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The purpose of this study was to determine the challenges and successes that educators encounter when incorporating Culturally Responsive Instruction (CRI) in their classrooms. I conducted a basic qualitative study involving four teachers and two administrators in the Washington County School District to assess teachers' experiences incorporating cultural responsiveness within their practice. Participants provided background information about themselves within the interviews, such as their own racial identity and experiences. Also, participants provided their level of education and professional development experiences. Additionally, they responded to specific questions about Culturally Responsive Instruction and provided examples of success and challenges that they have encountered in their classrooms.

The research study answered one prevailing question: "What does culturally responsive instruction look like when it is implemented in an elementary school classroom?" The study answered two questions regarding the success and challenges of implementing a culturally responsive classroom. Participants explained several characteristics of a culturally responsive classroom: supportive relationships between students and teachers, a focus on social and emotional learning, an atmosphere of caring, student-centered learning, relevant curriculum, culturally responsive teaching strategies, and pedagogical strategies that support the development of critical thinking; however, there are some barriers to incorporating CRI into instruction. Participants identified the following as contributing to barriers to implementing CRI: the curriculum, in-depth knowledge, lack of self-work, dysfunctional professional learning communities, lack of parent support, childhood educational experience, and lack of resources.

Lastly, culturally responsive teachers measure success through anecdotal data, increased student confidence, and digital portfolios.

Culturally responsive teaching requires that educators focus on their students, socially-emotionally and academically, and is a way for teachers to put critical race theory to practice. When teachers reflect on their beliefs or biases about children and think about their beliefs and their effect on their practice, institutional racism is minimized.

CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE TEACHING IN THE CLASSROOM

by

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents, Mr. and Mrs. James Jordan. They have always believed in me and inspired me to reach every goal. Their wisdom and love have been a consistent light within my life. I hope my accomplishment has made them proud.

APPROVAL PAGE

This dissertation written by Tasheka D. Jordan has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

The goal of educators is to empower and support all students in reaching their highest academic potential. Many teachers perform exceptionally well at this task; however, too often, there are times when students, in particular minority students, are not served adequately or equitably. Educators who are passionate about effectively educating all children must face the reality of marginalized students' experiences in the classroom. Many teaching strategies can be used to differentiate instruction to meet the needs of all learners. Thus, there is hope for all students.

Culturally responsive pedagogy, also known as culturally responsive teaching or instruction (CRI), is a pedagogical philosophy that encompasses many strategies that can be employed to meet the various educational needs of our students. As Ladson-Billings (2009) states in her classic work on this topic, *The Dream-Keepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children*,

> Culturally responsive teaching uses student culture in order to maintain it and to transcend the negative effects of the dominant culture. The negative effects are brought about, for example, by not seeing one's history, culture, or background represented in the textbook or curriculum or by seeing that history, culture, or background distorted. (p. 19)

Many American students struggle to meet educational standards and expectations. Minority students, in many cases, are at a disadvantage because the public school curriculum is not designed in a manner that focuses on and engages with their cultures. Some teachers do not

diversify their teaching materials, either intentionally or unintentionally, or change their often stereotypical mindset about race to meet the needs of their minority students.

Despite some teachers' efforts to serve all students well, there are still significant disparities in student experiences and educational outcomes. For example,

> Hispanics and Blacks are less likely than Asians and Whites to graduate from high school and attend college. Also, there is a college enrollment rate of 42% for White students between the ages of 18-24; however, the college enrollment rate is 35% among Black students within the same age range. (Norris, 2018, p. 26)

CRI is a philosophy of teaching that includes many practical methods all teachers can use to support the academic achievement of all students.

American schools' racial compositions are evolving, and our education system must meet the needs of minority students.

> In less than two years, White children who are not Hispanic will no longer be the majority among those under 18 years old in the United States, the Census Bureau estimates. The American school system will be comprised of more minority students than White students. (Norris, 2018, p. 90)

To ensure that we are reaching all students academically, there is a need to ensure that all schools are culturally responsive and that curricula address and include the range of cultures that students bring to the classroom. CRI is a philosophy of instruction that all teachers can use to support the academic achievement of all students, not just those who identify as non-White.

Statement of Problem

While CRI has been theorized and written about for several decades, this philosophy toward teaching is not widespread in schools around the country. It is important to understand why many educators are not using culturally responsive instruction in the classroom. Examples of CRI in practice, along with the narratives of teachers who have been successful or have struggled with it, are limited. Many teachers could be apprehensive about employing culturally responsive techniques in their classrooms because their own teachers did not utilize culturally responsive techniques. Ultimately, we have minority students who are failing in the classroom, while we know from research that there are ways to support these students better. Addressing the educational needs of all students is imperative if we want all students to reach success.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of my qualitative study was to learn from teachers and administrators about their experiences in incorporating CRI in the classroom. In this study, I explored the challenges and the successes that educators encounter when incorporating CRI, a teaching philosophy that includes various strategies, into their repertoire of teaching methods. The goal of this study was to understand the efforts of both veteran and novice teachers in a district that embraces CRI.

Research Questions

I explored three research questions in this study:

1. What does culturally responsive instruction look like when it is implemented in an elementary school classroom?
2. What challenges do teachers encounter when implementing culturally responsive teaching strategies?

3. How do teachers measure their success with students as they implement culturally responsive instruction?

Background Context

To provide a backdrop for understanding why culturally responsive instruction is imperative to all students' education, I review and unpack several topics in this section: inadequate instruction, issues of equity in our education system, the achievement gap, special education, how teachers communicate about race, and teacher education programs.

Inadequate Instruction

Many teachers today teach to an assumed middle-class White audience; if students do not fit that demographic, they are disadvantaged. Often in poor-performing schools, low-income students of color start school lacking the vocabulary, strategies, or other customs of middle-class life. As a result, teachers often recommend these students for special education, or they are classified as learning disabled and are placed in lower-level groups for instructional purposes. While these low-income students of color do not have the skill set that one might acquire in a middle-class home before attending school, they have different cultural capital when they come to school. Yet this capital is not always valued in American schools. As a result, students do not come to school with deficits; rather, our instruction is often inadequate (Delpit, 2012). If schools do not reach marginalized students through instruction in the classroom, they become quickly at risk of dropping out of school.

School-based challenges are especially significant for Black males. For example, Black males are more likely to be suspended and expelled from school than their White counterparts in many school districts. Another issue that plagues our marginalized population is college enrollment. From 1973 to 1977, there was a steady increase in African American enrollment in

college. However, since 1977, there has been a sharp continuous decline, especially among Black males. Typically males outperform in math and science, but this is not the case with Black males (Noguera, 2008).

Teachers must prepare students for the 21st-century workforce. It is also a school system's responsibility to ensure that students are prepared to be responsible citizens in America. If a student drops out of school or graduates without sufficient skills, educators need to study their complicity in this problem.

> Teachers who do not attempt to prepare urban students of color for meaningful work and dynamic participation in democracy are preparing them for academic death. An academic death is when a student's educational needs have not been met and the student has academic deficiencies that are preventing them from reaching their full potential. Academic death leaves more young people unemployed, underemployed, and unemployable and vulnerable for the criminal justice system. (Ladson-Billings, 2014, p. 77).

Often related to their failure in school, many of our minority males become victims of the school-to-prison pipeline. In describing the school-to-prison pipeline, Hammond (2015) quotes the Southern Poverty Law Center,

> … the school to prison pipeline is a set of seemingly unconnected school policies and teacher instructional decisions that over time result in students of color not receiving adequate literacy and content instruction while being disproportionately disciplined for non-specific, subjective offenses such as defiance. (p. 13)

Using effective teaching strategies in the classroom, educators can directly reduce the number of minority students, especially minority males, who experience harsh punishments

while in school and later more severe sentences from our judicial system. The statistics point to the need for these efforts:

> As of June 2001, there were nearly 20,000 more Black males in the Illinois state prison system than enrolled in the state's public universities; in addition, 992 Black men received a bachelor's degree from Illinois state universities in 1999, while an estimated 7,000 Black men were released from the state prison system the following year just for drug offenses. (Alexander, 2012, p. 190)

If students' academic needs are met, they are less likely to involve themselves in drug and gang activity. Alexander (2012) states, "Young men who fail to go to college face a lifetime of closed doors, discrimination, and ostracism" (p. 190). If teachers implement CRI in the classroom, they create an environment where all students can learn to be more accepting of their peers from other cultures and understand their biases towards others. As a result, there could be less violence in our society between races and a decrease in the arrest of minorities.

Equity in Education

CRI is designed to meet students at their current levels of academic achievement. We cannot expect to achieve academic success from all students by teaching all students the same way; equity and equality are not identical in the field of education. Students learn differently; therefore, schools must provide an equitable education for our students, not simply treat them as if they are all the same. Students from all ethnic backgrounds deserve an outstanding education responsive to their educational needs; currently, many of America's minority students who live in poorer communities are not receiving a quality education. Our society has embedded forms of racism in our education system, perpetuating an oppressive education system for minorities, especially African Americans and Latinos.

Many children do not fail in school because of their work ethic, innate abilities, or economic backgrounds; rather, teachers have not found the best strategies to reach these students. Educators struggle to differentiate their pedagogical strategies, so they continue to deliver education the same way for all children. Sue (2015) asserts,

> Many people feel that if you fail in our society you are lazy, less intelligent or less capable. Another myth is everyone can make it if they work hard enough; yet, these protestant principles are based on an ideal that all people are on a level playing field. (p. 40)

When teachers meet all students academically and design lessons responsive to their needs and learning styles, all students have been served equitably, and success is much more likely.

Horace Mann asserted, "education is the great equalizer"; however, the quality of education given to students currently differs based upon students' ethnicity or zip code (which is a stand-in for their class status). The property values in students' neighborhoods significantly influence the amount of funding that neighborhood schools receive. Therefore, intellectual property, or knowledge gained in school, is also influenced by a student's zip code (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Despite the differential amounts of funding dispensed to schools, culturally responsive instruction is a research-based approach to teaching that can lower the achievement gap.

Achievement Gap

There is currently a stark achievement gap between African American and White students. This achievement gap is one of the central problems that motivated my study.

> Academic achievement among diverse learners looks quite different compared with their White, middle-class peers. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics

> (2007), 30% of Blacks, Hispanics and American Indians scored below basic proficiency levels in fourth and eighth grade reading, while fewer than 10% of Whites and Asian Pacific Islanders scored below basic proficiency. (Jacobs et al., 2011, p. 499)

Ladson-Billings had reframed the achievement gap as an educational debt we owe to many members of society. “The education debt is the schooling and resources that should have occurred in low income schools. As a result of this lack of resources, we have social problems such as crime, low wages, low productivity, etc. Without the education debt we could narrow the achievement gap” (Ladson-Billings, 2006, p. 5). The achievement gap derives from a historical problem that predates the 1960s. Many people believe in cultural deficit theory, a racist perspective that assumes that differences in the achievement of African Americans and Whites can be attributed to African Americans’ culture, community, or home life (Ladson-Billings, 2006, p.4). Cultural deficit theory also leads to many students of color being placed in special education. “It is a combination of the historical, economic, sociopolitical and moral decisions and policies that have created a society with educational debt and provides a logical explanation for the achievement gap” (Ladson-Billings, 2006, p. 5). The educational debt, just like our economic deficit, is a problem that our society has created and is a problem that we all must solve.

Special Education

Many students of color are erroneously placed in special education classes because their academic needs are not being met in the general education classroom because the teacher is not differentiating their educational experiences to meet their needs. African American males are recommended to special education at disproportionate rates as compared to their White counterparts. Black males are more likely to be classified as mentally retarded or suffering from

a learning disability and placed in special education than their White peers. In addition, they are more likely to be absent from honors and advanced placement courses (Noguera, 2008, p. 18). Cultural responsiveness is a way to begin to meet the needs of minority learners and propel these learners to meet higher educational expectations. If teachers instruct through a cultural lens, this can change the number of African Americans referred to special education.

In a study in a large metropolitan area of Project Culturally Responsive Instruction (CRISP), professional development (PD) focused on the disproportionate representation of students of color in special education. Voltz et al. (2003) found that many teachers feel underprepared to address the educational needs of culturally diverse students. Thirty-three general and special education educators who taught elementary and middle school participated in this study. The Project CRISP study did not include any specific interventions; rather, the goal was to increase teacher knowledge in the area of culturally responsive pedagogy. The study's findings suggest that PD opportunities can influence how teachers think about addressing cultural differences in the classroom and expand their understanding of diversity to not simply conflate it with disability. The researchers call this the "diversity versus disability conundrum" and argued that educators must learn to distinguish between culturally-based learning differences and disabilities. For example, students cannot academically grow if they are not taught how they learn information. If a teacher does not realize this, she could be referring more minorities to special education programs than necessary. After the study, general education teachers felt more prepared to teach their students of color and felt they could distinguish between students' cultures, abilities, and disabilities. General and special education teachers agreed that pre-service or in-service PD prepared them for addressing the needs of their culturally diverse students.

