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Abstract

Despite recent federal mandates to address the educational achievement gap between white students and students of color, the educational outcomes for students of color do not match that of their white peers. Many initiatives and reform efforts have addressed the structural inequities in school, yet little research has been conducted to explore how white teachers make sense of their role educating students of color. Teachers have a significant impact on students, their success in school, as well as their potential to complete high school, and to best meet their needs, an exploration into how teachers perceive their own ability to educate students of color needs to be examined. Utilizing Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis methodology through the theoretical framework lens of Self-Efficacy, this study provided insight into how teachers make sense of their experience in educating students of color. Data analysis of interview transcripts revealed four emergent themes including Teacher Perspective, Pedagogical Strategies, Supports and Assistance, and Emotional Connections. Evident in the study is the lack of preparedness white teachers had to educate students of color. Implications for future study include narrowing the definition of students of color, a case study analysis of a teacher in their first or second year teaching students of color, and research into the knowledge and use of culturally proficient strategies across various subject areas at the high school level. Recommendations for practice include increasing the capacity of all educators to educate students of color, providing support for students of color being taught by white, inexperienced teachers, and working with teacher preparation programs to develop specific courses that will prepare teachers to work with a diverse group of students.

Keywords: Teacher perceptions, students of color, self-efficacy theory, interpretative phenomenological analysis
Chapter 1: Statement of the Problem

As schools continue to increase in diversity, understanding methods and practices to successfully educate all students is essential to the success of students of color. All students deserve a quality education. A quality education relies on teachers understanding their students, their learning styles, and the knowledge and use of highly effective instructional practices that enable every student to succeed in school (Vaught & Castagno, 2008; Frackenberg, 2012). Providing a quality, equitable education requires teachers to have high expectations and a growth mindset for all students. The need to create educational spaces that are meaningful and equitable for all students is especially important given the changing racial diversity in public schools. The National Center for Education Statistics (2014) reports that students of color represent approximately 48% of students enrolled in public school in the US; an increase of eight percent since 2001. Despite this increase in student diversity, the non-white-teaching force has steadily remained around 17% of educators (Boser, 2011), indicating a significant racial demography gap in the teaching profession.

Most public educators are white and have little understanding of the communities they teach in and how race and power permeate schools and impact student achievement (Milner & Howard, 2013). Most teachers live and were educated in racially un-diverse neighborhoods and schools, and have benefitted from their participation in white dominant social structures (Vaught & Castagno, 2008). Because of this, many teachers are not aware of the significant racial barriers that exist for students of color or how their own practices in the classroom can perpetuate these racial barriers (Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Vaught & Castagno, 2008; Frankenberg, 2012). Teacher preparation programs are not providing this knowledge to pre-service teachers before they enter diverse classrooms and schools. Recent studies have found that most teacher
educators do not understand the intersection of race, culture, teaching and learning, and therefore are unable to adequately train teachers (Merryfield, 2000). Student success in school is linked to lifelong success, and requires teacher preparedness to provide a strong educational environment for all students.

**Deficiencies in the Evidence**

Several studies have identified deficits in teachers’ knowledge of successful educational practices for students of color, but they fail to identify how these can be corrected to better serve the needs of a diverse student population. Studies indicate teaching candidates have negative opinions about students from other races and cultures (Hollins, Torres-Guzman, 2005; Vaught & Castagno, 2008), and prove that pre-service teachers believe that teaching in a diverse schools is more challenging (Morris, 2005; Wildhagen, 2012). Additionally, Wildhagen (2012) analyzed statistics from the Educational Longitudinal Study of 2002 and concluded that teachers perceive African-American students of exerting less effort and find them to be less conforming to classroom expectations compared to their white peers. These studies demonstrate that race is a significant factor in effectively educating all students, but these studies do not explain how teachers perceive their own ability or explain how teachers make sense of working with students of color, nor do they offer solutions for how to better prepare and instruct teachers to be effective educators of students of color.

**Audiences for this Study**

The audience for this study is current and prospective teachers, school and district leadership, parents and the community, as well as teacher preparation programs. This study will assist current and aspiring teachers in becoming more aware of how their beliefs and
expectations of students of color can potentially impact student performance and educational potential. This study can also influence current professional development in schools and districts to help initiate discussions about systematic racism and its connection to classroom practices. Given the lack of race based discussions in many teacher prep programs and the current climate within the U.S., professional development for teachers is particularly important so that teachers are prepared to model cultural proficiency in the classroom and so they are preparing students to enter and thrive in a highly diverse world. Parents and the community can benefit from the information gleaned in this study by becoming more informed about teaching practices and schoolwide structures that will best support their students’ success in school. Most significantly, this research can help influence and shape the current teacher preparation course of study. Teacher training programs can use this research to redesign their courses and better prepare future teachers to be successful educators in schools that are increasingly more diverse. Building a teaching force of individuals who are capable of providing an equitable education for all students must begin in teacher training programs.

**Significance of the Problem**

A significantly high percent of individuals attracted to the teaching profession are white and middle class, with little knowledge of students of color. Many teachers have not examined their own racial perceptions of students of color and do not understand the deep rooted racism in America nor do they understand the impact that their racially held beliefs have on the performance of the students of color in their class. This lack of knowledge and awareness has a detrimental impact on students. Students of color are frequently reported to be more difficult to teach, and to be exerting less effort and conforming less to classroom behavioral expectations than white student (Downey & Pribesh, 2004; Frankenberg, 2012; Wildhagen, 2012). This
indicates that teacher perceptions of students may be shaped by racial stereotypes. In order to provide an equitable education, teachers must examine these stereotypes so they can be more effective classroom instructors. The information gained through this study will suggest practices that will enable teachers to provide an equitable education for all students. It is essential that all teachers are prepared and able to provide a strong education to all students in their class.

Research gained through this study will not only be useful for classroom teachers, it will also be helpful to schools and school districts. Schools are places where students of different backgrounds, cultures and socioeconomic status come together with a similar purpose. As schools face increased accountability for the success and achievement of all students, understanding the racially held beliefs of the teaching force and the impact these beliefs have on student achievement will be useful for schools. Wildhadgen (2012) found that African-American students are less likely to meet their academic potential than white students. Two of the informers of low student achievement are race and racism (Vaught & Castagno, 2008). Increasing student achievement cannot occur only through curricular attempts – student achievement and success in schools is also based on the relationships built between students and teachers. This study will assist schools in developing training for teachers to increase student achievement though the establishment of meaningful relationships.

On the state and national level, the achievement gap has been of significant concern. Despite previous legislation, such as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 which aimed to increase the achievement of disadvantaged students through assessments of basic skills, a significant achievement gap still exists between white and students of color in America (U.S. Dept. of Ed, 2015). In Massachusetts for example, 61% of White students score Proficient on the Math MCAS compared to 38% of African-American and Hispanic students (Horowitz, 2014).
Other states consistently report students of color lag behind their white classmates. To address this concern, President Obama has consistently prioritized educational spending. In his 2016 budget proposal he included a $1 billion increase in spending in Title I grants, which would support programs to help close the achievement gap in schools (Bajgier, 2015). It is clear that white students are outperforming their non-white peers in school, and this deficit in achievement for students of color is concerning on both the state and national level. As the level of diversity increases in schools, it becomes increasingly more urgent to find methods to successful educate all students in school.

Most significantly, this research will have an impact on students. This study may enable students of color to receive a better education in school and will assist in their long term success. Statistical information proves schools are failing many students of color. Each year, more than 1.3 million students drop-out of high school (Little & Ellison, 2015), and some schools in urban, impoverished neighborhoods graduate as few as 50% of their students (Balfanz, Bridgeland, Moore, & Hornig Fox, 2010). The options for high school dropouts are dismal. Students without a high school diploma experience higher rates of incarceration and unemployment and lower lifetime earnings and life expectancy (Swanson, 2009). Teacher perceptions of students of color have impacts that extend beyond the classroom and it is imperative that teachers are aware of how these perceptions of students can impact student success in school.

The purpose of this doctoral thesis was to investigate and examine, using an interpretive phenomenology analysis, white teachers’ current perceptions of educating students of color and how they make sense of this experience. From this understanding, practices may emerge that will better enable teachers to create classrooms that are more equitable for all students.
Research Questions

A quality education for all students requires an understanding of the ethnic and racial diversity of students, their learning styles, and the culturally relevant instructional practices necessary to enable all students to be successful in school. To do this, teachers need to understand and make sense of their own ability to educate students of color. Thus, the purpose of this study was to investigate, how white teachers make sense of educating students of color and suggest practices that will better enable teachers to create classrooms that are equitable for all students.

Central Research Question: The overall research question guiding this inquiry is:

How do white teachers make sense of teaching students of color?

Rational

The educational achievement and outcomes for students of color does not match the educational attainment for white-students (Wildhadgen, 2012). American schools are not providing all students, students of color in particular, an equitable education. There are many likely causes for this, such as the lack of a culturally relevant pedagogy, underlining racist beliefs of teachers, and poor training for pre-service teachers in teacher preparation programs among the possibilities (Vaught & Castagno, 2008). There is a need to better understand white teachers’ perceptions and expectations of students of color.

The rational for this research is to learn and understand how white teachers perceive their ability to teach students of color. This study identified the perceptions that white teachers in an urban school district in Massachusetts have about teaching students of color and attempts to understand their current knowledge, beliefs, and experiences with students of color.
Theoretical Framework

Background

Albert Bandura, a psychologist, is known as the originator of the Social Learning Theory. His work on the Social Learning Theory, or how people learn by observing others, grew out of the work of N.E. Millar and J. Dollard in the 1940s. Miller and Dollard believed that if humans had motivation to learn, they could do so through observation and imitation, which would then be rewarded by positive reinforcement (Miller & Dollard, 1941). Bandura expanded this theory with his 1963 text *Social Learning and Personality Development*, in which he expanded on Millar and Dollard’s theory and included observational learning as a key component to social learning (Bandura & Walters, 1963). Through ongoing research, Bandura began to realize his own theory was lacking aspects of social learning, particularly, self-beliefs. In 1977 Bandura wrote “Self-efficacy: Toward a Unifying Theory of Behavioral Change,” which provided what he believed was the missing piece of the Social Learning Theory – self-efficacy and the role ones beliefs play into social learning. In 1986 Bandura again advanced his own theory of social learning by explaining the four sources of self-efficacy: mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, social persuasion, and physiological arousal (Bandura, 1986). During the 1980s he changed the title of his theory from social learning to social cognition to separate his theory from other social learning theories and to underscore the role of cognition in a person’s ability to understand and perform behaviors.

Bandura’s Social Cognitive Theory, specifically the aspects of self-efficacy, is the theoretical framework applicable to this research study.
Self-Efficacy Theory

A person’s self-efficacy influence how they function in the world and how they develop cognitively (Bandura, 1993). Bandura (1994) defines self-efficacy as, “one’s self judgment of personal capabilities to initiate and successfully perform specified tasks at designated levels, expend greater effort, and persevere in the face of adversity” (p.71). A person’s self-efficacy significantly impacts their perceived ability to succeed in various life situations, and Bandura explains these beliefs are determinates of how people will act, interact and react to the various situations throughout their life (Bandura, 1994). Self-efficacy has a far-reaching impact on a person; self-efficacy shapes a person’s system of beliefs and how they will navigate through the world and all situations they encounter. Bandura (1993) states “efficacy beliefs influence how people feel, think, motivate themselves, and behave (p.118). Individuals with low self-efficacy will draw away from situations they perceive to be challenging or difficult, while individuals with high levels of self-efficacy will engage in difficult tasks, often with higher levels of success than people with low self-efficacy (Bandura, 1993). People who believe they can master a challenge often view a difficult situation as something to achieve rather than something to avoid.

Sources of Self-Efficacy

Bandura believes that self-efficacy originates from four sources: mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, social persuasion and physiological arousal. Mastery experiences are experiences in which a person feels success. Bandura (1994) states that when a person feels success and believes they were successful in an experience or task, they increase their self-efficacy to repeat the task based on their previous feelings of success and accomplishment. Sometimes called performance accomplishment, mastery experiences are positive, successful experiences that lead people to feel confident moving forward based on their past experiences.
with similar situations. Vicarious experiences are the when a person observes another person successfully completing a task or an action (Bandura, 1994). Vicarious experiences are often achieved through observation, modeling or demonstrations. Watching someone else succeed in a task increases one’s own belief that they too will be successful, and therefore increases their self-efficacy. Social persuasion often occurs through feedback, encouragement or convincing from others (Bandura, 1994). When other people provide encouragement to attempt a task and then offer feedback on the performance during the task, it helps to overcome self-doubt and hesitation and ultimately increases a person’s self-efficacy. The final source of self-efficacy is physiological arousal, or a person’s moods, emotions or stress levels, all of which influence self-efficacy. Bandura (1994) explains that positive moods increase self-efficacy because positive moods increase your feelings about your personal abilities in a situation.

The four sources of self-efficacy have the ability to both increase and decrease self-efficacy. Positive previous experiences, observing someone else’s success, encouragement from others and a positive mood all contribute to increased self-efficacy. Conversely, the lack of past success, observing others fail at a task, the lack of support from others, and a negative attitude can all decrease a person’s self-efficacy. Diminished self-efficacy can impact performance in a situation because it may cause a person to not try at all given their perceived level of anticipated failure, or to put forth minimal effort based on their preconceived belief of failure (Bandura, 1994). A teacher’s self-efficacy, either positive or negative, impacts their success in the classroom.

**Self-Efficacy and Teaching Students of Color**

Teaching in urban schools and teaching students of color are often associated with more challenging teaching assignments (Downey & Pribesh, 2004; Frankenberg, 2012; Wildhagen,
2012). For many young, inexperienced white teachers urban schools are both their first experience teaching and their first experience working with students of color. The social stigmas associated with urban schools are not unknown – countless stories of dilapidated buildings, low achievement rates, no supplies, dangerous neighborhoods and disinterested students fill the news. These stories and stereotypes help create an image of urban education that ranges from nerve-wracking to frightening for new teachers. Inexperienced, white teachers often perceive these teaching assignments to be difficult. Most young, white teachers do not have life experiences that would increase their self-efficacy with students of color. They have not had prior experience working with diverse students in an urban environment, they have not seen successful educators model teaching to students of color, most will have little to no mentoring to provide them with feedback, and often their emotional state is centered in apprehension and high stress. All of these factors contribute to decreased self-efficacy for white educators teaching students of color.

