importance of the Study

Despite the increase in high school graduation rates for culturally diverse students over the past half-century, there continues to be a significant performance gap between this group and White students (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011; NCES, 2020). Standardized reading scores over the last decade indicate culturally diverse students, inclusive of Black and Hispanic students, have scored significantly lower than White students (NCES, 2020). According to Hemmerechts et al. (2017), there are limited data showing a relationship exists between socioeconomic status and reading literacy levels among culturally diverse populations; however, results from a longitudinal study on postsecondary adult educational and workforce achievements indicated there are correlations between family indicators such as parent occupation, highest level of education, and income (NCES, 2020). Further research regarding the impact of reading achievement disparity on the unemployment and poverty rates for culturally diverse populations is warranted.

The NCES (2020) reported there is a significant disparity between Black and Hispanic students who live in poverty in comparison to White students. Despite the reading achievement gap, the enrollment of Hispanic and Black students in U.S. classrooms has steadily increased over the last decade, whereas there has been a steady decline in White student enrollment (Kibler & Chapman, 2018). According to Freire (2000), issues related to educational equity and social justice for marginalized groups have an influence on socioeconomic disparity. Race and ethnicity data retrieved from the U.S. Census Bureau (2019) indicated 21.2% of Blacks and 17.2% of Hispanics live in poverty, whereas the percentage of Whites living in poverty is substantially lower at 10.3%. Data retrieved in 2016 by the NCES reported 34% of Black children and 28% of Hispanic children were living in poverty compared to 11% of White children (NCES, 2019).

Data collected by the NCES (2019) between 2009–2019 show the reading achievement gains for students based on race have been negligible with slight gains for all groups; however, the proficiency achievement level for White students substantially surpasses those of Black and Hispanic students (Lindo, 2006). Reading achievement results (NCES, 2020) show Black students at the fourth- and eighth-grade levels scored an average of 27% and 28%, respectively, lower than their White peers, whereas Hispanic students at these grade levels averaged 25% and 24% lower (NCES, 2019). The reading proficiency percentages for White, Black, and Hispanic students who were administered the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) between 2009–2019 are shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Percentage of Students at or Above Proficiency Reading Achievement National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)

Grade/race	2009	2011	2013	2015	2017	2019
Fourth						
White	42% (0.4)	44% (0.4)	46% (0.4)	46% (0.5)	47% (0.4)	45% (0.4)
Black	156% (0.5)	17% (0.5)	18% (0.5)	18% (0.5)	20% (0.5)	18% (0.5)
Hispanic	17% (0.5)	18% (0.5)	20% (0.6)	21% (0.7)	23% (0.5)	23% (0.4)
Eighth						
White	41% (0.4)	43% (0.4)	46% (0.4)	44% (0.4)	45% (0.4)	42% (0.4)
Black	14% (0.5)	15% (0.5)	175% (0.5)	16% (0.5)	18% (0.5)	15% (0.4)
Hispanic	17% (0.6)	19% (0.5)	22% (0.6)	21% (0.5)	23% (0.6)	22% (0.6)

Note. Standard errors appear in parentheses.

Viewing culturally responsive pedagogy through a social justice lens demands the existence of a framework that is inclusive of students' backgrounds, including their cultural history, community, and learning styles (Ladson-Billings, 2009a; Vavrus, 2018). Historical perceptions of culturally diverse students as unmotivated or intellectually inferior have subjectively influenced the achievement expectations and opportunities for these groups (de Silva et al., 2018; Hammond, 2015) and support the need for "sufficient opportunities in the classroom to develop the cognitive skills and habits of mind that will prepare them to take on more advanced academic tasks" (Hammond, 2015, p. 14). A result of the consistent achievement gap is an increase in reading skill deficits and a decrease in students' ability to become independent learners as they progress through the grade levels, which causes issues because this independence in learning supports the development of critical thinking and perpetuates the higher-order processing that leads to intrinsic motivation (Hammond, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 2009b; Walker & Hutchinson, 2020).

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

The complex relationship between teaching and learning is intertwined in the roots of pedagogy. Culturally responsive methodologies and instruction offer students an opportunity to learn in an environment that is multimodal and culturally sensitive (Milner, 2010). Knight and Peel (1956) offered an expansive definition of the term *pedagogy*, stating,

> Pedagogy, the study of teaching methods, including the aims of education and the ways in which such goals may be achieved. The field relies heavily on educational psychology, which encompasses scientific theories of learning, and to some extent on the philosophy of education, which considers the aims and value of education from a philosophical perspective. (p. 87)

In contrast, culturally relevant pedagogy incorporates realistic and relevant learning models as well as non-mainstream experiences in an explorative and interactive approach to learning (Irvine, 2010). Chenowith (2014) suggested "literacy instruction for the twenty-first century should reflect the diversity of the learners found in the classroom" (p. 37). In adopting this manner of instruction, students from diverse backgrounds will have the ability to be guided in a learning approach that uses their perspectives and knowledge to help them reach their academic goals. Chenowith noted that through this method, culturally diverse students are “also valued and validated as a means to personal empowerment and academic success” (p. 37).

Culturally relevant pedagogy can be integrated into the traditional curriculum to create a dynamic and modern learning environment, and research shows students are motivated to participate in accessing texts when they are given the opportunity of choice and there is relevance to real-world experiences (Bowmer & Curwood, 2016; Ivey & Johnston, 2013). Proponents of multi-literacy pedagogical structures emerged in the mid-1990s with Gloria Ladson-Billings at the forefront of the pedagogical shift. She proposed three tenets in which culturally responsive pedagogy is grounded: (a) an ability to develop students academically, (b) a willingness to nurture and support cultural competence, and (c) the development of a sociopolitical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 483).

Scholars in the field of education, including Gloria Ladson-Billings and Geneva Gay, have suggested adopting a culturally responsive pedagogical approach that is reflective of the cultural environment will present greater opportunities for literacy achievement for students of color (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995). Culturally responsive pedagogy frameworks include a distinct structure with various components that make up the attitudes, knowledge, and practices that support teaching students from culturally diverse populations. The evolution of this framework began as scholars in the field inquired about the challenges culturally diverse students face in educational environments as it relates to achieving academically. Gist (2014) stated, “Recognizing the clear need to address racial/ethnic and cultural/linguistic diversity in the classroom, courageous and thoughtful educators and scholars sought to describe pedagogy that improved education for students of color” (p. 265). Gist offered several components that should be present when adopting a culturally responsive pedagogical framework based on his research and the work of Gay (2018), Ladson-Billings (2009b), and Villegas and Lucas (2002), including (a) acting as a change agent, (b) empowering instructional practices, (c) learning about students and communities, (d) cultural competence and congruity, (e) sociopolitical consciousness, (f) caring, and (g) high expectations. These components are overarching themes within this model of teaching.

According to Liu (2019), Ladson-Billings’s theory of culturally responsive pedagogy “describes an approach to education that challenges deficit understanding of black students” (p. 90). Historically, students of color have received inequitable access to education and have been viewed as intellectually inferior to their dominant counterparts. Liu also stated, “These deficit approaches are often rooted in a culture of poverty theories that specifically pathologized black cultural practices, though they were also applied to other groups” (p. 90). Culturally responsive pedagogy supports the practice of incorporating historical, relevant, and practical instructional reforms that elevate student experiences and move beyond documented instructional models that support dominant cultural practices (Liu, 2019).

Culturally Diverse Students

Culturally diverse learners include students who live in urban areas and underserved communities; these students are not inclusive of a White majority population (Chamberlain, 2005) but are representative of different races and ethnicities, English language learners (ELLs), and students with disabilities (Calhoun et al., 2019; Kourea et al., 2018). The terms disadvantaged and at-risk are often used as descriptors for culturally diverse students, though students in this category are referenced as “underserved” within the context of the current study to denounce deficit characterizations (Milner, 2020).

Student Literacy Achievement

Analyses of nationally standardized reports of reading growth among students reveal there have been modest increases in reading scores over the last decade, though the scores of culturally diverse learners fall far below the national average (NCES, 2020). Additionally, students from culturally diverse backgrounds are representative of students with reading challenges at a disproportionately higher rate than their White peers (Artiles et al., 2004; Hammond, 2015). Trends in reading achievement for learners from diverse cultural backgrounds indicate they are not learning at the same rate as their White counterparts, likely due to the use of ineffective instructional models that are not motivating or engaging for culturally diverse learners (Kelley et al., 2015). The NCES administers the NAEP bi-yearly to public school students in Grades 4 and 8, and these scores are published. Achievement scores revealed by the NAEP measure the reading trends for students from various demographic groups (i.e., gender, race, disability, socioeconomic status, and region). The results from the 2019 NAEP reading scores support the argument for needed reform in the methods and strategies that are implemented to instruct and support students who read below proficiency levels, who are often culturally diverse students. According to the 2019 NAEP Report Card, there is a notable gap in the reading scores achieved by African American eighth-grade students in comparison to White students, with African American students’ scores being an average of 28 points lower than those of White students; in comparison to White students, Latino students scored an average of 20 points lower (NCES, 2019). In reviewing the NAEP reading scores for African American and Latino students, there is a trend in the score gap disparity relative to White students, and this score gap is increasing significantly for African American students (NCES, 2019), which indicates this subset of students is not learning the academic skills that will result in their ability to perform proficiently on standardized tests such as the NAEP (Polat et al., 2016; Terry & Irving, 2010). Research shows several factors may be the source for this score deficit, including socioeconomic status, teacher quality, standardized test bias, teacher preparation, and home–school mismatch (Polat et al., 2016; Terry & Irving, 2010).

Diversity cannot exist solely in the demographics of the student population, it must also exist within the classroom without limitations as demonstrated by the instructional approaches and curriculum (Hammond, 2015; Kanpol, 1999; Ladson-Billings, 2009b). The "hidden curriculum" reflects the subtle or invisible components within the educational environment that exist and perpetuate students being socialized to follow mainstream norms that may not promote cultural relevance (Dyches, 2018). Alsubaie (2015) stated, "A hidden curriculum refers to the unspoken or implicit values, behaviors, procedures, and norms that exist in the educational setting" (p. 125); however, a culturally diverse approach to learning requires instruction to be adopted that motivates learners and supports their cultural experiences. Teachers have a responsibility to respond to the needs of a culturally diverse student population by preparing themselves to become culturally competent instructors. As leaders of school systems set forth educational reforms and strive to implement curriculum that will result in teaching and learning that will meet the rigor of standards and accountability, it is apparent that there has been insufficient research related to teaching approaches that will motivate students and support their academic advancement (Taubman, 2009).

The need for a culturally relevant pedagogy surpasses the desire to attain positive academic outcomes and supports improved student engagement and constructive identity development (Christ & Sharma, 2018). When students can participate in a shared cultural curriculum and engage in discourse about equity and social justice topics such as racism, sexism, and economic disparities, they will be able to integrate new cultural knowledge and critically analyze the power structures that have historical and current relevance, and they will develop schema that will be incorporated in their higher-order thinking patterns (Giroux, 2005; Hammond, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 2009b). According to Giroux (2005), there is a need to adopt methods and instructional approaches that are representative of the lived cultural experiences and history of the student population. The cultural experiences of learners should not be disregarded in the school environment; rather, culturally responsive pedagogy should be developed and used as a resource when instructing students from diverse backgrounds (Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995).

Ivey and Broaddus (2001) found middle school students value reading content that is relevant to their real-world experiences and attributed the varying degrees of student engagement to student choice in text selections. They suggested students are less engaged when they do not have choice and are given standard curriculums. In looking toward selecting culturally responsive curriculum, Torres-Velásquez (2000) appropriately stated, “We can no longer afford to ignore the experiences, histories, and cultures of learners if we expect those learners to play an active role in constructing their future” (p. 69). Intentional and reflective pedagogy based in the tenets of culturally responsive teaching should be used as an anchor to understand and approach the dismantling of archaic dominant systems in education that negate the ability of students of diverse backgrounds to achieve at the same levels as their peers.

Student Motivation

Current and past research studies have shown culturally responsive instruction increases motivation among culturally diverse learners; however, there have been no resulting major shifts in policy or instructional practice (Ivey & Broaddus, 2001; Milner, 2010, 2020). Culturally diverse students who struggle to read in middle school will have less motivation to read and continue to fail unless they receive intensive intervention and support in a culturally responsive environment. According to O'Brien et al. (2007), "By middle school, students who struggle in reading already have perceived years of failure, which has reinforced their low perceptions about ability and loss of agency and contributed to increased disengagement from reading" (p. 52). To provide instruction that is motivating and challenging, educators are faced with the need to develop culturally responsive instruction that incorporates the history, culture, and community of students. Students' cultures are a part of their identities, which in effect drive their interests and motivation to engage in learning (Bowmer & Curwood, 2016). Recent studies (Bowmer & Curwood, 2016; Ivey & Johnston, 2013) have shown how culturally responsive instruction can be integrated within the traditional curriculum to create a dynamic and modern learning environment. In these studies, results showed students were motivated to participate in accessing texts when they were given the opportunity of choice and relevance to real-world experiences.

Teacher Preparation

When teachers value learning about the diverse cultures of their students, it will positively influence the classroom community and build student motivation in academic areas such as reading (Bowmer & Curwood, 2016; Kelley et al., 2015; Krummel, 2013). The substantial achievement gap that culturally diverse students confront is signified by a lack of preparation that is indicative of how teachers are delivering instruction (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Educators in the 21st century should receive the necessary training and practice to support culturally enhanced and effective methods (Chang et al., 2011; Chu & Garcia, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2000). Another factor that diminishes the trajectory for successful reading intervention at the middle school grade levels and beyond is the lack of qualified reading instructors. It is common for teachers at the upper elementary, middle school, and secondary levels to have a highly-qualified status in areas such as English literature, but not in teaching reading strategies (Fischer, 2000). Research studies related to teacher preparation and their ability to provide culturally responsive instruction have emphasized "the importance of collaboration, reflection, and experiences over time in preparing teachers to engage in culturally relevant pedagogy" (Christ & Sharma, 2018, p. 59).

Problem Statement

The percentage of culturally diverse learners in public-school classrooms across the United States has increased significantly between 2009–2019 (NCES, 2019). Although the demographic makeup of students in today's urban classrooms reflects this diversity, the literacy achievement of these culturally diverse groups falls significantly below the reading achievement levels of White students (NCES, 2019). The impact of the disproportionate rate of reading achievement is reflected in the socioeconomic disparities that exist for Black and Hispanic populations according to statistics that reflect labor percentages and unemployment rates (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics [BLS], 2019). The Bureau of Labor Statistics Monthly Current Population Survey (CPS) surveyed approximately 60,000 households that qualified to give information as it related to the U.S. job force, employment, and unemployment. The survey was used to gain information about school employment status for those persons ages 16–24 years old who recently graduated from high school or a college institution. Results of the CPS (BLS, 2019) indicated recent Black high school graduates were unemployed at a rate of 26.2%, recent Hispanic high school graduates were unemployed at a rate of 19.3%, and recent White high school graduates were unemployed at a rate of 12.1%. Further analysis of those students enrolled in college who were unemployed showed 20.9% of Black college students were unemployed, with Hispanic college students having 13.4% unemployment and White college students having 8.8% unemployment for this period. Students not enrolled in college had the following unemployment percentages: 29.9% for Black students, 25.6% for Hispanic students, and 15.6% for White students. These data indicate the unemployment rates for Blacks and Hispanics are significantly higher than those of Whites at both the high school graduate and college student levels, reading achievement scores are significantly lower for Blacks and Hispanics, and the unemployment rates of Blacks and Hispanics are significantly higher than those of Whites. This inverse relationship has a historical existence and further research into this phenomenon is warranted. Because reading achievement scores may directly affect the employment and economic opportunities for culturally diverse populations, research related to educational systems and teaching students from culturally diverse backgrounds should be a major focus to provide social justice reform in education.

Since the 1960s, national and state governments have enacted policies and initiatives to improve the educational outcomes for students and balance the achievement chasm between students of color and White students; however, recent standardized test scores continue to reflect a substantial achievement gap (NCES, 2019). Federal government policies, such as the Civil Rights Act (1964), allowed the Office of Education to help in the desegregation of schools, though there were no measures in the act that mandated equitable educational opportunities for marginalized groups. The act also included substantial sections prohibiting discriminatory practices based on “race, color, religion, sex, and national origin” (Civil Rights Act, 1964, para. 1). The Economic Opportunity Act (1964), which was included in President Lyndon B. Johnson’s “War on Poverty,” was meant to provide educational funding to support equitable practices and early childhood literacy initiatives. In addition, this program created the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (1965), which included Title I benefits for families that were economically disadvantaged with programs for youth such as Head Start, which supported early entry to preschool.

The federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2002) act called for schools to meet adequate yearly progress, administer state-developed standardized tests, and provide students with curriculum based on nationally aligned standards. Many critics of NCLB assert that these measures were detrimental in their attempt to level the achievement gap and unfairly targeted students from disadvantaged backgrounds and urban environments (Hursh, 2007). Despite past attempts at educational reform, the literacy achievement of culturally diverse learners continues to lag significantly behind that of their White peers, and it has been suggested that alternative measures that elicit changes in culturally relevant teaching should be sought to increase students' literacy achievement (Hammond, 2015).

Theoretical/Conceptual Framework

Understanding the historical nature of the achievement deficits of culturally diverse students through a critical theory framework that supports and informs critical pedagogy will reveal its impact from a social justice standpoint, and research on the impact of culturally responsive pedagogy through a constructivist approach can reveal applicable methods that may increase the literacy achievement levels for culturally diverse students (Comber, 2015; Jaramillo, 1996; John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996; Kanpol, 1999). Research related to culturally responsive pedagogy indicates it is a natural approach to motivating students by using "cultural knowledge as a scaffold to connect what the student knows to new concepts and content to promote effective information processing" (Hammond, 2015, p. 15). Critical theory, constructivism, and culturally responsive pedagogy framework were used to explain the relevance of culturally responsive pedagogy as it pertains to the study.

Rationale

The rising number of culturally diverse students who have reading challenges leads to a misconception about individuals who represent specific cultural groups and their ability to achieve in academic environments (Artiles et al., 2004). A cultural approach to learning requires the adoption of curriculum and instruction that will motivate all types of learners and support their cultural experiences. The significance of understanding how cultural and instructional diversity in terms of social and cultural systems affect student motivation in a greater sense is immense and has monumental implications for policymakers, administrators, teachers, parents, and students regarding the positive impact on reading achievement; however, this extends beyond the scope of this study. Leaders of schools with diverse populations of students with reading difficulties often face the challenge of providing adequate training for teachers due to budgetary constraints, lack of cultural competency, or lack of support from administrative staff. Despite these limitations, it is necessary for teachers to adopt a critical lens in their curriculum preparation for diverse student populations (Aronson et al., 2020; Milner, 2010). Providing data demonstrating reading progress as a result of the creation of culturally relevant academic programs may support lobbying for resources to train teachers and create culturally relevant pedagogies. The purpose of this study was to explore teacher perceptions of culturally responsive pedagogy as it pertains to increasing the reading engagement and achievement of middle school students at urban public charter schools located in the mid-Atlantic region.

Research Questions

This study was guided by the following questions:

1. What are teachers' perceptions about their efficacy in modeling culturally responsive pedagogy in their classroom?
2. What are teachers' experiences with student engagement when culturally responsive instructional models are practiced?
3. What are teachers' experiences with student achievement when culturally responsive instructional models are practiced?

Definition of Terms

Academic mindset: “Beliefs, attitudes, or ways of perceiving oneself in relation to learning and intellectual work that support academic performance” (Farrington et al., 2012, p. 28).

Constructivism: Adom et al. (2016) described “the constructive philosophical paradigm as an approach that asserts that people construct their own understanding and knowledge of the world through experiencing things and reflecting on those experiences (Honebein, 1996)” (p. 2).

Critical pedagogy: The crux of critical pedagogy is the promotion of social change through teaching and learning (Fobes & Kaufman, 2008). An extensive explanation of critical pedagogy suggests:

> Critical pedagogues posit that teaching and learning occur relationally through the reciprocal exchange of teacher-student discourses. Such an approach mandates that as instructors we construct learning opportunities that honor students’ voices, many of which have been squelched by the banking system of education. (Fobes & Kaufman, 2008, p. 2)

Cultural competence: According to Ladson-Billings (2006), cultural competence supports

> helping students to recognize and honor their own cultural beliefs and practices while acquiring an access to the wider culture, where they are likely to have a chance of improving their socioeconomic status and making informed decisions about the lives they wish to lead. (p. 36)

Culturally diverse learners: “These students are a diverse group of learners in terms of their education backgrounds, native language literacy, socioeconomic status, and cultural traditions” (Gonzalez et al., 2011, p. 61).

Culturally relevant pedagogy (culturally responsive instruction): Culturally relevant pedagogy has been termed as the combination of culture and instruction (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2006). According to Milner (2010), “Culturally relevant pedagogy is used as an analytic tool to explain and uncover the ways in which the teacher develops cultural knowledge to maximize student learning opportunities” (p. 1). Culturally relevant pedagogy (or instruction) is a term used to describe effective teaching in culturally diverse classrooms (Irvine, 2010). For this paper, Ladson-Billings’s (1992) description of culturally relevant pedagogy (or instruction) was referenced as she described teachers who practice culturally relevant teaching (pedagogy): “Practicing culturally relevant teaching, that is, a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (p. 382).

Indigenous pedagogy: An approach rooted in the epistemological concepts of the development of the human being as a whole person that includes elements related to experiential learning, place-based learning, and the significance of intergenerational communities (Antoine et al., 2018).

Motivation: Schunk et al. (2008) stated motivation is “the process whereby goal-directed activity is instigated and sustained” (p. 262). The scope of this statement infers motivation is intentional and structured among multiple levels in an evident direction.

Motivation is often used in social constructivist terms, in which it is perceived as more of an ideology than a measured source of data (Unrau & Quirk, 2014).

Multimodal: The New London Group (1996) regarded these modes “or means of communicating as being inclusive of visual, linguistic, spatial, aural, and gestural communication” (p. 60).

Self-efficacy: “One’s internal belief and self-confidence that one has the power and skills to shape the direction of one’s learning experience” (Hammond, 2015, p. 159).

Student engagement: According to the *Glossary of Education Reform* (Great Schools Partnership, 2016), “Student engagement refers to the degree of attention, curiosity, interest, optimism, and passion that students show when they are learning or being taught, which extends to the level of motivation they have to learn and progress in their education” (para. 1).

Summary

This chapter presented a discussion of issues related to how teachers can increase the motivation of students from culturally diverse backgrounds by providing culturally responsive instruction. The focus in this study was on students who attended public charter middle schools in an urban city in the mid-Atlantic region. The following chapter contains the results of a review of the literature related to culturally diverse students, equity gap, reading achievement, culturally responsive pedagogy, motivation and engagement, effective literacy instruction, and teacher competency and culturally responsive teaching.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This review of the literature provides an examination of the extant research related to the impact of culturally responsive pedagogy on student engagement and achievement. Within this chapter, research studies related to culturally diverse students, equity gap, reading achievement, culturally responsive pedagogy, motivation and engagement, effective literacy instruction, and teacher competency and culturally responsive teaching are synthesized and emergent themes pertaining to this topic are analyzed.

Much of the literature reviewed in this study was published and peer reviewed between 2010–2021 and was located using the following databases: Research Gate, Google Scholar, EBSCO, and ProQuest. A thorough search of terms related to the topic was completed to collect a substantial library of literature, including culturally responsive pedagogy, culturally responsive teaching, culturally relevant teaching, culturally responsive curriculums, culturally diverse students, culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students, multicultural education, culturally responsive teaching and student motivation, and student motivation and culturally diverse learners.

Culturally diverse learners are representative of different multicultural backgrounds, socioeconomic groups, ethnicities, and learning differences. Analyses of nationally standardized reports of reading growth among students have shown there has been little increase in reading scores between 1992–2019, and scores for culturally diverse learners are significantly below the national average (Hirshman & Massey, 2008; Kibler & Chapman, 2018; Morrison et al., 2008). Though the percentage of culturally diverse learners enrolled in urban classrooms across the United States is on the rise, literacy achievement for these groups remains stagnant and their scores have historically fallen substantially below those of White students (NCES, 2019).

