Knowing Your Who: A Qualitative Field Research on How Teachers Develop Culturally Responsive Teaching Practices in an Effort to Close the Academic Achievement Gap of Students of Color

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, there has been an increase in the achievement rate of students in U.S. public schools; however, the gap in achievement between White students and students of color (Latino and African-American) remains an issue. The increase in cultural diversity in public school classrooms has proven a challenge for both teachers and curricula. Various discussions of improving student achievement have concluded with suggestions to employ methods of culturally responsive pedagogy as a method of decreasing the gap in achievement, and giving students a sense of authority academically, socially, emotionally, and politically. This qualitative research study, using both explorative and descriptive methods, sought to answer two questions. First, the study explored how veteran teachers in a southeastern Title 1 middle school developed aspects of cultural responsiveness when their students differed from them in terms of race, ethnicity, and/or socioeconomic class. Second, the study examined how the school district’s professional development influenced teachers’ abilities to incorporate culturally responsive teaching practices in their classrooms. Analysis of data collected during the study produced five emergent themes revealing a significant lack of formal knowledge among participants pertaining to the subject of culturally responsive teaching. Findings from this study suggest that veteran teachers need specific and intentional training that focuses on culturally responsive teaching practices. Thus, educational leaders, new and veteran teachers can use the findings of this study to assist in effective implementation of culturally responsive teaching practices as a part of their daily routine.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Statement of the Problem

In recent years, there has been an increase in the overall educational achievement of students in U.S. public schools; however, the gap in achievement between White students and students of color (Latino and African-American) remains an issue (Center for Assessment and Evaluation of Student Learning [CAESL], 2004). Indeed, this achievement gap has become one of the most significant problems in America’s public education system. Educators at the national, state, and local levels are striving to close this gap; nevertheless, increasing cultural, racial, and economic diversities within classrooms present an ongoing challenge for teachers and curriculum development. Research centered on measurable achievement gaps as reflected in national standardized tests conducted in the United States have yet to fully explore teachers’ preparedness to instruct these increasing diversities. Past studies established the existence of an achievement gap between White students and students of color in standardized test scores, as well as grade point averages, course-level enrollments, eligibility for special education and gifted programs, and high school graduation rates (Darling-Hammond, 2000).

Culturally responsive teaching, which involves the cultural responsiveness of teachers to culturally diverse students, is among the proposed teaching methods and theories to narrow the achievement gap (Forster-Scott, 2011). Since race is an important element in America’s diverse culture, individuals often infuse race into their daily lives, interpersonal relations, and social activities. Race is also an integral factor in education, and a focus on the educational achievement gap between White students and students of color constantly reminds researchers of the disparity, which is frequently ascribed to the social, educational, familial, and environmental aspects of races. Through qualitative field research, this study investigated how veteran
southeastern Title 1 middle school teachers developed aspects of cultural responsiveness when their students differed from their own race, ethnicity, and/or socioeconomic class. In addition, this study explored how professional development provided by the school and the school district influenced teachers’ abilities to incorporate culturally responsive teaching practices in their classrooms.

**Significance of the Problem**

Because teachers play crucial roles in their students’ achievements, it is essential that these teachers be provided with specific guidance to understand and respond to factors that influence the achievements of all students, especially students of color. Demographic changes in the United States have proportionately altered the cultural makeup of classroom populations. Modern-day classrooms necessitate that teachers educate students of varying cultural backgrounds, languages, and capabilities, among other aspects. In many cases, veteran teachers are not prepared to meet these requirements. Research (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Nieto, 2010; Sobel & Taylor, 2006) has revealed that preparation of teachers for classroom diversity has resulted in extensive interests in various mentoring programs; however, few studies have investigated a knowledge base to help develop culturally responsive teachers’ entrance into such diverse conditions. Frequently, in diverse classrooms, inadequately prepared teachers resort to historic methodologies of “traditional” school cultures or practices they experienced while students (Ogbu, 2003). Teachers are a vital part of their students’ success, and studies find that the teachers’ ability to develop a rapport with students creates positive teacher-student relationships; these relationships generally result in promising educational student outcomes (Kaiwi & Kahumoku, 2006; Kana’iaupuni, 2007; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Using a foundation of culturally relevant pedagogy, teachers can build relationships with all of their students.
The results of this study provide valuable information for schoolteachers and administrators who seek to close the achievement gap through culturally responsive teaching practices, thereby increasing achievement for all students. Through this pedagogy, teachers are provided with the tools, techniques, and methods necessary to facilitate the achievements of culturally, racially, and socially diverse students. Culturally responsive teachers have high student expectations, and ideally believe that all students have the potential to apprehend and excel, regardless of race, culture, or socioeconomic background.

**Research Question**

Rooted in the need for more culturally relevant professional development training among teachers, this study was guided by the following research question:

- How does the professional development provided by a southeastern middle school and its school district influence teachers’ abilities to incorporate culturally responsive teaching practices in their classrooms?

**Practical and Intellectual Goals**

This project’s intellectual goal was to gain deeper insight into southeastern middle school teachers’ understanding of culturally responsive teaching, and how their understanding influences their teaching practices. Because there is limited research on closing the achievement gap in southeastern middle schools, this research investigated the presence of a relationship between culturally responsive teaching and closing the achievement gap.

The practical goals for this project were to examine how teachers develop aspects of cultural responsiveness and close the achievement gap when teaching students who differ from them in terms of ethnicity, race, and class. Additionally, this study sought to demonstrate how educational policies influence teachers’ abilities to incorporate aspects of culturally responsive
teaching. Through the findings of this study, the researcher developed a framework that can guide teachers and other education stakeholders in acquiring culturally responsive skills for teaching students of color.

**Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework that best informed the investigation of the problem of practice for this study was the culturally relevant pedagogy. Ladson-Billings (1992, 2009) qualified culturally relevant pedagogy as a theoretical model that guides educators to empower their students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and culturally. To accomplish this empowerment, acknowledgement and inclusion of students of color and their cultural backgrounds must be integrated into the learning experience and environment. For teachers to employ a culturally relevant pedagogy, they create a link between the school and home lives of students while simultaneously arriving at the demands of the state and district curriculum prerequisites. Culturally relevant pedagogy cultivates the notion that “how people are expected to go about learning may differ across cultures; therefore, in order to maximize learning opportunities, teachers must gain knowledge of the cultures represented in their classrooms, then translate this knowledge into instructional practice” (Villegas, 1991, p. 13). Ladson-Billings (1995) further explained that the development of this theoretical framework is contingent on three situations: (a) it is necessary for students to experience academic success; (b) students must cultivate and/or maintain cultural proficiencies; and (c) students must develop an acute awareness through which they challenge the status quo of the current social order (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006; Leonard, Barnes-Johnson, & Berry, 2010).

Various studies focus on the academic failure of students of color, and explanations for the failure vary (Irvine, 1990; Pascarella & Terezini, 2005). Researchers often attribute this
problem to the fact that these students are minorities with cultural differences, creating a cultural discordance between the school and the students (Ladson-Billings, 1995). In contrast, recent studies indicate that culturally responsive teaching can improve the performance of these students (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Because children differ in myriad ways, Banks and Banks (2010) posited that American education is not a single, regular structure that is present to all students in the exact same form. Modern classrooms mandate that teachers educate students of varying cultures, languages, abilities, and several other characteristics (Gollnik & Chinn, 2001). Therefore, in order to promote students’ successes, teachers must aid students by linking the gap between educational and personal contexts and cultures (Allen & Boykin, 1992).

Gay (2010) reasoned that culturally responsive teaching links a student’s cultural knowledge, previous experience, and performance with academic knowledge and tools of intellect through methods that legitimize a student’s pre-existent knowledge base. This teaching method connects the backgrounds, interests, and experiences of students as a means of teaching a curriculum that is standards-based. Consequently, there is more meaning to learning; in addition, the meaning becomes increasingly student-relevant, as the instructor draws upon the student’s prior knowledge (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000; Raphael, 1986).

For years, researchers have examined ways to understand the individual cultures of minority students that have not been academically successful in the past (Ladson-Billings, 1995). In a study by Mohatt and Erickson (1981), teacher-student interaction and participation structures indicated that teachers who used culturally responsive teaching practices to incorporate the students’ personal patterns of culture helped the students succeed academically relative to teachers who did not incorporate these techniques. Such practices are part of a culturally relevant pedagogy, a practice concerned with the instruction of students of color.
Although these practices are concerned with students of color, studies show these practices are effective forms of pedagogy for students, regardless of ethnic or racial backgrounds (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Through the observation of students in the environment of their homes, teachers can include various aspects of cultural environments in the instruction and organization that takes place in the classroom (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Jordan (1985) explained that culturally relevant educational practices need to cohere with the cultures of the students to ensure the development of scholastically focused behaviors. This, according to Ladson-Billings (1995), is not to suggest that all school practices must equal natural cultural practices, nor do they have to completely cohere. The goal of cultural compatibility is to use cultural awareness as a tool to select elements of educational programs designed to encourage preferred academic behaviors and avoid undesired ones. Previous studies located the origin of the failure of students and the ensuing achievement within the speech nexus, the patterns of language interaction used by the teacher and student (Ladson-Billings, 1995). The student’s success is represented in the achievement of speech and language within the current social structures outside the school setting. Therefore, the main objective of education becomes how to fit the students of different ethnicities, races, languages, or class structures into a hierarchal arrangement accepted within the current social structure (Jordan, 1985).

In essence, culturally relevant teaching is an approach that discerns the diverse cultural backgrounds of students and proportionately adjusts the teaching methods to account for such diversities. Culturally relevant teachers empower each student to relate the course content to his/her cultural background, a skill necessary to teaching in a culturally diverse class setting (Ladson-Billings, 2001).
According to Willis and Meacham (1997), the essentials of culturally responsive teaching should encompass practices that capitalize on opportunities to learn for all students and, more importantly, emphasize the importance of enhancing the outcomes of culturally diverse students’ learning via supervision of both the results and influences of learning. Additionally, culturally responsive teaching includes appropriate professional development and reasonable disciplinary practices, culturally and linguistically responsive family involvement, a multicultural core curriculum, a wide-ranging school environment, efforts in recruiting and retaining diverse teachers, and open and dynamic discussions of matters allied to race and ethnicity (Reg, 2007). Villegas and Lucas (2007) noted that teachers who understand the diversity of culture can assist students in developing a positive self-awareness through educating the students about the histories, cultures, and societal contributions of different cultural groups. Although culture is a component of ethnicity and race, it also encompasses ways of life passed from one generation to another through art, beliefs, and languages. When people understand how the diversity of culture affects their lives, they can also work on debunking myths about culturally responsive teaching, according to Sroka (2009).

Fordham and Ogbu (1986) indicated that success comes to students of color at the expense of their cultural and psychological well-being. Their research showed that African-Americans who acted “White” were socially isolated and shunned by their peers. The students believed that they had to separate themselves from other African-American students so that the teachers would not generalize them as having the same negative attributes as other African-American students (Fordham, 1988; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). Students perceive this cultural dilemma as one of the academic demands for success, and therefore culturally relevant pedagogy needs to provide methods for students to preserve their cultural identity while achieving
academic success (Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995). Therefore, culturally relevant teaching is a fundamentally reasonable pedagogical strategy that embraces the experience of educating minority students and providing them with the opportunity to develop skills that are needed for success in a more diverse society (Singer, 1988). Ladson-Billings (1995) observed that culturally relevant teaching must be synchronous with three criteria: (a) have the ability to propel pupils academically; (b) have the desire to foster cultural dexterity; and (c) cultivate sociopolitical expansions and critical awareness.

Culturally appropriate education, particularly instruction, is composed to better fulfill the demands and patterns of the culture of the group served (Singh, 2010). The verbal expressions of the group and its culture, as well as its global views, are the cornerstones of the curriculum, practices, and school organization. This foundation improves the learning achievement of the student and builds pride in the home culture of the student (Ah-Nee Benham & Cooper, 2000; Cajete, 1994; Cantoni, 1998; Fordham, 1998; McCarty, 2003). Kana’iaupuni (2007) defined culture as the ways of being, doing, and knowing that are shared. Hence, culture-based education is the instructional foundation of student learning that instills the morals, ethics, familiarities, and languages in a culture that fosters a shared way of being, doing, and knowing.

Kana’iaupuni (2007) elucidated five fundamental elements that constitute education that is culture-based:

- The language: involving, recognizing, and using the student’s native or heritage language.

- Family and community: actively involving the student’s family and community in the creation of courses, daily learning experiences, and leadership.
• Context: shaping the school and the student’s classroom in culturally appropriate ways.

• Content: involving making learning significant and pertinent through culturally diverse content and assessment.

• Data and accountability: collecting and preserving data, and using multiple methods of teaching to ensure students’ progress in culturally responsible ways.

Gay (2010) further identified five characteristics of culturally responsive teaching:

• The teacher and school recognize the acceptability of cultural heritages from different ethnic groups. They also recognize the legacies that affect the students’ behavior, outlooks, and attitudes toward learning as worthwhile content of the formal curricula.

• The teacher focuses on the importance of private and educational experiences and academic concepts, as well as the reality of their sociocultural situations.

• The teacher recognizes that there are different learning styles linked to a variety of instructional strategies.

• The teacher encourages all students to value and applaud their cultural heritage as well as the cultural heritages of their peers.

• The teacher utilizes multicultural resources and all subject area materials taught in schools in his/her routine.

According to Gay (2010), these characteristics of improving culturally responsive teaching involve classroom environment attention; this is inclusive of the classroom literature that emphasizes plural-ethnic points of view, literary genres, and learning activities that reflect a wide array of sensory opportunities, particularly auditory, visual, and tangible activities (Singh, 2010). The Alaska Native Knowledge Network (ANKN, 1998) noted the standards of culture are
based on the assertion that firm foundations in language, heritage, and culture are essential criteria to create both culturally healthy students and communities. These also become essential factors in discerning the characteristics and practices associated with educators culturally responsive to the curriculum and the schools. To put it simply, Ladson-Billings (2009) posited that culturally responsive teaching affords learners with social, academic, emotional, and political strength. Such pedagogy focuses on the cultural and linguistic resources of students by using various methods such as high standards, student-teacher bonds that are rationalized, societal engagement, culturally intervened instruction, culturally harmonious curricula, and cultural sensitivity (Nieto, 2010).

Heath (1983) and Ladson-Billings (1994) explained that culturally responsive environments of instruction reduce the alienation of the student, who aims to adjust to school life. Marginalized people who go through linguistically and culturally appropriate education are more often than not better prepared for the maintenance and development of their cultures while being active in the wider society (Skutnabb-Kangas & Dunbar, 2010). Culturally responsive teaching practices empower students to develop into improved individuals who, by extension, prove more successful. Such practices improve academic abilities, self-efficacy, and increased personal ingenuity. Students should trust their capabilities to succeed in learning tasks while simultaneously exercising the desire to persevere. Culturally responsive teachers showcase towering and relevant ambitions that give support, required for the students as they work toward academic achievement (Gay, 2001, 2010). Gay (2010) pointed out that culturally responsive teaching is strong, as it instructs students to understand that there is no permanent or single version of the “truth”; therefore, teachers must make genuine knowledge regarding different ethnic groups accessible to students. Similar practices quite often result in enhanced
achievements of various kinds, which include improved attentiveness regarding academic tasks, thinking with intuition, better-developed and assertive interpersonal skills, an improved understanding of and interconnection between individuals, and the knowledge that some things are to be continually shared, evaluated, and revised.

