TEACHER PERCEPTIONS OF CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE PEDAGOGY
IN THE CLASSROOM

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Abstract
Culturally responsive classroom-based pedagogy can engage students through curriculum that speaks to their own cultural heritage and assists with their meaning making. Education is recognized as a pathway to student success and achievement, and the use of students’ own cultural heritage within the curriculum is a way of challenging students to remain engaged and take ownership of their educational experience. Understanding how teachers perceive the use and effectiveness of culturally responsive pedagogy in their classrooms and what they perceive to be the best practices in approaching students of culturally diverse backgrounds is a powerful first step to creating interest and engagement among their students. Therefore, it is important to understand how teachers and support staff perceive the use of culturally responsive pedagogy to support students’ academic success.

Keywords: culturally responsive pedagogy, curriculum development, ownership of educational experience, meaning making, student engagement
# Table of Contents

Abstract ................................................................................................................................................. 2

**Chapter 1: Introduction** .................................................................................................................. 5  
- Statement of the Problem .................................................................................................................. 5  
- Significance of the Research Question ............................................................................................. 6  
- Research Problem and Research Question ....................................................................................... 8  
- Definitions of Key Terminology ......................................................................................................... 9  
- Theoretical Framework ....................................................................................................................... 10  
- Conclusion ......................................................................................................................................... 14  

**Chapter 2: Review of the Literature** ............................................................................................. 16  
- Culturally Responsive Pedagogy ........................................................................................................ 18  
- Student Engagement .......................................................................................................................... 26  
- Leadership in Support of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy .............................................................. 31  
- Summary ........................................................................................................................................... 34  

**Chapter 3: Research Design** ........................................................................................................ 36  
- Overview and Philosophical Underpinnings ...................................................................................... 37  
- Participants .......................................................................................................................................... 40  
- Ethical Considerations/Recruitment .................................................................................................. 40  
- Procedures .......................................................................................................................................... 41  
- Analytic Methods ............................................................................................................................... 43  
- Presentation of Findings ...................................................................................................................... 44  
- Positionality Statement ...................................................................................................................... 45  
- Limitations .......................................................................................................................................... 46  
- Conclusion .......................................................................................................................................... 47  

**Chapter 4: Findings and Analysis** ................................................................................................. 49  
- Teacher Perceptions of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy ................................................................. 49  
- Setting ............................................................................................................................................... 50  
- Participants .......................................................................................................................................... 51  
- Recognizing Culturally Diverse Students and Understanding Personal Bias .................................... 67  
- Perceptions of CRP in the Classroom and Engaging All Students .................................................. 72  
- Engaging Classroom Environment .................................................................................................... 86  
- Summary ........................................................................................................................................... 92  

**Chapter 5: Discussion and Implications for Practice** ................................................................. 94  
- Findings ............................................................................................................................................ 96  
- Recommendations for Practice ......................................................................................................... 103  
- Recommendations for Future Research ............................................................................................ 106  
- Conclusion .......................................................................................................................................... 108  

References ........................................................................................................................................... 109  

Appendices ............................................................................................................................................
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Appendix A: Statistics for City, US</th>
<th>122</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Appendix B: Statistics for City Middle School</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix C: Recruitment Letter</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix D: Recruitment Email</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix E: Informed Consent Form</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix F: Sample Interview Questions</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 1: Introduction

There are more students of color than White students in U.S. public schools (Cole, David, & Jiminez, 2016). Because of this, culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) can help offer an efficient educational experience to all students. It is important to understand, through the lens of teachers’ perceptions of their practices and techniques in the classroom, how an understanding of students’ unique cultural heritage is incorporated into developing a school’s curriculum. CRP is essential to educating culturally diverse students (Hsiao, 2015). The experiences students mine from within their own cultural backgrounds leads to the way they construct meaning (Weaven & Clifford, 2015). It is critical for teachers to be able to understand cultural differences so they can engage students of all backgrounds and promote efficient, effective, and successful schooling for them. The first step is understanding how teachers perceive their use of CRP. Through observations, reflections, and interviews, this study explored the perceptions of teachers and support staff regarding how the implementation of culturally responsive pedagogy leads to increased student engagement.

Statement of the Problem

Culturally responsive pedagogy improves the academic success of students, particularly those in low socioeconomic contexts (Ladson-Billings, 1995b). In the United States, students of color currently outnumber White students, and students whose first language is not English are quickly adding to the diversification of American public schools (Cole et al., 2016). Culturally diverse students and students of color are not achieving as much success in American public schools as White students (Milner, 2010). CRP puts the focus on teachers to understand students’ cultural perspectives (Cole et al., 2016). CRP stems from a respect for students’ rich cultural backgrounds and therefore offers a way to achieve social justice (Brockenbrough, 2016).
CRP is a means by which teachers can engage students by including students’ rich cultural heritage in the daily curriculum.

Teachers must develop new ways of challenging themselves in the classroom so the changing demographic of their student body can find success in an ever changing world. Power and authority often shape curriculum in the classroom, and the culture of a school is often represented by those in positions of authority (Giroux, 1986). Culturally responsive pedagogy engages students by recognizing their own cultural experiences; engagement supports their cognitive development (Love, 2015). Today, schools are an important part of society’s effort to create social justice: teachers need to implement culturally responsive teaching practices that engage students in the curriculum (A. Lopez, 2011) and effect social change. Therefore teachers must be aware of ways they can engage students through recognizing their cultural background.

If teachers better understood how to promote student engagement through culturally responsive pedagogy, then teachers and school districts would be able to better serve all students. More needs to be known about the relationship between students and teachers who use CRP because classroom-based efforts support teachers’ interest in the education of their students and their desire to remain true to the standards of education. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore teachers’ perception of the CRP practices and techniques that they use to engage students in the classroom. Audiences for this study include teachers, support staff, and administrators interested in understanding how teachers using CRP can promote change and student engagement.

Significance of the Research Question

It is imperative that school curriculum be responsive to students’ culture because it creates a symbiotic relationship that benefits both teacher and student. Teachers are responsible
for developing a feeling of security within students, as well as an inclusive educational environment, no matter what their cultural background (Baskerville, 2009). All students deserve the same access to a quality and equitable education, and national standards are a sound starting point for implementing a curriculum that is designed to attain high levels of achievement.

Unfortunately, students from underprivileged cultural groups or poor socioeconomic groups struggle to compete, while students from privileged backgrounds perform better on standardized tests and succeed at higher levels of education more than those from culturally diverse backgrounds (Kingston, 2001). Students of color and students from culturally diverse backgrounds face lower expectations and higher dropout rates (Boon & Lewthwaite, 2015).

Therefore, this study focused on developing an understanding of how teachers perceive their engagement with students while using CRP.

Because teachers and their perceptions of their classroom practices were the focus of this study, administrators will learn from it how teachers perceive their use of culturally responsive practices. While it is important for teachers who understand the need for social equity to teach in culturally relevant ways that their students can relate to (A. Lopez, 2011), it is also of paramount concern that administrators understand and support teachers in this endeavor. Leadership needs to support a safe and inclusive environment for students from culturally and ethnically diverse backgrounds (L. Johnson, 2014). There is a direct link between culturally responsive teaching practices and educational leadership (Santamaria, 2014). Principals and administrators create the culture and climate (Drago-Severson, 2012) that is necessary for the open teaching practices that support culturally responsive teaching practices. Culture, in this usage, refers to “norms, values, and beliefs” (Drago-Severson, 2012, p. 6) within a school. The dominant cultural perspective for this study – White teachers and support staff – is different from that of the core demographic of
the student population in this study. Engaging students by creating an atmosphere in which they feel they “have an important voice in their own learning process” (Delpit, 1988, p. 288) is integral to the operation. Hence, administrators need to support teachers who are willing to take risks to connect with students. An “organizational culture of risk taking and openness that permits occasional surfacing of ineffectual rules and practices” (Raelin, 2016, p. 46) is also necessary to achieve the desired goal. This study explored the perceptions of teachers and support staff about how the implementation of CRP leads to increased student engagement.

The implications for engaging pedagogy are clear: higher student engagement leads to lower dropout rates (Archimbault, Janosz, Fallu, & Pagani, 2009). Efforts and resources need to be focused on developing curriculum that is responsive to the diverse and rich heritage of students (V. Lopez, Pereira, & Rao, 2017). Student engagement is key, and it starts in the classroom; administrative leadership must focus on the educational goals that best suit students (Keating & Gasteyer, 2012). This study focused on whether teachers perceive their classroom practices as being efficient and effective in engaging students. Understanding how teachers perceive the way they implement CRP in the classroom is imperative for attaining meaningful change and student engagement, which will ultimately lead to student success.

**Research Problem and Research Question**

Education is the primary pathway to economic success (Kingston, 2001), so the disparity in educational outcomes among different cultural groups is troubling. Culturally responsive pedagogy creates an atmosphere in which academic achievement is noticeably improved among minority students (Okoye-Johnson, 2011). It is important to create an environment where students feel they have a voice in their own educational experience (Delpit, 1988), and this begins with understanding how CRP can engage students in the classroom.
The research questions for this study were: Based on the perceptions of teachers and administrators, how does the implementation of culturally responsive pedagogy at City Middle School lead to increased student engagement? How do teachers and support staff perceive that classroom techniques support culturally responsive pedagogy?

Definitions of Key Terminology

Culturally responsive pedagogy. CRP engages students and challenges them to use their cultural references to develop skills and draw meaning from their experiences and knowledge (Ladson-Billings, 1995a). CRP is a pedagogy designed to empower students by using their rich cultural history, their own perspective of reality, and the lens through which they view their current academic studies (Bartolome, 1994). CRP encourages students to connect with their cultural identities (Howard, 2001) as they pursue positive academic outcomes. CRP supports empowered learning (Sleeter, 2011) by drawing on the recognizable cultural heritage of each individual student. CRP is also known in academic circles as culturally relevant pedagogy and culturally responsive instruction (Cole et al., 2016).

Student engagement. Student engagement can be defined as behavioral, affective, or cognitive (Archambault et al., 2009). Student engagement can be characterized as a “composite of psychological processes” (Virtanen, Kiuru, Lerkkanen, Poikkeus, & Kuorelahti, 2016, p. 137) that is a mosaic of student attention, student investment in their own education, and the effort students place on their own educational experience. This includes students’ “responsiveness to learning, courses, teachers, and school affinity” (Cavendish, Marquez, Roberts, Suarez, & Lima, 2017, p. 3). Poor relationships develop between students and schools due to student “disengagement” (Archambault et al., 2009, p. 652).
Theoretical Framework

**Critical theory.** The theory that best addresses the problem of practice is critical theory. Critical theory has “social significance” (Klikauer, 2015, p. 201) and offers transformative as well as revelatory outcomes (Ponterotto, 2005). Critical theory demands interaction between subject and researcher, and between participant and observer, and it calls for assessing the relationship between social and political systems (Freeman & Vasconcelos, 2010). In this study, critical theory focused on how teachers perceive the use and effectiveness of CRP in their classrooms. Its findings provide a voice for change and transformation (Ponterotto, 2005) in the classroom and a specific call to action.

Critical theory is rooted in the Frankfurt School of the 1930s, which questioned capitalism and the status quo as a means of transforming society (McLaren, 2003). The historical significance of critical theory is that it sheds light on how capitalism enforces power relations in society and it creates the need for research to find ways to give voice to the oppressed (Brander, 2010). Critical theory has tremendous importance from a social as well as political standpoint because it can offer a critique of traditional power structures (Klikauer, 2015) as it seeks social change. Critical theory sheds light on social and economic inequality (Rehbein, 2018). Critical theory can give rise to change through its participatory nature. Its “reliance on the willingness and interest of humans to reflection and dialogue about their own practice” (Freeman & Vasconcelos, 2010, p. 14) opens an avenue of exploration that is specific and unique to the participants in this study. Schools represent cultural and political sites (Giroux, 1986). The unique landscape and demographic of the school in this study offered distinct and noteworthy reflections on the exploration of student engagement.
The seminal authors of critical theory can be traced back to the Frankfurt School of the 1930s. The two most prominent are Max Weber (1864-1920) and Max Horkheimer (1895-1973). Weber spoke of critical theory in terms of how power and authority are related to society. He observed that traditional, charismatic, and legal authority “offered a typology of social formations over time … [that could be used] as an analytic tool to dissect ways domination operates in any social formation” (Szelenyi, 2016, p. 12). Horkheimer believed critical theory could be used so man could understand his role in society and then fully understand his role as a change agent: “Man must be made to see the relationship between his activities and what is achieved thereby, between his particular existence and the general life of society” (Deranty, 2014, p. 1212). Horkheimer believed that critical theory was a lens through which solutions could be found to rid a society of the “shackles of domination, capitalist exploitation, and the historical oppression of nature” (Koepnick, 2016; originally from Horkheimer’s 1939 essay “Traditional and Critical Theory,” p. 554). Horkheimer believed the philosophy of critical theory would “bring reason into the world” (Horkheimer, 1999, p. 334). Both scholars understood that power structures needed to be challenged as a means for social change. Because power structures, including those found within schools and administrations, are often designed to continue to serve those already in power (Gramsci, 1971), the role of critical theory in support of this study was clear.

Paulo Freire (1921-1997) offers more contemporary insight than Weber and Horkheimer, so his views on critical pedagogy are important to this discussion. Freire’s critical pedagogy argues that power relations are of central concern in education, as traditional methods support the status quo (Spaaij et al., 2016). Freire posited: “education … is an act of knowing, a critical approach to reality” (Freire, 1990, p. 5, in Spaaij et al, 2016) and it must “include both social
critique and transformation” (Schugurensky, 2011, p. 8). Freire’s banking method proposed that education cannot exist when the teacher is the sole arbiter, simply depositing knowledge into the students (Freire, 1970). Students are not vessels into which education can be deposited, but rather students and teachers must interact in tandem to be efficient in the educational process. Critical theory and critical pedagogy address this concern through their transformative call to action to bring about social change.

**Critical theory’s tenets.** This section describes the relevant principles of critical theory as they relate to CRP. Weber’s focus was on power, domination, and legitimacy (Szelenyi, 2016). Hence, alienation of the lower social classes is part of discussions where socioeconomic status and political structures shape the development of a society (Apple, 2011). Some challenge the traditional notion of outmoded banking education (Freire, 1970, 1993), where teachers are the holders of knowledge and simply fill students with knowledge that is pre-determined and universal. More traditional educational theory posits that a suppression of “knowledge, power, and domination” (Giroux, 1986, p. 86) is also of paramount concern. Critical theory focuses on transformative change and social justice, as well as on the power and hierarchical structures that shine light on the “hidden curriculum” (Giroux, 1986, p. 86) that is geared towards the White normative power structure. Therefore, there is a need for critical theory’s call to action.

Offshoots of critical theory address this concern. An organic move towards critical consciousness allows the oppressed to claim ownership of their position and create change from within (Freeman & Vasconcelos, 2010). “Radical educational theory set itself the task of uncovering how logic of domination and oppression was reproduced within the various mechanisms of schooling” (Giroux, 1986, p. 85). In noting that school policies serve the interest of the White normative power structure, leaning on the tenets set forth by Weber, critical theory
addresses a movement designed to bring reformative action to the educational system (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Critical theory can bring change and reform; it aims at social equity and transformation (Ponterotto, 2005). Critical theory is a useful tool for developing transformative results while challenging the status quo and normative power structures.

**Critics of critical theory.** Critical theory has its detractors. Critical theory is not a theory that is “imposed on a process, but [rather] is a process that puts into practice a multiplicity of theories in the creation of transformative action” (Freeman & Vasconcelos, 2010, p. 16). Critical theory places an “emphasis on the enlightenment of individuals at the expense of understanding its relevance for mass social action” (Fay, 1987, p. 108). Both of these are valid counterarguments, but the strength of critical theory is in its transformative and emancipatory focus on cultural and ethnic values (Ponterotto, 2005). CRP aims to empower students through engagement in the curriculum. This study focused on how teachers perceive the use of culturally responsive pedagogies and the way they are approached in the classroom.

**Critical theory as it relates to the problem of practice.** Culturally responsive pedagogy is engaging. Critical theory helps develop the research question by focusing on what is at stake: efficient student engagement. Lack of student engagement leads to decreased academic success (Cavendish et al., 2017). Acceptance of the status quo disempowers students because of teachers’ inability to engage them, so the onus is on teachers to understand and implement culturally responsive pedagogy so equity can be achieved among all students in the teaching process. Critical theory sees CRP as a path towards social justice and equity. CRP reaches out to culturally diverse students and engages them with the curriculum because it speaks directly to them. Culture is no longer confined within borders (Kim & Slapac, 2015); with the globalization of cultural borders, the idea that the fixed establishment can dictate cultural, racial, and social
positions seems outmoded, pompous, and antiquated. Hence, the critical theory’s calls for stark social criticism and eliciting social change in the name of equity and social justice was relevant to the study at hand.

Critical theory was of interest because of its transformative nature and the aggressive way it challenges normative power structures. Capitalist ideologies make up the very language of schooling (Giroux, 1986). Critical theory aggressively disrupts and challenges the status quo (Ponterotto, 2005) with its specific call for reflection and empowerment. This study focused on how teachers perceive their use of classroom techniques to try to efficiently engage students.

**Conclusion**

Gaps exist in public education between the opportunities students of color receive and those that White students receive (Zion, Allen, & Jean, 2015). Socially and culturally responsive teaching practices engage students and develop in them a sense of ownership in their own educational experience (Z. Johnson, 2017). This creates an environment for equitable success in the classroom. It is important for teachers to understand students’ culturally diverse backgrounds and their rich heritage if they are to give their educational experiences value (Daminidou & Phtiaka, 2016). Culturally responsive pedagogy addresses this and allows teachers to understand their students’ perspectives. CRP is essential for the future of an educational system in which most faculty are part of the dominant White power structure yet are teaching an ever-growing student population that has multiculturally diverse backgrounds and heritage (Jenkins & Alfred, 2017). Teachers interested in equity and social justice in society must understand that student engagement through CRP will help all students better experience education (A. Lopez, 2011). This study focused on understanding how teachers perceive the need and proper implementation of CRP. It offers teachers a common lens through which to understand the issue, as well as a
platform from which to address the idea of equity and social justice in the middle school classroom.
Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

This study investigated how teachers perceive the use of culturally responsive pedagogy as a means of engaging students. The education of culturally diverse students has become a paramount concern in public education (Hsiao, 2015). With education commonly seen as a key to success (Lee & Bowen, 2006), public school districts need to understand and properly implement CRP. Teachers interested in equity and the creation of a socially just classroom environment must consider how students of varied cultural backgrounds engage with their educational experience (A. Lopez, 2011). Teachers must be inclusive and equitable with students in order to properly engage them in the classroom (Sanders, Rodrigues, & Li, 2016). Teachers are more able to engage students through an understanding of their home cultural patterns (Ladson-Billings, 1995a), a sentiment that will be addressed in detail later in this paper. CRP supports curricular engagement in students (Sleeter, 2011) by allowing them to embrace their values, cultural heritages, traditions, and cultural contributions to society (Pitsoe & Letseka, 2015). Hence, student engagement through CRP leads to higher achievement in schools (Okoye-Johnson, 2011).

