Teaching Black Kids when Black Excellence isn't a Curriculum Priority - a Phenomenological Study

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TEACHING BLACK KIDS WHEN BLACK EXCELLENCE ISN’T A CURRICULUM PRIORITY – A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

by

LETITIA Y. THORNTON

Under the Direction of Makungu M. Akinyela, PhD

ABSTRACT

This study examines the Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP) strategies of culturally aware teachers who serve high populations of African American students. This study posits that teachers share the phenomenon of classroom CRP implementation through creative, and sometimes covert tactics. This phenomenon exists since cultural relevance is often omitted in curriculum norms. This study seeks to provide field examples of CRP, allowing stakeholders to evaluate them for their audiences. The theoretical framework for this phenomenological study is Critical Race Theory in Education. CRT in Education explains why CRP is necessary, contributing to the rationale that learning environments should support its implementation. Data was collected through interviews and observations of four public high school teachers. Analysis was conducted through coding and pattern evaluation post interview. Results represent the common themes of sophisticated racism, cultural connections, and emotional availability. The overall research question is: How do teachers teach African American students when Black excellence isn’t a curriculum priority?

INDEX WORDS: African American, Cultural relevance, Pedagogy, Teachers, Strategy, Students
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by

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this research to the Raiders and Panthers that inspired me to figure out why most public schooling is not designed to celebrate their lives. I dedicate this work with gratitude to the scores of family and friends who contributed to the completion of this important work by picking up, dropping off, entertaining, feeding, cleaning, braiding hair, and keeping me sane. My charge would not have been completed without your service. I dedicate this piece with my love to Jalia and Landon for reminding me that I was still their mom despite the work that seemed to consume me. Please know that I did it for you as an advocate for your educational self-esteem. I dedicate this mission with my gratitude, love, and admiration to JET for consistently reminding me of my greatness, willing me to exercise my voice, simply because he chooses to listen.
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PROLOGUE

So, I’m a corporate brat. In polite conversation, whenever someone asks me where I am from, it is a struggle to offer a simple response. I was born in Michigan, but left with my family when I was still small, lived in seven different states, and have spent the majority of my life in Georgia. All of my family is from Mississippi, so, even though I try not to claim it, it is part of my where I’m from-ness too. We moved around quite a bit in my youth because my dad worked in Management for General Motors. So, I was a corporate brat.

During all of that travel, I experienced schooling in relatively underserved schools in Prince George’s County, Maryland, and affluent schools in Oklahoma and Georgia. Although I spent good amount of my school days as the only person of color in my class, I did not directly feel the exclusion of my culture in my schooling experiences. Perhaps that was due to the cultural pride I felt at home and at church. Maybe it was because my high school in Oklahoma offered an African American history course, which I took. Maybe it was because I didn’t believe my culture was supposed to be celebrated in school. I am not really sure.

What I do know, is that I was slapped in the face with a dose of reality when I attended the Georgia Institute of Technology, and as a freshman, my Computer Science 1501 lab partner declared that I was only admitted due to affirmative action quotas to which the Institute was mandated to adhere. He went on to exclaim that I most likely had taken an admission spot away from a more qualified White person. That was my wake-up moment. From that point on, I was deliberate in my desire to become more knowledgeable of the history of my people, and to immerse myself in the light of all my people had contributed to civilization. I wanted to become
more equipped with personal awareness for myself, but also to be able to respond to people like
my lab partner when faced with future similar situations.

After graduating from Georgia Tech, I spent about five years working in the Advertising
and Marketing industries. I let those industries because I felt a direct party to advocating blind
consumerism, patriarchal capitalism, and hidden racism. Also the nature of those industries in
my experience, was designed to prohibit professional advancement, unless you conformed to
what the agency believed trendy, or cool. My conscience would not allow me to go out for beers
with people that I did not necessarily care to spend my leisure time with. In essence, I just did
not feel like playing the game.

My unwillingness to alter my personality led to several professional dead ends.
Eventually, I landed in the school house as a teacher. After just a short time in the classroom, I
began to start asking questions. Why are there so many discipline issues? What accounts for the
high levels of students labeled with learning disabilities? Why are students so disengaged in
school? None of my colleagues seemed to have any answers. My desire to give students the
best experience I could, inspired me to stop asking questions and figure out what to actually do.
Part of that journey is captured in this study.
1 INTRODUCTION

This section will discuss information surrounding why this study was conducted, including the background of the problem, the significance of the problem, the theoretical framework of the study, assumptions, and potential limitations.

1.1 Background of the Problem

I am a high school United States History teacher in a school district that serves a high population of African American students. Each year students ask why slaves in the Americas did not revolt against their oppressors. I inform them about the Stono, Haitian, Nat Turner, and Gabriel Prosser Rebellions, letting them know that many slave revolts took place in various forms. After hearing my response, some students want to know why they never learned about those revolts in school. My response is usually that most of those events are absent from curriculum created by the Georgia Department of Education (GA DOE). The revolts that are included, are not expected to be taught beyond a mention, based on recommended pacing guides.

At this point in the class discussion, some Latino students verbalize their disdain with the omission of people and events related to their culture. Thus, our collective discoveries lead students to deduce that the Georgia United States History standards of learning are racist. I do not confirm or deny that assertion, but encourage students to continue their discourse. In reality, the current Georgia US History standards feature African Americans, Latinos, Asians, and Indigenous Americans in only 15% of its content (georgiastandards.org). The previously described classroom scenario and a wealth of research indicates that culturally relevant teaching is needed in educational practices.

Yes, the GA DOE does release required curriculum for which teachers are held accountable. Pacing guides are provided, usually at the school district level, but are teachers
really required to follow those and other guidelines? The answer depends on a myriad of factors. Many public-school teachers have an overabundance of material to teach, very limited time to teach it, and standardized assessments attached to teacher accountability. Sometimes those obstacles make it difficult for teachers to provide culturally relevant education for their students. In spite of the hurdles, some teachers have achieved success in bringing Culturally Relevant Pedagogy into their classrooms, and this study takes a closer look at not only the need for CRP, but most importantly, the strategies used to implement it in classrooms.

The theoretical framework for this phenomenological study is Critical Race Theory in Education. CRT in Education explains why CRP is necessary, and contributes to the rationale that learning environments should support its implementation. Data for this study was collected through interviews and observations of four public high school teachers with distinct methods of implementing CRP. Analysis was conducted through coding and analysis post interview. The overall research question is: How do teachers teach Black students when Black excellence is not a curriculum priority?

This study examines the Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP) strategies of teachers in schools that serve a high population of African American students. This study posits that teachers share the phenomenon of classroom CRP implementation through both creative, and covert tactics.

This chapter discusses the problem of conscious teachers having difficulty implementing the culturally relevant strategies that help African American students identify with themselves throughout their academic career. Background information on why the need for Culturally Relevant Pedagogy exists will be addressed, including the theoretical framework that supports existing research and claims. This section also discusses the purpose and significance of the
study, how it uplifts the academia of African American studies, and the African American community at large. The methodology used to conduct the study will also be addressed, including research methods, design, and desired participating groups. Finally, this chapter will discuss the initial expectations of the study as well as the potential limitations.

1.2 Problem Statement

The general problem addressed through this study is the gross injustice many African American students endure throughout their thirteen years of schooling in the public education system. Especially in the South, many public schools that serve higher populations of African American students are without the resources and comforts present in other school districts, initially placing teachers, and African American students, at a disadvantage. I have professionally observed that a lack of resources can create frustration in students, because they feel ill-equipped to meet high post-secondary expectations. Parents become frustrated because they want the best for their children, yet the school system seems to treat their children as inferior. Teachers become frustrated because a lack of viable resources means more front-end work, which can be difficult to complete with limited time. All of those frustrations can crescendo to an abandonment of effort on the part of all groups involved, leaving students without confidence, parents without reassurance, and teachers without sanity.

I recently attended a professional development session at a highly affluent school which serves a very limited number of African American students. The session was facilitated by a white teacher, in her classroom. As she shared her best practices while navigating with ease on the mounted smartboard at the front of her classroom, I thought about the solitary wall to wall un-smart whiteboard that is present in my classroom. She nonchalantly boasted about the abundance of supplies her students have at their disposal, and confessed that her main concern
was finding the time to grade the writing essays she periodically assigns to her students. Meanwhile in my school district, students are barely equipped with the dilapidated twelve-year old text books we are required to issue year after year. I do not envy the affluent teacher. I am glad some of youth are receiving the education they deserve. I just wish the education system was structured so that student success was not so dependent on zip codes.

So what can be done? Teachers that employ CRP instructional strategies exist, and they have specific strategies in overcoming obstacles. This study will expose those strategies for the benefit of other teachers who can also employ them. Ultimately the greatest beneficiary of this study will be the students that will learn more about themselves while attending their classes each day.

1.3 Significance

African American students often seek representations of themselves in their daily curriculum. Math, Science, and History programs greatly minimize or even omit the contributions of African Americans in their curricula, and in doing so, leave curious, impressionable students without visual models of cultural achievement. Author James Loewen echoes this point in his work, *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong*, where he indicates that throughout Social Studies curricula, students of History are given, at best, an incoherent, distorted, picture of those who are non-white (Loewen, 2008).

The effect of these cultural oversights includes a lack of engagement in classes, and can lead to course failures, stalled academic progress, or dropping out of school completely. Department of Education statistics reveal that most African American secondary students experience higher dropout rates than their White counterparts, findings widely supported in
academic literature. For example, the 2009 descriptive analysis report published by the U. S. Department of Education revealed that Hispanic and Black students experienced the highest drop-out rates among all racial/ethnic groups (Dalton, 2009). This academic deficiency is not indicative of African American student ability, but rather a reflection of inequities found in many areas of education. Poorly maintained buildings, a shortage of qualified teachers, and outdated technology are just a few of the issues that prohibit student progress. Culturally Relevant Pedagogy offers viable strategies for teachers and students, despite these academic deficiencies. My intent as the researcher is to compile the findings from this study to inform current and future teachers on the importance and specific practices in teaching with cultural relevance.

The overall significance of this research is two-fold: first, to legitimize the need for cultural relevance to those who refuse to acknowledge its necessity. Second, this research seeks to help African American students discover that their history is rich and expansive, and that they have the power to continue the works of their predecessors in doing awesome, meaningful deeds. Finally, this work is designed to help those who care about African American youth with strategies to realize our desire to make education better and more relevant to our children.

Dissenters

The current Donald J. Trump Presidential era has demonstrated it believes the needs of the marginalized and disadvantaged are irrelevant, and as such, it is very necessary for African American students to recognize and believe in their relevance in the United States. It has been the goal of many conservative and radical-right supporters to subdue any connection to cultural relevance and pride in schools, positing that the United States devotes enough of our efforts into helping those who ‘do not choose to help themselves.’
What follows are a few examples of how the Trump Administration has demonstrated disregard for the marginalized:

*Proposed Healthcare Plan*

The Trump Administration proposed a repeal and replace of the previous Affordable Healthcare Act, through a plan that has proposed measures to cut Medicaid funding by $880 billion, and would cut 24 million people out of their health insurance coverage due to higher costs if the plan was approved. President Trump threatened to cut off healthcare subsidies for the poor if Democrats did not vote for the plan (nymag.com). With the failure of the first proposed plan, the Trump Administration has relaxed on that measure now, but it is concerning that the idea was even a consideration at all.

*Proposed Federal Budget*

The proposed federal budget from the Trump Administration includes a multi-million dollar increase in defense spending, yet would drastically cut funding for anti-poverty programs such as medical research, public housing, education, aid to the indigent, development grants for poor and rural areas, etc. (Levitz, 2017).

*Relations with the Black Community*

In the early days of his Presidency during a press conference, President Trump deemed himself the “least racist person in existence,” and when a Black reporter asked him if he would meet with members of the Congressional Black Congress, he asked her if she and the CBC were friends, and to set up a meeting for him. During a speech given during Black History Month, President Trump insinuated that former slave and 19th century social reformer, Frederick Douglass was still alive in saying, “Frederick Douglass is an example of somebody who’s done an amazing job and is being recognized more and more, I noticed (Levitz, 2017).”
In August 2017, President Trump declined to formally denounce the radical neo-Nazi groups that participated in a violent protest in Charlottesville, Virginia, saying “I think there was blame on both sides (Merica, 2017).” In response to National Football League protests inspired by quarterback Colin Kaepernick, who took a knee and kneeled during the presentation of the national anthem in 2016, President Trump, while speaking at a political rally in Alabama declared that if players continue to protest during the anthem, NFL team owners should “get that son of a bitch off the field right now (Graham, 2017).”

**Education**

An example expressly relevant to this study is the appointment of Betsy DeVos by the Trump Administration for the position of Secretary of Education. Although a further review of DeVos will take place in the recommendations section of this paper, it is important to note that DeVos has no experience in the realm of education. Although the majority of educational institutions in the United States are public schools, DeVos’s four children never matriculated through them, nor, to date, has she made plans to conduct the proper research to understand the needs of public school institutions.

In fact, one of her major claims to fame prior to her Cabinet appointment was being a staunch advocate for ‘school choice,’ which on the surface appears to open viable education options for families, but the consideration of what is lost in the ‘choice’ process continues to be minimally investigated. Historically, school choice emerged after the Brown vs. Board of Education (1954) court case that desegregated public schools, but for decades resulted in creating ways to ignore the federal mandate. Today, school choice typically means that neighborhood
schools are disbanded, and inequality results through “the unequal distribution of public goods, often to the detriment of poor communities and communities of color (Dougherty, 2017)”

These are only a few of the examples that demonstrate the lack of care and concern for the marginalized. President Trump is social media literate “tweets” almost daily. He often posts insensitive, and offensive messages, in only a few characters, yet they send a strong message. The tone of the current Presidential Administration strengthens the assertion that the current educational system is designed to keep African American students in the dark regarding their great historical origins. This environment also solidifies the need for African American students to know about themselves, and realize that the strength of their past can carry them to success in the future.

For example, the lack of ethnic diversity in the Georgia United States History standards leads one to believe that people of color did little to contribute to the establishment and progress of our nation. The absence of women of color is even more astounding. Of the 250 United States and World History Georgia standards and elements, 17 are dedicated to the contributions of women, and zero are specifically dedicated to the contributions of African American women. For comparison, 100 US and World History standards are dedicated to the contributions of men, and 12 are specifically dedicated to the contributions of men of color, including African Americans, Native Americans and Hispanics.

The disproportionate underrepresentation of African Americans in the Georgia History standards diminishes the value, worth, and contributions of this group throughout the history of our nation. To remedy this egregious absence, the curriculum must contain significant elements that highlight the achievements of African Americans and give students an opportunity to experience a broader scope of United States history. The cultural hegemony of the current
Georgia History Standards does not provide a viable space for African Americans, and the students that are not afforded the opportunity to learn about them.

1.4 Research Questions

The overall research question for this study was: “How do teachers teach African American students when Black excellence isn’t a curriculum priority?”

To address this guiding question, several sub questions were discussed. Those sub questions included: “How do you define culturally relevant pedagogy?” “Does your school district support the use of culturally relevant classroom practices?” “What barriers do you believe hinder teachers from providing quality culturally relevant teaching?” and “Have you received CRP professional development training as a teacher?” Each of those sub questions helped shape the underlying considerations that contribute to the reality of culturally relevant classrooms, and ways well intentioned teachers may have been prohibited from its implementation.

“How do you define culturally relevant pedagogy?”

The first sub question allowed me, the researcher, to have a clear understanding of how the participant viewed cultural relevance. This allowed for the proper analysis after the observations and interviews were complete.

“Does your school district support the use of culturally relevant classroom practices?”

The second proposed sub question addressed the teacher’s attitude toward CRP implementation. If CRP was supported in their school, the teachers felt more comfortable with its presence in their classroom. Teachers discussed such things as if school administrators and school district officials provided resources to help them implement CRP if requested, and other factors that may have influenced their abilities.
“What barriers do you believe hinder teachers from providing quality culturally relevant teaching?”

The third sub question generated conversation that led to discussion about potential solutions to the problem. Teachers expressed an aspirational view of facing few barriers to CRP implementation, but the reality was that their current barriers were substantial.

“How have you received CRP professional development training as a teacher?”

To generate more discussion in the area of school and district support, and to address the last sub question, I also asked teachers if their school district has offered professional development sessions on cultural relevant pedagogy, which indicates a level of commitment toward the practice.

1.5 Theoretical Framework

In the 1980s, Critical Race Theory (CRT) was developed by scholars Derrick Bell, Richard Delgado, and Alan Freeman, who fought for racial justice through the legal system. Critical Race Theory is defined by Mari Matsuda as “the work of progressive legal scholars of color who are attempting to develop a jurisprudence that accounts for the role of racism in American law that work toward the elimination of racism as part of a larger goal of eliminating all forms of subordination (1993). CRT is an intersectional theory that uses its legal foundation to analyze the merging of race, law, and power as it relates to the oppression of people of color.

The tenets of CRT as described by Deborah Harmon include, (a) racism is normalized and embedded in the practices and policies of all institutions, (b) racism can be understood by listening to the voices of those who experience it, (c) liberalism is a belief that is based upon freedom and equality and justice cannot always be served through the legal system, and (d) those who are privileged will work for racial justice if it benefits them (Harmon, 2012). In addition to
those principles, CRT honors the creed that theory without practice is futile. It is the responsibility of the informed activist to move toward justice. The work of CRT activists continued, and inspired the genesis of CRT in Education.

*Critical Race Theory in Education*

In the early 1990s, CRT expanded when Gloria Ladson-Billings and William F. Tate adapted CRT to the field of Education, to fuel advocacy efforts for students and teachers of color. CRT in Education was introduced through Ladson-Billings and Tate’s article *Toward a Critical Race Theory of Education*, and is defined by Solorzano and Yozzo as “a framework or set of basic insights, perspectives, methods, and pedagogy that seeks to identify, analyze, and transform those structural and cultural aspects of education that maintain subordinate and dominant racial positions in and out of the classroom (2002)” The principles of CRT in Education are, (a) the centrality and intersectionality of race and racism, (b) the challenge of dominant ideology, (c) the centrality of experiential knowledge, (d) the interdisciplinary perspective, and (e) the commitment to social justice. CRT in Education also mirrors the goal of its CRT predecessor, and requires supporters to commit to solution-based activism.

