TEACHING THE CULTURALLY AND LINGUISTICALLY DIVERSE STUDENT: AN INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS EXPLORING ELEMENTARY SCHOOL TEACHERS’ EXPERIENCES WITH ARTS-ENHANCED CULTURALLY RELEVANT PEDAGOGY

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Abstract

The educational landscape is changing as increasing numbers of culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students enter the public schools in the United States. Schools, traditionally structured to support the hegemonic, monocultural White culture have educators challenged to accommodate and support this population of students while trying to understand the complexities of students with such distinct needs (Kelly-McHale, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 1995). This qualitative study, an interpretative phenomenological analysis, explored the experiences of seven general education teacher-participants who teach in a public elementary school. These teachers enhanced their teaching practices by including the arts as a way to engage and motivate all students toward cultural relevancy. The findings indicated that the arts can enhance teaching practices that educate students from a perspective relative to and accepting of all cultures and benefits teachers and students alike by creating a culturally sensitive learning environment for all.

Keywords: culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD), English language learner (ELL), culturally relevant teaching (CRT), arts integration
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May we all appreciate the beautiful blessings that God has given us.
Dedication

To my parents, Salvatore and Mary Luigina Meli
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Chapter One: Introduction

Statement of the Problem

In the United States, the demographics in the public schools are changing due to the influx of immigrants who are entering our country. The culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) student population is increasing. The United States Census Bureau predicted in 2011, that by 2050, the post-1992 immigration progression would have accounted for an 86% of all population growth in the United States (Kelly-McHale 2013). However, most of the students entering the teaching force in the United States public schools are White, middle class, and have lived experiences that are different from the CLD students they will teach (Budd, 2007; Gay, 2000/2013).

The United States Census Bureau defines the culturally and linguistically diverse individual as any person who is of non-White lineage and for whom English is a second language (Meidl & Meidl, 2011). Although many CLD students are those whose families have recently immigrated to the United States, CLD students also included are those who have been born in the United States. All CLD students enter the public school system at a disadvantage because of their sub-dominant cultural background and/or language deficiencies (Gay, 2000/2013).

With the entrance of CLD students into the public schools, the classroom climate is changing as teachers struggle with how to teach this population of students (Durden & Truscott, 2013; Kelly-McHale, 2013). Educational leaders must realize their roles in creating a culturally sensitive school environment (Irizarry, 2006). Some teacher preparation programs are requiring their students to take classes in culturally relevant teaching (CRT) (Keengwe, 2010, Lee & Herner-Patnode, 2012; Milner, 2009). Ladson-Billings (2014) stated, “This is the secret behind
culturally relevant pedagogy: the ability to link principles of learning with deep understanding of (and appreciation for) culture” (p. 77). The purpose of the culturally relevant classroom is to create a caring learning environment that sees the students’ cultural and linguistic diversity as an asset rather than a deficit (Gay, 2000/2013; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Santamaria, 2009).

Teacher preparation is important for understanding CLD students so that their abilities, usually presented in nontraditional ways, are recognized. The culturally relevant teacher presents classroom curriculum from the diverse cultural perspectives of the students providing them with a more worthwhile learning experience (Rychly & Graves, 2012).

In particular, the arts can support CRT and serve as a meaningful way for teachers to engage the CLD students (Hoffman, 2012; Ladson-Billings 2014; Lynch, 2007; Overland; 2013). With the integration of music and the arts in culturally relevant teaching practice, even more meaningful and engaged learning can occur (Gullat, 2008; May, 2013; Overland, 2013).

The benefit of integrating the arts into the classroom is that it offers all students additional pathways for understanding curriculum content. Studies have shown that when music is integrated into the curriculum, academic achievement as well as the students’ self-concept improved and student engagement levels increased (Brouillette, 2012; Lynch, 2007; May, 2013). Greene (1994) posited that actively engaging in the arts could address some of the challenges students faced in urban school settings as students become open to alternative possibilities through creative expression.

Although CRT in urban areas has been studied, especially with veteran teachers who have adopted this style of teaching, it was extremely difficult to find any studies that pertained to general education teachers who have included the arts in their CRT teaching practice.

My project addressed this topic of using the arts in teaching practice for the purpose of
achievement, motivation, and engagement of CLD students. This research could result in positive curriculum change for public schools in the United States as it emphasized the importance of the arts as an integral piece in meaningful learning not only for CLD students but also for all students. This research provided a way to communicate to educators and those who set educational policy of the importance for increased awareness of and sensitivity to the needs of the CLD student.

**Significance Statement**

As more people of diverse cultures make the United States their home, public school leaders, administrators, and teachers must realize that it is essential that teaching strategies change to accommodate the particular needs of the culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) student (Briggs, Reis, & Sullivan, 2008; Correa & Tulbert, 1991; Keengwe, 2010). The needs of the CLD students are not met being due to misunderstandings or misinterpretations of the students’ abilities by a teaching force that is overwhelmingly represented by a majority of middle class, White females, many of whom do not understand the complexities of educating students with such distinct needs (Kelly-McHale, 2013). Not understanding the culture of their students can lead to teachers making negative assumptions toward students. This can have a detrimental effect on student achievement and impact students’ success in school and perhaps beyond (Cartledge & Kourea, 2008).

The 2009-2010 dropout rates nation-wide in the United States were 6.7% for American Indian/Alaskan Native, 5.5% for Black, and 5% for Hispanic students while it was 2.3% for White students. Only Asian/Pacific Islander was lower at 1.9% (NCES, 2013). It is imperative that preservice teachers be informed of culturally relevant pedagogy that acknowledges and respects the cultural diversity that students bring to the classroom. This is significant because
without cultural relevancy, many students lose interest in school, experiencing what Ladson-Billings (2014) called an “academic death” (p. 77).

Through CRT, student motivation and engagement in the learning process increases (Gay, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Santamaria, 2009). This could result in students remaining in school. Retaining these students could result in an improved quality of life for students; attending college, securing employment, and exiting from the poverty and oppressive situations in which many are currently living (Littky & Grabelle, 2004, Santamaria; 2009). Culturally relevant pedagogy that is supported with the arts could further motivate and engage students. Studies have shown that when music is integrated into the curriculum, academic achievement as well as student engagement levels increase (Brouillette, 2012; Lynch, 2007). Integration of the arts into the culturally relevant classroom offers students additional pathways for understanding curriculum content and perhaps more importantly, demonstrating that understanding.

CLD students are often overlooked for entrance into gifted programs as qualification to participate in these programs is usually made through scores achieved on standardized IQ tests that inaccurately reflect the abilities of such students. These tests are administered in the English language and thus many CLD students are excluded due to their inability to attain high scores because of language issues (Briggs, Reis, & Sullivan, 2008; De Wet & Gubbins, 2011). Policy change for entry into these programs such as creating alternative assessments that include the arts could be implemented. All students could derive benefit from this change with photo collages, letters, oral story-telling, and creating scripts for animation being alternative ways for students to demonstrate ability in academic content as teachers’ sensitivity to different learning styles increases (Gay, 2000/2013).

In summary, the arts component in a culturally sustaining classroom can motivate students,
stimulate imaginative thinking, and promote meaningful relationships through collaborative work, skills that will last a lifetime (Kaimal, Drescher, Fairbank, Gonzaga, & White, 2014; Lynch, 2007). Teaching and learning through a cultural lens requires one to listen to and acknowledge a variety of perspectives, building bridges of understanding across cultures that can extend beyond the classroom and through generations. Through an arts performance, self-concept improves as students develop pride through creative expression, empowered as they realize their capabilities (Cane, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 2014; May, 2013). We all benefit when we are invited to understand an interpretation of experience through one’s cultural perspectives and the arts can provide this for us. Relationships among diverse populations become more harmonious and the dissonance subsides as commonalities among these diverse perspectives come to light.

One commonality all people share is that they express and define their culture through their art, and the integration of the arts when purposefully implemented within a culturally sustaining pedagogy, can provide holistic experiences that can motivate and lead not only CLD students but also all students towards success.

This research served to enlighten teachers and those who set educational policy in teacher preparation programs and the public schools to the injustices in educational practices that perhaps, until now, they had been unaware and may propel them to take action (Merriam, 1991).

**Positionality Statement**

This research focused on classroom teachers who teach in elementary schools and who use culturally relevant teaching (CRT) practices that includes the arts as a support to their culturally relevant teaching practice. These pedagogical strategies are intended for all students but are especially effective for reaching the culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) student.
My interest in this research area was twofold; 1) my personal background and 2) my 32 years of experience as a music teacher in the Massachusetts public schools. As a result, I was positioned to fulfill the role of change agent within the context of this study.

My personal background led to my current place in the world as a first generation American, the youngest child in my family, but the first to graduate from a four-year college and subsequently two graduate schools. My parents emigrated from Italy; my mother came to this country at age seven, in the 1930s, when students in the public schools did not have the advantage of bilingual or English as a second language education programs. After she graduated from high school, my mother attended art school thus communicating to me the importance of the arts in self-expression.

My father came to America as an adult in the 1950s. There were limited educational opportunities in the small farming town in Sicily, Italy where he grew up but he often spoke of the importance of a formal education and both of my parents supported any and all of my academic interests.

I was born and educated in America and although outwardly, it may appear that I could be from a family that has been in America for many generations, I bring, through my parents’ story, as well as my own as a child growing up in a culturally and linguistically diverse family, sensitivity and understanding of the struggles of the marginalized. “The other is not just a boundary that we cross from time to time; the other is always within us” (Briscoe, 2005, p. 31). I understand from my lived experiences the opportunities education can provide and therein lies my interest in researching ways for CLD students to better understand themselves and the world in which they live so that they can be successful in achieving their goals.

My teaching experience leads me to believe that the arts is a commonality shared among
all cultures, a way to for us to understand one another when a barrier such as language is presented. I believe that music, because it is intrinsic to being human and part of every culture, can reach every child regardless of gender, culture, cognitive ability, race, and economic status.

All people respond to music and I have seen many “a-ha!” moments when students, through carefully and purposefully selected music, understand ideas presented to them in their general classroom. I have witnessed a child, a selective mute, verbalize for the first time through song. I have seen a special needs child say “My name is Jose” to a rhythm pattern he played on a drum and heard the paraprofessional who assisted him in music class exclaim immediately afterwards that this was the first time she had heard the child speak a clear and complete sentence. I have taught English language learners (ELL) students English vocabulary through songs and have demonstrated to them and to their English-speaking peers that even with limited proficiency in the English language, group participation through the language of music is possible.

My experience led me to posit that when taught through a cultural lens, with music relevant to the cultures of the students, students are transported to a place of understanding where differences in others are acknowledged and appreciated. Recognition of this human connection could, when made through a shared musical experience, create a bond among students that propels them to yet another level of understanding. In addition, music could reach out beyond the classroom creating the same effect on families and the community through their witness of the performance as members of the audience.

Another important aspect of music is its ability to increase student understanding of the curriculum content presented in the general classroom. While learning music, connections to every subject; reading, math, expressive arts, science, history, social studies, languages, physical
education (movement and dance) can be strengthened. For example, when students divide a whole note (4 beats) into a half note (2 beats) into a quarter note (1 beat) then sing the duration of these notes, students are holistically demonstrating an understanding of math fractions.

In the school system, which can be viewed as a microcosm of society, the “other” can be interpreted as the marginalized teacher of a special subject in relation to the hegemonic classroom teachers (Jupp & Slattery, 2010). As the only full-time music teacher, music being a specialist subject, in a school full of elementary classroom teachers, I realize that I am the “other” in the educational process. I know the important role music can play in this endeavor especially for the CLD students, but the challenge is and always has been in getting others to recognize this.

**Biases**

I am biased primarily because my life experiences with music have been positive. In addition, I have seen students make meaningful connections to their world that result in enduring understandings in music class. I must remember that others may have had negative experiences.

Believing that most classroom teachers and administrators do not place equal value on the specialist subjects such as music but rather see them as periods within the day that give the students a respite from the rigors of classroom academics is another bias that I must confront. I must remember that perhaps they are not aware of the potential of the arts to motivate students and provide an additional pathway for understanding of the general classroom’s curriculum. By focusing my research on teachers who are using the arts in their teaching, I hope to reduce these biases, as these teachers most likely understand the value of the arts in education.

Another bias I have is that I think many teachers do not understand the difficulties the CLD students have in school academically or socially; that they lack an in-depth understanding
of who these students are, and based on bias and prejudice, may misread the true ability of these students (De Wet & Gubbins, 2011). Although I believe that I can better empathize with the situation of the CLD students because of my own background, I must not assume a lack of empathy, sensitivity, or understanding exists among those who have not had close ties with cultural diversity for the social lens by which we all view the world is shaped by our personal beliefs and experiences. (Ornstein, 2011).

Establishing culturally relevant classrooms is one way to motivate and reach students. The creative arts, as a support in the culturally relevant classroom, can help to create a space for the CLD students to express themselves, demonstrate knowledge, and better communicate what they are learning.

**Research Question (Qualitative)**

The purpose of this research was to gain an understanding of the pedagogical experiences of general education teachers in an elementary school setting who include the arts as a support in culturally relevant teaching.

This research was intended to inform educational leaders, including policy makers, public school administrators, teachers, and those who design curriculum for teacher preparation programs, of CRT practices that included the arts. With this knowledge, educational leaders in all areas may be open to trying alternative ways of reaching CLD students to better meet these students’ needs.

In order to examine this topic, I proposed the following research question:

How do elementary school teachers describe their experience in using arts-enhanced teaching practices as a way to engage and motivate students toward cultural relevancy?
The Theoretical Framework

As this research sought to gain an understanding of the experiences of teachers who use the arts to enhance and support culturally relevant teaching, Ladson-Billings’ theory of culturally relevant pedagogy was the chosen theoretical framework that served to frame the research question.

Culturally relevant teaching (CRT), a term created by Ladson-Billings (1995a, 1995b) is a pedagogical perspective that is defined as meeting three criteria: having the skills to develop students academically, having the inclination toward nurturing and supporting students’ cultural competence, and being willing to develop students’ socio-political awareness and critical consciousness.

This perspective can be traced back to the German Bildung tradition, and the suggestion that cultural awareness and enlightenment, through the educational process, can be transformative, developing human beings to realize their full potential in society (Horlacher, 2016). German philosophers Marx and Engels aligned with this tradition, situating education as part of the hegemonic social system as did Italian philosopher Gramsci, who, in his writings, developed the concept of hegemony to describe how the dominant social group determines what counts as knowledge (Kellner n.d.; Marks & Engels, 1975). Marx and Engels called for other forms of education that would serve to develop the minds of those of the working class, so they could rise out of their oppressed situations and increase their social capital (Kellner, n.d.; Marks & Engels, 1975).

This application of a critical lens towards educational process can be seen in the work of Brazilian educator Freire (1970/2000) who developed this concept further (Kellner, n.d.). Freire also viewed education as a transformative process: that disregarding culture in the classroom
oppresses students of sub-dominant cultures as teachers of the dominant culture regard these students as outside the norm, marginalized, and in need of being changed. He posited that, in reality, both the concept and perspective are flawed; these students are not on the outside in need of being reeled in but are on the inside. The issue is not to change them but to change the structure that is in place that prohibits them for being recognized for their strengths they possess and the individuals they are. Through the acknowledgement of their students’ cultures, teachers could bring about change that could result in the elevation and empowerment of the oppressed (Freire, 1970/2000).

In the United States, this belief system can be traced back to the progressive movement and experiential education. Dewey (1897) posited that education is a social process that must connect to the student’s home and community life and that there should be ongoing interpretation of the student’s “capabilities, interests, and habits” (p.6).

Larabee (2005) defines progressive pedagogy as,

Basing instruction on the needs, interests and developmental stage of the child; it means teaching students the skills they need in order to learn any subject, instead of focusing on transmitting a particular subject; it means promoting discovery and self-directed learning by the student through active engagement; it means having students work on projects that express student purposes and that integrate the disciplines around socially relevant themes; and it means promoting values of community, cooperation, tolerance, justice and democratic equality. In the shorthand of educational jargon, this adds up to ‘child-centered instruction’, ‘discovery learning’ and ‘learning how to learn’. And in the current language of American education schools there is a single label that captures this entire approach to education: constructivism. (p. 277)
Ladson-Billings (1995b) situated her theory of culturally relevant pedagogy in the work of anthropologists such as Au and Jordan (1981) and Mohatt and Erickson (1981) who conducted studies with Hawaiian students and Native American students respectively and found that educational practices that integrated the students’ cultural identities resulted in higher academic performance. Ladson-Billings (1995a) was also influenced by scholars who have examined pedagogical strategies and cited Bartolome (1994) as having captured the essence of CRT, as it called for a “humanizing pedagogy that respects and uses the reality, history, and perspectives of students as an integral part of educational practice” (p. 173). CRT is child-centered, rooted in the belief system that CLD students have much to offer, that their cultural strengths must be seen as assets that need to be drawn upon and related to instruction. It was developed as a means to empower those who have struggled in the inequitable environment of the educational system. Ladson-Billings’ work focused primarily on the African American student but is applicable to all CLD students (Ladson-Billings, 2009).

Culturally relevant teaching is essential for all students but especially for the CLD student, for when content is taught through the connections and relevancy of the students’ culture and lived experiences, student engagement and motivation to learn increases (Ladson-Billings, 2009). This is significant because without cultural relevancy there is a disconnect, a cultural mismatch; the ramifications are that many students lose interest in school, grades decline, and drop out numbers increase, thus perpetuating the circumstances of poverty and cultural isolation (Goldenberg, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 1995a).

Although the demographics of the United States have changed dramatically over the past several decades, a 2006 report from the United States Department of Education states that White, middle class females still account for the majority of the teaching force in the United States
A lack of cultural competence from the teachers who teach CLD students contributes to the oppression of this population of students. These teachers teach through their own White privileged perspective with little or no regard for the variety of perspectives of the students who sit in the seats in front of them (Gay, 2000/2013; Plata, 2011).

Cultural competence is essential for the success of CLD students in the classroom. However, it is simply not enough for teachers to have a superficial understanding of the cultural backgrounds of their students as this will result in the likelihood that teachers will misjudge CLD students based on bias and prejudice toward their appearance, behaviors, and language and lead to erroneous assumptions of the CLD students’ abilities thus setting students up to fail (Cartledge & Kourea, 2008). Perhaps even more important than affecting the achievement gap, a lack of cultural competence widens the opportunity gap between the hegemonic White dominant culture and the sub-dominant culture (Goldenberg, 2014).

CRT encourages educational leaders to critically reflect on deep-seated assumptions fostered by experiences in the White American-Eurocentric culture. Awareness of these biases will contribute to the realization that the experiences of those of sub-dominant cultures are not less than but merely different than their own. Once this is understood, pedagogical practices can be adjusted accordingly. (Cartledge & Kourea, 2008; Gay, 2000/2013; Goldenberg, 2014).

Ladson Billings (2006) put forward the idea that the achievement gap is based on the discrepancies among cultural groups that resulted from students’ scores on standardized tests. She called for educational researchers and practitioners to acknowledge the existence of an education debt and posited that these discrepancies were due to the inequities that have existed, and continue to exist, between various populations in the United States. This further argued for the need for cultural competence.
While individual academic achievement was essential, CRT also addressed the need for educational practices to provide students a pathway for the development of a socio-political and critical consciousness. This would enable them to see their world as it is and consequently move toward engaging in meaningful action to rectify perceived injustices for the collective good (Freire, 2000/1970; Ladson-Billings, 2009).

**Paradigm**

This research concerned constructing knowledge from the information garnered from the experiences of elementary school teachers who used culturally relevant pedagogical practices and the arts to increase student understanding of content and to engage their students in a more meaningful learning process.