School district leadership is also of concern. Teachers must feel supported, so school leadership needs to accommodate and understand the cultural heritage of the student body to maximize the students’ educational experience (Nogueura, 2011; Raelin, 2016). School leadership can develop a safe and equitable environment and curriculum that speaks to the diversity of a student body (Madhlangobe & Gordon, 2012). Different types of leadership, such as work-based or distributed leadership (Bush & Glover, 2014) can effectively influence and support teachers who are using CRP. This study explored the perceptions of teachers about how the implementation of culturally responsive pedagogy leads to increased student engagement.
Culturally responsive teaching pedagogies can engage students and thereby help students remain in school, graduate towards success, and ultimately influence and empower their community (Archambault et al., 2009; Crowder & South, 2003). Students’ access to and engagement in the curriculum plays an essential role in their academic success (Love, 2015), and CRP shapes school curriculum around their specific community and cultural heritage. This literature review explains the effects of culturally responsive classroom teaching and its ultimate influence on student engagement.

This literature review is presented in three sections. The first section outlines and defines culturally responsive pedagogy; its uses, needs, and influence on a school community; and its benefits and outcomes. It also describes the norms and values that frame the debate about the perceptions of teachers and administrators and how the implementation of culturally responsive pedagogy leads to increased student engagement. The second section addresses student engagement, its correlation with success, how sound engagement can lead to higher success rates in academics, how nonengagement can lead to higher dropout rates, and the use of multicultural education to spark engagement in the classroom. The final section addresses leadership by teachers in the classroom as well as by administrators who support teachers and their teaching techniques. This study focused on how teachers perceive pedagogy in their classrooms; administrators need to understand and support how teachers perceive their classroom practices if they are to succeed. This section focuses on whose voices get heard in that discussion and how those voices influence classroom practices. Leadership in support of student engagement will be addressed.
Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

The face of the student population in the United States is changing. In 2014, students of color outnumbered White students for the first time (Cole et al., 2016), and the trend seems likely to continue. Sadly, “many students from nondominant communities are not finding success in American schools” (Cole et al., 2016, p. 430), and the excuse of “cultural deficiencies” (Cole et al., 2016, p. 430) is no longer accepted as a viable explanation for the gap in achievement between White and students of color. Socially privileged students perform better on standardized tests, and thus wind up with more access to the structures that lead toward success (Kingston, 2001). Pedagogy and curriculum decisions that support this changing demographic are needed by school districts that are interested in promoting the academic achievement and success their student and community population deserve. Hence, culturally responsive pedagogy – sometimes referred to as culturally relevant pedagogy or culturally responsive instruction (Cole et al., 2016) – is more important now than previously recognized.

Pedagogy and curriculum decisions that are tailored to a particular student or community demographic are of great benefit because they can engage students who otherwise may be alienated due to cultural divides. A student’s lack of engagement in curriculum due to cultural divides can lead to limited success in school (Boon & Lewthwaite, 2015). Because education is a predictor of social mobility (Tramonte & Williams, 2010), student engagement is the paramount component of student success. Because cultural capital can be converted into educational success (Anderson & Jaeger, 2015), culturally responsive pedagogies become more important for engaging the student population.

There is a great need for CRP. Culture influences how students learn (Maasum, Maarof, & Ali, 2014), but understanding culture and the unique heritage and social backgrounds of
different students can be challenging for teachers who are not part of their students’ cultural background. Certain classroom tactics may help bridge the divide between student and teacher. Sound, supportive, and positive relationships between teachers and students are the most important element in a successful school (Phillippo, 2012). Of interest in addressing this issue is a practice known as personalism (Phillippo, 2012). Phillippo questioned how “low-income youth and youth of color might respond to teacher efforts to develop closer relationships” (Phillippo, 2012, p. 1) between students and teachers. CRP “illuminates a number of practice orientations and approaches that promote strong, supportive relationships between students from nondominant groups and their teachers” (Phillippo, 2012, p. 5). In short, a working relationship between teachers and students that supports student efforts and engages them through a mutual respect for their indigenous culture and heritage creates a bond between teacher and student that leads to student success both in and out of the classroom.

Culture is an asset, and “school curriculum itself as well as pedagogical practices can be viewed as cultural artifacts. […] Attention must be paid not only to the quality of instruction but also to the kind of personal interactions that occur between teachers and students” (Madhere, 1998, p. 285). To bolster this relationship, teachers must understand CRP, which includes “three instrumental components: confidence in student potential, visibility in the school and community, and professional empowerment” (Rogers, 2008, p. 48). Educators who are interested in engaging students on their own terms (i.e., through the lens of their own cultural heritage and backgrounds), need to understand the importance of these components and how they build and support each other in the movement towards success.

In addition, student engagement leads to success (Sanders et al., 2016). Engagement of minority and oppressed students through CRP is the first step in leveling the playing field in an
institutional education system that can exclude minorities and the oppressed in favor of White-dominated class-rooted cultural practices (Kingston, 2001). If equity and social justice is the goal, a desire to engage students through pedagogy that is relevant and specific to their own heritage is a prerequisite for success in the middle school classroom. Education is a “viable weapon against poverty and social inequality” (Lee & Bowen, 2006, p. 193). Student engagement can be, if properly understood and mined, developed into educational success (Anderson & Jaeger, 2015). Student retention and drop-out rates are of paramount concern (Kahu & Nelson, 2018), and student engagement in the classroom addresses that concern.

The circumstances that have created the need for a culturally responsive pedagogy that engages students are rooted in generational acceptance of cultural norms that favor the White normative power structure. One may ask: “Whose knowledge counts and whose knowledge is discounted?” (Yosso, 2005, p. 69). From this obvious concern stem questions about which pockets of our communities are able to influence curriculum and the pedagogy that is offered to a school system’s students each day. Access to sound and engaging educational curriculum and teaching techniques should not be contingent upon membership in a particular cultural group (Bourdieu, 1997), but it is universally recognized that racial and ethnic minorities are not offered equal opportunities (Aronowitz, 1996; Byrd, 2016; Cavendish et al., 2017) or acceptable standards of education. With such a standard accepted, student engagement becomes the paramount part of efforts to bolster academic achievement in communities that are outside the normative power hierarchy.

To achieve success, a district’s curriculum needs to be open to the cultural background and heritage of its student body. National standards are a sound starting point for implementing a curriculum designed to attain high levels of achievement, but “many potentially good students
are simply unable to compete because their academic programs do not prepare them adequately” (Aronowitz, 1996, p. 145). Furthermore, “poor and working-class students – especially racial and ethnic minorities – are shortchanged under locally determined standards” (Aronowitz, 1996, p. 145) because national standards do not adequately reflect the need for a regional and locally based curriculum that supports and enhances students of color’s communities’ cultural heritage. Teaching is not disconnected from the society it serves (Pitsoe & Letseka, 2015), so addressing the cultural heritage and diversity of the student body is essential to success. Teachers must develop a working understanding of students’ cultural heritage and backgrounds in order to be effective in the classroom (Byrd, 2016).

Students must be engaged. If not, students lose interest and lack the desire to own their educational experience and thus have lower success rates. Student success can be bolstered and supported through heritage-based curriculum choices offered in the classroom that engage and sustain their interest through unique and specific attention to their own backgrounds and upbringings (Gupta-Carlson, 2010). Students who recognize their own heritage within the curriculum are inspired to find connections between school and life; they therefore will be more likely to remain engaged in their educational journey. Families with culturally diverse backgrounds, including recent immigrants, recognize education as a means to success (Stevens, 2011). Engaging students in the curriculum is the first step.

The implications of nonengaging pedagogy raise concerns. Student engagement leads to lower dropout rates (Archimbault et al., 2009), thus efforts and resources need to be focused on developing curriculum that respects the classical educational system and also respects and recognizes students’ diverse and rich heritage. Research supports this. A study of 11,827 seventh to ninth graders in Quebec found that “cognitive and psychosocial characteristics …
underscored the importance attributed to basic participation and compliance issues” (Archambault et al., 2009, p. 651), which are factors in school dropout rates and correlate to student engagement. Students who are engaged in their classroom studies are more likely to succeed (Kahu & Nelson, 2018, p. 59). Non-engagement has its price; students who leave school before graduating find fewer opportunities and lower earnings (Crowder & South, 2003). Culturally responsive teaching is a pedagogy that recognizes the importance of including students’ cultural references in all aspects of learning. If teachers are able to understand best practices around engaging students through CRP, then they will be able to better serve all students. Therefore, it is pertinent to understand that CRP can be used to engage students through classroom pedagogy that speaks directly to them through their own specific rich cultural heritage and backgrounds. The goal of this study was to understand how teachers perceive their use of CRP to engage students and to develop in them a sense of ownership of their educational experience that will lead to continued success.

Pedagogy can use culture as an effective way to attract and engage the student population, but CRP can also be used to shape and maintain cultural values. “Vibrant cultures encourage creativity and recognize the educative potential of such an approach” (Weaven & Clifford, 2015, p. 66). Teachers should be attentive and respectful of all students’ cultures and experiences in order to enrich the education process. Understanding students’ cultural heritage along with what cultural experiences they may be receiving at home is a large part of this process. Bringing value to a student’s own cultural background is the role of curriculum. Teachers can bridge cultural gaps with their students through specific forms of writing, such as poetry, novels, short stories, films, and plays (Weaven & Clifford, 2015). To do this, teachers
must perceive themselves as effective and competent in understanding their students’ home lives and cultural communities (Byrd, 2016).

Engaging students through heritage-based CRP has effects that reach far beyond the classroom. Engaging students in the classroom can develop cultural capital. Cultural capital is not only something that is passed down from elders to youth in an effort to retain cultural and heritage knowledge, but it also can pass in reverse: “youth interpret[...] for elders” (Robles, 2014, p. 60). This model can work through engaging students; their efforts to comprehend and understand curriculum can then be passed back to the community. “It is precisely the diversity of the learner pool that, if harnessed appropriately, can anchor learning economic concepts and financial literacy” (Robles, 2014, p. 61). The spark begins in the classroom and extends outward to the community through the educational process being offered to students. CRP also creates a bridge between the classroom and the community (Byrd, 2016). How teachers perceive the success and reception of their curriculum is an important part of making this effort effective.

Culturally responsive pedagogy is a powerful tool. It is not only important for educating a community’s youth through specific heritage-based curriculum and recognition of that community’s cultural values, but it also can be a powerful tool for social change. Education geared to multicultural backgrounds can reach all students. It “not only reflects the diversity of society; it also raises awareness about inequality, discrimination, and stereotypes caused by differences” (Maasum et al., 2014, p. 102). Recognizing the need for CRP is not a given: educational efforts, presentations, and even lines of thinking and expression favor the normative and dominant classes (Olneck, 2000). Therefore, leadership and classroom decisions about pedagogy and curriculum must include culturally responsible avenues. The stakes are high. Inability to engage students with their own cultural heritage can cause alienation, which can be
linked to “high suspension rates, over-representation in special education, low educational attainment, and low retention rates” (Boon & Lewthwaite, 2015, p. 39). Therefore, understanding the relationship between CRP and cultural capital as it leads to student engagement is of paramount concern.

Cultural capital is a valuable asset within a community, but it needs to be recognized and understood before it can be used to its full potential for successful and efficient educational gain. Cultural capital is “cultural knowledge and experience, acquired over time, from family, friends, mentors, or teachers that imparts status, dispositions, cultural and linguistic expertise, and credentials” (Hinton, 2015, p. 303). Cultural capital is information that is learned or understood and shared as a process that develops over time. It comes from those in one’s life and community who are respected for their knowledge about cultural backgrounds and heritage. Openness to diversity can support the continuation of cultural values. Cultural capital is:

knowledge [that is tied to] social capital [networks and associations] that will translate to stability and economic capital [money and goods] … Education is a pathway to a better life [in that] … learning skills and knowledge in school will provide one with the cultural capital, the embodied knowledge that will position them favorably in society. (Stevens, 2011, p. 134)

Hence, cultural capital is not only something that can be acquired. Cultural capital also can be developed and positively manipulated on an individual basis to influence and reposition one’s status in community and society. With this in mind, cultural capital should be viewed as an influential tool that can be used in any number of ways, one of which is to improve a community’s efforts to have its voice heard in matters of curriculum development and school policy in an effort to help engage all students.
Cultural capital is tangible and can provide leverage in discussions of societal influence and status (Bourdieu, 1997). Bourdieu (1997):

Social capital is the aggregate of the actual or potential resources linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition – … membership is a group – which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectively-owned capital, a “credential” which entitle(s) them to credit, in the various senses of the word. (p. 51)

Membership creates a common and unified voice so the social and cultural capital of individual community members can be strengthened and supported. This can then influence power structures more efficiently than could be influenced alone. This creates the need for sound leadership within the community as well as within the district that receives the community’s unified voice. More on the leadership aspect of this dynamic is offered later in this chapter.

The need for culturally responsive pedagogy. The literature pays much attention to the idea that there is a normative power structure in place and that certain expectations of achieving the norm are quietly understood. Thus, the need for heritage-based and culturally responsible pedagogy is ever more pressing. History is taught by the dominant group in power (Aronowitz, 1996). CRP is a valuable asset for a regional or local community when it wants its children be raised with values and norms drawn from their specific cultural heritage. In recognizing the values and norms of the nondominant cultures, teachers can better engage students in the classroom. CRP addresses the following: “How are we relating to one another as humans? Who has been excluded from our deliberations? … What cultural or historical processes have led to our current state?” (Raelin, 2016, p. 46). These valid questions support the need for teachers to
understand the power of CRP for challenging students to better understand how their cultural heritage fits into their educational experiences.

Culturally responsive pedagogy should not threaten or quell the heritage-based education students get from home; rather, CRP should enhance and support the lens through which students view the curriculum against the rich backdrop of their own backgrounds and cultures (Madhere, 1998). This is supported by Durfur, Parcel, & Troutman (2013):

The mere presence of parental stores of knowledge is insufficient to ensure transmission of that knowledge to children. Instead, parents must make specific choices to invest in their children’s development and engage in interactions with a specific child to create the bonds along which information can be passed. (p. 2)

A cycle develops. “Family social capital investment has intergenerational consequences” (Durfur et al., 2013, p. 2). From this, proper implementation of educational processes is needed to fully immerse and educate children in the values and norms of the community, which have become ever more important in their development.

**Student Engagement**

Student engagement at the middle school level is our focus. Students who show disinterest at the middle school level are more likely to drop out of high school (Finnan & Kombe, 2018). Students who are more engaged with their studies are more likely to succeed (Kahu & Nelson, 2018). Disengagement from the educational process can result in lack of interest in the educational experience, particularly in remaining in school (Archambault et al., 2009). Student engagement occurs when there is a compatible working relationship between the practices of the school and a student’s background, heritage, and experiences (Kahu & Nelson, 2018). Student engagement is also produced by personalized teacher instruction and a feeling of
connectedness to the curriculum (Farnan, Hudis, & LaPlante, 2014), which is directly related to CRP. Pedagogy designed to highlight and support the diverse cultural background of students is essential to keeping them engaged.

Students who achieve a sense of engagement remain involved in their studies. Student engagement can take many forms, including being fully engrossed in a learning procedure and achieving a sense of accomplishment (Salmela-Aro, 2017). Teachers can develop teaching practices to achieve this state in many ways, one of which is multicultural education. Multicultural education helps students of color and of various cultural backgrounds engage in their own learning by accessing curriculum through their own cultural lens (Au, 2017). One means of social justice is multicultural education (Cho, 2017). Teachers can use multicultural education to reach a specific and targeted cultural demographic by offering students curriculum and pedagogy through the lens of their own heritage and backgrounds. Case study supports this. A successful program in the Bronx introduced hip-hop into the community to unite young women around a passion for their cultural background; this has led to many benefits for both the community and the students (Gupta-Carlson, 2010). There is great potential for societal change and community benefits by generating energy and engaging students. Outcomes of the Bronx program included “new voter registration drives; the establishment of neighborhood anti-drug, illiteracy, and youth violence projects; and the directing of youth from gang- or drug-related street activity to dance, art, and music production classes” (Gupta-Carlson, 2010, p. 516). The goal of introducing hip-hop to the community was noble, and it yielded results. Similar programs can help other students of color, immigrant students, or socioeconomically oppressed communities remain in school, remain engaged in classroom efforts, and achieve whatever
definition of success they desire; but they need to be implemented by teachers who understand the cultural divide and how to approach it.

Student engagement is important because academic success depends on how well the student can access the curriculum (Bernstein, 2000). Cultural awareness is pertinent to a student’s cognitive development (Love, 2015), and engaging students in the classroom is an important part of that effort. A teacher’s understanding of student identity is a key factor in student engagement (Baskerville, 2009), which can lead to empowerment and ultimately a positive sense of community (Charmaraman, 20013). Disengagement in the classroom can lead to higher dropout rates in high school (Armchambault, 2009), followed by fewer job prospects and more criminal activity (Crowder & South, 2003). The classroom experience must include a sense of ownership among students at an early grade level which stems from student engagement.

Culturally responsive pedagogy is necessary for sound diverse educational curriculum and heritage-based learning, but the focus does not end at the classroom. In the quest for equity and social justice, and in pursuit of engaging students and keeping them involved and interested in school, after-school club activities can also be used to create a sense of ownership within a school and community and bridge the gap between the two. Youth media production is an effective way to engage students. The idea is to create a connection that gives students a sense of pride and ownership that leads to engagement. In a study that focused on student engagement through media:

Adolescents were empowered through afterschool media production activities and, in the process, re-imagined themselves as active and engaged citizens within their communities…. Sociocultural capital [is gained] through group ownership; safe spaces
for creative expression; and the development of a sense of community with diverse voices. (Charmaraman, 2013, p. 102)

The clubs offered a voice to students who began to see themselves as having value in the community. This is akin to the mission of CRP. Engaging youth with a sense of ownership about their work, giving them a platform to create and develop narratives about their own cultural backgrounds and heritage, offering a way to distribute those narratives for others in the school and community to see and respect, and developing a sense of value within the student as someone who is viable and worthy are all positive benefits and outcomes of a culturally diverse pedagogy that recognizes the strength in the diversity of our youth and uses it to appreciate and respect avenues towards social change.

Success through student engagement can take many forms. These include attendance rate, a feeling of belonging or of ownership in a student’s personal efforts in school, and a student’s discipline record (Virtanen et al., 2016). Students also need to be heard so teachers can fully understand how the curriculum is being received. A decrease in student engagement can lead directly to a decrease in the rate of completion (Cavendish et al., 2017). Culturally relevant teaching practices can help bridge students’ cultural heritage and what teachers are offering in the classroom, which creates a stronger sense of engagement in the curriculum and schooling efforts (Byrd, 2016). Teachers must perceive how their students are engaging in their curriculum. A study by Siwatu, Chestnut, Alejandro, and Young (2016) of eight preservice teachers uncovered a sense of doubt among these teachers that “stemmed from a general lack of knowledge regarding student diversity and culturally responsive pedagogy” (Siwatu et al., 2016 p. 286). This qualitative study also uncovered the perception that “teachers were not exposed to proper culturally responsive pedagogy and models” (Siwatu et al., 2016 p. 287). A quantitative
study by Virtanen et al. (2016) linked teacher and student perceptions about student engagement. That study offered insight into self-esteem, school burnout, school dropout, and behavioral engagement. Virtanen et al. (2016) provided context for how teachers perceive what they are offering in the classroom and how it might be received by students.

Various ways of engaging students are of interest, including multicultural education. Multicultural education is a way to engage students and bridge communication and learning gaps that may be present or develop if teachers and the district and community have different cultural heritages and backgrounds. Multicultural education leads to ownership of the process and better engages students. Multicultural education:

- Enables students to recognize the role of power in the construction of knowledge; aims to cultivate democratic attitudes, values, and behaviors among students; it utilizes culturally congruent pedagogy; and it reorders the schools’ status and cultural systems to make them fair to those previously disempowered by Euro-American dominance. (Olneck, 2000, p. 318)

Student success in the classroom depends on how well they can access their own culture in a curriculum (Love, 2015). CRP supported through multicultural education is a way to enable this.

