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CULTURALLY RELEVANT PEDAGOGY IN PRACTICE: USING CRITICAL
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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the purpose of urban k-12 public schools and identifies the explicit and implicit ways in which they disrupt and limit urban students' opportunities. Through interviews with white teachers in urban schools, the study investigates how white supremacy, inequity, biases, and deficit mindsets curtail student achievement and dispossess students of their education. Based on the research findings, and the framework of critical whiteness, the dissertation examines classroom strategies and pedagogical measures to enhance white urban teachers' critical practices, enabling them to deploy their power, authority, and privilege to *disrupt* students' education enabling them to deploy their power, authority, and privilege to disrupt the education system's inherent racism. This study also examines how teachers can utilize their positions to foster equity in student achievement, interpersonal relationships, curriculum, and discipline practices. The project presents professional development designed to help teachers navigate issues of poverty, privilege, and policy, creating space for them to shift power and voice to their students. Results demonstrate that such professional development can help urban white teachers implement culturally relevant curriculum and humanistic pedagogical practices.

Chapter One

Importance of Critical Thought

“Connecting with students from diverse backgrounds takes conscious effort.”¹

-Aimee Courville Myers

When teachers are faced with cultural disconnection- the sense that they are not communicating effectively with their students due to different cultural backgrounds-their job is to learn and relearn about their students’ diverse lives and lived experiences. Connecting with students, as the quote above suggests, is the guiding principal of this research inquiry into the relationship between white teachers and their work in communities of color. This critical awareness is a developed skill, one that I did not possess at the beginning of my career, and a skill that I still work to develop each day. During my student teaching semester in a large urban school district in 2013, I struggled to understand cultural clashes and to address my own biases as a working-class white woman. I began working as an English teacher in a high-need, low-socioeconomic-status middle school, and I grappled with discipline practices, curriculum, and relationships. Patrick Camangian’s work on culturally relevant pedagogy reflects the issues I faced and my need to reimagine education. “Culturally relevant pedagogy rests on three propositions . . . [students must] experience academic success . . . develop and/or maintain cultural competence . . . develop a critical consciousness through which

1. Aimee Christina Myers, *Learning from Student Perceptions: A Dialogical Approach to Culturally Relevant Pedagogy* / by Aimee Christina Myers., 2017. (3).

they challenge the status quo of the social order.”² Exploring Camangian’s ideas left me with two critical questions: How could I (re)learn to engage with students with different backgrounds, and how could I bring critical consciousness to my own teaching practice? Working with Latino students in an urban school on the south side of Oklahoma City forced me to rethink about myself, reflect on myself, and understand my position as an authority figure, educator, and caregiver to students. I began to understand what it meant to teach with humanistic pedagogical practices, which Camangian describes as pedagogies that reeducate young people on how to have intersectional “racial, gendered, socioeconomic”³ relationships. In his view, humanizing pedagogies illustrate how intersecting systems of bias, oppression, and dehumanization intersect to influence the overall schooling experience.

Teaching at this school forced me to think about myself, reflect on myself, and understand the position I held as an authority figure, educator, and caregiver. I realized that my teacher education program had not prepared me for the reality of working as a white educator in an urban district with primarily students of color. I did not understand what a culture clash was because I had never had one before. I had never had to grapple with the dark issues of bigotry, stereotypes, and systemic racism. My process of learning led eventually to this dissertation, in

2. Patrick Roz Camangian. "Teach like lives depend on it: Agitate, arouse, and inspire." *Urban Education* 50, no. 4 (2015): 427.

3. Camangian, "Teach like lives depend on it: Agitate, arouse, and inspire," 449.

which one of my goals is to identify positive teacher attitudes informed by culturally responsive behavior to engage with urban students in classrooms and communities of color. Likewise, this project will identify negative teacher attitudes, informed by stereotype, that prevent successful engagement.

As I immersed myself in scholarship that challenges the power structures marginalizing minoritized populations, I was forced to reflect on my own complicity. These reflections sometimes felt uncomfortable or even threatening. I remember feeling defensive at first, thinking to myself, “Why do I need to change? Shouldn’t the kids be more like me?” I was grasping for what Michelle Fine refers to as “protective pillows.” In her words, “Whiteness accrues privilege and status; gets itself surrounded by protective pillows of resources and/or benefits of the doubt; . . . [it] repels gossip and voyeurism and instead demands dignity.”⁴ These metaphorical pillows allowed me, a white woman, to disengage from the complications surrounding race and culture. It centered both my whiteness and my discomfort. Barbara Applebaum and Megan Boler discuss the benefits of such discomfort: it “advances... [and] invites students and educators to shift out of their comfort zones by critically assessing their most cherished beliefs and habitual social practices in order to open up a space where individual and social transformations become possible.”⁵ I had to rethink what it

4. Michelle Fine, *Witnessing Whiteness*. In M. Fine, L. Weis, C. Powell, & L. Wong, (Eds.), *Off White: Readings on race, power, and society* New York: Routledge, 1997. (57).

meant to educate. The “habitual social practices” came from a culture of German-American sense of “how it’s done” and were poorly suited to the needs and lives of the students who sat in my classroom. I thought I knew how to teach, but the students reminded me through these series of cultural clashes that I could not remind me that I could not maintain my cultural ignorance if I wanted them to succeed. I would have to adapt to the students I was teaching if we were to be successful. I thought I knew how to teach, but repeated incidents of miscommunication with my students reminded me that I could not be complicit if I wanted them to succeed. Robin DiAngelo carries the critical pillow metaphor further, stating that protective pillows insulate our whiteness, and “build white expectations for racial comfort while at the same time lowering the ability to tolerate racial stress.”⁶ In my whiteness, I believed I was right, I was correct, I was what my students *should* be, and I struggled to understand why I wasn’t able to reach them. I reinforced and normalized whiteness. So, I had to relearn and unlearn. Cheryl Matias writes, “Only when society rightfully redistributes the burden of race off People of Color’s shoulders and to those who benefit from our subjugation, can pain be alleviated.”⁷ With this in mind, my aim in this project is

5. Barbara Applebaum. "Comforting Discomfort as Complicity: White Fragility and the Pursuit of Invulnerability." *Hypatia* 32, no. 4 (2017): 863. (Original Citation) Megan Boler, 1999. *Feeling power: Emotions and education*. New York: Routledge. 4.

6. Robin DiAngelo, and Michael Eric Dyson. *White Fragility*. Beacon Press, 2018. (55).

to challenge white educators to grapple with their own complicity in the subjugation of students of color, while also working to dismantle the systems of power present in both classrooms and curricula that harm communities of color.

REALIZING THE CONSCIOUSNESS GAPS

It is important to frame myself within the context of this research study as I navigate and better understand myself in relation to the power and authority that I have while teaching. To teach is to learn, and this dissertation will be an extension of this reflective practice. Building the ability to think reflexively about my actions, critically analyzing how I teach, is a powerful journey. Reflexivity allows me to learn and relearn. As teachers, we must admit when we don't know, and I came to realize that I did not *know* my students or the community and school I was teaching in. I also realized I had little critical cultural awareness, nor did I *understand* the needs of the students I served. In Irizarry's *The Latinization of U.S. Schools*, chapter author Jasmine Medina illustrates teachers' common cultural unawareness when preparing lessons and working with students of color: "I think part of the issue is that most teachers who aren't Latino don't know much about Latinos."⁸ This was certainly true in my case. I knew that cultural differences existed, but I didn't know how to navigate them. At first, I didn't even

7. Cheryl E Matias. "On the "Flip" Side: A Teacher Educator of Color Unveiling the Dangerous Minds of White Teacher Candidates." *Teacher Education Quarterly* (Claremont, Calif.) 40, no. 2 (2013): 57.

8. Jason G Irizarry, *The Latinization of U.S. Schools: Successful Teaching and Learning in Shifting Cultural Contexts*. London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2016: 61.

think it was possible to navigate them within my own classroom. Medina continues, “Since [teachers] don’t know much about Latinos, they too, may not think that there is anything related to Latino history, literature, and so on worth teaching. So, they teach the same content they learned and don’t try to tailor the curriculum to meet the specific needs of marginalized groups.”⁹ This reflects my own first year of teaching, after student teaching, when I worked in a middle school in Oklahoma City’s north side, a diverse neighborhood characterized by a mix of Black, Latino, Indigenous, and Asian-American students. . I had all of my lessons prepared before I ever stepped into the classroom. I had unit ideas that I had planned years in advance during my undergraduate course work. I planned to teach Edgar Allen Poe’s short story “Masque of the Red Death” because I had loved it as a student and thought my brand-new students would love it too. As I passed out the short story packet, perfectly stapled, my students’ faces showed their lack of interest. I remember using all my energy to get students interested in the rich prince dancing the night away instead of caring about his people dying from the plague, but my students responded only with blank stares. I had made a disastrous mistake: I didn’t know my students. I had jumped into the short story unit without taking time to get to know them. I realize now that there is so much more to teach than the writings, I happened to find interesting. Jasmine Medina’s words reflect my painful mistake:

The absence of that relationship disrupts the flow of information between the student and teacher and prevents the modification of the curriculum

9. Jason G Irizarry, *The Latinization of U.S. Schools*, 61.

and the inclusion of our cultural histories and lived experiences. We need more teachers who are willing to stand up for what is right for students and be brave enough to make changes to the curriculum, despite the fact that school districts are narrowing the scope of what we need to know in order to focus on the content we need to master to perform well on the state test.¹⁰

I'll always remember my students' disengaged and disappointed faces that day. My students were Latino, Indigenous, Black/African American, Vietnamese, and Pacific islanders, and instead of learning about their interests, their cultures, and their literatures, I focused on what I was comfortable and accustomed to, as Jasmine Medina points out. I should have made the time to get to know the students, and I should have been brave.

Continuing to reflect, I realized the problem was not simply that I was oblivious to the idea of cultural consciousness. I did not know how I perpetuated the cultural disconnect as a teacher, and how that was problematic. Ultimately, because of my inability to position myself as a white educator, I was unable to unpack and understand the intersecting issues my students faced, and it took me much longer than it should have to focus on relationship building. During this year on the north side, I frequently had to revise my curriculum and assignments. I faced considerable resistance from students because they didn't understand the *why* of what I was teaching – and that was my fault because I had never given them a *why*. I struggled to build connections with my students because I had never made time to learn about them and lacked an understanding of the many cultural differences between us. An obvious cultural difference was language:

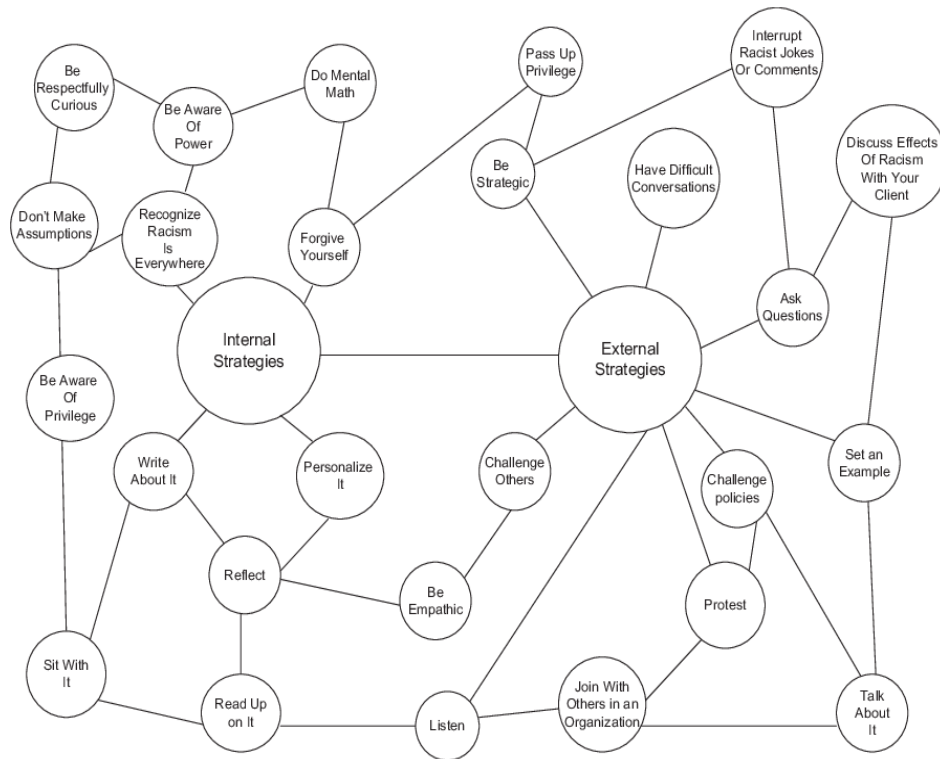
10. Jason G Irizarry, *The Latinization of U.S. Schools*, 60-61

Some of my students were native Spanish or Vietnamese speakers. But there were many other aspects of culture that I did not understand, such as family structure, religion, and the impact of poverty. These were just a few of the elements I had to learn about.

Transformational teaching practices begin when educators admit that they don't know and actively look for ways to learn. My first step occurred when I saw my eighth graders appearing glassy-eyed because my lesson about Edgar Allen Poe had no connection to them, no meaning. No learning was happening. I began to carve out meaningful classroom time to learn about what students valued. I scoured the internet looking for resources aligned with both my reading standards and my students' interests. It wasn't long before I found that students began casually talking to me during class changes. They gradually began raising their hands to add to class discussion. They began to trust me, and I shared news articles related to sports, told stories about myself when I was their age, and communicated my feelings and interests. It took time, but those eighth graders opened up too. They shared their opinions. They actively debated in class about articles that I found. I learned that if I wanted to connect with my students, engage in a humanistic pedagogy, and be culturally responsive, I would have to reflect on myself and what it meant to be a white teacher working with this group of students.

But understanding students' culture is only part of the narrative. To become a critical educator, it is equally important to engage in practices of anti-racism and to dismantle racist structures. The "web of resistance," developed by

Lisa Werkmeister Rozas and Joshua Miller, illustrates ways that educators can begin to dismantle structures that create obstacles for their students and communities, as shown in Figure 1, below.



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The web of resistance provided a framework as I began reflecting on my own internal and external strategies combatting my implicit biases and dismantling racist systems. I knew that white supremacy existed, but I didn't know how to undo it. I started becoming aware of my privilege. I began to reflect, and sit, and read, and *listen*. As I came to understand my own position within the school and my power and authority in the classroom, I began to unpack issues of white

11. Lisa Werkmeister Rozas, and Joshua Miller. "Discourses for Social Justice Education: The Web of Racism and the Web of Resistance." *Journal of Ethnic & Cultural Diversity in Social Work* 18, no. 1-2 (2009): 34.

supremacy and racism for the first time. Educators have documented the success of that culturally relevant, humanistic pedagogies focused on understanding and meeting students' needs. These practices are effective, but I argue that they do not go far enough. We must expand our critical practices to avoid the kinds of toxic and harmful attitudes described by Medina. Jack Neimonen describes whiteness as

(1) a state of being that is constituted by a historical denial of the harm that whites have inflicted upon minorities; (2) a property, marker, or position within a social hierarchy to which power and privilege are attached and from which they are wielded; (3) a standpoint from which whites evaluate, then denigrate, other identities and discourses; (4) a set of cultural practices that is unnamed [but] regarded as universal, neutral, or normative; (5) both a structural location and a strategy that allows whites to monopolize material and cultural resources; and (6) a form of capital from which advantages accrue regardless of social standing or place in life.¹²

I experienced discomfort as I engaged with my own whiteness, my unearned privilege, and ideas of supremacy. Until this point, I had never thought I had brought white supremacy into my classroom. Indeed, I had thought I was *unracist*, because I believed everyone was equal. However, as I worked with students of color, learned from students of color, and noticed the differences between how they were treated as students and how I had been treated during my student days, I began to see the uncomfortable reality of racism. Further, as I

12. Jack Niemonen. "Antiracist Education in Theory and Practice: A Critical Assessment." *The American Sociologist* 38, no. 2 (2007): 159-77. Accessed January 3, 2021. doi:10.2307/27700497. 162.

analyzed my pedagogy and my interactions with students, I realized that I perpetuated racist, white supremacist school policies that hurt students.

This was where and how I started to learn to be a “better” educator. I began to challenge the purpose of schools while realizing that my own position of power and authority in this school – my very presence, sometimes – reinforced racist power structures and eroded students’ power. I became aware of my “deficit mindset” – my implicit assumption that students’ failures reflected some deficit on their part, rather than my failure to meet their needs. The encyclopedia of Educational psychology cites this deficit model of thinking as,

The cultural deficit model is the perspective that minority group members are different because their culture is deficient in important ways from the dominant majority group. The field of educational psychology has long been interested in understanding why racially different, non-White children perform differently in school, with an emphasis on academic underachievement. The deficit model has been important in the evolution of thinking about this important social issue. Hence, the deficit model asserts that racial/ethnic minority groups do not achieve as well as their White majority peers in school and life because their family culture is dysfunctional and lacking important characteristics compared to the White American culture.¹³

As I reflected on my own shortfalls, my own culture, and my own deficit mindset during my first year of teaching, I began to see that my default teaching methods would fail in these spaces. I needed to shift to a pedagogy focused on equity in student achievement, interpersonal relationships, curriculum, and discipline

13. Neil J Salkind. "Cultural Deficit Model." In *Encyclopedia of Educational Psychology*, edited by Salkind, Neil J., 217-217. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2008.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412963848.n60>.

practices during my first year of teaching, I began to see that my default teaching methods would fail in these spaces. I needed to shift to a pedagogy focused on equity in student achievement, interpersonal relationships, curriculum, and discipline practices.

At this stage of critical awareness, I did not have the academic language or background to fully understand the deeper issues surrounding urban education. I did not understand the effects of gentrification, whiteness as property, inequitable funding practices. I failed to recognize how white supremacy had laid the foundation of today's schools and their practices. I was living in what scholars call the "white imagination, where I was emotionally disinvested in notions of race."¹⁴ According to Matias et al., "white imagination operates [among white teachers] as not having to think about what they are, yet in its existence, it still impacts others."¹⁵ This reflects societal issues of "othering" and white educators' lack of critical understanding of race. Because of the white imagination, discussions of race create an uncomfortable resurgence of white guilt. This was certainly my experience as a student and, later, as a teacher of pre-service educators. But the feelings of white guilt perpetuated the recycling of hegemonic

14. Cheryl E Matias, Kara Mitchell Viesca, Dorothy F Garrison-Wade, Madhavi Tandon, and Rene Galindo. "'What Is Critical Whiteness Doing in OUR Nice Field like Critical Race Theory?'" Applying CRT and CWS to Understand the White Imaginations of White Teacher Candidates." *Equity & Excellence in Education* 47, no. 3 (2014): 293.

15. Matias, Viesca, Garrison-Wade, Tandon, Galindo, "What is Critical Whiteness Doing in OUR Nice Field like Critical Race Theory, 290.

whiteness, negatively influencing my role as a teacher in urban schools. They still do, as my process of unlearning and decentering is ongoing. These practices of unlearning and decentering are challenging, but they are necessary for me to become a more critical teacher and to create a classroom culture of care, respect, and validation for my students. I needed to better understand my students, their families, their history, and their culture before I could be an adequate teacher. I had to address my own privilege and reevaluate my *why* – why I had chosen to become a teacher in the first place, and why I thought I could make a difference in my students' lives. To do so, I needed to transform into a teacher who engages with anti-racist pedagogies. Alastair Bonnett defines “anti-racism” as “forms of thought and/or practice that seek to confront, eradicate and/or ameliorate racism. . . . [and] ideologies and practices that affirm and seek to enable the equality of races and ethnic groups.”¹⁶ Gabrielle Berman and Yin Parades point out that anti-racism is more than simply “the opposite of racism . . . [it is] the construction of a positive project about the kind of society in which people can live together in harmony and mutual respect.”¹⁷

As I have mentioned, this process was often uncomfortable. My discomfort took several forms. At various times, I felt guilty about my whiteness

16. Alastair Bonnett. *Anti-racism / Alastair Bonnett. Key Ideas*. London; New York: Routledge, 2000. 4

17. Gabrielle Berman, and Yin Paradies. "Racism, Disadvantage and Multiculturalism: Towards Effective Anti-racist Praxis." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 33, no. 2 (2010): 218.

and white privilege, hopeless about the possibility of changing myself and the school system, confused about the “right” way to proceed, and even discouraged about my choice of career. But only after working through my internal discomfort could I move on to the external part of my journey – action and advocacy on behalf of my students, and all students. But only after working through my internal discomfort could I move on to the external part of my journey – action and advocacy on behalf of my students, and all students. This dissertation focuses on both parts of the journey – teachers’ internal transformations and their external actions and advocacy. My project aims to shed light on teachers’ cultural competence in urban schools, including the role of whiteness in schools where teachers have developed critical awareness about race, racism, and social injustice. The project’s data consist of interviews with and educational narratives from eight urban educators. Based on this data, I develop a spectrum of cultural competence that sheds light on the pitfalls of the white teacher workforce in Oklahoma City and can help reeducate urban school staff about how their privilege, power, and authority can perpetuate social injustice and white supremacy.

The Problem with Urban Educators and Authority

Inexperience leads to discomfort. In 2016, the U.S. Department of Education (DoED) Office for Civil Rights audited Oklahoma City Public Schools (OKCPS), one of the state’s largest school districts, due to the overrepresentation of Black students among those suspended from school for disciplinary

infractions.¹⁸ The inquiry found that 75% of African-American male high school students in the district had been suspended at least once in 2012.¹⁹ The Oklahoma chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) also investigated the situation after being contacted by a parent group. As a result of its investigation, the ACLU wrote a report and filed it with the DoED's Office for Civil Rights. This report led the Office for Civil Rights to create a plan of improvement, which all schools in OKCPS were required to follow.

The DoED Office for Civil Rights found evidence of discrimination, citing implicit bias, zero-tolerance policies, police presence, and a focus on high-stakes testing as indicators of OKCPS's destructive and dehumanizing school policies.²⁰

In its data collection, the Department of Education Office for Civil Rights found that students of color and students with disabilities are disciplined at higher rates than their white peers and students without disabilities. In their Dear Colleague letter, the departments acknowledged that school discipline disparities may be caused by various conditions and factors in schools, and do not necessarily indicate intentional discrimination. However, current disparities are not explained by differences in the severity or frequency of misbehavior alone. Rather, facially neutral discipline policies in

18. "The department recently conducted an investigation into the matter and concluded that the Oklahoma City district's black students were "significantly overrepresented in disciplinary actions." According to the investigation, black students accounted for 42 percent of in-school suspensions during the 2014-15 school year, 26 percent of the student population. Goodwin, Rachel. "Oklahoma City Public Schools Address Racial Disparities," April 20, 2016

19. Felder, Ben. "OKC School Suspension Rates Are among Highest in the Nation," September 17, 2020. <https://www.okgazette.com/oklahoma/okc-school-suspension-rates-are-among-highest-in-the-nation/Content?oid=2949371>.

20. <https://www.okgazette.com/oklahoma/okc-school-suspension-rates-are-among-highest-in-the-nation/Content?oid=2949371>

schools may have an adverse, disparate impact on some groups; violating their civil rights and causing them to lose important instructional time.²¹

However, the OKCPS has not undertaken meaningful or effective professional development initiatives in response to these findings. Even in 2021 students of color are still disproportionately subjected to suspension and deprived of an equitable education. So the questions remain: Where do we discuss this as a staff? How do we make these conversations happen in our schools? How do we make our teachers and policies antiracist?

Thinking back to the web of resistance, the first step is engaging in difficult conversations about white supremacy and race. The goal is to decenter whiteness as the norm and center the culture and experiences of the students we teach. Numerous large urban districts have implemented professional development on issues of race and implicit biases, and many universities have initiated diversity training, but we have seen that these programs are not solving the systemic issues. In a recent statement, OKCPS discussed these steps to address the abuse of teacher and school authority:

As a consequence [of the district's disproportionate suspension of students of color], administrators required all district staff-members take a 55-minute online course on implicit bias. Also, district officials are studying how to add more mandatory cultural sensitivity training on equity and relationship building, it has been learned. Officials are determining how to add more mandatory

21. Vicki J Limas et al., "Civil Rights and the School- to-Prison Pipeline in Oklahoma," n.d., https://www.usccr.gov/pubs/docs/Oklahoma_SchooltoPrisonPipeline_May2016.pdf.

training on cultural sensitivity next school year. The district offers 112.5 hours of optional training on equity, inclusion and relationship-building. Board Member Ruth Veales said optional training isn't enough, not when most of the district's teachers come from a different racial background than their students. "We are in a district of over 83 percent students of color," Board Member Veales said. "It really disturbed me to hear the word, 'optional,' for our teachers to have the kind of training necessary to speak to the students they are overseeing."²²

In other words, educators are required to complete less than one hour of training about race, privilege, bias, and inclusion. Because the training is online, there is no dialogue or reflective activity that requires teachers to engage critically with their own practices and pedagogies. And the rest of the training opportunities are entirely optional. Given the typical teacher's workload, it is unrealistic to expect educators to spend 112 hours engaging with material that causes discomfort. These efforts are shallow and incomplete gestures that cannot create real change. Even more problematic is the fact that these steps are a response to an injury, meaning that these trainings are an afterthought: a disciplinary action rather than a teachable moment. Before teachers are even introduced to the material, the training already has a negative connotation attached to its purpose. Districts should create these teachable moments in a way that protects students from systemic abuse before it occurs. We need to reeducate teachers so that they are exposed to culturally relevant pedagogical practices. Moreover, districts need to make time for teachers to get to know their students, rather than focusing so

22. F Page. and Disproportionately, B., 2020. *Blacks Contribute Disproportionately*. [online] Blackchronicle.com. Available at: <<https://blackchronicle.com/blacks-contribute-disproportionately/>> [Accessed 26 September 2020].

narrowly on end-of-year exams and pass/fail courses. Our students' sense of self-worth cannot be an afterthought. As Sabina Vaught reminds us, "Through a constellation of historical events and trends, racism was both directly and indirectly defined by the dominant culture and by the courts, through seminal cases, as a matter of racial separation rather than the racial subordination that is at its definitional core."²³ The policies that schools create damage students of color. One example is the school-to-prison pipeline, which thrives with every student who hits the metaphorical unbeatable obstacle put in place by white supremacy.

This research engages in conversations about white educators' ability to understand and navigate the complicated history and historical consequences of power, authority, and white supremacy in schools. Further, through the narratives collected via this project, I produce teaching materials that can be used to help white teachers understand their positionality and embolden them to engage with critical race theory through the lens of education. As Richard Milner articulates, "critical race theorists attempt to expose racism and injustice in all its forms and facets; they attempt to explain the implicit and explicit consequences of systemic, policy-related racism; and they work to disrupt and transform policies, laws, theories, and practices through the exposure of racism."²⁴ One goal of my study is

23. Sabina Elena Vaught. "The Color of Money." *Urban Education* 44, no. 5 (2009): 564.

24. Richard H. Milner, "Race, Culture, and Researcher Positionality: Working through Dangers Seen, Unseen, and Unforeseen." *Educational Researcher* 36, no. 7 (2007): 391.

to shed light on whether, and how, white teachers can understand themselves and contextualize their own positionalities, biases, and roles in these unjust systems. How can they begin to shift their ideologies when whiteness is seen as the norm? Can we as white folk engage in conceptualizing critical whiteness without centering our discomfort, and in turn create a much-needed discussion about power and authority? This dissertation engages white educators in conversations on themes of reflexivity, positionality, and critical whiteness in order to understand white educators' pedagogical practices and thereby create professional development opportunities and strategies that districts can use to educate or reeducate teachers already working in the field.

Significance of this Research

In U.S. K-12 public education, more than 60% of teachers are white women, many of whom lack cultural connections with their students.²⁵ Given this staggering statistic, it is unsurprising that students of color are denied educational opportunities due to school policies that target students of color. We have seen that these policies include disproportionate suspension rates, low curriculum quality, and implicit biases among teachers. According to Vaught, "Black failure is an insurance policy for white supremacy."²⁶ Looking toward the future, the United States' demographics will continue to shift towards more Latino/Hispanic

25. National Center for Education Statistics. (2019).

26. Sabina Elena Vaught. "The Color of Money." *Urban Education* 44, no. 5 (2009): 563.

students in public schools being taught by an overwhelmingly white workforce,²⁷ which only exacerbates the need for a more racially educated or radical teacher workforce. If we are to create culturally relevant pedagogy, white teachers must shift their curriculum, teaching practices, and class policies to reflect their students' demographics. Gloria Ladson-Billings writes, "Not only must teachers encourage academic success and cultural competence, they must help students to recognize, understand, and critique current social inequities. This notion presumes that teachers themselves recognize social inequities and their causes."²⁸ If we focus on teachers who are in the classroom now we can begin to shift the pedagogical mindset toward student success. We know that schools can serve as disruptions to inequity and disconnection, and that power can come from classroom spaces. Therefore, it is important for white teachers to understand the community and culture before they step into the classroom.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What does white teacher engagement and discipline policies look like in terms of humanistic and culturally relevant pedagogical practices?

