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"THEY'RE NOT LITTLE KIDS, THEY'RE TINY HUMANS": LIBERATING AND HUMANIZING STUDENTS THROUGH CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE PEDAGOGY

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“THEY’RE NOT LITTLE KIDS, THEY’RE TINY HUMANS”:
LIBERATING AND HUMANIZING STUDENTS THROUGH CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE PEDAGOGY

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Abstract

There is a continuing need for teachers who understand the value that culturally responsive pedagogy can bring to a classroom. To better understand how to develop classrooms that are responsive to their students' cultural identities, it is important for teachers to learn from those who have done so successfully. Based on this need, I interviewed four elementary teachers who had reputations for effectively engaging in culturally responsive practices with their students. Specifically, I used critical qualitative methods to learn about these teachers' culturally responsive perspectives and practices. My participants' responses suggested that culturally responsive teachers: (1) are attuned to students' needs; (2) critically discern classroom content; (3) affirm student autonomy; (4) possess an asset-based perspective; and (5) utilize an insider's understanding of historical or institutional disparity. Additionally, my interpretive lenses, based on the work of Paulo Freire and Luis Moll et al., illustrate and explain how culturally responsive teachers utilize local funds of knowledge to liberate and humanize their students. At the conclusion of the study, I explore possible implications for current educators, principals and district administrators, and other people involved with efforts to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion. Implications for this study acknowledge the unique characteristics of the participants that cannot be replicated by every teacher.

Chapter 1: Introduction

As a current educator who works in a large and urban public school, I am mindful of the fact that where I teach is demographically and culturally different from the school that I attended as a child. To clarify, many of the experiences my students come to school with and the cultural traits that define their identity vary in comparison to a majority of the students whom I attended K-12 school with. This has afforded me the opportunity to think about other ways that the school experiences of students in the United States may differ and has promoted further reflection about my own time spent in public schools. When I think back on my own personal experience with K-12 education, a majority of my memories are positive. I attended a well-funded public school in the same district from kindergarten through my senior year of high school. As an elementary school student, I remember feeling safe and content while in the classroom. Since I spoke English, I did not encounter language barriers, nor did I have to worry about understanding what my teachers or classmates said. While I experienced the average range of emotions for a child, making friends was typically not a struggle and I established connections with my classmates based on shared cultural norms, such as religious beliefs, family celebrations, or holiday traditions.

I began middle school feeling anxious about navigating such a large new building with nearly 1,000 students in my class, a majority of whom I had never met before. With the support of my parents, teachers, and friends, I quickly learned my way around and once again felt mostly content to be at school. My middle school was a place of greater diversity than my elementary school and my friend group became a bit more diverse as well. I took advanced classes and when I struggled with homework or a specific class, I had the support of my parents and teachers to help me through it. My middle school social studies and history classes consisted of American

and European history. When I learned about this history, I felt a connection to the curriculum and although I did not have a sentient understanding at that time, I didn't have to worry about whether or not I would feel represented in my textbooks and school resources.

In high school I once again felt fairly comfortable and connected to my school which had a wide variety of opportunities available to students. I chose to take several advanced placement (AP) classes where the demographics of students were noticeably less diverse than that of the entire student body. I felt like I was respected by my teachers, most of whom were White, and I never had to question whether the treatment from my teachers was authentic or whether it depended on factors of race, culture, or language. I joined various school clubs and participated in major school events with a healthy sense of school pride. I did not feel pressured by my family to get a job while I was in high school, nor did I feel the need to help support my family financially. I was able to balance my coursework with my social life while I thought about my future and where I wanted to attend college. I applied to a public four-year college, got accepted and celebrated my high school graduation with friends and family.

I would describe my overall K-12 experience as average, or typical. While there were times when I certainly struggled either emotionally or academically, my struggles didn't define my experiences; and I was able to work through any challenges that arose with the support of teachers, friends, and family. Moreover, I never had to discern whether my struggles were based on factors of my identity such as race, social class, ethnicity, or language. I also naively assumed that my K-12 experiences were similar to the experiences of most students in public schools.

Transitioning into college was relatively seamless as I was excited to live on my own, with the privilege of having the financial support of my parents. The rigor of college coursework during my freshman year mirrored that of the AP classes I had taken in high school, and I

enjoyed the social as well as academic aspects of college life. Due in part to the fact that my parents and grandparents had access to a college education and were able to find well-paying jobs after graduation, I was the beneficiary of generational wealth and did not have to worry about paying for college tuition and fees on my own. I knew during my first semester that I wanted to be an educator and as I learned more about public education in the United States, I began to uncover truths that fundamentally shifted my thinking. I read texts that introduced me to cogent ideas of inequality and privilege in ways that I had not previously encountered. I learned about the history and present-day inequity existent in the U.S. public school system. I encountered narratives from people who had different identities and experiences from my own and I began to realize that my K-12 experience was situated in many privileges not afforded to everyone. Privileges that could be implicitly attributed to my racial identity, socioeconomic status, language, citizenship status, and the educational levels of my parents.

While my consciousness about the inequities in public education developed, so did my desire to ensure that I entered the field of education as a teacher who did not perpetuate these disparities but worked to dismantle them. I began to understand education as a means of liberation and as a process of humanization in which people reflect and act upon their world in order to transform it (Freire, 1993, p. 79). Since graduating college, I have taught for 10 years at a public elementary school situated in a district where 100% of the students receive free lunch and breakfast. Additionally, over 80% of the student population consists of students of color, and more than 85% are categorized as economically disadvantaged (Statistical Profile - [pseudonym] Public Schools, 2022). Throughout this past decade, I have seen first-hand the effects of public-school disparity and have acquired deeper insight into the ways in which past oppressive practices still affect the public education system today. Moreover, I have a greater understanding

of how this historical disparity can be addressed and disrupted by teachers who intentionally engage in liberating and humanizing practices in their classrooms.

My own experiences as an educator have helped me realize the importance of teacher agency and autonomy in the classroom. Simply because a system has a history of disparate outcomes, does not mean the people working within that system are powerless. In fact, it is because of people who have disrupted and dismantled oppressive practices that progress has been made toward a more equitable school system, albeit there is work still to be done. A current practices of teacher agency that I have observed as having a profound impact on students was developed by Geneva Gay (2002, 2013), and is often referred to as culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) in which:

> 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, ethnic backgrounds; and develop students' agency, efficacy, and empowerment (Gay, 2013 p. 49)

As a professional educator, I see the value of CRP and how students can benefit from having a teacher who is responsive to their cultural assets (Gay, 2002; Paris & Alim, 2017). To better understand the need for CRP, it is helpful to examine the past and specifically recognize how historically marginalized populations have had to fight for equal access to public education in the United States.

Historical Disparities and Racially Oppressive Practices in Public Schools

A defining characteristic of culturally responsive pedagogy is that every student feels affirmed and valued in their cultural identities (Gay, 2002, 2013). Therefore, it is worthwhile to examine the historical context that has negated this ideology, as a means of working towards greater educational equity. From the inception and development of public schools in the United States, certain demographics of students and communities have been excluded, marginalized, and

treated in disparate ways based on their race, ethnicity, language, and socioeconomic status (Anderson, 1988; Child, 1995; Danns, 2009; García, 2018; Pak, 2013; Tamura, 2001; San Miguel & Valencia, 1998).

For instance, educative marginalization based on race can be seen throughout the United States in the decades after slavery ended. In *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935, (1988),* James Anderson (1988), provided insight about the strategies employed by White communities and their efforts to dismantle African-Americans who worked to obtain access to a liberating and universal education system. Throughout the text, Anderson detailed how the economic and social power structures of White communities used education to relegate Black communities to second-class citizenship. In one example, Anderson (1988), showed how Samuel Armstrong, a leader in the quest for racial subordination, perpetuated his ideas when he established the Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute, a school largely devoted to teacher training programs with the goal "to develop black teachers and leaders who would prepare the black masses for efficient service in racially prescribed occupational niches" (p. 42).

Anderson (1988), also revealed how schools located in Black communities did not receive equal government funds as the schools located in White communities, and therefore had to rely on funding from private sources. In detailing this reliance on private funds Anderson (1988), showed how: "This alternative to state-financed public education was necessary because in the early twentieth century whites all over the South seized the school funds belonging to the disenfranchised black citizens, gerrymandered school districts so as to exclude blacks from certain local tax benefits, and expounded a racist ideology to provide a moral justification of unequal treatment" (p. 154). Even though many schools in Black communities did receive

funding from what Anderson refers to as “White philanthropists,” the funding was largely stipulated on perpetuating a system of industrial education, instead of a truly emancipatory one.

While the White philanthropists who funded Black schools may have felt like their intentions were wholesome, this dynamic can be analyzed in the context of present-day schools to understand how people in positions of power can misjudge the implications of their actions. Likewise, I have observed teachers who believe that they have a sufficient understanding of their students’ cultural identities and academic needs; however, they are bound by narratives or classroom practices that indicate a cultural mismatch or misunderstanding of the communities where their schools are located. It is important for us as educators to critically examine our practices and perspectives to ensure that our goals align with an equitable education system for all students.

In the examination of historical oppressive practices, it is also important to explore how inequitable policies in other institutions, such as housing, have impacted disparity in public schools. In his text, *Strategies of Segregation*, David Garcia (2018), focused on Oxnard, California to highlight how entrenched racial ideologies contributed to segregation during the development of residential and educational structures from 1903 to 1974. Throughout the book, he used the term “white architects” to demonstrate the concerted effort among city leaders to ensure that a racial hierarchy existed in which the Mexican-American population was intentionally subjugated. This was evidenced by the city planning efforts of Oxnard’s first mayor, Richard Haydock and how he “led efforts to purposefully underdevelop what became the predominantly Mexican east-side neighborhoods. He approved plans for substandard housing and neglected to extend basic municipal services such as sewage, electricity and paved roads to

this area" (Garcia, 2018, p. 13). These actions taken by the white architects were used to dehumanize the Mexican-American population and generate false narratives about how they were inferior and potentially hazardous to the general well-being of the White population. These efforts to dehumanize and stigmatize Mexican-Americans living in Oxnard became the justification for segregation within both the residential structures and schools.

The book culminates with the court case: *Debbie and Doreen Soria et al. v. Oxnard School Board of Trustees et. al.* in which a group of Mexican-American and Black plaintiffs brought their fight for racial justice to the federal court. Garcia documented not only the efforts of desegregation advocates to expose the racist structures within Oxnard, but also the resistance from the board of trustees to keep those structures in place. Through a lengthy legal battle and amidst opposition from many of the white architects in Oxnard, the plaintiffs won their fight to desegregate schools and a systemic plan to increase education equality was legally mandated.

In addition to practices of segregation, it is meaningful to note the ways that schools have historically been weaponized as a space of forced assimilation and acculturation. In her book, *Boarding School Seasons*, Brenda Child (1998), exposed the manner in which government boarding schools stripped Indigenous populations of their culture, identity, and language. This was done under the guise of assimilation, with the goal of creating a Native American population that was fully acculturated to the White population in the United States. Throughout the text, Child (1998), used letters written between students who were forced to attend boarding schools, and their parents to reveal that the goal of these schools was subjugation. Child (1998) reveals this notion when she states:

> Nothing less than complete assumption of a new identity was expected…Government schools taught students to be ashamed of their names, their tribal languages, and even

> family surnames derived from tribal languages…Students lost important symbols of their tribal identity when they entered boarding school (pp. 29-30).

The purpose of boarding schools was not to provide students with a liberating education, but instead to make them feel devalued and dehumanized in order to become subservient to the White community. Child (1998), reveals this idea when she states: “It was widely assumed that the vocational education not only suited the “native mentality” but would also help to solve the nation’s so-called “Indian problem” by training the growing number of impoverished and landless Indians for wage labor” (p 13). Unlike other marginalized populations, which were intentionally kept out of public schools, this method of forced assimilation aimed to acculturate Native students to the extent that they no longer identified with their Indigenous communities. However, similar to other marginalized populations, the students didn’t receive a robust academic education, but an education based on vocational and industrial training with the goal of subordination.