In conclusion, CRP is a powerful tool for keeping students of color and students with culturally diverse backgrounds engaged in the curriculum. This ultimately leads to higher achievement and success (Byrd, 2016). When teachers validate students and their work, student engagement is higher (Cavendish et al., 2017). Higher self-esteem and lower burnout rates also result from increased student engagement (Virtanen et al., 2016). A lack of student engagement can lead to a “weakened relationship” between students and their school experience (Archambault et al., 2009, p. 652). Keeping students engaged is a key to academic success.
Leadership in Supporting Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

Culturally responsive teaching needs culturally responsive leadership. Proper leadership is paramount in allowing the development of culturally responsive pedagogy, and recognizing the need for CRP is part of sound leadership. “Ignoring culture in human social interactions adversely affects current and future communication, interactions, and knowledge construction” (Madhlangobe and Gordon, 2012, p. 179). Teachers need to be given enough leeway to shape and align curriculum to the rich heritage and background of the student body. This can only be possible if administrators allow teachers to fully immerse themselves in pedagogy that is aligned with the students’ needs. Community leaders can play a major role in this, but a community’s recognition of its value is worthless unless proper leadership is in place to allow the use of CRP in the classroom. The topography of the American public school community is changing. School leadership needs to evolve with it or find itself in the challenging position of being nonproductive due to community resistance or challenge.

Teachers work under the leadership of their school district. There are several ways to approach leadership. Administrators must be clear about what kind of school they envision. Educators must be able to “describe the ideal school they are trying to create…. [Only then will they be able to] develop policies, procedures, or programs that will help make that ideal a reality” (Bui & Baruch, 2010, p. 234). This starts with leadership. Teachers and administrators of various fields and strengths must understand the needs of students with culturally diverse backgrounds (Keating & Gasteyer, 2012). Communication, specific goals and efforts, and a willingness to understand and appreciate the value of all voices are needed to create and foment collaboration aimed at efficient educational efforts.
Distributed leadership (Bush & Glover, 2014) can address students’ cultural backgrounds by supporting teachers in pooling their resources and expertise to create a unified voice and common front. Work-based leadership (Raelin, 2016) opens teachers and administration to new avenues of support:

Work-based learning acknowledges participation in social systems that function with acute political tensions…. [That] requires an organizational culture of risk taking and openness that permits occasional surfacing of ineffectual rules and practices. It works best when organizational members, including executives, agree to submit even their governing values to scrutiny. (p. 46)

Work-based leadership and distributed leadership both hinge on a district’s ability to recognize that it must relinquish certain levels of power and instead collaborate for the good of the students. There can be social change through mutual understanding and respect between community and administration. Engagement of the marginalized starts in the classroom. The voice of unified community efforts that fall in line with the administration’s achievement of its educational goals draws on the notion of cultural capital. Community leadership programs benefit from “shared beliefs about who community leaders are, and the possibilities they together envision” (Keating & Gasteyer, 2012, p. 148). Engaging students through CRP can attain meaningful change.

As part of this discussion of leadership and suggestions for how to fully implement CRP for positive educational gain, there is a need to understand the cultural and heritage-based background of the students who are being taught by a community’s school district. Teachers must be “culturally and politically literate about context-specific histories and experiences that informed where students came from and how they viewed others” (Giroux, 1994, p. 40). The
challenge is to connect students’ own language and experiences to the curriculum so they can gain a sense of ownership over their educational experience (Giroux, 1994). In short, teachers must try to understand their students’ home lives and cultural backgrounds in order to make connections and develop strong working relationships with them. In order to engage their students, teachers must develop connections with their students.

Leadership must support this. There is a great need for alternative models of leadership that value the need for culturally responsive leadership practices (Santamaria, 2014). “The increasing diversity in schools calls for new approaches to educational leadership in which leaders exhibit culturally responsive organizational practices, behaviors, and competencies” (Madhlangobe & Gordon, 2012, p. 177). Furthermore, “ignoring culture in human social interactions adversely affects current and future communication, interactions, and knowledge construction” (Madhlangobe & Gordon, 2012, p. 179). Culturally responsive leadership “incorporates those leadership philosophies, practices, and policies that create inclusive schooling environments for students and families from ethnically and culturally diverse backgrounds… [This can lead to] cultural recognition, revitalization, and community development” (L. Johnson, 2014, p. 145). To reinforce an earlier meme, media club activities can support this ideal. Charmaraman (2013) outlined a study that empowered culturally diverse adolescents through a media club activity that helped minority students “re-imagine themselves as active and engaged citizens within their community …[and helped them create] sociocultural capital through group ownership, safe spaces for creative expression, and develop a sense of community through diverse voices” (Charmaraman, 2013, p. 102). This supports the notion that leaders who allow teachers the flexibility to bring culturally responsive teaching methods into
play will reap rewards that can engage youth. This will in turn empower the community through supporting the cultural capital gained from the students’ efforts. It is a win-win for all involved.

**Summary**

This literature review focused on the idea that culturally responsive pedagogy can engage students by offering a lens through which they can become involved in curriculum that is based on their culturally rich heritage. The three sections of this literature review revolved around the need for CRP, the importance of student engagement, and the need for strong and culturally aware leadership practices to implement curriculum that is culturally responsible and aware. This literature review supported the need for classroom efforts and pedagogical focus on how teachers and administrators perceive that the implementation of CRP leads to increased student engagement. Much is known about CRP and teaching practices, and much of the literature supports the positive and socially equitable desire to engage students through curriculum and material that will inspire them because of its cultural ties to their rich and diverse backgrounds.

Further investigation was warranted through this case study of teachers and support staff. This study offered an empirical study of their perceptions of classroom practices, strengths in refining CRP, and an in-depth look at the understanding needed to further push the development of culturally aware teaching practices by educators who know what needs to be done in their own classrooms and school buildings. There was a great need for qualitative analysis of classroom practices because of the diverse and culturally rich student body that is emerging in America’s public schools, particularly in the town where this study was undertaken. An understanding of how teachers engage their students through culturally aware curriculum and pedagogy is necessary because of the changing demographic of the work force. Knowledge of classroom practices aimed at engaging students with culturally aware pedagogy in an effort to engage their
educational focus can benefit a community’s cultural capital to the point where it can influence school policy and decisions revolving around curriculum. The implementation of CRP will lead to increased student engagement.
Chapter 3: Research Design

This study investigated the experiences of middle school teachers who educate an ever-increasing number of culturally diverse students and students of color. The use of culturally responsive pedagogy in the classroom was studied in order to find best practices that could be shared with faculty who are teaching similar demographics. The demographic of students of color and culturally diverse students in this study’s school district was quite varied, as there was no dominant minority group. This study focused on teachers’ perceptions of how the implementation of CRP led to increased student engagement. Because the heritage and backgrounds of the students were varied, special attention was paid to how teachers attempted to unify the experience of different cultural heritages and diversity to create student engagement in the classroom through culturally responsive pedagogy.

Teachers perceived that they were challenging students to be successful. Student success can be bolstered and supported through heritage-based curriculum choices offered in the classroom: it engages and sustains their interest because of the attention it gives to their own backgrounds and upbringings (Sleeter, 2012). This study sought to understand how teachers perceived their use of CRP to determine whether students who recognized their own heritage within the curriculum were being challenged and engaged. The expectation was that teachers would perceive students as more apt to remain engaged in their educational journey. Students become engaged when teachers are more involved in learning about their students’ rich cultural heritage (Gordon & Ronder, 2016). Education is recognized by recent immigrants as a pathway to success (Stevens, 2011), and first- and second- generation immigrants’ children made up a portion of the students at the research site.
Overview and Philosophical Underpinnings:

Using a case study design, this qualitative study explored how teachers and staff perceived the use of CRP to engage students with culturally diverse backgrounds. The most efficient way to approach a case study is to support it through a constructivist paradigm (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2002). A focus on how teachers perceive the way their curriculum was being received by students in the classroom was essential: “Reality is constructed in the mind of the individual, rather than it being an externally singular entity” (Ponterotto, 2005, p. 129). Constructivists “claim that truth is relative and that it is dependent on one’s perspective” (Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 545). More than one reality was possible in this methodology, so developing and creating reality through the eyes of the participants was a key goal of the study.

The purpose of using a case study was to find out how teachers used their perceptions and experiences to make sense of their own worlds (Merriam, 1998). A social reality was developed and explained as it was constructed and existed in the minds of the participants (Yazan, 2015). In other words, this research was subjective. By understanding each participant’s view, position, and perspective, the mosaic yielded an underlying understanding of the participants’ experiences. The result of the study was an understanding of teachers’ perceptions about how the implementation of CRP led to increased student engagement.

Qualitative case study methodology was used in this study because it supported the creation of theories, supported the evaluation of programs and understandings, and provided tools for the researcher to develop an understanding of the situation within its natural context (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Key scholars of the case study method include Robert K. Yin, Sharan Merriam, and Robert Stake, “three seminal authors who provide procedures to follow when
conducting case study research” (Yazan, 2015, p. 135). The next subsection identifies them as divergent thinkers and compares and contrasts their ideologies.

**Scholarly debate.** Case study is desired when questions of *how* and *why* are of interest (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Yin, 2003). Yin argued for the “exact planning for every step of inquiry” (Yazan, 2015, p. 143) along the way, and this tight structure is the hallmark of the Yinian philosophy. Because the goal was to find the participants’ perspective through their point of view and positionality, the case study was subjective; its focus was on appreciating “the different constructions and meanings that people place upon their experience” (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, & Lowe, 1991, p. 23). There is agreement on this position. “Most contemporary qualitative researchers hold that knowledge is constructed rather than discovered” (Stake, 1995, p. 100). This lens framed the interviews as well as the data collection in that the goal was to find pieces of the mosaic offered by the participants. This would help their experiences and positions be fully understood so future researchers could mine and develop their own positions on the discussion at hand. In comparison, Merriam is far more acute on case study, offering a more well-defined and specific structure (Yazan, 2015), in which rigid controls should be implemented and adhered to. In contrast, Stake posited that a more flexible approach to the case study can be efficient, noting that even after the study has begun changes can be made and the research question can be continuously in a state of being rewritten (Yazan, 2015). Stake’s flexible approach was more favorable because “it does not require as much design preparation as Yin’s [more structured] approach” (Yazan, 2015, p. 141). While all three have overlap, Stake’s acceptance of flexibility made that method of case study a better starting point because of the amount of latitude it offers the researcher. As the research unfolded, the flexibility of the case study model supported the evolving ideas and questions that unfolded along the way.
Alignment. Case study is an appropriate method for understanding the perceptions of teachers and support staff about how the implementation of CRP leads to increased student engagement. Case study supports inquiry into individuals and how they fit into communities and work environments (Yin, 2003), and it “ensures the issue is not explored through one lens” (Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 545). The type of case study that matches this problem of practice is an exploratory case study. An exploratory case study is “used to explore those situations in which the intervention being evaluated has no clear, single set of outcomes” (Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 548; Yin, 2002). The goal is not a how-to or toolbox for teachers to follow, but rather an exploration of how teachers perceive the effectiveness of their classroom efforts. Different teachers offered their own opinions on the research question, and a great deal of data was mined from the idea that participants had their own unique answers to the same questions. Because reality is created and developed within an individual’s mind (Yazan, 2015), context and point of view were key in developing an understanding of how teachers perceived their efforts to incorporate CRP.

The study utilized a qualitative case study methodology so the participants’ views could be observed and their positions discussed (Baxter & Jack, 2008). The constructivist paradigm allowed the researcher to fully understand the reality the participant had created (Ponterotto, 2005). Critical theory was used to seek an outcome that would be instructive (Freeman & Vasconcelos, 2010). Results can be offered to an audience of scholar-practitioners, faculty, and administrators where the study was conducted in an effort to shed light on how teachers perceived their use of CRP as a means of developing student engagement.
Participants

The participants in this study were middle school teachers and staff at City Middle School (a pseudonym) in a school district south of a major northeastern port city. City Middle School is a public school that teaches seventh and eighth grade students. Pseudonyms were used for all participants in order to ensure anonymity. Participants included four core curriculum teachers and two support staff at the middle school research site.

Of the four core curriculum teachers, two were English language arts teachers, one was a history teacher, and one was a math teacher. All of these teachers were White. Teacher participants had between 4 and 22 years of experience. As per the City Middle School administration, the demographic of the research site was more than 80 percent White. Teacher participants were observed in their classroom settings. Observations of teacher participants took place in their classrooms during a regularly scheduled lesson. A more in-depth exposition of their background and experience is offered in Chapter 4. An initial formal teacher interview was performed off-site, followed by an on-site observation and a final off-site formal interview.

Support staff participants included two student services (security) employees. The student services employees were not law enforcement officials and they did not carry a firearm. They interacted with the student population as part of their daily responsibilities. An initial formal support staff interview was performed, followed by on-site observation and a final formal interview.

Ethical Considerations/Recruitment

IRB forms were used in accordance with Northeastern University’s policy for requesting approval for the use of human participants in research. Recruitment procedures began with an initial verbal inquiry to all participants. If interested, the participant received a hard-copy
consent form that explained the study and its purpose, provided information and background about the researcher, described the procedures that would be used, and noted that the participant could at any time exit the study and negate the use of any information received by the researcher. In an effort to preserve anonymity, pseudonyms were used for all participants. Participants were not financially compensated for their time. If desired, a copy of the final study would be provided to the participants after the dissertation is complete.

**Procedures**

Data were collected through two interviews and one observation. An initial interview took place off-site with each teacher participant (see Appendix F). A final off-site interview took place after the classroom and workplace observation.

Observations of teachers were conducted during classroom teaching periods in an effort to observe and understand how the teacher presented and understood CRP in the class curriculum. Observing teachers in their own environment established context and meaning to the specific lesson and the participant’s relationship to the curriculum (Larkin, Eatough, & Osborn, 2011). One observation took place for each participant. The observation took place between the two interview sessions. This allowed the researcher to observe the participant and formulate exit questions to be asked in the final interview. This also allowed the participant to remain unbiased during the first interview. The interviews focused on meaning-making through the lens of the participants, which is paramount to case study methodology (Josselson, 2013). The researcher was able to observe how CRP was utilized in the classroom, and the final interview focused on how participants perceived the effectiveness of CRP in their lesson.

Observations for support staff participants were challenging because they did not have the same formal structure for interacting with students as the teacher participants. An open
structure was needed when observing support staff participants in their daily routines and responsibilities because of how much they moved around the entire research site.

Using a qualitative methodology framed by critical theory, teachers and support staff participated in interviews and observations to develop a mosaic revolving around the idea of CRP and how it best can be implemented to challenge and engage students with culturally diverse backgrounds. The focus was on how teachers perceived their efforts in engaging their culturally diverse students.

**Credibility.** Credibility can be defined as the “confidence that can be placed in both the data and the analysis” (Groenewald, 2008, p. 1). “Credibility is the quality of being believed or trusted” (Wagar, 2014, p. 873). The goal of this study was to offer a breakdown of the data in a credible and trustworthy format that could be confidently received by its readers. The integrity, honesty, and probity of the study was of paramount concern (Gunsalus, Marcus, & Oransky, 2018), as perceptions of credibility support the findings.

**Data collection and storage.** Data collection in a case study focuses on a particular issue (Noor, 2008). Intensive interviews with participants as well as observations of their classroom styles and teaching practices created data that were subject to memoing (Groenewald, 2008) and coding (Saldana, 2016). First-cycle coding was used to break down data into raw responses. Second-cycle coding was used to find patterns and recurrent themes, as well as to mine data from each participant’s perspective and position. A working understanding of the participants’ perceptions of their teaching practices and ability to utilize and understand CRP was developed through the breakdown of the data from the interviews and observations. A narrative of inquiry and discussion was developed for future researchers who are interested in the perceptions of teachers about how CRP engages culturally diverse students in the classroom. In
addition to interviews and observations, research documents pertinent to the study were perused and used and cited because doing so does not “intrude upon or alter the setting in ways the presence of an investigator often does” (Merriam, 2009, p. 139). This additional approach supported the original research that is described in Chapter 4.

Interviews were collected on a voice recorder with hand-written notes as support. The voice recordings were transcribed through an internet transcription service: Rev.com. Transcribed interviews were stored on a personal computer in the researcher’s home office. The notes will be kept at the researcher’s home office. The voice recorder used in these interviews was specific to this study; it had no other use and no other persons used the voice recorder. Upon completion of this study, transcribed interviews were removed from the researcher’s home computer and placed on a flashdrive. This flashdrive, recorder, all written notes, and the hard-copy paper research articles used in this study will be placed in a plastic storage container and kept in the researcher’s home for at least 5 years.

**Analytic Methods**

Case study was the most effective way to learn about the nature of the study while it was underway. This qualitative study was unique; and most efficient mode is that data were collected and analyzed at the same time (Baxter & Jack, 2008). This meant that a participant was interviewed while data from a previous participant were being analyzed. The most prominent advantage of this method of inquiry was that the researcher amended the questions and inquiry based on the information and data that was being analyzed. The researcher used pattern-matching to find trends within the data. Yin offered techniques that prompted this analytic method: pattern matching, linking data to propositions, explanation building, time-series analysis, logic models, and cross-case synthesis (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Yazan, 2015). The
researcher used the understanding of how teachers perceived their teaching techniques to find recurrent themes that were unique to their individual classroom efforts. The literature supported many of the findings, and this is cited in Chapter 4. Stake “describes categorical aggregation and direct interpretation as types of analysis” (Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 554). Yazan (2015) also offered support for Stake’s “categorical aggregation and direct interpretation” (Yazan, 2015, p. 145). Baxter and Jack (2008) supports this with, “The researcher must ensure that the data are converged in an attempt to understand the overall case, not the various parts of the case, or [simply] the contributing factors that influence the case” (p. 555). In short, the notion of a mosaic was the most efficient way to describe this procedure. The researcher used the observed teaching techniques and information from the interviews to create small insights into how teachers perceived their use of CRP.

**Presentation of Findings**

No study is complete unless the findings are offered in a way that helps the target demographic understand and build upon the basic tenets of the information being presented. A linear-analytic method was used, in which the researcher “discussed the problem, the methods, the findings, and the conclusions” (Creswell, 2013, p. 238; Yin, 2009). Readers of the research need to feel as if they were participants in the study. Baxter and Jack (2008):

The goal of the report was to describe the study in such a comprehensive manner as to enable the reader to feel as if they had been an active participant in the research and could determine whether or not the study findings could be applied to their own situation. (p. 555)

Context is key. The best way to present findings is to “tell the reader a story, provide a chronological report, or by addressing each proposition” (Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 555) within the
arena dictated by the research question. A concern was that participants offered an
overabundance of information, filled with intrigue and engaging storytelling that had little to do
with the study. Developing a sense of what was important and how the research question created
focus was paramount in presenting the findings.

**Positionality Statement**

This study focused on how classroom teachers perceived the results of utilizing culturally
responsive pedagogy in their classrooms. The participants in this study were White core-subject
teachers and school staff at a middle school. As I am also a White male teacher, bias may be
present. My background as a student was not filled with diverse faculty. From K through 12, I
was taught only by White teachers, so I had no frame of reference regarding a diverse faculty in
my elementary and secondary educational experience. This lack of diverse faculty continued
through undergraduate and graduate school. It was not until I began classes at the doctoral level
that I was able to experience the rich and culturally engaging positions of a diverse faculty. I
teach in a district that is overwhelmingly non-diverse, which prompted my research into CRP.