In 2012, the U.S. Census Bureau predicted that by 2043, the minority population will account for the majority of residents in the United States. Cho and DeCastro-Ambrosetti (2006) further estimated that by 2020, the culturally diverse student population will account for half of the public school population in the United States. Schmidt (2005) suggested that this shift in population will impact not only urban schools but also rural and suburban education systems, thus necessitating early preparations of in-service teacher training for the change to culturally responsive teaching. While teacher education programs as a whole have implemented reforms with revised programs intended to provide social justice and equity, preparing prospective teachers in ways that support equitable and just educational experiences for all students consists of programs still in development (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Major reform efforts include addressing the in-service training of teachers to meet the requirements of the student variety found in the American public schools. Among other attempts is the proposal to promote culturally responsive teaching in classes. Research shows that culturally responsive teaching that links students to home, community, and school helps them make sense of the curriculum and promotes development of literacy (Edwards, 1996; Garcia, 2001; Schmidt, 2005).

To many students of color, improvement in educational achievement results in a sense of community and mutual responsibility, a portion of the overall objective of cultural responsive pedagogy, indicating that education is multidimensional for teachers and students alike (Gay, 2010). Therefore, culturally responsive teaching entails employing diverse cultural knowledge,
experience, contributions, and perceptions. Integrating emotions, values, and cultures with practical information helps to develop curricula and instructions more responsive to cultural diversity (Whitney, 2006). A culturally responsive pedagogy centers on facets of cultural socialization, which has a direct impact on students’ learning. In this respect, culturally responsive pedagogy is transformative in that it accepts the existing power and accomplishments of students and works to improve them in the future through classroom teaching (Rowland, 2002).

**The Need for Culturally Relevant Pedagogy**

Schmidt (2005) explained that in the recent past, school, home, and community links have become an important challenge for the following reasons:

- Schools are more diverse culturally and ethnically. In the past, the population of teachers has constantly come from White suburban areas, where the educators traditionally described themselves as White and middle class (Schmidt, 2005; Sleeter, 2001).

- Most teachers lack experience in regular relationships with people from various cultural, ethnic, or lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Consequently, the stereotypes portrayed by the media influence the majority of their understanding about diversity (Schmidt, 2005).

- School curricula, methods, and materials typically reflect only European culture while ignoring the histories and experiences of students and families from lower socioeconomic levels and different ethnic and cultural backgrounds (Schmidt, 2005).
Most preparation programs do not effectively groom teachers for culturally relevant pedagogy and the importance of making robust home, community, and school connections (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Schmidt, 2005; Sleeter, 2001; Wallace, 2000). If teachers ignore the cultural differences of students, the students’ apprehensions and alienations elevate (Cummins, 1986; Greene & Abt-Perkins, 2003; Igoa, 1995; Schmidt, 2002). This problem has become a national issue linked to poor development of literacy and increased dropout rates among students belonging to rural and impoverished urban areas (Schmidt, 2005).

The theory of culturally relevant pedagogy strengthened this study because the researcher constructed all inquiries presented to participants around the culturally relevant pedagogy and its meaning. For example, questions were framed based on Ladson-Billings’ (1992, 1994) definition of culturally relevant pedagogy and its implementation, which provided a basis for culturally responsive teaching. Although culturally responsive teaching may be understood as a standard practice of public school teachers, there might be room for clarification of its definition and practices based on the assumptions of the participants in this study, and their idea of what culturally responsive teaching is and how the professional development they received influenced their ability to implement culturally responsive teaching practices.

In summary, few theories exist that attempt to analyze the impact of culturally responsive teaching to narrow the academic achievement gap for students of color (Ladson-Billings, 1992, 1994). While theories exist, it is important to view these theories in an appropriate context to apply the issues that concern bridging the academic achievement gap for students of color. Indeed, there exist few theories that relate to culturally responsive teaching in its entirety. Orchestrating this study was the theory of culturally relevant pedagogy, which provided for a balanced investigative study that considered how the professional development experiences of
teachers impact their approach to closing the achievement gap found between their students. The use of culturally relevant pedagogy as a theoretical framework provided the researcher with an explanation of how culturally responsive teaching practices are implemented; also, this framework guided the researcher in how to conduct this research and gain further understanding of the research question, while supporting the importance of the problem of practice.

**Summary and Organization of Thesis**

This thesis contains five chapters. The first chapter introduced disparities in academic achievement between students of color and their White counterparts in American public schools, as well the significance of the problem posed by these disparities. Also, the first section raised the question this study sought to answer and explained the practical and intellectual goals of this study. Finally, the theory that supported the study is the theory of culturally relevant pedagogy, which was elucidated in the theoretical framework.

In Chapter 2, the review of literature begins with a definition of the achievement gap, evidence of the achievement gap, and the possible reasons for the gap, including sociocultural and ethnic factors, educational attributes, racism, and stereotype threats. Chapter 2 also investigates possible ways to eliminate this gap, including culturally relevant pedagogy and its implementation in teaching.

Chapter 3 explains the research method that was employed by the researcher in conducting this study. The chapter begins with an introduction to the research question and an explanation as to how a qualitative research case study best addressed the research question. Additionally, Chapter 3 elaborates upon the choice of the research type and approach as well as the research design, sources of data, and selection of participants. The chapter further specifies
strategies employed for data analysis, the quality of the data sources, and ethical considerations of the participants for the research.

Chapter 4 reveals the study findings based on analysis of documentation created by the school district, interview transcripts, and observational field notes. Additionally, the chapter discusses common themes that emerged from the findings.

Finally, chapter 5 offers a discussion of the importance of the findings, and a review of each emerged theme and its relationship to the literature review of this study. Additionally, a discussion of the limitations of findings, implications for practice, and implications for future research are addressed in this chapter.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter consists of two parts, providing clarity to the logic of the study through emphasis of the significance of the problem of research and past attempts to implement cultural responsiveness in teaching students of color. The first section examines the achievement gap, its causes, and evidence. Causes include sociocultural and educational attributes, as well as threats of racism and stereotype. The second section examines culturally relevant pedagogy according to culturally responsive teaching, related teacher education programs, and classroom management strategies.

Among the most pivotal problems in the American system of education is the achievement gap between Latino, African-American, Native American, and low-income students when juxtaposed with their Asian and Caucasian counterparts, who are relatively economically advantaged (CAESL, 2004). Researchers have endeavored to enhance standardized tests and reduce embedded cultural and social prejudice. Even so, people have debated that many of these tests do not accurately gauge the potential of all students. For example, those for whom English is a second language (CAESL, 2004) are automatically disadvantaged. The ultimate objective is that students gain opportunities to receive the best quality education, and several organizations have focused on strategies to lessen the gap and encourage schools to learn from those who have succeeded. This literature review examines closing the achievement gap for students of color and culturally responsive teaching practices.

This literature review will focus on the following questions:

- What is the achievement gap?
- What factors contribute to causing the achievement gap?
• How can instructors, via culturally relevant pedagogy, contribute to eradicating the gap in achievement?

• How can instructors apply instruction that is culturally responsive in classrooms?

Defining the Achievement Gap

Fifty years following the momentous Supreme Court verdict of Brown vs. Board of Education (1954), which culminated in public school racial integration, there remain countless disparities between students of color and White students in academic achievement (Alliance for Excellent Education, n.d.; HB2722 Advisory Committee, 2008). Of the 1.2 million students who fail to graduate from high school in the United States each year, over half are students of color, who comprise less than 40% of the total high school population (Alliance for Excellent Education, n.d.). In addition to these alarming numbers is the fact that merely 57.8% of Latino, 53.4% of African-American, and 49.3% of American Indian and Alaskan students starting their freshman year receive a high school diploma four years later (Thompson, 2010). Statistics courtesy of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) revealed that grade 8 pupils’ reading proficiency levels were as follows: 15% of Black, 19% of Latino, and 22% of American Indian and Alaskan students read on grade level compared to 47% of Asian and Pacific Islander Americans and 43% of Whites (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). Such significant disparities have raised questions about the causes and possible solutions to this nationwide problem.

The Washington State School Directors Association (WSSDA; n.d.) has defined the achievement gap as the difference in academic achievement of African-American, American Indian, and Hispanic students versus their White and Asian peers, as well as the difference in academic achievement between students whose families are low income as opposed to peers
from middle- and upper-income families. The Washington State Institute for Public Policy considered several studies conducted to examine the reasons, circumstances, and justifications for the gaps in achievement and reported that “the achievement gap persists across subject areas, grade levels, and assessment measures, with variation among schools and districts” (HB2722 Advisory Committee, 2008).

**Causes of the achievement gap.** Several factors induce the disparities in achievement between students of color and their White peers. Causes include the social and cultural backgrounds of students of color, as well as racism in general, the school environment, and the cultural responsiveness of teachers.

**Sociocultural attributes.** Race is not the only factor that causes the achievement gap; indeed, a complicated blend of sociocultural and school-related factors also plays a significant role (Denslow, 2000). Studies reveal that students of Hispanic ancestry are twice as likely as African-Americans, and three times as likely as Caucasian students, to be raised in homes with low incomes (Lee, 2003). The minority status of students of color combined with these conditions strengthens the probability of a low educational level, which results from the detrimental effects of these conditions on education. Many of these children receive incomplete medical attention, have insufficient nutrition, have lesser education-related resources in their homes, and live with family members that have lower educational accomplishments and thus do not know methods to adequately prepare for and help manage the education of their child (Denslow, 2000). All these elements hinder schooling, making success in school less of a priority for students in these communities.

A study conducted by Lee (2003) confirmed sociocultural factors significantly relate to the educational gap found among minority students. Lee and Buxton (2010) indicated that the
gap in socioeconomic positions and domestic conditions between students of color and White students was lessened during 1970-1990; even so, this reduction halted in the late 80s and 90s. The fluctuation in familial socioeconomic conditions often mimics the conditions of the Black-White achievement gap. Such a correlation suggests that the socioeconomic position co-varies and is related to the gap in achievement but is not the sole variable.

A study by Roscigno (1998) revealed a 6.7-point disparity in test scores, standardized in mathematics, among the accomplishments of African-American students compared to Caucasian students. Roscigno noted that the differences found in family dynamics contributed up to 30% of the difference in achievement between students. The study also revealed a 1% increase in family income, which consequently resulted in a 0.4% increase in math scores. Roscigno also noted children that had at least 50 books in their home possessed a 2.6-point advantage over children who did not have books in their homes. Furthermore, children with parents who had a high school diploma at a minimum had a 2.1-point advantage in mathematics compared to those children who lived in homes with parents without a high school diploma; they had a 0.7-point disadvantage.

*Educational attributes*. Two factors linked to the achievement gap are sociocultural and educational factors, which consistently overlap. Socioeconomic factors such as the income of the family, parental structure, and education often determine the school the child will attend (Roscigno, 1998). Work by Ladson-Billings and Tate (2006) revealed that minorities normally attend schools in which the student body is comprised primarily of minority students. A study by Goldsmith (2004) noted that 94% of Whites attended separate White schools, whereas nearly 75% of African-American and Latino students attended majority non-White schools, which resulted in a massive influence on educator quality and school resources.
Teachers’ expectations also play a role in the performance gap. D’Amico (2001) found that teachers have lessened their expectations for students of color, while their high expectations for Caucasian students remain. These lower teacher expectations lead to students of color expecting less of their teachers, a result that leads to lessened achievement. Roscigno (1998) asserted that students whose teachers believe that they will attend college score 6.8 standardized test points higher than their peers, revealing that teachers’ beliefs have a strong impact on the educational outcome of their students. D’Amico (2001) emphasized that teacher instruction heavily contributes to the performance gap. More frequently than not, below-par instruction is evident in schools that enroll a vast majority of minority students. Because of such conditions, instructors often rely on drills, lectures, and memorization exercises that frequently result in low-achieving students.

In an effort to find the possible causes of and solutions to the achievement gap, the HB2722 Advisory Committee (2008) conducted a study and reported the following:

- By every indication, including scores on standardized tests and college attendance rates, students of color are less likely to get the standard of education needed to be successful in today’s society.

- The achievement gap is not only an issue of poverty but also of race. Data collected by the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL; n.d.) revealed that Caucasian and Asian students living in poverty score higher than students of color living in significantly better financial situations.

- Children of color trail behind their peers in early learning development when they begin kindergarten.

This same study revealed that additional causes of the achievement gap included the following:
• An inequitable distribution of trained, experienced teachers throughout the schools.
• Scarce and unequal amounts of funding provided to the schools.
• Inadequate, archaic, and uneven dispersal of facilities, equipment, and instructional materials.
• Inequitable access to challenging rigorous pre-college coursework coupled with a premature revelation of institutional racism.
• A shortage of cultural proficiencies among instructors, school staff, administrators, and curriculum and assessment developers.

Secondary causes of the achievement gap included
• Students are coming from families of intergenerational poverty.
• Stakeholders are unable to support and advocate for children.
• There is a lack of additional services, including mentoring and tutoring of students exposed to the inequities and risk factors listed above.

Racism. Racism is one of the primary causes of the gap in achievement between White students and students of color (Steele & Aronson, 1995). Studies have certified that individuals are not born prejudiced, but many ethics, expectations, and behaviors of people and institutions restrict the education of students of color and those belonging to low socioeconomic classes (Weissglass, 1990). Weissglass (1990) defined racism as the systematic mistreatment of a particular group of people (in this case, people of color) depending on skin color or other physical features. Society trains societal institutions or individuals to act in harmful ways to carry out this mistreatment. People of color go through systematic, continuous, institutionalized, and personal biases daily. Shirley Chisholm, the first Black congressional representative, once
commented, “Racism is so universal in this country, so widespread and deep-seated, that it is invisible because it is so normal” (as cited in Weissglass, 1990, p. 50). Weissglass explained that racism can be indirect or direct, conscious or unconscious, personal or institutionalized. Classroom racism is often an unconscious bias that is exhibited when a teacher has low expectations of his/her African-American and Latino students or students from indigenous family backgrounds. Institutionalized racism is by far the most prominent form of racism found in the school system today. According to Weissglass, its characteristics include:

- The addition of practices imbedded into an organization’s culture disadvantageous to students of color. For instance, allocating different resources for different races or assigning many students of color to lower tracks with less experienced teachers.
- The acceptance of the institutions of White middle-class values, reflected by the scarcity of minority authors found in the Language Arts curricula of varying secondary schools.
- Schools that are unresponsive when confronted with racial or prejudiced behavior that might interfere with a student’s learning or well-being, such as failure to address harassment or bullying, or meeting such behaviors with chastisement rather than attempting to build communication and understanding.

Many fail to realize that students of color can internalize and transfer racism, which can cause them to believe in and act upon the derogatory messages they absorb about themselves and their culture. This internalized racism can cause students of color to give up, become discouraged, or believe that their level of intelligence or self-worth is beneath their peers (Weissglass, 1990). This can undermine their confidence and result in interference in their ability to perform. Educators that have progressed in closing the achievement gap have used
encouragement, high expectations, and establishment of caring and trusting relationships with their students (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1992, 1994).

**Stereotype threat.** Steele (1997) defined the stereotype threat as the fear felt by minority cultures that others will view them through the lens of a negative stereotype, in addition to the worries they have of doing something that will confirm such stereotypes. Many minority students assume that mainstream culture views them as being subservient and therefore expects little from them, thus treating them as if their accomplishments will equate to little or nothing (D’Amico, 2001). Students might internalize this and put pressure on themselves to repudiate this thinking process, causing them unnecessary strain, which can result in failure. In such cases, racial stereotypes might influence the students’ grades, test scores, and academic identity (Denslow, 2000). In other situations, students might detach themselves from education to reduce the stereotype threat, thereby contributing to the steadily growing dropout rate of students of color. Steele (1997) revealed that Black students performed badly on tests they believed measured their intellectual ability; however, these same students performed better on tests they believed did not measure such. These behaviors support the notion that students can internalize negative stereotypes, which leads to performance anxiety, resulting in failing scores on tests and assessments.