These three texts provide a pragmatic context for discussion about present-day educational parity. It is important to examine this history because it has served a foundation for many of the ways in which schools function today. Additionally, these texts demonstrate how different communities had to fight for access to education and their concerted efforts to resist oppressive practices. In learning about this history, both students and educators can become better prepared to identify and dismantle any injustices they see in their own schools and society. Examining the past leads to relevant questions about the purpose of education - should schools be places that reproduce societal norms, or transformational spaces of critical thought that equip students with the necessary skills to question the injustices they see or experience in meaningful ways? I would argue for the latter. One way that educators can cultivate spaces of equity in

schools is by engaging in practices and perspectives that are relevant, responsive, and sustaining to the cultural identities of their students. In order to gain a deeper understanding about how teachers can use culturally relevant, responsive, and sustaining practices in their classroom, it is necessary to further explore these concepts.

Culturally Relevant, Responsive, and Sustaining Pedagogies

The idea of *culturally relevant pedagogy* reached levels of consciousness through the work of Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995), and her article, *Toward a Theory of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy* wherein she states: "The dilemma for African-American students becomes one of negotiating the academic demands of school while demonstrating cultural competence. Thus, culturally relevant pedagogy must provide a way for students to maintain their cultural integrity while succeeding academically" (p. 476). Culturally relevant pedagogy requires educators to value the culture, cultural norms, and identities of their students as assets to their learning as opposed to deficits. Understanding that culture is a relevant and integral part of a student's education postulates educators to engage in pedagogical practices that provide an equitable education, especially for historically marginalized populations.

Additionally, Ladson-Billings revealed a rationale for culturally relevant pedagogy by stating, "Not only must teachers encourage academic success and cultural competence, they must help students to recognize, understand, and critique current social inequities" (1995, p. 476). In conjunction with administering a high-quality, culturally relevant education, teachers must understand how to teach critical thinking skills and work alongside their students to identify, question, and disrupt inequitable practices. This is particularly important for educators who work with historically oppressed populations, so that education serves as a catalyst for liberation (Freire 1993).

An additional concept in understanding the impact of cultural pedagogies has been defined by the work of Geneva Gay as *culturally responsive teaching* (CRT) or *culturally responsive pedagogy* (CRP). According to Gay (2013), “culturally responsive teaching is grounded in some beliefs that are fundamentally different from most of those that govern how educational programs and practices historically have been designed for underachieving students of color” (p. 50). An important consideration of culturally responsive teaching is that while it is important to address the problems and challenges that certain populations encounter, educators should not focus solely on the struggles of a specific culture. It is important to reject deficit-based perspectives and instead view students in terms of potential, creativity, imagination, ingenuity, resourcefulness, accomplishment, and resiliency (Gay, 2013, p. 54).

In a more recent call for not only a continued understanding, but a reconceptualization of culturally relevant pedagogy, Django Paris and H. Samy Alim (2017), offer an emerging idea known as *culturally sustaining pedagogy* (CSP). In detailing why this shift in phrasing was made, Paris and Alim (2017) state,

> We believe that equity and access can best be achieved by centering the dynamic practices and selves of students and communities of color in a critical, additive, and expansive vision of schooling. Instead of being oppressive, homogenizing forces, CSP asks us to reimagine schools as sites where diverse, heterogeneous practices are not only valued but *sustained* (p. 3).

It is significant that educators understand culturally sustaining pedagogy as a means of responding to the legacy of oppression that has historically marginalized the voices and identities for communities of color in the United States. In order to ensure that the values, identities, and cultures of all students are being sustained in the classroom, it is not sufficient for teachers to simply state that they value their students. While this is important, educators need to move beyond words and ensure that their actions and classroom practices corroborate their values and

beliefs to ensure that the cultures and identities of students are affirmed in sustainable ways. While the notions of culturally relevant, responsive, and sustaining pedagogy have all informed my research, for the purposes of this study I have decided to focus on *culturally responsive pedagogy*.

The Continuing Need for Critical Cultural Pedagogies

Given the history of inequitable and oppressive historical practices, there is a need for teachers to understand how to use culturally responsive practices in their classrooms today. Given the historical context of U.S. schools and the need for CRP, *critical race theory* can provide insightful analysis about the intersection of systemic racism and education. Culturally responsive pedagogy includes teaching students how to think critically about their world and "CRT [critical race theory] can make a significant contribution to the curriculum content itself...it requires [students] to analyze institutional arrangements of society, assess how they are shaped by dominant cultural assumptions, and recognize how they may disadvantage members of nondominant cultural groups" (Ortiz & Jani, 2010, p. 189).

In many districts across the country, efforts to be more culturally responsive have included school board policies that focus on notions of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). As a result, there has also been increased backlash to the concepts of critical race theory, and DEI policies centered on ideas about how the history of racism should be examined and taught in the K-12 classroom (*Demonstrations over Critical Race Theory in the United States*, Jones, 2021). Due to this backlash, several states have passed laws to limit discussion about race in schools and books that include diverse experiences have been banned by school boards. These restrictive actions in response to DEI policies and critical race theory illustrate why culturally responsive pedagogy is especially prudent for schools today.

In addition to discussions about DEI and critical race theory, contemporary conversations about public education often focus on how successful a school is. In discussing what defines a school's success, oftentimes teachers, administrators, and district leaders center conversations around students' *outcomes* (e.g., test scores, data points, grades, and graduation rates). Due to this high focus on students' outcomes, how academic resources include or exclude the cultures and identities of students is not often part of the conversation. Additionally, discourse about schools' success lacks emphasis on whether or not teachers utilize culturally responsive practices or cultivate classrooms that are affirming spaces for students.

Instead, there is an overemphasis on how students perform on standardized tests, which can lead to deficit thinking among educators. Deficit thinking occurs when the systemic influences on disparities in social and educational outcomes are ignored, and students in historically oppressed populations are unfairly held responsible for the challenges they face (Davis & Museus, 2019, p. 122). When conversations are based largely on student performance, there is a level of accountability that is placed on the students themselves, instead of the institutions that educate them. As a result,

> Students in urban schools often resist American schooling ideologies because its "official" curricula silence the voices, sensibilities, and lived experiences of dispossessed youth of color throughout the country. Thus, dispossessed youth of color are not understood on their own terms, or in relation to a social system whose history is based on legacies of their subjugation (Camangian, 2013, p. 425).

Therefore, schools can become places of disempowerment for many marginalized students. This is due in part to styles of teaching such as *banking education* (Freire, 1993), rote memorization, and textbooks that leave out multiple perspectives, as well as teachers who aren't adequately trained to teach in ways that are culturally responsive. Instead of focusing almost

exclusively on standardized test scores, it is necessary for educators to understand that students are "critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher" (Freire, 1993, p. 81). It is important to explore the various ways in which educators can teach students critical thinking skills and use culturally responsive pedagogy to work towards an education system that is a place of equity and liberation for historically marginalized populations.

Considering the rationale for culturally responsive pedagogy, it is helpful to examine the larger social contexts of injustices and how they unfold as microcosms at the school level. For example, racial profiling that contributes to disproportionate levels of criminalization for people of color also contributes to disproportionate levels of discipline in schools for students of color. Shiv R. Desai, a college professor at the University of New Mexico conducted a pedagogical inquiry with a class of preservice teachers on the topic of several recent shootings of unarmed Black men. In noting that all of the students in his class were White and he, as the professor was a Black man, Desai (2016), stated: "I saw this as an opportunity to showcase the pedagogy of critical, multicultural, and culturally relevant teaching and for students to reflect on their own positionalities" (p. 1033). This demonstrates the imperative that culturally relevant and responsive pedagogies can have implications beyond being an effective method of teaching. Educators who employ culturally relevant or responsive practices confront larger societal systems of oppression both within and outside of the classroom.

This is an important understanding for educators due to the fact that "Our children of color carry with them the history of racism that society projects onto their parents, and have to overcome the biases, prejudices, and stereotypes projected onto them" (Desai, 2016, p. 1036). How children of color are perceived affects how they are treated. It is crucial that students from

marginalized communities aren't stereotyped, criminalized, or seen as culturally deficient. Additionally, it is imperative for educators who work with historically marginalized communities to understand the ways in which CRP can serve as a vessel to acknowledge and disrupt the harm that exclusionary school practices have inflicted on these communities.

In addition to the rationale for CRP, it is important to evaluate educators not only in their effectiveness of teaching with CRP, but also for their ability to self-reflect and identify areas of necessary growth. In this self-reflection it is prudent for classroom teachers to be able to identify and articulate their personal philosophies and to distinguish their perspectives and practices as a means of continued development of pedagogical praxis. To effectively engage in CRP, it is essential that the actions of teachers align with their values. In the article, *Practice what you preach: The moderating role of teacher attitudes on the relationship between prejudice reduction and student engagement*, researchers found that:

> Many teachers are advocates of equitable educational opportunities and hence multiculturalism; however, their actual teaching practices may not always be optimal. For instance, teachers were reported to find it hard to discuss sensitive topics such as racism and discrimination, and to endorse unconscious biased attitudes that can be expressed in subtle, non-verbal behaviors outside of their control (Abacioglu et al, 2019, p. 3).

Furthermore, researchers found that while most teachers reported having positive multicultural attitudes, those that were the most effective in positively impacting student engagement through prejudice reduction practices were educators who reported having an above-average multicultural sensitivity and awareness (Abacioglu et al, 2019, p. 7). This indicates the need for continuous evaluation of culturally responsive practices as evidenced in both the views of educators and their classroom practices.

For educators to be able to grow in their utilization of culturally responsive pedagogy, an awareness and evaluation of self-efficacy can be helpful. In a mixed-methods study on the topic

of teachers' self-efficacy for culturally responsive instruction (CRI) researchers were able to identify three types of low self-efficacy utilizing the Culturally Responsive Teaching Self-Efficacy Scale (CRTSE) that can provide insight about necessary professional development for educators (Malo-Juvera, 2018). The first type of teachers were identified as lacking efficacy for CRI in general, the second type of teachers were categorized as having the lowest efficacy for interacting with ELL [English Language Learner] students and parents, and the third type of teachers were categorized as having low efficacy for utilizing assessments and making connections between curricula and students' cultures (Malo-Juvera, 2018, pp. 150-153). This study exemplified the importance for educators to identify varying levels of self-efficacy in teaching with CRI and CRP. By identifying low levels of self-efficacy, teachers can better understand the support they need to improve their teaching practices.

Another important factor for using culturally responsive pedagogy is for educators to be aware of any biases they carry. In a study about teacher attitudes toward ELL students, researchers found that teachers in the southern portion of the U.S largely had deficit-oriented prejudices about their students identified as English language learners (Mellom et al, 2018). However, researchers observed a change over time in these deficit-oriented beliefs as a result of training in culturally responsive pedagogical practices. The change in teachers' beliefs resulted in greater comfort and participation from students, increased teacher knowledge of students' backgrounds, and a better linguistic awareness for both educators and students (Mellom et al, 2018, pp.104-105).

In exploring research on the topic of cultural pedagogies, I found an abundance of articles that were focused on the rationale and student benefits of culturally responsive practices. Many of these articles focus on the historical context of exclusionary practices that haven't centered the

cultures and identities of students. Moreover, there has been sufficient scholarship focused on the type of professional development that is necessary for educators to effectively utilize culturally relevant, responsive, or sustaining pedagogies in their classrooms. In addition to professional development, much of the research about CRP focused on teachers' attitudes and self-efficacy in utilizing cultural pedagogies, or on what pre-service teaching programs could do to include CRP in their coursework. Within these studies, there has also been a focus on the misinterpretations that educators have about topics of culture, identity, and CRP.

However, I found it more difficult to locate studies that focused on current elementary teachers who were effectively engaging in culturally responsive pedagogy. In designing my own study, I wanted to highlight the ways that teachers who were already effectively engaging with culturally responsive pedagogy could provide valuable insight for people working in education. While focusing on the specific practices of culturally responsive teaching, I also wanted to glean insight from the perspectives of teachers to better understand how their thoughts and beliefs have shaped their experiences. With this focus in mind, I arrived at my research questions:

1). What are the perspectives and practices of educators who teach with culturally responsive pedagogy in their classrooms?

2). What can be learned from the perspectives and practices of elementary teachers who utilize culturally responsive practices in their classrooms that can be helpful to other educators?

Chapter 2: Interpretive Lenses

An interpretive lens serves as a way to step back from the findings of a study and further illuminate or explain what has been found. The value of using an interpretive lens for this study was to understand the significance of the themes that emerged and to provide a cogent

explanation of *how* my participants engaged in culturally responsive pedagogy. Understanding the findings through the context of the study's interpretive lenses can also lead to a more comprehensive consideration of the resulting implications. There are many ways to interpret and provide context to a body of information, which includes the information that I accumulated as a result of this study.