Potential bias is of concern in any research study. Because my own experience with
faculty is filled with a lack of diversity, I was concerned that I would approach this research
study with conclusions already in mind. This presented a challenge. A plan to manage potential
bias included several aspects. First, questions offered to faculty stressed participants’ perception
of their own classroom experiences. These experiences were unique to each participant, so any
potential bias on my part was not relevant: the participants’ experiences were distinct and
individual to their own background and knowledge. Another effort to quell potential bias
stemmed from a desire to understand how unique or common teachers’ experiences were. This
research yielded some outcomes I did not expect and some that I already believed; pursuit of this
study confirmed the experiences shared by many teachers. Finally, my lack of experience with
diverse teachers lent itself to new channels of inquiry that would not be considered by someone
with a different positionality than mine. Having spent so little time with teachers of a diverse
background opened lines of discussion in search of solutions that I utilized in my research
findings. An understanding that bias existed does not need to be received in a negative light for
this type of qualitative methodological study.

Limitations

Certain limitations needed to be understood as the study moved forward. First, the
demographic of the participants was White middle school teachers, so the data generated from
interviews and observations may not be valid for all K-12 teachers due to the different
demographics of the students they teach. Future studies could extend the sample demographic to
high school and elementary school teachers in an effort to find similarities and differences
among how teachers perceive the effectiveness of CRP given the difference in the age of the
students being taught. This study focused on middle school teachers because they were most
relevant to the teaching practices being studied.

A second limitation surfaced in the challenges presented by a student demographic that
was over- or under-motivated towards success and achievement. This study focused on the
perceptions of teachers about their efforts in the classroom, but courses with varying degrees of
difficulty (e.g., advanced algebra as opposed to pre-algebra and regular education English
language arts as opposed to Honors ELA) produced students with different levels of interest and
effort within the same curriculum. In addition, not all students identify with their cultural
heritage (Cole et al., 2016); this added another variable to the study. These variables cannot be
controlled, so they must be interpreted by teachers as they offer their perceptions about how the teaching strategies are being received without using grades or formally assessed achievements.

A final limitation resulted from the use of the term *perceived* in the problem of practice. This term was interpreted in various ways by teachers, which could not be controlled. A teacher may feel she has offered a lesson that was received well by her students and thus perceive that she has effectively implemented CRP in the classroom, but this is a self-regulated benchmark that does not take into account how teachers assessed their own abilities and efforts. Or, a teacher may have offered a stellar lesson that was well received by his students (and by an observer) but the teacher may not have felt the success was enough to be lauded. The teachers’ perception of the use of CRP was subject to their own view of what constitutes success in their own classroom. In dealing with perceptions of a teacher’s own success within the classroom, personal work ethic and a clarity of personal teaching mission statement variables were present, which may have altered the outcome of this study.

**Conclusion**

Qualitative case study was an appropriate method for this research. The study explored the perceptions of teachers about how the implementation of CRP led to increased student engagement. This method of study is “utilized when research questions concerned how people understood and made meaning of the facets of their lives” (Josselson, 2013, p. 7). Student engagement is paramount to student success, and the way teachers perceived their efforts in the classroom was a window into how CRP was used to engage students of diverse and varied backgrounds in the classroom.

The next chapter analyzes the interviews and observations of the teachers and support staff participants and shows in detail how they perceived their use of pedagogy that challenged
and engaged culturally diverse students. Through direct quotations and discussions about the participants’ own observations about their classroom styles and teaching practices, a mosaic began to form about how the teacher and support staff participants perceived the degree to which their classroom and school wide efforts were reaching their students. Not all participant observations were positive, which should in no way be an indictment of the participant or of the teaching style. Participants’ own perceptions of their efforts and classroom tactics were unique to themselves, and the insight they offered into their own practices was the core of the data received.
Chapter 4: Findings and Analysis

Teacher Perceptions of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

This chapter discusses the perceptions teachers have about the use of culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) as they try to engage students of various cultural backgrounds at City Middle School (CMS). CMS is predominantly made up of seventh- and eighth-grade middle- and lower-middle-class students. The research questions were: Based on the perception of teachers and support staff, how does the implementation of culturally responsive pedagogy at City Middle School lead to increased student engagement? How do teachers perceive that school culture supports culturally responsive pedagogy?

The theoretical framework used to collect data and analyze teacher perceptions was critical theory. Critical theory offers transformation (Ponterotto, 2005). Critical theory demands an interaction between subject and researcher and calls for those who participate and have a stake in the outcome to assess the relationship within social systems (Freeman & Vasconcelos, 2010). The final product offers change (Ponterotto, 2005) and insight into how CRP is perceived by teachers in the classroom. Critical theory was used to focus on how teachers perceive the use and effectiveness of CRP in their classrooms. A specific call to action resulted.

To fully understand the context in which the teachers and staff participants are working, the social, economic, and history of the community is presented. Understanding the community and the social breakdown of the people who live and work there is essential for understanding the students who attend CMS and the way the participants perceived the use of CRP. This chapter first offers an overview and snapshot of the community that feeds CMS. In addition to a statistical overview of the makeup of the town and the school, the perceptions of teacher and support staff participants about the community and their students are presented. Next, the chapter offers insight into the social and educational backgrounds of the teacher and staff
participants and outlines the way they perceived the use of CRP in engaging students of diverse backgrounds and the rest of their student population. Several themes became evident during the research and analysis stage and these themes structure the rest of the chapter. These themes are: (a) Recognizing culturally diverse students and understanding personal bias, (b) Perceptions of CRP in the classroom and engaging all students, and (c) Engaging classroom environment.

Setting

The community surrounding City Middle School. Rich in American history, tradition, and patriotism, City (a pseudonym) was founded in the early 1600s and is located on the ocean 10 miles from a major American port city. According to (pseudonyms) City Writer A and City Writer B (2016), writing for the City Historical Society, City can be described as follows:

Beginning as an agricultural community, [City] evolved into a bustling shipping port and a manufacturing town with numerous shoe factories and iron works. Later, it became a seaside vacation community, a postwar suburb, and finally a modern town with public transportation, a respected hospital, and a great school system.

By the 1960s, City had become a slice of Americana with ample blue-collar jobs in local shoe factories, iron works, and at the neighboring town’s post-WWII shipyard. Some residents worked at a naval base on the south side of town and in the burgeoning health care field at the respected local hospital. Today, City has three town squares, two rail lines to downtown of the major American city, a beach with marinas and boat moorings that lead to the open ocean, a pond for small power boats and kayaks, a major WalMart, BJ’s box store, and countless businesses, eateries, and restaurants. City is a bedroom community with a great deal of promise and potential for the future.
City is a small middle-class American city (population: 56,000) in which 40% of the residents have a high school diploma or less, 86% are White, and 53% are Catholic. A more detailed breakdown and specific statistics for City are found in Appendix A.

**City Middle School.** City has a fairly large school district. The school district is comprised of nine pre- and elementary schools, two middle schools of approximately 900 students each, and one high school that has approximately 2,000 students in attendance. CMS, used for this study, had 884 students, 170 faculty members, and 87 teachers with 6 administrators as of February 15, 2019 (City Middle School front office, 2019); 98% of teachers and 82% of students at City Middle School are White. A more detailed breakdown and specific statistics for CMS are found in Appendix B.

**Participants**

A person’s awareness and subsequent understanding of diversity in students stems directly from their own personal experience and upbringing (Hathaway & Fletcher, 2018). Six participants with varying teaching and support responsibilities at CMS contributed their perceptions to this study. Information is offered below for the CMS full-time employees who participated in this study. Pseudonyms have been utilized.

- Mr. East, eighth grade English language arts teacher
- Ms. West, seventh grade English language arts teacher
- Ms. Smith, eighth grade math teacher
- Mr. Jones, eighth grade history teacher
- Mr. Brown, seventh and eighth grade student services support staff
- Ms. Tan, ninth grade student services support staff
CMS faculty and staff were 98% White. All participants were White. The study explored how White teachers perceived their use of CRP as well as the need for the efficient use of CRP in the classroom. These participants were chosen for their wide range of school-related experience, and their sound, laudable teaching practices and reputations. The teachers worked on separate teams of four core teachers (ELA, math, history, and science); each team had 85-100 students. During the four-period teaching day, the core teachers’ average class size was 20-30 students. The student services support staff participants interacted with the entire student body throughout the course of a work day.

**Mr. East**

*Experience and background.* Mr. East was a White male in his early 30s who brought over 8 years of teaching experience to his position as an eighth grade English language arts teacher at CMS. He was covered in intricate tattoos, donned contemporary street hip clothing and wore a tight ponytail that extended to the center of his back. While he was a White male, Mr. East was often mistaken for being Latino, something he found almost comical in certain situations. He was an enthusiastic and passionate person by nature and first began teaching while in the Peace Corps in Sierra Leone, a country in western Africa. There, he was exposed to cultural differences, abject poverty, and varying social norms that affect and influence his current teaching. Mr. East’s initial desire to become a teacher stemmed from his less-than-positive middle and high school experience. He recalled his high school teachers:

I was into music and skateboarding and things that were not mainstream and I wasn’t part of the mainstream. I saw teachers as authoritarian figures. I was never rude to them, but I also never had any of them reach out to me or recognize any of my skills in the arts... I thought, they don’t really care about me, so I’m just going to get through this. I felt like I
was overlooked [by my teachers]. All I ever wanted was for somebody to recognize that
I was a little bit different, a little bit creative, and had something unique to offer.

This less-than-ideal high school experience stuck with Mr. East. He remembered it quite
vividly and with great detail in his interviews, often calling upon specific memories and even
quotes from his former teachers as a way of expounding upon his experience. He was clear
about how he did not feel valued in his nonconformity and wished that there were faculty and
authority figures who would have understood he was not what many might call mainstream.
These childhood experiences made Mr. East feel left out and forgotten as a student, and even
sometimes abandoned. These experiences prompted Mr. East to go into teaching, and he called
upon his experience dealing with his own teachers when dealing with his current students:

“It’s important for me that my students feel valued. It’s very important for me that my
students have a good educational experience as far as academics … but it’s just as
important they feel valued, and appreciated, and they feel I am interested in their lives
and can offer them some insight or advice or get them interested in something or see what
their strengths and values are. I want them to know I am there for them.

Mr. East expressed a strong desire to make sure his students did not have a negative
educational experience like his. He made extra effort to show interest and offer attention
specifically to students whom he felt may also be nonmainstream or have unique and even
eccentric interests in his classroom.

**Perception of the community.** Mr. East noted that his students were predominantly
White, but also that both the community and the school were a changing demographic. Based on
the 85 students he had this school year (across four ELA classes), Mr. East perceived that the
surrounding CMS community was about 70 percent White Irish Catholic, with the other 30 percent a mixture of Middle Easterners, Haitians, African-Americans, and others. He offered:

My classroom is predominantly White students, but we have a dynamic mixed population of students from various ethnicities. The dynamic is interesting in a positive way because we have a changing community. For a long time, it’s been a predominantly White community that was working class, blue collar, also once supported a Navy base. It’s a community of younger parents and younger grandparents.

Mr. East was aware of the community that surrounds CMS because he would take time to connect with his students and ask them about their backgrounds and interests. From these conversations, Mr. East could understand his students’ home life and the challenges and concerns they might have as well as the challenges facing their parents. He was also in tune with his students’ understanding of how they saw their community. While Mr. East saw the growing diversity in his classroom as a positive addition to the school culture, he perceived there might be some opposite points of view as well. He saw this through the discussions and interactions of some of his students:

In the community, some might think there is a population who feels as though diversity and the changing demographic of the community is a negative thing. They’re skeptical of people who are coming here that are not necessarily born and raised in this community. And sometimes it seems as the students are parroting their parents, for better or worse. And this can offer a challenge.

Mr. East was acutely aware that his students saw the changing demographics and the growing number of culturally diverse people moving into the school district or moving up within the school system. His students were vocal about what they saw and how they perceived their
community, and some of them brought preconceived negative stereotypes to the conversations they engaged in with Mr. East. Mr. East was aware that some of these attitudes might be born and fomented at home through parents, extended family, or older siblings, and it was a challenge for Mr. East to simply listen to his students and their perceptions without trying to explain to them his own beliefs and positions.

Mr. Jones

*Experience and background*. Mr. Jones was a White male in his late 30s who brought over 16 years of teaching experience to his position as an eighth grade history teacher at CMS. He was a measured presence who brought a stately and impressive amount of knowledge about his field to the conversation. His desire to work with children and his interest in becoming a teacher had long been part of his focus: from the time he was a camp counselor in his teens he had wanted to work with young people for a handful of reasons, including “kids are generally happy.” He offered that he always enjoyed being in school, saying it was a fun endeavor and one that he did not find to be a chore or a negative experience. Through his travels as a child, Mr. Jones found the study of history to be the most engaging, which is why he chose it for his own field of study. He recalled how his teachers were supportive and strongly influenced his efforts to focus on his education. He especially recalled how he had a great deal of support at home from his family, specifically from his parents, for the idea of education for himself and also as a future career. His parents were influential in his pursuit of education as a career because “education was always really important to them.” In addition to his parents, he recalled how his teachers were influential:

When I first started teaching, I would look back at what I thought were my best teachers and my favorite teachers that I had throughout middle and high school and try to bring
elements of what they did and what I thought was effective. I knew that the world was a lot bigger than my hometown and that gave me a desire to learn more about history and about the world.

Mr. Jones’s positive experience with his teachers when he was in middle school was a formative step in his desire to go into education, and he remembered teaching practices and efforts his teachers made to make him feel supported and engaged. He tried to emulate some of those teaching practices in his current efforts. Mr. Jones’s experience was almost 180 degrees opposite of Mr. East’s. While Mr. Jones’s teachers made a grand impression on him, supported his efforts, and challenged him to succeed, Mr. East found the experience to be much less gratifying, stating that at times he felt his teachers were not interested in him due to his lack of interest in what they considered important. Surprisingly, both men developed the same desire to support and challenge their own students even though their personal experiences were vastly different.

**Perception of the community.** Mr. Jones perceived the CMS community as being largely middle-class. He noted that his students were predominantly White, but, similar to the way Mr. East perceived the community, Mr. Jones had noticed over the years a larger population of culturally diverse students. Mr. Jones noted more of a mixture of students from different socioeconomic backgrounds and different racial backgrounds. In addition to his African-American students, Mr. Jones stated that his culturally diverse students were from places like Brazil, Egypt, the Middle East, and North Africa. Mr. Jones noted that this year he had more diversity than in previous years, and he found this a positive thing – similar to the view Mr. East had that diversity and culturally heterogeneous student populations were a positive addition to a student body. Mr. Jones also saw students trying not to break from their own homogeneous
groupings and spend time with students of differing and diverse backgrounds, although he noted that he saw continued groupings more among socioeconomic demographics than cultural demographics. Mr. Jones perceived that the students in his class did not view one another in racial or ethnic terms, but rather clumped together based on where they lived in town.

Ms. West

*Experience and background.* Ms. West was a White female in her late 20s who brought over 4 years of teaching experience to her position as a seventh grade English language arts teacher at CMS. She displayed creative energy in teaching and was an inspiration to speak with. Ms. West was organized and thought quickly on her feet, and her interview was conversational in tone but at the same time very specific in detail about her teaching. She displayed this same kind of warmth and knowledge of her subject during the classroom observation. It was clear that her students felt comfortable and secure in her class while also feeling engaged and disciplined due to her mixture of friendliness and seriousness about the classroom discussion. Ms. West wanted to become a teacher because of her love for writing and her love of working with young people. She originally wanted to work with secondary age students but decided to work with middle school students after a stint as a student teacher at a middle school, describing her student teaching assignment as “just the best experience I’ve had.” She elaborated:

I originally went to school for elementary education, and then, through helping my college friends with their college papers, I realized how much I loved to write. I thought of the high school English teachers that I had, and they inspired me, so I decided to go down that route. I loved school [as a child]. I never missed school. It was my favorite thing. I wasn’t someone who was like, ‘Oh, only a couple more days until summer.’ I could not picture myself doing anything else.
Ms. West’s experience as a child in school was similar to Mr. Jones’s in that she was interested in school and found her teachers to be supportive and ready to challenge her. Ms. West’s enthusiasm as a teacher started when she was a student. The supports and reinforcements she received from her teachers prompted her to have a sound and engaging experience as a student. This factored into her interest in becoming a teacher herself, and she now channeled the same support she received toward her own students.

Perception of the community. Ms. West attended CMS and perceived the student body as becoming more diverse during her time there. She perceived that her classes were predominantly White, with a minority population around 30 percent. She also noted the growing number of English language learner (ELL) students in her classes over the years. She noted that she interacted in class with students who were White and African American, as well as students from Portugal, Brazil, and Egypt. She noted that the ELL students tended to coagulate and interact primarily with their own group: “Students tend to stick with the people they look like, people who speak their own language.” While Ms. West found this natural for children in seventh grade, she also tried to break up the groups during the work day in an effort to help challenge her students, take them out of their comfort zones, and challenge them to learn English in their studies, as well as in hope that they would make new friends along the way. There is literature that supports Ms. West’s efforts to keep students from grouping solely on the basis of identity. Concerns abound that divisions of students along ethnic or cultural lines deny students exposure to other cultures and supports in a general classroom setting (Siteine, 2017). While Ms. West was aware of the literature on the subject, her decisions stemmed from her own experience that found that students were generally happier when grouped together by ethnicity but also found learning about other cultures to be quite engaging. From this, Ms. West made a concerted
effort to challenge students across cultural lines and she has found that students generally enjoyed the exposure.

**Ms. Smith.**

*Experience and background.* Ms. Smith was a White female in her late 30s who brought over 15 years teaching experience to her position as an eighth grade math teacher at CMS. Ms. Smith was organized and precise in her dialogue. In conversation, she was very specific with her word choice and diction. A large part of her perception of cultural diversity was overshadowed by her experience that math offers numbers, so few discussions about culture or specific backgrounds made their way into individual lessons. Ms. Smith was also a very affable and approachable teacher. Outside her daily lesson, Ms. Smith made the effort to ask questions about her students and find out about their home lives and their interests outside of school. During her classroom observation, she displayed a seriousness toward math and almost a clinical precision to her lesson and the individual help she offered students during their work time. Still, she exuded warmth and approachability, and students seemed interested in working hard if for no other reason than to please her with their efforts. All questions were answered and students were made to feel challenged and supported, never forgotten or dismissed.

Ms. Smith graduated summa cum laude from a prestigious private university in New England, but noted that she did not like her own middle school or high school experience because she was a bit of an outcast who did not fit into the mainstream. Ms. Smith offered the singular reason she wanted to become a teacher: “I had a tough time in high school, so I wanted to work with kids for that reason. Just to help them get through it.” Her experience of being an outlier was similar to that of Mr. East, and both of them had similar experiences during their childhood in middle school. Both also drew on this feeling of being an outsider to eventually
focus on a career in education and used their own negative experiences to fuel their desire to try and help students have a positive educational experience.

**Perception of the community.** Ms. Smith grew up in a neighboring community to City, but had friends and knew people from City through middle and high school. Ms. Smith perceived the CMS community as follows: “Middle class to mostly middle-lower class. Mostly White, about 70 percent White, and we do have a large ELL population, about 10 percent. So with the ELLs, minorities make up about 30 percent.”