27. Greater OKC Hispanic Chamber of Commerce. (2019). According Recent census numbers there are close to 400,000 Hispanics in Oklahoma this is an 85% increase from the 2000 census. This data indicates that the trend for Latinos is growing continuously, but we will have to wait until the 2020 census before that can be ultimately confirmed.

28. Gloria Ladson-Billings. "Toward a Theory of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy." *American Educational Research Journal* 32, no. 3 (September 1995): 465–91. <https://doi.org/10.3102/00028312032003465>. 476-477.

- a) What practices that teachers utilize are empowering to students?
 - b) What practices that teachers utilize are dehumanizing to students?
2. How do teachers understand their role of power, privilege, and authority in the classroom through reflexivity and positionality?
- a) How does cultural consciousness emerge in urban classrooms?
 - b) Can career teachers' reeducation be affected by discussions surrounding issues of social justice, such as critical race theory, history of education, community action projects, and literature?
3. What can schools do to better serve their students of color, and how can districts create professional development opportunities to reeducate or educate white teachers to guide the profession and practice of teaching into more humanistic, culturally relevant practices?

UTILIZING CRITICAL RACE THEORY

I will apply critical race theory to this study using the model shown in Figure 2. I will draw from critical whiteness and engage with how teachers can use their whiteness, authority, and privilege to challenge inequity and white supremacy within school policies.

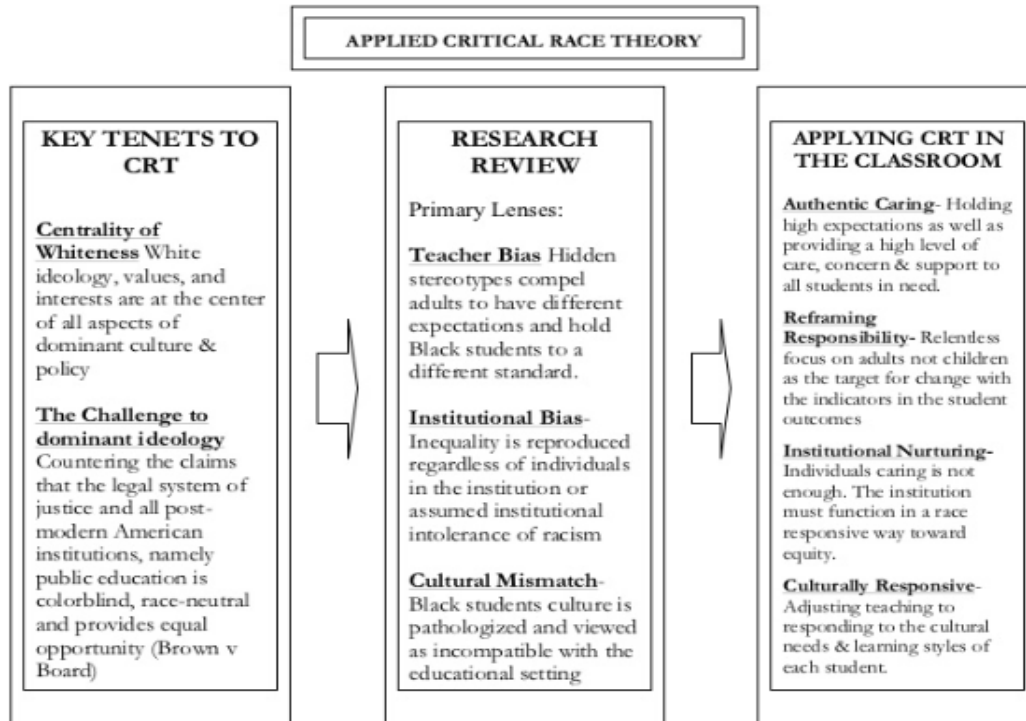


Figure 2: Critical Race Theory Tenets as applied to Classroom Culture ²⁹

White educators can use this model of applied critical race theory to dismantle their own beliefs, biases, and reliance on stereotypes through engaging with authentic caring in their classrooms and utilizing humanistic teaching practices. When students act against classroom expectations, we must shift the responsibility from the child to the teacher, changing our own pedagogical mindset to create a space where students thrive. This study will produce professional development literature and coaching strategies to guide white

29. Macheop. "Critical Race Theory Model." LinkedIn SlideShare, February 22, 2012. <https://www.slideshare.net/macheop/critical-race-theory-model>.

educators to engage with themes of care, humanistic pedagogy, and culturally responsive teaching practices to engage with students in ways that align with this spectrum of applied critical race theory.

Chapter Two

Theoretical Frameworks

Utilizing the framework of critical race theory (CRT), I will analyze white teachers' attitudes towards their own pedagogical practices and how their attitudes influence their relationships with the students and communities they serve.

Derrick Bell¹, a leading civil rights lawyer, began using the critical race theory framework “to address the “effects of race and racism in the U.S. jurisprudence. As a result CRT analyzes the role of race and racism perpetuating social disparities between dominant and marginalized racial groups...CRT’s purpose is to unearth what is taken for granted when analyzing race and privilege as well as the profound patterns of exclusion that exist in U.S. society.”² Critical Race Theory has been expanded upon by theorists and researchers from other areas outside of civil rights. Critical Race Theorist Daniel Solórzano has reimagined Derrick Bell’s tenets into more educative focused principles.

- “the intercentricity of race and racism;
- the challenge to dominant ideology;
- the commitment to social justice;
- the centrality of experiential knowledge; and
- the utilization of interdisciplinary approaches.”³

1. Derrick Bell Jr., “Brown v. Board of Education and the Interest-Convergence Dilemma,” *Harvard Law Review* 93, 3 (1980): 522-523

2. Payne Hiraldo, “<https://www.uvm.edu/~vtconn/v31/Hiraldo.pdf>,” *The Vermont Connection* 10 (2010): pp. 54, <https://www.uvm.edu/~vtconn/v31/Hiraldo.pdf>.

These tenets while similar, provide a focus for the reexamining of race issues in institutions. Both Derrick Bell and Daniel Solórzano say that race is endemic and permanent. Engaging with these precepts is an ongoing reevaluation. This means that as an educator who works with students of color, it is important that they examine their beliefs and the way that they navigate raced issues in their classroom. Solórzano says,

“Critical race theory challenges the traditional claims of the legal system to objectivity, meritocracy, color-blindness, race neutrality, and equal opportunity. The critical race theorists argue that these traditional claims are a camouflage for the self-interest, power, and privilege of dominant groups in U.S. society”⁴

This examination of race issues has to be ongoing, and must serve a larger purpose, for the interest of others. Engaging with social issues is incredibly important to create critical minded students, principle three of Solórzano’s tenets says that our larger goal should always be the abolishment and elimination of racism.⁵ Engaging with knowledge and knowledge holders is also incredibly important for a teacher who is focused on creating a critically minded classroom. Salórzano exposes this by saying that “critical race theory views this knowledge as a strength and draws explicitly on the Person of Color's lived experiences by including such methods as storytelling, family history, biographies, scenarios,

3. Daniel G. Solórzano. "Images and Words That Wound: Critical Race Theory, Racial Stereotyping, and Teacher Education." *Teacher Education Quarterly* (Claremont, Calif.) 24, no. 3 (1997): 5-7.

4. Daniel G. Solórzano. "Images and Words That Wound: Critical Race Theory, Racial Stereotyping, and Teacher Education." 6.

5. Daniel G. Solórzano. "Images and Words That Wound: Critical Race Theory, Racial Stereotyping, and Teacher Education." 7.

parables, chronicles, and narratives.”⁶As a teacher-researcher, I began to examine ways to apply these tenets in classrooms with students of color. For example, one of the tenets discusses storytelling and counter-storytelling, so inviting students’ parents into our classrooms to share wisdom, ideas, talents, and stories would be a way to create a counter-narrative towards a more inclusive classroom.

Likewise, classroom literature could, and should, reflect histories written by people of color instead of white authors. Salózano continues, “Critical race theory challenges ahistoricism and the unidisciplinary focus of most analyses and insists on analyzing race and racism in the law by placing them in both an historical and contemporary context...”⁷ The literature presented in classrooms should also include titles that discuss historical injustice, such as the Tulsa Race Massacre, about which historians are still unearthing the truths that have been buried for 100 years. In the same spirit, teachers could develop a variety of options for activities, readings, and centers, encouraging student choice rather than dictating each child’s educational journey, and focusing on growth rather than proficiency.

Becoming an anti-racist educator requires one to dive into the tenets of CRT. The first tenet acknowledges how racism granted privileges for whites. This reminds us that that racism is normalized, ordinary, and takes place in society on a

6. Daniel G. Solórzano. "Images and Words That Wound: Critical Race Theory, Racial Stereotyping, and Teacher Education." 7.

7. Daniel G. Solórzano. "Images and Words That Wound: Critical Race Theory, Racial Stereotyping, and Teacher Education." 7.

day-to-day basis. Schools reflect this normalization of whiteness and racism, as seen in their physical spaces and curricula and in the power and authority of the majority white teaching force and staff. A CRT framework challenges white people – particularly, for this study, white educators – to understand that they are granted unearned privileges and benefits because of the normalizing of whiteness and the power structures that protect whiteness. Power, authority, and privilege permeate the classroom. Discussions on race can be difficult, but white privilege and whiteness play immeasurable roles in society, which can make white people unable or unwilling to see social inequity. White educators who fear losing privileges and power might not prioritize dismantling these power structures and promoting equity. This can sometimes serve as an obstacle to initiating discussions of race, racism, power, and the ways in which schools must work towards achieving equity for students of color.

But if we are to make progress toward equity, teachers must understand how they benefit from their position of authority in the classroom. They must engage in practices that create opportunities for equity and understanding of white hierarchy through pedagogical practices, discussions with students, and activities that center on themes of social justice. Finally, after understanding that racism and white supremacy are normalized in our society, teachers must attempt to dismantle the structures that maintain and promote social inequities, reflect on the historical and contemporary barriers that hinder the full participation of students of color in schools spaces, and challenge societal obstacles that further marginalize students of color.

Derrick Bell's work on interest convergence points out that white people typically will allow and support social justice and social progress when they benefit from it themselves. Richard Milner provides an example. He discusses visiting a public school that had implemented a new English language learner program to help "non-English-speaking" students "learn to speak English." However, the reality of the situation was that the affluent English as a first language students were engaged in learning another language, that was the "highlight" for the school. It wasn't that the school was receiving funds to educate English Language Learners, it was that *their* students would receive the benefit of educating ELLs. In describing his conversation with his tour guide, a school district employee, Milner illustrates this point further by laying out the policies utilized to create this convergence.

What appeared obvious from the tour guide's description and responses to my questions about the policies and practices in the district and the school was his interest in the reality that the White students were becoming bi- or trilingual; thus, my tour guide and the policy- or decision-making body on the board for the district realized how important it would be for their children to be educated to speak multiple languages in this increasingly diverse country. The district and school were willing to negotiate and provide the resources necessary for the "non-English speakers" to "learn English" because the majority White students would, of course, benefit from the various racial, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds that would be present and represented in the school.⁸

Such policies are rooted in systems that further the supremacy of white students. In essence, this situation "cashes in" on students of color and uses them

8. Richard Milner. "Critical Race Theory and Interest Convergence as Analytic Tools in Teacher Education Policies and Practices." *Journal of Teacher Education* 59, no. 4 (2008): 333.

to boost white students' prospects. Being aware of, and critical of, such policies is essential for educators who are grounded in culturally relevant pedagogy, working within CRT, and critiquing whiteness. Educators must be able to discern the role of interest convergence in schools' power structures and distribution of resources.

Using a CRT framework, we can see how pervasive and normalized white supremacy and racism are in schools. Milner's example shows how entitlement, privilege, and whiteness supremacy all fuel educational inequity. The rationale behind these policies justifies the need for teachers and administrative leaders to correct, rather than ignore, schools' treatment of students of color, students in poverty, students who are multilingual, and students who are receiving special services. . Before educators and administrators can redress injustices, we must understand how embedded these injustices are into the systems we want to change. We must begin to understand the social construction of race itself. The third tenet of CRT points to our critical need to understand the construction of race and the role of biases and attitudes in fueling inequity in schools. Ian Haney López asserts that race cannot be independent from "social forces"; society attaches meaning and significance to ancestry, culture, and appearance, and these characteristics form the "origins" of race. Michael Omi and Howard Winant engage with the features of race but also expand their analysis into the socialization of racial constructs.

We know that race is about the body, that it involves the selection of phenomic features of human bodies for the marking that is racialization; and we know that this selection, this marking, takes different forms in different sociohistorical contexts. We have defined race as "a concept that signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to

different types of human bodies” (Omi and Winant 2015, 110). We still want to argue that even though race is socially constructed, the phenotypic, the “fact of blackness” (or whiteness, or brownness, etc.), continues to matter.⁹

It is therefore essential that white teachers understand the role of race in the classroom.¹⁰ According to Omi and Winant, racial formation is “the sociohistorical process by which racial identities are created, lived out, transformed, and destroyed.”¹¹ Engaging within the constructs of sociohistorical processes, they argue that race is embedded within the foundation of all U.S. intuitions.¹² In their view, racial formation is the main force driving categorization, separation, and political struggles in the United States. Expanding upon this, Jason Smith asserts that both cultural components and the history of race are important to racial formation and people’s relations with one another. Smith points out that “racial projects,” as characterized by Omi and Winant, “shape and distribute some form of resource/capital along racial lines [R]acial projects are ‘the building blocks’ of the racial formation process –

9. Omi, Michael, and Winant, Howard. “Blinded by Sight: The Racial Body and the Origins of the Social Construction of Race.” *Law & Social Inquiry* 41, no. 4 (2016): 1064.

10. Ian F Haney Lopez,. "The Social Construction of Race: Some Observations on Illusion, Fabrication, and Choice." *Harvard Civil Rights-Civil Liberties Law Review* 29, no. 1 (1994): 28.

11. Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2015). 109.

12. Jason A Smith, “GLOBAL SOCIAL THEORY,” GLOBAL SOCIAL THEORY, accessed January 4, 2021, <https://globalsocialtheory.org/topics/racial-formation/>.

building blocks that allow us to see how racial categorizations are hierarchically organized over time to the benefit of one group over the other.”¹³ It is crucial that teachers understand how history, ancestry, and appearance inform white supremacy and racism in classrooms and schools, both historically and currently. Sleeter reaffirms this notion, emphasizing the need to engage in conversations on teacher education through an understanding of the centrality of racism as endemic, institutionalized, systemic, and intentional. Through this understanding of the production of racism, and the production of teachers who are poorly equipped to teach racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse students, educational researchers can demonstrate that these ill-equipped educators are a product of “racist systems designed to meet White needs.”¹⁴ This engages with the first three tenets of CRT: By accepting that racism is normalized, that whiteness benefits through interest convergence, and that race is socially constructed, white teachers can begin to challenge claims of neutrality and color-blindness, and they can foster experiential knowledge through their own classroom teaching practices.¹⁵

CRT is a lens that researchers, and those critical of school and district policy, procedure, and pedagogy, can use in understanding how race and racism

13. Jason A Smith, “GLOBAL SOCIAL THEORY,” GLOBAL SOCIAL THEORY 1.

14. Christine E. Sleeter, "Critical race theory and the whiteness of teacher education." *Urban Education* 52, no. 2 (2017): 157.

15. Christine E. Sleeter, "Critical race theory and the whiteness of teacher education."157.

are embedded in educational institutions and teaching practices. White teachers must begin to engage in critical perspective: engaging with the positionality of being white in the space where they exist and engaging with what it might mean to be a person of color in a similar space. According to Adrienne Dixon, “Teachers and schools . . . offer an educational experience that is distorted and often patently incorrect.”¹⁶ This distortion comes from the lack of engagement with race and from the fear that white people often have for the “other”: When “white” is considered normal, nonwhites are othered.

Utilizing CRT enables a reevaluation of school-based policies to shed light on how institutions maintain practices that both historically and currently have dispossessed students of color. Irene Yoon adds to this discourse by addressing the fact that, in low-income areas predominantly populated by students of color, a large proportion of teachers are middle-class white women.¹⁷ She points out that issues of power and authority occur within these spaces, and “these white middle-class women have higher levels of privilege than, and certainly wield authority over, their students.”¹⁸ My study is informed by the premise that race is still an

16. Adrienne D. Dixon, “‘What’s Going On?’: A Critical Race Theory Perspective on Black Lives Matter and Activism in Education.” *Urban Education* 53, no. 2 (February 2018): 237.

17. Irene H. Yoon, (2012) The paradoxical nature of whiteness-at-work in the daily life of schools and teacher communities, *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 15:5, 592.

18. Irene H. Yoon, (2012) The paradoxical nature of whiteness-at-work in the daily life of schools and teacher communities 592

important conversation within education because of the presence of power and authority.

Teachers hold authority over students' future lives. Their power in the classroom it isn't an "aberration" but rather a "constant occurrence."¹⁹ When examining school policies, we can discuss how racism and white supremacy include the normalcy and endemic nature of racism that inhabits our daily lives. Ikenna Anchonlou issues a challenge to white educators: If they understand how pervasive white supremacy is, can they use that power to change racist policies and practices and remove the obstacles that hinder their students and colleagues of color? Acholonu advises them to build communities at the margins and to listen to ethnic and racial groups by utilizing a CRT framework.²⁰ To do so, practitioners of CRT must converse with racial and ethnic groups, and white listeners must engage with topics such as "immigration, language, identity politics, skin color, sovereignty, and culture."²¹ Furthermore, when white listeners engage with communities of color, they must understand the importance critiquing their own position within those communities.

White teachers must become aware that, when working with any community, it is important for them to acknowledge and be critical of their own whiteness, to understand how whiteness can be used (and is used) for power, and

19. Christine E. Sleeter, "Critical race theory and the whiteness of teacher education." *Urban Education* 52, no. 2 (2017): 157.

21. Ikenna A. Acholonu. *Racial difference as violence* 8.

to recognize the perpetuation of inequity. Acholonu reminds us of some of the ideologies used by white people who deny that racism is still a problem in our society. For instance, people who adopt the “colorblind” ideology make assertions like “I don’t see color; I treat everyone equally.” Similarly, those who accept the “post-racial” ideology claim that racism is no longer an issue, perhaps because “we have had a Black president” or “the civil rights era eliminated racism.” These flawed ideologies distract from the current realities faced by people and communities of color.²² Jennifer Lyn Simpson adds that members of dominant cultures are “rarely required to operate outside of the dominant cultural script”; therefore, white teachers think of whiteness as the norm and never have to engage outside of a monocultural lens.²³ This idea of colorblindness, not seeing a person’s heritage or culture, ignores pieces of a person’s identity and serves to perpetuate white supremacy. *If white teachers do not see race, they can excuse themselves from engaging with it.*

This blatant disregard for the lived experiences of people of color is detrimental to student achievement. It “upholds and affirms dominant ways of being, knowing, and doing at the expense of alternatives”²⁴ and perpetuates the

22. Ikenna A. Acholonu. Racial difference as violence 11.

23. Jennifer Lyn Simpson, “The Color-Blind Double Bind: Whiteness and the (Im)Possibility of Dialogue,” *Communication Theory*, Volume 18, Issue 1, 1 February 2008, 142

dominant narrative about who the knowers are and which knowledge is important. In doing so, it engages with the social construction of race to maintain racial hierarchies. My research project engages with white educators to shed light on how they view themselves through these ideologies.

Discussions of colorblindness must center power, privilege, and values. According to Zeus Leonardo, when power and privilege are at stake, white people feel a sense of entitlement, because “being white means to belong.”²⁵ If being white translates to belonging, whiteness becomes the cultural norm, and everyone becomes “the other.” This mindset preempts the discussion of race, dismisses racial hierarchies, and obstructs progress in creating equity for students of color and their communities. The colorblindness ideology contributes to the misleading notion of the “social melting pot,” wherein everybody is “the same” and seen as equal. CRT scholars and those who practice critical whiteness know that the social melting pot is a myth. According to Gary R Howard and Sonia Nieto, “Similar to the melting pot idea, the declaration of colorblindness assumes that we can erase our racial categories, ignore differences, and thereby achieve an illusory state of sameness or equality.”²⁶ The colorblind perspective treats race as

24. Jennifer Lyn Simpson, “The Color-Blind Double Bind: Whiteness and the (Im)Possibility of Dialogue,” *Communication Theory*, Volume 18, Issue 1, 1 February 2008, 142

25. Zeus Leonardo, “Race, Whiteness, and Education.” *Critical Social Thought*. New York: Routledge, 2009, 112.

“irrelevant, invisible and a taboo topic.”²⁷ For example, when white teachers enter classrooms with students of color but do not engage with their students’ identity, community, or culture, they are doing a disservice to students and themselves. They are disregarding students’ previous knowledge, devaluing students’ lived experiences of their students, and failing to make their classroom a shared space. In my own experience, I taught for several years before realizing that my classroom isn’t really *my* classroom. It is a space created by the students in it. But once I made this realization, I understood that I had to shift my teaching practices to align with the needs and perspectives of those being taught. This study investigates white teachers’ philosophical mindsets to shed light on their own journeys in teaching students of color. Have they made changes in their teaching practices? Do they use critical whiteness to engage with their students? And how do these teachers’ practices affect policies that can shift the teaching behaviors of white educators in future classrooms?

Engaging with critical whiteness studies allows for a better understanding of boundaries and culture gaps. It requires reflexive thought and the ability to understand the role of power in institutions, organizations, and relations among people and communities. Understanding the concept of power is crucial for classroom teachers, whose power and authority all too often undermine student

26. Gary R Howard and Sonia Nieto. *We Can't Teach What We Don't Know: White Teachers, Multiracial Schools*. Multicultural Education Series. New York: Teachers College Press, 1999, 53

27. Gary R Howard and Sonia Nieto. *We Can't Teach What We Don't Know*. 53.

success, a phenomenon that has been well documented. Leonardo states, “Whites are the subjects of whiteness, whereas people of color are its objects. All whites benefit from racist actions whether or not they commit them and despite the fact that they may work against them.”²⁸ We see power and authority exemplified when white teachers take away or limit their students’ power, voice, and identity through biased teaching practices, discipline, and relationships.

Regardless of how white teachers use their power, they must become aware of how their authority empowers or dispossesses students of color and how their position as educators benefits from that power and authority. Jessica Ruglis identifies students’ dispossession through the increase in dropout rates and the widening of the graduation gap since 1990 in urban schools. among students of color in urban schools. Schools contribute to the problem: the proliferating use of high-stakes tests is beginning to show how current educational policies and practices have created so-called “circuits of dispossession” that reinforce injustice in housing, employment, and other social institutions.”²⁹ Patricia Krueger writes, “the purpose of schooling and the purpose of the [school-to-prison] pipeline, feelings of alienation, [and] school safety measures [leave] students with fewer options while in high school.”³⁰ All of these practices – social alienation, high

28. Leonardo, *Race Frameworks*, 111

29. Jessica Ruglis, *Death of a Dropout: (Re)theorizing School Dropout and Schooling as a Social Determinant of Health*, 2009, 6.

30. Patricia Krueger, Nicholas Michelli, Cindi, Katz, and Carmen Mercado, *Navigating the Gaze: Young People's Intimate Knowledge with Surveilled Spaces at School*, 2009, 188.

stakes testing, prison-like school security, and so forth – dispossess students of power, leaving students of color feeling lost, undervalued, and criminal.

According to Moon, when we are aware that power exists and that white people benefit from unearned privileges, we can “[unpack] whiteness within the context of antiracist politics”³¹ and create ways that white identity can both acknowledge and celebrate critical race issues outside of whiteness. However, Sleeter points out that the “literature also continues to report White resistance to ... and fatigue from talking about and working with race.”³² That in itself is privilege: white people are not negatively affected outright by being white. Leonardo explains issues involving inequity affect white students differently than they do students of color: “White children are presumed to be more deserving than Black and Latino students. Much of the unfairness goes undetected and proceeds as part of normalcy and racial common sense.”³³ Once again, we see that racism is a “normal” part of social order. But when we engage with critical whiteness and practice positionality and reflexivity, we can challenge our own pedagogy, working from inside institutions to redress inequities. White teachers who are aware of systemic racism in education have a powerful voice, and they are more likely than their colleagues of color to be heard and taken seriously by

31. Dreama G. Moon, (2016) [“Be/coming” White and the Myth of White Ignorance: Identity Projects in White Communities](#). *Western Journal of Communication* 80:3, 188

32. Christine E. Sleeter, "Critical race theory and the whiteness of teacher education." *Urban Education* 52, no. 2 (2017): 157.

33. Zeus Leonardo, *Race Frameworks*, 98.

their white peers. This contributes to a “white comfort zone,” which can be beneficial when white people first encounter critical ideas about race and power systems. When white teachers learn about systemic racism from their white colleagues rather than from colleagues of color, they are less likely to feel defensive or guilty and are therefore more able to incorporate antiracist ideas into their views and practices.³⁴

Using CRT to Engage a Critical Whiteness Movement

Engaging with critical race theory through a critical whiteness lens provides white teachers the language and foundation that enables them to engage with antiracist pedagogy. This knowledge can be utilized to examine school policies, curricula, and pedagogy to better serve students of color and their communities. Using these frameworks, we can analyze systemic and institutional obstacles – financial, interpersonal, pedagogical, and curricular – that prevent students of color from achieving. White teachers with a raised race consciousness engage in culturally responsive teaching practices that boost for student success. This outcome is amplified when teachers also work to dismantle the power structures and ideologies that limit students of color in urban schools. According to Gere, Buehler, Dallavis, and Haviland, using a close analysis focused on race helps “develop the understanding of cultural responsiveness.”³⁵ Educators who continuously check themselves and are conscious to the backgrounds and cultures

35. Anne Ruggles Gere, Jennifer Buehler, Christian Dallavis, and Victoria Shaw Haviland. "A visibility project: Learning to see how preservice teachers take up culturally responsive pedagogy." (2009): 817.

of their students utilize the close analysis that that these authors suggest. Educators who practice reflexivity can become race consciousness. She continues, “We define raced consciousness as a way of seeing the world through race even when one is not consciously aware of race... without an awareness of raced consciousness, it is easy for instructors and students alike to underconceptualize.”³⁶ This underconceptualization can prevent white teachers and students from mutually understanding each other, which creates another obstacle to student learning.

There can be moments of disillusion and cultural clashes that prevent educators from recognizing their negative practices. White teachers can prevent these disconnections from occurring and thus enhance students’ learning. By applying critical whiteness and culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP), white teachers can reevaluate their engagement with students. By using such practices, teachers can avoid “activism fatigue”; overcome their own and others’ resistance to engaging in work related to race and racism; and acknowledge the gaps in their cultural knowledge. Working within the tenets of CRT, white teachers can become mindful of racial inequity and critical of their own privileges and positions of power, thereby creating opportunities for students of color in underserved, underfunded schools. According to Gere,

36. Anne Ruggles Gere, Jennifer Buehler, Christian Dallavis, and Victoria Shaw Haviland. "A visibility project: Learning to see how preservice teachers take up culturally responsive pedagogy." 817.

the interweaving of identity work, imaginative engagement with literary texts, interactions in an under resourced school and its community and exploration of key concepts of CRP [create] spaces for beginning teachers to make visible their diverse and complex understandings of cultural responsiveness and the extent to which raised consciousness [shape] their understandings.³⁷

By understanding and utilizing cultural responsiveness, white teachers can create ongoing reflexive practices to “check” themselves and redress issues of power, inequity, and white supremacy in their classrooms.