While there are a number of different interpretive lenses that could be used to explain my participants' perspectives and practices, what made the most sense after gathering data was to return to Paulo Freire's work grounded in an ideology of a *liberating* and *humanizing education* and to think about this work in conjunction with the concept of local expertise or *funds of knowledge* (Moll et al, 1993). Based on my findings, I will demonstrate that educators who center, value, and integrate the funds of knowledge of their students and their students' families provide a greater sense of affirmation of the community in which the students live, thus potentially providing a more liberating and humanizing educational experience. Not only were the two lenses provided by Freire (1993) and Moll et al. (1992) existent in the literature, they were also evident in the study and were suggested by the participants.

Humanizing and Liberating Pedagogy

To humanize is to recognize and treat as human. A humanizing pedagogy can be defined as an education that "values the students' background knowledge, culture, and life experiences, and creates learning contexts where power is shared by students and teachers" (Bartolome, 1994, p. 190). Furthermore, a humanizing education is one that liberates students to value the entirety of their identity, grow and develop their own consciousness, and view their unique cultural traits as assets. The need for a humanizing and liberating education, as discussed in chapter one, is due to the history of school practices that have acted in oppressive, dehumanizing ways toward

specific communities of people. Therefore, a humanizing education that rejects systems of knowledge tied to oppressive ideologies, serves as a foundation where students are empowered by the freedom to define themselves instead of being defined by others.

To liberate is to set free. Therefore, a liberating education would be an education in which students are freed. According to Freire, "Liberating education consists in acts of cognition, not transferals of information" (1993, p. 79). For an education to be liberating, it is important that educators understand their positionalities within a classroom. Teachers who are concerned with engaging in humanizing and liberating practices should recognize the importance of learning alongside, from, and with their students and the communities in which their students live. A liberating education can occur when teachers reject what Freire (1993) refers to as a *banking education* and instead engage in the humanizing practice of a *problem-posing education*. In distinguishing between the two, Freire (1993) points out that:

> Whereas banking education anesthetizes and inhibits creative power, problem-posing education involves a constant unveiling of reality. The former attempts to maintain the submersion of consciousness; the latter strives for the emergence of consciousness and critical intervention in reality (p. 81).

Understanding the difference between these two educational paradigms is an essential component for educators to view their students through a humanizing perspective.

For educators to engage in practices that are liberating and humanizing, Patrick Roz Camangian (2013) posits that there are three important components that can potentially lead to transformative change: agitating students politically, arousing critical curiosity, and inspiring self and socially transformative behavior (p. 431). Agitation occurs when students engage with content that they can relate to or that directly reflects societal issues they experience in their own

lives. The purpose of the agitation phase is to enact emotions and frustrations that students have experienced as members of dispossessed communities (pp. 431- 435). In arousing their critical curiosities, students are encouraged to reflect on their feelings of agitation. One way to do this is for educators to provide opportunities for their students to study interests within their own communities. In the third phase of humanizing pedagogy, assessments are created that evaluate students on the compassion, critical social analysis, and leadership qualities needed to disrupt dehumanizing social conditions. In addition:

> teachers and students must be able to not only identify and illuminate the intimate ways hegemonic thought is present in the immediate reality but also craft social commentary so that it bares out perspectives that resonate with oppressed people's most pressing needs (Camangian, 2013, p. 443).

Humanizing pedagogy provides an opportunity for teachers to engage students in meaningful learning experiences both in the classroom and in the context of the world around them. With this understanding, educators can shift away from isolating, exclusive methods of traditional teaching styles, and provide a liberating education that affirms and empowers students to engage in opportunities for personal liberation and social change.

Since one of the goals of humanizing pedagogy is to teach students to love themselves (Camangian, 2013, 448), educators should view their students in terms of humanity, perspective, and experience and must not rely solely on test outcomes or traditional methods as a standard by which to measure educational success. In order to ensure that pedagogical practices result in a liberating education for students, schools need to be places that provide opportunities for teachers and students to learn and grow collaboratively to overcome injustices. In working towards this idea, "This struggle requires that we apply humanizing pedagogies in the most

holistic manner possible and embrace the notion that the humanity of oppressed people is worthy of their own study" (Camangian, 2013, p. 426).

To avoid the potential perpetuation of oppressive school practices, educators' roles must not be grounded in simply telling students *what* to learn but must provide opportunities for students to grow their own consciousness. This can be achieved through liberating practices that engage students in problem-posing education where "people develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves" (Freire, 1993, p. 83). In developing their own sense of critical consciousness, students can better actualize their ideas and address problems they encounter. Additionally, it is important that teachers have the capability of learning with and from their students. As Freire (1993), states:

> the humanist revolutionary educator cannot wait for this possibility to materialize. From the outset, her efforts must coincide with those of the students to engage in critical thinking and the quest for mutual humanization. His efforts must be imbued with a profound trust in people and their creative power. To achieve this, they must be partners of the students in their relations with them (p. 75).

In establishing this partnership, it is essential for teachers to view themselves as collaborators in their students' learning and to acknowledge that they have the opportunity to learn and grow from their students' perspectives and realities as well. Within this understanding, it is important that educators help their students develop a sense of critical consciousness, which Freire describes as an awareness of the factors that perpetuate one's own oppression. The development of a critical consciousness can lead to a liberating experience for students by dispensing an understanding that what they learn can have relevance to their own lives and can be useful for a larger social purpose (Camangian, 2013, p. 427).

The words of Henry Giroux (1985) are worth repeating when he states: "It is important to stress that teachers must take active responsibility for raising serious questions about what they teach, how they teach, and what the larger goals are for which they are striving" (p. 378). It is pivotal for teachers to understand the limits of specific methods of teaching and to be aware of these limits in order to question their own actions. An important characteristic of humanizing and liberating pedagogy is the teacher's ability to acknowledge which practices may be contributing to a banking style of education. By discerning which methods possibly place limitations on students' learning, teachers can work to change these methods, overcome these limitations, and provide their students with a more liberating education. As educators work towards a better understanding of their own practices,

> a necessary first step in reevaluating the failure or success of particular instructional methods used with subordinated students calls for a shift in perspective - a shift from a narrow and mechanistic view of instruction to one that is broader in scope and takes into consideration the socio-historical and political dimensions of education" (Bartolome, 1994, p. 176).

Educators have a responsibility and, I believe, a moral obligation to provide an equitable and empowering education for their students that is rooted in humanizing and liberating practices. This is particularly important in communities that have a history of marginalization and oppression. Whenever educators encounter systemic practices that negate or deter a humanizing and liberating education, it is imperative that we speak up. Advocating for the rejection of harmful practices is essential for ensuring that classrooms are places of liberation and empowerment for students.

Funds of knowledge

In addition to Freire's notions of a liberating and humanizing education, the concept of funds of knowledge provided a second interpretive lens for this study. Funds of knowledge can

be described as "historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being" (Moll et al, 1992, p. 133). Moreover, funds of knowledge are characterized by a strong correlation to the home of a student, and the learning that takes place from the people who are connected to the student's home. Funds of knowledge provide value for education because it is all too common for the idea of what constitutes knowledge to be closely associated with a formal education, and it is less common to connect knowledge to the home, background, and cultural assets of a learner. As educators, it is essential for us to understand and value the different ways that knowledge is obtained and expressed. Not only is this necessary for culturally responsive pedagogy, but it is an important way to humanize and liberate our students. To create a classroom space that affirms students in their entirety, it is necessary for teachers to value the learning that takes place beyond the school building, in addition to a formal academic education.

Funds of knowledge are important for a humanizing and liberating education because "much of the teaching and learning is motivated by the children's interests and questions; in contrast to classrooms, knowledge is obtained by the children, not imposed by the adults" (Moll et al, 1992, p. 134). Utilizing students' funds of knowledge in the classroom and curating a learning environment that includes the personal interests and knowledge of students is a way for educators to ensure that they aren't engaging in an oppressive banking style of education (Freire, 1993). Moving further into ensuring that students' funds of knowledge serve to liberate it is important for educators to understand that "The actual strengths and methods depend, first and foremost, on the degree to which they embrace a humanizing pedagogy that values the students'

background knowledge, culture, and life experiences, and creates learning contexts where power is shared by students and teachers" (Bartolome, 1994, p. 190).

Thinking about funds of knowledge in the context of historically marginalized populations, it is important to understand that, "The creation of learning environments for low SES and ethnic minority students, similar to those for more affluent and White populations, requires that teachers discard deficient notions and genuinely value and utilize students' existing knowledge bases in their teaching" (Bartolome, 1994, p. 182). This idea is valuable for educators because schools have the potential to be places where conversations about what constitutes knowledge can fail to legitimize the funds of knowledge that students have gained at home.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the practices and perspectives of teachers who effectively used culturally responsive pedagogy in their classrooms. CRP provides an avenue for centering and legitimizing students' funds of knowledge. This can provide students with a more empowering education by steering educators away from deficit perspectives that may be based on cultural differences. In recalling the experience of one teacher, Lilia Bartolome points out how the view that this teacher had of one of her bilingual students was rooted in deficit ideologies based on the practices of the assessments given in the school. As a class assignment, the teacher (Bartolome's student) was asked to focus on a number of formal and informal open-ended tasks with the bilingual student. This provided opportunities for the teacher to learn more about her student's personality, personal history, and funds of knowledge. The benefits of this assignment are stated by Bartolome:

> The process of learning about her student's rich and multifaceted background enabled this teacher to move beyond the rigid methodology that had required her to distance herself from the student and to confirm the deficit model to which she unconsciously adhered (1994, p.190).

This shows the importance of educators being able to affirm students by thinking about non-traditional means of what constitutes knowledge. By getting to know more about the student apart from the context of school assessments, the teacher in Bartolome's developed a more humanizing view of her student. Instead of viewing her student through a reductive lens based on the school assessment, the teacher identified strengths and funds of knowledge that the student had and then was able to reflect on the ways that she had engaged in deficit views.

In addition to students' funds of knowledge, it is worthwhile to consider that parents also have funds of knowledge that can be utilized to connect students to places and learning outside of the classroom. Especially in schools where a large percentage of parents do not have college degrees, it is essential for educators to legitimize the funds of knowledge that these parents have for students to feel valued and humanized in their educational experience. Valuing parents' funds of knowledge and including those in the classroom can liberate students to feel pride and affirmation about their cultural identity, by providing an opportunity for them to view their own cultural traits as assets instead of deficits. When educators shift their thinking about what constitutes knowledge to include funds of knowledge, a more positive perception of the community and students' households can emerge.

Affirming students' and parents' funds of knowledge is particularly important in communities that have historically been devalued based on socioeconomic status or racial marginalization. "This [positive] view of households…contrasts sharply with prevailing and accepted perceptions of working-class families as somehow disorganized socially and deficient intellectually; perceptions that are well accepted and rarely challenged in the field of education and elsewhere" (Moll et al, 1992, p. 134). Valuing students' cultural assets in the form of funds

of knowledge is an essential component of maintaining a humanizing and liberating education. Although I did not initially realize it, as my study unfolded, Freire's notions of *liberating and humanizing education* and the idea from Moll et al of local *funds of knowledge* contributed significantly to my efforts to not only *describe* my participants' thoughts and actions, but to *explain* how they effectively engaged in culturally responsive pedagogy.

Chapter 3: Methodology

The aim of this study was to gain insight into the current practices and perspectives of elementary teachers who were reputable in using culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP). As an educator who teaches in a school where the racial, cultural, and socioeconomic identities of students are different from my own, I have come to understand the impact that culturally responsive and sustaining practices can have on students. I believe it is important for educators to learn from colleagues who have successfully implemented research-based practices that ensure classrooms are spaces where students feel safe and affirmed in their identities. To address this idea, I decided to learn from the stories and perspectives of elementary teachers in a public-school district who had experience using culturally responsive pedagogy.

Design

I investigated my research questions by using a qualitative design through a semi-structured interview process. Merriam (2009) states that "one central characteristic of qualitative research is that individuals construct reality in interaction with their social worlds" (p. 22). One of the main purposes for qualitative research is to gain an understanding about how people have made meaning of their lives and experiences. I selected qualitative research because my purpose for this study was to gain insight about how educators made meaning out of classroom

experiences, as it related to their perspectives and practices that included culturally responsive pedagogy. Specifically, my aim was to identify which practices and perspectives could be helpful to current educators and administrators who want to utilize CRP in their schools. Through interviews and document analysis, I was able to better understand the catalysts that had contributed to practices and perspectives of teachers who engaged in CRP in their classrooms.

