Who Deserves a Quality Education?:

Problems and Possibilities for Education in the United States.

by

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Abstract

The United States' education system currently offers an unequal and inadequate education to many of its students. As a result of unequal funding, students from different social classes often receive differing educations in terms of quality. In an unequally funded system and one that places such an emphasis on standardized testing, teachers and students are the ones who suffer the consequences of less resources, more testing, and less instructional time. This thesis explores an original framework, based on Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and Critical Social Theory, in order to counter our current educational system. As more education has been linked to a decrease in criminal activity and a decrease in poverty, it is necessary to find a way to provide United States' students with quality educations.

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Introduction

The term "achievement gap" once referred to the academic gap between Black students and White students. Due to a number of historical and cultural circumstances, White students were achieving at much higher academic levels than Black students were (Fryer & Levitt, 2005). Today, that gap still exists; however, some scholars assert that the gap tends to reflect a system of inequality focused on income rather than race (Coley & Baker, 2013). Students of color still run the risk of being subjected to unequal schooling, though, as low-income schools tend to be populated with more students of color than White students, and high-income schools reflect the opposite (Boschma & Brownstein, 2016). The fact that an achievement gap exists at all in today's day and age reflects the differential quality of the United States' education system.

A quality education system is one in which all students are treated on equal ground regardless of their race, their economic status, or their gender. Unfortunately, the biggest problem facing the United States' school system is its system of unequal funding and its reliance on standardized testing. Many low-income students begin school already behind their high-income peers; in Kindergarten, there is already an achievement gap. Due to a lack of resources, understanding, and training on the parts of the teachers, that gap is only expected to widen as the years go on (Baker, Sciarra, & Farrie, 2015; Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2005). Lower-achieving students have been proven to be more likely to be disruptive, which, especially due to the introduction of zero tolerance policies in the most recent decades, leads to suspension or expulsion (Christle et al., 2005). Suspension is the number one predictor of dropout, which is one main predictor of future incarceration (Christle et al., 2005; Flannery, 2015). In addition, students who do not complete high school

will have a lower average salary and a higher average unemployment rate for the rest of their lives (Bureau of Labor Statistics [BLS], 2015).

With all of these problems and implications that stem from a lack of a quality education system, the problem that remains is: what is there to do about it? In this thesis, I analyze the pitfalls of the current education system in the United States, focusing specifically on funding disparities and standardized testing. I then discuss Ladson-Billings's (1995a) CRP and Leonardo's (2004) CST followed by an examination of a quality education. In Chapter 3, I explore my definition of a quality education, which includes the work of Gloria Ladson-Billings's (1995a) Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP) and Zeus Leonardo's (2004) Critical Social Theory (CST) in order to examine how teachers can help students, especially low-income students who are vulnerable to the systemic inequalities, raise their academic achievements. In Chapter 4, I discuss an example of a quality education in Tucson Unified School District's Ethnic Studies program in order to illustrate not only that a quality education can be implemented on a large scale, but that it is effective at helping students achieve while also keeping them on the path to graduation. Finally, I discuss the implications of a lack of a quality education, focusing specifically on criminal activity and the cycle of poverty, with a specific emphasis on the school-to-prison pipeline. The ultimate goal of this thesis is to explain how our current system can be fixed and the dire consequences facing our country and citizenry should we ignore this fast-growing problem.

Chapter 1: How the United States Lacks a Quality Education System

The United States' public education system is currently faced with many challenges that directly affect its teachers and students. These challenges tend to stem from funding disparities between low-income schools and high-income schools and the reliance of administrators on standardized testing. This chapter focuses on these two very important issues as way of displaying how the United States lacks a quality education system.

In the first section of this chapter, I focus on how schools in the U.S. are funded and the funding disparities that disadvantage low-income students. I argue that due to the funding disparities in this country, low-income students are trailing far behind their high-income peers. Low-income students, statistically, begin school already behind their high-income peers (Baker, Sciarra, & Farrie, 2015; Christle et al., 2005). This means that in order to have an equitable funding system, low-income schools require more funding than high-income schools do. This section will look into the funding disparities that exist and how they affect both low-income and high-income students.

I then explore how heavily the U.S. education system relies on standardized testing to judge students' achievements and teacher worth. Due to the amount of standardized testing that students must complete during their K-12 education, teachers are forced to teach to the test, which means that the focus is on test preparation and less on skills that will help students in their secondary education, higher education, and in their personal lives (Popham, 2012; Volante, 2014). In this chapter, I argue that standardized testing is hurting students and teachers alike as it deprives students of many necessary skills.

In the final section, I briefly explore how funding and standardized testing are inextricably linked, focusing specifically on the "big three" textbook publishers, who also create all of the standardized tests that students take, and their stronghold on the U.S. education system (Broussard, 2014). I also look at how low-income schools are at a serious disadvantage when it comes to standardized testing as many underfunded schools lack the textbooks they need to help students succeed in school, let alone pass a standardized test (Broussard, 2014; Corey, 2014).

School Funding

On average, the U.S. spends over $550 billion a year on K-12 education, and though it is noted that school districts spend, on average, $10,658 on each individual student, the per-student spending rates vary greatly among states, districts, and even within school districts (Blumerman, 2012; New America, 2015). The funding for K-12 schools comes from three sources: local government, state government, and the federal government. Typically, state and local governments each provide approximately 44% of the funding for K-12 education, totaling 88% (New America, 2015; Spellings, 2005). The remaining 12% comes from the federal government, which comes out to approximately $79 billion per year, but the portion of that $79 billion that is allocated to each state varies. In some states, for example, the federal government's share of K-12 spending is less than 5% of the total, while in other states, it is higher than 16% of the total (New America, 2015).

State funding for K-12 education relies on income and sales tax (Biddle & Berliner, 2002; Lafortune, Rothstein, & Whitmore Schanzenbach, 2016; New America, 2015; Public Broadcasting Service [PBS], 2008). Individual legislatures decide how much funding is allocated to which schools, and many use a formula that provides funding based on how

many students are in each district. Some formulas are weighted based on many different factors, including how many students are living in poverty, how many have disabilities, or how many are a part of English as a Second Language (ESL) programs. Depending on the formulas, however, how these factors are weighted vary greatly between states. Much like the federal government's share in education varies from state to state, so does the percentage of state funding within states. For some states, their share in the K-12 education funding system is as high as 82%, but for other states, their share is as low as 29% (New America, 2015). In addition, some districts within states receive more or less money than other districts within the same state (Baker et al., 2015). Naturally, states that rely heavily on local property taxes as opposed to state funding have larger funding disparities between districts because those living in low-income areas are not able to pay as much as those living in high-income areas (New America, 2015).

School districts receive their money from the local, state, and federal government, but school districts and schools do not all receive the same amount of money, which means that students do not all receive the same amount of per-student funding. There are three different education funding systems that states can employ. A regressive funding system means that the state provides less funding to low-income schools and more funding to high-income schools. A flat funding system means that the state does not provide any additional funding to address the needs of low-income students, nor any additional funding to high-income schools. A progressive funding system means that more funds are allocated to low-income schools than to high-income schools (Baker et al., 2015). In Baker et al.'s (2015) study, they excluded Hawaii and the District of Columbia because they are single-district systems; in addition, Alaska was excluded because its study produced inconsistent results. Of the

remaining 48 states, in 2012, 14 had regressive funding systems, 19 had flat funding systems, and 15 had progressive funding systems (Baker et al., 2015).

To simply compare funding expenditures between states would not truly reveal funding disparities because there are many factors including funding both within and among states that can skew those comparisons (Baker et al., 2015). Therefore, Baker et al. (2015), in their study, composed a model that predicts average funding levels but that also controls for student poverty, regional wage, variation, and school district size and density. Their funding levels are also "predicted by the model at a 20% poverty rate" (Baker et al., 2015, p. 6). I am relying heavily on this study for my explanation of funding disparities in the United States because this study accounts for the nuances in educational funding between and within states as well as for the average level of poverty in the United States. This is the 4th edition of the study released by the Education Law Center and is referenced by over 100 researchers, pointing to the study's relevance and reliance in the research literature.

In 2012, states' average per-student funding levels ranged from a high of $18,507 in New York to a low of $6,369 in Idaho (Baker et al., 2015). In 2012, South Dakota, Delaware, Minnesota, and New Jersey were deemed the four most progressive states because they, on average, provided their lowest-income districts with 30% to 38% more funding than their highest-income districts. Conversely, Vermont, Wyoming, North Dakota, and Nevada were deemed the three most regressive states in 2012. Vermont, Wyoming, and North Dakota, on average, provided their low-income districts with approximately 80 cents for every dollar spent in high-income districts. Nevada, however, provided its low-income districts with approximately 48 cents for every dollar spent in high-income districts. Figure 1, which is reproduced from Baker et al.'s (2015) report, displays this information graphically. This

figure clearly shows the vast disparity between the United States' most progressive state and

its most regressive state. The percentage displayed on the figure is how much is spent on

low-income students per $1 spent on high-income students, e.g. South Dakota's percentage is

138%, which means that per $1 spent on high-income students, $1.38 is spent on low-income
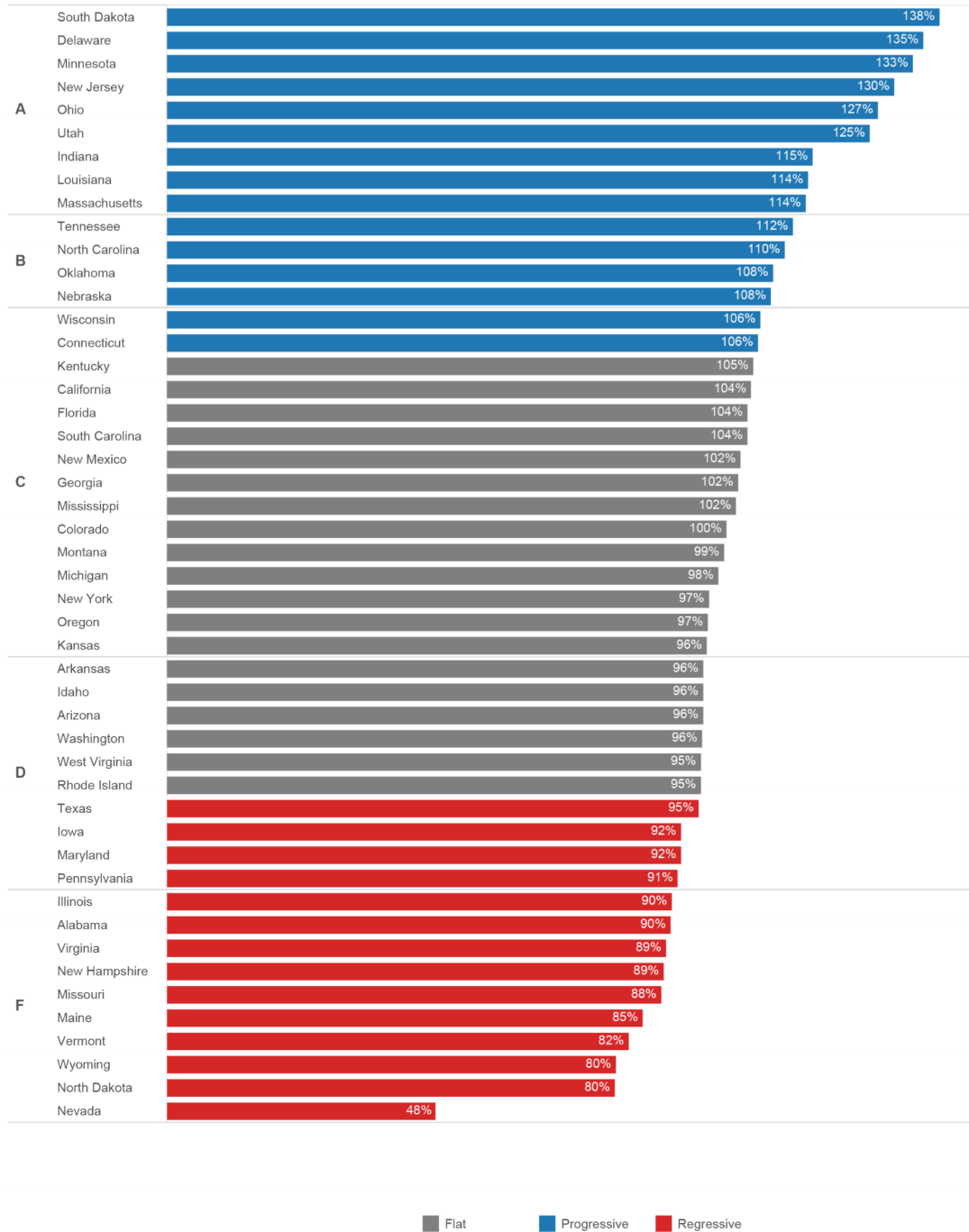
students.

Figure 1: The differences in funding between 48 of the United States. From Is school funding

fair? A national report card, in *Education Law Center*, retrieved from

http://www.schoolfundingfairness.org/National_Report_Card_2015.pdf.

Comparing how much states are spending on education is a very important component of this analysis, but it is also important to compare how they spend that money. For example, Idaho's per-student spending average in 2012 was $6,369, but Idaho utilizes a flat spending system. In fact, in Idaho, students in low-income areas are receiving 96 cents for every dollar spent in high-income areas. This means that school districts are able to spend almost the same amount of money on each student regardless of whether they come from high-income or low-income areas. In Nevada, even though the average per-student spending in 2012 was $8,349, (higher than Idaho's $6,369), Nevada was the most regressive state in 2012, with students in low-income areas receiving 48 cents for every dollar spent in high-income areas. So even though Idaho's average per-student spending is lower than Nevada's, low-income students in Idaho are having more spent on them than low-income students in Nevada (Baker et al., 2015).

Both Baker et al.'s (2015) report and New America's (2015) report noted "effort" as an important factor to consider when analyzing state spending on education. New America (2015) explained that capacity and effort are the two main factors that cause funding disparities between states, with capacity being how much a state has available to spend on K-12 education, and effort being how much the state is willing to put forth for K-12 education. In order to determine how much effort a state is putting forth, one must look at how much each state is spending on education in relation to the state's GDP (Baker et al., 2015). One could argue that if a state has a low GDP, then they do not have the funds to spend on education. However, Montana is noted as a state with a low fiscal capacity, but high fiscal effort state, which can be interpreted to mean that Montana values education enough to spend a significant amount of their low funds on education (New America, 2015). There are also

states such as Delaware, which are noted as low fiscal effort states as it has one of the highest

GDPs, but spends a small amount of its funds on education (Baker et al., 2015).