Although research studies have shown culturally responsive models of instruction increase motivation among culturally diverse learners, there have been no major shifts in policy or instructional practices to support educating this demographic beyond the traditional mainstream approaches and there are limited studies in the field of culturally responsive pedagogy and student engagement (Vavrus, 2018). Curricula that are not based on a culturally responsive approach to teaching culturally diverse learners may prevent marginalized students from becoming motivated to participate in the learning environment (Ervin, 2022). In her seminal book, *Ways With Words: Language, Life and Work in Communities and Classrooms*, Heath (1983) explored the language and social interactions of students from two distinct communities and found the daily activities and practices within the classroom conflicted with the norms and cultures of their home environments. Proponents of culturally responsive teaching argue that an integration of students' home-based cultural practices with a culturally relevant curriculum will help to increase student engagement and lessen the feeling of "social alienation" (Vavrus, 2008, p. 49).

Leaders of school systems across the nation strive to implement curricula that will meet the rigor of state standards (e.g., Common Core State Standards [CCSS]); however, it is becoming increasingly apparent that there is a disconnect between the need for educational leadership to institute culturally responsive approaches that will motivate students to engage with academic tasks and support their achievement and the desire to continue using historically hegemonic curricula. Taubman (2009) asserted that curriculum standardization “homogenize(s) diverse populations, locations, and situations,” which “in fact masks the real differences among groups, individuals, schools and locations, differences in resources, social treatment, histories, and power” (p. 114). When a standardized curriculum is used as a one-size-fits-all approach to learning, a disservice is done to all students, not only those representing culturally diverse populations. There is a need to use assessment data to measure the quality of instruction and learning, though what is devalued by school leadership is the educational experiences of students (Conrad et al., 2015).

Culturally responsive practices facilitate the conscious development of reading curricula that incorporates multicultural themes. Kourea et al. (2018) conducted an exploration of how the Response to Intervention (RTI) model can include culturally responsive pedagogy to support the learning acquisition of culturally diverse students. Within this intervention model, elements were used that revealed how a culturally reflective teacher can structure lessons to promote the use of a culturally responsive curriculum, a culturally responsive instructional delivery, and the use of culturally responsive environmental supports. According to Kourea et al., “Authorities in the areas of culturally responsive pedagogy and special education contend that evidence-based instruction is not sufficient to produce desired outcomes for students from CLD backgrounds” (p. 154). Cartledge et al. (2016) emphasized that multicultural literature benefits students’ self-esteem and pride, encourages an appreciation of various cultural identities, and encourages classroom community and diversity. Tatum and Gue (2012) conducted a study of students of CLD backgrounds and concluded that appropriate social and contextual opportunities for students to interact with texts and writing may support students who have not been engaged in the past and have experienced disproportionate academic challenges.

There is a lack of current research surrounding the achievement gap and literacy achievement for culturally diverse students in middle school. Ignoring the needs of culturally diverse learners has affected their ability to direct their socioeconomic growth. Educational inequities promote the marginalization of culturally diverse groups, which is a social justice issue. The sociopolitical landscape of this country has shaped the systemic educational structure to overlook the needs of culturally diverse groups.

Theoretical Framework

The current study was designed to investigate teachers' perceptions of how culturally responsive pedagogy affects student engagement and achievement. According to Jaramillo (1996),

> Educational theories are explanations of the human phenomenon of learning, not truth statements about why we do what we do. They provide a conceptual framework for us to explain how and why we learn. They are essentially based on beliefs that direct the questions that each theorist proposes. (p. 2)

The theoretical framework that best represents the practice of culturally responsive pedagogy is based on the tenets of critical literacy theory, social constructivism, and culturally responsive pedagogy. These three theoretical models were used in this in-depth qualitative study to explore the following questions: Why should students' educational experiences be rooted in social justice efforts as supported in the framework of critical pedagogy theory? What approaches in education should be considered as best practices based on culturally responsive pedagogical models? and How does a culturally relevant pedagogical approach in teaching and learning affect student engagement?

Critical Literacy Theory

For this study, the terms “critical literacy” and “critical pedagogy” are used interchangeably when describing the theoretical approach and practice. Critical theory has roots in Marxist systems that use a macro approach to socialization and education (Kanpol, 1999). A principal belief within critical literacy theory is that there is a sustained focus on the inequitable division of power that emboldens and propels social injustices related to race, gender, and socioeconomic disadvantage in society (Kanpol, 1999). Critical literacy theory has been used to explore education deficits and equity issues among marginalized populations and to question how teaching and learning can be explored to create effective instructional methods that work toward closing the achievement gap. According to Kanpol (1999), when teachers practice critical literacy propositions, they will use nontraditional approaches to educate students without the constraints of hegemonic systems, such as traditional curricula and teaching styles that create barriers to student access to information. Kanpol referenced this type of critical literacy as critical pedagogy and stated, “Critical pedagogy refers to the means and methods that hope to change the structures of schools that allow inequalities and social injustices” (p. 27). Kanpol further defined critical pedagogy as the following:

> Critical pedagogy is a cultural-political tool that takes seriously the notion of human differences, particularly as these differences relate to race, class, and gender. In its most radical sense, critical pedagogy seeks to unoppress the oppressed and unite people in a shared language of critique, struggle, and hope to

> end various forms of human suffering. Critical pedagogy incorporates a moral vision of human justice and decency as its common vision. Finally, critical pedagogy also addresses how one's beliefs and faith are embedded in schooling. (p. 27)

Kanpol's definition of critical pedagogy supports how culturally diverse learners can learn in an environment that encourages discourse and critical thinking surrounding social injustice and other systemic issues that are pervasive in traditional school cultures.

Texts and instructional approaches that have historically been used as a part of the literacy curriculum (e.g., *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *The Catcher in the Rye*, *The Great Gatsby*) sustain a hegemonic culture that does not articulate or consider the diversity within cultures, but continually places marginalized groups within limited contexts without exploration of their voice or purpose (Borsheim-Black et al., 2014). The role of critical pedagogies is to emancipate students by providing them with the ability to execute their beliefs and ideas about traditional texts that often prevent marginalized groups from accessing equitable opportunities within society, thereby providing them with a voice in realizing social justice (Janks, 2013). Recent studies (Borsheim-Black et al., 2014; Macaluso, 2017) have implemented critical literature pedagogy by introducing how canonical literature can emphasize traditional instructional practices for reading and writing acquisition, as well as those instructional methods that encourage looking at texts using reading and writing to resist traditional curriculum in multimedia. Researchers in the field promote critical pedagogy frameworks through various instructional methods and curricula, such as spoken word poetry (Call-Cummings et al., 2020; Jones &

Curwood, 2020), in an effort toward promoting student inquiry about dominant ideas and stereotypes that permeate established texts (Borsheim-Black et al., 2014).

Critical pedagogy is a theoretical approach that can be practiced through culturally diverse students participating in educational systems that provide them the tools they need to develop cognitive skills and inquiry regarding the relevance of texts, while learning and practicing critical skills that will lead to academic achievement. Though the tenets of critical pedagogy promote literacy practices that "help students think more critically about how existing social, political, and economic arrangements might be better suited to address the promise of a radical democracy as an anticipatory rather than messianic goal" (Giroux, 2020, p. 87), social constructivism offers a theory based on the integration of social situations within a contextual framework that supports the practice of learning.

Social Constructivism

The social constructivism framework, which evolved from Lev Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, indicates people develop ways of thinking based on their social situation and experiences (Adom et al., 2016; Jaramillo, 1996). John-Steiner and Mahn (1996) stated, "Vygotsky's theoretical framework, with its emphasis on language, culture, social interaction, context, and meaning as central to learning and development, is particularly relevant to teaching diverse learners and understanding how children most effectively learn" (p. 195). Vygotsky's (1978) work was based on the theoretical proposition developed by philosophers Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, as he incorporated their dialectical method and emphasis on the intersection of cognitive processes and socialization to become the basis for his research (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996). Marx’s theory of society, which has come to be known as historical materialism, indicates that as a phenomenon occurs, its effects can also be seen within man as he reacts in his way of thinking and doing, whereas Engel metaphorically equated human hands to tools that are transforming the environment. He suggested this interaction with the environment helps humans develop knowledge and control their surroundings. Vygotsky used these theoretical assumptions to support his seminal work illuminating that society and culture are integral agents by which individuals learn and understand by way of communicative tools such as language, symbols, and written artifacts (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996).

The constructivist theoretical paradigm is associated with how individuals process and comprehend information as previously held knowledge is intersected with current experiences of the same phenomena to gain new and broader meaning (Dogru & Kalender, 2007). According to Alvermann and Unrau (2013), “Constructivism is a widely applied theory of learning that explains how knowledge and meanings are constructed, rather than transmitted or absorbed, through our interactions with others and the environment” (pp. 56–57). Several strands of constructivism have emerged from this interpretivist philosophical paradigm; however, the main tenets of this approach support student learning through active and productive participation in the instructional process, which may include experiential and real-world learning opportunities within the classroom environment (Dogru & Kalender, 2007; Jaramillo, 1996). Jaramillo (1996) stated, “The learner constructs knowledge via his/her prior experiences, mental structures, and beliefs. The learner is not a passive vessel waiting to be filled with drops of knowledge from an instructor’s lecture” (p. 2). The divergent ideas of constructivist theories are exhibited in practical methods of teaching and learning, as noted in Piaget's theory of cognitive development in which knowledge is acquired in developmental stages and is rooted in cognitive constructivism, which includes models such as schema theory where memory is the foundation for building an understanding about new experiences (Jaramillo, 1996). Central in the theme of constructivism is the understanding that individuals are the leaders in their learning process through inquiry and engagement (Alvermann & Unrau, 2013). The constructivist approach adopted as the guiding argument in this study was social constructivism, which generates a broader approach modeled by socio-cultural theory and constructivist paradigms.

"Social constructivist perspectives focus on the interdependence of social and individual processes in the co-construction of knowledge" (Palincsar, 1998, p. 345). Social constructivism incorporates the sociocultural teachings of Vygotsky with the constructivist position that learners' activation of cognition occurs through their active participation and engagement in the learning process. Palincsar (1998) conducted an analysis of social constructivist views from an institutional, interpersonal, and discursive perspective and cited these three elements as being vital when applying social constructivist models in educational models. In the institutional aspect, attending school can be a cultural process in which the school itself acts as a cultural system, whereas the process and system intersect in activities such as cooperative learning, community-based involvement, parent participation, student–teacher lesson planning, and small group collaboration (Palincsar, 1998). Classroom culture is also exemplified through a social constructivist perspective when teachers establish classroom norms that support students incorporating their personal stances and opinions in discussions and encouraging students to extend their thoughts in the face of rigor and to work together to determine solutions within the classroom environment (Cobb et al., 1991). In the interpersonal analysis of social constructivism, student participation in classroom discussion or debate is speculated to influence higher-order cognitive processing (Palincsar, 1998). Classrooms in which most of the classroom period is focused on student-centered activities versus a traditional classroom setting where teacher-led instruction is the norm are thematic of a social constructivist approach. In analyzing the facilitation of discourse in a classroom setting, it is essential that written or spoken communication is a viable tool in social constructivism. Students participating in experiential or discovery learning is an example of naturally occurring discourse and this type of learning approach may be present in the classroom when students interact while completing experiments, and when they have opportunities to extend conversation when responding to teacher-led questions, which also supports comprehension (Jaramillo, 1996).

The identification of critical literacy in relation to the research topic is relevant in response to social justice issues that supports students in their ability to have a voice in the learning environment where they can become actively engaged. Within this approach, there is an opportunity to view how the constructivist framework can support the tenets of critical literacy through collaborative student–teacher interactions that promote discourse and learning opportunities.

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

In her seminal book, *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children*, Ladson-Billings (2009b) described her research with model teachers and their students and outlined her theoretical framework of culturally responsive pedagogy. She asserted there are three critical components that must be constant to practice culturally responsive pedagogy: (a) academic achievement/student learning, (b) cultural competence, and (c) socio-political consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2009a, 2009b). Ladson-Billings argued that these three tenets are critical to the culturally responsive pedagogy framework, and since the inception of these components, researchers interested in educational equity have expounded upon the foundational theory to incorporate themes that are relevant to their area of study, such as culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2018) and culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris, 2012). This framework has manifested as a critical theoretical approach for divergent groups based on various characteristics such as Indigenous heritage, environmental settings, and race (Gist, 2017; Milner, 2010; Ragoonaden & Mueller, 2017). Gay (2018) recognized culturally responsive instruction and learning as "one of the most powerful tools for helping students find their way out of the gap" (p. 15). She cited studies by Kalyanpur and Harry (2012) and Tatum (2009) in which they showed how culturally responsive approaches increase student engagement and achievement. Further description of this framework by Milner (2010) recognized culturally responsive pedagogy as an evolving educational approach in which "the theory, similar to theoretical orientations in education and other disciplines - has taken on multiple and varied meanings, depending on who is using it and for what purpose" (p. 70). For this study, the theoretical framework was applied to gain a greater understanding of teachers' perceptions of their knowledge and application of culturally responsive pedagogy within their practice, as well as their beliefs about its impact on student engagement and achievement.

Culturally Diverse Learners

Culturally diverse learners (CDLs) are a major segment of the student population in urban school districts across the United States. “Students from CDL backgrounds include students whose race and ethnicity differ from the traditional European-American group. They may come from low socioeconomic households and/or can be English language learners (ELL)” (Kourea et al., 2018, p. 153). Correa and Tulbert (1991) suggested diversity has three main attributes of language, culture, and socioeconomic background. Alghamdi (2017) argued for the implementation of multicultural practices in the classroom setting and suggested students from diverse backgrounds have different experiences that may not align with traditional teaching models. Culturally diverse students have the challenge of adapting and achieving in educational environments that do not represent their culture or experiences. To build a culture of mutual trust and respect in the classroom, teachers can build a culturally responsive environment that values the history, experiences, and interests of the group (McGlynn & Kelly, 2018).

Equity Gap

Terms such as achievement gap, at-risk, and culturally disadvantaged have historically been used as deficit descriptions to inform quantitative data when referencing culturally diverse students, particularly African Americans (Gorski, 2016). Ladson-Billings (2009b) suggested the “use of such terms contributed to a perception of African American students as deprived, deficient, and deviant” (p. 9). These terms have received critical objection as a biased effort to rationalize the standardized test scoring discrepancy between students of color and White students, yet many scholars have suggested a substitution of these deficit terms to justifiably describe the inequitable educational systems that have affected marginalized groups (Chambers, 2009). Arguably these terms are used to place blame on students of color for their standardized performance; conversely, White students are categorized as the "achievers" in the group comparison, which indicates the "gap" evokes a portrait of a deficit model where Black and Latino students are consistently at the bottom of the performance scale (Chambers, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 2009b). Instead of pursuing a deficit model of achievement, scholars have sought to develop culturally relevant frameworks that approach systematic structures as having historical deficits that do not adequately provide the academic and cultural resources for students of color to perform at levels that reflect their true academic capabilities (Hammond, 2015).

Despite the use of colloquial terms to describe culturally diverse students' performance outcomes, there is valid cause for concern surrounding the unbalanced performance of culturally diverse students in comparison to their White peers. As discussed in Chapter 1, educational reform programs and policies were implemented as early as the 1960s, though they have not been effective in significantly balancing the academic testing results among Black, Hispanic, Indigenous, and White students (American Psychological Association, Presidential Task on Immigration, 2013; Gay, 2018) and there continues to be a scarcity of literature about how the interplay of race, ethnicity, and income levels affects student achievement. Paschall et al. (2018) concluded, "Understanding the nature of achievement gaps requires simultaneous examination of race/ethnicity and income" (p. 1164). Social justice inequities have caused severe racial disparities in this country that affect educational access and lead to disproportionate economic outcomes. Paschall et al. stated:

> The source of these gaps remains unclear; potential sources include educational policies or policies regarding families in poverty, segregation and racism, unequal distribution of resources, and differences in home environments. As researchers and policymakers continue to probe the causes and trajectories of achievement gaps, we conclude that it is critical to consider the intersection of race and poverty. (p. 1180)

A review of the extant literature by Ford et al. (2018) revealed several factors that suggest a rationale for the Black–White achievement disparity, including home, school, health, and nutrition, with the factors related to race and income discrepancy being elevated and warranting further exploration. Ford et al. (2018) stated, “Essentially, race and income should be interrogated and deconstructed; urban educators should not assume or presume that these two variables (alone or combined) completely determine student achievement” (p. 405). Educational inequities are also inclusive of the materials, curricula, and teaching methods that have historically been represented in a mainstream educational approach while diminishing the historical presence of people of color (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Alghamdi (2017) suggested culturally responsive settings require:

> Effective implementation of a multicultural education system requires public schools to have some characteristics and qualities that contribute to students’ academic success. For instance, schools need to establishing classrooms that are equipped with modern technology to support cooperative learning, having recreation rooms for students to spend their leisure breaks, and other extra facilities that help visitors to engage in the school activities. (p. 50)

Culturally responsive classrooms are inclusive of instructional methodologies, culturally relevant materials, current technology, and comfortable settings that support the engagement and academic growth of culturally diverse students.

Reading Achievement

Reading achievement scores for culturally diverse students have not shown substantial gains between 1992–2019 when compared to the reading achievement levels of their White peers; however, studies have shown culturally responsive teaching methods promote student engagement, which leads to literacy growth (Morrison et al., 2008). The focus in the current study was on diversity characteristics such as race, language, and socioeconomic status in relation to student reading achievement. According to Spear-Swerling (2013), an exceptional number of students are challenged with the ability to read, and their issues are not categorized by limitations related to cognitive deficits, lack of educational instruction, or impediments related to socioeconomic factors or language considerations. These students, for a variety of reasons, did not make gains in core reading skills as they progressed through the early elementary grades, where there is usually a significant amount of instruction related to word recognition.

The achievement gap as constructed by standardized measures within society will continue to show abnormal disparities unless there is a standardization of teaching methods that incorporate the cultures, interests, and experiences of those students who are represented in the classroom. This lack of progress is mirrored not only in national reading proficiency results (NCES, 2019), but in the recurrent systemic failure of culturally diverse learners. Research studies related to student achievement for these groups are almost nonexistent. Future research is necessary to support pedagogy that will be beneficial in ameliorating the achievement gaps, as studies indicate there is a substantial correlation between reading achievement and socioeconomic status that must be addressed through the expansion of research in this area and the implementation of culturally relevant curricula delivered to students by competent teachers (Bennett et al., 2017; Kelley et al., 2015).

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

A comprehensive definition of "pedagogy" is the foundation for understanding how the design of a culturally broad academic framework emphasizes the importance of being historically accurate and culturally responsible when supporting students from diverse cultures. Giroux and Simon (1988) defined pedagogy in the following manner:

> Pedagogy refers to a deliberate attempt to influence how and what knowledge and identities are produced within and among sets of social relations. It can be understood as a practice through which people are incited to acquire a particular "moral character." As both a political and practical activity, it attempts to influence the occurrence and qualities of experiences. When one practices pedagogy, one acts with the intent of creating experiences that will organize and disorganize a variety of understandings of our natural and social world in particular ways . . . Pedagogy is a concept which draws attention to the processes through which knowledge is produced. (p. 12)

A culturally responsive approach to learning supports that pedagogy should be adopted to motivate all types of learners and support their cultural experiences. Conrad et al. (2015) asserted standardized curricula are counterproductive and disregard or simplify the impact of diversity. Thus, pedagogy in any form should incorporate moral and equitable stances that support social justice and move toward providing educational opportunities for all students (Ibrahima & Maizonniaux, 2016).

With the growing need for school programs based on a culturally responsive approach to learning, there will be a need for teachers to be trained in culturally responsive teaching, yet Vavrus (2002) suggested “notwithstanding institutional pockets of promising practices, most teacher education programs are hesitant when it comes to incorporating multicultural reforms with depth and fidelity” (pp. 18–19). When students’ socioemotional needs are met by their teachers and they feel a sense of belonging in the classroom, they will be motivated to participate and learn (Roeser et al., 1996; Wentzel & Asher, 1995). Teachers who value and take an interest in learning about the diverse cultures of their students may realize positive outcomes in the classroom community through improved student motivation and achievement.

The premise of culturally responsive pedagogy is that it is a socially situated tool in which students use their experiences and prior knowledge to make meaning of new information and concepts that will enhance their comprehension and retention of information (Irvine, 2010). Giroux (2020) extended the explanation of pedagogy by incorporating it within a moral and social justice scope that can affect the political and economic enterprises that relate to the influences of social norms and power structures that are present in lived experiences.

Several concrete elements must be met by teachers who desire to teach in a culturally responsive manner, including mastery of the content and a thorough understanding of the multiple facets students bring to the classroom environment inclusive of their lived experiences within their homes, cultures, and social environments (Irvine, 2010). However, researchers also support the intangible elements of caring and empathy that teachers must possess as they attempt to lead students to positive academic outcomes (Gay, 2018; Hammond, 2015; Warren, 2014). The aforementioned elements extend to the culturally responsive pedagogy framework that Gloria Ladson-Billings pioneered as a model for culturally responsive teaching approaches.

Framework

As the demographics of schools in urban environments shift from a White mainstream student enrollment to a majority Black and Latino population, further research is needed to support teachers' abilities to deliver instruction that correlates to the cultural model and provides knowledge that is relevant to the interests of those students represented within their classrooms (Kibler & Chapman, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2009b). Ladson-Billings's (2009) pivotal work with successful educators of diverse student populations produced the groundwork for the theoretical notion of culturally relevant pedagogy. According to Ladson-Billings (2006, 2009b, 2014a), the notion of culturally relevant pedagogy is built on three propositions: (a) academic achievement/student learning, (b) cultural competence, and (c) socio-political consciousness. She asserted that for culturally responsive pedagogy to occur and to provide "quality education" for all students, all three components must be present. She explained that student learning occurs when teachers facilitate creating quality instruction that includes all three propositions and further stated, "Student learning involves challenging students' minds, so they improve their ability to think" (Ladson-Billings, 2014b, 15:57).

Historical data have shown a disproportionate percentage of culturally diverse students are suspended and overrepresented in special education, and researchers have conducted studies to determine whether the use of culturally relevant pedagogical approaches would lessen these inequities (Fiedler et al., 2008; Shealey et al., 2011). Green and Stormont (2018) found diverse learners were disproportionately referred for special education services and disproportionately punished for exhibiting behavior issues in the classroom that would result in the removal from the classroom or suspension from school. Green and Stormant argued that evidence-based instructional methods and culturally relevant lessons may decrease the off-task behaviors of diverse learners.

In the literary field, culturally responsive pedagogy has brought a greater balance to representing the diversity of cultures that may be present in a class. There is no one-size-fits-all approach and there is a direct synthesis between home, community, and school culture. The planning of this approach is explicit and detailed and requires conscious monitoring to ensure efficacy. Evidence-based instructional practices are implemented throughout instruction to support the learning styles of diverse learners; methodologies such as direct instruction and behavior-specific praise are also elements of the culturally responsive pedagogy framework, and both have proven effective in increasing achievement (Santamaria, 2009). Other research has noted the implementation of culturally responsive pedagogy has increased the motivation of culturally diverse students to engage in classroom activities (Ladson-Billings, 2009a). In addition, curriculum development that is inclusive of these practices supports student engagement and academic growth.

Curriculum

Stachowiak (2017) argued that culturally responsive teaching elevates a teacher's stance from viewing the curriculum as the guide from which all knowledge emanates to the student being the central focus and the guide in terms of what is communicated and learned. Stachowiak described culturally relevant teaching practices as a pedagogy that "shifts our teaching from the curriculum to the student, and as such, students' lives are centered in ways that create immense opportunities for growth and achievement" (p. 29).