Hierarchies of Power

Critical whiteness centers on white supremacy, addressing white power’s consequences on people of color and shedding light on the history of oppression and slavery. Practicing critical whiteness allows cultural gaps to be addressed. Allen states that, in its desire for social control, the white population created the “institution of the ‘white race’ as *the* system of social control, the key necessity of preserving ‘white skin’ privileges.”³⁸ Through discourse shaped by critical whiteness, white educators can evaluate their own positions of social control, the advantages they receive based on the color of their skin, and the distribution of power embedded within whiteness. This can give them the tools to understand themselves, their students, and their students’ families. Critical whiteness encourages white people to reframe their positions in society. As Peggy McIntosh

37. Anne Ruggles Gere, Jennifer Buehler, Christian Dallavis, and Victoria Shaw Haviland. "A visibility project: Learning to see how preservice teachers take up culturally responsive pedagogy." 841

38. Theodore Allen, *The Invention of the White Race* / Theodore W. Allen. *Haymarket Series*. London; New York: Verso, (1994): 41

points out, “As a white person, I realized I had been taught about racism as something which puts others at a disadvantage, but had been taught not to see one of its corollary aspects, white privilege, which puts me at an advantage.”³⁹

Utilizing critical whiteness enables teachers to understand the need for reflexive practices, curriculum reevaluation, and the humanistic treatment of students in their classrooms. Through the frameworks of CRT and critical whiteness, my project sheds light on how white educators can work to challenge their/our own positionalities in order to engage in better pedagogical practices within urban schools.

Theoretical Shift in Pedagogy

One way for educators to work towards creating equitable teaching and learning spaces for their students is by examining and shifting their teaching pedagogies and focusing on humanistic pedagogy, first described by Carl Rogers in 1969, which promotes experiential learning involving both the teacher and the learner. In humanistic pedagogy, the teacher begins to understand the student and allows the love of learning to come naturally, in an unforced manner. “Even when the impetus or stimulus [for learning] comes from the outside, the sense of discovery, of reaching out, of grasping and comprehending, comes from within.”⁴⁰ Rogers claims that the experience of learning allows the student to

39. Peggy McIntosh, “*White privilege and male privilege: A personal account of coming to see correspondence through work in women’s studies*” Wellesley, MA: Wellesley Center for Research on Women. (1988): 1

build meaning into what is being taught: “When [humanistic] learning takes place, the element of meaning to the learner is built into the whole experience.”⁴¹ Similarly, educators can reflect on and reevaluate their practices by engaging with culturally relevant pedagogy⁴² (CRP). CRP calls on teachers to recognize and heed the cultural factors that affect how children learn and retain information. According to Churchman, Herman, and Hall, “Culturally relevant materials should be utilized to develop competency skills necessary to positive interactions within a complex environment.”⁴³ CRP involves linking a child’s experiences, interests, and background knowledge to the material being taught. Using CRP as a model, Churchman, Herman, and Hall were able to better understand the learner through engagement with a indigenous curriculum led by parents. They explain,

The TACC cultural curriculum for Indian preschoolers is a co operative effort that drew on the talents of many people. Parents provided enriching cultural detail and solved many of the problems related to teaching Indian culture to young children. Educational specialists conceptualized the

40. Carl R Rogers. *Freedom to Learn; a View of What Education Might Become* [by] Carl R. Rogers. Studies of the Person. Columbus, Ohio: C. E. Merrill Pub., 1969. 5.

41. Carl R Rogers. *Freedom to Learn*.

42. David Churchman, Joan Herman, and Teresa Hall, “To Know Both Worlds,” *Journal of American Indian Education* 14, no. 3 (1975): 8.

43. David Churchman, Joan Herman, and Teresa Hall, “To Know Both Worlds.” 8.

program and developed the objectives. Teachers planned activities to achieve the objectives...⁴⁴

Expanding on CRP practices, Ladson-Billings remarks that “teachers can utilize students’ culture as a vehicle for learning”⁴⁵ and emphasizes the importance of including families in the classroom.

Key Educational Terms to Be Explored

Academic curriculum. Academic curriculum refers to the material or content that a teacher uses their classroom, whether it is anchored curriculum, worksheets, lecture, formative (ongoing) learning, or summative (final) learning.

Hidden curriculum. Hidden curriculum refers to the informal lessons taught in school. For instance, placing rules in your class that address the teacher as the authority and abides by social roles that are dehumanistic. According to Jane Martin, “A hidden curriculum consists of some of the outcomes of byproducts of schools or of non-school settings, particularly those states which are learned yet are not openly intended.”⁴⁶ Another example would be not allowing students to talk amongst themselves,

44. David Churchman, Joan Herman, and Teresa Hall, “To Know Both Worlds.” 11.

45. Gloria Ladson-Billings, “But That's Just Good Teaching! The Case for Culturally Relevant Pedagogy,” *Theory into Practice* 34, no. 3 (1995): 161.

46. Jane R. Martin, “What Should We Do with a Hidden Curriculum When We Find One?” *Curriculum Inquiry* 6, no. 2 (1976): 137

which could potentially teach students their thoughts, ideas, stories, and lived experiences are not important in the classroom.

Teacher engagement. Teacher engagement. This refers to positive practices that teachers use in the classroom to teach and work with students. Positive practices are those that both honor students' cultural backgrounds and generate effective learning. These might include one-on-one instruction with students or higher-level questions aimed at critical thinking skills. Positive practices also include constructive encouragement, allowing students to work in pairs or groups, and the use of various learning strategies (aural, visual, physical/kinesthetic, and verbal) to ensure student understanding.

Discipline. Discipline practices are explicitly related to behavior and academic expectations. According to Marshall, discipline ultimately is about managing student impulses in the classroom.⁴⁷ Teachers use behavior reminders, encouragement, pull-outs, and one-on-one reminders to foster and reinforce these expectations. Discipline can also be expressed in a restorative way, which focuses on relationship-building and reconciliation. This approach involves a conversation or explanation about the expectations and, in some cases, creates a compromise between teacher and student. For some teachers, discipline includes singling out a

47. Marvin Marshall, Curriculum, instruction, classroom management, and discipline. Teacher's.net Gazette (2003)

student to be reprimanded in front of other students or even removing the student from the classroom.

Critical cultural consciousness. According to Ladson-Billings, teachers must think beyond students' individual characteristics and achievements and allow students to "critique cultural norms, values, mores, and institutions that produce and maintain social inequities."⁴⁸ Teachers create and are aware of the social issues that they integrate into their teaching, and they encourage students to be critical, to question, and to apply their views, culture, and prior knowledge to projects.

Professional development. Professional development is state-required training that occurs periodically throughout the school year. These training sessions typically are sponsored by district staff or the leadership staff of individual schools. Topics vary according to the schools' needs and the interests of the teachers and administrators. These sessions typically are mandatory, with a certain number of hours being required for teachers to maintain their state certification.⁴⁹

Professional learning community. According to the Glossary of Education Reform, a **professional learning community** is a group of

48. Gloria Ladson-Billings, "But That's Just Good Teaching! The Case for Culturally Relevant Pedagogy." *Theory into Practice* 34, no. 3 (1995): 162

49. Information found at the Oklahoma State Department of Education, this lists the multiple requirements teachers, staff, and administrators must have to work in school districts. <https://sde.ok.gov/professional-development>

educators “that meets regularly, shares expertise, and works collaboratively to improve teaching skills and the academic performance of students. The term is also applied to schools or teaching faculties that use small-group collaboration as a form of professional development.”⁵⁰

Professional learning communities are used primarily to improve strategies, implement new ideas, and write curriculum.

Pedagogy. Pedagogy is the art of teaching; it is the practice an educator employs when working with students in the classroom. It encompasses the beliefs, norms, and culture that a teacher creates and enforces in the classroom.

IMPLICATIONS OF REVIEW

Utilizing the tenets of CRT, understanding how power plays into hierarchies of injustice, and engaging with systemic problems are the first steps toward becoming critically conscious as a white educator. By understanding how schools create policies that pose obstacles for students of color, white educators can address racist pedagogy and policy, become aware, and act in ways that can prevent further damage. Ladson-Billings has built theory that addresses cultural dissonance and helps educators teach with best practices by shifting blame for “low achievement” from students of color, who have limited power within school structures, to the school and the educators in power. While examining research studies about good teaching, she noticed that Black students were taught using

50. <https://www.edglossary.org/professional-learning-community/>

curricula that did not incorporate their intersectionality but instead catered to the experiences of white students. “These studies have several common features. Each locates the source of student failure and subsequent achievement within the nexus of speech and language interaction patterns of the teacher and the students. Each suggests that student ‘success’ is represented in achievement within the current social structures extant in schools. Thus, the goal of education becomes how to ‘fit’ students constructed as ‘other’ by virtue of their race/ethnicity, language, or social class into a hierarchical structure that is defined as a meritocracy.”⁵¹ Culturally relevant pedagogy, one of the frameworks used in my study, can counter this problem. CRP is a philosophy that teachers, administrators, and school districts can use to address issues of inequity. According to DeCuir-Gunby, “The first proposition of culturally relevant pedagogy is the need to promote academic success among the students. This proposition focuses on the idea that all children have the potential to be academically successful. From this perspective, educators emphasize academic excellence while simultaneously challenging deficit-based learning, thereby positioning African American students as capable of learning and experiencing academic success.”⁵²

51. Gloria Ladson-Billings. “Toward a Theory of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy.” *American Educational Research Journal* 32, no. 3 (September 1995): 465–91. <https://doi.org/10.3102/00028312032003465>. 467.

52. DeCuir-Gunby, J D. "Educators' Perspectives on Culturally Relevant Programs for Academic Success: The American Excellence Association." *Education and Urban Society*. 42, no. 2 (2010): 186

White educators can use the three components of CRP to counter the deficit mindset in active resistance of racist practices and to embed humanistic methods into their methods. According to Patrick Camangian, CRP's three guiding principles are academic success, cultural competence, and the development of students' "critical consciousness through which they challenge the status quo of the current social order."⁵³ Geneva Gay argues that teachers should encourage students to think about their communities: "the education of racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse students should connect in-school learning to out-of-school living; promote educational equity and excellence; create community among individuals from different cultural, social, and ethnic backgrounds; and develop students' agency, efficacy, and empowerment."⁵⁴ The research I present in this dissertation is informed by CRP and employs the notion of critical whiteness, which challenges white teachers to understand that their practices are not neutral: if their pedagogies do not actively resist racial norms, they are complicit in reinforcing them.

In his work on humanistic pedagogy, Camangian illustrates how teachers can become critical and use their power to humanize their role and authority in the classroom. Teachers who utilize humanistic pedagogies engage with dispossessed youth by actively discussing their students' realities, tapping into students' ideas,

53. Camangian, Patrick Roz. "Teach like lives depend on it: Agitate, arouse, and inspire." *Urban Education* 50, no. 4 (2015): 427

54. Geneva Gay, "Teaching to and Through Cultural Diversity," *Curriculum Inquiry* 43, no. 1 (2013): 49.

and understanding how students navigate the world they live in.⁵⁵ This engagement acknowledges the inequities that students face; humanistic educators do not shy away from the factors that make students human. Teachers who practice humanistic pedagogy have an interest in cultural competence, and they understand or desire to understand the lives of the students they teach. When teachers engage students with the realities of their own lives, students begin to “apply, analyze, synthesize, and evaluate information to excel in schools.”⁵⁶ Developing cultural competence gives white educators in communities of color the ability to help students grow in the “knowledge and understanding of their own culture while acquiring skills in other cultures, typically mainstream culture which we expect students to navigate to become socially, politically, and economically viable.”⁵⁷

Evelyn Young’s 2010 research on teacher cultural competence illustrates some of the positive teacher practices associated with CRP. This builds on Ladson-Billings’s work on using CRP “to promote the students’ understanding and knowledge of both their own culture and the culture that oppresses them.”⁵⁸ Young presents a simplified version of these practices in a way that can be easily

55. Patrick Roz Camangian. “Teach Like Lives Depend on It: Agitate, Arouse, and Inspire.” *Urban Education* 50, no. 4 (2015): 425.

56. Patrick Roz Camangian. “Teach Like Lives Depend on It 427

57. Patrick Roz Camangian. “Teach Like Lives Depend on It 427

58. Evelyn Young, "Challenges to Conceptualizing and Actualizing Culturally Relevant Pedagogy: How Viable Is the Theory in Classroom Practice?" *Journal of Teacher Education* 61, no. 3 (2010): 252

implemented by teachers working with students of color: “(a) know your students, (b) build relationships with your students, and (c) affirm students’ cultural identities.”⁵⁹ In Young’s view, the purpose of teaching is to create opportunities for leaning, knowing the students in the classroom, and building relationships with families and communities. Critical whiteness as a framework gives white teachers the chance to examine themselves and their own biases and beliefs when working with communities outside their familiar culture.

Teachers who incorporate culturally responsive teaching practices can drastically improve student achievement by using student cultural filters. According to Gay, “using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them. . . . It is a means for improving achievement by teaching diverse students through their own cultural filters.”⁶⁰ Furthermore, Gay states that when CRP teaching practices are implemented, educators replace “pathological and deficient” ideas about students with positive ones, engaging with critical whiteness and examining their own perceptions of race and bias.⁶¹

REEDUCATING TEACHERS: CRP AS BEST EFFECTIVE PRACTICES

59. Evelyn Young, "Challenges to Conceptualizing and Actualizing Culturally Relevant Pedagogy 252

60. Geneva Gay, “Teaching to and Through Cultural Diversity,” *Curriculum Inquiry* 43, no. 1 (2013): 49

61. Geneva Gay, “Teaching to and Through Cultural Diversity,” 54

When educators understand the importance of connection between students and teacher and understand that students have their own independent thoughts different from their own, many classroom misunderstandings can be corrected. According to Camangian, “dispossessed people are not understood on their terms, or in relation to a social system whose history is based on legacies of their subjugation. Instead, ‘urban youth are often blamed for society’s ills.’”⁶² Understanding that students have their own separate lives from their school lives is a beginning step. Students interpret what they learn and experience through their individual frames. But the educational system neglects parts of students’ identities, which creates a disconnection between school and self. As Ivan Illich points out, “Schools themselves pervert the natural inclination to grow and learn into the demand for instruction.”⁶³ Evidence from research on CRT frameworks indicates that the conventional educational system isn’t “broken,” as some suggest; indeed, the system operates exactly as it was intended to.

Teachers can use CRP to create a classroom atmosphere that rectifies this educational neglect. CRP requires white teachers to acquire knowledge about their students’ cultures and beliefs and to express the value of cultural diversity. They must “[see] cultural differences as assets; [create] caring learning

62. Patrick Roz Camangian,. "Teach like lives depend on it: Agitate, arouse, and inspire." *Urban Education* 50, no. 4 (2015): 425 first cited from David Stovall. "We Can Relate." *Urban Education* (Beverly Hills, Calif.) 41, no. 6 (2006): 586.

63. Ivan Illich,. *Deschooling Society*. 1st ed. World Perspectives; v. 44. New York: Harper & Row, 1971, 27.

communities where culturally different individuals and heritages are valued; [use] cultural knowledge of ethnically diverse cultures, families, and communities to guide curriculum development, classroom climates, instructional strategies, and relationships with students”⁶⁴ Such practices create an opportunity for students to feel empowered, accepted, and valued. They enable white teachers to challenge “racial and cultural stereotypes, prejudices, racism, and other forms of intolerance, injustice, and oppression [and to become] change agents for social justice and academic equity; [to mediate] power imbalances in classrooms based on race, culture, ethnicity, and class; and [to accept] cultural responsiveness as endemic to educational effectiveness in all areas of learning for students from all ethnic groups.”⁶⁵ By using CRT strategies, teachers can encourage students to share their background knowledge, which further educates the teachers about the students’ cultures. When teachers learn from their students, they cede some of their authority, which helps equalize the power differential in the classroom. As Rose points out, “We are getting educated all the time, of course: by family, community, teachers, pals, bullies, and saints.”⁶⁶ One way to foster this two-way learning is to use “open-ended” conversations with “a genuine dialogue [in

64. Geneva Gay, "Teaching to and Through Cultural Diversity." *Curriculum Inquiry* 43, no. 1 (2013): 50

65. Geneva Gay, "Teaching to and Through Cultural Diversity." 50.

66. Rose, Mike. *Why School?: Reclaiming Education for All of Us*. New York: New Press: Distributed by Perseus Distribution, 2009, 31

which] neither party knows at the outset what the outcome . . . will be.”⁶⁷

Commenting on shared learning roles and shared authority, Brown writes, “These authors also acknowledge pre-service teachers need to hold knowledge about teaching that places societal and educational transformation, along with students’ subjectivities, communities, experiences and values at the center of the teaching act.”⁶⁸

Every day, both teachers and students should discover more about each other and themselves and learn how their identities, beliefs, and biases intermingle with critical consciousness. Since the 1990s, “educative transformation” has been a prevalent theme in teacher education. Gere, Buehler, and Dallavis interviewed early career teachers to discover the extent of their educative transformation and its contribution to the process of becoming culturally responsive.

White teachers who are open to creating spaces of empowerment in their classroom understand the necessity of mindful transformation of classroom procedures and policies. “Without this transformation of ourselves, any attempts at developing a multicultural perspective will be shallow and superficial.”⁶⁹

Culturally responsive teaching practices acknowledge the transformation of self

67. Nel Noddings,. "Moral Education and Caring." *School Field* 8, no. 2 (2010): 147

68. Brown, *Teaching in Color*, 327

69. Anne Ruggles Gere, Jennifer Buehler, Christian Dallavis, and Victoria Shaw Haviland. "A visibility project: Learning to see how preservice teachers take up culturally responsive pedagogy." (2009): 842.

while using critical whiteness to better understand the differences between themselves and the students who are in their classrooms.

Gay and Kirkland outline the importance of CRT in classrooms: “(a) multicultural education and educational equity and excellence are deeply interconnected; (b) teacher accountability involves being more self-conscious, critical, and analytical of one’s own teaching beliefs and behaviors; and (c) teachers need to develop deeper knowledge and consciousness about what is to be taught, how, and to whom.”⁷⁰ The desire to care forms the root of teacher reeducation. How can white teachers understand the role of their whiteness as it works within classrooms populated by students of color? According to Noddings, “When we care, we accept the responsibility to work continuously on our own competence so that the recipient of our care is enhanced. There is nothing mushy about caring. It is the strong resilient backbone of human life.”⁷¹ This desire to care causes educators to recognize their power, privilege, and authority. The desire to care gives us the reflexivity to address our own cultural competence and make corrections or adopt new pedagogical practices that promote healthy classroom cultures of acceptance and understanding.

THREE AREAS OF FOCUS FROM THE LITERATURE

70. Geneva Gay, and Kipchoge Neftali Kirkland. "Developing Cultural Critical Consciousness and Self-Reflection in Preservice Teacher Education." *Theory into Practice* 42, no. 3 (2003): 181

71. Nel Noddings. *The Challenge to Care in Schools: An Alternative Approach to Education* / Nel Noddings. *Advances in Contemporary Educational Thought Series*; v. 8. New York: Teachers College Press, 1992, 175

This research investigates three elements – curriculum, teacher engagement, and discipline – to shed light on how educators think critically of their pedagogical practices and thereby to identify ways to implement CRP in the classroom. These three elements exemplify the many different roles teachers play throughout a school day. Investigating teachers’ choice of curriculum provides insight into questions such as “does the teacher know their students?” and “do schools trust their teachers to make curriculum suggestions and supplementations?” Examining teachers’ engagement with their students sheds light on questions about student leadership, classroom culture, and the overall structure of the classroom norms. And exploring discipline will help resolve questions about how to address problem behaviors in the classroom: Should our approach be humanistic, radical, authoritative, or reliant on school policies? Curriculum, teacher engagement, and discipline do not make up the whole of what it means to be a teacher. But these three facets provide a foundation for building on the good work that urban teachers are doing, and they shed light on how school districts and state and national organizations should focus their professional development and teacher reeducation efforts.

Curriculum

The materials that teachers use in the classroom are a major focus during evaluations and teacher professional development. In this study, I conduct interviews and observations of teachers regarding their practices in choosing materials and creating curricula. “Curriculum” refers to the material or content that a teacher uses their classroom, whether it is established curriculum,

worksheets, lecture, formative (ongoing) learning, or summative (final) learning. The research looks specifically at teachers' use of materials that exhibit racial, religious, linguistic, and other kinds of diversity. This project investigates how teachers create coursework that both delivers culturally relevant practices and meets content standards using materials that are free of racial, ethnic, gender, sexuality, and age bias. In studying curriculum, I will also pay particular attention to readings that are relevant to students' daily lives, readings that supply background information to help students build on their own cultural knowledge, and readings that may contain microaggressions. My investigation into curriculum also pertains to sheltered instruction for English language learners and accommodations for disability based on section 504 plans and individualized education plans.

Teacher Engagement

This study also addresses teacher engagement, investigating how educators in the classroom interact with students, how they group students, how they set up their classroom, and where they teach in the classroom (such as standing in the front of the room, moving from group to group, gathering students around them, seated at a desk, etc.). I also examine how teachers help students process content by relating it to their background and interests. According to Camangian, "Humanizing pedagogies . . . [aim] to teach students to love themselves, love people, and see humanizing education as part of a long history of

struggle for radical social justice.”⁷² One goal of my research is to help humanize the classroom by observing teachers’ community-building methods, identifying the most effective of these practices, and using them to create professional development materials and activities that will reeducate more teachers. Martin writes, “Once the quality of life in school commands the foreground, questions arise about the classroom climate, school routines, and rituals, relationships between teachers and children and among the children themselves, the teachers’ modes of teaching, and the children’s ways of learning. And with this refocusing of attention comes a reorienting practice.”⁷³ This is how teachers can fight against unjust school policies that foster apathy toward student achievement. Teachers have the ability to create a classroom culture that builds self-efficacy into every activity, to create empowering moments for students. In Martell’s view,

Culturally relevant teachers foster academic success as a result of their classroom instruction and learning experiences. They believe their students are capable of intellectual growth; their pedagogy is art; and they consider themselves members of the community who are giving back. Culturally relevant teachers encourage collaborative learning, form fluid social relationships, and demonstrate connectedness with all students. They develop a shared, recycled, constructed, and critical conception of knowledge.⁷⁴

72. Camangian, Patrick Roz. "Teach like lives depend on it: Agitate, arouse, and inspire." *Urban Education* 50, no. 4 (2015): 448

73. Martin, Jane Roland. *Schoolhome: rethinking schools for changing families*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1995,42

74. Christopher C. Martell, "Teaching Race in U.S. History: Examining Culturally Relevant Pedagogy in a Multicultural Urban High School." *Journal of Education* 198, no. 1 (2018): 64

In urban classrooms populated mainly by students of color, the inclusion of can create a community of learners, rather than an adult disseminating knowledge to quiet students. This environment recognizes every student's knowledge and accepts every student's life experience as valid, which can be a novel approach in discussions of what constitutes "curriculum" and which knowledge is valuable (and can be assessed through end-of-year exams). By participating in critical reflective practices, teachers can articulate their own engagement and their process of creating opportunities for students to express their ideas and flex their leadership skills as a knowledge holder.

Discipline

The third element that this research will address is discipline. Specifically, this project will dissect what it means to hold authority in a classroom by investigating how educators manage and work through issues of misbehavior, boredom, excitability, and disengagement; how they establish classroom discipline norms; and how they maintain expectations for all of their students. Sofia Bahena writes, "Teachers often fear losing control of the classroom, and they do not want their authority undermined. As a result, suspensions frequently occur in the absence of actual violence. Students who are singled out by teachers tend to be those who vocalize their displeasure, which teachers perceive as a threat to their control."⁷⁵ Educators often try to create discipline policies that are

75. Sofía Bahena. (2012). *Disrupting the school-to-prison pipeline*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Educational Review.

fair, but we know that there are teachers all across the United States who dehumanize students by choice or because they are unaware of culturally relevant practices. This study examines how educators solve discipline problems creatively instead of relying on policies that lead to high and inequitable suspension rates.

CONCLUSION

This project serves as a reminder of the *why* behind this chosen career path. By engaging with educators who truly love their jobs and align themselves with humanistic practices rooted in culturally relevant pedagogy, this research is able to shed light on what it means to be a white urban teacher, addressing in particular their spectrum of critical awareness. This study examines how teachers create opportunities for students to excel despite the many obstacles posed by racism, white supremacy, and biases. How do teachers learn from their students and reeducate themselves to meet their students' needs? My study asks teachers to identify their "best" practices encourages them to examine their shortfalls and the *why* behind practices that, upon reflection, they realize did not work. Further, this study analyzes what schools, districts, and colleges of education should address in their education and professional development of white teachers in urban schools.

Chapter Three

Methodology

This study was a qualitative research project based on interviews with white teachers currently working predominantly with students of color in an urban school district. The project explored the many roles that educators play throughout the school day and the shifts in teachers' attitudes over time in response to their classroom experiences. The interviews probed participants' perceptions about what it means to teach. The study was designed to shed light on the beliefs and mindsets of the "teacher" and to apply reflexivity and analysis to guide future professional development for urban teachers. This chapter, which describes the conceptualization of the study, consists of six sections.

1. **Aims of the Study.** Reviews the research questions and states the overall aims.
2. **The Phenomenological Case Study Approach.** Describes how this project combines the phenomenological case study approach with teacher interviews.
3. **Setting and Participants.** Provides detailed information about the research context.
4. **Methods of Data Collection.** Identifies and describes the elements of data used in the study.
5. **Data Analysis.** Describes the processes used in analyzing the data and ensuring alignment with accepted case study practices.

6. Confidence and Trustworthiness. Discusses the role of researcher as participant and describes the methods used to ameliorate researcher bias.

1. Aims of the Study

As outlined in chapter one, the research questions guiding this study are as follows.

- What does white teacher engagement and discipline policies look like in terms of humanistic and culturally relevant pedagogical practices?
- a) What practices that teachers utilize are empowering to students?
 - b) What practices that teachers utilize are dehumanizing to students?
4. How do teachers understand their role of power, privilege, and authority in the classroom through reflexivity and positionality?
 - a) How does cultural consciousness emerge in urban classrooms?
 - b) Can career teachers' reeducation be affected by discussions surrounding issues of social justice, such as critical race theory, history of education, community action projects, and literature?
 5. What can schools do to better serve their students of color, and how can districts create professional development opportunities to reeducate or educate white teachers to guide the profession and practice of teaching into more humanistic, culturally relevant practices?

The Phenomenological Case Study Approach

The purpose of this case study was to provide a deeper understanding of what it means to teach students of color as a white teacher. According to Bromley, "The value of the case study approach is that it deals directly with the individual case in its actual context.... Case studies get as close to the subject of interest as they possibly can, partly by means of direct observation in natural settings, partly

by the access to subjective factors (thoughts, feelings, and desires.)”¹ Utilizing the design of the phenomenological case study, I examined how teachers create opportunities for learning using the pedagogical practices of critical race theory (CRT), critical whiteness, and culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP). A case study is a “written description of a real situation involving real people in a real organization. Typically, a case study provides a rich description of an organization and usually focuses the reader’s attention on an issue or dilemma that the organization faces.”² Schwandt explains phenomenological studies as those in which researchers identify and describe participants’ subjective experiences from participants’ point of view.³ Phenomenology describes “things as one experiences them.... [Phenomenological descriptions] are possible only by turning from things to their meaning, from what is to the nature of what is.”⁴ A phenomenological methodology is suitable for this project because the interrogation of experience deepens our understanding of what it means for white educators to work with students of color.

1. D.B. Bromley. *The case study method in psychology and related disciplines*. Chichester, UK: Wiley. (1986). 23.

2. *Case Study Research: A Method to Enhance Student Learning*. Washington: International Council for Small Business (ICSB), 2016.
<https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.lib.ou.edu/docview/1952088719?accountid=12964>.

3. Thomas A Schwandt. *The Sage Dictionary of Qualitative inquiry* (3rd Ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage 2007. 225-226

4. Thomas A Schwandt. *The Sage Dictionary of Qualitative inquiry* 226

This project utilized the phenomenological case study methodology to shed light on the dominant sociocultural norms of the teaching profession in an urban environment and analyze teacher actions through the lens of CRT, CRP, and critical whiteness while engaging teachers in reflexive practices for analyzing their own power and authority. The data collected came from the lived perceived experiences of teachers and their personal narratives and self-evaluations.