Dembo and Gibson (1985) describe teacher efficacy as “the extent to which teachers believe they can affect student learning” (p. 173). Applying Bandura’s self-efficacy theoretical framework to teachers implies that teachers are more likely to be successful teaching students of color when they have enhanced self-efficacy. An increased self-efficacy among teachers has been proven to lead to positive outcomes in student achievement (Klassen, Al-Dhafri, Hannok & Betts, 2011). Based on this, it is important to understand teachers’ current perceptions and level of self-efficacy about educating students of color and to explore ways to increase teachers’ self-efficacy in order to increase achievement for students of color.
Conclusion

Understanding how white teachers perceive their own ability to teach students of color is an important step in the exploration of the achievement gap that exists in American schools. Teachers play a critical role in the success of their students, and understanding how teachers believe they impact non-white students can lead to strategies and practices that are more inclusive and culturally relevant for students. The next chapter outlines the achievement gap in American schools and explores how educator bias and teacher expectations impact the overall achievement of non-white students.
Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Introduction

A students’ potential for high academic achievement in school is based as much on their demographic profile as it does on their persistence and effort in school. Students of color are less academically successful in school, less likely to graduate from high school, and more likely to fail high stakes assessments than their white classmates (NAEP, 2014). Students of color receive exclusionary discipline punishments and are more often tracked into lower level or non-college preparation classes (Strauss, 2015). Schools seek ways to address the education inequalities, but research primarily focuses on the structural elements of schools, such as teacher licensure, curriculum and length of the school day, and the impact these have on student achievement. According to the Editorial Projects in Education Research Center (2011), attempts to impact the achievement gap through federal and state mandates have had little impact, and the majority of these efforts have not addressed perceptions educators have about students of color and how these beliefs may impact school improvement efforts.

This review explores White teachers’ views of educating students of color and how they make sense of their own practice to improve the educational achievement of students of color in American schools. Pedagogy, classroom practices and teacher beliefs are overridden with a deficit thinking mindset about students from different cultural, linguistic, and economic backgrounds, and these beliefs directly impact the academic achievement of students of color (Delpit, 1995; Kozol, 2005). Excluded from the discussion about the achievement gap are teacher beliefs, and most school reform targets the technical aspects of schooling, such as the increase in data reporting, accountability, and assessments to measure growth and progress. There have been no mandates requiring training to increase the cultural knowledge of teachers or
to alter the deficit opinions many educators have of students. Beliefs are essential to school reform efforts. Understanding educators’ beliefs about students will allow for a more equitable education for students of color. This literature review aims to understand the impact of educators’ bias and expectations for students of color and their potential for academic success in school.

The following literature review provides an overview of the achievement gap that exists in American schools between white students and students of color as well as the ongoing attempts to improve achievement for students of color. Second, teacher bias as demonstrated through instructional strategies and the treatment of students are examined to determine what impact these beliefs have on students’ potential for academic success in school. Finally, teacher expectations and the deficit thinking model are investigated to understand how expectations can impact student achievement. This information will suggest that bias and lowered expectations do have an impact on the academic achievement in school and on the achievement gap for students of color overall. Finally, a summation of the literature will be drawn to make recommendations and suggest implications for future practice and for future teachers.

**Education Achievement Gap**

In a significant number of educational indicators, students of color lag behind white students (Hartney & Flavin, 2013). Educational indicators include high stakes assessment results, graduation rates, dropout rates and rigorous course selections. In each of these areas, white students are significantly more likely to be successful in school, perform better on assessments, take a more rigorous course of study in school, and complete high school with a diploma than their non-white peers. The National Center for Education Statistics reports that non-white students trailed their white peers by an average of two grade levels, and found that
less than 10% of students of color participated in a rigorous course of studies in school (NAEP, 2014). The U.S. Department of Education reports that approximately 87% of white students graduate from high school within four years compared to 71% of African-American students; for some urban districts, like Washington, DC and Detroit, predominately non-white school districts, graduation statistics for African-American students is significantly lower than the national average, and in some schools, only about 50% of students graduate within four years (Balfanz, Bridgeland, Moore, & Hornig Fox, 2010). Government officials, policy makers, researchers, and educators all agree there is an education achievement gap in American schools, but not everyone agrees on the causes of the differences in academic attainment between white and non-white, primarily Black and Hispanic, students.

**History of the Achievement Gap**

The 1954 landmark Brown v. Board of Education case attempted to address the educational disparity in American schools by deeming separate but equal unconstitutional and mandating the integration of public schools. Part of the intent of this ruling was to provide equal access to high quality educators, educational materials, and educational opportunities for all students. Despite these attempts, the integration of public schools did not equalize the educational attainment opportunities for all students. There is a gap in achievement based on race and ethnicity.

The education achievement gap continues after Brown v. Board of Education because of a second generation of discrimination (Braddock & Gonzalez, 2010). This new type of discrimination is supported by de facto segregation, which began in the 1970s and 1980s. Many public schools in America are currently highly segregated despite court ordered integration, due to housing discrimination and cutbacks in funding to operate district initiated desegregation
programs (Kozol, 2005). Recent activity in Washington, Delaware, and Tennessee prove how state and local governments can bypass federal anti-segregation mandates to recreate segregated schools by establishing varying size districts, creatively drawing district lines and opening charter schools (Anderson, 2011; Glenn, 2011). Glenn’s study posits that “most states are closer to complete segregation than to complete desegregation, a relationship that has remained in effect since the late 1980s” (p. 724).

Urban schools experience other challenges as well, such as school funding inequities. The differences in school funding between suburban and urban school districts create disparities in schools and provide further evidence of second generation discrimination. The 1973 U.S. Supreme Court in San Antonio Independent School District v. Rodriguez, for example, found that inequity of resources was in fact not unconstitutional. Currently there are significant differences in school funding between schools serving predominately white students and schools educating predominately students of color. Many state courts have deemed funding disparities unconstitutional, but these rulings have not been enforced or have been circumvented by other state funding policies (Darling-Hammond, 2010). These inequities are important because school funding directly impacts student performance; a 10% increase in per pupil spending results in a 4% increase in graduation rates (Stone, 2014). By deeming funding disparities constitutional, or by ignoring court mandates to equally fund schools, school districts and states are essential allowing schools to return to the era of pre-Brown segregation and school conditions. These are not the only challenges plaguing urban schools and contributing to the educational achievement gap; inequities exists in teacher quality, the use of exclusionary discipline practices with students of color, and the lack of culturally relevant pedagogies used in many urban schools.
Recognizing that an achievement gap exists in schools, the federal government has intervened in an attempt to force schools to address the educational inequities that exist for students of color. The 2002 No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), a reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, passed by President George Bush aimed to create federal authority in education and enhance the educational opportunities for students of color (Hartney & Flavin, 2013). For the first time schools and states were required to document and report student assessment data by race, ethnicity, disability and socioeconomic status, with the specific goal of “closing the achievement gap between minority and nonminority students (ESEA, Section 1001[3]). Unfortunately the law did not achieve the one hundred percent proficient goal, and some states reported approximately 50% of their schools as “failing” schools under the law (McNeil, 2011). President Obama’s education policy, Race to the Top (RTTT), also included achievement gaps as a key component. In RTTT, decreasing the achievement gap among racial subgroups, reforms within state educational policy, and access to highly effective teachers were all part of the scoring rubric for the competitive grants to states from the federal government (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). In both federal programs, closing the achievement gap has been a priority, but neither program has had a significant contribution in the reduction of the gap between white students and students of color (Reardon, Greenberg, Kalogrides, Shores, Valentino, 2013; Strauss, 2015).

**Significance of the Achievement Gap**

While research (Balfanz et al., 2010; Kozol, 2005; McNeil, 2011) indicates there is a difference in educational outcomes by race and ethnicity, many educators also believe educational potential differences exist based on race. Cultural beliefs and generalizations are embedded into school performance, and even when evidence suggests otherwise, most educators
are guided by their beliefs over actual evidence (Noguera, 2008). Many teachers make judgments about students based on their race and culture. Noguera (2008) argues that educators must be mindful about relying on culture as an explanation for student achievement because it inaccurately reinforces stereotypes about students of color.

These deficit beliefs have a significant impact on students. The differences in educational outcomes contribute to long-term, social inequities for students of color, such as future earnings, employment potential, incarceration rates and lowered life expectancy (Branson, Marbory, Brown, Covington, McCauley & Nash, 2013; Hartney & Flavin, 2013; Heckman & LaFontaine, 2010). Schools are intended to be the training place for future democratic participation and life, yet as schools reinforce deficit thoughts and beliefs about students, they are perpetuating the educational achievement and social inequities.

**Closing the Achievement Gap**

Various studies have researched the achievement gap and have found factors contributing to the inequity in the educational outcome between white students and students of color. The factors most significantly impacting the education gap are the lack of integrated learning environments, differences in school funding, and the lack of access to highly trained and skilled teachers for many students of color (Glenn, 2011; Merryfield, 2000; Vaught & Castagno, 2000).

Condron, Tope, Steidl and Freeman (2013) conducted a longitudinal study using state level data on the achievement gap and determined segregated schools create inequities based on two reasons – they lack resources both within and outside of the school. The study found schools serving predominately students of color had unequal resources compared to schools serving predominately white schools. They also found schools serving predominately students of color were located in areas that were considered disadvantaged because they often had higher
rates of poverty, unemployment, crime, and lower educational attainment for those living in the area (Condron et al., 2013). Condron’s (2013) study concluded that the higher the rate of segregation in a school, the greater the achievement gap. This finding is troubling given that schools are more segregated now than in the 1960s (Lopez and Burciaga, 2014). School segregation has an extremely negative impact on the learning and achievement of students of color, and providing students of color with integrated learning environments will increase achievement and educational equity for students.

School funding is the second significant indicator of the achievement gap. The differences in spending between high and low minority schools is significant, and in some instances is as much as $7,000-$9,000 more is spent on students in affluent districts than for students in urban, low income districts (Baker, Sciarra, Farrie, 2014; Kozol, 2005; Lewis, James, Hancock, Hill-Jackson, 2008). Collectively, this accounts for hundreds of thousands of dollars difference in the overall operating budget of schools. It is not only the dollar difference; there is also a disparity in resources. Schools in urban communities often lack technological resources, facilities, extracurricular and enrichment equipment, and supplies for students. These inequities create a social gap that impacts the ability for students of color to compete against peers with knowledge and access to these resources. Equity of resources is also necessary to close the achievement gap.

The most significant change needed to provide an equitable education for students of color is access to high quality teachers who are skilled educators of students of color. Despite federal mandates for equal access to highly quality teachers in NCLB and RTTT, many students of color have inadequately trained and poorly prepared teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2005; Lewis et al., 2008). A recent Center for American Progress Report (2014) found that students of
color were less likely to be taught by highly effective teachers. In Massachusetts for example, a non-white student is three times more likely to be assigned a teacher rated Unsatisfactory than a white student, and more likely taught by a teacher rated Needs Improvement than Proficient (DeMonte & Hanna, 2014). Research indicates that student achievement is most significantly impacted by teacher effectiveness (Hartney & Flavin, 2014) and certain aspects of teacher effectiveness can be controlled, such as the license and credentials required to teach, or the college major of the teacher. The mindset of teachers and their belief that all students, white students and students of color, have the same level of aptitude and deserve the same high quality education cannot be controlled by state mandates and requirements.

**Educator Bias**

Education and accountability are almost synonymous. As schools face increased scrutiny in response to recent federal mandates that impose high stakes assessments as measures of school effectiveness and of student learning, teachers are challenged to prepare students for assessments and to adhere to curricular changes required for students to demonstrate mastery. Teacher effectiveness, and how to create and recruit effective teachers in particular, is a common educational discussion. What constitutes effectiveness in a teacher goes beyond content knowledge, and pedagogical strategies; educator effectiveness is connected to educator beliefs about their students. An effective educator believes that all students, regardless of race, language, and socioeconomic status can be successful in school. However, many educators do not believe all students are capable of academic achievement (Walker, 2011).

Beliefs are the lens through which people see and make sense of the world, and they are powerful internal compasses. Personal beliefs are change resistant and beliefs often have a more powerful impact on behavior than knowledge (Pohan & Aguilar, 2001). When a belief and
knowledge collide, people are more likely to follow their personal beliefs than professional knowledge. This information as it relates to teachers and their students is significant. Teachers, regardless of their knowledge about achievement, may disregard this information in lieu of personal beliefs and bias. Delpit (1995) believes educator bias manifests itself in two important ways in the classroom: through instruction and the treatment of students.

**Culturally Relevant Pedagogy**

As schools have become more diverse, the achievement levels of students of color continue to decline (Darling-Hammond & Post, 2000). The academic success of African-American and other students of color are dependent on a curriculum that is culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1995). The curriculum in many schools does not benefit all students, and embedded in many curriculums are policies and practices that are oppressive and marginalizing for students of color (Chapman, Tatiana, Hartlep, Vang & Lipsey, 2014). There is an overwhelming disconnect between the home culture and school culture for many students of color, as most schools and curriculums more closely reflect white, middle class culture. Research suggests that if students experience speech and language at school that resembles speech and language used in their homes, students of color will be more academically successful in schools (Delpit, 1995). Yet schools and teachers replicate white norms because they are white and middle class. Ladson-Billings (1995) defined a culturally relevant pedagogy using three criteria: academic success for students; the development and maintenance of cultural competency; and the development of a critical competency.

Textbooks are a prime example of the lack of culturally relevant materials in schools. Textbooks often represent author and cultural bias in an attempt to appeal to mass markets (Shapiro, 2007). Rosenberg (1972) found that most economic, mathematics and history
textbooks failed to accurately represent non-white groups, while other studies (Garcia, 1993; Morgan, 2010; Ndura, 2004) found that minorities are misrepresented in American textbooks. Without equal and accurate space in textbooks, teachers can perpetuate this information through their classroom instruction. The omission, underrepresentation, and misrepresentation of ethnically and racially diverse groups help to solidify the already dominant culture and breeds ethnocentrism. Textbooks are used as the primary tool for instructional material in many schools and classrooms and they play a significant role in the marginalization of minority cultures as well as the alienation of students of color in the classroom.

At the forefront of all teaching strategies and pedagogies is academic achievement. A culturally relevant pedagogy requires students to develop strong academic skills in literacy, numeracy, technology, social and practical skills (Ladson-Billings, 1995). The methodology used to develop such skills may vary, but is necessary for students to successfully participate in society. Ladson-Billings (1995) further argues that the trick to a culturally relevant pedagogy is getting students to select academic achievement, not to have it forced on them. The second requirement is the development and maintenance of cultural competency in students. Students must maintain cultural integrity (Ladson-Billings, 1995). This is often challenging for students of color who are forced to balance their culture with the expectations of school. Fordham and Ogbu (1986) outline the challenge many students of color face in school when they attempt to balance academic achievement with their culture. Students must “act white” in school, or adhere to the traits of the dominant culture to be successful in school, which isolates them culturally from their like-peers (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). This tension can lead to academic disengagement in students of color, which is why Ladson-Billings (1995) argues that
maintenance of cultural competency must exist in a culturally relevant pedagogy. Students can be both culturally authentic and excel academically.