Culturally relevant teachers demonstrate mastery of their content area and align their curriculum to lessons that offer a general familiarity and relevance to their students; in addition, they advance their instruction by building upon prior knowledge by introducing multiple instructional models without diminishing the standards or expectations for rigor (Irvine, 2010). There is a notion that culturally responsive teaching diminishes academic expectations; however, these expectations are enhanced by increasing understanding using materials, models, experiences, and relevant information that support learning (Hammond, 2015; Irvine, 2010)

Gay (2018) reasoned that for students to comprehend the content, teaching is best approached through a cultural lens where they may use prior experience and meaningful culturally historical resources as the foundation to build mastery of new information. Gay stated European cultures have traditionally used this approach in their educational systems and thus have attained higher achievement scores than marginalized groups. She sustained this rationale as an argument for the adoption of culturally relevant pedagogies.

Indigenous Pedagogy

Although the focus of the current study was on culturally diverse populations in the United States, the review of literature includes studies about culturally relevant pedagogy in other parts of the world where marginalized groups, such as the Indigenous populations in Canada and New Zealand, have had a history of educational inequity and disproportionate literacy achievement when compared to the mainstream population (Henderson, 2013). This information is vital to this research because it can be juxtaposed to Indigenous populations (i.e., Native Americans) and Black people in the United States. Boon and Lewthwaite (2015) described Australia as a country that has a "low-equity-high quality" educational system as surmised from the Program for International Student Assessment (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2006) report, which provided comparisons of the disproportionate achievement gap between "Indigenous students and non-Indigenous students" (p. 38). This disproportionality led the researchers (Boon & Lewthwaite, 2015) to develop a survey instrument to analyze the characteristics of culturally responsive pedagogy and measure how they related to teachers' practice with the purpose of elevating teachers' understanding and support of culturally responsive practices to effectively affect student outcomes. However, the study results indicated teachers had a lack of competency in the practice of culturally responsive teaching. Most applicable to the current study is the thematic correlation between Indigenous pedagogy and the principles of culturally responsive pedagogy (Antoine et al., 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2016). Indigenous pedagogy is rooted in the epistemological concepts of the development of the human being as a whole person and includes elements related to experiential learning, place-based learning, and the significance of intergenerational communities (Antoine et al., 2018), which are tenets that relate closely to culturally responsive pedagogy. Boon and Lewthwaite (2015) asserted that culturally relevant pedagogy includes elements of Indigenous pedagogy as well as social constructivist themes, and instructional models related to Vygotskian theoretical tenets that build upon the culture and experiences of Indigenous students when learning.

Further studies in the Yukon region of Canada have led to the conclusion that the absence of culturally responsive teaching methods has affected Indigenous students' access to an equitable education as well as their achievement outcomes (Lewthwaite & Connell, 2018). Other studies that promote this claim include those that support performance poetry as a nontraditional approach for Indigenous students to express their independent voice and develop prose through an expressive art form (Jones & Curwood, 2020; Ladson-Billings, 2014a; Lopez, 2011). Lopez (2011) conducted a study based on critical literacy and concluded, "Using performance poetry as a form of critical literacy to engage in culturally relevant teaching in diverse classrooms is valuable in building cross-cultural understanding, raising critical consciousness and helping students to understand how oppression works in multiple ways" (p. 88). Lopez cited Freire and Macedo (1987), arguing that it is imperative for students to pursue a critical consciousness to understand and analyze the systemic inequities they face. These themes are prevalent in the culturally responsive pedagogy framework and work toward student awareness and voice in social justice.

Further research related to Indigenous pedagogy has been conducted in New Zealand where low academic achievement and disproportionate suspension and retention rates among Indigenous students have been attributed to low achievement standards and feelings of isolation (Ministry of Education, 2006). Data analysis related to Indigenous studies has revealed several consistent themes, including student engagement, academic achievement, critical/political consciousness, and cultural competence that are congruent to themes built on research about culturally responsive pedagogy in diverse classrooms in the United States. The sections that follow show the existence of these themes.

Culturally Relevant Texts

McCullough (2013) defined culturally relevant texts as those in which students' "knowledge, beliefs, values, and practices" are reflected in the "character development, plot, and language" (p. 398). Christ and Sharma (2018) argued that "culturally relevant text selection and pedagogy support students' motivation, engagement, literacy outcomes, and positive identity formation" (p. 55). The selection of culturally relevant texts should be considered in relation to the dimensions of the textual elements (Table 2) to allow the complexity of cultural identities to be taken into consideration for individual students prior to text selection (Christ & Sharma, 2018).

Table 2

Dimensions of Culturally Relevant Narratives

Textual elements	Characters	Setting	Plot
Dimensions	Age, race/ethnicity, gender, dialect	Place and time period	Events, problems, and solutions
Text selection criteria	Are these elements similar to the student reading the book?	Has the student who has been reading the book been to similar places and lived in the same time period portrayed by the book?	Has the student who is reading the book had life events similar to those that occur in the book?

Recent studies have shown teachers are using the tenets of culturally responsive pedagogy to enact differences within their classrooms for similar pursuits as those of Indigenous pedagogy (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008). Hobson and Vu (2015) depicted proleptic-ethnodramatic as "a critical approach to literacy learning that invites students to question the relationships between texts, people, and power dynamics within and between cultures" (p. 399). A study related to proleptic-ethnodrama (Hobson & Vu, 2015) involved teaching students to comprehend the cultural importance of texts and how it relates to their lives within a current and historical context. Hobson and Vu (2015) stated, "As a result, ethnodramatic pedagogy provides an opportunity for teachers to underscore the sociocultural significance of textual interpretations as well as the significance of the ways these textual interpretations change over time" (p. 399). The connection between this approach and culturally responsive pedagogy is based on guiding questions and stages that are enacted as the text is read. The stages evolve and persist in challenging students to relate their lived experiences, cultural identities, and wonderings to the story in the text. The stages also permit the students to delve into the sociocultural issues that evolve throughout the text and to "deconstruct the layers of interpersonal, personal, social, cultural, and institutional beliefs and language practices that perpetuate systems of injustice" (Hobson & Vu, 2015, p. 400).

L. P. Johnson (2015) conducted an ethnographic study of Black male middle school students who participated in situated learning with a focus on providing them with a sense of community to elicit a critical place pedagogy supporting a caring and nurturing environment that promotes academic achievement. L. P. Johnson described critical place pedagogy as "the signs, symbols, text, pictures, and affirmations used to educate, encourage, and inspire students" (p. 908). The findings supported dismantling the stereotype that the school setting could not be an environment that is welcoming and affirming for Black male students. The educators at the school found their community relationship extended beyond the school walls by engaging in the experiences of the students in their everyday lives. In addition, critical place pedagogies transgressed the systemic norms of the school and L. P. Johnson described this as impactful for the teachers, as "it provided a sense of belonging, educating, encouraging, and inspiring their students" (p. 10).

Myers (2019) conducted a case study in which students engaged in the text through a specifically developed sequence for approaching the text to include (a) engaging in student lives within the classroom and the community, (b) teacher collaboration, (c) allowing the students to select textual themes that reflected their experiences, (d) inclusion of prior text to generate prior knowledge, (e) monitoring and understanding how students perceived themselves as readers and writers, and (f) self-reflection and self-recognition as a teacher. The outcomes of the study were based on several themes that resulted from the culturally responsive pedagogy model and incorporated the act of social constructivism through a sense of connection to the community and to self that occurred through collaboration and an awareness of how prior experiences create a connection and engagement with the text. Myers shared the following about the teacher's perspective upon completing the text:

> CRT gave Carla a focus and a new way of viewing her own teaching within this restricted content. Her process became a micro-revolution that did not aim for large scale educational reform, but instead focused on the learning needs of her

> students. Carla's revolution is founded solidly on her and her students' ability to connect with themselves and the content. (p. 9)

An unexpected outcome gained through this approach was the sense of empowerment gained by the teacher based on her ability to restructure the curriculum to include elements of culturally responsive teaching. Her empowerment was gained by being able to control what and how her students learned in the classroom while adhering to the mandated curriculum.

Husband and Kang (2020) conducted a literature review of 62 scholarly journals that focused on literacy instruction models and strategies that indicated positive outcomes for African American male students from the primary through 12th grades. Within the 62 publications reviewed (between 1994–2019), only 17 had topics related to African Americans in the PK–12 grade range; however, the researchers were able to identify common themes among this literature, which proved to be interesting and engaging for this student population (Husband & Kang, 2020). The themes that were found are also fundamental to the tenets of culturally relevant pedagogy: (a) culturally responsive texts; (b) critical literacy approaches; (c) student choice; (d) collaborative tasks; (e) teach meaning-making strategies explicitly and continually; (f) make connection across reading at home, community, and school; (g) design whole school models and approaches; and (h) reform disciplinary policies and practices (Husband & Kang, 2020).

Another study (Scullin, 2020) of Black male students showed that "among the many factors contributing to the historical lack of reading gains of our Black male students is the absence of texts accurately and authentically representing African American characters in today's schools" (p. 82). Scullin (2020) found a significant number of picture books recommended in the study depicted African Americans as slaves and athletes, which supports that a stereotypical impression may be sustained in their portrayal to mainstream audiences. Results from the study showed that when given instruction about textual characteristics and choice, Black male students were motivated and engaged to read texts that were relatable and explored their varied interests (Scullin, 2020), which also correlates to the major themes summarized in Husband and Kang's (2020) study. Recent studies with specific culturally diverse groups had common themes involving positive outcomes related to culturally responsive pedagogy that included the use of culturally responsive texts, relating information to prior knowledge and experiences, exploring content that is relevant and interesting to the student, and an expectation for critical thinking (Scullin, 2020).

As a socially situated practice, critical literacy allows ELL students to navigate and question the mainstream systems that exist within classrooms and society. The critical literacy practice no longer requires assimilating to a new culture and learning how to read the text but inserts various cultural identities while learning (Childers-McKee et al., 2016). Providing text that represents the authentic cultural experiences of students supports learning for meaning and increases comprehension (Harvey & Goudvis, 2000). Giroir et al. (2015) asserted,

> Teachers who understand the role of culture and language in learning better meet the needs of ELs by pursuing culturally relevant connections to text content and building on students' prior knowledge, experiences, interests, and home language, rather than viewing those as obstacles to learning (Gay, 2002; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). (p. 641)

Giroir et al. analyzed the impact of a read-aloud routine designed to increase the vocabulary and comprehension of EL students in grade levels K–3. Components of culturally responsive pedagogy were represented, including providing culturally responsive texts that held significance to the students and offered the teacher an opportunity to build upon knowledge about the students outside of the classroom. Results showed key literacy approaches support enhancing learning for ELs to include (a) using culturally relevant texts to support literacy skill development, (b) using prior knowledge related to first language skills to support learning the second language, and (c) using different aspects of sociocultural experiences to understand texts while sustaining an expectation for critical thinking and performance. The researchers emphasized that these culturally relevant teaching practices as well as "teaching vocabulary in context, facilitating interaction around the around text, and sustaining culturally relevant learning environments - when infused with a read-aloud routine, can support a model for learning and language acquisition for culturally and linguistically diverse students" (Giroir et al., 2015, p. 642).

Cartledge et al. (2016) conducted a study using positive and culturally relevant reading passages that had themes related to early elementary grade level students' current and historical experiences. The study data showed the students evoked two reactions after reading the texts: they found the story passages engaging and relevant or they found them fun and entertaining because it helped them to learn something they did not know. The researchers concluded students are motivated to engage with educational resources when they are relevant to their interests, when they can use past experiences to comprehend new information, and when they have learned new information.

Lawrence (2020) asserted using dialogue to promote effective internet-based virtual instruction to infuse engagement in learning that offers an opportunity for the "co-construction of knowledge as cogenerative dialogue" (p. 21), which is a collaborative method of exercising productive change within a virtual classroom. He stated, "Engaging students in cogenerative dialogue can generate more equitable learning experiences for traditionally marginalized students, because teachers learn about their students' learning needs as well as their social needs and can adapt instruction to meet those needs (Beltramo, 2017)" (p. 21). The dialogic pedagogical instructional method is based on the tenets of culturally responsive pedagogy where a hierarchical learning environment is replaced by an interactive teacher–student dialogue approach. Lawrence (2020) indicated this method of communication is culturally responsive because it is less transactional and allows for ongoing conversation. This approach focuses on "using caring language in all communicative exchanges, using an appreciative tone throughout the course, encouraging students to express their perspectives, and providing prompt feedback" (Lawrence, 2020, p. 22).

Frankel et al. (2018) positioned literacy mentors with secondary students to collaborate and support the students' ability to select literature that supported their achievement and stated, "We argue that youth can and should be involved in efforts to disrupt traditional literacy instruction because they bring perspectives that are grounded in their own experiences as readers, writers, and learners" (p. 447). The findings of this study showed independent reading and discourse allowed for legitimate intercommunication between students and mentors that enabled positioning not related to hierarchical norms, but rather allowed for the flexibility of rights and duties between the collaborative group (Frankel et al., 2018). Building on the impact of mentorship, results of a literacy study by Friedland and Truscott (2005) showed providing the option of choice for middle school students in an after-school tutoring program can lead to reading gains for struggling readers. The researchers stated,

> This project provides some initial support for the conclusion that tutoring programs that have choice, control, flexibility, and an emphasis on building relationships can help adolescents develop an awareness of their own literacy learning and foster persistence and commitment in learning more. (Friedland & Truscott, 2005, p. 550)

These studies support that student relationships with teachers and mentors in which students have choice promote awareness and achievement.

Oral Discourse

Lee (1993, 1995, 2001, 2007, 2011, 2016) has documented the performance achievement of culturally diverse students through the use of the cultural modeling framework, which incorporates culturally responsive instruction by accessing the prior knowledge and oral language culturally diverse students use in their homes and communities, as well as “the ways that students reason about and make sense of the their world, and the language and communicative patterns of students” (Risko & Walker-Dalhouse, 2007, p. 98). As noted in the principles of Indigenous pedagogy (Garcia & Shirley, 2013), oral discourse is also historically prevalent among Black communities. Researchers employing “cultural modeling” have suggested it can be used within the culturally responsive pedagogy framework to plan instruction “to make explicit connections between content and literacy goals and the knowledge and experiences students share with family, community, and peers," which supports "a respect for differences and the use of these differences as teaching and learning resources rather than deficits to be overcome" (Risko & Walker-Dalhouse, 2007, p. 98). According to research findings by Lee (2001), students demonstrated improvement in comprehension skills and writing ability with secondary students showing improvements in the areas of "comprehension monitoring, student-generated questions, and reasoning about the significance and applications of text information" (Risko & Walker-Dalhouse, 2007, p. 98) when using this technique. Cultural modeling embodies constructivist approaches to learning that can include differentiated subject matter that meets students' needs through culturally responsive design and implementation (Watts-Taffe et al., 2012). These studies support that there is a commonality between themes that support lived experiences, cultural identity, students' interests, and discourse that promotes critical thinking through the use of culturally responsive pedagogical models.

Critical Thinking

Although multicultural education aspects may be present in the classroom, such as the use of culturally responsive texts or the integration of multicultural information in a traditional curriculum, there is often a disconnect among many educators surrounding how culturally relevant pedagogy involves critical thinking and moves past basic comprehension questions and responses (Stachowiak, 2017). When including critical thinking under the umbrella of culturally responsive pedagogy, teachers are also applying the principles of equity and empowerment, which are foundational to the tenets of culturally responsive pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 2006) and propositions that the curriculum may include texts that have misinformation and sometimes subtle messages that degrade the experiences and histories of culturally diverse students. They may also realize that these curricula are incongruent with the interests, learning styles, and relevance of culturally diverse learners.

Incorporating a critical pedagogy approach in a culturally responsive pedagogy framework enhances students' ability to think critically by using texts or materials that are relevant or interesting to culturally diverse students. In a culturally responsive classroom, the texts promote inquiry, comprehension, and exploration about the themes, which leads to discourse and engagement among the classroom community. This task gives teachers and students a voice, as opposed to being passive receptacles of information that may be meant to misinform, degrade, or diminish people (Freire, 2000). The aim of adopting culturally responsive pedagogical frameworks is to give diverse students equitable opportunities to engage in learning. Motivation and engagement are intertwined in achieving this aim.

Motivation and Engagement

Students' social situations and experiences are incorporated into learning opportunities that motivate and engage students when working toward mastery of curricular objectives (Irvine, 2010). Irvine (2010) also suggested that when new information or text is introduced, a student should feel some relevance to their lived experiences and culture for there to be motivation, engagement, and retention. According to Wang et al. (2014), federal policies encourage school reform that focuses on improving student engagement because it is presumed to increase achievement and intervention outcomes.

Student Engagement

Engagement is a verb that indicates some type of action is occurring during the process. Gay (2018) suggested engagement is not only active, but also an emotional state that can defined as students consciously exhibiting "emotionality, variability, novelty, and active participation" (p. 228). Another definition of engagement is, "Student engagement refers to the degree of attention, curiosity, interest, optimism, and passion that students show when they are learning or being taught, which extends to the level of motivation they have to learn and progress in their education" (Great Schools Partnership, 2016, Student Engagement section, para. 1).

Researchers maintain that students must feel their cultures are respected and valued, though this is often not the case for culturally diverse students (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017). Goodenow and Grady (1993) asserted, "Students' subjective sense of school belonging recently has been identified as a potentially important influence on academic motivation, engagement, and participation, especially among students from groups at risk of school dropout" (p. 60). The impact of this alienation or exclusion is a loss of engagement that may then affect academic achievement. According to M. Anderson (2016), when teachers provide lessons that connect to students' lives, students will be more engaged; conversely, cultural alienation and exclusion can lead to disengagement and a lack of achievement.

According to Rangvid (2018), "Student engagement is a multidimensional concept that is typically used to refer to student' degree of involvement, connectedness, and commitment to school as their motivation to learn" (p. 266) and is an overarching term that includes emotional, behavioral, and cognitive elements (Rangvid, 2018; Wang et al., 2014). Emotional engagement, which is also referred to as affective engagement, indicates students have a feeling of attachment or allegiance to school that brings feelings of acceptance, inclusion, and respect and often elicits a sense of value (Rangvid, 2018; Unrau & Quirk, 2014). At the classroom level, affective engagement refers to positive emotions during class, such as interest, enjoyment, and enthusiasm (Fredricks et al., 2004; Skinner et al., 2009). Behavioral engagement refers to observable behavior such as time-on-task, overt attention, classroom participation, question asking, and choice of challenging tasks. Cognitive engagement refers to mental effort, such as meaningful processing, strategy use, concentration, and metacognition. There is a gap in the research as it relates to culturally diverse students and how the multiple dimensions of classroom engagement in their different facets influence student achievement.

Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation

Although research analyzing the impact of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in reading comprehension is substantive (Anmarkrud & Bråten, 2009; Louick et al., 2016; Park, 2011), most of these studies are not representative of students from culturally diverse backgrounds. Studies supporting data that can be used in culturally responsive teaching include research by Ardasheva et al. (2012), who analyzed the administration of the English Language Learner Motivation Scale (ELLMS) to pre-college ELL students. The ELLMS is an instrument that has generally been used to assess the learning motivation of students in postsecondary settings. The scale was edited to be primarily useful in indicating how intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, introjected regulation, and external regulation interplay to determine motivational outcomes in learning. Results of their study indicated understanding the factors leading to motivation for ELL students at a younger age may help to adjust and elevate learning outcomes for this subgroup of diverse learners.

A similar study (Park, 2011) was conducted using data from the U.S. PIRLS study, which assessed specific factors affecting reading motivation and how these components affected reading. Recent studies (Bowmer & Curwood, 2016; Ivey & Johnston, 2013) illustrated how culturally responsive instruction can be integrated with traditional curriculum to create a dynamic and modern learning environment. In these studies, students were motivated to participate in accessing texts when they were given the opportunity of choice and relevance to real-world experiences. Results from these studies indicate student motivation and self-efficacy can be positively influenced when teachers design and teach curriculum that provides students with the ability to apply their knowledge in real-world opportunities (Boykin & Noguera, 2011; Sela-Shayovitz & Finkelstein, 2020).

Research and practice have revealed that culturally responsive instruction can motivate academic achievement among culturally diverse learners, though this approach is currently underrepresented in the field of literacy education. Extant research focused on intrinsic motivation, with little research surrounding how extrinsic motivation can promote theory and practice. Where intrinsically motivated students may be described as independent learners, extrinsically motivated students are sometimes described as being dependent learners who lack the confidence to develop positive academic mindsets (Hammond, 2015).

Academic Mindset

Hammond (2015) asserted that the motivation for marginalized students must be restored so they can become confident learners. She stated teachers are charged with shifting the “academic mindset,” which is defined as the “beliefs, attitudes, or ways of perceiving oneself in relation to learning and intellectual work that support academic performance” (Farrington et al., 2012, p. 28). An outcome of shifting the academic mindset is promoting student motivation and participation in instructional activities (Farrington et al., 2012).

Hammond (2015) asserted that the non-engaging or inappropriate behaviors exhibited by students with poor academic performance are indicators of self-doubt and a lack of confidence in their academic capabilities. Teachers use various methods and strategies to encourage or motivate students, though this does not always address the root cause. Hammond argued that “as culturally responsive teachers our focus has to be on shifting mindset rather than on trying to force engagement or cajole students’ motivation” (p. 110). According to a literature review by Farrington et al. (2012), positive academic mindsets lead to perseverance in academic tasks that leads to improved academic behaviors and improved academic performance. Researchers have suggested students who develop a “mantra” of academic mindsets will improve their academic performance and feel as though they belong to the academic community; their effort improves their ability and competence; they have a feeling of confidence in succeeding at the task; and there is relevance and value in performing the task (Hammond, 2015).

Self-Efficacy

For a student to move from a dependent learner, which Hammond (2015) described as those students who have not received the instruction that produces critical thinking skills, to independent thinkers, there must be a shift in academic mindset that is built through self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986). Self-efficacy is “one’s internal belief and self-confidence that one has the power and skills to shape the direction of one’s learning experience” (Hammond, 2015, p. 159). Hammond stated, “For culturally and linguistically diverse students, their opportunities to develop habits of mind and cognitive capacities are limited or non-existent because of educational inequity” (p. 13). Thus, these students have not developed the mindset to move past academic difficulties with an “I can” attitude (McCabe & Margolis, 2001). In studying middle school students who struggle in reading, it has been determined that although they show low self-efficacy and interest in reading, their self-efficacy can be high in areas or activities in which they are interested, and self-efficacy is influenced by family, community, and school during the stages of development (Wood et al., 2006). To support these students in building self-efficacy and promoting an academic mindset, Hammond (2015) suggested implementing the following strategies:

- Help students create a counter narrative about their identity as learners—new narrative responds to experiences based on reality, not just inspirational positive thinking.
- Use images, quotes, and poetry to ignite students’ imagination about what is possible—find culturally congruent images that communicate a positive sense of triumph, success, and accomplishment.

- Help students connect with their current expertise and competencies—having students state in writing and share with others their area of expertise helps stimulate those regions of the brain related to self-concept and competency.
- Help students interrupt negative self-talk. Seligman (2006) noted negative self-talk is a part of learned helplessness. Teachers must show students how to interrupt these internal statements and replace them with more positive ones (Hammond, 2015, p. 118).

Effective Literacy Instruction

Culturally relevant pedagogy is shaped through creating and sustaining a cultural connection with students. The student–teacher relationship is by far one of the most important components of culturally relevant pedagogy in that it builds upon trust, which sets the stage for students to become engaged in the possibility of exposing themselves to information that may be unfamiliar, uninteresting, or difficult (Gay, 2018; Hammond, 2015; Irvine, 2010). In an analysis of culturally responsive pedagogy, Irvine (2010) provided descriptions of classroom experiences that exemplified culturally relevant teaching and a lesson that did not exemplify this aim, and asserted teachers who practice culturally responsive pedagogy demonstrate a knowledge of student interests and are caring and supportive of their students. These teachers are leaders and role models to novice teachers and provide opportunities for them to observe their classroom and collaborate together (Ladson-Billings, 2014b). Culturally relevant teachers are reflective and participate in action research in which specific areas of improvement are identified and a plan is developed that includes implementation and reflection to understand the areas of achievement and possible continued plan modification (Gay, 2018; Hammond, 2015).