Any kind of resistance to equitable school funding sends the message to students in

low-income areas that they are not worth receiving equitable funding. Biddle and Berliner

(2002) explain that there are many different arguments people use, including individualism

and essentialism[1], to resist equitable funding, most of which are related to people's beliefs

about the causes of poverty (Biddle & Berliner, 2002). Jonathan Kozol, author and education

activist, is quoted by PBS (2008) as explaining that "[the U.S. needs] to have urban schools

that are so good that they will not be abandoned by [White] people, and this is impossible

without equitable funding." Chemerinsky (2003) furthered this idea with an analogy between

the U.S. education system and the U.S. medical system. He asks the question, "if wealthy

people had to receive their medical treatment in public hospitals, is there any doubt their

quality would be dramatically different?" (p. 1462). Here, he is asserting that if students from

a school that was able to spend $15,000 per student per year were sent to a school that could

only afford to allocate $4,000 per student per year, parents would begin to understand the

differences in the quality of resources and teachers that students all across the U.S. are

receiving as well as the effect that is has on students. Because of funding disparities between

high-income and low-income areas, higher-paid and more experienced teachers are often sent

to high-income, low-needs schools because those schools have more resources to allocate to

teacher salary. This means that the less-experienced teachers are often sent to the low-

income, high-needs school (New America, 2015). U.S. Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan,

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[1] Individualists tend to believe that effort, rather than social circumstance, is to blame for one's personal success or failure, while essentialists hold that impoverished people are biologically pre-disposed to fail rather than succeed. These two beliefs build the base for an argument that a quality education would not even benefit low-income students.

even noted that educators are aware that low-income students are the ones who truly need extra resources and extra support in order to succeed at the same level as their high-income peers, but the policies that are enacted do not represent this understanding; in fact, the policies only perpetuate schools' unequal spending habit (U.S. Department of Education [U.S. DOE], 2011).

Baker (2016) asserted that, on average, measures of per-student spending habits are positively associated with better academic achievements. Additional funding has more of an effect on some students than on others, which Baker et al. (2015) noted in their report, explaining that students from low-income areas, who typically attend schools with less funding, would be more likely to benefit from extra funding than would students from high-income areas. This is because students from low-income areas are not, on average, receiving the same amount of academic attention at home as are students from high-income areas (Ushomirsky & Williams, 2015). Condron and Roscigno (2003) concurred with Baker's (2016) findings; according to their study, a $1,000 per-student increase in local instructional spending, which is comprised of teachers' salaries, textbooks, and various other classroom-related supplies, would lead to approximately "6 percent to 10 percent more students passing proficiency tests" (Condron & Roscigno, 2003, p. 30). In addition, if the schools that spent the least were funded at the same rate as the highest-spending school, "the percentage of students passing the tests could increase 24 percent to 40 percent, depending on the test" (Condron & Roscigno, 2003, p. 30). Despite this knowledge, during the 2008-09 school year, more than 40% of Title I schools spent far less state and local money on teachers than did non-Title I schools at the same grade level in the same district (U.S. DOE, 2011).

Teachers, and how they interact with their students, play an important role in shaping students' experiences and their academic achievements. However, how much funding a school receives determines how much they are able to pay teachers (New America, 2015). Condron and Roscigno (2003) asserted that highly-qualified teachers are more likely to be found in high-income schools, which they noted was a difficult assertion to make. However, in their study, they noted that of the 23% of teachers who moved from one school to another, half of those 23% moved within the same district. They asserted that the reason for this migration is because schools with higher per-student spending have more tangible classroom resources available to both the teacher and the student. These findings not only illustrate why highly-qualified teachers are often found in high-income schools, but they also highlight that there may be just as much unequal spending within districts as there is between districts. If the schools were funded equally, then highly-qualified teachers would have the opportunity to be randomly distributed within a district, rather than concentrated in the high-income schools, which would offer a more equal education to all students within the district (Condron & Roscigno, 2003). Partially because students of color tend to be more highly-represented in low-income areas, Condron and Roscigno (2003) found that this unequal spending within districts is linked to "patterns of class and racial stratification" (Boschma & Brownstein, 2016; Condron & Roscigno, 2003, p. 27).

Equitable funding, unfortunately, does not mean that every school receives the same amount of money to spend per student. Instead, it means that every student is receiving the same amount of support and resources necessary to keep him or her at the same level as all of the other students in that grade level. This is why low-income schools need more funding than high-income schools. The fact of the matter is that it costs more to educate a low-

income student to keep him or her at the same level as a high-income student in his or her

same grade. Low-income students statistically begin school academically behind their high-

income peers (Baker et al., 2015; Christle et al., 2005; Ushomirsky & Williams, 2015).

Ushomirsky and Williams (2015) calculated, based on the Title I formula, that it costs a

district 40% more to educate a low-income student compared to a high-income student; they

noted that this percentage may be an underestimate, as other studies have calculated that it

may cost even 50% or more. In 1989, Kentucky's Supreme Court ruled that an efficient

public school system required each student to be given equal opportunity to receive an

adequate education. Their decision made clear that adequacy was more than equal spending;

instead, they found that low-income schools needed substantially more funding in order to

compensate for "out-of-school disadvantages of low-income students" (Lafortune et al.,

2016, p. 9).

Figures 2 and 3 give graphical representations of why low-income students need more

funding than do high-income students. They are reproduced from Coley and Baker's (2013)

report. Figure 2 shows the basic skills levels of children both at ages 2 and 4 based on

whether they live below, at, or above the poverty line. It is clear to see that as the years go

on, the achievement gap between low-income and high-income students only grows. Figure 3

displays students' National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading scores

based on whether or not they qualify for free lunch, for reduced lunch, or for neither lunch

program, which are indicators of living below, at, or above the poverty line. The figure

clearly shows a consistent disparity among students at different income levels, which

explains why students at different income levels need different levels of funding.

2-Year-Olds

Listening Comprehension
- In poverty: 29
- At or above poverty: 39

Expressive Vocabulary
- In poverty: 55
- At or above poverty: 67

Percent Proficient (0, 20, 40, 60, 80)

4-Year-Olds

Letter Recognition
- In poverty: 20
- At or above poverty: 37

Numbers and Shapes
- In poverty: 45
- At or above poverty: 72
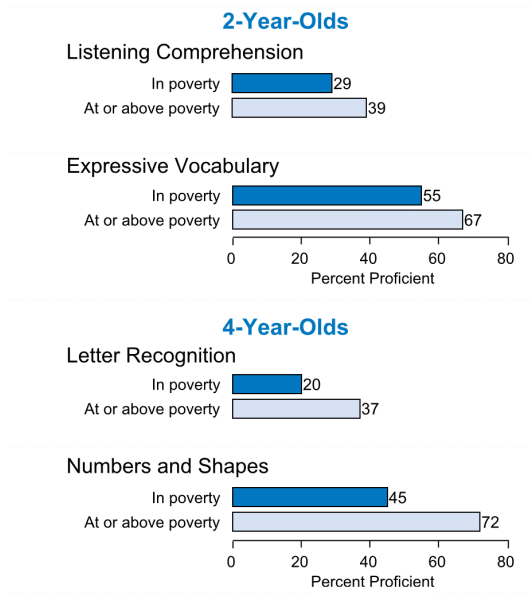
Percent Proficient (0, 20, 40, 60, 80)

Figure 2: Basic comprehension levels of children based on whether they live below, at, or above the poverty line in 2003-04 and 2005-06. From Poverty and education: Finding the way forward, in *Educational Testing Service*, retrieved from https://www.ets.org/s/research/pdf/poverty_and_education_report.pdf.

4th-Graders

- Eligible for free lunch: 206
- Eligible for reduced-price lunch: 218
- Not eligible: 235

8th-Graders

- Eligible for free lunch: 250
- Eligible for reduced-price lunch: 261
- Not eligible: 275

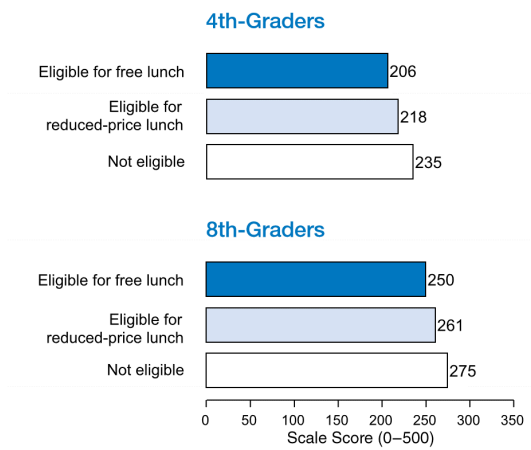Scale Score (0–500) (0, 50, 100, 150, 200, 250, 300, 350)

Figure 3: The average NAEP reading scores compared with whether or not students are eligible for free lunch, for reduced lunch, or not eligible for either. From Poverty and education: Finding the way forward, in *Educational Testing Service*, retrieved from https://www.ets.org/s/research/pdf/poverty_and_education_report.pdf.

Funding in the United States favors high-income students. Low-income students are more likely to start school already behind their high-income peers, and they continue to stay behind due to the lack of resources they are provided with. Less funding means less resources and less qualified teachers; students at low-income schools, especially in regressive states, are experiencing a wholly different educational experience than their high-income peers. Unfortunately, in the United States, as we do not have equitable funding, there is great disparity in who receives a quality education. In addition to funding disparities, standardized testing also significantly impacts education opportunity and quality.

Standardized Testing

Standardized testing allows administrators to easily compare large groups of students and interpret their results in an attempt to judge their academic achievements (National Council of Teachers of English [NCTE], 2014). However, standardized testing is often used as a way to judge the educational quality of both schools and teachers (Popham, 1999). Being able to compare students' results is a respectable reason for utilizing standardized testing; however, I assert that the quantity of and the focus on standardized testing in U.S. public schools is not only unnecessary and a waste of time and funding, but that it hurts students' potential for greater academic success.

Only 38% of the public and 31% of parents surveyed by the National Education Association (NEA) in 2014 supported using students' standardized test scores to evaluate teachers (NEA, 2014). In fact, many parents and teachers argue that the ways in which schools handle testing and test preparation has "warped education" (Brown, 2015). The most distressing part of the excessive standardized testing in the United States is that there is no evidence to support the idea that more testing improves students' overall academic

achievements (Strauss, 2015). Specifically, there is currently no founded information that presents a correlation between how much testing students complete and how well they perform on the NAEP, a federal test given every two years, which Layton (2015) asserted is the "only consistent measure of student achievement across state lines." If there is no evidence to support the necessity of standardized testing, one could reasonably question why states are spending $1.7 billion annually to support an industry that many scholars argue is becoming more harmful than helpful to students (Chingos, 2012; Layton, 2015; NEA, 2014; NCTE, 2015; Ramey, 2014; Volante, 2004).

On average, students in the United States will take 112 mandated standardized tests between pre-K and 12th grade; these tests are in addition to the tests created by teachers for their own grading purposes (Layton, 2015). Research has also shown that teachers lose between 60 and 110 hours of instructional time each school year due to standardized testing, and the NEA (2014) reported that teachers are spending approximately 30% of their time every year preparing students for tests, proctoring tests, and grading and interpreting test scores (NCTE, 2014). This means that, for example, in an English class, instead of focusing on a broad set of skills that students need to succeed in secondary education, higher education, and in their personal lives, such as reading, writing, speaking, and listening, which many educators consider a "well-balanced literacy curriculum," teachers are forced to focus simply on reading comprehension, something that can be easily measured by a standardized test (Volante, 2014). Narrowing the curriculum and focusing more time on test preparation forces many schools, due to various reasons, such as time constraints, the pressure to perform well relatively in the school's district, or budget cuts, to cut subjects such as music, art, or foreign languages because they are not found on standardized tests (NCTE, 2014). Focusing

efforts on standardized tests instead of important skills that will help students later in their educational careers is hurting students in the long run.

The act of focusing too much classroom time on test preparation, testing, and skills that will help students perform better on standardized tests is called teaching to the test (Volante, 2004). Teaching to the test is problematic for many reasons, one of which being that it dumbs down students' educations. When teaching to the test, due to the limitations of standardized tests, teachers must overemphasize basic skills, such as choosing the correct answer to a math problem, rather than more complex skills, such as explaining why they solved the math problem in that way, which cannot be as easily judged by a standardized test (Volante, 2004). Volante (2004) asserted that the techniques that teachers utilize when teaching to the test negate the effectiveness of standardized test scores. That is, when students are taught how to read the exam to find the right answer, rather than how to study to be knowledgeable on the subject, it is impossible to know if the score that the student received is because he or she is competent in that subject or because he or she knew how to "find" the right answer. One teacher who was interviewed by the NEA (2014), Connie Fawcett, explained that administrators expect her to spend her instructional time training her students how to be able to recall facts for a test. However, as a teacher, she explained, teaching students how to conduct research or how to discuss and explore problem-solving situations is more important to her than test preparation (NEA, 2014). The problem, however, is that oftentimes for administrators, the bottom line when it comes to classroom instruction is whether or not something is going to help students on the test, and if it's not, second-grade teacher Mary Lemon explained that administrators do not feel that they have time for it (Volante, 2004). Due to increased pressure due to threats of budget cuts and other extreme

measures, administrators are forced to prioritize higher test scores over higher academic achievement overall.

One could assert that when teachers are focused on test preparation and having all of their students perform well on tests, they are less able to learn students' academic strengths and weaknesses and help them achieve personal academic success. Seventy-two percent of the teachers surveyed by the NEA (2014) reported feeling moderate or extreme pressure from administration to improve their students' test scores; of this 72%, 42% reported that this pressure had a negative impact in their classroom. An interesting conclusion drawn from the NCTE's (2014) report is that while GED recipients and high school graduates perform at approximately the same level on standardized tests, GED recipients have poorer life outcomes because they lack skills such as curiosity, conscientiousness, perseverance, and sociability (NCTE, 2014). High school students are working with teachers who, despite being forced to teach to the test in one way or another, genuinely want to help them, while GED teachers' only goal is for their students to pass a standardized test. If we begin to transform schools into a place where standardized test scores are the most important aspect of teaching and learning, it is not unfounded to assert that students may begin to lose the same skills that GED students were noted as lacking. Student-teacher relationships, meaningful and relevant lessons, and curriculums tailored to each class's needs are all important aspects of a quality education.