Because there were so few faculty members of color on the staff and in the building, Ms. Smith noted she sometimes had some concerns for the minorities and ELL students she interacted with in the classroom. Sometimes, she noted, language was a barrier in the effort to communicate the lesson with certain students, and it sometimes could also be a barrier to communicating support and even pleasantries with students. She allowed her students to use Google Translator in class as well as during nonlesson times, and Ms. Smith noted this was a huge help and also gave the students a sense they were accomplishing something by being able to learn or understand a new phrase or carry on a discussion. Ms. Smith was aware there were few – if any – minority faculty members on staff, and wondered whether this was a positive thing for the students of color and students from diverse backgrounds. Ms. Smith’s perception was:

I don’t think the minority students are represented in the teacher population. I think we have maybe five percent teachers and staff of color. I would think the students would notice this. I would think they would notice if there’s no Black role model, no Latino role model for the kids to look up to. I hope it doesn’t make them think they are not part of the school, make them feel like an outsider. I make sure to make everyone feel welcome, so I’m trying do my part.
Ms. Smith was aware of the homogeneous cultural background of the faculty but also noted that it takes time and a great deal of acknowledgement on the part of the administration to bring a diverse and multicultural faculty to a school district. Ms. Smith wondered about the school’s hiring practices and whether there even was a pool of multicultural or diverse applicants applying for positions at the school and the district: “There must be, I would think… but I don’t know.” Ms. Smith wondered about the amount of diversity that candidates who applied to the school might offer. She also noted that while she wondered about this and felt it may be a problem for students of color, it was not in her capacity as a teacher to be in charge of hiring practices for the school.

Mr. Brown.

*Experience and background.* Mr. Brown was a soft-spoken, clear-headed, insightful White male in his late 50s who brought over 17 years of experience to his position as a seventh and eighth grade student services support member at CMS. He displayed little sense of humor and was very serious about his position and his efforts, but his light touch and unflappable demeanor made him appear open and approachable. Mr. Brown worked in a security position (without a firearm) and also in a support position for teachers who may be called out of a classroom setting. Mr. Brown was a Police Academy graduate who had extensive training in domestic violence. While in his late 30s, Mr. Brown changed career fields from security to education. His insight was valuable and contributed to this study by offering the perspective of a member of the CMS staff who interacted with the entire student body on a daily basis (as opposed to only a specific 100 students per day). He also interacted with students in every physical area of the school, including the hallways, the lunch room, the classrooms, the library, and the gymnasiums, as well as outside on school grounds before and after school. Mr. Brown
spent time in classrooms in support of teachers and worked to keep the building secure. Mr. Brown loved his own educational experience as a child and spoke in glowing terms of his teachers and his schools. He started working with students as a high school and middle school basketball coach, and it was through this lens that he tried to interact with students. He used sports as a means of connecting with students in conversation, and used experiences he had while coaching to defuse or approach certain situations that might become somewhat heated. Many of the positions he took in dealing with students on a daily basis stemmed from his experience dealing with young athletes on and off the basketball courts and athletic fields.

**Perception of the community.** Mr. Brown interacted with the full student population daily, and his perception of City was that it was made up of mostly middle-class Whites, with the student body being about 65 percent White and 35 percent African-American, Latino, Asian, Middle Eastern, and others. Mr. Brown had worked in several schools in the region, and noted that the general makeup of the schools was similar. Over the years he had noticed, like the other participants, a growing number of culturally diverse and students of color. Mr. Brown felt his extensive background in varying diverse local school systems prepared him for his duties at CMS:

My previous background, I was at [School X] in [City A], which is mostly a Portuguese community. I worked in [City B], which is mostly a Cape Verdian community. I worked in the inner city high school in [City C], which was almost an entirely minority school and community, Hispanic and Black. Over the years, I’ve learned how to navigate and understand the differences between the different social classes. I look at the diversity at [City Middle] and I feel very comfortable around all of these students in general.
As for the students he encountered in his daily interactions in the hallways and classrooms at CMS, Mr. Brown was impressed with how the administration was handling the growing population of ELL students in the building: “I see a vast diversity of students within the school every day. I’m very well aware of the ELL programs. It’s become a much more diverse environment, and City Middle does a really nice job at that.”

Mr. Brown had dealt with some volatile situations at the school, including fights among students and students who became physically or verbally abusive with teachers. He was measured in his attention to these kinds of outbursts and rarely changed his demeanor, even when situations escalated. During the observation, which took place during a lunch period in the cafeteria, it was easy to see that students felt they could approach Mr. Brown. Most students used sports – specifically basketball – to start conversations with him. Mr. Brown understood the need to be able to retrieve information about students and their home lives because it could give him a heads-up about potential concerns that might erupt during the school day. He was aware of students’ different moods and was in tune with the student body. If a student seemed off-kilter in the morning he could tell there was a concern and he would approach the student and try and make a connection. Understanding a student’s home environment, Mr. Brown noted, was of paramount interest because it could help tip off a concern before it erupted in school. While Mr. Brown felt the administration was doing a great job supporting his efforts in dealing with discipline, his one major criticism was that administration would not allow him to access student records due to HPPA restrictions. Mr. Brown felt that knowing more about an individual student’s background and home or legal situation might make his job “on the street” more efficient, but he understood why the administration had this policy.
Ms. Tan.

**Experience and background.** Ms. Tan was an upbeat, optimistic White female who brought over 19 years of experience to her position as head of student security (non-firearm) at City High School. Her perspective was relevant because the students from CMS matriculate to City High School and become her security responsibility. Her perceptions of the student body were of equal importance in that her interactions confirmed the concerns and challenges of the teachers and support staff at CMS. Ms. Tan was easy to talk to, open and conversational in tone, and had a light sense of humor which she exuded during the interview.

Ms. Tan had a military family background and was raised to believe that there was a right way and a wrong way to deal with every situation. She brought that attitude to her position in security at City High. As a child, she moved 42 times before the age of 18 and this developed in her a sense that she did not fit in. While she had the similar experience of being an outlier as Mr. East, Ms. Tan’s inability to fit into the mainstream was more of her own doing, given that her family moved so many times. Changing schools was a way of life for Ms. Tan as a child, but she always felt supported and engaged wherever she went even though she rarely stayed somewhere long enough to make any real inroads towards fitting in. Additionally, as a child, she was familiar with what it meant to go hungry at times. She recalled several times as a child when she did not have enough to eat and would go to bed hungry. She recalled that this lack of economic stability also made her feel like an outcast in school. These memories, she noted, helped her relate to the students with whom she interacts:

> I can relate to some of the kids who are having a really hard time because it was a background that I can honestly say I share with them. The, you know, the being hungry.
They’re not necessarily fitting in with all the clothes and whatnot. So that part for me is … I can understand. I didn’t fit into all those little groups.

This sense of understanding about what it means not to be part of the in-group as a child in school gave Ms. Tan a sense of compassion that drove her to go the extra mile to make students feel welcome and supported. This understanding of being the outlier was similar to that of Mr. East and Ms. Smith, and all three of these participants used their negative feelings about school as a child to focus their adult efforts toward making students feel welcome and part of the community.

**Perception of the community.** Ms. Tan perceived the school community as mostly middle class and working class, with some students from other cultures who worked hard and remained quiet and under the radar. She noted that the middle-class students seemed like they were part of a tight-knit community where everyone knew everyone else and there was little focus on ostracizing students simply due to who they were or what ethnic background they had.

In the hallways, she saw the students, for the most part, clump together in like-minded groups:

The kids who are from out of the country almost always will stay together. The kids are usually borderline withdrawn. They don’t fit into the norm as most people call it. The kid who’s probably economically lower than the rest and socially just hasn’t grown up into it and learned how to be a part of it for one reason or another.

The idea that an outsider to the school might not initially be invited into a clique or group did not sit well with Ms. Tan because she was that student as a child. Thus, Ms. Tan made it her charge to try and bring students together, especially in the lunch room or the cafeteria. Often, Ms. Tan would bring students who might not be part of any group into a situation where they could make connections. One way to achieve this was to bring a lone student into an existing
group. Ms. Tan saw the popular students as being open to such situations. After Ms. Tan made an introduction, the students in the larger group:

[They] make it their mission for the rest of the year to take care of those kids. When you can connect those kids with that group as the in group it changes their whole perspective. They want to go to lunch. They’re not so alone in the hallways and whatnot because those same kids will look out for them.

Even though like-minded minority students from other countries might group together, Ms. Tan did not see the lack of mixing between groups of students to be along cultural lines, but rather mostly along socioeconomic lines. This also harkened back to her own experience as a child when she might not have had enough money to buy lunch or to keep up with trendy fashion. In the hallways and in the common areas, Ms. Tan’s perception was that cultural lines were not being drawn that exclude or include students, and she found this to be a positive.

**Conclusions.** The common theme in these participant profiles is one of desire to make a difference in the educational experience of the students and to help those who might have been in a similar situation as the participant. This recognition of the participants’ own situations led to channeling those thoughts towards the positive goal of becoming a teacher. The recurrent theme of being ostracized was also present: some felt they were overlooked or unappreciated for their uniqueness as students. This led to several participants vowing to make sure all of their students were appreciated and made to feel welcome. A teacher who can recognize students who are feeling ostracized but still desiring success is able to introduce pedagogy and classroom practices that can engage students in similar situations. In addition, the participants recognized the cultural and economic backgrounds of students in their classrooms and hallways. Recognition of a flock or group mentality also existed. Concerns abounded as to whether students who did not
see themselves represented in faculty and staff in regards to heritage and ethnicity might have been feeling left out. Participants were acutely aware of the socioeconomic situation in the community and the growing diversity in the school. Participants were also aware of the way students perceived their own differences and their lack of initiative to branch out and include those with differing backgrounds.

**Recognizing Culturally Diverse Students and Understanding Personal Bias**

**Understanding culture.** Participants said that understanding and recognizing a student’s unique cultural background is important for engaging that student in the classroom. All participants offered a general consensus that appearance is the initial identifier of a student’s possible cultural background and identity. It was also generally agreed upon that language (or more specifically, the language barrier) and culture are completely separate. A student’s culture is a lens through which students approach and respond to various stimuli in the classroom but the language barrier is not married to cultural identity. Participants noted that students’ visible identity, such as complexion, appearance, and how they dress, helped with the initial recognition of cultural diversity. Other visible indicators of cultural identity, such as a student’s name, may not be as conclusive, but are still important when preparing for cultural differences in the classroom. Names offered by a student or on a student class list can indicate cultural diversity and are also an effective way to prepare for inclusive classroom strategies. “You can venture a guess,” offered Mr. Jones about a student’s cultural background, “but you definitely don’t know for sure.” Ms. West cautioned against the “easy” way teachers might jump to conclusions about students from varying backgrounds simply due to appearance: “We always should wonder. A student might look just like me but might be from another country. They might be from Sweden.
So it’s a lesson.” There was a general consensus that making assumptions was not the best way to identify a student’s cultural background.

**Addressing the issue.** Moving away from colorblind teaching discussions and pedagogies is a positive move in the classroom because it opens up lines of communications between teachers and students (Nash, 2018). None of the participants shied away from the idea that they should recognize and embrace what makes a student unique as an individual. All felt that culture and race (and uniqueness) were things to be proud of and things that students should feel free to be open about. Mr. East was adamant about the importance of seeing a student’s cultural uniqueness and openly recognize who she is:

Some people don’t understand why it’s inappropriate to say “I don’t see color.” When you say that, you are denying somebody’s cultural identity. So for me, when I see a student of color, I acknowledge that. And that’s important because that student is coming in with a whole different set of cultural backgrounds, cultural norms, and cultural expectations. For me, it’s important to recognize that from the get-go.

Mr. East made no effort to deny that his students were of varying cultural backgrounds, and he openly embraced their ethnicity, race, and color in an effort to keep any semblance of discomfort about race out of his classroom. His efforts were out in the open and he made no excuses for his positions.

Ms. West was able to blur the line between visible and invisible cultural identity markers by noting that language is an identifier of a student’s unique background and position. While a student’s accent is an identifying aspect of who she is, whether it be a student from Egypt or Latin America or even South Boston, she felt the way they spoke often helped her identify
cultural diversity in students. During a summer when she taught in Fiji, Ms. West realized that cultural differences were many times offered in subtle ways:

How [a student] speaks to you. If they speak to you with respect, or if they speak to you with their eyes down. If they’re looking around. They might just be a little nervous, but I’ve found out more about families from the way the kids look at me, or don’t look at me. It’s a cultural thing, if they stand too close to you, or put their arm around you, and I’m like, “don’t touch me” but their body language, and they don’t even really think about it in some countries. It’s just like, “Well, why wouldn’t you be able to hug your teacher?” But here, it’s hands off.

Ms. West was referring above to an interaction she had with a student in Fiji. Politeness and respect for authority is an invisible cultural marker that is not a clear indication of cultural diversity, although American rules and classroom expectations might differ from what a student is used to in his home country. Ms. West was open and receptive to a student’s interest in making a connection but was not open to the idea that students would hug or embrace their teachers.

**Understanding respect.** Ms. Tan noted that students from certain cultures exude a great deal of respect when interacting with faculty and staff, and she offered: “Every student I meet from India has got such a high level of respect. It’s amazing.” Still, she cautioned that not all students show such respect. She found that White students sometimes treated her as if she were their peer, referring to her as “Dude” or calling her by her first name: “I don’t think it’s a sign of disrespect, but it brings me to where their peers are. We’re not equals; I’m a figure of authority.” Ms. Tan found the ideas of authority and respect to be interwoven. Students should respect each other, but students should also respect their authority figures and adults simply because it is an
American cultural expectation. When it was not present, Ms. Tan felt she was justified in requesting that respect be shown to her and other authority figures in her position.

**Recognizing bias.** In classroom settings with a host of students from culturally and economically diverse backgrounds, concerns about bias are almost always present. Teachers who interact with different groups of students must constantly learn about different heritages and cultures, which is an ongoing and potentially taxing endeavor. The lack of time to properly educate themselves on every cultural nuance may cause teachers to lean on stereotypes in order to fill the gaps in their own experience and education (Ndemanu & Jordan, 2017). Additional effort must be taken so a teacher does not overlook someone based on cultural background or approach that student with a set of preconceived notions or attitudes (Bonner, Warren, & Jiang, 2017). There was a consensus among the participants that they were aware that they were capable of bias towards their students. Ms. West offered:

> I acknowledge that everybody has that bit of bias in them, and you can never say, “I’m absolutely sure I treat all my students exactly the same.” But [this issue] is really important because I think people should stop saying they don’t see color, because you do. And whether you judge it or not, whether you respond to it or not. I just think you can’t say you don’t see color because everyone does, and you should because it’s part of their culture.

Ms. West was aware that there were varying cultures and ethnic diversity among the students in her classroom. Ms. West also understood that she needed to be aware of her own cultural bias when dealing with culturally diverse students. There was general consensus around the idea of bias among all the participants, but Ms. West was more open to policing her own bias than the other participants. Much like Mr. East, Ms. West was open and clear with her students
about how she approached color. She perceived that she was aware and did not hide or try and subvert her acceptance of students of different and varying cultures and ethnicities, but rather made an effort to understand and even draw upon this cultural diversity in the classroom to try and be as respectful of differing viewpoints as she could.

Similarly, Mr. East was always aware of how he might be profiling a student, and therefore went out of his way to be open and understanding of his students and receive them for who they were instead of what social group they might belong to. This stemmed from his fear of offending anyone and his desire to make his students feel welcome and supported at every turn. Similar concerns about how she was being perceived by students also challenged Ms. Smith during her daily interactions with students. Her goal was to be fair and consistent across all cultural lines, and she felt she achieved this on a regular basis.

Bias, while of concern in that it can be a detriment to fair teaching practices, can also take the form of reverse-bias. Ms. West was introspective about her interactions with her students, noting that there were times when she found herself being academically easier on students of color or on students she knew had a tough time at home or were from a socioeconomically challenged home life. She recalled a situation about which she would later write a reflection:

I had a student [of color] who we knew was in and out of foster care. His race had nothing to do with anything, but I knew his background. I was so nice to him. I was too nice to him. And then there was this [White] girl who was just a really good student, but she was over the top asking questions, and so I remember, I wrote about this in a reflection. I was reflecting on the day, and I was like, I could not be nicer to this boy, and he doesn’t give me the time of day, and there’s this girl, and I’m a little stand-off-ish, and she adores me. And so I’m thinking I try and consistently try to even the playing field for
all of them, and not go harder on the kids who have it harder, or go easier on the kids who have it harder, but it doesn’t always work that way.

In the past, there has been a bias in education as faculty projected their own perceptions on students of differing backgrounds or colors (Marks & Heffernan-Cabrera, 1977), so a natural default position might be to overcompensate for perceived bias by attempting to make amends for a perceived wrong: hence Ms. West’s position. Ms. West showed an ability to be introspective and address her concern and to be wary of her reverse bias and not overcompensate for a perceived bias that did not exist.

**Conclusions.** Common elements in this theme revolve around teacher perceptions that all students should be given the same opportunities in the classroom, and that viewing their needs with a sense of equity is of paramount importance. The language barrier is a major challenge and is taxing in the classroom, but it is separate from culture. Offering respect for each and every student is a common element within this theme. Another common elements in this theme was teachers initially discerning cultural differences based on appearance, accent, mannerisms, level of respect offered, names on a class list, or even the level of eye contact. Concerns over stereotypes or bias were always present, and this was something the participants were aware of in their classrooms. Participants felt a constant need for self-reflection and self-check in order to maintain a sense of fairness and equity in the classroom for all students. Finally, it was okay to see color because it is part of American public school culture, but color should not be the only point of contact or entry teachers have with students of culturally diverse backgrounds.

**Perceptions of CRP in the Classroom and Engaging All Students**

**Fitting-in as it relates to student engagement.** The participants recognized that it is delicate to find ways to get students to become engaged in classroom lessons and offer
information about themselves, but there was general consensus among the participants that this is necessary in order to fully engage students from diverse cultural backgrounds. A major concern is overpowering a student who might not be open to sharing her/his unique cultural background due to fear or anxiety about being made fun of. This was especially of concern in Mr. Jones’s history class when they discussed cultures from the Middle East and Muslim countries:

I try and engage a student organically. I teach about Islam in my class, and before I begin a unit I make sure to make contact with the Muslim students and just feel them out to their comfort level. I’ve had students who were very open to sharing, and I think the other students tended to like that.

Mr. Jones found that approaching a student from a culturally diverse background before starting a lesson that might include that student’s cultural heritage is a way to not only prepare the student for that lesson but also to help him create and develop an ownership of the lesson in a small way. Allowing and involving a student who is Muslim to be the second authority in the classroom in regards to a lesson that focuses on Muslims and their culture is a sound and efficient way to engage that student in the lesson and give them a sense of ownership in the material. At times, Mr. Jones noted, the student will be the go-to person in the class for questions about the material simply because they are from that culture, and this, at times, can make that student feel important and essential to the lesson, thus giving a sense of ownership. Anything that gets students involved and interested in the material, noted Mr. Jones, is of value in a class lesson and should be embraced.

**Approaching students about their identity.** Approaching students who are culturally diverse and may even themselves perceive they are not mainstream is always a tricky endeavor, but understanding a student’s background so specific connections can be made is essential for
engaging students and giving them a sense of membership in a class. Involving students and giving them a sense that their contribution to a particular lesson is noteworthy can draw in students and make them feel empowered and engaged. This also allows teachers to humanize the student and see beyond stereotypes and clichés (Mellom, Straubhaar, Balderas, Ariail, & Portes, 2018). Ms. West offered:

Kids like being asked about their backgrounds and their stories, so I start with them writing a personal narrative, and they tell a story that’s meaningful to them, and I always go around and I talk to them one-on-one. And if I get a new student, I might ask him individually, “Do you want me to introduce you to the class?” I feel comfortable asking them about their backgrounds.