Gay (2018) provided a synopsis of why culturally relevant pedagogies are essential when teaching marginalized groups. She asserted:

> As such, teaching is most effective when ecological factors, such as prior experiences, community settings, cultural backgrounds and ethnic identities of teachers and students, are included in its implementations. This basic fact is often ignored in teaching some Native, Latino, African, and Asian American students, especially if they are poor. Instead, they are taught from the middle-class, Eurocentric frameworks that shape school practices. (p. 28)

Gay (2018) termed this Eurocentric framework as "cultural blindness" (p. 28) and stated teachers who have good intentions may support assimilation into the dominant culture by thinking that if they treat all students that same, it will eliminate bias. However, she suggested that instead of adopting "cultural neutrality and the homogeneity syndrome in teaching and learning for Native, African, Latino, and Asian American students who are not performing well on traditional measures of school achievement" (p. 29), there should be a major shift to acknowledge the accomplishments of these cultural heritages and a thrust toward providing the necessary resources to encourage accelerated literacy achievement.

According to Acosta (2015), the characteristics of effective teacher literacy instruction have been studied and researchers (Pressley et al., 2002; Pressley et al., 1997) have concluded that several key factors, including high teacher expectations, classroom environment, student engagement, and reading and writing practice, lead to literacy achievement. Studies that reported effective literacy instruction were based on students receiving individualized instruction and teachers providing direct instruction that also included scaffolded practice to transfer independent learning strategies (Allington, 2002). It should be noted that the majority of participants in both studies were White, thus diminishing the ability for teachers of color to contribute their teaching methods and practice (Acosta, 2015). Also, these studies did not take into consideration factors related to “teachers’ racialized and cultural perspectives and how these beliefs influence their teaching practice” (Acosta, 2015, p. 29).

Researchers have discussed how culturally responsive teachers take into consideration their implicit bias, which focuses on the intention, cultural identity, and cultural frames of reference that an educator brings to their practice (Hammond, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 2009b). The exclusion of culture was seen in the National Reading Panel and National Institute of Child Health and Human Development’s (2000) report that indicated the five areas of reading focus should be phonics, phonemic awareness, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. There is a gap in the literature surrounding how sociocultural factors affect reading achievement, as the bulk of research has led to elevated systems of hegemony while limiting the experiences of culturally diverse students (Acosta, 2015). The exclusive reliance on ethnocentric ways of thinking and knowing about effective instruction is what Acosta (2013) conceptualized as “pedagogical hegemony” (p. 30). Despite significant limitations, many of these studies have been used as the backdrop for the way teachers and researchers talk about, think about, and learn about effective elementary literacy instruction (Compton-Lilly & Lilly, 2004; Powell & Rightmyer, 2012).

Hammond (2015) stated, “Culturally responsive teaching isn’t a set of engagement strategies you use on students. Instead think of it as a mindset, a way of looking at the world” (p. 52). She suggested the process for becoming a culturally responsive teacher is not simply engaging in methods of instruction that have been research- and evidence-based but adopting a culturally responsive mindset that begins with acknowledging current attitudes and reflecting on “the beliefs, behaviors, and practices that get in the way of their ability to respond constructively and positively to students” (p. 53). Teachers must be aware that their personal biases may play a part in how they interact with and support culturally diverse students. Becoming a neutral participant means teachers do not adopt an emotional stance when students’ responses in the learning environment do not correlate to the expectations or ideas that have been a personal or systemic norm. Hammond (2015) stated, “Before you can leverage diversity as an asset in the classroom, you must reflect on the challenges that can interfere with open acceptance of students who are different from you in background, race, class, language, or gender” (p. 53).

Milner (2010) conducted a qualitative study to understand the experiences that allowed one teacher to build “cultural competence” (Ladson-Billings, 2006) at a highly diverse middle school located in an urban environment. He asserted that the success of this culturally responsive teacher occurred “because he developed cultural competence and concurrently deepened his knowledge and understanding of himself and his practices” (Milner, 2010, p. 66). This study revealed how one culturally responsive teacher’s mindset was continuously developing through reflection and practice that allowed him to engage effectively with his students to develop and maintain significant and natural relationships with the students in his classroom. The culturally responsive teacher purposefully acknowledged the complex and multifaceted nature of culture and discussed topics related to race that might have been uncomfortable for his students and himself. In addition, this culturally responsive teacher's efforts to collaborate with colleagues helped produce a collaborative working culture in the school (Milner, 2010). Whereas the evolution for culturally responsive teaching can be adopted based upon mindset and reflection, Hammond (2015) and Milner (2010) suggested "caring" is a characteristic of culturally responsive teachers when they are able to remove *emotion* from the definition of caring and consider *action* as the central aim of their practice.

Ladson-Billings (2009b) recounted how caring manifests in student achievement by highlighting how a student with reading challenges demonstrated progress and confidence when he read aloud in a culturally responsive teacher's classroom. The concept of caring in a culturally responsive environment focuses on providing action in terms of protecting children physically and emotionally, which builds trust (Gay, 2018; Hammond, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 2009b). Gay (2018) suggested "caring about conveys feelings of concern for one's state of being, caring for is active engagement in doing something to positively affect it" (p. 57).

Building Knowledge

Teachers' responsibility for developing students in their ability to construct knowledge is one of the main principles of culturally responsive pedagogy and it embodies the belief that providing support for students, such as scaffolding and differentiation, will be impactful in reducing skill gaps (Ladson-Billings, 2009b).

"Culturally relevant teaching attempts to help students understand and participate in knowledge-building" (Ladson-Billings, 2009b, p. 88)

In *The Dreamkeepers*, Ladson-Billings (2009b) related how culturally responsive teachers establish a classroom where the environment is adorned in materials and objects that invite multi-sensory exploration, such as artifacts that are representative of the diversity of the students in the classroom; in addition, these teachers encourage students to participate in collaborative learning where they can exchange ideas through small group peer interaction that includes relevant discussions. Student writing stresses the importance of writing for expression in the initial drafts over a concern for the proper usage of standard English conventions. Subsequent drafts support revising and editing to reflect improvements in content, style, and grammar (Ladson-Billings, 2009a, 2009b). Ladson-Billings suggested culturally responsive teachers should have high expectations for their students as she recounted observing one teacher's translation of a popular rap lyrics to Standard English in an activity that compared the linguistics of both versions. This task also allowed for dialogue between the teacher and the students that was relevant and showed how Standard English can be translated in different social settings (Ladson-Billings, 2009a, 2009b).

As Hammond (2015) stated, teachers who use culturally responsive pedagogy create partnerships with their students that are centered upon the knowledge students bring to the classroom, and the teachers must adopt a mindset that helps them to expose and build upon it. In *The Dreamkeepers* (Ladson-Billings, 2009b), this opportunity was realized when a teacher established a learning relationship with her students that supported and validated their knowledge and experiences, and within this context the teacher made learning a partnership and built upon students' knowledge by providing relevant feedback about their writing (Hammond, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 2009b). Ladson-Billings (2009b) recounted how a student who was referred to by other teachers in the school building as "special-education material" was placed in the inclusive group by the culturally responsive teacher: "By providing him with a few structural clues, she builds his confidence, allowing him the psychological freedom to solve problems and raise questions" (p. 105). Ladson-Billings provided five major tenets for culturally responsive teaching based on her study: (a) students should build upon their competence and receive intellectually demanding instruction, (b) teachers should use the knowledge and skills students bring to the learning environment as a baseline for learning, (c) students and teachers engaging in teaching and learning is the focus of the instructional setting, (d) learning is contextualized and extends students' ability to reason and perform, and (e) effective instruction occurs when there is a teacher–student connection and the teacher has thorough knowledge of the content (pp. 134–136).

Although culturally responsive teachers have different qualities, they share distinct commonalities that enable them to cultivate achievement among culturally diverse students. They have developed a mindset and approach that actively pursues excellence in their students while acknowledging their experiences, interests, backgrounds, learning styles, and communities. Results of a qualitative study by Howard (2001) of student perceptions of culturally responsive teaching showed they valued culturally responsive practices like building a community-based classroom setting and providing intellectually-demanding instruction.

The root of culturally responsive teaching lies in its relationship with social justice and how culturally relevant teaching approaches can support culturally diverse students in educational systems that have historically given inadequate and inequitable resources to culturally diverse students. Ladson-Billings (2009b) stated, “Culturally responsive teaching is about questioning (and preparing students to question) the structural inequality, the racism, and the injustice that exist in society” (p. 140). Through questioning and building the ability to analyze, understand, and formulate ideas that negate social injustice, students will be led to higher achievement (Gay, 2018).

Teachers acquire knowledge about becoming culturally responsive teachers through intentional and procedural courses of action. Gay (2018) suggested that through the acquisition of knowledge, becoming personally and professionally self-aware, and having dialogue about cultural diversity, teachers can become “competent and caring instructors for ethnically diverse students” (p. 81). Gay stated this may be accomplished through content mastery and pedagogical enrichment and encouraged relying on literary resources that provide essential elements, such as “ideological foundations, learning styles, sociocultural contexts of human growth and development, essentials of culture, experiential knowledge, and principles of culturally responsive curriculum design and classroom instruction” (p. 81) to develop culturally relevant teaching styles. Gay cited researchers in the field (King et al., 1997; Smith, 1998; Teel & Obidiah, 2008) whose resources guide teachers who are seeking to strengthen their abilities in this area by reading about historical narratives, authentic teaching approaches and strategies, and theoretical and practical experiences to incorporate culturally responsive methodology into the classroom. According to John-Steiner and Mahn (1996), culture, the individual, and social interaction are intertwined and are the basis for the constructivist approach in teaching and learning.

Student–Teacher Learning Partnerships

Although developing the ability to become a culturally responsive teacher occurs through knowledge of the foundational principles, a partnership between students and teachers must be built as well. Hammond (2015), who believed culturally responsive relationships are “critical,” would likely support Gay’s (2018) assertion that “this relationship is anchored in affirmation, mutual respect, and validation that breeds an unshakable belief that marginalized students not only can but will improve their school achievement” (p. 75).

Hammond (2015) stated the relationship between students and teachers is built in three phases of rapport, alliance, and cognitive insight. In the initial phase, a relationship built on caring and trust is developed and rapport is established between the student and teacher. The alliance phase is cultivated through building a shared bond between teacher and student where the element of rapport is strengthened and develops into the student’s “positive self-efficacy beliefs and a positive academic mindset” (Hammond, 2015, p. 89). The third phase, cognitive insight is closely related to Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development in which a student works at a level that is challenging but able to be reached with support from an adult or peer. When cognitive insight is attained by a student, the teacher can analyze specific areas of strength and challenges and can focus the instruction by using this insight to build upon student knowledge and autonomy (Alley, 2019). One important aspect of cognitive insight is that the student uses metacognition to promote independent learning. Hammond (2015) stated, “In the process, the student becomes more aware of his own learning moves and is positioned to begin directing his learning" (p. 75).

Milner (2010) stressed the importance of developing cultural competence through "the building and sustaining of meaningful and authentic relationships" with students (p. 87). His qualitative study profiling a White male teacher of culturally diverse students in an urban environment displayed the teacher's willingness to reveal his identity by sharing personal information and intimate experiences and pursuing a relationship with students by demonstrating the ability to listen without judgement. These steps are often the catalyst to students buying into building a relationship with teachers and opening themselves up to sharing not only their personal backgrounds, but also their ideas, interests, and goals. Building relationships is the beginning of a trusting and nurturing community in which students and teachers can share a commonality that may lead to cultural competence for both the students and teachers, but importantly it sets the stage for academic growth for the students (Ladson-Billings, 2009a, 2009b).

Pre-Service Teacher Competency and Culturally Responsive Teaching

Hancock et al. (2017) asserted "a teacher preparation program that does not critically interrogate race, power, and privilege in the context of schools does not maintain a social justice mission and consequently does not meet the tenets of CRP" (p. 1). Research promoting teacher competency in literacy instruction for culturally diverse learners is vital for effective culturally relevant literacy practices, yet many teachers are unprepared to deliver instruction that is based on culturally relevant pedagogical frameworks (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 2000, 2014a). Hancock et al. (2017) concluded,

> Teacher education programs are charged with the daunting task of preparing the next generation of teachers. However, the extant literature has documented that teacher education programs have struggled to effectively arm teacher candidates with effective pedagogies to meet the needs of our increasingly diverse student population. (p. 1)

The current landscape of pre-service teachers is overwhelmingly White and female, though the students they are being prepared to serve reflect a more diverse population (Hancock et al., 2017; Kena et al., 2015). To prepare pre-service teachers to teach children from diverse cultural backgrounds, they need coursework and mentorship. Vavrus (2002) stated,

> While multicultural reform recognizes the importance for a White-majority teaching population to have the skills necessary for working with culturally diverse student populations, Valli and Rennert-Ariev (2000) found that most contemporary reform efforts are far from agreement on making structural changes for multicultural education. (p. 33)

Despite resistance to incorporate reforms at university-level teaching programs, researchers have proposed practices that support multicultural education opportunities for pre-service teachers.

Higher education teaching programs are structured to promote the hegemonic norms and practices that translate and mirror this type of "status quo" instruction within the classroom. However, to promote equitable instruction for culturally diverse students, Price-Dennis and Souto-Manning (2011) established several themes that should be emphasized when promoting social justice education for pre-service teachers:

- Consistent reflection and practices that revise and develop relevant pedagogical practices
- Authentic teaching opportunities that do not include scripted instructional models
- Classroom instruction that incorporates student experiences and resources that allows them to conceptualize and extend their “funds of knowledge” (González et al., 2005)
- “A learning environment where students are seen as active participants who construct knowledge, negotiate meaning, and use their agency to challenge oppressive practices that marginalize certain groups in our society” (Price-Dennis & Mariana Souto-Manning, 2011, p. 226).

These themes are prevalent within the literature surrounding culturally responsive learning opportunities for pre-service teachers.

Chang et al. (2011) conducted a study that focused on three models related to culturally responsive instruction and training involved pre-service teachers’ exposure to curricula at institutions of higher learning that promote self-reflection and service learning. Chang et al. asserted that the combination of self-reflection and service learning may lead to positive results and attitudes about diverse cultures among student teachers. Self-reflection includes writing narratives, which supports positive practice for student teachers to “develop a deeper understanding of and connection with multicultural and diversity issues” (Kang & Hyatt, 2010, p. 44). Service learning achieves a different outcome by allowing pre-service teachers the opportunity to participate in real-world experiences with culturally diverse students. When novice teachers are offered the opportunity to immerse themselves in a classroom setting with culturally diverse students, they will benefit from dispelling previous stereotypes related to marginalized groups through positive interactions and building relationships (Obiakor et al., 2002). Pre-service teachers can benefit from professional mentorship that involves modeling culturally responsive classroom behavior and instructional styles that motivate culturally diverse students. The importance of modeling is that it is multi-directional with ongoing discussion and collaboration among the pre-service teachers, teacher educators, and the master teacher (Krummel, 2013).

Exposure to multicultural education for pre-service teachers should occur extensively during their coursework at higher education institutions as well as through service-learning models to develop a well-rounded experience (Gorski, 2009). Although cultural perceptions can be rigid, leaders of educational institutions must take the lead in providing consistent and relevant cultural opportunities for pre-service teachers. Instruction directed toward cultural diversity must promote discourse and debate related to culture and differing attitudes within the classroom. Further research of the effects of teacher education in culturally responsive instruction and teacher perceptions of culturally diverse learners is needed.

Relationship Between Prior Research and the Current Study

This literature review provided insight into the use of culturally responsive pedagogy in the classroom environment, particularly as it pertains to teaching and motivating culturally diverse students. Teachers must have the ability to be reflective and reflexive in their practice in their effort to provide culturally appropriate pedagogy that is relevant to how culturally diverse students interact socially and acquire knowledge. The study was based on theoretical approaches related to critical pedagogy, constructivism, and culturally responsive pedagogy. Whereas critical pedagogy promotes an opportunity for students to use their prior experiences and knowledge to discuss issues related to social justice and controversial subjects, constructivist approaches in learning will guide students to use their experiences and interests to enhance their knowledge in social and cultural contexts. A culturally relevant pedagogy framework offers a setting where students are given equitable resources that are related to their knowledge and interests and allow them to engage in the learning process.

Systemic educational inequities continue to plague marginalized populations and the manifestation of this plight is seen in socioeconomic disparities related to class, ethnic origin, gender, and race. Teachers have the ability to bring social justice issues to the forefront in their classrooms through the adoption of culturally responsive teaching frameworks that are cultivated to engage student experiences and perspectives.

The current study was designed to acknowledge the lived experiences of teachers who worked in diverse urban classrooms. Their perceptions of how culturally responsive pedagogy affects the lives of their students are important in developing policy and programs that can provide equitable learning opportunities for culturally diverse students. Although prior research has provided significant data to support the use of culturally responsive pedagogical models, these models have not been adopted as a mainstream approach to teaching and learning within public-school systems in the United States.

CHAPTER 3: METHODS

Research Design Overview

The primary focus of this study was to investigate the experiences of urban middle school teachers who work with students from culturally diverse backgrounds. Research on culturally responsive pedagogical models indicates environmental settings that introduce culturally centered learning approaches support higher motivation, engagement, and achievement for culturally diverse learners (Ladson-Billings, 2006, 2009a, 2009b).

Research Questions

This study was guided by the following questions:

1. What are teachers' perceptions about their efficacy in modeling culturally responsive pedagogy in their classroom?
2. What are teachers' experiences with student engagement when culturally responsive instructional models are practiced?
3. What are teachers' experiences with student achievement when culturally responsive instructional models are practiced?

The research questions were answered using a combination of instruments, including a short-answer demographic questionnaire, open-ended interviews, follow-up interviews, a researcher journal, field notes, audio recordings, and video recordings designed to gain rich data about the lived experiences of the participants in relation to the nature of the study.

A qualitative research approach was used to respond to the research questions. Qualitative research involves an integrated approach that begins with generalizations and progresses toward the development of specific themes through a process of inquiry, discourse, observation, coding, and analysis (Lichtman, 2013). According to Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011), “Qualitative researchers are after meaning. The social meaning people attribute their experiences, circumstances, and situations, as well as the meanings people embed into texts and other objects, are the focus of qualitative research” (p. 4).

The philosophical stance that served as the foundation for the qualitative paradigm in this study was developed through the researcher’s ontological and epistemological perspective. The term ontology is derived from the new Latin term, *ontologia*, which focuses on the existence of things or what is to be, and the term epistemology is Greek in origin, taken from the word *epitstanai*, which means to understand or know (Vagle, 2018). Whereas an ontological perspective can maintain that knowing is unchangeable, there is also the opposite belief that knowledge is not static (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011; Terrell, 2016). The researcher in the study adopted an epistemological perspective, which allowed the researcher to take an active or passive stance as the study proceeded (Terrell, 2016).

Within the study framework, a paradigm acts as the overarching system that leads researchers to pursue a field of study based upon specific knowledge, tenets of thought, and understandings of previous research that align with current topics or problems (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Unrau et al., 2018). According to Kuhn (1977), as researchers proceed in their quest to answer questions related to a problem in a field of study, they may inevitably extend the information in each paradigm or even create a new paradigm when the implications of the results no longer fall within the old paradigm or system of understanding. Unrau et al. (2018) surmised that paradigms are inclusive of “a network of theoretical, conceptual, instrumental, methodological, and sociocultural sources that serve scientists broaching scientific puzzles in their research community" (p. 54). Researchers' affiliation with a paradigm should be representative of the ideas and theories that are the foundation of their research.

Contextual Relativist Approach

The researcher in this study gathered data related to teaching practices used with culturally diverse student populations and it was of the utmost importance to establish and maintain a trustworthy and professional environment between the researcher and participants throughout the study process. In adopting an ontology that supports answering the research questions, the researcher pursued the belief that humans operate within an unknown universe that is constantly changing based on contextual situations. A relativistic approach as it pertains to the topic of study indicates there are many "truths" that exist within the realm of culturally responsive pedagogy. A contextual relativist or epistemological pluralism approach was adopted in the study, which elicited a reflective model that required the ability to not only adapt to change, but also to question and propose new systems for knowledge and understanding to be developed (Andreotti & Wheeler, 2010; Major, 2011). According to Major (2011), "Epistemological pluralism questions the system itself and proposes that teachers should also question 'the system' and re-assert agency by critically engaging with change rather than simply adapting to it" (p. 253). In using an inquiry-based model of change rather than adapting or adjusting, there is an opportunity to view different realities in a dynamic and plausible framework. Major stated, "We negotiate and renegotiate our conceptualisations, utilising the multiple perspectives in diverse, global societies, and critically engaging with power relations and hegemonic discourses" (p. 253).

Research Design

A phenomenological approach was the qualitative design of inquiry used in this study. This approach was appropriate because it enabled the researcher to study the lived experiences of teachers who work with culturally diverse students and integrate culturally relevant methods into their practice.

The nature of phenomenology is to study the lived experiences of people as they relate to their descriptions of a phenomenon and has roots in the historical work of philosophers Martin Heidegger and Edmund Husserl (Peoples, 2021; Vagle, 2018). Heidegger's approach is called hermeneutic phenomenology and stresses an interpretive method, whereas Husserl's philosophy leans toward a descriptive or transcendental approach (Peoples, 2021; Vagle, 2018). For this study, the researcher followed Husserl's methodology as a philosophy to be understood through the actual experience that a person has rather than a generalization of an event (Vagle, 2018). As teachers who work with culturally diverse students have unique and individual experiences that inform their views, using a descriptive phenomenological approach provided a rich narrative about teachers' perceptions regarding their experiences with culturally responsive teaching and culturally diverse students.

Validity/Trustworthiness

The validity and trustworthiness of phenomenological research promote the ability to defend the study as it relates to the feasibility, reliability, and integrity of the research data (R. B. Johnson, 1997). According to R. B. Johnson (1997), "When qualitative researchers speak of research validity, they are usually referring to research that is plausible, credible, trustworthy, and therefore, defensible" (p. 282). To eliminate researcher bias and protect the research data against allowing selective data approaches and selective collection to occur, Lincoln and Guba (1986) suggested four criteria be present to enhance the trustworthiness of a qualitative study. The first criterion, credibility, indicates the information is true or believable and therefore establishes confidence in the researcher and data. The second criterion, confirmability, pertains to the degree to which results can be corroborated by other researchers. Transferability promotes the generalization of the results to other contexts. The fourth criterion, dependability, indicates the conclusions of the study would be the same if the study were conducted with the same participants. To maximize the validity of qualitative studies and incorporate the criteria listed above, researchers support the use of varied strategies (Kirk & Miller, 1986; LeCompte & Preissle, 1993; Lincoln & Guba, 1986; Maxwell, 2008). The researcher in the current study used several of these strategies, including low inference descriptors, triangulation, participant feedback, peer piloting and peer review, and using a researcher journal to adhere to the concepts of bracketing and epoché, as a means to ensure the trustworthiness of the current study.

Low inference descriptors include data collection related to information gained during the interview process (R. B. Johnson, 1997). These descriptors may contain direct quotes from the participants as well as high quality field notes that detect nuanced data (e.g., emotions, mood, body language). Triangulation is defined as "when more than one source of data is being used" (Terrell, 2016, p. 174). Using multiple sources for data acquisition allows a researcher to accurately develop a synergy between the various themes associated with the participants' responses (Vagle, 2018). The use of various methods of data collection (e.g., interview, audio recording, video recording, and field notes) exemplifies the triangulation used during this study. In his explanation of the triangulation process, R. B. Johnson (1997) stated, "When the different procedures or sources are in agreement you have 'corroboration'" (p. 283). The ultimate effect of corroboration is to achieve validity.

Member checking and discussion of the data are integral in ensuring the validity and trustworthiness of the research. The final report was provided to the participants to allow them to check for accuracy of intended meaning of the information they provided Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Terrell, 2016). Another process used to enhance the validity of a phenomenological study is inter-related checks, which involves cross-checking or verification of the data by colleagues or peers of the researcher (Lichtman, 2013; Peoples, 2021; Vagle, 2018). In the current study, this process included developing open-ended and exploratory research questions that were piloted by a peer prior to the participant interviews. The data coding process included multiple reviews of the data by the researcher and the review of the thematic coding data by a peer who was not familiar with the research study.