Setting and Participants

My study's aim was to forge a deeper understanding of teacher reflexivity and critical consciousness. The overall setting was a large urban district, Oklahoma City Public Schools (OKCPS), which labels itself a "multicultural district" and serves approximately 45,000 students at 33 elementary neighborhood schools, 13 middle schools, nine high schools, two alternative schools, and nine charter schools.⁵ The study included eight teachers who work in eight different schools with students ranging from kindergartners through high school seniors. To select participants, I used purposive sampling, which is appropriate for studies in which participants must meet a particular profile (Berg 1995). Specifically, I needed to select Caucasian/white educators who were assigned as classroom teachers. In addition, I attempted to recruit participants of different genders, ages, and experience levels to give me the opportunity to observe differences in pedagogical practices among teachers. In addition, my sampling method employed elements of snowball sampling, in which "researchers identify a small

5. About Our District / About OKCPS. Accessed September 24, 2020. <https://www.okcps.org/Domain/96>.

number of individuals who have the characteristics in which they are interested. These people are then used as informants to identify, or put the researchers in touch with, others who qualify for inclusion and these, in turn, identify yet others.”⁶ I created an informational flyer and distributed it by email to teachers who I knew might be interested in participating, and I asked them to forward it to others they knew. Interested potential participants contacted me via email to set up an initial interview appointment. The interview took place using Zoom, a video conferencing program. The interviews employed mainly open-ended questions and followed a semi-structured format, and participants were allowed to opt out of any question for any reason. In addition, for the sake of anonymity in the reporting of the research results, each participant chose a pseudonym.

Teacher Participants

Karra. Karra is in her second year of teaching. She has worked for both years at the same public magnet high school as an English language arts teacher, first for eleventh graders, and now for ninth graders. She is in her early twenties, with vibrant pink hair and a septum ring in her nose. She considers herself in tune with her students’ needs and interests. Her classroom is decorated minimally and has a large bisexual pride flag displayed on the back wall. She is a traditionally certified teacher who is working with an urban preparation cohort support group

6. Louis Cohen, Lawrence Manion, Keith Morrison (2007). *Research methods in education*. Routledge. 116.

based at the university she graduated from. Her magnet school requires prospective students to complete an application, and academic achievement is one of the major criteria for acceptance. Applicants are required to submit previous end-of-year reading and mathematics scores, as well current grades, other benchmark test scores, and attendance records. In addition, applicants' parents are required to submit a parent involvement pledge. The school serves 732 students in grades nine through twelve. According to end-of-year test results, 17% of students' math scores and 32% of students' reading scores are at or above the "proficient" level. Although these proficiency levels are lower than the average for high school students in the United States, they are higher than the average for urban high schools in neighborhoods with similar socioeconomics and demographics. The school's racial composition is 71% Hispanic, 12% African American, 11% white, and 6% biracial.

Kristen. Kristen is a veteran teacher with 14 years of experience. She is currently teaching her second year in a home economics classroom. Her previous years of teaching have placed her in a variety of roles within the school. She is traditionally certified to teach middle level science, kindergarten through twelfth-grade visual arts, and career technology education. In 2019, OKCPS closed, reopened, and moved entire schools, and some teachers were required to take on roles outside their areas of experience and expertise. Although home economics was a new venture for Kristen, she accepted the district's offer of a position teaching home economics at a large high school. Her spacious classroom is lined with stoves and refrigerators along both sides. Her school serves 1,355 students in

grades nine through twelve. According to end-of-year test results, 5% of students' math scores and 9% of students' reading scores are at or above the "proficient" level. The school's racial composition is 73% Hispanic, 11% African American, 10% white, and 6% biracial.

Ina. Ina is a 50-year-old second-year teacher who is traditionally certified to teach science. Before she became an educator, she served many different roles in schools, she was a registrar, secretary, and then a liaison between families and the school. In her second year, she teaches family and consumer sciences to seventh and eighth graders. Because her courses are at the basic level, they are focused mainly on emotional health and character education, and they don't delve deeply into intricate cooking or sewing projects. She is a self-described "mama bear" to her students, and she routinely cooks extra to share with students who walk past her classroom. She writes grants and Donors Choose⁷ applications to obtain much needed support for her students. She recently wrote a successful grant application for a washer and dryer so that students could do laundry discreetly at school and have clean clothes to wear. Her classroom is filled with inspirational sayings such as "Live. Laugh. Love," "You Choose Your Family," and "We Cook, We Eat." At the back of the large room are massive refrigerators and cooking elements, and at the front are desks facing the chalk board at the

7. Donors Choose is a national company that pairs teachers' needs to citizen donors to buy necessary and desired materials for classrooms. Teachers can create a profile and submit a grant proposal request for anything related to schools, local and national donors give money to specific causes that they want to fulfill.

front. This public middle school serves 915 students in grades seven and eight. According to end-of-year test results, 6% of students' math scores and 10% of students' reading scores are at or above the "proficient" level. The school's racial composition is 64% Hispanic, 17% African American, 13% white, 1% Asian, 2% American Indian, and 3% biracial.

Jenna. Jenna, who is in her ninth year of teaching, began her career as a journalism major and editor of a major collegiate newspaper. She was recruited by Teach for America⁸ and served her two years in New Orleans, an experience that led her to realize she enjoyed teaching. After Teach for America, she moved back to her small rural hometown in Oklahoma. She eventually moved to Oklahoma City, where she teaches first grade at a small elementary school that serves 248 students in pre-K through sixth grade. Her room is a calm mix of colors with different stations for student learning. According to end-of-year test results, 5% of students' math scores and 5% of students' reading scores are at or above the "proficient" level. The school's racial composition is 6% Hispanic, 78% African American, 9% white, and 7% biracial.

Shannon. Shannon has 22 years of experience teaching middle school. She is traditionally certified to teach mathematics in grades 5 through 12. She started

8. According to Teach For America's website, "Teach for America is a diverse network of leaders who confront educational inequity by teaching for at least two years and then working with unwavering commitment from every sector of society to create a nation free from this injustice." Staff. "What We Do." Teach For America, August 28, 2018. <https://www.teachforamerica.org/what-we-do>.

her career at the same middle school where she currently works and rightfully brags about teaching math skills to generations of families. She is a self-described country woman who enjoys her 35-minute commute to and from her school. Her classroom is set up in a traditional layout, with desks in rows facing the smartboard and her giant desk at the front of the room. Everything is meticulously organized; as she says, “my room is military precision.” Her classroom is in the middle of a busy hallway, and she likes to stand outside her room between class periods and watch all her current and former students walk past. Susan’s school serves 802 students in grades seven and eight. According to end-of-year test results, 11% of students’ math scores and 11% of students’ reading scores are at or above the “proficient” level. The school’s racial composition is 3% American Indian, 77% Hispanic, 8% African American, 9% white, and 3% biracial.

Jake. Jake, a high school teacher, is in his second year with Teach for America. He chose to be an English language arts teacher because of his absolute love of books. He is a self-described “coastal elite” whose formative years included golf courses and world travel on private planes. Jake has had many multicultural experiences, and he often talks about his college experiences with his high school students. Jake enjoys reading the “classics” and laments not being able to teach *The Count of Monte Cristo* to his eleventh-grade students. After completing his second year of Teach for America, he will go back home to Rhode Island to work at a law firm while pursuing his J.D. He currently works for a public charter school that does not have any entrance requirements or testing parameters for acceptance. Admission is based on a lottery. Jake’s school serves

999 students in grades nine through twelve. According to end-of-year test results, 4% of students' math scores and 14% of students' reading scores are at or above the "proficient" level. The school's racial composition is 1% American Indian, 92% Hispanic, 4% African American, 2% white, and 1% biracial.

Maisie. Maisie, who currently teaches second grade, is in her fifth year of teaching. She knew from her undergraduate work that she wanted to be in a school that "needed attention" and sought job interviews at schools that matched her career goals. She identifies as a Christian and uses her beliefs to make decisions. She is the head of several committees in her school that promote community engagement, and she often uses partnerships with universities to give her elementary students unique experiences with athletes they admire. Her classroom is empty this year, as she is a 100% virtual educator due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and she works from her living room. She enjoys teaching from home because her cats keep her young students entertained and engaged. She has a large class: 42 students whose parents and guardians have chosen completely virtual schooling. She is excited about the challenge of keeping students engaged in remote learning. Maisie's school serves 520 students in grades pre-K through five. According to end-of-year test results, 40% of students' math scores and 36% of students' reading scores are at or above the "proficient" level. The school's racial demographic is 4% American Indian, 22% Hispanic, 24% African American, 37% white, 6% Asian, and 7% biracial.

Madelyn. Madelyn is in her eighth year of teaching, and most of her experience is in the fourth grade. She describes herself as a well-rounded, teacher

and she is her school's grade-level leader. She and the other fourth-grade teachers at her school typically "departmentalize" their teaching. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the prospect of online schooling, they decided this year to teach all of the subjects for their own students so that each student would need to contact only one teacher when they needed help. During Madelyn's undergraduate work, her observation placements assigned her to this school, and she knew immediately that she wanted to teach here. She often refers to her students as her children. She says that she aims to learn from her students, and she has organized her classroom to be more communal, to allow more talking between students. Her goal as an educator is to get students to believe in themselves, and she does this through meaningful lesson planning. Because many of her students are English language learners, Madelyn says she often uses "gestures" to teach vocabulary required by state standards. Her school serves 846 students in grades pre-K through five. According to end-of-year test results, 8% of students' math scores and 11% of students' reading scores are at or above the "proficient" level. The school's racial composition is 3% American Indian, 82% Hispanic, 5% African American, 8% white, and 2% biracial.

Methods of Data Collection

This research project used semi-structured interviews to collect data. In semi-structured interviews, the researcher works from a set of pre-defined (and mostly open-ended) questions but also asks probing and follow-up questions

based on the interviewee's responses. This allows the interview to "flow" like a natural conversation, eliciting a great deal of detail and depth while also ensuring that all interviews address the elements of importance to the research. Open-ended questions are essential. As Robert K. Yin points out, "Having participants limit their responses to single-word answers as in most closed-ended questions would be a qualitative researcher's last wish."⁹ The in-depth interviews took place online using Zoom, a video-conferencing program. All interviews were audio-recorded. The interview questions were intended to prompt participants to analyze their own teaching craft and to reveal insights about how teachers' mindsets, values, attitudes, and awareness influence their practice.

Semi-Structured Interviews

The phenomenological interview questions were semi-structured to allow participants to explore the phenomenon of teaching and their own pedagogical practices. I generated a list of interview questions in advance, but the interviews evolved into natural conversation when necessary. The semi-structured questions were divided into five integral parts that inform the study in five different ways.

The first section elicited information about the teacher as a person and allowed them to start building a narrative.

Teacher as Person

- How long have you been teaching?
 - In general, at the school
- Are you certified to teach? Do you have any other certifications?

9. Robert K Yin,. *Qualitative Research from Start to Finish*. Second Ed. ed. New York: Guilford Press, 2016. 142

- What is your goal as a teacher?
 - What do you do to work towards it?
 - What is something that you struggle with as a teacher?
- What do you think the purpose of school is?
- What do you love about teaching?
 - How does this metaphorically fill your cup?
- Did you always want to teach in the city? Where have you taught before? (if applicable)
- Do you live in the community where you teach?
- Do you know much about the community space that you work in?
- Describe your own school experience.
- What made you want to teach in Oklahoma City?
- How do you engage with community activism? (if applicable)

The second section presented questions about school climate issues, allowing the teacher participant to reflect on their school's culture and purpose.

School Climate

- Please describe your school.
- Describe the teacher demographic.
- What does professional development look like at your school site?
 - What does it typically focus on?
- What type of community outreach does your school do?
- How does the school communicate with parents?
 - Do teachers provide materials in Spanish and English?
- Are parents present in the school?
- What do you love about teaching in your school?

The third section of the interviews asked teacher participants to describe their classroom layout. These questions were specifically designed to paint a picture of a typical school day and to open the discussion into teacher and student interaction and engagement.

Teacher and Student Engagement

- Describe a typical day in your classroom.
- Where do you often teach from?
 - Tables, podium, desks?
- How often do you have one-on-one meetings?

- What do you typically talk about during these one-on-ones?
- Do students typically work solo or in pairs?
- How would you describe your students?
 - Personality-wise, academically, behaviorally?
- What does leadership look like in your classroom?
- Do you often tell stories about your life?
 - Do you allow students to engage storytelling/sharing?
- What are some ways you interact with parents (not discipline)?

In the fourth section of the interviews, we discussed curriculum. This brought up topics related to CRP and addressed how teachers manifest representation and inclusion in their classroom.

Curriculum

- Who makes the curriculum that you teach?
 - Are you able to change it as needed for student level and engagement?
- Do you use textbooks?
- Are you familiar with your students' Lexile levels when you create lessons?
- Do you talk about race in your classroom while using curriculum?
- How do students typically respond to your teaching?
- Describe a time when you gave the perfect lesson.
 - What made it successful? How did the students perform?
- Do you engage with questions regarding current news?

The last section of the interviews addressed discipline, which links closely to teachers' use of power and authority and their connection or disconnection with students in the classroom.

Discipline

- How would you describe your classroom expectations and teaching style?
- What are some consequences that you have in place in your classroom?
- Do you often reach out personally to speak with parents/guardians?
- What are some strategies that you use to monitor and correct behavior?

Data Analysis

The interview data were labeled with pseudonyms and saved on a password-protected personal laptop. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. I analyzed the transcripts for language and content and identified the common themes that emerged. Next, I organized the themes into topics that could further be researched and analyzed for future teacher professional development. In discussing the transformative aspects of qualitative research, Curry and Wells suggest asking, “how has the topic of investigation operated in this person’s experience; what kind of transformation did this person experience; and how did this experience change how this person interacted with their world?”¹⁰ By creating a dialogue during the interview, I was able to shed light on the gaps in humanistic pedagogy and reimagine how reeducation could look for already working educators. Emergent themes became apparent from my analysis of the initial interviews, and during the process of coding, I refined the themes to uncover patterns in the teachers’ pedagogies.¹¹

For the analysis I created a scatter plot matrix with all eight participants falling into one of four quadrants. I created four of these matrixes that illustrated each participant’s perception (or inaccurate perception) of themselves regarding the themes of curriculum, discipline, teacher engagement, and critical awareness. Each matrix utilizes the horizontal and vertical axes and is broken into application

10. Deah Curry, & Steven Wells. *An organic inquiry primer for the novice researcher: The who, what, when, why, and how of a sacred approach to disciplined knowing*. Seattle, WA: Studio 403. (2004). 81.

11. Robert K Yin,. *Qualitative Research from Start to Finish*. 2016. 334

and training/knowledge. Participants who engaged with Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and had little to no training were placed into a different quadrant from someone who had formal and ongoing training, but little application and usage in the classroom.

Confidence and Trustworthiness

In this study, I utilized Lincoln's idea of reciprocity between the researcher and participants, keeping in mind the "person-centered nature of interpretive work" and the "kind of intense sharing" that marked our relationships with a "deep sense of trust, caring, and mutuality."¹² Research credibility derives from multiple factors. It is important that the research results are believable, and in qualitative research, this depends in part on an authentic relationship between the researcher and the participants. The interviews were genuine conversations, sometimes involving tension or disagreement. It was important for me to allow the participant to lead the discussion and illustrate their own process for understanding what it means to teach and to create success for students. I entered into the interviews prepared to analyze and reflect on all data, even if some participants were resistant to the research topics or dismissive of the process. I found myself working through my own tension. How was I supposed to be "unneutral" and naive in white supremacy, when I am evaluating what constitutes damages to students of color. This was a process that I had to undergo, reevaluate

12. Yvonne Lincoln. (1995). Emerging criteria for quality in qualitative and interpretive research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 1(3), 275-289. 283.

my own perceptions, reread Ladson-Billings' and choose through coding what illustrated teachers who were engaging with Culturally Relevant Pedagogy. Using Ladson-Billings six principles I engaged with how teachers answered, their terminology, their rhetoric, and compared them to how they utilized these concepts in their classrooms.

The coding and reflection process included what Anderson characterized as “sympathetic resonance” or an “immediate apprehension and recognition of an experience spoken by another.”¹³ Yet it was also important for me to maintain an analytical stance. I had to continuously remind myself that *no one gets a pass*. I found myself during this process making excuses, “Karra is an early career teacher, and her first year of teaching was disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, so maybe that explains *insert negative behavior*.” I found it is this mindset that allows white supremacy, white normalcy, and cultural dissonance to flourish. I began to live in this constant state of tension, where I had to continuously check myself and remind myself that whiteness is the socialized norm, and that I was a part of that. I had to resist my strongly empathetic nature and my natural desire to create connections with others. Moreover, it was important for me to continually remember and reflect on my own power and authority in this research project. I had to utilize the Ladson-Billings' six principles of culturally relevant pedagogy and live in this constant tension, understanding that the perception these eight

13. Rosemarie Anderson, Intuitive Inquiry. In W. Braud & R. Anderson, Transpersonal research methods for the social sciences: Honoring human experience. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage (1998). 73.

teachers were retelling might contain inaccurate versions and “rose colored” experiences that negate the experiences had by their children. I had to understand the colonialism behind the “nice teacher’s benevolence” and how these sy

Because I am currently a sixth-grade reading teacher who works in OKCPS and a university graduate teaching assistant, I was both an insider and outsider in this research setting. I reminded myself that, even though I had taught for eight years in the same area as several of my participants, I had to continuously examine and evaluate my own biases towards teacher education, professionalism, and pedagogy. When something said in an interview caused me to react internally, I made note of it. For instance, I had a visceral reaction to words and phrases like “thug,” “at risk,” and “illegal immigrants,” and I had to make myself listen and think deeply about how these teacher participants interact with the world in their own terms. In other words, I had to manage my own reactions and focus this study on what was most important for the research project: the unbiased accounts of eight white teachers who are teaching in communities of color.

The COVID-19 pandemic played a significant role in this research project. I collected data during the 2020-2021 school year, when all schools featured in this study fluctuated between in-person and virtual learning. We also saw significant variation in student numbers, as class sizes grew and shrank rapidly with the spikes and dips in active COVID-19 cases. Similarly, we experienced dramatic fluctuation in the energy levels of educators trying to keep their heads above the metaphorical waters and do their best to educate students who have had

little school structure since March 2020. The balancing act that many participants described were not an exaggeration; these teachers, like their colleagues, were trying to teach virtually, teach in person, mentor students, and keep their students safe—in addition to taking care of their families and finally themselves.

Summary

My interviews with eight urban white teachers created a vast collection of vignettes celebrating, discussing, scrutinizing, and analyzing the qualities and practices that make them educators. Each hour-long interview delved into the practices that each teacher uses to engage with their students of color. These interviews were transcribed and analyzed to identify key commonalities that best describe what it means to be a critical educator and to determine how we as a district, state, and nation need to redirect our efforts.

Chapter Four

Findings

This chapter contains the results of the phenomenological case study methodology conducted to answer the following research questions:

6. What does white teacher engagement and discipline policies look like in terms of humanistic and culturally relevant pedagogical practices?
 - a) What practices that teachers utilize are empowering to students?
 - b) What practices that teachers utilize are dehumanizing to students?
 7. How do teachers understand their role of power, privilege, and authority in the classroom through reflexivity and positionality?
 - a) How does cultural consciousness emerge in urban classrooms?
 - b) Can career teachers' reeducation be affected by discussions surrounding issues of social justice, such as critical race theory, history of education, community action projects, and literature?
 8. What can schools do to better serve their students of color, and how can districts create professional development opportunities to reeducate or educate white teachers to guide the profession and practice of teaching into more humanistic, culturally relevant practices?
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1. What can schools do to better serve their students of color, and how can districts create professional development opportunities to reeducate or educate white teachers to guide the profession and practice of teaching into more humanistic, culturally relevant practices?

This chapter describes in detail the process I used to analyze transcripts and uncover common themes from the eight individual interviews. The purpose of this research study was to examine teachers' attitudes toward and familiarity with culturally relevant pedagogical practices, focusing primarily on curriculum, teacher engagement, and discipline. After I issued the recruitment announcement

that explained my research project, the eight participants reached out to me, interested in telling their stories. At the beginning of each one-hour interview, the participant listened as I read the research consent document. Each one knew that this research project was investigating how white teachers engaged with students in schools predominantly populated by students of color. In analyzing the interview transcripts, I used open coding, a process by which a researcher looks for meaningful expressions and simplifies them into phrases or themes. As I read and reread the transcripts, more questions emerged. In addition to my original areas of focus—curriculum, teacher engagement, and discipline—issues of certification, institutional professional development, the belief gap, and critical awareness emerged, and I have added these topics to the discussion. My findings form the foundation for a plan of action, detailed in chapter 5, for how school districts and colleges of education could bolster pedagogical practices that lead teachers to address and dismantle systemic inequities in education.

It is important to remember that everyone has their own internal biases. This is part of what it means to be human. Each interview transcripts is a snapshot of a person at a particular point in time, so the transcripts reflect a variety of biases regarding race, gender, and other constructs. The purpose of this research is to use the examples of pedagogical practice revealed in the transcripts to create a way for teachers to become more aware of their positions of power and to deploy their power to create opportunities for educational achievement in their urban classrooms. These eight teachers' stories represent real human beings, and they

demonstrate various locations along the journey to become a critical educator—places of progress as well as areas for growth.

A Snapshot of our Workforce

Curriculum

Karra is a young second-year teacher who is bisexual. She works at a magnet high school in Oklahoma City. She is currently a freshman English literature teacher, so we began our interview by talking about her work and her ability to build curriculum. One of the first things Karra and I discussed was her choice of literature to use in her classroom. Many schools offer a short list of approved novels for use. Karra said, “As far as literature, I try to make it relevant to them.” When I asked what that meant, Karra said, “I polled them for a short story of what would they be interested in reading for like the genre, and since it was, closer to the start of October, they said spooky and or horror, so we did “Lamb to the Slaughter,” which was kind of like murder mystery. So, students got to pick what they wanted to read.” She said her students are very resistant to reading; they often disengage with the in-class work and turn to their “escape,” as Karra states, and pull out their phone. This disengagement suggests that Karra’s practices might not be culturally appropriate for her students. Gloria Ladson-Billings states, “[C]ulturally relevant teaching is a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes.”¹ Although Karra offers her

students some choice about their reading materials, the choices might not include “cultural referents” that are meaningful to them.

Karra mentioned that her school has an English language arts (ELA) coordinator who oversees all the ELA teachers in her department. I asked whether the coordinator is involved in examining and evaluating the materials that the ELA teachers select, Karra said, *“I feel like it’s based on whatever random chance that ELA a coordinator finds out, we would get, you know, gently suggested to follow the guided novel list for the district or whatever.”* I then asked whether there are many authors of color on the ELA master list. Karra said she didn’t know; she’d never really seen a list, and had just been given old lesson plans and went off of those for her own teaching. I asked about her relationship between her partner teacher and how they decide which literature to teach. Karra replied, *“So I work within my department really well. I love my department, they’re great. And I think it helps that we’re small.”* I asked her how else she made her curriculum relevant; including polling and a choice in the reading material is a great way to boost student interest and buy-in, but I was wondering how she came up with the options. She reflected back to her lesson plans from the previous year, *“Last year, we did Lord of the Flies, and it just went over their heads for the ninth-graders, just because it has heavy language and, content-wise, it was, it was a lot. It’s something that I wish I could do better. And then with my*

1. Gloria Ladson Billings (2009). *The dreamkeepers*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass. (Original work published 1994) 20.

*one group of juniors last year, we did *The Crucible*, and again, that was rough to get through, just because they're like. 'eh,' they couldn't really relate to it."* I asked her I asked her whether she'd had any expectations in advance about how her students would engage with *The Crucible*. She simply shrugged her shoulders. Karra's description of her students' reactions reminded me of Patrick Camangian's comments about the importance of "connection" when teachers attempt to engage students. In his view, teachers can create engagement by keeping students' interests in mind.

In turn, urban educators must design assessments that develop and evaluate young people on the critical consciousness, compassion, and leadership qualities needed to transform unjust social conditions. Toward this end, we must motivate students to transform the world and leverage this desire to also learn in school—which we should see as hand in hand. With these priorities in mind, we respond to student "failure" and disengagement by having them discuss the experiences that shape their worldview through our content areas and the critical and cultural perspectives that will help them develop alternative ideologies concerning their communities.²

I had noticed the blue and pink bisexual pride flag hanging on the wall behind Karra, and she had mentioned earlier that she was bisexual, so I asked her whether she includes literature from LGBTQIA+ authors or literature with LGBTQIA+ characters. Karra replied, *"Nothing that we read or consume is in regard to gender or sexuality just because I don't want to... you know, parents. a student comes up and says, 'Hey, we read about something that involves a queer*

2. Patrick Roz Camangian, "Teach Like Lives Depend on It." *Urban Education* (Beverly Hills, Calif.) 50, no. 4 (2015): 450.

couple, ' and, you know, a parent gets mad because that's not what they want their student reading about or hearing about, and he gets back and blah blah blah. But [students] do know I am bisexual, um, they know that I am the sponsor of the Spartan Equality Club, which is essentially just our fancy GSA [Gay-Straight Alliance]." I asked whether Karra felt that the administration would back her up if a parent came upset to school. Karra described a situation in which a parent was disturbed by the choice of reading material. She said, *"this is pretty much how it is"* when administration and parents are involved. *"The principal, like, texted me and said, 'Hey, like this family might take this issue to the school board.' And it was just something stupid."* I asked whether Karra could legally tell me what had happened. She didn't answer this question directly, but she said, *"Well, first of all, the assistant principal walked in when I was doing virtual parent-teacher conferences and started to talk to me about it, even though I tried to tell her, 'Hey, I'm in the middle of a parent-teacher conference right now with a completely different parent and student set.' And so, there was that and... like, of course, you know, I muted myself. But still, that's frustrating because it was a like a 10-minute time block slot that the parent student had signed up for, and I was booked back-to-back."*

Kristen has been a teacher far longer than Karra has, but she has taught family and consumer science for only two years. In her curriculum, she is currently engaging her students with a unit on childcare. She admitted that the virtual means of instruction presents many obstacles for how she teaches. Kristen said, *"My curriculum is not going to be as important to me as, you know, creating*

scenarios where, where I can learn more about them. I mean, a lot of them I don't even know what they look like, because I know their names, but I have no idea. Like, I could see him on the street, I wouldn't even know they were one of my students at this point." However, despite the barriers introduced by virtual learning, she tries *"to do everything I can to make this work relevant."* One of the ways she makes childcare relevant is by trying *"to find out the home lives of these kids."* In doing so, Kristen exemplifies empathy, a factor that Chezare Warren describes as being highly significant in education. "While empathy is a mechanism for obtaining new perspectives on culture that align more closely with the experiences, realities, and perceptions of diverse students and families, teacher dispositions are the site of candidates' professional development where the application of empathy may be rehearsed."³ I asked Kristen how she learns about her students' home lives: does the topic arise naturally through class discussion, or does she engage more directly? Kristen replied that many of her students have similar stories, and that she has a reasonably good idea about their homes lives based on their behavior.

A lot of our kids end up babysitting cousins, little brothers, while their parents run errands or work during the day. One example literally happened the other day. So, we were learning all about childcare. And that's when he turned his camera on. This kid never participates. If he does participate, he's blasting loud music or being distracting. But when he turned on his camera this time, he was holding a baby. And I said, 'Oh, look, that's a real tiny baby! Who's this? Who's the baby?' And of course,

3. Chezare A Warren. "Empathy, Teacher Dispositions, and Preparation for Culturally Responsive Pedagogy." *Journal of Teacher Education* 69, no. 2 (2018): 170.

I didn't know if it was his baby or not. Was it a brother? Was it, you know, his? And he said, Oh, yeah, my mom just had a baby. And then there's another little toddler showing up. And I said, 'we're doing developmental level 125. This is perfect.' And I started blasting him with questions because this guy is probably an expert. I asked him, 'Have you seen this behavior? Or have you seen these things from the lesson? You know, so I really tried to make it relevant for him because it was perfect. I mean, he had these little kids. And then it gave him a chance to share, like, he does know something that the other kids didn't know.

I asked whether allowing students to share their personal lives in the classroom was a common practice for Kristen. She nodded her head vigorously. *"I want kids to tell their stories. They usually think they are the only ones, when most of the kids have had similar experiences or would rather listen to them."*

I also inquired about Kristen's cooking classes, specifically, how she chooses foods and gets students interested in what she is teaching. Kristen responded,

I'm also going to have a whole section on "struggling" meals where you put what you got out of the fridge and you make something out of it. And you can feed a lot of people with it. And I'm hoping that because a lot of this stuff they're going to have to do on their own, that it will feed everybody. I mean, what parent wouldn't be okay with showing up at dinners? Like everybody's been fed already, you know.

I asked where the term "struggling meals" came from, and whether it was something that Kristen had come up with. She implied that she had adopted the name from a popular concept that she had heard from other FCS teachers. I asked if she intentionally built curriculum around her students' cultures, and she told me she has plans to show a YouTube channel called "Ranch to your Table."

There's a woman and she lives in Mexico, and she's got a cooking show.... She's got little YouTube videos of how to cook traditional Mexican food. And, and they're all in Spanish because she's in Mexico. And so, most of my kids speak Spanish. Once we get into the culinary, I'm definitely going to have them watching those videos. I know that they and their parents will

be able to watch the videos. I'm gonna try to recreate some of those recipes that I'm sure a lot of the students already know.