**Evidence of the achievement gap.** According to the HB2722 Advisory Committee (2008), the unequal education of students of color stems from system-wide low expectations in their performance, the ongoing and widening achievement gap, and the under-involvement in school activities other than sports. The under-representation in programs for the gifted, coupled with an overwhelming representation in special education programs and disproportionate discipline referrals, frequently results in unwarranted suspension and expulsion of minorities and
students of color. Generally, an infusion of negative representation is more likely to yield an increased representation in the juvenile justice system, a system that typically has low expectations of students and considers education to be a privilege rather than a right. Even in this technology-driven age, students of color still have less access to and effective use of technology, which in turn contributes to lower graduation rates, lower entry to post-secondary programs, and minimum representation in both college and job preparation programs (HB2722 Advisory Committee, 2008).

Lewis, Paik, and Johnson (2001) explained the documented differential accomplishments of underprivileged and ethnically diverse students. This differential in accomplishments, or “gap,” exists in school districts across the country and is not restricted to those schools that have higher percentages of students of color or students that belong to families with low incomes. The U.S. Department of Education (2011) acknowledged that reading and math scores have improved nationally, but the gap of achievement between Caucasian and African-American students has also increased in all grade levels. The report also emphasized that the test score gap between African-American and Caucasian students persisted even when socioeconomic status, education of parents, and other factors were controlled.

According to D’Amico (2001), if the achievement gap persists at the same rate, by age 17, 95% of White students will be able to read 12th-grade textbooks, while 25% of African-American students will have dropped out. The remaining 17-year-old African-American students will only be able to read at an eighth-grade level. These predictions, coupled with the fact that Caucasian children are still two times more likely to attend post-secondary institutions than African-American children, and three times as likely as Hispanic students, paint a negative portrait of the current education environment (D’Amico, 2001).
Substantial literature confirms an achievement gap exists between students of color and their White and Asian counterparts. When gaining an understanding of this problem of practice, there is a need to clearly define the achievement gap and what elements contribute to its existence. The next section assesses the literature on culturally relevant pedagogy and its implementation.

**Culturally Responsive Teaching**

Individuals from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds and lesser socioeconomic levels quite often feel a specific disconnection between their educational and personal experiences (Schmidt, 2005). However, if educators connect with these students, their families, and community members, the academic gap will narrow, while the students’ attitudes toward school will increase positively (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Culturally responsive teaching assists minority students in connecting the different ways of knowing, engaging, and demonstrating their prowess in language use, mathematics, and other tools required in their daily lives (Kozleski, 2010). Students can then understand how to transform logical knowledge structures and apply them to lessons learned through school curricula.

Culturally responsive teachers generate meaningful lessons culturally relevant to their students by connecting the coursework to the familiarities and practices of diverse students in their classes via validation of family backgrounds and utilization of literature found in their homes (Schmidt, 2005). These instructors form relationships with the community and family while using talents and available resources (Edwards, 2004). Educators who are culturally responsive manage to recognize oral expressions linked to leadership in the African-American church (Edwards, Dandridge, McMillon, & Pleasants, 2001) and make use of the mechanics of understanding the importance of respect and admiration found in Hispanic communities.
(Schmidt, 2005). Such teachers are rare, despite the fact that research reveals that education programs need to prepare educators for culturally responsive instruction to promote students’ academic accomplishments at all educational stages (Schmidt, 2005). Delpit (2006) asserted that “in order for teachers to be culturally competent, they must have knowledge of children’s lives outside of school to recognize their strengths” (p. 172). Teachers need to learn as much as they can about the communities, families, and cultures of their students if they want to build bridges from their home to school culture and, eventually, to the mainstream power culture.

Teachers with culturally responsive dispositions value and build on students’ prior knowledge, and work to instill a sense of pride in the students’ home culture, utilizing the funds of knowledge (Moll, González, Andrade, & Civil, 2001). Moll et al. (2001) noted that the term 
\textit{funds of knowledge} refers to generational and cultural knowledge needed for individuals or households to function and thrive. According to Gay (2010), teachers are culturally competent when able to achieve academic success while developing cultural consciousness. These teachers augment cultural affinity and academic accomplishment through the creation of opportunities for pupils to perform well in school by using resources of the students’ cultures at home.

Cohen (2008) investigated the impact of student engagement through the utilization of culturally focused instruction that consisted of a number of structured writing tasks centered on self-affirming values. Students of color wrote about their values and experiences, including such motifs as family, friends, and interests. Within 2 years, there was notable improvement in students’ performance and grade repetition reduced. Simultaneously, the performance of the White students did not indicate any negative effect. The outcome of this study indicated that self-affirming interventions interrupt the recursive series of poor performance and thus suggest that the low performance of students of color does not have to continue (Noel, 2000).
For successful implementation of culturally responsive teaching to occur, Schmidt (2005) identified the following characteristics:

- **High expectations**: Culturally responsive teaching provides students with the support needed to grow intellectually by utilizing literary material appropriate for the ages and abilities of those being taught. High expectation requires active involvement. Schmidt observed that when a teacher facilitates a learning community, the teacher is no longer the center of the classroom but a learning guide for students. Becoming a learning guide will allow them to learn a lot more about individual students and free them to aid those who need attention.

- **Positive relationships with families and community**: When teachers are able to make comprehensible connections with the students’ family and community, as these connections relate to curriculum content, students are often more motivated to succeed in their academics, compared to those not receiving such support.

- **Cultural sensitivity**: Successful execution occurs when educators are able to restructure the curriculum, focusing on culturally valued knowledge. Culturally responsive teaching must have a link with the curriculum that is standards-based and connected to students’ individual cultural backgrounds.

- **Active teaching methods**: These methods occur when teachers engage students in multiple writing, reading, speaking, viewing, and listening behaviors throughout the class period.

- **Teacher as facilitator**: This characteristic is seen in teachers who are able to share information, give directions, summarize responses from the students, and group students to work in small groups, pairs, or individually. Through paired and group
learning and delegation, the teacher demonstrates belief in the students, suggesting that the students can learn with prudently planned instructions.

- Small group work: This method allows students to discuss quietly the current topic while completing their classwork in small groups and pairs. The “healthy hum” in the classroom demonstrates a focused conversation among students. Schmidt noted that allowing students to actively participate in small groups provides the opportunity to listen, talk, read, and write more easily, with the implication that hearing others in the group encourages learning.

Some teachers may find it challenging to implement culturally responsive teaching in their classroom; thus, it is important to examine the specific related characteristics that have been identified in order to ease this process.

**Key features of culturally responsive teaching.** Kozleski (2010) outlined the following features of culturally responsive teaching:

- Communicating high expectations: Teachers should let students know what is expected of them, what they are required to perform, achieve, and engage in, rather than making excuses for students who do not engage at optimal levels at all times.

- Actively engaging students during learning: Teachers should coach students to question, consult original materials, connect with their lives, conduct research, test hypotheses, and build relationships with the students to avoid disappointments that arise from unsuccessful learning.

- Facilitating learning: Teachers should help develop their students’ ability to handle new material, decipher complex problems, and cultivate new skills through
scaffolding their learning, using students’ prior knowledge through a series of increasing complexity that shifts focus from the teacher to the pupil.

- Understanding the potential of the students’ families: It is advisable for the teacher to understand their students’ cultures. Teachers can visit neighborhoods where students live, listen to them talk about their lives, understand what they care about, and regularly engage them in real conversations and dialogues. It is important to note that these types of personal discussions are better with small groups rather than the whole class.

- Anchoring the curriculum with everyday life: Connecting the classroom curriculum with the students’ daily lives personalizes the instruction and focuses on topics that matter to the students.

- Selecting participating structures for learning that reflects the students’ epistemologies: Teachers are encouraged to put themselves in situations in which they are not part of the majority group but a noticeable minority. This noticeable minority grouping might be a place where they do not know the norms or the unspoken rules. This will make the teachers recognize what it feels like to be in a minority group, and therefore prompt them to consider what they would do to survive in such a scenario. The findings from such situations will help teachers understand the challenges minority students face and how to assist them in overcoming such challenges.

- Engaging in reflective writing and thinking: Teachers need to reflect on their own acts and interactions to comprehend the private motivations that prompt behaviors.
Through comprehending elements that contribute to certain practices, the first step toward changing them will be accomplished.

- Exploring family and racial history: Teachers must search their own experiences that may have added to their comprehension of themselves as “racial” or “nonracial” individuals. This will help the teachers realize their views’ roots and challenge them.

- Accepting the membership of various social groups: Educators need to identify and acknowledge the bonds with various societal groups, as well as the limitations and benefits of being a member of each group. They should then evaluate how belonging to these groups influences their relations and views of other groups.

- Recognizing the background and experiences of diverse groups: By understanding the lives and practices of other groups, teachers can learn how varying historical accounts have shaped the opinion and viewpoints of various groups. This can also assist teachers in seeing the differences between their own values and those of others.

- Including students’ families and community: It is paramount that teachers become acquainted with their students’ families and community as a means of relating to each student as more than just a “warm body in a seat,” and instead as a social and cultural being who is a part of a complex social and cultural network. This will also help teachers gain insight into influences on behaviors and attitudes of students.

- Becoming familiar with research about successful teachers in diverse settings: Teachers should visit the classrooms of thriving teachers with varied backgrounds and read authentic accounts of success in order to obtain exemplary examples to help develop their own skills.
Appreciating diversity: For a teacher to be effective in class, he/she must appreciate diversity. Teachers should view differences as normal in society and reject the notion that one group has more competence than another, hence creating respect for the differences, and show a willingness to teach this perspective. Such practices will encourage a much broader view of the world.

Culturally responsive teacher education programs. According to Schmidt (2005), successful teacher education programs that promote culturally responsive teaching require cultural self-awareness literacy activities that prompt teachers to reflect on various issues, which in turn helps current and future teachers acquire knowledge of self and others through cross analysis. These activities help White teachers become more aware of others culturally, and of the stereotypes they believe concerning other groups (Greene & Abt-Perkins, 2003). Hence, the main aim of these programs is to empower educators to address individual variances of students compassionately through reflective literacy activities.

Culturally responsive classroom management strategies. Getting the cooperation of students in the classroom is reliant on a teacher’s ability to establish an environment that addresses the whole student, including their emotional, social, and cognitive needs (Brown, 2003). Effective teachers act as “conductors” or “coaches” by assuming responsibility for the academic development of their students, contrary to those that assume the role of “custodian” by spending their day merely keeping an eye on students (Ladson-Billings, 1994). The effective teacher specifically creates a cooperative, business-like environment in which expectations for performances are unambiguously stated, and the needed tools for the students to meet expectations are provided. Crosby (1999) noted that instituting and sustaining reasonable conditions and expectations are quite often a massive challenge, especially in urban area
classrooms. Crosby explained that the new wave of immigrants from various countries around the world, including the Middle East, Latino countries, and Asia, have brought students of diverse cultures. These students bring with them cultural and linguistic challenges:

The teacher turnover rate in urban schools is much higher than in the suburban schools. The result is that largely newly hired or uncertified teachers often staff urban schools, especially those in the inner cities. These teachers, who were trained to teach students from middle-class families and who often come from middle-class families themselves, now find themselves engulfed by minority students, immigrants, and other students from low-income families; students whose values and experiences are very different from their own (Crosby, 1999, p. 302).

Effective teaching in a culturally mixed classroom requires the implementation of culturally responsive communication processes and instructional strategies, the development of respectful student-teacher relationships, and the recognition of, honoring of, and responding to the various cultural and language differences among students (Brown, 2003). Following are some of the aspects of developing cultural responsiveness.

**Caring for the student.** Teachers must treat their students as children, not just mere subjects or heads in the class (Brown, 2003). Culturally responsive teachers need to initiate and cultivate out-of-class conversations with the students as a means of getting to know their students personally. In his research, Brown (2003) questioned a teacher about how to best develop cultural responsiveness in the class. The teacher explained that “I try to get to know as many kids as possible on a personal level, so when I see them in the hall, I can ask about their families; I try to see them in other settings outside of school” (p. 2). Research on urban teaching and
characteristics of the children and adolescents has emphasized that psychological safety and care are crucial components of classrooms in an urban area (Brown, 2003).

Dryfoos (1998) explained that at-risk urban adolescents lack nurturance, attention, supervision, understanding, caring, and, at times, might have inadequate communication processes with their family members, especially adults. Teachers therefore must meet the students with care if they expect the students to focus on their academic assignments during the day. Ladson-Billings (2001) underscored that psychological security is the trademark of each classroom, as this makes students feel comfortable and supported. Research conducted by Howard (2001) on African-American elementary students showcased that students preferred educators who exhibited caring bonds and attitudes toward them, along with those that created classroom environments that reminded them of both their community and family. Based on a study with ESL (English as a second language) teachers, Brown (2003) explained that teachers agree with the assumption that “it doesn’t matter what good content you have, or what good curriculum you have, or what exciting lessons you have; if you don’t care about students, they know that, and you don’t have a chance to get them” (p. 3).

**Being assertive and acting with authority.** Effective teachers need to identify the academic strengths and weaknesses of their students and then ask for the best effort they know the students can deliver (Brown, 2003). Students of color require assertive teachers; this is crucial in creating the authority needed for the maintenance of a business-like atmosphere of learning. Weiner (1999) elucidated:

Urban teachers’ primary source of control is their moral authority, which rest in the perception of students and parents that the teacher is knowledgeable about the subject
matter, competent in the pedagogy, and committed to helping all students succeed, in school and life (p. 77).

Delpit (2006) explained that African-American students require assertive teachers. These students expect direct verbal commands and straightforward instructions, as they can ignore directives posed as questions. These teachers have expectations that are categorically stated; they do not acknowledge mediocre student practices and immediately take care of inappropriate behaviors (Wilson & Corbett, 2001). Delpit (2006) further stated:

> Black people often view issues of power and authority differently than people from mainstream middle-class backgrounds. Many people of color expect authority to be earned by personal efforts and exhibited by personal characteristics. In other words, the authoritative person gets to be a teacher because she is authoritative. Some members of middle-class cultures, in contrast, expect one to achieve authority by the acquisition of an authoritative role. That is, the teacher is the authority because she is the teacher (p. 35).

**Effective communication.** Congruent communications in the classroom are essential to teachers’ successes when answering students’ ethnic and cultural needs (Brown, 2003). Teachers need to be aware of particular communication approaches that have an impact on students’ abilities and desires to participate in learning activities. Among the strongest means of the establishment of sound communication in class is listening (Brown, 2003). Gay (2010) noted differences in communication styles have the ability to influence the quality of relationships between instructors and their African-American, Latino, and Native American students. African-Americans might prefer a type of social interaction that permits the students to speak as the teacher is talking as a reply to a comment, as a way of acknowledging an agreement or raising
concern about the teacher’s comment, rather than as a rude disruption or demonstration of disrespect (Brown, 2003). As Gay (2010) pointed out:

African-Americans “gain the floor” or get participatory entry into conversations through personal assertiveness, the strength of the impulse to be involved, and the persuasive power of the point they wish to make, rather than waiting for an “authority” to grant permission. (p. 105).

Research by Obidah and Manheim Teel (2001) emphasized that teachers’ negative reactions to such behaviors might result in strained relationships between the student and the teacher. Culturally responsive teachers recognize other patterns of communication among learners that are diverse as they provide meaningful learning activities (Gay, 2010). Some learners, for example Asian Americans, tend to avoid correcting their peers’ mistakes or avoid replying in a manner that is competitive during classroom discussions, based on their belief in “traditional values and socialization that emphasize collectivism, saving face, maintaining harmony, filial piety, interdependence, modesty in self-preservation, and restraint in taking oppositional points of view” (Gay, 2000, p. 105).

Outside of the limited amount of literature that explains culturally relevant pedagogy, very little information is provided as to how the professional development provided to educators helps them become culturally responsive teachers through the use of this pedagogy when teaching students of color.