Since the field of qualitative research is broad, I believed the specific qualitative research design that best fit in answering my research question was critical qualitative inquiry. My reasons for identifying with critical inquiry stem from a desire to engage with ideals of social justice. According to Crotty (1998), "Critical inquiry keeps the spotlight on power relationships within society so as to expose the forces of hegemony and injustice" (p 157). I decided to use critical qualitative inquiry as a way to engage in a study that was connected to ideas of justice and power. Since CRP was developed as a response to power imbalances and injustices that left many students of color feeling marginalized by their school experiences, I decided that a critical qualitative approach would be appropriate for this study. Additionally, critical qualitative research can provide an understanding of experiences through a multifaceted lens and with many layers of context such as socio-political, cultural, or economical.

I was interested in critical qualitative inquiry to explore how the perspectives of teachers who utilized CRP addressed the power relationships that existed within the school system. Specifically, my interest in this research was driven by a desire to dive deeper into relationships between educators and their students, in order to identify ways that teachers empowered their students through culturally responsive and sustaining practices. The reason this is important is because culturally responsive pedagogy can bridge the gap between teachers and students from

varying backgrounds and cultural norms and provide teachers with the necessary understanding to ensure that their classrooms are affirming spaces for all students. I decided to choose participants who had an established reputation of using culturally responsive practices to ensure that each teacher who participated could provide useful and insightful data for analysis.

Participants

I used purposeful and more specifically, criterion sampling to select participants for my research. Criterion sampling refers to the kind of research conducted with participants that meet specific criteria, based on the nature of the research and research questions (Merriam, 2009, p 77). I used the following criteria when selecting participants: (a) elementary school teachers, (b) currently teaching in a classroom, (c) teaching at a school in an urban district, (d) reputation for using culturally responsive practices. My sampling procedure was also of convenience. I limited my participants to teachers in my own urban district so that I would have the opportunity to meet in person when the participants opted to do so. This combination of criterion and convenience sampling resulted in a pool of four participants. All four identified as female and as a person of color however, these were not predetermined criteria for including or excluding participants for this study.

I decided to interview elementary school teachers to keep my research focused on the primary grades. Additionally, I chose to focus on elementary teachers because, as a fourth-grade teacher myself, I have a contextual understanding of the experience of teaching in an elementary school. I decided to include current classroom teachers as a way of ensuring that the data I collected were relevant and current. The reason I selected my district as the location of this study was because the topic of culturally responsive practices is particularly important in schools

where a large percentage of teachers have a different cultural, racial, linguistic, or economic background from their students, as is the case in the district I teach in.

The first participant in this study was a woman named Sophia who was in her early 30's, identified as Latina, and was bilingual in English and Spanish. She taught fourth grade at an urban, high-poverty elementary school with a majority population of Latino/a/x students. She had been teaching at this school for eight out of her nine years in education. In addition to fourth grade, Sophia had also taught third and fifth grade. She had a bachelor's degree in elementary education, and a master's degree in administration. Sophia intentionally selected where she taught due to the high population of Latino/a/x students and was happy to teach in a school close to where she grew up. As a person who struggled with her own transition from high school to college, it was important to Sophia that her students began thinking about life after high school while they were in her classroom. She valued their success not only during their time in her fourth-grade classroom, but for the rest of their lives.

The second participant in this study was a woman named Julie who was in her mid 30's and identified as biracial (African-American and White). She had a bachelor's degree in sociology and a master's degree in human relations. Julie entered into education through an alternative certification program. Julie had taught third grade for four years, all in a high-poverty, urban elementary school with a majority population of Latino/a/x students. In addition to teaching third grade, Julie had been the STEAM (science, technology, engineering, art, and math) coordinator for two years which she enjoyed and was very passionate about. She valued teaching her students the required standards and curricula, as well as social, emotional, and behavioral skills. Teaching her students how to cope with strong emotions was particularly important to Julie because she had lost her mom in a tragic act of violence when she was in

elementary school. She made it known that she had high expectations for her students both behaviorally and academically and ensured that her students knew what was expected of them. Julie took pride in sharing that her classroom was a place where students had high levels of autonomy and independence.

The third participant in this study was a woman named Amelia who was in her late 20's, identified as Latina, and was bilingual in English and Spanish. Amelia was a certified teacher with a bachelor's degree in elementary education. She had taught fourth grade for three years and although all three of those years had been affected by Covid-19, she had just completed her first full year in person and was excited about her future in education. Amelia taught at a high-poverty, urban elementary school with a majority population of Latino/a/x students. The school that she taught at was close to the home where she grew up and where her parents still resided. Amelia specifically chose the district where she taught because she believed that all students deserved a teacher with high expectations regardless of where they lived.

The fourth and final participant for this study was a woman named Patricia who was in her late 20's and taught at an urban innovative transformation school where a majority of the students identified as Latino/a/x and lived below the poverty line. Patricia was bilingual in English and Spanish and identified as Latina. She was a third-grade teacher, who had taught for four years and had teaching experience with both second and third grade. Patricia taught in the same district where she went to elementary school and decided to teach there because she had several teachers that she described as "not the best" who would "push me off to the side" and wanted to ensure that her students never had to have a similar experience. When talking about the goals that she had for her students, she included short-term educational goals as well as long-term goals for living successful and happy lives beyond high school.

Data Collection & Analysis

I conducted individual semi-structured interviews with each of the participants, which took place in mutually agreed upon private settings. Two of the interviews took place in person, and two interviews were completed using the video chat platform, Zoom to accommodate busy schedules. The interviews lasted from 37 – 56 minutes, and were audio recorded using the voice memo application on an Apple iPhone. For the interviews, I developed an interview protocol that consisted of eight overarching prompts, with predetermined follow-up questions for a total of around 25 individual questions per interviewee (see appendix A). The first half of the interview questions focused on background and teaching experience, school context, and how teachers had built relationships with their students. The second half of the interview questions focused specifically on participants' perspectives and implementation of culturally responsive practices in the classroom.

After completing the interviews, the recorded data were then transcribed word-for-word for each research participant. After listening to each interview to ensure transcriptions were accurate, they were then coded and analyzed utilizing the constant comparative method and inductive analysis. Coding and analysis were completed using the central idea from Merriam (2009) that, "data analysis is a complex process that involves moving back and forth between concrete bits of data and abstract concepts, between inductive and deductive reasoning, between description and interpretation" (p. 176). The specific steps of the protocol for analyzing data are detailed below:

- I read through the transcriptions to identify emerging ideas and commonalities, using the constant-comparative method.

- After the first read-through, I re-read transcripts and began the process of category construction through open coding by marking responses using different colors.
- Next, I used a system to begin grouping together parts of the interview that supported emerging commonalities and themes, as described by Creswell (1998) "themes in qualitative research (also called categories) are broad units of information that consist of several codes aggregated to form a common idea (p. 194).
- Emerging commonalities were then evaluated and grouped into two umbrella categories, either practice or perspective, based on the original research question.
- Then, I identified, sorted and named the sub-categories for each umbrella category using axial coding in order to identify the major concepts and themes of the interviews and research.
- Once the interviews were completely coded and analyzed, I shared transcripts with participants to ensure that the description and analysis accurately represented their lived experiences.

Confidence and Trustworthiness

As Merriam (2009) points out, the aim of qualitative research is to describe and explain the world through experiences and interpretations of what happens. As with all research, it was important to ensure that the results were consistent with the data that was collected. (pp. 220-221). I utilized the constant-comparative method of data analysis in order to cross-check commonalities and ensure that themes emerged based on the data from interviews and not from my own projections. Additionally, I included thick descriptions of each participant as well as their teaching contexts and backgrounds. I included participants' ideas and beliefs which often

utilized their own words through direct quotes. Furthermore, to contribute to the trustworthiness of the study, I conducted a critical self-reflection regarding my "assumptions, experiences, worldview, and theoretical orientation to the study at hand" (Merriam, 2009, p. 219). In congruence with qualitative research, my purpose with this study was not to arrive at a predetermined outcome. Instead, my goal was to cultivate a deeper understanding about the practices and perspectives of teachers who effectively engaged in culturally responsive pedagogy. To ensure confidence and trustworthiness in my research I used several strategies including reflexivity, triangulation, and adequate engagement in data collection (Merriam, 2009, p. 219).

I used triangulation and adequate engagement in data collection to contribute to the reliability of the study. Data was triangulated through the process of interviewing multiple participants. In addition to interviews, participants shared relevant documents with me which I was able to analyze. Some of the documents that were used for correlation included email exchanges, lesson plans, and teaching resources. I used document analysis for the purpose of correlating what participants had said about their teaching practices and perspectives during the interviews. Through triangulation I was able to ensure that the participants' responses were supported by the resources that they used in their classrooms.

I engaged in reflexivity throughout the research process and reflected on how my experiences in education have shaped my own perspectives and practices. I am currently an employed educator within one of the largest urban public-school districts in my state. I teach fourth grade at an elementary school and am currently in my 10th year as a classroom teacher. As an educator, I am proud of the effort our district has put into developing an equity policy that

includes verbiage on culturally responsive classrooms. I have attended a handful of professional development meetings that have included conversations about the importance of culturally responsive, relevant, or sustaining pedagogies; however, I have not attended an explicit training session provided or required by our district on this topic. As a white, middle-class woman, I reflect the identity of many teachers in our district. As an educator who identifies as having a culturally responsive classroom, it is important to note that my racial identity as a person who is white, and of European descent differs from the primary demographic of my students as Latino/a/x. Therefore, the culturally responsive practices I have used in my own classroom have been grounded in the literature from Gloria Ladson-Billings, Geneva Gay, Django Paris, and Samy Alim, among others.

Another way that I engaged in reflexivity with this study was to postulate how conducting research with educators in my district provided opportunities of both strength and limitation. One of the strengths was that I shared experiences with the teachers I interviewed because I knew what it was like to work in a large urban district and at a school where a majority of the students were Latino/a/x. Another strength was that I had an insider's perspective about the frequency of opportunities for professional development on the topic of culturally responsive pedagogy within the district. I also had familiarity with the resources, decision-making processes and leadership style present in the district. Moreover, I had an understanding about the demographics of the students and communities for the district as a whole, and for several of the individual school sites. In addition to these strengths, I was also aware of and wanted to think through potential limitations that could arise from interviewing participants in my district. An example of one potential limitation I thought of was how I would respond if a participant had a

perspective that I felt was inaccurate based on my own personal experience. For instance, if a participant shared with me that they thought the district had done an adequate job of providing professional development that included culturally responsive pedagogy and I disagreed with that conclusion, I would need to be particularly mindful of the difference while writing about my findings. However, this or other limitations did not arise, and I was able to maintain a sense of disciplined subjectivity throughout the research process.

Chapter 4: Findings

The purpose of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of the specific perspectives and practices of elementary teachers who effectively used culturally responsive pedagogy in their classrooms. This was important to study because culturally responsive pedagogy was developed to ensure that all students, regardless of their cultural identities, feel connected to and empowered by their educational experience. Many theories have been developed regarding culturally responsive pedagogy and a number of studies have been conducted around the framework and efficacy of CRP. However, I found it more difficult to locate studies that drew on the perspectives and practices of current elementary classroom teachers who effectively engaged in CRP.

Therefore, I developed this study to better understand the specific perspectives and practices of four purposefully selected elementary teachers who had reputations of effectively engaging in CRP in their classrooms. My findings suggest that there were several common classroom practices and teaching perspectives among my participants. Specifically, I found that all four teachers were attuned, discerning, and affirming in their classroom practices. Furthermore, the participants had perspectives that were grounded in asset-based views of their

students, and an insider's perspective of historical or institutional disparity based on their own experiences.

Part 1: Teacher Practices

Attuned to Students' Needs (Academic, Linguistic, Social, Behavioral, Emotional)

One common practice that all four teachers shared was that they were attuned to their students' academic, linguistic, social, behavioral, and emotional needs. Every teacher described that their schools had significant challenges, such as high populations of students living below the poverty line, students who performed below grade level, newcomers who didn't speak English, students whose parents did not graduate high school or college, and traumatic home situations. Given the weight of this collective adversity, it would have been understandable for these teachers to feel overwhelmed. However, every teacher expressed that none of these challenges lowered the academic expectations they had for their students. In fact, these challenges served as catalysts to put extra effort into meeting their students' academic needs. Patricia provided insight into this when she shared the progress one of her students had made in reading,

> from not being able to read, now to being on grade level - that motivates me so much and I'm just like *this is working, whatever we're doing is working;* and it's a great motivation to be like, 'See, you could do it' because he [student] would tell me 'I don't know how to read, I can't read this' but now like they're reading chapter books… That's my motivation every single day[1]

This example showed how Patricia was unencumbered by the challenges of teaching in high-poverty schools and it exemplified the culturally responsive practice of being attuned to the academic needs of her students.