Another danger of teaching students to the test is that while students are able to perform well on the standardized test that they are preparing for, many cannot perform at the same level when they take a different type of test on the same subject (Ramey, 2014). We are not training students to be professional test-takers, so it does not make sense to teach them

test taking skills instead of critical thinking, problem solving, or analytical skills. Ramey (2014) explained that when elementary school students are forced to memorize and regurgitate facts, teachers are limiting their natural curiosity by not allowing them to use their imagination. When focusing solely on choosing the right answers on a test, and not having to explain why they chose that answer, students are not learning critical skills such as how to research and write a paper, how to organize and deliver a speech, or how to conduct a science experiment. Students are regurgitating facts instead of demonstrating their knowledge through real-life problems and solutions. By depriving them of these opportunities, students are losing the opportunity to learn the basic skills they will need to succeed in secondary and higher education (Volante, 2004). Oftentimes, standardized tests have an unwanted psychological effect on students; the NCTE (2014) reported that when students are constantly receiving standardized test scores that fall below their classmates', especially at a young age, students are led to believe that they are no longer academically capable and that they will not be able to do well in school.

Standardized tests put too much pressure on teachers and students to continually perform better. Even worse, the amount of emphasis that is placed on these tests forces teachers to focus on test taking skills rather than academic skills such as research and public speaking skills. Standardized tests are meant to be an easy way for administrators to compare students' general knowledge in a subject; however, they are being used to judge students' academic achievements and teachers' worth as educators. By focusing efforts on testing rather than on instructional time, students are not learning all of the skills that they need to succeed in secondary and higher education, let alone in life after college. Students are not receiving a quality education due in part to the fact that they are being taught to the test.

When Funding and Standardized Testing Work Together

In the United States, there are three textbook publishers who seemingly have a monopoly on the textbook publishing business: CTB McGraw Hill, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, and Pearson. This is problematic because these three publishers also produce and profit off of all of the standardized tests that students take during their K-12 careers (Broussard, 2015). If students are lucky enough to use the same textbook and test publisher in their schools, then they are more likely to do well on the standardized tests, as passages and problems often overlap (Figueroa, 2013). However, if their school happens to use a different textbook publisher from their test publisher, then they are at an extreme disadvantage, as standardized tests are timed. If a student has read a passage during test preparation, he or she is more likely to remember the discussion about the passage and will need less time to read and analyze; however, if all of the passages are new to a student, then he or she will need more time and will not have any analysis to rely on (Figueroa, 2013).

In high-income schools, this is less of an issue because students will generally have textbooks, regardless of the brand. In low-income schools, however, this is not always the case. In Philadelphia Public Schools District in Philadelphia, PA, in 2012, the average school only had 27% of the books in the district's recommended curriculum. Ten schools had no textbooks at all (Broussard, 2014). If teachers are unable to teach from a textbook, which the standardized test is going to be based on, then how can they expect their students to perform well? Broussard (2014) asserts that low-income students are at a disadvantage when it comes to standardized testing due to unequal spending. In 2012-13, every middle school in Philadelphia Public Schools District, the eighth-largest district in the country, was allocated $30.30 per student to buy all of their textbooks (Broussard, 2015; Corey, 2015). For context,

one textbook for one class costs over $100 (Broussard, 2015). Broussard (2015) calculated

that in order to provide every student with every textbook in the curriculum would have cost

$68 million. Therefore, even though in the previous section, I warned against teachers

teaching to the test, for districts such as this one, teachers were not even given the

opportunity to teach to the test, which may ultimately hurt their students more in the long run

as test scores are often linked to funding (Corey, 2014).

Standardized testing has become an industry that brings in nearly $2 billion each year,

and it is only expanding. Pearson, the largest education company in the world, brought in

$9.43 billion in 2013. In the first six months of 2014, "Pearson administered 9 million high-

stakes K-12 tests" (Strauss, 2015). Broussard (2014) noted that testing standards change

almost annually, which makes the previous year's textbooks nearly useless if teachers and

students need the new textbooks for this year's tests. When schools are not funded enough to

by textbooks one year, why is the U.S. education system forcing them to buy new textbooks

year after year just so that students can perform well on a standardized test that may not even

be beneficial to students' academic achievements? It is reasonable to assert that the money

spent on newer textbooks and standardized tests could be spent on classroom resources that

would actually benefit students. It seems that the United States has allowed these

corporations to take over their schools and take advantage of low-income schools,

specifically. As Corey (2014) noted, if the U.S. education system allows this system of

standardized testing to continue under these three textbook and test companies, textbook

companies will continue to profit while underfunded schools suffer.

The United States, due to its lack of funding and its prioritization of standardized

testing over instructional time is depriving its students of a quality education. President

Lyndon B. Johnson, in 1965, said "Poverty must not be a bar to learning, and learning must offer an escape from poverty." Currently, in the United States, low-income students are being deprived of a quality education because their schools are funded by local taxes, which are simply not as lucrative as local taxes in high-income areas. These students, if they are not lucky, may be forced back into a life of poverty, a dilemma that is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 5. A quality education cannot be fostered in an environment obsessed with test scores rather than with students' personal academic strengths and weaknesses. And it certainly cannot be fostered in an environment lacking in textbooks, resources, and qualified educators. In the next chapters, I explore quality education beyond standardized testing using Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and Critical Social Theory.

Chapter 2: Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and Critical Social Theory

In Chapter 3, I examine and explain the notion of a quality education beyond standardized testing using a combination of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP) and Critical Social Theory (CST) as a framework for my study. Gloria Ladson-Billings's (1995a) grounded theory of CRP is a pedagogical stance that utilizes students' cultures, lived experiences, and interests in order to connect students with their education. Zeus Leonardo's (2004) CST asserts that the core component of a quality education is criticism, which is used to engage students deeply in their education to help them become autonomous learners. CRP and CST both seek to build autonomous learners who are engaged with and in charge of their own educational experience. Together, CRP and CST have the power to inform a better understanding of a quality education and ultimately change the lives of students, specifically those receiving a lesser education in low-income areas, in order to help them raise their academic achievements and their motivations to succeed in school.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

CRP is a framework that was developed by Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995a) that requires teachers to understand the cultural differences among their students so that they can adjust their curriculum, as well as how their students are learning, based on these differences in order to better engage students in their education (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011). CRP's three basic criteria are that students are experiencing academic success, that students are developing and/or maintaining cultural competence, and that students are developing a "critical consciousness through which they challenge the status quo of the current social order" (Ladson-Billings, 1995b, p. 160). To Ladson-Billings (1995b), developing the tenets of CRP was not a monumental achievement; in fact, she had teachers explain to her that what

she had described was "just good teaching" (p. 159). Ladson-Billings's (1995b) goal in

developing CRP was to understand why these strategies were being implemented in high-

income, White schools, but not as frequently in low-income schools, which are, statistically,

more likely to be filled with students of color than high-income schools are (Boschma &

Brownstein, 2016). Although the most important achievement gap in this thesis is the gap

between high-income and low-income students, the research surrounding CRP is focused on

the educational differences of students of color and White students (Ladson-Billings, 1995b).

In this thesis, I assert that a quality education is not dependent on race or ethnicities, but on

the individual student and the teacher's willingness to work with each student's culture.

Although there is evidence to show that low-income schools are statistically more likely to be

filled with students of color, the various examples involving students of color serve as an

example of the different cultures that can and will be found in classrooms, and the ways in

which teachers must work with those cultures, rather than against them, to achieve a quality

education (Boschma & Brownstein, 2016; Orfield, 2012).

While there is no evidence to support that a teacher of color would automatically lead

to better academic success among students of color, there is research suggesting that White

teachers' failures to acknowledge and reference the cultures of their students that are

different from their own is a player in those students' academic successes (Douglas, Lewis,

Douglas, Scott, & Garrison-Wade, 2008). Therefore, one could assert that students of color

do not require a teacher of color, but rather a teacher who is aware of the systemic racism

that is a daily occurrence in our country, and who will not only appreciate students' of color

lived experiences, but embrace them and utilize them in their classroom. While Ladson-

Billings (1995a) explained that she began her study of CRP with the intent to discover why

students of color were not receiving the same kind of instruction as White students, in this thesis, I assert that CRP is necessary for every single student and every single teacher regardless of race, as every student has different lived experiences and deserves to understand their relevance in both their classroom and their society.

Historically, students of color have not performed as well as White students have in traditional classroom settings, which is due to a number of extenuating circumstances (Douglas et al., 2008; Fryer & Levitt, 2005). Without understanding these circumstances, or bothering to investigate the reasons behind the performance differences, some arguments present themselves that these students are simply inherently less intelligent (Biddle & Berliner, 2002). For example, if a teacher doesn't understand what is causing some students of color to perform poorly when many White students are performing well, he or she might unconsciously begin to view students of color as inferior to White students, which oftentimes leads to negative student-teacher relationships (Douglas et al., 2008). A negative student-teacher relationship, especially one caused by the teacher's own biases, tends to disconnect students from their education, which makes them less motivated to learn. Since motivation is hugely important as students' levels of engagement in their education have been shown to predict students' academic achievements as well as whether or not they will graduate, this effect on students' academic futures could be detrimental (Furrer & Skinner, 2003, p. 149).

CRP requires work from both the students and the teachers because the aforementioned three criteria require students to become critically engaged with their own schoolwork, but they also require teachers to be aware of what students need academically (Ladson-Billings, 1995b). CRP is beneficial for both the students and the teachers involved in the process. It allows students to feel connected with their education and with their

classmates, and it allows teachers to better understand the students with whom they are working, which allows them to learn about their students' academic strengths and weaknesses, which they can use to help their students succeed. When CRP is utilized in classrooms, teachers begin to understand the differences and nuances among their students. By intentionally including every student's background and lived experiences in the classroom, a clear distinction between the ideas of difference and deficiency appears, thus allowing teachers to realize that the differences between their students does not necessarily imply a deficit in some students' abilities (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011).

Tyrone Howard (2003) explained that by using the knowledge and lived experiences that comes with students' cultures in order to make learning "more relevant and effective" for students, not only do teachers begin to use students' strengths that they already possess in order to help them understand what they are learning in the classrooms, but they help them understand that their culture is relevant, instead of forcing them to understand and assimilate to a different culture (p. 196). By allowing students to have their own culture and by allowing lived experiences to play a role in their education, especially in a subject like history as people of color are not always represented in the U.S. history that's taught in schools, teachers are able to make students of color feel as if their history and lived experiences are as relevant to the society in which they are living as their White classmates' are (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011). CRP connects students with their education; it makes students want to learn.

Howard (2003) asserted that teachers' purposes in implementing CRP is to "increase the academic achievement of culturally diverse students" (p. 196). Race matters in the United States' society; those with different skin colors have different lived experiences and to try to ignore that fact in a classroom setting undermines the importance of each race's separate

culture (Howard, 2003). To treat all students as if they are the same does not align with the

goals of CRP because the fact is that students are not all the same. Different students have

different needs, socially, emotionally, and academically. Once that is understood, it becomes

clear that certain teaching methods are simply not going to work for some or all students

(Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011). This is wholly relevant when considering the "traditional

material" that students are often presented with in schools (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011, p.

74). For example, when studying history, students are studying it from the viewpoint of

White historical figures, which gives students from the mainstream culture a privilege; they

are more likely to feel connected with what they are learning, while students of color are

marginalized (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011). Students of color bring value to the classroom,

though, and if teachers do not acknowledge that, then one could assert that the students,

being constantly subjected to a whitewashed culture, may never realize the worth in their

culture. It is important that teachers understand and acknowledge the cultural capital that

students of color bring to the classroom. CRP allows teachers to "utilize students' culture as a

vehicle for learning," and they are given the opportunity to work with students who do not

align with these mainstream norms in order to connect and engage them with their education

(Howard, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1995b, p. 161).

The third tenet of CRP is to ensure that students are developing a "critical

consciousness through which they challenge the status quo of the current social order"

(Ladson-Billings, 1995b, p. 160). While quality education is at the heart of CRP, a quality

education and higher academic achievements cannot be achieved without the cultural

competence and awareness that Ladson-Billings described. It is important that students of

color and low-income students feel that their culture is relevant and that they have a right to

rebel against a mainstream culture in a classroom that doesn't represent them, but this concept is just as, if not more, important for White students and high-income students. When teachers utilize all students' cultural capital in the classroom, White students and high-income students begin to see not only that there other cultures, but that those cultures are just as important as theirs, which will, hopefully, lead them to question why they do not see much of this culture in mainstream society. When all students begin to respect and understand all of their classmates' cultures in the classrooms, this means teachers were successful in creating a community that is able to utilize their own culture in their education, but also other cultures, which helps them become culturally competent, the second tenet of CRP (Ladson-Billings, 1995b).

The end goal of CRP is that students are achieving academically. When teachers are given the opportunity to get to know their students' cultures, lived experiences, and interests, and they are able to incorporate all of them into their learning experience, not only do children feel connected with their education, but they can begin to see the worth in education. Education is more than just teaching students how to read and write; teachers are shaping students to become active members in our society. By teaching them how they are connected with our society, they are creating educated people who can contribute once they have finished their education. By simply taking the time to understand their students, teachers can make an impact not just in the classroom, but on society as a whole

Critical Social Theory

CRP requires teachers to transform their classrooms and the way they interact with their students; similarly, CST requires teachers to change the way they teach and the way students discuss instructional material and interact with one another. At the heart of

Leonardo's (2004) CST is criticism. Criticism often has a negative connotation, but within the context of CST and this thesis, criticism means to utilize critical thinking skills in a constructive way that will benefit students' educations. This theory asks students to criticize everything, which forces them to break down everything they're learning and put it back together in a way that makes sense to them. Though Leonardo (2004) focused on oppression and emancipation as the main goals of CST, I assert that criticism is relevant to all subjects because when students are forced to criticize everything, they will be rewarded with a better understanding of everything.

Leonardo's (2004) CST emphasizes the importance of students becoming in charge of their own education. CST encourages analysis, critical thinking, and communication within the classroom. Leonardo (2004) explained that "classroom discourse broadens students' horizons of possibility, [and] expands their sense of a larger humanity" (p. 11). Criticism is the key idea driving CST because when a student criticizes or analyzes an idea in the classroom, it is impossible for him or her to remain apathetic or disengaged in that moment. By forcing students into their education, rather than being sightseers on the outside of what their teacher is lecturing them about, CST transforms students' education from abstract to practical (Leonardo, 2004).