**Summary**

The intent of this literature review was to provide an overview of knowledge about closing the academic achievement gap through the use of culturally relevant pedagogy. The extensive amount of literature reviewed revealed a gap in research as to how schools and school...
districts prepare teachers to effectively implement culturally relevant teaching strategies as a means of closing the academic achievement gap between students. The review of literature was organized using two categories: (a) an examination of the achievement gap, and (b) an analysis of culturally responsive teaching practices and implementation. The next chapter of this thesis will discuss the study design and methodology.
Chapter 3: Study Design and Methodology

This research used case study methods to explore how the professional development provided by a southeastern school and its school district influenced teachers’ abilities to incorporate culturally responsive teaching practices in their classrooms. This chapter specifies the design of the study, including site and participants, as well as data collection and analysis activities utilized to address the research question. This chapter also addresses the protection of human subject considerations.

Research Question

Specifically, the study was guided by the following research question:

- How does the professional development provided by a southeastern middle school and its school district influence teachers’ abilities to incorporate culturally responsive teaching practices in their classrooms?

This was a qualitative, process-oriented question that allowed for the examination of the process by which teachers acquire culturally responsive teaching techniques. The researcher posed this question to assist in establishing common themes found among teachers regarding their knowledge of culturally responsive teaching practices, as well as their ability to incorporate these practices. The results can be used for further studies related to culturally responsive teaching.

Positionality Statement

The following statement was designed to explain how my experiences have influenced my view of education and my research interest.

I was born in Birmingham, Alabama, and raised by parents that grew up during the Civil Rights Movement. I am of African descent; however, I am told that my mother has a documented
European background, three generations removed. My parents are not sure about the specifics of my mother’s cultural lineage.

My mother earned a master’s degree and became a public school educator. She has worked as an educator since the early 1970s. The commitment and dedication she has demonstrated in educating children has certainly influenced my desire to initially teach and eventually serve as an administrator in the public school system.

My father also has a master’s degree, with a concentration in agency counseling. However, most of his work experiences have been in upper-level management. Throughout my childhood, he served as the vice president of a small consulting firm. As a consultant, one of his responsibilities was to visit state prisons and train prisoners’ officials on how to prepare inmates to re-enter society and the workforce. He also worked as an adjunct instructor for a local junior college. He has demonstrated an untiring commitment to serving the community and educating youth. His professional experiences have helped to heighten my awareness of the many challenges faced by individuals living in poor inner-city communities, and his experiences have further fueled my desire to teach.

When I began my teaching career, I was warned during the interview process as well as the new teacher orientation that many of the students with whom I would interact were gang members and came from broken homes. This fact was stated as though there was a direct correlation between the two. As the years progressed, many of my peers maintained the notion that “those students” could not learn, and they were just attending school because the law required it. Troubled by the insinuations, I experienced a sense of frustration born from the fact that the complaining teachers were White veterans, unwilling to accept the change in the student makeup. Over the years, the student body changed from affluent Whites, with less than 15% of
the student body receiving free and reduced lunch, to a majority population of poor Blacks and Hispanics, with over 85% of the student body receiving free or reduced lunch. However, I also felt a great sense of accomplishment derived from a desire to work harder and to access all available resources to ensure that all students were given the opportunity to learn without fear of one’s biases being confirmed.

Currently, I work as a teacher serving the same population I did in the beginning of my teaching career. Certainly, there are challenges to teaching this population. However, challenges do not give teachers the right not to teach, nor do they impede students’ ability to learn. Hence, this study focused primarily on teachers who taught this population of students. I examined teachers as they instructed students of color and the assistance they received with connecting students’ daily experiences to the content. Working past the attitude I had about some teachers’ interactions with students, and simply listening to what the teachers had to say, were perhaps my greatest challenges in conducting this study.

Methodology

Qualitative approaches in general, and case study methods in particular, were employed as the two key strategies in the research. This section discusses the approaches, particularly their relevance to and for this study.

Qualitative study. According to Andersen and Taylor (2007) and Patton (1990), a qualitative approach is most suitable for the discovery, explanation, and comprehensive understanding of complex processes and activities. Qualitative research examines a complex phenomenon and does not reduce this complexity to variables and causal relationships. The qualitative approach enables significant attention to setting, nuanced complexities, interdependence, context, and idiosyncrasies. The theory of culturally relevant pedagogy, along
with a qualitative approach, oriented this research toward a holistic comprehension of how the professional development received by southeastern Title 1 middle school teachers aided implementation of culturally responsive teaching practices.

Qualitative research centers on the description and understanding of a phenomenon. Describing the phenomenon entails detailed narrations of the activities, context, processes, and participants (Andersen & Taylor, 2007; Patton, 1990). This study’s goal was to portray how professional development provided by a southeastern school and its school district influenced teachers’ ability to incorporate culturally responsive teaching practices in their classroom.

Qualitative methods focus on practice and are considerably more interested in comprehension and description of the dimensions and complexities of the process (Andersen & Taylor, 2007; Patton, 1990). The focal point of this study was the “what” and “how” in respect to teachers developing aspects of cultural responsiveness when teaching students of color. The research focused on understanding how professional development provided by the school and district influenced teachers’ ability to employ culturally responsive teaching in their classes.

Qualitative research includes fieldwork that entails personal and direct interactions in the natural setting of the individuals involved in a phenomenon (Andersen & Taylor, 2007; Patton, 1990). The researcher conducted fieldwork with individuals who worked in a southeastern Title 1 middle school to understand how school- and school-district-provided professional development influenced their ability to perform culturally responsive teaching practices when teaching students of color.

Qualitative method presumes that the researcher merges the data (Andersen & Taylor, 2007; Patton, 1990). In this study, the researcher collected data through observation of the teachers instructing students of color and their White peers, semi-structured interviews with
teachers, and examination of textual evidence, specifically district-provided professional
development materials. Qualitative research specifies how individuals construe and construct
experiences in their respective social worlds. Qualitative methods assume that every stakeholder
offers a unique process perception (Andersen & Taylor, 2007; Patton, 1990). This study directed
attention to school- and district-provided professional development, particularly its vision and
values of the process of developing and supporting culturally responsive teachers; thus, this
research process was inductive.

Qualitative approach is exploratory and concentrates on discovery. This research sought
to discover how the professional development provided by a southeastern middle school and its
school district influenced teachers’ ability to incorporate culturally responsive teaching practices
in their classroom. The research sought to identify and characterize important categories,
dimensions, and interrelationships in the phenomena. Therefore, linking these assumptions
confirms that a qualitative research approach was most suitable for this study.

Case study. A case study approach provides an inquiry mode for in-depth monitoring of
the phenomena. According to Yin (1994), case study is an empirical inquiry that:

- Investigates an ongoing phenomenon within the original context.
- Acknowledges boundaries between context and phenomena that are not obvious.
- Assumes numerous sources of evidence will be used.

Case studies encourage the use of several approaches for data collection and analysis.
Key documented foundational materials and evidence, including participant interviews and
observation of lesson progress (teachers teaching mixed-race classes), were employed as primary
sources for this study.
According to Yin (1994), a case study is appropriate as long as it is relevant. A revelatory case assumes the problem under study in a particular situation is common to others. Discovering and describing aspects of developing cultural responsiveness when teaching students of color might be applicable to other situations within the southeast region of the United States as well as other regions of the country.

There are three types of case research studies (Stake, 1994):

- Intrinsic: researchers review existing cases to gain a clear understanding of the topic being studied.
- Instrumental: a specific case is reviewed in an effort to gain insight on an issue or refine an existing theory.
- Collective: several cases are reviewed concerning a population, phenomena, or general circumstances.

This study was both instrumental and intrinsic in nature. The aim of the research was to develop a holistic understanding of how professional development provided by the school and the school district influenced teachers’ abilities to incorporate culturally responsive teaching practices in their classrooms as a means of narrowing the achievement gap between their White students and their students of color. Through both the intrinsic and instrumental approaches, this study reviewed concerns associated with cultural responsiveness and teaching students of color.

**Site and Participants**

**Study site.** The setting for this study was a middle school located in a large, suburban school district in the southeastern region of the United States. At the time of this study, the school system served approximately 168,600 students in kindergarten through 12th grade. In the 2013-2014 school year, there were 26 middle schools serving sixth through eighth grade in this
district. The middle school used for this study had an enrollment of 878 students in grades 6 through 8. The student body was comprised of 44% African-Americans, 28% Hispanics, 17% Whites, 7% Asians, 3% multiracial, and 1% American-Indian/Alaskan Natives. Additionally, 84% of the students participated in free or reduced lunch (Gwinnett County Public Schools, 2012). The school employed 65 teachers, according to Gwinnett County Public Schools (2012). Of the 65 teachers at this school, 10 teachers had 0-5 years of teaching experience, 22 had been educators for 6-10 years, 19 had been educators for 11-15 years, eight had been educators for 16-20 years, two had been educators for 21-25 years, and four had been educators for 26 or more years. Additionally, 11 teachers at this school held a bachelor’s degree, 38 of the teachers held a master’s degree, 15 held a specialist’s degree, and one held a doctorate degree.

The researcher developed a list of potential study candidates from the current staffing roster of a southeastern Title 1 middle school. The researcher used purposeful sampling techniques to select key participants from the teacher population of the school (Creswell, 2006; Patton, 1990). Participant selection processes consisted of two primary objectives:

- Maximize the breadth of perspectives on how the professional development provided by the school and the school district influenced teachers’ abilities to incorporate culturally responsive teaching practices in their classrooms.

- Focus on the concentration of topics revealed during the data collection, for which the researcher required in-depth explanations, refinement, and characterization.

The participants for this study consisted of six middle school faculty members representing language arts, social studies, math, and science in seventh and eighth grade. In accordance with Yin (1994), each of these teachers was defined as the case for this study. Participants were selected based on the school system and school location for which they
worked. The teachers were observed and interviewed on school grounds, individually, to identify their perception of culturally responsive teaching and its implementation.

**Study participants.** Creswell (2002) suggested that case studies involve three to five participants. This study consisted of five Title 1 middle school teachers. Each was assigned a pseudonym to protect his/her respective identity, specifically April, Beth, Clair, Deb, and Eric. The following descriptions were accurate at the time of this study:

- April, who is in her seventh year of teaching, is an African-American 35-year-old female. April is a seventh-grade language arts teacher that was born in Nashville, TN; however, she lived in Seattle, WA, from the ages of 3-18. April moved to Georgia at the age of 18, where she currently resides with her husband and two children. April has a Bachelor of Arts in English and a Master of Arts in Education.
- Beth, who recently turned 40, is an African-American eighth-grade science teacher who has been teaching a total of six years. Originally from Columbia, SC, she currently lives north of Atlanta, GA. Beth earned a Bachelor of Science degree in biology and later earned a doctorate in chiropractic.
- Clair, a Caucasian wife and mother, is an eighth-grade mathematics teacher who began her teaching career nine years ago. Clair was born and raised in the state of Georgia, where she and her family currently reside. Clair has a Bachelor of Science in applied mathematics.
- Deb, who is also a Caucasian female, has been teaching for a total of 21 years. She is a sixth, seventh and eighth grade math teacher. Deb was born, raised, and currently resides in the state of Georgia. Deb has a Bachelor of Arts in secondary education and a Master of Arts in math education.
Eric, an African-American male, is also a sixth, seventh and eighth grade math teacher. He has worked as a teacher for the past 12 years. Eric is originally from Chicago, IL. He later moved to the Atlanta, GA, area where he and his family currently reside. Eric earned a Bachelor of Science in business administration, a Master of Science in education administration, and an educational specialist degree in education administration.

It is important to note that none of the five participants were raised or taught in the school district for which they worked. It is also important to note that none of them were educated in a school where the population was similar to the one in which they taught.

Data Collection

This study used three approaches to data collection:

- **Documents**: Textual evidence that included primary source materials related to the school and school district’s professional development sessions.
- **Interviews**: Guided interviews with Title 1 middle school teachers.
- **Participant observations**: Classroom observations of Title 1 middle school teachers.

**Documents.** Textual information is relevant to every case study topic, as it can help the researcher discover significance, advance understanding, and determine relevance to the problem (Yin, 1994). The researcher used district-provided professional development materials distributed to teachers via the school system’s curriculum and instruction web page as primary source material. The key criteria for selecting the primary material was based on its authority, which is necessary for establishing the documents’ credibility and relevance because these same documents must be relevant to the study.
Interviews. According to Andersen and Taylor (2007) and Patton (1990), interviews provide an opportunity to collect information and discover details that the researcher would not ordinarily observe. Yin (1994) elucidated further by stating that interviews are an integral part of data collection in case studies, as case studies commonly focus on human affairs.

Through a purposeful sampling approach, the researcher identified teacher participants in the study’s interview and observations phase. Interviews provided a foundation for understanding how teachers in a southeastern Title 1 middle school developed aspects of cultural responsiveness when teaching students of color. The interviews provided historical information, such as background, on the context, origin, and early responses to cultural diversity and culturally responsive teaching. Additionally, they provided information about more recent development activities such as how teachers developed aspects of cultural responsiveness, challenges faced by these teachers and their students, and how the professional development provided by the school and district influenced the teachers’ abilities to incorporate aspects of cultural responsiveness in class, therefore answering the research question.

The interview protocol for this study was based on Gay’s (2002) explanation of culturally responsive teaching. According to Gay, culturally responsive teaching involves many things: course content, learning environment, classroom conditions, student-teacher relationships, and teaching methods. The researcher conducted one interview with all participants; the interview consisted of 14 questions and required roughly one hour to complete. The researcher recorded all interviews via audio recording equipment for subsequent transcription.

Participant observations. Observation of participants implies active engagement with individuals in a natural setting. The researcher observed the selected teachers in their classrooms while teaching students of color. The researcher observed how these teachers employed
culturally responsive methods to increase the students’ class participation. According to Wang and Noe (2010), observations are important to this process because they

- Amplify the researcher’s ability to understand the motivations, opinions, apprehensions, and behaviors of the participants.
- Allow the researcher to perceive the world as participants perceive it, function within their limitations, explore the phenomenon in its natural state, and understand the culture in its surroundings. They provide the researcher access to the responsive feedback provided by participants and thus allow the researcher to be the data source.
- Allow the researcher to build on implied knowledge, derived from the researcher and the participants of the study.

Classroom observations were conducted for each participant over the course of one month, May 2014. During the observations, data on content delivery, teacher-student interactions, and classroom management skills of the participants were collected using detailed field notes. The purpose of the observations was to collect an accurate depiction of the participants in their natural settings (Miles & Huberman, 1994). To avoid additional distractions to the normal classroom environment, classroom observations were conducted from the back of the classroom. In each case, the classroom floor plan was free of any obstruction, which was conducive to observations of the participants’ interactions with their students. Each observation lasted the entire class period of 60 minutes. The participant observations in the study involved observing teachers conducting their lessons in the classrooms. Additionally, the researcher recorded observations in the form of written notes, and provided debriefings following the interviews to ensure that the data and researcher’s field notes were accurate.
Data Analysis

The researcher began the data analysis process by reading all previously recorded transcriptions and breaking them down into smaller sections, as suggested by Creswell (2012). Similarities were then identified, grouped together, labeled, and color-coded, which allowed the researcher to identify prevailing and recurring themes (Creswell, 2012). Ryan and Bernard (2003) suggested that repetition aids the researcher in identifying themes; thus, words and phrases that were consistently repeated were appropriately noted. Through a process of induction, the researcher reported on the data, identifying the categories and working themes. The researcher examined the data for regularities, patterns, and topics while using words or phrases to represent the topics and patterns for the development of coding categories (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). The aim of data coding was to assist in searching for patterns and data themes, as well as to allow for easy analysis and interpretations. The primary source material was undertaken initially to develop a historical reconstruction of the integration of cultural responsiveness in teacher training programs. This source was official records. The researcher documented all the findings from these documents for coding.