CRT in Education is needed to critically analyze the practices of educational structures. This theoretical framework “challenges white privilege… and exposes deficit-informed research that silences and distorts epistemologies of people of color (Delgado, 2017).” CRT in Education also uncovers policies that penalize some African American students in ways that do not affect most Caucasian students. Black students generally suffer higher discipline infractions than white students. Those offenses may result in excessive suspensions, which follow a student’s permanent record and damage options for academic success (Leonardo, 2013). Black students are more often classified as needing Special Education services, which often relegates students to
less challenging academic classes (Herzik, 2015). Similarly, Black students are less likely to be recommended for Advanced Placement courses – college level classes available during secondary school that open scholarship opportunities and prepare students for the rigors of higher education (McBride, 2015). CRT in Education offers a deliberate analysis of why those and other oppressive measures are common, and approaches the analysis from the voices of the marginalized.

Critical Race Theory and Critical Race Theory in Education effectively frame this research because it reveals the innate racism that besets our society, and how that racism affects African American students. CRT in Education justifies the need for culturally relevant pedagogy. The principles of CRT complement my qualitative research method and phenomenological design, because addressing issues from the voices of the affected is paramount, and that is exactly what occurred through the in-depth interview process.

1.6 Definitions

Included here are several terms important to the overall integrity of the paper. Their definitions are provided.

**Culturally Relevant Pedagogy** has been defined as “good teaching” that replaces negative aspects of traditional learning and teaching practices with engaging content, shared in safe environments that empower students to seek opportunities for success (Ladson-Billings, 1995). In a culturally relevant academic environment, students of color see themselves in the curriculum. They are reassured that their place in the world is valuable.

**Schooling** is born from the historical context of African-American students being taught from a perspective that serves as “an agent of capitalist hegemony,” and seeks to prohibit the
working class from “achieving social mobility (Jennings, 2005).” It is this system of educational division that breeds the need for justice through culturally relevant pedagogy.

**Hidden Curriculum** is described by Merfat Alsubaie (2015) as “an implicit curriculum that expresses and represents attitudes, knowledge, and behaviors, which are conveyed or communicated without aware intent; it is conveyed indirectly by words and actions that are parts of the life of everyone in a society.” Alsubaie notes that hidden curriculum can be interpreted in a positive or negative way within educational systems, therefore, it is important for teachers to be aware of these hidden curriculums to make the necessary adjustments. The hidden curriculums present in current public education systems include whitewashed curricula and the treatment of achievements of people of color as a mere footnote. It is this hidden curriculum that must be uncovered through deliberate practices such as CRP.

**Biculturalism** is defined by Antonia Darder (2012) as having or combining the cultural attitudes and customs of two nations, peoples, or ethnic groups. In the current public education system, bicultural students can be those who live in the United States, but denote their primary heritage from another country. Bicultural students can also be those with a primary language outside of Standard English, and prefer to speak in their primary language. Bicultural students are often neglected in traditional schooling settings, and CRP steps in to meet the needs of neglected bicultural students.

**Hegemony** is described in Racial Formation by Omi and Winant (1994) from the standpoint of Antonio Gramsci. Gramsci described hegemony as “the conditions necessary, in a given society, for the achievement and consolidation of rule…always constituted by a combination of coercion and consent (Belliotti, 2010).” Hegemony supports the principle of Critical Race Theory in Education that asserts that racism is an endemic aspect of society. This
tenet can be overturned through the stories of the oppressed, and intentional activism, such as through the efforts of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy.

**Majoritarian Narratives** are stories perpetuated by mainstream society and assumed to be true due to perceived racial authority. These narratives “generate from a legacy of racial privilege,” and paint people of color as weak, poor, needy, and criminal. In education, “the majoritarian story tells us that darker skin and poverty correlate with bad neighborhoods and bad schools.” (Solorzano, 2002) Majoritarian narratives are racially divisive, and inspire the Counter Story principle of Critical Race Theory.

**Withitness** is the acute awareness of teachers in their classrooms. Think of it as teachers having “eyes in the back of their heads.” Jacob Kounin (1970) coined withitness as one of the techniques that distinguish good from poor classroom managers, and teachers who possess withitness are not only aware, but are able to react appropriately to their surroundings. I believe withitness is a key component to establishing a caring, safe environment that supports CRP because it means teachers are aware of their students and in tune with their behaviors.

### 1.7 Assumptions

The assumptions of this study were that teachers with reputations of using CRP in their classrooms do so in somewhat covert ways due to the obstacles presented by the structure of the public schooling system. Another assumption was that teachers that do not have reputations of including CRP in their instruction have no desire to do so. These assumptions did not incorporate the considerations of individual school sites, the resources of the teacher, and local demographics that may affect the ability of a teacher to meet the needs of their unique students. Also, an assumption was that teachers who did not make a consistent practice of using CRP
could have the desire to do so, but were unsure of how to do so without following the school district and school site requirements, which could possibly affect their job security.

1.8 Limitations

The foreseen limitations of this study included limited time for data collection, the reliability of pre-study teacher documents, and potential participant hesitancy. I would prefer to have more time to thoroughly conduct the observations and interviews surrounding this study. However, with only a few months to conduct the study, I am concerned some areas of importance may be overlooked. Also, I am remaining faithful that the syllabi, and lesson plans reviewed will be authentic, and not fabricated to reflect what I am seeking in this study. Finally, I am also concerned that participants may be hesitant to speak freely if they are working covertly to bring CRP to their students. They may feel that their identities will be revealed and they will face negative consequences. These limitations were acknowledged and addressed with careful consideration as the study took place.

1.9 Summary

This section discussed the key components of this study, including the historical reasons that formed the problem at hand, the pertinent research questions employed in the study, the theoretical framework that guided the research, the pertinent definitions that will be referenced in the study, as well as the specific assumptions and limitations anticipated surrounding this research. The next chapter will discuss a review of the literature that supports the Critical Race Theory in Education theoretical framework, and the overall issue of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy.
2 REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The purpose of this study is to reveal specific strategies teachers use to allow their students to experience cultural relevance within their required curriculum experiences. The questions driving this research are:

1. How do teachers teach African American students when Black excellence is not a curriculum priority?
2. How do you define culturally relevant pedagogy?
3. Does your school district support the use of culturally relevant classroom practices?
4. What barriers do you believe hinder teachers from providing quality culturally relevant teaching?
5. Have you received CRP professional development training as a teacher?

This section will discuss relevant literature surrounding Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and the various topics that shape its creation and significance.

2.1 Historical Context

The need for critical pedagogy stems from historical racism that prohibited African Americans from obtaining and maintaining the education needed to integrate into a post-Civil War United States. The residual effects of stunted education was made even worse according to Peter McLaren (2003) in *Critical Pedagogy: A Look at the Major Concepts*, when schooling became a means for indoctrinating young students into capitalism.

During the 18th and 19th century in the United States, the enslaved were not permitted to obtain formal education. Despite this prohibition, attempts to gain education were sometimes carried out covertly. Some were able to obtain educational liberation through direct exposure to
the lessons white children received, while others acquired books and other educational tools through various means in an attempt to learn and share.

Once the 13th amendment to end slavery and servitude was ratified after the Civil War and the Reconstruction Era began, educational ambitions increased when the Freedmen’s Bureau established learning centers across the former Confederate South. Those schools were designed to educate those denied the privilege of learning the basics of reading, and writing. Although many white educators from the Freedmen’s Bureau may not have believed education would elevate African Americans far beyond their limited status in society, having access to information previously unavailable to the was golden for former slaves. The simple skills being taught in the Bureau schools were imperative in the quest for real freedom, as they allowed African Americans the opportunity to make their own professional, economic, and social decisions, through education.

Once Reconstruction ended in 1877, empathy toward African Americans waned tremendously. The white supremacist Ku Klux Klan emerged, terrorizing Freedman School teachers and burning school houses. The efforts taken to stop African Americans from gaining education led to the need for other outlets of learning and social integration (Payne, 2008). Black and white students were schooled separately in the mid-20th century before the Brown v. Board of Education decision that mandated integrated schools across the United States. For some, racial separation allowed for freedoms that became stifled when integration took place. In Teaching to Transgress (1994), bell hooks recalls the transformation of her educational experience from one where Black teachers were on a mission to fully educate students and their families, to a system of integration where the school environment was no longer a place where black students were valued. hooks recalls that prior to integration, black teachers considered
education as political because it was rooted in anti-racist struggle. However, schools changed with integration - it was no longer a pleasurable experience for black children, but considered a place where students were on lock down (1994). Some sixty years later, this is still the sentiment of many black children in public schools. Students compare the seven hours they spend in school to jail – they are released from location to location at the sound of a bell, must have a pass if outside their jurisdiction, receive a short break in the middle of the day, and are not permitted to leave until their time is complete.

Since Black students suffered the burden of early school desegregation, Black teachers deliberately participated in the process, and continued to nurture Black students in mixed race classrooms. Under desegregation, critical thinking became seen as a threat against authority, so some Black teachers adopted a holistic teaching model to benefit Black students. hooks (1994) argues that through holistic teaching, the teacher values the presence of all students and knows that creating excitement in the classroom is paramount. All students are more eager to enter a class they believe pertains to them, and this excitement can come from engaged pedagogy, which promotes well-being, for students and teachers.

Much like the post Reconstruction era, when the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision occurred, African American schools faced a gradual end, as students began to attend White schools, and Black teacher’s jobs were eliminated when integration took root. Epps (2002) contends that “the number of jobs lost [was] at about 38,000 in 17 states in the South between 1954 and 1965.” Those numbers reflect a staggering loss of teachers whose cultural connection with the students they taught was affirming, and helped students make sense of academics and the social implications regarding the volatile racial climate of the day. It is even possible that the shortage of Black teachers in schools today may be due in part to the
integration, where Black students were placed in white schools. When the students left, a drastic reduction in the need for African American teachers was left in the wake.

*Hegemony*

Freedom Teachers are vital to liberation since society says domination is natural through the hegemony principle. For instance, if racial domination is the norm, white people believe they are superior, and in turn, those who are not white believe they are inferior. Once those roles are established, the treatment one receives based on their role will be internalized and agreed upon. According to Peter McLaren (2003), hegemony is an institution where the dominant culture wins the consent of the oppressed and coerces the oppressed to unknowingly participate in their own oppression. This manifestation is represented in education when teachers and other decision makers believe students of color are not going to excel academically, so it is futile to invest time and resources into elevating them. As a result of hegemony in education, students are conditioned to believe that high achievement is not possible.

Very few of the high achieving students I serve pursue post-secondary education at four-year colleges and universities. Although they cite financial concerns as part of their decision to forgo challenging post-secondary opportunities, they also feel obligated to stay close to their families, unsure that they will succeed in the “real world.” All of the students who express these sentiments are academically prepared, but are victims of a hegemonic cycle that convinces them to be content where they are. The *Critical Pedagogy Reader* (Darder, 2003) indicates that critical pedagogy is necessary because it encourages students to know that they have the right and ability to overcome obstacles and become agents for change. The challenge is to open the eyes of students, igniting their passion within. One way to create the spark, is to increase awareness, and grow the movement.
Pauline Lipman (2009) stresses in *Beyond Accountability: Toward Schools that Create New People for a New Way of Life* that in schools there is an absence of counter hegemonic discourses that capture the gravity of the current situation in urban schools, and that we as concerned stakeholders should press for rich intellectual experiences, cultural and social relevance, democratic participation, and critical thought. These discourses can take place through partnerships with parent, teacher, student associations (PTSA), professional development programs, and other connections with the community. The theoretical framework that supports these discoveries of racially based inequities, is Critical Race Theory in Education.

### 2.2 Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Schooling prevents creativity in instructional delivery, lending systematic, uninspired learning experiences for students and teachers alike. African American educators such as Mwalimu Shujaa have studied this phenomenon, noting that schooling is intended to “perpetuate and maintain the society’s existing power relations and the institutional structures that support those arrangements (1994).” Think of the ‘factory system’ mode of learning, where students sit in straight rows, respond to bells, and have designated start, stop, and break times. Unfortunately, this is the norm in public schools.

Although Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP) takes on many different names, all forms of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy are rooted in the theoretical framework of Critical Race Theory, and is defined educationally as “an interdisciplinary attempt to approach educational problems and questions from the perspectives of Women and Men of color (Jennings, 2005).” Operationally, CRP is referred to as the use of “cultural knowledge, prior experience, frame of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning more
relevant… it teaches to and through the strengths of the students (Gay, 2000).” These teaching practices are the counter practice to the oppressive measures of schooling.

The lack of equity in curriculum development is central to the narrative of CRP. CRP eradicates “hegemonic curriculum,” which demonstrates how “curriculum in schools has been shaped to reflect the interest of the dominant social class.” Curriculum violence describes when “pertinent cultural values, messages, and historical truths are suppressed or omitted in aims to continue oppression amongst minority groups (Allen, 2013).” Perhaps my students uncovered an act of curriculum violence in observing the missing narratives of African Americans and other people of color from the Georgia US History standards. My students were angered by the blatant cultural rejection from their education experience, and agency within schools may help heal deep set historical trauma. CRP programs lead to “restorative justice practices (Gill, 2014)” that promote the well-being of ignored students.

One way to counter the oppressive nature of the traditional schooling model is through the familial nature of CRP. Studies have shown that African American students “often learn best in a relational environment that has high expectations, and is similar to an extended family (Durden, 2013).” For example, Willis (1999) observed faculty and students at elementary schools where African-American students performed higher-than-expected on standardized tests. He found the school climate was one where teachers held positive attitudes about students, high expectations of students, and positive extended family relations. Teachers felt responsible for themselves but also for others. An effort was made among faculty and staff to form strong relationships with students and their families. In all instances, teachers used culturally responsive teaching.
Historically, the familial aspect of teaching African American students was key. Post-civil war African American schools took distinct honor in providing their students with the type of education that catered to their needs. Instructional strategies were student-centered, and the curriculum was enhanced with the history and contributions of African Americans. Teachers used student experiences in teaching the content. They differentiated the content and allowed students to work in small groups. Students were encouraged to question what they read and to engage in problem solving (Anderson, 1988).

The rich resources of culturally relevant curricula were exactly what African American students needed, yet not easy to obtain. Freedom curricula was provided at a cost, and some schools could not pay. Instead, they opted for free, traditional programs, and tried to enhance the material with culturally specific content. To further the challenges in providing CRP, when the Reconstruction era ended in 1877, the dissolution of many African American schools soon followed. Black teachers were intimidated by the Ku Klux Klan, and some became martyrs for the cause. (Butchart, 2010).

Carter G. Woodson

Coined the “Father of Black History,” and arguably the originator of cultural relevant advocacy for African American students, Dr. Carter G. Woodson, demonstrated not only the words to support why African American students needed to be nurtured with cultural relevance in schools, he backed it up with action – providing specific materials and instructions to assist teachers in their efforts with African American students. In The Mis-Education of the Negro, originally published in 1933, Dr. Woodson asserted that African Americans at the time were being “culturally indoctrinated, rather than taught, in American schools.” This “conditioning” placed African Americans in positions of dependence, rather than encouraging freedom through
learning experiences. Dr. Woodson wanted African Americans to do for themselves instead of waiting for the government or society to take action in righting the historical wrongs they had endured.

Dr. Woodson further asserted that teachers of African American students should aid in directing students to do for themselves by resolving to “treat the disease rather than its symptoms (Woodson, 1933).” By this, Dr. Woodson was suggesting tackling the root of the problem of educating African American students, which he believed was the fact that African American students were stifled by the fresh, and stinging memories of slavery, and ignorant to their rich history.

Cultural competence and historical truth became tenets of Dr. Woodson’s mission. In *The Early Black History Movement, Carter G. Woodson and Lorenzo Johnston, Greene*, Pero Gaglo Dagbovie chronicles Dr. Woodson’s contributions to the celebration of Black culture, from the initiation of Negro History Week, to the publication of the *Negro History Bulletin*, and everything in between. Founded by Dr. Woodson in 1915, the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, now called the Association for the Study of African American Life and History (ASALH), created a platform for Dr. Woodson to disseminate proper information to the African American community. Sometimes, ASNLH meetings were held in Black community churches, places of education, or community centers (Dagbovie, 2007). This direct access to the community assured control of information and training opportunities in the spaces that would benefit the most from the content. Dr. Woodson’s intent was for his publications and prepared curriculum would affect students, and address the problems of educating African American students.
In *The Mis-Education of the Negro*, Dr. Woodson spoke on Negro colleges and universities, explaining that their existence was necessary, but there needed to be a restructuring of the system as a whole. Course offerings should be designed by “men of vision” who could shape the courses with cultural relevance (1933). On a secondary education level, Dr. Woodson posited that students should be ‘bilingual’ and learn standard English, including the generally studied European writers, and also study the evolution of language through African folklore. Students should become proficient in the study of Negro writers, and ensure that their historical background knowledge has its foundations in Africa (1933).

Dr. Woodson’s practical approach to cultural relevance in the 20th century is also relevant to students today. On the subject of vocational guidance, Dr. Woodson stated that, “schools are daily teaching Negroes what they can never apply in life or what is no longer profitable because of the revolution of industry by the multiplication of mechanical appliances (1933).” Dr. Woodson’s sentiment, with the modification of a couple nouns, could be nearly literally translated from the early 20th century to the early 21st century. Many of the traditional professions currently being promoted in public schools are industries that will be obsolete in the coming decades, due to the greater focus on robotics, and automated transactions. It is the duty of culturally relevant teachers to understand these changes in economic and process trends, and to guide students into those revelations as well.