Bracketing and Epoché

Within the field of descriptive phenomenological research, reaching the essence of a phenomenon encourages a reductionist process of bracketing and epoché. According to Lichtman (2013), "Bracketing involves placing one's own thoughts about the topic in suspense or out of question. Epoché involves the deliberate suspension of judgement" (p. 88). Vagle (2018) stated phenomenological epoché "involves suspending judgement of the existence and pre-understandings of things outside the human mind, so that phenomena can be studied in their givenness to consciousness" (p. 14). To provide an unbiased and relativistic approach of the data analyzed during the study process, the researcher must be able to bracket or exclude their own views about the subject, thereby becoming non-judgmental. The adoption of bracketing and epoché in phenomenological research indicates the researcher suspends their ability to use prior experiences or opinions and seeks to see the data "as an experience in itself, a process of setting aside predilections, prejudices, predispositions, and allowing things, events, and people to enter anew into consciousness" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 85). This approach demands that all occurrences, events, and situations be approached by the researcher with an innocence and a vulnerability to explore phenomena and allow the moment to be shaped without direction. Moustakas (1994) suggested, "From epoché, we are challenged to create new ideas, new feelings, new awareness and understanding" (p. 86).

Study Participants

Role of the Researcher/Researcher Reflexivity

The researcher's role as a Black female special educator and administrator at a majority African American middle school in an urban setting led to an interest in the disproportionate reading results of Black and Latino students in comparison to White students. The examination of how culturally responsive methods affect student engagement and motivation was based on the researcher's observations of how texts, teacher attitudes, and instructional styles can alter student behavior. The researcher's prior experience within a charter school with a significantly more diverse and affluent student population led to an interest in how socioeconomic disparities affect student engagement and achievement, and how culturally responsive pedagogy can be used to leverage this inequity and promote student achievement. The researcher's background in special education and working with students with emotional and behavioral disorders encouraged a pursuit of researching pedagogy that may lead to greater educational equity for culturally diverse student populations. The researcher adopted a reflexive approach, which supports an awareness of the ability to adopt a transparent approach in data collection (Lichtman, 2013). According to Lichtman (2013), "To be open, to be aware, to be forthcoming – these are watchwords of reflexivity" (p. 157).

Participants and Recruitment

Moustakas (1994) provided a general description of the criteria for the selection of participants in a phenomenological study, stating:

> Essential criteria include: the research participant has experienced the phenomenon, is intensely interested in understanding its nature and meanings, is willing to participate in a lengthy interview and (perhaps a follow-up interview), grants the investigator the right to tape-record, possibly videotape the interview, and publish the data in a dissertation and other publications. (p. 107)

For the current study, five content teachers from three public charter schools in an urban school district in the mid-Atlantic region were selected to participate in the open-ended interviews. Teachers who had graduate-level coursework were selected as the participants in the study because of their potential for awareness and experience with the subject matter in theory and practice. Graduate-level coursework generally requires the completion of core coursework and concentration area studies, yet many programs are lacking in their ability to offer courses that promote an understanding and practice of culturally responsive practices within the classroom (Ladson-Billings, 2000). Participants in this study had a minimum of 6 years of experience providing core content instruction to middle school students in Grades 6–8 in English language arts (ELA), math, and science. Participants were recruited from three urban public charter schools in the mid-Atlantic region.

Participants for the study were enlisted after the researcher obtained formal consent from senior school leadership (e.g., head of school or principal; Appendix A) at the three designated middle schools located in urban districts. The researcher sent a research participant inquiry letter (Appendix B) to teachers at the schools who met the search criteria. Responding teachers were asked to complete a brief demographic survey (Appendix C) and those who met the participant requirements were invited to participate in the study.

Researcher–Participant Relationship

There was an existing professional relationship between the researcher and four of the participants. As the special education administrator at one of the public charter schools, the researcher's interactions with three of the study participants occurred during school-wide meetings and special education student meetings. The participants were not observed or evaluated by the researcher in any capacity during the school year. One of the study participants was employed at a school where the researcher was employed over 6 years ago. One of the participants was recruited after contact with leadership at the school.

Recruitment Process

Potential participants for the study were identified via a research participant inquiry letter sent via email to select teachers who served middle school students in an urban school district. The email included the participant demographic criteria and provided general information about the research study process. Interested participants were provided with the researcher's contact information (Appendix B).

Participant Selection

The sampling method used for this study was purposive or intentional, which indicates participants are intentionally selected for a study because they meet the criteria outlined in the targeted population (Terrell, 2016). Participants of this study had a minimum of 6 years of experience providing core content instruction in one of the following subject areas: ELA, mathematics, or science. Participants had a minimum of 6 years of experience working with middle school students (Grades 6–8) in an urban environment.

Data Collection

Terrell (2016) explained that quantitative researchers generally use data collection instruments to gather numerical information (i.e., rankings, surveys, and tests) whereas qualitative researchers rely on observations, questionnaires, interviews, and focus groups. In a phenomenological study, the interview protocol may follow an unstructured, semi-structured, or structured system. Researchers who prefer an unstructured interview state that it permits open dialogue through a conversational approach (Vagle, 2018). A semi-structured interview allows for the "initial spontaneity of phenomenological research"

(Peoples, 2021, p. 52), whereas a structured interview calls for the researcher to prepare questions that are posed to participants.

Though the researcher developed an initial individual semi-structured interview protocol (Appendix D) to prompt spontaneous interaction and conversation about the research topic between the researcher and the participants, follow-up interviews were used to target responses by the participants to clarify and develop narratives to support robust study data. According to Peoples (2021), “This method of collecting data first allows the lived essence of circumstances to operate spontaneously through the first interview and then are assessed more precisely (Gorgi, 1985)” (p. 52).

Informed Consent

Participants in the research study were apprised of potential threats and benefits related to their participation in the study. When human participants are used as research subjects, it is necessary that voluntary informed consent be included in the process (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). There are three elements that define valid consent: “The absence of coercion or undue influence, providing participants with information relevant to the decision at hand, and ensuring that participants have the capacity to use that information to make an authentic decision on whether to participate” (Palmer, 2015, p. 62). Palmer (2015) suggested the participant consent process be an iterative process where there is substantial communication between the potential participant and the researcher to eliminate any misunderstanding of the research study’s purpose and the participant’s role within the study. The iterative process included providing simplified verbal and written language regarding the study to allow potential participants to explain their understanding of the study and its process.

Participants were provided with a notice of the confidentiality and anonymity of collected data (Appendix E). Confidentiality and anonymity are interrelated; however, they are distinct because confidentiality is the overarching tenet in which anonymity falls. Confidentiality refers to spoken or written words being kept private and not shared, whereas anonymity refers to a person who does not have their identity revealed to anyone other than the researcher (Wiles et al., 2006). This study is considered confidential because although the researcher reported the findings of the study, the participants of the study were not disclosed.

According to Wiles et al. (2006), confidentiality of data is ensured through the separation of the participant data from any identifying participant information and filing the participant data securely and privately. Those who have access to the data, including outsourced individuals (e.g., transcriber), should not reveal information. The researcher informed any parties that had access to the data of their ethical obligation to confidentiality. Protecting anonymity for participants and research locations supports confidentiality.

Data storage occurred through a secured file located in Google Drive. The researcher maintained the security of the files through the creation of a Google email account that allowed Google Cloud access. The researcher had sole access to the Google password and files. Data transcription was completed using the Zoom audio recording and video recording platform.

Pseudonyms

As it relates to the current study, participants were invited to self-select pseudonyms prior to the transcription process. This was done to provide realistic and relatable names that correlated to their lived experiences. Choosing alphabetical letters or ordinal numbers to give anonymity to the participants would not have achieved this goal. Allen and Wiles (2016) found a positive psychological impact upon participants who self-selected their pseudonyms and related them to socio-cultural representations. These researchers stated, “The care and thought with which many participants chose their names, and the meanings or links associated with those names, illuminated the importance of the process of naming” (p. 149).

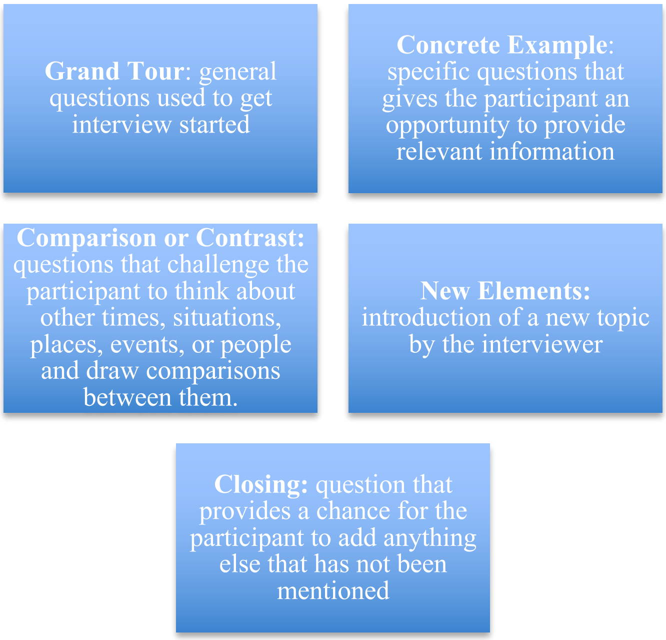
Instruments

For this study, exploratory semi-structured interviews and follow-up interviews were the primary resources for data collection to illuminate the lived experiences of the participants. According to Lichtman (2013), the purpose of an interview in a qualitative study is to “set up a situation in which the individual being interviewed will reveal to you his or her feelings, intentions, meanings, sub contexts, or thoughts on a topic, situation, or idea” (p. 190). Gathering this information in a reflexive manner did not mean the researcher was an objective participant, and it should be acknowledged that the researcher gathered information through her lens. The contextual relativist approach adopted in this study required the interview process to be evolutionary and built through continual opportunities to adopt varying frameworks of reality. In referencing the interview process between the researcher and the interviewee, Lichtman stated, “You are not trying to be objective. You adopt the role of constructing and subsequently interpreting the reality of the person being interviewed, but your own lens is critical” (p. 190).

When conducting the interviews, the researcher posed a broad group of open-ended questions to all participants, though not necessarily in a strict order, which allowed the interviews to flow in a natural manner (Lichtman, 2013). Follow-up probes afforded participants an opportunity to expound upon their previous responses. To conduct an interview that elicits rich and significant information, it is important that rapport be established between the researcher and the interviewee. Lichtman (2013) suggested sharing personal information may reveal a commonality or similar interests and may be helpful in creating a comfortable atmosphere and balancing the relationship between interviewer and interviewee. Lichtman's examples and descriptions of types of interview questions (e.g., grand tour, concrete example, comparison or contrast, new elements, and closing; Figure 1) were useful in the development of the interview questions (Appendix D).

Figure 1

Types of Interview Questions



Grand Tour: general questions used to get interview started

Concrete Example: specific questions that gives the participant an opportunity to provide relevant information

Comparison or Contrast: questions that challenge the participant to think about other times, situations, places, events, or people and draw comparisons between them.

New Elements: introduction of a new topic by the interviewer

Closing: question that provides a chance for the participant to add anything else that has not been mentioned

(Lichtman, 2013, p. 197)

The researcher collected data from content teachers using the Zoom Pro virtual technology platform. The decision to use this platform was related to the COVID-19 pandemic and the need to practice social distancing. The researcher is adept at this technology and the Zoom Pro platform allows video and audio recordings to be uploaded to a designated password-protected Google file. A time-stamped transcription of each interview was accessible on this platform as well. Audio transcripts were edited for word accuracy and to address the inability of the transcription feature on Zoom Pro to discern capitalization and punctuation.

Data Analysis

The researcher incorporated the following steps when interpreting and analyzing the data (Sohn, 2017):

1. The researcher was aware that the participants' words were being read through a contextual lens. Bracketing or being conscious of eliminating judgement to focus on the phenomenon is an essential element in this process (Peoples, 2021). The researcher used a journal throughout the study to process and monitor biases, assumptions, and expectations. The data were interpreted based on the whole experience of the participant and were not broken into parts.
2. To maintain a continual sense of the participants' experiences, the researcher listened to the audio or video recordings at least two times to elicit context prior to transcribing.
3. The interviews were transcribed using the Zoom audio and video recordings. The researcher made edits to the transcripts to ensure accuracy. The researcher

read the transcripts multiple times to ensure the lived experiences of the participants remained relevant. The researcher invited a colleague in the field to read the transcripts to gain an alternative perspective and maintain neutrality.

4. The researcher continued to read and gain knowledge about phenomenological research approaches to guide the theoretical approach used in this study.
5. The researcher understood that to analyze the data objectively, there should be an opportunity to process the information and not be constantly immersed in it. Therefore, the researcher transcribed and analyzed the data over several days.
6. The researcher developed the themes that were extracted from the data and used them as one resource in creating the narrative.
7. Member checking was conducted with the participants after the data were transcribed to ensure the interview data were depicting what the participants intended to convey during the interviews. The participants received a copy of their narratives to review for accuracy. The researcher followed up with each participant to ensure their voice was being reflected in the narrative.

The coding process in a phenomenological study demands bracketing and extracting meaning from the data to derive the essence of the lived experiences of the subject matter exposed by the participants in the study (Peoples, 2021). The researcher manually coded the data to develop control, understanding, and proficiency of the data to enhance the ability to assign meaning and interpret words that were symbolic themes and supported the results of the study (Peoples, 2021; Saldaña, 2016). The overarching method of coding, concept coding, was used for this study. The premise of concept coding is understanding that the aim is to develop categories that represent macro ideas (Saldaña, 2016). A specific type of concept coding was conducted using the Moustakas (1994) modification of the Van Kaam method of phenomenological data analysis (Appendix F).

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

Several themes emerged during the analysis phase of the study. Several cycle coding processes were used that generated categories that were continuously refined and condensed to elicit salient themes to reflect the essence of the phenomenon. “Qualitative inquiry demands meticulous attention to language and deep reflection on the emergent patterns and meanings of the human experience” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 10). The concept coding method allows researchers to advance the overarching ideas that are supported by the study data. This chapter includes the research questions and the related concepts, followed by an example of rich textual data extracted from the participant demographic information (Table 3) and interviews.

Table 3

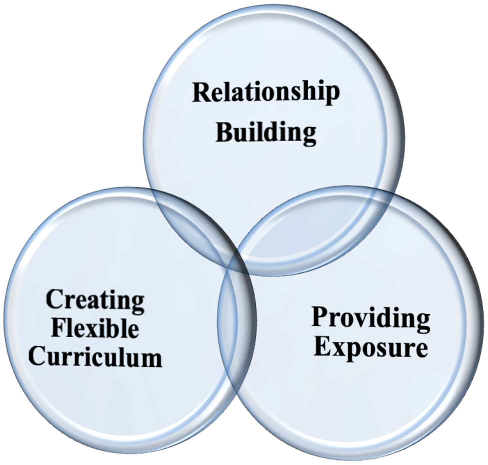
Participant Demographic Information

Participant	Educational background	Years of teaching experience	Content area	Grade level
Bethany	Teach for America	6	Math	6th
Carla	Juris Doctor and English teacher certification	14	ELA	8th
Gina	Teach for America	7	ELA	8th
Tanya	Graduate level coursework in physics	13	Science	8th
Wendy	Master’s English	14	ELA	6th

After transcribing the interviews, the researcher coded and re-coded the data to extract emergent concepts. The three themes that were emerged were found to intertwine as the researcher analyzed the data and interpreted participants’ interview transcripts (Figure 2).

Figure 2

Emerging Themes


Relationship Building
Creating Flexible Curriculum
Providing Exposure

Comparable dimensions were found to exist within the themes that emerged; therefore, a meso-level or micro-level hierarchy was not defined. Sub-themes were identified within each theme as shown in Table 4.

Table 4

Themes With Sub-Themes

Theme	Sub-themes
Relationship building	Student connection
	Classroom community
	Family engagement
	Teacher collaboration
Creating flexible curriculum	Culturally relevant texts
	High interest topics
Providing exposure	Identity awareness
	Social equity

Research Question 1

What are teachers' perceptions about their efficacy in modeling culturally responsive pedagogy in their classroom?

The interview protocol included several open-ended questions related to culturally responsive pedagogy and practice. The participants exuded confidence in their responses about their efficacy in modeling culturally responsive practices in their teaching. Interestingly, the participants did not study or seek to become educators through a teacher education program during their undergraduate studies. Their career backgrounds included practicing law, providing private art lessons, and working in the hospitality industry. Two of the participants joined Teach for America and the other participants pursued coursework at the graduate level to become certified in their content area. Teaching culturally diverse students in urban environments was an intentional change in all of the teachers' initial career paths. Their desire to enter the field of education seemed to be predicated on the "need" they saw as they worked with students in urban environments. The themes that emerged from the research data related to the study questions were relationship building, creating flexible curriculum, and providing exposure.

Relationship Building

The theme of relationship building emerged continuously for all five participants in the study. They related their practice as a culturally responsive teacher to the ability to build relationships with their students that provided the students with the ability and confidence to take risks and become personally open to exploring and seeking support.

When speaking about how they developed relationships with students, the teacher participants espoused intentional steps they took as culturally responsive practitioners to develop a framework for building student relationships in a respectful and caring way. Wendy described how developing relationships encouraged her students to take risks, thereby supporting their growth and engagement:

> So, everybody likes to do a favor, nobody likes to be told what to do. When kids are in a relationship with an adult that is caring, compassionate, and parental, they will do hard things even if they are not innately interested in them in order to facilitate that relationship. It's a little bit of a sneak, it's true, but what happens more often than not is that once they take that initial plunge into doing the hard thing and it becomes less hard thereby becoming more interesting and more accessible.

Inclusive of the student–teacher relationships that manifest in culturally responsive practices is the building of a community, which includes all students and teachers in the classroom. The importance of building community relationships manifests when teachers and students can share personal experiences and have discourse surrounding topics of interest. Specifically, the participants referenced how they developed relationships with their students outside of scheduled class time:

> **Carla:** And one of the high points of that advisory that I think is really key, is that if they were interested in doing something and it was reasonable from my perspective, I would make it happen.
>
> **Wendy:** Instead, I doubled down on lunch intervention and time after school with kids and pushing all of the things that I could control within the locus of my classroom to make sure the work they were doing was both useful and necessary, and achievable at the same time.

Participants agreed that cultivating family relationships was important and a vital connection for student achievement, though they stated that due to the pandemic, it had been difficult to build relationships with parents. Despite this barrier, it was apparent that they had empathy for the parents and their possible struggles. The participants described the importance of relationships with the families and shared that the global COVID-19 pandemic had affected their ability to build these relationships:

> **Carla:** I think parents are doing less active parenting in some ways because I think they are overwhelmed by everything else that's going on so some of this is falling through the cracks. I think that parents are really struggling right now, and this is the time where they probably need more communication, we need better relationships.
>
> **Gina:** In the past I had really strong relationships with families, but this year for whatever reason, it's been a struggle for me.

The ability to build relationships and collaborate with co-teachers and colleagues was also very important. The participants expressed a general respect and appreciation for collaborative input because it provided them with additional support in lesson planning and instruction. It seemed this connection enhanced the teachers' ability to create curriculum, develop cohesive lessons, and support students in the classroom. The participants explained the significance of co-teaching:

> **Wendy:** My co-teacher and I have been together longer than my husband and I have . . . It's a co-parenting relationship much more than it is a co-teaching relationship.

> **Gina:** The first year that I was here we had that co-teaching model and I know that with the teacher shortages we've gotten away from that, but always having a second body in the classroom is like my literal favorite thing.

Although the participants discussed their experiences with co-teaching, the literature about co-teaching models as they relate to culturally relevant pedagogy is scarce. Researchers have found teacher collaboration and professional learning communities that support culturally responsive practices provide teachers a sense of empowerment and a collaborative working culture (Husband & Kang, 2020; Milner, 2010; Myers, 2019).

Creating Flexible Curriculum

Participants reflected on their ability to have input or autonomy over the development of their curriculum, which they said provided more options for students to become engaged. Data showed that when the teachers were able to supplement or design their curriculum, they were empowered as culturally responsive educators to teach what they were passionate about. Participants shared their thoughts on how this supported student interest and engagement:

> **Tanya:** So that's the whole purpose of just being able to have my own curriculum that I can actually get off topic and bring it back and allowing the students to actually teach other in the class because there are things that they might know about the topic that others don't know and there are things I might not know about that topic.
>
> **Carla:** I mean that's when we amped up our BLM [Black Lives Matter] teaching, so we have really tried to not be reactive but to be sensitive and responsive to what students want to read and part of that came from [supervisor's name] telling

> me, you know, teach what you are interested in, teach the things you really are passionate about.

Culturally responsive teachers create curricula that are relevant to the lives and experiences of their students, thereby engaging the students in what they are learning and practicing (Gay, 2018; Irvine, 2010; Stachowiak, 2017). The participants used various instructional models to represent information and they described their interactions with students:

> **Bethany:** When you make it totally relatable to things that they could envision or things that they've been through . . . or things that they know they could calculate, I think it's not as difficult as they think.
>
> **Gina:** They loved it so much and there were so many conversations around . . . are these things real? Do these things actually happen? Do Black people and Indigenous African people . . . do they have these types of monsters and these types of things exist?

Providing Exposure

In culturally responsive classrooms, teachers expose students to various social issues that have relevance to the students, their families, and their communities (Ladson-Billings, 2009a, 2009b). They promote discourse that may be controversial and enlightening, while challenging their students to think beyond their current situation. The participants shared their thoughts about texts that were relevant to their students' lives:

> **Carla:** It's pretty much seeing them overcome lots of challenges that may reflect and mirror their own personal challenges in life. We changed our curriculum a lot and we are looking for stories that can shed light on other peoples' humanity.

> **Gina:** The book talks a lot about food deserts and food scarcity. Kids can have a conversation like those critical race theory conversations about why is it that in my community, which is primarily Black, are there limited access to fresh fruits and vegetables? Why is there limited access to grocery stores?

Culturally relevant teachers also seek to support their students' understanding of who they are as individuals in society and what their contributions can be as global citizens. They explore students' talents that reveal the many facets they offer as individuals. The participants described how they assisted students and facilitated opportunities for identity awareness:

> **Wendy:** We make them note cards that say, I see you . . . and lists all things that we've noticed about them that they've never noticed in themselves. Building them up like that consistently throughout everything we do . . . I think is what makes—really that makes the difference . . . like that's what makes us family. They have gifts . . . let them know that and let them feel seen that way.
>
> **Carla:** How does your own identity impact your ability to do right by the students in the classroom? How does race and race relations in the community impact students' ability to be successful in the classroom?

Several concepts emerged during the analysis of the data that were connected to the initial research question: What are the teachers' perceptions about their ability to model culturally responsive pedagogy? Data analysis showed these concepts overlap and are interrelated (Figure 2). Sub-concepts also emerged during the data analysis (Table 4) as the participants and researcher had an open-ended discussion about the participants' beliefs and lived experiences modeling culturally responsive teaching practices.

Research Question 2

What are teachers' experiences with student engagement when culturally responsive instructional models are practiced?

Relationship Building

The study participants were teachers of culturally diverse students and their answers indicated they feel strongly that relationships are the catalyst for igniting engagement during the learning process, which includes instruction, task-related participation, and demonstration of what is learned. The participants shared their views about forming relationships with their students, and they suggested they used these relationships to build trust and support learning:

> **Bethany:** I think a big part was forming relationships and trusting relationships with your students because once your students actually see that you take the time out to actually get to know them . . . to form these relationships and they trust you . . . I feel like learning is a little bit easier.
>
> **Wendy:** Building them up like that consistently throughout everything we do, I think is what makes really that makes the difference . . . that's what makes us family.

Participants felt strongly that their ability to create or supplement the curriculum led to increased student engagement because they were able to teach relevant information. Ladson-Billings (2009b) stated, "it is the *way we teach* that profoundly affects the way that students perceive the content of that curriculum" (p. 15). The participants shared that students were more participatory and more likely to reveal personal experiences when they were engrossed in the topic or text.