The constructivist/interpretivist paradigm aligned best with this research. Research conducted from the perspective of the constructivism/interpretivism paradigm realizes that knowledge is not fixed but is continually changing (Merriam, 1991). Knowledge is gathered and meaning is constructed over time. Through the lens of the constructivism/interpretivism paradigm, the world is seen as a continuous story on humanity and the researcher, being human, cannot help but be involved as part of the story (Butin, 2010). The researcher is involved in the process as the researcher’s values and interpretations come into play.

This research aligned with the constructivism/interpretivism paradigm as knowledge, and in essence reality, is built, or *constructed* through the interviews of the research participants, teachers who practice arts-enhanced CRT. By recording the opinions and thoughts of the research participants through interviews based on their experiences with CRT and the arts, understanding and meaning making was achieved through the researcher’s analysis and interpretation of this information.
Additionally, this research informs those who work with and for this population of students. It allows those in power to make decisions concerning the educational pathways of learning that these students will follow, to reflect upon their own perceived reality of the abilities and capabilities of CLD students, and to implement changes accordingly. The goal being to bring about transformational change through the educational process (Merriam, 1991).

As stated previously, Freire (1970/2000) and his work on educational equity for oppressed cultures, and Dewey (1938) and his work on experiential learning were embedded within the theory of culturally relevant pedagogy. The arts as an additional pathway to enduring understandings for the culturally and linguistically diverse student has Eisner (2005) and his work on the arts in education integral to this theory as well.

**Freire educational theory.** Freire’s theory of "conscientizacao" (conscientization) which can be defined as the critical dimension of consciousness that acknowledges that people, for this purpose, teachers, can serve as change agents and transform their world and their students through their culturally relevant practice (Freire, 1998).

Culturally relevant teaching can serve to motivate and engage students through a practice that seeks out the cultural assets or *capital* that students bring to the educational process from their lived experiences. It is through this practice that teachers can build better understandings of, and relationships with, their students resulting in meaningful learning for all (Goldenberg, 2014).

Approaching content from the cultural essence of the CLD students is not only an attempt to create equity among all students but also a way to improve the educational experiences of students, thereby making valid connections to the concept of social justice (Irizarry, 2006).

**Dewey and experiential learning.** Dewey’s philosophy was guided by the way he perceived human development. What he proposed through his work was not an educational
theory per se; one based in understanding the puzzle that makes education what it is by taking it apart and examining its pieces. Rather, the aim of Dewey’s work was to understand knowledge and to motivate educators to put this understanding of knowledge into practice. His intention was not to create a contest between the educational traditionalists and the progressives, provoking debate over which was the preferable educational philosophy, but to make a case that an educator must create through relevant experiential learning, a continuous process by which one experience affects the next. This educational process would result in benefits for both the learner and society (Dewey, 1938).

Through experiential learning, (Kolb & Kolb, 2009) asserted that students are involved in the learning process on the following four levels:

1. Experiencing.
2. Reflecting.
3. Thinking.
4. Acting.

**Eisner and the arts in education.** Eisner’s views on arts in education aligned with culturally relevant theory in meaningful ways for CLD students. Eisner (2002) stated that the arts provide opportunities to think and learn in original and innovative ways and also allowed for successful communication when other language forms failed. He was concerned that the arts were being used as servants to the academic subjects, that the arts for its unique educational value was being dismissed. One of the outcomes Eisner (2002) had for the arts in education was that students would come to understand the culture and time in which art was created, understanding the freedoms and limitations the artist endured creating art and the risk-taking that artists took that at times, defied expectations and traditions. Eisner posited that through the
experiential process of participating in an arts activity, students developed an awareness and acceptance of the many perspectives and resolutions that are presented through the creation of artwork.

The arts inform as well as stimulate, they challenge as well as satisfy. Their location is not limited to galleries, concert halls and theatres. Their home can be found wherever humans chose to have attentive and vita intercourse with life itself. This is, perhaps, the largest lesson that the arts in education can teach, the lesson that life itself can be led as a work of art. In so doing the maker himself or herself is remade. The remaking, this recreation is at the heart of the process of education. (Eisner 1998, p. 56)

These select features in the works of Freire, Dewey, and Eisner are important because this study posited that it is the value of the arts to enhance culturally relevant teaching practices that creates an entrance for freedom of expression. By removing the barriers such as those posed by having to explain comprehension by means of an unfamiliar spoken or written language, CLD students could draw upon their cultural strengths and participate in learning experiences that resulted in enduring understandings. Through the arts, students were free to demonstrate what they know in an engaging and non-threatening manner.

Freire, Dewey, and Eisner informed the content that was presented by culturally relevant teachers thus influencing the educational experiences for both the students and the teachers in the classroom, but it is Ladson-Billings’ theory of culturally relevant pedagogy that framed this research and provided the lens from which to view this research study.

Ladson-Billings’ theory of culturally relevant pedagogy was appropriate for focusing the problem of practice, as it undergirded the strategies implemented by the participants in this study. Through the process of conducting semi-structured interviews, I gathered the participants’
interpretations of their experiences in the classroom. As I analyzed the collected data, my own interpretations came into play and created a double hermeneutic, thus the appropriate methodological choice for this research study was Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA).
Chapter Two: Literature Review

The purpose of this investigation was to gain an understanding of the experience of general education elementary school teachers who practice arts-enhanced culturally relevant teaching. The theoretical framework selected to examine this investigation was Ladson-Billings’ (1995) theory of culturally relevant pedagogy.

Many students enter the public schools in the United States as first generation or second-generation immigrants where English is not the primary language spoken at home (Williamson, 2012). Many students enter the public schools disadvantaged by their ethnic-minority background. These students identify as culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) (Gay, 2013; Ladson-Billings; 1995). Schools, traditionally structured to support the hegemonic, monocultural White culture are facing challenges as educators, many of whom do not understand the complexities of educating students with such distinct needs, struggle to meet the needs of CLD students (Kelly-McHale, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Teacher preparation programs can be instrumental in preparing future teachers for working with the CLD population through programs that teach about culturally relevant pedagogical practices. One promising way to meet the needs of CLD students is through the development of culturally relevant classrooms that include the arts (Hoffman, 2012; Ladson-Billings 2014; Lynch, 2007; Overland; 2013).

This literature review reports on research focused on the CLD population of students. Its purpose is to examine what constitutes a culturally relevant teaching practice and what the implications are for the teacher and all of the students in such a classroom. It is organized into the following four sections: The Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Student, Culturally Relevant Practice, Teacher Education Programs that Recognize Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, and Arts Integration.
These themes interconnect, presenting the literature to ascertain whether adjustment of pedagogical practice toward cultural relevancy meets the needs of today’s public school students. Which students are identified as culturally and linguistically diverse? What is the importance of adjusting pedagogical practice to accommodate their specific needs? Is it essential that teacher preparation programs inform preservice teachers of culturally relevant practice and the need to be culturally competent? What is the role of the arts in culturally relevant teaching? Does it serve a purpose in facilitating the learning experience for students and lead them to a better understanding not only of the diversity among various cultures, but also of the commonalities?

**The Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Student**

Increasing numbers of culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students are entering the public school system in the United States. Teaching this population of students presents specific challenges for educators and requires pedagogical strategies that will serve to facilitate learning for CLD students be practiced (Budd, 2007; DeWet & Gubbins, 2009; Durden & Truscott, 2013; Garrett & Morgan, 2003; Kelly-McHale, 2013).

**Demographical statistics.** The culturally and linguistically diverse student (CLD) population in the public schools in the United States is increasing (Garrett & Morgan, 2003). According to The National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), the percentage of public school students in the United States who were English Language Learners (ELL) was higher in 2010–11 (10 percent, or an estimated 4.7 million students) than in 2002–03 (9 percent, or an estimated 4.1 million students) (NCES, 2014). Of these students, more than one half of them were born in the United States (Brouillette, 2012).

The United States Department of Education (2009) reported that in 1972, 78% of the nation’s public school student population was White with the remaining percentage, 22%, of
students being culturally diverse: African American, Hispanic, Asian, and Native American. By 2005, the demographics had changed considerably in schools, both in the urban and suburban areas of the United States with nearly 42% of students being culturally diverse (United States Department of Education, 2007). By 2011, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reported that the number of students who were culturally and linguistically diverse had increased to 45% although demographics for teachers has remained fairly constant with 84% of classroom teachers in K-12 schools in the United States being White and female. (Durden & Truscott, 2013, Ford & Kea, 2009).

**Challenges for teachers and students.** As increasing numbers of CLD students enter the public schools, the classroom climate changes as teachers struggle with how to teach this population of students (Durden & Truscott, 2013; Kelly-McHale, 2013). These students’ cultures and lived experiences are unfamiliar to the majority of the teaching force in the United States (Plata, 2011). In addition, because of the challenges these students face, such as English not being their first language, students arrive to their classroom ill equipped to handle the content they are being taught (Kelly-McHale, 2013).

When teachers dismiss a student’s culture, it leaves student at a loss for performing their best because they have lost the point of reference from which they make meaningful interpretations to the instruction resulting in lack of student engagement (Goldenberg, 2014). In response to this cultural discordance, Milner (2010) states, “cultural conflicts can cause inconsistencies and incongruence between teachers and students, which can make teaching and learning difficult” (p.14).

The cultural identities and limited linguistic proficiencies can be transferred into negative, stereotypical understandings of students. For example, students who have limited
English proficiency may be seen as less intelligent than their English speaking classmates, African American students may be expected to demonstrate more behavioral problems in class, and those who dress differently than the dominant cultural norm or display tattoos may be viewed in a negative manner (Cartledge & Kourea, 2008; Plata, 2011).

CLD students arrive to school with particular needs and many times these needs are not met due to a misunderstanding or misinterpretation of the students’ abilities based in part on the teachers’ belief systems (Goldenberg, 2014; Plata, 2011). According to a 2006 report from the United States Department of Education, White, middle class females account for the majority of the teaching force in the United States (Ford & Kea, 2009; Kelly-Mchale, 2013). Although these teachers may have a superficial understanding of the cultures and backgrounds of their students, they usually lack an in-depth comprehension of whom these students are, and based on bias and prejudice, may be unable to accurately read their students’ true abilities (De Wet, 2011).

Plata (2011) posits that when teachers impose their “monistic cultural schemata” (p. 117) there is a great possibility that they will jump to unfounded conclusions about their students. These teachers, many of whom do not have an in-depth understanding of cultures other than their own, may make assumptions that can have negative effects on the educational development of their students. The students’ cultural identities and limited linguistic proficiencies can be transferred into negative, stereotypical understandings.

Teachers may prejudge students based on their appearance and ways of speaking thus leading them to make assumptions toward the CLD students. For example, (a) English language learners (ELL) students are academically deficient compared to their English-speaking classmates due to their limited English proficiency or (b) Black students are more likely to display aggressive behaviors. These assumptions can lead to decisions that will negatively
impact student achievement (Plata, 2011). Subsequently, this can lead students to judge the culture of the school unfairly with the end result being detrimental to student success in school and beyond (Cartledge & Kourea, 2008).

Lack of fluency in speaking, reading, and writing English, or the use of English dialects may be interpreted by some teachers as a learning disability or an intellectual deficiency. These characteristics are some of the reasons many CLD students are erroneously referred to special education classes (Correa & Tulbert, 1991). On the other end of the spectrum are the students who, because of their cultural and linguistic backgrounds, are overlooked by their teacher for participation in gifted programs. Alternative means of assessment are recommended for the CLD students so that they can be equitably represented in gifted programs (DeWet & Gubbins, 2011). The creative arts can be a fair way for teachers to have CLD students demonstrate understanding and ability in academic content while also being sensitive to different learning styles (Gay, 2000/2013).

Although the difficulty in accurately assessing the abilities of CLD students may be rationalized as being that the teaching force is overwhelmingly represented by a majority of middle class, White females, many of whom do not have experience in educating students with such distinct needs, there are other reasons as well. Teachers are also faced with teaching a curriculum that has them “teaching to the test” although many would like to have more flexibility in adapting, integrating, and pacing their lessons (Meidl & Meidl, 2011).

One study on teachers’ beliefs toward educating CLD students in their classrooms focused on the teachers’ perspectives. The study was conducted in an inner city elementary school where the majority of the students spoke Spanish although all classes were taught in English. The participants were three White, female elementary school classroom teachers, one
of whom spoke Spanish (Meidl & Meidl, 2011).

Through the interview process of the research, the teachers expressed frustration with trying to satisfy what the mandated curriculum based on the state standards called for and that when teaching, they had to rely on a set curriculum paced toward the taking of standardized tests. These teachers believed that adapting curriculum by tweaking lessons and integrating curriculum through the use of outside resources to enhance the curriculum, would help them to fill the gaps, enabling them to better reach the CLD students in their classrooms. These teachers also expressed a desire to teach more in-depth, and proceed at a slower pace rather than focusing on maintaining a pace that ensured they were covering what would be on the test (Meidl & Meidl, 2011).

Increasing numbers of CLD students are entering the public school system in the United States, one that is overly represented by a White, middle class, monocultural teaching force (Ford & Kea, 2009; Kelly-McHale, 2013; Plata, 2011). Identifying CLD students, understanding the unique challenges encountered when teaching these students, and making a commitment to a culturally relevant teaching practice are all essential for purposes of reaching these students and ensuring that they are learning to their maximum potential (Ladson-Billings, 1995, Plata, 2011). It is paramount that special accommodations be made in teaching practices and curriculum development if students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds are to succeed in the nation’s public schools. These special accommodations can be provided through a culturally relevant teaching practice (Budd, 2007; De Wet & Gubbins, 2009; Meidl & Meidl, 2011).

**Culturally Relevant Practice**

A pedagogy that emphasizes cultural relevancy results in more effective teaching. When content presented is culturally relevant, it has greater meaning for students and concepts are
more easily understood (Kesler, 2011). This section examines what constitutes culturally relevant practice by looking at its origins and development.

**Historical trajectory.** In the 1974 Supreme Court decision *Lau v. Nichols*, the United States Supreme Court guaranteed linguistically diverse students the right to a meaningful education (Irizarry, 2006). This led schools to develop curriculum that responded to the culturally and linguistically diverse students in the context of bilingual education. The terms *culturally responsive pedagogy* or *culturally relevant pedagogy* had not been coined yet, but instructional methodologies that were *multicultural* and *bilingual* were being developed (Sleeter, 2011).

Multicultural pedagogy is one that is inclusive of many cultures and based on an equity pedagogy that presumes schools are structured to advantage the dominant White culture. A multicultural pedagogy recognizes and affirms the many diverse cultures of students in the classroom and through instructional and learning strategies, gives all students equal access to knowledge that will allow them to be competitive regardless of culture, language, race, religion, or gender (Saint-Hillaire, 2014).

Bilingual pedagogy is one where students possessing limited or no English proficiency are taught in their native language and in English. Where the mother language supports the learning of English so that students can succeed in an English speaking society (Branum-Martin, Foorman, Francis, & Mehta, 2010). Although other factors such as desegregation of schools and the War on Poverty contributed as well, the implementation of a culture-centric curriculum led to greater academic achievement for diverse students (Sleeter, 2011).

Also in the 1970s, the increase of students from diverse cultures entering the public schools in the United States led educational researchers to recommend and encourage educators
to approach instruction in a way that did not see the sociocultural differences of students as obstacles to overcome but rather, as resources from which to draw upon when designing lessons for the classroom (Ladson-Billings, 2009; Santamaria, 2009). New ideas concerning how curriculum could be presented and implemented in this new and culturally diverse classroom were advanced, designed, and developed with the intent of engaging and motivating all students toward academic success.

Definition of culturally relevant teaching. Culturally relevant teaching (CRT), therefore, is a relatively new phenomenon. It must not be confused with multicultural teaching although multicultural teaching can undergird culturally relevant teaching. Multicultural pedagogy can be taught to students who are of one culture whereas culturally relevant pedagogy addresses the cultures of all the students who are present in the classroom and creates, through acknowledgement of these cultures, relevancy and meaningfulness of the learning content for the student (Rychly & Graves, 2012). In addition, multicultural pedagogy is most concerned with equity of knowledge among students whereas CRT is most concerned with closing the achievement gap among marginalized groups of students and those of the dominant culture (Gay, 2000/2013; Ladson-Billings, 1995b; Saint-Hillaire, 2014.)

Many terms have been used to denote instruction that draws from the cultural strengths of the students in the classroom. Some of these terms are culturally relevant, culturally contextualized, culturally synchronized, culturally mediated, culturally reflective, culturally congruent, culturally sustaining, and culturally responsive (Gay, 2010; Paris, 2012). These terms have been used interchangeably throughout the literature albeit with subtle differences among them.

There exists much ambiguity among the term definitions within the literature. Important
to note however, is that although culturally *responsive* pedagogy does move toward social justice issues such as equity for the marginalized, it is in the third component of Ladson-Billings’ (1995b) criteria for culturally relevant teaching, the development of a student’s socio-political or critical consciousness, where culturally relevant teaching branches off and significantly adds to culturally responsive teaching (Ladson-Billings, 1995b; Sleeter, 2011).

In 2006, the National Center for Culturally Responsive Educational Systems (NCCREST) came out with a report that listed ten characteristics of culturally responsive pedagogy. They are:

- Acknowledge students’ differences as well as their commonalities.
- Validate students’ cultural identity in classroom practices and instructional materials.
- Educate students about the diversity of the world around them.
- Promote equity and mutual respect among students.
- Assess students’ ability and achievement validly.
- Foster a positive interrelationship among students, their families, the communities, and school.
- Motivate students to become active participants in their own learning.
- Encourage students to think critically.
- Challenge students to strive for excellence as defined by their potential.
- Assist students in becoming socially and politically conscious (Cozzens-Hayes, 2013; Richards, Brown, & Forde, 2006).

*Contexts.* Through the implementation of a culturally relevant pedagogical practice, teachers make every effort to seek out ways to understand their students from each student’s cultural perspective and view behaviors presented through a cultural lens (Villegas & Lucas,
Refusal to recognize and practice this important principle may result in teachers judging the CLD student unfairly. For example, if teachers only know one culture, most likely the White dominant culture given the statistics mentioned previously, then it is probable that assumptions toward CLD students will be made (Plata, 2011).

By keeping the sociocultural context in mind when preparing lessons, the diversity in the classroom, for so many years considered a deficit to learning, would now be an asset as students would be able to relate the academic content to their lived experiences. Culturally relevant teachers keep their relationship with their students as “fluid and equitable” (p. 163), at times letting students take on the role as teacher and seeing themselves as learners as well (Ladson-Billings, 1995a). Additionally, teachers who practice CRT see themselves as a part of the community, attending community events and frequenting community stores and services thus building bridges between the student’s school and home life. This is an essential component of CRT (Gay, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 1995a; Santamaria, 2009).

When preparing lessons for the culturally relevant classroom, there must also be an awareness of the socio-political context (Sleeter, 2011). Freire (1970/2000) posited that teaching is political in that it determines who wins and who loses when pedagogical decisions are made. According to Freire (1970/2000), “One cannot expect positive results from an educational or political action program which fails to respect the particular view of the world held by the people. Such a program constitutes cultural invasion, good intentions notwithstanding.” (p. 95).

In this global society, with the increase of immigrants from diverse countries, such as the recent influx of illegal immigrant children crossing our borders entering our country and subsequently its educational system, it is imperative that teaching practices take a multicultural stance. Also important is that students come to understand the cultural differences and
similarities among their classmates and this needs to begin at an early age (Nieto & Bode, 2008; Banks, 2006).

Approaching content from the cultural essences of these students is an attempt to create equity among all students and to improve their educational experiences, thereby also making valid connections to the concept of social justice (Irizarry, 2006). Villegas and Lucas (2002, p. xiv) outline the following six principles that apply to those who practice cultural relevancy in the context of social justice.