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[1] Direct quotes have been edited for clarity to exclude redundant or unnecessary words, while maintaining the integrity of what was said during the interview.

In order to maintain high academic expectations, participants acknowledged the importance of meeting their students' linguistic needs. Every school in this study had a population of over 70% Latino/a/x students. The high population of Latino/a/x students was one of the first descriptors mentioned when I asked teachers to describe their schools and communities. Each teacher in this study was fully bilingual or conversational in both Spanish and English and expressed the importance of providing instruction in both languages. Several participants related the importance of bilingual instruction to their own experiences of being EL (English Learner) students when they attended elementary school. The participants recalled the arduousness of having to learn English in a classroom where their teachers didn't translate into Spanish and the ways in which they felt devalued as a result. For example, Patricia reflected on her experience with teachers who weren't attentive to her needs as an EL student and how that affected her,

> I remember being in first and second grade, my teachers would kind of push me off to the side…I know I don't want other kids to go through what I went through…because I didn't have those supports. I remember crying because it was so hard.

In this experience, Patricia did not have teachers who used culturally responsive practices to meet her linguistic needs. In contrast, my participants expressed the ways they were intentionally attuned to the linguistic needs of their bilingual students, ensuring that their students would not have to endure the adversity that Patricia faced when she was in elementary school. For example, each teacher articulated how they spent extra time while lesson planning or teaching to translate resources into Spanish so that their newcomers and bilingual students received content in both Spanish and English. Teachers provided bilingual instruction either during whole group lessons, in small groups, or both depending on the needs of their students.

Several teachers created specific small groups for their newcomers to ensure that they received instruction entirely in Spanish.

While many teachers understandably struggle to meet the needs of bilingual students, the teachers in this study understood from an insider's perspective what it was like to be in a classroom and not fully understand what was being said. As a result, participants shared the culturally responsive practice of providing instruction in both English and the native language, in this case Spanish, for bilingual or newcomer students. By providing instruction in two languages, participants demonstrated linguistic interdependence, or the idea that "that two languages bolster each other and thus the student in his or her acquisition of knowledge" (Garcia, Kleifgen, & Falchi, 2008, p. 27).

In addition to the linguistic and academic needs of their students, my participants expressed the importance for students to feel safe in their classrooms, and the ways in which they proactively met students' social, emotional, and behavioral needs. Elementary students experience a range of emotions on a daily basis that affect their social and behavioral interactions. Therefore, it is important for educators to understand how to respond to the social, emotional, and behavioral needs of students in ways that are culturally responsive to ensure that students feel safe. One example of this was when Sophia described a project she did with her class at the beginning of the year, in which students brought their own artifacts to represent their identities. The project was called a "Me Museum" and consisted of students laying out their chosen artifacts with explanations about why each one was significant to their identity. In speaking about this project, she stated,

> I had some scholars bring in a rainbow flag and they said, 'Oh, because I'm bi[sexual]'... it was just nice to see that they felt safe, and I mean, they knew that adults were coming, their principal, everyone, and they still felt safe enough to say, *you know what, this is who I am.*

Sophia knew that in order for her students to feel safe in her classroom, they needed to be able to feel comfortable expressing their identities. By intentionally investing in an opportunity for students to express themselves, she demonstrated a responsiveness to the emotional, social, and behavioral needs of her students.

Another culturally responsive strategy used by the participants to meet students' social, emotional, and behavioral needs was a structured daily morning meeting where each student had the opportunity to participate. Julie explained how she used morning meetings to support students' emotional and social development by including an emotional check-in on a scale of 1-5. Students then had the opportunity to share where they rated themselves for the day and why they felt a certain way. If a student rated themselves as having strong emotions for the day, Julie would discreetly check-in with them to see if they wanted to visit with a counselor. This attentiveness to her students' emotional needs allowed Julie's students to feel safe in her classroom, knowing that they were able to be honest with their feelings and get the appropriate counseling when necessary.

Additionally, Patricia and Sophia each shared that their morning meetings consisted of a daily question or prompt in which every student had the chance to share. Patricia revealed that she also had time during her morning meeting for students to share anything they would like to, "We talk about just like anything that they have, anything they want to share. We do a little activity, and then after that, we go over our schedule for the day." In describing morning meetings, Julie, Sophia, and Patricia all made it clear that when it came to the sharing out loud portion of the morning meeting, participation was entirely optional. They wanted to give every student a chance to share without being forced to participate in something they were not

comfortable with. In this way, participants were attuned to their students' needs to create a classroom climate that felt safe for each student.

Furthermore, in discussion about the ways that the emotional, social, and behavioral needs of students were met, teachers shared strategies that were particularly attuned to students who had experienced trauma. Sophia expressed that one of her highest priorities for her students was for them to feel safe in her classroom. She acknowledged the importance for students to feel safe in order to be able to learn and focus on academics. She expressed that an important strategy in establishing a safe environment for students was to know when a break or opportunity to calm down was necessary. Sophia described how she took a proactive approach in order to avoid behavior disruptions by stating,

> It's just that balance of trying to figure out who needs what. I feel like there's a high number [of students] who have witnessed trauma, so just being aware of triggers and things…We have the cooldown spot where they can cool down if they need to. I always try to provide that space, and I'll ask but without pressuring [them] like, 'is everything good'?

By demonstrating her awareness of potential triggers and purposefully creating a space in the classroom for students to de-escalate, Sophia helped students regulate their own behavior and maintain a feeling of safety while at school. Patricia also recognized the importance of meeting students' emotional needs with the option of taking a break. She explained that when her students struggled with their behavior,

> I give them options. I let them know, 'do you need a break from me right now? Do you need to go walk down the hall and come back, or do you want to have a conversation now?' So, it's just giving my kids options.

Both teachers detailed strategies they used to de-escalate students' behavior. This was important because these strategies reinforced a feeling of safety for their students and prevented situations that could have resulted in students being removed from class.

Discerning (Intentional and Deliberate) (e.g., of Class Content and Teaching Resources)

In addition to being attuned to their students' needs, my participants shared the common practice of critically discerning which content was or was not appropriate for classroom use. Moreover, participants emphasized the importance of being able to connect the content in their classroom to their students' identities in meaningful ways and rejected the use of superficial and stereotypical resources. This was important because at the core of culturally responsive pedagogy, is the idea that a student-centered approach, focused on cultural assets promotes high student achievement (Gay, 2002, 2013). In order for a classroom to be student-centered, educators need to use content and resources that students can connect to in authentic and consequential ways. Participants expressed the desire for their classrooms to be spaces that connected students' home lives, communities, and school. This was done through a deliberate selection of classroom content that represented the cultural aspects of their students' experiences and identities in significant and authentic ways.

Sophia recounted her own experiences as an elementary student in order to justify the importance of connecting school, community, and home. She shared a feeling of disconnect when she said, "going back to my experiences, like home, my neighborhood, that was one thing, and school was a different thing." One way that she ensured a through line between home and school for her students was by deliberately choosing books for her classroom library that students could connect to. Sophia revealed that connecting school to home was "as simple as reading a book with a person that looks like them [students] or the person in the book is eating the foods that they eat. It then brings that connection from school, community, and home together." Patricia also discussed the importance of being deliberate in the literature she selected for her classroom. She explained that,

> I have all kinds of books that represent my kids, so they can see themselves in the books that I'm reading to them...there's a book that's called *I Am Enough*; and I have a little girl that has the same hair. She's like, 'I look just like the little girl on the cover!'

In addition to using literature as a connection to her students' homes and identities, Patricia also detailed a rotating book display that she had on a wall in her classroom, in which she changed the books out monthly. The display of books often aligned with a specific heritage month, e.g. for March she displayed books for Women's History Month.

Furthermore, Patricia also celebrated heritage months and used them as opportunities for students to share about their own identities and funds of knowledge. An example of this was provided when Patricia described how she conducted research with her class during Hispanic Heritage Month about the various countries where her newcomer students were from. When her newcomers had been to the places they researched, or made personal connections, they were able to share their stories with the rest of the class. By providing an opportunity for students to teach about their own experiences in other countries, Patricia curated a space where her students could bring their authentic selves and outside experiences into the classroom. In discussion on how she valued the identities of her students Patricia expressed,

> I try to expose my kids to as much as I can, so they can see themselves in the stuff that we're doing and if they're not familiar with it, we'll look it up and I just try to make sure they feel like they're heard and represented in my classroom.

This demonstrates the intentionality that Patricia used when she made decisions about what kind of content to include and use in her classroom.

My participants made it clear that they wanted their classrooms to be spaces where students felt heard and represented. Another culturally responsive practice that participants shared was the ability to discern which content was or was not an adequate representation of culture. Simply presenting content with diverse and multicultural identities is not enough to

ensure that students make meaningful connections. Additionally, classroom content that focuses too heavily on the adversity or struggle of a culture is not an adequate representation because it can promote single-story narratives (Tschida, Ryan, & Ticknor, 2014). Amelia provided specific insight into this idea when she discussed the need for literature that was relatable to the everyday aspects of her students' identities, and not just connected to a historical context. In discussing the use of multicultural books in her classroom she stated,

> it is just a white dominant world, so them [students of color] seeing themselves in positive books, not just when they're learning about history, like, 'oh discrimination, boom - I see myself' or César Chávez & Dolores Huerta, although they're great, if that's the only thing that they're learning about Hispanics… It's like, what about other stories? Like a story about family, carne asada and piñatas - experiences that they can relate to, that are just day-to-day experiences and not just like a movement or the struggle.

With this, Amelia showed how the context of representation matters. While it is important that students learn about their histories, there has to be more representation than what has happened to people who look like them. As a culturally responsive teacher, Amelia wanted to ensure that her students weren't simply seeing people who looked like them in a historical context but were able to make positive and present-day connections to their own identities and cultures through the content she brought into her classroom.

Participants revealed their abilities to not only select appropriate resources but reject resources that were potentially harmful due to superficiality or stereotypes. There were comments from several participants about teachers they had observed who thought they were being culturally responsive but were actually just making superficial connections to culture in their classrooms. For example, in response to a question about advice she would share with other teachers, Julie stated:

> what you see on TV or what you might see on social media is not necessarily culturally responsive teaching. You have to talk to your students and talk to their parents and find ways that you can bring their home into the class… make it more relatable and

> responsive than like "oh we can just do this coloring sheet about Mexico, on Cinco de Mayo".

The point that Julie reinforced was that the resources used in a classroom should be deliberately and purposefully selected. Students who completed a coloring page of Mexico on Cinco de Mayo weren't learning the significance of that date or what happened, they were simply attaching a day to a country with very little meaning. As a culturally responsive teacher, Julie understood the significance of ensuring that her students connected in substantive ways to the content in her classroom.

In discerning what resources to include in their classrooms, participants exemplified their abilities to identify resources that could cause harm or were stereotypical to a specific culture. They shared the importance of being able to identify and if necessary, alert other teachers about these kinds of resources. Sophia detailed an example of this via an email exchange she had with a colleague who sent out a resource for Hispanic Heritage Month that included stereotypical aspects. She felt that it was necessary to respond to the email and asked staff members to remove the stereotypical items before using them in their classrooms. She also noted that the resource was heavily centered around Mexico, and that it should have included all of the countries that were represented during Hispanic Heritage Month. In her email, she stated:

> The PPT [PowerPoint] perpetuates stereotypes of what the Latinx/a/o culture represents. There were some really great books linked to the resources, however it is very heavy on Mexican culture, excluding many Latin countries and their contributions. From my perspective when I am teaching about a culture that I do not identify with, I focus on individuals and sharing their narratives.

This scenario demonstrated the culturally responsive practice of discerning whether or not a teacher-created resource was appropriate for classroom use. Furthermore, Sophia elaborated on how she decided what resources to use when she taught about a culture that she didn't identify with. Specifically, she revealed how she selected content during Black History Month by stating,

"I'm just going to say here's some amazing people who have contributed who are Black. I'm not going to try and tell any kind of narrative, I'm going to pull [resources] and use their narrative." What Sophia revealed here was the importance of using resources that reflected an insider's perspective and narrative, especially when teaching about culture and identity.