Dr. Woodson wanted to ensure that teachers and communities had the tools they needed to equip themselves to teach African American students about themselves beyond the debilitating backdrop of slavery and oppression. Some six decades after *The Mis-Education of the Negro*, a compilation of stories also meant to help teachers and communities was published – Gloria Ladson-Billings’ *The Dreamkeepers*. 
Dreamkeepers

Gloria Ladson-Billings The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children, was an excellent precursor to my research. Ladson-Billings defines culturally relevant teaching as “a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes (1994). Ladson-Billings was clear in the purpose of her book, which was to “provide examples of culturally relevant teaching in specific contexts (1994), rather than just provide advice. Great care was taken to carefully vet the participants of her research, which included eight elementary school female teachers, some Black, and some White. She was able to capture the essence of what they consistently did to make their students feel safe, respected, included, and important. She highlighted a couple of similarities between participants that led to their successful teaching practices. Those similarities were their extensive teaching experience, and the understanding of having a particular “transformative moment” in their life or teaching profession that compelled them to modify their teaching practices. The majority of the participants in the study discussed in this paper also noted a transformative moment that encouraged them into the teaching profession, as well as into culturally relevant pedagogy.

Some of the teaching strategies revealed from the Ladson-Billings study included an emphasis on building rapport through getting to know students and their families, establishing community within the classroom, and supporting bilingual language. All of these approaches effectively support culturally relevant teaching, and were directly or indirectly addressed by participants of the study discussed in this paper.

Building Rapport
Teachers have found it very important to establish a positive rapport with students as early into the school year as possible. Upon achieving this rapport, students are typically better able to trust the teacher, which in turn, makes students feel more inclined to receiving culturally relevant instruction. An example from Ladson-Billings’ work includes a teacher that issues an “entry questionnaire” at the beginning of the school year to all of her students. This document contains general contact information, and goes further to explore what students enjoy and like to do when they are not in school. This information is not designed to violate privacy, but for the teacher to have a better sense of who her students are and what motivates them. Once students feel comfortable with trusting their teacher, they will be more likely to follow her lead (Ladson-Billings, 1994).

**Community Connection**

Building community within the classroom is a strategy used by culturally relevant teachers to assure their students that they have a secure place where their opinions and perspectives are validated. One of the teacher strategies described in The Dreamkeepers, was to establish a connection with parents by providing her personal phone number and establishing a phone tree so all parents in the class could communicate with one another, as well as the teacher (Ladson-Billings, 1994).

Another method described with regard to building a community connection was through the sponsoring of a class camping trip. On this journey, students were able to engage in team building activities that supported elements of the required curriculum, and the students who participated were able to build relationships with each other that they continued to develop throughout the school year (Ladson-Billings, 1994)

**Bilingual Language**
Similar to the sentiments of Dr. Carter G. Woodson, some of the participants in Ladson-Billings’ research operated under the realization that students should be allowed to express themselves in the way they felt most comfortable, even if that method deviated from standard English. One of the featured teachers empowered her students through an activity where students translated song lyrics from a popular song of the day. This activity guided students through the process of analyzing text, while showing them that their experiences were valuable, and they actually possessed knowledge they could explain to the teacher (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 91). All of these methods described, in addition to others, are reflections of the theoretical framework of this study, Critical Race Theory in Education.

2.3 Critical Race Theory in Education

“The education of any people should begin with the people themselves.” This Carter G. Woodson (1933) quote summarizes the theoretical framework of critical pedagogy. Critical pedagogy is a way of teaching that “points educators toward a mode of analysis that stresses the breaks, discontinuities, and tensions in history, all of which become valuable in that they highlight the centrality of human agency and struggle, while simultaneously revealing the gap between society as it presently exists and society as it might be (Darder, 2009).” This mode of educational analysis emerged as a response to the anti-liberatory schooling process evident within public school systems. Traditional education methods serve as a detriment to all students, especially marginalized students of color (Darder, 2009).

Through CRT, this commitment to social justice “offers a liberatory or transformative response to racial, gender, and class oppression (Matsuda, 1991). Examples of agency in education-based CRT include advocating for liberatory education reforms and policies, creating spaces where stakeholders such as students, parents, and teachers can voice their concerns and be
part of creating the solutions, and supporting the creation and implementation of inclusionary curriculum, such as culturally relevant pedagogy.

CRT in Education pioneer, Gloria Ladson-Billings, touts CRP as a necessary component of instruction toward African American students. Ladson-Billings contends that CRP “demands that students experience academic success, develop and/or maintain cultural competence, and develop a critical consciousness, which empowers them to challenge the status quo (Harmon, 2012).” So how have educators attempted to resist against tradition and provide cultural relevance in their classrooms?

Resistance and Agency

One entity that sought to repair the vacancy in African American education were Citizenship Schools. As an adult education program and political activist agency, about 2,500 teachers taught “basic literacy and political education classes for tens of thousands of their neighbors (Payne, 2008).” These schools were deemed successful, due to its “sustained focus on overcoming illiteracy to strengthen Black electoral power, an interactive pedagogy that built upon the experience and culture of the students, and an explicitly political approach to education that assertively linked the acquisition of knowledge with collective efforts to overcome racism (Payne, 2008).”

One of the tangible ways Citizenship Schools put their vision to work was through practical curriculum applications. Although literacy was traditionally taught, students also learned to read and understand voter registration documents and labor contracts. These were appropriate ways to liberate students. It is my opinion that the current public school systems neglect real world applications of knowledge, instead opting for politically biased curriculum that results in limited opportunities for students. Across the United States, programs such as
building construction, automotive technology, and other vocational offerings are being eliminated, leaving some students with few opportunities for sustainable employment after high school. Since tangible skills are not typically embedded in district curriculum requirements, it becomes the responsibility of the conscious teacher to fill the gaps.

Citizenship Schools were also successful in my opinion because of the abundant student desire for learning. Students had a thirst for knowledge, and gladly sacrificed to receive an education. This fervor for learning is vital, yet often absent among present day students. CRP strategies tend to take boring out of the classroom, and make school a place where students want to be, consistently. Citizenship teachers engaged their students, and did not have to tackle their mission alone.

Citizenship Schools expanded their reach beyond the schoolhouse. When the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) took control of the Citizenship School programs due to funding constraints, activism increased through community programs. Partnerships with public figures helped to bridge gaps between formalized education and the “real world” (Payne, 2008). Current public school cultures are solitary in nature - teachers are expected to advance low-performing students to drastically higher levels based on standardized test scores – with limited support. Job security and financial incentives are based directly on test scores, however, few investments are made in increasing the quantity and quality of resources available.

Other agents of resistance were the Freedom Schools. Developed to fight the status quo and provide quality education for African Americans, Mississippi Freedom Schools were a strategic facet of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement. The magnolia state has long been economically deficient and poorly educated. It is for this reason that Mississippi was chosen as the anchor location for the Freedom School mission.
The curriculum goal of MS Freedom Schools was to focus on the “philosophy of the Civil Rights Movement, the foundations of Black history, and literacy (Moore-Clemons, 2014).” Of special importance was literacy, because it opened doors that had long been locked away, and challenged the rhetoric of slavery that perpetuated racial inferiority. Literacy brought freedom, “emancipation was and is the freedom to think for oneself. Literacy brought protection from being enslaved again (Harmon, 2012).”

At the end of the slavery, dissenters felt African Americans could not handle formal education and resented the reality of African American schools educating students. In an attempt to regain power and control, national, non-culturally relevant education groups recommended the curriculum for African American schools. The suggested curriculum was lacking in accurate core content and focused more on teaching employable skills. Instructional strategies were teacher-centered, and not surprisingly, this curriculum was available to schools for free. Then and now, funding for African American schools was sparse, making the less culturally relevant curriculum option more appealing to African American school systems (Harmon, 2012). These cultural incongruences in African American curriculum were countered at various stages in history with deliberate acts of resistance through culturally relevant pedagogy.

2.4 Intersectionality

A discussion about Culturally Relevant Pedagogy will not be complete without the consideration of gender and class, along with race. In Feminist Analysis of Gender and Schooling, Kathleen Weiler (2003) discusses several theories on the effects of gender in schooling. Some of those theories discuss gender roles that have developed from society, while others explore notions of intersectionality with gender, society, and class.
One of the theories presented in *Feminist Analysis* was the Feminist Reproduction Theory. This theory suggests that schools play a strategic role in the reproduction of gender oppression within schooling. This way of thinking states that the schooling system relegates females to subservient, docile positions within the schoolhouse, roles perpetuated in society. The theory believes that through schooling experiences, girls are encouraged to pursue unpaid domestic work or low-paid work in secondary roles. This theory is Marx based, and thus considers class a contributing factor to the way girls are treated in school, suggesting the role of women in a capitalistic society is considered insignificant (Weiler, 2003).

Other arguments supporting Feminist Reproduction Theory include the idea that females innately lack the physiological characteristic of aggression that makes one successful in a capitalistic workforce. Instead, women are nurturing, a characteristic not valued in the cut throat world of capitalism (Weiler, 2003). This theory is represented in education through the lack of emphasis on encouraging girls to pursue “aggressive” career paths, namely within the fields of science and mathematics. Although there is a stereotype that girls do not “do” science and math, Weiler wrote this piece in the late 1980s, and many efforts have since been initiated to encourage girls to pursue interests in science and math. For example, Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) initiatives are creating math, science, and robotics after school programs, summer camps, and even toys, geared toward girls.

Although girls face many challenges in the academic environment, resistance to gender oppression in schools is evident. Girls excel academically in great numbers, and many of my grade conscious female students continue their education beyond secondary school. As stated earlier, the greatest concern of most students regarding academic elevation, is not racial oppression or the glass ceiling, but the reality of the financial ceiling. Many students choose to
forgo college or accept a lower-tiered school due to financial fears. It is evident that, for those students, class oppression trumps gender and racial oppression.

The economic class issue is discussed by Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) in *Toward a Critical Race Theory* with a conversation on property taxes. The authors state that property taxes fund public schools – so areas that have higher property values also have higher property taxes. These additional funds allow schools to have higher quality resources and technology. The schools left behind are typically the ones in more modest to poor communities, generally populated with people of color. For example, the average home price in Clayton County, Georgia is about $89,000. Surrounding Atlanta metropolitan counties such as (North) Fulton, Gwinnett, and Forsyth have property values between $167,000 and $238,000. I have also noticed that schools in “elite” counties organize fundraisers to supplement funding in their schools. This is a practice I have not observed in some of the “lower tiered” counties. It is possible that Title I federal funding may pose fundraising restrictions on designated schools, but the ease of fundraising for schools that do not receive federal funding goes hand in hand with the economic status present in the communities they serve.

Consider the following example. A Denver, Colorado mother has two children that attend very different schools. School A struggles to raise $300 at a bake sale to supplement an activity for one classroom, while School B holds a direct giving campaign and raises over $14,000 for the entire school. The difference? School B serves very few poor students, meaning very few poor parents, and those parents can give generously (Denver Post, 2016). Economics plays a major factor in the vast deficiencies between neighborhoods and their schools, a factor that dehumanizes the educational experience.

Pauline Lipman (2009) addresses economic disparities in schools, saying,
“this is a system that treats people as a means to an end. The economizing of education and the discourse of accounting reduce people to potential sources of capital accumulation, manipulators of knowledge for global economic expansion, or providers of the services and accessories of leisure and pleasure for the rich. Students are reduced to test scores, future slots in the labor market, prison numbers, and possible cannon fodder in military conquests.”

This treatment extends to teachers and administrators as well, despite reforms advertised as being necessary for the best interest of students and schools.

The intersectionality of race, class, and gender work together to form the current state of society, and bell hooks (1994) asserts that an unwillingness to approach teaching that includes all those facets is a disservice to students. hooks posits that the fear of teaching non-traditionally is rooted in the idea that classroom management will compete with the free flowing nature of ideas and discussion (1994). This idea may initially ring true, but as the classroom facilitator, the instructor will shape the culture to a place of order and safety. Culturally relevant teaching helps to create this safe space where all voices are valued.

2.5 Teachers and CRP

Teachers who seek to incorporate Culturally Relevant Pedagogy in their instructional practices can do so in many ways. Some of those strategies will be discussed in this section, including teacher and student voice, community culture, and the specific strategies utilized by education leaders of the past.

Teacher and Student Voice

The importance of voice is vital for all educational stakeholders. Students need to know their voice is valued in school, teachers need the reassurance that their voice is supported and has
the power to make change, and parents should know their voice is strong enough to effectively advocate for their children.

Strategies teachers can implement to create a culture of community include seating arrangements that facilitate collaboration, and décor that invites comfort. Overall, the instructor must value the presence of all students, and once that is achieved, building excitement in the classroom becomes a collective effort (hooks, 1994). Creating community in the classroom is important because it includes everyone in the conversation, assuring students that their classroom experience will be personally enriching. One way hooks encourages community is through the use of journals – students write reflections in their journals and they share their selections with classmates. This practice allows students to exercise their voice, assuring them that their opinions are valued.

Despite the wonderful discoveries of culturally relevant teaching, hooks notes that tension in the critical pedagogy classroom is often present and CRP is often met unfavorably by students. Most of the students I receive have been conditioned to have the teacher tell them all the answers so they do not really have to think throughout their “learning” experience. When I challenge students to learn new skills, it takes several weeks before they are willing to participate. This adaptation to a new way of thinking can literally hurt. Discomfort is involved in giving up old ways and accepting new ways, so it is not uncommon for students to suffer headaches and other ailments when transitioning to CRP from the “banking method” of education, as described by Brazilian education reformer, Paulo Freire. Freire describes the banking method of education as “fill(ing) students with the contents of (the teacher’s) narration,” transforming students into “containers” and “receptacles” to be “filled” by teachers (Freire, 1970).
This critical focus on educational experience is necessary in part due to the “hidden curriculum” found in many public-school systems in the United States. Darder spotlights a Texas school board and its legislative efforts to limit critical education through its text book adoption program. Text book adoption occurs within school districts when the textbooks for a particular subject are replaced with updated versions so students are able to interact with materials that are in good physical shape, and that contain accurate information. The books selected for students in the Darder example omitted or marginalized the stories of women and people of color, yet emphasized the accomplishments of Eurocentric men. This application of hidden curriculum is similar to the treatment of Social Studies standards of learning in Georgia. Educational standards of learning for the 2017-2018 school year were revised, and held up in the approval process due to a state Senator who weighed in on the content, saying, “though important, we should recognize that the dominant features of our culture are no longer anchored in Native American cultures, but in the Anglo-American traditions of Western Civilization, and therefore, the historical focus should major on the majors, and not major in the minor themes of displaced cultures (Downey, 2016).” It is precisely this closeminded perspective that besets much of society, and prompts the necessity of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy.

Community Culture

_Culture and Power in the Classroom_ discusses multicultural education as a “pedagogy of possibility,” a way of teaching that provides students with an enlightening and empowering education that encourages them to question the status quo (Darder, 2012). Darder asserts that simply getting students ready to function in an oppressive society is not sufficient - students must be led into recognizing themselves as productive agents of resistance. This task can be challenging due to many restrictions in school culture. In public schools, following the rules is
paramount. Students can find themselves in trouble for using a cellular phone, listening to music, or violating a uniform code. To reverse some of these oppressive norms, critical teachers work with students to establish classroom guidelines that focus on allowing students to exercise their own educational freedom. Teaching is an art. It takes a creative person to guide students to discovery, and teaching African American students requires extra mastery to ensure justices are met.

Supporting literature asserts that successful teachers of African American children use culturally responsive instruction to engage in the following practices: (a) draw on African American culture and history, (b) locate ‘self’ in a historical and cultural context, (c) enable students to create new knowledge based upon life experiences, and (d) view knowledge as reciprocal. (Ladson-Billings, 1994)

Strategies

Teachers should choose strategies that meet the unique needs of their students, and should be comfortable with the risks associated with those strategies. Henry Giroux indicates in *Critical Theory and Educational Practice* (2004) that to overcome the hurdles of implementing cultural relevance, it is imperative for teachers to know their content so well, that creating opportunities for cultural relevance becomes seamless. Once a teacher is comfortable with the required material, it only makes sense to enhance it with gems that lead students to greater understanding.

One way to teach critically is to involve students in the creation of the curriculum, giving them ownership of the learning process. Teachers ask students what they want to learn, and create spaces within the traditional curriculum to draw inferences and connections within the context of what students want to know. Giving students the wheel takes time and courage, but
will yield an environment of trust, cultural appreciation, and allow students to become “problem
posing” scholars (Freire, 1970).

Some critical teachers are hesitant to lecture in their classrooms for fear of depositing
information into students, however, teachers must find the balance between direct explanation of
content and political analysis. Educators must avoid spending most of their instruction engaging
students in dialogue outside of the mandatory content. Explicit lesson planning may help evoke
the balance between content and cultural relevance. Explicit planning involves brief direct
explanation of content; modeling, where the teacher demonstrates a skill; guided instruction,
where students work together to practice the learned skill; and independent practice, where
students are released to demonstrate their mastery of the skill. These elements engage and allow
students direct involvement in the learning process, while leaving space for critical interaction
within the required content. These practices will work well with CRP if school officials are
accepting of the explicit instructional model.

James Banks and AW Boykin are CRP scholars that have contributed instruction models
reflecting Ladson-Billings guidelines, providing a rare curriculum blueprint for conscious
teachers. Despite nuances of difference, both approaches consider the student as a well-rounded
individual, placing emphasis on a model of reciprocal connection and care.

James Banks – Multicultural Education

The Banks model follows four approaches to multicultural curriculum:

Contributions is the Banks approach that focuses on cultural aspects such as holidays
and traditions. These cultural aspects are typically not woven into the fabric of the class
environment in the current public education setting, and their inclusion in this Banks model
demonstrates their importance to student lives. The Additive approach focuses on
supplementary material added to the existing curriculum. This can be in the form of additional text books, journals, visual aids, or other items that enhance the provided content materials. This approach is often used by teachers in my school district, since limited core resources are available. The **Transformation** approach provides multiple perspectives and a focus on empathy. This perspective is about establishing rapport with students and creating a comfortable environment by letting students know their teacher cares for their wellbeing. The **Social Action** approach focuses on problem solving to make a difference while addressing inequities. This is similar to the approach Black teachers used during the desegregation process, and mirrors the activist requirements of Critical Race Theory in Education (Banks, 2006).