- Have a socio-cultural consciousness: they understand that learning and behavior are influenced by factors such as ethnicity, culture, and language.
- Have affirming views about people from diverse backgrounds: they do not see diversity as a problem to be solved.
- Have a commitment to being responsible for effecting positive change for students from diverse backgrounds.
- Embrace constructivist views of pedagogy: they see learning as an active, empowering, and affirming process.
- Believe in pedagogical interactions that build on what students already know as a foundation for further learning.
- Are familiar with students’ prior knowledge and beliefs derived from personal and cultural experiences.

**A culture of caring.** In the culturally relevant classroom, caring does not mean to be “nice” or “kind” but intends to hold all students to the same high standards regardless of their cultural or linguistic diversity (Rychly & Graves, 2012). Caring for students in a culturally relevant classroom can be defined as the teacher showing concern for a student not only as a
member of the class but also as a person, validating and taking interest in each student’s cultural persona. A teacher who cares for their students is committed to understanding that students thrive in an environment that nurtures their learning, acknowledges them as individuals, accepts them for who they are, and encourages their academic success by providing support strategies (Habib, Densmore-James, & Macfarlane, 2013; Perez, 2000).

In a culturally relevant classroom, students respond positively to a teacher who demonstrates caring for students in the classroom. Teachers who demonstrated these qualities of caring were seen by students as more than just authority figures but teachers who had students’ best interests for success in school (Bondy, Ross, Hanbacher, & Acosta, 2012; Cartledge & Kourea, 2008; Perez, 2000).

Warm demanders, teachers who approach their students with a no-nonsense approach, exacting high standards, and expecting no less from their students have been shown to be effective in increasing academic achievement in urban classrooms, especially among African American students (Bondy, et al., 2012). Morris and Morris (2000) found that teachers who were warm demanders were among the favorite teachers of their students. Even when a school lacks the financial resources to purchase books and supplies or is in a run-down building, when an environment of caring is evident; attending school is valued by the students. As one student stated, “When I was too sick to go to school, I was doubly sick, because I was sick again because I couldn’t go” (Morris & Morris, 2000, p. 4).

In a number of studies conducted in New Zealand, four themes emerged that are essential in establishing a culture of care in the classroom. They are (a) building relationships, (b) exercising holistic care, (c) building capacity, and (d) building trust (Habib, et al., 2013). Ware (2006) has taken caring to a new status as a pedagogy in and of itself but it remains a critically
important component of culturally relevant teaching. It appears that a culture of caring may be the most important factor in determining academic success (Perez, 2000).

**The teacher’s role.** A teacher’s approach to teaching and what it means to be a teacher is of critical importance as to whether the classroom is culturally relevant. In the United States, the public school system is structured toward teaching the values and beliefs of the White dominant culture reinforcing the social and cultural oppression of the CLD student population (Rios, 2000).

Stating that there is no official national curriculum in place, Apple (1990) suggests that it is the White dominant culture that has, because of its power, decided what knowledge is essential for students to know. Citing the textbooks that tell the stories of the social and political encounters and the various cultural relationships among the world’s people, Apple (1990) asserts that these textbooks were created by members of the White dominant culture and emphasize the Eurocentric perspective of the White dominant culture thus continuing White power and privilege as these stories continue to be told through a curriculum that emphasizes and perpetuates myths of what actually happened during historical events.

Apple (1990) calls a group that intentionally imposes its cultural dominance on a nation in social, political, and economical ways *cultural hegemony* and posits that this can occur in three different ways within educational settings.

- By overt examples, such as what is included in the curriculum and deemed, by the White majority of educators as important to know reinforces this control and the oppressive action of cultural hegemony.

- Within a hidden curriculum, through the daily interactions and relationships that occur among teachers and students and also through those that occur among students
and other students.

- Through the perspectives and beliefs teachers hold toward their students, which shape the expectations teachers have for their students (Apple, 1990).

Given that the teaching force in the United States is overwhelmingly represented by White, monocultural, middle class females, traditional understandings dictate assimilating CLD students into the dominant culture by dismissing the diverse cultural identities of the students, seeing them as deficits that are in need of being changed (Freire, 1970/2000; Goldenberg, 2014; Kelly-McHale, 2013, Ladson-Billings, 2009; Plata 2011).

Contrarily, teachers who adopt a culturally relevant mindset acknowledge and welcome diversity, viewing diverse cultural identities as assets and strengths (Ford & Kea, 2009; Gay, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Santamaria, 2009).

Developing cultural awareness requires that teachers engage in critical self-reflection of their positionalities. This is an important component towards overcoming both the acknowledged and the hidden biases and assumptions White teachers harbor toward the CLD students (Durden & Truscott, 2013). Anders, Bryan, and Noblit (2005) explored the understanding of Whiteness and privilege through narratives that encouraged White participants to reflect on their culture and background. The authors posited that only by a straight-forward confrontation of one’s positionality and place in the world, the power it brings, and the influence it has on others can one even begin to understand what all this means in terms of how this affects relationships with those of the less powerful sub-dominant cultures (Anders, Bryan, & Noblit, 2005).

The following table lists the characteristics teachers possess whether they be of an assimilationist or culturally relevant mindset.
Table 1. Conceptions of Self and Others. (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 38)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Culturally Relevant</th>
<th>Assimilationist</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher sees herself as an artist, teaching as an art.</td>
<td>Teacher sees herself as a technician, teaching as a technical task.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher sees herself as part of the community and teaching as giving something back to the community; encourages students to do the same.</td>
<td>Teacher sees herself as an individual who may or may not be a part of the community; she encourages achievement as a means to escape community.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher believes all students can succeed.</td>
<td>Teacher believes failure is inevitable for some.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher helps students make connections between their community, national, and global identities.</td>
<td>Teacher homogenizes students into one “American” identity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher sees teaching as “pulling knowledge out” like “mining”.</td>
<td>Teacher sees teaching as “putting knowledge into” – like “banking”.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In summary, the emergence of culturally relevant teaching can be traced back to the 1974 United States Supreme Court decision regarding the case *Lau v. Nichols* that guaranteed that linguistically diverse students be entitled to a meaningful education (Irizarry, 2006). This decision served as a springboard for a new way to design curriculum, one that focused on ways to teach these students, evidenced by the development of multicultural and bilingual pedagogies.

Additionally, educational researchers’ recommendations for the inclusivity of students’ sociocultural differences in the classroom for purposes of increasing student engagement led to new ideas. Culturally relevant teaching (CRT) is one such idea that also places emphasis on closing the achievement gap among marginalized groups of students and those of the dominant culture (Gay, 2000/2013; Ladson-Billings, 1995a; Saint-Hillaire, 2014).

A classroom that is structured to be a caring learning space, one where the students’ cultural and linguistic diversity are viewed by the teacher as an asset rather than a deficit or
mode of resistance, further helps students because they are valued for their unique cultural perspectives. Development of cultural awareness through critical reflection allows teachers to access students’ cultural knowledge, helping students connect their lived experiences to school thereby increasing students’ ability to find meaning within the learning content (Goldenberg, 2014; Ladson Billings, 2009; Milner, 2009; Rychly & Graves, 2012; Schmeichel, 2012).

Abilities of CLD students are usually presented in nontraditional ways. Any disabilities are sometimes hidden behind cultural or linguistic barriers. So that these can be recognized, it is necessary that preservice teachers are prepared for teaching the CLD student (Budd, 2007; Cartledge & Kourea, 2008, & De Wet & Gubbins, 2011).

Given what we know about the impact a culturally relevant teaching practice has on CLD students, it is necessary to examine teacher education programs for the purpose of identifying what is being done to prepare preservice teachers to understand and teach CLD students.

**Teacher Education Programs that Recognize Culturally Relevant Pedagogy**

This section will explore the literature surrounding the need for preservice teachers to be provided ways to participate in varied experiences and trainings that increase cultural awareness. The development of a comprehensive understanding of what it means to be culturally competent will result in the ability for future teachers to better relate to all students (Frye & Vogt, 2010; Gay, 2000/2013; Lee & Herner-Patnode, 2010; Sleeter, 2011).

The number of students entering the public schools who are culturally and linguistically diverse is increasing (Ford & Kea, 2009; Garrett & Morgan, 2002). According to the National Center of Education Statistics (2011) 45% of children who attend public school in the United States are CLD while 84% of the teachers who currently teach in the public schools are predominantly White and female (Durden & Truscott, 2013; Kelly McHale, 2013, Gay, 2013).
Regarding teacher training, it is important that teachers who express an interest in working with diverse populations are actively recruited (Ladson-Billings 2009, Rodriguez 2000). Every effort should be made to recruit teachers from diverse backgrounds. The reason for this is that students who share the culture of their teacher can better relate to that teacher and will probably better understand that teacher’s instructional style. Additionally, for many students, having a teacher of the same culture provides a role model towards navigating their space as a member of a sub-dominant culture (Rodriguez, 2000).

However, given that most students in teacher preparation programs are from the White dominant culture, it is imperative that teacher preparation programs equip students with the necessary skills to relate to the CLD students who will occupy many of the seats in their classroom (Keengwe, 2010, Lee & Herner-Patnode, 2012; Milner, 2009). Therefore, preservice and inservice teachers must be provided opportunities and experiences that help them to understand and appreciate the central role of culture in the lives of students (Budd, 2007; Herner-Patnode, 2010; Keengwe, 2010). Culturally relevant preservice training includes prolonged immersion in diverse communities, observation of teachers engaging in CRT, and longer and more controlled teacher training opportunities (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Fostering cultural awareness that moves beyond the classroom walls results in a better understanding of the cultural make-up of families and communities (Ladson-Billings, 2009; Lee & Herner-Patnode, 2010).

As it is typical to see students from a variety of cultures in many classrooms, for many of these students, English is not their primary language (NCES, 2014). According to the National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition (NCELA) (2012), the student population in the United States public schools has become more racially and ethnically diverse during the past 10
years with an increase of 66.03% in ELLs from 3.5 to 5.3 million in the last decade vs. 7.2% growth rate in the general student population.

One of the most important skills a preservice teacher can have is the ability to realize that their reality is not necessarily the reality of their students. Their lived experiences may be radically different from those of their students and they must come to understand that the lens through which they see the world may not be the same lens through which their students see it. A lack of understanding of this reality can affect teachers’ perceptions of the CLD students and can reveal itself in teachers’ holding onto stereotypes of cultures, false beliefs, and misunderstandings towards their students’ abilities. This can lead to lower expectations for these students (Kelly-McHale, 2013; Vaughan, 2005). One way to address the need for understanding of diverse cultures is through the development of teacher preparation programs that intently focus on the development of cultural awareness (Lee & Herner-Patnode, 2010).

Through a cross-cultural conversation project, one study partnered White female preservice teachers who had limited experience with diverse cultures, with ELL students who attended the same university. The preservice teachers responded that their initial feelings towards meeting the ELL students were ones of nervousness and fear. They realized that they held assumptions toward their ELL partners and discovered that, upon reflection, they learned to accept and respect other cultures and people. As one participant stated, “Once I got to meet my partner, I realized that these people are just like me…we thought it really funny that we were scared of each other.” (Keengwe, 2010, p. 201). The participants stated that through this project, they could better imagine the challenges the CLD students in their future classrooms would face and they learned the importance of overcoming stereotypical assumptions and strive to see through to the individual student (Keengwe, 2010).
Freire, a Brazilian educator and seminal author whose work focused on the application of a critical lens toward the educational process, viewed education as a transformative process. He posited that disregarding culture in the classroom oppresses students of sub-dominant cultures as teachers of the dominant culture regard these students as outside the norm, marginalized, and in need of being changed (Freire, 1970/2000).

It is not our role to speak to the people about our view of the world, nor to attempt to impose that view on them, but rather to dialogue with the people about their view and ours. We must realize that their view of the world, manifested variously in their action, reflects their situation of the world. Educational and political action which is not critically aware of this situation runs the risk either of “banking” or of preaching in the desert. (Freire, 1970/2000, p. 96)

Teacher education programs understand the need for a comprehensive program that teaches awareness of cultural and linguistic diversity but currently, there is no standardized or set curriculum among them. Villegas and Lucas (2002) encourage those who prepare teachers to become educators to come together within their institutions to develop a curriculum through “dialogue and negotiation” (p. 21) that is focused on cultural diversity. Milner (2009) extends this concept further and posits that educators throughout different institutions of higher education should come together and create a curriculum that would focus on specific components in a diversity studies program that would be used throughout teacher preparation programs.

It is important to note that one cannot learn culturally relevant teaching as if it were a teaching methodology or curriculum. CRT is more of an attitude or mindset towards cultural and linguistic diversity that must be developed (Frye & Vogt, 2010). Gay (2013) refers to this as Cultural Competence.
Some attributes of a culturally diverse program for preservice teachers would include:

- Cultural Competence – that preservice teachers understand the knowledge base of students’ cultural experiences and perspectives and use this understanding as a means to engage students in the learning through cultural relevancy to their lived experiences (Frye & Vogt, 2010; Gay, 2000/2013).

- Critical Reflectivity – that preservice teachers examine their beliefs and assumptions towards CLD students, their families, and communities (Durden & Truscott, 2013).

- School and Community Engagement – that preservice teachers engage in experiences working with the CLD population both in school and beyond through community interaction (Durden & Truscott, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 2009).

Teacher preparation is important for developing cultural competency in the preservice teacher. Understanding CLD students necessitates that one looks within, continuously examining personal belief systems while acknowledging the presence of alternative belief systems (Durden & Truscott, 2013). Although it is impossible to understand all aspects and perspectives of all cultures, there is a cultural knowledge base that can be understood so that preservice teachers who enter the workforce can do so more comfortably, skilled in knowing how to best assess their students’ needs through culturally relevant pedagogy that seeks to bring out the best from each of their students (Lee & Herner-Patnode, 2010; Sleeter, 2011).

Tomlinson (2014), an American professor and author whose work is focused on differentiated instruction, posited that teachers must design instruction and adjust practices to meet the needs of the many diverse students in today’s classrooms.

You can only care for the child you understand - what it is like to be part of that child’s culture, what it is like to be unable to speak the language of the classroom, what it is like
to go home to a shelter every night…you can only do that [connect with learners’ interests] when you know what they care about, what they do that gives them joy, what they would wish for if they dared. (Tomlinson, 2003, p. 67)

The social lens by which we view the world is shaped by our personal beliefs and experiences. As actions are influenced by our individual philosophy, it is essential to reach out to understand other perspectives when making decisions concerning curriculum (Ornstein, 2011).

In summary, as increasing numbers of CLD students enter the United States public school system, teacher education programs are understanding the need for preparing future teachers, the majority of whom are White, middle class, monocultural females, to better understand these students. By providing preservice teachers experiences working with CLD students both in school and in the community as well as opportunities to engage in critical reflection of their own belief systems and those of other cultures, teachers can begin to develop the cultural competency that is so vital to engaging and motivating CLD students.

This research addressed the use of the creative arts within the culturally relevant classroom for the purposes of providing additional ways for CLD students to more readily understand and demonstrate what they are learning. Therefore, it is necessary to examine the relationship the arts have to world cultures and to the curriculum of the general classroom.

**Arts Integration**

The arts are a commonality all cultures share. It is one way that cultures are defined. When language barriers present obstacles for communication, the arts can provide a way for a culture to be understood. The integration of the arts into the general classroom curriculum can enable content to be presented through a variety of modes that can result in enduring understandings for students (Lynch, 2007).
**Historical trajectory.** Arts in the public schools began in Massachusetts in the nineteenth century because of two directives from important men in education reform, Horace Mann and Thomas Dewey. In the 1800s, Mann insisted that music and the visual arts be taught to students in the common schools for the purpose of enhancing the curriculum. In the 1930s, Dewey deemed the connections made between the arts and learning to be positive. His position had many schools implementing music and art into the curriculum and in the majority of prekindergarten through Grade 12 public schools in the United States, the inclusion of the arts within the school curriculum continues (Darby & Catterall, 1994).

**Definition.** There are many interpretations of the term *arts integration* but no exact agreement on its definition. The United States Department of Education stated in a 2010 report that arts integration is “the practice of teaching across classroom subjects in tandem with the arts…creating relationships between different arts disciplines and other classroom skills and subjects.” (Overland, 2013, p.32).

Depending on who is teaching, what is being taught, and how it is being taught, arts integration can look very different. It can be a way to memorize a learning concept by setting it to a simple and familiar tune or it can be an elaborate interdisciplinary production that came about through collaborative efforts with other teachings. Although also considered *arts integration*, teaching one objective across a variety of disciplines is better defined as *arts integration teaching* (Overland, 2013).

**Benefits of arts integration.** The benefit of integrating the arts into the classroom is that it offers all students additional pathways for understanding curriculum content. In an assessment of teacher-preparedness, one university conducted a self-study by giving out questionnaires to the student teachers, supervisors, and cooperating mentor teachers in prekindergarten through
Grade 12 classrooms. Preliminary analysis of the data found that teacher preparation programs that include integration of arts-based instruction did serve to support student learning (Cowen & Sandefur, 2012).

With music integrated into the curriculum, academic achievement as well as the students’ self-concept improve and student engagement levels increase (Cane, 2009; May, 2007). For many CLD students, the arts serve as an avenue to express understanding. This is especially true for ELL students when language presents a barrier to communicate understanding (Lynch, 2007).

For the ELL student who is learning to read English, music can support the learning process. The repetitive practice that takes place when learning to sing a song helps students to hear the pronunciation of the English syllables. The rhythmic patterns that are internalized through singing and movement, such as clapping, also help the student feel the language patterns and see how words fit together (Brouillette, 2012).

The arts allow students to explore and demonstrate their understandings in ways that are different ways than is traditionally done in the classroom. The arts provide a holistic experience for students for when learning classroom content through the arts, the whole child is involved. The music experience may have the child vocalizing loudly or involved physically such as when singing, playing a musical instrument, or dancing. A child may be actively listening to and for instruments in a musical selection or for rhythmic patterns. The arts provide a safe place for students to be free, take risks, and make decisions about what is important in their particular activity or performance (Lynch, 2007).

When supported with the arts, all students experience learning by participating in ways both collaborative and independent. The arts encourage communication with each other through teamwork. Working collaboratively in groups can place students in the Zone of Proximal
Development, where learning is just beyond a student’s capability but success can be achieved with the help of others (Vygotsky, 1978). However, when listening to music or practicing an instrument, the arts can also allow for quiet reflection and critical response (Edmiston, 1993). The arts also encourage risk-taking, exploration, and discovery through creative means (Gullat, 2008).

In 2006, however, a national survey conducted by the Center on Education Policy found that 71% of the 15,000 school districts in the United States had reduced instructional time in the arts to provide additional instructional time in the areas of math and reading (Aprill, 2010).

School systems however, do seem to understand the important role the arts have. The Chicago Arts Partnership in Education (CAPE) is dedicated to providing quality arts integration programs to students. The CAPE study in “Champions of Change: The Impact of the Arts on Learning” found that over a six-year span of time, higher test scores were evident in schools that had implemented the CAPE arts integration program when compared to schools that had not (Aprill, 2010).

The United States Department of Education has cited the CAPE schools, which uses a network of community artists in their implementation of arts integration and two others, A+ Schools, which uses certified arts educators, and Arts Integration Model Schools (AIMS), whose schools provide arts integration for students in high poverty areas and have, over a three year period, shown substantial improvement in math scores (Overland, 2013).

Turnaround Arts is an arts integration program that came about after many school improvement initiatives such as standardized testing, proved to have a negligible impact on “priority designated” schools (lowest performing 5% of the schools in a state). The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 required interventions if schools did not achieve Adequate Yearly
Progress. As the search for innovative practices that might make a difference as other attempts were not working, Turnaround Arts was imagined as an intervention (PCAH, 2011).