Affirming (e.g., Student Autonomy and Agency)

Along with being attuned to students' needs and discerning of classroom content, all four participants engaged in practices that were affirming of their students and promoted agency and autonomy. An important aspect of culturally responsive pedagogy is that teachers engage in practices that promote independence. The participants articulated this to mean that their students functioned in classrooms where they felt like they had a voice. In fact, Patricia explained that fostering student voice was one of the goals she had when she said, "I know that sounds kind of cheesy and cliché, but I feel like that's our job as educators, is to prepare them to stand up, and stand up for what's right for them and their families." With this statement, Patricia showed that she valued her students' ability to develop a voice within her classroom that allowed them to speak up for themselves and their families both in and outside of the classroom.

To empower students in her classroom, Amelia discussed the intention she put into developing procedures and routines in order for her students to gain autonomy by understanding what was expected of them. For Amelia, it was particularly important that she explained the purpose of anything she asked her students to do as a way of creating a trusting relationship and avoiding authoritarian practices in her classroom. In discussing her daily routines, Amelia shared that, "by the end of the year, they were able to line themselves up…because I always told them why we're doing stuff." It was important to Amelia that she didn't ask her students to follow rules arbitrarily. Instead, she was intentional about explaining why she asked them to follow

certain rules. This illuminated the affirming relationship that Amelia aimed to create with her students. While she understood that, as the teacher in the classroom she was technically in a position of authority she didn't use that power in a way that disrespected the relationship she had with her students. Instead, Amelia demonstrated how explaining the reason for procedures established respect among her students and promoted autonomy because they understood the purpose for classroom routines. This understanding led students to take ownership in classroom procedures to the extent that they actually lined themselves up when they knew it was time to go somewhere.

When I asked Amelia about how she established relationships with her students, she expressed, "just valuing them as a person, not even thinking of them as like, well, that's a kid, I'm the adult. No, that's a human, I'm a human." This excerpt articulated the affirming lens that Amelia viewed her students through and demonstrated her ability to build empowering relationships with her students based on a shared understanding of dignity and agency. Likewise, Julie spoke about the expectations she had for her students and the way she intentionally built autonomy within her classroom. For Julie, it was important that her classroom was a place of high structure and clear expectations so that her students knew what was expected of them. Julie revealed that she established high expectations from day one and noted the growth in autonomy that she was able to see in her classroom.

> They're just curious and self-sufficient which is completely different from how they were the first nine weeks. Teacher Y told me 'I just love covering your class because they know what to do'. And I was like, yeah, because they know what's expected of them…Like they're not little kids, they're tiny humans so that's my expectation.

Julie often referred to her students as 'tiny humans' throughout the interview in order to show that she viewed them as more than just children who need to be told what to do. Her use of this term revealed that she viewed her students through an affirming lens and saw them as people

who were exploring what it meant to exist in the microcosmic society of school. Julie understood the parallel of her school classroom to the larger world beyond and ensured that her students had high and realistic expectations for their behavior.

In addition to establishing high expectations, Julie openly embraced the idea of bridging important topics with her students to help them establish agency. One way that she demonstrated this was through teaching her students about how to set personal boundaries. As a result of some personal experiences that Julie had as a child, consent for hugs and touching was a very important boundary in her classroom. Instead of simply telling her students that they needed to ask before they hugged her, she taught them about consent and the importance of personal boundaries in a way where they felt empowered to set their own boundaries as well. Julie explained,

> I have really high expectations and I set my boundaries from day one with my kids and I teach them that they can set boundaries too. And I expect that. So, like they know not to hug me unless I agree because they need to learn about consent… I have the same expectations for all of them. I make sure that they know what they are up front, and they don't change. And then I also treat them the same way that I want to be treated. So, I will always ask them before I hug them.

As a culturally responsive teacher, Julie understood the importance of clear expectations and the reciprocity of her role as an educator in staying true to what she expected of her students. In this way she treated her students in affirming ways that allowed them to become empowered in her classroom.

Another commonality among participants in promoting student autonomy was the practice of empowering students to work through their own interpersonal challenges. Each participant expressed the importance of teaching their students to communicate in ways that helped them solve their own problems. Sophia explicitly expressed that one of the goals she had for her students was "that they learn to stop, name their feelings, and calm down. And then be

able to advocate for themselves, but have a conversation, and not feel so on the defensive all the time." This interview excerpt demonstrated how Sophia invested in teaching her students skills for their overall wellbeing. Participants also acknowledged the need to support students in their development of interpersonal communication skills. In one instance, Julie revealed that a student in her class continued to be convinced by another student that her answers were wrong. In order to address this situation, Julie articulated to her student "Just because he speaks louder than you doesn't mean he's smarter than you." To empower this student, Julie gave her a new seat and worked with her to regain her sense of voice and confidence.

Part 2: Teacher Perspectives

In addition to being attuned, discerning, and affirming in their culturally responsive practices, my participants also revealed a commonality among their perspectives that further indicated a cultural responsiveness towards their students. Specifically, all four of the teachers possessed an asset-based view of their students and exhibited invaluable insider perspectives about the larger social context of historical disparity. Moreover, each participant revealed ways in which their perspectives as educators had been shaped by personal experiences as students in elementary school. Those experiences, either positive or negative, served as contributing factors in the development of not only their educational ideals, but their worldviews as well.

Asset Perspective, (Rejection/Disruption of Deficit/Harmful Narratives)

One of the most significant commonalities between my participants was that all four held an asset rather than a deficit perspective of their students. In most public schools today, the predominant demographic of teachers is white, female, and middle-class (French, 2019, p. 1). At the same time, public schools in the U.S. are increasingly composed of students of color. Because of this difference of identity, it is more vital than ever that teachers understand the

importance of being aware of harmful narratives or practices that disproportionately impact students of color. Participants in my study articulated the importance of rejecting narratives that perpetuated stereotypical or harmful views of their students and schools. In addition to a rejection of deficit-based views, participants also conveyed an awareness of being able to identify deficit perspectives among common narratives or in the ways that the schools and communities were discussed.

One example of this occurred when Patricia shared what kind of stereotypes and negative labels were placed on her school because there were students who lived in subsidized public housing units. She stated,

> So, every time that we talk about my school, they always say that our zip code is the worst in the district because we have a lot who live in section eight…and there's a lot of gang violence is what we're told.

To disrupt this narrative, Patricia acknowledged that the staff at her school didn't feed into the stereotypes and instead tried "to make the community for the parents welcoming so they know that their kids are safe at our school and try to get rid of those stereotypes that people bring on our kids." This example illuminates the importance of teachers who understand the harm that can be caused when stereotypes about a school go unchecked. Instead of ignoring the stereotypes, Patricia and her colleagues worked to create a sense of safety for their students that disrupted the narrative that her school had the worst zip code in the district.

In contrast to deficit perspectives, my participants brought to light how they viewed and used students' cultural traits as assets in their classrooms. One example of this was how each teacher embraced having newcomer students in their classrooms. All four participants expressed positive views of having students who spoke Spanish while indicating that it was not enough just to create a welcoming environment for emergent bilingual students. In addition to welcoming

newcomers into their classrooms, each teacher also embraced the perspective that bilingualism was an asset. In contrast to a colleague who didn't allow students to speak Spanish in her classroom, Amelia indicated how she empowered her students to view their emerging bilingualism as a strength,

> I told them to use their Spanish to their advantage because they're ELL [English language learners]…and so I don't see it as a deficit or as a negative thing, because there are teachers in the building that need to be gone, because they told the kids 'don't speak Spanish in the class'...so with my kids, I'm just like *use that Spanish to your advantage*.

Amelia then illustrated several examples of words that had a connection between English and Spanish and how she used her understanding of both languages when teaching vocabulary. Through this type of instruction, Amelia not only broadened her students' understanding of academic content through bilingualism, she also showed her EL students that knowing multiple languages was an asset to learning, not a disadvantage.

Julie, who was not a native Spanish speaker but who knew enough to be conversational, expressed how having multiple newcomer students in her class was an asset in creating a space where students felt comfortable to speak Spanish in her classroom. She articulated how the newcomer students in her class were able to feel connected and established a sense of community when she shared,

> I have six newcomers that don't speak English. So that's an interesting, like mix into our class, but it's really cool, because one of our girls came from Honduras in January, and on her first day, she got to go home and tell her mom she had a great day of school because she had five other kids in her class, who also spoke little English. And so, I love having that many newcomers

Here, Julie revealed her asset perspective by indicating an appreciation that her newcomer students were able to develop a sense of community by bonding over their common experiences.

Another common asset perspective among participants was the belief that schools should not just be places for students to survive, but to thrive. When asked about the purpose of

education, Sophia needed time to process and think about her answer because she felt like the way the public education system was designed could make people of color feel like their purpose was just to survive. In answering the question, she stated,

> I feel like it's [education] kind of high stakes for people of color, so that's like a loaded question. But it's different because it's not a pathway that has always been accessible to us, and then it wasn't made for us…so I feel like it's different because I'm a person of color. I feel like my answer would be different if I wasn't, but it's [the purpose of education] to survive…I don't know, that's really a hard question for me. I guess in a perfect world, the purpose of education would be to find solutions to problems.

For Sophia, it was important that her students didn't experience school simply as a means of surviving an inequitable system. Instead, she indicated that in a perfect world the purpose of education would be for her students to be able to find solutions to problems and that was exactly what she aimed to curate in her classroom.

Even though participants discussed several challenges that were commonplace in their schools like students reading below grade level or parents who were not able to provide academic support at home, they maintained a conscious effort to hold their students to high standards and reject any lowering of expectations that may have been present among their colleagues. In one response, Amelia shared how she consciously rejected perspectives that would lower expectations for her students who were in special education or had experienced trauma. She stated,

> if they're neuro divergent [atypical brain functions], it's like respecting them and knowing that I'm still going to have high expectations for you. I still need you to do what everyone else is doing, but it's just going to look different…but still like not thinking, "oh, well they're, a SPED [special education] kid, so they're not going to get it." or "oh, well they come from trauma, they're not going to do any work"...I really think it just comes down to believing that they can do it…just like not seeing them as a victim, I think is a big thing.

Maintaining high expectations for all students, regardless of the challenges they've experienced is an important aspect of maintaining a culturally responsive perspective.

Insider Understanding (e.g., of Institutional / Historical Disparity)

In addition to rejecting deficit perspectives and maintaining an asset-based view of their students, my participants also revealed an insider perspective that included an understanding of the institutional and historical disparities that had impacted the schools where they taught. It is important for culturally responsive teachers to have an understanding about the societal, historical, and systemic factors that have affected or continue to affect the school and community where they teach in order for classrooms to be spaces where students have access to equitable opportunities. When discussing the schools they taught at, each participant expressed an understanding about the disparity in the communities in which the schools were situated. It was evident that these educators didn’t end up at their current schools due to happenstance, but rather through a cognizant recognition of the need for culturally responsive educators in communities that had historically been marginalized by inequitable practices.

For example, Amelia talked about her decision to teach at a school that was not far from where she grew up. She expressed how her understanding of public education disparity led her to deliberately choose the school she taught at:

> coming from a similar background to these kids, like, this is where the need is. I used to be that kid in those classrooms, so I want to be able to make a difference and make an impact on these kids the way that my teachers made a difference with me…any district where there's a high level of low socio socioeconomic [students]…they don't get that same opportunity.

In acknowledging the difference in opportunities that existed between various districts, Amelia provided insight into her decision to teach at a school that she viewed as having a higher need for impactful educators. Through this dialogue, Amelia revealed her understanding of the larger systemic factors that impact parity in public schools.

In addition to her own understanding of disparity, Amelia also recounted how her students developed an awareness of educational inequality. She revealed that her school was around 100 years old and in need of repair. She mentioned unsafe staircases and a roof that leaked when it rained, among other examples. Amelia shared that her students felt a connection when they learned about school segregation and the disparity that existed in the 1950's and 1960's when she said, "whenever we learned about Clara Luper and the sit-ins and like, you know how they didn't have the same access to education or even like a nice building, like the kids really connected to it."