2  **Boykin’s Cultural Asset-Based Instruction**

The Boykin model is asset-based instruction, which centers on cultural assets as the foundation for instruction. Cultural norms of African American students are not to be perceived as problems, but celebrated as a method of bringing students into the content. The cultural assets Boykin references are: (a) spirituality, (b) harmony, (c) expressive individualism, (d) affective, (e) oral communication, (f) communalism, (g) movement, (h) verve, and (i) social time perspective. Each of these elements of culture are to be embedded into lesson instruction, leading to student buy-in, comfort, and engagement (Boykin, 2000).

Banks and Boykin were committed to cultural instruction, yet sometimes commitment becomes challenging when conscious teachers are isolated in their mission. Cultural hegemony says racism is a societal norm, but awareness yields a renewal of the mind. Many people, including teachers, were taught in anti-engaged environments, and were led to believe that was the universal way of education. Some veteran teachers fear losing control of their classrooms if
they do not continue to teach in the manner they were taught. I hope this study will reveal that collaboration can provide tangible CRP strategies. Once teachers are open to teaching through cultural relevance, effective CRP teachers can dispel the common misconceptions that tokenism is feasible CRP, or that culturally relevant teaching is not necessary if students of color are not present. Culturally relevant teaching is even more powerful, when the leaders who use it understand that race is not the only variable in CRP.

2.6 Education Reform

Formal education reform in the United States developed during the 19th century when pioneering American education reformer, Horace Mann, “prodded and pushed our country toward a free public education system as an indispensable element of a democracy (Gross, 2014).” Mann’s influence instituted compensatory attendance regulations in the United States for children of the day. Subsequent reform platforms lacked Mann’s passion for student engagement and morphed into platforms for political gain. Current national education reform can be politically divisive, often pitting uber-conservative Republicans against radically left-wing Democrats in Congress. Sometimes reaching a happy medium does not seem possible, as “current policy discussions read as though only one definition matters, and it includes high scores on standardized tests, pay for performance, charter schools, bringing recalcitrant teachers’ unions into line, and, above all, being accountable (Gross, 2014).” These standards stunt the ability to provide well-rounded curriculum that welcomes cultural inclusion.

Intelligence tests made their way into the educational landscape during the Cold War. Intellectual competition with the Soviet Union created a focus on math, science, and Advanced Placement courses in schools. This competition even birthed the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA). Public schools began to receive federal funding with the 1965
Education Act under President Lyndon B. Johnson’s Great Society initiative, and accountability based on standardized test scores started with the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) reform system under President George W. Bush. (Darder, 2012)

Standardized testing is steeped in the dominant ideology of culture and class, and does not account for the lack of resources and other oppressive forces in schools that serve bicultural students. Educators often deviate from critical teaching methods due to the pressures to ‘teach to the test,’ to produce ‘successful’ testing data. These practices create an impression that school knowledge is impersonal and irrelevant beyond the test.

Despite these unrealistic expectations, if bicultural students fail, society assumes they lack intelligence and drive. Under the Barack Obama Presidential Administration, the Department of Education created the ‘Race to the Top’ initiative that uses the College and Career Ready Performance Index (CCRPI) model to determine if schools have achieved the ‘appropriate’ goals for the year. CCRPI is the revised version of the Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) measure, which was instituted under the George W. Bush Presidential Administration. CCRPI rewards schools for high marks in areas that are not terribly difficult to establish, such as attendance and suspension rates. However, some CCRPI areas are not simple to navigate, requiring interventions and programs that may take years to implement and yield results, such as increased graduation rates and standardized test scores. These benchmarks create a very challenging situation for conscious teachers who deliver culturally relevant curriculum, yet want to remain in compliance with school, state, and national requirements.

Some sources have touted charter schools, private schools, and academies as potential solutions to the rigidity of the public-school business model. Although these sites offer benefits in curriculum flexibility, challenges also exist. Transportation to the sites is sometimes difficult
for students and their families, and the complexities of corporate funding and other financial considerations are also potential barriers.

2.7 Summary

This chapter discussed some of the pertinent literature that supports Critical Race Theory in Education and Culturally Relevant Pedagogy. After a thorough review of the literature, the following gaps were discovered, and are briefly discussed here.

Gaps

The current discourse surrounding Critical Race Theory is “primarily occurring within academic communities rather than practitioners involved with the day-to-day education of African American students (Morris, 2001).” Many teachers outside of higher academia are not familiar with CRT, especially if their school district does not provide any support through professional development opportunities. Front line teachers should be properly equipped to provide African American students with the best education for their needs and prepare them to be productive citizens, able to effectively seek social justice in their fields.

In my analysis of literature surrounding culturally relevant teaching, most of what I observed focuses on urban students of lower socio-economic status. This may be because the thought is that students in this demographic are deemed to be the most in need. I would argue that students in rural areas are also in dire need of culturally relevant teaching, and that although affluent students may not have as many obvious obstacles to overcome, they too will benefit from quality CRP.

Another gap in the literature is that Culturally Relevant Pedagogy discourse is traditionally focused on quantitative and qualitative data that discusses why CRP is needed in
classrooms, rather than taking it a step further and addressing specific strategies that are used to support CRP in the classroom. I hope to help fill that gap with this research.

Another gap in CRP literature is gender inclusion. Although hooks speaks thoroughly on how gender affects the dynamics of the education process, she does not specifically call on CRP as a solution. She speaks to holistic education, which focuses on creating a safe community and individual wellness, and even relates that students respond better to classroom environments that seem relevant to them. However, she does not name CRP as the framework for instructional strategies that can help close the gender gap.

Lisa Delpit speaks to the lack of teacher preparation courses that emphasize culturally relevant teaching (2003), and other pieces of literature speak to other issues related to teacher prep courses, but additional analysis as to the way CRP is addressed or not in teacher preparation courses is needed. Depending on the goals of the institution, quality of public schools in the area, and knowledge of faculty and administrators, CRP may be addressed improperly or not at all in teaching programs. Although actual classroom action is the best experience, exposure to proper CRP inclusion can make a great difference in informing potential teachers on cultural relevance in teaching.

Finally, a major gap I have noticed in the literature, also addressed by Lisa Delpit (2003) and Renee Smith-Maddox (1999), is the egregious lack of professional development for veteran teachers. Instructors immersed in the education cycle year in and year out are sometimes reluctant to stir the pot with new information. However what veteran teachers may lack in new teacher zeal, they make up for, with an abundance of resources and “withitness.” Veteran teachers know how to establish their expectations early, get a handle on classroom management to limit behavior issues, and can implement new strategies without a major disruption to their
normal practices. Some school environments do not know CRP training is available, and possibly others do not believe it is necessary. Whatever the reason, CRP is not as widely known as it should be, as evidenced through the lack support for CRP professional development.

**Conclusion**

The information contained in the literature review of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy reveals that CRP is necessary because historical racism has prevented African American students from seeing positive images of themselves in curriculum. The theoretical framework of Critical Race Theory in Education supports culturally relevant teaching and, encourages supporters to go beyond talk and move to action. The literature provides some isolated suggestions of CRP incorporation, including creating a culture of community in the classroom, incorporating the experiences and ideas of the students in the formulation of the course norms, and honoring student voice (hooks 1999). The goal through my research is to corroborate ideas contained in the literature with teachers currently in the field to denote what is working right now in the classroom, and help other teachers devise a plan based on those exemplars.

This study matters to African American Studies and the African American community because most CRP studies address why students need deliberate attention to their culture in school, but do not address the specific ways teachers center their classrooms around CRP. This work is meant to inspire teachers unaware of CRP, and teachers who have the desire to implement it but do not know how. CRP as an instructional strategy provides counter stories to the majoritarian narratives prominent in public school education, and this study celebrates teachers who sacrifice and take risks to provide students with the cultural relevance they deserve.

**Summary**
This section discussed the historical context that explains the need for Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, and how CRP can positively affect the negative aspects of the current public schooling system. The theoretical framework of Critical Race Theory in Education was discussed, as well how the principles of the framework can be translated into specific instructional strategies. Some of the proposed strategies discussed were holistic education practice, student voice, and activism. The next chapter will detail the proposed research methods of this study, and how the composition of the study will accurately address the guiding research questions surrounding CRP strategies.

3 METHODOLOGY

This chapter contains eight sections that discuss the specific methods used to conduct the study. The qualitative design of the study is explored, as well as the methods used for participant and site selection. The phenomenological approach to the data collection is discussed, as well as the methods of data analysis used. Validity and reliability measures are detailed, and researcher bias and assumptions are discussed. The research questions for consideration:

1. How do teachers teach Black students when Black excellence is not a curriculum priority?
2. How do you define Culturally Relevant Pedagogy?
3. Does your school district support the use of culturally relevant classroom practices?
4. What barriers do you believe hinder teachers from providing quality culturally relevant teaching?
5. Have you received CRP professional development training as a teacher?
3.1 Design of the Study

This qualitative study focused on the instructional strategies used by teachers in their attempts to meet the neglected cultural needs of African American students in public school settings. The qualitative research method was more appropriate for this study than the quantitative method because qualitative research yields a human connection using observation and interview techniques, such as the plan for this study. Qualitative research also yields a more accountable interpretation of participant views than some quantitative research methods might offer. Michael Quinn Patton (2002) states that qualitative researchers “engage in naturalistic inquiry, studying real-world settings inductively to generate rich narrative descriptions.” Through these rich descriptions, I discovered patterns and themes that reflected the common phenomenon shared between the participants.

The research design for this study was centered on the phenomenological approach, which involves the distinct analysis of the shared ‘phenomena’ of a similar group of people in a way that binds them together (Creswell, 2013). The phenomena shared between the participants of this study is the commitment to teaching African American students by infusing cultural relevance in their instructional strategies. This commonality provides a direct connection to the foundational theme that runs throughout the research. The shared phenomenon also led to the discovery of common themes experienced by the profiled teachers. Creswell also asserts that the researcher is involved in the research by discussing his/her personal experiences with the phenomenon – but seeks to avoid infusing their personal experience with the group analysis (2013). My personal experience as a teacher was certainly infused in the fabric of the overall research observation and discussion, yet I believe it did not taint the study with excessive researcher bias.
A document review including course syllabi and lesson plans was conducted prior to the class observations as a close read of the ways teachers made attempts to integrate cultural relevance in their lessons.

3.2 Sample Selection

The population of this study consisted of four public school teachers in a major metropolitan city in the southern United States. The profiled teachers were all certified, with at least three years of teaching experience, and served a population of mostly African American high school students. A minimum of three years of experience was required so that their CRP incorporation could be measured without the distractions that come with being a new teacher.

Four teachers were selected to provide a variety of perspectives on how to implement CRP, and to provide balance in data analysis. No more than four teachers were selected due to time constraints. No age or gender requirements were designated, and the only requirement regarding subjects taught was that the teacher led a Social Studies course, such as History, Economics, or Psychology.

All participants recruited were colleagues I have informally observed as being culturally relevant, either through discussions and classroom visits. Data for this phenomenological study was collected through qualitative classroom observations and in-depth participant interviews surrounding their CRP teaching strategies. Data was analyzed through the coding process and reviewed for patterns and common themes.

Confidentiality

Participants received an informed consent document prior to the observations and interview sessions, which explained the details of the study, the importance of the study to African American students and the community at large, how information they provided would be
used, how long information would be stored, methods of follow-up post interview and observations, and the confidentiality of their personal information.

3.3 Site Selection

The study participants taught at two different schools, so I ensured I was able to gain access to each site with the assistance of the participants. Since I am also a teacher within the district, access to the two sites was not especially difficult. As part of the follow up process post study, I will reach out to participants with regard to creating a cohort for ideas and support. This group could potentially create a district-wide African American Studies club for students that places the spotlight on the historical achievements of Black people. Each of the participants, if willing, could serve as advisors to the club.

3.4 Data Collection

The research design for this study was centered on the phenomenological approach, which involves the distinct analysis of the shared ‘phenomena’ of a similar group of people in a way that binds them together (Creswell, 2013). The phenomena shared between the participants of this study was the commitment to teaching African American students by infusing cultural relevance in their instructional strategies. The shared phenomenon of the participants was revealed through classroom observations and interviews. This was the best method for data collection because it allowed the participant to verbalize their strategies and reflect on their impact, while the researcher corroborated the participant views through direct observation in their classrooms.

Data collection took place through document review, classroom observations and in-depth interviews. Prior to the observations, I obtained copies of participant syllabi, and lesson plans for review. I combed through those documents to obtain an initial understanding of how
participants integrated culturally relevant instructional strategies. I also referenced those
documents to corroborate information gleaned from observations and interviews. I was able to
employ my teacher lens to review those documents and check for potential discrepancies with
relation to CRP in a typical public school classroom.

I conducted the classroom observations before conducting the conversational interviews
with participants to have an opportunity to clarify information from the observations. Copious
field notes were taken during the classroom observations and the individual participant
interviews were audio recorded to aid in securing data accuracy. The details in these notes also
helped me to incorporate thick description in the findings section. I asked each participant to try
not to inform students of my visit, so students were not enticed to ‘act.’ I prepared a chart in
addition to my field notes that helped me to quickly capture the classroom observation from a
sensory standpoint. Through the chart, I was able to describe not only what I saw, but also what
was available to touch, hear, and smell, as it related to the overall classroom experience. I relied
heavily on my recordings and notes to determine if the observed moments were authentic or not.

*Table 3.1 Observation Chart*
The interview approach used for this study was the cultural interview approach as described by Herbert J. and Irene S. Rubin in *Qualitative Interviewing: The Art of Hearing Data*. The cultural interview approach was chosen because it reflects the goals I as trying to reach as the study Researcher. Rubin describes cultural interviewing as a “focus on the norms, values, understandings, and taken-for-granted rules of behavior or a group or society (Rubin, 2012).” This method reinforces the phenomenological design of the study in that it demonstrates the shared experiences of a group of teachers using culturally relevant practices in their instruction.

Rubin also asserts that the cultural method of interviewing is relaxed, and interviewers are to engage more in “active listening than aggressive questioning (Rubin, 2012).” This method is a strategy that I employed during my interviews with participants, although my natural impulse to continuously ask probing questions was tempting. Sometimes the silence and wait time provided to participants was awkward, but it allowed participants to tell their own stories in explaining their relationship with cultural relevance in their instructional strategies. Storytelling

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Classroom Fragrance</th>
<th>Classroom Lighting</th>
<th>Classroom Sounds</th>
<th>Classroom Temperature</th>
<th>Classroom Visuals</th>
<th>Desk Layout</th>
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<td>Daveed</td>
<td>No scent</td>
<td>Overhead bulb</td>
<td>Collaborative discussion</td>
<td>Seasonably appropriate</td>
<td>Afrocentric images</td>
<td>Small groups</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fuller</td>
<td>Scented oils</td>
<td>Overhead and natural light</td>
<td>Collaborative discussion</td>
<td>Seasonably appropriate</td>
<td>Student exemplary work samples</td>
<td>Small groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jean</td>
<td>No Scent</td>
<td>Natural</td>
<td>Collaborative discussion</td>
<td>Comfortable</td>
<td>Student exemplary work samples</td>
<td>Small groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Langston</td>
<td>Scented candles</td>
<td>Low overhead, and natural light</td>
<td>Instrumental Hip-Hop music</td>
<td>Comfortable</td>
<td>Inspirational quotes</td>
<td>Small groups</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
is an integral component of Critical Race Theory in Education, as it allows participants to lend their voice in opposition to majoritarian narratives. Rubin also posits that cultural interviewing allows participants to “convey values and themes (2012)” that reveal the culture of a particular institution. I believe this interview method worked best for this study because it did not direct participants into saying what I wanted them to say, it allowed them to describe their experiences in their own words.

Interviews were conducted after school hours, on the same day of the observation. For the convenience of the participants, three of the interviews occurred at their school site, and the fourth was conducted at a local, public eatery. Although all the participants were generous and open in their conversations with me, I believe the off-campus interview allowed the participant to feel less time constrained, and more receptive to speaking freely about his instructional strategies, including some of the barriers to implementation. The interviews were conducted on the same day as the observation so the observed information remained fresh in my mind, and the participants could also speak with greater accuracy. Interviews were audio recorded to aid in the researcher transcription process, which helped to ensure data was correctly captured. I informed participants at the time of the interview that I would follow up after the transcription and initial coding process to ensure their information was synthesized appropriately.

The questioning in the interview process started out with the participants describing their own educational experiences to provide background and context. As custom in cultural interviewing, there was not a rigid set of questions asked, as the process evolved organically, based on participant responses, and moments experienced in the individual observations. However, some of the common themes included questions on how each participant defined
cultural relevance, and if they received any professional development training in culturally relevant pedagogy.

3.5 Data Analysis

The methods of data analysis employed were meant to accurately and thoroughly discover the theoretical and procedural connections between the teachers profiled in the study. Two cycles of coding were conducted through various methods to aid in this process, including descriptive, process, and pattern coding.

Coding

Data was coded using the Elemental methods of Descriptive and Process coding for the first cycle after all interviews were transcribed. Elemental coding methods are beneficial for “primary approaches to qualitative data (Saldana, 2009),” and the specific use of descriptive and process coding was conducted to reveal common themes. Descriptive coding “summarizes in a word or short phrase – most often a noun – the basic topic of a passage of qualitative data (Saldana, 2009).” This method allowed the data to be organized for clarity, which helped in determining patterns and themes.

Process coding was applicable in this study because it focuses on “ongoing action/interaction/emotion taken in response to situations, or problems, often with the purpose of teaching a goal or handling a problem (Saldana, 2009).” The goal of this study was to understand what teachers were doing in their classrooms to implement cultural relevance in their required content, therefore Process coding was a logical selection to assist in unpacking data.

For second-cycle coding, Pattern Coding was selected to assist in deciphering the categorical information from cycle one. According to Saldana, Pattern codes are “ones that identify an emergent theme, configuration, or explanation. They pull together a lot of material
into a more meaningful and parsimonious unit of analysis (Saldana, 2009).” Saldana also asserts
that the Pattern method helps develop major themes in the data, which was precisely the aim for
the data analysis of this study.

Validity and Reliability

Since I have acknowledged that my relationship with this study is personal, I made a
concerted effort to limit any infusion of my bias in the collection and analysis of data by not
justifying or dismissing material based on comparisons to any of my experiences. Although my
story may corroborate or provide a counter position to participant narratives, my researcher
perspective did not taint the findings of the study.