Turnaround Arts school leaders engage in collaboration with principals and other school leaders for purposes of developing meaningful experiences that allow students to explore the creative arts within their classroom learning. Students are kinesthetically, visually, and aurally engaged in experiential learning. Students are also given freedom. For example, a student could take a break from a reading class to practice a musical instrument or draw a picture, and then refreshed and with a new mindset, return to their reading (NBC News, 2013).

Over a three-year period, Turnaround Arts schools demonstrated a 23% improvement in math proficiency and a 13% increase in reading proficiency. Additionally, student attendance rates markedly increased while student disciplinary issues showed reductions of up to 86% (PCAH, 2015). Levin (2006) posits that school culture is premised on set expectations and that schools can be resistant to school reforms that challenge their assumptions on these expectations; which can be academic, behavioral, or social. Therefore, for an enterprise such as Turnaround Arts to be implemented successfully, the school must be willing to make changes that entail taking risks.

Integration of the arts into the classroom curriculum has great benefit for all students as it allows access to different ways of experiencing learning concepts and understanding curriculum content. For the CLD students, arts integration allows for expression of culture and emotions and it also provides for communication in ways that is not only language based. Arts integration can be defined in many ways but for it to truly have meaning for students, it must be well planned and purposefully implemented.

The use of the arts as an enhancement to school curriculum can be traced back to the
1800s. That it continues to be included within the prekindergarten through Grade 12 curriculum today can perhaps be attributed to educational reformer Dewey’s assertion in the 1930s that the arts promote positive connections to learning (Darby & Catterall, 1994). Although arts integration can present differently within classrooms, when successfully implemented, the results are higher levels of student motivation, engagement, and achievement (Cane, 2009; May, 2007). Especially for the CLD student, the arts can support the learning process by facilitating comprehension and providing additional means for them to express understanding (Brouillette, 2012; Lynch, 2007).

**Summary**

Culturally relevant pedagogy is rooted in the multicultural and bilingual programs that were developed in 1970s in response to the influx of immigrants coming to America. The culturally relevant classroom is one where the teacher has created a caring environment based on mutual respect between teacher and students. A culturally relevant teacher strives to present classroom curriculum from the diverse cultural perspectives of the students. The teacher sees the students’ cultural and linguistic diversity as an asset that contributes to the learning space rather than a deficit that detracts from it. This caring learning environment encourages academic success by nurturing the potential of each student, valuing their unique background and lived experience.

Teacher preparation programs can assist preservice teachers to approach their teaching with a culturally relevant mindset. Development in the area of cultural competency will allow preservice teachers to better understand CLD students and to recognize these students’ abilities as well as any disabilities, which can be hidden behind cultural and linguistic barriers.

One commonality all people share is that they express and define their culture through
their art, and the integration of the arts when carefully and purposefully implemented, can provide holistic experiences not only for the CLD students but also for all students, allowing for multiple ways for students to communicate understanding.

This research study sought to answer the following research question:
How do elementary school teachers describe their experience in using arts-enhanced teaching practices as a way to engage and motivate students toward cultural relevancy?

As a culturally relevant elementary school music teacher who has been enhancing the classroom curriculum through the creative arts, this researcher has seen the important role the arts play for all students, especially CLD students, who benefit from this additional pathway to learning. It is this experience that prompted the inquiry as to whether general elementary classroom teachers who practice culturally relevant teaching are using the arts in their classrooms to enhance student learning.

Through the methodology of an interpretative phenomenological analysis study (IPA), the experiences of teachers who engage in arts-enhanced culturally relevant teaching practices and their perceived impact on teaching and learning for the CLD student will be gathered, analyzed, interpreted by this researcher, and presented. This study will build upon the body of knowledge currently focused on CRT through the added dimension of the arts and their impact on culturally relevant teaching practices in the general elementary classroom. This research has the possibility of changing the educational landscape to accommodate the needs of CLD students as awareness of the need to structure general classroom curriculum not only to be culturally relevant but also to include the arts as an engaging and motivating means is understood.
Chapter Three: Methodology

The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of how general education teachers in various elementary school settings who practice culturally relevant teaching that include the arts as a support make sense of their experience.

This study will address the following research question:

Research Question

How do elementary school teachers describe their experience in using arts-enhanced teaching practices as a way to engage and motivate students toward cultural relevancy?

Methodological Approach

In order to examine these experiences, a qualitative research design was the appropriate methodology for this study, seeking to understand the experiences of elementary school teachers who use arts-enhanced culturally relevant teaching practices in their general education classrooms. Qualitative research is a method of social science research where the goal is to understand, what the eighteenth-century philosopher Dilthey called *verstehen*, how people interpret the world (Willis, 2007). This research embraced an ideographic approach, attempting to understand the social world by exploring the participants’ lived experiences (Burrell & Morgan, 1979).

There are numerous methodologies that can be employed when conducting qualitative research. Researchers attempting to explain the essence of a phenomenon will choose phenomenology, but when the researcher wants to investigate how one makes sense of an experience with a phenomenon, IPA is the more applicable choice (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). If one thinks of qualitative research as a tree, various methodologies including case study, narrative, and phenomenology would be its branches and IPA would be a branch that would be
an offshoot of phenomenology. This research was an interpretative phenomenological analysis study (IPA). IPA is the appropriate methodological approach for this research as not only did it allow engagement with the participants through a semi-structured interview process, but it also allotted space for the researcher to personally interpret the participants’ sense-making of their experiences creating what is called a double hermeneutic (McNabb, 2012; Smith & Osborn, 2008).

**Phenomenology.** According to Kockelmans (1967), the term *phenomenology* appeared as early as 1765 as a science that is concerned with description of one’s perception, awareness, and consciousness. Phenomenology is a study of the human sciences as opposed to the study of the natural sciences (Giorgi, 1997). Seminal theorists and authors include Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, and more recently, Moustakas, Van Manen, Gadamer, and Giorgi.

Rooted in philosophical and psychological underpinnings, the development of phenomenology as a research method can be attributed to Husserl, who proposed the study of phenomenology as a way for humans to objectively understand the world (Moustakas, 1994). Husserl spoke of adopting a *natural attitude*, of studying things as they are and not based on first developing a hypothesis, and then through deductive means, seeking to understand the world. Husserl posited that while living, the natural world is there and human beings are ever interacting with it even though they may not be consciously aware of this (Moustakas, 1994).

**Hermeneutical phenomenology.** Heidegger, who was a student of Husserl, diverged from Husserl regarding hermeneutics believing that interpretation is embedded in the experience itself (Larkin, et al., 2011). Hermeneutics is a reflective process on interpretation of an experience and the interpretation of that experience is dependent on experiences that occurred prior, and this affects the said experience. Therefore, the interpretation is affected by and
dependent upon these prior experiences (Moustakas, 1994; Smith, et al., 2009).

**Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA).** Developed in 1996, IPA as a methodological approach can be attributed to Smith, who in accordance with Heidegger, and other earlier theorists such as Merleau-Ponty and Sartre, took Husserl’s concepts of phenomenology to an even more interpretative approach (Smith, et al, 2009). The theoretical principles of an IPA study are (a) phenomenological, interested in participants’ lived experiences, (b) hermeneutic, based on interpretation by both the participant and the researcher, and (c) idiographic, focused on examining in detail the sense-making of a participant’s experience of a phenomenon (Smith, 2010).

IPA research extends the concept of hermeneutics in phenomenology to include not only the interpretations of the participants on their experience but also to include and welcome the entrance of interpretation on the part of the researcher. Instead of bracketing personal pre-assumptions and leaving them out of the research, the researcher engaged in IPA will utilize them in interpreting the participants’ sense making. This is called a *double hermeneutic* (McNabb, 2012).

In IPA, the researcher engages in the practice of double hermeneutics as the researcher (1) reads the participant’s response, (2) reflects on the descriptive interpretation presented in the text or observation, and (3) not being able to completely remove prior experiences, understands this, acknowledging that one’s own experiences affect the interpretation of the collected data (McNabb, 2012; Smith, et al, 2009). For these reasons, interpretative phenomenological analysis was the chosen methodology for this study.

Selection of participants in this IPA study was purposive, meaning that the participants were chosen because they could provide descriptions of the experience the research is seeking to
understand. The seven participants were selected by purposive sampling utilizing the criterion sampling strategy as all teachers shared the commonalities of being elementary school classroom teachers who are using culturally relevant teaching practices that include the arts.

Snowball sampling strategy was also used as some participants were recruited either through the recommendation of those who work in public schools as administrators or teachers, or by participants themselves, who referred other qualified participants who met the study's specific inclusion criteria.

This research concerned the experiences of elementary school teachers. As this study is an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), the number of participants fell within the recommended number of three to ten subjects (Dukes, 1984). The limitations are that the seven participants are from one elementary school. However, the use of site triangulation, comparing and contrasting analysis from data accessed from research conducted at different grade levels will contribute to the ability to generalize findings.

**Recruitment and access.** After locating elementary classroom teachers who practice culturally relevant teaching enhanced by the arts, and upon receiving Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from Northeastern University as well as approval from the organization where this study was conducted, teachers were contacted and informed of the study’s purpose. Incentive for participation was in knowing that this research was important as it fills a gap in the literature as there has been minimal research done in the area of culturally relevant teaching and the arts in elementary schools.

**Protection of human subjects.** Each participant voluntarily signed a consent form detailing the study’s purpose as well as expectations of participants. Included in this form was information that the participant's privacy would be respected, that confidentiality would be
maintained, and that the participant would have the right to withdraw from participation in the
study at any time (Creswell, 2013).

Data Collection

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews as this allowed for more flexibility
during the interview process and necessitated interaction between the researcher and participant
(Smith & Osborn, 2008). Artifacts such as notes as well as any pertinent documents were also
collected.

There were 3 meetings. These meetings were conducted face-to-face in a location
convenient for the participant. All primary interviews took place in the classroom of each
participant.

1. An initial introductory meeting to (a) confirm that the participant met the criteria,
   (b) to obtain informed consent, and (c) to schedule the interview.

2. The primary meeting using the semi-structured interview questions.

3. A follow up meeting was arranged with each participant to reflect upon the
   the interview, to share the transcript, and to clarify any ambiguity in the interview
   responses.

The questions for the semi-structured interviews, designed by the researcher, were crafted
so that the participant was able to provide rich, detailed description. The interview questions
were open-ended to allow the participant freedom to venture into other areas of pedagogical and
lived experiences thus enriching the responses. The interviews, lasting approximately forty-five
minutes each, were conducted within four months of the school year. These semi-structured
interviews were digitally recorded to preserve the data thus making it possible to transcribe and
analyze the data at a later date (Smith, et al., 2009). The recorded interviews were transcribed
verbatim by the researcher.

**Data Storage**

Digital audio recordings of the interviews were uploaded and stored by the researcher on a computer, labeled to secure the confidentiality of all participants. Backing up of data was made as necessary. Any artifacts uploaded, such as pertinent school related documents and notes, were also labeled to secure the confidentiality of all participants. Information was stored on a computer protected by a password. Only the researcher has access to the information stored. Hard copies of artifacts, as well as the researcher’s reflective notes were stored in a locked cabinet to which only the researcher has access. Digital recordings, once uploaded were erased on the device immediately. Data will be stored as required for three years and then it will be destroyed.

**Data Analysis**

Once the data was collected, the researcher began listening to the recorded tapes of the semi-structured interview and proceeded to transcribe verbatim each interview conducted, applying a pseudonym to all names and places to ensure anonymity. The researcher color-coded the questions and responses to facilitate the reading of the transcripts. During the initial phase of analysis, the researcher utilized an inductive approach, working from the specific to the general, reading through each transcript individually, taking care to *bracket* the researcher’s assumptions while looking solely for the participant’s meaning. Assumptions noted were jotted down in the researcher’s journal. This allowed the researcher to obtain, as much as possible, an unbiased account of the transcript. Emerging patterns and themes were noted in the wide right hand margins of the transcripts. Each of the seven transcripts were looked at in this way. The second phase of analysis was to look at the transcripts as a group, to see where commonalities and
differences appeared across the transcripts. Emerging themes and patterns across the transcripts were noted on a separate paper. The transcripts were read many times during analysis with the descriptive account of the interpretation of the participants’ individual experiences being reflected upon and analyzed by the researcher. Each revisit drew out new understandings and interpretations which were written down as analytical memos and journal entries. Subsequent readings allowed for the researcher’s reflection and interpretation of the transcripts. Patterns among the seven transcripts emerged with final analytical decisions made as super-ordinate themes and sub-ordinate themes were applied resulting from the description of the participant’s experience as well as the researcher’s personal interpretation of each participant’s interpretation (hence the double hermeneutic in IPA) (Saldana, 2009; Smith et al., 2009).

The theoretical framework (culturally relevant pedagogy) shaped the analysis from the initial noting through completion.

**Procedures.** When conducting phenomenological research, questions asked of the participants through semi-structured interviews also necessitated the need for the researcher to engage in *eidetic reduction.* This entailed analyzing the transcribed data gathered from the semi-structured interviews for the essential commonalities within the participants’ experiences, weeding out the participants’ pre-assumptions and searching for that which could thematically result in the understanding of the essence of the phenomenon being studied (Smith, n.d.). Phenomenology is descriptive as it seeks to understand through description rather than explanation the essence of a phenomenon derived from participants’ interpretations (hermeneutics) of lived experiences (Finlay, 2009).

**Trustworthiness/Validation**

This research relied on Whittemore, Chase, and Mandle's (2001) primary and secondary
criteria to determine validation in this qualitative research study.

**Primary criteria.**

- **Credibility**
  - Prolonged Engagement – One primary interview of each participant, each lasting approximately forty minutes, was conducted over an extended period of time during the school year.
  - Member Checking – Participants were given the opportunity to verify and challenge the transcripts researcher’s interpretations of their statements so that the intended meanings of the participants will be interpreted accurately.
  - Triangulation
    - Data triangulation – Data was attained from different sources (interviews, artifacts, notes) at different times which led to higher credibility.
    - Site Triangulation – Interviews were conducted at one elementary school but across grade levels to ensure that the results of the data collected could be applied generally.
- **Authenticity** – The participants in this study have varied lived experiences that have led them to use the arts-enhanced culturally relevant teaching and this was explored for understanding.
- **Criticality** – Critical reflection on interviews, notes, and artifacts was thorough. A search among the data collected revealed connections among the evidence that support interpretations (triangulation).
- **Integrity** – Ongoing critical self-reflection on the part of the researcher was employed ensuring that any biases revealed were recognized and removed. The
researcher kept reflective notes that were instrumental in an increasing awareness of any biases that emerged.

As this is an interpretative phenomenological analysis, the researcher’s interpretations of the participant’s responses were reliant upon the researcher’s personal perspectives and lived experiences (Creswell, 2013). In addition to the individual semi-structured interviews, a follow-up meeting between the researcher and each participant was held for purposes of reflecting on the themes and interpretations that emerged. Participants had the opportunity to provide clarification of any of their responses so that the researcher’s interpretations were reported with the utmost accuracy.

**Secondary criteria.** The secondary criteria are presented as contributing guiding principles to assure quality and these are woven throughout the study.

- Explicitness – Research was present clearly and unambiguously.
- Vividness – Thick, rich, detailed description of participants’ experiences was presented.
- Creativity – The researcher used imagination and vision in the development of questions, analysis, and presentation that can challenge traditional ways of thinking.
- Thoroughness – The data collection and analysis was comprehensive.
- Congruence – The research process connected: the research can relate to other studies as well.
- Sensitivity – Research was conducted with respect for the culture and dignity of participants and subjects.

**Protection of human subjects.** It is important to note that when conducting qualitative research including IPA, the researcher cannot guarantee complete confidentiality to the
participants as this would mean that anything the participant said would remain solely between the researcher and the participant. However, the researcher has guaranteed anonymity to the participant, all people identified, and settings mentioned during the interview process. This was done through the use of pseudonyms (Saldana, 2009; Smith et al., 2009).

Each participant voluntarily signed a consent form detailing the study’s purpose as well as expectations of participants. Included in this form was information that the participant’s privacy will be respected, that confidentiality will be maintained, and that the participant will have the right to withdraw from participation in the study at any time (Creswell, 2013).

**Presentation of Findings**

In the next chapter, the findings are presented as themes and sub-themes. A table organizing participants’ arts experiences is included as are comments or quotes (in vivo) from the semi-structured interviews, thus providing thick, rich description (Saldana, 2009; Smith et al, 2009). A narrative report of the analysis is also presented.
Chapter Four- Findings and Analysis

The purpose of this research was to gain an understanding of the pedagogical experiences of general education teachers in an elementary school setting who include the arts as a support in culturally relevant teaching. This chapter provides an analysis of the data acquired through conversations that allowed for participants to reflect upon and expound on their experiences via a semi-structured interview surrounding the study’s research question:

How do elementary school teachers describe their experience in using arts-enhanced teaching practices as a way to engage and motivate students toward cultural relevancy?

There were seven participants in this research study. All participants taught in the same elementary school although they taught grade levels ranging from kindergarten to Grade 5. They brought to their teaching roles varying experiences which contributed to their understandings of the mindset that is culturally relevant teaching.

Table 2. Participants’ Professional Educational Experience

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant and Grade Level</th>
<th>Total Years Elementary School Teacher</th>
<th>Years at this Elementary School</th>
<th>Other Public School Teaching</th>
<th>Private School Teaching</th>
<th>Other Relevant Educational Experience/Certification</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Ruby Grade 3</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Beginning Year 1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Sheltered English Immersion (SEI) Certification</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Garnet Grade 3</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Special Education Paraprofessional Elementary Level (5 Years)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Topaz Grade 5</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>___</td>
<td>___</td>
<td>Preschool/Paraprofessional for Kindergarten, and Grade 1 (4 Years)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Emerald Grade 4</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>___</td>
<td>Less than 1 Year</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Pearl Grade 1</td>
<td>Beginning Year 1</td>
<td>Beginning Year 1</td>
<td>___</td>
<td>___</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2. Continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ms. Sapphire Grade 1</th>
<th>10</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>Private International School in Egypt (1 Year)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Diamond Kindergarten</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>___</td>
<td></td>
<td>Preschool/ Paraprofessional for English as a Second Language (ESL) and Title 1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Their personal arts experiences also shaped their beliefs concerning the importance of the arts to support the lesson content for purposes of achievement, engagement, and motivation of all students but especially culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students. Their viewpoints on the arts as well as the challenges presented by including the arts within the classroom were also detailed. To protect the identity of the participants, pseudonyms were given.

This chapter will begin with participant profiles including classroom demographics. The findings, the super-ordinate and sub-ordinate themes, which resulted from the analysis and interpretation of the data will follow.

**Participant Profiles**

**Ms. Ruby.** Ms. Ruby is a new teacher to the district and although it is her first year teaching at this elementary school, it is her tenth year as an elementary school teacher. She previously worked in San Diego on the U.S. – Mexico border in what she believes is the largest elementary school in California with almost 1200 students in kindergarten through Grade 6 with over 90% of the students being English language learners (ELL), almost all of whom are Spanish speaking.

She worked at this school for six years and then worked at a very elite private school for two years until she decided that she preferred teaching in a public school and returned to the school on the U.S. – Mexico border for two more years before moving to the Boston area with
her husband and young family. She is a White, monolingual, monocultural female having had two years of high school French. She mentions that her husband is an English language learner, having come to America from Italy.

Personally, travel is really important to me and I kind of have always incorporated it into my teaching and not that travel, the actual action of travel aspect but um, getting to know the world, I think it’s very relevant because especially with technology, the world has become a smaller place. (Ms. Ruby)

Her third grade classroom in this elementary school is comprised of students who are designated to be among the lower level ELL students. In this district, this is determined by the administering of WIDA assessments to all ELL students. The results of these assessments determine the level placement ranging from level 1 to level 6 with level 1 being the lowest, a child with very limited English abilities to level 6, the highest with these students having a firm and confident understanding of English skills (WIDA, 2014). The students in Ms. Ruby’s class have WIDA scores between 1 and 3 and her class has the greatest diversity of language speakers in the third grade.