Ms. West was comfortable asking student if they were open about her sharing with the class that they come from a varied or diverse background. Her experience has been that, almost always after initial hesitation, most students embrace the idea that they have something meaningful to contribute to the lesson and are more than willing to allow Ms. West to share the student’s experience and allow her to expand on the issue at hand in regard to cultural diversity. It should be noted that Ms. West had a very unassuming demeanor, and her welcoming and supportive approach to these students played into their desire to please her. She was able to get students to trust her. If needed, Ms. West would approach these students individually outside of the classroom environment in an effort to make the student feel comfortable, to exude the notion that all viewpoints and positions are worthy of being shared with the class, and to emphasize that all viewpoints hold equal importance. This is a philosophy that Ms. West believed and implemented in her daily classroom practices.
Making the connection. Student engagement leads to self-confident students. Students who are engaged in their classrooms have higher self-esteem and therefore are more efficient in their studies (Virtanen et al., 2016). Decreased engagement in class is linked to lower self-esteem and a lower chance of graduation and postgraduate success (Cavendish et al., 2017). In order to create situations where culturally diverse students would share their experiences, Mr. East wanted his students to feel comfortable and secure. Mr. East felt the need to be authentic and genuine in his approach to culturally diverse students in an effort to create a bond of trust:

I want to value and respect the diversity in my room, but I also don’t feel it is appropriate to specifically ask a student about their background. So I take the time throughout the beginning of the school year to understand [the students] and talk to them, engage with them, and get interested and ask about their weekend and then give them the opportunity and the space to learn and welcome them into the community.

Mr. East was aggressive in his desire to connect with students; he felt it was the best way to get students to perform to their potential. To connect, Mr. East was aggressive about opening lines of communication with students. He felt knowing what his students were doing when they were out of school was essential to understanding how they were navigating the school day. If there were challenges that needed to be addressed, Mr. East felt he could better understand and address those challenges if he knew more about his students and their out of school habits and activities. Mr. East was also aware that he needed to be subtle about being aggressive; knowing when to stop asking questions is just as essential as knowing when to start asking questions.

To understand a student’s unique perspective, a connection must be made so the teacher can see through the student’s own lens. Connecting to students is a positive way to engage them and show them they are respected and have support within the school community. There are
myriad positive outcomes that result from teachers and faculty being advocates and allies to students (Cook-Sather & Des-Ogugua, 2018). Becoming an advocate for the student is a potential avenue for inroads. Mr. Brown offered:

I try to understand where they are coming from. I try to be a positive role model. I ask questions, and one of the biggest questions I like to ask a student is what do they enjoy doing, what do they like to do. If you can get a student to open up, if you can get a student to focus on what makes them happy, I think then they can become a better student.

Mr. Brown felt there was more to a connection than just understanding a student’s personal life: being a role model was also an option, for they look up to authority figures. Making connections with students by getting to know them on a more personal basis is an efficient way to develop trusting relationships, which can lead to students being more engaged and interested in school and their studies (Down & Choules, 2017). To make meaningful connections, teachers must be able to know a student’s comfort level with opening up about their own personal backgrounds. Mr. East said:

It’s difficult to establish relationships and trust and understanding, because especially in our community where there is a reluctance to engage with people from diverse backgrounds and accept them and welcome them into the community, I think there is some apprehension from my students of color to trust their teachers and trust that those teachers are going to respect their cultural differences and even cultural boundaries.

Concern over whether a student can trust a teacher is always present, and Mr. East was aware that students can be guarded and reluctant to offer information to a teacher without first appreciating that the teacher is welcoming and supportive. This is not a given; trust is earned.
Hence, efforts must be made to introduce students to a teacher’s desire to be inclusive and respectful of all points of view.

**Use of the personal narrative.** It is essential to know more about the students to be able to engage with them. Discussions with students about their backgrounds is a sound way to achieve engagement with students (Mellom et al., 2018). One way to get students to become comfortable in their educational experience is to get them talking about their own personal experiences, for example through the personal narrative. Much of the reason to draw out personal narratives and stories from students is to offer emotional support, the lack of which is directly related to a lack of student engagement (Strati, Schmidt, & Maier, 2016). By and large, culturally diverse students sharing their stories is also a way to engage other students who may not be as courageous or willing to offer information about themselves. Mr. Jones:

I have students who are open to sharing their stories. And the other students tend to like that. Say I’ve had a student who has lived in a Muslim country, even if they’re not Muslim, they can speak to that experience of what it’s like. And that’s really helpful because to the kids who have lived where the school is their whole lives, they have no idea what it’s like. It’s positive when a kid is able to share a little bit about themselves.

Ms. West said, “Kids like being asked about their backgrounds and their own stories. Kids share about their culture and it makes them feel good about themselves.”

Allowing students to be the second expert in a classroom setting gives them capital among their peers and it also empowers them to take control of their own educational experience. This can be engaging as students will be drawn to the idea that they are contributing to their classroom environment. It can also open lines of communication outside of the classroom as
students may be more willing to create relationships among their peers after seeing them participate and express their knowledge in the academic setting.

**Owning the educational experience.** Making connections with students often means allowing them the freedom to take chances. Finding ways to bridge communities together gives way to exchanges of cultural experiences that heighten students’ interests and draws them into their educational experience (Emdin, 2017). Students who are actively participating in a project or classroom event take ownership of their experiences and are more engaged in the moment (Beck & Reilly, 2016). There are many ways to engage students in the moment. One way to engage students in the moment is through music. Students’ cultural uniqueness can be mined when their musical interests are shared and found of interest by their peers (Bond, 2017). This requires teachers to be willing and able to allow students to be part owners of the daily lesson. Mr. Jones found this to be an efficient and productive way of conducting his classes:

I encourage the kids, if you have a song that fits what we’re studying bring it in and maybe we can throw it in there somewhere. We might have a conversation as a class and the student can tell why they picked that song and why he thought it would be a good one. The kids are definitely proud if they show me a song. They have a sense of pride if they help contribute.

Mr. Jones was aware that students take pride in their contributions to a class lesson. This pride relates to the student’s sense of ownership. It can help make a student more engaged in the lesson and, Mr. Jones noted, he will be looking forward to another opportunity to engage in the classroom efforts. It can also lend itself to a sense of classroom community, as other students may be drawn to students who are open to taking the chance to share their cultural background and diversity with the class at large.
**Emotionally obstructive behaviors.** It is important for teachers to not focus on negative behaviors or engage in negative practices. Sarcasm or negative reinforcement can damage the relationship a teacher is trying to develop with a student. Strati et al. (2016) offers, “Emotional obstruction refers to teacher disregard, disrespect, sarcasm, criticism, threats, and negative affect towards students” (p. 133). Students who own their educational experience find more meaning and depth, and in the process can become more engaged. It is of prime importance for teachers to “structure opportunities that enable youth to experience feelings of competence, belonging, usefulness, and optimism” (Haggis, 2017, p. 3) as a means of connecting and engaging students. Incorporating other cultures into the classroom is important. It is equally important that teachers understand and appreciate not only what a student brings to the classroom from their own experience but also that the mere act of them bringing something allows them ownership of the process (Bonner et al., 2017). Mr. East: “Students need a sense of ownership to realize their worth; stories from different cultures make all kids feel valued.” Mr. East understood how it felt for him to not be valued as a student and went out of his way to make sure his students felt supported in their efforts.

Mr. East stated that he felt neglected by his teachers and also that he felt that his inability and lack of desire to be part of the mainstream of school students caused his middle school experience to be that of an outsider. This, he felt, was brought on by teachers who did not respect his position and identity in middle and high school, and it negatively affected his school experience. Ms. Smith had almost identical feelings of not fitting in and being an outsider during her high school years. These feelings can be directly related to negative teacher practices. The obstructive behavior of teachers can have long-lasting effects on students.
**Building bridges.** The participants had general consensus that knowing everything about every culture was not possible, but they also had consensus that they felt they had a working knowledge of the dominant diverse cultures in their daily classrooms. While “a surface understanding of cultures and diversity does not make for meaningful social cohesion” (Blackman, 2017, p. 22), there is still room to engage students through bridge-building ideas. There was general consensus among the participants that there were ways to engage students of culturally diverse backgrounds and build connections with all students through the classroom use of music, food, clothing, specific pedagogical decisions, and even dance. Mr. East noted that giving students room to own their experiences through music can give students a sense of pride and help break down cultural barriers. While the participants had general consensus about the idea of ownership, they had some specific suggestions in addition to music for allowing students to explore the sense of pride they achieved while contributing to the classroom. For example, poetry can be an effective tool for bridging cultural gaps and engaging all students in the classroom. Poetry can be used to develop students’ identities as well as to inspire their own writing (Sigvardsson, 2017). While some teachers who are working with students whose first language is not English might avoid poetry (Sigvardsson, 2017), Ms. West was drawn to the opposite: the use of poetry as a means of connecting with all students regardless of their backgrounds is something she found to be an efficient use of classroom energies. Ms. West said:

> I love bringing poetry in the classroom in terms of acknowledging culture. I find that poetry is a really good way to connect to students with different cultural backgrounds, not only because of the language barrier, but because it is less intimidating. Poetry is so free form, and it comes from all different places. We’ll watch different videos of slam poetry, which is not what kids first think of when they think of poetry, and we read along with it,
and these kids, who sound like they are just having a good time, realize they are actually very, very articulate. And very, very intelligent in the words they’re putting on the paper, so it’s a nice thing.

In a stealthy way, Ms. West was able to engage students through slam poetry and also traditional poetry; her students were engaged and drawn in without the intimidation of poetic verses and ultimately found and made connections to the material in a natural way. In the classroom observation, Ms. West was clear with her students about the daily charge, but her light touch was instrumental in engaging her students so they found the material entertaining and enlightening and were drawn to learning and participating in the process.

Noting that poetry is easier to digest simply because, in her experience, students found it “less intimidating on the page,” Ms. West also used graphic novels, comic books, and her students’ own illustrations to draw visuals of the meaning and inferences found in the poetry. The symbolism in a picture book opens avenues of discussion that might not be found in a chapter book, and Ms. West said it is “a way for all kids to bring their own experiences to the table.” Self-introduction through a poem or picture drawing is an efficient way to get students to become more comfortable sharing about themselves. It also allows teachers to share cultural ideas that can be expanded upon in discussions that are organically introduced by students, who by extension develop a sense of ownership and pride in the topic (Chen & Yang, 2017).

Mr. East had a similar opinion on the use of poetry in the curriculum, one more specific to CRP. Noting that the curriculum was “predominantly White” and that most of the curriculum’s mentor texts were written by White women (Harper Lee, S. E. Hinton, and Frances Goodrich), Mr. East found himself at times going outside the confines of the curriculum to bring
in authors of color so he could expose his students to viewpoints they might not find on their own:

I find short stories or articles or poems that go through a diverse range of poets and authors and writers and covers a wide range of cultures and backgrounds so the students have exposure to literature from around the world. Our curriculum favors the White population, so I am bringing in an injection of culturally appropriate and sensitive material so that my students of color don’t feel left out and my students who are White can see differences and maybe draw connections to their own experiences.

Mr. East understood that he was a bit of a maverick when it came to his curriculum; he was outspoken about bringing in socially relevant and culturally diverse authors and literature that were not specifically on the approved curriculum list. He understood that these efforts needed to be done in addition to the approved curriculum rather than in lieu of it; he was able to cover all of the approved mentor texts and still have time to expand the material to include authors and literature from a culturally diverse field of writers. This helped him engage all of his students with the material being read and studied in class.

Another way of opening up discussions about students and their home lives is to approach it through the lens of food. Mr. Jones said, “Food can be a cultural bridge; kids open up about cultural meals at home and this opens discussions.” Using food as a common point of discussion is a sound way to engage students because it begins by asking them to share what they know –their cultural customs – while at the same time opening them up to learning about what they might not know. This challenges their preconceived notions about different cultures (Sammells, 2017). These efforts in the classroom were encouraged, and Mr. Jones also felt reaching out to the community with such efforts was a positive way to engage students:
We have a cultural night [in the community] to recognize different cultures, and that’s awesome because people volunteer to be a part of it and they decide to bring their own culture, and their food, and their music, or whatever they want, and I think that’s great. The food is awesome and that’s a great way for people to connect because people like food from all different kinds of cultures. The kids feel not just more a part of the school, but part of the community as a whole and get to show everyone where they are from.

In Mr. Jones’s experience, a cultural night was a way to involve students in the community and a way for parents to also be involved in their student’s educational experiences. Mr. Jones wished there were more opportunities like cultural night on a school-wide basis, but was pleased with the opportunity the cultural night offered his students and their parents.

**Spokesman for the culture.** Engaging students from culturally diverse backgrounds is a way to create a more open and welcoming environment in the classroom, but concerns abound over what Mr. Jones called making a student the “token” for an entire culture or region. The mere fact that a student is from a certain region does not mean she is willing to share what she knows about her background. It is also dangerous to assume that a youngster from a particular region of the world who now lives in City knows about the background and history of that region simply because they were born there. Mr. East said:

The goal is to get students of color or from culturally diverse backgrounds to share something that might be a little bit unique to them and their culture, but not make them feel like they were singled out or asked to be the spokesperson of the entire culture.

Mr. Jones built on this, noting that it is also not safe to assume that a student from a specific cultural background would be an expert on cultural history::
We’ve had some students from Africa or the Middle East and we’re talking about Medieval Europe or the Renaissance, and I assume a lot of things they might know about the Christian church, but there’s some kids coming from different backgrounds that have no idea. I always try to make some kind of modern-day reference, but it’s very possible I might isolate kids without even knowing I’m doing it.

A delicate approach to how much students are willing to offer – or can offer due to their knowledge base – is needed when dealing with cultural differences among students. Calling out or forcing a student to share past experiences, the participants agreed, is not an efficient way to engage students in the educational process or to create in them a sense of ownership of their educational experience unless they first check to see what the student has to offer.

**Tying in culturally responsive pedagogy.** These elements can be used to support CRP in the classroom. In an effort to engage students, the consensus among the participants was that students will be more involved if they think their voice is heard and respected. Exposing students to writers and cultures other than their own will help them develop their own view on society and themselves beyond popular opinions in the media and the curriculum as offered (Brewington & Hall, 2018). Mr. East felt CRP was important for all students, not just culturally diverse students:

It’s super huge to connect with students when you can and tie in a culturally responsive aspect to that which allows them to speak about their culture and have their voice heard. It’s huge not only for them to feel like they have ownership over something that’s theirs but for the other students who don’t come from that background and might only know about that from stereotypes or the kitchen table. It’s huge to get to hear from another student’s personal perspective.
Understanding a student’s perspective is essential to giving value to their own life experiences (Damianidou & Phtika, 2016). Mr. East, Mr. Jones, and Ms. West had similar views on how students perceived their contributions to a lesson when they were able to share their personal stories and narratives with their classmates. Mr. East was specific about how White students benefit from hearing about other cultures, and Mr. Jones believed his White students delighted in hearing about other parts of the world and other cultures. Ms. West found her classroom was more cohesive when students were sharing their thoughts and taking ownership of their backgrounds and cultural identity.

**Conclusions.** Common elements in this theme point to the idea that teachers must try to understand where a student is coming from (colloquialism), learn what is happening at home, and relate to students beyond being an authority figure. Building bridges and connecting on a personal level gave students a sense of support, which led to them feeling valued in their educational experience. In addition, getting students to open up about their own stories and cultural experiences gave them a sense of value within the classroom community. Students also tended to be interested in the colorful and different stories that cultural diversity brings to a classroom. Students are neither automatons nor robots, and their feelings and desire to be valued is an excellent way of getting them involved and engaged in the classroom effort.

Also of note was the participants’ ease with using CRP in their daily routine and how well they understood the need for it. The word “connection” runs through this theme as the participants connect and support the need for CRP with the way they implement it in the classroom. This is a smooth and fluid use of their own previous experience that offers an understanding of the need for CRP, how CRP is incorporated in the classroom, and the support that can come from a sound mentor and positive role model. Role models, especially cultural
ones, are important to the early education experience (Golos, Moses, Roemen, & Cregan, 2018). These elements are not mutually exclusive, but rather build and support one another: the need for an understanding of a student’s culture to feel a sense of ownership, the use of culturally responsive pedagogy in the curriculum, and the offering of a sound role model to support and challenge students and their efforts.

**Engaging Classroom Environment**

**The physical layout of the classroom.** The physical look and arrangement of a classroom is also important for engaging students across cultural lines. Classroom environments that promote student engagement also promote creativity: a visually rich or appealing poster or wall hanging offers not just one interpretation, but rather a vast number of responses based on the social and cultural group the student belongs to (Kiss & Weninger, 2017). Therefore, the decisions teachers make regarding what to place on their classroom walls and how to use the space is important to efficiently engaging students in class. Classroom layout, where and with whom students sit in group work, is also part of creating a classroom environment that promotes engagement among students. An unintended consequence of allowing like-minded culturally diverse students to group together is that it promotes the idea of ethnic division (Siteine, 2017). While this may, in some instances, seem in opposition to the goals of CRP, Ms. West had a lighter touch when it comes to trying to separate students of similar backgrounds and cultures: “I don’t let students group together via culture or background. This forces all students to speak and strengthen their English skills and forces kids to interact and break down self-imposed barriers.”

Ms. West was a strong advocate for cultural diversity in her classroom, but at times she also supported having her students intermingle with students from different cultural backgrounds
Mr. Jones used similar classroom tactics to break social and cultural cliques, but his reason was based more on aptitude:

I arrange the desks and have kids work in groups or partners. I try and mix the students up from what they are used to and give the kids an opportunity to work with all different kinds of kids because that’s what the world is like. I group students together for group work based on need, accessibility, and ability, not culture or language.

Mr. Jones found that placing students together based on their aptitude, work ethic, and interest in the material challenged them to be more efficient in their classwork. To achieve this goal, Mr. Jones chose groups the students would work in, hoping they could learn and grow from one another instead of becoming complacent in their own protected cultural bubble.

Mr. East also felt group work was an important part of his classroom teaching efforts, and he used the physical layout of his classroom to achieve a similar goal of challenging students to break out of their comfort zones. Mr. East was specific about the choreography of his room, and he also placed students in physical proximity based on their ability and aptitude rather than their culture or background:

In my classes, two sides of the room face each other, so when we’re engaging in discussions you get to see almost everyone’s face. The idea is that the rows are nice and organized, and neat and orderly, but it invites the opportunity for people to see each other face-to-face. I will position ELL students in one of the first few rows closer to me, and they can hear me better and also see the board better. I think it’s a way to make sure they can understand what I’m doing or what we’re doing. On cultural lines, I don’t know if my seating impacts them one way or another.
Mr. East challenged his students through the floorplan of his classroom while at the same time creating feelings that the students were welcome and should feel comfortable in their surroundings. Students were able to see other’s faces when speaking, instead of simply seeing the back of the student’s head who was sitting in front of them. Mr. East tried to create an atmosphere of support among the students because he felt they would be more open to class discussions if they were having them with another face or person instead of simply speaking to the class without being able to read facial expressions and receive feedback.