The researcher then analyzed the results of the interviews with a focus on the development of cultural responsiveness and practices that affect the implementation of cultural responsiveness in schools. The data were coded into relevant categories as a form of content analysis, which included coding, identifying, and categorizing primary data patterns. Participants’ responses to the interview questions were audio recorded and then transcribed the same day as the recordings. To ensure accuracy of transcriptions, member checks were done within 72 hours of the transcriptions.
A similar process was done for analysis of classroom observations, as Marshall and Rossman (2006) suggested that a comparative analysis is appropriate when comparing one observation to one another as a means of finding similarities and differences. Similar observations were given the same code. The researcher analyzed the results of notes taken during classroom observations with a focus on the teachers’ abilities to implement culturally responsive teaching practices into the content being taught. The observation protocol used during classroom observations was designed to capture multiple aspects of what Gay (2000) described as culturally responsive teaching practices. The use of a single observation provided more authentic data collection and provided participants with less opportunity to prepare to enact what they thought the researcher was expecting to observe.

Document analysis, interview transcripts, and field notes taken during observations were analyzed using descriptive, topic, and pattern coding. The first-cycle coding of the data consisted of in vivo coding, while the second cycle of coding utilized axial coding (Saldaña, 2009).

**First-cycle coding: In vivo coding.** This study used a first-cycle in vivo coding process to code the data as accurately as possible. According to Saldaña (2009), the initial coding simplifies qualitative data into separate pieces, allowing for a focused review and analysis of the data to expose common themes and differences. Saldaña added that initial coding is especially suitable for interview transcripts, thus making it suitable for use in this study since it allowed the researcher to accurately represent the subjects’ views and perceptions. A relevant feature of the in vivo coding process is that it uses the actual words of subjects to enhance the understanding of the issues that affect the study. As a result, it ensured that the researcher accurately understood the significant and individualized views of each study participant (Brint, 2006).
By using in vivo coding, the researcher was able to capture the results of the participating teachers’ responses to the interview questions. This process allowed for the individual views of April, Beth, Clair, Deb, and Eric to be clearly identified and accurately represented prior to additional groupings and filtration. Each participating teacher was asked to respond to a series of questions relating to (a) their personal philosophy on teaching; (b) how they would describe the students they teach; (c) how long they have been teaching in their current system; (d) their understanding of culturally responsive teaching; (e) how they prepare for the instruction they provide their students; (f) the outside resources they use in their class to connect to the various cultures represented; (g) their method of addressing discipline problems in their classroom; (h) how they establish relationships with their students and parents/guardians; (i) how they would describe the relationship they have with the parents of their students; (j) whether they would self-reflect as a culturally responsive teacher, and why or why not; (k) how the school- and district-provided professional development has influenced their thinking about culturally responsive thinking; (l) whether they think that teachers are able to develop on their own; and (m) what components of the culturally responsive professional development that they have received are most influential on their teaching practices.

In short, the responses to the interview questions were as diverse as the group’s ethnicity, age differences, teaching experience, and personal encounters with diverse cultures. However, some responses were quite similar amid the individual differences of the teachers. Eighty percent of the group had similar responses to the question about their understanding of culturally responsive teaching. One member of the group acknowledged that he/she did not have a formal definition of culturally responsive teaching. In response to the question that pertained to their personal philosophy on teaching, 100% of the group provided a response that was fundamentally
the core belief of teachers: “all students can learn.” However, the differences, even in those responses, had much to do with how the teachers approached the subject matter and their awareness of diversity in the classroom. Other differences were quite prevalent in the responses to questions pertaining to (a) how to prepare for the instruction to provide students, (b) what outside resources are used in class to connect to the various cultures represented, and (c) how to describe one’s method of addressing discipline problems in the classroom. Perhaps more so than any other areas, the diversity in the group’s makeup contributed significantly to how each member responded to these questions.

**Second-cycle coding: Axial coding.** To analyze the data while maintaining its integrity, the researcher utilized a second-cycle axial coding method, specifically designed to summarize the data gathered from the first-cycle coding process (in vivo coding process). According to Saldaña (2009), the principle objective of second-cycle coding is to gather the distinct responses from the first cycle and merge them, forming one common theme. The researcher chose to use the second-cycle axial code matrix, displayed in Table 1, because it allowed for the development of a cohesive fusion of the data collected in the first-cycle coding process, which was then organized according to themes. Saldaña also suggested that the ultimate goal of the axial coding method is to organize the data initially isolated during the first coding process. Axial coding allows for identifying relationships between collected data and then reassembling it via renaming based on the most prevailing findings (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Codes and themes were manually recorded using the data collected from documentation, interviews, and classroom observations. No software was used to code any of the data. Throughout this process, transcriptions were reviewed multiple times in an effort to avoid excluding any pertinent information potentially deemed valuable to this study. Participants’
names were not used throughout this process in an effort to maintain their anonymity. Data were kept on a password-protected computer, housed in a secured room in the researcher’s home.

Table 1

*Second Cycle—Axial Coding of Interviewee Synthesis*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Interviewee Synthesis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Please describe your personal philosophy on teaching.</td>
<td>Teachers are to inspire learning; learning is not limited to one type of person, but available to all who are willing; learning is a continuous process; cultural origin/background does not determine one’s academic success.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. How would you describe your students?</td>
<td>Student population consists of mainly ethnic minorities, many of which are considered academically disadvantaged, including those with disabilities, or students coming from low socioeconomic home environments. Typically labeled as at-risk students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. How long have you taught in the present school system?</td>
<td>Ranging from 6 years to 21 years of experience in current school district. All by district standards are considered full-time tenured teachers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. What is your understanding of culturally responsive teaching?</td>
<td>Participants considered awareness of student population in classrooms a strong indication of being a culturally responsive teacher. Sensitivity to students’ cultural differences and the ability to connect content to the cultures represented in the classroom were also deemed as important.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. How do you prepare for the instruction you provide your students?</td>
<td>Participants rely heavily on district-produced academic calendars, which outline the academic standards to be taught.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. What outside resources do you use in your class to connect to the various cultures represented?</td>
<td>A vast majority of participants use the Internet. Other materials include personally acquired reference material and subject-specific periodicals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Describe your method of addressing discipline problems in your classroom.</td>
<td>Expectations are communicated explicitly and students are given opportunities to self-correct negative behaviors after receiving warnings. Administrative assistance is requested in extreme situations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. How do you establish relationships with your students and their parents/guardians?</td>
<td>Various opportunities to communicate with students and parent/guardian are utilized, including group discussions, individual conversations, email correspondence, and parent/guardian conferences.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. How would you describe the relationship you have with the parents of your students?</td>
<td>Less personable relationships are established with parents; however, the relationships established are professional and respectful.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Would you consider yourself a culturally responsive teacher? Why or why not?</td>
<td>Participants considered themselves culturally responsive teachers because of their awareness of the varying cultures within their classroom population and willingness to make adjustments to their teaching routine based on the cultures represented.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. How has the school and district provided professional development?</td>
<td>Participants agreed that neither the district nor the school offered any professional development on culturally responsive teaching practices.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Do you think that teachers are able to develop on their own?</td>
<td>Teachers believed that they are somewhat capable of becoming a culturally responsive teacher on their own; however, the pursuit of such could only be accomplished through true self-motivation.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
13. What components of the culturally responsive professional development that you have received are most influential on your teaching practices?

Participants agreed that no formal culturally responsive professional development had been provided to have an influence on their teaching practices. Some participants noted that as a personal initiative, outside classes had been taken that focused specifically on various cultures.

Validity and Credibility

An important element to any research is use of appropriate instruments that assure the reader and researcher of the quality of its findings and processes (Creswell, 2006).

Quality of data sources. This research employed high-quality data sources. The researcher was assiduous throughout the study to capture quality data that constructed an understanding of developing aspects of cultural responsiveness in teaching students of color. Several procedures assisted in ensuring that quality data were collected, including the use of a primary data source from the school district’s professional development materials, and the use of purposeful sampling to select the participants for the study to ensure authoritative data. Additionally, the researcher recorded the observations and interview progression to prevent data loss and corruption.

Systematic management of data. The researcher implemented a systematic method of data collection and management after making the identification and collection of quality data sources. The following activities assisted in maintaining quality control during data collection:

- Observation: Observational engagement allowed the researcher to develop a genuine understanding of the critical characteristics in the phenomena (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2002).
- Recorded interviews: The researcher used a digital recorder to record interview processing, rather than depending on post-interview write-ups. This enabled the researcher to maximize the use of information collected.
Purposeful sampling: Purposeful sampling enabled the researcher to collect sufficient data to provide detailed accounts of implementation of cultural responsiveness in class.

Data management controls: The researcher applied procedures of data management, such as recording primary source materials and interview results, along with the maintenance of inventories from the collected data, for systematic recording and access.

Protection of human subjects. To protect the participants in this case study and ensure compliance with the current regulatory requirements set forth by Northeastern University for Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval of research using human subjects, the overall proposal was reviewed by the IRB to ensure that the human rights of the participants were protected and to identify any possible dangers to these participants (Creswell, 2009).

In order to sustain protection of human subjects, a sequence of protocols was implemented. First, the researcher sent out a letter to participants informing them of the intention of the proposed study and requesting their participation. Following this step, the researcher provided each participant with a consent form to read and sign. The consent form was required for all interviews and observations. Specifically, the consent form ensured that each teacher’s name would remain anonymous in the research study report by way of researcher-assigned pseudonyms. Through the consent form, participants were informed that they would not receive any remuneration, consequences, or rewards for their decision to participate in this study. Because this study was completely voluntary, participants were made aware of their ability to withdraw, if desired, at any time without penalty.
Finally, it was the goal of the researcher to protect the integrity and reputation of the participant schools, and therefore the researcher shared the analysis and observations with involved administrators and faculty members. The researcher also solicited participants’ ongoing member checks during the course of the study.

Conclusion

This qualitative study sought to examine how the professional development provided by a northeastern school and its school district influenced teachers’ abilities to incorporate culturally responsive teaching practices in their classrooms.

Although various studies about reducing the gap of achievement among students of color and their White counterparts have emerged, through a descriptive and explorative approach, this study examined the application of culturally responsive pedagogy in the education of students of color in a southeastern middle school.

The foundation of this study considered the theory of culturally relevant pedagogy. The researcher obtained data for this study from primary source materials that related to the school district’s professional development, interviews of selected teachers, and observations of how these teachers employed aspects of cultural responsiveness in class. Selection of participants was based on consideration of roles in the implementation of culturally responsive teaching, knowledge, and authority in its implementation, school or organizational affiliation, and overall specialty. The researcher ensured quality and trustworthiness of the research through implementation of procedures that ensured validity of data sources, protection of participants, and proper management of data.
Chapter 4: Report of Research Findings

This study’s primary purpose was to examine the ways in which veteran teachers develop aspects of culturally responsive teaching practices and incorporate those practices into the classroom. The research question that guided the pursuit of this study was the following: How does the professional development provided by a southeastern middle school and its school district influence veteran teachers’ abilities to incorporate culturally responsive teaching practices in their classrooms? The study was designed to explore teachers’ knowledge of culturally responsive teaching practices and relevant support linked to implementing those practices via their respective school systems. Teachers were interviewed and observed to reveal information about their knowledge and understanding of culturally responsive teaching.

This chapter provides a description of the research findings, specifically how teachers developed culturally responsive teaching practices to close the academic achievement gap of students of color. Each participant in the study provided valuable, thorough accounts of their unique experiences in teaching students of color. It proved helpful to gauge the efficacy of their training to assist them in effectively relating the content to the various cultures represented in their classrooms. Analysis of the collected data revealed four common themes among participants: (a) teachers need training (teachers have not been formally trained on the subject); (b) student competence (all students can learn); (c) communication (student-teacher communication); (d) awareness (teachers know who their students are and what their students are doing); and (e) expectations (students know what the teachers expect of them). These themes were derived from the similarities found in each of the responses provided by participants during interviews and the field notes taken during classroom observations. This chapter will provide a
synopsis of the findings revealed during the data analysis, along with a detailed discussion of the study findings based on the five common themes.

**First-Cycle Coding Findings: In Vivo Coding**

The initial analysis of the responses to the interview questions helped to explain how participants (April, Beth, Clair, Deb, and Eric) described their personal experiences with teaching students of color. Although the participants acknowledged that they had virtually no formal exposure to the topic of culturally responsive teaching, each expressed the belief that teachers could teach themselves how to become culturally responsive. The group further expressed the belief that the resources used to engage their students, and their perceived awareness of their students’ cultures, were among the main attributes of their teaching skills that would classify them as culturally responsive teachers.

Ultimately, the initial findings indicated that teachers had limited knowledge regarding the subject of culturally responsive teaching practices. The implication of such findings suggested that practicing teachers need more information on the skills and instructional methods associated with culturally responsive teachers. Following the initial coding, the researcher conducted a second coding process to consolidate the responses and identify common themes.

**Second-Cycle Coding Findings: Axial Coding**

Participants believed that learning is not limited by uncontrollable circumstances and can be obtained by all. It was also noted that most participants considered their students to be “at risk,” specifically minorities with challenging backgrounds, which could be obstacles to learning but surmountable with motivation and awareness of cultural diversities. Overall, participants felt that culturally responsive teaching was based on teachers’ awareness of the cultural diversity
represented in their classrooms and their ability to adjust their content based on the represented cultures.

Additionally, participants agreed that classroom management was important to address student behavior. To maintain a sense of structure in their classes, participants established expectations and communicated those expectations to their students as a means of minimizing negative student behavior. Finally, participants agreed that there had not been any professional development provided by the school or district concerning culturally responsive teaching; however, the vast majority of participants felt that they were culturally responsive teachers, and teachers are capable of developing such skills without formal training.

Document Review

Analysis of the school district’s area of focus for teacher professional development revealed that the intentional areas of interest were accountability and assessment, English language learners, facilities and operations, foreign language, gifted and accelerated programs, health services and school social workers, mathematics, science, and special education and psychological services. Descriptions of specific areas were outlined for each area of training, none of which specified a focus on culturally responsive teaching or any of its practices. Analysis of the school district’s list of professional development areas suggested that participants had not received formal training on the topic of culturally responsive teaching from either the school or the school district.

Classroom Observations

Analysis of the observational data indicated some discrepancies between what participants described as their teaching practices versus their actual teaching. Observations revealed that the majority of participants were not consistent in preparing lesson plans as guides
to their instruction, or visibly listing the standards that would be covered during their class sessions. Additionally, while students appeared to be actively engaged during observed classes, no participants, with the exception of Beth, utilized approaches that were conducive to students working in pairs or groups; rather, students worked independently either on computers or bookwork/worksheets. Observations also suggested that each participant had established some pre-existing standards of classroom behavior that had been shared with the students, as there were no observed instances that would suggest that participants were unable to maintain order in their classrooms.

Finally, there were no observed instances that suggested that participants were attempting to connect the cultural backgrounds of their students to the content students were working on. Beth, however, did conduct an activity that allowed students to express personal connections to the content on their own; she confirmed and expanded on what the students stated. Observations confirmed that participants actively monitored their students’ progress by walking around and, when needed, asking and answering questions to aid students in completing their assignments. A simplified representation of the data recorded is displayed in Table 2.
Table 2

Summary of Classroom Observations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher/ Date Observed</th>
<th>Grade/ Subject</th>
<th>Lesson plan/ learning objective was provided</th>
<th>Students’ culture was linked to lesson</th>
<th>Students were actively engaged</th>
<th>Teacher summarized responses from students</th>
<th>Students worked in groups or pairs</th>
<th>Teacher expectations were stated</th>
<th>Teacher was able to maintain classroom management</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>April/ May 12, 2014</td>
<td>7th/ Language Arts</td>
<td>Yes/Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beth/ May 5, 2014</td>
<td>8th/ Science</td>
<td>Yes/Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clair/ May 8, 2014</td>
<td>8th/ Math</td>
<td>No/No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deb/ May 15, 2014</td>
<td>6th, 7th, 8th/ Math</td>
<td>No/No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eric/ May 9, 2014</td>
<td>6th, 7th, 8th/ Math</td>
<td>No/No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Emerging Themes

The themes that emerged from the interviews and classroom observations addressed both the teachers’ perspectives of culturally responsive teaching and their teaching techniques. Common themes included (a) teachers need training, (b) student competence, (c) communication, (d) awareness, and (e) expectations. The resulting themes revealed essential components needed to assist teachers as they develop culturally responsive teaching practices in an effort to close the academic achievement gap of their students of color.