Furthermore, based on the findings, the researchers implore school systems to incorporate specific training for general education teachers around referring students into special education programs (Voltz et al., 2003). Only when children experience equitable opportunities to learn can teachers accurately determine the students who have a learning deficiency or disability. Moreover, teaching with a culturally responsive lens could increase the number of minority students recommended for gifted programs.

To effectively implement CRI, teachers must understand their biases, the communities where their students originate, and the cultures of their students. Additionally, the teacher's core instruction should meet the needs of most of the students in the classroom. Too often, students of color are placed in special education classes when they do not have a learning disability; rather, the teacher is not teaching in a manner that the student can comprehend.

Communication about Race

Compounding the problem of non-differentiated instruction, many teachers struggle to discuss issues related to race in the classroom, so they choose not to acknowledge it; this can have huge implications for students' performance in schools and society. Choosing not to acknowledge race in the classroom can translate to a form of racism called colorblindness. If teachers enter a classroom with a colorblind mentality, they are unlikely to incorporate culturally responsive teaching techniques. For example, these educators will not incorporate texts that focus on the accomplishments of African American authors or provide a protective platform for students to express their feelings about race in their personal lives or the country as a whole. As a result, minority students can become disengaged with their education which could lead to a decrease in their academic performance.

Additionally, when students can understand how their culture fits into the American fabric of society, they are less likely to construct a dichotomous worldview: minorities versus dominant cultures. This “us vs. them” mentality can be a catalyst for cultural collision when people from different races interact. Many districts have chosen to incorporate various forms of comprehensive professional development, including culturally responsive instruction, to combat the lack of communication about race and promote cultural responsiveness.

Lack of CRI in Teacher Education Programs

Many of our teacher education programs are not incorporating culturally responsive education into their curriculum. As a result, teachers are uninformed about CRI. Exacerbating this problem, novice teachers often teach remedial courses or teach in urban areas with little professional support. Many teacher education programs do not integrate cultural responsiveness because most faculty members are White (Ladson-Billings, 2001, p. 12). Too often, preservice teachers, who are primarily White, do not receive the proper education in multiculturalism. A key problem is the teaching pipeline is primarily White when high rates of minority students are being served. There is a huge cultural gap between current pre-service educators and the students in the classroom they will serve; as a result, many of our minority students are unsuccessful (Sleeter, 2001). Often, these teachers and the instructors who train them have preconceived ideas about students of color; thus, they are not prepared to teach these students. Matias (2013) argues that the current teacher education system is a White supremacist institution that measures students of color by White-focused curriculum, strategies, and standards. To challenge this White supremacy, researchers and teachers have found that future educators must adopt CRI.

Culturally Responsive Instruction

The development of CRI stems from the recognition that educators need to better meet historically marginalized students' needs. Ladson Billings (2014) embraces the evolvement of the term culturally responsive pedagogy to the term culturally sustaining pedagogy proposed by Django Paris. Culturally responsive pedagogy and culturally sustaining/revitalizing pedagogy both suggest that we utilize African American students as the subjects of the instructional process and not simply the object. Ladson Billings (2014) suggests, "Culturally sustaining pedagogy allows for a more fluid understanding of culture and a teaching practice that explicitly engages questions of equity and justice" (p. 74). Within my research, I employ the term culturally responsive pedagogy because this is the term that most educators utilize.

Historically, schools have normalized Whiteness, often unintentionally. Most schools use a lecture-based teaching strategy that resonates with students from middle-class lifestyles, and lectures focus on the accomplishments of Whites. Minority students who can conform to this form of education can perform well in school. However, the needs of many other minority students are unmet. Research shows that culturally responsive instruction can help level the educational playing field for all students. To unpack the meaning of CRI, in this section, I discuss the idea of culture, culturally responsive teaching, mindsets of culturally responsive educators, the history of CRI, and five important tenets to culturally responsive pedagogy.

Culture

Teachers teach, and students learn through their cultural lenses. Saifer et al. (2011) define culture as a way of life, especially related to the socially transmitted habits, customs, traditions, and beliefs that characterize a particular group of people at a particular time. They suggest that culture is the lens that we use to look at the world. Everyone has a culture; however, it creates

school challenges when students' home cultures clash with school cultures. Saifer et al. (2011) provide a telling example. Many Asian Americans, Native Americans, and Alaska Natives value group work and shared responsibility; consequently, learning in a typical American classroom centered on independence and competition may be challenging.

There are different types of cultures. Hammond (2015) indicates,

> Surface level culture encompasses concrete areas of culture such as food, music and clothing. Moreover, shallow culture includes but is not limited to norms, social interactions and behaviors towards elders. Deep culture is knowledge and unconscious assumptions that govern our world view. In addition, it includes our ethics and spirituality and much more. Our deep culture determines how we internalize information; for example, two people from two different cultures look at the same event and have different responses to it due to their deep culture. For example, the color red in eastern culture means good luck; while, in western culture the color red means danger. (p. 22)

It is important to understand students' surface- and shallow-level cultures, but educators can enrich their teaching and reach all students by understanding students' deep cultures. Deep cultural roots are how we construct our worldviews. Any challenge to cultural values at this level can trigger the brain's flight or fight response (Hammond, 2015). Understanding shallow- and surface-level culture is important, but we need to understand our students' deep culture because it significantly influences how we intake information. Moreover, Hammond (2015) asserts,

> Many teachers worry about not understanding the many cultures in their classroom. Educators should focus on the deep culture worldview, core beliefs, and group values. While cultures vary widely within the surface and shallow level, there are commonalities between culture's deep culture. (pp. 22–23)

Culturally Responsive Instruction

Culturally responsive instruction is an approach to education that honors and builds upon students' cultures. Culturally responsive instructors infuse students' cultures into the curriculum, building upon students' life experiences to help them understand new information. Gay (2013) argues "that the education of racially, ethnically and culturally diverse students should connect in-school learning to out of school living; promote educational equity and excellence; create a community among different individuals; develop students' agency, efficacy, and empowerment" (p. 49). Students must find their education relevant based on their life experiences. Once they understand their own cultures and how they fit into the curriculum, students can better use this information to address problems plaguing their communities. In one compelling example of culturally responsive instruction, Saifer et al. (2011) explain how Mar Vista Elementary School in Oxnard, California developed *Project Fresa,* an interdisciplinary multimedia project, to incorporate students' culture into the curriculum successfully.

> Students who are children of immigrant farm workers, study statistics and probability but instead of using generic charts and graphs, they create timelines and graphs with data they collect from their family members. This is standards-based mathematics that is hands on and is meaningful learning. (p. 4)

These students already had a working knowledge of farm work, so they could easily connect with the curriculum. Also, by incorporating their parent's occupations in the curriculum, the students understood that the school valued their families. Also, teachers were helping students to buy into what they were learning.

Teachers can ascertain a wealth of information from their students' varied cultures to enrich their lessons and provide a deeper and richer context for the curriculum. Culturally

responsive educators see differences as assets (Gay, 2013). They include students' cultures in the curriculum in a positive way to increase students' self-worth, as doing so helps these students to see the positive effects their culture has had on our society. Gay states (2013), "culturally responsive teaching does for minorities and low income children what traditional instructional ideologies and actions do for middle class European-Americans" (p. 51). Culturally responsive teaching meets minority students educationally where they are so they can have the same academic opportunities as middle-class Whites.

Mindsets of Culturally Responsive Educators

Culturally responsive instruction involves more than just incorporating new teaching techniques into lessons. CRI requires self-reflection on teaching practice and on how teachers view their students. The mindset of most teachers must change before they can effectively incorporate CRI into their teaching methods. Teachers must view children and their families as teachers too, and they must also evaluate their implicit biases. "Some teachers carry a deficit thinking paradigm. When operating from this paradigm, educators and policymakers believe that culturally and linguistically diverse students fail in school because of their own deficiencies" (Hammond, 2015, p. 59).

Unfortunately, some current professional development approaches can have derogative effects on teachers' mindsets towards minority students. Some districts have employed trainings such as Ruby Payne's *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* and Eric Jensen's *Teaching with Poverty in Mind* to support the academic achievement of minority students. There is very little research, if any, that supports these two professional development series as being effective in schools. Moreover, some contend that the previously mentioned programs support a deficit mindset regarding marginalized populations (Bomer et al., 2008). Ruby Payne presents a deficit

thinking approach to understanding poverty and provides problematic characterizations of people in poverty. These stereotypes can affect teacher beliefs, and these beliefs affect the educational outcomes of minority students. Payne blames students for their educational outcomes rather than the institutions. Supporters of the deficit model say that family structure, violence, and lack of morals are why students in poverty fail in school (Bomer et al., 2008). Culturally responsive educators believe that their students' home lives do not determine their educational outcomes; they hold high expectations for all students and are willing to incorporate the knowledge their students can provide into their curriculum. Ladson-Billings (2014) states, "it is important that we learn from and not merely about African American students. It is prevalent in literature that you will find terms such as at-risk, disadvantaged and underachieving to describe African American children" (p. 77). She indicates that there was no language of academic excellence associated with African American students before her research. Historically minorities have experienced challenges when attempting to obtain equitable learning experiences.

History of Minorities in America's Education System

The *Brown vs. Board of Education: Topeka Kansas Supreme Court* decision in 1954 mandated that all schools become racially integrated because it had been proven that African American schools were not equitable to White schools; in addition, the existence of separate schools was harmful psychologically to African Americans (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 2). Before *Brown vs. Board of Education*, Jim Crow laws prohibited African Americans from receiving an equitable education. Once they were integrated with White children, African Americans had to adjust to new resources, different teaching methods, and different mindsets from some teachers who believed that these students were inferior.

During the 1960s and 1970s, deficit approaches to teaching were common. Educators believed that the languages, literacies, and cultural ways of being of many students and communities of color were deficits that minorities needed to overcome. Teachers in American schools demanded that students learn the dominant culture's language, literacy, and cultural ways of schooling, which corresponded to White, middle-class norms. Any languages or literacies that fell outside of those norms were marginalized in schools. For example, in the 20th century, federal Indian schools were established to strip languages and cultures from indigenous people (Paris, 2012). This form of deficit thinking was the foundation for educating students of color in U.S. public school systems after integrating schools. As part of this deficit mentality, teachers felt that they needed to "fix" African American students. "In the 1960s and 1970s many educational interventions were designed to remove the students from their homes, communities and cultures in an effort to mitigate against their alleged damaging effects" (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 9).

In the 1970s and 1980s, researchers introduced different educational approaches to learning. In using deficit approaches to learning, teachers did not value historically marginalized students' experiences and did not consider that these students had educational value to contribute to classrooms and schools. Alternatively, some educators developed approaches to teaching that acknowledged differences. "The difference approaches viewed languages, literacies, and cultural ways of being of students and communities of color as equal to, but different from, the ways demanded in school teaching and learning" (Paris, 2012, p. 94). Later resource pedagogies were introduced that honored communities of color and were premised upon the belief that these communities had value. These educational strategies were established in the 1970s and 1980s to combat the deficit and different perspectives on minority cultures (Paris, 2012).

During the 1960s and 1970s, many schools were forced to integrate, but in later decades, the desegregation of schools would come to a standstill, and districts started to resegregate. *Milliken v. Bradley* (1974) was one of the first Supreme Court Cases that reversed the trend of promoting school integration by releasing school systems from integration if they felt that they could not integrate due to housing patterns (Frey & Wilson, 2009, p. 2). Then, *Belk v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education* (2001) banned the busing of students based upon students' race as a strategy to desegregate schools. Furthermore, in *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1* (2007), the Supreme Court declared that lower courts could no longer assign students to specific schools. All of the latter cases essentially have permitted segregated schools. In recent decades, many Whites have been returning to newly gentrified urban areas; the higher cost of living has forced minorities out, leaving our schools more segregated now than ever (Brown, 2009).

To serve our African American students properly, leaders have contemplated separate schools to meet the needs of minorities. Ladson-Billings (2009) asserts, "our schools are already segregated, but leaders who are interested in creating separate schools want African Americans to have the control within these schools" (pp. 2–3). Many people believe that African American immersion schools can cultivate an atmosphere for Black students to thrive, focusing on their culture and specific needs. Brown (2009) believes that several factors must be in place to maintain a quality education for students attending racially isolated minority schools. First, there must be equal allocation of resources for all schools. There must be the recruitment of highly motivated Black teachers and administrators. The placement for students in special education and academic tracking must be reduced. Lastly, the community must choose to end school choice programs that allow bright students to attend alternative schools outside of their community.

However, some proponents of integration contend that separate schools will never be superior or equivalent to majority White schools because most African American schools do not receive the same resources (Ladson-Billings, 2009).

Additionally, there are academic benefits to school integration. For instance, desegregation reduced the number of dropouts among Black students in the 1970s and 1980s, the achievement gap narrowed between younger Black and White children, and in an experiment when students took advantage of a random offer to be bused to a suburban school, they were more likely to work in a professional job 20 years later (Echenique et al., 2006). However, in the end, whether students are in a racially isolated school or a diverse environment, they must be taught using Culturally Responsive Instruction (CRI) strategies.