To strengthen the validity and reliability of this study, coding analysis was both peer
reviewed and externally audited for inter-rater reliability and accuracy. A diverse peer review
team was employed for the task, including members with African American Studies knowledge,
and some without. The peer review team also included members with experience conducting
qualitative studies, as well as members with little experience in that area. This diverse team
allowed for objective data analysis. Each rater received printed copies of participant transcripts,
and raters were asked to identify passages they felt correlated with specified patterns that
emerged from the coding analysis. Additionally, raters were asked to corroborate specified sub
codes to further solidify the theoretical and procedural connections that emerged from participant
interviews.

In an attempt to reinforce validity, I contacted each participant to review their transcript
and my coding analysis as a result of our interview. Each participant had an opportunity to
review the collected material, and all participants were satisfied with the initial method of
collection. This data approval provided participants with the confidence to know that their stories would be told with fidelity. At the conclusion of the study, I have also offered to provide the interview transcript and final manuscript to each participant for their records and confidentiality.

3.6 Researcher Bias and Assumptions

I am a reflection of the participants of this study. My researcher bias includes the fact that I am currently a teacher, just as each of the participants speak of, and I teach Social Studies, just as the participants. I even teach in the same school district as all of the participants, and in the same school as some. The proposed phenomenon that binds the group is one for which I am also very familiar. Ever since my first year in front of students, I have made efforts to determine how to commit to cultural relevance in my lessons and instructional delivery, so this matter is extremely relevant and important to me.

In addition, as an African American Studies pupil, and Black woman, I bring an interest and passion for the subject material that both fuels my excitement, and could have led to unintentional influence over participants. Throughout the process I tried to be clear in stating my goals yet remain neutral in allowing participants to provide genuine responses, a task I believe was supported through my deliberate method of cultural interviewing.

3.7 Summary

This section discussed the research methods and design elements used in this study. The strategies for selecting participants was detailed, as well as how the study sites were selected, how data collection took place, how data analysis took place, and how the research methods reflected validity and reliability across the study. The next section will discuss the findings of
the study from the standpoint of each participant and their stories of how CRP is reflected in their classrooms.

4 FINDINGS

The purpose of this study is to reveal specific strategies teachers use to allow their students to experience cultural relevance within required curriculum experiences. This qualitative study was designed on the phenomenological approach and was conducted from February through May 2017.

The overall research question for this study is: “How do teachers teach African American students when Black excellence isn’t a curriculum priority?” Some of the sub questions affiliated with the study are:

1. How do you define Culturally Relevant Pedagogy?
2. Does your school district support the use of culturally relevant classroom practices?
3. What barriers do you believe hinder teachers from providing quality culturally relevant teaching?
4. Have you received CRP professional development training as a teacher?

This chapter contains three sections detailing participant narratives resulting from the classroom observations and conversational interviews conducted. Also discussed is an overview of the themes that emerged from the observations and interviews, and how those themes relate to the overall purpose of the study. The final section in this chapter serves as a summary of participant narratives and the resulting themes that emerged from the study.
4.1 Participants

Three Black men and one White man who live and teach in a large Southeastern metropolitan city participated in the study. All participants were observed in a classroom setting at least once, and all also participated in debrief conversations post observation.

Mr. Langston is a teacher in his mid-forties, born and raised in a rural Southern town. He has a Bachelor’s and Master’s degree from two different Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), one of which is in African American Studies, as well as an additional Master’s degree from an online University, in the Education field. Langston recalled a childhood where he was reared by a mother that was brave, and protective. Langston expressed that he kept those qualities close with him during his eight years of service in the United States Army and believes that some of those qualities have influenced his teaching practices.

Langston credited his time in the Army with his commitment to establishing routines and procedures. This characteristic was obvious during the several visits made to his classroom. Students were always clear on what it was they were to do once they entered Mr. Langston’s class – which was to work on their bell ringer activity. The bell ringer is considered a warm up activity for students to gradually transition into class and prepare their minds to engage in the specified topic of the day. During this activity, students can write down the lesson standards, or the day’s learning objective. In Mr. Langston’s class, students also write down and study the quote of the week. Although one might automatically believe that a former soldier with a preference for precision would be a menacing character, but on the contrary, Mr. Langston is quite kind and gentle in his interactions with students. He greets them all by name with a handshake as they enter the class, with his regular, “good morning, young scholars – are you treating yourself well today?”
Upon my visits to Mr. Langston’s class, the cool, comfortable temperature, low lighting, scented candle aroma, and instrumental hip hop music made it seem more like a spoken word club than a classroom. Students were always compliant, but not constrained. They knew what to do and wasted no time in getting it done so they could proceed with the day’s lesson.

Mr. Langston has been teaching a total of about fifteen years, and at the time of this study was teaching Sociology, a semester long, elective Social Studies course. Due to this, Langston teaches students across all grade levels, often within the same class period, providing unique access to a wide range of students. A document review of Mr. Langston’s lesson plans revealed a commitment to cultural relevance, simply due to the range of cultural content covered in Langston’s class. The teacher’s lesson plans demonstrated that students were to learn about the historical origins of Black History Month, the impact of Black sociologists on the discipline, and the course would also tackle issues such as the war on drugs and the history of hip hop.

*Inauguration Day*

Mr. Langston’s class is full of theatrics, from the physical environment to the syntax and syncopation of Langston’s verbal delivery. Oftentimes, students are poised on the edge of their seats waiting for what will happen next. Staying true to his roots of routine and procedure, Langston typically starts his lesson with a guided question posed to the class. During my first visit, the question stemmed from a previous class where they discussed the significance of the “Willie Lynch letter,” which found recent fame circulating on various internet channels. The letter is a supposed plan to ‘make a slave’ written by fictional slaveholder, Willie Lynch, in the early 1700s. The letter discusses how to pit Black people against each other through colorism, and describes how to keep Black people in psychological ‘chains’ (New Crisis, 1999). Langston asked students how, even though there is strong evidence to suggest the letter is fraudulent, how
the content of the letter is manifested today, especially due to the political transition that was taking place that day.

One student said she felt the letter might ring true today because dark and light skinned African Americans are sometimes pitted against one another, where the lighter the skin the more attractive you are perceived to be within the Black community. Another student said that the volatile police culture of the day creates an environment that could make Black men fearful – much like that of a slave owner or overseer. Mr. Langston interjected a comment, indicating that a student in a previous class offered that the race division game is the same as in the past, just with different players. The student cited Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown as examples of Black men that got lynched, just without the rope. Langston exclaimed that he was really moved by the response of that student and impressed with their interpretation of the subject.

There was an instructional transition to a lecture on sociologists, and W.E.B DuBois was the subject. Mr. Langston displayed a PowerPoint slide featuring DuBois, and described the “double consciousness” phenomenon DuBois presented in his work The Souls of Black Folk. In that work, DuBois spoke of how Black people in the United States live two existences, one that focuses on the way they must perform in society, and one that focuses on their true reality (1903). Mr. Langston gave an example of this phenomenon by stating that on a recent school field trip to a local, predominantly White college, the students from his school, mostly Black, were jovial and happy on the bus ride, but their attitude around the White University officials and other students changed completely when they arrived at the institute. Mr. Langston then asked students in his class to think about if this twoness was something they had personally experienced. Some Black students said they had experienced this as an athlete traveling to predominately White schools, and another student said she had a White friend and whenever she
went to her house, her demeanor changed, to represent herself in the best light around the “good people,” as some in her family refer to White people.

One student said he does not only change his demeanor around White people, he changes around anyone different from him, out of respect for other cultures. This portion of the class demonstrated to me that Mr. Langston’s instructional strategies are student centered because he includes them and their perspectives in the major portions of the lesson.

Students were then asked if they knew what the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) was, and if they knew the expanded meaning of the acronym. None of the students offered a correct response. Once Mr. Langston revealed the answer, students were surprised that Black people were once referred to as Colored. As the discussion progressed, Mr. Langston offered that his parent’s birth certificates indicated Colored as their race, and then a student brought up Rachel Dolezal, remembering that she was affiliated with the NAACP. This started a discussion regarding whether it was good or bad that Dolezal pretended to be Black. Some students argued that it was ok because she was trying to help Black people. They cited the fact that she has a Black husband, and attended Howard University, a Historically Black College and University. Others argued that her pretending was not alright because they said she lied and she did not have the right to assume someone else’s culture.

A Latino student in the class noted that race matters in our country seem difficult right now, and he wanted to know if Mr. Langston thought it possible to fix the system. Mr. Langston then asked the student to read a quote from DuBois that he placed on the projector screen which read, “A system cannot fail those it was never meant to protect.” Mr. Langston asked the student to interpret the quote, and the student said that it means Black and Brown people were not considered when the country was being formed, so the needs of those people were not, and are
still not considered important. Mr. Langston went on to probe the students on who was at the table when our country was being formed, and more importantly, who was not at the table. When the class agreed that Black people, Latino people, and women were not at the table, Mr. Langston then encouraged the class to think about ways to challenge the system that does not typically consider them. Students said they could protest, or put pressure on their local legislators to change the laws to better protect them. The student who asked the initial question indicated that he felt it was his responsibility to “take action” and that he felt committed to doing whatever it takes to make a difference.

Mr. Langston’s line of questioning, patience in allowing students to think about what they want to say, and allowing them to consider and appreciate opposing points of view is a good example of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy because it demonstrates his commitment to incorporating African American culture as the focal point of his lessons, not just as a side note, or fun fact, as it is generally covered.

Mr. Langston’s definition of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy is one that centers on the student. Langston states that CRP “communicates to the individual, and illuminates in their consciousness, the importance, not only their past, or their history, but also who they are today.” Langston expands his view of instructional inclusion by stating that CRP “celebrates their culture, their traditions, their customs, their language, and their being.” He says that it is important for students to learn from a perspective of cultural relevance because “it lets them know “why they matter, why you matter, why we as a people matter today. It helps them consider what it is about us that counts? What is it about us as a people that should be studied, and should be included in these books that they call history? That’s cultural relevance.”
Mr. Langston credits his interpretation of culturally relevant teaching not from teacher training, or even classroom experience, but from his interactions with co-workers while employed as a Correctional Officer and waste management worker. Langston explained that he spent time simply talking with people. As a Correctional Officer, Latino colleagues taught him Spanish, which he speaks with Latino students during class changes as greetings. In his experiences, he also learned about the cultural differences between Puerto Ricans and Cubans, or Hondurans and Mexicans, and how those differences can sometimes lead to social conflict. When he worked in waste management, he worked alongside many uneducated White people, who taught him about their culture and typical life experiences, which gave him an appreciation that he had not previously experienced. Mr. Langston believes that giving students access to students of other cultures in class, by way of inquisitive questioning and dialogue, he is bridging the gap and helping to dispel cultural misconceptions.

*Black Sociologists*

I watched Mr. Langston’s CRP views in action even more with another visit to his classroom. During this visit, on the first day of Black History Month, I stayed for approximately 15 minutes after the start of the class, and the lesson for the day was a continuation on a lesson about Black sociologists. The specific subjects being studied were, Franz Fanon, Audrey Lourde, W. E.B. DuBois, Ida B. Wells, Ana Julia Cooper, E. Franklin Frazier, and C.L.R James. In fact, the student bell ringer was for students to recall and be prepared to speak on three tenets of E. Franklin Frazier’s philosophy. They were also scheduled to discuss Pan Africanism, and the African Diaspora. All of those names and terms were written on the whiteboard, as a vocabulary list of sorts, regarding the intended focus for the lesson.
The quote of the week displayed on the board was, “You don’t need someone to complete you, you only need someone to accept you.” Mr. Langston connected the obvious relationship-focused meaning of this quote to the sense that in general people need people to accept them for who they are, regardless of their racial, ethnic, or class status. After students completed their routine of writing the obligatory items off the board, including the vocabulary terms, Mr. Langston began to address the students by describing Carter G. Woodson and the origins of Black History week, explaining how Black people treated it as a month-long observance in the 1960s, and the week became nationally recognized as Black History month in 1976 under President Gerald Ford.

Mr. Langston then transitioned into asking students if they knew the unofficial Black National Anthem. No student raised their hand. With dramatic flair, Mr. Langston then revealed to students that Lift Every Voice and Sing was title of the Black National Anthem. At that point, a few students acknowledged that they were familiar with the song through school programs, or their church. One student asked Mr. Langston why he referred to the anthem as the “unofficial” Black National Anthem, and he responded that there is no official Black Nation, therefore, the anthem is an unofficial observance of an aspirational Black Nation.

To enforce the discussion, Mr. Langston played a five-minute video of a religious choir singing the anthem while positive images of influential African Americans such as Malcom X, Martin Luther King, Jr., Shirley Chisolm, Audrey Lourde, Marian Anderson, Langston Hughes, Marcus Garvey, Stokley Carmichael, Emmitt Till, Gloria Richardson, and others were displayed. Additionally, various images of scenes depicting various Black history moments of the Civil Rights Movement, including the efforts of the Little Rock Nine, all the way through to the Presidential election of Barack Obama.
Orangeburg Massacre

During my final visit to Mr. Langston’s class, he opened the discussion with a gripping informational piece on the Orangeburg, South Carolina Massacre of 1968. The event was explained through a variety of methods, including images, lecture, video, and audio clips. Mr. Langston described the feeling of accomplishment and pride the South Carolina State students must have felt when they were able to peacefully protest the injustice of them being denied entry into the local bowling alley. He reminded students how simple it is for them to gather and have an opportunity to enjoy time with friends out in public. Langston continued to indicate that due to racism and political motivations, the student’s peaceful protest turned deadly when South Carolina State highway patrolmen opened fire on a crowd of unarmed students as they retreated, killing three and wounding dozens. Mr. Langston compared this event to the Kent State protest shooting two years later, and pointed out the difference in media coverage between the two events. Mr. Langston explained that it was 49 years ago to the day that the Orangeburg massacre occurred and asked students to think about how the deaths of those three students may have completely changed the lives of their loved ones. He then charged students with describing an event that became a defining moment in their lives.

One student offered a story about how her father’s indiscretions negatively affected her mother and caused her to become depressed, yet, inspired to start an organization to help others in similar situations. That, in turn, inspired the student to start a group for teens affected with family issues. Mr. Langson told a personal story about when he was a child and an intruder came into his family’s house after his mother had put him to bed. He remembers laying down facing away from bedroom door, but hearing the commotion downstairs. He was scared, but went down to help his mom. To this day, he does not sleep with his back facing the door
because he does not want anyone or anything to sneak up on him and catch him off guard. The students seemed familiar with Mr. Langston sharing his personal stories as part of their normal practices.

Another student spoke of how his family issues when he was younger have molded him into a more mature young adult and he believes that he will be better off for the difficult experiences he has endured. Another student said his mom was a victim of domestic violence, and has been able to find solace with the support of others in similar situations, and the student has taken the opportunity to mentor some of the younger children part of the support group, to help them in their healing process. Finally, one student shared that she had experienced some difficulties with a relative faced health issues, and that experience led her to start writing poetry and spoken word.

I believe that Mr. Langston’s class is one where students share in this fashion because he establishes an environment of comfort that allows students to feel safe. In fact, Mr. Langston credits the establishment of this environment due to the boundaries set through their routines and procedures.

“Students thrive when they feel safe and they feel safe when they have rules and boundaries. When they know that the car is going to stop at the stop sign, that creates a trust that leads to safety. But when everyone runs the stop sign, there is chaos and no safety. So I always try to show that we will hit our stop signs and there won’t be any mass traffic jams in this class. I tell them that it’s ok, you can say what you feel. No one is going to hurt you. It’s alright. Then I have to show them by revealing myself. There is a saying that to impress someone you can see them from afar, but to influence someone you have to see them up close – to see their flaws, strengths, and weaknesses. So, I’ve told them some things about me. And since I’ve done
that, they feel ok. Not only is he say ing it, but he’s doing it. Now usually I close the door, and it’s just me and them, and we talk and get real, and that’s how we’ve been able to encourage each other.”

I felt that this experience demonstrated cultural relevance because students felt comfortable sharing, and the students clapped for each other after each story was shared - showing support for one another. In the debrief process, Mr. Misher revealed that the students decided to clap for each other on their own – he did not prompt them. That activity demonstrated that although some students have an apathy for resistance, activism and action, some have a fire that just needs to be stoked. They need to have an opportunity to tell their story.

Although Mr. Langston has more autonomy to infuse Culturally Relevant Pedagogy in his classroom because he teaches an elective and not a core class, he has a reputation of being culturally sensitive in any capacity – including when he teaches core social studies classes, such as World, and United States History. Mr. Langston seems to be consistently proficient in differentiating his instruction, to appeal to student senses in a variety of ways. Langston uses the traditional method lecturing, using his jazzy, theatrical style. He also uses a good number of pictures, audio and video clips, as well as guest speakers to solidify his lesson topics. Mr. Langston also allowed students to ask questions often and praised them for doing so. At one point I observed Langston telling students he loved it when they asked questions, reinforcing that by saying they were “wise” to ask questions. Mr. Langston also gave students ample time to digest the information being presented and to think critically about their answers before speaking aloud. In the world of education, this practice is referred to as giving students adequate “wait time.” Despite the plentiful applications of cultural relevance in Mr. Langston’s class, he says he
has never received any professional development training regarding the subject during his entire fifteen year teaching career.

**Mr. Jean** is a teacher in his mid-thirties. He was born and raised in a Southern, metropolitan region, and comes from a family of Educators. He has a Bachelor’s and two Master’s degrees from a predominantly White institution in the South. Mr. Jean currently teaches United States History, and has a history of teaching students identified with learning disabilities. When I had the opportunity to visit Mr. Jean’s classroom, there was a consistency of comfort and camaraderie between students and teacher. The classroom environment reflected this level of comfort – the room maintained a moderate temperature, Mr. Jean made use of the natural lighting by ensuring the blinds were fully opened, the desks were arranged in small groups of three to four students, and the classroom walls were covered with exemplary sample student work.

Mr. Jean has been teaching around eight years and serves a wide spectrum of student levels, from general education students, to students labeled as having learning disabilities, and even students who may be considered “honor students,” but do have that label or designation attached to their academic record. The first class I visited was one of the classes that Mr. Jean considers his “honor” students.