Ina is another FCS teacher in a middle school where she works with students in grades five through eight. During our interview, she discussed how little cooking occurs in her classroom, mentioning that her classroom is often a space where students to engage with issues that are happening at home and at school. Ina says, *"I just treat my class like a family. We do talk a lot about conflict resolution, and we do talk a lot about relationships. And it's kind of funny because we're not cooking. I mean, we might talk about nutritious meals. But in reality, these kids, you know, sometimes to eat nutritiously is expensive. So, we focus on the other."* Ina told me she spends a lot of her class time on topics like honor, bullying, and mental health. I asked whether her cooking curriculum aligned with students' interests. She said that she doesn't cook, but *"might make some popcorn, these kids are always hungry."* This exemplifies what Warren theorizes with his work on empathy teaching: "the core of culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) is the interactions between teachers and their students."⁴ When Ina realizes that her students are always hungry makes snacks for them, she steps beyond her role as educator.

4. Chezare A. Warren, "Empathy, Teacher Dispositions, and Preparation for Culturally Responsive Pedagogy." *Journal of Teacher Education* 69, no. 2 (2018): 178.

Jenna is the only participant who works in early childhood education. Jenna tries to use as much diverse literature as she can. *“It’s where I spend the most time and literally the most money.”* When I asked how Jenna engages students in the classroom through curriculum, she was quick to pull up her current week’s lesson plan. She explained that, for American History Month, her students were spending time on stories told from the perspective of children their age. *“We read a book called ‘My Life as a Native American.’ My kids were like, ‘I’m Native American too, that’s just like me.’ Students got really engaged with the book and really liked it.* I asked her if choosing books like this was a common practice of hers, and she said her classroom library needed to be diverse so that she could expose students to different ways of life and different cultures. She mentioned that there were a lot of school-motivated misconceptions about what occurred when the pilgrims landed in America, so she instead focused on books that both spoke historical truths and entertained five-year-old students.

It’s named American History Month, so instead of doing like books about Thanksgiving, and how the pilgrims and Indians were best friends... I refuse to teach my children a whitewashed and incorrect version of history. I think that that’s not fair to them. So, our read-alouds for this week focused on Sitting Bull, Chief Joseph, and Crazy Horse. The books that we read talked a lot about how their land was taken from them, and how they and their tribe fought back. This is why it’s important to remember these people throughout history, and ask what can we learn from them? Why do we think it’s important to learn about them? And just trying to incorporate it in ways like that when we don’t have time for it? You know, the rest of the school year?

Jenna has created curiosity in her classroom. This is a space where culturally relevant curriculum and social justice curriculum intertwine. Jenna makes it a point to include to include literature specifically about people who share

characteristics and cultures with her students. Jenna chooses her curriculum very intentionally. Jenna chooses her curriculum very carefully. Her practices call to mind Richard Milner's work on CRP, which discusses the essential reasoning for creating a classroom that holds cultural connections to its students. He writes, "Teachers must be mindful of whom they are teaching and the range of needs that students will bring into the classroom. Moreover, the social context that shapes students' experiences is vast and complexly integral to what decisions are made, how decisions are made, and why."⁵ Jenna further illustrated her practice of including students in the curriculum by telling me about a student who speaks Quechua. The little girl's family comes from a tiny village in Peru. Jenna made sure to include Peruvian books in the curriculum and even displayed posters in the classroom showing Quechuan clothing. Jenna said that this effort was nothing compared to the happiness of the girl and her mother upon seeing the classroom's inclusion of their culture and language.

Shannon is a long-time teaching veteran who has worked at her middle school continuously for 21 years. She is a self-described traditional mathematics educator who does not like to rely on technology. When we began this interview, I asked her about her teaching methods and strategies. Shannon said that she likes to "chunk" work for students so that they do not get overwhelmed. "*The first*

5. Richard H Milner IV, and Milner IV, H Richard. "Culturally Relevant Pedagogy in a Diverse Urban Classroom." *The Urban Review* 43, no. 1 (2011): 67.

thing I asked them is, 'what operations?' Because that's something they can answer. They may not know the answer to the whole problem, or the solution to the problem, but they can tell me something. So, I try to always go back to 'what can you tell me' so that they know they're not clueless, they kind of understand that they do know some things. Then we just work from there." Shannon asserted that starting at the beginning of basic operations is a way to build students' math resilience and confidence, something her students lacked.

Jake is a second-year English language arts teacher who is part of a Teach for America cohort. He acknowledged having trouble figuring out how to engage students while also following school policies. Jake said that his high school principal is restrictive on the curriculum that they introduce to students:

I'm not allowed to use books to teach English, which I find odd. Um, so I can use excerpts or short stories, but my principal has decided that books are a no-go in eleventh-grade English. So, that's a severe limitation that makes no sense to me and totally flies in the face of obviously, like, what I want to do as an English teacher and a guy who liked English and wanted to teach my favorite books. So, my process is, because of that limitation, I mostly find the standards and then try to conceive of how to teach them and then find a text that seems appropriate.

I asked how he felt about these limitations and how successful he felt engaging with student interests. *"Well, we did a whole unit around that documentary, 'The Thirteenth,' on Netflix."* I asked him how his students perceived it, and he said that the students had heard on the "downlow" that the documentary had won awards and also featured some historical violence. Jake said he was afraid his students wouldn't be able to understand some of the history because it had not been taught in any of their previous courses prior. I asked how he made it relatable for students. Jake shook his head and said that he had noble goals, but students just

were below his expectations for eleventh graders, which made his job more difficult. I asked if he thought it might have been a school culture issue, or maybe a district, state issue and Jake replied,

Culturally, I feel like [all the teachers have] great intentions. . . . But the actual actions taken [by the teachers and administration] very rarely seem to align with what we want for our students, which is academic success. Here at the high school about, I believe, like 96% of the students move on to the next grade. But according to Oklahoma Department of Education only 20% of them are capable of moving on, and that right there, I think kind of says it all.

Jake described the high amount of pressure he is under to “*make students at or above*” grade level for all standards. The “at or above” is one of his district’s adopted strategies to motivate students and teachers to bring about tremendous growth in academic achievement. I asked Jake to think about his own expectations for students. He nodded his head slowly. “*Our students just can’t compete on level. I teach juniors and yet I have students with third-grade reading levels. We aren’t doing anything to help these students, just passing them through to the next grade.*”

Maisie had concerns similar to Jake’s, but she felt more prepared overall in her content area. Maisie, who serves on her elementary school’s leadership committee, said she felt that her school was student-centered and focused on all the facets of the child. Maisie said her curriculum was focused on students becoming leaders. She works with primarily Black students, and she stressed the importance of giving her second graders the chance to lead often and take ownership in “*their*” classroom. “*I use leadership a lot during small group time. There are different opportunities where they get to switch the leadership. And I*

have my reading group going, and then I have a floor group. So, the floor group is also meeting at the same time, they are also reading the same book that we read yesterday, but someone in that group gets to be the leader today.” I asked her how she was able to monitor all the students who are moving from center to center. Maisie said she didn’t like micromanaging students: *“I am not telling them what to do every second, and because of that, they are more relaxed working with their partners.”* She continued, *“So I have a system that’s like this big rainbow wheel. And for small groups for reading and math, I pair a low student with a medium, and a medium student with a high student. There isn’t a huge discrepancy, and students learn from each other.”*

When I asked Maisie what types of books she used for whole-group reading, Maisie expressed pride in her classroom library. She listed title after title, explaining that she had bought many of the books specifically for a particular student.

When my kids pick up a book off the top shelf—it’s not usually the normal kind of “look at this dog, the story’s about a pug. It’s more about “look at this story of a Native American and their drama and how they tell stories,” or, you know, a story of a girl who, like a couple of weeks ago, we read a book called Lila’s Lunchbox, it was about Ramadan. And if you could have seen the look on one of my student’s faces who her family participates in Ramadan, like seeing her face light up because she knew that we were learning about her and I gave her the opportunity to share—like, “what does that look like in your house?”

Maisie had an intentionality about her classroom curriculum. She said it was easy to teach the standards to any book and that she really tries to diversify her library to reflect various races, genders, LGBTQIA+ identities, and cultural lives that her students may have experienced.

Like Maisie, Madelyn brings a critical perspective to the literature she uses in her fourth-grade classroom. As a grade-level leader, she has made it a requirement that teachers in her department think about the literature they use in instruction. She said she makes an effort to include as much social studies and science as possible in their reading selections because those subjects are often overlooked when large amounts of time are devoted to reading and practicing test-taking strategies for English language arts and mathematics. Madelyn has pushed back against her school's decision to adopt a scripted curriculum from a popular curriculum provider.

I'm always trying to critically analyze what the content is in my classroom. So, for our language arts standards, I don't use the prescribed curriculum. It's very scripted. I mean, it literally tells the teacher, like, ask the students to share a memory of blank. And then it says, like, tell the students thank you for sharing a memory. It doesn't feel like I'm being treated as a professional.

I asked Madelyn if she felt this level of scripting was necessary for a new educator, and she laughed and said, "No." She is glad her school gives her the ability to select the material she deems necessary and most powerful for her students.

I tend to center my lessons that I do for English language arts around literature that I've found from various websites or blogs that I follow, respectable websites and resources that basically brand themselves on providing diverse, inclusive, and responsive literature. So, it's like finding a book that, you know, centers around a young female narrator. And she's talking about all of the women in her family and the different ways that they wear the hijab and when they wear it, and why they wear it and how they wear it and things like that. So pulling that book into a lesson on text structure and talking about, you know, how this is a descriptive text structure, because it's describing lots of different ways and places and styles for how people wear hijabs, and then having some discussion about

that and providing space and time for students to ask questions and say, “Have you heard of, you know, this word? Have you seen people wearing this?”

Madelyn says that the majority of her students are Latino/a/x and that their families typically do not travel outside the United States because of issues of poverty, documentation, and language. Nor do her students tend to watch the Discovery channel to learn about different places around the world. She said that her goal is to bring the world to her students. Like Maisie, Madelyn enjoys exposing her students to cultures from around the world and focuses her lessons on cooperative learning styles so students not only learn about the world, they learn from each other. She encourages students to engage with each other through conversation and exploratory learning. *“Cooperative learning provides a space for them to shine, and that makes them the center of the classroom and allows them to learn in a way that, I think, values and respects them as people. I wouldn't want to sit in a classroom all day and do worksheets.”* Madelyn says that she wants students engaged, talking, reading, discussing, and arguing while they are learning with her.

Discipline

Karra, who teaches English language arts at the high school level, stated that she was a “*go with the flow*” kind of educator. The only behavior she insists on correcting is students’ use of phones for “*escaping*” when they are supposed to be doing classwork. She said, *“when they’re on their phone, if that was the first time— like, per my policy, first time I see it—it’s like, ‘hey, like, get off your phone.’ Second time I see it, [the phone] goes in this little Tupperware box on my*

desk called phone jail. And they don't get it back until the end of the class" This led me to questions about how often students are reading, and how they are reading in her classroom. Kara explained that, because school has been completely virtual this year due to COVID-19, she has had to simply trust students to do their reading. But she reflects on last year and how she got her eleventh graders to read. *"I did ten minutes of reading at the start of class on Tuesdays and Thursdays where they came in sat and sat on their butt and then popped open a book. I did get a lot of students who put their phone behind the book and then you know... I call them out for that because if you're doing this [gestures to putting her head down on crisscrossed arms] or like smiling at the book, or have you know, even the light shining on their glasses, they have the thing like online where it's the blue coat [blue light blocker]—if I can see that, you're probably not reading. I also had ones that just flat-out did not want to do it. So that was that was kind of rough, rough, rough, the juniors were super resistant to that."* I asked her what she did to redirect students to get them back to her classroom expectations. She replied, *"if they were skimming through the book and not really reading through it, I would ask them, like, 'hey, like, what you think of it so far? Like, um, what have you read? Like, do you like it? Do you not like it? What do you like? What would you be interested in reading?'"* I pushed further and asked whether she met with students one-on-one to address behavior expectations, she nodded her head in the affirmative. *"I would never want a student to be embarrassed. I always want to remain a teacher they can trust."*

Kristen, who teaches FCS at the high school level, opened the discipline discussion with laughter, *“Oh god, I had this one class, they were out of control.”* She tells me a story of her first year as an FCS teacher and the struggle of learning how to balance cooking, flames, and teenagers. *“I learned that I had to build rapport with my students. And my students know that I care about them. You know, I’m not going to punish you for the sake of punishing you. I’m going to try to correct this behavior. And we’re going to try to talk about why we shouldn’t be doing this.”* She said that her transition into a classroom with a kitchen made her reestablish some of the classroom rules that she had become lax on while in a traditional classroom. *“Classroom management is the key to everything, is the key to being able to actually teach the kids, is the key to having your sanity, and not just feeling like kids are walking on you all day. It is the cornerstone piece of everything else.”*

During Ina’s interview, she spent much of her time talking about her “mama bear” instincts. In her view, teaching is *“90% parenting and 10% teaching.”* She said that when she first started working in her urban middle school, she experienced culture shock at the difference between her students’ behavior and the way her own sons had behaved around the same age. Ina said, *“You know, students have a difficult time coming from their household and how they’re being disciplined and how they’re being raised by the school. This is not like how I ran my household; you know, teachers just have to remember that, and it is frustrating sometimes.”* I asked her to name some differences that she had noticed. She replied that many of her students do not respect the classroom itself:

they leave messes, they put their feet on tables, and, she said with finality, “*they steal from me. If I was gone a day to like FCCLA [a professional conference], I’d come back, and my fridge would be empty. All my candy be gone. I mean, I would just be so heartbroken. I’d say, ‘don’t steal from me, I’ll give it to you, you just got to ask.’*” I asked her how often she would come back to an empty fridge, and she responded sadly, “*every single time.*”

I asked Ina to think back on recent positive events that have filled her metaphorical cup. Ina thought for a bit and then spoke about a student who had at one time been disrespectful to her in class. I interrupted her and repeated my question, and she laughed and said the story had a positive ending. She continued, “*I had this one little girl last year, she was just really acting out, just being so hateful. And I finally just called her out into the hallway. And I said, ‘What’s going on with you?’*” Ina said the girl looked down at her feet and said that it was the anniversary of her baby sister’s death. Ina began to get emotional at this retelling. I asked her what she did after the girl disclosed that information. Ina said, “*I just bear-hugged her. What else can you do?*” Ina said that none of the teachers had known about this tragic event that led to a trauma response. Ina took it upon herself to inform the administrator, who then forwarded the message to the appropriate teachers. Ina took a deep breath and assured me that her school does a good job at working with students who need extra behavioral support. “*There’s sometimes I think to myself... I don’t have to be here. But I want to be here. You know, I don’t have to do this. I don’t have to teach this course because there’s*

days I think, what the heck am I doing? There are days I literally say maybe I should just go be a truck driver,” Ina laughed.

Jenna said she is decidedly aware of how much her first-graders need to move—almost constantly—and she works with students on transition skills. She likes to bring in all the students close to her so there are limited distractions and it is easier for the softer-spoken children to be heard when they are reading or talking about the lesson. She tries to build lessons that allow and encourage students to go to different centers and stations and that give students have space to work alone or with small groups. Jenna said that her classroom has a motto that the students learn and say every day. She calls it her “social contract,” and each student signs it on the first day of school as a promise to each other. *“But sometimes, a teacher needs a break,”* she stated. *“Sometimes, I just need a break from a specific student, like, if a student’s just bugging me, or annoying me, they don’t really need a break, but I need a break. And so, in that case the student would just go into like the other classroom for, like, five minutes, or as long as ten minutes, to do their work in there.”* I asked her if this happens often. Jenna said that she and her partner teacher typically send one student a week to each other, or she might have a student deliver a note to the teacher across the hall so the student gets to stretch their legs or decompress with a leadership role.

Shannon describes herself as a very structured educator. She has policies posted in her classroom as well as policies that she references while she is teaching. I asked Shannon how she ran her classroom, what it looked like, and how she worked with students.

I'm very, very structured. I mean, very. There're some teachers who like kids to be, I don't know, talking more and more, and they run their classrooms that way, and more power to them. That suits their style. That does not suit my style. I like my kids in nice, neat little rows all facing front.... I feel like if you don't have their attention, if they're not listening to you, then you're just talking to the air, it doesn't do any good. So, if they're not focused on what I'm trying to teach them, then there's no point.

Shannon expressed the idea that schools today have become soft and lazy when students are truant or failing courses. I asked more about Shannon's policies and what she meant about schools being "soft." She elaborated, saying *"If they were in my classroom, they would be turning in their work or they would not go to their elective. They would not go sit with their friends at lunch. They would be with me until that work was done. Because I mean what I say, and I make believers out of them right from the beginning. So, they know not to do that."* I asked her whether this was effective and whether students responded in the way she desired.

Shannon nodded enthusiastically in agreement and told me that teachers need to have structure in their classrooms and much follow through with class policies.

She gave a few examples.

They call it the 'mother look,' I don't know. But I do go stand next to them. I just—proximity, that works really well. Then sometimes you have a kid who didn't take their medicine that day, and they're having a meltdown. So, I just put them out in the hall, and right where I can keep my eye on them. And I go out and check on them, you know, in between, like, give the kids a problem to work on. I go check on them. And you know, I don't yell or scream. I'm just like, "are you ready to be calm and come back to class yet?" If they say yes, I say "You're welcome." If they don't, I say, "Hey, I'll be out to check on you again in a couple minutes."

Jake, who teaches English language arts at the high school level, describes himself as a "problem student" during his school days. If he had been Shannon's student, he would have happily spent his day out in the hall in what he terms

“freedom.” He said he was often difficult to his teachers on principle because he could, because he was lucky to be intelligent and a quick learner. As a teacher, Jake enjoys the “hard” students and often reflects on his own behavior and mindset from his early teenage years. He actively wants students to be challenging: *“you don’t challenge unless you care. If you don’t care, you just check out.”* He says his form of protest was to push back against the authority of whomever was in charge. In his view, it was up to the teachers to reach out to him, engage with him, and not look down on him because of his age. Jake now thinks he handled some things a bit disruptively.

I just love either being challenged by a student, or questions, because that’s good. I think I found as a first-year teacher, having been a difficult student myself, I felt like I had a little advantage there like, if you’re engaging however you are, that means something’s going right. Now, the way you’re engaging might be disruptive. And you might not realize that.... I didn’t realize that I was disruptive.

I asked Jake about his current classroom culture with his eleventh, and specifically about how he works with students when discipline situations arise. Jake chuckled before answering my question. He said, *“I had one student in particular who I had a lot of problems with, basically, because he was a lot like me.”* I asked Jake to clarify, and he said the student had a problem with authority and following basic classroom rules and expectations. He said the student “knew it all” and loved to push back and challenge his teachers. Jake says, *“So I bet I almost always knew what he was thinking, which is a huge problem.”* Jake said he was pretty much at the end of his tether when he asked for help from a colleague who also taught this student. The colleague asked whether Jake had ever had an honest, non-academic conversation with this student.

And I was totally flummoxed by the questions and I eventually flustered my way through talking to him. I mean, it didn't magically fix anything but there was an understanding that started that hadn't been there before, because I hadn't actually taken an interest. I really think it's important to develop that teacher sense for when you couldn't really explain. I felt like I was forcing them to talk to me in the hall, which had happened to me so many times as a student that I didn't want to ever do that.

I asked if this advice was helpful long-term, and Jake said that he has attempted to make those relationships immediately after the school year starts.

Maisie described her classroom as a safe place for students, and she works to make it that way. She has taught at the same school site for five years and has a rapport with her current and previous students. She said,

"Lots of kids come to take breaks in my room [when they've had a disciplinary issue in another teacher's classroom]. And I'm very open to that. I have some frequent fliers. And so, they all have a journal, it's in the corner, they write down what happened. And when I get a minute, I go look at it, and we talk about it and talk about what we're going to do differently when we go back."

She says that she doesn't have too many discipline issues in her classroom because it is a fast-paced environment that is supportive and has many opportunities for breaks. However, when a student needs a break or becomes overstimulated, she provides weighted stuffed animals that students can hug, and she provides weighted stuffed animals and sensory toys. Maisie said that this intentional practice helps regroup students, focuses their attention, and calms them if they become stressed, upset, or frustrated.

Madelyn thinks of herself as a teacher whom students want to please. She encourages them to take pride in their work and their growth. *"They want my approval," she said, and she attributed this to her practice of building respectful moments in her classroom from the very first week of the school year. Madelyn*

emphasized that her discipline is structured in a way that makes sense to students; there are no surprises. *“I try to make everything as logical as possible.”* She said that discipline issues are rare in her classroom, but when something arises, she meets it with compassion.

I’m not always—I’m not a perfect teacher. But the goal is to be someone who responds first with a sense of compassion, and say, “you know, here’s what was said. Why do you think this was said? What do you think they were feeling when they said this? What would make this better? You know, what do you want?” Well, sometimes with some students who are not ready to talk, or who are too angry—for me, it’s a matter of, “are you ready to talk now? Or do you need some time to cool down?”

Madelyn also provides a cool-down zone where students can sit and think about emotional situations. She has built socio-emotional awareness in to the centers in her classroom.

So I do have a specific cool-down place in my classroom that I tried to make, because I have had students who will, like, flee, you know, or who will slam the door and walk out when they’re upset by something. I’m making sure they’re in the classroom, making sure they emotionally feel safe, and having the tools to, you know, provide breathing exercises, zone regulations, “can you identify what zone you’re in? Do you want to identify what zone you’re in?” This is something I’ve picked up over the past, like, two years, and has been really helpful.

I asked Madelyn to explain zone regulations, and she directed me to an online resource that uses color codes attached with specific emotions and reactions.⁶

Madelyn builds these zones in to her procedures and classroom expectations.

6. Blue zone is sick, sad, tired, bored. Green zone is happy, calm, feeling okay, focused, ready to learn. Yellow zone is frustrated, worried, wiggly, excited, loss of control. Red zone is mad/angry, terrified, yelling/hitting, elated, out of control. “Learn More about the Zones.”

First, a cool-down spot zone of regulation, then a conversation. And then if it's a recurring problem—we've had conversations, they've been given two or three chances, and they're just continuing to make choices that warrants a consequence—then typically, the consequence will be something like pulling the parents into the conversation. Sometimes I'll ask students to have lunch with me one on one, so that we can just have that time to talk and kind of get to the root of what's happening. I don't support taking away recess as punishment.

Madelyn emphasizes that it's important for teachers to remember that these are children first; they are bound to make mistakes. When this happens, they need to understand that a harm has occurred and to have a respectful conversation about what needs to happen next.

Teacher Engagement

In her interview, Karra told me she always wanted to be a teacher whom students could trust and confide in. This prompted me to ask Karra how her interactions with students boosted their trust in her and whether her own youth helped her connect with students. She said,

*Often I do try to tie in, like, what TV shows they like to watch, because more often than not, I've found if they like something like TV-show-wise, if they like romance, they probably like romance books. So that kind of translates. And then also asking, "Well, have you have you seen the movie *The Fault in Our Stars*? And yes or no? Okay, well, it's based off a book, here's the book, we can go to the library.*

I then asked what happens when a student is resistant toward a book they are reading and wants to go to the library for a new book: Does the whole class go to the library, or only the student who wants a new book? Karra explained that the whole class goes together to the library, and they must schedule it with the librarians. *“They got like a good chunk of class time to peruse some books and see what they wanted to read. And I just acted as like, someone to bounce like feedback off of, because I read a lot of ‘white’ books when I was in middle school throughout high school, and still kind of do. So, they could ask like, ‘Hey, have you read such and such?’ And I could be like, ‘Yes, I have. No, I haven’t,’ and then direct them from there.”* I mentioned the resistant eleventh graders, the ones who put their heads down and refused to read for ten minutes, and asked Karra whether she felt students would take her book recommendations and read in her classroom. She replied, *“It’s honestly a 50/50 shot.”*

Kristen said her engagement comes through the way she includes stories in her everyday lessons. *“I find it easier to teach if I give a why, a real-life why.”* She says that students need to understand the rationale behind why they cook the way they do in this classroom. This rationale is embedded into their classroom structure and in Kristen’s use of leadership roles for her high school students.

These jobs might seem childish, but there is a why behind each of them, and it gives kids a chance to pretend to run a classroom. Each job was on a little piece of paper, and it was taped onto the table. If you sat at that seat, that was your job. [One job] was the door opener, so if somebody knocked on the door, there was a procedure, I trained you how to open the door... you don’t just let anybody in, if they have a badge, if they’re a teacher, you know, if they’re another student, you wait until I can get to the door. There’s a whole procedure, and that procedure is there with their little job. I always call one of them the pencil pal, where I have the

pencils clipped to the board and the student is responsible for signing them out. I don't keep track of that.

When I asked Ina about her engagement with students, she immediately said, “*School is a sanctuary for students.*” I asked Ina what her school in particular does to become a sanctuary. She said she tried to model her classroom on a supportive home. I probed for details, asking what it meant for a school to model a home. Ina screen-shared her computer and directed my attention to a fulfilled Donors Choose grant application. “*I just did a Donors Choose project and it got funded. It's for a washer and dryer because I will wash and dry their clothes.*” A little taken aback, I asked why she would write a Donors Choose application for two thousand dollars to buy a washer and dryer that will be used in her classroom. Ina explained,

Because they come to school, they don't smell good. Their sweatshirts are all stretched out. Last winter, you know, I'd give them a brand-new jacket, they'd be so proud but they'd want their old jacket back so their little siblings could have it. And you know I do this a lot because who doesn't want a fresh smelling sweatshirt? That's when I started realizing ... Okay, these kids have very little. I mean this one young man I taught, he was in seventh grade last year. I mean, big boy, I'm talking six foot almost. And you know, it's wintertime, and you can see his ankles because his pants are so short... I brought all kinds of stuff for those kids. I had girlfriends saying for me to take clothes, and things like flat irons, and, you know, just stuff that just we have, too much junk laying around. These kids thought it was the Taj Mahal. I mean, you know, they thought, “Whoa, look at this!” I just started noticing that a lot of the kids didn't have good shoes or they, you know, their pants were high-waters because they're growing so fast or, or whatever. So, I brought in a lot of clothes and I let them go shopping. I would say, “Okay, if you finish you can get to go shopping,” you know, but what was really sweet is a lot of the kids would be like, “Well, can I take this to my mom?” I would just say, “you can have whatever you want.”

Ina finished this story by saying, *“I love on them. I tell them they’re my kids... I think the kids just need to know somebody cared, you know.”*

Jenna’s interview also raises the theme of care. She talked about why she continues teaching despite the heavy workload and emotional challenges. Jenna said, *“[It] just makes me tear up whenever I see the look on a kid’s face of how proud they are. When they’ve accomplished something and how proud they are of themselves. And like that just is the best feeling in the world, like knowing that you have helped a child accomplish that feeling.”*

Shannon also reflected on the notion of accomplishment, stating that her goal as a teacher is to make mathematics doable. She mentioned that her students are resistant to doing math, but through her extensive years as a mathematics educator, she has learned how to get students thinking positively and engaging with mathematics in a different way. *“I will have kids, as soon as the paper touches their hand, ‘I don’t get it,’ like, and I say, ‘well, you haven’t even read it. How could you possibly get it when you haven’t even had time to look at the words?’ So, I do teach them strategies for breaking things down into smaller pieces... I’m very methodical about, you know, step-by-step. But kids, a lot of times, aren’t able to see the step-by-step, they just either think it’s all or nothing.”* Because Shannon is a core teacher who mentioned the high stakes testing during her interview, I asked her how strongly the standardized tests influenced her curriculum and teaching practice. She said that the tests reflected on her teaching, and that success seems to move farther and farther away each year. I asked about

how she prepares students for testing, and she said, “*we just do the order of operations. We practice, practice, practice.*” She continues:

I say everything out loud for students. For example, ‘I need to do the inverse operation.’ I say that out loud as I’m doing it, so that they’re hearing it and writing it at the same time as they’re seeing it. I’ve tried to hit those different learning styles. And I have them turn and talk to their seat partner about the answer. I’ll practice one or two problems with them, or I will have them try one on their own and turn and talk to their seat partner. And then we’ll do a couple more together.