The final aspect of a culturally relevant pedagogy is the development of a critical competency. A critical competency, or the development of social consciousness, means that students are trained and encouraged to critique social norms, especially those that perpetuate injustice (Ladson-Billings, 1995). As schools aim to prepare students for democratic society and as schools aim to be equalizers, students need the opportunity to critique social norms that are unfair and learn ways to initiate social change. Little and Ellison (2015) believe the millennial generation demonstrates less social and civic awareness and contend it is especially important for teachers to engage students in opportunities to learn about social agency so they understand they can make a difference in the world.

A curriculum, argued by Schwab (1983), is something successfully conveyed to a specified group of students who are known to the decision makers. In order for a curriculum to have an impact on student achievement and to reduce the achievement gap, the curriculum must be culturally relevant to students of color and reflect the cultural norms and values of students of color. Curriculums, like schools, that only meet the needs of the dominant majority fail to adequately address the learning needs of students of color. The instructional strategies are not the only way bias against students of color exists in schools; the treatment of students as seen through the discipline strategies and higher rates of discipline referrals of students of color also indicates a bias exists against students of color.

**Disproportionate Discipline**

Students of color are disciplined at higher rates than white students, and are more often assigned exclusionary discipline. The NAACP (2006) found that in the 1970s, African
American students suspensions occurred twice as often as their white peers. This percent has increased, and in 2014, African American students are suspended three times as often as white students (Rich, 2014). African American students account for 16% of students enrolled in public schools, yet are assigned 42% of out-of-school suspensions in school and account for 34% of the students who are expelled from school (Cook, 2015). This demonstrates an inconsistency in discipline for students of color and highlights the bias of educators who make discipline referrals and discipline decisions for students.

Discipline rates for students of color have increased since the 1970s due to the introduction of zero tolerance policies in schools. Zero tolerance policies were enacted as a school based reaction to the 1980s War on Drugs and the 1994 Gun-Free Schools Act (Evans & Lester, 2012). The intended purpose of zero tolerance policies was to standardize discipline responses for drugs or weapons found in schools; however, zero tolerance policies have been applied to far less serious infractions (Evans & Lester, 2012). These policies have enabled schools to subjectively exclude students for such behaviors as disrespect and failing to follow directions. A study conducted by Balfanz, Byrnes, and Fox (2012) found African-American students were suspended more often and for longer periods of time than white students, and Forsyth, Bigger, Forsyth and Howat (2014), found that African-American students were disciplined and excluded from school for behaviors with subjective definitions. Exclusionary discipline often strengthens the school-to-prison path, or the link between out-of-school suspensions and the risk of juvenile and criminal justice system involvement for non-white students (Skiba, 2000).

Policymakers have not ignored the alarmingly high rates of exclusionary discipline practices for non-white students. In a joint 2014 letter between the U.S. Department of Justice
and U.S. Department of Education to schools, alternatives to suspensions and the need for
schools to handle school discipline without the influence of law enforcement was strongly
encouraged. In Massachusetts a new legal statue put into effect in 2014 makes exclusionary
discipline practices more difficult for schools to enforce by mandating parent conferences prior
to assigning discipline, requiring schools to explore alternatives to exclusionary discipline, and
requiring schools to provide educational services for students who are suspended or expelled
from school (M.G.L. c. 71, § 37H3/4). Overall, zero tolerance policies negatively impact
students of color. School discipline in general is not favorable to students of color and the higher
rates of suspensions and expulsions of students of color demonstrate a bias on the part of
educators and school administrators.

**Teacher Expectations**

Student characteristics such as race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status influence the
expectations teachers have of their students (de Boer, Bosker & van der werf, 2010). These
expectations for students are based on the stereotypes and prejudices that are deeply engrained in
humans and the way they process information (Anderson-Clark, Green, Henley, 2008). For
many teachers, they are unaware of how they may perceive their students and often expect less
of them because they view their race, neighborhood and language patterns as being inferior
(Dray & Wisneski, 2011; Morris, 2005). Morris (2005) argues that schools implicitly favor
white students over students of color teachers often use visual cues to make interpretations about
their students. Interpretations are made based on race, ethnicity, style of speech, clothing,
residential location, and engagement behaviors of students, and many white teachers interpret
these visual cues as indicators of lower class, or less able students (Morris, 2005).
Expectations and beliefs are embedded in the way humans process information. Students of color students are perceived to be less intelligent and teachers expect them to do worse in school than white students (Cross, DeVaney & Jones, 2001; Jussim & Harber, 2005; Shepherd, 2011). Other studies have shown that white teaching candidates have negative opinions about students from other races and cultures (Hollins, Torres-Guzman, 2005; Vaught & Castagno, 2008), and another study found that pre-service teachers believe teaching in a diverse schools is more challenging than teaching in a predominately white school (Morris, 2005; Wildhagen, 2012). Students of color are frequently reported to be more difficult to teach, and perceived to be exerting less effort and conforming less to classroom behavioral expectations than white student (Downey & Pribesh, 2004; Frankenberg, 2012; Wildhagen, 2012). These studies demonstrate that teachers expect non-white students to be less capable, less motivated, and more challenging to teach than white students.

**Deficit Thinking Model**

A deficit thinking model is the belief that some students are unsuccessful in school because of personal deficiencies, not because of school policies or procedures (Dray & Wisneski, 2011). Deficit thinking relies on the assumption that students of color are less-than, at a disadvantage, and at-risk of being unsuccessful at school. Teachers who view students through a deficit perspective believe race is an excuse for the failures of students of color and they often believe students of color are less capable and intelligent than white students (Walker, 2011). The deficit beliefs rely on something being wrong with students of color personally or in their homes, such as the lack of value in education, the underexposure to academic dialogue, poor behavioral norms, and poverty (Delpit, 2012). Pollack (2012) studied the power of deficit narratives and found that deficit narratives reinforce educators’ deficit beliefs, contribute to school cultures of
low expectation, contribute to the abdication of teacher responsibility, and have a significant influence on new teachers. Pollack (2012) believes that deficit narratives among teachers leads to less challenging school work, lowered expectations, and inaccurately remove the school or teacher from being blamed for the achievement gap. Instead, children and families are blamed for their lack of perceived readiness or willingness to participate effectively in school, and schools no longer become the culprit for the achievement gap.

**Expectations and the Achievement Gap**

Much like teacher bias, expectations teachers have of their students of color impacts student performance and achievement. The link between teacher expectations and students achievement is not a new area of research. Rosenthal and Jacobson’s (1968) seminal research, The Pygmalion study, discovered that teachers’ beliefs are subtly communicated to students, influencing their achievement, and they discovered that students believe their teachers and act accordingly in response to these subtleties (Brault, Janosz & Archambault, 2014; Rosenthal and Jacobson, 1968; Tenenbaum & Ruck, 2007). This study was significant in that it proved a link between what teachers expected of students and actual achievement by falsely providing teachers with information on students who would flourish academically during the school year. Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) discovered that teachers communicated differently with students whom they expected to be higher achieving students, and as a result, the students demonstrated higher rates of achievement than their peers.

The results of the Pygmalion study are troubling, especially since schools are becoming increasingly more diverse and common stereotypes continue to exist about the educational aptitude of students of color. For example, in a study of children’s voices, participants described African-American speakers as less intelligent and ambitious than white voices (Sheperd, 2011),
and a study of 130 elementary school teachers found that teachers overwhelmingly assigned low achieving scores to vignettes with students with ethnic sounding names compared to the same vignette using a student with a white sounding name (Anderson-Clark, Green, Henley, 2008). Tenenbaum and Ruck (2007) discovered that teachers’ expectations and speech patterns were different for white students and students of color, with greater amount of positive speech directed at white students and higher rates of negative referrals, to special education and discipline for example, directed at students of color. These results indicate that teachers have lowered expectations for students of color.

Lowered expectations may be contributing to the achievement gap. Low teacher expectations lead to lower engagement, self-expectations, learning opportunities and achievement among students, while high teacher expectation lead to more effective teaching strategies and increased student performance (Brault et al., 2014). The self-fulfilling prophecy, or the difference between actual intelligence and student achievement based on non-genetic factors like teacher expectations, have a greater impact on African-American students and students with a low socioeconomic status (de Boer et al., 2010). Expectations are like feedback. Students with negative or neutral feedback from teachers start high school with lower levels of academic achievement and are often placed in lower track or remedial classes, classes which often offer less challenging curriculums (de Boer et al., 2010). To combat the achievement gap, students of color need more positive speech and positive feedback from teachers, as well as teachers who believe in their educational aptitude.

Pringle, Lyons and Booker (2010) studied African-American student perceptions of teacher expectations and learned that students overwhelmingly believed race and ethnicity was a factor in how teachers treated them in class. In the study, students made a strong connection
between teacher expectations and whether or not they believed the teacher liked them and cared about their success in school (Pringle et al., 2010). Many of the 48 students studied felt their white teachers had lowered expectations for African-American students and most believed they demonstrated these feelings in class (Pringle et al., 2010). McKenzie (2009) suggests that most students know how their teachers feel about them, and even if teachers are not overt in their expression, the impact of lowered expectations can have a negative effect on students and their chances of being successful in school. Lowered expectations of students of color, or a deficit thinking mindset about the capabilities of students of color, hinder student achievement and contribute to the Achievement Gap.

An example of lowered expectations for students of color can be seen in the equity and access to Advanced Placement (AP) classes in high school. The College Board reports that four out of five African-American high school students are either excluded from AP courses, or they attend a school that does not offer AP courses (College Board, 2014). Research conducted by the College Board proves that students of color, based on PSAT scores, were less likely to be enrolled in AP courses than their White classmates. A 2014 AP Report demonstrated that White students account for 58% of the high school population and 56% of AP enrollment, whereas African-American students represent 14.5% of the high school population and only 9% of AP enrollment (College Board, 2014). The same is true for honors classes in high schools, where higher income White and Asian students are typically tracked and students of color are often excluded (Barshay, 2016). The deliberate tracking, decision to offer AP courses in schools, and teacher recommendations that exclude students of color from honors and AP courses is based on lowered expectations of teachers for students of color compared to their White peers.
Summation

Achievement tests conducted on infants have found no intellectual difference exists between white and non-white children, yet two years into school African-American students lag behind white students (Fryer & Levitt, 2013), and by the end of high school, African-American students demonstrate achievement equal to a white eighth grade student (Lewis et al., 2008). Students of color are not demonstrating academic success in schools, the cause of which has puzzled teachers, school administrators, policymakers and researchers. All studies indicate that there is something occurring in school that contributes to the truncated achievement of students of color.

Federal and state mandates have been created to address and correct the lower achievement of non-white students, but none of these policies have tackled teachers’ perceptions of educating students of color. Instead, they focus on policy and structural issues, such as teacher credentials and the types of courses all students should take in high school. The mandates have not addressed teacher training to increase knowledge about students of color, culturally relevant teaching practices, or about correcting the deficit mindset held by many white teachers. The cause of these deficit beliefs, according to Ladson-Billing (1999) is that whiteness is “normal” and all others are categorized as other and different. This system of beliefs is also what leads students of color to be disciplined at higher rates than white students and is what fails to engage non-white students in the school curriculum – their learning style and classroom behaviors are deemed deficit and lacking. There is an overwhelming lack of cultural relevance, knowledge and awareness of racism in schools. This lack of information hinders the progress of students of color.
Understanding teachers’ perceptions of educating students of color cannot easily be explored through federal and state legislation. Changes in the mindset of teachers needs to occur, and this change should ideally occur in teacher education and pre-service programs, before teachers enter diverse classrooms. Schools are increasingly more diverse in language, race and culture, yet the teaching population is predominately middle-class and white (Cochran-Smith, 1995; Reynolds & Brown, 2010). Many pre-service and current teachers are unaware of the systematic oppression that occurs within society or school, and their approach to viewing all students the same, regardless of race or ethnicity only reinforces this oppression in schools. Despite this, 80% of new teachers begin their career in schools with high percentages of students of color; the majority of which are unprepared to work in a diverse environment (Lewis et al., 2008). Reynolds and Brown (2010) question why middle-class white teachers are employed when studies overwhelmingly indicate that they have lower expectations of students of color, view students from cultures other than their own as deficit, and are under-educated about other races and cultures, especially when research indicates that teacher quality has the most significant impact on student achievement (Rivkin, Hanushek & Kain, 2005). Schools fail to employ a diverse teaching population, to incorporate a culturally relevant pedagogy, or even to provide explicit professional development and training to teachers so they can become more successful educators of students of color. Academic improvements for students of color rely on understanding teacher perceptions so that both schools and teacher preparation programs can better train teachers to work with diverse students and to eliminate practices that are adversative to academic excellence (Lewis et al., 2008).

Derrick Bell (1992) believes that race and racism pervades all components of American life. Schools permeate racism. Race is an overlooked variable in the consequence of student
achievement for students of color and a significant cause of the achievement gap (Kozol, 2005).

For schools and society to become equitable for students of color, schools need to address the
systematic disenfranchisement of students of color; the first step to achieve this goal is through
an understanding of teacher perceptions of students of color, which ultimately will allow schools
and teachers to redress the inequalities that currently exist in public schools.
Chapter 3: Research Design

Introduction

The goal of this study was to examine the experiences of white classroom teachers currently educating students of color. A review of the corresponding literature identified that students of color lag behind their white peers in school; students of color perform lower on high stakes testing, face higher rates of exclusionary discipline, are more likely to drop out, and are less likely to graduate from high school (Frankenberg, 2012; Wildhagen, 2012). The research also indicated many white teachers lack the knowledge and skills to be effective educators for students of color (Boser, 2011). This study provided valuable information on this phenomenon from the perspective of white classroom teachers. The following research question drove this study: How do white teachers make sense of teaching students of color?

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) study was to investigate how white teachers make sense of educating students of color and to suggest practices to better enable teachers to create classrooms that are more equitable for all students at an urban vocational high school located in the Northeast.

Positionality

My previous teaching experience in the Washington D.C. and Boston Public Schools, two large, highly diverse public school districts, as well as my current role as a high school principal in a diverse school, led me to believe that white teachers, despite how committed to teaching in urban schools they may be, have a bias, known or unknown, that impacts the classroom interactions and expectations of students of color compared to white students.
I am a white, middle class female, grew up in an overwhelmingly white town, and attended majority white schools. I decided to become a teacher while in college, and was eager to begin my career in a school that was the opposite of the schools that I attended as a student. I was ill prepared for my first teaching experience in the Washington D.C. Public Schools. I was hired to work in a school labeled as “underperforming” that served a 100% African American student population. I wanted to teach there and was eager to make a difference, but my own lack of knowledge and experience with the students of color provided a steep learning curve. It was through the assistance, candid conversations about African-American culture, mentoring and modeling from my African-American colleagues, as well as my own desire, that I was able to become a more effective teacher for students of color.