Teachers need training. As conversations developed throughout the interviewing process, participants expressed a lack of formal training in culturally responsive teaching. All participants shared that neither their employing school nor their school district offered any type of training as assistance to teach students of color. Indeed, several participants became noticeably sarcastic and cynical as they discussed the training provided by the school and school district. Deb, for example, was asked to describe any culturally responsive teacher training she received from the school and/or the school district, and she replied, “They do that?” While initially somewhat humorous, she later indicated that during her years of employment with the school district, culturally responsive teaching or any other specific approaches to teaching students of color were simply never discussed. Deb’s response segued into her personal definition of culturally responsive teaching. She stated, “To me this means that, as educators, we need to be more sensitive to all of the cultures around us. In other words, we need to find ways to make all children from all cultures motivated to be successful in our schools.” According to Deb, education should offer different approaches when teaching multiple cultures.

April’s response was similar to Deb’s. She shared the following: “I can’t recall any professional development provided by the school or district that has influenced my thinking
about culturally responsive teaching.” April was also asked to share what she thought being a culturally responsive teacher meant, and she replied

I think it just means being aware and open to the many cultural differences that exist in modern society. It’s teaching that is aware and acknowledges the diverse cultures within a class. I think culturally responsive teachers use culturally inclusive materials in their classrooms that highlight different genders, cultures, and ethnicities.

Beth’s experience was no different; she too indicated that she had not received any training about culturally responsive teaching from the school or school district. She shared

In six years, I have not attended one professional development seminar focused on culturally responsive teaching. While the school and county have provided some staff development on ELL practices, I do not feel this training has occurred regularly enough to have an impact in my classroom.

Consistent with the previous interviews, Beth was also asked to share her understanding of culturally responsive teaching. She responded as follows:

Culturally responsive teaching means teachers are aware of their students’ environment, interest, history, and needs. A culturally responsive teacher views education through the eyes of his or her students. They take into account the student race, culture, and ethnicity when delivering the content. This makes the subject more relevant to students.

Eric echoed the same sentiments. When asked about the professional development he had received from the school and/or school district concerning culturally responsive teaching, he stated, “I am not aware of any professional development that focuses on culturally responsive teaching.” He too provided his perception of the meaning of culturally responsive teaching, explaining
To be very honest, I don’t have a formal definition of culturally responsive teaching, but if I had to define my understanding of what it means, I would say that the teaching styles and plans could and should be directly related to the student’s culture, his/her way of life, and the way in which the student has been raised.

As this conversation concluded, Eric shared a final thought about his understanding of culturally responsive teaching: “Culturally responsive teaching is incorporating the student body’s cultural values, beliefs, and human interactions in your lessons and activities.”

Although each participant agreed that there had been no professional development about culturally responsive teaching, Clair’s response was slightly different. She too indicated that there had not been any professional development concerning the topic of culturally responsive teaching, but a recent professional development session provided more focus on students of color than any other training she had been offered from the school district. She shared, “I think the Tara Brown meeting was a move in the right direction, but it was just touching the surface of the issues.” Clair shared that the speakers’ focus was to encourage teachers to move beyond their comfort zones and to attempt to perceive education from their students’ viewpoints. Clair was hopeful that the school district was beginning to recognize a need for specific training that focused on the Hispanic and African-American student population; however, she acknowledged that since that one training session, there had not been follow-up sessions or follow-up materials provided. Although Clair appeared to be slightly more aware of the need for specific teacher training concerning teaching students of color, she was also asked to share her understanding of culturally responsive teaching: “Culturally responsive teaching is teaching and honoring different methods of thinking based on student cultures, but it is not changing the names in a word.
problem to be multicultural.” She went on to state, “It involves recognizing the differences of my students and including those differences as relevant connections with content.”

While there were no opportunities to observe any participant behaviors related to professional development, individually, participants were asked to share their personal experience of the professional development their employing school and/or school district had provided about culturally responsive teaching. One after another, participants expressed the absence of such training throughout their teaching career and thus provided a valuable opportunity to discuss participants’ individual definitions of culturally responsive teaching despite their lack of formal training. Participants’ responses provided additional confirmation that culturally responsive teaching was not a topic of interest during professional development sessions. Although each participant was able to provide his/her definition of culturally responsive teaching, the inconsistent definitions of culturally responsive teaching clearly aligned with the theme of “teachers need training” and thus confirmed that participants had not received formal training in this area.

**Student competence.** Throughout the interviewing process, each participant expressed the belief that all students are capable of learning on some level. There were several references made by participants that alluded to such belief; however, as discussions took place, participants became more direct in communicating their feelings. For example, April stated, “I believe that all students have the chance, ability, and capability of achieving their best.” As the conversation continued, she explained

Because I know all students do not learn in the same way, I have my students grouped in twos where they can think, pair, and share their ideas regarding the lessons. Some activities include them reading, writing, and listening, while others include hands-on
activities where they are reading, writing, viewing, and listening, to accomplish the desired outcome of a lesson. This allows all students to experience some level of success regardless of any limitations they may have.

Beth responded similarly when asked about her teaching philosophies: “Everyone is capable of acquiring some form of new knowledge despite their economic, social, or racial background.” Beth spent time talking about the fear older teachers seem to have when it comes to changes in their teaching styles in order to make sure all students’ needs are met, and this conversation served as a segue into Beth explaining

To better meet the learning needs of my students, I have started to incorporate more technology-based activities in my classroom. I use eCLASS two to three times each week. I feel the use of eCLASS has helped to increase student learning because it both allows me to differentiate my lessons and for students to have more control over the pace of their learning.

Clair’s philosophy of teaching closely mimicked that of her peers; she stated, “Learning does not depend on social status, economic background, or the race of a student; teachers are charged with the responsibility of motivating students to achieve their full potentials.” Much of Clair’s conversation focused on the motivation of students and the role she played in that process. She shared the following:

To help keep my students excited about learning, I allow students to write on the smart board, participate in choral response, sometimes I draw names, and other times students write one down then I walk around. When students get a correct answer, I try to reward them by allowing them to push the Easy Button, or at least have one large moving activity a week. The goal is a short one, and one that everyone can be successful at.
When Deb was asked to share her teaching philosophy, she was very slow in responding. She eventually replied by stating that there were so many things that contribute to her beliefs about teaching. She shared some of her experiences as a new teacher, and explained how those experiences changed her approach to teaching. According to Deb, her philosophy of teaching is always changing, but her core beliefs have been consistent. She shared:

Everyone is capable of learning as long as he or she has the right attitude toward the activity that is placed in front of them. Discipline is the key to success, and most times students fail not because they are incapable, but simply because they don’t believe in themselves or have a willing heart to work toward their success.

As Deb continued to reveal why she felt the way she did, she devoted time to explaining the importance of helping students gain more interest in their learning:

I try to motivate my students by utilizing methods such as peer tutoring, elbow partners, exit tickets, and technology such as smart boards. This helps me to gauge student mastery of content and help them to experience some type of academic success, usually, before they leave my class period.

Each participant was asked the same initial question, and every conversation was unique to the individual; however, common among each of the participants was the fundamental belief that all students can learn. Eric, who did not have very much to say during most of the interviewing process, provided a very short but summative response when asked to share his teaching philosophy: “Learning is a continuous process. The more effort one puts in, the better they perform, which in turn increases his or her chances of excelling academically.” Based on participants’ responses, each recognized that learning does not look the same for every student, but all of them were in agreement that every student is capable of learning.
Classroom observations were analyzed as a way to describe instructional practices of participants. Practices noted in classroom observations included questioning, reading, writing, worksheets, and group activities. Each of these instances showed some evidence of participants offering support to aid students in completing their assignments. Students were also encouraged to “try it first” before seeking assistance from the teacher or their peers. As such, these were observed practices that aligned with the theme of student competence, which appeared in teacher interviews.

Overall, the findings were similar when matching data between teacher interviews and classroom observations. Participants reflected on their personal philosophies of teaching, articulating the notion that learning can be obtained by all of their students. Participants insisted that the more students desired to learn, the more they would learn. Ultimately, participants acknowledged that although students might not be excited or willing to learn, it is their responsibility to facilitate the learning process so that they are able to meet the needs of their students.

Communication. The theme of communication derived from this study was yet another aspect of teachers’ perspective of what culturally responsive teaching entails. The concept of positive student-teacher communication is a well-researched topic, and that the theme of communication emerged in this research is not surprising considering all participants were veteran teachers. Overall, participants expressed the importance of building positive relationships with their students, identifying communication as a foundational element in this process. Participants added that their ability to effectively communicate with their students played a significant role in their students’ academic success. Interestingly, participants covered many facets of their communication experiences with their students, including but not limited to the
classroom discussions they had and the practices they had adopted in an effort to teach students how to communicate with others. Participants freely shared the challenges of effectively communicating with some members of their student population and the impact these challenges had on their teaching practices. April, for example, explained the methods of communication she used throughout the year, starting with the first couple of weeks of school:

Class discussions and email exchanges play a huge role in how I get to know my students and how they learn what they can expect to gain from my class. This knowledge helps me in lesson preparation for my students.

Initially, April provided the researcher with what was interpreted as generic responses to additional probing questions, but as the conversation progressed, the researcher asked April to explain how she knew if the students had a clear understanding of what it was she wanted them to know, and she replied

I try to make certain that I have all of my students’ undivided attention when I am giving direct verbal commands. Once I have verbally given the instructions, I have several students to repeat for me what my expectations for the lesson are. Basically, I have the students to repeat the directions for me while others are listening. Sometimes I think it is better communicated when students hear their peers repeat the directions.

April explained that she believed repetition was important for her students because so many of them would not ask her to repeat anything when they are around their peers.

Beth’s response regarding how she built relationships with her students was very similar to April’s. Beth explained that establishing a relationship with her students and their families was sometimes hard because they did not always speak English. She proceeded to describe her experiences in working with her student population:
Communication doesn’t always have to be face-to-face, but it does have to be consistent. Meeting with both the students and parents helps us understand our students’ needs and it helps to create a sense that we are all working as a team to ensure the students’ success.

Beth continued to speak about the language barriers that she is often presented with when teaching her students:

I try to make sure I’m concise when I am giving instructions to students, because I know that students have limited attention spans, and that for some students it makes it more difficult for them to understand if too many instructions are given in a short amount of time. Also, whenever I state something verbally, I make sure the same information is posted on the board so that students can hear and see the instructions. If I feel that a student does not understand my verbal instructions, I will often slow down my speech pattern and/or rephrase the instructions to better help the student process the information.

In a similar fashion, Deb shared her perspective on the importance of communication. She stated,

Determination and hard work always plays a role in students’ academic achievements, but effective communication and the relationship between teachers and students are equally important in their success. Teachers have the responsibility to help students to discover who they are in order to improve in life and excel academically.

Throughout the interview, Deb would often address many concerns before providing a direct answer to the question she was asked. Recognizing that the longer Deb spoke, the more her conversation shifted focus, the researcher constructed questions designed to get her back on the topic of communication. Deb was asked if her perspective on communication (determination and hard work) was the reason her students were able to achieve academically in her class. She
explained that she had tried many approaches over the years to attempt to help her students. Effective communication had certainly proven to work. She stated, “I try to establish eye contact and I use questioning techniques which require students to verbalize instructions.” As Deb concluded, she explained her student population again and reiterated the importance of making sure they understood her.

    Clair was unique in her views and approaches to teaching. She stressed the importance of communicating with her students, and then she became very specific about her methods of communicating:

    When I give verbal instructions, most often I use physical gestures too. Hand movements, and directing attention toward a tangible items are my most common. I also use a lot of analogies and demonstrations when I’m giving out verbal instructions.

Clair explained that as a math teacher, things are very straightforward for her. She expressed that her class periods were too short to add frills and entertainment to her lessons; therefore, all communication had to be purposeful.

    Communication was not a focus for Eric when discussing building relationships with his students; however, when the conversation shifted to classroom management, Eric revealed his passion for effective communication from his students. Eric explained that oftentimes he observes students simply do not listen as they should. He expressed that there is a core problem with most students, which is that they are not taught how to listen or speak to others. Later in the conversation, Eric indicated that he tries as much as he can to help his students see the value in properly communicating with others, stating, “The best way to incorporate what I call ‘communication skills,’ which includes reading, writing, listening, and speaking, is through project based learning.” Eric continued by providing details to his approach: “I frequently assign
projects to my students that are encompassed through teamwork. Each group and team member has to research, write, and present their finished project as a team and specific segments individually.” According to Eric, through constant practice, his students learn the importance of effective communication, as well as how to respond appropriately to their peers and adults.

However, during classroom observations, it appeared as though teacher-centered communication was more prevalent than student-centered communication. Participants were not consistent in communicating the learning objectives verbally or in writing. Teachers were, nevertheless, very willing to answer students’ questions or encourage them to complete a task. Participants exhibiting acts of communication with their students was an observed practice, thereby aligning with the theme of communication that emerged during teacher interviews.

While the findings revealed similarities between teacher interviews and classroom observations, the overall impression of how participants communicated with their students proved professional and heavily geared toward providing instructions or directions. Participants shared their experiences and concerns associated with providing and receiving effective communication when teaching their students. Additionally, they shared methods and approaches they adapted in an effort to better communicate with their students. Ultimately, participants recognized communication as being a necessary element in the teaching and learning process.

**Awareness.** Awareness was the fourth emergent theme of this study. Participants asserted that for one to be a culturally responsive teacher, he or she should be well acquainted with cultural differences that exist in his or her classrooms. During her interview, April was asked to explain the methods she used to prepare lessons for her students. She replied, “I try to prepare lessons that relate and capture the cultural differences that exist in my classroom; this helps me to capture my students’ attention while I’m teaching.” April expressed that knowing
what her students know was a very important part of preparing her lessons: “I walk around to do informal observations of my small group activities. Any student not participating is addressed to ensure that they understand the expectations, as well as to ensure that all students have a role in group exercises.” April explained that monitoring what her students are doing enables her to see what they know, and they are less likely to misbehave.

When Beth was asked about her practices for planning lessons, she explained that she often referred to the Internet. When asked why she found the Internet to be such a valuable source, she stated, “Teachers need to be more aware of their students’ cultural differences when they deliver their lessons. I try as much as possible to show my students that I appreciate them and the cultural diversity they add to the class.” Beth indicated that the Internet gives her ideas that she would not otherwise think of. As the conversation went on, Beth explained that many of the activities she finds have students work in groups. She proceeded by discussing the importance of knowing one’s students and how they behave in certain situations:

I rarely give students a choice concerning group placement. I assign students to collaborative groups to ensure the groups are balanced according to intellectual ability, motivation, and social needs. Also, I always attach some type of assignment/product to small group exercises so that all students are held accountable.

Beth suggested that when teachers know how their students behave, they have a better chance of having productive group interactions.

During the conversation with Clair concerning components of culturally responsive teaching that influenced her teaching practices, she stated, “I learned in my ESOL class that sensitivity of cultural differences is a key element in teaching students that English is their second language. This helps assure students that they all belong and can be successful in my
class.” As the discussion continued, Clair was adamant that the cultural backgrounds of her students are always listed in their permanent folders and all teachers have the ability to find out what the cultural backgrounds of their students are.

While engaged in a similar conversation with Deb, she shared the following: “Awareness of the cultural backgrounds helps in how I respond to my students and how they respond to me. In some cases, I think I become more sensitive to some of their behaviors because I know their cultural backgrounds.” Deb was also asked how she learned of her students’ cultural background, and she too referenced viewing students’ enrollment records to obtain such information.