**Supportive classroom decor and materials.** What is on the walls is as important as the layout of the groups and desks. Using visuals in classwork helps students understand concepts (Shields, 1997). The goal would be to visually immerse students in quotes and visuals that constantly reinforce the idea of cultural diversity. When students see word walls, letter sound cards, or quotes from important people, it challenges the idea of problem solving (Collet, 2017). Mr. Jones hoped the visuals in his room would inspire students to take an interest in other parts of the world as well as prompt them to become engaged in the lesson at hand:

What’s displayed [in my classroom], a lot of it is curriculum-based. I’m lucky to teach a curriculum that is pretty diverse. Yes, there’s a lot of European medieval history, but we also talk about the Middle East, Africa and some parts of Asia. There are different cultures represented in our curriculum, and I try to represent that in my classroom. I have quotes and pictures of people who are important in the world, and important Americans and how they made an impact in our world today. There’s reading material [in the form of magazines and books] that hopefully introduces [the students] to different cultures and different ways of life.
Mr. Jones’s classroom walls were peppered with pictures of famous people such as Martin Luther King, Jr., Benjamin Franklin, Amelia Earhart, Emily Dickinson, Nelson Mandela, and Barack Obama. They also hosted quotes from famous and important people, maps, charts, regions of the world in vivid color, and student work. Students sitting in class could peruse these visuals from their seats or view them closer for more detail. Items on the walls were intended to inspire the students and help them engage in classroom discussions. Because most of the visuals were of people and places, language barriers did not pose an issue. Students from around the world and from America could see their cultures represented in the famous and important people and places pictured on the walls.

Ms. West also favored cultural diversity in the physical setting of the classroom. She made culturally diverse reading material available to students, and she noted that students would sometimes challenge themselves to read them during free-read time. Ms. West said, “In the bookshelf there’s plenty that’s specific to other cultures, there are plenty of books from other places. I bring in books from different languages, especially Portuguese.” Ms. West took pride in the fact her students were open to reading about other cultures.

**Educational ownership through classroom organization.** An open environment and a climate designed to nurture and support the emergence of new ideas is important for student growth (Wang, 2018). One of the most unique and efficient classroom tools used by Ms. West to achieve this goal was her “interactive bulletin board.” A bulletin board is not something usually thought of as interactive, nor is it culturally specific, but this board became that way. When a student would finish reading a book, she would fill out a card and tack it onto the interactive bulletin board, thus gaining recognition as well as ownership of the project. Ms. West said:
I don’t want it to be just something they look at because they won’t look at it. They write
down the books they’ve read independently, and that’s an effort to get them involved in
what the classroom looks like, bringing a little more color and even culture into the room.
It makes it a happier place and so they’re actually looking at it. This board is welcoming
and engaging because they love this board; it’s a big deal when they finish a book. They
want to be recognized. They want to create their own little sections. Last year I did a
Wall of Symbolism where they brought in a picture that symbolized who they were. A
lot of people brought in pictures of themselves, and it made everyone feel a little more
comfortable. They have something that belongs to them in the room, so it worked. One
hundred kids can get something up there.

Ms. West was proud of the interactive bulletin board in her classroom because she felt the
students took pride in creating it and adding to it, and it became their own over the course of the
year. It was a living document, of sorts, that was always changing and always worthy of
students’ interest. It was also a way for students to feel they were accomplishing something that
was adding to the classroom as a whole, and it became culturally relevant in the process.

Building on the theme of a classroom needing to be open and comforting in order to give
students a feeling of security, Mr. East created a welcoming and inviting environment through
the use of lighting and furniture where he could create “a culture of respect and understanding.”
Mr. East said:

I want to create a comfortable classroom because of the topics we engage in. I have these
twinkle, little starry lights, puts the room in a different mood, more cozy. The artwork in
my classroom comes from different communities, from Frida Kahlo to signs that are anti-
misogynistic, like “For every girl who ever dreamed of working in construction, there is a
boy who wanted to have an Easy Bake oven.” The artwork in my room is designed to have students look around and feel comfortable no matter who they are.

The artwork on Mr. East’s walls contained quotes from and photos of culturally hip people such as skateboarding legend Tony Hawk and drawings from his own students, as well as contemporary and hip present-day references that supported Mr. East’s background as a maverick outsider. The materials on the walls were culturally diverse and gave a sense of worldly vision and support for all gender identities as well as many culturally diverse locations and regions of the world. Mr. East felt that all of his students were in some way represented by what was hanging on his walls.

**Conclusions.** Common elements in this theme include a general consensus that the layout, choreography, and materials in a classroom can engage students by giving them a sense of ownership and also a sense they are represented in the curriculum and classroom materials. Hanging culturally diverse posters, pictures of important and influential people, quotes, and travel destinations around the room are a means of inspiring students to want to travel or become interested in those cultures. A sense of ownership is a common recurring element in this theme, as the interactive bulletin board gave students the sense that they were contributing to their own environment. Stressing group work was common at City Middle School, but clumping due to cultural background was not a common practice. All teachers agreed that their rooms should be open, welcoming, and give the sense of support that students need to feel secure in their educational experience. Classroom choreography and visuals are an important part of the educational process for all students, including students from culturally diverse backgrounds.
Summary

This chapter offered the thoughts and perceptions of six teachers and staff members of the City School District regarding their classroom practices, their desire to create an inclusive and welcoming environment for their students, the importance of student ownership in their own educational process, and how they support and challenge students of culturally diverse backgrounds while also supporting the mainstream student population. An investigation of the individual backgrounds of the participants found similarities in their educational and academic achievements, but their educational experiences unfolded differently during their middle and high school years. Several participants were open and enthusiastic about the support they received from teachers in middle school, and those positive experiences were instrumental in their decision to pursue education as a career. These participants felt nurtured and secure in their education because teachers took the time to support and challenge them, which made them feel as if they were valued and had merit in their educational experience. Giving value to a student’s experience gives students a sense of belonging (Damianidou & Phtiaka, 2016). Conversely, several participants had experiences that were not positive. Feelings of being an outcast or being deemed nonmainstream stemmed from feeling that their teachers did not support their efforts. These participants did not feel valued, and their overall remembrances of middle and high school did not yield positive thoughts or feelings. Nevertheless, these negative feelings prompted them to focus on education as a career in an effort to make other students’ educational experiences more positive than their own. A general consensus among all participants was that their own experiences in middle and high school (either positive or negative) were instrumental in their desire to help all of their students have a positive educational experience.
The following chapter will discuss the findings of this study. The theoretical framework will be recapped, as will the methodology used to support it and how it led to the findings. The themes described in this chapter will be discussed, as will how they are supported by the literature. Chapter 5 will discuss implications, how these findings can be used in future settings, and areas where future investigations can take place.
Chapter 5: Discussion and Implications for Practice

The purpose of this study was to understand teachers’ perceptions about their use of culturally responsive and culturally specific pedagogy to maximize the engagement of students of varied cultural backgrounds. Student engagement leads to student success (Anderson & Jaeger, 2015), so a focus on student engagement in the classroom is of paramount interest to teachers who are concerned about seeing students maximize their potential for success. Educating students from culturally diverse backgrounds is very important (Hsiao, 2015), especially in a community that has a growing minority population. This study interviewed and observed six participants, who offered their thoughts regarding how they perceived their use of culturally responsive pedagogy to engage students. The participants were four middle school teachers and two support staff for the district. The study was conducted at City Middle School in a mid-sized city of 60,000 residents about 10 miles south of a major east coast American port city. The theoretical framework used in this study was critical theory. Critical theory offers transformative and revelatory outcomes (Ponterotto, 2005). Critical theory demands interactions between subject and researcher and between participant and observer, and calls for those with a stake to assess the relationship between social and political systems (Freeman & Vasconcelos, 2010). Critical theory was used to focus this study of teachers’ perceptions about the use and effectiveness of CRP in their classrooms. The final product of a critical theory study is a voice for change and transformation (Ponterotto, 2005). A specific call to action resulted.

Qualitative case study was the research design for this study. Case study methodology was used because it supports the creation of theories, supports the evaluation of programs and understandings, and provides tools the researcher could use to develop an understanding of the situation within its natural context (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Case study was the appropriate methodology for addressing the questions of how and why something took place. Exploratory
case study was used to understand how teachers perceived their classroom efforts. This study was not intended to offer a set of how-to moments or a toolbox for teachers, but rather to share insight into what teachers and support staff perceived about their use of CRP to engage students in their daily educational efforts. This approach led to the findings. Interviews and observations gave the researcher insight into how the participants made meaning of their use of CRP as well as how successful they perceived their efforts to engage students in the classroom were.

Several themes were found throughout the research. First, participants discussed their efforts to understand culturally diverse students and address their own personal bias in working with them. The second theme uncovered teachers’ perceptions about how CRP could be used to engage students of varying cultural backgrounds as well as students who were considered to be in the mainstream or majority of a classroom population. The final theme that emerged was the perceptions teachers had about the use of floorplan, walls, materials, seating plans, and even lighting to create a classroom atmosphere that was open to student success and engagement. All participants were focused on creating an environment in their classrooms and work areas that engaged all students. All were aware of and open to the idea that CRP was a valuable asset for interacting with students of varied cultural backgrounds as well as mainstream White students.

This chapter focuses on conclusions pertaining to the two research questions: Based on the perception of teachers, how does the implementation of culturally responsive pedagogy at City Middle School lead to increased student engagement? How do teachers perceive that classroom techniques support culturally responsive pedagogy? This chapter will conclude with a discussion of the implications of the findings and how they can be used in the practice setting. It will suggest areas for future research and discuss the limitations of the study.
Findings

Through interviews, the researcher identified the participants’ desire to ensure that their students were engaged in the process of learning and were as efficient as possible in their classroom efforts. The participants’ positive and negative personal backgrounds led them to want to make students feel welcome and comfortable in their surroundings. The use of culturally responsive techniques and visuals helped bridge some of the language barriers posed in the classroom, but this was not the initial focus of the study. This study focused on how teachers perceived CRP and the need for teachers to feel as if they were connecting to their students. Teachers need to offer emotional support so students feel valued in the classroom. Emotional support stems from trust, acceptance, encouragement of ideas, and whether students perceive that the teacher cares about their well-being (Strati et al., 2016). The participants conveyed support through various classroom practices; at the core of each participant’s efforts was a clear focus on offering support and demonstrating caring for students in the classroom, the hallways, and the lunch rooms. Personal connections were also used, because understanding a student’s personal background was key to making connections and allowing teachers to engage with the students (Down & Choules, 2017). The participants conveyed a natural and welcoming desire to support and challenge their students; they perceived that this was a way to engage students in classroom activities. School burn-out is directly related to a lack of engagement in school (Salmela-Aro, 2017). Students who drop out of school before graduation have fewer opportunities in the work force (Crowder & South, 2003). The participants’ understanding of the need for student engagement emerged from and was evident in their teaching practices. Nontraditional students have higher drop-out rates (Kahu & Nelson, 2018), so student engagement is crucial for creating an environment where all students feel valued and want to complete their education.
The participants shared a general consensus that an important element in engaging students in the lesson was respecting their cultures in the classroom. Culture means more than the simple recognition of ethnicity and race; the word culture also includes the identification and self-identification of socioeconomic status, gender identification, and even political affiliation (Alaca & Pyle, 2018). It is important for educators to be able to recognize cultural differences in students so they can develop an engaging approach to pedagogy. Recognizing students’ differences can take various forms, including visible and invisible diversity (Hathaway & Fletcher, 2018). Visible diversity is what an educator can see, such as race, ethnicity, or religion. This recognition can be through skin color or fashion choices relating to religion or cultural background, and it is what an educator literally sees when a student walks into the classroom. A second type of diversity is invisible diversity, “such as family history and personal differences,” which gives teachers the “ability to experience children as individuals” (Hathaway & Fletcher, 2018, p. 85). Moving away from colorblind teaching discussions and pedagogies is a positive move in the classroom because it opens up lines of communication between teachers and students (Nash, 2018). Being able to understand and recognize both visible and invisible markers of personal and cultural identity is imperative if an educator is to be able to engage students through culturally responsive pedagogy.

**Identifying culturally diverse students in the classroom.** The first of the three main findings focused on teachers’ perceptions about how they identified and understood culturally diverse students in their classrooms. Implicit in this is teachers’ understanding that biases may be present. Participants noted that they initially understood that a student from a culturally diverse background was in their class through the roster, where they recognized a student’s name as being ethnic, or by the physical appearance of the student. At times, certain fashion and attire
marked a student as being from a culturally diverse background. None of the participants drew prejudice from this in the interviews or observations. In fact, the opposite was evident: a sense of opportunity was apparent in all participants as such students could be mined for their cultural knowledge and understanding and thereby broaden the horizons of the other students in the class. Participants found that students from diverse cultural backgrounds were generally open to the idea of sharing their experiences. This allowed students to own their educational experience while creating an open and welcoming environment for all students. This use of students’ diverse and varied backgrounds was most evident in the classrooms of Mr. East, Mr. Jones, and Ms. West. Their interviews revealed an energy and delight in being able to open up the curriculum and build bridges by using the diverse student’s cultural heritage. Observations of their classrooms during a lesson yielded a working perspective of their desire to support their students and offer a welcoming and warm environment. This practice, however, did not simply materialize, nor was it something that unfolded without a conscious effort to make it happen.

Consensus emerged among all participants that great effort was needed to approach students on a personal level in order to gain their trust and support their sense of value and uniqueness. An important focus in this effort was to treat all students as equals no matter their cultural or economic background. Personal connections support student learning (Farnan et al., 2014), and investing effort and time to get to know students was important to all participants. The literature shows that lack of engagement is directly related to students discontinuing their educational experiences (Borden, 2014; Finnan & Kombe, 2018; Kahu & Nelson, 2018; Salmelo-Aro, 2017). The participants used personal connections and open lines of communication to build bridges and create relationships that increased their students’ interest in the classroom. The participants also agreed that the tactics used to create personal relationships
with their students were instrumental in their ability to engage students and create a warm and welcoming environment in the classroom. These personal connections were important, and participants’ understanding of the use of culturally open classroom techniques was the next line of discussion.

**Use of culturally responsive pedagogy to engage all students.** The second main finding focused on teachers’ perceptions about using CRP to engage all students. The word “connection” was mentioned in all participants’ interviews, and during observations it was clear that the participants were making extra effort to build bridges and keep appropriate personal connections with students. The understanding that students of this age can easily be considered outsiders recurred in the interviews. The participants were aware that students sometimes did not fit in with the mainstream, regardless of their cultural background, but that students of diverse and varying backgrounds at times had a more challenging time fitting into even a typical daily lesson. Building on the sense of trust and connections from the first main finding, the participants asked students about their backgrounds and challenged or supported them in sharing their personal stories and narratives with the class. Students of varied cultural backgrounds succeed at higher rates when they respond to efforts by teachers to develop closer relationships with them (Phillippo, 2012). Sometimes, as with Mr. Jones, this effort to develop a personal relationship with a student was implemented to support a lesson: for example, asking a student from the Middle East to share thoughts about the Muslim religion. This, Mr. Jones found, was the kind of personal contribution his students enjoyed making. It gave them a sense of ownership in the lesson and confidence about their own position within the classroom ecosystem. Often, a student’s diverse cultural background was offered in a lesson that was stand-alone rather than part of the curriculum.
Teachers are responsible for creating culturally responsive classrooms (Baskerville, 2009), and the freedom to introduce and experiment with progressive ideas about how to engage students is paramount for student success. For example, Ms. West challenged students to write personal narratives about their own cultural experiences and backgrounds as part of an initial ice-breaker exercise. Her experience unfolded similarly to that of Mr. Jones, in that the students seemed to revel in the idea of sharing what was unique about themselves. Ms. West’s use of her interactive bulletin board gave the students a sense of ownership in her classroom that built upon the idea that students should take ownership of their classroom experience. This ties in to CRP, as the participants agreed that students would become more engaged if they believed their voices were being heard. All participants perceived that discussion of a varied and diverse swath of authors would help students become engaged in lessons. The literature supports this view (Brewington & Hall, 2018; Z. Johnson, 2017), as connecting with the identity of an author or artist can help students engage with the curriculum. Ms. Smith noted the lack of culturally diverse faculty and staff at CMS, and wondered aloud if this made her students feel they did not have appropriate role models who “looked like them.” Role models, especially cultural ones, are important to the early education experience (Golos et al., 2018). In her efforts to counter this feeling, Ms. Smith’s perception was that she was open and vocal about extending herself to all of her students in an effort to act as a sound and positive role model in the classroom.

The classroom as a culturally responsive teaching tool. The final theme that emerged revolved around the classroom itself as a tool for engaging students. Participants supported making connections with students, and CRP can engage all students through the physical layout and classroom choreography of the rooms where they interacted with their students. Embracing an ethnic group’s cultural values and identity is a way to engage students in their educational
experience (Pitsoe & Letseka, 2015). The participants’ efforts to make their classrooms open and inviting included the classroom layout; seating plans designed to help students interact and be drawn out of their comfort zone and cliques; and the use of culturally relevant wall hangings, including posters and quotes from important and famous people from all ethnicities and cultural backgrounds. Learning environments must be student-centered and encourage a sense of ownership among classroom participants (Flynn, James, Mathien, Mitchell, & Whalen, 2017). Overly simplistic efforts to introduce cultural markers simply for the sake of having them in the classroom can be damaging (Sleeter, 2011). A lack of understanding about cultural specifics can lead to doubt among teachers regarding the efficacy of their initial efforts in a classroom (Siwatu et al., 2016). These concerns were not evident in this research. The participants displayed a sound understanding of the appropriate level and exposure to culturally relevant visual aids in their classes. These ultimately were effective in challenging thought, provoking interest, and offering an open and welcoming environment that the students could call their own.

Understanding their students’ home lives, backgrounds, and personal narratives is key to creating connections (Byrd, 2016). The classrooms developed by the participants universally supported their efforts to build connections with their students and support a sense of value and support for their educational experience.

Summary of findings.

Research questions. As the researcher studied the observations and interviews, he began to better understand the way teachers perceived culturally responsive pedagogy in the classroom, the need for it in an effort to instill a sense of value in all students, and the ways teachers perceived their practices and the effectiveness of it as a teaching technique. The research questions for this study were: Based on the perception of teachers, how does the implementation
of culturally responsive pedagogy at City Middle School lead to increased student engagement?

How do teachers perceive classroom techniques support culturally responsive pedagogy?

This study answered these research questions by obtaining the thoughts, insights and experiences of six teachers and support staff in a school district made up of predominantly White teachers and a growing student body of culturally diverse students. Literature supports the need for CRP (Boon & Lewthwaite, 2015; Byrd, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 1995a; Siwatu et al., 2016). The participants understood its importance and the need for it in the classroom to promote student success, desired to use it to create a welcoming and supportive environment that supported students’ value and uniqueness, and used it to actuate a classroom floorplan and strategy that created efficient visual stimulation and engaged students.

**Findings within the literature.** The findings from this study align with the literature on many fronts. Student engagement is paramount to student success. Feelings of attachment and belonging are directly related to student engagement (Armchambault et al., 2009). High academic expectations are a must for any efficient teacher. Teachers who tether their curriculum in their students’ real-life culturally diverse experiences have greater academic success (Nash, 2018). Getting culturally diverse students to open up about the world around them gives them a sense of ownership as well as opening up other students to a world larger than their own (Charmaraman, 2013). The general consensus among working teachers might be to focus entirely on curriculum and not on a student’s cultural background. Arguments against this, however, are easy to find. Moving away from colorblind teaching discussions and pedagogies is a positive move in the classroom because it opens up lines of communication between teachers and students (Nash, 2018). The participants were open and vocal about recognizing students’ cultural diversity and drawing on it in classroom interactions.
Making connections with students along personal lines, such as through the use of cultural identity, engages students in the curriculum. Engaged students have lower dropout rates (Crowder & South, 2003), and creating positive experiences for students is a way to better engage them in the classroom. The literature supports the idea of student engagement through culturally responsive teaching (Hsiao, 2015), and the participants seemed aware of and interested in using such teaching to build bridges and make connections. The literature supports the idea that culture has evolved to include how people recognize their own identity (Alaca & Pyle, 2018). Culturally responsive teaching means that teachers support students through connections they make with their backgrounds and heritages (Ladson-Billings, 1995a). The general consensus among the participants was that making connections with students drew them in and engaged them with the classroom activities. The literature supports the idea that a classroom environment needs to be personalized in order for teachers to reach students (Farnan et al., 2014). Participants perceived that connecting with students in a personal manner led to increased engagement. The viability and usefulness of connecting with students was recognized as an efficient way of engaging students. Recognizing and honoring cultural traditions is a way to engage students in the classroom (Drago-Severson, 2012), and the participants showed an interest and desire to create such an environment in their own classrooms.