I am currently an administrator in a school with a diverse student population and overwhelmingly white, middle class teacher population. As most teacher preparation programs fail to prepare teaching candidates for the reality of working with diverse students (Hollins, Torres-Guzman, 2005; Vaught & Castagno, 2008), my school has failed to provide new teachers with the necessary information and support to be effective instructors of students of color.

My research topic is not without the possibility of bias. I am a white, privileged member of the dominant class. I have no firsthand knowledge of oppression nor do I have experience as a member of an oppressed group. My research aimed to make suggestions to benefit an oppressed group and there is the possibility, as presented by Briscoe (2005), that my own group membership prevents me from understanding students of color. Being a racial and cultural outsider may cause misinterpretations and misunderstanding, based solely on the lens that shapes the way I see and interpret the world. Despite my own differences from students of color, there were opportunities that existed within my research to learn about authentic feelings and
perceptions of teachers towards students of color. I offset this bias by relying on my previous teaching experiences as well as my interest in providing an equitable education for students of color. I have had experiences that enable me to empathize with both well-intentioned white teachers, and with students of color. I plan to use my position of power as the principal of a diverse high school as well as my recognition of privilege in connecting with white teachers to make institutional changes in my school to assist in implementing structures and procedures for teachers in the school that will benefit the overall achievement and equity for students of color.

**Research Design**

This study used a qualitative research method to better understand white teachers’ experiences educating students of color. Qualitative research is “a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (Creswell, 2007, p.4). Creswell (2007) further explains qualitative researchers attempt to make sense and interpret phenomena and the meaning people bring with the phenomena in their natural setting. Qualitative research is best suited when the purpose of the researcher is to study individuals who have experience with a particular phenomenon (Creswell, 2012). In this study, the researcher sought to understand the experiences of white teachers with similar backgrounds who instruct students of color, a topic which required conversations with teachers and a deeper level of understanding of a phenomenon.

This research relied on participants sharing their stories about teaching students of color, to explain areas where they find both success and challenges, and to explain how they make sense of their experiences with students of color in their classes. The research was conducted in a neutral location, such as the school or a local library, and the location was driven by the
participants based on their convenience and level of comfort. All interviews were be conducted face-to-face.

A constructivism-interpretivism paradigm was be utilized in this study. A constructivism-interpretivism paradigm necessitates researcher-participant dialogue so the researcher can understand the lived experiences of the participant (Ponterotto, 2005). To gather valuable data from participants, the participants must trust the researcher and the two must engage in a reciprocal conversation where thoughts, feelings, and information are exchanged. The experiences and values of the researcher are connected, not separated from the data (Ponterotto, 2005). Strong data collection relies on meaningful interactions between the participant and the researcher; this helped ensure that honest information and stories are shared throughout the interviews.

Qualitative research’s strength is the inductive approach utilized by the researcher and the focus on words allows for a better understanding of social and human problems (Maxwell, 2005). Additionally, “qualitative researchers study things in their natural setting, attempting to make sense of, or interpret phenomena in terms of the meaning people bring to them” (Creswell, 2007, p.36). Using stories and experiences of white teachers, the researcher was better able to understand how teachers make sense of and explain their own experiences teaching students of color.

Research Tradition

Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) is a qualitative research approach developed by Professor Jonathan Smith. IPA is rooted in phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography (McNabb, 2016; Smith, 2011; Smith & Osborn, 2007). Phenomenology, fathered by Husserl, is the study of the lived experiences of people, but it does not offer explanation of
descriptions (Creswell, 2013; Wagstaff, Jeong, Nolan, Wilson, Tweedlie, Phillips, Senu & Holland, 2014). Hermeneutics is a theory of interpretation, and in IPA often there is a double hermeneutics, when the researcher and respondent both try to make sense of an experience at the same time (Callary, Rathwell & Young, 2015; Larkin et al, 2011; McNabb, 2016; Smith, 2011). IPA has had popularity within the field of health psychology as an alternative to the top-down traditional approach and in recent years has spread to other disciplines (Reid et al, 2005). Reid et al, (2005) argues that IPA has realist ontology, more so than other qualitative disciplines, and offers researchers the opportunity to combine research and practice.

IPA focuses on an examination of lived experiences, how these experience have meaning to participant, and how the participants explains or makes sense of the experience (Brocki & Wearden, 2006; Reid, Flowers & Larkin, 2005; Smith, 2011; Smith & Osborn, 2007). IPA was an ideal research methodology for this study for three distinct reasons. This research sought to understand the experiences of white, middle class teachers working in schools and classrooms with predominately students of color. The teachers’ lived experiences with students of color have caused them to make meaning and sense of their students’ educational successes and failures, and this research sought to understand how teachers have made sense of their experiences, and what meaning these experiences hold for the teacher. Second, IPA does not require bracketing, or the separation of researcher assumptions from the study topic, which is important given that this study occured in my place of employment. Finally, IPA research extends the research method to include the researcher as an important component in interpreting the messages of the study participants as well as understanding how they themselves perceived the phenomenon (Smith, 2010). Based on these three unique perspectives of IPA, it was the most appropriate research approach to match the research topic.
Participants

The goal of this study was to understand how white teachers make sense of teaching students of color. To achieve this goal, purposeful sampling was utilized. Smith and Osborn (2003) believe that purposeful sampling is consistent with the intentions of interpretative phenomenological research and analysis. Purposeful sampling enables deliberate selection to achieve the greatest information (Maxwell, 2005). For this study, four to six white teachers who attended predominately white, K-12 public schools in predominately white communities and intentionally sought teaching positions in diverse public schools were sought as participants. This study took place at an urban vocational high school in the Northeast, at a school where the teaching population is overwhelmingly white and middle class.

Interested teachers at the school were asked to complete a brief survey about their own schooling, background, and interest in teaching positions when they pursued employment. Based on this information, potential teachers were contacted to discuss their answers to ensure they meet the criteria for participation. Once participants are selected, they were all advised about an Informed Consent Form, which explained the reason for the study and why the participant was selected. Participants were asked to participate in three rounds of interviews, each lasting approximately 45-60 minutes. The location of the interviews was selected in a comfortable, neutral location. Participants were not be given compensation for their role in this study.

The sample size, five teachers, provided an authentic perspective of the experiences of teachers’ understanding of teaching students of color. The topic of this study required trust and comfort between the participant and researcher. Given that the research site is a single school district and half of the teachers are vocational teachers and therefore do not meet the
requirements for the study, a sample size of four-six participants was sought for the study.

**Recruitment and Access**

The researcher obtained permission from the school superintendent (Appendix A) to use the school and teachers to conduct research. The superintendent was kept abreast of the study as it proceeded, including receiving copies of consent forms, IRB protocols, and descriptions about the scope and purpose of the study. The superintendent offered assistance in any way necessary for the study, including distributing a “Call for Participants” (Appendix B) to potential teacher participants in the school.

A “Call for Participants” was be distributed to all white teachers in the school. This document contained a description of the study, purpose of the study, and a short survey to assist in identifying potential matching participants in the study. Interested teachers were asked to participate in a brief telephone survey. Interested participants were made aware that their interest did not ensure they would be selected as a participant, and they were informed that all information presented in the phone survey was confidential.

When five participants were been selected, the researcher worked with the participants to coordinate interview days, times and to select neutral locations.

**Protection of Human Subjects**

As required by Northeastern University, the researcher received consent to conduct the research described by the Institutional Review Board. All research complied with regulations to protect the physical, emotional, and social well-being of all participants (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009). The researcher completed the National Institute of Health (NIH) training course entitled, “Protecting Human Research Participants”.
Participants were advised of their right to end their participation in the study at any point and signed a consent form (Appendix C) outlining the scope and commitment of their participation prior to beginning research. Finally, all responses and information shared by participants were kept confidential and pseudonyms were used to ensure anonymity.

**Data Collection**

In IPA studies, interviews are the primary method used for gathering data. In this qualitative study, the researcher was the primary instrument for the collection of data, with the main data sources being interviews and journal reviews (Creswell, 2012). Three, semi-structured interviews were conducted with each of the five participants. The goals of the interview were to move from past to present to future, and to scaffold the interviews so that questions began open-ended and informal and progressed into more formal prompts as needed (Appendix D). In the first interview, background information was learned. An understanding of the teachers own schooling and educational experiences was sought and the teachers were asked about the level of diversity in their own schooling, K-12 and higher education, as well as in the community where they grew up. The second interview focused on the teachers’ desire to work in a diverse school and with students of color as well as their experiences as a new teacher in a diverse school. In the final interview, teachers were asked about what information and knowledge they wished they knew as a new educator in a diverse school and what they believed teachers should know prior to working with students of color. All interview questions were framed in a manner as to not restrict the participant’s responses (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). During the interviews, the researcher asked the participant if their interpretation was accurate and had an opportunity to reflect and seek additional information if necessary, and this dialogue was helpful in guiding the depth, scope and accuracy of the interviews (Frankel et al., 2012).
Semi-structured interviews were utilized throughout the interviews with several questions and follow-up questions prepared in advance. Smith & Osborn (2007) argue that semi-structured interviews are the preferred method for IPA studies because it is a flexible data collection instrument. In semi-structured interviews, the researcher and participant are able to engage in a dialogue and use their questions to more deeply examine interesting or noteworthy topics that emerge during the interview (Reid et al, 2005; Smith, 2011; Smith & Osborn, 2007). Questions were open-ended to encourage participants to freely tell stories and respond in ways that they felt most comfortable (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The face-to-face interviews were digitally recorded and professionally transcribed. During and after the interview, the researcher took notes to assist in creating follow up questions and to provide clarification. All interview transcripts and notes were kept confidential.

In addition to the three part interviews, a document review of the journal maintained by the participants was reviewed. Not all participants chose to maintain a journal. The purpose of the journals was two-fold. First, the journals assisted in the creation of interview questions. Thoughts, reflections and topics written about in the journals were explored in more detail during the interviews. Second, the journals assisted in the validity of the research as a point of triangulation to check if what was said during the interview and what was written in the journal matched. Overall, the journals were a somewhat useful tool in addition to the in-depth, semi-structured interviews.

**Data Storage**

Original interview files were saved on the researcher’s private, password protected computer, iPad and/or iPhone. Each of these devices is backed up to both a cloud based server as well as an external storage device, both of which are password protected. Paper copies of
materials related to this study were stored in a private office in a locked cabinet. All names and identifying information were removed from the files to ensure anonymity for all participants. All research data will be stored for five years. Once five years has passed, all data will be permanently deleted.

**Data Analysis**

Analysis is crucially important in an IPA research study because data must be reviewed and analyzed for meaning rather than just for repetition of information. In IPA methodology, the researcher must closely describe and understand experience of the participants through their words and stories (Smith et al., 2009). Because of this, the researcher must engage in a lengthy analysis of the text as well as a deep process of interpretation. To create this level of analysis and interpretation, the researcher used the interview transcripts to create codes, to look for themes, to connect themes, and to analyze individual interviews with other interviews. The researcher read and re-read the interviews to understand the data from multiple perspectives (Smith et al, 2009). Qualitative data from the interviews was analyzed using inductive coding with the assistance of the computer program MAXQDA. For each open-ended question, in vivo, emotion, descriptive, and process coding was used based on the responses from the participants (Saldaña, 2009). These codes were organized into themes using code mapping, which includes finding areas in which responses overlapped. Initial themes were rooted in what the respondent actually said in the interview (Callary et al, 2015; Smith & Osborn, 2007; Wagstaff et al, 2014). The second cycle of coding involved taking the most prominent themes found throughout all the coding, and applying them to look for patterns. Connecting themes enabled the researcher to note emergent themes and make sense of the emerging theme (Reid et al, 2005). Once themes were clustered, quotations and phrases were pulled from the text to support the theme; this
process was important to ensure the words and meaning of the respondent was not lost in the analysis (Smith & Osborn, 2007). Finally, the themes were placed into a table with corresponding sections from the text. After redoing this process with the transcripts from each interview, an analysis was conducted using the information from all respondents. During this step, the researcher clustered repeating themes while also identifying new themes. The purpose was to establish what is both common and different among the separate interview texts (Callary et al, 2015; Smith & Osborn, 2007; Wagstaff et al, 2014). This analysis was intended to enable the researcher to identify how the participants make meaning of educating students of color.

**Trustworthiness**

Establishing trust between the researcher and participants was essential in this study and was paramount in the overall value of this study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The validation of this study occurred through several different methods, including prolonged engagement, triangulation, member checking, and pilot interviews.

Prolonged engagement is when the researcher spends significant time understanding the phenomenon by understanding the culture. The researcher is a white female who grew up in a predominately white community and attended predominately white, K-12 schools. The researcher sought employment in a diverse school and has spent her whole career working in diverse schools. Additionally, the researcher has been employed by the urban, diverse vocational school where this research will be conducted for seven years. This experience has allowed the researcher to both understand the school culture and to build positive relationships with the teachers in the school. This personal and professional knowledge provided validity to the study. The researcher used analytic memos, or notes about facial expressions and impressions, for example, throughout each interview as additional sources of information.
Creswell (2007) explains triangulation as the process of looking at evidence from different sources to offer perspective. For this study, participants were asked to maintain a journal and information from the journal was used in addition to the face-to-face interviews. This use of multiple or different sources, or triangulation, added to the trustworthiness of the data collected from participants and offered different opinions and perspectives from the in-person interview.

Member checking occurred after the interviews were completed. The researcher shared data to maintain accuracy and logical interpretation, which Lincoln & Guba (1985) feel is a critical technique to establish credibility in a qualitative study. All participants had the opportunity to review the transcribed interviews and were able to make corrections for errors and possible misinterpretation.

Finally, a pilot interview, or trial run interview, was conducted prior to the real interviews being conducted to both practice the technique of interviewing and to gather feedback on the questions. Feedback sought includes information on question clarity and if the questions asked were able to gather the information sought. The participant in the pilot interview was someone who met the criteria for the study who currently teaches in a different vocational high school in the Northeast. The participant knew they were a pilot participant and not a participant in the real study. The feedback received from the pilot interview was helpful in improving the overall questions and interview process.

Limitations

This study provided a limited view of the experiences of white teachers’ experiences educating students of color. The participants were from both relatively similar homogeneous demographic backgrounds and had personal school experiences that are similar. This study was
conducted using teachers from one high school in the Northeast, so the information gathered may not reflect the reality of other teachers, other schools in the Northeast, or other schools in the country. The honesty of the participants could not be controlled.