One main goal of CST is to separate a theoretical education from the very real society in which we live. Education is directly connected to students' lives, so by teaching subjects, such as history or science, as abstract, students are unable to see how it connects to their lives, rendering it boring or useless. Teachers utilizing CST want their students to question everything. Instead of teaching students about oppression, giving them the definition, and explaining how it happened in the 1950s, before women's suffrage, and other historical

examples, they would ask students if they have ever witnessed oppression in their everyday lives. If students are only given historical examples, they will be detached from their education; to them, oppression is a thing of the past (Leonardo, 20014). But by asking them to find examples in their everyday lives, they can begin to question why oppression still happens. This allows them to think critically about both their education and their everyday lives. This connects them with their education.

Leonardo (2004) asserted that a quality education includes preparing students for the society in which they live. Critics have argued that CST is pessimistic, negative, or aggressive, and that teachers who utilize it have a political agenda that they are forcing on students. Leonardo (2004) explained that while there are not answers for all of the questions, such as why racism is still perpetuated to this day, it is important for students to understand that it is a reality and not just something found in history books. CST requires a language of hope, which means that while students will learn that there are terrible things happening, criticism is important as it offers a way out; it offers a possibility of a time when there are not terrible things happening (Leonardo, 2004). This idea of asking students to criticize everything not only gets them thinking, but it forces students to be the ones to make the connection between their education and the society in which they live. This allows them to continue learning long after they leave the classroom.

Criticism is important to a quality education because it forces students to "question, deconstruct, and then reconstruct knowledge" (Leonardo, 2004, p. 12). In addition, criticism teaches students to notice contradictions and to begin to look at all sides of an issue, which Leonardo (2004) believed is a trait that they will take with them out of the classroom. CST asks students to question and criticize everything. When students notice a problem or a

contradiction, they are encouraged to point it out, even if they do not have a solution to the problem (Leonardo, 2004). This is because the criticism that Leonardo (2004) promoted is to help students become autonomous in their education. If students learn to question and critique everything they read or hear, they begin to take charge of their own education. Instead of waiting for a teacher to ask them a question, they are already answering the question (Leonardo, 2004).

CST is vital to my definition of a quality education. It requires teachers to change their way of teaching in a way that will help students become autonomous learners. If students are sitting idly in their classrooms, merely listening to teachers lecture, it is not surprising that many do not see a connection between what they are learning and their real lives. However, when teachers require a classroom discourse on nearly every topic, it is impossible for students to remain disengaged. The moment that students realize that everything they are learning in their classrooms is relevant to their everyday lives is the moment that they begin to receive a quality education.

Much like Ladson-Billings (1995b) hoped that CRP would help students begin to question the current status quo, Leonardo (2004) hoped that by teaching students a "language of critique," they would use that language and thought process to begin to criticize social life outside of the classroom (p. 12). Similarly, the end goal of Leonardo's CST is to emancipate students from their teachers, allowing them to choose knowledge and academic success on their own, while CRP relies on the goal of getting students to "choose academic excellence" (Ladson-Billings, 1995b, p. 160). One of CRP's main goals is to connect students to the world around them and to make them culturally competent (Ladson-Billings, 1995b). Classroom discourse is the main tenet of CST; Leonardo (2004) asserted that this discourse

will allow students to become more open-minded, as they see how many possibilities there are. In addition, students will begin to see the world outside of their own lives and their own culture (Leonardo, 2004). This lines up perfectly with CRP's goal of connecting students with their education, their society, and the different cultures that they encounter (Ladson-Billings, 1995a; Ladson-Billings, 1995b). When CRP and CST work together, they produce very similar outcomes; if a teacher implemented both pedagogical stances in their classrooms, there is no doubt that students would begin to feel connected with their educations and begin to see the relevance of education in their everyday lives. Within my definition of a quality education, CRP and CST come together to build autonomous learners who are engaged with and interested in their education.

Chapter 3: Defining a Quality Education

In this thesis, I define a quality education as one that creates an environment in which students feel comfortable, in which they feel as if their voices are being heard, and in which their learning needs are being met. This chapter analyzes the research behind the effects of student-teacher relationships using Ladson-Billings's (1995a) Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP) as a lens. Additionally, I discuss implementing CRP and Leonardo's (2004) Critical Social Theory (CST) into the classroom in order to best explain, in terms of the United States' current education system, what I deem a quality education.

In the first section of this chapter, I discuss what teachers must do in order to make students feel comfortable in their classroom, explaining through an analysis of the research on student-teacher relationships as well as an analysis of CRP that the first step toward creating a quality education is forming a positive student-teacher relationship, which allows students to feel comfortable in their classroom. In the second section of this chapter, I discuss, through an analysis of research through the lens of CRP that students should feel valued in their classroom and that teachers should be learning about students' at-home cultures in an attempt to bridge the gap between home and school. After forming positive student-teacher relationships, teachers can begin to listen to their students and allow their voices to be heard in order to make a difference in the lessons that they are receiving in the classroom. Connected to bridging the gap between home and school is the third section of this chapter, in which I explain how teachers can utilize CRP in order to learn the best way to teach their students, and how they can utilize CST to give students the ability to take charge of their own education. This will place an emphasis on specific types of grouping that can benefit the students' learning needs best. By listening to their students, teachers can learn

what helps their students learn best in order to engage them in their education and make it easier for them to raise their academic achievements.

Do They Feel Comfortable?

According to the research, a positive student-teacher relationship will have a positive impact on the way students view schoolwork and school itself. Conversely, a negative student-teacher relationship will negatively impact students' self-esteem, and therefore their ability to perform well in school (Baker, 2006; Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Gallagher, 2013; Hamre & Pianta, 2006; Rudasill, Reio, Jr., Stipanovic, & Taylor, 2010; Skinner & Belmont, 1993). Therefore, the most effective way to make students feel comfortable in their classrooms is by forming positive student-teacher relationships. In this section, I explore the research on student-teacher relationships as well as Ladson-Billing's (1995a) CRP in order to show how the basic premise of CRP can aid teachers in making their students feel comfortable in their classroom and connect with their education. The basic premise of CRP, for the purposes of this thesis, is making sure that students feel as if their culture and lived experiences are relevant to their education. When students' education becomes something that interests them, teachers are tapping into their intrinsic motivation, making it easier for them to complete their academic activities (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991). Teachers must get to know their students in order to make them feel comfortable, which will ultimately raise their academic achievements.

Baker (2006) suggested that there are several important constructs, both social and emotional, in a child's life that contribute to academic achievements, including "[a child's] sense of relatedness, belongingness, caring community, perceived pedagogical caring, or positive [student-teacher relationships]" (p. 212). All of these constructs are found within

CRP, and this thesis asserts that none of these constructs can exist without student-teacher relationships. Without a positive relationship, it would be difficult to form any of the other bonds listed. The research suggests that a positive student-teacher relationship can be indicative of various outcomes, including "prosocial behavior, responsibility, engagement in school, belongingness to school, and psychological well-being" (Rudasill et al., 2010, p. 393). This is why I assert that making students feel comfortable, with an emphasis on positive student-teacher relationships, is the first step to providing a quality education.

Adolescence is the period in a child's life when he or she begins to test their own strengths and weaknesses, as well as when he or she begins to learn about society, and how one does and does not act (Rudasill et al., 2010). Teachers in elementary schools help facilitate that process (Murray, Murray, & Waas, 2008). Positive student-teacher relationships allow students to adjust to school comfortably and to begin to develop and grow academically. These relationships have also been linked to a decrease in children's aggression, which is one attribute that teachers have noted as causing a negative student-teacher relationships. When teachers spend the time to understand their students, they begin to have more confidence in their students' academic abilities, a feeling that the students pick up on, which affects their behavior (Rudasill et al., 2010). Positive student-teacher relationships give students an emotional security, or a feeling of safety, which allows them to confidently move forward in their education. This allows them to begin developing emotionally and socially in the classroom (Baker, 2006).

Positive student-teacher relationships are crucial in forming an environment that fosters a quality education. A positive student-teacher relationship is characterized by a closeness between the student and the teacher. Rudasill et al. (2010) described this closeness

as one with "mutual respect, caring, and warmth" (p. 393). On the other hand, a negative

student-teacher relationship is characterized by conflict between the student and the teacher.

This can be described as a relationship filled with frustration and frequent disciplinary

actions (Rudasill et al., 2010). I assert that, by utilizing CRP, teachers can form positive

relationships with students whom they have described as difficult to teach and connect with.

Most of the research done on student-teacher relationships focuses on elementary school

children; this is mainly due to the fact that in elementary school, students spend the majority

of their time, if not all of their time, with the same teacher, while in middle and high school,

students typically have closer to 8 teachers. In addition, teachers in elementary school are the

ones helping students navigate the transition from home life to school life, and elementary

school is where students learn how to act when they are at school every day (Murray,

Murray, & Waas, 2008). The research shows that by late elementary school, students have

already developed "decisive beliefs" about their academic abilities, which leads to a

reasonable assertion that the student-teacher relationships formed in elementary school will

have the most effect on students' academic successes (Baker, 2006, p. 212).

Children who have secure attachments to those who take care of them, be it their

parents, their teachers, or their babysitters, are more likely to function well in their school

performance than those who do not have secure attachments to their caregivers. Teachers'

ratings of closeness with individual students in kindergarten is a good indicator of their future

school performance; in addition, a child's sense of relatedness to both their teachers and their

classmates is a significant factor that influences their motivation toward school and their

academic achievements (Furrer & Skinner, 2003). This is significant because it presents the

possibility that students with negative student-teacher relationships who perform poorly in

school, and who continue throughout their education to perform poorly and who do not possess a sense of motivation, could have performed well in school, or at least could have had the motivation to perform well, had they had a better student-teacher relationship. While this is an assertion that would be nearly impossible to prove, Hamre and Pianta (2006) show that students who had been threatened with retention and who were eventually retained had more negative relationships with their future teachers than did the students who had been threatened with retention but were eventually allowed to move up in elementary school, who actually reported more positive relationships. One could assert that those students who were not retained felt that their teachers cared about and believed in them, thus motivating them to perform better in school, while the students who were retained felt like no one cared enough about them to help them perform better, thus ensuring their academic failure.

Children who described themselves as feeling appreciated by their teachers were more likely to describe their academic activities in the classroom as interesting and fun; they also stated that they felt happy and comfortable in the classroom. Conversely, students without positive student-teacher relationships reported feeling unimportant and ignored by their teachers in addition to feeling bored, unhappy, and angry when completing academic activities (Furrer & Skinner, 2003). Not surprisingly, a negative student-teacher relationship can also impact a student's self-esteem and his or her academic performance, as negative student-teacher relationships have been linked to lower academic achievement, a low level of engagement with school, and less motivation to perform well in school (Gallagher, 2013; Rudasill et al., 2010). Baker (2006) explained that negative student-teacher relationships showed an even stronger connection with poor academic achievement than did the positive connection between positive student-teacher relationships and academic achievement. This is

not surprising considering the large amount of research that supports the claim that a negative

relationship in elementary school, even in Kindergarten, will predict students' academic

achievement and levels of motivation throughout elementary school and even into middle

school (Baker, 2006, Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Rudasill et al., 2010).

The research shows that students from low-income areas tend to enter Kindergarten

already behind their more affluent peers. More often than not, they tend to remain behind as

they can tell that teachers view them as less intelligent, and oftentimes, they are treated

differently (Baker, Sciarra, & Farrie, 2015). Baker (2006) explained that positive student-

teacher relationships can especially have an important effect on low-income, Black students

who have experienced alienation from school. This is where Ladson-Billings's (1995a) CRP

comes into play because low-income students need teachers who understand their culture and

their lived experiences, but especially low-income, Black students, as scholars have deemed

White teachers who do not consider the cultural needs and differences of Black students as

one of the main driving forces working against Black students in schools (Douglas et al.,

2008). Low-income students need more help in school than high-income students, and when

teachers respect them, the students feel more comfortable relying on their teachers for

educational support (Baker et al., 2015; Gallagher, 2013). The fact that a positive student-

teacher relationship has the possibility of influencing the academic achievement of these

students should encourage teachers to make more of an effort to connect with them, despite

how difficult it might be (Baker, 2006). The cultural needs of all students, be it an issue of

race or income, must be met in order to foster an environment for a quality education.

There are many factors that have been identified by teachers, either consciously or

unconsciously, as reasons for a negative student-teacher relationship, or at least one fraught

with conflict, which include income and gender. For example, Rudasill et al. (2010) noted that third grade children from lower-income families were prone to negative student-teacher relationships; they also found that being male and having a more "difficult temperament" led to more conflict in student-teacher relationships, which often led to poor academic achievement or more "risky behavior" (p. 405). Baker (2006) also noted that teachers generally reported more positive relationships with girls than they do with boys. As has been stated, positive student-teacher relationships are related to positive academic achievement and higher motivation levels, but if teachers are prone to negative relationships with certain students, then there is a higher statistical chance of those students doing poorly in school (Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Gallagher, 2013). The research shows that in elementary school, as students change teachers every year, students often attempt to form relationships that are strictly related to their educational tasks rather than emotionally-based (Baker, 2006). If students do not form the relationships themselves, it is not unfounded to assert that teachers should be the ones to form the emotionally-based relationships. CRP is relevant when teachers are having problems with students because the simple act of a teacher finding out what interests his or her students and factoring those interests into the classroom not only begins to forge a positive student-teacher relationship, but it engages students with their education.

    In general, positive relationships are important for children's social development, including both their relationships with their teachers as well as with their classmates (Furrer & Skinner, 2003). It has been shown that the way that a teacher feels about a child is clear both to the child and to his or her classmates. This emotion has an impact on the class as a whole; if one student has a negative relationship with his or her teacher, his or her classmates

pick up on that and it has been shown to negatively impact that student's relationship with his or her classmates (Gallagher, 2013). The research shows that when students are rejected by their peers, they experience more feelings of loneliness and social isolation than do students who are accepted by their peers, which has been shown to cause negative feelings toward and a lack of motivation toward academic activities, which can also lead to them eventually dropping out, as they feel no connection with their education or those with whom they attend school (Furrer & Skinner, 2003). Dropout will be further discussed in Chapter 5 as a predictor of crime and poverty. Teachers have a unique position in that they can intervene with students and prevent dropout through attempting to secure a quality education for their students.

Positive student-teacher relationships lead to higher motivation and higher academic achievements, while negative student-teacher relationships lead to poor academic achievements, which have been shown to continue until middle school and beyond (Baker, 2006, Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Rudasill et al., 2010). In addition, a positive student-teacher relationship can help a student among his or her peers, while a negative student-teacher relationship can have the opposite effect (Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Gallagher, 2013; Rudasill et al., 2010). A positive student-teacher relationship can have many positive effects for students, both academically and socially, but attempting to form a positive student-teacher relationship by using CRP is only the first step to creating an environment where students feel comfortable (Ladson-Billings, 1995a). After forming a relationship with students, it will be much easier for teachers to become aware of what they are interested in, which allows them to create a classroom that provides them with a context to connect with their education.