Mr. Jean’s lesson was a review session in preparation for an upcoming quiz about big business and technological innovations after the post- Civil War Reconstruction period. The students played a digital quiz review game, where they could interact with the interface using their smartphones. The students worked in their small groups and were very competitive, as the goal of the game was to ring in with your answer before the other teams. Students were well versed in the content and excited to demonstrate their knowledge to themselves and the teacher.
Students on the same team high-fived each other for correct answers, and a friendly level of trash-talking took place among opposing teams. The results of the game were posted on the screen in real time as the question and answer period progressed, and students at the top of the leader board were completely focused on maintaining their lead, while students toward the bottom of the board picked a team to support and consistently rallied them in hopes of winning vicariously through them. This activity demonstrated cultural relevance in Mr. Jean’s classroom because the student-centered activity empowers students to take charge of their learning in a hands-on manner. As an incentive, Mr. Jean offered students five bonus points on their upcoming assessment for the group that emerged victorious.

Mr. Jean described Culturally Relevant Pedagogy as “taking required lessons and attaching some sort of cultural connection with students. No matter what their culture is, I’ll try to bridge the content with what they already know about themselves or their surroundings and put that together for them to see themselves in the content.”

Mr. Jean demonstrated this idea of bridging the content with the engaging activities provided in his class. In the second class I was able to observe, his lesson plan reflected that students were to learn about American imperialism and the Spanish American War. The specific task of the day was a Spanish American Timeline “Scavenger Hunt,” where students were shown primary sources that dealt with the lesson topic, and were to use them as clues to assist in identifying the key features of American imperialism and the Spanish American War. The class began with a bell ringer activity that summarized the lesson from the previous day and asked students to connect that day’s learning objective with the previous one.

Mr. Jean proceeded with a whole group overview of the background information of the causes and results of the Spanish American war. This overview was generally handled through a
popcorn style reading of a document that discussed the political, economic, and social implications of US involvement in the independence efforts of Cuba and other territories. After each student read their portion of the document, the discussion included an inquiry as to why the United States would want to ensure that Spain no longer controlled Cuba. Through probing questioning techniques, the conversation revealed that, among other things, the US was trying to protect its economic interests in Cuba through the sugarcane industry. The conversation also discussed the explosion of the USS Maine and who, besides Spain, would have motive to do damage the US – and WHAT those motives might be. The conversation then ended on a cliffhanger where the students were encouraged to determine what they believed to be the answer through the activity, and the scavenger hunt was introduced.

Students were charged with completing a timeline of the Spanish American war through the analysis of primary and secondary sources. The sources included in the scavenger hunt remained on topic with the required elements of the established curriculum, and included additional culturally relevant elements such as an analysis of United States expansionism and the social/moral implications of the intended goals of the United States. A primary document featuring the Buffalo Soldiers, describing their service and commendations during the war was included. A document that demonstrated the war with the Philippines in conjunction with the Spanish American war, including the savagery of the US through the taking of prisoners and killing combatants was also part of the timeline. A document detailing Emilio Aguinaldo and his role as a Filipino revolutionary was also featured, demonstrating that United States imperialism was not met without resistance. Public school teachers are most often charged with creating their own materials to support their lessons, and Mr. Jean chose to include items that were culturally inclusive.
Students then were able to work in their groups to analyze the primary documents and complete the timeline. Mr. Jean released the students and they were able to navigate throughout the assignment with little need for assistance, although Mr. Jean was available if necessary. Mr. Jean had a good handle on classroom management as well, as there were no behavior issues with students. Mr. Jean has a good rapport with students – he knows them all by name (including some nicknames) and was able to laugh and joke with them. I felt this familiar nature with students demonstrated that students both respect Mr. Jean as their teacher, and feel comfortable being natural in his class at the same time.

Mr. Daveed is a teacher in his mid-twenties. He was born and raised in a relatively small town on the west coast, and credits his childhood educational experiences for inspiring him to become a teacher. His parents were economically sound when he was a young child, and thus, he attended a private Christian school, albeit an affordable one. However, when his family’s financial situation changed, he transferred to a public school. Once there, his teachers determined that he was several grade levels behind and he was placed in several remedial situations and small group learning environments. Mr. Daveed did not receive an official special needs label as a young student. He did not receive an Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) with specific accommodations. An IEP is available for public school students who are eligible for special education services. Mr. Daveed was placed in an inclusionary classroom environment, meaning he was not pulled out of class for personal instruction, or separated from on-level learning students. Mr. Daveed recalled internalizing that he was dumb because of his special learning circumstances. When he attended middle school, he was enrolled in mostly general education classes, while many of his peers were enrolled in gifted classes. This separation
continued to make him feel less than smart. Mr. Daveed’s educational outlook began to change when the method of instruction he received changed in the 7th grade.

Mr. Daveed had his first Black male teacher in his 7th grade world history class. It was the teacher’s first year teaching, and Mr. Daveed never experienced history the way that he did under this teacher’s tutelage. He taught in a way that centered on cultural inclusion, specific to African Americans, but not only that, the well dressed, Jordan sneaker wearing man was simply cool to the twelve-year-old Mr. Daveed.

The fashionably cool teacher encouraged the young Mr. Daveed to join their schools AVID program, described by Mr. Daveed as a college and career preparatory program that targets underrepresented students in schools. Most of the students targeted for the program are students that average B and C grades. The official AVID website states that AVID “brings research-based strategies and curriculum to educational institutions in elementary, secondary, and higher education (avid.org).” Mr. Daveed indicated that even before the suggestion of joining AVID, he was already a strong critical thinker, often questioning the concepts presented by his teachers. As such, he was recommended to take honor classes, and did so, as well as taking the AVID classes.

Mr. Daveed remembers feeling uncomfortable in the honor classes. The school he attended included majority Latino and Black students, but the upper middle class White students were the ones who filled the honor classes. The school he attended was located on the border of an area near an upper middle class section of town and a housing project. Due to the mixture of those two worlds, Mr. Daveed felt out of place in the honors classes, but performed well due to his astute critical thinking skills. Mr. Daveed’s academic success continued into high school, but the AVID program seemed to become “too confining” for Mr. Daveed, and he dropped out of the
program, believing he had garnered enough skills to help him get into college. By his Senior year, Mr. Daveed had enrolled in several Advanced Placement courses, and passed the corresponding aptitude tests. The skills he learned led to him apply and get accepted into a prestigious west coast University. Although he feels he made the right decision for himself by leaving the AVID program, he does wonder if he would have been able to earn more scholarships to help with the costs of college, had he remained in the program. And Mr. Daveed can trace this academic progression way back to his middle school history teacher.

When recalling the way his favorite teacher addressed students, Mr. Daveed indicated that it is now difficult to investigate what his teacher did instructionally, since he now is a teacher. However, he did recall one defining moment that shaped the way he thought about the world, and the way he thought about himself, was a field trip to a senior center. At the senior center, students were tasked with interviewing the seniors they met as an oral history project. Mr. Daveed remembered some of the seniors said “wild stuff” such as how slavery was a good institution that helped the country. When the class returned to school, his teacher facilitated a debrief session and students discussed what they discovered at the senior center.

During the conversation, the teacher encouraged students to consider the poverty cycle, and how people in impoverished areas can be hyper-exposed to conditions that can lead to risk behaviors, or unhealthy lifestyles – conditions such as liquor stores, food deserts, lack of public transportation, etc. Mr. Daveed remembered that being part of that critical conversation made him feel smart after such a long time of being academically remediated. Mr. Daveed recalled that taking that field trip was the moment that made him believe that he did have a critical mind, and that he was “worthy of being in someone’s classroom.” I too believe that field trips are an
integral component of a culturally relevant learning experience, and will argue so in the recommendations section of this paper.

Mr. Daveed is a relatively new teacher, with three years of experience, and entered the profession through the Teach for America program, an organization founded in 1989 as a means to empower young teacher-leaders to affect change among students. The original goal of TFA was to help address the national epidemic of low performing schools in “high-need urban and rural schools (teachforamerica.org).”

Mr. Daveed teaches United States History, serving students ranging in learning abilities, those with identified learning disabilities to students considered honors or gifted. At the time of the classroom visit, the environment was very conducive to a positive learning experience. The classroom temperature was comfortable, and sufficient overhead lighting was available, even though there was no window in the classroom. Mr. Daveed included interesting visual elements in the room including a large red, black, and green African liberation flag hanging from the ceiling, and other Afrocentric posters and images. Although there were many students in the class (about 35), the desk arrangement in small groups of 3-4 made it so that students could get comfortable, and not feel cramped.

Due to the population of students that Mr. Daveed serves, his syllabus was designed to specifically reflect the District required standards and curriculum mandates. Although the syllabus did not demonstrate much of a deviation from the requirements, his classroom practices showed several levels of CRP implementation. The lesson for the day was focused on the United States history standard that discussed the relationship between growing north-south divisions and westward expansion. The learning target for the day was for students to describe the war with Mexico and the resulting Wilmot Proviso.
As with most Mr. Daveed’s classes, the class contained students with a mix of intellectual and skill levels. There were low level students with specific learning deficiencies and accommodations, as well as general education, and higher level students integrated with each other throughout the class. Students were polite as they entered the classroom and were in good spirits as they settled into the class routines. Mr. Daveed’s instructional strategies included an adherence to routines, such as students sitting in their assigned seats and beginning to work on their bell ringer prompt, which was a question that asked students to refer to knowledge gained from the previous day’s lesson. Mr. Daveed transitioned students from their bell ringer to the activity of the day, which was to analyze a set of documents regarding the War with Mexico, and then to take a position on the proposed question – Was the United States justified in going to War with Mexico? Mr. Daveed made effective use of the limited technology in the district by presenting a previously prepared PowerPoint video where he modeled the document analysis skill by speaking to the students in a think aloud manner through the video, while annotating the document with highlighted marks that appeared on the screen via the PowerPoint presentation. Mr. Daveed monitored student progress by walking around the room and aiding as needed while students followed the video prompts.

Students were clearly familiar with the document analysis technique they were engaged in that day, as they had no problem transitioning to the student work portion of the lesson, and were even able to predict what would happen next in the prepared video, including exactly what Mr. Daveed was going to say next. This practice demonstrated that Mr. Daveed employs consistent strategies in his classroom to ensure that students are given multiple opportunities to demonstrate their ability to think critically and be agents of their own learning.
When Mr. Daveed was specifically asked about the strategies he consciously employs in his classroom to focus on cultural relevance, he indicated that although he makes a concerted effort, he is not sure if he is making as big an impact as his favorite teacher did on him. However, he did say that one of the things he does is to encourage his students to identify bias. He feels that those qualities will not only help students in high school, but also as they progress to higher education. He also stated that he is upfront with students about his own bias. He shares his personal story and identity with them, and then, with that knowledge, tasks students to analyze his bias throughout the course. He says that whenever he is being pointedly pro-Black, he wants students to identify his behavior and determine why it has occurred – to consider what about his background explains why he feels the way he feels. Then, he challenges students to look at the situation from a differing perspective.

Mr. Daveed noted that racial conflict is pervasive throughout United States history, considering issues such as slavery vs. freedom, the Jacksonian Democracy period where poor Whites conflicted with enslaved peoples, and many other occurrences. Keeping this perspective in mind, Mr. Daveed said he always tries to bring attention to racial dynamics so students can identify their own racial dynamics. Mr. Daveed commented on a specific example he had previously used in class regarding required content, the Great Society.

Mr. Daveed described that when teaching the Great Society, he often tells the story of his mother, and how she grew up in a housing project in the Bronx, New York. He uses student knowledge of the content to encourage them to ask if living in the housing project would be relevant to Lyndon B. Johnson’s Great Society goals. Mr. Daveed said that students usually respond that they absolutely would be relevant with LBJ’s goals. Mr. Daveed also shares with students how his grandfather served in the Vietnam War, another US History content
requirement, and he then asks if that experience is also related to LBJ. Mr. Daveed indicated that students also say yes it does, because LBJ was the generator of the Gulf of Tonkin resolution, which was an integral factor in the United States relations with the Cold War.

Mr. Daveed also shares with his students how because of his involvement in the war, his grandfather was introduced to heroin and brought his discovery home, which began a cycle of substance abuse in his family. The exposure to drugs affected his mother so that she left home as soon as she turned eighteen to join the job corps, a program of LBJ’s Great Society. Mr. Daveed indicated that he also talks with students about himself, and how, despite his circumstances, he credits his mom capitalizing on provided opportunities, which set him up to be able to obtain a college degree. Mr. Daveed expresses to students that he believes his mom used the Great Society to get out of poverty. To contrast his situation, he talks about his cousins who still live in New York and how they are only financially able to live there still because they receive public assistance – otherwise, they would not be able to afford the cost of living in New York City. In addition, they are still dealing with addiction, several generations after his grandfather returned from Vietnam.

That insight into Mr. Daveed’s life leads to the discussion, were the Great Society programs a hand up, hand out, or both? How are we able to solve for the issues of government assistance? How does government reform look? How should it look? Mr. Daveed believes that using his family as an example helps to ease the awkwardness of discussing government assistance programs with students. Mr. Daveed said, “it built a trust to let them know their teacher is not perfect.” Mr. Daveed indicated that students sometimes assume their teachers are where they are in life because they do not have to struggle. Mr. Daveed feels that this process of opening up to his students serves to facilitate a stronger relationship – Daveed indicated that
“they got closer to me in the process.” This stronger relationship is extremely important when it comes to Culturally Relevant Teaching because students need to know that their teacher is not only a teacher, but a real person with a background, and a culture. Students also need to know that many of the political, economic, and social issues that affect them also affect their teacher, that they are not isolated or alone. Mr. Daveed says exploring this commitment to the student and teacher relationship requires the teacher to be whole, which allows the teacher to honor their identity, inspiring students to honor theirs in turn.

Mr. Daveed indicated that he infuses his identity into the classroom content with anecdotes, because students just want to know how the required content will affect them in their life, and Daveed believes the only way to achieve that is to “show them that I’m a real person,” let them know how issues affect him, and consequently how it may affect them in their lives.

It is clear from Mr. Daveed’s deliberate classroom tactics that he believes in the need for Culturally Relevant Pedagogy. Mr. Daveed believes the need for CRP in part derives from the state of race relations in the United States today. Daveed believes that race relations are currently very class segregated, meaning there is a general understanding among differing races in low income poverty areas, that since everyone is poor, there is not a specific advantage for one race over the other. Mr. Daveed indicated that he grew up in a diverse area with people of different races and from similar socioeconomic statuses. There were poor Whites living among Black people, which bred closer relations. These closer relations included being able to talk more honestly among one another. Mr. Daveed also believes that the middle class has not been able to come together very much at this point because they cannot reach common ground. He says the relationship between middle class folks is somewhat “superficial and situational,” meaning its members can get along when necessary, but are not able to really address anything
of substance. Mr. Daveed is certain that race relations will not be fully addressed until the
“elephant in the room” is fully addressed. One of the ways Mr. Daveed proposed to address the obvious division, is to allow people of privilege to “air out their problematic thoughts without feeling attacked.” Daveed believes that once grievances are aired, the issues should be productively understood and challenged to facilitate fruitful conversation. Mr. Daveed spoke about how evoking this delicate balance between individuals with differing ideologies has been challenging as a relatively new teacher, especially in the current Trump Presidential era. Daveed said he is improving his skills in hearing people out and not feeling that he needs to hide his political beliefs at the same time.

Mr. Daveed indicated that he is aware of how important it is to employ his position to focus on cultural relevance in the classroom, and that he seeks to inspire his students to be aware and channel their passions in the right direction when it comes to the Trump era. Mr. Daveed expressed that the biggest problem he has observed with his students regarding the Trump era is that students demonstrate that they are “afraid to actively engage with things that they do not understand, or necessarily like.” Students are currently predisposed to automatically enter into a frenzy when Trump is mentioned, even though there are probably some Trump policies that teenagers would support.

For example, international affairs, such as the United States’ involvement in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is a potential area of common ground. Many students believe the United States is too involved in the world, and we need to go back to being isolationist, a policy that President Trump endorses. However, Mr. Daveed wants students to explore the idea that this type of policy can garner a lot of dangerous repercussions. One strategy Mr. Daveed used to open students up to considering differing perspectives is to present
students with differing scenarios. One particular classroom strategy Mr. Daveed has used was to present students with Trump-supported arguments without actually bringing up Trump’s affiliation with those policies. After students review the policies, many support them, leading Mr. Daveed to reveal that they were in fact Trump policies. Of course, Mr. Daveed indicated that students will try to switch their positions as soon as they learn the truth.

What Mr. Daveed seeks to do with that exercise is to help students identify their own bias and determine how to adjust when they support issues that are seemingly against their identified bias. So essentially, Mr. Daveed said he sometimes omits some facts to get students to think outside of their bias. Daveed attempts to help his students understand that their relationship with politics in the Trump era is about them being proactive. He wants them to take the initiative about being informed, especially since it is so easy for students to simply reject President Trump. Many young people do not take care to unpack what they believe is dangerous with Trump, take the time to consider what they like, versus what they do not. Mr. Daveed believes this is important regarding cultural relevance because it allows students to understand that their opinions matter and they are important enough to intelligently weigh in on the issue.

When asked how Mr. Daveed would define Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, he indicated that it involves pedagogy and strategies that “acknowledge the student’s humanity,” and incorporate the student’s identity so they can learn the ability to develop a greater sense of their identity if it is not already established. Mr. Daveed believes that CRP “should always have students to look inward.” With that understanding, Mr. Daveed believes that the appropriate CRP strategies should be put in place to filter the content and present it to students in a “whatever it means to me – lens.” The students need to see how the instructional strategies apply
to them personally. Having said that, Mr. Daveed realizes that achieving that feat can be easier said than done.

Mr. Daveed noted that whenever he introduces opinion based lessons, students are often confused. Common student comments include, “wait, so this is my opinion?” Mr. Daveed consistently assures his students that they should express their theories as long as they substantiate them with U. S. History to support it. Further, Mr. Daveed reminds students that they can disagree with the content, but again, they must be able to specifically point out what it is that they do not like.