**Recommendations for Practice**

Student engagement leads to higher graduation rates (Cavendish et al., 2017). As discussed in this study, there are many ways that CRP leads to increased student engagement. Several steps are recommended for practitioners at City Middle School who are interested in implementing CRP to increase student engagement. A sound first step in introducing the need for and framing the intended results of CRP in the classroom would be professional development
that exposes teachers and support staff to its positive effects. Professional development can emphasize the need to make personal connections with students of varying cultural backgrounds, the desire to make students feel valued in their classroom efforts, and the need for students to feel a sense of ownership in their educational experiences, all of which were discussed in this study. The benefits of these techniques could be incorporated into professional development that would lead teachers and support staff to develop an understanding of how CRP affects student engagement that would be similar to what the participants already recognized.

Reformatting curriculum to support the techniques mentioned above would also be a step towards creating a culture that allows CRP to flourish. Discussions at the team and department head level could revolve around the introduction of authors from various cultural backgrounds and diversities as a way to give students a sense of ownership in their educational experience. Mr. East noted that all of the authors of his mentor texts were White (S. E. Hinton; Harper Lee; Frances Goodrich). As such, Mr. East implemented such curriculum decisions in his classroom, but he did so in addition to and outside of the current curriculum directives. Ms. West used diverse authors in her free reading time with her students, but not in her curriculum mandate. Department heads and team leaders should discuss the use of more diverse authors in the actual curriculum. This could also be cultivated through professional development geared towards the development of mentor texts that utilize a broader and more diverse spectrum of authors; this, in turn, would represent a wider swath of students’ cultural diversity. Finally, professional development could be used to cultivate in the faculty a more in-depth understanding of how the use of culturally diverse mentor texts would engage students of varying cultural backgrounds. Through professional development, a dialogue could be developed asking all teachers at CMS to suggest authors from all cultural backgrounds and ethnicities, including those of White American
heritage. This practice could lead to a sense of ownership of the curriculum among all teachers at CMS. Just as student ownership of their educational experience yields higher student engagement, faculty engaged in developing the curriculum would develop their own sense of ownership and feelings their contributions were valued.

This study focused on teacher perceptions of CRP as a way to develop student engagement. There is room for additional studies to supplement its findings. Future research at CMS should include what administrators perceive about using CRP to engage all students. Culturally responsive leadership is the first step to developing a strong connection between administration and faculty (Madhlangobe & Gordon, 2012). Faculty who use CRP at CMS should be supported and encouraged to develop a wider spectrum of mentor texts and physical classroom décor that would support culturally diverse students. The more leadership understands how to support teachers in this effort, the more efficient teachers can be.

Efforts should also be made to diversify the faculty at CMS, where the faculty and staff are almost entirely White. Ms. Smith wondered whether this made some students feel they were not represented in the faculty or administration. A recruiting process that encouraged culturally diverse faculty, administrators, and staff members to apply to CMS School could be implemented in an effort to, over time, develop a staff that represented the student body and its cultural diversity. Finally, future studies at CMS might benefit by including administrators in the discussion. Culturally responsive leadership is necessary for culturally responsive teaching practices to be supported in the classroom, and understanding how administrators perceive the idea of supporting cultural diversity in school teaching practices is a sound next step in understanding this problem of practice.
Recommendations for Future Research

While the need for CRP is constant, our understanding of its effectiveness for student success and for teacher efficacy is a work in progress. Researchers should investigate the many variables teachers may find in their classrooms, especially as the face of the student body in America is constantly changing and evolving towards a more diverse and culturally rich environment in which students of color will eventually eclipse the number of White students (Cole et al., 2016). Understanding how teachers perceive their work environments, how their efforts are received by their students, how teachers perceive their classroom pedagogies and their classroom visuals, and why this is imperative to a district’s well-being, are all important for understanding how the use of CRP can lead to student engagement in the classroom and then student success. Future research should focus on the idea that teachers create environments in their classrooms that, if properly constructed, offer students a sense of ownership of their educational experience, a sense of participation in their classroom and lessons, feelings of being respected and valued by their teachers, acceptance by their peers through a sense of strengthened confidence, and a desire to make their teachers proud of them. These are all biproducts of the need to engage students and support their efforts in the classroom. Scholar-practitioners should look at the curriculum and relate the use of diverse mentor texts, stories that deal with culturally diverse protagonists, and the use of culturally diverse classroom materials to quantifiable student academic success. Scholar-practitioners should also consider looking at student perceptions about the use of CRP in the classroom. An in-depth exploratory case study of how students from varying and diverse cultural backgrounds respond to the use of culturally diverse mentor texts would shed light on teachers’ perceptions about the effectiveness of their own use of culturally responsive teaching techniques. Such a study would go hand-in-hand with this study. This study
showed what teachers perceived about their own techniques and how they used them to engage students in the lessons. Future research could investigate specific teaching practices and actual quantitative academic success, such as grades on classroom assessments, growth on certain district assessment such as iReady and Dibels testing, and grades on state standardized tests.

**Limitations.** There are several limitations to this study. There is a need to teach using inclusive, supportive, and welcoming practices (Sanders et al., 2016) because culturally responsive teaching supports success and the students’ completion of their education (Flynn et al., 2017). This study focused on six participants who tried to be efficient and supportive of their students in the classroom and school environment. The participants unanimously wanted to support and challenge their students to succeed, meet potential, and feel valued and welcomed at all times. This was a commendable effort, and the researcher thanks the participants for their candor and focus. The central focus of the research was on what teachers perceive about their use of CRP in the classroom. Perception is subjective, and teachers may perceive their efforts as efficient in a subjective set of standards even if their efforts were not meeting a school district’s standards.

In addition, CRP assumes that a teacher is properly versed in the understanding of all cultures and backgrounds and can universally implement the idea of cultural efficiency with all students. Generalizations about background and ethnicity without support or first-hand knowledge can lead to negative outcomes, such as ethnic division (Siteine, 2017), but a teacher might not perceive that this has happened. While teachers may perceive their efforts as focused on creating a classroom culture that is open and inclusive, they may instead by moving toward a classroom where all students find a secure but muddled middle ground (Jenkins & Alfred, 2017). Teachers view the world through their own beliefs, attitudes and values (Warren, 2018), and
differing backgrounds and upbringings skew their view of what is culturally appropriate and what is culturally offensive. These viewpoints are subjective. For CRP to be effective, other cultures must be recognized (Bomer, 2017), and the backgrounds of the participants, while varied, progressive, and steeped in higher education, do not guarantee a worldview that supports and acknowledges all cultural backgrounds and heritages as equal.

Finally, the educational experiences of the participants varied. Some remembered middle and high school teachers as supportive and encouraging, while other participants felt neglected and treated like outsiders. This perception of their own middle and high school experiences changed the lens through which they viewed their own teaching and educational efforts, and therefore may have skewed their perceptions of how teachers should properly and efficiently support students in the classroom. All participants were educated and successful in their efforts to become teachers, but their varied personal experiences could change their perceptions of what would be a successful outcome of challenging students to be engaged in the classroom. These limitations are noted, but need not be damning nor negative to the study or its findings.

Conclusion

In conclusion, as public education in America evolves, and as students from more diverse and varying cultural backgrounds become more prevalent in all areas of American elementary and secondary education, it is important to learn about teachers’ perceptions about how well CRP works. This study focused on what teachers understood about the need for CRP and their perceptions of what worked in the classroom as they tried to engage all students. Engaged students develop ownership of their educational experience and this leads to academic success. Culturally responsive pedagogy and techniques in the classroom are an important part of teachers’ efforts to keep students engaged.
References


Dufur, M., Parcel, T., & Troutman, K. (2013). Does capital at home matter more than capital at school? Social capital effects on academic achievement. *Social Stratification and Mobility, 31*, 1-21.


Appendix A: Statistics for City, US

Table 1

City, US Industry, Religion, Education, Origin

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attribute</th>
<th>Value</th>
<th>Source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Population</td>
<td>56,644</td>
<td>U.S. Census Bureau (2017)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median household income</td>
<td>$75,892</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median home value</td>
<td>$345,300</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most common local industries</td>
<td></td>
<td>Citigroup, Inc. (2016)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional, scientific, technical</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finance/insurance</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public administration</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health care</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational services</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployment</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resident education</td>
<td></td>
<td>U.S. Census Bureau (2017)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school graduate or higher (age 25+)</td>
<td>93.4%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s degree or higher (age 25+)</td>
<td>35.8%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious affiliation</td>
<td></td>
<td>Citigroup, Inc. (2016)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainline protestant</td>
<td>4.9%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>4.6%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evangelical</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orthodox</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No affiliation response</td>
<td>35.3%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race and origin</td>
<td></td>
<td>U.S. Census Bureau (2017)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White alone</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black/African American alone</td>
<td>5.1%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian alone</td>
<td>5.8%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic/Latino</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix B: Statistics for City Middle School

Table 2

Race and Ethnicity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attribute</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of students (2018-2019)</td>
<td>884</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White only</td>
<td>730</td>
<td>82.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American/Black only</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>7.69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African-American/Black-White</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian only</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native American/mix</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pacific Island/mix</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English language learner (ELL)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>students</td>
<td>22</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>87</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrators</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paras/student services</td>
<td>24</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Custodial</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>47</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Breakdown of staff ethnicity and origin</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>167</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Breakdown of teacher ethnicity and origin</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>85</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Source: Obtained from City Middle administration, February 15, 2019.
Appendix C: Recruitment Letter

Northeastern University College of Professional Studies Doctor of Education Program

Subject Line: Research Study with Will Dreyfus

Dear [Potential Participant],

My name is Will Dreyfus and I am a student in the Doctor of Education program at Northeastern University. I am currently conducting a study for my doctoral thesis and am seeking research participants. For my study, I am exploring teachers’ perceptions of culturally responsive pedagogy as used in their classrooms.

I’m writing to see if you would consider participating in this study. If you choose to participate in this study, I will be asking about your experiences of how you perceive culturally responsive pedagogy used in the classroom. The expected time commitment will be no longer than 2.5 hours, broken down as follows: (a) approximately 1.5 hours for the interviews over the course of two interactions spread about 2-3 weeks apart and (b) an approximately 1-hour observation of your classroom teaching or administrative duties. You will choose the locations of the interviews, although none can take place when any student is in the same building.

Your participation is entirely voluntary. If you do not email me at dreyfus.w@husky.neu.edu to volunteer, you will not be contacted again regarding this research.

If you are interested in participating in this study or have any questions, please reply only to this email: Dreyfus.w@husky.neu.edu. Emails received at any other of my email addresses must be deleted without response per Northeastern University IRB.

Thank you,

William Dreyfus

IRB# CPS18-06-20

Approved: 7/26/18 Expiration Date: 7/25/19
Appendix D: Recruitment Email

Northeastern University College of Professional Studies Doctor of Education Program

Subject Line: Research Study with William Dreyfus

Dear [Potential Participant],

Thank you for your interest in my research study. My name is Will iam Dreyfus, and I am currently working on my doctoral thesis for the Doctor of Education degree program at Northeastern University under the guidance of Dr. Cherese Childers-McKee.

For my research study, I am exploring teachers’ and administrators’ perceptions of culturally responsive pedagogy.

For this study, I am recruiting participants that meet the following criteria:

(a) Teacher participants must be currently working and have at least 7 years of teaching experience in their core subject. Teachers must have students currently enrolled in their classes who are of diverse cultural backgrounds and heritages. No minimum nor maximum number of students per class is necessary.

(b) Administrators and staff must have at least 5 years of experience in the field and currently be interacting with students of culturally diverse backgrounds. No minimum nor maximum number of student interactions throughout the day is necessary.

If you decide you still wish to participate in this study, there will be (a) two formal interviews not lasting more than 45 minutes each as well as (b) one observation of you working in your field not lasting more than 1 hour. Each interview will be audio recorded and transcribed into writing. Participants will be allowed to view their own transcripts to check for accuracy and add any additional information. No interviews will take place during school hours or when students are in the building.

Based on your availability, I would like to propose __________ as the time for our first meeting at _____________________________.

Thank you for your interest in participating in this study. Please email me only at Dreyfus.w@husky.neu.edu, or call me at (781) 724-5489 if you have any questions.

Thank you for your consideration,

William Dreyfus

IRB# CPS18-06-20

Approved: 7/26/18 Expiration Date: 7/25/19
Appendix E: Informed Consent Form

Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies

Title of Project: Teacher Perceptions of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study

We are inviting you to take part in a research study. This form will tell you about the study, and the researcher will explain it to you if you have additional questions. You may ask this person any questions that you have. When you are ready to make a decision, you may tell the researcher if you want to participate or not. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. If you decide to participate, the researcher will ask you to sign this statement and will give you a copy to keep.

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?

We are inviting you to participate in this study because of your experience with teaching middle school students who come from varied and diverse cultural backgrounds.

Why is this research study being done?

The purpose of this study is to understand how teachers perceive their use of culturally specific pedagogy when teaching students of varied and diverse cultural backgrounds.

What will I be asked to do?

If you decide to take part in this study, I, the student researcher, will ask you to participate in two individual interviews for approximately 45 minutes each. Additionally, I will observe you in your teaching environment for one 60-minute session. For formal, in-person interviews, we will meet at a location of your choosing when no students are around. All interviews conducted in person will be audio recorded and transcribed into writing. All materials will be stored securely and your name will be replaced with a pseudonym. The pseudonym will be chosen by the researcher.

Where will this take place and how much of my time will it take?

Please see above regarding time commitment. Interviews will take place after school hours and not at the school. You can choose the site for the interviews or we can mutually agree on a site. Observations will take place in your teaching or working environment at the school.

Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?

There is no foreseeable risk associated with this study while your perceptions about the use of culturally responsive pedagogy are explored. There are no right or wrong answers, as your perceptions are your opinions. Understanding the way you perceive the use of culturally responsive pedagogy when it comes to educating students of diverse cultural backgrounds is the focus of this study.

Will I benefit by being in this research?
There will be no direct benefit to you for taking part in this study. Your participation will hopefully inspire other researchers interested in understanding how teachers perceive the use of culturally responsive pedagogy to further study of this topic.

Who will see the information about me?

Your part in this study will be confidential. Only the researcher will see the information about you. If you decide to participate, a pseudonym will be selected that will be used throughout the study to protect your identity. Additionally, any mention of this study will utilize the participant’s pseudonym and will not include any personal and identifying information. Data about participant age, gender, or race may be included to create rich, detailed descriptions and give background knowledge about the participant. The interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed into text by a transcription service. This service will be required to sign a nondisclosure agreement. All physical documents or files related to this study will be stored in a locked file cabinet at the researcher’s home. All electronic files will be stored in a password-protected online file storage program. All data will be retained for 7 years and then destroyed.

In rare instances, authorized people may request to see research information about you and other people in this study. This is done only to be sure that the research is done properly. We would only permit people who are authorized by organizations such as the Northeastern University Institutional Review Board to see this information.

If I do not want to take part in the study, what choices do I have?

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may decide not to participate and you may discontinue your participation in the study at any time.

What will happen if I suffer any harm from this research?

The chance of suffering harm from involvement in this research study is extremely low. No special arrangements will be made for compensation or for payment for treatment solely because of your participation in this research.

Can I stop my participation in this study?

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate if you do not want to and you can refuse to answer any question. Even if you begin the study, you may quit at any time. If you do not participate or if you decide to quit, you will not lose any rights, benefits, or services that you would otherwise have.

Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?

Please contact William Dreyfus via email at Dreyfus.w@husky.neu.edu or Dr. Cherese Childers-McKee at c.childers-mckee@northeastern.edu if you have any questions about this study. Per Northeastern University IRB, emails to the student researcher to any other email address must be deleted with no response.

Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?
If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 490 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115, Tel: 617.373.4588, Email: n.regina@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

Will I be paid for my participation?

Participants will not be paid for participating.

Will it cost me anything to participate?

No.

I agree to take part in this research.

____________________________________________ ________________________
Signature of person agreeing to take part Date

____________________________________________
Printed name of person above

____________________________________________
Signature of person who explained the study to the Date
participant above and obtained consent

____________________________________________
Printed name of person above

IRB# CPS18-06-20

Approved: 7/26/18 Expiration Date: 7/25/19
Appendix F: Sample Interview Questions

Northeastern University College of Professional Studies Doctor of Education Program

Institution: City Middle School, City, U.S.

Interviewee (Title and name): Teacher #1; Middle school English teacher

Interviewer: William Dreyfus

Research question: How do teachers perceive culturally responsive pedagogy in the classroom as a means of empowering students of diverse cultural backgrounds?

Introductory Protocol

You have been selected to speak with us today because you have been identified as someone who has a great deal to share about culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP). My research project focuses on the perceptions of teachers and their efforts to empower culturally diverse students through the use of CRP. Through this study, I hope to gain more insight into how teachers understand and approach CRP. Hopefully this will allow us to identify ways in which we can better serve students from diverse and ethnically rich cultural backgrounds.

Because your responses are important and I want to make sure to capture everything you say, I would like to audio tape our conversation today. Do I have your permission to record this interview? I will also be taking written notes. I can assure you that all responses will be confidential and only a pseudonym will be used when quoting from the transcripts. I will be the only one privy to the tapes, which will be eventually destroyed after they are transcribed. To meet our human subjects requirements at the university, you must sign the form I have with me. Essentially, this document states that: (a) all information will be held confidential, (b) your participation is voluntary and you may stop at any time if you feel uncomfortable, and (c) we do not intend to inflict any harm. Do you have any questions about the interview process or how your data will be used?

These interviews should last about 30 minutes. During this time, I have several questions that I would like to cover. Do you have any questions at this time?

Thank you for offering me your time. As I mentioned, culturally responsive pedagogy is the focus of my study. The idea of bringing multicultural education to the classroom is of paramount interest, especially with a student body that is somewhere around 30 percent minority and rising each year. Our faculty is almost 100 percent White, so my area of focus is on how a
diverse study body can become engaged by a predominantly White faculty and still feel supported and engaged.

I want to thank you in advance for your time.

**Interviewee Background:**

1. Tell me why you became a teacher.
2. Describe your educational background.
3. How long have you been a teacher, where, what settings?
4. Discuss how your personal background connects to your teaching experience.

**Interviewee Questions**

1. Describe the students at City Middle School.
   a. Who are they, who are their families, what is the community like?
2. Tell me about the students in your classroom.
3. How do you interact with culturally diverse students in your classroom?
   a. What works well in engaging culturally diverse students?
   b. What are some of the challenges?
4. Definition: Culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) is a student-centered approach to teaching in which the student’s unique cultural strengths are identified and nurtured to promote student achievement and a sense of well-being about the student’s cultural place in the world. With this definition in mind:
   a. Do you feel CRP could be helpful? Why or why not?
   b. Discuss how you believe CRP might help support student engagement and empowerment.
   c. Describe the support(s) available to you from the administration in regards to culturally diverse students.
i. What additional support(s) would be beneficial to you in your classroom?

5. Discuss your thoughts on multicultural education and how it might impact your students.

6. Can you think of something else I should have asked?

7. Do you have any other thoughts on the subject?