Of the 17 students in this classroom, a variety of six languages are spoken. These six languages are quite different from the languages her previous students spoke but she embraces this challenge stating,

it’s actually a good challenge for me. After 10 years, you kind of want a little bit of a challenge … so I’m used to teaching Spanish speakers … but it’s very different because they’re not all Latin-based languages in this classroom where I might know a little bit of French, a little bit of Italian just here and there … at least structurally how they’re set up, where as some of my kids in here, they speak Ugandan and that’s completely out of my
… comfort zone as far as the set-up of the language. I don’t know a word in that language … so we have Ugandan, Cambodian … and … then we do have some Spanish speakers but even my Spanish speakers, they argue sometimes over which word means what because there’s a Spanish speaker from Guatemala, and there’s a Spanish speaker from Puerto Rico, and there’s a Spanish speaker from Mexico … Oh, and then we have Haitian-Creole um, French-Creole which I’m learning is actually … similar in sound but it is different from the basic French that you would recognize so … that it’s still more foreign to me … Oh, and then I have Portuguese. (Ms. Ruby)

Ms. Garnet. Ms. Garnet is a White, monolingual, monocultural female teacher who has been teaching third grade for nine years. This is the only school in which she has ever taught. She is Sheltered English Immersion (SEI) certified and of the 18 students in her class, nine are ELL students. They are however, classified as higher level, 3-6, based on their WIDA scores, meaning they are able to access most of the grade level curriculum. There are no beginner ELL students in this Grade 3 classroom. Her ELL students have a solid command of the English language although some may need additional support in areas such as writing English. These students speak English exclusively at school and of those who speak another language at home, for all but one who speaks Portuguese, that language is Spanish. She regards her classroom as more culturally diverse than linguistically diverse.

Ms. Garnet does not speak another language but studied French in high school and traveled to France as an exchange students for a few weeks.

Unfortunately, I lost a lot of that over the years because I haven’t had the opportunity to continue speaking it … I wish I would’ve taken Spanish probably just because it would’ve been more practical although I loved French. I definitely wish I would’ve
learned Spanish, maybe I still will, but I think that would be very helpful actually. (Ms. Garnet)

She has a great interest in collaborating with arts specialists on projects that allow more opportunities and time for the integration of the arts. Regarding her students, she states, “I think they crave those things I mean, they’re always saying that … art, music, drama … those are their favorite classes. Which I love to hear, but then I also wish we could do more of that in here.”

Ms. Topaz. This is the eleventh year that Ms. Topaz has been teaching at the fifth grade level. Prior to attaining this teaching position, she spent five years as a special education paraprofessional at three different schools in the district. This year has brought about immense changes to her routine as a fifth grade teacher at this elementary school because the Grade 5 has become departmentalized. This means that each member of the Grade 5 team is not teaching all core subject areas but rather, each fifth grade teacher is responsible for one or two core areas.

This year, Ms. Topaz finds herself primarily teaching math daily to 62 students but also teaching a small reading group of approximately 15 students. This is a very different set-up from what she has been used to in the past but she embraces the challenges presented by the new format of Grade 5 and the large number of students she now teaches.

Ms. Topaz is a White, monolingual, monocultural female teacher and although she has been exposed to Italian culture and language though her marriage and had studied French for eight years, she admits that she is not fluent in another language. Of the Grade 5 students she teaches, 15 students are Latino and 8-10 are of Indian ethnicity. Only one student is currently receiving English as a Second Language (ESL) services. The others are either Former Limited English Proficient (FLEP), meaning they have formally exited the ESL services program or, in some cases, parents have opted out of having their child receive ESL services.
The range of socioeconomic levels of families is staggering with some families living in subsidized housing while other families are living in multi-million dollar houses. Ms. Topaz was raised in and considers her own family now to be a working-class family and states,

I have learned as a teacher of a range of cultures that I can’t necessarily assume that the family makeup is exactly as what I’m used to - what I have right now in my own family and what I grew up with so parents might work opposite shifts … gone are the days where we’d say “Around the dinner table discuss this.” That doesn’t, I know it doesn’t happen in every family. So, when I … assign different things where “Go home and talk about this with a parent or with a, one of your grown-ups.” I tend to say now because we don’t know who the grown-ups are in the home … sometimes it’s over breakfast or sometimes it’s over … a ride in the car so I really have had to shift the way I talk about families … (Ms. Topaz)

Concerning how she gets to know her students now that she has so many, she posits, I think that it’s really important to foster a community feel. It’s been a little bit of a challenge this year just because I don’t have my own homeroom all day long so … I have 20 students and then the next 20 students and the next 20 students so that was something that I struggled with at first just um, thinking about what’s so important to me as a teacher, but I feel like a get a good feel of at least who the siblings are … who the grown-ups are in their life and sometimes it’s mom and dad and the grandma, or dad and dad and a grandma, or whoever it might be so it’s really just a lot of conversations. (Ms. Topaz)

Ms. Emerald. Ms. Emerald has been a Grade 4 teacher in this district for 24 years. Other than substitute teaching and a brief stint in a private school in East Boston, this is the only
district where she has worked. She describes her classroom of 17 students, there had been 20 but three students moved, as very diverse, with eight ELL students. Of the eight ELL students, six are described by Ms. Emerald as “very proficient to be able to handle what we do in the classroom” while two students, one from the Ukraine and one from Peru,

   struggle with just regular, your average words … they all have command of the English language. They’re all very good at listening and speaking … but as far as even though they can phonetically sound out the words and things, they don’t know what they mean, a lot of them. (Ms. Emerald)

Ms. Emerald is a White, monolingual, monocultural female teacher. When asked if she speaks any other language, other than English she said “Un poco Español, enough to get by, but no, I don’t.” In this classroom, there are also several students who see the school adjustment counselor as they present with varied social issues.

Of all the participants, Ms. Emerald is most committed to designing lessons that go on for weeks with students fully immersed in projects surrounding whatever is being studied at the time. She has her students working in a variety of ways be it independently, with a partner, or in groups. When possible, she prefers to integrate students of different levels and likes to give students a variety of choices so that each student may choose a topic or activity that reflects their personal interests. She believes that offering choices are important because these choices address various students’ learning styles. On the teacher education program she attended, Ms. Emerald comments, “… it was all about cooperative learning but even beyond that, I think it’s evolved into the multiple intelligences and really being keyed in to how kids learn.”

To assist the linguistically diverse students in her classroom, Ms. Emerald has the support of an ELL specialist who visits her classroom but it’s a flexible schedule and although the ELL
specialist is supposed to be in her classroom daily, this doesn’t always happen, but she takes advantage of it when possible. She states,

Typically, I integrate kids with different levels but for this particular project, because I have the ELL teacher in here during that block, I kept my four neediest children together so that they would work with her the whole time … they did get to a point where they could be more independent at probably around the fourth week though it took the first few weeks. (Ms. Emerald)

Ms. Pearl. Ms. Pearl is experiencing her first year as a Grade 1 teacher at this elementary school. She had spent four years working in this district prior to acquiring her educator license. She taught in the preschool and also held positions as a paraprofessional for both kindergarten and Grade 1 classrooms.

Her classroom is extremely diverse not only in the areas of cultural and linguistic diversity but also concerning socioeconomic status with one student who is identified as homeless and whose family is currently seeking shelter to much more affluent families. Of the 18 students in her Grade 1 classroom, at least seven are ELL students with varying levels of needed ESL support.

Although the majority of students in her classroom communicate quite effectively in English, eight diverse languages are spoken at home by the students in her classroom. Three students speak Spanish, one student speaks Haitian-Creole, two students speak Luganda, a major language of Uganda, one student speaks Arabic, one student speaks Armenian, one student speaks the Indian language of Gujarati, one student speaks Hindi, and one student speaks Farsi.

Ms. Pearl is a White, monocultural, monolingual female who describes her experience with other languages as,
I took Spanish in high school which was a long time ago but I did speak it well then and I worked in food service for a number of years so I got to practice it a little bit. I’m a little familiar with Portuguese because I traveled in Brazil but other than that – no I don’t have any familiarity with other languages. (Ms. Pearl)

She states that it was her desire to be a public educator and work in a culturally diverse city that shaped her teaching perspectives.

It was really important to me when I decided to go into public education. Well first of all that I went into public [emphasis added] education. I wanted to be a public educator and I also wanted to work in a city and a district where there was a wide variety of cultures … because I just feel like it really, it enhances each of the students’ learning to have different perspectives and to meet different people …

It can also be that it presents some challenges, you know, with language and translating and communicating with parents … but I embrace those challenges. I really like being able to reach out to kids who I feel like need extra help. (Ms. Pearl)

Ms. Sapphire. When approached to participate in this study, Ms. Sapphire was unsure if she met the inclusion criteria of a being culturally relevant teacher but was assured that she indeed did. Upon reflection, she agreed to participate.

Ms. Sapphire is a White, monolingual, monocultural female who has been teaching for the past 10 years and has always taught Grade 1 in some capacity. For example, she previously taught a combined Grade 1 and Grade 2 class, but now she teaches exclusively Grade 1. She has worked at the elementary school in this district for the past five years but her prior experience includes one year at a private school in central Massachusetts and one year teaching at an international school in Egypt.
The international school in Egypt was a private school where students were accepted on the criteria that a) they could answer select entry questions and b) their parents’ ability to pay. The students in this program could speak Arabic but except for Arabic class, they were expected to speak English during the school day. The majority of teachers at this private international school were all English-speaking being American, Canadian, or British and many of her colleagues were also Egyptian. When asked if she spoke Arabic, Ms. Sapphire stated, Arabic? I did not know a lick of Arabic going there … and the children are just so lovely … they’re so warm and sweet and want to help in any way possible … but the children loved the opportunity which I would provide for them at the end of the day. We would spend the last 10 minutes where they would get to teach … me Arabic.

So, all day I’m teaching them English of course, and then they got to teach me Arabic. So, they taught me the colors, the numbers … they were so cute about it. They would hold up a crayon and be like “How do you say this color? How do you say that color?” … they would quiz me on numbers … and it was just so amazing (Ms. Sapphire).

As she reflects upon her experience in Egypt, she likens it to having an entire classroom of ELL students where in her present classroom, she has 16 students of which eight are ELL students. All of the ELL students are in the lower WIDA levels of three and under with the exception of one student who is designated as FLEP, having exited the program.

Although Ms. Sapphire is used to having some diversity in her classroom, she believes that recent redistricting has noticeably impacted her classroom and teaching “… we gained some students that are from a particular socioeconomic area … in town and lost some … and so seeing that shift I have noticed … came some more diversity … in my own classroom this year.”

Ms. Diamond. Ms. Diamond is a White, monolingual, bicultural female kindergarten
teacher. Born in America, she has been exposed to the Italian culture as she is second generation Italian and although she fondly remembers speaking Italian to her grandparents when she was a little girl she has not spoken Italian for many years and has since lost this ability. Other than English, she presently does not speak any other languages.

Prior to securing her position five years ago as a kindergarten teacher at this elementary school, she was a paraprofessional for both ESL and Title I teachers in nearby cities and towns in the Boston area. She also has experience as a preschool teacher and taught in a Reggio-Emilia program for one year. She describes the Reggio-Emilia philosophy on teaching children as,

So, the Reggio-Emilia inspired programs are based out of Reggio-Emilia in Italy and they are based off of this … everything comes from the child, so it’s an immersion curriculum, you cannot plan anything in September, you cannot plan anything in any month, you have to wait until you meet your children … and then you have to sort of allow them to explore and allow them to direct which way they’re going.

So, when I taught in my Reggio program, I taught 3-year-olds … when I first started, I was thinking there’s no way that 3-year-olds are going to direct me to what the curriculum is going to be and after about, I think it was probably like two months, we finally realized that the 3-year-olds are really curious about what was inside of things and so our entire project for the rest of the year was growing and what was inside of seeds and then building and what was inside of building materials and how they went together and we did … something with the construction department at the school that I was at and … something with a retired teacher because Reggio also believes in pulling in the community … and making it into everyone educates the child. It takes the village to raise the child, well it takes the community to educate the child. (Ms. Diamond)
Although the kindergarten class she teaches at this elementary school is not a Reggio-Emilia program, Ms. Diamond brings an understanding of this philosophy to her teaching and her approach toward the students in her kindergarten classroom is one that encourages their autonomy to make decisions concerning what they learn according to their interests.

The ELL students that she teaches are what she calls the level 1 pod, clarifying that these ELL students are those who speak the least amount of English as they are the newcomers. Of the 16 students in her classroom, many students speak another language at home such as Spanish and Armenian and the linguistic diversity is extreme with one student speaking an Indian dialect that the school has not yet identified. All students however, speak only English at school with the exception of one new student who recently entered school and speaks Portuguese exclusively.

The following table details the number of students in each classroom, the number of different languages spoken by students in each classroom either at school or at home, the number of ELL students and their WIDA levels.

Table 3. Classroom Demographics.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Students</th>
<th>Languages</th>
<th>ELL</th>
<th>WIDA Levels</th>
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<tr>
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<td>3</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Lower</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>3</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Higher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Topaz</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>62 (All)</td>
<td>&gt;2</td>
<td>App. 23</td>
<td>FLEP (1 Higher)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>4</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>&gt;3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Varying</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Pearl</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>&gt;7</td>
<td>Varying</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Sapphire</td>
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<td>16</td>
<td>&gt;4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Lower (1 FLEP)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Diamond</td>
<td>K</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>&gt;4</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Data Analysis and Findings

The researcher’s thorough analysis of each individual transcript and comparison of data across all transcripts resulted in the emergence of patterns and themes. Final analytical decisions made revealed three super-ordinate themes and eight sub-ordinate themes. They were

1. Beliefs Concerning the Role of the Teacher in a Culturally Relevant Classroom
   1.1 Teaching Style: The Non-Traditional Teacher Identity
   1.2 Fostering Independence: The Belief that Students are Capable
2. Understanding the Influence of Personal Educational Experience to Affect Teaching
   2.1 The Empathetic Teacher: Relationships and their Effect on Student Learning
   2.2 Perspectives on Personal Arts Experiences
3. Beyond Entertainment: Understandings on the Scope of the Arts
   3.1 Arts for Accessibility: Pathways toward Academic Achievement
   3.2 Arts for Engagement and Motivation
   3.3 Arts for Appreciation and Understanding of Cultural Differences
   3.4 Challenges to Arts Implementation

Beliefs Concerning the Role of the Teacher in a Culturally Relevant Classroom

This study focused on the experiences of teachers who were identified as culturally relevant teachers. Culturally relevant teaching is a pedagogical perspective that is defined as meeting three criteria: having the skills to develop students academically, having the inclination toward nurturing and supporting students’ cultural competence, and being willing to develop students’ socio-political awareness and critical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 1995a, 1995b).

Through the conversations with participants during the interview process, it became quite apparent that these teachers practiced culturally relevant teaching even though they may not be
familiar with the term and all that it signifies. I understood this for it was my own interest in research that addressed CLD students and how the arts can be used for purposes of reaching, engaging, and motivating these students, that I first came to the realization that I am and have always been a *culturally relevant teacher*.

**Teaching Style: The non-traditional teacher identity.** A commonality among participants is the categorization of their teaching style to be non-traditional, that lecturing in front of the classroom to a roomful of children is not their style. Ms. Garnet declared, “I definitely have more of a conversational style … I like to engage students like I say more of conversations than like me standing at the front and just giving information.”

She attended a master’s program in education that she describes as non-traditional; one that was less focused on traditional aspects of teaching such as behavior management and curriculum and more focused on,

pedagogy and the theories behind education and what … works for children … some of our assignments were just to go to a museum and look at exhibits and just come back and write about what we thought of the exhibit and then to take groups of children to that museum and see what they thought of that exhibit … I know it wasn’t traditional and I really appreciated that. I know other people didn’t necessarily appreciate that … but it’s something that I’ve always tried to kind of carry through my own teaching … it does cause issues sometimes because I know like I didn’t take a class in behavior management so sometimes that can be a problem because I don’t have necessarily those skills. (Ms. Garnet)

Ms. Emerald stated,

My teaching style would be very hands on. I love to integrate all the disciplines into
lessons and all the multiple intelligences so that I can make sure I’m hitting everyone’s learning style so I put a lot of that when I’m planning lessons. As far as um, my doing some of the teaching that the kids really discovering a lot of things on their own through … activities where they’re guided but they’re invested in doing the work and see themselves. (Ms. Emerald)

Later in the interview she continued,

even the fact of when I have them when I’m teaching a small group something, I might have those kids then teach another group and then all those kids will teach another group or even between the classrooms like right now … so what I’m teaching them in here, they’re teaching to second graders on interacting with their reading … so I think that they internalize it when they do it. (Ms. Emerald)

Ms. Topaz sees her classroom as non-traditional.

As far as movement so I really believe in moving around the classroom. As you can see the classroom is not set up in rows, … I tend to do a small introduction with the whole group and then students move around to work at different stations and work in small groups with the teacher or independently. (Ms. Topaz)

Non-traditional styles of teaching present differently depending on one’s perspective of what is traditional. A culturally relevant teacher sees the role of a teacher to be a facilitator and guide in the classroom - a teacher who is interested in “mining out” knowledge from their students rather than depositing or “banking” knowledge into empty vessels seated before them in the classroom (Ladson-Billings, 2009; Freire, 1970/2000).

**Fostering independence: The belief that students are capable.** Providing opportunities for students to take ownership of their learning is a priority for these teachers. Even at the
kindergarten level, where language and reading is difficult for the majority of students, fostering student independence is paramount. Ms. Diamond stated,

So, my teaching style is … I try to let my classroom be our [emphasis added] classroom and I really try … if you look around you can see that everything is kid accessible. If it needs to be used by them, it’s accessible to them and it’s set up in the same system so that once they learn one system of using something, it’s applied to the entire classroom. (Ms. Diamond)

For all students but especially the linguistically diverse student, the use of visuals is utilized in all classrooms so that all students can understand directions and meanings. All participants spoke of the benefits of visuals, whether they be on a poster to facilitate student understanding, drawings on flashcards next to words or accessible through technological means.

Ms. Pearl spoke of using anchor charts to delineate the 3 steps for student writing. “The first step is, think of a topic, and then the picture is the word think in a thought bubble so … they can actually visualize “Oh okay, that I can’t read that word I can guess what it means.”

Ms. Diamond spoke of choice boards,

So, if there’s a child who wants to play with trains, they know to put their tag at the picture of the trains and if that child later in the day, wants to go to read-to-self, they use the same tag … and they put it at the picture of someone reading by themselves. (Ms. Diamond)

Ms. Emerald spoke of her English language learners (ELL) students using Chromebooks® to access vocabulary they did not understand,

For example, um, rhinoceros came up in one of our books the other day and … automatically they just go in, we type in rhinoceros and pull up a picture and nine times
out of 10 they go, “Oh, I know rhinoceros.” (Ms. Emerald)

Seeing their students as capable is a trait of the participant teachers. Believing that every student has knowledge to share and relaying this to young students who sometimes do not believe it themselves is a priority for these teachers. Ms. Sapphire’s Grade 1 classroom was in the process of writing teaching books and two Hispanic boys were struggling to come up with a topic to write about and she went up to them and said,

“Well, I’m pretty sure you told me last week all about soccer. Isn’t that something you know a lot about?” … Some of these children just don’t feel … they haven’t had many experiences to pull from or talk about. So, sometimes I feel like I am there sometimes to remind them like, “You do [emphasis added] know a lot! You know how to brush your teeth because you do it every day. I can tell you know a lot about soccer because you are always telling me about your soccer practice and you do know a lot about this!” (Ms. Sapphire)

Another way students come to understand they are capable is through literature. When students are reluctant to try, Ms. Diamond encourages her students by reading *The Dot* a book by a local author Peter H. Reynolds.