Create Flexible Curriculum

Participants suggested that when they had flexibility in presenting their curriculum to students, meaning they were able to select texts and materials that were relevant to the students' interests and needs, the students became excited and engaged in the lesson. The participants shared how providing choice in texts and instructional approaches engaged their students:

> **Carla:** The African American students tend to select the African American related books, but this year we had a bunch of students select the Japanese internment story even though they're African American.
>
> **Tanya:** Yes, I actually love teaching same-sex classrooms. There's less distractions. The boys feel a little more comfortable being themselves, so the boys are going to be in a room together and there are no girls, so they don't have to impress anybody. They can be truly themselves; they can do what they want in that class. They're a lot more hands-on so they're going to be a little more tactile. I know that with them I would have to do a lot more hands-on stuff, giving them more manipulatives to explain things.

Providing Exposure

Culturally relevant teachers help facilitate students expanding their views, ideas, and ways of thinking. Ladson-Billings (2009b) asserted, "Culturally relevant teaching is a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes" (p. 20). The participants described some of their students as not having access or knowledge beyond their lived experience; however, by engaging them in current events or literature that may have acted as “mirror” to their lives, they were able to see similar situations or challenges the characters face and overcome. Conversely, they can become engaged in information that is seen as a “window” to their lives, where something new may be interesting. Participants shared how they used literature to expose students:

> **Wendy:** One of the biggest problems I think our kids have when it comes to just interacting with life is that they lack words to name the feelings that they have. Literature provides a great way to do that, to look at the spectrum of meaning within this negative emotion because all you know is that they feel bad and so let’s tease that out. What are the things that are going into that negative feeling and then let’s apply it to your life.
>
> **Carla:** I think the one thing I can tell you that engaged them is that when it is something new that they had no idea about and so this is extremely interesting to them.

Several concepts emerged during the analysis of the data that were connected to the second research question: What are teachers’ experiences with student engagement when culturally responsive instructional models are practiced? Culturally responsive teachers use various tools to engage their students. They build trust and rapport, which develops into an alliance where the teacher supports learning while the student takes academic risks; this engagement is the foundation for learning (Hammond, 2015).

Research Question 3

What are teachers’ experiences with student achievement when culturally responsive instructional models are practiced?

The teachers in the study remarked that providing students with new experiences, whether through reading the text, hearing about the experiences of others, or through actual participation, expanded the students' knowledge and encouraged them to have discussions about a wide range of topics.

Relationship Building

Teachers of culturally diverse students support student growth by building students' confidence and encouraging them to become independent learners (Hammond, 2015). The participants challenged their students to take risks because they had developed a mutual sense of trust where they could show growth in a safe environment. Participants shared how they supported their students' achievement by giving positive feedback:

> **Bethany:** And I also praise my students just for small gains . . . saying "you did really well today! You answered two problems today, let's try for four tomorrow!"
>
> **Wendy**: If you're enthusiastic about it, it can become engaging to kids because you're doing something new and different right, but you've done it in a way that makes it feel safe . . . so long as kids feel safe and feel like they can get a piece of it they're willing to try it, but if it all just feels unattainable why would I bother.

Creating Flexible Curriculum

The participants presented their students with several options to demonstrate proficiency. Though all participants said they used rubrics to give students detailed information about what should be included in an assignment or project, they also provided a "model" of the assignment or project as an exemplar. Flexibility in designing or supplementing the curriculum afforded the teachers the ability to present instruction using various modalities, such as audio, video, and kinesthetic activities. It also gave them the ability to create assessment tools using modalities that were structured according to the students' interest and ability.

> **Bethany:** Achievement I look at . . . something that you're working towards . . . steps that you're taking to finally achieve it. It's like an overall goal for you before I call it an achievement, so for example if I'm working with my student and a goal of theirs is to earn an A by the end of the school year, we worked four quarters to get there, and you earned it . . . that's an achievement . . . you make growth on the way.
>
> **Gina:** I'm listening to their conversations. I think a lot of the time because . . . writing is such a struggle; they were having conversations that were related to the text while I was leaving. If they're engaged and they're having those conversations, then I'm pretty sure that I can look at their stuff and I could see that they're at least moving in the right direction.

Providing Exposure

There is a sociopolitical dynamic present in culturally responsive classrooms in which students are encouraged to question and debate traditional literary themes that affect people and society. Aliakbari and Faraji (2011) argued:

> Through problem posing education and questioning the problematic issues in learners' lives, students learn to think critically and develop a critical consciousness which help them to improve their life conditions and to take necessary actions to build a more just and equitable society. (p. 78)

Participants exposed their students to activities outside of school, different lifestyles, and different cultures to increase dialogue in their classrooms and to elicit different ways of thinking. When asked questions about student achievement, the participants' focus was on the types of conversations they had with their students in which students expressed their opinions and made inquiries. Whether the dialogue was related to the lesson or another topic, the participants supported their students' acquisition of knowledge by purposely creating opportunities for student-led conversation around subject matter related to social equity issues and identity awareness:

> **Wendy:** Making it manifest that the reason we say it's important to go to college or it's important to go to a trade school and to get a degree or a certification of some kind, is that the world can be an amazing place if you have the access path.
>
> **Carla:** Maybe it's nothing as negative as that, it may be just students seeing how in history we've continued to use divisions among groups to divide so maybe they want to learn about different groups of people who are oppressed.

Several themes emerged during the analysis of the data connected to the final research question: What are teachers' experiences with student achievement when culturally responsive instructional models are practiced? The themes of relationship building, creating flexible curriculum, and providing exposure supported student achievement in developing their identity through dialogue and articulating their ideas in the social context of the classroom.

Participant Profiles

The participants in this study were five teachers who taught at the middle school level in an urban environment. The researcher conducted the initial interviews virtually via Zoom. Follow-up interviews were conducted with two of the participants to clarify their responses from the initial interviews. Profiles are included here to provide a brief history about each participant as well as excerpts from the interview transcripts that provide thick rich data, including quotes and observations taken from the audio and video recordings of the interviews.

Wendy

Wendy is a sixth-grade ELA teacher at a public charter school within the participating urban school district. Prior to returning to school to earn her degree in English, she taught art for many years to what she described as an “affluent” population. Her experience teaching students art was enjoyable, yet she was disturbed by the sharp socioeconomic contrast to the students with whom she worked in a writing lab located in an urban university a short distance away. She described her work in the writing lab as “gratifying and challenging.” This experience propelled her interest to pursue her master’s degree in urban education and begin working with middle school students in urban environments. As a new teacher of middle school students in an urban city, Wendy was aware of her inexperience and its potential impact on how she interacted with her students, calling herself “well-intentioned but clueless.” Throughout the interview she interjected anecdotes about her students that displayed their curiosity and kindness; she did not mention their achievement in terms of grades or scores.

Relationship Building. Wendy initially allowed her caring and empathy for her students to affect her expectations for them; however, through mentorship, reflection, and research, she made the conscious decision to transform her teaching by changing how she engaged with families, interacted with students, structured her lessons, and thought about the work she did. Wendy saw promise in all her students and valued building relationships with them that allowed them to take risks based on the safe space and trust that was developed in the classroom community. She used the words “love,” “joy,” and “fabulous” to describe her students and she referenced their individualism, stating:

> Not every child can necessarily achieve the same thing in the same way, but how very boring would our world be if the only things that ever happened is that we all achieve the exact same thing with the exact same way.

Wendy appreciated the long-standing collaborative relationship she had developed with her co-teacher and referred to their classroom community as a “family” where they acted more like co-parents than co-teachers. She stated:

> She and I think this is family and this is parenting and lot of what we as teachers are tasked to do on a daily basis, particularly with the community that we’re lucky enough to serve, is stepping into that parental Auntie village role because for whatever reason the village is not available at the moment.

Wendy advocated for an increase in family and student engagement, believing that a proactive approach to working with and engaging families is beneficial to student development, and she was convinced that this could be achieved by going into the students’ communities to meet parents and extended family. She shared how learning about students’ home lives helped set the stage for how she viewed children, noting a “challenging student becomes less so” when she was able to meet their loved ones and hear stories about them. She valued the intimacy in the family relationships that she had built, and she described it as a “teacher-parent-school family.” She did suggest that since the COVID pandemic, making family connections had become harder.

Providing Exposure. Throughout the interview, Wendy spoke passionately and vibrantly about social justice issues and the issues that were present in urban cities, including unstable housing and the structure of the educational system that inherently rewards the privileged while underserving historically marginalized groups. She spoke about her curiosity in working with people who were not like her and her former desire to create social justice reforms; however, she found her passion in teaching. She explained her desire to teach:

> I think teaching is not just an individual way but like an action—the closest thing that I have to give to the 19-year-old kid who wanted to go into international affairs and do aid work and become a lawyer and work with the Hague. This is the way that you create a more equitable and more just society, one kid at a time, one moment at a time, making sure that someone somewhere sees them for who they are and gives them an opportunity to become whatever it is that will make them happiest.

Wendy referred to her students as "smart people" and talked about the conversations they had when she talked to them about her personal life, which allowed them to explore different cultures and experiences. She stated, "As sixth graders usually are, they are very inquisitive about places and things that they may not have experienced or have access to outside of their neighborhoods." Wendy made intentional choices about planning nontraditional field trips for her students that "show them something new about the world," like going white water rafting. She stressed the importance of goal setting and believed that when teachers provide students with experiences, it allows the students to see why it is important to receive an education or training that will open opportunities to gain socioeconomic access.

Creating Flexible Curriculum. Wendy said she felt fortunate to be able to supplement and tailor the current sixth-grade curriculum to meet the interests and needs of her students. She advocated for the use of texts that related to students' interests and provided a mirror into their lives, while using reflective texts to reveal parts of students' lives and different aspects of the world. She emphatically stated:

> If you are enthusiastic about it, it can become engaging to kids because you're doing something new and different, but you've done it in a way that makes it feel safe so long as kids feel safe and feel like they can get a piece of it, they're willing to try it, but if it all just feels unattainable, why bother right?

Wendy provided her students with rubrics, explicit models, and practice for projects that evaluated student achievement. She called this a "ritualized" process that was done with fidelity and revealed to the students in a "special" way that made them a part of the process:

> For example, when we roll out a writing project that's a major one, not just like an in-class write, I'll give then a teacher seed piece as the model and then I'll give them the rubric. We'll go over the rubric and they will grade the teacher seed piece. Whichever teacher is posing as the novice writer will say, "but I only got a 2 out of 5, how do I get to a 5?" Then kids have lots of ideas and can go back and expand. They will say, "I can tell you everything that's wrong with your writing Ms. Scott, everything! Let me tell you!" Chase is so cute, she will say, "Just let

> me tell you all the things that you didn’t do quite rightly, we can fix them, I’m sure.”

By creating explicit models and practice, Wendy found that expectations for achievement in her classroom became normed and students began to “own their own expectations.”

Tanya

Tanya was currently a middle school science teacher at a public charter school within the participating urban school district. Her first job out of college was a long-term substitute teacher position that she thought would be temporary, but she fell in love with teaching and the children she served. After receiving her undergraduate degree in biology and taking master’s-level courses toward a degree in physics, she planned to work in a medical laboratory, but she admitted that her students kept her motivated to continue teaching. Her passion for teaching science was evident as she compellingly described her experiences as a student where she was held to high expectations and became “overly” prepared to succeed while pursuing her bachelor’s degree in biology.

Relationship Building. Tanya used her prior experiences as a student in her classroom today where she “overly” prepared students and built their confidence to meet the rigor of high school science:

> I tell the eighth graders every year, “At this point you are in high school, you are not an eighth grader, I’m going to treat you as such and all of the work that you’re going to get is going to be geared toward that, I have to prepare you for high school.” I want them to be super prepared. I don’t want anything to blind side them . . . I tell them, “I want you to feel confident when you go to science class in high school.”

Her experience of being challenged consistently throughout her education and attending schools in culturally diverse settings was integral in her decision to remain in the urban school environment:

> People say "Why did you go into teaching," and I say, "I do it for the outcome." I don't know how I touch you now, but when I see you in the future, because I run into former students all the time . . . they say, "remember when we used to . . ." or "I got a job at such-and-such." I say, "I'm just happy that you have been successful enough to make it!"

Creating Flexible Curriculum. Tanya had an exuberant and animated personality and she spoke about science projects and experiments with an enthusiasm that she would spread to the students in her classroom. She recalled how one "incredible" math teacher gave her the confidence and ability to do math, a subject she said she did not like prior to having this teacher. She described the teacher as creating "a lightbulb in her mind" that allowed her to perform "any kind of math now." Tanya acknowledged that she strove to create this type of excitement and engagement for her students. The passion she saw in her math teacher was the passion she exuded to her students because she wanted them to be passionate. Tanya, who had autonomy in developing her curriculum, charismatically talked about a science experiment in which the students baked bread:

> Everybody wanted to make that bread! They've been asking about that bread for 2 weeks, 2 weeks, 2 weeks and they were excited! I said, "we can't make bread unless you guys get through these chemical reactions and you guys can explain XYZ to me" and they were on it! I was passing out materials and doing different things asking questions and they were on it!

Student: Yeah it's a gas.

Tanya: It's a gas? What do you mean?

Student: Well, it's carbon dioxide

Tanya: Fantastic! You guys are on it! I want you guys to be super engaged and excited about it as I am!

Providing Exposure. Tanya shared how she used the students' interests to create an open forum for dialogue in the classroom where everyone had input and an opportunity to teach and to learn, including the adults in the classroom. She chuckled when she told the story of a student who wanted to create a comical moment and get the class off topic and stated she engaged him by using that moment to demonstrate how his comment related to science. Tanya's experience put her in a realm where she knew her students' interests and created an open space where they could share and show how their interests are relatable to science. Tanya intentionally talked about her personal experiences in international travel to provide students with exposure to different cultural perspectives while incorporating conversations related to science that were meaningful and relevant, such as the global pandemic and the metric system.

Gina

Gina was an eighth-grade ELA teacher at a public charter school within the participating district. Gina did not pursue teaching during her undergraduate studies; however, she remarked that she has "stumbled upon the most amazing things" that had happened in her life. She started out her undergraduate career as an opera major but finished her degree in English and British literature. She worked within the hospitality industry for several years before applying to a teacher education program with a stated mission of training future leaders who will promote equitable education practices in marginalized communities.

Relationship Building. Culturally responsive teachers are caring and resourceful (Hammond, 2015) and these characteristics extend beyond the classroom. Gina described working in an economically underserved community where the students often did not have clean uniforms to wear to school. She stated the school policy was that if a student was not in uniform, they could not attend classes. She found these types of policies and lack of appropriate school materials circumvented the ability to build a trusting and safe environment for students. When she went to school leadership about her concerns, she said changes were not made: "And so, I bumped heads with the leadership in that school because I was like really trying to advocate for things that I thought would be the best for our demographic of students." For Gina, building relationships with students meant advocating for them and going outside of the classroom.

Creating Flexible Curriculum. Gina felt passionately that students should see themselves in books, not just their race, but also mirror experiences to which they could relate and reflective experiences that allowed them to investigate the lives of others. She conceded that learning about traditional English literature is important but should not supersede those texts where students can become engaged because they relate to the experiences of the characters. She spoke excitedly about a new text her class read this school year that was rooted in "authentic" Mexican culture:

> It was familiar for a lot of our students where the character was a caregiver, like they are to their siblings . . . and there's a single-parent home where dad is absent . . . and mom really does not have time to take care of the kids in a way that

> would be the best way . . . For a lot of kids, they connected with that story and that narrative and that was a text where it was both mirrors and windows, where kids got to look into the situations that were familiar to them or familiar to their friends at least.

When discussing texts that were not engaging for students, Gina spoke about struggling with students to read *To Kill a Mockingbird* for 3 years in a row. She candidly told the story of her eighth graders inquiring about the book, which she described as "savior texts." Gina expressed her view about the book, saying:

> I also think *To Kill a Mockingbird* did not engage our students in the way that it should have . . . in the way that people hoped it would. The kids said, "How come this story is about White people saving Black people?" I said, "Let's just sit down and have a conversation about it. Why do you guys think we're reading this book?" The students said, "because people think it's important." I asked them, "Why do people think it's important?" What they eventually came to is that we don't need a book like this anymore, we don't need a White people savior, we need White people alongside us having the conversations about race . . . The book when it first came out was groundbreaking as far as talking about race relations and everything, but it's not relevant to our students and their needs right now. The kids weren't getting anything from it.

Gina was adamant that in ELA the teacher can teach students the standards and the necessary textual elements, and elevate critical thinking with newer texts. She felt it is important to gain insight in what students were interested in and liked to read by starting conversations and building relationships. She said the initial question she asked her students was simply, “What do you want to see in a book?” She found children desire texts that have younger kid voices in them, and she did her best to put those in front of her students as much as possible during skill builder sessions where students had text selection options.

Gina felt she had the flexibility to manipulate the curriculum at her current school and was excited about a nonfiction text that had recently been introduced in the curriculum. She believed the students would be engaged in the text because it “lets the students look into another world and there’s a lot of opportunity with that book to talk about how the issues discussed relate to our community and our people.”

Providing Exposure. Despite her training being rooted in critical race theory and culturally responsive teaching practices, Gina found herself teaching in economically underserved communities where students were not given the resources they needed to support their social-emotional or academic needs. She stated it was during this period that she began to understand critical race theory and how students’ experiences in the classroom are affected by race. She sought a teaching environment where conversations about race could be had among staff and leadership for the betterment of the students being served.

In her former school, Gina advocated for her students to receive equipment and materials that would support their learning. However, her efforts were not well received by leadership, and she espoused that she was “deeply unsettled” by the punitive measures taken against students for things they could not control, like being out of uniform when they had no clean uniforms to wear to school. She also acknowledged that the texts the students read were not culturally diverse, although the majority of students were of color:

> I really pushed to change some of the materials that we used and the practices that we used. It was not at all culturally responsive. They wondered why they have all of these behavior problems, and I'm like, "you're not treating the students like they are humans" . . . what's not connecting. I remember sitting up late, racking my brain about how I can help students. I think that if our students felt seen and loved and appreciated, and they could see themselves in stories that we were teaching that maybe we can get them to connect and engage with the content more.

In discussing a new book that her class would read next semester, Gina seemed excited that it would create an opportunity for students to have a platform to discuss limited access in marginalized communities. As she looked for options for her students to discover relatable texts, she seemed less concerned about standardized achievement, but said she was encouraged when she heard her students discussing the text after the lesson had ended. Although she provided rubrics and modeling prior to written projects, she acknowledged that writing was a struggle for her students. Gina found in her practice that oral discussion was a good way to measure whether students were engaged and moving in the "right direction" academically.

Carla

Carla was an eighth-grade ELA teacher in the participating urban school district. She began her teaching career after many years of practicing law in an urban city. After moving to a new city with her family and deciding to not pursue practicing law, she reflected on her future career and found she had an interest in working with middle school teachers to create a writer’s workshop program. This decision led her to pursue her certification to teach English and apprentice with a mentor English teacher.

Relationship Building. Carla asserted that relationships with middle school students can most authentically develop when the adult is not seen in an academic role. For many years she held an advisory class and the students gathered at her home several times a year. The students often suggested other activities they could do as a team within the community but outside of the school building. Carla said that if the requests were “reasonable from my perspective, I would make it happen.” Carla believed school clubs and team sports where a teacher is seen outside of their traditional role promote healthy bonding between the teacher and the students because they can spend time not in the classroom setting. She reflected “that’s also a way of building a relationship with students because they see you as someone different when you are not teaching them in the academic work.” She stated that since the global pandemic, developing family relationships had included virtual meetings between families, she admitted that parents seemed to need additional support during this period, and she attempted to create an environment where she could provide positive feedback and a baseline of student behavioral expectations.

Creating Flexible Curriculum. When reflecting on student engagement and the texts, Carla provided a series of adjectives and actions to describe what engagement looked like in her classroom, including stillness, as students become immersed in reading books at their desks, or concentration, and joyful. She described students as being “riveted” by texts that relate to Japanese internment within the United States. She specifically stated that out of four Asian students in her class, three selected this text.

This was in sharp contrast to interest in texts related to civil rights and Black Lives Matter, which were popular in years past. Carla reflected on this shift and suggested, “I can tell you that what engaged them is that it is something new that had no idea about and so this is extremely interesting to them.” One surprising engaging moment for Carla was when a student became upset when a fellow classmate teased and insulted her about not keeping up with the work. The student who was teased became overwhelmed with emotion and later chose to seek tutoring to help her move toward understanding the lesson. Carla described this as student engagement that may look like competition. She also described how students who may need constant movement were engaged and provided with opportunities to show their abilities through active learning.

Carla’s passion for reading books that interested her personally was evident as she talked about the characters and the themes of some of the books her classes had read over the years. She evolved her curriculum to meet the interests of the students and introduced texts that were relevant to their lives, such as nonfiction books where the student incorporates data packets:

> We did a bunch of different books . . . books that dealt with immigrant stories, and then we combined it with data, so we had a data packet . . . that was really successful, and we learned that students really like math and they like data. So, when we talk about responsive instruction, we don’t just mean about cultural topics, we also look at nonfiction versus fiction. One thing we learned was we weren’t teaching enough nonfiction. Both Raina [collaborative teacher] and I felt strongly that we should teach more nonfiction because it can relate to current events. It gets kids more excited and it’s also more relevant to their lives.

Carla emphasized that she and Raina tried not to be reactive when selecting books but to be “sensitive and responsive” to what students wanted to read. She credited this in part to advice she had received to teach was she was interested in, to teach the things that she was passionate about. This led her to begin teaching more social justice issues and issues related to identity. Although her students had books they were required to read, they were also required to read a book of choice, which they selected from a “curated” list of books that changed frequently:

> I’ve never seen a curriculum that has the choice our curriculum has . . .and there are the books they are required to read, they have to read a book of choice that comes from a list we curate and it changes but it is always designed to promote much more diversity. They have a Korean author, they have a Mormon author, they get to talk about different religions and different ethnicities and different kinds of people. I think we are just really trying to keep pushing this idea of . . . we are all different, this idea that we are a race blind, race neutral world, not true,

Carla spoke openly about designing a curriculum meant to encourage students to talk about their own experiences as they related to the characters’ stories. She and her collaborative teacher intentionally selected texts that allowed multimodal opportunities for engagement through videos, music, and poetry. The rubrics she designed for students to use during assessment provided students with specific requirements. Students’ scores were based on the inclusion of these components in their responses, not from a qualitative perspective.

Providing Exposure. Carla was an avid reader and promoted student access to texts related to themes surrounding social justice. She and her collaborative teacher selected memoirs, poetry, and refugee experiences among other nonfiction texts to introduce various voices and experiences into their students' lives and classroom discourse. She did not shy away from controversial themes, texts, or discussions and she explained her conviction:

> I think controversial issues are what kids like to read about. I am not fearful about venturing forward into controversial areas. I think racism and slavery are controversial because we are going to have people disagree about it and I think that if something is not that controversial, I am not that interested in talking about it frankly. I think kids want to talk about the controversial. They are interested in it and unlike a lot of adult people, I think kids can handle this because shying away from it makes it problematic for them because then they are approaching these subjects without a guide, without someone to bounce ideas off, without someone to hear and that's where I think you get these extreme views . . . I think it's better to put all of these things out there and expose them to the gamut of ideas and perspectives and then they can figure out what they think about it. I personally am not going to shy away from the controversial stuff because that is the heart of our life.

Bethany

Bethany was currently a middle school math teacher in the participating urban school district. Bethany was a neuroscience biology major in undergraduate and took a detour from attending medical school and was accepted into a teacher training program. She had specialized in teaching students with disabilities within an inclusion setting for the last 6 years and spoke pointedly about her dedication to teaching students from marginalized populations in urban settings.