Another way that participants revealed an understanding of historical disparity was through conversations about what their college experiences were like. While discussing goals she had for her students, Patricia said she wanted them to stand up for themselves and their families. During the interview, I asked Patricia to expand on what she meant by "stand up for them and their families" and she explained that many of her students had parents who didn't graduate high school or attend college. Instead of her students resigning themselves to a similar trajectory, Patricia shared her experiences of going to college with her students and empowered them to see college as a possibility in their future. Patricia also shared that she was a first-generation college student, and expressed how her experience as a child of immigrants impacted the way she talked about education with her students:

> So, for me, growing up, education was very important in my household because my parents are immigrants…I'm a first-generation college student, and I tell them [students] my experiences. So, they're like, I want to be like you. I want to do that, so I can help my family when I go to college.

In this example, Patricia revealed the insider perspective she shared with many of her students who were also children of immigrants and who had parents that weren't afforded the opportunity to attend college. She understood what it was like to have parents who had not had access to a

college education, but who valued the possibilities that it could provide, and she was open and honest with her students about that experience.

Sophia also revealed the disparity she felt with her experience as a student in preparing for college. She shared her story of missing the deadline in eighth grade to apply for a program of financial assistance. She revealed that she attended public school in the same district where she taught and felt like her schools didn't do an adequate job of preparing her for college. She conveyed that the lack of preparation in her K-12 experience led her and her friends to feel like they were not able to transition successfully into college after high school. She talked about her transition to college by stating:

> that transition from high school to college, it was not something that was mentioned to me enough times…so that's something that I want to make sure that they're [students] thinking about it [college] was a culture shock. Academia is, I feel like, predominantly a white space…I have so many friends who started college and did not get through it did not succeed. My support system, my parents, are the reason I finished.

Sophia gave credit to her parents as a catalyst for why she was able to successfully finish college. However, in this example she also revealed how an education system she had been a part of both as a student and an educator was not necessarily functioning in a way that made the transition into college easily accessible for students with a similar background to hers. Because of her insider perspective of being a person of color who experienced culture shock upon starting college, she was able to ensure that her fourth graders were already starting to think about their lives beyond high school in her classroom.

In both Patricia and Sophia's examples, it was clear that their own experiences had affected their perspectives as educators. They both understood the disparity in access to college that exists in the public-school system. In viewing their students as people who would someday graduate high school and potentially to go to college, they wanted to ensure that their students

felt empowered to see college not only as accessible, but as a space where they would be successful.

The purpose of this study was to gain valuable insight into the practices and perspectives of teachers who had reputations for effectively engaging in culturally responsive pedagogy. As a result of the data from interviews and document analysis, I was able to identify several commonalities among the teachers' practices. Ultimately, my participants engaged in culturally responsive practices by showing that they were attuned to students' needs, discerning of classroom content, and affirming in their practices. In addition to these shared practices, participants also revealed common perspectives rooted in culturally responsive pedagogy. These common perspectives included an asset-based perspective, and an insider's understanding of historical and institutional disparity. The notions from the interpretive lenses of this study can provide a deeper understanding of the themes that have emerged from the findings.

Further Analysis and Explanation of the Findings

As detailed in chapter two, there are many ways to make sense of a body of research. For this study, the interpretive lenses that made the most sense to me were Freire's (1993) notion of education as a means of liberation and humanization, and the legitimization of funds of knowledge as explained by Moll et al (1992). These ideologies were significant in the literature and, more importantly, were suggested by my participants' data. Again, as noted in chapter two, humanizing and liberating pedagogies can be defined as educational practices that aim to teach students to love and value themselves and to view their cultural traits as assets. Additionally, humanizing pedagogy is characterized by the ability to help students "develop a deeper sense of control over their individual and collective destinies" by empowering them to think critically about their world (Camangian, 2015, p. 448). Furthermore, a liberating education can be defined

as “a praxis: the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it” (Freire, 1993, p. 79). Funds of knowledge are understood as the knowledge that has been acquired through cultural and experiential learning from people that are associated with a student’s home. A liberating and humanizing education can be achieved when students’ cultural assets are regarded as essential for learning and their funds of knowledge are valued and legitimized.

A cohesive understanding of the findings shows that when my participants engaged in culturally responsive practices and perspectives what they ultimately substantiated was a liberating and humanizing education for their students. Specifically, the participants cultivated a liberating and humanizing classroom by affirming, growing upon, and substantiating the funds of knowledge of their students and school communities. In addition to validating their students’ funds of knowledge, the participants were able to utilize their own insiders’ perspectives and draw upon their own funds of knowledge to create classrooms that were spaces where the complexity of their students' cultural identities were affirmed and sustained.

Viewing the findings through the interpretive lenses shows how the participants’ culturally responsive practices and perspectives liberated their students and humanized their academic experiences. For instance, the “Me Museum” project described by Sophia provided a safe and affirming space for students to share their identities to the extent of a student feeling comfortable enough to bring in a rainbow flag to represent their bisexuality. The humanization and liberation of students was also reiterated in the example of how Amelia affirmed and validated her students by stating that her philosophy was centered around “Just valuing them as a person, not even thinking of them as like, well that’s a kid, I’m the adult. No - that’s a human, I’m a human.” Amelia’s perspective of her relationship with her students illustrates how she

rejected the dichotomy that "the teacher knows everything, and the students know nothing" (Freire, 1993, p. 73) and instead used her beliefs to liberate and humanize the educational experience for her students.

Moving deeper into an understanding of the findings, a more luminous example of how the participants' practices humanized and liberated their students was illustrated by the inclusion of social-emotional learning (SEL) in their classrooms. When participants discussed the value of daily morning meetings that provided space for students to share their ideas and engage in emotional self-regulation, they revealed the significance of students learning within a community where they felt safe, and therefore liberated to express themselves. Additionally, when the participants shared the perspectives and strategies they used to help students cope with emotions, they liberated their students to feel empowered and humanized by working through their own feelings. An example of this liberating practice was when Sophia shared that one of her goals for students was "that they learn to stop, name their feelings, and calm down, and then be able to advocate for themselves." By valuing her students' ability to understand the cause of their feelings and advocate for themselves, Sophia sustained an environment in which students felt liberated to work through their feelings in purposeful ways.

In addition to the teaching practices that humanized and liberated their students, each of the participants clearly valued and affirmed their students' (as well as their own) local funds of knowledge. Teachers who validate their students' local funds of knowledge "know the child as a 'whole' person, not merely as a 'student,' taking into account or having knowledge about the multiple spheres of activity within which the child is enmeshed" (Moll et al, 1992, pp. 133-134). This was evident when Julie discussed the importance of engaging authentically in CRP and she stated, "You have to talk to your students and talk to their parents and find ways that you can

bring their home into the class." This quote, while used to describe CRP, also encompassed the importance of utilizing students' funds of knowledge in the classroom. In this example, Julie showed the value of engaging with both students and their parents in order to make meaningful connections between school and her students' homes. The relationship between school and home is important because "This relationship can become the basis for the exchange of knowledge about family or school matters, reducing the insularity of classrooms, and contributing to the academic content and lessons." (Moll et al, 1992, p. 139).

One prevalent example of how participants humanized and liberated their students by valuing their funds of knowledge was through the ways they discussed bilingualism as an asset. The teachers saw their students' bilingualism as strengths that liberated them to be their full and authentic selves in the classroom. In part, this perspective was due to participants' own experiences as bilingual students who didn't always feel that their bilingualism was liberating. This is evident in the example that Patricia shared, when she articulated that as an EL student, she felt like "my teachers would kind of push me off to the side." As a result of their own experiences, the participants were able to understand the funds of knowledge that come with speaking more than one language. Therefore, they provided experiences for their students, such as conducting small groups in their native language, that humanized instead of isolated them.

An example shared by Amelia shows how her perspective of bilingualism provided a liberating educational experience. Amelia, who was bilingual in Spanish and English, shared that she had often encouraged her bilingual students to find connections between the two languages in new vocabulary words. This, she noted, gave her bilingual students an advantage to learning new words because they could find similarities to help them understand the meaning of words. She explained how she explicitly shared this with her students by stating "I told them to use their

Spanish to their advantage because they're ELL [English Language Learners]". By teaching her students that bilingualism was a strength, Amelia was able to liberate her students to think about their bilingualism as an asset, instead of an obstacle to their learning.

Another example of the participants' emphasis on humanizing their students was illustrated by their critical discernment of classroom content. The way that participants were able to critically discern which content was or was not an appropriate representation of culture and identity demonstrated an ability to humanize students' by ensuring that stereotypical or reductive views of students' identities were not present in their classrooms. An example of how this was uncovered in the findings was through Sophia's discussion of the Hispanic Heritage Month presentation that was shared with her colleagues. As someone who had an insider's understanding of how stereotypes could be dehumanizing, she helped liberate and humanize the students at her school by drawing attention to the stereotypical depictions in the presentation and asking her colleagues to reject those aspects of the resource.

This was evidenced in her response to the email, when she stated that "The PPT [PowerPoint] perpetuates stereotypes of what the Latino/a/x culture represents…it is very heavy on Mexican culture, excluding many Latin countries and their contributions." By rejecting the harmful and exclusionary PowerPoint, Sophia exemplified how

> Schools reflect both the positive and negative aspects of a society. Thus, the unequal power relations among various social and cultural groups at the societal level are usually reproduced at the school and classroom level, unless concerted efforts are made to prevent their reproduction (Bartolome, 1994, p. 78).

If stereotypical views of a student's cultural identity are brought into the classroom, not only is it not liberating, it has the potential to feel dehumanizing for students. In her concerted effort to prevent the reproduction of stereotypes within the PowerPoint presentation, Sophia liberated the students and teachers at her school from being exposed to a reductive and dehumanizing

depiction of cultural identity.

Additionally, Amelia's critical discernment of the portrayals of culture and identity in the content she had in her classroom helped to humanize and liberate her students. She explained that it was important for her students of color to see themselves represented in a positive light in books, and that representations shouldn't be limited to historical struggles for marginalized populations. Amelia was not advocating for the exclusion of stories about historical injustice, but she wanted to ensure that her students felt humanized by seeing themselves in multifaceted ways, not only through the lens of historical discrimination. As a person who identified as Latina, she had an insider's perspective of what a reductive depiction of identity could feel like. In one specific example, she explained that she wanted her Latino/a/x students to see themselves in "a story about family, carne asada, and piñatas - experiences that they can relate to that are just day-to-day experiences and not just a movement or the struggle." With this sentiment Amelia highlighted the importance of students, especially those who come from populations that have faced oppression, to see themselves depicted in positive, contemporary ways where they feel liberated and humanized in their cultural identities. By making a conscious effort to ensure that students didn't only see themselves depicted in instances of struggle, Amelia demonstrated that "the critical issue is the degree to which we hold the moral conviction that we must humanize the educational experience of students from subordinated populations by eliminating the hostility that often confronts these students" (Bartolome, 1994, p. 190).

A defining aspect of a liberating and humanizing education is for teachers to engage in practices that promote students' abilities to think critically for themselves and make their own decisions about their lives. My participants engaged in liberating practices in their classroom by providing time and space for their students to think about their long-term goals and life after high

school. Specifically, Sophia and Patricia shared how they used their own funds of knowledge about what it was like to navigate college as a first-generation student with immigrant parents, a demographic that mirrored many of their students. Patricia shared with her students what it was like to be a first-generation college student and explained the impact this had on her students by stating, “I’m a first-generation college student, and I tell them [students] my experiences. So, they’re like, ‘I want to be like you. I want to do that so I can help my family when I go to college’ ”. This example provides evidence of how Patricia liberated her students to think about possibilities that may have otherwise felt was inconceivable.

Finally, Sophia also revealed how she drew on her experiences with college and utilized her funds of knowledge to liberate her own students. Sophia revealed that when she began college she felt like “it was a culture shock…I have so many friends who started college and did not get through it, did not succeed. My support system, my parents are the reason I finished.” Since Sophia felt like she was responsible for figuring out how to navigate college largely on her own, she possessed funds of knowledge about the challenges that first-generation college students can experience. In response to her own experience, Sophia drew on her funds of knowledge to plant seeds for a different trajectory for her students, one in which they would be liberated to begin thinking about college as a possibility during their time in her classroom.