At the beginning of the year we get a lot of “I can’t do it! I can’t do it!” I’m like “Did you try?” “No, I can’t try!” “Oh, everybody can try it doesn’t matter what it comes out like.” … but I start the beginning of the year reading this book showing this little girl says she can do anything … in the last page is some gigantic dot and every time you turn to the last page, they all go “Oooohh!” I follow this by reading his other book called *Ish* … the little boy draws something and his brother says that doesn’t look like whatever he drew.

Well it looks vase-*ish* [emphasis added] and boat-*ish* [emphasis added] … and we
intentionally draw things that kind of don’t look like something we really know what they look like and that’s more how I launch writer’s workshop … so we really talk about this empowerment of “You didn’t think you could do it, you made a mistake, and you lived.”

(Ms. Diamond)

The participants see their students as capable and do not accept excuses but rather instill in them the confidence to perform their personal best.

**Understanding the Influence of Personal Educational Experience to Affect Teaching**

Drawing upon their own personal educational experiences, participants could identify best teaching practices. An understanding of the learning difficulties that they experienced led to the development of an empathetic nature toward their students. The memories of having teachers who could relate to them as students and the positive effect this had on their own learning as students, shaped their vision of the teacher they now strived to be. Their own personal experiences with the arts impacted their desire to include the arts as an enhancement to their teaching practice.

**The empathetic teacher: Relationships and their effect on student learning.** Many participants stated that they learned best when they had a teacher who could relate to them. Ms. Topaz stated,

I remember having teachers that I knew didn’t really relate, want to hear anything about my life as a 12-year-old or a 16-year-old but those who did … I became more engaged in their lessons and I feel that that’s what I am trying to do with my students. (Ms. Topaz)

Ms. Sapphire stated,

I was not a very strong student, I wasn’t a terrible student, I was … well-behaved and tried my best. I worked so hard. I know as a teacher that is where I get my passion from,
is knowing that school, while easy for some, is not for a lot of kids and um, just remembering what that felt like for me and thinking of the teacher, one particular teacher who I had who … just kind of stuck with me and kind of became my inspiration as a teacher … and just knowing that if more teachers had taken the time to relate to me, I think I would have been more successful. I’m not trying to put that on anyone else. I’m just trying now, as a teacher how that can help me be more successful as an educator.

(Ms. Sapphire)

Ms. Ruby spoke of relatability in the context of her lessons. Her conversational teaching style often finds her stopping within a lesson to clarify an issue or explore a student’s comment. Although engaging, the student’s comment may cause her to go off the planned lesson objective and into a tangent. She welcomes what she calls these teachable moments as these moments can provide clarity and explanation for a student and the class.

We were talking about what a Pilgrim is and the question came up “Are we Pilgrims?” … those students that came from another country here and we kind of talked about what the difference would be and how they look compared to the Pilgrims … hundreds of years ago … It does come up a lot … a video clip showed different Native Americans … in South America and he said, “That’s Uganda!” and I said “No, that’s South America.” and he said, “But that looks exactly like Uganda!” and so we kind of stopped during class and that was a sharable moment for him to be able to share where he’s from and share a little bit with the class to get to know him and also for the class to see where he came from and what Uganda might look like and then we’re talking about connections so I kind of stop teaching sometimes. (Ms. Ruby)

The last line of this quote is particularly telling; that Ms. Ruby in her efforts to (a) relate
to students by allowing them opportunities to see themselves as Pilgrims exploring their understanding of people who have moved to a new land and relate this to the students lived experiences and (b) to acknowledge the Ugandan boy and allow him time to share his knowledge of the Ugandan culture, while (c) giving the class time to process the similarities between the South American and Ugandan cultures, and (d) to explore all that this meant for the students in the class still registers that she had stopped teaching because she went off the original planned lesson objective.

**Perspectives on personal arts experiences.** All participants had positive experiences with some form of the arts as children. Ms. Ruby, Ms. Garnet, Ms. Topaz, Ms. Pearl, and Ms. Sapphire all participated in instrumental lessons. Ms. Emerald was a student during the era of Proposition 2.5 in which many programs in the arts were cut in many public school districts in the state of Massachusetts.

I had gym maybe once every three weeks and our own school teachers were doing the music. My fourth grade teacher … favorite teacher of all time was the music instructor and she brought in her guitar on Fridays and we sang … (Ms. Emerald)

One exception to a positive arts experience in school was Ms. Diamond who explained that she had wanted to participated in music lessons but due to her dyslexia it was not allowed, I was told I was not allowed because … notes turn directions like letters turn directions and notes jump lines like letters jump lines … which I really feel was a loss because my brother didn’t take a music program because he wasn’t interested and my sister played … up through high school band … (Ms. Diamond)

Ms. Diamond continued however, describing a positive experience due to her family’s encouragement of her involvement in the arts.
My grandparents had this big gigantic piano and it took up more space in their living room than the couch … and we would go over there and immediately start playing whatever was not a song but was a song to us so within that we grew up with a lot of exposure to music. I danced from the time I was in kindergarten until I was in middle school. (Ms. Diamond)

Ms. Garnet commented that she could remember one instance where an arts experience was less than positive,

My mom is an art teacher, or a designer, and I was always encouraged to be really creative … I actually have a memory from I think it was third grade in art class … we were making papier maché castles … and I painted mine … green and purple polka dot and the art teacher came over and scolded me for that and said, “You know, castles are not green and purple.” Like, I was a really good student … like I always followed the rules like I wasn’t like a trouble maker, anything like that, just was like horrified by that. I thought “Oh my gosh! What, why does that matter? Why can’t it be green and purple?” And that moment really stuck with me as a kid and just my whole life because I thought you know kids should be able to explore … their imaginations and be creative and there’s a time for being … realistic and there’s a time for being creative as well and so I’ve always been someone that thinks that there’s a time and place for realism and then you know, more creative moments. (Ms. Garnet)

Despite the drawbacks encountered, whether it be because arts programs were cut, being told one could not participate in a program, or the negative experiences brought about by an insensitive teacher whose harsh words still resonate for an adult teacher, all participants Over came their negative experiences and found ways to participate in the arts in some positive
way. They spoke of families who encouraged their participation and they have come to recognize the power of the arts to transform lives.

The participants’ fond memories of their positive experiences the arts in their lives as children led to the arts being important to them as adults. The participants all commented on how the arts are important to their adult lives. Ms. Emerald, who grew up without weekly music classes in school stated, “… I probably could live without TV but not without my music.”

Ms. Pearl commented,

I was talking to someone who was telling me he paints … and he said “It’s something that I picked up and started doing.” and I was kind of inspired by that because … I used to paint in high school so I would kind of like to pick it up and do it again but it’s not something I actively do. (Ms. Pearl)

Ms. Sapphire relayed,

As an adult … when I was maybe 25, 26, I took voice lessons because it was something I always wanted to do … and I just did it for a year … and I told the instructor like, “This is not a long term thing for me.” … something I’ve always wanted to do and I’m gonna do it … and it was fun. (Ms. Sapphire)

Ms. Garnet said,

I always wanted to learn how to play a guitar and so and I just never did and I thought I really don’t have too much time now, I have two kids and … about a year and a half ago I just decided, you know what? I’m gonna do it and I went and bought a guitar and I signed up for lessons and I started taking lessons and I’ve let them lapse now and I need to get back to it but I still just think that it’s really important …

One thing that I noticed starting those lessons is how important it is as a teacher to
learn something new because it immediately puts you back in the mode of being a student and noticing from the instructor the things that work and the things that don’t and the things that kind of motivate you and the things that make you feel like silly or stupid … and it makes you feel like a student again and ‘cause you are and I thought it really helped me as a teacher also. (Ms. Garnet)

A love of learning and being lifelong learners are two characteristics of the teacher participants. There is also an empathetic quality that these teachers exhibit, the ability to remember what it is like to be a student struggling to learn. When the teacher-student roles reverse, a teacher comes to better understand the learning frustrations of the students in the classroom. Although the specifics of the particular learning problem may vary, the feelings of inadequacy, discouragement, or failure as well as success upon perseverance are similar.

The following table shows the participants’ experiences with the arts as children (C) and as adults (A). An X indicates that the participant had some experience in that arts discipline whereas (--) indicates that the participant either did not participate or did not mention this art form during the interview.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Music</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>Art</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>Dance</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>Drama</th>
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Beyond Entertainment: Understandings on the Scope of the Arts

The creative arts, music, art, drama, and dance (movement) are indeed entertaining but the culturally relevant teachers who use the arts in their classroom to enhance their lesson content understand the strength of the arts to go beyond entertainment. The use of the arts can empower all students but especially CLD students to demonstrate through creative opportunities their talent and knowledge when other language forms fail thus making the classroom an exciting place to be (Eisner, 2002).

Arts for accessibility: Pathways toward academic achievement. For the CLD student, the arts make the phrase ‘show what you know’ accessible. When asked about using the arts in this manner, Ms. Ruby said, “Sure we do … especially with ELLs … if they are lower ELLs and they are just learning English and they don’t have the vocabulary … in the past I have used … drawings to illustrate … to me what’s happening.”

Later in the interview she commented on one particular student,

He’s an ELL student. He’s a very stressed out student naturally … and he has a little bit of … trouble focusing on his writing but his pictures and his drawings are beautiful on his animal report and I can tell he at least knows the habitat. He knows what the animal looks like. He knows what it eats so he’s at least shown me through drawing that he understands … what his animal is and then what was required of him. (Ms. Ruby)

Regarding a math lesson, Ms. Topaz stated,

The prompt was that these two students were in a contest to create a rug in any design that they wanted so … the original idea was for them to do area model multiplication. It turned in to the students were working in pairs and they created these beautiful color combinations so we ended up sharing them, and we kept the math in it because they had
to figure out the area of the different squares, it was kind of like quilts … it allowed the students who maybe couldn’t access the math easily … they were able to show their strength in the art of laying it out … or language. I do have one student … who is new to our country … she has trouble when there are lots of words on the page and reading … she was paired with a student … English is her first language, so it leveled the playing field. (Ms. Topaz)

Ms. Emerald commented, I think that it’s exciting for kids to use art in their work, I think that sometimes where kids can’t find the words. Especially where I have ELLs where they can draw it out or they can build something. A lot of my ELL students are amazing when you see what, what they can build or what they can draw. (Ms. Emerald)

For the past three years, Ms. Sapphire has her Grade 1 class involved in a business venture. It came about when the math curriculum stated that the next lesson was to be on money, knowing the difference between a penny, a nickel and a dime. Knowing that her students already knew this, were academically ready and interested, she decided to pursue this project.

Students set up the store, decided what to sell, set prices for items, added up their profits, decided what to do with their profits, they discussed supply and demand, why certain items sold while other items did not, and practiced customer service skills. Under the supervision of some students in the fifth grade, they also created a delivery service bringing snacks to classrooms.

Ms. Sapphire commented, With this came so many life lessons and just real world application to learning … if you look at cultural diversity and the truth behind a lot of these families. If you look at the jobs that a lot of these children’s parents have, especially looking at that 50 % of my class
who is the ESL population, their … the parents’ jobs are store clerks, they are you know, and that’s honorable, that’s wonderful, that’s great. They are going to work each day and they are helping people and they are … able to provide for their child and that’s something to be proud of and I feel like if the children see both sides, not just making a purchase and buying a snack … but also the customer service side of things … and how just making someone else smile can make you feel good … we’re providing a service for people and there was a need and just trying to pull in life lessons to an academic goal … just trying to put more meaning into the learning. (Ms. Sapphire)

Accessing learning content through drama is another way for linguistically diverse students to demonstrate understanding. Ms. Topaz has her students reenact scenes through pantomime.

From the American Revolution and act it out without words and pick groups. So, each group would be assigned a different battle that we’ve learned about or a different scene and they had to guess what it was … the actors weren’t speaking. (Ms. Topaz)

When asked, what effect this lesson had on students who do not speak English, she replied,

It was fabulous! … students were able to show me their understanding in ways that I never expected. Because they were, they were reaching … the curriculum in a different way - without words, if that makes sense, without reading the words and without speaking the words … They could act it out and show me their understanding … So, I think we need to do it … I as a teacher need to do that more often too so everybody can access, so everybody can show what they know. (Ms. Topaz)

Arts for engagement and motivation. All participants commented that they used the
creative arts for purposes of engaging and motivating students. Music was utilized in a variety of ways in the classroom. Most often it was used to calm and focus students.

Ms. Pearl observed,

I always have music playing, some sort of music. It’s usually classical or jazz. I just put on a streaming service and we’ll play music and it serves two purposes. I don’t like a quiet classroom even if I know it’s because they’re working, it seems unsettling to me to walk into a room with 18 6 or 7-year-olds and there’s no sound. So, I like having the sounds and I think it helps them to, to stay focused but it’s also because…when they do start talking, if they reach a certain volume you can’t hear the music anymore so it’s kind of … their voice volume control that I can say, “I can’t hear the music, you’re talking too loud.” … so I use music every day in that way. (Ms. Pearl)

Ms. Topaz stated,

Something else that I’ve been incorporating more over the past couple of years is meditation and mindfulness and I do use … different music … to go along with that. So recently … I introduced to them some chanting … so we talked about an Om choir and how that sound some people believe that an Om is the sound of the universe so that lended … itself to a nice conversation because … I have a student who … does practice Hinduism with his family so it just brought that out and it, I never really know where these conversations are going to go. I guess as a teacher I’m lucky in that respect. (Ms. Topaz)

Additionally, she said,

Well I did have a student this year … his family is from Guatemala and he suggested a Pandora® radio station and it, he said it sounds like music that he’s used to … so he was
able to connect to that and he said that something that his family listens to at home and I can see for him music really does, he struggles, he has a lot going on emotionally in his life and I don’t know if music is something that he connects to on his own or it’s something that his family has instilled in him, but I can definitely see a change … in him. (Ms. Topaz)

Ms. Garnet commented that she tends, to play more either classical or just instrumental music, sometimes jazz, things like that depending on the mood … creates a nice atmosphere in the classroom … I also, I like to play music without words when they’re working just so that they can concentrate on the work and not be hearing words … cause that can be more distracting … more so just for the atmosphere, I think it just immediately creates a like a cozier and more … comfortable place. (Ms. Garnet)

Music is seen as a way to calm and focus students and when combined with meditation or movement, music is seen as easing students into transitions.

Ms. Topaz said,

It’s a radio station … and the kids really seem very engaged and I can see that it changes … the focus. It sets a tone, a calm tone, at the beginning of each class so we do our little meditation. Sometimes we reflect on how that made us feel but usually we don’t. Usually the two minutes is up you get your materials ready and then we go, so … it’s a way [to] transition into math because it’s hard, it’s hard for this age to move from class to class. (Ms. Topaz)

Ms. Pearl and Ms. Sapphire use a music and movement program called GoNoodle®. Ms. Pearl stated, “I usually use them during transitions. If I’m doing a dance one, it’s during a
transition.” She also introduces GoNoodle® music to students who are new to America.

So, I have a student who came about a month, maybe six weeks into the school year. We were expecting him at the beginning of the school year but he was coming from India and things got slowed down and I feel like playing songs like that have kind of helped him to feel like he understands a little bit more about the culture that we’re in. (Ms. Pearl)

Ms. Sapphire uses GoNoodle® to remind students to read expressively.

If a child is reading very monotone and not reading with expression, I’ll say, “You sound like a robot. Don’t read like a robot.” and GoNoodle® has this great little dance/rap. It’s these three men that are rapping the song and … adding … little dance moves to it and this robot comes, this man dressed as a robot, comes out and he’s like [lowers voice] “Don’t Read Like a Robot.” and of course the kids get a kick out of it but I think also coming back to like those ELL kids that maybe didn’t even know like, what a robot is or you know they hear me say it to them … “Don’t Read Like a Robot.” and I might be taking for granted the fact that … assuming they know what I’m talking about even … (Ms. Sapphire)

Like music and movement, art and drawing for purposes of engagement and motivation was also used by participants. Ms. Ruby encourages students to free draw at their desks during lessons.

I think part of it is it calms some of them and others, it just gives them a focus and a concentration … I’ve noticed even personally that when I paint I realize when I’m done that that’s all I’ve focused on and that I’m not worried about tomorrow and I’m not thinking about the day and I kind of feel like that’s kind of where a lot of these kids go to is a focus and they’re still listening to what’s going on but that’s the only thing in the
room that’s going on and it kind of centers them a little bit … (Ms. Ruby)

Similarly, Ms. Topaz commented,

I’ve had … lots of students over the years who are amazing artists who just like to sketch throughout a lesson, they may be doodling. And I think another thing that has gone away from teaching is “Pay attention. Stop doodling.” because I think it’s important - a lot of people need to do that to … engage that part of their brain. I try and encourage doodling as much as possible because I think it’s important. (Ms. Topaz)

Ms. Emerald said,

I’ve had my share of behavior issues this year and during … anything with, that’s not necessarily easy, still challenging but fun at the same time because it incorporates the arts, I have zero behavior problems … because everyone is so invested in their learning. (Ms. Emerald)

Sometimes, teachers take the learning beyond the school walls in efforts to motivate and engage students. Ms. Sapphire recounted an incident that occurred on the date of our interview, math in the afternoon is hard with first graders and I was just getting a whole bunch of glazed over looks even though it was stuff we’ve been going over for days and instead of fighting it … I took a breath and said, “You know what? Go get your jackets on.” They were like “Wait, what? Huh?” So, we put on their coats we went for a walk … As we were walking I was like thinking and planning, “… Oh I see a group of five trees. I see a group of three bushes. How many living things do you see?” like, totally just making up math as we were walking and then we get down to the basketball court … and I taught them about the 3-point line and then anything inside the 3-point line is two points … some of the kids knew this, and then … a free throw would be one point and I said,
Alright, here’s our math. We’re going to add up our points. “So, do you want to take a 3-point shot or a 2-point shot or a 1-point shot?” And they took different imaginary shots … They were … jumping all over the place. They thought this was the greatest thing ever! They were adding up their team’s points … then we subtracted to find the difference and so it was an immediate boost of their energy and all of a sudden, they became interested in doing … they didn’t even know they were doing math. I reminded them afterwards, “Do you realize what we just did?” and it just became like the best decision I made all day. (Ms. Sapphire)

Ms. Garnet also takes the learning beyond the school walls as she purposefully uses the outdoors to create meaningful lessons that include the arts with the intention of motivating and engaging students.

As part of our geography unit in social studies, they have to … locate some of the major towns and cities and waterways in Massachusetts and so a lesson I came up with years ago that they really like is I’ll go out on the basketball court and I take a big piece of string … I’ll have the students just sit along the edge of the basketball court while I quickly go around and outline with a string … a huge map of Massachusetts on the basketball court … I’ll tape it down or use things to hold it down and then I have these big … signs with the different places that we’re locating and this is after they’ve already located these places … using a map in a book and things like that so they’re already familiar somewhat … then … I’ll give each student a sign and one by one they’ll run over with the sign and hold it in that place so that kind of gets the movement in there and I think that helps them remember the places … I also have them drawing and cutting out shapes of states and gluing them together in the right spot … for the New England states
… so there’s a lot of art that goes into that. (Ms. Garnet)

Ms. Garnet also uses drama activities to motivate and engage her students, “With the American Revolution unit, I do a lot with … reenacting different events so they’ll act out different things which I think really helps them … remember the details and just be much more engaged with it.”