Five Tenets of CRI

There are many components of culturally responsive instruction; however, five components are mentioned frequently in the research. I discuss these components to provide the reader with a foundational understanding of CRI. Teachers need to integrate some of these tenets into their teaching techniques and use the other tenets to cultivate a culturally responsive learning environment. I focus on the following five important tenets of CRI: self-understanding, building relationships, culture in the curriculum, a supportive classroom, and a student-focused perspective. First, self-understanding is an essential component of CRI. Before teachers can understand the concept of cultural responsiveness, they must know their own experiences and prejudices about race. Many school districts draw on Glenn Singleton and Curtis Linton's (2005) book, *Courageous Conversations About Race* to help teachers to explore the concept of race as part of their professional development. Next, as part of culturally responsive instruction, teachers

should be encouraged to build relationships with students. Teachers must embrace cultures that have been traditionally excluded from schools.

For example, Khalifa (2013) advocates using hip hop to engage Black students. Teachers must embrace their students' culture in the classroom. Third, another component of CRI is incorporating culture into the curriculum. Educators must allow students to integrate their life experiences and cultural ways of knowing into their learning. Fourth, CRI entails creating a supportive classroom. Teachers should cultivate an environment that allows students to feel comfortable enough to express their opinions, be vulnerable enough to acknowledge their lack of understanding of a concept, and know that their teacher respects their culture. Lastly, having a student-focused perspective is another tenet of CRI. The classroom should be student-focused, and students should have the opportunity to take on the role of the teacher and provide knowledge as well.

While much has been written about the theory of culturally responsive instruction, there is much less on what it looks like in practice or the struggles and enablers in enacting CRI in classrooms. For this dissertation, I was interested in how teachers work to be more culturally responsive in the classroom. Therefore, I designed a qualitative study to gather rich information about this topic.

Brief Description of Dissertation Methods

I conducted a qualitative study in a metropolitan school district to explore the challenges and successes of teachers when implementing culturally responsive instruction in the classroom. I interviewed a diverse group of primary school teachers who instruct students in grades 1-5. Similar to Gloria Ladson-Billings's study conducted between 1988 and 1991, I interviewed four teachers who school administrators, curriculum facilitators, and school interventionists deem to

be culturally responsive and teach from a culturally responsive lens. Their school's administrative team recommended these teachers, and they had at least three of the four following elements of culturally responsive teachers: documented above average test scores, good classroom management and student discipline records, high student attendance, and high student engagement, which were noted in the positive feedback from administrative observations. In Chapter III, I provide a brief description of each teacher's background and experience as an equity leader within their school. After careful selection and upon the educators consenting to participate in the study, I conducted a 45-minute to one-hour-long introductory interview. Then, I conducted a one-time semi-structured interview that lasted approximately one and one half to 2 hours in length. I had four teacher participants. I also asked my participants to provide artifacts to support their use of CRI in the classroom (e.g., curriculum plans, student work samples). Lastly, I interviewed two instructional leaders as well. These interviews lasted approximately one hour each and provided me with knowledge of the implementation of CRI in the classroom from an administrative perspective.

This qualitative study provides valuable information to teacher education program coordinators, researchers, current teachers, and school leaders. I describe the challenges and successes that teachers encounter when incorporating CRI into their lessons. The focus of this study was to learn the thoughts and ideas of a small sample of culturally responsive teachers so that others can learn from their experiences. I explained in the methods chapter why the school district I selected for this study is a particularly good location to examine culturally responsive instruction. I hope findings from my study can help to disrupt fixed mindsets that some teachers hold that minority students are unteachable and are a burden to our educational system.

Theoretical Framework: Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is a theory that is rooted in social justice. Mette et al. (2016) assert, "CRT contends racism is inherent in American society and is central to the functioning of the laws and policies of the United States. Through this framework educational policies and practices are seen as inequitable and unjust to students of color" (pp. 4–5). Educators must understand the degree to which racism is embedded in our educational system, leading to inequitable experiences for minority students, which can leave them unprepared for life after secondary education. Colorblind racism and White privilege are two mechanisms that perpetuate institutional racism. In this section, I explain the relevance of CRT to CRI. I also explain two of the key tenets of CRT that are important for my study, colorblind racism and White privilege, and how these two concepts affect the education of our minority students. Lastly, I explain how my study is grounded in the theoretical framework of CRT.

Relevance of CRI to CRT

CRT provides a framework for understanding how racism occurs, often despite the good intentions of education. It also offers strategies and a path for eliminating racism, including the more subtle forms of color-blind racism that have permeated our educational system. Mette et al. (2016) state, "CRT provides a theoretical framework to analyze existing power structures through the lens that racism is institutionalized and pervasive in the dominant culture in the United States" (p. 5). When all stakeholders in our education system realize that racism is institutionalized, they can equip students with this knowledge; this will empower people to disrupt the racist power constructs enforced in our society and directly impact students' schooling and their communities in general. Culturally responsive instruction is one way to put critical race theory into practice. A component of CRI is that teachers must understand their

students' deep cultures and support them in understanding how inequitable educational systems impact their communities. When both White and minority educators understand the barriers that impede the ability of students of color to make educational and financial gains compared to their White counterparts, they can both work to change inequitable systems and structures. The goal of our education system should be to provide equal opportunities to all citizens of America. Many people mistakenly believe that the current education system is the great social equalizer. However, racism is institutionalized in American society; it impacts our minority students' abilities to thrive in a society focused more on the success of middle- and upper-class White individuals rather than on the success of minorities. According to Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995), "Critical Race Theory provides an understanding of the racial discrimination that impacts the educational experiences of children of color" (p. 60). Teachers who understand the dynamics of power, privilege, oppression, discrimination, and racism, as articulated within the tenets of CRT, are well-positioned to incorporate CRI principles in their lessons by using collaborative teaching strategies, incorporating more of the students' culture in the curriculum, and cultivating a culture of acceptance for these students' communities.

One of the most important contributions of CRT to educational practice is that it involves the narratives of Black people and their experiences in educational settings. Many times, the educational experiences of the oppressed are discussed without the impacted individuals being a part of the conversation. An essential element of CRT is highlighting the "voice" of oppressed people, a first step on the road to justice (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 58). Unless we understand the experiences of minority students, teachers, administrators, and other important stakeholders, it will be challenging to change our educational system to better this population and all students. When teachers do not recognize that our education system is steeped in racist

legacies and only accept the narratives about minority students' educational abilities that have been established by those who hold power in our society, they will be unable to teach in ways that support our minority students' success. These teachers are more than likely teaching from a colorblind perspective; this colorblind racism preserves de facto segregation and lowered expectations for students of color.

Colorblind Racism

The prevalence and damage of colorblind racism is one of the tenets of CRT. In the classroom, colorblind racism is a covert form of racism evident when teachers attempt to treat all students the same (as if they all have the same experiences and background as middle-class White children) and do not acknowledge their cultural differences. Unfortunately, this form of racism is often undetected because many teachers have good intentions toward their students, problematically assuming that noticing and acknowledging differences is detrimental to their students' education.

According to Bonilla-Silva (2010), there are four central frames of colorblind racism. The four frames are abstract liberalism, naturalization, cultural racism, and minimization of racism. However, Bonilla-Silva suggests that abstract liberalism is the most common of all of the frames. One important part of a frame of abstract liberalism is the assumption of sameness premised on the belief that a level playing field already exists in society. From an abstract liberal framework, all people should have the same opportunities, and no preferential treatment should be given to any group. Abstract liberalism also means that force, or special programs, should not be used to achieve social policy. For example, affirmative action should be avoided because this provides preferential treatment towards certain people, even though minorities are underrepresented within many sectors of the world. Next, in invoking the frame of naturalization, Whites often

explain away racial issues and differential opportunities due to natural occurrences. For instance, many say segregation in housing occurs due to races enjoying being near people of their own race rather than acknowledging that minorities are treated unfairly within the housing market. The frame of cultural racism entails the belief that minorities behave a particular way due to their biological inferiority. This frame is at play when people claim that some Black people do not perform well in school due to their culture not emphasizing the importance of education. Lastly, using a frame of minimization, Whites suggest that discrimination is no longer an issue within our society. Moreover, anytime a racial problem is mentioned by a minority person, people might suggest that they are using the "race card" (Bonilla-Silva, 2010).

CRT exposes de facto segregation alongside the institutional racism that affects the lives of our minority students. Colorblind racism permits Whites to mistakenly believe that minorities' often lower-level social status is because of natural occurrences or cultural insufficiencies and that institutionalized racism does not play an important role in keeping inequitable power structures in place (Martinez, 2014). In previous decades, our society accepted de jure (legally sanctioned) segregation, which included blatant discrimination such as requiring separate water fountains for people of color. In recent decades, it has become socially unacceptable to promote segregation overtly. Colorblind racism enables individuals to believe that the low performance of minorities and the disparity in the achievement gap is due to elements beyond society's control or that exist as deficits within minority groups themselves. Many educators cannot address racial issues in society due to Whiteness permeating American education systems and teacher education programs (Brown, 2013). The ideas that educators should view everyone the same, all people need to assimilate into American culture, and we all should become a melting pot are perspectives that keep the power structures in place. Scholars drawing on CRT work to destroy

these problematic beliefs and their associated practices. If we focus on one culture, the supposed American culture, we are not embracing the many minority cultures that make up our society. American culture has historically been referenced to Anglo-European culture (Sue, 2015). Color blindness is a new manifestation of racism that maintains that people are products of their circumstances, and there is nothing educators can do to sufficiently teach marginalized students. CRI is an educational practice and philosophy that aims to disrupt colorblindness and White privilege and create more socially just opportunities for all students.

White Privilege

Another tenet of CRT is White privilege, which is the idea that White people have an unfair advantage over people of color because of their skin color. White privilege is another reason why Whites achieve at higher rates than their counterparts. There are more White female teachers in American classrooms than African American teachers; it is common for students to go through school and never have an African American teacher. A White child experiences having a White teacher frequently; this provides them with an element of White privilege that they possess unknowingly. Their teacher does not experience the challenge of understanding their racial identity; thus, it is easier for them to connect with the teacher, which could translate to them performing at higher rates academically than their minority counterparts. Often these advantages are unbeknownst to White Americans, and their obliviousness to the advantages allows the hurdles that minorities must face in American society to go unnoticed (Blakemore, 2017). Classrooms hold many privileges for White students, such as seeing themselves in the curriculum, being less likely to experience implicit bias by White teachers, and being taught by educators of their race. Understanding White privilege is necessary for all students to build their cognitive capacities to understand different people's experiences in the world.

Seeing themselves in the material being studied is a privilege that many White Americans do not realize they possess. U.S. History is typically taught from the perspective of White European Americans, and textbooks are often written by White authors (Blakemore, 2017). Recognition of one's culture in the curriculum can increase an individual's self-confidence, especially when they understand the contributions of people of their race to society. Additionally, seeing people of their race in the course materials shows all students that their culture is an essential part of the curriculum that all students must learn. Having a more culturally diverse curriculum can also increase student engagement, which, in turn, may translate to higher test scores and other tangible evidence of student success.

White students have advantages in public schools because educators of their race typically teach them. Therefore, teachers do not have to learn about their culture, and they have access to many more role models from their race. According to the U.S. Department of Education (De Brey et al., 2019), there were an estimated 3,827,100 teachers in public elementary schools in the U.S during the 2015-2016 school year. About 80% of all public school teachers were non-Hispanic White, 9% were Hispanic, 7% were non-Hispanic Black, and 2% were non-Hispanic Asian. Given the disproportionate number of White teachers, White teachers must understand culturally responsive techniques to be effective with students from various cultures.

White children have the privilege of White educators not predicting (however consciously) their academic performance based on their race. Like all people, educators have implicit biases; however, research suggests that some White educators have negative implicit biases towards Black students, which can affect the academic performance of their minority students. For example, a White teacher is 30% less likely to predict a Black student will obtain a

four-year college degree and 40% less likely to believe the student will graduate from high school than evaluations made by Black teachers (Blakemore, 2017). These predictions are especially problematic when the previously mentioned statistic of the number of White educators in American schools is considered. When White teachers have this perception of their students, they are less likely to make the curriculum rigorous or provide their non-White students with rich learning experiences. Additionally, "due to different cultural backgrounds some White teachers may perceive Black students' behavior as hostile and violent, which leads to more severe punishments for these students" (Blakemore, 2017, p. 58).

CRT provides a framework for teachers and students alike to understand and develop their perspectives on race. Culturally responsive instruction, if effectively adopted in the classroom, is a way to enact CRT. Drawing on this theory is advantageous to Black students and provides White students with an opportunity to embrace other cultures. The latter can potentially change the mindset of America's youth and may potentially diminish current power structures and disrupt institutional racism in the future. It has been ingrained in American society and the minds of all students that for many decades Whites are the superior race. White children associate positive attributes with their race and negative attributes with other races (Sue, 2015). Cultural responsiveness in the classroom requires that teachers acknowledge their students' differences, which breaks colorblind barriers that have been firmly in place. CRT shines a light on institutionalized racism and can help us create more equitable educational opportunities for all students.