Observational analysis revealed two very interesting factors. First, there were no practices observed that would suggest that participants were aware of the cultural backgrounds of their students, and second, all participants monitored their students by circulating throughout the classroom. Due to their constant monitoring, they were able to encourage students to complete their work and were able to answer student questions on an individual basis. Consequently, participants were aware of what their students were doing, thus exhibiting some of the practices that were discussed during teacher interviews that contributed to the emerged theme of awareness.

This research set out to understand how teachers incorporate culturally responsive teaching practices into their daily teaching routines. From four of the five participants, it is clear that they recognized the value in teachers knowing the cultural backgrounds represented in their classrooms. Additionally, participants suggested that knowing what students are doing in the classroom and familiarities of student behavior were both essential when preparing lessons. Ultimately, participants recognized that knowing their students as individuals plays an important part in being able to effectively teach their students.
**Expectations.** Participants suggested that students must understand the expected behaviors for their classroom to experience the most of the class offerings. When asked about her approach to classroom management, April stated,

The only way students can learn is through a structured system. Students must observe rules and regulations of not only the school but my classroom. Keeping order allows me to monitor students and address their needs in a timely manner.

As the conversation progressed, the researcher asked April if she felt that her classroom management helps keep her students on task. April then explained several of the approaches she used to make sure her students complete their work. She stated, “At the beginning of the lesson I review each of the expectations or standards for the lesson. I list the expected outcomes, the language objective, and the essential question.” As April finished, she reiterated the fact that her students knew exactly what she expected of them and, in most cases, they are able to meet her expectations.

Eric also focused on aspects of his lesson planning when the subject of expectations was discussed. He shared,

I clearly define my lesson objectives and expected outcomes prior to introducing the lessons to my students. I also identify the objectives covered throughout the delivery of the lesson to check their comprehension and formally assess students at the conclusion on the lesson.

Eric suggested that by providing his students with the goal of the lessons, they were able to better understand what they were expected to learn during the class period.

Classroom management was another topic of discussion that exposed participants’ views of expectations. When the researcher discussed classroom management with Beth, she explained
that her approach was very simple: “Just like the government has deemed laws and regulations as being the best way to monitor human behavior in world, students must be governed in the classroom in order to prevent chaos.” When the researcher asked Beth how her students felt about her philosophy of classroom management, she indicated that she really did not know how they felt, but she knew that they understood what she expected of them based on their behaviors and responses. Clair had a similar philosophy when asked to explain her approaches to classroom management: “Human beings are just like animals and can only coexist peacefully when they are living within a structured environment.” Clair proceeded to share her experiences as a child in school and the expectations her teachers and parents had of her. She explained how those expectations helped her become a better individual: “I tell my students that there has to be order in everything that we do, class work, group discussion, or whatever, in order for everyone to benefit from the activity.” Clair expressed her desire to have a positive influence on her students’ lives by teaching them some of the same values others taught her.

Throughout the interviews, participants frequently spoke of the expectations they had of their students. Analysis of the observational notes revealed that no practices were observed of participants verbally sharing any expectations with their students. It was, however, assumed that the expectations participants had concerning classroom behavior had been shared with their students, since there were no student behaviors that had to be corrected. Two of the five participants were observed as posting the desired outcome of their lesson on the board, which allowed students to view exactly what the teacher expected them to learn. As such, there were some observed behaviors that aligned with the interview responses that led to the emerged theme of expectations.
Overall, the majority of participants were consistent in their belief that expectations were an important part of their students’ success. Analysis of classroom observations offered some support for the responses participants provided, specifically concerning student behavior. Ultimately, participants expressed a divided focus between the expectations they had for their students’ behavior and the expectations they had of students in satisfying the learning objectives.

Conclusion

This study examined how teachers develop culturally responsive teaching practices. The central research question asked how the professional development provided by Georgia County Middle School and the Georgia County School District influenced teachers’ abilities to incorporate culturally responsive teaching practices in their classrooms. The study findings in this chapter were based on analysis of documentation created by the school district, interview transcripts, and observational field notes.

Although the collected data revealed the individual experiences, understandings, perceptions, and beliefs of participants, five themes emerged from the findings, which were organized under the following headings: teachers need training, student competence, communication, awareness, and expectations. The identified themes indicated participants’ exposure to formal training on the subject of culturally responsive teaching, as well as the prevailing skills participants believed were indicators of culturally responsive teachers. The following chapter presents the interpretation of the findings as it relates to the literature review of this study and recommendations for practice and future studies.
Chapter 5: Discussion of the Research Findings

The purpose of this study was to explore how veteran Title 1 middle school teachers develop aspects of cultural responsiveness to aid in the closing of the achievement gap of their students of color. The goal was to gain deeper insight into veteran Title 1 middle school teachers’ understanding of culturally responsive teaching, and how their understanding influences their teaching practices. The researcher attempted to uncover what culturally responsive teaching strategies, if any, were used by participants when teaching students of color. The researcher further attempted to evaluate how this population of teachers develops aspects of cultural responsiveness, and what influences the school and school district have on their ability to incorporate culturally responsive teaching practices into their curriculum.

The research question that guided the pursuit of this study was the following: How does the professional development provided by a southeastern middle school and its school district influence veteran teachers’ abilities to incorporate culturally responsive teaching practices in their classrooms? The five themes generated from the data analysis phase of the study were as follows: (a) teachers need training, (b) student competence, (c) communication, (d) awareness, and (e) expectations. The themes confirmed the gap in empirical data regarding the understanding and perceptions of veteran middle school teachers who are assigned to Title 1 schools located in the southeastern region of the United States and are responsible for teaching students of color. Therefore, this study might add to the growing literature concerning the ways in which practicing teachers become culturally responsive.

In utilizing Ladson-Billings’ (1992) culturally relevant pedagogy as the theoretical lens for this study, the researcher was able to gain an understanding of the participants’ responses and behaviors that contributed to how they interpreted their teaching experiences. Because of the
history participants had in teaching students of color, isolated attention was given to this population. It was their experiences and understandings that directly influenced their behaviors as educators, which ultimately impacted the academic performance and achievements of their students of color.

The lack of knowledge and training among participants regarding the meaning, application, and execution of culturally responsive teaching practices was repeatedly confirmed in the findings of this study. As such, some justification was revealed as to why many veteran teachers have difficulty in helping more of their students of color obtain academic success. The following section is a discussion of the significance of the findings, followed by a discussion of the emerged themes, which reviews each theme and its relationship to the literature review of this study. This will be followed by discussions on the limitations of findings, implications for practice, and implications for future research.

**Significance**

Because a vast majority of educational studies have excluded the culturally responsive teaching knowledge of veteran Title 1 middle school teachers, little is known about their journey to becoming culturally responsive. Through the findings of this study, scholarly practitioners may be able to gain a better understanding of how veteran Title 1 middle school teachers perceive and interpret culturally responsive teaching practices when teaching students of color. From the study’s findings, five common themes emerged, providing a foundational base for further research and for the development of professional training sessions on culturally responsive teaching, particularly for practicing teachers. As such, the findings of this study may be of value to both school-teachers and educational leaders who are responsible for creating professional development programs for educators.
Although this population of teachers is quite similar to teachers in financially affluent schools, their teaching experiences are oftentimes significantly different from those of their counterparts, who are less likely to encounter students who have been labeled “at risk.” It was in that vein that multiple recaps were shared of participants’ teaching experiences, many centered on their overarching belief that all students are capable of learning. The significance of such a belief originates from the fact that, traditionally, this student population has been negatively labeled and treated as if their learning experiences are not as important as their Caucasian or Asian peers. However, during this study, it was apparent that participants desired to teach their students and help them obtain academic success, despite the study’s findings, which suggest that participants had not received adequate training to teach their student population. As a result, participants lacked the necessary skills needed for implementing appropriate teaching methods intended for the diversity of cultures represented in their classrooms.

The findings of this study can provide valuable information for teachers, as well as school and district leaders, as they explore what is necessary to better prepare practicing teachers on how to effectively implement culturally responsive teaching practices into their daily teaching routines. Additionally, these findings may further provide both scholars and educators with additional information that can be used to dispel many of the misconceptions veteran teachers have concerning culturally responsive teaching practices.

Discussion of Findings

The study’s research question played an integral role in the development of the emerging themes that resulted from the data analysis of documents, field notes taken during classroom observations, and participants’ responses to the interview questions. It was through each of these phases that greater insight was obtained as to how participants developed and perceived their
teaching experiences when teaching students of color. The conceptual framework for this study was based on the work of Ladson-Billings (1992, 2009) on culturally relevant pedagogy, as outlined in Chapter 2.

Analysis of the data for this study revealed that each participant lacked formal training on the meaning and practices of culturally responsive teaching. Nevertheless, they all held the belief that all of their students were capable of learning. There was a consistency among participants’ beliefs that knowing their students and knowing what their students were doing was an essential practice of teaching. Also, participants were emphatically consistent in their belief that conversations and written assignments were effective approaches to use when learning about their students. Finally, all participants felt that students needed to have a clear understanding of their classroom norms. As a result, the following five themes emerged from the data analysis of this study: (a) teachers need training, (b) student competence, (c) communication, (d) awareness, and (e) expectations. The emerged themes provided more clarity into participants’ perspectives of culturally responsive teaching as it related to this study’s research question.

The results of this study offer the possibility of providing additional support for existing studies that emphasize the importance of culturally relevant pedagogy, a tool to assist teachers in becoming more culturally responsive in their teaching practices. Additionally, including this population of teachers in academic research may contribute another perspective to the discussions concerning teacher professional development and non-traditional teaching approaches. Such possibility exists due to the lack of sufficient academic literature that explores veteran Title 1 middle school teachers located in the southeastern region of the United States and their experiences with, and understandings of, culturally responsive teaching. Finally, previously conducted studies authenticate the findings of this study, as they suggest that culturally
responsive teaching skills must be taught, refined, and expanded upon through both formal and continual training. The following discussions were arranged to reveal how each emerged theme coincided with the previously reviewed theoretical framework and literature review used in this study.

Alignment of study findings to literature on teachers need training. Ladson-Billings (1994) indicated that specific characteristics determine a teacher’s cultural responsiveness, and such characteristics are developed through professional development. Milner, Tenore, and Laughter (2008) agreed that training sessions are vital to equip teachers with the necessary tools needed to teach diverse student populations effectively. Data analysis of documentation, interview responses, and classroom observations revealed an absence of professional development focused on the meaning and practices of culturally responsive teaching. Even though conversations disclosed participants’ desire for their students to experience academic success, there were clearly conflicting opinions and many struggles as to how participants approached such tasks. Villegas and Lucas (2002) recognized that practicing teachers are often limited in their teaching styles and approaches and suggested that their beliefs about themselves, education, and cultural diversity must change. Sleeter (2014) further explained that such a shift toward culturally relevant pedagogy must be taught throughout various points of teachers’ educational experiences.

While participants provided a valiant attempt to define culturally responsive teaching and its practices, the data analysis revealed obvious gaps in their attempts; the lack of formal training on the subject prohibited their ability to accurately offer a precise explanation of the meaning of culturally responsive teaching or its practices. According to Cohen and Hill (2001), such gaps in knowledge can be addressed through the professional development teachers obtain. Specifically,
research (DuFour & Fullan, 2013) indicated that for teachers to acquire and develop culturally responsive teaching skills, school districts must foster opportunities for teachers to adjust and buy into different approaches of teaching.

According to Zozakiewicz (2010), culturally responsive teaching emphasizes culturally relevant teaching practices, while embracing the belief that traditional teaching approaches must be reevaluated. It has been established that traditional educational classes rarely prepare aspiring teachers to become culturally responsive or provide opportunities to develop an understanding of cultural relevant pedagogy. The data analysis of this study revealed that the lack of professional training significantly influences participants’ inability to provide an adequate response to their understanding of culturally responsive teaching. Thus, the results of this study aligned with the literature regarding the need for teachers to receive professional development training for culturally responsive teaching.

Alignment of study findings to literature on student competence. According to Parsons, Travis, and Simpson (2005), culturally responsive teachers believe that their students are capable of learning; they are able to express their appreciation for their students’ cultural differences by using the experiences of their students and connecting them to the curriculum, thus increasing their students’ chances of gaining mastery over the content. Throughout the interview sessions, all study participants shared the belief that each student has the ability to learn. As conversations progressed, participants indicated that district standards determine the curriculum, and the curriculum calendar was the tool used to dictate what standards are taught and when they are taught. Participants indicated that teachers are permitted to use additional resources if they wish; however, a very limited amount of outside resources was mentioned when discussing with participants how they connected the curriculum to the cultural backgrounds of
their students. Likewise, analysis of field notes taken during classroom observations revealed that many of the additional resources mentioned during interviews were not observed as being utilized in participants’ classes. While participants shared multiple teaching practices that are used in their classrooms, the data analysis did not indicate that the cultural differences of participants’ students were identified, nor was any portion of the curriculum linked to the different cultures represented in their classrooms.

Overall, the study results did not align with the literature regarding teachers’ belief of their students’ learning ability. According to Gay’s (2000) framework for Culturally Responsive Teaching, teachers should execute lessons that empower student learners by developing multiple tasks for students to complete and multidimensional resources and materials to accommodate those tasks. By doing so, teachers create learning environments that encourage students to not only think critically but also form a sincere respect for both their cultural backgrounds and the cultural backgrounds of those with whom they interact. Such practices help to build students’ self-confidence and encourage them to become advocates for themselves and others.

According to Schmidt (2005), culturally responsive teachers offer support to help their students’ mental capacities expand. While all participants verbally expressed their feelings regarding their students’ learning capability, participants did not express, nor was any practice observed, indicating that participants designed their lessons to include multiple tasks, or multiple approaches, to completing assigned tasks. Additionally, analysis of data collected during participant interviews and classroom observation revealed no indication that participants utilized any teaching practices that would encourage their students to acquire or develop a sense of academic authority as a result of the lessons being taught. Ultimately, there was no evidence to confirm that participants’ beliefs in their students’ ability were supported by any practice of
culturally responsive teaching. On the other hand, the study’s findings concerning student competence revealed a lack of knowledge among veteran educators in utilizing culturally responsive strategies to encourage and foster students’ academic growth and success.

**Alignment of study findings to literature on communication.** Gay (2000) asserted that effective cross-cultural communication is an essential element of being a culturally responsive teacher. Talbot (1997) went further to suggest that in order for students to obtain an increase in academic achievement, they must actively engage in the communication process. Based on the analysis of collected data during this study, each participant used various strategies to communicate with his/her students, as documented in Chapter 4. Participants stated that in their effort to learn about their students, both verbal and nonverbal communication were utilized. Study participants also indicated that they frequently used verbal communication to express their expected classroom behaviors to their students, as well as the expected outcome of the lessons being taught, based on the standards associated with those lessons. Finally, participants indicated that communication was necessary when establishing relationships, not only with their students but also with the parents or guardians of their students. While participants utilized communicating to learn about their students and build relationships so that they could “connect” with their students, the practices used were not exemplary of culturally responsive strategies.

When reviewing the topic of communication, the study findings did not completely align with the literature. According to Stiggins (2002), teachers that engage their students in the communication process empower their students to set and accomplish goals for academic success. Although participants seemed to understand the importance of communication when seeking to help their students experience academic success, other critical factors associated with the communication strategies found among culturally responsive teachers were not revealed.
during the data analysis. Studies suggest that culturally responsive teachers constantly communicate with their students in a manner that reflects their students’ cultural values and beliefs (Delpit, 2006; Gay, 2000).

Analysis of the data collected revealed that participants used both written and verbal communication to explain the lessons being taught; however, there were no data to support that the communication between participants and their students was the result of participants having any knowledge of their students’ cultural backgrounds or that they considered the values or beliefs associated with the varying cultures. Moreover, there was no evidence that suggested that the communication between the participants and their students was ever designed to make any attempt to link the content being taught to the cultural backgrounds of their students, or assist students in setting academic goals. Therefore, the study findings suggest that there is a lack of understanding as to how to communicate effectively with students, as well as how to use the information gathered from the communication to help in the teaching of the curriculum.