Mr. Daveed’s preference for teaching is very reflective of the way culturally relevant teachers seek to interact with their students. However, the many requirements of the public-school system make it very difficult to commit to those type of practices. Mr. Daveed expressed his perceptions of the challenges of public school teaching, indicating that the required elements of the job make it so that teachers tend to simply show up for work and do everything they need to do to complete their check list, and not get fired. In that environment, Mr. Daveed indicated that students do not have agency – not in the classroom, nor in their relationship with counseling services, be it the intensive emotional aspect, or with their academics. Mr. Daveed expressed that when students do not feel like they can affect change in their lives, it is difficult to convince them that they can do so in the classroom. Mr. Daveed believes “students are programmed” in their educational experience to believe that they do not and cannot make an effective difference in their lives. Culturally relevant pedagogy is one of the ways that Mr. Daveed believes can combat the debilitating effects of public schooling in the United States.

Teachers are often tasked with participating in mandatory professional development sessions, others are offered with incentives, either financial stipends or credits toward
certification renewal called Professional Learning Units (PLUs). Mr. Daveed expressed that the only time he has received any professional development regarding cultural relevant instruction was during his time with Teach for America. Mr. Daveed indicated that social justice is one of the missions of TFA, and as such, professional development was offered in that area. Mr. Daveed received extensive exposure to CRP training through the TFA summer institute for members, and the required certification classes. Mr. Daveed chose the TFA certification pathway that included courses such as Teaching Like a Historian through Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, and Incorporating Social Justice in Humanities. Mr. Daveed also participated in a CRP professional development course as part of the African American core member summit that is offered through the TFA program.

Mr. Daveed expressed that he believes it would be beneficial to use some of the mandatory professional development sessions in his current school district to discuss ways to build school pride, and how to create culturally relevant classrooms. Daveed insisted that although he foresees that CRP sessions would garner much resistance from a range of educators, those sessions should be required as part of teacher duties and responsibilities. Mr. Daveed expressed that a focus on CRP is especially important since many marginalized students are served in his school district. Mr. Daveed indicated that he learned a very important CRP strategy during a professional development session that he uses in his class daily, one which I observed during my classroom visit.

Mr. Daveed used a call and response tactic in his class designed to gain student’s attention during classroom transitions. Mr. Daveed called out “Ago!” and students emphatically responded with “Ame!” while they settled down to await instructions from Mr. Daveed. At the beginning of the school year when Mr. Daveed sets expectations with students, he explains to
students the West African origins of the Ame – Ago call and response, and has experienced situations where some of his West African students will approach him to say that he is literally speaking their language. They express to him that they use that phrase in Ghana. Mr. Daveed embraces the excitement of those students and encourages them to provide personal explanations on how the phrase is used among their friends and family at home. This is a specific example of how cultural relevance can create a student-centered environment that allows students to know that their culture is important.

Mr. Daveed reflects on his teaching experiences and although he does not know if he impacts his students in the same way his favorite teacher impacted him, he believes he does make students feel smart, and not just in a superficial way, on a deeper level that allows students to say “I got it – I learned that!” Mr. Daveed believes that through his culturally relevant instruction, students are validating themselves, and he truly enjoys witnessing students have those types of moments.

Mr. Fuller is a teacher in his mid-fifties from the deep South. He has been in the profession around twenty years and currently teaches Economics. Mr. Fuller’s personal definition of culturally relevant teaching involves making lessons relevant to the lives of each student and how they can personally use the information being taught through the curriculum. Mr. Fuller believes that the immersion of culture and heritage in curriculum is also an important aspect of CRP, however, he feels that the current public education system lacks in how much of that practice is present. Mr. Fuller indicates that the text book lacks in cultural relevance, and what teachers can contribute is minimal due to the lack of time to complete curriculum requirements, leaving little time or freedom to do much else.
As an example, Mr. Fuller told the story of listening to a radio program where an African American education official spoke of the phenomenon of African American students matriculating through twelve years of schooling to receive a high school diploma, yet hardly ever receiving any cultural curriculum instruction. Besides the standard, generally misrepresented Martin Luther King, Jr. reference, almost no curriculum instruction is directed toward African American students. Mr. Fuller indicated that it does not seem to even make much of a difference if the school district has an African American Superintendent of Schools and a majority African American Board of Education.

In all of Mr. Fuller’s years teaching, he has not seen much change in the area of cultural relevance, despite the fact that Mr. Fuller feels teachers would appreciate the opportunity to provide a sense of cultural relevance in their classrooms. Mr. Fuller described that one of the inhibitors teachers face is that they feel somewhat micromanaged with regard to what teachers can do in the classroom based on the required curriculum, he feels that if cultural relevance is to become a serious addition, the school district will have to imbed the cultural relevance into the lessons for teachers. Mr. Fuller declared that regarding the inclusion of culturally relevant pedagogy in schools there is “definitely room for improvement.”

The barriers to CRP implementation that Mr. Fuller described are representative of his syllabus and lesson plans, as they, like other teachers, remain focused on the required elements that the school district has indicated as elements that teachers are held accountable for adhering to each year. Despite these barriers, Mr. Fuller demonstrates his desire to infuse cultural relevance in his classroom through several methods. The classroom environment was comfortable for students – the temperature was amenable, the overhead lights were at the appropriate brightness, coupled with open blinds that featured an abundance of natural light. The
pleasant olfactory nature of the room was calming and energizing at the same time. The calm classroom ambiance allowed for students to have an opportunity to engage and excel.

Mr. Fuller teaches Economics, and the lesson on the day of the classroom visit was based on the curriculum standard concerning the measurement of economic activity and the Federal Reserve System. The class observed was an integrated Department of Exceptional Services (DES) inclusion class with a total of about thirty students. Mr. Fuller approaches his students with a kind, compassionate attitude, which demonstrates his genuine care for all of his students.

Mr. Fuller’s classroom was full of content related materials posted on the walls. There were also examples of exemplary student work samples posted with teacher commentary to demonstrate why their work was exemplary. Both of those practices demonstrated that Mr. Fuller is compliant in following the required content elements, while assuring students that their contributions to the class are valid and meaningful. Mr. Fuller also demonstrated other instructional strategies that reflected a connection to cultural relevance in his classroom.

Mr. Fuller reviewed an assessment the students had recently completed, asking students to share their misunderstandings after receiving their exam results. Mr. Fuller ensured students were involved in the review process by having them read the questions aloud and provide an oral rationale as to why they selected the answer they chose before Mr. Fuller explained the correct answer. Mr. Fuller used humor to connect with students, with real world examples that related to the content. Mr. Fuller used visual diagrams of the content on the white board to better explain the rationale regarding the correct answer.

Students engaged in Mr. Fuller’s re-teaching strategies intently, and when Mr. Fuller infused real world applications that included the issue of raising minimum wages, students were
interested in how and why the minimum wage was set, and how that decision could affect them and people they know. Mr. Fuller encouraged students to access answers by activating their prior knowledge, and encouraging students to analyze question distractors on the test. Fuller encouraged students to ask an abundance of questions if they needed additional clarification.

Students asked about how the economic cycle might be affected due to President Trump and his potential policies. Mr. Fuller reminded students of his potential bias due to his liberal views and how he hopes the economy will thrive despite his personal disagreements with Trump’s social policies. Mr. Fuller encouraged students to research policies and look toward knowing both sides of the story. He also praised students for asking questions, indicating that it was important for them to be inquisitive to fully understand how the content related to their lives. When discussing the current economic cycle, Mr. Fuller showed a CNN Money news clip that discussed the specifics of the Federal Reserve Monetary Contractionary Policies. This short three-minute video clip resonated with students because the content came from a CNN Money broadcast that aired just one day prior to class, enforcing the ideology that the information they were learning was expressly germane to their lives and the lives of those around them. After speaking with Mr. Fuller about his educational experiences, it shed light on why he operates his classroom the way he does.

Mr. Fuller matriculated in the public-school system, and remembered looking forward to some of his classes, and not being very impressed by others. Mr. Fuller’s kind nature didn’t allow him to recall having any especially bad teachers, but perhaps no more than a few that needed to improve in their classroom management skills. Mr. Fuller expressed he generally felt that if a teacher was doing their best to convey material to students then they were a good teacher, and he could work with them as a student to get something out of the experience.
Mr. Fuller recalled a high school geometry teacher he had, that he felt did not convey the message of strong teaching. However, Mr. Fuller hesitated to place the blame solely on the teacher, as he admitted that he was a terrible math and geometry student. As with many students, young Mr. Fuller realized he did not understand, and essentially made the decision to simply try to get through each class session and hope to get something out of it in the end. The example of the geometry teacher was an anomaly for Mr. Fuller, as he remembered the awesome teachers as the ones that always kept their cool, and did not mind taking the time to explain the material to students individually.

Although Mr. Fuller indicated that he is not opposed to receiving instruction in a lecture format, he also remembers the good teachers as those who had a variety of different teaching strategies, including lecture, activities, and cooperative learning. Mr. Fuller believes that his perception of what made a good teacher while he was a student is something that he tries to adhere to as a teacher now. For Mr. Fuller, one of the strongest ways to hold true to good teaching is to ensure that lessons are current and relevant to student’s daily lives.

“I think it [making a current event connection] is very important, I teach economics, so anytime they turn on the news there is probably something going on that affects them economically and they need to be aware of current events, but it also affects the decisions they make in life. They need to know what differing political groups and certain people are saying about them, and what kind of intentions those people/groups have about them being able to achieve certain things and improve their standard of living.”

In keeping with this notion of being politically aware, several students asked content related questions regarding the Trump Administration, indicating they could tie together material with what is currently happening in the world. This is a large feat to achieve with teenagers who
tend to focus more on what affects their social media feeds, rather than the pertinent government news of the day. It was clear though, that the students in Mr. Fuller’s class understood the content and that it did relate to their questions and concerns, and that they felt safe enough to convey their concerns in class. Mr. Fuller has observed that in the infancy of the Trump presidential era, students have found themselves more emotionally interested in the political process.

Mr. Fuller informs students that he is a liberal-minded person who does not always have nice things to say about the Republican party, but he makes an effort to make students feel comfortable enough to explore opposing political views and state how they feel. With that in mind, Mr. Fuller lets students know that despite whether you identify as a Democrat or a Republican, you most likely will not agree one hundred percent with any political party.

Mr. Fuller’s southern drawl was prominently emphasized when he humorously stated, “when people go home, they are probably not in agreement 100% with their spouse, so they certainly are not going to be in total agreement with a political party.” Fuller indicated that he believes students should think about the things that President Trump could do that would be problematic for them, in addition to what he could do to help them, and what he could do that may or may not affect them either way.

Mr. Fuller indicated that any ideas he may have acquired about how to address cultural relevance in the classroom stemmed from professional development opportunities presented through his educational experiences, not through his professional teaching experience. Mr. Fuller remembered being exposed to many classes related to cultural relevance while obtaining his Masters and Education Specialist degrees, but finds his memory less clear on receiving such training while employed as a teacher. Mr. Fuller began teaching in his current district at a time
when most students were White, and now, the demographic make-up of students in the district leans heavily toward an abundance of Black and Latino students, as well as a significant population of Asian students. This shift in the demographics of the county has resulted in a shift in the demographics of the students served in the school district, which may indicate that the district needs to catch up with the shift in cultural community demographics.

4.2 Overview of the Themes

The shared phenomenon all participants experienced of utilizing cultural relevance in their classrooms revealed an additional common set of themes that emerged as a result of their CRP teaching experiences.

First Cycle Descriptive Coding

In the first-cycle coding stage, the following Descriptive Codes emerged: Bias, Racial Conflict, and Trump.

Bias

Teacher biases are derived from their background and experiences, and part of the educational process is to model for students how to identify bias. Teachers indicated that they openly disclosed to students their personal social and political biases that may become abundantly clear during their classroom journey. Students were charged with being deliberate in identifying their teacher’s bias and determining how it may affect their discussion or activity.

Racial Conflict

Participants consistently spoke of how the status of race relations in the United States inspires conflict between ethnicities and class divisions. Each teacher spoke in a different way about how “things haven’t changed” or how White privilege is prevalent and negatively affects
Black students today. Teachers also discussed that realizing those racial dynamics influenced the ways they sought to infuse cultural relevance in their classrooms.

**Trump**

When asked, each teacher detailed the instances of their students expressing some form of resistance to the Trump Presidential Administration. This disdain extended across varying ethnicities, Black, White, Latino, Asian, African. Most lower-income, marginalized students feel threatened by President Trump, oftentimes, due to the influence of the adults around them. Teachers also explained that they implored with their students to have a political opinion, but to make efforts to be more critical in the way they analyze the motives of political figures, President Trump included. Despite the areas of growth for students to become more critical thinkers, teachers were encouraged that due to the polarizing nature of the political climate, students were exhibiting more interest and buy-in to being aware of the political process.

Each of the four teachers featured in the study indicated that their students are fixated on the political and societal issues emerging in the United States because of the Trump Presidential Administration. Students have questions and concerns about how the Trump Administration will handle issues ranging from immigration laws to the creation of jobs, and foreign policies that may force them to go to war. All teachers also indicated that students have a perception of Trump as being an oppressive President, and therefore, it is extremely important that students are inquisitive, aware, and cognizant of their cultural identities, so they know they have a valuable place in society, despite how they may feel about the nation’s political leaders.

All included teachers indicated that a focus on personally relevant and culturally specific lessons are the way to combat the pervasive hegemony in the Eurocentric society of the United States. Mr. Daveed and Mr. Jean cite that the Trump era is a manifestation of the theory that
race relations in the United States have not grown or progressed in any real way over the years, and as such, it is up to the teachers in the classroom to promote cultural relevance.

*First Cycle Process Coding*

In the first-cycle coding stage, the following Process Codes emerged: Dealing, Teaching, and Training.

**Dealing**

Participants expressed through their interviews that they thought of themselves as simply dealing with the current state of education. The teachers realize that the school district has certain mandatory elements that must be adhered to, and that their employment status could be negatively affected if they veer from the “teacher-proof” curriculum script (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 87). In their efforts to just ‘deal,’ teachers felt that their deliberate efforts to be culturally responsive are watered down in order to leave enough time to cover the mandatory curriculum.

All teachers featured in this study expressed their feelings of being constricted by a “curriculum script” that prohibits their ability to infuse their own creativity, including a focus on cultural relevance. All participants connected the fact that the mandatory state and district curriculum guides prohibit the flexibility of the implementation of CRP. This idea was synonymous among the participants.

**Teaching**

Regarding the way the participant teachers handled the barriers to CRP that they faced, they indicated they continue to keep on teaching. Teachers indicated that although they make specific efforts to infuse CRP instructional strategies, they knew that if they were not able to
address cultural competency from a content perspective, they could attempt to do so through consistent classroom rituals and practices.

**Training**

All participants expressed that they have not received any professional development training as a teacher regarding culturally relevant classrooms. Participants indicated that they did receive various forms of CRP training in their teacher preparation or graduate school requirements, but again, not during their service as teacher. All participants also believe that CRP training should be mandatory within the school district, and should be addressed in a way that will benefit receptive teachers, and minimize resistance from teachers who may not see the benefit.

Mr. Langston, Jean, and Daveed all insisted that teachers can be an agent of change in the lives of students, and believe that they personally are a teacher that serves as an agent of change for the students they serve on a consistent basis. They insist that their presence, influence, and commitment to cultural awareness automatically makes them agents of change, and they understand that the evidence of their influence is represented when students demonstrate knowledge and mastery of the required content, through their lens of cultural discovery.

**Second Cycle Pattern Coding**

In the second-cycle pattern coding process, all the initial codes that emerged led to several common themes shared by the participants. Those themes included: Sophisticated Racism, Cultural Connection, and Emotional Availability.

**Sophisticated Racism**

Teachers in this study all indicated that a covert racism is woven throughout the United States society today. They believe that the war on discrimination is sometimes more discreet
than it was in the traditional Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, and as such, is sometimes not taken as seriously by White and Black people alike. This form of sophisticated racism is especially dangerous because it coerces Black youth into believing that they are resigned to a second-rate existence.

Mr. Fuller indicated in his interview that he implores his students to be aware of current events so they are in tune with the political and economic pulse of the day, including the factors that can have negative consequences on their livelihood. Mr. Fuller believed that his emphasis on current events is a strategy that keeps students informed, giving them the tools to help them make choices that will improve their standard of living.

**Cultural Connection**

Participant teachers expressed through the interview process that their goal in teaching Black students subject to an educational system that excludes truthful, positive immersion of their culture and tradition is to establish and cultivate a cultural connection between the required content, their collective history, and their lived experiences. Mr. Fuller discussed his surprise when hearing a radio broadcast that described the typical secondary public school matriculation of an African American student. In that description, the person speaking indicated that an African American student would potentially go a full thirteen years through their schooling, and never learn an in-depth, factual lesson about their heritage and culture. That is a problem, especially in a society and education system that does not decidedly celebrate African American culture.

Mr. Langston believed his focus on cultural relevance and establishing a cultural connection stemmed from his collegiate experience in African American Studies, which he felt established the desire in him to reveal the ‘pro-Black’ truth to his students. Mr. Jean asserted
that it was his duty to ‘bridge the content’ in his classroom so that students would have access to culturally relevant information that placed a spotlight on the positive and influential aspects of Black history and culture.

This commitment to establishing a cultural connection is also illustrated in *The Dreamkeepers*. Ladson-Billings discussed how one of the teachers profiled in her study used the content-related activity of using evidence to prove or disprove a theory. In many school districts, this process is called the Document-Based Question (DBQ). Students are tasked with a question such as, “Was the American Revolution Really Revolutionary?” Students are then tasked with analyzing primary and secondary sources (evidence) that will support their response to the question. The question posed to students in *The Dreamkeepers (1994)* was, “Were the Ancient Egyptians Black?” Students were able to engage with the evidence, considering why it was even important to ponder on such a question. Some students remarked that it was important to consider that question so Black people would be associated with doing marvelous things, not just Europeans. When students make this cultural connection, it leaves a lasting and powerful impact.