How CRT Influences This Study

My inquiry is grounded in critical race theory because I believe that implementing CRI is one way to disrupt systemic racism, which is the central focus of CRT. CRT and CRI are closely

related. Based on my selection criteria, I studied teachers who incorporate CRI into their pedagogy and draw upon their students' life experiences to inform the curriculum. During the interviews, I asked teachers to reflect on their own experiences as racialized beings, their encounters with people from other races, and how racism has personally impacted them. Culturally responsive teachers are used to navigating challenging conversations about race and even color blindness in our educational system. I was interested in the challenges that teachers face in implementing CRI, alongside barriers and enablers. I used some of the insights and language from CRT in my data analysis and concluding this study.

Researcher Positionality and Perspective

As I reflect on my experience as an African American student in a public school system, I do not recall my teachers using culturally responsive techniques. As a student, I was always interested in the accomplishments of people who shared my culture and race, and I did not understand why that information was rarely discussed. When we addressed issues related to power and race, these discussions generally entailed the subjugation of minority people. My education was very much lecture-based, and teachers were instructed through a White lens. In hindsight, it is a fair assumption that my teachers did not differentiate instruction; they saw themselves as the holders of knowledge within their content areas, not as facilitators of learning. I am unsure if many of my classmates were left behind academically due to being exposed to a curriculum that does meet their cultural needs.

As an educator with 10 years of experience, I have had the privilege of working in various schools with a range of different students. These experiences have led to my desire to delve deeply into cultural responsiveness research and incorporate new strategies in my classroom. Culturally responsive instruction is a research-based way of instructing students that

encompasses a cultural mindset shift for teachers who choose to use this approach to teaching and learning. When teachers and school leaders use CRI, they can create more socially just educational outcomes for all students.

During my administrative internship at a suburban school in the northeast central region of North Carolina, I learned about the concept of cultural responsiveness, even though I was already familiar with some of the strategies that it entails. This elementary school's focus was cultural responsiveness, and school leaders encouraged and supported their teachers in centering this perspective in their classroom practice. This topic interested me so much that I decided to enroll in a graduate program with a social justice focus to provide a context to support the integration of CRI into the classroom.

It can be challenging to meet the needs of all students in the classroom, but success can be accomplished through the use of culturally responsive instruction. I have used CRI in many situations without knowing what it was called. For example, as a teacher, it has always been my goal to build relationships with students and be engaging in a way that makes certain that all of my students learn. In many high-needs schools, it is easy to default to what Paulo Freire (2000) calls the banking model method with its emphasis on traditional lecture-style instruction; however, I have found by experience that the most productive learning, especially in high needs schools, occurs when students' cultures and curriculum intersect. As a former World History and American History teacher, I have had the opportunity to incorporate discussions about race into my lessons. As a result, my students have unpacked concepts concerning race as they relate to the Confederate monuments, police brutality, and stories of the challenge and oppression of Black males.

Moreover, instead of just discussing the negative effects of the Atlantic Slave Trade or European Imperialism, I have integrated meaningful dialogue about the accomplishments of the ancient West African kingdoms to enrich their understanding of African culture so African American students can feel pride in our culture's contributions to the world. Additionally, by teaching how the socially constructed idea of race is derived, I have helped students understand the racial hierarchy in America. Yet, as an African American educator, I still have room for improvement in culturally responsive instruction. Nevertheless, one of the beneficial outcomes of this study is that I have learned from my participants' experiences in their classrooms and now have some new strategies I can use to support instruction in my school as an educational administrator.

Significance of the Study

All stakeholders in the school system and those passionate about educating America's children should be interested in this study. Additionally, parents, teachers, students, and educational leaders should desire to understand how our classrooms can be culturally responsive. My study contributes to the body of knowledge regarding the challenges teachers encounter when incorporating CRI into the classroom. Additionally, I studied how success is measured when implementing CRI. If educators are aware of the barriers that they might encounter and strategies that they can use to overcome the challenges of incorporating CRI, they will be more likely to employ this pedagogical philosophy and strategy that has been proven to support the success of minority students. This study has significance because we have discussed the racial academic achievement gap and how it has been pervasive in our schools across America for decades. Cultural responsiveness is an approach to education that can reduce this problem that has plagued our education system for decades.

Minority children's education, health, fiscal future, and overall well-being are at-risk compared to their White counterparts.

> African American children are three times as likely to drop-out of schools. The high school drop-out rate in New York and California is about 35% in inner cities where large numbers of African Americans live. African Americans make up only 17 percent of the public school population but 41% of the special education population. (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 2)

Teachers must find solutions for our minority students that will mitigate the problems that marginalized students currently have. Educators can wait no longer to solve these issues. Students today encounter many of the same educational issues that minority students who went to school in the 1960s encountered. It is time that teachers acknowledge that minority students often come from different cultural backgrounds than their White counterparts. These backgrounds are worthy of recognition and must be taken seriously to teach these students successfully.

My research also has implications outside of the classroom's four walls. If teachers understand how to overcome the barriers of implementing CRI and successfully teach students by engaging them through their culture, they will also be able to better engage members of students' communities. As a result of classrooms incorporating CRI, parents may be more inclined to become more involved in their child's education. When students feel empowered through education, they will be less likely to focus solely on the negative occurrences in their community; they will pay more attention to their futures and how education can provide a way to transform their worlds. Many culturally responsive teachers push students to consider critical

perspectives on policies and practices that may directly impact their lives and communities (Ladson-Billings, 2014).

Even though professional development on CRI was not a direct part of my study, this research informs school and district leaders of possible ways to change their current professional development sessions that focus on cultural responsiveness to include the barriers and successes current practitioners experience. Also, my findings are insightful for in-service teachers as well.

Overview of Chapters

In this introductory chapter, I explained the concept of Culturally Responsive Instruction and the mindsets of the educators who employ CRI strategies. I described the challenges that many students of color, especially Black students, encounter in schools. I also explored equity issues in our education system, the persistent achievement gap problem, issues with minorities in special education programs, how teachers communicate about race, and the lack of CRI taught in teacher education programs. This information provides a foundation for why it is important to incorporate CRI in the classroom.

In the next chapter, I review the literature that grounds the need for my study, focusing on five tenets of CRI: self-understanding, building relationships, culture in the curriculum, a supportive classroom, and a student-focused perspective. CRI provides a way to enrich the curriculum by incorporating various cultures, sparking student interest, and building intellectual capacity. In Chapter III, I discuss the methods I used in this study. I share the findings from this study, organized by theme, in Chapter IV. In the final chapter, I answer my research questions directly, discuss implications of the study, provide recommendations for practice and future research, and reflect on the contributions.

CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

I focus on five important tenets of culturally responsive instruction (CRI) in this review of research: self-understanding, building relationships, culture in the curriculum, creating a supportive classroom, and having a student-focused perspective. I review research related to each of these tenets. Culturally competent and responsive teachers understand and incorporate these components into their repertoire of teaching techniques to ensure the achievement of all of their students. Culturally responsive teachers help students know that they are knowledgeable and capable beings who can learn and solve problems. Such teachers have an in-depth knowledge of their subject and their students (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Before making a profound impact on their students through CRI, teachers must be self-aware, particularly about how race has shaped their own experiences and understandings.

Self-Understanding

One of the salient foundations for CRI is self-understanding. Ford and Trotman (2001) assert, "culturally competent educators seek greater self-awareness and understanding regarding their biases, assumptions and stereotypes. Teachers must be self-aware in the classroom, as their beliefs influence the way they teach" (p. 236). Teachers cannot cultivate a culturally responsive classroom and make effective connections with their students unless they understand their racial identity, reflect on Whiteness, eliminate a colorblind perspective, and change their often-unconscious negative mindsets about their students' academic abilities. One role of a classroom teacher is to bring instruction alive. Thus, teachers must be able to make a connection with their students to do this. Culturally responsive teachers understand how the socially constructed idea of race intersects with culture and its impact on the lives of students of color.

Impact of Race

To incorporate CRI, teachers must understand how race has impacted their lives. Kose (2009) conducted a qualitative study examining three school principals for social justice, describing how culturally responsive leaders support their teachers. For example, "Within the study, principal Harte played a powerful role in encouraging (often White) teachers to consider how race/ethnicity influenced his or her life through creating autobiographies. This activity generated conversation about understanding the relationship between teacher and student racial identities" (p. 645). When teachers understand who they are and how race has shaped their autobiographies, they can more effectively connect with their students and integrate CRI into their classrooms.

Whiteness

Many White teachers do not understand how their racial identity in the classroom impacts their ability to teach students of color successfully in a culturally responsive way. According to Matias (2013), "Whiteness is socially constructed ideology, epistemology, emotionality, and psychology that often produces concrete systemic racism by normalizing these elements as invisible" (p. 73). If White teachers want to support students of color, they need to take an introspective look at themselves and how they may hold problematic assumptions about students of color and how White ideology and experiences may permeate the classroom. A classroom climate of Whiteness is sometimes unbeknownst to White teachers, even as it can be obvious to a classroom full of students of color in an urban school. Some White teachers enter the teaching profession with great ambition to close the achievement gap and reach students trapped in a cycle of poverty using the culturally responsive techniques they acquired in their collegiate classes. However, too often, novice teachers with so much zeal believe that they will use these

techniques to “save” students of color (Matias, 2013). The problem that prevents these teachers from being culturally responsive educators is a lack of self-understanding. They have only been educated about the “other” or who they are going to teach. White teachers may face emotional distress when they work to understand the impact of their Whiteness and how it affects the classroom environment; however, the White teachers who do not undertake this introspective reflection are more likely to adopt a colorblind mentality when interacting with students of color.

Colorblind Mentality

When teachers understand how the issue of race impacts them and our world, they will recognize that acknowledging and building on students’ differences, such as race during instruction, is not racism. They will leave behind their colorblind perspective and use an understanding of the dynamics of race as a way to enrich their pedagogies. In a study conducted in a Midwestern school striving to be culturally responsive, teachers perceived their greatest success and challenges in implementing culturally responsive professional development was acknowledging the cultural differences that exist among students (Mette et al., 2016). Many White teachers who do not perceive themselves as being part of the dominant culture in our society or understand how racism is institutionalized approach teaching with a colorblind mentality. These teachers have never experienced the effects of institutionalized racism. As a result, many students will disengage from their teaching and school as a whole because the students are unable to relate to the information that is being taught. Teachers need to use attributes of students’ culture that our society calls deficits and turn them into strengths as part of their instruction; however, teachers can only do this if they recognize how their beliefs and experiences shape their interactions with people of other races.

Milner (2011) conducted a case study at Bridge Middle School of a culturally responsive White science teacher, Mr. Hall, with three years of experience. Mr. Hall had been called racist during his first year of teaching by many of his students. He believed he received the label because he was teaching from a culturally blind perspective. He did not realize at the time that his cultural blindness was the cause of the disconnect between him and his students. After building his cultural competence, Mr. Hall discovered the commonalities he possessed with the students and shared that information with his students. Students began to see that he was relatable (p. 83). Mr. Hall used his cultural competence to build a trusting relationship with his students. Ladson-Billings (2009) states,

> a color-blindness masks a 'dysconscious racism,' an uncritical habit of mind that justifies inequality and exploitation by accepting the existing order of things as given. Teachers who use a colorblind lens are unconscious of the ways in which some children are privileged and others are disadvantaged in the classroom. (p. 35)

Students want to know that their teachers value them and that they can see themselves in the curriculum that is being taught.

Mindset about Students' Academic Potential

Teachers must also understand their mindsets about their students' academic capabilities. Gay (2013) asserts, "… culturally responsive teaching requires replacing pathological and deficient perceptions of students and communities of color with more positive ones" (p. 54). The way teachers feel about their students' intellectual capacities and places in society indirectly and directly influences the quality of education their students will receive. Teachers set their expectations for their students' performance based on their perceptions of them. If educators only notice students' deficits, students will not achieve the optimum level because their teachers will

not incorporate necessary support, challenges, and rigor into the curriculum. “Culturally responsive teachers are committed to discovering the creativity, ingenuity and imagination that resides in those deemed to be marginalized” (Gay, 2013, p. 54). Culturally responsive teachers adopt a social justice mindset and realize the importance of drawing out of minority students’ knowledge that many individuals do not take the time to realize that they possess. Gay (2013) encourages teachers to concentrate more on the promise and potential of African Americans rather than on their problems. She argues that culturally responsive instruction is about finding solutions to achievement problems.

Moreover, White teachers must understand the way cultural values and norms are transmitted within their race and in the race of minority students and feel comfortable confronting issues regarding diverse cultures in the classroom. Gay (2013) asserts, “Teachers must understand their students’ cultural socialization and their difference in order to engage students in any meaningful learning” (p. 61). Teachers must understand their mindset, including their perceptions of their students, before they can successfully implement culturally responsive instruction.