**Arts for appreciation and understanding of cultural differences.** Addressing topics concerning cultural differences and also inequities among cultural groups can be difficult subject to broach with children. Given the diverse population of students entering the public school system in the United States, it important is that students come to understand the cultural differences and similarities among their classmates and this needs to begin at an early age (Nieto & Bode, 2008; Banks, 2006).

Creating student awareness of cultural differences is usually approached in the younger elementary grades through the subject of holiday traditions. Ms. Pearl, Ms. Diamond, and Ms. Sapphire all make use of this venue. Ms. Pearl asks students to talk with their families and then share their knowledge about their traditions with the class. Ms. Diamond creates an opportunity for families to visit the classroom and tell students about the specific tradition or do an arts project like making gingerbread houses or learning to play dreidel, activities that surround a particular holiday tradition. Ms. Diamond spoke of a parent who came in and made gingerbread houses with the class and another parent from Russia who came in and told the story of the Snow Princess to the students but she observed that,

It’s very hard to get parents to be available to come in but it’s extra hard to get parents who don’t feel comfortable in their own speaking abilities to come in to speak to children who are native English speakers when children are the least judgmental you have to
worry about. (Ms. Diamond)

Ms. Sapphire spoke of the difficulty she encountered when a student stated,

“My mom said ‘We won’t, we don’t do Christmas because we don’t have the money.’”

And … that was said in front of the class. And so now I’m like okay what am I gonna do with this? How am I going to handle that? And it’s hard … to know the right things to say but I think if you just kind of bring it back to “Well, we all celebrate different things and we all have our reasons for why we do and do not celebrate certain things or why we do believe in particular things or don’t believe in things.” and you know just kind of making this general like … “We are all different…and special in our own ways.” and trying to take it off the focus of that particular comment that may have broken my heart a little bit …

And kind of trying in some teeny tiny way to make the child feel okay with who he is and their family situation and that “Presents don’t equal love and presents don’t equal something better and of course, it’s fun to get presents and it’s fun to open things and have surprises but think of all the other things you get to do that are fun and special with your family.” and you know and just kind of trying to remind them what is special about them and knowing that it’s okay to be different … it’s okay to not have the same things. (Ms. Sapphire)

Ms. Pearl spoke on addressing racial differences with her comment on the Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday.

Talking about the subject, which feels uncomfortable sometimes for me as a White woman and thinking I’m introducing … the idea of racism to a group of 6 and 7-year olds. When I have that thought though, I have to stop and remind myself that I’m
probably only introducing it to the children who are not children of color because those children … probably have some awareness if not exposure to the fact that they are other [emphasis added]. So, there’s a lot of conversations that have to be really delicate … but it’s something that I embrace because it’s really important to me. (Ms. Pearl)

Ms. Diamond uses an age-appropriate book of Martin Luther King, Jr. and has a discussion with her kindergarten students.

There is one picture that has maybe two African American children walking into a school with really angry looking White children and we had talked about … “How do you think those boys and girls feel? They couldn’t go to the nice school. They had to go to a school that didn’t have a lot of things.” and I put it into their perspective. I told them it didn’t have a lot of toys, it didn’t have a lot of crayons … For them, hearing that the building wasn’t as nice isn’t going to be anything that they understand. So, saying there wasn’t … as many crayons, or … when they wanted to play with toys they didn’t have very many. I tried to encompass it a little bit larger so it’s not just those three children there with the dark skin and I said, “What if they said only boys can do this?” … and they were like “Nooo!” And then I had said well, “What can you do?” And they were like, rattling off the list … it was larger stuff, it wasn’t just, “Be nice” … they were like, “You could give them the Legos®.” “You can let them have a turn on the slide …” “You can give them your crayon.” “Okay, great – that’s sharing. So, you could share.” … These really individualized experiences for kindergarteners … they hold on to the little moments. The little moments are big moments. (Ms. Diamond)

In Grade 3, Ms. Garnet reads a story to her class entitled The Skin You Live In by Michael Tyler with illustrations by David Lee Csicsko.
It’s this poem all so it says things like … it’ll describe … all about the different colors of our skin as well as the different things that we’re interested in. So, it says things … my … chocolate mocha dream skin, my vanilla cream, peachy skin, things like that … Then I’ll have all the kids draw self-portraits and I have … all the different colors, of … crayons and colored pencils and they can kind of try to mix together and match their own skin color … and they’ll draw that and they write their own poem about the beautiful color of their skin and then also things that they’re interested in. So, they’ll say things like … “my loves to play music skin” … One student one year wrote “my creative and artistic skin” which I loved that so it kind of celebrates all of their diverse cultures like that … (Ms. Garnet)

When asked about the effects of this lesson on the culturally diverse students in her class, Ms. Garnet responded,

I think that sometimes students start out with this project feeling almost uncomfortable because they feel like they’re supposed to not want to talk about the color of their skin … so I think … that project with … the poem The Skin You Live In kind of helps them to see that it’s okay to talk about … the colors of their skin and that’s not a bad thing … and that that’s okay and it’s a good thing to celebrate it and that there are ways to talk about that that are appropriate and wonderful instead of immediate … they just they have this preconceived idea that even just mentioning skin color is a bad thing. (Ms. Garnet)

**Challenges to arts implementation.** There were definite challenges to implementing arts in the classroom. Although the participants felt that although certain structures such as scheduling and curriculum expectations were in place that curtailed their freedom to use the arts more frequently, they definitely believed that the arts enhanced the learning experiences in
meaningful ways for all of their students.

Ms. Garnet stated,

I do like to get into a lot with the arts if I can … In my first few years of teaching, I definitely did more of that because I felt like it was allowed more and I feel like over … the last eight or nine years, it’s gotten much more strict with how closely you have to teach to certain standards and … certain curriculum which I think is important but at the same time kind of doesn’t leave as much time for some the more artistic and creative projects, and some of the ones that I started out doing I’m not able to do anymore and I still try to work them in where I can. (Ms. Garnet)

Ms. Pearl commented,

It’s a challenge with the district expectations with how many minutes are spent teaching certain things and it being my first year at the grade level, trying to figure curriculum and perhaps after having a year under my belt, I’ll be able to have more wiggle room and find more ways … to put arts into my lessons. (Ms. Pearl)

Ms. Emerald stated, “I almost … think that I have good attendance in here lots of times because kids go home happy and want to come to school and do fun things and they hate to miss out.” She pondered,

that the shifts in education … all the stringent rules … the arts have taken a little bit of a hit … that it wasn’t valued as much as it needed to be. And it’s very structured with the intervention challenge blocks, that your block ends here and it starts here and those kinds of things. It’s almost like the teachable moment, we need to keep going with it and it’s not that flexible anymore. So … if you’re told that you’re teaching math at this block it needs to be math … I felt like it went from being a little bit of not doing the same thing to
(pounds fist on table) everybody is doing the same thing ... I think it’s swinging back a little bit in the other direction where as long as you hit that objective it, it doesn’t matter that some people are working on things at different times. (Ms. Emerald)

Ms. Emerald added, “I think that without the arts, my classroom would be dramatically different and I don’t think I would get my students to learn to the extent that they learn because they need that avenue.”

Summary

The purpose of this research study was to examine the experiences of general education elementary school teachers who use the arts as ways to enhance the lesson content and to motivate and engage their students. The seven participants were all from the same elementary school in the same school district. This district was a semi-urban suburb with six elementary schools, two middle schools, and one high school located approximately 30 miles northwest of Boston, Massachusetts. The elementary school from which the participants came was pre-kindergarten through Grade 5 with approximately 500 students attending. The socioeconomic level of the families who attend this school ranged from families who are homeless and seeking shelter to those who live in multi-million dollar homes. Due to recent redistricting, approximately 60 new students have moved to this elementary school from another elementary school in the district, while families who had attended this elementary school are now attending another elementary school in the district. The result of this redistricting venture has been a marked increase in the number of culturally and linguistically diverse students who attend this elementary school thus making it an ideal place to have conducted this study.

The following chapter will be a discussion of the research findings, the super-ordinate themes and the sub-ordinate themes. It will explore their relation to the previous research
detailed in chapter two, the literature review. Implications for further research and for practice in the field of education concerning the use of the arts in the general elementary classroom for purposes of motivating and engaging students toward cultural relevancy will also be discussed. The chapter will end with a personal reflection.
Chapter Five: Discussion of the Research Findings

As increasing numbers of culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students enter the public schools in the United States, the classroom climate has changed and teachers have struggled with how to teach this population of students (Durden & Truscott, 2013; Kelly-McHale, 2013).

This research project addressed the topic of using the arts in one’s culturally relevant teaching practice for the purpose of achievement, motivation, and engagement of all students but especially CLD students. Its aim was to gain an understanding of elementary general education teachers who use the arts to support lesson content.

Research Question

The following research question was posed:
How do elementary school teachers describe their experience in using arts-enhanced teaching practices as a way to engage and motivate students toward cultural relevancy?

To examine this, an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) study was selected as the methodology as it allowed the researcher analyze and interpret the data retrieved from interviews with participants while also allowing for the researcher’s experiences to affect the interpretation of the data, a double hermeneutic (McNabb, 2012; Smith, et al, 2009).

The seven participants were selected through purposeful sampling, having to meet the specific inclusion criteria of being a culturally relevant general education teacher in a public elementary school and who uses the arts to support learning in a classroom that includes CLD students.

Data was collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews that allowed for teacher participants who taught general education in an elementary school to respond to open-ended
questions. These open-ended questions were constructed in such a way that allowed the participants’ opportunity to reflect upon their experiences and speak freely. Many times, during the interviews, the conversation veered away from the constructed questions and into new territory, exploring areas of experience that resulted in deeper understandings.

**Theoretical Framework**

To examine this investigation, Ladson-Billings’ (1995) theory of culturally relevant pedagogy was selected. There are three criteria that teachers who can be defined as culturally relevant must meet; culturally relevant teachers have:

1. The skills to develop students academically.
2. The inclination to nurture and support the cultural competence of students.
3. The willingness to develop students’ socio-political awareness and critical consciousness.

Embedded within this theoretical framework and essential to this research are the works of three education reformers and philosophers, Freire (1970/2000) and his work on educational equity for oppressed cultures, Dewey (1938) and his work on experiential learning, and Eisner (2002) and his work on the arts in education. The theoretical framework, theory of culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995), and the works of Freire (1970/2000), Dewey (1938), and Eisner (2002) supported the analysis as it provided a vantage point from which view and situate the participants’ experience and perspectives.

**Restatement of the Analysis**

The seven participants reflected upon and detailed their experiences with the arts in both their professional and personal lives during the semi-structured interviews. The data collected was transcribed verbatim by the researcher and each individual transcription was analyzed by the
researcher for emerging patterns and themes. Subsequent analysis across the seven transcripts was performed and led to emergent patterns and themes. Analysis of this data and also that of the researcher’s analytical memos and notes ultimately resulted in the researcher’s final analytical decision of three super-ordinate themes and eight sub-ordinate themes.

Table 5. Themes and Sub-themes

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Discussion in Relation to Previous Research

This section will discuss the super-ordinate themes and sub-ordinate themes in relation to the prior research as detailed in chapter two—the literature review. This research project fills a gap in the literature as there has been limited prior research conducted concerning the use of arts-enhanced culturally relevant teaching practices in the general education elementary school classroom.
Beliefs Concerning the Role of the Teacher in a Culturally Relevant Classroom

All seven participants in this study were White monolingual females, six were monocultural (American) and one was bicultural (second generation Italian American). The students entering their classrooms however, were increasingly both culturally and linguistically diverse coming from many different countries. The National Center for Education Statistics, NCES, reported that in 1972 the percentage of culturally diverse students in the United States public school system was 22% being. This increased dramatically by 2011, with 45% of students being culturally diverse. The demographics for classroom teachers however, remained comparatively constant with 84% of K-12 teachers being White and female (Durden & Truscott, 2013). The National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition (NCELA) (2012) found that the student population in the United States has become more racially and ethnically diverse. During the last 10 years, the percentage of English language learners (ELLs) increased 66.03% from 3.5 million to 5.3 million while the general student population growth rate was 7.2%.

All of the participants had experiences with another language primarily through studying a Latin-based language while they attended high school or through travel to a country where the main language was Latin-based. The one exception being Ms. Sapphire who taught at an international school in Egypt. She taught her classes in English and admittedly spoke no Arabic.

Every participant in this study regarded themselves as fluent only in English although they had been exposed to other languages. In their classrooms, however, are seated students who are from many different countries and who speak languages that vary widely in how they are structured in comparison to Latin-based languages. As one third grade teacher participant expressed,

they’re not all Latin-based languages in this classroom where I might know a little bit of
French, a little bit of Italian just here and there … at least structurally how they’re set up, where as some of my kids in here, they speak Ugandan and that’s completely out of my … comfort zone as far as the set-up of the language. I don’t know a word in that language … so we have Ugandan, Cambodian … and … then we do have some Spanish speakers but even my Spanish speakers, they argue sometimes over which word means what because there’s a Spanish speaker from Guatemala, and there’s a Spanish speaker from Puerto Rico, and there’s a Spanish speaker from Mexico … Oh, and then we have Haitian-Creole um, French-Creole which I’m learning is actually … similar in sound but it is different from the basic French that you would recognize so … that it’s still more foreign to me … Oh, and then I have Portuguese. (Ms. Ruby)

In Ms. Pearl’s Grade 1 class of 18 students, three students speak Spanish, one student speaks Haitian-Creole, two students speak Luganda, a major language of Uganda, one student speaks Arabic, one student speaks Armenian, one student speaks the Indian language of Gujarati, one student speaks Hindi, and one student speaks Farsi.

The participants who had taught for several years acknowledged that the classrooms dynamics had indeed changed considerably over the years with the inclusion of many students from immensely diverse nations. Although they felt overwhelmed at times by this, they were committed to embracing the challenge such cultural and linguistic diversity presented.

**Teaching Style: The non-traditional teacher identity.** All participants in this study met the inclusion criteria of being a culturally relevant teacher. Unlike multicultural pedagogy which can be taught to students of one culture, culturally relevant pedagogy addresses the cultures of all students who are present in the classroom and creates meaningful learning through the acknowledgement of these cultures (Rychly & Graves, 2012). Ms. Ruby spoke of one of these
teaching moments when a student mistook South America for Uganda.

a video clip showed different Native Americans … in South America and he said, “That’s Uganda!” and I said “No, that’s South America.” and he said, “But that looks exactly like Uganda!” and so we kind of stopped during class and that was a sharable moment for him to be able to share where he’s from and share a little bit with the class to get to know him and also for the class to see where he came from and what Uganda might look like and then we’re talking about connections … (Ms. Ruby)

Helping students “make connections between their community, national, and global identities” (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p.38) is a characteristic of a teacher who is of culturally relevant mindset.

Many of the teacher participants described their teaching style as non-traditional but their definitions of a being a non-traditional teacher varied. Ms. Garnet spoke of her non-traditional teacher training,

I never went to a traditional program for teaching so I don’t know first-hand the differences but from everything I’ve heard from people who have gone to a more traditional program … they’re much more focused on the curriculum and behavior management and things that are much more traditional and my program focused more on like the pedagogy and the theories behind education and what … works for children (Ms. Garnet)

Ms. Emerald stated, “My teaching style would be very hands on. I love to integrate all the disciplines into lessons and all the multiple intelligences so that I can make sure I’m hitting everyone’s learning style.”

Ms. Topaz’s idea of a non-traditional teaching style centered around student movement in
the classroom. “As you can see, my classroom is not set up in rows … students move around to
work at different stations.”

Ms. Diamond stated, “So, my teaching style is … I try to let my classroom be our
[emphasis added] classroom.”

Ms. Sapphire commented,

In an ideal world view I think we would have less chairs in the room … I like to
incorporate a lot of movement a lot of … talk … kids talking to each other. Not just me
talking to them but a lot of peer work too … turn and talk and have discussions amongst
yourselves. (Ms. Sapphire)

As they consider the diversity in their classrooms, they understand that their teaching
practice needs to accommodate the diverse learners they teach. Ms. Sapphire pointed out that she
is, “also really cognizant of ... the children’s backgrounds and knowing who they are, really
getting to know ... the children as individuals so that when I am teaching them, I am taking all
this into account.”

These different viewpoints on teaching styles supports the position that culturally
relevant teaching is more of an attitude or mindset towards cultural and linguistic diversity that
must be developed. It is not something one can learn as if it were a teaching methodology or
curriculum (Frye & Vogt, 2010).

Fostering independence: The belief that students are capable. The aforementioned
non-traditional styles encourage students to be independent. Ms. Emerald stated, “… my doing
some of the teaching that the kids really discovering a lot of things on their own.” Ms. Diamond
has a system that is consistent across her classroom so that all activities are easily accessible and
through the use of visuals all learners can navigate through the classroom independently. For a
student who recently entered her classroom and speaks exclusively Portuguese she stated,

I was watching her count my crayons in Portuguese and I’m thinking what is she doing well? She’s not doing what she’s supposed to be doing, but what can I get from this experience without constantly saying “No, no, no.” …so I just gave her the outlet that I felt would be most closest to what she was doing. (Ms. Diamond)

Ms. Emerald worked with the ELL specialist to set up Chromebooks® so that ELL students can simply type in a word they come across in their reading that they do not understand and they can simply type it in and a picture of the word they typed appears. She stated, “automatically they just go in … we type in rhinoceros, pull up a picture, and nine times out of 10 they go, “Oh I know rhinoceros.” It is paramount that special accommodations be made in teaching practices and curriculum development if students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds are to succeed in the nation’s public schools (Budd, 2007; De Wet and Gubbins, 2009; Meidl & Meidl, 2011).

Getting students to believe that they are capable can be difficult. Ms. Sapphire commented, “So, sometimes I feel like I am there to remind them like, you do [emphasis added] know a lot!”

Ms. Diamond expressed, “At the beginning of the year we get a lot of ‘I can’t do it!’, ‘I can’t do it!’ I’m like, ‘Did you try?’ ‘No, I can’t try!’”. She reads her students two books by the author Peter H. Reynolds, one called The Dot and one called Ish. These books speak of trying one’s best. Ms. Diamond stated, “… so we really talk about this empowerment of “You didn’t think you could do it, you made a mistake, and you lived.”

Warm demanders are teachers who approach their students with a no-nonsense approach, exacting high standards and expecting no less from their students. This has been shown to be
effective in increasing academic achievement in urban classrooms (Bondy, et al., 2012).

Warm demanders create a culture of care in their classrooms. Building capacity was one of four themes that emerged from several studies conducted in New Zealand on establishing a culture of care in the classroom (Habib, et al., 2013). A culture of care remains an essential component of culturally relevant teaching and may be the most important factor in determining academic success (Perez, 2000; Ware 2006).

**Understanding the Influence of Personal Educational Experience to Affect Teaching**

All seven participants had positive experience with the arts both as children and as adults. Table 4 details their involvement in music, art, drama, and dance (movement). Although there were some individual negative experiences, these were all overcome. Ms. Garnet had an art teacher in elementary school who criticized her imaginative color selection of green and purple polka dots for a papier maché castle. This incident, although it has remained with her throughout her life, has actually bettered her teaching as it has allowed her to see the benefit of creativity. She stated, “I thought … kids should be able to explore … their imaginations … so I’ve always been someone who thinks there’s a time and place for realism and then, you know, more creative moments.” Gullat (2008) posits that the arts encourage risk-taking, exploration, and discovery through creative means.