In addition, teachers will have a better understanding of how a student learns, and they can adjust group teaching or classroom teaching to make it easier for students.

Are Their Voices Being Heard?

The second tenet of a quality education is ensuring that students feel as if their voices are being heard. In order for a student's voice to be heard, students must feel as if their opinions and experiences are valued in the classroom. Specifically, in terms of CRP, students should feel comfortable telling their teachers that they do not understand the way in which the material is being taught so that teachers can determine a problem and therefore a solution to their learning situation. This helps teachers conform education to their students, rather than forcing students to conform to education. When students are valued in the classroom, they feel respected by both their teachers and their students, and they feel as if their input is important.

As a society, we have determined that education is a basic need because without it, a person cannot successfully survive in the society that we have created. However, students, especially those in elementary school, cannot comprehend that concept. To them, school is a boring place where they must spend 40 hours a week. Therefore, it would make sense to make the lessons and the ways in which students receive those lessons relate to students' lives. Everything that students learn in school *is* relevant to students' lives, and while that concept may not be the most important idea that teachers focus on, it is not too difficult to find a way to make education interesting for students. In fact, by forging a relationship between students and education based on what students want, we allow students to take charge of their own education. This is something that both Ladson-Billings (1995a) and Leonardo (2004) asserted in their frameworks. In fact, Leonardo (2004) asserted that the goal

of CST is to make it easier for students to become autonomous in their learning. While the research points to the conclusion that when there are positive student-teacher relationships at play, students feel more comfortable making their voices heard, I also assert that teachers should be the ones to ensure that every student has the opportunity to feel valued in the classroom. Below, I focus on Ladson-Billing's (1995a) CRP and Leonardo's (2004) CST and how they can help teachers transition from helping students feel comfortable to ensuring that students' voices are being heard in their classroom.

CST emphasizes the importance of children being in charge of their own education. This means that a teacher is guiding them through a curriculum, but in a way that helps students learn and understand lessons as simply as possible while still challenging them with exercises (Leonardo, 2004). Skinner and Belmont (1993) explained the importance of teachers supporting autonomous behaviors in students by giving them the freedom to choose education on their own terms, or letting them pick what interests them. Then teachers can help forge connections between students' interests and their educations. This gives the students a say in their educations and makes them feel as if they are valued in the classroom because they have the power to choose how they learn (Skinner & Belmont, 1993). Skinner and Belmont (1993) also explained that the opposite of autonomy is coercion, so if children are not choosing to learn, teachers are having to convince them why they should learn, which means that the teacher's voice is being heard, not the students', and forcing students to learn is not a way to get them excited about their education. CST emphasizes the importance of students choosing to learn because this engages them with their education and makes it easier for them to succeed as they are more motivated to succeed on their own terms (Leonardo, 2004).

Schools in the United States are focused on answers to questions, and the teachers and administrators seem unconcerned with how students came to choose those answers, as long as the answers are correct. In fact, Cortes, Jr. (2010) asserted that students are being taught how to conduct searches on the internet and being taught how to provide an answer, but that they are rarely being taught to question the question itself, to dig into the relevance and the many dimensions the question might hold. I assert that when students do not enjoy school or when they do not feel motivated to perform well in school, it is because they do not feel a connection with what they are learning. If students are taught only to answer a question, not to question why they are answering it, then they do not have a context upon which they could forge a relationship. In that instance, the work seems unnecessary to the student. It is unfair to force students to conform to the current educational system. Rather, as Ladson-Billings's (1995a) CRP asserts, the educational system should conform to the student. This is possible by listening to what the student has to say. Instead of hearing "I'm bored," teachers can find out why the student is bored and think of what he or she is interested in that could make the lesson more interesting to him or her. By finding a connection between the student and what the students are learning, teachers can find a way for students to connect with their education.

Brown-Jeffy and Cooper (2003), in their deconstruction of Ladson-Billings's (1995a) CRP, noted that an important concept is "teaching the whole child," and when teachers do this, they foster students' "skill [developments] in a cultural context;" they bridge the gap that is often found between home, school, and community; they create a "supportive learning community" among students; and, most importantly, they "empower students" (p. 76). At home is where students first learn about life, but when they come to school, many find that

the way things are done at home are not the way that things are done at school. Vast cultural

differences between the two places where students spend the majority of their time can lead

to conflict, and it can be difficult for students to adjust (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011). This

is why "home-school-community collaboration" is such an important concept of allowing

students' voices to be heard (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011, p. 76). If a student does

something a certain way at home, and it is possible for that student to complete an academic

task in the same way at school, it is important that teachers listen and try to work with the

student. Students bring different cultures with them to school; CRP asks teachers to be the

bridge between these two places. If teachers can find a way to connect students' lived

experiences with their new academic knowledge, students will have the opportunity to glean

additional information from the tasks presented to them at school because they will have

something relevant to relate it to in their real life (Howard, 2003). By listening to students'

needs, and allowing their voices to be heard in the classroom, teachers can make school

relevant and interesting to students.

Howard (2003) explained that using CRP in congruence with other teaching styles

that utilizes students' different lived experiences is a clear indication to students that their

voices are being heard and that their lived experiences and cultural capital that they are

bringing to the classroom are valued. In many instances, students feel as if their "at-home"

culture or the way they were raised are not as important as the culture in their classroom.

This is why teachers must make every attempt to understand students' backgrounds (Howard,

2003). For example, if a teacher "rails against the evils of rap music," students who feel a

connection with this type of music, especially Black students from low-income areas, who

are often already viewed as less intelligent than their peers, might feel as if the culture in

which they were raised is not legitimate or is something to be ashamed of (Ladson-Billings, 1995b, p. 161). Ladson-Billings (1995b) interviewed many teachers who utilize her pedagogy; one of whom, Patricia Hillard, explains that she understood that her students felt a connection with rap music, and she understood that they had every right to be able to feel comfortable celebrating their culture. Therefore, she allowed her students to bring in rap lyrics for a poetry unit. By letting her students choose the type of poetry they are learning, she is allowing their voices to be heard. By letting them choose rap music, something some elementary school teachers might shy away from, she is letting them know that their culture and lived experiences are relevant. And in doing both of these things, she is letting the students take charge of their own education (Ladson-Billings, 1995b). Ladson-Billings (1995b) noted that the students in Hillard's class "far exceeded" the poetry knowledge requirements of the state department of education and the local district (p. 161). Simply by listening to what students have to say about their education, teachers can improve their academic achievements.

Brown-Jeffy and Cooper (2011) introduced the idea of creating a "supportive learning community," which they explain can happen when students see that different cultures of other students are being valued because then they begin to see the value in the culture and therefore the student (p. 76). This all begins with a positive student-teacher relationship – when teachers value students, other students begin to value them as well, and if a teacher clearly does not appreciate a student's culture, other students will take note of that (Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Gallagher, 2013). One teacher in Ladson-Billings's (1995a) study noted that she allowed students to act as teachers, and she wouldn't answer students' questions unless they had asked their classmates first. She said that every student was expected to be the

expert in something that the class was learning, and each one was expected to share that

knowledge with his or her classmates. By giving each student something to be "in charge of,"

this teacher was not only valuing each student and allowing the class to work in a

collaborative environment, but she was taking note of each student's strengths, rather than

their weaknesses, thus making them feel valued in their classroom (Ladson-Billings, 1995a).

One could assert that CRP became necessary because teachers were not embracing all

of their students' cultures in the classroom, but rather enforcing their own cultures. If the

teacher's culture is a different culture from what some children were used to at home, many

students would be unable to perform as well as they might have been able to had a different

approach been used. In Ladson-Billings's (1995a) study, she found that teachers who

attempted to recreate the language and culture used in students' homes were better able to

improve students' academic achievements than teachers who did not. In fact, the teachers

who incorporated students' cultures into reading lessons were able to help students score

higher than predicted on standardized reading tests (Ladson-Billings, 1995a). When teachers

take students' concerns about their learning and implement changes to make the classroom a

place where students can freely be themselves, students are given the opportunity to learn in

a way that is simple for them. Simple does not necessarily mean that the work they are doing

is easier, but as long as students are learning the required material, then it shouldn't matter

how they are learning it, as long as it engages the students with their education. Ladson-

Billings (1995b) noted that oftentimes school is not a place where Black students feel that

they can be themselves. This is not acceptable for a teacher who is practicing CRP because

they are expected to take their students' cultures, even if it is different from their own, and

find a way to connect it to their education in order to better engage students (Ladson-Billings,

1995b). A student should not be falling behind simply because he or she is not familiar with the way the material is being taught. He or she should be able to speak up and know that the teacher is going to take what he or she said to heart and try to make a change.

The first step to creating a quality education is creating a positive-student teacher relationship with all students and making students feel comfortable in their classroom. Once that is achieved, then teachers can move on to the topic of this section, allowing students' voices to be heard. By making a student feel valued and as if he or she is in charge of his or her education, teachers can learn what is important to students, and they can use that to create more engaging activities to make school conform to students' needs and interests, rather than the other way around. This is essential to engaging students in their education and creating a quality education.

Are Their Learning Needs Being Met?

Teachers have taken to referring to what they do nowadays as "teaching to the test," which basically means they are only teaching what the students need to know for the upcoming standardized test (Volante, 2004). Oftentimes, standardized test scores do not reflect true knowledge. Yes, it can give the administrators an idea of what level students are at, but students can quickly forget something that they have recently memorized. One could assert these scores are used to satiate parents, administrators, and oftentimes even students. When it comes to CRP, though, teachers are required to genuinely pay attention to what students need academically instead of just making them "feel good" (Ladson-Billings, 1995b, p. 160).

Skinner and Belmont (2003) have asked the question, "Why is it so difficult to optimize student motivation?" (p. 571). They note that children tend to lose their sense of self-motivation and become disconnected from education somewhere in the educational process between pre-school and high school (Skinner & Belmont, 2003). I assert that students lose that sense of motivation and become disconnected because teachers are not meeting their learning needs. It is reasonable to assert that the education system is structured in one way, which may meet the learning needs of some students, but not all of them. However, teachers have the ability to personalize each student's educational experience so that it lines up with what that student needs to succeed. The only way to do so is to form a relationship with students and learn how best to let their voices play a role in their academic experience.

There are many options for teachers to personalize students' educational experiences, but grouping is a technique that I have found in the research to be the most promising in transforming students' educations. Grouping is a controversial topic among educators. It was once very popular, but became almost taboo in the late 1980s and early 1990s when it became clear that putting students in a lower-achieving group trapped students there, and these students were more often than not poor and minority students, thus perpetuating a cycle of poverty (Yee, 2013). In fact, the research showed that when students are placed in a lower-achieving group, they lose their motivation to learn because they consider themselves lesser than their peers. This might be because they tended to receive a lesser education, they were considered less intelligent, and they therefore received easier instruction, which means they learned less skills than students in higher-achieving groups (Young, 1990). While I acknowledge that grouping is a highly-contested and complex process, and I reject the

practice of grouping by ability as it marginalizes particular students, I argue that the practice

of dynamic grouping was designed with this critique in mind. Teachers who use dynamic

grouping look at students' needs and abilities and tailor each group's activities to these needs

and abilities, but they do not treat any group as less intelligent. Every group has the same

expectations, but students from different groups may need to receive instruction in different

ways in order to meet these expectations (Yee, 2013). Dynamic grouping is a way to

personalize instructional time in order to enhance every student's different abilities.

Not every student learns in the same way, nor is every student going to be on the

same level, which is why teachers need to adapt to each student, not ask each student to adapt

to a certain teaching style. There are many different types of learners, including visual,

auditory, read-write, and kinesthetic learners (Friedman, 2008). To combine the knowledge

of which way students learn best with their lived experiences is a significant aspect of a

quality education. This is the way in which grouping would work best. Often times, students

are grouped based on their academic achievements so far, which often times leads to the

"dumb group" and the "smart group" (Neuman, 2009). Instead, using dynamic grouping,

students would be grouped based on their mutual cultural backgrounds as well as on their

learning style; in fact, CRP requires teachers to be aware of the differences among the

students both in terms of their cultures and in terms of their learning styles. CRP is used in an

attempt to better engage students with their education, which is why it is necessary for this

particular tenet of a quality education (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011).

There are many different forms of grouping that could all be described as dynamic

grouping. In Yee's (2013) study, one teacher whom she interviewed, Jill Sears, explained her

method of grouping, which began as a form of ability grouping, though she made sure to give

each group the same amount of attention. After teaching the entire class the same lesson, she would break the students up into their groups where they would work on activities and assignments that Sears had specifically tailored to each group. The "lowest-achieving group" would not receive less instruction or be expected to learn any less than the other students; rather, Sears noticed what types of learners all of her students were and ensured that their group activities reflected that (Yee, 2013). Young (1990) explained that interest grouping gives students the opportunity to work with students who have similar interests, but differing abilities. This provides students with the opportunity to make connections with other students and makes it easier for them to want to work together. In addition, the research shows that when students are genuinely interested in the material, they develop motivation which helps them overcome material that they once deemed too difficult (Young, 1990). Much like CRP, Young's (1990) concept of interest grouping allows students to develop a connection with their education and realize how it connects to their lives.

Skinner and Belmont (2003) asserted that when students begin to show signs of lacking motivation, teachers can and should do something about it. They can increase their involvement in students' learning experiences, and in their lives, to let them know that they care about their academic experiences. They can help them become autonomous in their educational experience by targeting what had once motivated the student in an attempt to magnify that and show them how they can continue to work successfully (Skinner & Belmont, 2003). When students are forced to sit and listen to facts being taught to them, without any involvement or interaction from the class, Leonardo (2004) explained that students begin to experience education in "its alienated and abstract form;" he then asserted that an education without analysis and discussion could hardly be called quality (p. 11). The

reason behind this is because classroom discussion allows the student to see that learning is not one-sided, but that there are endless possibilities to be discussed. This expands their horizons because they see that other students have other opinions which must be respected. Learning this at a young age makes them more able to participate in society, but it also teaches them to learn with an open mind. In addition, by asking them to respect other students' beliefs, teachers are reminding students that everything they do affects other people, which helps them realize that their actions, and what they are learning, will affect a broader society. Working with and listening to others helps expands students' minds, which is important to a quality education (Leonardo, 2004).