Teachers must know who they are and how they relate to their students to provide the best educational experience. Many teachers are resistant to culturally responsive instruction because they do not want to confront the issue of race or how they fit into the race narrative of our society. Many people doubt CRI’s validity or usefulness in raising achievement, and some are anxious about incorporating this pedagogical strategy. Some individuals believe that CRI is a racist and discriminatory practice because it highlights differences. Others resist engaging in CRI by saying such things as, “I would incorporate CRI if I knew how”; yet, as Gay (2013) argues,

they do not make “a commitment to obtain the necessary skills to implement culturally responsive teaching” (pp. 56–57).

CRI is much more than an educational strategy. Matias (2013) maintains that when White teachers begin to have inner anger about the injustice our students are experiencing and refuse to let the injustice continue, CRI can occur in the classroom. Additionally, Matias (2013) states, “Only then does culturally responsive teaching turn into a project of the self and one’s relationship to society instead of a project to merely identify effective practices of the other” (p. 78). CRI is a way that teachers can learn about themselves and their relationship to our society, then systematically combat an educational system that has not been established to meet the needs of our minority students. Self-understanding is the foundation that must be laid when a teacher pursues the idea of becoming culturally responsive. A teacher cannot construct a classroom focused on social justice for people of color without confronting the impact of their racial identity in the classroom and their own biases and perceptions of Black and Brown students.

Building Relationships

Students may not remember what the teacher taught them, but they will always remember how the teacher made them feel. A teacher’s relationship with their student is key to the student’s academic success. “When students believe that teachers believe in their ability, when they see teachers willing to go the extra mile to meet their academic deficiencies, they are much more likely to try” (Delpit, 2012, p. 82). Additionally, when teachers have authentic relationships with their struggling students, they will understand their culture; this knowledge will assist them in devising interventions to support their students’ learning.

Teachers must have a positive connection with their students of any race. When teachers take the time to get to know their students, it sends a message that they matter more than the

curriculum and the teacher truly cares about the child's well-being. Additionally, school leaders must support teachers in cultivating positive relationships with their students. When an educator cultivates a relationship with a student, the relationship becomes a catalyst that inspires the student to learn.

Teacher and Student Connection

To teach students effectively, teachers must take the time to build relationships with students. If a teacher does not understand who their students are personally or their cultures, the teacher will be unable to present the curriculum in a relatable manner. Ladson-Billings (2009) describes Elizabeth Harris as a schoolteacher who is active in her church, and she uses the church as a way to interact with students outside of the school building. Once obtaining parental permission, Harris takes students who accept her invitation to Sunday School. Each Sunday, she provides students with breakfast and a Biblical lesson. Ladson-Billings shows how students in Elizabeth Harris's class are more successful than students in classes without a culturally responsive teacher who cultivates relationships with students beyond the classroom door. Students can sense when a teacher is behaving authentically. To successfully teach students, teachers must show them that they care. For students in disadvantaged schools, a teacher may be one of the few people who show genuine interest in their lives. When teachers cultivate relationships, they are setting the stage for CRI to take place in their classrooms.

A school can feel like a second home to students when they have established positive connections with their teachers. Students have many stressors outside of school; therefore, school should be a sanctuary for peace and provide freedom for students to thrive educationally. Students should feel free to participate in classroom instruction within their schools at large. In

Milner's (2011) study of Mr. Hall, a culturally responsive science teacher, Milner quotes Hall as saying,

> I think that you have to develop a relationship with each student. Every kid that you have has a different story and if you show interest in what they've gone through, they're going to show interest in what you're trying to convey to them. Then they will show interest in what you're doing [in the classroom]. (p. 77)

As a result of students developing relationships with their teachers, schools should feel like a haven:

> There must be a connection between the school and the student, the school must embrace the student like a loving mother. The student should be able to come to the school outside of classes as well, for example to read a book in the corner of the school yard or to work in different settings within the school on his interests. (Tuncel, 2017, p. 1332)

School Leadership Facilitating Relationship Building

Culturally responsive instructors are masterful at building relationships with students. In a case study of an assistant principal, Faith Dean, of Washington High School in Central Texas, researchers argued that she was a culturally responsive leader who found that student success depends on building relationships with them. Faith argued, "Our job is to teach these students … And the way you teach them is to get to their hearts. If you don't have a relationship, you have nothing" (as cited in Madhlangobe & Gordon, 2012, pp. 186–187). At Faith's school, relationship building was an important part of leading and teaching. Faith assisted teachers in building a rapport with their students by teaching them how to reduce their students' anxiety levels regarding school. She shared articles that focused on reducing anxiety and emphasized the importance of empathizing with the students' situations.

Additionally, she inspired students to become more responsible and treated them like adults when they entered high school. Furthermore, she believed that students brought valuable experiences with them and that this added to a positive school environment. She encouraged teachers to embrace the knowledge that students shared. She also promoted building relationships in her school building by having students share their experiences of how their past and current teachers changed their lives in a positive way (Madhlangobe & Gordon, 2012, pp. 187–189). When students have positive relationships with their teachers, they will feel comfortable in the school environment and willing to take risks and work to learn something new.

Culture in the Curriculum

Educators have the responsibility of presenting the curriculum in an engaging way for their students. Culturally responsive instruction is a method that can help teachers create lessons that students connect with and find engaging. Ford and Trotman (2001) assert, "culturally competent educators attempt to increase multicultural awareness and understanding among all students. These educators practice multicultural education even in homogeneous settings" (p. 236). Students of all races need to understand other cultures. CRI helps to equip students to be successful academically and with their interpersonal skills. There are many ways for teachers to be culturally responsive. First, teachers can incorporate diverse cultures into lessons in various ways. Second, hip hop is an essential part of many minorities' culture and is worthy of study. It can be used as a vehicle for students to express their understanding and knowledge. Third, instructional leaders need to promote diverse cultures in the curriculum. Fourth, by incorporating culture in the curriculum, student engagement in the classroom has been shown to increase.

Diverse Cultures in Lessons

Educators should want the curriculum to become a part of their students' everyday life and not just distant facts in their textbooks. Wiggan and Watson (2016) reference a study by Stanford University. "Researchers explored the role of culture in student learning. The study revealed that embedding student culture into the curriculum and pedagogy is beneficial to all students" (Wiggan & Watson, 2016, p. 770). Educators must integrate diverse cultures into their lesson plans since this will allow students to see the value of other cultures represented in their classrooms.

> Similarly to CRI, research on anti-racism education and antiracist curricula helps to create relevancy for African American students. Many researchers believe that educators must move beyond basic multiculturalism, which often only additively teaches students about proverbial non-White heroes and special holidays. (Wiggan & Watson, 2016, p. 770)

Wiggan and Watson (2016) assert, "African American history should not be limited to one month but should be integrated each day" (p. 784). When educators only incorporate multicultural education once a year, an indirect message is given to students that their culture or history is only an accessory to our country's overall history. Many students will not see African American or Hispanic history, when only taught for one month out of the school year, as an important or a necessary part of American History or culture as a whole.

Zane, one of the teachers who was observed as part of Brown and Crippen's (2016) study, observes, "it is important to acknowledge students' cultural identities and the value of seeing the world from their perspective" (p. 116). When students feel that their culture is valued,

they feel that they are a part of the learning community. Minority students need to see themselves in the content that is being presented, and it needs to be relevant to their lives.

As a part of culturally responsive instruction, it is so important to hear the stories of our students and allow them to integrate their life experiences into the curriculum. An essential element of CRT is valuing minority voices, which provides a way to communicate the experiences and realities of the oppressed, a first step on the road to justice (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Hearing the stories of the oppressed is an important step to dismantling racism. Historically, our societies' narratives have been written by those who hold power, which is not the marginalized population of our society. Educators can use a component of CRT to impact their instruction by having students of color discuss their experiences and histories, which is empowering for minority students. This provides minority students with a way to construct a race narrative very different from what oppressors have portrayed to society.

Students must understand the connection between their culture and the curriculum that is being taught. In her research of the behaviors of culturally responsive teachers, Gloria Ladson-Billings (2009) describes Margaret Rossi, a teacher in a California urban school district, who is relatively new to the district. She is known as a strict teacher who implements CRI. As a part of CRI, she integrates current events from the community and world into her classroom. As a part of the current event assignment, she asks students to relate to their local and global communities. As a part of CRI, students must understand how their culture fits in with the larger community to provide them with a deeper educational experience. Students' self-esteem can increase as a result of teachers teaching in a culturally responsive manner. Students of color must realize that their cultural heritage is important to American history and should be studied.

Hip-Hop in the Classroom

Incorporating hip-hop culture into the classroom is one important way educators can incorporate the culture of many minorities into the curriculum. Florence, a high school English teacher, successfully incorporates hip hop into the curriculum by requiring students to study the lyrics of politically conscious rap artists and find their vocabulary words in the artist's lyrics (Kim & Pulido, 2015). In addition, she explores what it means to be Black today by analyzing the life of a popular rapper, T. I. She requires her students to evaluate T. I. as a rapper, a businessman, father, and felon. Then, she challenges her students to determine how they define themselves. Then, they must reflect on the long-term consequences of the representations of themselves (Kim & Pulido, 2015). Kelly (2013) explains the importance of incorporating hip hop literature in the curriculum, not in comparison to canonical text but as an independent genre of literature worthy of study. Often teachers utilize hip-hop literature to spark engagement among their students before teaching the canonical text. Students should understand that hip-hop literature is just as significant as other accepted texts. "The study of hip hop literature gives students an opportunity to embrace their individuality. Many students feel that they must shed their true selves to be successful academically" (Kelly, 2013, p. 52). Many, but not all, students of color identify with hip-hop culture, but students must understand that hip-hop culture can be integrated into the curriculum.

> The study of hip hop in the classroom gives some students who are rarely heard a voice. We may think that this silence is self-imposed; but, it is a direct result of the marginalization of the culture and language of these students. (Kelly, 2013, p. 53)

Many students do not participate in classroom discussions because they do not understand how they "fit" into the curriculum. However, once students see their community, cultures, and languages in the curriculum, they can relate to classroom discussions.

> The silence of hip hop literature in the classroom is not only harmful to minority students, but it prevents White students from being introduced to the culture of minority populations. African Americans spend a great deal of time learning about White's culture in the classroom, while White students are rarely introduced to African American culture. (Kelly, 2013, p. 53)

Research indicates that incorporating cultural traditions and arts in classrooms, such as hip-hop, can contribute to student success. As an example, the University of Wisconsin recruited students to enroll in their First Wave program. First Wave is an innovative spoken word and hip-hop arts program. The university committed to integrating hip hop into its curriculum. First Wave students, along with other students, were provided a platform to engage in spoken words on topics such as domestic abuse, classism, and violence. The university found that integrating this program was a valuable and relevant teacher education experience (Ladson-Billings, 2014). All students could benefit from learning about hip-hop culture because it will minimize many stereotypes and biases of people of color, help individuals connect with others, and ultimately have a profound effect on our society.

School Leaders Supporting Culture in the Curriculum

School leaders should support teachers in using culturally responsive techniques to meet the standards-based curricula. CRI is not something additional that educators must do; rather, it is a vehicle to teaching the standards. Many teachers are apprehensive about incorporating CRI into the curriculum because they are concerned about not having enough time to teach the

students the standards they will be assessed on at the end of the year. In the study conducted by Madhlangobe and Gordon (2012) that I discussed previously, the researchers describe how Faith, an assistant principal, does many things to promote CRI in her school. One teacher notes how she encourages CRI,

> she continuously reminds us to reflect on our teaching approaches or to be more inclusive. She helped to select books and videos for use in our English classes. That helped the curriculum to be more inclusive … We could see she was consciously helping to change the curriculum. (p. 194)

Furthermore, students and teachers can analyze the textbooks and other teaching materials and critique those resources from a CRI lens. Faith demonstrates how leaders can change the standard curriculum, modify the instructional delivery method, and select resources to make learning more accessible for minority students.

Increased Student Engagement with CRI

Culturally responsive instruction increases student engagement in the classroom. Chen and Yang (2017) conducted a study of three adult English Second Language (ESL) students from China to discover the effectiveness of culturally responsive teaching. These students were selected from the 10 students in the class because the researchers were familiar with Chinese culture; additionally, these students had previously displayed a lack of interest in the subject matter and were not engaged participants in the class. The study lasted 5 weeks with 2 weeks of observation to collect data for the initial baseline, one week of intervention data collection, one week of second baseline data collection, and another week of second intervention. The instructor typically used a lecture-style approach to teaching. For the study, the instructor met with the researchers to learn about culturally responsive teaching techniques and how to incorporate this

pedagogical strategy into her instruction to improve her practice. During the study, the researchers determined the effectiveness of CRI by the active participation of the students in the class, attention to the instructors' explanations, answering questions, and respect when someone else was talking. During the first week of intervention, the students' interest in their subject matter was aroused, and there was more active participation from the observed three students. After two weeks of intervention and establishing a data baseline, the instructor returned to lecturing during her vocabulary and grammar lessons. During this week, all interventions were withdrawn. Lastly, the researchers implemented a second intervention the teacher returned to using CRI strategies. The data showed that the CRI intervention resulted in significant changes in the three students' classroom participation behaviors. When the intervention was removed, students returned to their pre-intervention behaviors.