**Emotional Availability**

Three of the four participants acknowledged the importance of teachers demonstrating to their students that they care about them and their opinions. Once trust is established it allows students to become more receptive in receiving culturally responsive instruction. Many of the methods these participants described as demonstrating care were more intrinsic than physical. Mr. Langston, Daveed, and Fuller, all indicated that the classroom appearance and environment helped provide the foundation to helping students enjoy their time in the class and become
comfortable in the space. This comfort level was achieved through the decorative ambiance, pleasant aromas, and interesting visual elements each teacher featured in their classrooms.

Mr. Langston and Mr. Daveed expressed that to establish trust with their students, they must be vulnerable and willing to reveal their identity to encourage students to share their identities as their cultural competence develops throughout the school year. Mr. Langton went on to discuss the dire need to fully listen to students and allow them to tell their stories in their own way, without shame, judgement, or ridicule. This practice assures students that their presence is essential, and that they can be ‘real’ and not be afraid to state how they feel about various issues in class.

Table 4.1 Qualitative Coding-1st and 2nd Cycles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1st Cycle of qualitative coding - Data Organization Descriptive (CRT)</th>
<th>1st Cycle of qualitative coding - Core Code Process (CRP)</th>
<th>Inter-Rater Coding Alpha Descriptive</th>
<th>Inter-Rater Coding Alpha Process</th>
<th>2nd Cycle Phase of qualitative coding - Pattern Codes</th>
<th>Inter-Rater Coding Alpha Pattern</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Common Terms: Bias Racial Conflict Slavery Trump</td>
<td>Common Terms: Dealing Teaching Training</td>
<td>.80</td>
<td>.80</td>
<td>Emerging Themes: Sophisticated Racism Cultural Connection Emotional availability</td>
<td>.87</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.2 describes the data analysis for the qualitative coding of this study. The first cycle of qualitative coding included descriptive coding, which led to the formation of the core code surrounding the Critical Race Theory component of the study. The second element of first cycle coding was process coding, which led to the formation of the core code surrounding the
Culturally Relevant Pedagogy component of the study. The second cycle of qualitative coding included pattern coding, which produced the two core codes of “Sophisticated Racism,” “Cultural Connection,” and “Emotional Availability.”

I identified six passages in the transcripts that reflected the core code of sophisticated racism. The average corroboration between the two raters was a four, meaning on average, the raters identified sophisticated racism in four of the five passages I identified originally, yielding a (.80) coefficient. Regarding the core code of cultural connection, I identified ten passages reflecting that sentiment, and the corroboration between the two raters was an eight, also yielding a (.80) coefficient. For the core code of emotional availability, I identified fifteen passages reflecting that sentiment, and the corroboration between the two raters was a thirteen, yielding a (.87) coefficient. The themes that emerged reflected participant sentiment that racism still exists in United States society, but it is disguised in subtle, covert ways.

Participants also revealed that empowering students to learn more about their heritage and culture will help combat inherent societal racism. The themes also revealed that teachers believe it is necessary for them to demonstrate transparency and let students know them as a person to establish trust and encourage students to tell their stories in their own way.

4.3 Summary

This chapter discussed the findings of this study, including the specific stories of each of the four participants based on the classroom observations and interviews that were conducted. Next, this section discussed the data analysis methods used to discover the common themes that emerged between the participants. The next chapter will discuss final conclusions based on the gathered data, the implications of the study, as well as recommendations for further research.
5  CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this study was to reveal specific strategies teachers used to allow their students to experience cultural relevance within required curriculum experiences. This qualitative study was designed on the phenomenological approach and was conducted from February through May 2017. The overall research question for this study was: “How do teachers teach African American students when Black excellence isn’t a curriculum priority?” Some of the sub questions affiliated with the study were:

1. How do you define Culturally Relevant Pedagogy?
2. Does your school district support the use of culturally relevant classroom practices?
3. What barriers do you believe hinder teachers from providing quality culturally relevant teaching?
4. Have you received CRP professional development training as a teacher?

General findings from the study revealed that teachers who serve African American students realize that racial biases are covertly prevalent in society, and to overcome those challenges, an education focused on cultural competence is essential. Findings from the study also revealed that teachers believe they must be somewhat vulnerable to allow students to learn about them as a person, in turn gaining the trust needed to allow students to feel safe in the classroom environment.

5.1 Conclusions and Discussion

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy is an affirming tool teachers can use to open doors and provide inclusion to their students of color. It is a necessary tool because historic racism has
pushed out the importance of the cultural relevance of people of color in schools. Critical Race Theory in Education explains these hurdles, and suggests teachers instruct their classes through a lens of people of color. This method will deliberately include students whose cultures have been placed to the margins, and by default, still include the cultures of White students based on the magnitude of attention given to White culture in curriculum.

As shown by the findings of this study, teachers want to incorporate CRP in their classrooms because they understand how important it is for African American students to embrace and celebrate their culture. Although teachers do their best to lend focus to CRP, they desire to have support from their school administrators and district officials, in the form of professional development and training. School districts should take the time and care to invest in CRP training for all teachers so the students they serve will be exposed to the best educational experiences, a basic right they deserve to enjoy.

5.2 Limitations of the Study

The limitations of this study include a range of factors that may have affected the findings of the research. First, the research could only accommodate a study featuring four teachers who detailed their relationship with cultural relevance in their classrooms. The study could have been more diverse if a greater number of teachers could have participated, to provide differing perspectives on how to approach CRP.

In addition, each of the four participants were male, simply as a factor of scheduling availability and general qualifying criteria. Ironically, males are typically a minority in the teaching profession, and although the male teacher presence in classrooms is important, the study may have had a different feel had female teachers been involved in the process. It is my assumption as a teacher that a stronger emphasis on teacher care as an element to combat culture
exclusion may have presented itself, had females been included in the study, however, that assumption is based on personal observation and not empirical research.

To give full justice to a study of this sort, consistent and multiple observations and interviews are necessary, as Ladson-Billings achieved with the teachers profiled in *Dreamkeepers*. The study would have been greatly enhanced had the opportunity for increased interaction between the researcher and participants been possible. This type of observational and interview work required during this study should span the course of multiple school years to establish patterns teachers may employ across different sets of students.

Finally, the researcher acknowledges that as a teacher myself, it is naturally enticing to infuse my opinions and expertise regarding the subject of cultural relevance and its importance in the school system. In some ways, this familiarity with the subject is a benefit – it allowed easier access to the appropriate participants, and created a collegial comfort that was beneficial in the interview process, encouraging teachers to provide honest, forthright responses.

5.3 Implications for Theory

*Critical Race Theory in Education*

All participants spoke on how race relations and the current cultural and political climate can hinder the way Black kids are taught, and how they learn. The teachers in this study spoke on how cultural relevance is achieved through establishing a rapport with students early in the school year, and making consistent efforts to maintain the positive relationship cultivated throughout the school year. Ladson-Billings also discusses rapport building in *Dreamkeepers*. One of the ways the teachers in the study she conducted accomplished this task was by making connections with her student’s families at the beginning of the year through trips and weekly contact (Ladson-Billings, 2009). One of the other ways the Dreamkeeper teachers made a
commitment to rapport was through sharing a portion of their lives with students, a method also shared by some of the participants of this study.

Through personal storytelling, the participants of this study indicated that they are letting students know how the content they are compelled to study has affected their teacher. This glimpse into the teacher’s life shows students that their teacher is a real person and not a shell whose sole purpose is to deposit information into them everyday. Also, participants indicated that when the content is connected to the student’s lives they will understand the immediate importance of why the information is good for them to know and understand. In the era of social media and an app for just about everything, young people are accustomed to getting the things they want now, and filtering out the things they are not interested in until later, or never. To put the technology piece in perspective, most of the seventeen-year old Juniors I teach have NEVER been without the internet and would not be caught ANYWHERE without their smartphone. Therefore, students have a need to know how the information they are exposed to in class will affect them, otherwise it is deemed unimportant.

5.4 Recommendations for Further Research

*Curriculum inclusion*

One of the best ways to incorporate true, consistent commitment to cultural relevance in classrooms is to ensure it has deep rooted, deliberate inclusion within the curriculum. Some of the ways to achieve this could range from benign methods of interweaving cultural relevance throughout the established curriculum, to creating spaces explicitly dedicated to the mission of celebrating culture and increasing cultural competence.

Based on factors presented in this study that prevent teachers from focusing on cultural relevance, some of the study participants employ a method of strategic cultural inclusion, that
includes the use of music, environment control, rapport building, and storytelling. Participants all indicated that although they utilized their specific methods of cultural pedagogy, they feel they personally would benefit from additional assistance regarding CRP.

One example of an educational system that has fully committed to the use of CRP in its public-school curriculum is the Maryland State Department of Education. Since 2004, this education system has formed a partnership with the Reginald F. Lewis Museum of Maryland that directly incorporates the cultural mission of the museum and customizes it with the specific relevance to African American History in the state of Maryland. Regarding its mission for the program, the Reginald F. Lewis Museum website states:

“The objective of this unique partnership is to create a climate of understanding and appreciation supportive of Maryland African American history, culture and art. Through both museum-based and school-based interactive programs and in/outreach activities, the partnership curriculum will reach every Maryland student, in every classroom, in every school.”

In addition, the Maryland State Department of Education’s Museum Education Task Force Chair indicated that the goal of the program is to help “African American children to understand their history and grasp their connections to the past… as well as introducing… the African American experience to non- African American children (Danois, 2004).

The curriculum is integrated into the fabric of the daily learning experiences of its students through a specified, grade appropriate set of lesson plans. Those plans include primary and secondary sources containing the historical content, graphic organizers to help students analyze the sources, and critical thinking discussion starters to assist students with applying the knowledge gained from their analysis.
The program also features a commitment to getting students outside of the school and allowing for opportunities to experience learning through field trip experiences. The Maryland district partners with the Reginald F. Lewis museum to integrate learning experiences into the daily objectives. The museum/curriculum program also integrates some of the permanent and temporary exhibitions into the content of the curriculum. Lesson plans are created around those exhibitions, encouraging teachers and students to visit the museum to provide alternative context for students, and to place greater emphasis on the relevance of their classroom learning experiences.

In my experiences as an educator, teachers sometimes avoid organizing field trips because it can be difficult to secure the proper paperwork in the arrangement process, and it can also be difficult to secure funding, either from an external or internal source. The Reginald F. Lewis museum seeks to address the funding gap through offering stipends to schools to help allow them to visit the museum site.

On a recent field trip to a civil rights museum, some of my students had the opportunity to witness in person the sights and sounds associated with some of the content we learned in class. Students interacted with lunch counter exhibits, exhibits featuring the complexities of freedom rides, the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr, and the stories of those whose voices are generally not deemed important enough to be heard. Because of this trip, several students were eager to share their experiences with me. They indicated they felt a great sense of excitement in being able to interact with some of our content outside of the classroom, and were sure to revisit the museum, bringing their friends and family with them to learn and enjoy.

These field trip experiences, along with the other elements of the Maryland African American curriculum program, deserve an intense examination through further research. The
data collected from a study of this nature could be beneficial in exploring the potential for similar programs to take shape in other parts of the country.

**Black Studies Courses**

Another area of further research on the topic of Cultural Relevance is the implementation of Black Studies classes in public school curriculum. As a high school Junior in Oklahoma, I took an African American history class in a predominantly White school. The text for the course was very comprehensive, and despite the demographics of the school, most of the students in the class were Black, yet the instructor was White. She did not have any specific training in African American Studies, she simply expressed an interest in teaching the course.

I remember that our teacher was very cognizant of being culturally sensitive and facilitated lots of dialogue among the group. I believe that African American history class may have planted the seed regarding my interest in becoming an African American studies scholar. I believe benefit can be derived in determining what other school districts offer Black studies programs, and how it impacts student cultural competence and activism in their communities.

**Elementary CRP**

Research opportunities also are present regarding how CRP is being addressed at elementary school levels. I have never taught in an elementary setting, but have participated in integrated collaboration sessions with elementary teachers who often explain that they have limited opportunities to teach Social Studies in their weekly schedules, and due to school and district requirements, Social Studies often gets placed on the back burner to make room for extended lessons in reading and math. Although CRP does not, and should not exclusively take place in a Social Studies environment, in my observations, teachers who do not explicitly know
how to implement CRP generally believe it fits best within Social Studies. Therefore, they may pay specific attention to integration strategies in this area, and not be quite as deliberate in other subject areas.

Based on conversations with elementary teachers, I imagine many teachers are approaching cultural relevance in their instruction in a ‘quick and dirty’ fashion. They know they have certain mandated material they must deliver, and that time is not in their favor when it comes to even teaching Social Studies, let alone incorporating cultural relevance in their approach to Social Studies. Again, I understand that CRP should not be relegated to Social Studies, however, I believe many teachers look to this subject first for CRP integration, and my bias as a Social Studies teacher compels me to seek accurate and effective methods of CRP implementation within the Social Studies discipline. Gloria Ladson-Billings profiled elementary teachers in her research published in Dreamkeepers, and I am not suggesting that the exact research should be conducted again. I am suggesting that an updated analysis may be beneficial, since factors may have changed since the book’s first publication in 1990s.

Professional Development

Professional Development is a critical area of focus that deserves further investigation. All teachers featured in this study indicated they do not recall ever receiving professional development at the district level during their time of employment as a highly-qualified teacher. At the same time, all did indicate having ample exposure to college or teacher preparation courses that dealt with some area of cultural relevance and instructional strategies. All teachers in this study also indicated they felt that consistent exposure to culturally relevant training will benefit teachers and empower them to confidently teach students through a culturally relevant lens. I believe further study is needed to determine why cultural relevance is offered extensively
in teacher preparation environments, but those offerings do not always translate to opportunities for professional development in some school districts. A comprehensive study on this issue may reveal measures that would determine if CRP benefits students and teachers, and if it is a system that should be supported by schools and school districts.

Reform efforts

Curriculum inclusion, Black Studies Courses, and Professional Development will become even more critical if education reform efforts continue to divide and stagnate the progress of seeking quality education for all students. As stated earlier in this work, education reform efforts over the centuries have varied from a focus on customizing education to fit the economic needs of the country, to enforcing social mandates through the schoolhouse. Currently, it is possible that minimal gains for marginalized students will be made if education leaders decide to treat education as an industry rather than a space where students are to be served with humanity and dignity.

Under the Trump Presidential Administration, Michigan political socialite Betsy DeVos was appointed and confirmed as the Secretary of Education. DeVos was an unprecedented selection, as she has no ‘front line’ experience in public education, as a teacher or administrator. She also does not have public education experience as a parent, since none of her children attended public schools. DeVos’ only exposure to the education world was as Chairman of the American Federation for Children, a school choice advocacy group. School choice remains a cornerstone for DeVos’ platform, and despite the problems associated with this issue, a closer consideration of her motivations for accepting a position in an arena almost completely foreign to her are even more disturbing.
DeVos’s family has a long history of generously supporting the Republican Party, which alone is not disturbing, but coupled with the DeVos familial connections with Conservative Right Christian groups, the motivations for a Betsy DeVos position in the Trump Administration begins to seem more like a power play than an actual desire to serve the people. Her confirmation hearings were filled with questionable moments, including when she failed to provide an explanation between school proficiency and growth, terms education officials are generally familiar with, and she was not able to state with assurance that she would support “equal accountability” among all tax-payer funded schools, whether they are public, public charter, or private institutions (Reitman, 2017). In just the first few weeks of DeVos’ tenure as Education Secretary, her public appearances have been met with outrage, protest, and resistance. With the motivations of the education leader in question, it is necessary to understand how the Federal government will support or intervene in the field of education. With this knowledge, culturally relevant teachers will have a greater understanding of the mandates they will need to abide by to be compliant, while ensuring their students receive instruction that meets their cultural needs.

**Social Studies Cohort**

Perhaps the most impactful next step for this research would be the establishment of a social studies collective between teachers that would serve to address the culturally exclusionary issues presented due to the required state curriculum. One of the common themes that emerged from the research was teachers “dealing” with the situations they were presented with – knowing that the required state material was culturally lacking, but not having the time or resources to remain in compliance and add cultural richness. The creation of this cohort would help to address this phenomenon by giving teachers a chance to vent their frustrations, and provide best
practices on how they may have attempted to address cultural issues, as they pertain to course standards. New teachers would be a welcome addition to this cohort, as they navigate through the various requirements of maintaining a viable classroom environment. The rigors of the profession include lesson planning, assessment building, and classroom management. This cohort would allow new teachers to obtain assistance with typical elements teaching, as well as the intricacies of determining how to culturally enhance their classrooms.

In addition to teacher support, some of the features that could occur in this platform would be a space where students can dialogue with respect to the stresses they encounter in their lives due to racially motivated issues they experience both at school and in the general environment. The fabric of the nation today brings about a wealth of emotions for many, especially children and adolescents. The Social Studies CRP collective could encourage students to go outside their comfort zone to explore new places and discover positive elements of their heritage through field trips, case studies, and research projects. Students would also have the opportunity to take a lead role in activist movements with relevance to their lives within their own communities. I have observed that many young people do not believe they have the ability to do anything to make a difference and change the way society perceives and treats them. In essence, many of those young people are doing exactly what their teachers tend to do – just deal with the situation as it is presented to them. This cohort of visionaries can reveal the many ways youth can contribute to improving cultural relevance in schools, and any other issues that are of importance to them and their peers.

5.5 Chapter Summary

The purpose of this study was to reveal specific strategies teachers use to allow their students to experience cultural relevance within required curriculum experiences.
The overall research question for this study was: “How do teachers teach African American students when Black excellence isn’t a curriculum priority?” Some of the sub questions affiliated with the study were:

1. How do you define Culturally Relevant Pedagogy?

2. Does your school district support the use of culturally relevant classroom practices?

3. What barriers do you believe hinder teachers from providing quality culturally relevant teaching?

4. Have you received CRP professional development training as a teacher?

It is quite apparent that teachers are doing their best with regard to transforming exclusionary curriculum to inclusionary experiences for students. Still, teachers are looking for guidance on incorporating CRP in their classrooms, and it should be the mission of school districts to provide that guidance through professional development opportunities. Those of us who are engrossed in the process have a duty to go into these spaces where enhancements are needed, and initiate the change.
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