I asked Shannon whether she works through every problem with students, and she said, “*of course! And I think in order to show a kid, you know, you have to talk it out aloud with them.*”

Regarding engagement, Jake lamented that he was unable to engage students with the full experience. “*My dream is to give a book to someone, and they become hooked. All it takes is one book to really click with something you feel is true. And then you’re hooked on reading. Once that happens, you realize, wait a minute, like this person from 1000 years ago felt the exact same way. Like that’s crazy. And so I just I’ll never get tired of trying to do that.*”

Maisie expressed a similar desire to foster transformative experiences for her students. But rather than becoming hooked on a particular book or reading, Maisie hoped her students would grow more aware of their socio-emotional needs. She focuses a lot of attention on how students feel. She mentioned that she has a space in her classroom where students can sit and write. “*There’s some feeling charts, there’s some journal paper. So again, with second grade, it’s usually like coloring and how you’re feeling.*” Giving her students the language to express feelings is one of her missions as a second-grade teacher. For students

who are processing emotions, she says, *“We listen to some calming piano music before we talk. I just try to really ground them before we have that conversation. I always teach my students about ‘I statements,’ and how it’s okay to talk about our feelings if we use an ‘I statement.’”*

Madelyn tries to keep her classroom as calm as possible. She utilizes stations where students can *“have a little bit of energy.”* She likes to vary how she does instruction, ranging from whole-group activities to individual centers where students can work on multiple skills. She makes choice an important facet of her classroom as well. She said, *“I try to have some, like, try to have individual choice as much as possible, some movements, discussion, and some quiet time.”*

She described her classroom as a medley of activities. She states,

Usually, I’m teaching near my smartboard and they’re, like, either sitting on the carpet or have moved their chairs close. So, we’re kind of all in a group. And I’m sort of doing some teaching. And then when they’re practicing, I’m just like walking around the room, sort of asking them questions, facilitating their learning, checking in on their notebooks, checking in on, you know, what they’re creating, but just kind of moving around the room as much as possible. Or at my teacher table with a small group, because I do a lot of—after we do whole-group, then it’s usually like stations. So, I may be at my teacher table with small groups, and then the students are sort of rotating through the different stations.

Madelyn said she places priority on having students share their work with their peers. She wants them to take pride in their work. She builds her lessons around giving students a chance to discuss their ideas with each other. She builds this time with intentionality so that students can learn to trust each other and engage in respectful ways with an academic purpose.

Family Connections

When I began this study, I was focused on three major themes: curriculum, discipline, and teacher engagement. However, through the eight interviews, I became aware of several other prevalent themes that I had not anticipated. Family connections is one that arose in all of the interviews. This emergent theme is important to the discussion of critical whiteness, as many families in Oklahoma City are families of color and many of the teachers are white and do not reside in the communities where they teach. After Karra told her story about a parent who was unhappy with her choice of reading material, I asked how she reached out to parents to involve them in the reading participation process. She reflected for a moment before illustrating the frustrations she encounters when reaching out to parents. She told me about a situation where a student received a zero for an assignment that he hadn't turned in. Karra said, "*I did everything I could, except for short of going to this kid's house and holding his hand and walking him through how to turn something in.*" The parents were upset by the grade of zero and Karra's refusal to regrade the assignment. "*And I got... I got griped at by admin. And even though I thought it wasn't fair, and had reached and reached out to the kid, multiple ways, and didn't get any feedback from him....*" She shrugs sadly. "*Like I said, I did everything short of coming to his house and holding his hand and walking through how to turn in the stupid assignment.*" In this case, she said, the parents did not support the policy stated on her syllabus, which had been in place the entire school year. I asked whether Karra had reached out to others who had previously taught this student or whether she was paired with a mentor teacher since she was still technically in her first

year. Karra replied, *“I’ve never really gotten feedback or like, to be sarcastic, I’ve never gotten an instruction manual for how to deal with parents, or how to even talk to parents. Last year, I really didn’t have to call home... I think I did once. And that was it. This year, I’ve called home so many times. I’m finding myself calling home about every single day in the week, just because it’s either, students aren’t turning in work, or they’re not turning in work and they’re not showing up. Or, like, I had to call them today because I had a kid cheat on a quiz.”* I felt as though we were spiraling into unproductive negativity, so I attempted to change the subject, asking about Karra’s positive interactions with parents. She mentioned that many parents speak Spanish and are uncomfortable speaking English without a translator or their student present. I asked whether the school had any built-in supports to help overcome the language barrier between teachers and parents. *“There is a ‘language link services,’ but it’s kind of complicated because we have to call the language link service, tell them what language we need spoken or translated, and then call the parent for a three-way call. But the school suggests using the English language learner assistants instead of the language link service, just because it’s more personal and is somebody that we already work with, and somebody possibly the student has already interacted with.”*

Kristen expressed a similar sentiment about using the Language Link Services. She prefers to handle these situations herself. *“I’ll ask the student, ‘does your mom or dad speak English or Spanish?’ And if they say ‘Spanish,’ then I’ll tell them I speak a little bit of Spanish, so we’ll try to figure this out. Whenever I*

call parents, I will write down all the things that I want to say, in Spanish, so that I can actually talk to them. So, there's a real effort." I asked whether this is difficult and whether the conversation has ever stalled due to limitations in her Spanish vocabulary. Kristen replied that, for the most part, parents listen to what she says and typically respond positively. *"The parents know I am going out of my way to speak Spanish."*

In Jenna's interview, she immediately dove into the conversation surrounding families, mentioning that parents often want to be included in her classroom because her students are so young; parents want to stay and watch their "baby" learn and interact with other students.

Parents are welcome to be, like, involved as much or as little as they want. I had one kid last year who his mom walked him into class every single morning and would hang up his backpack, put his stuff down, like get them all settled. She and I got a chance to connect every morning and just talk about whatever and be friendly with each other, and I think that's really important. Connecting with parents is just being real with them and not like putting on this front.

Jenna said that new teachers typically feel some reservations when interacting with parents. They fear doing or saying something that clashes with the parent's child-rearing practices or their goals for their child. Parents, after all, must place a great deal of trust in teachers; they are handing over their "baby" to another person who will help rear and educate them. *"I am upfront about how kids are doing,"* Jenna said. *"I say the data [such as test scores], and I also mean, like, anecdotal notes like observations and things that I've noticed, like work samples for my kids. I gather all that together, and then I would speak with the*

parents and let them know what the things are that they need to be working on.”

Jenna made a point of helping parents feel involved in the learning process and empowering them to work on skills at home with their child.

During Shannon’s interview, she consistently spoke about her connections to students and families within the community where she has taught for more than 20 years. *“I have taught generations. Last year, I had a child of one of my former students. And I have another one this year. I’ve had lots of kids from the same families. We are predominantly Hispanic, and just in general, they tend to have larger families. So, I get lots of brothers and sisters and cousins. And they’re like, ‘Oh, I know you.’”* Shannon said that teaching is what gives her life purpose, and she is one of the longest-serving teachers in the district. She said that every day that she works with students is a gift. *“I love the kids. Like they make me smile every day. Like I’ve never had a day where I went home crying.”* I inquired about that particular rhetoric: Did Shannon know teachers at her school who cried on their drive home? Shannon laughed and said, *“there is a reason teacher turnover is so high in this particular district. The kids are tough, and you have to be tough, you know?”*

When I asked Jake about his school’s structure and the way that his school communicated with parents, he smiled and laughed. He said that, even though his school serves mainly Latino/a/x students, most communications to parents were written in Spanish that had been badly translated through Google Translate.

Our school uses a personal Facebook of our assistant principals to disseminate information that students then have to give their parents in Spanish. As a teacher, this is so problematic because I

have to have a conversation in English with a student who is serving as a translator. What if I have a student who speaks virtually no English, and now the impossible problem of, I can't give you an A if you didn't, like, write a sentence, now tell your parents that. Did the student even understand what I wanted to say? Did the student tell their parent that information? Did the meaning even translate?

Maisie tells me that Black parents historically have been left out of the educative process. Because she works in a Black community, she knew early in her career that she had to make Black families an integral part of each child's education. Always concerned with students' feelings and their processing of emotions, Maisie brings socio-emotional awareness to her communications with parents and guardians. *"And I always reach out to parents, I call at least two parents with a positive note every week, but in the beginning of the year, I call everybody. I do always ask them, you know, 'are there things that you do at home with your child that helps when they're upset?' And I try to get as much information as I can."* In her interview, she referred to parents as partners in her mission and emphasized that she tried to make sure parents knew what students were learning so that they could share in that learning process. I asked her how she was involved with the community, and she excitedly told me that she was very much present during the Black Lives Matter marches that took place in Oklahoma City in 2020.

I love everybody. But when it became my job, I realized my students needed me to understand who they are, it really changed me. And as a person, you know, I saw some of my students this summer when I was at the Black Lives Matter protest, and seeing me there, the parents started crying, you know, 'you're here, and you're supporting us.' And I was like, 'Well, yeah, I'm gonna be here. I told you, from the get-go, I always tell my kids, once my kid always my kid.'

Madelyn focused on the ways that her school communicated with families to explain the necessary changes to school life due to COVID-19. Her school, located on the city's south side, is a majority Latino/a/x school. *"Firstly, our principal does speak Spanish, and so she has met with the Parent Teacher Association."* Madelyn said that having a principal able to interact one-on-one with parents has been powerful and has brought comfort to the families in her classroom. Madelyn said that her families receive a biweekly newsletter in English and Spanish to help parents keep up with important school news, including dates of family involvement events. *"We've had like parent nights. We do a science night, a math night or reading night, a social studies night, where families come in and participate in different activities. Our social studies night we've always done in March. It's planned around Cesar Chavez' birthday, and we do a big, kind of like birthday party celebration, which has always attracted a lot of parents and families."* She said that these fun activities are important for her students because they are safe and educational and help get parents involved in their children's education.

Institutional Professional Development

Institutional Professional Development (PD) is another emergent theme that I uncovered through the interview process. Every participant mentioned PD, either discussing some type of teacher education course or commenting that their school had not provided any training for the 2020-2021 school year. It became apparent that PD played an important role in teachers' lives and that they noticed when their school failed to provide it. Karra, Ina, Shannon, Jake, and Maisie all

revealed that their schools had not supported their growth by providing them with learning opportunities on trauma-informed teaching, empathy, culturally relevant curriculum building, classroom expectations, or other school-based professional development. Karra stated that, except for a refresher course four weeks into the semester, she has received no professional development on how to engage students in virtual learning.

Kristen said her principal has made a focused effort to discuss the practice of restorative justice. She recalled that, during the week before the school year began, her school site had paid a panel to discuss the “*necessary shift in pedagogical mindsets*” with the school’s teaching staff. She said the large-group session (over Zoom) went well. “*People had their cameras on, and they were participating.*” But engagement deteriorated when participants were placed in breakout rooms for small-group sessions.

The panel talked about trauma. They were right on with what they were talking about, considering everything going on, the pandemic with all the protesting, Black Lives Matter, the [2020 presidential] election.... When we got into breakout rooms with our peers, my colleagues were upset. I noticed that no one on the panel was white, you know, and my colleagues kept saying that the panel made them feel like they’re a racist, and they had taken offense to the PD. And, and I thought, wow, that definitely says a lot about where we are.

Jenna’s school site has built in a lot of interpersonal time for professional learning communities and interdepartmental time to help teachers align their strategies and goals with each other’s and with the overall mission of the school and the district.

We have three hours of additional professional development and planning time together as a grade level, three hours every week, outside of contract

hours, for which we're paid a stipend. My team, every week, we go through our purpose statement, and pick out a word to focus on, and that is what we're going to focus on for that week, or if there's something that like means a lot to us, we can discuss it between the three of us. And I don't know that every team does that, but we, every week, we've talked about . . . what we're focusing on that week for our students and why. And so I feel like my team and I are pretty much on the same page about what we want to instill in our students and in our purposes.

Jenna explained that 80% to 85% of the teaching staff at her school site agree that the extra PD time is valuable because it helps them build relevant, powerful, skill-driven curriculum for students. Jenna added that the additional PD time is sometimes used to discuss students' non-academic needs. Her school's principal has especially encouraged teachers to learn about trauma to help them understand the trauma responses of families affected by the pandemic or poverty. Jenna's school employs a parent liaison who works with students' families and makes home visits when teachers suspect a check-in would be helpful. Jenna said that the family liaison approaches issues within the home with an attitude of "*what can we do to help you?*" For instance, if a family needs assistance with transportation, the liaison can steer them to financial resources to buy bus passes. Likewise, the school also partners with Red Rock, a non-profit counseling service that has become popular among families whose children attend her school. Jenna explains, "*So if their academic performance is suffering because of their behavioral performance, if they're having behavior issues, and they are having a hard time staying in the classroom, then we have someone to work with them on that.*" Jenna said the whole purpose of these professional decisions is to benefit the family and the student, thus fostering the student's success in school.

On the topic of site-level professional development, Shannon excitedly disclosed that she was the mentor teacher for all the new hires at her school site. She mentioned that many new teachers place too much stock in making students “*too comfortable*” in their classroom. She said, “*I am the lead mentor in my building. I oversee all the new teachers. And I think it’s my fourth year of that. So, I spend a lot of time in classrooms looking at, you know, I go observe the new teachers. I’m watching them teach and I watch your classroom management. I’ve taught several little things on classroom management.*” I asked her which common issues she sees when observing new teachers. She replied,

Kids listen when adults talk and, you know, kids get their say too, but when it’s time to listen, listen, new teachers just let kids talk. I’ve seen some teachers who are facing the chalkboard or whiteboard, talking and teaching away, and the kids are on their phones, across the room visiting with their friends, or not paying a bit of attention, and the teacher at front completely oblivious to what’s going on in the classroom.

Shannon said that this problem is very common, and she emphasized that teachers need to take control to ensure that students are learning. “*I have to tell them that we aren’t there to be friends [with our students].*”

During Jake’s interview, he mentioned problems about grading, curriculum, and parent interactions at his school site. I asked whether he had discussed these issues with his instructional coach or administrators. He said he had attended a school board meeting, prepared to discuss how the high school was creating difficulties for the already frustrated teachers, students, and families.

I had spoken up and talked a little bit, and I just spoke from the heart; I didn’t really have anything planned. But one thing I said is that I think everybody is frustrated and emotional, and that can be expressed in different ways right now. What I really want is to collectively work on

solving the problems we all know exist now. And nothing came of that. And nothing had come about before except my principal sent me—by the way, she was not at that meeting—sent me an email. In the email, she said, ‘I heard that you want professional development. Please let me know what you are looking to learn, and I can help you.’ I just remember looking at the email thinking, ‘but that’s, like, not what I said.’ Like what I wanted was to work together with other people. What ended up happening is, it was one of those impossible emails—like, how do I say, ‘you’re wrong?’ Like, how do I respond? So, I just said, ‘oh, here’s like an area I’ve been asking about.’ And I just got an email back. She said, ‘oh, here’s what you should do.’ I just thought, ‘yeah, like, this is not what I want.’ I want it to be ongoing. I want to learn. Just like teaching isn’t telling people things, I think professional development shouldn’t be listening to people in meetings, it should be an ongoing process. And that just has not been happening. And not only has it not been happening, but it truly seems like it is totally absent from my talking to other teachers. They corroborate my experience now and in the past that there is no meaningful professional development.

I asked Jake whether he had continued being a voice in his professional learning community. He said that he talks with the teachers he works with, but he is not comfortable engaging with other departments or going to his administrator because nothing ever comes of it.

During the summer before the 2020-2021 school year, Maisie spent time preparing and (re)learning what it means to be a teacher to Black students. She calls herself a “work in progress.”

*To be honest, I didn’t prepare myself like I should have right off the bat. I don’t know if it was being a, you know, naive 22-year-old, but I’ve done more work on myself in the past two years, specifically this past summer, than I had before. I’ve spent a lot of time reading literature, like the *The New Jim Crow*, or there’s one book that’s called *White Teachers, Middle Class Black Students [Black Students, Middle Class Teachers]*, like learning more about the Black community, and focusing on the Black community and learning about their culture has changed me as a person.*

Maisie said that she had also met with her leadership committee to do book talks, and each time they met, their goal was to make the school environment more

inclusive and inviting for families. She mentioned that, in her school, some personnel are resistant to engaging with issues of race and inequity. Maisie's school had held several PD sessions discussing equity in classrooms, and Maisie felt that some teachers were disengaged and uninterested in the concept of (re)learning.

We have a lot of older white women who have a lot of internal racism that they don't want to look at. So, I in particular have a really good relationship with a lot of our kids who have behavior problems. And every year I get loaded with them in my class, just because it's something that I'm really good at, I'm good at saying "it's okay for you to go calm down in the corner instead of fighting back," and I think it's almost like a generational thing. Like for them [the older white teachers], it's "you don't disrespect me," automatically yelling, and I'm like, "wait, but if you're both yelling, it's not gonna work."

Maisie said that the recent Black Lives Matter activism paired with a tense 2020 Presidential election season has led some teachers to avoid any discussion of race and issues of school inequity.

Madelyn reported a strong focus on PD at her school. She and another teacher were encouraged to lead a whole-school PD session on CRP. She said that her PD is fluid, without a set topic of discussion. Instead, she encourages teachers to bring ideas that they find important and to discuss them with each other.

Critical Awareness

One goal of my project was to learn how these participants understood their role as a white teacher. I asked about their personal beliefs and brought up the concept of colorblindness. Karra said, *"I've heard about that before, but what is your definition?"* I asked if she considered the interests, culture, and language of her mainly Latina/o/x students when planning lessons. She replied, *"Oh, the*

colorblind aspect—if you’re not seeing color, then you’re not seeing their identity, you’re not seeing their culture, they [teachers] are not seeing who they are as a person, a human being. And you’re just kind of negating it in favor of education.” I asked Karra what teachers might be negating.

I think it’s absolute bullshit that people say, “Oh, well, I’m colorblind to race” or whatever.... I don’t think you can actually have a colorblind curriculum. [Karra paused for a moment.] Because I feel like if you do that, you’re still going to be pulling in works that are that are from white males. You’re not going to pull anything different. I’m gonna say a statement and I know, it’s hard in the American literature courses because it’s predominantly white writers. But going back to my own high school experience, we read Frederick Douglass and for American literature, and I think that was the only piece by a nonwhite person that we read.

I asked her again to think about the materials that she used for class. She started listing stories, novels, and plays: Roald Dahl’s *Lamb to the Slaughter*, William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies*, and Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible*. Karra then laughed and said, “wow, my class is white.”

I asked whether students might have been resistant because these works were foreign to them. Karra said she realized that might be a possibility. I asked if the students enjoyed the novels while reading in class, she had stated earlier in the interview about reading the same novels in her middle school courses. In her own schooling experiences, these middle school courses were Advanced Placement and her justification for teaching them to her high schoolers is that it was equitable. Karra explained,

*Yeah, last year, I found myself [telling students my own school experience stories] when they’re complaining about doing such and such. It was more of ah *sigh* ‘Okay, well, I worked hard at [my high school] and we did X, Y, and Z. So, shut up and be grateful we’re not doing that. Like, you can*

even complain all you want, but at least you're not doing this [the same work I did].'

I asked Kristen similar questions about what it means to be a colorblind educator. She talked about discipline practices and how they might be construed as racist actions. *"You know the school-to-prison pipeline. I was very aware of the inequities that could happen when you're not paying attention. Are you sending that kid down because they're a Black kid? Because they've done a behavior that you think shouldn't be allowed but if it was a white kid, maybe you would let it go?"* This gave me an opening to engage Kristen further, and I asked whether she was familiar with the district's efforts to correct its disproportionately high suspension rate for students of color. She mentioned that she had been working for the district in 2016 when the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights had become involved in improving the district's inequitable suspension rates, requiring each school to examine its practices. *"I have been aware of this mess since 2016 when the mess hit the fan. We all need to understand our biases and make sure they don't bleed into our classrooms."*

Ina took a reflexive stance, beginning with the differences between her own upbringing and that of her students.

I've had a very sheltered life. Obviously, I grew up in small town, East Texas, population 5000. I was raised very conservatively, you know, preacher's kid, yada, yada, yada. Then here in Guthrie for 20 years, was a secretary at a school for five years. And then I got to get my first teaching job. It was for a middle school on the south side, Yeah. In the barrio. I mean, it's rough, and I had no idea how rough it was.

I asked Ina what issues she saw in this particular school and why she was willing to continue working here. She replied, *"First things first, the language, the*

vernacular of these children—and they are children. Also, the sexuality, and I would even say the aggressive physical behaviors between females and males.”

Ina continued to talk about how much cussing takes place inside the school. “*Kids don’t even realize the words they’re using are bad.*” She said when she hears profanity, she reminds students that “*my kids don’t talk that way,*” and usually that is all she does for discipline. Ina also described the sexually suggestive behavior of the school’s older students: “*they plug these fifth-graders into these schools with these children who are in seventh and eighth grade who are obviously very sexual. And they’re actively sexual. I’ve heard some of my kids will just—they’ll say things like, ‘I’ll just go be a stripper’ or ‘I’ll sell drugs.’ I mean, they’ve told me these things. And I’ll be like, ‘you’re better than that.’*” I asked whether her own children went through this phase of sexuality. She said it was never reported to her, so she thinks it didn’t happen until much later in their development. I asked whether she thought about the racial differences rather than the social differences of the school site, and she said she is still trying to learn about the culture of the school.

Because I want them to understand each other’s culture. Does that make sense? I think of the Black community. They have their own things that they do. And then in the Hispanic community have their own things that they do. You know, we talked about that just recently, we were talking about, I don’t remember how we brought this up, but it was about culture and you know, Cinco de Mayo, or what one group may cherish or one group celebrate versus the other side. My school is mostly Hispanic, and then the next demographic is the African American and then, the whites are the minority really, and then they have to act—they almost have to act that way. Does that make sense?

I asked Ina to explain what “acting that way” meant. She explained that white students mimic Black students, using terms like “aight” (all right) and “cuh”

(cousin or friend)—words her own children do not say I asked Ina to elaborate a little more, and she quickly changed the subject to ask what this project was going to be used for.

Jenna articulated a desire to better understand her students' cultures. She expressed awareness of her privilege and pointed out that she does not live in the community where she works. Jenna said that her school is on the right track with the right leadership but mentioned that it still has a long way to go before she would want her children to attend. *“Our school is very much committed to equity. And so, I feel like that is a part of that equity framework. We're giving students those experiences, and teachers are reflecting about their experiences and what we're teaching to make it meaningful for them.”*

Unlike the other interviewees, Shannon was resistant to talking about race, and she almost refused to mention culture in relation to her classroom practices and curriculum.

Actually, I don't think race has anything to do with my class. But, when I do word problems for the kids, I changed it to whatever kids' names I have that year. So, they're always seeing their name in a word problem. So, maybe you can picture yourself doing something, you know, but I don't know that. I don't really think numbers have anything to do with race, or gender or, you know, anything. Numbers are just numbers. So, I don't know. I just—I do think we have a lot more Black kids in special ed, I've noticed, it seems like there's a higher portion of, you know, African American students who are in the special ed, and I don't know if that's nature or nurture.

This interaction with Shannon called to mind the work of Richard Milner, who implies that CRP can be applied in any subject, even math, because it creates a critical framework for students. “The construct [CRP] suggests that students

develop a critical consciousness and that they move beyond spaces where they simply or solely consume knowledge without critically examining it. The idea is that teachers create learning environments where students develop voice and perspective and are allowed to participate (more fully) in the multiple discourses available in a learning context by not only consuming information but also through helping to deconstruct and to construct it.”⁷ Shannon’s assertion that race was irrelevant suggested a refusal to engage or learn from her students. According to Milner, “Teachers actually use student culture in their curriculum planning and implementation, and they allow students to develop the skills to question how power structures are created and maintained in US society. In this sense, the teacher is not the only, nor the main arbiter of knowledge.”⁸ Shannon’s comments left me feeling uncomfortable, so I knew I needed to ask for clarification. I asked whether she felt a disproportionate number of Black students were identified as needing an individual education plan. She replied, “*no, it all goes back to the parents though.*” I pressed a bit further. Shannon did not seem defensive or troubled by my inquisition. She said,

A lot of times, you know, if you have a teenager who has a baby at a young age, then that parent lacks the ability—not all the time, but in general—lacks the ability to go for higher education. It makes it very, very difficult for them to do that. And less education in general means less income. And so, they live in poverty, and they continue to live in poverty. And so when

7. Richard H Milner IV, and H Richard Milner IV. "Culturally Relevant Pedagogy in a Diverse Urban Classroom." *The Urban Review* 43, no. 1 (2011): 69.

8. Richard H Milner IV, and H Richard Milner IV. "Culturally Relevant Pedagogy in a Diverse Urban Classroom." 69.

that child that they gave birth to in high school, comes to school, they have been raised by a teenager and not by an adult, which makes a world of difference in how kids are when they first come to kindergarten. And then, you know, you have these—unless you have someone to do really intense work with them, they continue to fall behind a little bit every year, every year, every year, every year. So, it's really a cycle. Which is really sad. But you know, I don't know how to stop teenagers from having babies. I wish I did. But I think if you could, it's just my own philosophy, but I feel like if you could physically prevent teenagers from having babies, that you would wipe out a huge chunk of social problems that we have. Not all, there's never going to be an all solution. But I think, for a decade, if you did that for a decade, I think a lot of changes would take place.

Throughout Jake's interview, he mentioned several times that he was the newcomer on the team. In his own lived experience, he came from a background of high socioeconomic status, and he struggled to understand the vast differences between himself and the students he teaches. *"I knew that there were these huge education problems in the country. But I didn't understand them."* I asked him to give me some examples. *"For me, school, it was all about absorbing as much knowledge and understanding as I could. I never perceived it as 'access.' And the reason for that is because I don't think I ever perceived anything as being in my way, aside from something that I wouldn't do as well as I needed to gain entry to some new place."* Curious about how Jake used his education to advance into these new places, I asked whether he had pursued his Ivy League education because his family expected it or because of his own aspirations. He said that college was expected in his family; it was tradition, it was not optional. He also said that he had a great relationship with learning, just not schooling, and he embraced any opportunity to learn and be exposed to new things in his life. Jake had brought up the topic of money several times in our conversation, comparing himself to the *"haves"* and his students to the *"kind of have-nots."* I asked him to

reflect on his own education and privileges and compare his experience to his students' experiences.

I still remember my first year when team kids were coming in to meet me. They had to fill out paperwork, part of it was for free, reduced lunch, this was something where you had to put down like family income. And I remember just being shocked, I just couldn't believe it. Because I had thought I took a huge pay cut by choosing to become a teacher, when like all of my friends were doing other things. And then I saw that information, and it blew me away. And I would have never connected that before and thought, "no, like learning, like you just need a brain and pencil, paper, books." But now I've learned, "no, like the environment is super important." And now I perceive education as access.

Madelyn had given me a vivid description of her school's culture, which made me curious about how her school discusses race relationships between teachers and families. She mentioned her PD on CRP, noting that most teachers had seemed to understand and had responded positively. She added that some teachers are unwilling to engage with race in a critical way, but they are not the majority.

We do have a majority of teachers in the building who are white. I think there are some white teachers in the building who are critical of their whiteness, or aware and strive to understand what that means to be a white teacher in a building with predominantly students of color. And then I think there are also white teachers who are happy to teach using methods that they would use if they were in a school with white students, and don't necessarily maybe get a little bit deeper than that. And so I think there can be a sense sometimes of 'saviorism,' you know, so I think that in some conversations that happen, there can tend to be a focus on what the students need, like what the deficit is and the challenges that they face and the adversity that they experience.

Madelyn expanded on this issue by telling me that many teachers in her school were shifting to more progressive teaching styles; and recent teacher-led PD sessions demonstrate that many teachers are applying creative strategies in their

classrooms. This calls to mind Milner's assertion that "In culturally relevant pedagogy, cultural competence seems to concern the ability of teachers to help foster student learning about themselves, others, and how the world works in order to be able to function effectively in it and also how to contribute to their communities."⁹ Madelyn's school is creating cultural competence among teachers to enhance students' opportunity to connect to their communities. She said she feels that the school's leadership promotes "*valuing the whole experience that a child has in school*" and ensuring that all the teachers bring high expectations into their classrooms.

Belief Gap

When I asked interviewees how they were planning out their semester, we came to the topic of academic gaps in standards. Karra mentioned that, due to the prevalence of remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, she did not have a thorough sense of her students' reading skills. But she had noticed that "*basic reading*" was a challenge for many students who had attended a particular middle school.

This is last year, when I saw the majority of my kids came from [this middle school]. And when I asked them anything about [this middle school], from test scores to work that they created to even what they said about their time in that place, the school was just a glorified babysitter. So, there is... there's a ridiculous achievement gap between students that come from [this middle school], or students that come from anywhere else. And like, you can see it in their scores, and you can see it on the ELL

9. Richard H Milner IV, Richard H and Milner IV. "Culturally Relevant Pedagogy in a Diverse Urban Classroom." *The Urban Review* 43, no. 1 (2011): 72.