Creating a Supportive Classroom

Students thrive in safe and encouraging learning environments. For some students, school is the only place that provides serenity, security, stability, and structure. Culturally responsive teachers create supportive classroom environments by acting as warm demanders, establishing a culture of care, and forming a community or family atmosphere. A supportive environment can engender a feeling of safety, which will, in turn, make students feel secure enough to take educational risks and stay engaged when learning new material is particularly challenging.

Warm Demander

Empirical research provides evidence that when teachers act as "warm demanders," students are more successful. Warm demanders have high expectations for students, convince students of their intellect, and support them in obtaining their educational goals in an organized learning environment (Delpit, 2012). In Delpit's (2012) study, the author sought to determine

what differentiated schools improved from those that did not. Delpit found that the most successful schools maintained two elements—academic press and social support. Academic press means that the content has been clarified, expectations are kept high, and students are held accountable. Social support means that the students have access to warm relationships among their peers and the adults in the building (Delpit, 2012). Students need teachers who maintain consistency while holding them to high expectations and cultivating supportive peer and adult relationships. "Two characteristics of exemplary teachers of African American students are adopting a tough-love policy, which means not allowing students to 'slack off,' and holding high expectations" (Ford & Troman, 2001, p. 235).

Culture of Care

Mr. Hall was able to have great success with CRI by cultivating a culture of care in the classroom, being a role model for students, and creating a family environment. Mr. Hall stressed that sometimes teachers have to assume different roles for their students in the learning environment and not just in a particular classroom. Successful educators are more than just a child's teacher; they are often simultaneously mentors, coaches, or parental figures. When teachers take on these additional responsibilities, they become role models, and they need to model appropriate behavior. When students attach another role to their teacher, they implicitly say that the teacher cares about them. Another way Mr. Hall promoted a culture of care was by creating a family environment in his classroom. He believed that most family members would not let you fail, so he treated his students like they were a part of his biological family (Milner, 2011).

Thompson (as cited in Chen & Yang, 2017) describes the idea of culturally responsive caring in action. This type of instruction enables ethically and culturally diverse students to be

open and flexible in expressing their thoughts, feelings, and emotions and receptive to new ideas and information. The features of caring-in-action instruction are patience, persistence, facilitation, validation, and empowerment for the participants. Uncaring instructors were distinguished by impatience, intolerance, dictations, and control. When students believe that the teacher cares for them and is concerned about them, they will frequently rise to expectations.

Holistic Teaching

Culturally responsive teachers care about their students' academic, cognitive, and social-emotional wellbeing. Teachers who are culturally competent and responsive strive to meet the needs of the 'whole child.' Many students who attend urban schools must cope with issues, such as poverty, that impact their ability to obtain an equal education compared to their counterparts who do not struggle with the same problems. In his theory related to a hierarchy of needs, Maslow indicates that there are tiers of needs that must be met before students can attain their full potential. To teach to the 'whole child,' it is important that culturally competent teachers have a relationship with the students' families and the community. When possible, culturally competent teachers build a relationship with the student's family and include them in the educational process (Ford & Troman, 2001). Parent involvement in the classroom can have a positive effect on student discipline. Epstein and Sheldon (2002), as cited in Hershfeldt et al. (2009), found that as family and community involvement increases, discipline referrals for students will decrease. Culturally responsive teachers care about a child's experiences inside and outside the school, and they demonstrate their concern by crafting multicultural lessons and partnering with parents and the community.

Community of Learners

The relationship established between the teacher and student sets the stage for learning in the classroom. Ladson-Billings (2009) asserts that it is important to establish the classroom as an "extended family" (p. 67). Students are more likely to learn in an environment where they have cultivated a close tie with teachers. "Encouraging a community of learners means helping the students work against the norm of competitive individualism. The teachers believe that the students have to care, not only about their own achievement but also about their classmates' achievement" (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 74). A supportive classroom provides a successful learning environment for students of culturally responsive teachers who teach from a student-focused perspective.

Risk-Taking Environment

Baumgartner et al. (2015) assert that students are more willing to take risks, exchange ideas, and wrestle with difficult issues in safe and supportive classrooms. Research and theory support the notion that students learn a great deal from each other when the interaction is facilitated by a supportive environment that encourages students to take chances and experiment with ideas. Every instructor is responsible for cultivating a student-centered environment where students feel comfortable and know that learning is encouraged and welcomed by teachers and peers.

Student-Focused Perspective

When teachers are student-focused, they are change agents. Baumgartner et al. (2015) assert, "to function as an agent of change this requires a repositioning of the teacher away from one who controls the learning context to one who co-constructs knowledge and shares management of the classroom with the students" (p. 52). The latter form of teaching is known as

relationship-based or relational pedagogy. Teaching with a student-focused perspective includes not using a lecture style or banking model as a teaching technique, facilitating a student-led culture based on dialogue and conversations, and supporting the development of students' cultural competence.

Disrupting the Banking Model

The banking model is a teaching approach that Freire (2000) argues perpetuates hegemony. This model perpetuates hegemony because students are taught information from the perspective of the individuals who hold power in our society; through the banking model, they learn or "bank" knowledge accepted by the systems that our society has instituted. Students in many low-income schools are subject to this form of instruction within their classes. Rarely are students from low-income schools provided with the opportunity to express themselves and articulate information that can relate to the curriculum or engage in interactive discussions and problem-based learning. Instructors attempt to fill them with knowledge as though they are empty vessels. When teaching from a student perspective, instruction allows dialogue to occur within the classroom between the students and their teacher. Brown and Crippen (2016) conducted a study of six science teachers implementing CRT in classrooms within five diverse high schools. The teachers learned how to reposition themselves in the classroom and implement particular instructional changes. Teachers had to switch their teaching from a lecture-based style to cooperative learning. Then, the teacher had to take on the role of facilitator. Some authority was taken from the teacher and given to the students during instruction. As students were allowed to voice their opinions, they became intellectual leaders and the holders of knowledge. However, in many cases, students are de-centered within a lesson. Students receive very little opportunity to input their own ideas. The teachers and each of their students capture the world

from their personal perspective due to their life experiences. Therefore, the teacher and each student have a unique cultural perspective to contribute.

Ladson-Billings (2009) also describes an example of problem-based learning in Peggy Valentine's classroom. She describes how this experienced teacher, through role exchange, asked students to become the teacher as she became the student, thus allowing the student an opportunity to expound on their knowledge of a topic. Students benefit from the experience of critical thinking and from realizing that they have the intellectual capacity to reposition themselves as teachers in the room. Transitioning away from the banking model can be a challenge for some teachers; as a result of teachers repositioning themselves in their lessons, students will better understand the content and develop higher-order thinking skills.

Student-Led Cultural Conversations

A student-centered classroom should have student-led dialogue that intertwines culture in the curriculum. Experiential learning, group projects, cooperative groups, and student-designed learning activities are validated by empirical data that indicate the powerful ways they advance students' learning. These approaches allow students to exercise initiative and assume responsibility for their own learning (Baumgartner et al., 2015). Students need to have a chance to articulate themselves and their learning. In a study conducted by Misco (2018) in the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands among social studies teachers and two administrators, the researcher found that indigenous people have been subjected to many oppressive governments, and middle schools were focused on the indigenous history and were more student-focused than high school instructors. One vice-principal mentioned that some of the high school courses were student-centered; however, other than a few classes, the student-centered class filled with discussion did not focus on culturally responsive teaching but more on

the curriculum. The point of a student-centered classroom is not to have robust discussions about the curriculum exclusively but to be culturally responsive. The idea is to connect the students' culture with the content; this should be the catalyst for liberating students from the oppression to which they have been subjected. Misco (2018) quotes Gay (2010), "those who are passionate and connect culture are able to better release the intellect of students of color from the constraining manacles of mainstream canons of knowledge and ways of knowing" (p. 93). When teachers know their students' histories, they can facilitate classroom discussions that connect the curriculum to current and historical concepts to help students make sense of biases, the world around them, and the injustices that minorities have experienced. As a result, this will help develop a social consciousness within students to find ways to liberate themselves and work for equity and justice in our society.

Cultural Competence

Another component of the student-focused perspective is teachers helping students develop the cultural competence to maintain their unique culture and thrive in the dominant culture. Cultural competence is the ability to maintain community and heritage ways with language and other cultural practices to gain access to dominant ones (Paris, 2012). Paris (2012) coined the term culturally sustaining pedagogy which means supporting students in sustaining the cultural and linguistic competence of their communities while simultaneously offering access to dominant cultural competence.

Becoming a culturally responsive teacher requires a student-focused perspective on classroom instruction and a critical reflection on pedagogical—as opposed to student—flaws when discerning instructional quality (Brown & Crippen, 2016). When teachers are constructing lessons, they must see the learning that can potentially happen in their classrooms. Teachers must

not default to a deficit model, believing that their students are coming to them without knowledge or skills. Instead, students are taught how to maintain their heritage and understand and incorporate the dominant culture in a student-centered classroom. All of the tenets of CRI, including having a student-focused perspective in the classroom, are essential for meeting the needs of our minority students.

Conclusion

It is uncommon to find high academic achievement in schools that serve high numbers of students in poverty. Research has shown that culturally responsive education is a viable teaching methodology and an important pedagogical philosophy for reaching all students, especially minority students. Utilizing CRI methods encompasses all of the following: teachers understanding themselves, building relationships with students, integrating their cultures into the curriculum, creating a supportive classroom, and teaching with a student-focused perspective. All students are capable of attaining academic achievement. Educators have to work as detectives to find the necessary pedagogical strategy to meet their educational needs. We also need to know more about how teachers enact CRI in their everyday practice. I designed this research study with that goal in mind.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

The purpose of this study was to learn about the challenges and successes that educators encounter when incorporating culturally responsive instruction in their classrooms. I conducted a basic qualitative study involving four teachers and two administrators in the Washington County School District to assess teachers' experiences as they incorporate cultural responsiveness in the classroom. Washington County is a pseudonym for a district in the eastern portion of a southern state. I chose this school district because this district is committed to cultural responsiveness by providing all teachers with professional development on this educational approach at the school and district level. The study is guided by the broad question, "What does culturally responsive instruction look like when it is implemented in an elementary school classroom?"

Pilot Study

This study emerges from a pilot study I conducted at a school that I call Honey Bee Elementary, where I studied a professional development program teachers took part in related to CRI. Within Honey Bee Elementary School's district, Washington County, schools must incorporate professional development that supports teachers in becoming culturally responsive in their classrooms. Conducting this pilot study helped me to shape the direction of the dissertation. When I conducted my pilot study, my focus was the professional development that the teachers received. This focus led me to the current study about the challenges and successes that teachers encounter when implementing CRI. Despite this shift, the pilot study was useful in shaping my current study. The goals of the pilot study were to understand how school leaders understood CRI, to understand the challenges of implementing professional development that promotes CRI, to understand the purpose and effectiveness of the biweekly caucus meetings related to CRI, and

to understand the effectiveness of the practical application of Race Talks in an elementary school. During my pilot study, I interviewed the assistant principal and the administrative intern. These interviews provided me with information about the background of the teachers and the professional development that teachers receive.

Honey Bee School had relatively new staff. The principal selected the staff, understanding that they would be focusing heavily on CRI; therefore, the entire staff is committed to this work, but there are varying levels of knowledge about CRI among the staff. During my pilot data collection, I learned that the school sent 10 people to the Race Equity Institute in another part of the state and would send eight additional people within the next few weeks after the interview. The Race Equity Institute aims to help leaders understand and address racism in their organization and community through workshops.

During the pilot interviews, I learned about how the leadership at Honey Bee has worked to create a school climate of cultural responsiveness. The school's administrative team showed staff members the *Ground Water* presentation that the Race Equity Institute produced. This presentation provides quantitative and qualitative data to help viewers understand that racial inequity is a substantial and pervasive issue. Additionally, the district provided a viewing of *Teach US All*. Administrators in the school asked the staff at Honey Bee to respond to the question, "How was the desegregation of schools different from what you have heard or were taught?" The school's leaders wanted to determine if their school's identity was wrapped up in equity. Next, the administrative team organized caucus meetings. The administrative staff discussed various articles with the rest of the staff, and they had a very informal dialogue about race each time they met. The goal during the caucus meetings was for people to feel comfortable opening up about their lived experiences surrounding issues of equity and race. The

administration claimed that most of the staff members were comfortable disclosing their lived experiences.

Additionally, the administrative team also conducted Race Talks that were open to the entire school community. The focus was on parents and students, and some of the sessions allowed students to have critical dialogues about race. For example, they were given a space to discuss voting rights and power. Other conversations that the Assistant Principal and Administrative Intern led, such as one on White privilege, were reserved for parents. Some of the sessions were geared to parents and students together. At the time of the pilot study, the leaders were uncertain if the Race Talk sessions had impacted their school's culture.