The ideas embedded in the interpretive lenses of this study have provided a deeper understanding and greater illumination of the themes that emerged in the findings. The explanation of the findings showed how the culturally responsive practices and perspectives of the participants ultimately served as a means of liberation and humanization for their students. By engaging in culturally responsive pedagogy that aligned with a problem-posing education, the participants ensured that their practices coincided “with those of the students to engage in critical

thinking and the quest for mutual humanization" (Freire, 1993, p. 75). Moreover, the findings revealed the ways that local funds of knowledge of both the students and teachers were utilized to ensure a humanizing experience by providing "classroom instruction that far exceeds in quality the rote-like instruction these children commonly encounter in schools" (Moll et al, 1992, p.132). Through culturally responsive practices and perspectives that specifically validated the students' funds of knowledge, the participants established a liberating and humanizing educational experience for their students.

Chapter 5: Implications

I began this study with an effort to better understand the perspectives and practices of teachers who effectively used culturally responsive pedagogy in their classrooms. Through my findings, several important themes emerged that provided valuable insight into the specific ways that the participants engaged in CRP. Moreover, in my findings chapter, I provided an analysis and explanation about how my participants specifically used CRP to liberate and humanize their students by drawing on and validating the local funds of knowledge within themselves, their students, and communities. In this chapter, I will discuss the implications of the findings for current educators, principals, and district administrators who are curious about learning more about how to utilize CRP as a means of liberation and humanization for their students.

As someone who has come to understand the impact that culturally responsive pedagogy has on students, particularly on students of color, I have advocated for its implementation both in my own classroom and within my school. As I have grown in my own utilization of culturally responsive and sustaining practices, I have observed how these practices can humanize and liberate students. As a personal implication, this study provided a sense of inspiration about the impact that CRP can have on students, and affirmed that it is a valuable and worthwhile

endeavor. As a result, I want to continue learning about ways to ensure that my classroom is a place that is culturally responsive. I plan to use many of the ideas that were brought to light in this study directly in my classroom, and when advocating for the importance of CRP.

Implications for Current Educators

This study's findings are significant and have consequential implications for current educators. As an educator, I understand the importance of growing in my pedagogical practices and one way that I do that is by learning from my colleagues. Therefore, I believe there are also valuable insights from this study that can benefit current educators who want to grow in their practice of utilizing CRP to liberate and humanize their students. It is important to note that the participants of this study have unique perspectives and experiences that have shaped their practices in the classroom.

It would not be realistic to suggest that teachers who want to learn from these participants try to emulate all of their unique abilities. However, there are valuable implications for educators who want to gain a deeper understanding of how to create classrooms that are culturally responsive. First, there is value in understanding that all participants engaged in culturally responsive practices and perspectives due to their own agency. They did not act as a result of a top-down directive or because they waited until it was required at their school. My participants also didn't wait to be invited by another teacher to learn about the benefits of CRP. They engaged in culturally responsive practices and perspectives because they personally understood the importance it had for their students. Therefore, teachers who want to engage in CRP can learn from these participants that there are ways to begin without needing to wait for the leaders of a school or district to decide it is necessary. Moreover, even though teachers cannot replicate

every aspect of the participants of this study, there are several implications that can be helpful for current educators.

As a result of this study, I think one way current educators can ensure that we are humanizing and liberating our students is to spend time reflecting on our own perspectives and to educate ourselves about the ways that we may be unwittingly perpetuating deficit thinking. In schools, particularly where large portions of students are considered 'academically behind', there are tendencies for perspectives and narratives about these students to focus on areas of deficiency. This is a phenomenon I have noticed in my own school, for example when teachers lament that our students' parents do not speak English, and therefore presumably are not able to help with homework.

I would recommend that we think about what limitations we may have identified in our students and reflect on whether or not those perceived limitations could potentially be a result of deficit perspectives that we may carry. Moreover, I think we need to learn about and draw on the local funds of knowledge within our students and their communities in order to shift our thinking away from deficit perspectives, and towards asset-based learning approaches. Furthermore, the findings imply that it would be beneficial for educators to identify the funds of knowledge that our students' parents possess to humanize students by building a stronger connection between their schools and homes.

In addition to shifting away from deficit perspectives and towards asset-based approaches, I would recommend that we as educators engage in practices that actually *utilize* the local funds of knowledge of students and their parents in our classrooms. The participants expressed the importance of connecting home, community, and school as a means of humanizing their students and creating more culturally responsive classrooms. In addition to learning about

our students, it would be auspicious to gather information about the funds of knowledge, and areas of expertise that parents have based on their jobs, skills, and cultural assets. Then, when possible, we as educators should find opportunities to invite parents into our classrooms to share their funds of knowledge. When the knowledge that parents have is valued in the classroom, there is a deeper connection between home and school, and students can feel liberated to develop a greater sense of pride about their own families and identities.

Finally, we as current classroom teachers should engage in humanizing and liberating practices by developing the ability to discern which content is and is not appropriate for teaching about cultural identities. Sophia's concern about the stereotypical PowerPoint presentation represented an all too common occurrence for teachers who want to teach about different cultures but who haven't yet developed a critical reflective lens to assess what is appropriate. Sophia explained that when she taught about a culture that she did not personally identify with, her approach was not "to try and tell any kind of narrative" but "to pull [resources] and use *their* narrative." I believe these are wise words that can be useful for all educators when teaching about cultures and identities that we do not personally associate with because it shows how to utilize cultural funds of knowledge. Among other places, insiders' perspectives can be accessed through autobiographical videos and texts, primary resources, or classroom visits.

Implications for Principals and District Administrators

In addition to current educators, these findings have significant implications for principals and district administrators. First and foremost, it is vital that school and district leaders support educators who are working towards becoming more culturally responsive. My first suggestion for people who work in administrative or district level positions such as curriculum coordinators or instructional leaders would be to ensure that a climate that embraces culturally

responsive pedagogy has been established. Educators will not be able to grow sufficiently and further develop culturally responsive pedagogy if they do not feel safe and supported in that venture. One way to achieve this would be for a school district to adopt a board policy that supports and affirms the use of CRP in classrooms. Additionally, principals should reflect on the hiring practices they use and consider adding questions that would provide insight into a candidate's beliefs about CRP. If school leaders want to ensure that the school environment is conducive to promoting culturally responsive pedagogy, it is important to hire teachers who share or are open to a similar philosophy.

Beyond creating an environment that embraces CRP, it is important for principals and district administrators to provide opportunities for educators to further develop their practice of utilizing culturally responsive pedagogy. In any given school year there are a number of professional development engagements that are either required or optional. As an educator who has experienced a mixed bag of professional development experiences, I know that some of my experiences have felt fruitful while others have felt like acts of compliance. To provide fruitful experiences for educators, I would suggest that districts provide professional development opportunities that focus on CRP and the impact it can have in classrooms. Furthermore, in seeking people to lead these professional development experiences, I would urge principals and district administrators to search inward before seeking consultation with people or companies outside of the school district.

Since CRP is focused on utilizing students' cultural assets and funds of knowledge, it is important for people who provide professional development to understand the communities and cultures within a school or school district. The participants in my study demonstrated how to be thoughtful, knowledgeable, and articulate in sharing their perspectives and experiences with

culturally responsive pedagogy. They were also able to identify practices or perspectives of colleagues that didn't align with being culturally responsive. For these reasons, I believe it would be favorable to seek out teachers who are already utilizing culturally responsive practices, to educate or provide learning opportunities for colleagues. Based on the insider's perspectives that were shared, I would specifically recommend this type of professional development for districts where a majority of the students are Black, Indigenous, or people of color, due to the historical oppression of these communities.

A final suggestion for those who work within curriculum departments at a district level would be to develop and include sample lessons that demonstrate what CRP looks like for various subjects. Specifically, how to utilize CRP with different subjects will depend on the local funds of knowledge within each community and within each school district. However, there are opportunities within every school to provide teachers with examples of what it can look like to use CRP with specific subjects. An important characteristic of CRP that was revealed during this study was the ability of teachers to connect students' schools to their homes and communities. In keeping with this idea, people who work in curriculum departments could benefit from reaching out to people within their community who could provide areas of expertise that coincide with state standards and work alongside these community members to develop lesson plans and resources that include local funds of knowledge.

Implications for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

Finally, it is necessary to understand how my participants' findings have implications for policies and departments that engage in practices of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). In the years that have followed the murder of George Floyd and the subsequent protests, there has been a heightened awareness about the intersection of race, policy, and systemic practices in the

United States. In response, many businesses and school boards have worked to establish policies and practices grounded in DEI. While these actions are important, they are only a first step in creating a culture and environment that fully affirms, values, and humanizes the people within it. The connection between a humanizing and liberating classroom grounded in culturally responsive pedagogy, and a society with a greater understanding of historical and present-day issues of DEI cannot be ignored.

As depicted in the introduction of this study, the United States has a history of inequitable school practices in relation to race, ethnicity, and social class. Sustainable changes to historical practices take time and an important first step is to acknowledge that change is needed. An imperative present-day effort to ensure that schools function through an equity lens that serves to humanize and liberate all students is to move beyond the language of DEI policies and into action. The notions of culturally responsive pedagogy are rooted in the understanding that diversity, equity, and inclusion are a significant part of a student's education. This study focused on teachers' practices and perspectives which reiterated the importance of the praxis of thought and action. Teachers, schools, and districts need to examine all policies and practices rooted in DEI, and they should develop a protocol to measure their effectiveness. The goals of these policies and practices should be rooted in working towards valuing diversity, equity, and inclusion as a means of humanization and liberation.

My findings demonstrate that one way to really value the diversity of students is to fully affirm and recognize the local funds of knowledge they possess as well as the funds of knowledge that exist in their communities. For a teacher, school, or district to be inclusive and equitable in their practices, people in positions of power must affirm and validate the local funds of knowledge of the students, teachers, and community members by including them in their

decision-making processes. In this way we can begin to effectively implement culturally responsive pedagogy and in so doing, utilize and validate local funds of knowledge to humanize and liberate *all* of our students.

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Appendix A (interview protocol)

Introduction: "Hi, thank you for meeting with me today. As you know, I am a graduate student at the University of Oklahoma. Today I will ask you to participate in a conversation with me where I will ask you to respond to questions and prompts. At the end of the interview, you will have a chance to share anything else that you'd like me to know, that may not have come up during the interview. Do you have any questions before we begin?"

For this study, I have asked for participation from teachers who connect with and meet the needs of a diverse group of students – you're a person who has a reputation of that, so the purpose of this study is to reach out and learn from people who are doing it well to share it with others.

Build rapport – How are you today, how's the school year going?

Prompt/Question 1:

- Tell me about your teaching experience (# of years, schools taught at, grades/subjects, demographics of school(s) taught at)

- Tell me who your students are, describe them, who are your students? Who does your school serve? (The school, community, students)

Prompt/Question 2: Can you describe what your values and beliefs are about education?

- What contributed to your decision to become a teacher?
- What motivates or inspires you as a teacher?
    - where does that come from, have you always been that way, have there been things that contributed to that?
- For you, what is the purpose of education is?
- What factors have contributed to the development of your beliefs about education?
- Tell me about your relationships with your students, what kind of relationships do you establish? How do you go about doing that?

Prompt/Question 3: What does a typical day in your classroom look like?

- Potential follow up:
    - What does your morning meeting look like?
    - How do you establish positive relationships with your students?
    - How do you respond when students are struggling?
    - Describe the expectations you have for your students.

Prompt/Question 4: Can you tell me about your overall goals or aims for your students? What do you want them to gain or develop as a result of being in your classroom?

Prompt/Question 5: As you know, the purpose of this study is to gain an understanding about how teachers use culturally responsive practices. I'm interested in the ways that teachers value

the experiences, lives, and identities of their students, can you tell me about how you do that in your classroom?

- Can you think of a lesson you've taught that focuses on your students' identities?
- How does culturally responsive pedagogy fit into your personal philosophy of education?
- If I were a teacher who had never heard of using culturally responsive practices, how would you describe the impact it has and its value in your classroom?

Prompt/Question 6: What are your experiences with culturally responsive pedagogy?

- challenges or setbacks?
- successes?
- what advice would you give teachers who are wanting to include CRP in their own classrooms?
- In what ways would your classroom be different if you didn't include culturally responsive practices?

Prompt/Question 7: As you know, the purpose of this research is to better understand the thoughts and actions of teachers who use culturally responsive pedagogy. Can you please describe a lesson you've taught that exemplifies culturally responsive pedagogy?

Prompt/Question 8: Is there anything else that you would like me to know, related to your beliefs and practices of culturally responsive pedagogy?

Is there anything else that's been on your mind or that you're thinking during our conversation?

Is it ok to follow up and contact you – if more questions come to mind or if I need clarification on something?