There are students who come to school already behind their peers. Yes, the students who have already begun to learn to read will be easier to teach than the one who has rarely, if ever, opened a book. But the second child is able to be taught; he or she just requires more involved teaching and higher expectations. However, when students are already where they need to be, teachers can often be swayed into thinking that the students who are behind are simply less intelligent, thus providing them with less learning expectations. This leads to the achievement gap (Rothstein, 2004). When students are given what they need to learn successfully, the achievement gap can be avoided, thus providing students with a quality education.

A quality education is one in which students feel comfortable, in which their voices are being heard, and in which their learning needs are being met. A positive student-teacher relationship is the first step to achieving this environment. Once students feel comfortable talking with their teachers and simply existing in their classroom, then they can begin to speak up and give their input, which will allow teachers to make their students' voices

relevant in the classroom. Finally, once these basic classroom needs are met, teachers can

help students learn in a way that is conducive to each student's particular learning style. Only

with a positive relationship can teachers begin to get to know their students and help them

feel comfortable, and in order to place students in groups that will help them learn best,

teachers must have formed this relationship and have taken the step to make students feel as

if they contribute to their classroom. All three components must be met and must work

together in order for teachers to provide their students with a quality education.

Chapter 4: Tucson Unified School District – An Example of Quality Education

Aligned with the components of a quality education that I outlined in Chapter 3, such as teachers who care about their students, a comfortable environment, and an environment in which students feel valued, many Ethnic Studies programs exemplify a quality education. While Ethnic Studies programs were first developed in an attempt to make students of color and other marginalized groups feel connected with their education, much like with Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP), I assert that the same basic concepts can be applied to all students, albeit in slightly different ways. In this chapter, I discuss what an Ethnic Studies program is, then I focus specifically on the Raza/Mexican-American Studies program at Tucson High in Tucson, Arizona. At Tucson High, the program was introduced as a way to connect Latino students with their education, as Latinos at Tucson High had a higher than average dropout rate. Students who had previously dropped out came back to school to attend these classes. This section focuses on why students were connected to this program, and it includes my analysis of how these concepts can be applied to any classroom to create a quality education.

When researching the Ethnic Studies program in Tucson Unified School District (TUSD) in Tucson, Arizona, many different names were used to describe the program and other similar programs, including Mexican-American studies, Raza studies, and Ethnic Studies. For the purposes of consistency within this thesis, I will use Ethnic Studies as the term to describe TUSD's program and all other similar programs. In addition, there is considerable controversy surrounding TUSD's program with laws being put in place to block it. Though I will mention the critics in this chapter, I am not focusing on the lawsuit as it is

not relevant to the benefits of the Ethnic Studies program that will be discussed and analyzed in this chapter.

Ethnic Studies is a program whose courses are focused around the knowledge and perspectives of a particular ethnic or racial group. Ethnic Studies serves as a counterbalance to the mainstream curriculum that tends to focus on White history and experiences (Sleeter, 2011). Students of color are often surrounded by a distinctly Eurocentric presence in their schools, which leads many students of color to feel marginalized because they cannot relate to the mainstream culture. Ethnic Studies fills that void, allowing these students to be immersed in a curricula that affirms their racial identities. This connects them with their education; this makes them feel relevant when it comes to their education (Sleeter, 2011). When students are connected to their education, they see a point to it, and they are less likely to drop out and more likely to actually take something away from their education.

Many critics question why a program like this is necessary (McGinnis & Palos, 2011). Sleeter (2011) conducted a survey in which White and Black students were each questioned separately about their educations. The majority of White fifth graders believed that the Bill of Rights gave rights to everyone, while many of their Black classmates were able to point out that that was not the case. In fact, many of these Black fifth graders were already beginning to build a language about racial oppression. In her survey of eighth graders, many Black eighth graders noted that they got tired of learning about White people all of this time, and that their educational experience would be more interesting if they were able to learn about more Black people (Sleeter, 2011). Many White critics will never understand why there is a need for this class, but the numbers of successful students coming out of these classes should speak for themselves. The fact that Black students are able to

vocalize the problems that they have encountered with their educations demonstrates how and why changes should be made within classrooms.

The research clearly shows a positive connection between Ethnic Studies programs and the academic achievements of the students enrolled. More importantly to the topic of this thesis, the research supports a positive connection between the Ethnic Studies programs and the enrolled students' attitudes toward learning (Sleeter, 2011). When teachers are able to make a connection between students and their education and show them how what they are learning is relevant to their lives, students begin to engage with their education, which will naturally raise their academic achievements because they are motivated to achieve more. The first step to a quality education, as noted in Chapter 3, is a positive student-teacher relationship. Once teachers understand their students' interests, backgrounds, and lived experiences, it is that much easier for a quality education to fall into place.

In TUSD, the dropout rate for Latinos was 50% (Delgado, 2013; McGinnis & Palos, 2011). After implementing the Ethnic Studies program, the dropout rate for Latinos was 2.5%, compared to the national average of 56% (Chow, 2014; Fong, 2014). TUSD's Ethnic Studies program is characterized by

> "a curriculum that is culturally and historically relevant to the students, focuses on social justice issues, is aligned with state standards but designed through Chicano intellectual knowledge, and is academically rigorous; critical pedagogy in which students develop critical thinking and critical consciousness, creating rather than consuming knowledge; and authentic caring in which teachers demonstrate deep respect for students as intellectual and full human beings" (Sleeter, 2011, p. 14).

This program allowed students who had been marginalized to connect with their education and to let their voices be heard (McGinnis & Palos, 2011). Students wanted to learn more, and that is presumably what teachers wanted for their students. Accordingly, the students enrolled in the Ethnic Studies program were receiving a quality education.

TUSD's Ethnic Studies curriculum was centered on Mexican history as it relates to American history. All classes were still based on state standards, but their central focus was Latino culture. For example, in their English classes, the students would read stories that had Mexican, Latino, and Mexican-American main characters; the literary themes would be focused on their marginalization or their struggle, both of which the students could relate to (McGinnis & Palos, 2011). Students stated that they finally felt connected to their education and that they finally felt like what they were learning was focused on them (Delgado, 2013; McGinnis & Palos, 2011). Even when the program was disbanded, students were so dedicated to learning about their own history and their own culture that they began meeting on weekends to take classes (Acosta, 2014). These classes truly allowed students to take charge of their education, which is something both Ladson-Billings (1995a) and Leonardo (2004) expressed as an important part of a quality education. These students were learning about moral issues, and they wanted to be "leaders for justice" as a result of their classes (Delgado, 2013, p. 1536). That had become their goal, and if that meant they now needed to go to school, go to college, or go to any other higher education to complete that goal, these students now had a driving force motivating them to do so. Even more, they were excited about this prospect, and they would talk about what they had learned in class outside of class, with friends, family, and teachers (Delgado, 2013; McGinnis & Palos, 2011). Education is exciting, and for students to be excited about what they are learning is one very important

goal of a quality education. The Ethnic Studies program allowed students' learning needs to be met, which helps them achieve better academic success that they had previously been able to.

Leonardo (2004) warned against an education that is theoretical and abstract because it alienates students from their education and it makes it seem as if their education is not relevant today because everything they are learning is from the past. In the Ethnic Studies program, students were able to see how what they were learning affected their lives and how it is found in their lives, instead of an "abstract or generalized" education (Acosta, 2014). Learning is not static, nor is it something that should be learned from afar; a quality education will allow students to immerse themselves in their culture and their education (Leonardo, 2004; Sleeter, 2011). Delgado (2013) explained that while White, American history may be enough for White, American students, students of color, many of whom share a different ethnic background than their White, American classmates, deserve to learn their history just as much as any other student. This will not promote divisiveness, but rather it will make these students actually feel included in their education for once (Delgado, 2013).

In Chapter 3, I explained that a positive student-teacher relationship is a necessary component of a quality education. Fong (2014) quoted Curtis Acosta, one of the teachers from Tucson High's Ethnic Studies program, as explaining that a teacher's job is to cultivate a student's mind. Teachers should never look down on students, but rather they should help them look forward (Fong, 2014). Acosta's (2014) curricula included time for students to take what they had learned in class and reflect on how it related to their own lives. This not only allows students to speak candidly with other students about their lived experiences, which allows the culture of the classroom to grow, but Acosta (2014) asserted that in doing this, he

made students feel as if their voices are heard and necessary to their education. Students, in completing these activities, were building relationships with their teachers, which allows the teachers to better understand how they can help their students succeed. In addition, by giving students the opportunity to discuss with their classmates, they are building a strong classroom culture in which everyone's voices and opinions are valued. This culture, according to Ladson-Billings (1995b), is crucial to building strong and adapted students outside of the classroom.

In TUSD's Ethnic Studies program, the students were learning in a classroom with language that is familiar to them and with cultural aspects that are present in their homes. This makes them feel comfortable in their classroom, which means they are more likely to feel positively toward their education (Acosta, 2014). Acosta (2007) explained that the overarching idea behind the Ethnic Studies program is love; this can be a love for learning, the love that is shared within the classroom, or the admiration and respect that teachers have for their students who are trying their absolute best. This love extends itself to teachers listening to students and figuring out why they are struggling and what they can do differently to help students succeed. When teachers are invested in their students' academic careers, students feel more connected to their education (Acosta, 2007). As explained in Chapter 3, a quality education requires a strong student-teacher relationship; this "love" that Acosta (2007) described is the base for these relationships that are being formed within TUSD's Ethnic Studies Programs. In addition, students feel comfortable in their classrooms because their cultures and lived experiences are represented and valued, and their voices are being heard (McGinnis & Palos, 2011). Because of the fact that they were receiving a quality education, these students began to succeed academically.

While I do not endorse using test scores to determine students' intelligence or worth in the classroom, the fact of the matter is that test scores are used to judge students' academic achievements. Following the Ethnic Studies program, the students in the program during 2007 – 2008 and 2008 – 2009 were 144% and 96% more likely, respectively, to pass the standardized AIMS Math test than were students who were not enrolled in the Ethnic Studies program (Cabrera, Milem, & Marx, 2012). In addition, students enrolled in the Ethnic Studies program during 2007 – 2008 and 2008 – 2009 were 51% and 108% more likely, respectively, to graduate from high school than were those not enrolled (Cabrera et al., 2012). Students were satisfied with their classroom, indicating that the three tenets of my definition of a quality education were being met. In addition, students in this program were passing test scores at a higher rate, which means that administrators should be pleased; finally, Latino students enrolled in the program, who had previously been much less likely to graduate from high school than their non-Latino peers, were now graduating at a much higher rate. When students are pleased with their education, it shows through their academic achievements, both those graded by their teachers and by standardized tests. This means that they will be more likely to go to college, or at least graduate from high school, therefore giving them a better opportunity to succeed in life.

White students can benefit from Ethnic Studies as well. What students are learning in these courses are still educational; they are still learning History and English, the teachers are simply approaching it from a different angle (Sleeter, 2011). Laurenzi (2008), a White student who was enrolled in the Ethnic Studies program, explained that they still learned about American and World history, and to assert that what they are learning is too violent or that it will teach them to go against the government is ludicrous. Students already learn about

the Holocaust, about the American Revolution, and about slavery, but for some reason

Mexican history, which is very much intertwined with American history, is largely ignored in

mainstream textbooks (Laurenzi, 2008). Chow (2014) explained that Ethnic Studies allows

students to learn about a part of American history that is not normally studied, and it allows

Mexican-American students to connect with their education; most importantly, though, they

are able to achieve greater academic success because of this.

In Chapter 3, I explained my definition of a quality education and why it is important

to students and to their futures; Laurenzi (2008) affirmed these ideas when he explained that

he liked writing about topics that are relevant to his life. Although the Ethnic Studies

program is slightly different from what I described in Chapter 3 because it is focused on the

struggles of students of color in mainstream education, the practices that its teachers

implement and the goals that its teachers set line up with the notion of quality education that

I have discussed here. Although White students have not been marginalized in the same way

as students of color, it can still be hard for them to relate to what is going on in the

classroom. School can and should be interesting for all students, which is why the principles

of Ethnic Studies programs broadly align with the principles of a quality education.

My definition of a quality education relies on a positive student-teacher relationship,

on students feeling as if their voices are being heard in their classroom, and on students'

learning needs being met in their classroom. The Ethnic Studies program in TUSD utilizes all

three parts of a quality education. Latino students are given an environment in which they

feel comfortable because their cultures are represented in the classroom. This means that

their voices are being heard and their learning needs are being met. Most importantly, there is

a solid student-teacher relationship on which this environment is based. While quality

educations can take many shapes and forms, this example in TUSD perfectly conveys how a

quality education can affect its students in such a positive manner.

Chapter 5: Education's Effect on Crime and Poverty

There is undeniable evidence that education is an important deciding factor in whether or not people eventually participate in criminal activity or live in poverty. While education is not the only deciding factor, I am asserting in this thesis that with a quality education, teachers and administrators can help reduce the chances of students – who are already facing systemic inequalities – participating in criminal activity or living in poverty. Specifically by diverting students from the school-to-prison pipeline and encouraging students to graduate, their opportunity costs of crime will be higher. This chapter discusses how and why education and crime and education and poverty are connected, and what that means for students should they not receive a quality education.

Education and Crime

The research has shown that there is a negative relationship between the level of education a person attains and the likelihood of that person being incarcerated (Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2005; Ehrlich, 1975; Lochner & Moretti, 2004; Machin, Marie, & Vujic, 2011; Wald & Losen, 2003). In this thesis, I assert that a quality education will reduce the likelihood of a person participating in criminal activity. However, without extensive experimental research, this is an impossible claim to support. Therefore, I analyze the existing research on the relationship between education and crime, on the protective factors that teachers can take to prevent students from participating in criminal activity, and on the school-to-prison pipeline in order to use my definition of a quality education to theoretically prove that a quality education could reduce a person's likelihood of being incarcerated.

The research performed on the relationship between education and crime has demonstrated that education does have an impact on crime. There are many reasons for this, one of which being that education can teach students about risk aversion and patience, which will ultimately affect their decision to commit crimes later in life. Students who drop out of school tend to be more focused on the immediate returns they can get from either crimes or a job instead of focusing on the long-term benefits of completing their education (Machin, Marie, & Vujic, 2011). After graduating from high school, the incentive to commit crimes is not as high as it is for high school dropouts because those with high school diplomas have the opportunity to earn more money and hold a full-time job (Ehrlich, 1975; Lochner & Moretti, 2004).