Relationship Building. Bethany believed building relationships with students was integral in sustaining their attention even if they felt the work was challenging because they knew that she cared, and this made them willing to practice the math steps repeatedly until they understood the concepts. She developed their ability to have confidence in their answers by asking them questions when they were confused, such as "why or what parts specifically do you need help with?" She understood that part of building that relationship meant not wanting to disappoint their teacher, so she incentivized her students and capitalized on their willingness to take risks in the classroom. She noted that when she rewarded a student who was brave enough to come to the board to practice a problem, the next day more students would raise their hands at a chance to perform at the board.

Bethany acknowledged any amount of growth her students made and saw this as incremental steps toward achieving the overarching goal. She felt it was necessary to expose her students to the world through her teaching so it could become relatable and would like to see culturally relevant teaching "pushed" in urban schools.

Creating Flexible Curriculum. Bethany spoke confidently about providing resources as a special educator and how she provided her students with access to grade-level material. She articulated how understanding their learning styles, adapting materials, or using technology was effective and allowed her to meet her students at their level. She realized her students worked best in environments where there was structure, and she understood that some of her students may not have this in their home environments because their parents were working or the students may have been responsible for a younger sibling. She spoke about how students working virtually in the home environment may not have the support to navigate technology or focus on virtual instruction without 1:1 support, and she took these factors into consideration as students returned to in-person instruction and she supported them with skill deficit instruction. Bethany believed building relationships with students also included family support in which parent and teacher created a relationship that ultimately supported the student:

> It's a good feeling because you have support at school, and you have your support at home. Parents are more open to hearing not just positives, but the negatives about their student because typically when you don't have a relationship, a parent doesn't want to hear from the teacher about how their daughter or son was bad.

She found that students liked using colorful models that they were able to manipulate and said, "When we're creating a model, my students love that, and they are more excited . . . and engaged in that way." She used project-based learning and small group pairings to engage her students. She encouraged students to interact with their peers for support prior to reaching out to a teacher, thereby developing a community in the classroom:

> I created a system where you rely on your buddy for help first, then if your partner can't fully help you the way that you want, then the teacher helps. It's kind of relying on your peer-to-peer instruction, peer-to-peer tutoring and then I step in so they can do some of the heavy lifting themselves.

To make math more accessible for her students, Bethany used real-world language and world problems that were relatable to her students. She incorporated food items that she knew her kids liked as well as other interesting topics. To enhance student learning, she also used knowledge or familiar experiences that her students shared. She posed math problems by providing situations she knew would interest her students; for example, her boys wanted to play professional football, so she talked to them about financial contracts. She also used math to expose things that may have been unfamiliar.

> We did another project where they were going on a road trip, and they had the option of picking whatever state they wanted to go to. A lot of my students have never left this city, so this gave them an opportunity to actually pretend like they're on a trip.

The students had to calculate how much they would spend to get food, recreation, gas, and lodging for time they would be away. Bethany said the students remarked, "This is expensive!" She told them this was what vacation looked like and it was more expensive than what it looked like on paper. The students responded, "Dang, I am going to have to get a cheaper motel."

Providing Exposure. Bethany shared her thoughts about teaching in an urban environment, stating, "I felt like the urban areas needed more like-minded teachers who actually believe in them and wanted to see growth and teachers who are willing to be consistent and teach them in these areas." She described like-minded teachers as being optimistic and going into the setting without bias. She felt it was necessary to go into her classroom daily giving her best so her children could succeed, and she pushed them to increase their performance. She believed in her students' ability and knew that with support, they could close the skill gaps and reach grade-level performance.

When asked about what made her a culturally responsive teacher, Bethany noted how she distinguished this role. She recalled a point in her master's training program where she was given an example of a culturally responsive math problem involving Treyvon Martin and the calculation involved solving the distance from where he was killed to where he lived. She felt this type of approach to culturally responsive pedagogy was disturbing and traumatic:

> When I think about culturally responsive teaching, I think about instruction that's very relatable to our students and when I say culturally responsive, I don't say it because I teach a population of students of color. I'm not just going to throw Black around in my teaching. I think it's more so knowing your students, knowing their background, knowing their likes and dislikes, and just making your content very relatable to them so they can actually understand and feel part of the instruction so there can be some academic growth.

Bethany was aware that some students may not be familiar with historical figures or leaders; therefore, she believed putting them in a math problem or a reading curriculum without providing background was not culturally responsive.

She made connections with her students that allowed them to access the curriculum. Bethany spoke about her fellow teachers whose "mindsets" allowed them to view students who lived in urban neighborhoods and had a lack of resources as not being capable of achieving. She noted that she had seen this type of mindset in her personal experience and that it could be frustrating. Instead, she believed forming trusting relationships with students supported their growth:

> Once your students actually see you take time out to actually get to know them to form these relationships and they trust you, I feel like learning is a little bit easier because they're able to put this wall down and be vulnerable and to ask for the support and ask for the help.

Throughout the interview, Bethany referenced that she felt building relationships with students was central to learning and growth.

Chapter Summary

The three themes that emerged from the study data were presented in this chapter. An analysis of the data showed building relationships between the participants and their students, teachers having curriculum flexibility or autonomy, and teachers providing their students with exposure to elevate their self-identity and awareness of other environments were the major themes. The chapter was organized to present the findings in relation to the research questions as posed by the open-ended interview questions. Data from the participant demographic survey and interviews reflected the study participants' perceptions of culturally relevant pedagogy, student engagement, and achievement with culturally diverse middle school students in urban environments.

In the following chapter, the researcher discusses the interpretations of the major findings and relates these findings to the theoretical and research literature. The chapter also includes the limitations of the study, recommendations for future research, and recommendations for future practice.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

According to a comparison of data from 2009 and 2019, the U.S. educational system in has seen an increase in the percentage of culturally diverse students attending public schools (NCES, 2020) and a decline in the percentage of White students. Despite this demographic shift, the Eurocentric curriculum remains the dominant pedagogy in the United States (Gay, 2018), historically marginalized groups continue to lag in standardized testing outcomes (NCES, 2019), and the rates of unemployment and socioeconomic levels are inversely related for Blacks and Hispanics (Hemmerechts et al., 2017; NCES, 2019). In viewing pedagogy through a social justice lens, Ladson-Billings (2016) remarked that curriculums can promote social discourse and a participatory democracy. Research shows a hegemonic curriculum does not appropriately support culturally diverse students in accessing these opportunities (Gay, 2018; Hammond, 2015). Alternately, research has shown culturally responsive pedagogy influences students to become engaged learners who achieve when their teachers are competent, relevant content is delivered, and the learning environments are affirming of their identities.

The goal within this phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of middle school teachers who teach culturally diverse students in urban environments and to make meaning of their perceptions of culturally responsive pedagogy, student engagement, and student achievement. Several findings emerged from the data that are analyzed and interpreted in this chapter. The implications of this study are related to the research questions and the following findings are reported in the main sections of this chapter: (a) relationship building, (b) creating flexible curriculum, and (c) providing exposure and awareness.

Relationship Building

Findings showed the participants in the study understand that creating and sustaining relationships with culturally diverse students is an imperative component in the student–teacher dynamic. This relationship structure is integral in building trust and respect and is the catalyst for cultivating a learning dynamic that supports student growth (Hammond, 2015). Culturally responsive teachers approach relationship building in various ways and realize it is a mutually reciprocated process between student and teacher.

Findings indicated the participants developed rapport with their students through one-to-one conversations, building student confidence, articulating positive attributes, learning about students' interests, setting goals, holding high expectations, believing in students' abilities, providing individualized support, and praising students' accomplishments. Building the student–teacher relationship is the foundation for preparing a student to see their teacher as a role model and someone they can trust to guide them in the learning process (Gay, 2018).

As students from culturally diverse backgrounds may come from family environments that are inclusive of an extended family, culturally responsive teachers are aware that developing relationships with their students also means building a community. Findings showed the participants understand that developing student relationships through community building is important for engagement, though only three out of the five participants were explicit about how they built a community in their classrooms. Hammond (2015) stated,

> In a collectivist, community-based culture, relationships are the foundation of all social, political, and cognitive endeavors. This is consistent with the fact that all human beings are hardwired for relationships after living in communal, cooperative settings for millions of years. (p. 72)

Building relationships in a community model as stated by Hammond is the foundation for creating trust and rapport, which is discussed later in this chapter.

Findings indicated the participants all demonstrated characteristics of being culturally competent practitioners. Cultural competence, which is a tenet of the culturally responsive pedagogy framework, manifests when teachers develop communities in their classrooms and provide students with the opportunity to learn about other cultures and lifestyles. Ladson-Billings (2006) defined cultural competence as,

> helping students to recognize and honor their own cultural beliefs and practices while acquiring access to the wider culture, where they are likely to have a chance of improving their socioeconomic status and making informed decisions about the lives they wish to lead. (p. 36)

These communities are built from the foundation of the student–teacher relationship and enhance academic growth for students (Ladson-Billings, 2009a, 2009b). Participants often discussed their unique experiences with their students and encouraged students to ask questions and share information about their backgrounds.

Findings indicated the participants shared personal stories with their students and developed meaningful relationships inside and outside of the classroom. Milner (2010) revisited the importance of teachers building cultural competence and used this tenet to explore how a White male teacher of culturally diverse students pursued relationships with his students by “paying careful attention to the needs of each student” (p. 77). The teacher was described as building caring and trusting relationships with his students, which promoted increased engagement and achievement. Milner also indicated the teacher knew that “in some cases, he would have to go *beyond* the walls of the classroom to build a meaningful relationship with the student to connect and converge with the students in the classroom” (p. 80). Findings of the current study revealed student–teacher relationships were formed outside of classroom instruction when participants coached or tutored their students. Field trips that were not related to academic content were also said to support building relationships and exposing students to activities.

Hammond (2015) described the relationships between student and teacher as student–teacher learning partnerships and stated these critical partnerships exist in three key phases: (a) building trust and rapport, (b) developing an alliance, and (c) developing cognitive insight. These phases are related in that building trust and rapport and an alliance with students develop into cognitive insight. Findings indicated the participants in the current study developed trusting relationships with their students; however, the researcher cannot attest to whether they used the key phases mentioned above as a model, but believes the participants’ experience, familiarity, and enjoyment in working with the student populations they served provided the authentic student–teacher partnerships that Hammond developed in her framework. As experienced teachers, the participants spoke about being reflective and changing their practice to meet the needs of their students.

They were intentional in how they supported their students by establishing connections with their students inside and outside of the classroom.

Building Trust and Rapport

In the first phase, a caring and trusting relationship is developed in which rapport is established between the student and teacher. Hammond (2015) suggested listening is a strong way to build trust and rapport because it "communicates a sense of respect for and an interest in the students' contributions" (p. 77). Hammond posited listening is an essential element in building trust and rapport and described how she coaches teachers in this aim: "I coached the team to understand rapport in a unique way based on neuroscience, sociocultural learning theory, and findings from teachers successful with culturally and linguistically diverse students" (p. 78). Hammond described coaching a teacher who was unsure about how to start building trust and suggested the teacher should start by listening:

> Because there was a schoolwide effort at Storybrook to use conferencing to talk about student writing, Janice decided to devote the first five minutes of every student writing conference to two simple questions: "How are you?" and "What are you excited about these days outside of school?" She let students talk. She made it clear to students that what they had to say was important. She reported back that at first students were not used to being listed to. They just sat in silence thinking it was some type of test. Finally, by the end of the month, she had learned a great deal about her students during their "little chats," as she called them. Janice said the sense of connection and rapport spilled over into other classroom activities. (p. 78)

The findings of the current study indicated the participants exhibited the qualities of being active listeners, demonstrating empathy, and showing interest in their students. Participants invited discourse through classroom discussions where students could openly talk about myriad topics concerning their personal interests, current events, sociopolitical issues, and future goals. The teachers used conferencing to review student data and set goals for student growth, and students felt comfortable discussing personal stories with the participants. This may be due to the care and concern for their well-being that was shown inside and outside of the classroom by their teachers.

Samuels (2018) explored teachers' perceptions about culturally responsive pedagogy and their views on how to create equitable and inclusive classrooms. Teachers maintained that students should participate in active engagement and discourse where collaborative and constructivist learning approaches are used in a respectful classroom environment. When asked how they established respectful environments in which students felt safe taking risks, the teachers said they thought team building activities were helpful. Findings of the current study showed the participants used team building activities when creating individual relationships and student community in their classrooms, such as experiential learning, taking field trips, and participating in sporting events. Findings showed the participants showed empathy and understood that their middle school students often face challenges related to adolescence, living in an urban environment, and bias and stereotypical judgements. In a related study by Samuels (2018), teachers emphasized the use of collaboration and constructivist approaches in learning, though they also infused an awareness about the sociopolitical environment, which is a cornerstone of culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 2009a, 2009b).

In doing this, empathy and caring became natural elements in a safe classroom environment, making rapport and trust between student and teacher attainable.

Although listening is integral in building trust and rapport with students, other elements such as vulnerability and similarity are important in the development of relationships (Hammond, 2015). Brafman and Brafman (2010) described the creation of relationships as a “click” (p. 32) and suggested the aforementioned elements are also important in its development. Culturally responsive teachers must be intentional and reflective when using these elements in an authentic and caring manner (Gay, 2018), which the current study’s participants conveyed as being a part of their practice.

Vulnerability. When culturally responsive teachers become vulnerable in the presence of their students, they create an opportunity to be seen in a different light because they are no longer just the teacher. They are now seen in multiple roles, such as a coach, a mentor, or a confidant. Teachers may find the idea of revealing personal information uncomfortable because an intimate part of oneself is being shared with students; however, Brafman and Brafman (2010) asserted “our willingness to risk being vulnerable can deepen the quality of our relationships and make us more likely to connect with others” (pp. 186–187).

Similarity. Teachers who believe they have no commonalities with a student may realize that similarities exist. Brafman and Brafman (2010) suggested that when trying to make a connection with someone perceived as different, focusing on similarities can help build an “in-group dynamic that brings people together” (p. 187). The element of similarity indicates shared interests provide a catalyst for relationship building or “plants the seed of connection in the relationship” (Hammond, 2015, p. 79). Findings in the current study showed the participants' classrooms were familiar learning environments for students where they had similar experiences, were taking risks, and were overcoming academic obstacles in an intimate setting. These similarities helped to create a classroom community. Findings revealed the participants sought to discuss personal matters with their students to encourage vulnerability and connectedness between the students and teachers. The participants also revealed that they shared personal information with their students to enlighten them to seek opportunities that might be beyond their current realm of knowledge.

Developing an Alliance

An alliance is a critical element of the student–teacher partnership because it is an unwritten pact for student and teacher to work together toward academic success. When a relationship has been nurtured and developed between the student and teacher, the second phase of the learning partnership ensues where an alliance between the student and teacher is formed. Hammond (2015) argued, "The alliance phase of the learning partnership speaks to the realities of education in the sociopolitical context that creates unequal academic outcomes for students of color, English learners, and poor students" (p. 90). The goal of culturally responsive teaching is to guide students toward adopting an academic mindset where they become independent learners with an ability to think critically (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2009b). Within the student–teacher alliance the student develops the confidence to work toward goals based on the trusting relationship and bond that has been built between the student and teacher (Hammond, 2015).

Researchers (Caraway et al., 2003; Knesting & Waldron, 2006) have reported goal setting has a positive impact on the achievement of culturally diverse students.

Outcomes from these studies indicated that when students develop overarching goals and have a relationship with a caring teacher, they show perseverance to achieve their goals and are more likely to continue goal setting (Caraway et al., 2003; Knesting & Waldron, 2006). Goal setting and accomplishment lead students to shift their academic mindset because although they have been given scaffolded support, their sustained effort was the reason for their achievement. According to Hammond (2015), “An alliance is more than a friendship. It is a relationship of mutual support as partners navigate through challenging situations” (p. 89).

Findings in the current study revealed the participants used goal setting consistently to measure student progress and strategically support students’ awareness about their academic growth, and that they continuously provided instructive and specific feedback. Some of the participants had weekly data talks with their students and remarked that the students became excited over time to discuss their progress and pinpoint areas of improvement. Findings showed the participants had developed relationships with their students through what is termed “wise feedback” (Cohen & Steele, 2002). This is a feedback approach that uses specific elements to convey a teacher’s expectation for high standards of achievement, confidence in students’ capability, and a plan to accomplish goals (Cohen & Steele, 2002).

Developing Cognitive Insight

During the third phase, the teacher has developed greater insight in the areas of strengths and challenges for their students. Cognitive insight enables teachers to provide targeted skill instruction to students. Cognitive insight also supports the acquisition of knowledge and skill development for students (Alley, 2019).

Myers (2019) found culturally diverse students became engaged with the text after the classroom teacher practiced a sequence of steps that included “spending time to get to know her students. This sense of community is displayed throughout the classroom” (p. 5). To alleviate barriers to teaching the mandated school curriculum, the teacher intentionally sought to collaborate with a teacher from a different school. The outcome of this study indicated the teacher felt a sense of empowerment in her ability to work with colleagues to restructure the curriculum to better support the needs of her students.

Frankel et al. (2019) found that authentic relationship building between secondary students and mentors supported students’ ability to selects texts that fostered their achievement. Friedland and Truscott (2005) suggested “tutoring programs that have choice, control, flexibility, and emphasis on building relationships can help adolescents develop an awareness of their own literacy learning” (p. 550). Participants in the current study indicated having the ability to work with students individually or in small groups supported students’ ability to take risks when working on academic tasks such as reading aloud or computing math problems.

Creating Flexible Curriculum

Findings related to teacher autonomy in developing curriculum were significant and all five participants expressed that having the ability to change or supplement the curriculum for their students resulted in instructional delivery that was engaging and relevant. According to Irvine (2010), teachers who practice culturally responsive pedagogy demonstrate content mastery that is reflected in their ability to align the curriculum to lessons that have general familiarity and offer relevance to students. The participants of the current study who taught literature spoke intently about the significance of providing mirror, reflective, and window texts in their classrooms, whereas the math and science teachers discussed the importance of producing hands-on assignments and tasks for their students. Bishop (1990) stated, “The terms windows and mirrors to refer to texts that could transport students to other worlds they had not experienced (windows) and in which they could see themselves and their lives mirrored” (p. 56). When teachers have the flexibility to integrate culturally responsive texts in traditional curriculum and students are given the option of choice in text selection, research shows student participation and engagement increase (Bowmer & Curwood, 2016; Ivey & Johnston, 2013).

The culturally responsive teachers in the current study elected to use self-affirming texts that placed their students’ identities within the context of society and the human experience. They opted to include texts and instructional materials that were not sustaining of a hegemonic culture (Christ & Sharma, 2018); instead, they provided students an opportunity to explore their voice and purpose by inserting diversity in their curriculum. These instructional methods are indicative of critical pedagogical approaches where students able to discuss controversial topics within the classroom community that are relevant to their lived experiences (Janks, 2013). Critical pedagogy has been used to develop literature instructional practices that emphasize resisting traditional curriculum in multimedia, as well as using modern instructional methods, such as spoken word poetry, to promote inquiry about dominant ideas and prejudice.

Findings indicated the participants felt a sense of empowerment in their ability to supplement and develop the curriculum to meet the needs of the students in their classrooms. Collaborating with other teachers seemed to promote a sense of community and partnership as colleagues and allowed them to have thought partners to strengthen the curriculum. Participants who had co-teachers relied on this relationship to support students in the classroom as well.

Conrad et al. (2015) argued that standardized curriculums are ineffective and neglect the impact of diversity for students in relation to engagement and achievement; Ibrahima and Maizonniaux (2016) extended this assertion by advancing an equity stance where diversity in the curriculum supports providing educational opportunities for all students. Gay (2018) reasoned that because the U.S. educational system has primarily used a European cultural lens to educate students and this has been beneficial for the literacy achievement of European descendants as indicated by standardized test scores, there should be an alternative opportunity for diverse curriculums that present the history, experiences, and interests of culturally diverse students. Findings of the current study indicated the participants were aware of the inequities that are present in society and how students may be affected. Thus, participants used their platform as educators to supplement and design curricula that promoted knowledge about social justice issues.

Christ and Sharma (2018) suggested the complexity of text selection should be taken into consideration when curriculum is developed. Textual elements composed of characters, setting, and plot should be assessed by reviewing specific criteria through asking the following questions: (a) Are these elements similar to the student reading the book? (b) Has the student who has been reading the book been to similar places and lived in the same period portrayed by the book? and (c) Has the student who is reading the book had life events similar to those that occur in the book? (Christ & Sharma, 2018, p.

57). Within the context of culturally responsive pedagogy, distinct text selection is imperative to increase student engagement.

Providing Exposure

Teachers of culturally diverse students promote teaching about relevant experiences to provide exposure and awareness of historical elements, current events, and future opportunities. Participants shared that student engagement was enhanced when students were learning about relevant topics. Participants supported student discourse surrounding controversial topics related to social disparities and inequity.

According to Gist (2014), there are several essential components that should be included in a culturally responsive pedagogical framework: (a) acting as a change agent, (b) empowering instructional practices, (c) learning about students and communities, (d) cultural competence and congruity, (e) sociopolitical consciousness, (f) caring, and (g) high expectations. Findings of the current study showed these culturally responsive teachers demonstrated these components with their students, and they were intentional in their approach to serving students of culturally diverse backgrounds. Participants sought teaching assignments in urban environments to be proponents of change for student populations that have been historically marginalized and they chose nontraditional approaches to instruction, such as project-based learning and experiential learning opportunities.

Christ and Sharma (2018) suggested culturally responsive pedagogy promotes not only academic achievement, but student engagement and constructive identity development. Culturally diverse student participation in a diverse curriculum that is inclusive of topics related to social equity will allow them to create discourse that enhances their critical thinking and elevates their cultural knowledge to develop higher-order thinking structures (Giroux, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 2009b). Culturally responsive pedagogy that is intentional and effective should be used as a foundation to realize and practice systems that dismantle archaic dominant systems (Torres-Velásquez, 2000).

Findings reflected participants' incorporation of instructional materials that challenged deficit models of marginalized groups and elevated their historical and relevant outcomes in relation to systemic dominant themes. Participants' use of mirror, reflective, and window texts supported their view that students must be able to see themselves in the characters, but also be conscious of other cultures, customs, and worldview in order to expand their experiences. Hobson and Vu (2015) conducted a study that focused on preparing culturally diverse students to focus on place, time, and space to understand how texts are socially constructed in specific situations and contexts. The purpose of this approach was to teach students how to relate texts to culture and their lived experiences. This approach, called proleptic-ethnodrama, encourages students to adopt a critical pedagogy stance to reading literature and "invites students to question the relationships between texts, people, and power dynamics within and between cultures" (p. 399). Hobson and Vu suggested this pedagogy provides a "transformative and critical alternative to the disconnected, decontextualized approaches to teaching and learning" (p. 404), which aligns to providing exposure opportunities for students while taking into consideration individual student learning styles and differences. Critical pedagogy's tenets stress that students must be taught authentic histories so they can develop informed opinions. Giroux (1992) argued:

> Students need more than information about what it means to get a job or pass standardized tests that purport to measure cultural literacy; they need to be able to assess dominant and subordinate traditions so as to engage their strengths and weaknesses. What they don’t need is to treat history as a closed, singular narrative that has simply to be revered and memorized. Educating for difference, democracy, and ethical responsibility is not about creating passive citizens. (p. 8)

Findings of the current study showed the participants supported tackling controversial topics that may challenge students’ opinions on social justice dilemmas and promote critical thinking about injustice and how it affects them and their community.

Connections to Theoretical Framework

The tenets of critical theory relate to systemic power structures that are unbalanced and challenge students to engage in discourse and think critically to advance social change (Aliakbari & Faraji, 2011). Rodriguez et al. (2004) stated, “Critical theory looks deeply into practices and policies that are based on power, and asks the question: Who benefits and who loses, by these conditions or acts?” (p. 47). Participants in the current study fostered conversations in their classrooms that encouraged students to think past the obvious themes, main ideas, and viewpoints in the literature. They wanted their students to develop and discuss their opinions and attitudes about social justice and inequities that were relevant to their histories, experiences, and culture.