The researcher in this study is the high school principal, which may have introduce a level of bias, as the participant pool may be reduced based on the researcher’s role in the building. However, the researcher has worked at the school in other capacities before becoming the principal and has developed positive working relationships with many educators in the school. In an attempt to limit bias, no teacher involved in this study had the researcher as their primary evaluator.

**Conclusion**

Significant research exists that identifies that students of color are not succeeding in K-12 schools compared to their white peers. Various markers, such as high stakes testing, discipline reports, dropout rates and graduation statistics all prove students of color are at a significant disadvantage in schools (Wildhagen, 2012). Studies and reports also prove that white teachers in diverse, urban schools are predominately unprepared, underqualified and often view teaching students of color as less desirable teaching positions (Frankenberg, 2012). Missing from the research is the experience of white teachers who sought teaching positions in diverse, urban schools and who have stayed in such districts. Many of these teachers had aspirations to work in urban, diverse schools despite their own lack of knowledge and skillset to initially be effective teachers of students of color. Understanding their experiences and what they have learned on the job could offer insight into specific training and educational opportunities that can be created for other new teachers. As hiring diverse teachers becomes more challenging (Boser, 2011), specific training and programs to enable white teachers to be highly skilled teachers for students of color
could be the answer to creating better educational experiences for urban, diverse students.
Chapter 4: Summary Findings

The goal of this interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) study was to better understand the perspective of white classroom teachers who are responsible for educating students of color in the K-12 classroom. A growing population in public schools, the National Center for Education Statistics (2014) reports that students of color represent approximately 48% of students enrolled in public school in the United States. Despite the growing number of students of color, the teaching force has steadily remained overwhelmingly white, with approximately 17% of teachers of color working in public schools (Boser, 2011). A qualitative approach was appropriate for this study as it allowed teachers to describe their experiences educating students of color (Smith et al., 2009), as well as enabled teachers to explain and describe how they made sense of their experience educating students of color. The participant’s way of thinking and their motivations are specific to IPA and this methodology allowed the researcher to understand the participant’s perspective as a result of in depth conversations.

The purpose of the study was to understand teachers’ perspectives about educating students of color and the potential impact this could have on students of color. This study examined the experiences of high school teachers at a public, diverse vocational high school in Massachusetts. Based on the overall level of school diversity, all teachers included in this study have students of color in all of their classes, as students of color represent 56% of the overall school population (DESE, 2016). The definition of students of color is those who self-identify their race and/or ethnicity as something other than white and/or Caucasian. This study highlights the experiences of white teachers educating students of color from the perspective of white teachers.
Research Questions

A quality education for all students requires an understanding of the ethnic and racial diversity of students, their learning styles, and the culturally relevant instructional practices necessary to enable all students to be successful in school. To do this, teachers need to understand and make sense of their own ability to educate students of color. Thus, the purpose of this study was to investigate how white teachers make sense of educating students of color and suggest practices that will better enable teachers to create classrooms that are equitable for all students.

Central Research Question: The overall research question guiding this inquiry is as follows:

How do white teachers make sense of teaching students of color?

Data Collection and Results

Recruitment of Participants and Interview Protocol

The research utilized one school district, the district where the researcher is employed, to recruit participants for this study. This school district is made up of one regional, vocational high school serving students in grades 9-12. Students from five different towns can attend this vocational high school instead of their own town high school at no charge to the student. The researcher solicited participation consent through a letter to the superintendent requesting permission to conduct the study (Appendix A). The superintendent granted permission for both the study to be conducted at the school and for teachers in the district to be contacted.

A Call for Participants was sent to all white teachers in the district who met the criteria for the study. The researcher received one email response to the Call for Participants. Upon receipt of the email, the researcher arranged a phone interview with the interested person to discuss the focus of the study and to ensure the participant met the established criteria set forth in
the Call for Participants. The phone call also enabled the research to be given names of potential participants who may be interested in participating in the study. The study intended to utilize purposeful sampling to recruit candidates, however, the lack of response to the Call for Participants led to the utilization of snowball sampling. Snowball sampling occurs when existing participants suggest other potential candidates for the research study (Morgan, 2008). As potential research participants were identified, all potential participants were screened to be sure they met the criteria set forth in the Call for Participants.

The study involved a total of five participants. Participants were assigned a pseudonym according to their gender (Mary, Tom, Emma, Jack, and Jane). Additionally, because this study occurred at one high school, the specific academic department that the participant works in has been given a pseudonym to ensure anonymity for all participants.

Description of Participants

Mary. Mary is a professional status teacher in the mathematics department and has taught for 12 years. Prior to working at this vocational high school, Mary taught at in a large, urban school district in Massachusetts. Mary always wanted to be a teacher, but faced pressure from a parent who was a teacher to pursue another career. While in college, Mary decided to complete her undergraduate degree in her major and then attended a graduate program in education. Mary believes education is her calling and is the right profession for her. She is married and has one, school-aged child.

Tom. Tom is a professional status science teacher with six years of teaching experience at the vocational high school. Tom did not intend to become a teacher; instead he was enrolled in a graduate program, did not like it, and found a teaching job as he was looking for something
else to do. Tom feels like he stumbled into the profession rather than seeking it out, but is happy he decided to become a teacher. Tom is newly married.

**Emma.** Emma is a professional status special education teacher who has taught for five years, all of which have been at the vocational high school. Emma had various life experiences that have allowed her to teach others, and she feels these experiences are what attracted her to the field of education. Emma was hired by the district from her graduate program in education. Emma is particularly interested in her dual role as teacher and advocate for students in the school.

**Jack.** Jack is a professional status music teacher in the district. Jack has worked in the district for six years. Prior to working in this district, Jack worked in a large, urban district in Massachusetts. Jack did not intend to become a teacher; instead, he took an internship in college at a public school that led to a permanent job after graduation, which eventually led to him becoming a teacher. Jack acknowledged life takes interesting turns, and in hindsight, is happy for the opportunities that he fell into because he enjoys the teaching profession. Jack is married and a parent to a school aged child.

**Jane.** Jane is a professional status English teacher having spent all of her nine years as a teacher in the district. Jane is the daughter of a teacher and states that she always wanted to be a teacher. She majored in English and education while in college and took a teaching job after graduation. While teaching, Jane pursued a Masters degree in education. Jane is a busy mother of two young, non-school aged children.

**General Demographics.** The participants represented similar demographics. Three of the participants were female and two of the participants were male. All of the participants were white and ranged in age from late-20s to late 30s. The teaching experience of the participants
ranged from five years to twelve years. This range allowed them to recall their introductory years of teaching and also allowed them enough distance from their introductory teaching years to be reflective. Three of the participants have earned a Masters degree, one has earned a professional teaching license through a program, and one is pursuing a degree. None of the participants have received any specific training on teaching students of color.

**Participant Confidentiality**

The goal of the researcher was to keep all information confidential. Interviews were transcribed through an online transcription service named rev.com. The researcher received a non-disclosure agreement to ensure confidentiality. The researcher assigned pseudonyms to the name of the school and the teacher, as well as assigned a different department to each participant to ensure confidentiality. Audio files of the interviews were recorded on a locked and password protected device, and after the interviews were transcribed, the files were deleted. All hand written notes, reflective memos and journals associated with this research were kept in a locked drawer in a locked office. All material related to this research will remain locked and be will destroyed after five years.

**Data Collection Procedures**

The first step in the data collection process was a pilot interview. The pilot interview was conducted with a person who met the criteria set forth in the call for participants, but was someone who was employed at a school district with similar demographics. The pilot interview occurred prior to any interviews with participants. The purpose of the pilot interview was for the researcher to practice and get feedback on the interview questions, as well as practice the interviewing process. The pilot interview proved to be useful in that the researcher received
feedback that some of the questions seemed confusing or unclear to the pilot participant. Specifically, two original questions were lengthy and possibly too open-ended which caused the participant to be unsure what was being asked of them. Using this feedback, the two questions were reworded to be less vague.

Prior to the interviews, the researcher was able to speak with each participant about the study to verify their criteria for participation, to discuss the purpose of the study, to gather basic demographic information about the participants, to discuss expectations and time commitments for participation, as well as answer any questions the participants had about the study or their participation in the study. This conversation was useful because it allowed the researcher and participants to engage in a casual discussion prior to a more formal, audiotaped interview.

Interviews were conducted in a meeting space selected by the participant. The researcher suggested various interview locations for two of the participants who were unsure of where they wanted to hold the interviews, but ultimately, the participant determined the interview location. Overall, the participants seemed excited to participate in the study. Dialogue was natural during the interviews. Participants were eager to share their experiences as teachers of students of color, and seemed particularly interested in sharing their reflections on their early career as a teacher.

During the interviews, the researcher utilized semi-structured questions. The participants responded directly to the question asked, but the questions were open-ended enough that they allowed participants to expand on their responses and to add examples and stories to support their answers. The story telling and sense making is key in interpretive phenomenological studies and allows for authentic analysis of themes (Smith et al., 2009). In one interview, the researcher often asked if the participant had an example or story to support the answer; over the
course of the interviews, this participant began to expand on their answers and offer supportive examples, most likely as they became more comfortable with the interview process. The structure of the interviews seemed to work well for each participant; none of the participants needed to end the interviews early based on time, and none seemed exhausted by the number of questions at the end of any interview.

**Data Analysis**

After each interview, the researcher uploaded the audio file for transcription to rev.com. Once transcribed interviews were received, each interview was analyzed and notes were made by hand before being uploaded to the software program MAXQDA. This program allowed both individual coding and analysis, as well as access to all interviews on one screen.

The following steps, as defined by Smith et al., (2009), were utilized in reviewing the data: reading and re-reading, initial noting, developing emergent themes, searching for connections across emergent themes, moving to the next case, and looking for patterns across cases. The researcher read and reviewed each interview from each participant as separate and different responses. After reading each interview several times, the researcher used MAXQDA and hand-coding to establish broad based emergent themes. As suggested by Saldaña (2013), the researcher progressed to second cycle coding. The researcher created and populated sub themes within the thematic codes, which allowed similarities to become apparent to the researcher.

Using the four overarching themes, Teacher Perspective, Pedagogical Strategies, Supports and Assistance, and Emotional Connections, the researcher reviewed the themes and sub themes. The Teacher Perspective theme had a total of 172 occurrences. The occurrences fell into the sub themes Knowledge of Working with Students of Color (72 occurrences), Preparedness to Educate Students of Color (57 occurrences), and Perceived Difficulty of the Job
The Pedagogical Strategies theme had a total of 152 occurrences. These occurrences fell into the sub themes Colorblindness (75 occurrences), Modification of Academic Program (27 occurrences), Expectations of Students (33 occurrences), and Culturally Proficient Materials (17 occurrences). The Supports and Assistance theme had 252 occurrences. These occurrences fell into the sub themes Support from Colleagues (114 occurrences), Formal Training and Professional Development (9 occurrences), School Based Training (12 occurrences), and Learning by Doing (117 occurrences). The final theme, Emotional Connections, had 193 occurrences. The occurrences fell into the sub themes Positive Classroom Experiences (97 occurrences), Developed Confidence Teaching Students of Color (21 occurrences), and Long-term Relationships with Students (75 occurrences).

**Discussion of Themes**

The themes and sub themes identified are based on the interviews with participants who described their experiences teaching students of color. Researcher observations from interviews and research memos were also included in the creating of sub themes and themes. Each of these themes and sub-themes are described in greater detail below.

**Theme One – Teacher Perspective**

The teacher perspective theme identified the personal experiences of teachers during their journey from student in a predominately white school to educator in a diverse school. Teacher perspective in this area provided an understanding of the knowledge, beliefs, assumptions and experiences as a job seeker and new employee in a highly diverse school system. The sub themes within this theme include knowledge of working with students of color, preparedness to educate students of color, and perceived difficulty of the job.
The first sub theme within the teacher perspective theme was knowledge of working with students of color. Participants were able to outline their own educational path, and share their knowledge of working with students of color. While some participants expressed some knowledge of students of color, most had extremely limited knowledge of working with students of color prior to being hired into their first teaching position. Emma recounted a moment when she was a student in school.

I distinctly remember I had to write an essay for Martin Luther King Day about how things would be different if he hadn’t existed. My good friend was African American, but I didn’t make the connection. I wrote about an Indian kid in our school. My teacher actually had to explain it to me; my friend had white features, I didn’t even know she was African American.

The inadequate knowledge participants had about working with students of color extended into the hiring process for participants. Mary shared her feelings prior to beginning her first year of teaching. “I was very nervous going in because I felt I did not have any experience with any population other than white populations. I had no idea what I was walking into on the first day”.

Tom describes a similar experience when he was in his initial days of teaching at the school. Tom states he was unfamiliar with both the school and the town, and had recently relocated from a different state.

I thought it was so weird that there were stores in the center of town that were bakeries that also sold phone cards and halter tops. It didn’t occur to me why that was. I remember the attendance sheets on my first day, most of the names and the pronunciations were not phonemes that were familiar to me.
Emma’s, Mary’s and Tom’s responses highlight the depth and breadth of knowledge the participants had about working with students of color. Participants acknowledged a lack of knowledge about students of color and how this created some anxiety in the beginning of their teaching career.

The next sub theme, preparedness to educate students of color identified the experiential knowledge of participants. This sub theme supports the overarching theme of teacher perspective because it is shaped by the unique experiences and stories of each participant. Jane described her student teaching as an opportunity to increase her preparedness to teach students of color.

I was going to be looking for a teaching job in 2008 and I very much wanted a full time position. I knew I wanted to student teach in an urban district because I felt like I didn’t have enough, or any, experience there. I knew what suburban education look liked, but I didn’t know what urban education looked like. I was much more open to applying to work in urban districts after student teaching in one.

Emma shared a similar story about student teaching.

The group I teach here is in some ways less diverse than what I had for my student teaching. During student teaching, I had kids from all over central and South America and the Caribbean, like we have here, but I also had kids from different parts of Africa, from Eastern and Central Europe and a lot from India and Southeast Asia. Student teaching made me feel more prepared to take this job.

Other participants, Mary and Emma, describe courses in college that touched on multicultural topics. Mary did not feel the course was sufficient, but acknowledged it was helpful in at least providing some perspective prior to beginning her employment in a diverse school district.
The third sub code, perceived difficulty of the job, highlighted some of the beliefs and perceptions participants had about being hired into a diverse school district. It is categorized under the larger theme of teacher perspective because it directly highlights some of the beliefs and assumptions held by teachers in the early stages of their teaching career. Mary recounted how friends joked with her about violence and what “classroom supplies she would be given for the violent aspect of the community”. Tom told a story about seeing students on the first day of school.