Suspension is the number one predictor of dropout, and dropout is one factor that has been connected to people later participating in criminal activity (Christle et al., 2005; Ehrlich, 1975; Elias, 2013; Flannery, 2015). This is due to the fact that a high school degree yields more professional options than one will find with less than a high school degree (Lochner & Moretti, 2004). Students who are suspended, expelled, or held in a juvenile detention center, upon returning to school, have missed necessary instructional time in addition to having been affected emotionally (Wald & Losen, 2003). Re-entry into school is a crucial time in their academic career during which they need support and guidance; however, more often than not, students do not receive this guidance. Within one year of returning to school, approximately two-thirds of ninth graders who were previously held in juvenile detention centers will drop out of school. In addition, three-fourths of ninth-graders who are repeating the ninth grade who were previously held in juvenile detention centers will drop out (Wald & Losen, 2003). As dropout is a factor that plays a large part in determining whether or not a

person will commit a crime, it makes sense that teachers and administrators should focus on reducing the suspension and dropout rates.

The school-to-prison pipeline has been characterized by academic failure, exclusionary disciplinary practices, and dropout (Christle et al., 2005). The pipeline is facilitated by the policies and practices employed by teachers and administrators that push students out of school and into the criminal justice system (American Civil Liberties Union [ACLU], n.d.). The research blames zero tolerance policies as the main contributor to the pipeline (ACLU, n.d.; Christle et al., 2005; Elias, 2013; Flannery, 2015; Wald & Losen, 2003). Between 1974 and 2000, due to the introduction of these policies, the average number of students suspended annually had nearly doubled from 1.7 million to 3.1 million (ACLU, n.d.; Wald & Losen, 2003). Because suspension is the number one predictor of dropout and dropout has been connected to people participating in criminal activity, the idea that the school-to-prison pipeline begins with zero tolerance policies is well-founded. Therefore, I assert that better retention policies and programs need to be created in order to decrease the number of young adults entering the corrections system.

Students who are suspended or expelled are receiving a punishment far worse than the administrators intended. Without any constructive guidance regarding their academic activities, and without being able to sit in on their classroom instructional time, students begin to fall behind on their coursework. Even worse, though, is that this punishment contributes to a feeling of disengagement with their education and with their teachers, which has been shown to be a predictor of dropout (ACLU, n.d.). In addition, low academic achievement is connected to an increase in youth delinquency (Christle et al., 2005). These students are more likely to be reprimanded, and in a school with zero tolerance policies, they

are more likely to be punished or suspended, which removes them from the academic

instruction that they so desperately need to begin achieving at the same level as their peers

(Christle et al., 2005). Instead of disciplining students, I assert that by implementing my

definition of a quality education, teachers can divert low-income students who are facing

systemic inequalities from the school-to-prison pipeline.

Low-income students come to school already behind their peers (Baker et al., 2015;

Christle et al., 2005). The school-to-prison pipeline is facilitated particularly well in these

low-income schools where police officers have a larger presence. Administrators allow

teachers to place the disciplinary responsibility on the officers rather than empowering them

to take charge themselves in their own classrooms (ACLU, n.d.). However, teachers know

their students far better than any school police officer ever could, which means that they are

in a unique position to deter students who are facing systemic inequalities from the school-to-

prison pipeline (Elias, 2013). When students are constantly disruptive and performing poorly,

it is easy for teachers to get upset, and when the option of sending them out of class presents

itself, it makes sense that they would want to take it. However, if teachers took the blame off

of the students and instead placed it on the students' circumstances, they could make a vital

change in students' lives (Chiariello, 2013). The school-to-prison pipeline focuses on low-

income and lower-achieving students; by taking note and attempting to make a difference,

teachers can impact the school-to-prison pipeline.

The research shows that positive student-teacher relationships can overcome many

outside circumstances that are hindering students from performing well in school (Christle et

al., 2005). In fact, because primary school teachers are often students' first role models

outside of their parents, the way that teachers act and the way that students perceive them is

the deciding factor in whether or not students enjoy school or not (Christle et al., 2005).

When discussing how to influence the school-to-prison pipeline, Chiariello (2013) explained

that teachers have to adopt a "social-emotional lens." Instead of getting angry at a student

who is constantly disrupting the class during a lecture, a teacher should instead question why

he is acting this way, and after determining possible reasons, the teacher should connect with

the student, asking why he or she acts out and even suggesting activities that can connect him

or her with his or her education. Then, teachers can begin to plan instructional time that

relates to their students' interests. After taking the time to get to know the student and why he

or she acts out, the teachers can shift their responses from punishment to development and

resist criminalizing school behavior (Chiariello, 2013). These teachers that seek to help

students are teachers who, by my definition, were creating an environment that fosters a

quality education.

Chiariello (2013) asserted that a student who constantly acts out, with the proper care,

can have his or her attitude shifted without punishment. I would like to present an example

based on Chiariello's (2013) plan and based on school-to-prison pipeline research that shows

the negative effects of a teacher punishing a student who constantly acts out. A student

comes to class every day and constantly taps his pencil during lecture; the teacher, thinking

he is simply choosing to be disruptive, will reprimand him angrily in front of the class.

Sometimes she will give him detention, and after a couple of weeks, she sends him to a

school police officer. As it turns out, the student doesn't understand the material, but doesn't

care enough – or know – to ask for help, as he has always performed poorly in school. His

parents don't help him at home and rarely ask about his grades. Without proper guidance, he

will continue to act out in school, and he becomes known as a trouble-maker whom teachers

do not want to have in class. After escalating in his disruptive behavior, he is eventually

suspended in high school, and upon returning is much too far behind to even consider trying

to make up his work. So he drops out. Without a high school degree, he begins committing

property crimes, and he is eventually incarcerated. If the original teacher had simply taken

the time to talk to him, and to find out what was wrong in his home life that made him act out

in class, Chiariello (2013) asserted that with enough work, the student would have felt the

presence of someone who believed in his academic potential, and could have succeeded

enough in school. The school-to-prison pipeline is often the easier choice for teachers, but at

what cost?

Chiariello's (2013) guide for diverting students who are facing systemic inequalities

from the school-to-prison pipeline follows the same guidelines that I explained as making up

a quality education in Chapter 3. When students are acting out or are performing poorly, a

positive student-teacher relationship allows teachers to communicate with their students to

discuss what is wrong, which can help teachers help their students work out a solution. In

addition, students will feel comfortable approaching their teachers with their problems rather

than feeling as if their teachers only want to punish them. Chiariello (2013) explained that

instead of getting mad at a student, or immediately jumping to disciplinary action, teachers

should, after talking with the student, figure out what would interest a student in an attempt

to divert their attention from bad behavior that may cause them harm later in life. This is

exactly like ensuring that students' voices are being heard in the classroom; when teachers

take the time to plan activities and classwork that revolve around students' interests, students

feel as if they are an integral part of the classroom. Finally, when teachers take these interests

and help students funnel them into productive activities, their learning needs are being met. If

teachers take the time to understand their students, and help them find activities that relate to both their interests and their education, students will be able to see a purpose to their education, and they will feel motivated to complete their education. A quality education can stop students from dropping out of school.

Society as a whole can benefit from future generations receiving quality educations. There are social benefits to educating students now rather than imprisoning them later. According to Lochner & Moretti's (2004) study, one extra year of school reduces the probability of a person being incarcerated by .1% for Whites and by .4% for Blacks, and a high school diploma reduces the probability by .8% for Whites and 3.4% for Blacks. One additional year of schooling reduces murder and assault charges by approximately 30%, motor vehicle theft by approximately 20%, arson by approximately 13%, and burglary and larceny by approximately 6% (Lochner & Moretti, 2004). By those estimates, had the average graduation rate in 1990 been 1 percentage point higher, there would have been 400 fewer murders, 8,000 fewer assaults, and 100,000 fewer crimes overall. The social savings from that decrease in murder would have been approximately $1.1 billion, and the social savings from that decrease in assault charges would have been approximately $370,000 (Lochner & Moretti, 2004). The implications for providing a quality education and keeping students in school would benefit society as a whole.

Steurer and Smith (2003) conducted a survey concerning how education during incarceration affects inmates following their release, with findings that show that education can reduce crime, even after crimes have been committed. Correctional educators, despite critics claiming that taxpayers' money is being wasted, have long held the belief that education reduces the likelihood of repeat offenders. Their findings were statistically

significant, finding that 48% of participants were re-arrested compared to 57% of non-participants, and only 27% of participants were convicted, compared to 35% of non-participants (Steurer & Smith, 2003). While this study does not concern young students receiving a quality education, it does provide evidence that prisoners' future criminal activities can be affected by an education. If this is the case with those who were already incarcerated, imagine the implications for students who have never committed a crime before.

The fact of the matter is that in order to have an educated, civically-active population, we have to invest in education because otherwise, we will be investing in unemployment, welfare, and prison programs, with no social returns to society (Flannery, 2015). As Frederick Douglas said, "It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men;" while spending more money in education may seem to some as useless, it is better to build a strong populace with a lesser propensity for criminal activity than to have to continually invest in their imprisonment, with no social gains whatsoever.

Education and Poverty

The government spends $500 billion a year on the expenses associated with childhood poverty, such as "lost productivity in the labor force, spending on health care and the criminal justice system" (National Center for Children in Poverty [NCCP], n.d.). Children who are born into poverty are less able to escape a life of poverty than those who are not born into poverty (Baker, 2012; Coley & Baker, 2013). According to the research, to climb out of poverty, the first step is to complete high school (Baker, 2012). There is no doubt that there is a link between graduating high school and earning more money, which makes it easier to escape a life of poverty (Coley & Baker, 2013). Students in low-income areas tend

to receive a lesser-quality education than high-income students. Therefore, students from low-income areas are the ones most at risk of living a life of poverty. I assert that a quality education will make it easier for students to escape a life of poverty. In order for that to happen, though, they must have teachers who are willing to put in the work.

Students in low-income areas are more likely to grow up to be adults living in low-income areas than high-income students are. As shown in Chapter 1, the answer to this problem is more resources, but simply throwing money at schools is not the answer; yes, low-income schools need more funding, but the ways that teachers and administrators utilize those resources is what will have an impact on struggling students. The Rochester City School District spends almost twice as much per student as the national average, but it still remains the lowest performing urban school in the United States (Hickman, 2015). Hickman (2015) asserted that "the root cause of poverty is lack of education," which is the claim on which I am basing my assertion that students who receive a quality education will be less likely to live in poverty. Julie Strawn of the Center for Law and Social Policy concluded that while yes, education is hugely instrumental in helping impoverished people rise out of poverty, education alone is not the answer to poverty (Bernstein, 2007). While I assert that education is a very large component of helping students later in life, an education must not only focus on school subjects, but on helping students outside of school as well. Students need a quality education that is focused on their needs that will help them understand how they are connected to their education. Strawn asserted that education combined with focused job training is how to help people rise out of poverty; if we interpret that claim in the context of young students, education must be focused on how they will utilize these skills in society (Bernstein, 2007).

The United States is in the top 35 richest countries in the world; of those 35 countries, the United States ranks second highest in child poverty, coming in just behind Slovakia (Coley & Baker, 2013). This is problematic as we have the capability to help these children escape poverty through education, but unfortunately, those low-income students are the ones receiving a lesser-quality education (Baker, 2016; Baker et al., 2015). These students, if they are not receiving a quality education, are less likely to graduate from high school, which means that they are more likely to perpetuate the cycle of poverty. The research shows that there is a link between a child's family income and their adult outcomes later in life. Low-income students, on average, tend to complete two fewer years of school and earn less than half as much money as students whose families had at least twice the income of the poverty level (Coley & Baker, 2013).

The achievement gap has typically been discussed concerning a gap between Black and White students, but today, the achievement gap between low-income and high-income students is twice as large as the gap between Black and White students (Coley & Baker, 2013). Although there are more White Americans living in poverty than Black Americans and Hispanics, the poverty rate for Blacks and Hispanics is significantly higher than for Whites (Coley & Baker, 2013). When students from low-income and high-income schools are held to the same standards concerning standardized test scores expected of them at the state and federal level, the achievement gap is more likely to widen. This is because treating all students the same, despite having different lived experiences and challenges, not to mention the disparity in resources, disregards the challenges that low-income students face, thus placing the blame on the students rather than the system (Coley & Baker, 2013). Lower-achieving students whose circumstances are not their fault should not be punished for their

achievements, nor should they be treated differently from their higher-achieving peers. To punish them in school could force them into a life of poverty, or force them to remain in a life of poverty.

According to the Kids Count Data Center, as analyzed by Semuels (2014), 39% of Black children were living in poverty in 2013, and 42% of Blacks born into the lowest-income category remained in that category as an adult. One education center, Dunbar, in Atlanta, GA offers free, high-quality pre-school for low-income students whose parents participated in their work program (Semuels, 2014). As I have established, low-income students tend to enter kindergarten either unable to read or with minimal reading skills compared to their high-income peers, and within the current system, that gap is unlikely to shrink (Baker et al., 2015; Christle et al., 2005). After attending Dunbar, 55% of the incoming kindergarteners from their pre-school program were reading at or above grade level expectations; the previous year that percentage had been at 6% (Semuels, 2014). Baker et al. (2015) explained that the students who enter school already behind are oftentimes viewed by their teachers as less intelligent than the students who are at or above grade level, which is why the achievement gap very rarely shrinks. With 55% of Dunbar students reading at or above grade level, they are more likely to be performing better in school, which gives them a better chance of completing school and rising out of poverty.

The information in Table 1 is from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) (2015), which used data from 2015, looking at workers ages 25+ who are working either full-time or salaried positions. The chart shows that students who graduate from high school are more likely to earn more and are less likely to be unemployed. Looking at the differences between those who do and do not have high school diplomas, the earnings are vastly different

(Ehrlich, 1975). It is not surprising that, with more education, earnings go up and unemployment rates go down. It is noteworthy, though, that the more education you have, the easier it would be to rise out of poverty. However, in order for students to graduate and have the motivation to go on to higher education, students need to receive a quality education. Without a positive relationship with a teacher who will help motivate them, and without an environment that meets their educational needs, students may be forced to drop out before graduating.

Table 1: The Differences in Earnings and Unemployment Rate between Degrees

Type of Degree Earned	Median Usual Weekly Earnings	Unemployment Rate
Doctoral Degree	$1,623	1.7%
Professional Degree	$1,730	1.5%
Master's Degree	$1,341	2.4%
Bachelor's Degree	$1,137	2.8%
Associate's Degree	$798	3.8%
Some college, no degree	$738	5.0%
High School (HS) Diploma	$678	5.4%
Less than HS Diploma	$493	8.0%

Note. Adapted from *Employment Projections*, by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016, Retrieved from http://www.bls.gov/emp/ep_chart_001.htm.