Lawrence (2020) asserted that exchanges between students and teachers that are linear, meaning more conversational in nature, support student learning and social needs in an environment where the teacher does not hold all the power. As students share their thoughts and experiences, the alliance in the student–teacher partnership (Hammond,

2015) is manifested and the teacher develops more cognitive insight about the students. Lawrence (2020) described this type of conversation as “dialogic co-generative dialogue” and asserted “care, listening, and reciprocity are implicit” (p. 21) in this type of exchange. Findings of the current study showed the participants aligned with this position as they chose relevant texts and designed lessons that aligned with their students’ experiences and interests. Participants also promoted dialogue initiated by their students that may have been off topic or guided by current events.

Social Constructivism

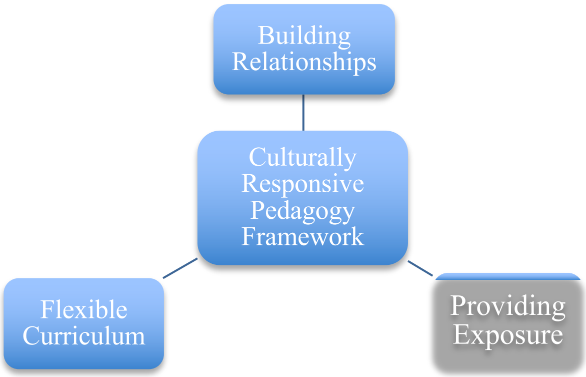
Social constructivism is an element the participants of this study illuminated in their teaching by supporting students in the ways they learned and understood through dialogue within a social context (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996). Social constructivist approaches advocate that students become the leaders in their learning process through consistent inquiry and engagement, which is also provocation for the adoption of culturally responsive methods in today’s classrooms. Palincsar (1998) argued that constructivism includes an interdependence of social and individual processes where the school acts a cultural system and the intersection of social activities (i.e., cooperative learning, community-based involvement, parent participation, student–teacher lesson planning, and small group collaboration) supports building student knowledge.

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

A culturally responsive pedagogy framework is a model that transforms learning for all students, and particularly for students who are from marginalized groups (Ladson-Billings, 2009a, 2009b). The tenets of this framework are critical to supporting student achievement and include (a) academic achievement/student learning, (b) cultural competence, and (c) socio-political consciousness. Results of the current study showed the participants engaged in the following themes: relationship building, creating flexible curriculums, and providing exposure to their students. The researcher asserts that a synergy exists between the emerging themes and the tenets of the framework. The themes that emerged in this study did not correlate directly with one tenet but acted as overarching themes (Figure 3).

Figure 3

Relationship Between Culturally Responsive Pedagogy Framework and Themes



The participants in the current study discussed their high standards for their students' work performance. They encouraged their students and built their confidence by goal setting and providing additional academic support if needed. The participants' interactions with their students inside the classroom and within the community were the cornerstone for building trusting relationships that encouraged their students to take risks. Knowing their students' interests and experiences enabled the participants to develop curriculum and lessons that their students would find relevant and engaging.

Conclusion

The findings indicated students of culturally diverse backgrounds are interested in texts that are representative of multiple cultures, though a common theme was to choose texts that exuded relevancy and opportunity to learn about the experiences of other people with similar challenges. Participants' knowledge of appropriate text and lesson selection seemed to align with the needs of their students; however, the findings show this awareness evolved through professional experience. Participants indicated the relevancy of texts and information given to students were not static but could transform based on many factors, such as student interests, current events, and student exposure.

Limitations

Several limitations existed in this study. This phenomenological study was designed to explore the lived experiences of the study participants as they related to culturally responsive pedagogy, student engagement, and student achievement. The study took place in an urban city where the participants were teachers at middle schools that serve predominately African American students. Study data were gathered from five participants during open-ended interviews that took place virtually and the data were "lumped" to elicit broad themes that could be generalizable to other contexts (Saldaña, 2016).

The first limitation of the study relates to the transferability of the findings. The findings may be better suited for the current population of students with whom the participants teach and interact in the school community. The findings may not be generalizable to settings other than those in urban environments; it is possible that teacher participants at middle schools in rural or suburban environments may not have similar perceptions or experiences as the participants in this study.

The second limitation of this study relates to the data collection, which took place in a virtual setting via Zoom. Although the video-recorded interviews afforded the researcher the ability to review the recordings multiple times, the inability to observe the participants in their classroom environments limited the data collection to the perceptions of the participants surrounding their practice as culturally responsive teachers. Qualitative research allows a small sample population to be selected in a purposive manner.

A third limitation of this study is that three of the participants and the researcher work at the same middle school location. Although the researcher does not directly supervise or collaborate with the participants, it is possible the participants may have felt hesitation or reluctance when answering the open-ended interview questions. The researcher accounted for this prior to starting the interviews by informing the participants that their interview data would remain confidential and pseudonyms would be used in place of their names. Participants signed a consent form prior to the study.

The triangulation of data throughout the data collection and analysis processes was inclusive of open-ended interviews that provided thick rich data as well as low inference descriptors (i.e., direct quotes and field notes) and these data are reflected in the emergence of the themes set forth in the findings. The participants' lived experiences as teachers of culturally diverse students reflected that they were intentional in creating relationships with their students to build trust and community in their classrooms, they were instrumental in developing their students' identities by introducing and discussing topics that were relevant and engaging, and they supported students voicing their opinions and creating solutions related to social inequities in society. To support culturally diverse student achievement, stakeholders must support research that will deepen the understanding of culturally responsive pedagogical models.

Recommendations for Future Research

Culturally relevant pedagogical practices are essential in elevating student engagement and achievement, particularly among marginalized populations. Future research should be conducted to broaden the knowledge of these practices and support school system leaders in standardizing culturally affirming practices. Within a culturally relevant pedagogy framework, a conscious re-branding of traditional roles between student and teacher must occur. A concept that emerged in this study is that teachers' ability to build partnerships with their students is essential in creating a relationship based on trust where students can accept guidance in becoming independent learners and critical thinkers. Future research to gain more insight about how teachers of culturally diverse students develop culturally responsive student–teacher partnerships is warranted. Research (Gay, 2018; Hammond, 2015) has shown student–teacher relationships are valuable in developing academic mindsets that lead to student achievement.

The development of diverse curriculums that approach literacy through a social equity lens is also a recommendation for future research. This research would connect how diverse curriculums promote student engagement in learning, which is the foundation for student achievement. Adopting a critical literacy and culturally relevant pedagogy approach to developing literacy curriculums sets the foundation for students to think critically where equity is forefront of the learning process. Stachowiak (2017) asserted that teaching literacy should be done with social justice in mind:

> As such, when literacy teachers apply culturally relevant pedagogy and critical thinking into their practices and classrooms, it is also important that they demand critical literacy . . . Students use their cultural experiences and perspectives to

> question the messages in the text related to the social construction of knowledge and issues of equity, power, and justice. (p. 15)

Creating culturally diverse curriculums present students with opportunities to elevate their voices and develop critical thinking skills. Future research to understand how culturally diverse curriculums affect student engagement and student achievement is recommended.

Recommendations for Future Practice

According to the NCES (2020), the United States became even more diverse between 2010 and 2020. The result of the diverse population growth is that there has been an increase in the number of culturally diverse students attending urban public schools; however, the teaching demographic remains majority White (Skepple, 2015). There is a consensus in the literature that teachers are not prepared to meet the needs of culturally diverse students because they do not have the necessary training and experience (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 2014a; Siwatu, 2007; Vavrus, 2002; Villegas & Lucas, 2007). Future practice recommendations include providing pre-service teacher programming that supports teachers' knowledge of culturally responsive pedagogy.

Skepple (2015) found pre-service teachers felt knowledgeable about preparing differentiated instruction for culturally diverse students, though they were less confident in their ability to apply this knowledge to teaching culturally diverse learners. Mandating that pre-service teachers enroll in a succession of courses that contain a focus on culturally responsive pedagogy should become a standard in urban teacher preparation programs. The implementation of this policy would necessitate revamping the traditional teacher preparation programs to incorporate coursework and field experiences that will benefit teachers of culturally diverse students. Although developers of teacher education programs acknowledge the need for multicultural programming, “most teacher education programs are hesitant when it comes to incorporating multicultural reforms with depth and fidelity” (Vavrus, 2002, p. 19).

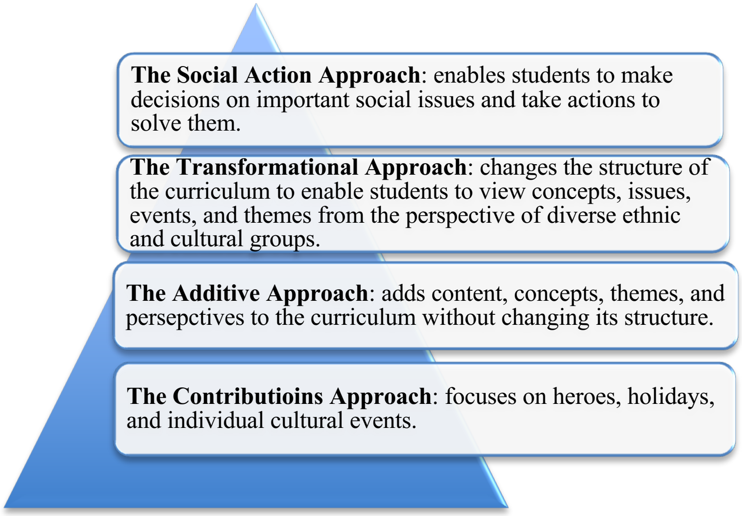
According to researchers (Gay, 2002; Skepple, 2015), developing culturally responsive pre-service teachers includes three significant components: (a) changing the attitudes of pre-service teachers, (b) making pre-service teachers knowledgeable about other cultures, and (c) training pre-service teachers to become effective teachers of culturally diverse students (p. 59). Developing culturally responsive programs for pre-service teachers would be inclusive of “modifying their curricula to include sociocultural consciousness awareness, modeling culturally responsive pedagogical skills, increasing dialogue among pre-service teachers on diversity topics, and exposing teacher candidates to diverse students, teachers, administrators, and teacher educators throughout the teacher education program” (Skepple, 2015, p. 66). Results of Obidah’s (2000) study of pre-service teachers participating in a diversity course showed pre-service teachers achieved four results: (a) examining identity formation through discourse, (b) understanding how different cultural experiences affect educational outcomes, (c) participating in an empowering setting, and (d) becoming reflective and intentional in being a culturally responsive educator. Cicchelli and Cho (2007) found a shift in attitudes was the main characteristic of pre-service teachers who were exposed to culturally responsive content and had fieldwork experience.

Based on the review of research in the field and analysis of the data, a social action approach (Banks, 1993) toward curriculum reform for pre-service teachers would be effective in preparing them to be competent teachers in culturally diverse classrooms. Vavrus (2002) argued, “Multicultural teacher education and staff development is a place where teachers can learn to become culturally responsive practitioners . . . Yet reaching this multicultural goal of a culturally responsive teaching force through teacher education remains difficult and elusive” (p. 19). Culturally responsive pedagogy is included within a multicultural education framework that focuses on multicultural curriculum and learner-centered instructional practices (Vavrus, 2002). Researchers in the field have noted that for teachers to gain skills that will support their competence as culturally responsive teachers, they must be trained throughout their pre-service study (Gay, 2018; Irvine, 1992; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Banks’s (1993) social action approach reflects a classification system for multicultural content integration (Figure 4) and incorporates the tenets of critical pedagogy and constructivist learning approaches. Vavrus (2002) stated the majority of cooperating teachers who were surveyed about their preference for this classification approach selected the social action approach and the transformational approach because they were the best approaches for their students (Figure 4; Banks, 1993, p. 45).

Figure 4

Levels of Integration of Multicultural Content



The Social Action Approach: enables students to make decisions on important social issues and take actions to solve them.

The Transformational Approach: changes the structure of the curriculum to enable students to view concepts, issues, events, and themes from the perspective of diverse ethnic and cultural groups.

The Additive Approach: adds content, concepts, themes, and persepctives to the curriculum without changing its structure.

The Contributioins Approach: focuses on heroes, holidays, and individual cultural events.

The implementation of curriculum reform in teacher education programs is looked upon as an exhaustive and demanding process. Vavrus (2002) emphasized that a well-developed plan is necessary:

> As teacher education faculty rethink multicultural education within a program's curriculum, a systematic approach is appropriate. Consideration should be given to incorporating multicultural concepts throughout the teacher education curriculum, reconfiguring traditional methodology and educational psychology courses, and analyzing the multicultural impact of program-arranged field experiences. (p. 43)

When pre-service teachers are provided the necessary courses and fieldwork experiences that will prepare them to practice culturally responsive pedagogy, they will have the opportunity to provide equitable learning opportunities for culturally diverse students. This training will support their ability to become culturally relevant practitioners.

Teachers' perceptions of their ability to model culturally responsive teaching practices and its impact on student engagement and achievement were the focus of this study. Results led to several implications that are significant for working with culturally diverse learners. As the percentage of culturally diverse students in urban classrooms increases, there must be a re-establishment of systems that will present equitable educational opportunities for this marginalized group. eachers' ability to build student–teacher relationships, have flexibility in developing their curriculum, and provide students with exposure were the major themes reflected in the data. Further research in the area of culturally responsive pedagogy that can be incorporated into teacher practice to support the academic growth of culturally diverse students is needed.

APPENDIX A

Principal Consent Form

Dear Principal:

Your school has been selected to be used as a site to conduct a research study to learn more about the lived experiences of teachers with culturally responsive pedagogy, student engagement, and student achievement. The study implications may influence policy and practice as it relates to culturally responsive pedagogy. This study will be conducted by Suzanne Brooks, Department of Education Specialties and Counseling, St. John's University, as part of her doctoral dissertation work. Her faculty sponsor is Dr. Michael Sampson, Department of Education Specialties and Counseling.

If you agree to allow your school and teachers to participate in this study, the researcher may ask to gain access to teacher email addresses and student demographic information. The teacher participants will complete a demographic questionnaire and take part in a virtual interview which will be audio and video recorded. The interview is designed to take approximately 45 min. to complete. There are no known risks associated with your site participating in this research beyond those of everyday life.

Federal regulations require that all subjects be informed of the availability of medical treatment or financial compensation in the event of physical injury resulting from participation in the research. St. John's University cannot provide either medical treatment or financial compensation for any physical injury resulting from your participation in this research project. Inquiries regarding this policy may be made to the principal investigator or, alternatively, the Human Subjects Review Board (718-990-1440).

Although you will receive no direct benefits, this research may help the investigator understand culturally relevant pedagogy and its influence on student engagement and achievement which will inform teacher practice.

Confidentiality of the site and its participants will be strictly maintained by removing names and any identifiers will be replaced with a pseudonym. Consent forms will be stored in a separate location from the interview documentation using a password protected computer file. Participant responses will be kept confidential with the following exception: the researcher is required by law to report to the appropriate authorities, suspicion of harm to yourself, to children, or to others.

Participation in this study is voluntary. Participants may refuse to participate or withdraw at any time without penalty. You may refuse the researcher access to school and student demographic information.

If there is anything about the study or your participation that you do not understand, if you have questions, or would like to report a research-related problem, you may contact Suzanne Brooks, suzanne.brooks17@my.stjohns.eduu, St. John's University 8000 Utopia Parkway, Queens NY, 11439 or the faculty sponsor, Dr. Michael Sampson, sampsonm@stjohns.edu, St. John's University, 8000 Utopia Parkway, Queens NY, 11439.

For questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the University's Institutional Review Board, St. John's University, Dr. Raymond DiGiuseppe, Chair digiuser@stjohns.edu 718-990-1955 or Marie Nitopi, IRB Coordinator, nitopim@stjohns.edu 718-990-1440.
You will receive a copy of this consent document to keep.

Agreement to Participate

Yes, I agree to participate in the study described above.

____ __________________________
Participant's Signature Date

APPENDIX B

Participant Letter of Interest

Dear Potential Study Participant:

My name is Suzanne Brooks and I am a doctoral student in the Literacy Program at St. John's University. I am conducting research for my dissertation, and you have been identified as meeting the criteria to participate in the study.

I am conducting a research study about the lived experiences of urban teachers and their perceptions of culturally relevant pedagogy and its impact on student engagement and achievement. Study participants will be asked to participate in a virtual interview which will take a minimum of 45 minutes. Participation in the interview process is voluntary. You may withdraw from the study at any time. A brief follow-up conversation (approximately 15 min.) may occur with you to gain additional information or clarify responses. You will have the opportunity to review your transcript after the interview. The results of the study may be published; however, participant information will remain confidential and anonymous.

The possible benefit of your participation in the research study will be that it may provide greater insight about the lived experiences and perceptions of culturally responsive pedagogy and how it can impact teaching and learning in urban environments.

If you are interested in participating in this study or have additional questions, please respond by January 21, 2022, at suzanne.brooks17@my.stjohns.edu or 202.489.2154.

Best regards,

Suzanne R. Brooks

APPENDIX C

Participant Questionnaire

1. How long have you been in the teaching field?

2. What is your educational background (higher education schools attended and major)?

3. What subject(s) do you teach?

4. Where is your current school located?

5. Do you currently use culturally responsive teaching practices in your classroom? If yes, provide a description of how you incorporate culturally responsive instruction in your lessons.

APPENDIX D

Interview Protocol

Institution: (pseudonym)
Interviewee: (pseudonym)
Interviewer: Suzanne Brooks

Research Questions:

1. What are teachers' perceptions about their ability to model culturally responsive pedagogy?
2. What are teachers' experiences with student engagement when culturally responsive instructional models are practiced?
3. What are teachers' experiences with student achievement when culturally responsive instructional models are practiced?

Part I: Interview Protocol

Good afternoon. Thank you for participating in this research study. You have been selected to participate in this interview because you have been identified as an educator that meets the participant criteria and practices culturally responsive pedagogy in your classroom. This study seeks to understand teachers' experiences using culturally responsive pedagogy and how they perceive student engagement and achievement when this model is practiced. The research will provide teachers with an opportunity to reflect and share their experiences about culturally responsive teaching models which may give implications for further research and practice.
Your responses are valuable, and it is important to capture what you say accurately throughout the interview. Do you provide consent to audio and video record this interview? Also, I may take written notes during the interview to support accuracy. You are participating in this interview on a voluntary basis, and you may choose to discontinue at any time. All personal information and details about the interview will remain confidential and pseudonyms will be used. I am the only person that will view and have access to the recordings, and all recordings will be kept in a password protected file on my computer. Do you have any questions about the interview process or how your data will be used?

The interview should last approximately 45-60 minutes. During this period, I have several questions that I would like to ask. The main topics of our discussion will be culturally diverse learners', culturally relevant pedagogy, student engagement, and student achievement. I have provided you with succinct definitions of these topics (screen share). Do you currently have any questions?

***Culturally diverse learners**. "These students are a diverse group of learners in terms of their education backgrounds, native language literacy, socioeconomic status, and cultural traditions" (Gonzalez, Pagan, Wendell, & Love, 2011).*

Culturally relevant pedagogy - practicing culturally relevant teaching, that is, a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes (Ladson-Billings, 1992, p. 382).

***Student Engagement -** According to the Glossary of Education Reform (2016), "student engagement refers to the degree of attention, curiosity, interest, optimism, and passion that students show when they are learning or being taught, which extends to the level of motivation they have to learn and progress in their education."*

Part II: Interviewee Background Questions

1. Tell me about your teaching experience.
2. Why did you choose to teach in an urban area?
3. Describe your teaching mindset/philosophy. How has it guided you in relation to teaching culturally diverse learners?

Part III: Main Questions and Follow-Up Questions

Student Engagement

1. How do you build your student-teacher relationships? Family relationships?
2. How do you know your students' interests? What topics engage your students? How do you incorporate their interests in your lessons and classroom environment?
3. How do you make learning relevant to your students' lives?
4. Describe how engagement looks and feel in your classroom.
5. What strategies and resources do you use in your classroom to support student engagement?
    a. Why do you use these strategies and resources?
    b. Are there other strategies and resources that you would like to use that may support student engagement?
6. Describe a lesson where you felt that students were actively engaged?
7. Describe your relationships with the parents or families? Do they play an integral role in your classroom?

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

1. What is your approach in providing culturally responsive instruction (texts, current events, discourse)?
2. How does your curriculum incorporate culturally responsive instruction?
3. How could culturally responsive instruction be enhanced in your classroom?
4. What type of training or professional development have you had surrounding culturally responsive pedagogy (pre-service/in-service)? Do you think participating in training would be helpful for you or your colleagues?

Student Achievement

1. How do you use the knowledge and skills that the students bring to the classroom to enhance their learning?
2. How do you know if students are comprehending what they are learning?
3. How do you communicate academic expectations in your classroom?
4. How do you measure student achievement in your classroom?
5. How do you acknowledge student achievement in your classroom?
6. Describe how culturally diverse teaching models have supported achievement in your classroom?
7. When you reflect on your instructional practices is there anything that you feel that you need to support students in your classroom?
8. What are your thoughts about standardized tests?

Final Question

Is there anything you would like to add before we conclude today's interview?

APPENDIX E

Teacher Consent Form

Dear Participant:

You have been invited to take part in a research study to learn about the lived experiences of teachers with culturally responsive pedagogy, student engagement, and student achievement. This study will be conducted by Suzanne Brooks, Department of Education Specialties and Counseling, St. John's University, as part of her doctoral dissertation work. Her faculty sponsor is Dr. Michael Sampson, Department of Education Specialties and Counseling.

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to complete a demographic questionnaire and participate in an interview to help the researcher understand your knowledge of culturally responsive teaching and practices, your ability to model culturally responsive pedagogy, and your knowledge about student engagement and achievement in culturally responsive classrooms. Your answers to the interview questions will be audio and video recorded through a virtual platform. Participation in this interview will involve a minimum of thirty minutes of your time to complete. A brief follow-up interview may be necessary to clarify your previous answers.

Federal regulations require that all subjects be informed of the availability of medical treatment or financial compensation in the event of physical injury resulting from participation in the research. St. John's University cannot provide either medical treatment or financial compensation for any physical injury resulting from your participation in this research project. Inquiries regarding this policy may be made to the principal investigator or, alternatively, the Human Subjects Review Board (718-990-1440).

Although you will receive no direct benefits, this research may help the researcher understand the lived experiences of teachers as it relates to culturally responsive pedagogy, student engagement, and student achievement; and, the results of this research may benefit teaching practices with culturally diverse students. There are no known risks associated with your participating in this research beyond those of everyday life.

Confidentiality of your research records will be strictly maintained by removing your name and any identifiers will be replaced with a pseudonym. Consent forms will be stored in a separate location from the interview documentation using a password protected computer file. Your responses will be kept confidential with the following exception: the researcher is required by law to report to the appropriate authorities, suspicion of harm to yourself, to children, or to others.

Participation in this study is voluntary. You may refuse to participate or withdraw at any time without penalty. For interviews, questionnaires, or surveys, you have the right to skip or not answer any questions you prefer not to answer.

If there is anything about the study or your participation that is unclear or that you do not understand, if you have questions or wish to report a research-related problem, you may contact Suzanne Brooks, suzanne.brooks17@my.stjohns.eduu, St. John's University 8000 Utopia Parkway, Queens NY, 11439 or the faculty sponsor, Dr. Michael Sampson, sampsonm@stjohns.edu, St. John's University, 8000 Utopia Parkway, Queens NY, 11439.

For questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the University's Institutional Review Board, St. John's University, Dr. Raymond DiGiuseppe, Chair digiuser@stjohns.edu 718-990-1955 or Marie Nitopi, IRB Coordinator, nitopim@stjohns.edu 718-990-1440.
You have received a copy of this consent document for your records.

Agreement to Participate

Yes, I agree to participate in the study described above.

____ ____________________
Participants Signature Date

APPENDIX F

Modification of the Van Kaam Method of Analysis of Phenomenological Data

1. Listing and preliminary grouping of meaningful statements.
2. Reduction and elimination to determine invariant constituents.
3. Clustering of invariant constituents.
4. Final identification of the invariant constituents by application – validation.
5. Individual textural description.
6. Individual structural description.
7. Textural-structural description.

(Moustakas, 1994)

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