I remember the first day when all students arrived. I was standing in the hall and had a chance to visually survey. I was like, oh, okay. This is definitely a different experience than what I am used to, this is not going to be easy.

Jane also felt the job would be difficult. She describes a visit to the school as “intimidating” and when she saw the classroom, thought, “Oh, whoa, this is different”. This perceived difficulty was not isolated to beliefs in the early stages of teaching. Participants felt the job continued to be difficult throughout the tenure of their employment. Jack reflected on how the position, in his opinion, has not gotten any easier over time.

This job is hard. I know I work with a diverse group and I have tried to learn about them, but it does not get easier. Many days are a challenge with language barriers; some students speak little or no English at all. I try to get to know them and talk to them, but sometimes I do not know what to do.

The teacher perspective theme was highlighted during the interviews as participants described their knowledge of working with students of color, preparedness to educate students of color, and perceived difficulty of the job. This theme described the feelings of uncertainty, apprehension and frustration of the participants.
Theme Two - Pedagogical Strategies

The pedagogical strategies theme identified the strategies used by white teachers working with students of color in the classroom. Teacher perspective in this area provided an overview of some of the tactics white teachers used to educate their students of color and to find meaningful classroom materials for their students. The sub themes within this theme include colorblindness, modification to academic programs, and culturally proficient materials.

Participants discussed their attempts to use pedagogy with students of color in varying degrees throughout their interviews. For some participants, they felt their content could more easily be modified, while others expressed difficulty in finding materials and connections between the curriculum and students. In all interviews, there was a strong tone of colorblindness from participants. This was evident in both how teachers viewed their students and in how they treated students. Mary described how she viewed her students of color, “These are just kids. You have to understand that. First and foremost, they are students at a school, in my class.”

Jack describes a similar opinion about teaching students of color.

When I was in that classroom, I didn't really think of it is as, these are all black or Hispanic students. I just thought these are my students, and that they need to learn and I'll do my best to teach them what they need to learn. I really didn't think about them being as minorities.

Tom also showed colorblindness when describing his expectations of students, stating “No one can tell the color of your skin from the code you write. I feel like you can make valuable contributions regardless of what you look like”. This notion of colorblindness is not the only way participants demonstrated their attempts to make sense of teaching students of color,
the second sub code, modification to academic programs, demonstrated how teachers tried to find ways for students to be successful in class.

When asked about success for students, and how participants measure success for their students of color, the responses showed the different attempts each make in the classroom to find academic success for all of their students. Jane described “progress” as her measure of success for students. She explained that the goal is the same for all students, ideally, but in actuality, the goals varied by student. Jane also explained that what she expected from students is different than what she would expect from students at a school with a higher socioeconomic status, but “they’re not starting from the same place. They can’t all get to the same place at the same time”. Mary described how academic success is different for her students of color.

Success is not a grade. It’s that feeling that when you walk out the door on a day, a month, in June, that you have learned something useful for your future. I think success is the way students present themselves.

Jack echoed these feelings in describing how academic success has to look different for students of color.

The idea is that everybody gets the same experiences and everybody learns the same, and everybody gets the same place at the end. But of course, it doesn't work like that for all students. Some student's best might not be as good as someone else's best. Ideally, yes, everybody should be at the same point at the end. But if some students are not there, and they're at their best then I guess that's okay. As long as they're learning and understanding what's going on. Not everybody's going to get an A.
When discussing academic success for students of color, several participants brought up the notion of using or not using culturally proficient materials. Emma explains her methods to maintain interest in the classroom through culturally proficient materials.

Materials wise, you have to stay current. The kids, especially the ones who lack an interest in education, can sometimes connect to current literature. Books and articles that are more reflective of their experiences are helpful to an extent. You want them to be more helpful than they are. Well maybe, English teachers want them to be more helpful than they are. I’m not sure how helpful they are for students.

Emma explained that in her classroom, she tries to use materials that are similar to what other students in the building are using because she believes this will make students feel more included and more like other students; “Student like when they are reading books like their classmates”. Tom explains how he learned to use the cultural knowledge of his students when planning lessons.

When I start teaching, I usually try to think about the content. My subject area is pretty divorced from issues of race and diversity. At the same time, it’s also not. For example today, we were discussing compound interest in class. I was aware of the fact that some students’ parents live paycheck-to-paycheck, so the notion that you can save money is unfamiliar to them. In the past, I may not have always done that. I may not have taken a step back and thought what is the full range of experience in my classroom.

Jane explained her difficulty in knowing whether to bring culturally relevant materials into the classroom.

For me it’s a topic I don’t always feel comfortable dealing with because I myself don’t have an experience growing up as a person of color or dealing with a lot of...or any
similar experiences as them. I don’t want to put them in a position to talk about something that makes them uncomfortable, unfairly. I don’t know that’s the right thing to do sometimes.

Each participant described their classroom experiences with students of color though different lenses. They described how they try to view and treat students the same, they explained how they find success in their students of color, and they explain their use and knowledge of culturally relevant materials in the classroom. Each participant was able to share a story or experience from multiple perspectives.

**Theme Three – Supports and Assistance**

The supports and assistance theme emerged from the interviews and highlighted the ways and methods teachers believed they have become more capable teachers for students of color. Four sub themes emerged in the transcript analysis that described how and where teachers received support and assistance while teaching student of color. The sub themes were support from colleagues, formal training and professional development, school based trainings, and learning by doing. Common among all participants was an active search for assistance and tools to become better and more effective educators of students of color.

The support from colleagues sub theme included both conversational and observational support. Participants described a range of experiences with colleagues that they found to be helpful in their journey to become a better teacher of students of color. Mary described common planning time among fellow teachers as being useful to her increased knowledge, Jane described department meeting time as helpful in her development, and Tom explained the relationship with his mentor his first year of teaching as being a valuable tool for development. Participants,
however, viewed less structured support from colleagues, as more important learning time. Mary described the lunchroom as a place that aided her development.

I definitely learned a lot from the people around me. I think I learned a lot of it from veteran teachers; that lunchroom talk. It wasn’t ever from a professional development or even from formalized mentoring. A lot of it was, I would be talking about a situation in my classroom and one of the veteran teachers was able to explain something about the student or could give me an idea to try next time. I always thought, ‘why didn’t I think of that?’

Tom described similar, informal learning experiences.

Honestly, now that I think back on it, I think I picked up a lot of information about cultural differences and how I should be approaching things because I was friends with a certain teacher. I would ask her a lot of questions. She usually had a reasonable understanding of different cultural differences and especially students who would come from another country, what it was like or what their education was like there. That was actually, thinking back, I think I picked up a lot of information from that, just talking about different issues that came up and putting it in context.

Emma relied on colleagues from her teacher prep program for assistance.

There’s a group of five girls that I’m still, very, very close with from my teacher prep program. We would get together when we began teaching and even send emails or texts during the day to ask questions or bounce a situation off of each other. They were, and are still, so helpful to me and I feel like I have learned so much about teaching from them.
Jack, Emma and Tom explained how a professional assignment became a professional learning opportunity to increase their classroom knowledge around teaching students of color. Both Emma and Tom were assigned to be aides in a colleagues classroom their second year, and both explain how the experience benefitted them. Emma said, “Looking back, it was so helpful. It is nice to be in another person’s room and to learn from them.” Tom had a similar feeling.

It was interesting to see how someone else handles their classroom. With respect to diversity and those issues, I don’t think that was ever something that crossed my mind when I was in the classroom. In retrospect, it was certainly something I noticed and learned about. I noticed there were many cultural differences about deference and respect.

Jack explains how watching a veteran teacher benefitted him.

Like every classroom with a new teacher, I had some unruly kids. I got to see this one teacher just take care of that class and do a really good job at it. Even those kids that were unruly in my class were focused and learning. To learn how to do that better and watch someone who was good at it, was definitely helpful.

Several participants mentioned the second and third sub themes, formal training and professional development and school based training. Some recalled such trainings, while others did not. Tom recalled training, but was uncertain about the details.

I recall we had a session during the new teacher training about diversity, I know that there was; I remember talking about it briefly. I don’t remember with whom. We did have a training my first or second year about cultural sensitivity, but honestly, I do not recall the details.
Jane recalled discussing diversity with her district assignment mentor during her first year of teaching, and both Mary and Jack recalled being told information about the demographic and socioeconomic breakdown of the school when they were hired, but they could not recollect details beyond the sharing of demographic information. Additionally, a few participants mentioned discussing diversity in a course in college, and other mentioned attending professional development outside of the building that had something to do with diversity, but none were able to speak about the trainings and experiences beyond referring to them as a memory.

The final sub theme in the supports and assistance theme is learning by doing. Several participants expressed the sentiment that learning by doing, or figuring it out along the way, was one of the key methods of support in their initial stages of working with students of color. Tom referenced “figuring it out” several times in his interview, and when asked how he figured it out, he explained.

Often by making mistakes. Nothing ever egregious. I never said anything that was like inappropriate to a student, but there were certainly times when like, for example, I might’ve expected more from a student that I received, and they were expecting more from me than they received. There may have been a disagreement about that. Things like that.

Mary also shared some of the same ideas about figuring it out on the job, when questioned about how exactly she figured it out, she explained by trial and error.

I think I just figured it out. I think it was one of those things…after making so many mistakes and doing things wrong, I tried something different and figured out if that worked. Because of these lessons, I can skip the redundant steps now and do what I have learned works.
Jane had a slightly different opinion. She also reinforced the idea of figuring things out as you go, but she felt there was a mindset that allowed the type of trial and error to occur in some people.

My own expectations, and I come from a family of teachers, were challenged. Some of it I think honestly is personality type. If you’re really flexible or you’re willing to become really flexible, you’ll probably survive. If you’re not willing to try different things and assess what works and what doesn’t, you probably won’t survive.

Emma was the most direct about learning by doing as a support.

There’s such an incredible learning curve with teaching, I think more so than probably pretty much any other job except maybe medicine, that a lot of it you kind of do just have to figure out on the fly. I don’t necessarily know if that something that can be taught. I think it’s something you have to experience on your own. I don’t know if you can teach some of the stuff that happens on a day-to-day basis with this population.

As participants described the supports and assistance that were available to them, it was clear that they saw supports in two categories, both formalized trainings and learning, as well as less formal learning, in the form of assistance from colleagues and the notion of figuring it out on the job. While figuring it out on the job does not appear to be a typical support, it appeared so frequently throughout the interviews and was talked about in such depth, that it became evident that participants saw their own trial and error as a support in their own development as a teacher of students of color.

**Theme Four – Emotional Connections**

The final theme emerged from the data was the emotional impact of educating students of color. Participants shared stories about teaching students of color and the impact it had on them.
and on their connection to students. Three sub themes emerged, positive classroom experiences, developed confidence teaching students of color, and long term relationships with students.

Common among all participants was the personal connection they had with students. Mary describes an interaction with a student her first year of teaching that still stands out to her today.

The spring of my first year of teaching all of the athletes had to get a form filled out by their teachers to see if they were academically prepared for sports. I was in the middle of the hallway, coffee in hand, folders, two bags, and a student came up and said he forgot to ask me to fill out the paper in class. Before I could answer him, he was reaching to take some of the items from me so I could complete the form. I was like, wait a minute. That was a moment for me. He wasn’t just handing me the paper, he was seeing all of this stuff, and he was so respectful. It was just that moment where it was like, ‘Wow.’

Emma shared a similar story about a positive experience with one of her students.

I still remember literally having like a buffalo, but it was a student, come storming into the room when he found out he passed the state assessment. I remember he came flying into the room and literally swept me off my feet. He was so excited about it and he was coming to tell me. That’s a really big thing.

Similar to these positive classroom experiences, participants shared stories that demonstrated their developed confidence teaching students of color. The stories show success in difficult situations or with a student who they felt were challenging, and their own success with the student created an emotional connection. Jack describes such an experience.

In one class my first year, there was one student who just didn't seem to care. Like she just was not into school, didn't want to do anything, she didn't want to listen to anybody. Pretty much the whole year I tried to work with her, get her to do stuff, to actually be a
part of the classroom and learn, and just participate and be a student. So working with her really made me feel better about working with these students, just because I was able to get her to try and put herself out there a little bit, and contribute to class.

Jane had a similar experience with a challenging student.

I had this student in class and we made so much progress as far as how easily she pushed my buttons to how much I would be able to get out of her by the end of the year. I approached her in a way, in a different way, and didn’t allow her to push my buttons in the same manner. She wanted attention so badly that I learned to give her attention when she was doing the right thing and when she was performing well. I didn’t completely negate her behaviors, but I minimized them. It always made me feel better. Usually what would send me home disastrous was if I felt like I had lost a kid for the day.

Having these positive interactions and good days made me feel better about the job I was doing.

Another reoccurring theme raised by participants was the emotional impact of the long term relationships they developed with students. Participants discussed the lasting relationships they developed with students and the impact the relationships had on them as educators. Mary described some of her long term relationships with students.

I have a student who I get messages from on Christmas and on Mother’s Day…because we built that relationship. She needed somebody. For me, that’s an important moment in my life. I filled a spot she really needed. Now I’m seeing her with all her friends, building her own family, and graduating from college. She has become the young woman that was always in there.

Jane has similar relationships with students.
My classroom was like a home for students and they still come back and tell me what’s happening in their life, or they’ll send me papers to edit or tell me about their jobs. I know that the community I built in my classroom has made a difference when they still want to see me and update me on their life many years later.

Each participant was able to describe the emotional connections they have made educating students of color. Participants shared stories that had significant meaning and impact for each of them, and the experiences highlight the importance of emotional connections teachers have with their students. It suggests that positive emotional experiences increase the connection teachers have to their students of color. Each participant was able to share a story about educating students of color from multiple perspectives.

**Summary**

This study focused on the experiences of white classroom teachers’ educating students of color at one public, vocational high school in Massachusetts. One English teacher, one science teacher, one music teacher, one mathematics teacher and one special education teacher provided information about their experiences with students of color. Chapter four describes emergent themes from the study that grew from a two cycle coding process. After coding individual transcripts, the researcher compared responses across participants and identified four overarching themes. Each participant voice was evident and seen in the sub themes that were categorized as: knowledge of working with students of color, preparedness to educate students of color, perceived difficulty of the job, colorblindness, modification of academic program, expectations of students, culturally proficient materials, support from colleagues, formal training and professional development, school based training, learning by doing, positive classroom experiences, developed confidence teaching students of color and long-term relationships with
students. These sub themes enabled the researcher to find four overarching themes including Teacher Perspective, Pedagogical Strategies, Supports and Assistance, and Emotional Connections.
Chapter 5: Discussion of Finding and Implications for Practice

The percent of students of color in public schools have increased, while the percent of teachers of color has decreased (Boser, 2011). This means white teachers in K-12 schools are educating the majority of students of color. This demographic disparity has not changed in decades, and in order to better serve students of color in schools, a deeper understanding of white teachers and their experiences educating a diverse student population is needed. The goal of this study was to understanding the perspective of white classroom teachers who are responsible for educating students of color in the K-12 classroom. The following research questions guided this study and allowed the researcher to understand individual experiences on how white teachers make sense of their students of color.