**The empathetic teacher: Relationships and their effect on student learning.** Personal academic struggles encountered by the participants had a definite impact on the climate of their classroom and how these teachers relate to their students. Ms. Sapphire stated,

I was not a very strong student … I worked so hard. I know as a teacher that is where I get my passion from, is knowing that school, while easy for some is not for a lot of kids and um, just remembering what it felt like for me. (Ms. Sapphire)
Ms. Diamond noted,

I’m dyslexic … I didn’t learn how to read until about the end of second grade so the only outlet that I had was visual and it was you know when you’re in kindergarten and everybody else is also not writing, it’s no big deal. When you’re in first grade and everybody else is writing and you can’t figure out what those letters say, it becomes a big deal. So, we have, my Mom actually saved it, we have these journals that we had in elementary school and they’re probably an 11 by 17 hardcover book and if you look at, the whole thing of mine is a mess because of the dyslexia but if you look at the beginning of mine, it’s … these big colorful drawings and then if you look at my first grade section, they get smaller and smaller and smaller. So, I’ve always been aware of how illustrations will represent how children are feeling and how when they draw themselves one inch tall and everybody else around them 5 inches tall … it’s not the red flag, the giant red flag but just be aware “Oh, let’s draw you really big in the next picture and let’s see if we can give you a little boost that you are a little more special.” (Ms. Diamond)

Ms. Topaz noted,

I remember having teachers who didn’t relate, want to hear anything about my life as a 12-year-old or a 16-year-old … but those who did … I became more engaged in their lessons and I feel that’s what I’m trying to do with my students. (Ms. Topaz)

The literature supports that students respond positively to a teacher who validates their students by caring for them as individuals. Students view caring teachers as more than just authority figures. Students understand that these teachers have their students’ best interests for success in school (Bondy, Ross, Hanbacher, & Acosta, 2012; Cartledge & Kourea, 2008; Perez, 2000).
Perspectives on personal arts experiences. Participating in some form of the arts was deemed very important to the participants in this study. Ms. Emerald did not have weekly music classes as a child, due to budget cuts that resulted from Proposition 2.5. She did however, have a favorite general education teacher in elementary school who brought her guitar to class and played while the students sang. Ms. Emerald stated, “I probably could live without TV but not without my music.”

Lifelong learners, participants spoke of their desire to continue their learning in some area of the arts. Ms. Pearl related a conversation she had with another adult who just took up painting one day and said, “I was kind of inspired by that because … I use to paint in high school so I would kind of like to pick it up and do again.”

Ms. Garnet, spontaneously decided to take guitar lessons because, “I always wanted to learn how to play a guitar.” Ms. Sapphire took voice lessons “… because it was something I always wanted to do … and it was fun.”

These teachers view learning as enjoyable and see the benefit of taking on the challenge of trying something new. They understand that the arts encourage risk-taking, exploration, and discovery (Gullat, 2008). They bring this excitement for experiential learning to their classroom and their learning experiences also shape their teaching.

one thing that I noticed starting those lessons is how important it is as a teacher to learn something new because it immediately puts you back in the mode of being a student and noticing from the instructor the things that work and the things that don’t and the things that kind of motivate you and the things that make you feel like silly or stupid … and it makes you feel like a student again and ‘cause you are and I thought it really helped me as a teacher also. (Ms. Garnet)
The participant’s positive arts experiences were significant as to why they now use the arts in their classroom. They understand that the integration of the arts into the general classroom curriculum can result in enduring understandings for students (Lynch, 2007).

**Beyond Entertainment: Understandings on the Scope of the Arts**

In the 1930s, John Dewey’s position that the arts provided positive connections to learning resulted in music and art classes being added to the curriculum of most public schools in the United States (Darby & Catterall, 1994). Integration of the arts, music, art, drama, and dance (movement) into the general education classroom creates a pathway for all students to demonstrate understanding of what they are learning. When integrated into the curriculum, student achievement and student engagement levels increase (Cane, 2009; May, 2007).

**Arts for accessibility: Pathways toward academic achievement.** Communicating knowledge through the arts is especially beneficial for ELL students when language presents a barrier (Lynch, 2007).

He’s an ELL student. He’s a very stressed out student naturally … and he has a little bit of … trouble focusing on his writing but his pictures and his drawings are beautiful on his animal report and I can tell he at least knows the habitat. He knows what the animal looks like. He knows what it eats so he’s at least shown me through drawing that he understands … what his animal is and then what was required of him. (Ms. Ruby)

All students could derive benefit with photo collages, letters, oral story-telling, and creating scripts for animation being alternative ways for students to demonstrate ability in academic content as teachers’ sensitivity to different learning styles increases (Gay, 2000/2013).

Ms. Topaz shared,

when I was teaching history, we might take a scene from ... the American Revolution and
act it out without words and pick groups so each group would be assigned a different battle that we’ve learned about or a different scene and they had to guess what it was … the actors weren’t speaking.

When asked about the effect this had on students who do not speak English, Ms. Topaz replied, It was … fabulous! … students were able to show me their understanding in ways that I never expected … they were reaching the, the curriculum in a different way - without words … without reading the words and without speaking the words. They could act it out and show me their understanding. So, I think we need to do it … I as a teacher need to do that more often too so everybody can access, so everybody can show what they know … I think I learned a lot more about students’ understanding that way rather than a paper and pencil assessment. I think we think about it [arts] as mostly just engagement and motivation but after doing these different … out of the box assessments, it really shows that teachers can gain different understanding and we talk a lot about “checking for understanding”. I think as … a teacher at this grade level, I have to continue to incorporate these non-traditional methods of assessing, not just a piece of paper to show me your math understanding. There are … different ways, especially in math Wow! It makes me think. Thanks. It is important, not just motivation, I would say, it can reach the … content in a different way too. (Ms. Topaz)

Especially for the CLD student, the arts can support the learning process by facilitating comprehension. The use of the creative arts; music, art, drama and dance (movement) provide additional ways for students to holistically express understanding (Brouillette, 2012; Lynch, 2007).

Arts for engagement and motivation. The arts component in a culturally sustaining
classroom can motivate students, stimulate imaginative thinking, and promote meaningful relationships through collaborative work, skills that will last a lifetime (Kaimal, Drescher, Fairbank, Gonzaga, & White, 2014; Lynch, 2007).

Ms. Diamond stated,

   It all came from one year I was trying to make a Martin Luther King project and I just felt like I needed to do something more and I have the Curious George CD and I play it for quiet time … the song came on and I was kind of like Why did I not think of this before? This is so perfect! My own two hands! I take their hands and, and put them together so thumbs touch, and trace their hands for them … and then … we draw inside of the hands, what they can do with their hands. So, it’s a song, it’s called “My Two Hands” … so I first play the song and we talk about the different things and then the song it says something like “I can build … with my own hands, I can play with my own hands.” and it gives you some ideas and then we talk about like “What can you do with your hands?” … So, this year I decided with our fourth grade buddies, cause many of those fourth grade buddies did this project with me in kindergarten, so they took their hand, they took their buddies hand, and they decided what they could do together with their two hands. And then the bottom is they fill in a sentence story that says I can blank with my own two hands. (Ms. Diamond)

Greene (1994) posited that actively engaging in the arts could address some of the challenges students faced in urban school settings as students become open to alternative possibilities through creative expression.

Ms. Emerald stated,

   I’ve had my share of behavior issues this year and during … I’ll say during the explosion
boxes, during the bulletin boards, during anything with, that’s not necessarily easy, still challenging but fun at the same time because it incorporates the arts, I have zero behavior problems … because everyone is so invested in their learning.

Eisner (2002) stated that the arts provide opportunities to think and learn in original and innovative ways. Although arts integration can present differently within classrooms, when successfully implemented, the results are higher levels of student motivation, engagement, and achievement (Cane, 2009; May, 2007).

**Arts for appreciation and understanding of cultural differences.** The development of cultural awareness is essential when teaching in today’s diverse classroom. Teachers must acknowledge that their students lived experiences may be extremely different then their own experiences. If they do not understand this reality, there is the possibility that they may misjudge these students’ abilities and hold on to stereotypes of cultures leading to lowered expectations for these students (Kelly-McHale, 2013; Vaughan, 2005).

On the topic of cultural awareness, Ms. Topaz stated,

I have learned as a teacher of a range of cultures that I can’t necessarily assume that the family makeup is exactly as what I’m used to - what I have right now in my own family and what I grew up with … (Ms. Topaz)

Ms. Sapphire commented on her students’ first grade school-wide project,

We also talked about customer service skills. What does that mean? … it doesn’t even matter what your background is, but if you look at cultural diversity and the truth behind a lot of these families, if you look at the jobs that a lot of these children’s parents have especially looking at that 50% percent of my class who is the ESL population … the parents’ jobs are store clerks they are you know, and that’s honorable, that’s wonderful,
that’s great. They are going to work each day and they are helping people and they are...able to provide for their child and that’s something to be proud of … I feel like if the children see both sides of not just making a purchase and buying a snack … but also the customer service side of things … and how just making someone else smile can make you feel good. (Ms. Sapphire)

Cultural awareness moves beyond the classroom walls and results in a better understanding of the cultural make-up of families and communities (Ladson-Billings, 2009; Lee & Herner-Patnode, 2010).

It is important that students come to understand the cultural differences and similarities and this needs to begin at an early age (Nieto & Bode, 2008; Banks, 2006). Fostering cultural awareness among students was centered around holidays in the younger grades.

In Ms. Diamond’s classroom, parents were invited to school to share a holiday family tradition. One parent did an arts projects making gingerbread houses. Building bridges between students’ school and home life is an essential component of culturally relevant teaching (Gay, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 1995a; Santamaria, 2009).

To promote cultural awareness, Ms. Garnet uses literature, art, and creative writing via a book entitled, The Skin You Live In by Michael Tyler with illustrations by David Lee Csicsko.

I’ll have all the kids draw self-portraits and I have you know, all the different colors, of um, crayons and colored pencils and they can kind of try to mix together and match their own skin color um, and they’ll draw that and they write their own poem about the beautiful color of their skin and then also things that they’re interested in. So, they’ll say things like … “my loves to play music skin” … one student one year wrote “my creative and artistic skin” which I loved that so it kind of celebrates all of their diverse cultures
The arts allow students to explore and show their understandings in different ways than what is traditionally done in the classroom (Lynch, 2007). Freire (1970/2000) viewed education as a transformative process and posited that disregarding culture oppresses students of subordinate cultures. Through this art project, the students in Ms. Garnet’s class see their unique and special qualities. Villegas and Lucas (2002, p. xiv) outlined six principles that apply to teachers who practice cultural relevancy in the context of social justice. This art project connected with the following three principles.

- Have affirming views about people from diverse backgrounds: they do not see diversity as a problem to be solved.
- Have a commitment to being responsible for effecting positive change for students from diverse backgrounds.
- Embrace constructivist views of pedagogy: they see learning as an active empowering affirming process.

**Challenges to arts implementation.** The school system is structured in a way that limits teachers to freely teach in the way they see as most beneficial to the diverse students they teach. One study on teachers’ beliefs toward educating CLD students found that the teachers were frustrated as they were “teaching to the test”. Many wanted like to have more flexibility in adapting, integrating, and pacing their lessons (Meidl & Meidl, 2011).

Educational reforms such as recently implemented educator evaluation tools and district expectations leave little time for arts projects. A national survey conducted in 2006 by the Center on Education Policy found that 71% of the 15,000 school districts in the United States had reduced instructional time in the arts to provide additional instructional time in the areas of math
and reading (Aprill, 2010). Ms. Emerald stated,

the shifts in education … all the stringent rules … the arts have taken a little bit of a hit …

And it’s very structured with the intervention challenge blocks, that your block ends here and it starts here … it’s not that flexible anymore. (Ms. Emerald)

Ms. Pearl, a first year Grade 1 teacher commented,

It’s a challenge with the district expectations with how many minutes are spent teaching certain things … perhaps after having a year under my belt, I’ll be able to … find more ways … to put arts into my lessons. (Ms. Pearl)

Ms. Garnet concurred,

In my first few years of teaching, I definitely did more of that because I felt like it was allowed more and I feel like over … the last eight or nine years, it’s gotten much more strict with how closely you have to teach to certain standards and … certain curriculum … I still try to work them in where I can. (Ms. Garnet)

These teachers understand the importance of the arts in the general education classroom as it addresses the unique challenges encountered when teaching CLD students. Making a commitment to a culturally relevant teaching practice are all essential for purposes of reaching CLD students and ensuring that they are learning to their maximum potential (Ladson-Billings, 1995, Plata, 2011).

Limitations

This study is limited because it was conducted at one elementary school albeit an elementary school with a very diverse student population. Attempts to maximize variation by race, culture, and gender did not transpire as all seven study participants were White, monolingual females.
**Recommendations for Further Research**

This research builds upon the existing literature concerning both culturally relevant teaching and arts integration. It fills a gap in the literature as its focus is on the general education elementary teacher and examines experiences using the arts for purposes of motivating and engaging students in the culturally relevant classroom. In this study, all participants were White, female, monolingual and, with the exception of one bicultural participant, all were monocultural.

Further research would be indicated to explore experiences of both male and female teachers and those who are of diverse cultures. Rodriguez (2000) posits that for many students it may be easier to relate to a teacher of the same culture and that students may better understand a that teacher’s instructional style.

Research has shown that student motivation and engagement in the learning process increases in the culturally relevant classroom (Gay, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Santamaria, 2009). Research on the experiences of teachers in secondary schools is suggested to see if the findings of increased student engagement and motivation that resulted from arts-enhanced culturally relevant teaching in the elementary school would transfer to secondary schools. The following question for possible further research is posed: Would the addition of the arts in the culturally relevant classroom further increase student motivation and engagement in secondary schools?

Given that the 2009-2010 dropout rates nation-wide in the United States were 6.7% for American Indian/Alaskan Native, 5.5% for Black, and 5% for Hispanic students while it was 2.3% for White students. Only Asian/Pacific Islander was lower at 1.9% (NCES, 2013). An additional question for further research would be: Does an arts-enhanced culturally relevant teaching practice have an effect on the drop-out rate?
which leans disproportionately toward those of sub-dominant cultures?

**Implications for Personal Practice and Across the Field**

This section will identify the stakeholders who would be affected by awareness of this research and how an arts-enhanced culturally relevant teaching could result in positive curriculum change for public schools in the United States.

**Students and teachers.** Although all students benefit from participation in the arts when they are included as a way to creating engaging and motivating lessons. Arts-enhanced culturally relevant teaching goes further as the arts become part of a teaching practice that sees the cultural and linguistic diversity present in the classroom as a strength from which to draw upon. CLD students are empowered as their cultural strengths are viewed as assets; no longer expected to assimilate into the hegemonic culture, each student in the classroom is respected for their unique cultural perspective and teachers design lessons that reflect this (Ladson-Billings, 2009; Rychly & Graves, 2012).

The arts allow CLD students to be on a level playing field, able to demonstrate acquisition of knowledge unencumbered by the spoken or written word of the dominant culture (Saint-Hillaire, 2014). The arts component in a culturally relevant teaching practice makes learning more meaningful and less frustrating for CLD students. It provides an accessible pathway for understanding and relaying concepts that are being taught. It builds independence and confidence and results in students and their teachers realizing they are indeed capable. Teachers realize that the classroom is a place where students and teacher learn from each other recognizing commonalities and celebrating differences (NCCREST, 2006).

**Inservice teachers and preservice teachers.** Having a base knowledge of the cultural makeup of one’s classroom puts teachers, the majority of whom are White and female, at ease as
they come to understand that their students lived experiences differ from their own (Lee & Herner-Patnode, 2010; Plata 2011; Sleeter, 2011). Through cultural awareness workshops or classes, both inservice and preservice teachers can become culturally competent, developing empathy and understanding of the struggles of the CLD student through critical reflection of their own lived experiences that will bring long held beliefs and biases toward those who are diverse to the forefront (Durden & Truscott, 2013).

**School administrators and teacher preparation program designers.** The traditional structure of the public schools favors the Euro-centric perspective and leans toward teaching the values and beliefs of the White dominant culture but the classrooms of yesterday are not the classrooms of today as increasing numbers of students from myriad diverse cultures enter the public schools (Apple, 1990).

School administrators must work to shift the current system to one that is more culturally inclusive and come to understand that the classroom needs to be a place where CLD students can access the content and show their true abilities (DeWet & Gubbins, 2011; Gay 2000/2013). Accomplishing this is no small endeavor as it will necessitate a shift in the mindset of what constitutes valid assessment. Gay, (2000/3013) posits that photo collages, letters, oral story-telling, and creating scripts for animation can be alternative ways for students to demonstrate ability. For the CLD student, it ensures that they will be able to express their understanding without being expected to access traditional pen and paper assessment that requires a skill set they may not yet have. Getting veteran inservice classroom teachers to buy-in to non-traditional assessments may not be easy but the stakes are much too high given the drop-out rates due to disengagement from the learning process that Ladson-Billings (2014) called “an academic death” (p. 77).
There also needs to be a shift in the way that teacher preparation programs in higher education prepare preservice teachers. To develop cultural competence, it is essential that these programs provide more opportunities for preservice teachers to engage with other cultures through interaction with them both in school and in the community (Ladson-Billings, 2009; Lee & Herner-Patnode, 2010). Not acknowledging the perspectives of other cultures perpetuates oppression of these cultures and marginalizes students (Freire, 1970/2000; Rios, 2000).

**Connecting the research to practice.** Sharing the findings of this study could be accomplished through some of the following ways.

- Design professional development sessions and visit different school districts to inform them how adjustment to practice to include arts-enhanced culturally relevant teaching could be instrumental in meeting the diverse needs of all students but especially the CLD student.

- Present at conferences to increase awareness and inform teachers and those who set educational policy of the benefit of using arts-enhanced culturally relevant teaching in the general education classroom.

- Present at staff meetings in the elementary schools in the district in which I work to inform general education teachers of the benefits of an arts-enhanced culturally relevant teaching practice.

- Design and teach a course for a teacher preparation program focused on the importance of arts-enhanced culturally relevant teaching.

**Personal Reflection**

It was my experience as a general music teacher that I came to understand just how important my classes were for engaging students. I would be the recipient of comments on how
all students were engaged both in music class and at concerts and often times it would be attributed to the fact that music class is “fun”. I knew it was so much more than that, that for my classroom, the engagement and motivation was the result of the acknowledgment of the many cultures of the students. By drawing upon the cultural strengths and interests of all students, musical concepts and connections to classroom content could be made through the authentic songs and music from the cultures of all my students.

I taught songs in the English language but I also taught songs in the first languages spoken by some of my students from sub-dominant cultures. When the songs were in their first language, the CLD students, who were often quiet and appeared shy in class, were singing loudly and proudly, comfortable with the lyrics that now had their English-speaking classmates struggling to pronounce. There arose a newfound respect and understanding among all students.

*After reading Ladson-Billings, *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children* (2009) during Northeastern’s doctoral program’s first summer residency, I realized that my teaching style had a name; I was a culturally relevant music teacher. I wondered if general education classroom teachers who taught in public elementary schools and practiced culturally relevant teaching, were aware of the transformative power of the arts to help CLD students for purposes of engagement, motivation, and achievement. I decided to call this *arts-enhanced culturally relevant teaching* and this is where I focused my research.*

*Through the coursework and readings, I have come to an even deeper understanding of the traditional structure of the public school system in the United States. With increasing numbers of students from many different countries entering the nation’s schools and who come with such diverse needs, educational leaders today are faced with the awesome responsibility to see that these needs are met by providing students with a meaningful and relevant learning*
experience.

I look forward to a desired career change that has me stepping away from the role of the culturally relevant music teacher and into the role of an advocate for the CLD population in the public schools. I hope to be a change agent and do my part to inform others of the ability of the arts to help remedy some of the difficult learning situations many of the CLD students currently encounter in the public schools.

This study could have profound influence on the lives of the CLD student once educators, both preservice and inservice, and those who set educational policy become aware of and sensitive to the necessity of reaching the CLD student through an arts-enhanced culturally relevant teaching practice that acknowledges the strengths these students bring to the learning process.
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