The administrative team felt that its PD was successful, and they evaluated its effectiveness by evaluating teachers through an equity lens. As a result, the administrative team provided me with a wealth of knowledge about how they were working to meet social justice goals. However, I did not learn about any specific challenges teachers encountered or how professional development translates into culturally responsive teaching. These questions drove my study, as I explored in more detail what culturally responsive instruction looks like in Washington County School District and the challenges and successes the teachers experience in this setting.

Sample Population

I used a community nomination strategy to identify teachers who school administrators deemed culturally responsive. I asked the instructional leaders to use the following four criteria to identify successful teachers who are culturally responsive: test scores, discipline and classroom management, student attendance, and high student engagement. Each participant met at least three of the four criteria. To expound further on the criteria, I required that the

participants had higher than district or school average test scores as measured by their benchmark assessments, effective discipline and classroom management strategies as indicated by lower than school average office referrals, and attendance records, which showed that no student in the class had missed more than 10 days of school. Additionally, students at the Washington School District must be in attendance 95% of the time, which means students should not miss more than ten school days. Lastly, students in these teachers' classes must be engaged, as assessed by administrative formal and informal observations. I interviewed four teachers who fit the profile, as well as two administrators. I also collected artifacts that helped illustrate cultural responsiveness.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

1. What does culturally responsive instruction look like when it is implemented in an elementary school classroom?
2. What challenges do teachers encounter when implementing culturally responsive teaching strategies?
3. What success do teachers encounter when incorporating culturally responsive teaching?

Specific Methodology

I employed a basic qualitative study to collect data for this study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). First, I interviewed each of the selected teachers twice and asked them to share artifacts they selected to illustrate cultural responsiveness. More specifically, I asked the teachers to provide me with two lesson plans that indicate how they incorporate culturally responsive pedagogy in their classrooms and two anonymous student work samples. I also collected

background information about each teacher, including demographic information, education, and experience.

Researcher Experience in the District

My goal in this study was to obtain rich data from culturally responsive teachers. I worked with some of the teacher participants at Honey Bee School when I was an administrative intern, but I did not know any of the teacher participants from Bear Den Elementary (also a pseudonym). I am no longer a district employee or affiliated with the school district, so I felt that teachers would feel comfortable being honest about their successes and challenges concerning culturally responsive teaching, especially since I was not in an evaluative position. I am also an educator who has worked to be more culturally responsive in my classrooms, which helped me to connect with my participants professionally.

Because of my relationship with the administrative team at Honey Bee School, I was aware of the school's goals and how the staff desire all students to receive an equitable education. I also learned that the same was true at Bear Den Elementary. The teachers from those schools I selected to be a part of the study were among the strongest in their respective schools in engaging in culturally responsive teaching. Also, I know that Honey Bee School has participated in the race dialogues I previously discussed, thus indicating that teachers at this school have had professional development beyond what is typical in most other districts. As an administrative intern, I participated in these race dialogue sessions, which assisted me in understanding other individuals' perceptions on race and culture and how they act on their perceptions in classrooms.

Setting

I chose to conduct my study in the Washington County School District. This school district is located in the metropolitan area of North Carolina. According to the school district's

fact report by year, the school district currently has approximately 190 schools, and there are an estimated 162,000 students enrolled in their district. There are an estimated 28,000 Hispanic, 35,000 Black, and 16,000 Asian students. The latter is the largest of the minority groups within the county. Additionally, the school district has established the Office of Equity Affairs to provide staff with training focusing on equity.

Data Collection Methods

The goal of my study was to understand the challenges and successes that educators encounter when incorporating culturally responsive instruction. First, I interviewed two administrative team members at Honey Bee School to understand the type of work done regarding CRI, especially since I collected my pilot data. I then interviewed four teachers from two different schools in the district regarding their experiences with culturally responsive pedagogy. From these interviews, I learned about these educators' feelings and thoughts regarding CRI. Next, I used a semi-structured interview protocol to uncover each teacher's experiences related to the implementation of CRI in the classroom (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Lastly, I reviewed lesson plans and student work samples to receive a more in-depth understanding of how CRI is being used in the classroom.

Interviews

I interviewed six participants to learn about their strategies, challenges, and successes in culturally responsive instruction. I obtained signed consent from all participants. Based on my pilot interviews, I anticipated needing to interview each participant twice, with the initial interview taking at least 45-60 minutes and the second interview lasting one and one half to 2 hours. Instead, I interviewed each administrator once and each teacher twice.

During my pilot interviews, I interviewed two administrators. Both administrators were familiar with CRI and provided information about the school and how teachers were collectively implementing CRI in their classrooms. They were able to provide me with information about the professional development that was implemented school-wide. However, for this study, it was more beneficial for me to collect data from teachers about the challenges and successes of incorporating CRI in their classrooms. I interviewed administrators to better understand their commitments to cultural responsiveness and how their commitments were enacted in the school (see Appendix A).

I initially worked with the administrative team to select the participants for Honey Bee School. At Bear Den Elementary, I worked with the school's interventionist to secure participants. I asked about their backgrounds, including years of experience, the current grade level that they teach, and race/ethnicity. I interviewed teachers at the middle or end of the year because, by then, they had built a strong relationship with their students and had good examples of how they have integrated issues of diversity into their lessons. Furthermore, I conducted a funnel-shaped interview (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009), asking participants broad questions about their educational experience and understanding of cultural responsiveness at the beginning of the first interview, then narrowing down to more specific questions about their practice by the second interview. The first interview included demographic questions about the teacher, their understanding of culturally responsive instruction, and their experiences with CRI. The second interview was about the teachers' current pedagogical strategies and their efforts in implementing CRI or their lack of implementation. I asked about the successes and challenges teachers encounter in the classroom when they attempt to implement CRI. I used a semi-structured interview guide to ensure that I asked all teachers the same set of broad questions (see

Appendix B). I asked them questions regarding their racial identity and their experiences that have caused them to reflect on their racial identity.

Additionally, I explored the idea of CRI and the professional development that they received in college and during their professional career. Also, I inquired about the success and challenges encountered when integrating this form of pedagogy. I gave the teachers plenty of time to elaborate on their responses. I asked open-ended questions and followed up with probes. With the participants' permission, I audiotaped and transcribed all interviews for analysis.

Data from Documents

I requested two different forms of readily available data—lesson plans and student work samples—from the study participants. I asked teachers to provide me with at least two student work samples and two lesson plans as relevant materials for this study. As I conducted my inquiry, I explored how the documents reflected culturally responsive instruction. I also asked the teachers to talk about these lessons and work samples, including why they selected them and how they reflect the challenges and successes the teachers have had in implementing culturally responsive instruction in their classrooms.

The lesson plans and student work samples turned out less useful than I had initially imagined. Due to the pandemic, teachers could not provide a plethora of lesson plans and artifacts. There was also a lack of details in what they provided, even when I asked them to talk about them. Alternatively, the interviews provided a plethora of information, and I, as the researcher, could ask probing questions to gain more insight into various topics. The lesson plans and work samples were not originally created for research; therefore, these sources were not as informative as I would have liked for my study. However, the documents I chose for my study provided more depth to the information that the participants shared in the interviews.

Participant Profiles

Table 1. Participant Profiles

Participant Position	Degree	Ethnicity	# of years as an educator	# of years teaching at current school	School Setting	Grade Level/ Subjects Taught
Sirena Morton/ Teacher	Bachelor's degree in Organic Chemistry Master's Degree in Toxicology	Indian	10	4	Honey Bee	Third Grade Homeroom Teacher
Bianca Page Teacher	Bachelor's Elementary Education Master's Reading Intervention	African American	5	4	Honey Bee	2nd Grade Homeroom' Teacher
Shae Byrd/ Teacher	Bachelor's Music Education	White	28	8	Bear Den	K-5 Orchestra
Scout Miller/Teacher	Bachelor's Elementary Education Master's Business Administration	Hispanic	7	6	Bear Den	3rd Grade
Shelia Hill/ Principal	Bachelor's Elementary Education Master's School Administration Doctorate Educational Leadership	African American	25	4	Honey Bee	Instructional Leader
Amber Holmes/ Curriculum Facilitator	Bachelor's Elementary Education Master's Reading	White	25	4	Honey Bee	Instructional Leader

Sirena Morton

Sirena Morton is a 10-year veteran teacher who embraces culturally responsive instruction. Ms. Morton has taught at her current school since its inception. She is a third-grade teacher. Her most recently completed equity trainings include a workshop by the Racial Equity Institute of Greensboro, North Carolina; a 2-year cohort focused on Zaretta Hammond's book, *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain* within her school district; and a school-wide book study focused on the text, *Cultivating Genius: An Equity Framework for Culturally and Historically Responsive Literacy* by Gholdy Muhammad.

Sirena was born and raised in India. She also began her teaching career in India as well. Sirena noted that the understanding of American history that she obtained while in India differed greatly from what she found to be true when she arrived in the United States. She thought that racial injustice was an issue only in America's past and that complete racial reconciliation had occurred. While in her graduate courses in America, she first felt the impact of being a woman of color when there were not many Asians in her college classes, and her peers were mostly White. She has struggled with being accepted and respected by her colleagues; she feels that her colleagues often do not see her as a person that possesses the knowledge and skills necessary to teach children successfully because she is a person of color.

Sirena Morton has participated in many professional development sessions and is an active part of her Equity Team. Additionally, she is an equity leader in her professional learning community, as she is a teacher who maintains a culturally responsive lens when she creates lessons for students.

Brianna Page

Brianna has been teaching for 5 years and has taught at her current school since its inception. She currently teaches second grade but has taught fifth grade in the past. Within this study, she provides examples from her experiences with both her second-grade and fifth-grade students. Mrs. Page has most recently participated in the following professional development: Ground Water Training by the Racial Equity Institute, a school-wide book study on *Courageous Conversations about Race* by Glenn E. Singleton, a district-wide book study on *For White Teachers who Teach in the Hood* by Christopher Emdin, and the National Summit for Courageous Conversations in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Brianna realized her racial identity when she was in elementary school. She grew up in a predominantly White neighborhood. However, she explained that the street that she grew up on had three Black families. Brianna said she learned she was Black in a school with predominantly White students in elementary school. Brianna asserted,

> It sounds very strange, but like, I remember, like, after recess, all the little White girls would, like, take their hair and do like this to get their water from the water fountain, to not get it wet. And like, I didn't have to do that, but I kept doing that. And, I didn't really realize what I was doing until my mom came to school one day and was picking me up and saw me do that. And she was like, Bri, you don't have to do that. You're a Black girl, your hair is not going to, you know, it's not going to get all in the way like that. And I was like, Oh, okay.

Brianna indicated she became even more aware of and thoughtful about her racial identity during the third through fifth grade; at this time, her elementary school began to put students into

various academic tracks. She remembered being the only Black student among her White and Asian peers in her advanced classes, leaving her feeling disconnected.

Mrs. Page has been instrumental in presenting culturally responsive instruction to staff members. Currently, Mrs. Page leads her school's Equity Team. Additionally, she uses *Cultivating Genius*, a book by Gholdy Muhammad, to help teachers integrate culturally responsive strategies into their lesson plans. Her classroom serves as the model classroom for CRI at her school. Also, she has led a district-wide book study on *For White Teachers Who Teach in the Hood* by Christopher Emdin. Moreover, she is on the 2019-2021 Learning for Justice Advisory Board.

Shae Byrd

Shae is a 28-year veteran teacher who embraces culturally responsive instruction. Shae has taught at her current school for 8 years. She is a kindergarten through fifth-grade orchestra teacher who also meets regularly with academic intervention groups. Ms. Bryd's most recent CRI-relevant trainings include a Disrupting Disproportionality workshop provided by the school district and a school-wide book study on *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain* by Zaretta Hammond.

Shae grew up in a very White community, and her high school consisted of predominantly White peers and school staff. However, during her first year of college—a multicultural environment—Shae realized that we live in a racialized society.

Shae has been instrumental in establishing a foundation for culturally responsive instruction at her school. Currently, Mrs. Byrd co-facilitates her school's Equity Team. Additionally, she led a book study at her school on Zaretta Hammond's book, *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain*.

Scout Miller

Scout Miller is a 7-year veteran teacher who embraces culturally responsive instruction. Scout has taught at her current school for 6 years. She has taught second and fifth grade. Her most recent CRI-related training entailed completing a 2-year district cohort focused on *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain* text by Zaretta Hammond.

Scout first realized her racial identity when she was 8 years old. Her parents divorced around that time, and the differences between her parent's racial identity became particularly pronounced as a result. Her father is a White German male from the Midwest, and his family was located in that area as well. In contrast, her maternal grandparents and mother are Puerto Rican and Black. Unfortunately, it was clear that her father's family believed that Blacks and Hispanics were lesser than Whites, and Scout recalls feeling the scope of racial bias from her paternal grandmother. Scout summarized this by saying,

> I grew up in a very strong Puerto Rican culture. I knew very little of the German side of my family. I didn't look like they did. I had dark hair and dark eyes. My demeanor was different. My skin tone was different. I was always a passionate child is what they called me. And they said that I was passionate because of my roots. So, unfortunately, it came from my own family when I was kind of made aware of the fact that who I was was not acceptable.