**Alignment of study findings to literature on awareness.** According to Ladson-Billings (1997), culturally responsive teaching is a pedagogy that considers a student’s culture as one of the most important elements of the student’s learning experience. Data analysis revealed that participants acknowledged that knowing their students’ cultural origin was an important factor when teaching; however, with the progression of conversations, it was evident to the researcher that participants had limited knowledge of their students’ culture, but had a sound familiarity of their students’ ethnicity. Beyond the ethnicity of their students, participants did not suggest that the other aspects of their students’ cultural background was a determining factor in any aspect of their interactions with their students. Gay (2001) insisted that teachers’ knowledge of the cultural diversity represented in their classrooms should not be limited to a mere awareness, or general
conception, of what differentiates one ethnicity from the other but rather a detailed understanding of factual information concerning each culture linked to the different ethnicities represented in their classes.

Hyland (2005) asserted that teachers must deliberately gather information through which the cultural customs, languages, or values of their students can be taught. Hyland further suggested that teachers should use the gathered information to guide their instruction, thereby increasing their students’ chances of obtaining academic success. While participants insisted that their “awareness” determined which materials were used to incorporate cultural diversity in their teaching practices, no collected data supported that notion. In fact, there were no data that suggested participants intentionally attained any materials or cultural background knowledge that could be linked to their students’ cultural backgrounds.

Burnette (1999) maintained that culturally responsive teachers purposefully take time to learn about the cultural backgrounds and interests of their students as they seek to establish content relevance for their students. Hilliard (1997) went further to recommend that teachers should integrate elements of the cultural backgrounds of their students into their lessons. Additionally, teachers should understand and use historical elements of their students’ cultural experiences if they want to bring relevance to the lessons they are teaching students of color. The analysis of data collected for this study provided no evidence that would suggest that participants made any attempt to gain any specific cultural references associated with the varying ethnicities of their students.

Studies about culturally responsive teaching emphasized the importance of teachers understanding cultural features and contributions of the different ethnic groups represented in their class (Smith, 1998). When analyzing the data collected for this study with regard to the
subject of awareness, the results were not supported by the literature. Analysis, however, revealed that participants had no clear understanding of the variance in the ethnicity and culture. Although participants claimed that outside resources were utilized to help students make a connection to the content, the data analysis was unable to support any specific measures that were taken, beyond the use of general assumptions, to link the curriculum content to students’ cultural backgrounds. In situations like these, Gay (2001) contended that such misconceptions frequently occur because teachers are unfamiliar with the concept of culturally responsive teaching and lack the necessary training to include the contributions of different ethnicities into the specific content they are teaching.

**Alignment of study findings to literature on expectations.** Ladson-Billings (1995) explained that culturally responsive teachers hold their students of color to a high level of expectations. She asserted that when teachers do so, it helps to strengthen their students’ self-confidence, foster a more productive learning experience, and increase the intellectual development of their students of color. Analysis of data for this study suggested that participants’ students were held to some level of expectations. Frequently, participants mentioned that their students should understand that school is not always easy and that through hard work they can achieve academic success. More often than not, the expectations expressed by participants focused on how students should conduct themselves, with academics being a by-product. Participants insisted that students need to know what is expected of them in terms of behavior and performance if they are to succeed academically. Analysis of the data collected revealed that all participants implemented some type of strategy to ensure that students were able to satisfy teachers’ expectations of completing their assignments; however, there were no data to support
the notion that participants purposely provided opportunities to develop skills beyond those
determined by their employing district as part of their curriculum’s content.

The study’s findings regarding expectations did not align with the literature. Although
classroom management and student behavior have a major influence on students’ academic
achievement, the literature pertaining to culturally responsive teaching practices emphasizes that
the expectations teachers have for their students should result in intellectual growth. As such,
culturally responsive teachers set expectations for their students and share with their students the
desired academic performance, level of engagement, and overall achievement behaviors they
want to see (Kozleski, 2010). Results of the data analysis revealed an apparent lack of
knowledge among participants concerning the purpose of student expectation, its expression, and
the impact it can have on students’ development, both academically and personally. Both
Ladson-Billings (1995) and Gay (2001) stressed the importance of consistency and
encouragement as teachers work toward increasing the academic performance of their students of
color. They suggest that the academic performance of students should be the overarching drive
that determines the expectations teachers have for their students. The analysis of data collected
during this study provided no indication that participants intentionally linked the expectations
they have for their students to the amount of intellectual growth they desired to see in their
students, nor was there any indication that participants catered their teaching to aid in the
development of their students’ critical thinking skills.

Limitations of Findings

This study contributes a qualitative perspective of how veteran Title 1 middle school
teachers perceive and acquire aspects of culturally responsive teaching practices; however, there
are limitations in this study. First, the study’s sample size was limited to five teachers. A larger
number of teacher participants would amplify a similar study and provide opportunities to increase the amount of information that is collected concerning veteran teachers’ knowledge and perceptions of culturally responsive teaching and its practices. Second, this study lacked Caucasian male teachers, Hispanic teachers, or Asian teacher participants. While there was a diverse range of teaching experiences represented, all participants were either African-American male, African-American female, or Caucasian female. Thus, the lived experiences and perceptions of Hispanic teachers, Asian teachers, or Caucasian male teachers were not expressed in this study.

Third, this study did not include students taught by the participants. Adding this population to the study would provide an additional perspective of those most impacted by such a study. Future studies that aspire to expand this investigation should consider including this population in an effort to capture the lived experiences and perspectives of students of color taught by veteran teachers. Fourth, sixth-grade teachers were not in the study. Sixth, seventh, and eighth-grade teachers were invited to participate in this study; however, no dedicated sixth-grade teachers responded to the invitation. In the future, this study should consider using multiple school locations in an effort to increase the potential that teachers from all grade levels will participate.

Fifth, the researcher had a short span of time to collect data. Due to the timing of this study and the reassignment of location for some participants, data had to be collected in roughly a six-week period, near the end of the school year. Future studies should consider the expansion of the allotted time to conduct such a study so that multiple interviews and observations can be conducted. By doing so, participants will have multiple opportunities to delve deeper into their experiences and perspectives of culturally responsive teaching.
The final limitation of the study was the absence of school and district leaders’ perspectives concerning the topic of culturally responsive teaching and teacher professional development. Leaders at both the school and district levels were invited to participate; however, neither group responded to the researcher’s invitation. Future expansion of this study may aspire to consider including multiple schools and districts, which will increase the probability of individuals in leadership positions participating. Including this population will provide the researcher with opportunities to gain information from yet another perspective regarding teacher professional development, its goals, and its intentions, as they relate to the culturally responsive teaching practices of veteran teachers.

**Implications for Practice**

The empirical data from this study may provide valuable information to educators and educational leaders responsible for designing professional development programs for practicing teachers. The study’s findings revealed thematic consistencies as well as individual perspectives of veteran Title 1 middle school teachers who primarily taught students of color. The findings also revealed a significant lack of knowledge among participants concerning the topic of culturally responsive teaching practices. While the main objective of this study was based on the notion that veteran teachers must be taught how to implement culturally responsive teaching strategies into their daily teaching practices, this study’s findings suggest that teachers, as well as school and district leaders, should focus on improving teacher instructional practices that benefit all learners, specifically students of color.

Recognizing that most traditional college courses provide students with very little exposure to educational philosophies like Ladson-Billings’ (1992) culturally relevant pedagogy, providing teachers with professional development that focuses on Gay’s (2000) framework for
Culturally Responsive Teaching can provide them with the opportunity to acquire skills that can effectively and efficiently be employed during their daily teaching practices. Although many will likely find it challenging to appreciate the value of such professional development, it is nonetheless necessary that teachers prove capable to analyze and adjust their instructional practices to meet the needs of all students, particularly their students of color, so that the professional development can be more accurately evaluated.

Results of this study suggest the need for more culturally responsive teaching training for practicing teachers. Based on the data analysis for this study, and the admitted lack of formal training participants received on the topic of culturally responsive teaching, the following sections will cover recommendations made for further research, for teachers, and for the school and the school districts in which teachers are employed. Such recommendations are suggested as a means of assisting teachers in acquiring and executing culturally responsive teaching strategies while working with their students of color.

**Recommendations for Further Research**

Although this qualitative case study was limited to five participants, the perspectives shared offered valuable insight into the experiences and perceptions of teachers that teach students of color. Recognizing that the topic of culturally responsive teaching is becoming a more frequently discussed topic among educational leaders, the quest to bridge the academic gap between students of color and their Caucasian and Asian peers remains constant. Based on the themes and findings of this study, it is evident that more research needs to be done in this area. To further this study, the researcher recommends conducting research in additional schools both within and outside of the district. Perhaps future researchers will gain a greater insight into
veteran teachers’ understandings and perspectives of culturally responsive teaching and the influence schools and school districts have on teachers’ ability to implement such practices.

Based on the findings of this study, using a larger sample population with similar characteristics in terms of race, gender, and ethnicity would be another suggestion for investigation. Such stipulations for participating in the study may reveal similarities and/or differences in perceptions or practices among the different groups, hence increasing the possibility of obtaining more detailed information on the experiences of veteran teachers as they relate to culturally responsive teaching. In addition, delving further into this matter with a more diverse population would offer school and district leaders the opportunity to design culturally responsive professional development courses. The focus of these courses can address the apprehensions found among different groups of teachers responsible for teaching diverse student populations. Thus, a greater effort to form such documentation can ensue and then be provided to teachers responsible for teaching culturally diverse students. Finally, the researcher recommends that future studies conduct a comprehensive evaluation of the policies and practices that impact the abilities of teachers to implement culturally responsive teaching strategies. Results of this evaluation may provide a deeper review of the effectiveness of the professional development teachers receive, as well as offer an outline as to how educational leaders can structure future culturally responsive teaching support to practicing teachers.

The findings of this study indicated the use of several strategies and beliefs that were common among many of the participants; however, none of the findings were completely supported by the literature presented in this study. Thus, the information revealed can clearly offer additional support to the field of education regarding the growth and development of the
benefits already linked to the use of culturally responsive teaching practices when teaching students of color.

**Recommendations for School and District Leaders**

Gay (2000) contended that preparation programs that focus on culturally responsive teaching provide teachers with the foundational information needed to prepare to work with students of color. It is through such training that teachers are given instructions regarding communication variations that exist among ethnic groups, as well as the cultural values associated with those ethnic groups. In their quest to increase the academic success of students of color, district and school leaders might consider implementing culturally responsive teaching professional development standards as a part of their ongoing training initiatives. Gay suggested that by implementing culturally responsive teaching training, teachers can gain an understanding of how to mold students’ attitudes about learning by creating an environment that encourages students to actively participate during lessons. By understanding this concept, school and district leaders can offer assistance to teachers in the following ways:

- Make provisions for professional development that focuses on culturally responsive teaching. This requires subsequent trainings on a continuing basis, focusing specifically on ways to identify and utilize teaching approaches that include the cultural similarities and differences of students.

- Allow time during staff training for teachers to address specific concerns relative to the implementation of culturally responsive teaching practices.

- Create an environment during curriculum meetings that allows teachers to collaborate with one another concerning culturally responsive strategies used in specific content areas.
Recommendations for Schoolteachers

Study results revealed that participants used multiple teaching strategies in their attempts to ensure their students were engaged throughout the class period; however, these strategies are not necessarily considered culturally responsive strategies. Hyland (2005) contended that culturally responsive teachers are interested in learning about their students and the communities in which they reside. It is suggested that culturally responsive teachers intentionally seek out information to learn about the specifics concerning each ethnic group’s cultural norms and values that are represented in their classroom. Based on the results of this study, teacher recommendations are:

- Attend classes/trainings that are designed to assist teachers in becoming more culturally responsive.
- Create and use lesson plans that have been modified to make a connection between the curriculum and elements of students’ cultural backgrounds. Special attention should be given to activities that develop students’ critical thinking skills.
- Take the additional time needed to learn about the cultural background of each student. Teachers who purposefully create lessons that make a connection to their students’ cultural backgrounds are typically the teachers who make the lesson more relevant to their students.
- Attend events hosted in students’ communities. Teachers will most likely develop a stronger understanding and appreciation for the social customs and cultural norms of their students by doing so.
Conclusion

This study provided an opportunity to learn about the perceptions and practices of five Title 1 middle school teachers who had several years of experience teaching students of color. Collectively, participants expressed a genuine love for their students and the teaching profession. There were expressions of mixed emotions ranging from excitement to discouragement as they shared experiences about teaching students of color in a Title 1 school. However, it was quite evident to the researcher that the emotions were nestled in the center of the devotion they had for their students and the teaching profession. Although each participant lacked formal training in the area of culturally responsive teaching, each believed that his/her teaching skills were sufficient to identify them as culturally responsive. Participants did not hesitate to explain their strategic attempts to promote their students’ academic success, emphasizing the use of multiple tools to aid in connecting the curriculum to the perceived cultural backgrounds of their students. It was apparent that participants’ approaches to teaching kept students busy, but it was equally apparent that teachers needed to learn and understand the formal meaning of culturally responsive teaching and what it entails.

Generally, teachers have little to no influence on what population of students they will be assigned to teach. However, at some point in their careers, it is almost certain that they will teach students of color. Therefore, it is essential that educators are equipped with the necessary skills required to meet the academic needs of students coming from diverse populations and backgrounds (Haberman, 1994). Gay (2000) suggested that culturally responsive teachers are able to create a learning environment that encourages students to value their cultural differences and respect the cultural differences of their peers. She added that culturally responsive teachers have the ability to apply aspects of their students’ cultural backgrounds into their teachings rather
than simply using their cultural origins as a point of reference. It is at this point that culturally responsive teaching takes place and meaningful connections can be made by students in terms of connecting their lived experiences to what they learn in class.

Throughout this study, good faith efforts were revealed of participants’ attempts to incorporate cultural diversity in their teaching approaches; however, none demonstrated the fundamental principles of culturally responsive teaching. Based on the information gathered from this study, and in congruence with the literature review completed for this study, the findings are relevant and suggest that teachers have not received the culturally responsive training needed to efficiently and effectively bridge their students’ cultural backgrounds to the content being taught. Dooley (2004) suggested that these results are not isolated, and the lack of teacher preparation spans across the country. Consequently, a vast majority of teachers in the public education sector are ill prepared to teach within cross-cultural learning environments.

Culturally responsive teaching practices are the result of the theoretical framework of culturally relevant pedagogy; becoming a culturally responsive teacher extends past a perceived cultural awareness and involves precise strategies applied to teaching as a result of the cultural backgrounds of students being taught. The findings of this study revealed that participating veteran middle school teachers were not knowledgeable of culturally responsive teaching practices; thus, it is the researcher’s opinion that in the participants’ quest to increase the academic achievement of their students of color, they must be educated on the multi-dimensions of culturally responsive teaching. By doing so, they will acquire the pedagogical skills required to meet the academic needs of their culturally diverse student population and to help prepare them to become productive members of a culturally diverse society (Uchida, Cetron, & McKenzie, 1996).
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS
Interview Questions for Teacher Participants

Background Information
1. Tell me about yourself (name, places you have lived, languages spoken, etc.).
2. Please describe your personal philosophy on teaching.
3. How would you describe your students?
4. How long have you taught in the present school system?

Planning
1. What is your understanding of culturally responsive teaching?
2. How do you prepare for the instruction you provide your students?
3. What outside resources do you use in your class to connect to the various cultures represented?
4. Describe your method of addressing discipline problems in your classroom.

Relationships
1. How do you establish relationships with your students and their parents/guardians?
2. How would you describe the relationship you have with the parents of your students?

Professional Development
1. Would you consider yourself a culturally responsive teacher? Why or why not?
2. How has the school and district-provided professional development influenced your thinking about culturally responsive teaching?
3. Do you think that teachers are able to develop on their own?
4. What components of the cultural responsive professional development that you have received are most influential on your teaching practices?