Central Research Question: The overall research question guiding this inquiry is as follows:

How do white teachers make sense of teaching students of color?

The theoretical framework guiding this study is Bandura’s (1986) self-efficacy theory. This theory focuses on the ability of an individual when facing a challenge, and how an individual develops and increases their ability when they perceive a task to be difficult. An interpretive phenomenological allowed a lens into a group of teachers to better understand how they perceive teaching students of color as well as how they increased their level of self-efficacy while being employed in a diverse school district. The goal of this chapter is to examine the findings of the study by examining previous research and the theoretical framework of self-efficacy, as well as explore potential implications to current practice and future research.

Areas of Vulnerability and Limitations

The researcher strictly followed measures to promote a high level of credibility and trustworthiness in this study, despite this, areas of vulnerability emerged throughout the process.
One of the primary concerns in this study relates to the topic of race and asking teachers to discuss race. Generally, people become hesitant and more cautious when discussing race. Several of the participants appeared to be cautious in selecting their words or when explaining their opinion when answering a question. The researcher clearly articulated the purpose of the study, which was to understand their experiences with the goal of enhancing district practices. However, there were several times during the interviews where the participants started to answer and paused, or they re-explained their answer and used different words. It is impossible to know if participants modified answers or withheld statements in an effort to make their answers and opinions politically correct.

Another area of potential vulnerability was the positionality of the researcher and the impact that this may have had on the participants and research. The researcher is an administrator in the school where the research was conducted, and the researcher has many years of experience working in diverse schools with students of color. The researcher acknowledges positionality in Chapter 3, and has made efforts, through the use of an interpretive paradigm as well as using researcher memos throughout the study, to limit bias. The use of a critical friends group to review themes, findings and all written work provided other to offer an independent perspective on all work.

The goal of this study was to understand the perspective of white classroom teachers who are responsible for educating students of color in the K-12 classroom. The work experience of the researcher impacts the interpretation of how teachers make sense of their experience, especially because the researcher was once a young, white inexperienced teacher working in a highly diverse school district. The personal knowledge and shared experience of the researcher
may have impacted the level of empathy for teachers and the challenges they face being effective teachers for students of color.

**Overview of Findings**

As a result of this study, the researcher identified several findings consistent with each participant in this study.

1. Each teacher emphasized a lack of preparedness to working with students of color in the classroom. As identified in their responses, participants acknowledged their lack of both life experiences in addition to their lack of formal training by way of teacher preparation programs to prepare them to work with diverse students.

2. Each participant acknowledged the need to modify classroom expectations and materials for students of color, yet all participants emphasized the belief that all students, including students of color, are viewed the same in the classroom.

3. Each teacher believed that knowledge about the school demographics may have been helpful at the onset, but all emphasized the most important learning occurred through on-the-job experience working with students of color.

4. Each participant had an emotional connection to his or her students of color. This is evidenced by the stories participants shared about their care for their students and by the personal stories each shared about their students of color. The relationships with students increased teacher motivation while working in a diverse school.

5. Each educator expressed feelings and thoughts about teaching students of color that had strong overtones of deficit thinking. Participants presented these feelings with good intentions, but did not realize they expressed opinions that demonstrated deficit beliefs.
Discussion of Research Findings in Relation to Literature Review

This section will connect the findings from the study to previous research. Each finding will also include specific examples connecting the experience of the participant to the literature and findings.

Lack of Preparedness

Each teacher emphasized a lack of preparedness to working with students of color in the classroom. As identified in their responses, participants acknowledged their lack of both life experiences in addition to their lack of formal training by way of teacher preparation programs to prepare them to work with diverse students.

Teacher preparedness is a challenge for many school districts. As schools are increasingly segregated, most white teachers have had little exposure to students of color during their own time in school (Reynolds & Brown, 2010). Additionally, school districts are relying on the expertise of teacher preparation programs to adequately train and prepare future teachers for the reality of working in diverse schools. However, studies have found that pre-service teachers believe teaching in a diverse school is more challenging than teaching in a predominately white school (Morris, 2005; Wildhagen, 2012). Unfortunately, this often leads to an education gap in teacher knowledge. As a result, many students of color are taught by inadequately trained and poorly prepared teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2005; Lewis et al., 2008).

The participants all identified a lack of knowledge about working with students of color. Two of the participants recalled taking multicultural courses in college, but neither believed it prepared them for the challenges of working in a diverse school. All of the participants shared their belief that working with students of color was challenging, more challenging than teaching in a predominately white school. Four of the participants described feelings of culture shock
when they began working in a diverse school; this culture shock was centered on the vast differences between the community and school they were hired to work in and the school and community where they grew up. This acknowledgement often led to feelings among participants of uncertainly and being overwhelmed. Additionally, all five participants shared their acute awareness when they began working in a diverse school that they did not really know anything about other races, ethnicities and cultures. These examples support the literature in that teachers often perceive teaching students of color to be a challenge and that white teachers are lacking the knowledge and expertise to be effective teachers for diverse students.

As evidenced in the stories of the participants, it was a challenging adjustment when hired to work in a diverse school. Reflecting on their initial days and months in the classroom, participants shared stories that highlighted their feelings of uncertainly as they learned more about their students of color. Despite varying levels of preparedness among teachers, all described their lack of knowledge on the onset to taking the teaching position and all described the lack of knowledge as a challenge for them as they began working in a diverse school.

**Classroom Modifications**

Each participant acknowledged the occasional need to modify classroom expectations and materials for students of color, yet all participants emphasized the belief that all students, including students of color, are viewed the same in the classroom; a colorblind approach.

According to Delpit (1995), students of color who are taught using speech, language and materials that resemble their home, are more successful in school. The academic success of students of color is not just dependent on teaching strategies, it is dependent on the curriculum and textbooks used in schools, many of which are marginalizing and oppressive for students of color (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Morgan, 2010). Instead of having inclusive and diverse materials,
most schools, teachers, curriculums and classroom materials promote white norms because schools and teachers are overwhelmingly white and middle class.

All participants in this study were white and middle class. Some expressed budding knowledge of cultural proficiency and a desire to find classroom materials that were inclusive for students of color, but their responses and explanations to questions demonstrated superficial understanding of a culturally relevant pedagogy. In one instance, a participant explained what he thought was inclusive instruction when teaching about compound interest. He explained how he learned to be more descriptive when teaching this topic because he assumed parents of his students lived paycheck to paycheck. This explanation demonstrated bias and a deficit mindset more than cultural proficiency. Delpit (1995) believes educator bias strongly exists in schools and is strongly manifested in curriculums. In another instance, the participant explained she considered fostering classroom discussions regarding race and class, but she felt uncomfortable facilitating the discussion and she did not want to make her students of color uncomfortable during the discussion. Ladson-Billings (1995) argues that a central element of a culturally relevant pedagogy is teaching students to develop a critical competency where students are encouraged to critique social norms. These examples highlight how the academic success of students of color is being limited by the lack of knowledge many teachers have about pedagogical strategies that are proven successful for students of color.

**Learning by Doing**

Each participant believed that knowledge about the school demographics may have been helpful at the onset, but all emphasized the most important learning occurred through on-the-job experience working with students of color. Most emphasized trial and error methods when leaning to become more confident teachers of students of color.
As evidenced in this study, all participants discussed how they figured out how to teach students of color mainly through trial and error methods. None of the participants shared research based methods or places, such as in professional development or in courses, where they learned these strategies. Instead, they appeared to rely on their own expertise and the knowledge of their colleagues to become more confident teachers of students of color. This is also consistent with the literature, as Noguera (2008) discovered that most educators are guided by their beliefs over actual evidence. It is difficult to ascertain from participant responses how much trial and error occurred or if what they ultimately discovered as effective strategies were in fact effective. Also troubling is the impact the trial and error had on students of color. Studies show that students of color trail white classmates by an average of two grade levels, and students of color are between 16 and 52 percent less likely to graduate from high school in four years (Balfanz et al., 2010; NEAP, 2014). Most high school students take courses only once, and inadequate instruction in a key course can lead to deficits in knowledge that manifest in lower overall achievement and lower scores on high stakes assessments. As teachers are figuring it out on the job, students of color are missing out on high quality instruction. This information would lend merit to the idea that teacher identity contributes to the achievement gap. Federal mandates aimed to lower the achievement gap require minimal teacher credentials and increased reporting from schools, but it fails to addresses the opinion, beliefs and mindset of the teaching force working with students of color.

**Emotional Connections**

Each participant had an emotional connection to his or her students of color. This is evidenced by the stories participants shared about their care for their students and by the personal
stories each shared about their students of color. The relationships with students increased teacher motivation while working in a diverse school.

The literature shows that teachers are strongly influenced by student characteristics such as race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status (de Boer et al., 2010). The majority of these expectations are based on stereotypes and prejudices, both of which are deeply ingrained in the human and impact how they process information (Anderson et al., 2008). Many teachers who have lowered expectations of their students of color may not even realize they expect less of them or have different expectations of their students of color compared to their white students. Pollack (2012) studied deficit narratives in new teachers and found a significant link between deficit beliefs and feelings among new teachers. This deficit narrative and culture of lowered expectations was substantiated in the interviews in this study. While teachers did not explicitly express deficit feelings, they did share stories of the emotional connections they developed with their students of color based on deficit beliefs.

Participants shared stories that demonstrated their emotional connections to their students of color during the interviews. In one instance, a participant provided an example of a student holding materials for her so she could sign a paper, one told a story of finally being able to get a student to care about school, and another explained how she spent the better part of the year figuring out one of her challenging students and learning to only provide positive reinforcement and in response to her challenging behavior. While these examples were clearly meaningful for the participant and had an impact on their desire to continue working with students of color, these examples also highlight their surprise and pleasure when their students of color engaged with them in a polite manner and when they behaved as teachers expected them to in class. Participants seemed to expect students to be disrespectful and difficult to manage in the
classroom. Instead of beginning their career with high expectations of their students, participants shared stories that indicated they expected a lot less from students of color and were pleasantly surprised when they learned differently about their students.

This finding is consistent with Pollack’s (2012) work in deficit thinking. He argues that teachers expect less from their students of color academically and socially, and these feelings are often used as a tool to blame students for their own low academic achievement and failure in school (Pollack, 2012). While the stories of emotional connections with students of color were meaningful and important to participants, it is interesting to note these connections were not rooted, for example, in a similar love for a subject area, a similar author, or in a mentoring relationship leading to college acceptance. Instead, they are based on baseline levels of respect for humans and interest in school, both of which seem to be surprising when discovered in their students of color.

**Deficit Thinking**

Each educator expressed feelings and thoughts about teaching students of color that had strong overtones of deficit thinking. Participants presented these feelings with good intentions, but each participant expressed feelings that demonstrated they held deficit beliefs about their students of color.

Participants shared stories throughout their interviews in response to research questions, but seen throughout many responses from all participants were strong overtones of deficit thinking. In one instance, a participant discussed an emotional connection with a student, but the connection was more related to her surprise at his manners than to an actual educational or personal connection. In another instance, a teacher discuses a major achievement in her teaching was learning how to deal with a disruptive student in class. And finally, a different participant
explained he needed to teach compound interest differently because of his assumption that his students came from homes where parents did not have a saving account. All of these stories highlight the strong influence race and class had on the participants, particularly their expectation of their students of color, as they learned to teach in a diverse school setting.

These examples are supported by the literature on deficit thinking among white teachers working with students of color. Deficit thinking is the belief that some students are unsuccessful in school because of personal deficiencies, not because of school policies or procedures (Dray & Wisneski, 2011). It relies on the assumption that students are less than. This was seen in the example of the participant being surprised by the manners of her student, a feeling she likely would not have had if working in a predominately white high school. Teachers who view students through a deficit perspective believe race is an excuse for the failures of students of color and they often believe students of color are less capable and intelligent than white students (Walker, 2011). These assumptions strongly existed throughout the interviews, and while participants did not appear to realize they held these assumptions, it became clear to the researcher after a close analysis of participant responses and themes across all interviews that all participants held deficit feelings for their students of color.

Discussion of Research Findings in Relation to Theoretical Framework

A goal in both the research questions and interview questions was to understand how teachers develop their understanding and capacity for educating students of color. During each interview, participants were asked questions about their perceived abilities teaching students of color. Bandura (1994) concludes these perceived abilities explain how people act, interact, and react to situations throughout their life. This theory of self-efficacy and how people respond and react to difficult situations are rooted in four sources: mastery experiences, vicarious
experiences, social persuasion and physiological arousal (Bandura, 1986). Mastery experiences are experiences where a person feels success and the feeling of success increases their self-efficacy to repeat the task. Vicarious experiences are the when a person observes another person, often through observation, modeling or demonstrations, successfully completing a task or an action. The final source of self-efficacy is physiological arousal, or a person’s moods, emotions or stress levels, all of which enhance self-efficacy. The higher the level of self-efficacy a person has, the more likely they are to exert more effort during a task they perceive to be difficult or challenging. Understanding the level of self-efficacy, and specifically which sources of self-efficacy were motivation for them, requires the analysis of individual responses to interview questions.

**Mastery Experiences**

Often called performance accomplishment, mastery experiences are positive, successful experiences that lead people to feel confident moving forward based on their past experiences with similar situations. One participant discussed her previous teaching experience in a different, diverse school district while another participant talked about her role student teaching in a highly diverse school district as examples of mastery experiences. Both participants used these as examples of experience, but neither shared feelings of expertise in their knowledge of students of color when they took positions in their current school district. It was evident from their responses that the experiences gave them confidence, but was not the primary method for increasing their self-efficacy.
**Vicarious Experiences**

Watching someone else succeed in a task increases one’s own belief that they too will be successful, and therefore increases their self-efficacy. Often vicarious experiences are achieved through observation, modeling and demonstrations. Three participants noted opportunities to watch and observe other teachers successfully teaching students of color in diverse classrooms as important learning opportunities for their own self-efficacy. Two teachers were assigned to assist in a colleague’s classroom and one observed a class being taught by a more experienced teacher. All noted that seeing someone else successfully working with challenging students and watching their co-workers model strategies that they could use was a learning experience. These experiences made participants feel more confident as they developed as a teacher in a diverse school.