Critics have often claimed that spending more and more money on pre-school and primary school funding is a lot of money to put in for little kids, but I argue that it's more expensive to intervene later in life, be it rehabilitation, prison, or welfare programs, than to simply begin by building strong, educated children (Semuels, 2014). It is much better to spend resources "up front," rather than after the fact, which may lead to repeat offenders (Baker, 2012). We may have to wait a while, but those social benefits will far outweigh the funding that is necessary to build strong children. These strong children will build a strong

workforce, and they will ultimately help our country. The implications of students continuing in the current educational system are bleak. Education is clearly an indicator of whether or not students, specifically low-income students, will participate in criminal activity or end up living in poverty. The social benefits of a quality education are great for the public of the United States, but more than that, a quality education will benefit students facing systemic inequalities and make it easier for them to improve their lives.

The implications of the current education system continuing as is, with the disparities between low-income and high-income schools, is that many students will be pushed out of schools and will be forced to participate in criminal activity or will be forced into a life of poverty. The social costs of schools lacking quality education systems is more expensive for taxpayers than it would be to invest in students' educations at an early age. With the school-to-prison pipeline in place and moving students quickly through school to prison, the risk of students ending up in prison is harsher than ever. It is also nearly impossible for impoverished students to escape a life of poverty themselves. With a quality education, teachers would be able to help divert students facing systemic inequalities from participating in criminal activity or being trapped in a life of poverty.

Chapter 6: Discussion

Summary

The U.S. school system is engulfed in a system of inequality that has drastic effects on students and society. Unequal funding and an unnecessary emphasis on standardized testing has warped our school system and made it nearly impossible to foster a quality education. School funding for U.S. schools comes from local, state, and federal government funding, the amount from each varying depending on the school receiving the funds (Blumerman, 2012; New America, 2015; Spellings, 2005). State funding for K-12 education relies on income and sales tax, which means that many students, specifically those living in low-income areas, tend to receive less per-student funding than high-income students (Baker et al., 2015; Biddle & Berliner, 2002; Lafortune et al., 2016; New America, 2015; PBS, 2008). Regressive and flat funding systems are problematic as students in low-income areas tend to enter school already behind their high-income peers, and the research shows that the achievement gap between them is only expected to widen; low-income students need more funding than high-income students in order to perform at the same level as the average (Baker et al., 2015; Christle et al., 2005; Coley & Baker, 2013; Condrom & Roscigno, 2003; Lafortune et al., 2016; U.S. DOE, 2011; Ushomirsky & Williams, 2015). Currently, the school funding system for U.S. schools favors high-income students despite the knowledge that progressive funding systems would push more students to perform at the same average level (U.S. DOE, 2011).

In addition to inequitable funding practices that affect educational quality, the practices that surround standardized testing often take time away from practical teaching practices that will better prepare students for higher and secondary education. Standardized

testing was implemented with the idea that it would allow administrators to easily compare

large groups of students in order to judge students' average academic achievements in

comparison to a larger average (NCTE, 2014). Currently, even with the amount of

standardized testing that occurs in U.S. schools and with students taking an average of 112

mandated standardized tests between pre-K and 12th grade, there is no evidence to support

that more testing is correlated with higher academic achievements; in fact, many teachers and

scholars assert that excessive testing is harming students' academic achievements (Chingos,

2012; Layton, 2015; NEA, 2014; NCTE, 2015; Ramey, 2014; Strauss, 2015; Volante, 2004).

Faced with the stress of funding being linked to standardized test scores, teachers must now

"teach to the test," which means overemphasizing basic skills and teaching students test

taking strategies, in order to help students score higher on tests, despite research that has

shown that students who score highly on standardized tests often cannot perform at anywhere

near the same level on a different test on the same material (NEA, 2014; Ramey, 2014;

Volante, 2004). When teachers are forced to focus on answers to a test rather than critical

thinking and problem solving skills, the research shows that students can lose their senses of

curiosity, conscientiousness, perseverance, and sociability, skills that are necessary for them

to succeed in life (NCTE, 2014). By forcing teachers to teach to the test, we are dumbing

down students' educations and depriving them of a quality education.

In the U.S, the same three textbook publishers who have a monopoly on the textbook

publishing industry (CTB McGraw Hill, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, and Pearson) are the

same three industries who make all of the K-12 standardized tests (Broussard, 2015).

Therefore, students attending schools who use the same textbook and test company are at an

advantage, as they will likely have read the passages and problems beforehand; this is

problematic for low-income schools as many do not have up-to-date textbooks, and many

lack textbooks at all (Broussard, 2014; Figueroa, 2013). Standardized test scores are often

linked to funding, so those schools with an advantage on their textbooks being up-to-date and

aligning with their test publishing company will likely receive more funding; however, as

discussed, schools who cannot afford textbooks are the ones who need funding the most,

simply in order to keep up with high-income students (Corey, 2014). When schools are

funded inequitably and test scores are dependent on a school's ability to afford up-to-date

textbooks, low-income schools are likely to suffer.

In this thesis, in an effort to define a quality education, I outlined Culturally Relevant

Pedagogy (CRP) and Critical Social Theory (CST) as a framework before explaining how I

utilized them in my definition of a quality education. CRP's basic criteria are that students

are experiencing academic success, that students are developing and/or maintaining cultural

competence, and that students are developing a "critical consciousness through which they

challenge the status quo of the current social order," while the main goal of CST is to

develop autonomous learners (Ladson-Billings, 1995b, p. 160; Leonardo, 2004). My

definition of a quality education combines CRP's basic criteria and the end goal of CST in

order to engage students with their education. By customizing education to students'

individual needs and cultures, teachers are able to help students become critically engaged in

their education. Scholars asserted that when teachers use students' cultures, knowledge, and

lived experiences, students feel relevant both in their classrooms and in their educations,

which helps to raise students' academic achievements (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011;

Howard, 2003). By connecting students with their education, teachers allow students to view

education practically rather than abstractly, thereby helping them to question not only what

they learn in their classrooms, but in their everyday lives, which helps them become autonomous learners (Leonardo, 2004).

A quality education is one that creates an environment in which students feel comfortable, in which they feel as if their voices are being heard, and in which their learning needs are being met. Forming positive relationships gives students a sense of comfort when they are at school (Baker, 2006; Rudasill et al., 2010). Feeling comfortable helps students to feel confident when taking on academic assignments; they are also better able to express themselves, which helps teachers get to know them better and helps teachers tailor activities to students' needs and interests (Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Gallagher, 2013; Rudasill et al., 2010). Ensuring that students' voices are heard is essential as students are vital to classroom activity, so when they feel relevant, they are more likely to engage in their education and feel positively about educational activities. In addition, allowing students' voices to be heard provides them with an opportunity to take charge of their education and express how they want to or need to learn, which provides a deeper connection with their education. Finally, ensuring that students are learning is the best way possible for them is crucial to helping them grow as autonomous learners. I discussed grouping as a possible way for teachers to implement these changes as they allow students to learn on their own terms as well as with students who have similar needs and interests. After forming a positive student-teacher relationship with students, and placing them in groups that showcases their interests and abilities, it will be very easy for teachers to get involved and help students achieve at higher rates than they were previously (Skinner & Belmont, 2003). By making sure that students are learning in a way that is most helpful to them, teachers can help students not only achieve at higher rates, but also become more connected with their education.

The example that I chose to portray a quality education in practice was Tucson

Unified School District (TUSD) in Tucson, Arizona. By making students' cultures and racial

backgrounds the center of their educational experience, teachers were able to raise the

academic achievements and the personal motivations of the students enrolled (Sleeter, 2011).

Students explained that they felt comfortable in their classrooms and that they finally felt a

connection with their education (Acosta, 2007). The positive feedback from students clearly

expressed that they felt comfortable, that their voices were being heard, and that their

learning needs were being met. In addition, the statistics surrounding students' test scores

and graduation rates clearly displayed that the program was having positive effects on

students (Chow, 2014; Delgado, 2013; Fong, 2014; McGinnis & Palos, 2011). This program

was a success because it was designed with students in mind, and the teachers made sure to

maintain positive relationships to help students feel comfortable in their classrooms. By

implementing a quality education, teachers were successful in keeping students interested

and invested in their educations.

Education has been shown to decrease the likelihood of a person participating in

criminal activity or being forced into a life of poverty (Christle et al., 2005; Ehrlich, 1975;

Lochner & Moretti, 2004; Machin et al., 2011; Wald & Losen, 2003). When students do not

receive a quality education, such as the one students received through TUSD's Ethnic Studies

program, their teachers might not work as hard to form the positive student-teacher

relationships that I discussed in Chapter 3, which clearly leads to poorer academic

achievements (Baker, 2006; Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Hamre & Pianta, 2006; Gallagher,

2013; Rudasill, et al., 2010; Skinner & Belmont, 1993). An analysis of the school-to-prison

pipeline, both what causes it and what comes from it, clearly shows that students who are

disconnected with their education are more likely to drop out, which makes them more likely

to participate in crime (Ehrlich, 1975; Elias, 2013; Flannery, 2015).The research shows that a

positive student-teacher relationship, the first component of a quality education, can help

overcome many outside circumstances that are hindering students from performing well in

school (Christle et al., 2005). By depriving students of a quality education, teachers are

facilitating the school-to-prison pipeline and pushing students out of school, thus raising their

chances of participating in criminal activity.

The research shows that when students receive a quality education at a younger age,

the achievement gap is more likely to shrink (Semuels, 2014). By pushing students to

graduate, they are less likely to live in poverty, but in order to help students understand why

they should graduate and commit to their education, their education must be quality.

However, as I discussed in Chapter 1, there is a system of unequal funding that provides

students from low-income areas with a lesser educational experience than their high-income

peers. Students who grow up in low-income areas are more likely to grow up to live in low-

income areas than high-income students are. In order for low-income students to have a

chance to escape poverty, they must first be given the opportunity to receive an equitable,

adequate education. Schools must be funded in a way that allows all students of any class or

race to receive an adequate education before teachers can begin to implement a quality

education system. Once equitable funding is in place, though, teachers can begin to

implement tactics that will put students on a path toward higher academic success, thus

keeping them in school and out of the school-to-prison pipeline, which will ultimately reduce

the likelihood that they will participate in criminal activity. In addition, receiving a quality

education and keeping students in school will make it easier, though it will not guarantee, for students to climb out of poverty.

Limitations

In this thesis, I examined the problems facing the U.S. education system and my explanation of how they can be fixed. This thesis was designed as an analysis of existing research and their findings, not as an experimentally-designed study. However, limitations still exist in this type of research. I explore possible limitations below.

Nature of the study. This thesis was based on conclusions from many different forms of research, including experimental studies and studies based on interviews. These vary, as experimental studies can control for variables and are more widely accepted as fact, while studies based on interviews can vary from person to person, and may not be generalizable. However, this thesis itself was a form of analysis and in order to form my theoretical idea of a quality education, both experimental studies that can definitively show the problem and interview-based studies that show how things can be changed, classroom-by-classroom, were necessary. However, this thesis was not an experiment or based on interviews, but rather an analysis of existing research.

The nature of participants. As I noted throughout this thesis, students are all different. While, in a perfect world, my definition of a quality education could reach all students and help them achieve at higher rates than ever before, the fact of the matter is that this definition may not reach all students. However, my definition and frameworks can be used a starting point for teachers to attempt to reach all students. In addition, I require a positive student-teacher relationship, and as shown through Chiariello's (2013) example of

reaching students rather than enforcing zero-tolerance policies, the easier choice for teachers

is simply to kick out disruptive students. Finally, I place the responsibility of this

transformation on teachers, rather than administrators, thus putting even more pressure on

teachers, without an easy way to implement these practices. While I assert that my analysis

and logic is solid, I do not deny the difficulty of implementing these practices.

Conclusions and Implications

In order to change the inequalities facing teachers and students due to unequal funding and an unnecessary emphasis on standardized test scores, I assert that teachers must implement a system of a quality education based on Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP) and Critical Social Theory (CST). Teachers must ensure that students feel comfortable, that their voices are being heard, and that their learning needs are being met. In doing so, teachers have the opportunity to connect students with their educations and help them see the relevance between their lives and their education. By getting to know their students and helping them achieve their academic goals, teachers are able to help students stay in school, thus avoiding the school-to-prison pipeline. When students remain in school, they have a better chance of avoiding criminal activity and a life of poverty, both of which are negatively correlated with more education. A quality education will create well-rounded students who will become active participants in society.

In this thesis, I focused on a system of inequality facing students and teachers in our current education system. In order for change to happen on a grand scale across the United States, steps must be taken in order to implement an equitable funding system that provides all students with the opportunity to succeed at the same level as all other students. This means implementing progressive funding systems among and within all districts. The research shows that this is what would benefit all students the most, yet our policies do not reflect that knowledge. Only once a uniform, equitable funding system is in place can we, as a country, begin to take steps forward to implement changes with school and classroom policies.

The research analyzed in this thesis shows great responsibility on the parts of administrators and teachers to begin implementing changes in school policy. However, with the current system in place, it is difficult to expect changes to happen on a great scale. In order to make changes to a system that administrators can claim is working, more research must be done on the effects of education on the reduction of crime and poverty. Although the research shows a negative correlation between educational attainment and crime levels, it is necessary to show the connection between the quality of education and a person's propensity for crime later in life as well as his or her economic status, which would require case studies of multiple classrooms in differing areas of the United States over a long period of time. In order for change to happen on a large scale, there must be concrete evidence to support the hypothesis that changing the current system will have social benefits.

While it is simple to challenge a few teachers to change their curriculum; currently, without the research noted above, it would be impossible to force all teachers to implement the practices outlined in this thesis in their classrooms. As noted in this thesis, teachers are bound to the rules set by their administrators. Change must begin either at the top, with policies being implemented to educate teachers on how and why they should implement change in their classrooms, or at the bottom, with a revolution by teachers, demanding that the current system of standardized testing and unequal funding be reviewed in favor of a system in which teachers are able to take charge in their own classrooms.

Teachers are bound to the current system of teaching to the test and teaching all students in one way, with funding and resources being held hostage should they refuse to follow these guidelines. We need to create an education system in which teachers are empowered to take charge in their classrooms and to do what is best for their students. Only

when the focus is taken off of standardized testing and placed on the best interests of the students can this change be implemented. Without implementing the changes described in this thesis, teachers run the risk of facilitating the school-to-prison pipeline and pushing students who are facing systemic inequalities out of school, thus making it more likely that they will participate in criminal activity or be stuck living in poverty. The United States needs to support teachers, students, and the nation as a whole by implementing policies that will help educate students in a way that will help them become educated, active members of society.

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