[English Language Learner] kids' WIDA, anything like that. [WIDA is a test of English language development] scores And there's a whole amount of—especially last year, it was like, 'Well, did you not get this last year? Did he not learn about this last year?'

I was curious about this statement and asked Karra about her own educational experience. I was hoping to prompt Karra to realize that all schools struggle in different ways and that perhaps her perception of her students' achievement gap was exaggerated. In Karra's frustration, she demonstrated a deficit perspective. Ladson-Billings provides a counterpoint to the deficit mindset: the belief "that all of the students could and must succeed."¹⁰ Karra mentioned that she had attended an intensely rigorous public magnet high school completely focused on college preparedness. Even ninth-graders at her school were required to take Advanced Placement courses, and after ninth grade, the school offered no on-level courses. "That level of rigor is what I come in with." I asked whether Karra thought about why the school where she teaches is different from the school she attended. She replied, "more often than not, I find myself having to dial it back and even my own expectations, because they [students] don't come with the equipment to meet those expectations." I asked her to elaborate. She mentioned her experience teaching *Lord of the Flies*, saying she had to "constantly stop and go over plot points. Even when Piggy died, students didn't understand." I asked whether she used visuals, graphic organizers, vocabulary trackers, character trackers, or other learning aids. She replied, "there's a lot of groundwork that has to be gotten, has to be built, before they can even try to begin to meet those expectations, like

¹⁰ Ladson-Billings, Gloria. "But That's Just Good Teaching! The Case for Culturally Relevant Pedagogy." *Theory into Practice* 34, no. 3 (1995): 163.

majority of them have never interacted with MLA format before in their life. So, I can't go in expecting, you know, 'today we're going to write a paragraph and you have to have it in MLA format.' I have to go back, so we have to do a whole, you know, two-day or three-day lesson over what MLA format is just so they can get it first."

Kristen's statements provide a contrast to Karra's comments. Kristen asserts, *"Kids can still be successful even if they are not great readers. They can still move on in the world and be really successful adults."* Kristen admits that she always struggled with professional writing and mathematics, but she focused her energy on the necessary skills that she would need to become a teacher. *"Some kids just aren't good test takers. Some students have so much more on their plates than just school. Half of our students work after school, or they are taking care of kids! Teachers need to see past the standards and think about the kids. They're surviving.... If I can have them value education, and be successful, and move on to a job that's not minimum wage, then that's my goal."*

Throughout Ina's interview, she focused on her students' low academic achievement and resistance to reading. Several times, she mentioned the difficulty of creating a lesson that required students to read and write. *"I mean, it's really hard to teach them. And they're such different levels. The reading levels are way below where they should be. Their comprehension levels are way below where they should be. I believe it is the language barrier, because a lot of them are ELL [English language learners]. I'd say, I don't know, I'd say 90% of our students are Hispanic."* At this point in the interview, I pressed to engage Ina critically

with the work that her school was doing. I asked how she accommodated bilingual students and how she built her lessons around what students need to be successful. Ina said she likes to take the reading and writing slowly. *You know, I've said to some teachers, 'I think I'm asking a lot, I think I'm maybe expecting too much out of them.' Or, 'you know, maybe I'm going too fast for them.'*” Other than using an English-to-Spanish dictionary and using online translation tools, Ina couldn't name. Ina also couldn't identify reading strategies she had used for her classroom. I could tell this line of inquiry was making her uncomfortable, so I directed the questions more towards how the school helps English language learners. *"I hate to use this word, but I'm going to use it anyway. I am not mediocre. So I hate to say with some of the teachers, I have a feeling that they're just kind of pushing these kids through, because how else could they get to me, supposed to be seventh- and eighth-grade reading level, in the third-and fourth-grade reading level? I'm telling you it is bad."* Ina is a new teacher and new to the district, and I know this makes it even more difficult to challenge one's colleagues to create institutional change. I asked whether Ina was familiar with the “belief gap,” teachers' practice of lowering their expectations rather than changing their pedagogies. Ina sighed heavily and said that she maintains high expectations in her classes. *"I've had to explain so much to them, you know, just simple words. I expect them to be able to spell better . . . but then you have to put in the component of the language barriers too, so there's just so many things. It's almost just like, I don't know, it's almost like they can't."*

Jenna argues that educators need to focus on growth and purpose rather than focusing on what is wrong with students.

I want to create purpose within my students, and they know their purpose in the world. And they know why they are doing what they're doing. And I guess that's just, like, a value that I have, I'm always very purpose-driven, from a standpoint of, like, my own personal values, I'm doing this because this is right. And this is what I need to do to contribute to our society or our community.

Jake believes that he is part of the system that is failing his eleventh.

When we discussed student achievement, he asserted that the school's grading scale creates dysfunction later in the educative process.

What really upsets me is because my grading [when I was in school] was 90 and above, A. 80 to 90 would be a B. It was in 10-point increments. But here, the grading is, like, 85 and above is an A, and it's just off-putting. So, I think it gives students a false impression of where they actually are. I'm constantly putting in grades and someone will have a 59 and they have a C. I just think, "Wait, that's not true."

He said that we are giving our students a "false sense of security," by failing to align their grades with the commonly accepted standards for earning an A, a B, and so forth.

I think kids get moved along because the it might be the lesser of two evils. You know, socially, you don't want somebody to stagnate when everyone's moved along. I feel like the left-behind-[they] could get angry. I think it's just easier to move somebody along rather than reckon with anyone individually. Because if you did, you'd have to reckon with the whole system being full of individuals like this. So, I think it's just, the buck just gets passed, and then you graduate, and it's 'Welcome to the real world,' which no one can really conceive of until it happens.

Maisie engaged with the belief gap differently. She almost vehemently rejected the idea, expressed by Jake, that generous grading gives students a "false sense of security" or an inflated sense of their own achievement. She has arranged for student athletes from local universities to work with and mentor her students.

She said that she acknowledges that social and academic gaps exist, but she wants to work to patch them. *“Seeing the fifth-grade boys, especially those who really need a male in their life, if they don’t have one—seeing them say, like, ‘Well, my buddy this morning that I met said that I have to stay in school and listen to my teacher. So, I’m going to try because I want to play basketball when I grow up.’ It’s powerful.”* Maisie said that she sometimes must fix the gaps that occur within her own school, and there are some issues she wishes she could fix. She said some teachers are not as focused on socio-emotional health as she is, and instead of allowing students a calm place to process their emotions, these teachers *“inevitably [send students] to my room.”* Maisie admitted that her school has issues with the belief gap and the lowering of academic expectations, and she said that teachers who are resistant to talking about race and inequity are often the perpetrators. *“It’s heartbreaking when one of those kids does come to my class and says, ‘My teacher thinks I’m a dumb black kid.’ It just breaks your heart, and that they’re hearing those lies at such a young age. And then, you know, who else besides me is going to put in the work to change that mentality that that’s how they feel?”*

Madelyn likewise avoids focusing on the gaps in academic success; instead, she focuses on what she views as her own job. She claimed that *“My job is to empower and support and work in solidarity with the students and the community and their families.”* She said that the gaps in students’ knowledge more on the teacher than on the student. In her view, that’s where the discussion needs to start. *“It’s my ability to reflect and to understand that my job is not to*

come into the building and to not to be a savior” But to make the classroom a space of equity, safety, and community. Madelyn described how she builds a strong classroom community by

establishing strong relationships with students and their families and [providing] logical structure and routine. You want your classroom to feel like a safe place for your students. It’s up to you to figure out how best each of them learns. And make sure that you are, you know, valuing them as individuals and as people, and not just seeing them as students who need to learn what you’re teaching them. Your job is not to tell them what to think, but to teach them how to think. So, make sure that that’s at the foundation of everything that you’re doing.

Madelyn said that by engaging students as individuals, teachers can listen to their needs without imposing their own interpretation of what they think students need. For Madelyn, it is crucial for teachers to understand that students are all different and that our classroom practices need to be places of encouragement, not disengagement.

Chapter Five

Overview of the Study

This study explored teacher attitudes and perceptions regarding their engagement with culturally responsive pedagogical practices. I conducted semi-structured interviews with eight white teachers in racially diverse urban schools at urban schools, asking questions focused on discipline, curriculum, and teacher engagement practices. Each participant engaged in reflexive strategies during the hour-long interviews, and emergent themes arose from the interview data.

I used a phenomenological case study methodology to help me identify the participants' most prominent roles and practices in their classrooms. Although I started the project with the intent to explore discipline, curriculum, and teacher engagement, several other important themes emerged as I analyzed the interview data: family connections, institutional professional development, critical awareness, and the belief gap. The researcher found that the grounded theory of discipline, curriculum, and teacher engagement were targeted, but other themes illustrated how multi-faceted the title of teacher is. These additional themes highlight areas that school districts should address by employing culturally relevant pedagogy and teacher (re)education to create culturally responsive teachers. My analysis is based on the six dimensions of culturally relevant teaching defined by Geneva Gay.

1. Culturally responsive teachers are socially and academically empowering by setting high expectations for students with a commitment to every student's success.
2. Culturally responsive teachers are multidimensional because they engage cultural knowledge, experiences, contributions, and perspectives.

3. Culturally responsive teachers validate every student's culture, bridging gaps between school and home through diversified instructional strategies and multicultural curricula.
4. Culturally responsive teachers are socially, emotionally, and politically comprehensive as they seek to educate the whole child.
5. Culturally responsive teachers are transformative of schools and societies by using students' existing strengths to drive instruction, assessment, and curriculum design.
6. Culturally responsive teachers are emancipatory and liberating from oppressive educational practices and ideologies

Discussion of Findings

The participants' responses to the interview questions provided a multifaceted view of what it means to be a teacher. Each participant carried with them their own lens through which they viewed the world. Participants like Jenna, Maisie, and Madelyn were deliberate about choosing curriculum that helped them address issues of inequity and race in their classrooms. Others, like Kristen, Jake, and Ina, expressed some ambivalence. They sometimes expressed the desire to select culturally relevant curriculum but were thwarted by administrators. During the interviews, I could see them examining their positionalities and understand the why behind their pedagogical practices. Shannon and Karra demonstrated deficit mindsets regarding their students' behaviors and academic achievement. They tended to attribute students' lack of success to characteristics of the students or their families, rather than to the schools' failure to meet students' needs. This led me to examine what leads a teacher to develop a critical mindset? All eight participants are well educated, and all but Jake have completed university teacher preparation courses and received traditional teacher certification. Yet the interview responses show that some teachers lack a critical awareness, and this

suggests that teacher education programs and school districts have failed to instill the importance of culturally relevant practices.

The research questions in this study focused primarily on teacher attitudes and their relationship to culturally relevant pedagogical (CRP) practices. Based on grounded thematic exploration and emerging patterns found in all eight teachers' responses, I identified six themes. In the list below, the first four themes are the most relevant to CRP, and these are the themes I will explore in depth in this chapter. However, I include themes 5 and 6 in the list because they are also significantly represented in the data.

1. Curriculum that is culturally responsive, inclusive, and representational to students.
2. Discipline practices that are culturally responsive and humanistic.
3. Teacher engagement practices that are interpersonal and that promote mutual respect and connection.
5. Critical awareness practices that demonstrate teachers' reflexivity and the ongoing learning process that white educators undertake to check and recheck themselves and their pedagogy for culturally relevant practices.
4. Family connections practices that affirm the importance of family in schools. This looks at how teachers create opportunities for families to be included in the curriculum and how family culture is important to student understanding.

6. Belief gap mentality that demonstrates a deficit mindset for student learning, experiences, or achievement.

Figure 3 below uses the interview analysis presented in chapter 4 to document teachers' willingness to engage in CRP practices through curriculum. The chart's quadrants correspond to four teacher attitudes. The upper left quadrant identifies teachers who are knowledgeable about CRP practices, either through professional development or teacher education programs, but do not apply these practices. The upper right quadrant identifies teachers who are knowledgeable about CRP practices, either through professional development or teacher education programs, and who express the intent to apply them, but do not actually follow through on their intent. The lower left quadrant, on the other hand, would identify teachers who do not have knowledge of CRP practices and who therefore cannot apply them. (None of the study participants actually fell into this category.) In the upper right quadrant, we see teachers who have knowledge of CRP practices and apply them consistently in their classroom. The lower right quadrant identifies teachers who have not formally been trained in CRP but still implement culturally relevant practices.



Figure 3: Figure 3. Participants’ willingness to engage in the CRP framework through curriculum (theme 1), plotted along two axes: application of CRP practices (horizontal axis) and formal training in CRP (vertical axis).

The two participants in the upper left quadrant displayed high knowledge of CRP practices but were unable or unwilling to practice it in their classrooms. Karra gave conflicting accounts. She stated that she employs student choice and encourages questioning. But she also exemplified a deficit mindset for student achievement, blaming students for their shortcomings instead of holding the school responsible. Kerri Ullucci and Tyrone Howard address this attitude: “teachers may believe that students from low income backgrounds cannot be taught effectively, lack the necessary intellectual and cognitive dispositions to be

successful learners, and come from home environments that do not support learning.”¹ Karra’s deficit mindset might be responsible for her failure to act on her intention to apply CRP. Similarly, Karra stated that she wanted to have a representational library for her students of color, but instead of choosing authors of color and themes that students would relate to, and themes that students can relate to, she teaches the traditional (white-centric) canon. As the interview ended, Karra expressed the realization that she teaches the same curriculum that she encountered in her own high school, remarking, “wow, my class is really white.” Jake also falls into this category. He is very culturally aware of the desires of his classroom and reflects on his own schooling often so that he can continue to relate to his students. Chezare Warren illustrates how relating to students and being a reflexive educator creates the necessary connections to become a successful, empathetic teacher. “Perspective taking is required to establish empathic concern. Thus, perspective taking is the anchoring dimension of the application of empathy in social interaction.”² However, Jake states that he is “stuck” using a traditional curriculum due to his lack of time as well as constraints placed on him by administrators.

1. Kerri Ullucci and Tyrone Howard, "Pathologizing the Poor." *Urban Education* (Beverly Hills, Calif.) 50, no. 2 (2015): 173.

2. Chezare A Warren. "Empathy, Teacher Dispositions, and Preparation for Culturally Responsive Pedagogy." *Journal of Teacher Education* 69, no. 2 (2018): 171.

In the upper right quadrant, we see teachers who have knowledge of CRP and apply culturally relevant curriculum in their classrooms. Jenna creates learning opportunities that celebrate students' identities and "creates curiosity" by spending much of her classroom budget on books that her students can connect to and become excited about. She exemplifies the kind of teacher Peggy Ashbrook describes: "By developing a relationship of trust and respect with children, we create a classroom culture that supports questioning."³ We also find Maisie in this quadrant because she share her authority with students: By regarding them as "knowledge holders," she inspires them to take on leadership roles. She values her students' abilities and encourages them to develop strong critical decision-making skills. In her interview, Maisie discussed her love of books and her practice of learning about her students' lives and interests. She mentioned that she often peruses the Scholastic (publisher) website to find a high-interest book for a particular student or a book that reflects a particular student's family structure, with characters raised by single parents, grandparents, or two moms or dads, or characters with an incarcerated parent. Madelyn offers perhaps the best example of what it means to be a teacher with high strengths in CRP. She is very aware of her students' needs and engages them with critical thinking skills. Her practice also reflects the importance of exploratory learning practices, which Amy Dombro, Judy Jablon, and Charlotte Stetson emphasize: "Teaching is more than

3. Peggy Ashbrook. "Encouraging Curiosity." *Science and Children* 53, no. 8 (2016): 22.

following a curriculum successfully. It is an ongoing process of inquiry that requires curiosity and the ability to ask questions and look for answers.”⁴

Madelyn’s methods encourage students to question what they are reading, and she structures her classroom in a way that allows students to engage with each other, challenge each other, and learn from each other. One of the most prominent features of Madelyn’s practice is that she considers herself a learner along with her students.

The lower right quadrant identifies teachers who apply CRP practices even though they are unfamiliar with the terminology of culturally relevant pedagogy and the full implications what it means to teach in culturally relevant ways. Shannon, for example, expressed great discomfort in her interview when I brought up the topic of race. When I asked whether she had ever heard of culturally relevant pedagogy Shannon conveyed an almost colorblind approach, stating that approach, stating that culturally relevant practices were unimportant in teaching students to be successful in math. I pushed back against this assumption, asking Shannon to consider how systemic issues have created obstacles and led to damage that schools must address by rethinking educational practices. Shannon refused to engage with this topic and changed the subject quickly. It was clear that Shannon makes her teaching somewhat relevant for her students and holds high expectations for them, but her practices seem to fall short of being truly culturally

4. Amy Laura Dombro, Judy R. Jablon, and Charlotte Stetson. "Powerful Interactions." *YC Young Children* 66, no. 1 (2011): 15.

responsive. This places her in the lower right quadrant because she does *work* with students, but sometimes isn't sensitive to language, culture, or the whole child. Another participant in this quadrant is Kristen, who has strong instincts to engage with students as people and is unafraid to challenge them with difficult questions. However, Kristen admits that she sometimes fails to follow through or plan these discussions fully, so her engagement does not always go as she hopes it will. Ina is also in this category. Her interview made it clear that she devotes time to addressing her students' needs: engaging them in conversation, preparing food for them, laundering their clothes, and even bringing them new clothes. Ina's heart is in the right place. When I asked her about race, however, Ina expressed very generalized notions about her students, relying on stereotypes and using words like "ghetto" and "barrio" to describe where her students come from. Her application of CRP is adequate, but she would benefit from learning more about the theory to help her shift her deficit perspective.

The second theme I examine is discipline. Figure 4 depicts teachers' willingness to engage with the CRP framework in their discipline practices. The figure's quadrants follow the same pattern as in Figure 3. The upper left identifies teachers who exhibit knowledge of CRP regarding discipline methods and classroom expectations but who do not apply CRP in their own practices. The lower left quadrant represents the attitudes of teachers with limited knowledge of CRP who do not engage in discipline practices rooted in CRP. The upper right identifies teachers who are knowledgeable about CRP discipline practices and

apply them in their classrooms. The lower right quadrant represents teachers with low knowledge of CRP who nonetheless apply CRP in their discipline practice.

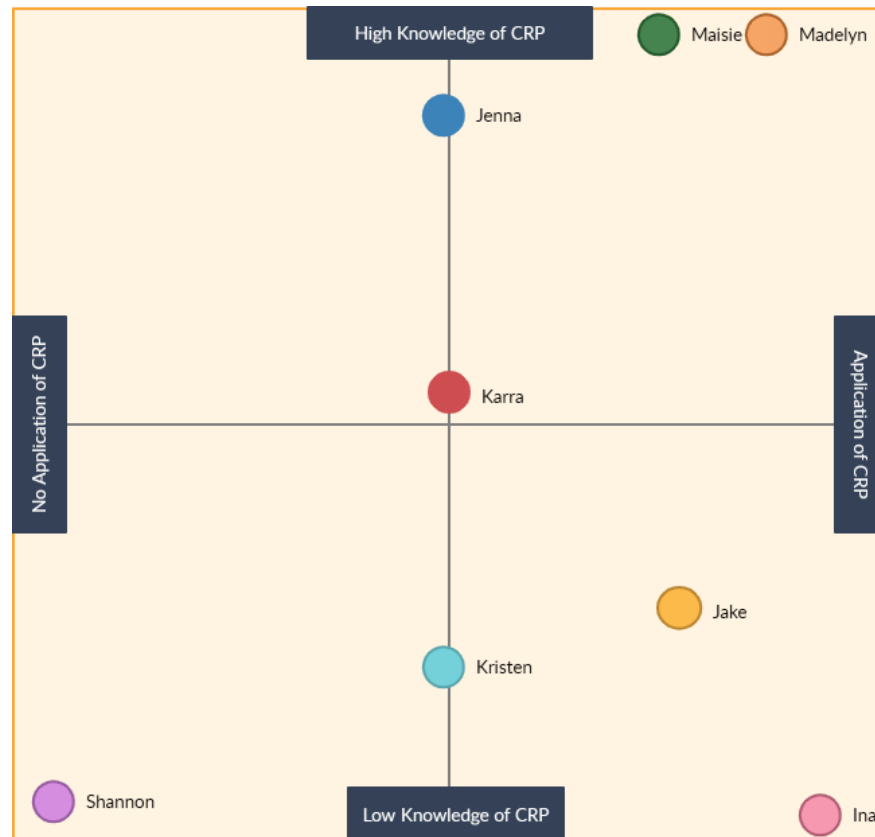


Figure 4. Participants' willingness to engage in the CRP framework through discipline (theme 2), plotted along two axes: application of CRP practices (horizontal axis) and formal training in CRP (vertical axis).

The COVID-19 pandemic made it difficult to engage with the topic of discipline due to the prevalence of remote learning, which disrupted teachers' usual practices. During the time when the interviews took place, the eight teachers were facing a variety of classroom situations and experimenting with ways to

ensure that students were learning and abiding by classroom policies during remote learning. I prompted the participants to engage reflexively and discuss how they would engage with discipline in a normal in-person class. The upper left quadrant shows Karra and Jenna on the cusp of application. Karra admitted that she wants to be fair and trusted but sometimes “lets things go” or reacts in the moment. As an example, she explained that when students use their phones during mandatory reading time, she is inconsistent: she sometimes takes the student’s phone and puts it in “cellphone jail,” but sometimes ignores the issue completely. Jenna understands the need to be culturally responsive to students’ needs but sometimes gets caught up in deficit thinking. For instance, Jenna uses a practice known as “buddy teachers,” in which two teachers agree to let each other’s students visit their classroom when they need to cool off, burn some energy, or work in a quieter environment. This practice is popular among teachers, but when used for disciplinary purposes, it can ostracize students.

Shannon’s strict discipline policies place her in the lower left quadrant. She admitted in her interview that she believes students should listen and teachers should do the instructing. This practice contradicts CRP because it makes students passive rather than active learners, lessens inquiry, and elevates the teacher’s role as knowledge holder rather than allowing students to assist with the teaching process. Shannon expressed discomfort when the interview topics turned to power and authority in her classroom. I asked how she engaged with student leadership, and Shannon explained that she was the leader in her classroom, adding that her students do not spend much time in discussions except with their

shoulder/elbow partners.⁵ Gloria Ladson-Billings's work on CRP informed my decision to place Shannon in the lower left quadrant for discipline. In discussing effective CRP practices, Ladson-Billings writes, "To solidify the social relationships in their classes, the teachers encouraged the students to learn collaboratively, teach each other, and be responsible for the academic success of others."⁶ Collaboration enriches the classroom environment, creates community among students, and provides opportunities for them to build crucial leadership skills.

In the upper right quadrant, both Maisie and Madelyn are placed high in the corner, representing that they are very critical of their discipline practices and knowledgeable about CRP. Maisie has created such a strong relationship with previous students that other teachers use her classroom to comfort students whom she calls "frequent fliers." Instead of reacting to student misbehavior, Maisie has created a safe space for students to talk about their emotions. She uses one-on-one conversation to bridge misunderstandings in her classroom and constantly refers to "grounding"⁷ her students. Madelyn also models this concept of grounding and

5. Shoulder/Elbow partners are a common practice where students can turn to a neighbor close to them in order to ask questions or participate in small group discussion.

6. Gloria Ladson-Billings, "Toward a Theory of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy." *American Educational Research Journal* 32, no. 3 (September 1995): 465–91. <https://doi.org/10.3102/00028312032003465> 481.

7. Grounding is an educative term that means to bring a student's focus back. When students are upset, they sometimes struggle to work through strong

respects students' emotions. She encourages students to use breathing strategies and engages in conversation when the student is ready to address the problem. She invites students to eat lunch with her and offers this time as a treat or gift during her check-ins with students. This practice recalls the work of Ladson-Billings. When discussing teachers who use CRP effectively, she emphasizes the importance of reciprocal relationships: "In these teachers' classrooms, the teacher-student relationships are equitable and reciprocal. All the teachers gave students opportunities to act as teachers. In one class, the teacher regularly sat at a student's desk, while the student stood at the front of the room and explained a concept or some aspect of student culture. Another teacher highlighted the expertise of various students and required other students to consult those students before coming to her for help."⁸ Maisie is highly aware that being invited to lunch with a teacher could be perceived as a punishment, but she makes it known in her classroom that it is a special time to relax and chat.

Jake, Kristen, and Ina are represented in the lower right quadrant. These three participants show strength in applying CRP practices even though they do not explicitly engage with the concept or terminology of CRP. Kristen is on the cusp; she believes that students are children and they will make mistakes, so she gives

emotions, using weighted stuffed animals, calm down bottles, or a quiet space where students can process is best practice for trauma informed teachers.

8. Gloria Ladson-Billings, "Toward a Theory of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy." *American Educational Research Journal* 32, no. 3 (September 1995): 465–91. <https://doi.org/10.3102/00028312032003465> 480.

them room to make mistakes. She knows that she should keep her expectations high but admits that she sometimes lowers her expectations to create space for her students to “grow.” This strategy sometimes backfires; students can begin to believe that these low expectations mean that teachers don’t care, or don’t believe that students can achieve. Jake wants to maintain high standards for students’ behavior and academic achievement, but he admits that he has been unsuccessful. He often lowers expectations so he can create fun opportunities rather than rigorous ones.

Ina is also in this quadrant because of her kind and forgiving nature. She loves creating an environment where students can make mistakes and take ownership of them. But she has problems, keeping students on task, and she feels deeply and personally hurt by the fact that students continually steal her food when she is away from the room. She says she hopes to create policies to prevent students from becoming “thieves,” a term that reveals her deficit mindset regarding her students. Ina’s practices and attitudes bring to mind Ladson-Billings’s discussion of the role of high expectations in effective CRP strategies. According to Ladson-Billings, teachers who practice CRP push students to achieve rather than allowing them to “choose failure.”

The teachers demonstrated their commitment to these conceptions of self and others in a consistent and deliberate manner. Students were not permitted to choose failure in their classrooms. [The teachers] cajoled, nagged, pestered, and bribed the students to work at high intellectual levels. Absent from their discourse about students was the “language of lacking.”⁹

Carol Weinstein, Sandra Tomlinson-Clark, and Mary Curran discuss how culturally relevant pedagogy can easily be transformed into culturally responsive classroom management (CRCM) by applying the tenets of CRP to discipline and expectations.

We then suggest five components essential to CRCM: (a) recognition of one's own ethnocentrism and biases; (b) knowledge of students' cultural backgrounds; (c) understanding of the broader social, economic, and political context of our educational system; (d) ability and willingness to use culturally appropriate classroom management strategies; and (e) commitment to building caring classroom communities.¹⁰

Because Jake, Kristen, and Ina had lowered their expectations rather than building classroom management strategies that encouraged students, they were placed in the lower right quadrant, representing those who apply CRP practices but exhibit low knowledge about the theory behind CRP.

Teacher engagement is the third theme. The quadrants shown in Figure 5 follow the same pattern as those in Figures 3 and 4 as it relates to teacher engagement with students. The notion of teacher engagement encompasses all aspects of teachers' interactions with students: their ways of communicating, their support of various kinds of learning, their connections with students who speak

9. Gloria Ladson-Billings, "Toward a Theory of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy." *American Educational Research Journal* 32, no. 3 (September 1995): 465–91. <https://doi.org/10.3102/00028312032003465> 479.

10. Weinstein, Carol S, Tomlinson-Clarke, Sandra, and Curran, Mary. "Toward a Conception of Culturally Responsive Classroom Management." *Journal of Teacher Education* 55, no. 1 (2004): 27.

languages other than English, and their rigor in developing students' critical thinking. The upper left quadrant identifies teachers who demonstrate knowledge of CRP as it relates to teacher engagement with students but who do not apply this knowledge to their practice. The lower left quadrant represents the attitudes of teachers who have limited knowledge of CRP and do not apply engagement strategies rooted in CRP. The upper right quadrant identifies teachers who are knowledgeable about CRP engagement and apply CRP engagement practices in their classrooms. The lower right quadrant identifies those with low knowledge who nonetheless practice CRP-informed engagement strategies in their classrooms.