**Social Persuasion**

Social persuasion occurs when others provide encouragement to attempt a task and then offer feedback on the performance during the task. This helps to overcome ones self-doubt and hesitation and ultimately increases a person’s self-efficacy. This source of self-efficacy was seen least in participants responses to interview questions despite questions seeking to understand if and where they received feedback on their instruction for students of color. Several participants mentioned their assigned mentor was useful, but none directly spoke about receiving feedback about working with students of color. The researcher’s role as an administrator in the building may have limited discussion around this topic because commenting on feedback from a supervisor may not have been a comfortable topic for participants.
Physiological Arousal

Positive moods increase self-efficacy because positive moods increase ones feelings about their own personal abilities in a situation. All participants shared stories and examples of positive physiological arousal during the interview process. Each participant had an example of a positive classroom situation or a personal connection with students of color, and evident by their stories and examples, these experiences had a significant impact on their perceived ability to teach students of color. When asked, each participant was able to think of a story or situation that had deep meaning for them, and often, participants had several stories about working with students of color that they were able to quickly recall in the interview. These situations had a positive impact on their self-efficacy because their own feelings of happiness and success ultimately increased their own perceives ability to teach students of color.

The results of this study align with Bandura’s (1986) sources of self-efficacy. In the beginning stages of teaching students of color, participants reported very low levels of self-efficacy, and over time, often two to three years, participants discussed experiences that increased their level of self-efficacy for teaching students of color. Most notable of the sources of self-efficacy were vicarious experiences and physiological arousal. All participants were able to recall times and places where these experiences occurred, and all were able to share several stories that provided evidence of a self-efficacy building experience for the participant. Two participants shared examples of mastery experiences, but questions about these experiences were not met with the same rich stories from the participants. Despite this, participants shared previous experiences in different districts that increased their confidence, but participants did not provide evidence that these experiences had a significant impact on their overall self-efficacy. It seemed the external sources for gaining self-efficacy, such as vicarious experiences and
physiological arousal, had a deeper and more personal meaning for the participants. This conclusion is supported by the themes and results that indicated watching others, learning by doing, and having emotional connection to students were deeply helpful and meaningful to participants as they developed their capacity to educate students of color. The source of self-efficacy that was found the least in participant’s responses was social persuasion. As noted above, the role of the researcher may have influenced participant responses, since the researcher is an administrator in the school. Additionally, almost none of the participants could recall trainings or professional development where effective instruction for students of color was taught nor were any able to provide examples of trainings that provided them feedback on their instruction for students of color.

**Credibility and Trustworthiness**

In order for a qualitative research study to be valid and reliable, it must be appropriately evaluated (Smith, 2012). This research study followed the protocols of an IPA study as defined by Smith et al (2012). The researcher adhered to interview, data collection, analysis and interpretation guidelines to best understand how white teachers make sense of their role educating students of color. A qualitative methodology warrants quality is upheld through several measures of trustworthiness (Creswell, 2009). The researcher collected and analyzed multiple sources of evidence as part of this study, and therefore greater credibility and trustworthiness was achieved. For example, data was triangulated for the purpose of strengthening the trustworthiness. The researcher also had follow up discussions to ensure accuracy of information during interviews, and frequently asked for clarification during the interview process to maintain the intended responses of the participants. Additionally, research memos were utilized throughout the interview process. The reflective notes taken during and
after interviews provided an additional layer of credibility to the responses from the participants and were helpful in understanding if the words of the participant matched their non-verbal responses to interview questions. Finally, the researcher coded after each interview and cross referenced notes with interview transcripts to ensure accuracy and authenticity of all information.

**Implications for Future Study**

As research suggests, schools are becoming increasingly more diverse as percent of teachers of color also declines in American schools (Boser, 2011). Based on this fact, it would be beneficial to continue research about how and when to increase the capacity of white teachers to become highly effective teachers of students of color.

Narrowing the topic and definition of students of color would add to the scholarship on this topic. This study broadly used the term students of color, however, specific races, ethnicities, or socioeconomic statuses were not defined as part of this research. Narrowing the topic and focus would provide information to both school districts and classroom teachers that more directly relates to the demographic statistics in their school. Not all students of color are the same and socioeconomic status plays a role in school performance. A study that is more specific and focused could enable a more authentic transfer of knowledge to schools and teachers seeking to better understand how white teachers make sense of teaching students from a specific race or ethnicity.

During the data analysis process, there was evidence of stereotyping and bias by the participants in the study. Many of these beliefs were unknown to the participant and were shielded behind stated feelings of care and concern for students. Despite this, many of the comments reflected deficit thinking for students of color on the part of the white participants. A
possible future study to examine stereotyping and bias would be beneficial to better understand the deeply held beliefs of white teachers working with students of color.

Another potential study that may provide insight into the research would be a case study of one teacher who is in their first or second year of teaching in a diverse school. As evidenced by the participant responses in this study, they all believed that they gained capacity as educators by figuring it out on the job. The consistency of this response across educators of different genders, life experiences, and subject areas was intriguing. It would helpful to gain a better understanding of what figuring it out on the job looks like, and to understand the perspective of the educator as they figure it out on the job.

Finally, it would be beneficial to research teachers in specific content areas. This study included educators from five different subject areas in a high school, and each participant felt differently about how their content area connected to culturally relevant teaching strategies. Participants believed they were teaching content to student first and foremost, while some participants, the English teacher for example, were able to see the connection between their subject area and their students of color, others did not make the same connection. A study of English teachers, who can easily incorporate materials into their curriculum that reflect the level of diversity in their students would be an interesting comparison to math or science teachers for example, who as participants in this study, tended to emphasize their role as content teachers. This perspective could provide viewpoints about the preparedness of content area teachers to educate students of color.

**Implications and Recommendations for Practice**

The results of this study have an impact on current practices. When educating students of color, practices among educators are inconsistent and may not be meeting the individual needs of
students of color in the classroom. Evident from the research, teachers discussed a belief of colorblindness and figuring it out on the job, and these practices may not be rooted in research based strategies that reflect cultural proficiency. While it was clear their attempts were made in the best interest of students, there is no way to measure the level of effectiveness. The results of this study substantiate the implementation of the following recommendations.

The first recommendation is to build the capacity of all educators at the school to teach students of color. The research indicated new teachers were unprepared to work in a diverse school and demonstrated that many new teachers relied on colleagues to figure out what to do in the classroom, mainly independently, during their first few years as an educator. Capacity building is needed for new teachers based on their voiced lack of knowledge and experience. However, capacity building is also needed for teachers who have worked in the district for long periods of time. This recommendation is based on the research that indicated new teachers relied on the advice, suggestions and observations of their colleagues. If new teachers are going to use their colleagues as a resource, all educators need to be able to provide recommendations and model practice that are rooted in research based strategies that are proven successful for students of color. This capacity building does not need to come by means of whole group professional development, instead coaching would be recommended to allow teachers to practice strategies and to receive specific and targeted feedback.

When working to build the capacity of all educators to teach students of color, it is recommended that there are different levels as teacher’s progress throughout their career. The first level of capacity building would be increasing the awareness, or deepening the awareness of educators new to the field. As indicated in the study, all educators felt unprepared to work with diverse students. This first phase should exist in new teacher orientations and in mentoring
programs. The purpose would be to spend the first year of an educator’s career widening their baseline knowledge of working with students of color. As teachers develop their own skill as educators and become more confident as teachers, the second step to capacity building would be to allow educators to examine their own practice with a specific lens on examining bias and deficit thinking, as well as the roles whiteness and power play in a classroom. This phase would not be possible with new teachers who are still developing the skill for teaching, and ideally, would begin around year three of a teacher’s career. The final phase of capacity building would be to engage the faculty and staff in the school in dialogues about systematic and institutional racism with the goal of building an inclusive school environment for all students. This step is especially important given the evidence provided by participants about learning from colleagues. Throughout each of these phases, it is imperative that the topics and language is direct and focused on examining power structures. Often conversations about race and class are uncomfortable, and the discomfort can cause a softer message. If we are truly committed to developing schools that are equitable for all students, clear, honest, and straightforward communication around the topic of race and class need to exist in schools.

The second recommendation as a result of this study relates to the educational and social needs of students of color. Teachers in this study openly discussed their lack of preparedness for the job, their apprehension, their belief that teaching diverse students was challenging, as well as their trial and error method to classroom instruction. If this was the experience of all five participants in this study, this is likely the experience of many new white teachers working in diverse schools. This inexperience must have an impact on the academic and social progression of students of color in the classroom. Despite the well intentions of the educators and their emotion connection to their students of color, a byproduct of their inexperience must be
ineffective teaching strategies. If finding diverse educators is not easy for districts, they must find ways to support students of color by asking them to be part of hiring committees, by instituting peer mentor programs, and by initiating school-wide events that reflect their academic and social needs while the school works to better train the educator to work with students of color.

The next recommendation would be to establish stronger relationships with local teacher preparation program. Teacher preparation programs are always seeking sites for pre-service teachers to have an opportunity to observe educators and to fulfill their student teaching requirements. It would be more beneficial if pre-service teachers had courses that specifically addressed multiculturalism, culturally relevant pedagogy, and provide opportunities for pre-service educators to examine their own whiteness prior to working in a diverse school. The school should consider developing a partnership with a local college, and specifically working together to develop the courses and curriculum for such courses. The school could then become a site for pre-service teachers as long as pre-service teachers are gaining the knowledge and expertise that the district needs through the mutually designed courses. This would benefit both the school and college because the school is gaining teacher with certain baseline knowledge, and the college is gaining a site to send pre-service teachers.

Given the researchers role as an administrator in the school where the study was conducted, these recommendations can be implemented into the study site and can also be used by other school districts seeking to better prepare their white teachers to educate students of color.
Conclusion

The goal of this study was to understand the perspective of white classroom teachers who are responsible for educating students of color in the K-12 classroom. Increased knowledge in this field could strengthen the capacity of educators, allow districts to enhance their professional development practices, and provide a more meaningful educational experience for students of color.

This study validates previous research about the perspective of white teachers teaching students of color because the participants substantiated much of the literature and scholarship in this field. Specifically, white teachers were not prepared to educate students of color and lacked training prior to working with diverse students. Teachers demonstrated varying degrees of success implementing culturally relevant materials into their curriculums and often tended to view students through a colorblind and deficit lens. Teachers often used colleagues and trial and error methods to increase their own capacity and self-efficacy for working with students of color. Finally, participants expressed their emotional connection to student of color and shared stories of their developed connection for their students, but these often perpetuated deficit and bias.

Based on the research findings, public schools should work to increase the capacity and the self-efficacy of all educators of students of color. The stories and experiences shared by white teachers working with students of color will help others understand the emotional connection between teachers and students, even if the teachers’ knowledge base about research-based strategies is lacking. When and how teachers develop capacity for educating students of color is an important area of research. This study can potentially lead to further studies that support the focus on the impact of white teachers on students of color.


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Appendix A

Letter to Superintendent of Schools

Dear Superintendent,

As part of my doctoral studies at Northeastern University, I will conduct a research study that addresses an identified problem of practice in education and contributes to the field of study. I am writing to request permission to conduct interviews high school teachers in your district. This letter outlines my intentions and presents the context for the study.

The problem of practice that I seek to address is the complex issue of white teachers’ experiences educating students of color. Current research highlights the achievement gap that exists for students of color, as well as the higher rates of school non-completion and lower graduation rates. As the teaching force throughout the county is overwhelmingly white, the need for dialogue and coordination between stakeholders is evident, and the classroom teacher has a critical perspective that needs to be heard. The aim of this study is to better understand the teacher’s experience in educating students of color.

Utilizing qualitative research practices, data will be collected through three in-person interviews and the responses will be professionally transcribed, coded and evaluated for emergent themes. An interpretative phenomenological analysis design for the study will yield an authentic lens of how teachers perceive their experience educating students of color.

It is my contention that the research will provide insight into the classroom experience for teachers and provide voice to educators. Information from this study may create a transferable framework for professional development and new teacher induction programs that can be applied in a variety of school settings regardless of content or discipline. It is my hope that this study will make a positive contribution to the field of education and benefit both teachers and students of color.

If you have any questions regarding this study, please contact me directly at (508) 509-2402 or via e-mail at snow.s@husky.neu.edu, or my Doctoral Advisor, Dr. Carol Young at c.young@neu.edu or 508-587-2834. Thank you for your continued support. I look forward to hearing from you regarding this request for permission.

Sincerely,

Shannon Snow
Appendix B

Call for Participants

A study is being conducted to better understand the experience of classroom teachers who educate students of color.

In order to participate, individuals must be licensed Massachusetts public high school teachers who have taught a high school aged student of color in the past eighteen months. In an effort to establish some working parameters, a student of color is defined as an African-American or Hispanic student.

The study consists of a brief (5 – 10 minutes) phone interview to ensure qualifications are met to participate in the study and three in person interviews (45-60 minutes), which can be conducted at your convenience and at a location of your choice.

If you are eligible and willing to participate, or know someone who may be interested in participating, please email snow.s@husky.neu.edu or call (508) 509-2402 for more information.

Confidentiality of all parties is guaranteed. No identifying information will be published or shared with others.
Appendix C

Participant Consent Form

Northeastern University, Department of Education

Name of Investigator(s): Dr. Carol Young (Principal Investigator), Shannon Snow (Student Researcher)

Title of Project: Understanding How White Teachers Make Sense of Educating K12 Students of Color: An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis

Request to Participate in Research
We would like to invite you to take part in a research project. The purpose of this research is to better understand the experience of classroom teachers who are responsible for educating students of color.

You must be at least 18 years old to be in this research project.

Your participation in this study is voluntary and you may choose to withdraw at any time. If you agree to participate, you will receive an intake phone call that will last approximately 5-10 minutes to provide background information. You will then participate in three, semi-structured interviews to answer questions, clarify information and validate accuracy of data. Interview should last approximately 45-60 minutes.

There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts to you for taking part in this study.

There are no direct benefits to you for participating in this study. Your participation, however, may provide insight about strengths and gaps that currently exist in educating students of color.

Your part in this study will be handled in a confidential manner. The Principal Investigator and Student Researcher will know that you participated in this study. Any reports or publications based on this research will use only group data and will not identify you or any individual as being part of this project.

The decision to participate in this research is up to you. You do not have to participate and you can refuse any question. Even if you begin the study, you may withdraw at any time. If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Shannon Snow (Tel: 508-509-2402, Email: Snow.s@husky.neu.edu), the person mainly responsible for the research. You can also contact Dr. Carol Young (Northeastern University, Boston, MA, Email: C.young@neu.edu), the Principal Investigator.
If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617.373.4588, Email: irb@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

You may keep this form for yourself.

Thank you,

Shannon Snow

____________________________________   ____________ ________
Signature of Participant        Date

_______________________________________   _________ _____________
Signature of Student Researcher       Date