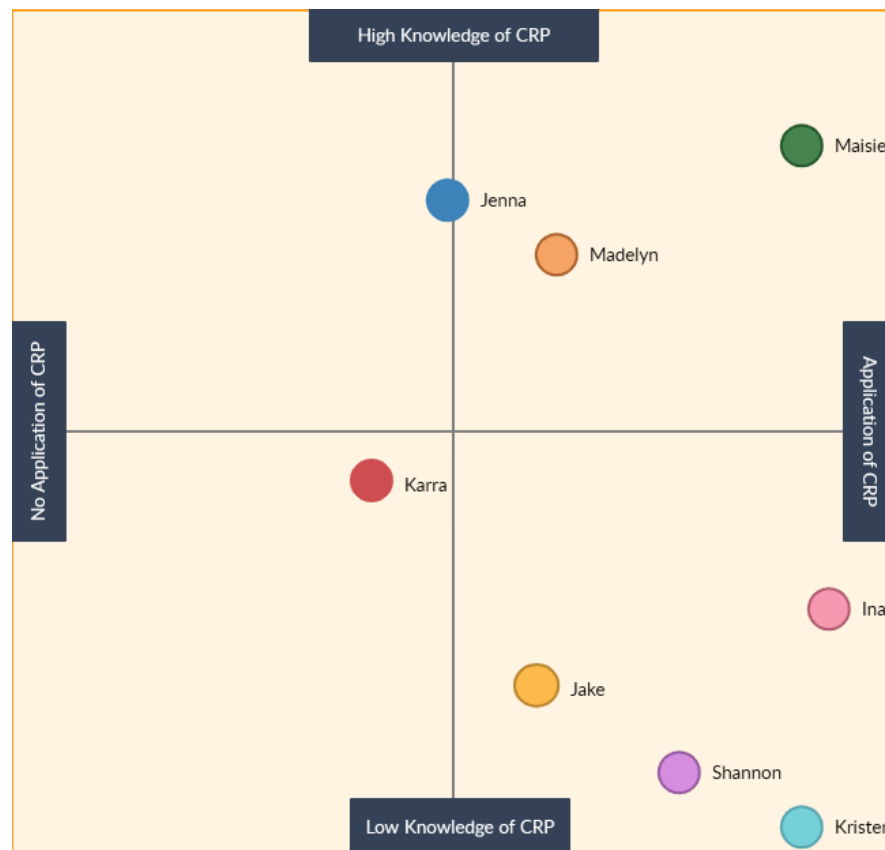


Figure 5. Participants' willingness to apply the CRP framework through teacher engagement (theme 3), plotted along two axes: application of CRP practices (horizontal axis) and formal training in CRP (vertical axis).

The COVID-19 pandemic presented some challenges in my analysis of teacher engagement because each participant was in the process of adjusting their practices during for remote learning and/or hybrid learning. Each teacher's situation was unique, but all of the teachers had to experiment with new ways of structuring their classes and ensuring that students could learn. Part of this process was learning how to teach effectively via remote learning platforms such as Google Meets and Zoom. Seven of the eight participants had taught face-to-face for only four days of the school year when their sites switched to virtual learning. During the interviews, I encouraged participants to engage reflexively and discuss how they would engage in a normal in-person class or think back to a previous year.

None of the participants exhibited the characteristics of the upper left quadrant: high knowledge of CRP without the intent to apply CRP practices in their engagement with students. We find Karra in the lower left quadrant: She has some understanding of CRP, but she engages with students in ways that do not push them to think critically. The rationale for placing Karra in this quadrant comes from Raymond Wlodkowski and Margery Ginsberg's framework for creating student motivation through CRP practices. They list four necessary conditions for attaining student connection and engagement:

. . . *establishing inclusion in your classroom*. This is when you create a learning atmosphere where students and teachers are respected and connected to one another. *Developing attitude*—creating a favorable disposition toward the learning experience through personal relevance and choice. *Enhancing meaning*—creating challenging, thoughtful learning experiences that include student perspectives and values. *Engendering competence*—creating an understanding that students are effective in learning something they value [emphasis added].¹¹

Karra did not meet all four of these conditions. Instead of creating challenging experiences, she sometimes stifled students' growth through her inaction.

We find Madelyn and Maisie in the middle of the upper right quadrant. In their interviews, both displayed an appreciable knowledge of CRP practices. They mentioned giving learners multiple opportunities to shine with the assistance of a teacher to work alongside. Maisie reflected on her own education and explicitly stated that her students choose to have conversations with her regarding the material they are covering in class. Maisie said that she encourages students to develop ideas and arguments and to question what they are working on; this is part of the foundation of her classroom. She empowers students by giving them specific ways to exhibit leadership, often taking herself out of the “knower” role and devoting time to students' experiences and ideas. Madelyn also created spaces for students to explore and question, she creates opportunities where students direct the learning objectives. Jenna is also in this quadrant, but she is on the cusp

11. Raymond J. Wlodkowski and Margery B. Ginsberg, “A Framework for Culturally Responsive Teaching,” *ASCD* 53 (September 1995): pp. 17-21, <http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/sept95/vol53/num01/A-Framework-for-Culturally-Responsive-Teaching.aspx>.

between “doesn’t apply” and “applies” CRP practices. Jenna exhibits knowledge of CRP practices, but sometimes takes a passive stance regarding implementation. She keeps her students’ attention focused on her, even though she admitted that it is a good practice to let students share and explore. Jenna commented, “If it doesn’t enhance student learning, you should not waste time on it,” a remark that dismisses valuable creative and whimsical activities that urban students too often are deprived of. Jennifer Rich writes, “Never forget that you are teaching children, not a curriculum. It’s okay to break some of the rules some of the time to meet the needs of the children in your care.”¹² I argue that CRP cannot exist through curriculum alone; just as important are the opportunities to engage with students, to laugh, to earn their trust, and to make school a balanced place where social needs are met with academic ones.

The engagement practices of Jake, Ina, Shannon, and Kristen place them in the lower right quadrant, which identifies those who apply CRP methods without necessarily possessing knowledge about CRP theory or terminology. These four teachers engage with students in ways that meets the needs of their classrooms. Jake has admirable instincts on how to engage with his high school students. When thinking about how to connect with his eleventh-graders, he is reflective and often thinks back to his own disruptive behavior when he was a

12. Rich, Jennifer. “OPINION: Confessions of a White Teacher in an Urban School.” *The Hechinger Report*, March 30, 2020. <https://hechingerreport.org/opinion-confessions-of-a-white-teacher-in-an-urban-school/>.

student. Shannon recognizes her students' needs and engages with them in a variety of ways. She conducts weekly one-on-one sessions with them to check their understanding and to watch them work through their math problems.

Although she is hesitant to discuss race, Shannon shows respect for her students' cultures by inserting their names into word problems. She also tries to make mathematics approachable for students who are apprehensive or resistant. Like Shannon, Ina is reluctant to discuss race. In her interview, Ina stated that her approach to engagement comes from her motherhood. She defends her practices by saying she treats her students like her own children; she claims that she doesn't see students' race but rather just hungry, funny, "sometimes stinky" children.

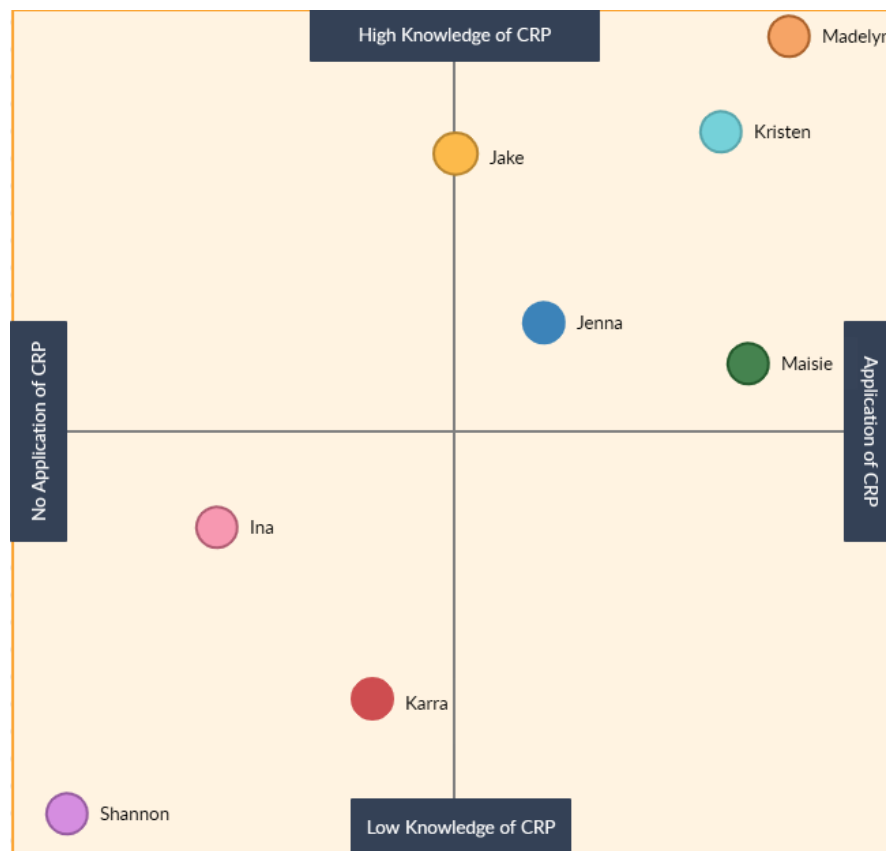
Kristen is also in the lower right quadrant. Her classroom provides students with opportunities for leadership, opportunities for leadership, but she admits that she is not particularly knowledgeable about her high schoolers' interests, joking that she is "un-with-it." She wants her classroom to resemble a home, where there is mutual respect and everyone has chores, but this sometimes makes her less responsive to students because it comes off authoritarian rather than reciprocal.

Kristen's emphasis on chores demonstrates that, as a white teacher, she has failed to consider that many of her students do menial chores (mopping, washing dishes, etc.) at home on a regular basis; for them, school is the one place where they can be a young adult regular basis; for them, school is the one place where they can (or should) be a young adult, free of such chores and responsibilities. I asked Kristen whether any of the classroom jobs in her family and consumer science

course were positions of power, such as “head chef.” Kristen vetoed that idea, stating that in her classroom, she’s the executive chef.

The fourth theme is critical awareness, which encompasses teachers’ use of CRP regarding cultural differences, including their application of critical whiteness when working with students in the classroom. As an example, a teacher with high critical awareness might recognize the need to reexamine their curriculum and change their lectures to be more affirming of students’ cultures. The quadrants shown in Figure 6 follow the same pattern as in the three previous figures. The upper left quadrant identifies teachers who demonstrate knowledge of CRP as it relates to critical awareness but who do not apply this knowledge in their practices. The lower left quadrant represents the attitudes of teachers who have limited knowledge of CRP and whose practices do not exhibit critical awareness. The upper right quadrant identifies those who are knowledgeable about CRP and who exhibit critical awareness in their classrooms. The lower right quadrant represents teachers with low knowledge of CRP who nonetheless exhibit critical awareness in their practices. In examining these themes and analyzing participants’ attitudes, I referenced the work of Anne Ruggles Gere, Jennifer Buehler, Christian Dallavis, and Victoria Shaw Haviland, who conducted a case study of raced consciousness among teachers in a program called Teachers for Tomorrow (TFT). Their report provides four findings. First, [preservice teachers] brought a raced consciousness to TFT, which surfaced in the ways they positioned themselves in classroom interactions and interviews; Second, raced consciousness gave [preservice teachers] a heightened awareness of how they were being read

racially by others; Third, raced consciousness shaped [preservice teachers'] responses to position-taking assignments and our readings of those assignments; and Fourth, raced consciousness shaped [preservice teachers'] processing of cultural responsiveness.¹³ These insights helped me organize the critical awareness data into the four quadrants. Relating these authors' results to my own, I was able to determine the extent of participants' knowledge and application of critical awareness.



13. Anne Ruggles Gere, Jennifer Buehler, Christian Dallavis, and Victoria Shaw Haviland. "A Visibility Project: Learning to See How Preservice Teachers Take up Culturally Responsive Pedagogy." *American Educational Research Journal* 46, no. 3 (2009): 827.

Figure 6. Extent of participants' critical awareness (theme 3), plotted along two axes: application of CRP practices (horizontal axis) and formal training in CRP (vertical axis).

No participants were located in the upper left quadrant. We find Ina, Karra, and Shannon in the lower left quadrant due to their discomfort engaging with issues of race, power, and authority. In their interviews, this discomfort was visible in how they deflected conversations about race. Ina frequently referred to her students' demographics, but she used deficit language and relied on stereotypes and generalities: "that's the way *they* are." This places her lower on the vertical axis. Karra also is placed low on both axes. Karra reported consistently engaging with CRP principles, but when I asked whether she had followed through in practice, she indicated that she had not. She seemed uncomfortable not with the topic of race itself, but with the prospect of engaging with race before earning tenure at her school. Karra is the Gay-Straight Alliance sponsor at her school, and she acknowledges the value of enriching the curriculum with gay and Lesbian authors and books with LGBTQIA+ content. However, she did not actually do so, citing issues with parents who complained about the content of such books. When I engaged Shannon with topics of race, she immediately cut me off and refused to engage with that portion of the interview. She seemed agitated and angry, mentioning several times that "young teachers just don't get it." This brought to mind Barbara Applebaum's work on white discomfort: "whites have a repertoire of socially sanctioned discursive practices of escape. These discursive practices of escape include 'the outward display of emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation,

silence, and leaving' the scene."¹⁴ Displays of emotion, anger, fear, and shame were present in all three interviews in this category. Kristen and Ina, who are both relatively new to teaching or to their current subject, acknowledged that they had not done much work in CRP, critical whiteness, or critical race theory. Shannon surprised me with her refusal to acknowledge her students' cultural backgrounds and her belief in a colorblind approach to education. This again reminds me of Applebaum's description of "escape" from white discomfort. Shannon refused to engage with this concept because she has never had to reconcile her colorblind beliefs and because no one has challenged her to do so, even though she has taught mathematics for 22 years on the south side of Oklahoma City, where 81% of her students are students of color. Applebaum states,

White people become inept at tolerating the slightest unease when the question of one's complicity in racism is even intimated because they are socially afforded tools that encourage this ineptness...white privilege insulates white people in a protected cocoon of comfort that creates an expectation of comfort. When that comfort is disturbed by the challenge of having to confront their "unconscious habits of white privilege . . . whites [practice] escape."¹⁵

This protected cocoon, also referred to as a protective pillow,¹⁶ enables white teachers to negate the pieces of students' identities that make them uncomfortable.

14. Barbara Applebaum. "Comforting Discomfort as Complicity: White Fragility and the Pursuit of Invulnerability." *Hypatia* 32, no. 4 (2017): 866.

15. Barbara Applebaum. "Comforting Discomfort as Complicity: White Fragility and the Pursuit of Invulnerability." *Hypatia* 32, no. 4 (2017): 867.

In the upper right quadrant, the teacher attitudes of Jake, Jenna, Kristen, Maisie, and Madelyn illustrate high competence and knowledge of critical awareness. They consistently check themselves and their classrooms to make sure they do not devalue students' identities or futures. These five participants engaged with race, but all of them expressed the idea that they had initially been uncomfortable doing so. Applebaum's work on the transformative nature of discomfort is relevant here: "Discomfort thus becomes synonymous with the possibility of individual and social transformation."¹⁷ Jake places high on the vertical axis. He told me that his "aha" moment came during his first year of teaching when he realized he had brought his own ideas of what it meant to be educated into the classroom with him. He realized how much he had taken for granted and addressed his class and race privileges. However, despite these realizations, Jake does not fully apply these ideas. This is due in part to limitations placed on him by the curriculum and his employment conditions. Jake expressed a strong desire to shape his curriculum to reflect his students' backgrounds and to engage them on issues that are important to them. Jenna also is located in this quadrant because of her work on identity representation in her classroom. In addition to using materials that are culturally relevant to her students, she also

16. Michelle Fine, *Witnessing Whiteness*. In M. Fine, L. Weis, C. Powell, & L. Wong, (Eds.), *Off White: Readings on race, power, and society* New York: Routledge, 1997. 57.

17. Barbara Applebaum. "Comforting Discomfort as Complicity: White Fragility and the Pursuit of Invulnerability." *Hypatia* 32, no. 4 (2017): 862.

includes books, photos, and videos that highlight worldwide diversity. Kristen readily discussed student demographics. She encourages students to view YouTube videos showing authentic Mexican chefs and asks students whether they know a talented cook who could be invited to give a class demonstration. This is a good example of the CRP principle that teachers should share the role of “knowledge holder” with students. By being open to inviting families into her classroom, Kristen engages with students’ cultures and interests. Kristen admitted that she had no idea how to make authentic Mexican dishes and didn’t even know what some of the ingredients were, but because Mexican recipes are familiar to many of her students, she includes them in her curriculum. Kristen is also critical of her district’s handling of race issues. She talked in detail about her colleagues’ negative reaction to professional development sessions presented by diversity experts on the topic of restorative practices. This critical attitude is necessary if we are to create opportunities to change. Maisie also is in the high-knowledge, high-application category. Her pedagogical practices are inclusive of all her students, and she continuously creates opportunities to empower them. At Maisie’s school, she leads a program that brings in athletes from nearby colleges and pairs them with a student. Each student gets the chance to eat breakfast and lunch with their mentor as well as times to engage one-on-one for discussion. She also puts together events called “Boys Night” and “Girls Night.” Students create the agenda for these events, and teachers attend and spend time participating in fun activities while building relationships with students. Madelyn likewise demonstrated a commitment to critical awareness. She applies a critical eye to her

role in her school and works with other teachers to engage with critical whiteness and culturally relevant pedagogy. Madelyn also creates space for student learning and equity and constantly checks herself as she engages with faculty, students, and parents.

Implications

This research implies that one role of schools should be to (re)educate the teaching workforce. Although some of this study's participants demonstrated culturally relevant pedagogical instincts, schools that serve communities of color fail when even one teacher refuses to engage with the needs, interests, and identities of students. "Ignorance, internalized stereotypes, and defensiveness are bolstered by prevalent and dominant discourses asserting that racism is a thing of the past and enough has been done to rectify disparities that used to exist."¹⁸ Effective teaching demands that teachers create spaces in their classrooms for discussion and critical thinking. Lee Schulman labels teachers who refuse to engage with the culturally sustaining practices "drive-by educators," implying that they are like witnesses who encounter a car accident but drive by instead of helping people who are injured.

[T]eachers must accept the ethical as well as the intellectual and pedagogical challenges of their work. They must refuse to be drive-by educators. They must insist on stopping at the scene to see what more they can do. And just as is the case on airliners and freeways, many of the

18. Lisa Werkmeister Rozas, and Joshua Miller. "Discourses for Social Justice Education: The Web of Racism and the Web of Resistance." *Journal of Ethnic & Cultural Diversity in Social Work* 18, no. 1-2 (2009): 26.

needed resources may be lacking. Nevertheless, they must seize responsibility.¹⁹

This might seem like a harsh label to place on teachers, but it is accurate when teachers neglect their students' needs. Teachers' refusal to engage with students' race, identity, and culture is detrimental to the students' success. Echoing Applebaum, schools become complicit in harming students if they comfort whiteness and white teachers' discomfort. Applebaum writes, "Comforting . . . alleviates white discomfort and pre-serves white innocence... white tears terminate the conversation [and] white "calming techniques" provide absolution from guilt."²⁰ As my results show, teacher participants occupied different spaces along the knowledge and application axes in different facets of the CRP analysis. Engaging teachers in social justice education can allow mindsets to shift and change.

Social justice teacher education actively and intentionally prepares teachers to engage students in all four overlapping aspects of CRP and CSP [culturally sustaining pedagogy]: academic excellence, cultural competence, cultural sustenance, and critical consciousness.²¹

It is imperative to acknowledge that this is not a linear process; it requires reflexivity and recursivity. Educators need to be up-to-date on the best practices

19. Shulman, Lee. (2003). No drive-by teachers; A Carnegie perspective. *The Hispanic Outlook in Higher Education*, 14. 20

20. Barbara Applebaum. "Comforting Discomfort as Complicity: White Fragility and the Pursuit of Invulnerability." *Hypatia* 32, no. 4 (2017): 865

21. Tanya Maloney, Nini Hayes, Katherine Crawford-Garrett, and Kelly Sassi. "Preparing and Supporting Teachers for Equity and Racial Justice: Creating Culturally Relevant, Collective, Intergenerational, Co-created Spaces." *The Review of Education/pedagogy/cultural Studies* 41, no. 4-5 (2019): 6.

for their students. This can be achieved through professional development targeted on curriculum, discipline practices, teacher engagement, and critical awareness.

Application and Teacher (Re)Education

This study's analysis shows that teachers grapple with white resistance in their teaching craft. Most participants revealed attributes that led to high placement in the culturally relevant pedagogy and application categories, but there is more work to be done. Madelyn and Maisie both exemplify how teachers who are educated in these practices can engage and transform the culture of an entire school site. It is worth pointing out that the schools with little or no professional development in the areas of curriculum, discipline, engagement, and critical awareness fostered teachers who fell short of meeting best practices for their classrooms. Oklahoma City Public Schools have strong connections to local universities, and I recommend that the district engage with university faculty in a reciprocal relationship.²² Kristen's testimony about her colleagues' reaction to a virtual panel discussion leads me to recommend that such topics be discussed face-to-face, without the anonymity of being behind a screen with cameras off.

Lisa Werkmeister Rozas and Joshua Miller's "web of resistance" is a tool that breaks down the process of critical awareness into doable steps and could be implemented over the span of a school year. Their chart, shown in Figure 7,

22. Universities often send preservice teachers into OKCPS classrooms to engage with their urban school placement. This seems like a logical way to reeducate teachers on practices of CRP and engage them with critical whiteness studies.

displays “points of connectedness” that describe a path to becoming a critical educator and shows how schools can (re)educate teachers to engage with their whiteness. The chart provides both an internal and an external strategy web and arguably allows a path for growth of both intent and application of best practices.

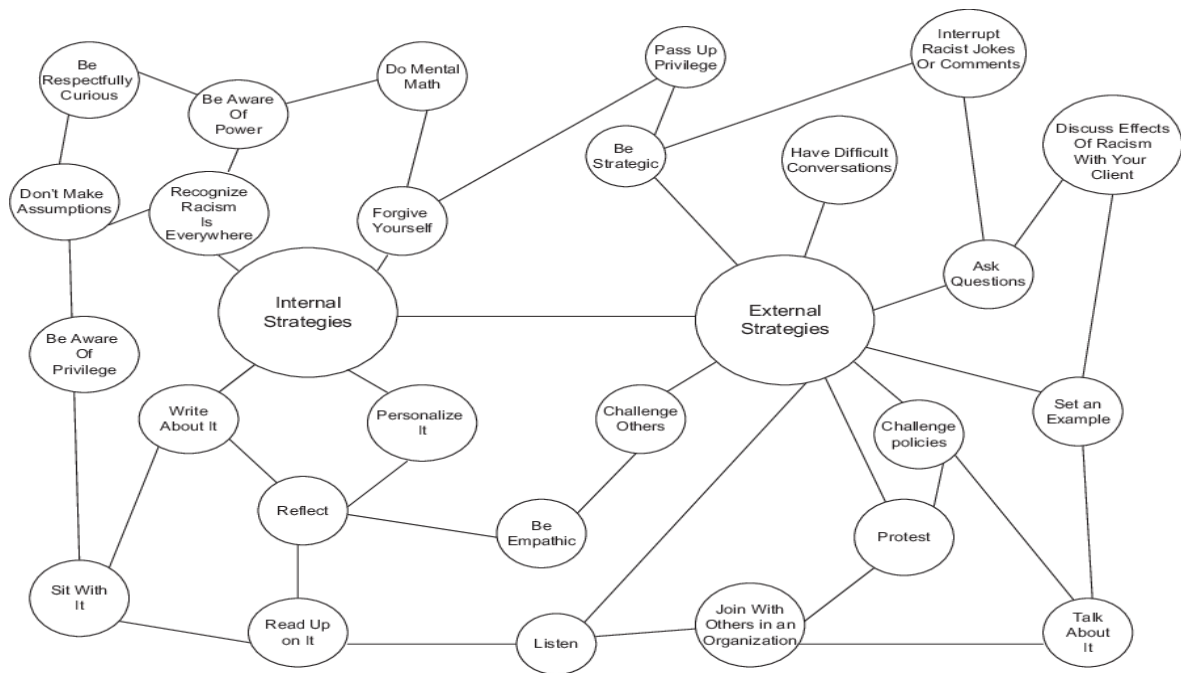


Figure 7: Web of Resistance²³

The web of resistance does not coddle resistant teachers but does provide steps for both internal and external growth to transform into advocacy.

Werkmeister Rozas and Miller explain, “Internal strategies focus on what is

23. Lisa Werkmeister Rozas, and Joshua Miller. "Discourses for Social Justice Education: The Web of Racism and the Web of Resistance." *Journal of Ethnic & Cultural Diversity in Social Work* 18, no. 1-2 (2009): 34

required of the individual who attempts to participate in an anti-racism movement—efforts and tactics focusing primarily on the development of an inner capacity to engage in resisting racism.²⁴ Therefore, the first step is to engage resistant teachers to begin to (re)think their own classroom space, engaging them with culturally relevant pedagogical practices and giving them space to address their own misconceptions and reliance on their stereotypes and internal biases. The authors also list external strategies that can facilitate motivation, and if an entire staff engaged with these facets, truly transformative schools could emerge. Werkmeister Rozas and Miller write, “External strategies are aimed at ongoing action, created in an alliance or coalition with others. These involve action-oriented activities that help to dismantle the forms of racism cited in the web of racism.”²⁵ The web of resistance illuminates a path that schools, leadership, teachers, and staff can take to create a space that is truly transformational for students.

Limitations

This research contributes to the scholarship on critical whiteness and culturally relevant pedagogy. However, it is important that I acknowledge its limitations. It was difficult to recruit participants, due in part to the many

24. Lisa Werkmeister Rozas, and Joshua Miller. "Discourses for Social Justice Education: The Web of Racism and the Web of Resistance." *Journal of Ethnic & Cultural Diversity in Social Work* 18, no. 1-2 (2009): 33

25. Lisa Werkmeister Rozas, and Joshua Miller. "Discourses for Social Justice Education: The Web of Racism and the Web of Resistance." *Journal of Ethnic & Cultural Diversity in Social Work* 18, no. 1-2 (2009): 33.

challenges facing teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although many teachers contacted me when my flyer was first posted in schools, a large proportion failed to follow through on my communications with them.

Another limitation is that this research project represents just eight of the 66 school sites in the Oklahoma City Public Schools, or approximately 12% of all schools. The attitudes and practices I uncovered in my analysis are suggestive, but it cannot be assumed that these results are generalizable to all schools in the district or to all white teachers in highly diverse urban settings.

Suggestions for Further Research

My next research interest is to engage the concepts of culturally relevant pedagogy and critical whiteness at the preservice level in a university setting. I believe it is important to be able to inform best practices before students embark on their first teaching position, where they may cause harm and prompt resistance to their pedagogical practices. This will also allow more teacher leaders like Madelyn and Maisie to work in school sites to create the transformation that schools deeply need.

I would also like to conduct a similar research study in rural and suburban settings to learn whether the findings would be similar in such environments. The majority of graduates from my university enter suburban school districts, and I believe it would be informative to determine whether suburban and rural districts focus on culturally relevant pedagogical practices that engage their particular student demographic. After realizing the major concerns of this research, I think it would be beneficial to create reciprocal opportunities by forming partnerships

between public schools and colleges of education. Having a familiar face working with teachers to bridge scholarship and practice would be constructive for everyone involved.

Conclusion

This work is an ongoing labor of love. Culturally relevant pedagogy provides teachers the opportunity to connect with their students' interests and to teach more effectively. It allows teachers to innovate and develop skills that build trust among knowers. CRP validates students. It provides humanistic elements in a field where teachers too often dehumanize and hide behind "protective pillows" of resistance instead of (re)educating themselves. This study is an analysis of how teacher attitudes fluctuate, decline, and rise depending on their knowledge and application. To teach is to learn, and this dissertation was an extension of this reflective practice. In my own practice, I had a visceral reaction as I came to understand that I was part of a system that allows biases to fester and as I engaged with themes of privilege—my privilege—and my role in white supremacy. I couldn't continue to carry these biases. I had to relearn. I had to learn to create what would work for my students, not what was easiest for me to teach. As educators, we need to create opportunities to relearn. We need to engage in academic excellence for our students. It is imperative that we learn cultural competency and relearn about our students by listening. We—all teachers—need to teach with culturally sustaining goals so that students can bring their leadership and knowledge into our classroom. This is how we engage with critical consciousness to dismantle privilege, biases, and reliance on stereotypes.

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