Mrs. Miller has established an Equity Team at her school. She is a school-wide advocate for racial equity and is supporting the staff with this endeavor. She is using the support that she has received from the district level to craft an equity plan for her school to meet the specific needs of the students in her school.

Shelia Hill

Shelia Hill is a 25-year veteran African American educator who embraces culturally responsive instruction. Dr. Hill is currently the principal of Honey Bee School and has been the instructional leader at Honey Bee since its inception 4 years ago. Dr. Hill's most recent equity related training includes Beyond Diversity Training provided by the school district and the Racial Equity Institute Training.

Shelia said that she first realized her racial identity when she attended the Racial Equity Training. Her eyes were opened to how racial issues in this country impact her personally. In her words, this training helped her understand why she did not have the luxury of having a beach house when she was growing up. She said, as a child, she was implicitly taught to assimilate and refrain from drawing attention to her skin color. After she attended the Racial Equity Institute, she began to see it as her mission to inform others about the systemic racial problems in our world.

Shelia has supported her staff's understanding and implementation of culturally responsive instruction. She has made equity work a part of Honey Bee School's identity. Additionally, she has promoted her school's school-wide book study on Zaretta Hammond's *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain*, and she invited Gholdy Muhmmad into her school to provide teachers with information about culturally responsive instruction based on her book *Cultivating Genius*. Moreover, Dr. Hill has provided professional development to other instructional leaders using the text *Troublemakers* by Carl Shalaby. Lastly, Shelia continuously conducts formal and informal observations through an equity lens.

Amber Holmes

Amber Holmes is White woman and a 25-year veteran educator who embraces culturally responsive instruction. Mrs. Holmes is currently the curriculum facilitator and academic interventionist of Honey Bee school. She has been the instructional leader at Honey Bee since it was founded 4 years ago. Mrs. Holmes's most recent CRI-related trainings include participation in a school-wide book study on *Cultivating Genius* by Gholdy Muhammad, completion of the Racial Equity Institute Training, and participation in a book study on *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain* by Zaretta Hammond.

Amber indicated that the Racial Equity Training was enlightening. She mentioned this training inspired her to think about race in an in-depth manner for the first time. Mrs. Holmes said that as a child, she always understood that her White race afforded her privileges, but she could not evaluate the meaning of that privilege until she attended the equity training.

Amber supports all kindergarten through fifth-grade teachers on their equity journey. Amber indicates that she dissects the curriculum with teachers and supports teachers as they work to incorporate culturally responsive teaching strategies. Moreover, Mrs. Holmes has essential conversions with teachers to promote culturally relevant pedagogy within professional learning communities within the school.

Data Analysis Strategies

Interviews

I read the interview transcripts multiple times, coding them as I read. I looked for recurring topics, key ideas, and any thoughts or feelings the participants expressed related to cultural responsiveness. After coding, I collapsed similar codes into categories and eventually developed themes from these categories.

I developed themes across my data that led me to my research findings. I used an inductive, constant comparative method of data analysis. Throughout my research, I looked for units of data or information that were thought-provoking and provided information to help me answer my research question. At the beginning of my research study, I used an inductive analysis strategy to make connections between the categories as I tried to determine connections among coded data. As I neared the conclusion of my study, I used a deductive analysis because I made certain that the data that I found served to substantiate the categories that I created. I compared units of data to construct a new idea and not only provide descriptions of the data but also reflect upon the meaning of the data, including analytical coding. This process connected the themes and provided a finding for my research study (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Artifacts

As part of this study, I analyzed artifacts shared by the participants. For example, I analyzed a multicultural lesson plan provided by one participant. The participant provided an example of how she established supportive relationships in her classroom by incorporating this lesson and cultivated a caring environment because she displayed the student work that was a product of this lesson plan. Another participant provided a professional development PowerPoint presentation that she presented to staff members. The presentation included culturally relevant teaching strategies that she utilizes in the classroom. Another participant provided a dinosaur choice board. Students learned about dinosaurs and were provided different culturally responsive activities that challenged them on different levels of Bloom's Taxonomy Pyramid. The assignment was presented in English and Spanish. The last teacher participant provided an anchor chart that displayed how she taught her students the proper protocol for collaborative conversations. Additionally, she also provided examples of sentence starters and photographs of

students completing inquiry-based learning activities. While the documents did not provide that much useful information, they did help to confirm that the participants were utilizing culturally responsive teaching strategies.

Data from Documents

I reviewed the lesson plans, artifacts, and student work samples to mine information from these documents. Similar to the interviews, I used a constant comparative method to analyze the lesson plans and student assignments (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). I coded ideas derived from the lesson plan and work samples related to elements for CRI. I looked for similar categories within all of the data from the documents. This data provided a theme for the types of CRI methods that are being employed in the classroom.

I used the lesson plans, work samples, and interviews to create a consistent picture of how CRI is used in the classroom and understand teachers' challenges or achievement areas. CRI can be perceived as a teaching strategy or a pedagogical approach, and this idea can also impact the ability to incorporate CRI successfully.

In describing my data analysis strategies as a whole, Milner's (2016) study of a culturally responsive teacher was a good model for my data analysis. Milner (2016) utilized various data collection methods in the case study at Bridge Middle School, which focused on Mr. Jackson, a mathematics and science teacher. Milner deemed the Black teacher to be culturally responsive in how he incorporated Geneva Gay's strategy of validating students into his teaching practice. The purpose of Milner's study was to identify the teaching strategies of this Black male teacher to glean some knowledge from him that other teachers could apply to their teaching repertoires. Milner collected data in a variety of different ways. He observed Mr. Jackson teaching and participating in various school events, he conducted two formal and six informal interviews with

him, and he recorded and transcribed each one. Additionally, he collected lesson plans and worksheets from Mr. Jackson to learn about the knowledge base of Mr. Jackson's work. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, I was unable to observe teaching in the classroom. I was able to model Milner's other strategies in my study.

Trustworthiness

I employed several strategies to ensure that my research was trustworthy. First, I provide a rich, thick description of my methods and findings, including reporting details that allow future researchers to repeat my study. Second, I triangulated three data sources: interviews with administrators, interviews with teachers, and documentary artifacts, including lesson plans. Triangulation involves drawing evidence from several different sources to help substantiate findings. Third, I used member-checking to ensure that my findings resonated with the participants. Member checks helped me to control for biases and ensure that my own beliefs and perspectives did not unduly influence my interpretations of the data. After interviewing the participants, I shared the interview transcripts and some initial thoughts on my data analysis with the participants via email. I asked clarifying questions to make sure that my initial interpretations of the data resonated with their experiences. I wanted to make sure that my interpretations of the data were consistent with what they were conveying during the interviews. Feedback from these member checks confirmed that my analyses were trustworthy. Finally, I worked to be reflexive throughout the research process.

Reflexivity

I took notes on my initial impressions and a growing understanding of the participants' teaching practices throughout the research process. I reflected on how I changed as a result of my conducting research on cultural responsiveness. I believed the participants' experiences in

conjunction with the literature could profoundly affect my beliefs, which could affect the research (Palaganas et al., 2017). Also, I reflected on my values and examined how my experiences, social background, location, and beliefs affected the research practice. Finally, I tried to implement caring reflexivity (Rallis, 2010) by asking myself questions such as:

> Are my descriptions thick enough to support my interpretations? Am I describing or prescribing? Are biases recognized and used? Whose voice dominates? What is my purpose—to convey my own views or to discover anew? Do discoveries emerge from dialogic interaction with participants? How are discoveries likely to be used? (p. 439)

I used these questions to work toward being caringly reflexive in bringing all the data together to create my findings.

CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to understand the challenges and successes that educators encounter when incorporating culturally responsive instruction in their classrooms. I conducted a basic qualitative study involving four teachers and two instructional leaders within the Washington County School District. I chose four teachers within the Washington County School District because this school district is committed to cultural responsiveness by providing all teachers with various forms of professional development that support culturally responsive instruction. This study included two semi-structured, individual interviews with each of my four teacher participants. I also conducted one interview each with two instructional leaders. All the interviews were conducted via Google Meet video conferencing as I was not permitted to conduct in-person interviews in the school setting due to the Covid-19 virus. The study was guided by one broad question: "What does culturally responsive instruction look like when it is implemented in an elementary school classroom?"

Within this research study, I focus on culturally responsive instruction (CRI) in the classroom. Based on my conversations with teachers and administrators, I found several characteristics of a culturally responsive classroom: supportive relationships between students and teachers, a focus on social and emotional learning, an atmosphere of caring, student-centered learning, relevant curriculum, culturally responsive teaching strategies, and pedagogical strategies that support the development of critical thinking. At the same time, there are some barriers to incorporating CRI into instruction. My participants identified the following as contributing to barriers to implementing CRI: the curriculum, in-depth knowledge, lack of self-work, dysfunctional professional learning communities, lack of parent support, childhood

educational experience, and lack of resources. Lastly, culturally responsive teachers measure success through anecdotal data, increased student confidence, and digital portfolios.

Features of Culturally Responsive Classrooms

The features described in the literature about culturally responsive instruction in practices all came up in my study, but the ones I have included in my findings have stood out the most. The existing body of research supports the importance of my findings of key features of culturally responsive classrooms: supportive relationships, social-emotional learning, a caring atmosphere, student-centered learning, and critical thinking.

Supportive Relationships

Culturally responsive educators understand that supportive relationships are the foundation of this form of pedagogy. Without authentic relationships with students, teachers cannot establish a caring classroom atmosphere, help students make connections between their lives and the curriculum, or teach students to think critically about the subject matter. Hershfeldt et al. (2009) describe authentic teacher-student relationships:

> Indicators of a teacher's initiating and sustaining positive relationships include (a) tangible evidence of warmth, caring, and trust; (b) evidence of positive attention directed toward the student … ; (c) instances of interest and participation in the student's activities and personal life; (d) truly listening to the student rather than just reacting to overt behavior; and (e) sensitivity to the referred student's situational messages and recognizing that setting events … influence behavior. (pp. 5–6)

Building close and supportive relationships with students is essential because students will learn more from teachers when they believe that they care about them as individuals.

The work of culturally responsive instruction cannot be undertaken without teachers building supportive relationships with students. Culturally responsive teachers get to know their students on a cultural level. Scout mentioned that it is important to ask students for information about their culture. She explained that students are more than happy to share their cultural experiences with their teachers and peers. Additionally, she explained that it is important for teachers to refrain from assuming that they know their students because they look a certain way. It is imperative to understand students' deep cultural values.

Additionally, Brianna mentioned that it is important to be the lead learner in the classroom and not the sage on the stage. Students need to understand that the teacher is not the only one who holds the knowledge in the classroom. Culturally responsive instructors are a part of the learning process with their students. When teachers are the lead learner in the classroom, students and teachers can exchange information, which builds a trusting relationship, as both individuals bring essential knowledge into the classroom. This mutual sharing allows students to develop a trusting relationship with the teacher, and they can also see their teacher as a lifelong learner.

My findings suggest that teachers must develop relationships with their students to ensure they become successful learners. Before teachers can support students with making connections between their personal experiences and lives and the curriculum, students must feel comfortable with their teacher. Sirena states,

> My understanding of CRT is that it overlaps a lot with social, emotional learning. So, social justice and race talks could be a part of that. But I think before we get there, we need to have the kids comfortable in the classroom, build relationships with them, and

make sure they're able to express their feelings, and give them the words to express their feelings.

Brianna creates an inviting environment by decorating her classroom with her students' multicultural maps that showcase their identities. This activity also allows for her to be able to get to know her students. Brianna mentioned,

> The multicultural maps become our first classroom decor for the year. And so that kind of, if students want to, like, I never posted the student work without their permission, but students were able to post them or some of them. They were able to put them in their binder front covers to have that kind of as a little decoration, or just [a] reminder of who they are. I think before, you know, that was also [a] really great way for me to get to know who my kids are and say, okay, so if I'm going to be a culturally relevant educator, I need to know who my kids are and what they're comfortable disclosing, right? Because I've had kids before who are from adopted families, but don't want their classmates to know. Right. And so even though his mom is White and they're Haitian, they don't want the class to know, they don't want to highlight that part of their identity. So if I have not taken the time to really get to know them and think about what they want you to disclose, then I would have just maybe outed them and put them in an awkward situation. Right? So I really kind of let my kids and what they're comfortable with guide how I'm going to be relevant to them culturally.

My findings indicate that teachers must understand their students to relate the curriculum to them and meet their social-emotional needs.

Social-Emotional Learning

Culturally responsive instructors support students' social-emotional needs in addition to their academic needs. The goal of a culturally responsive teacher is to educate the whole child. Hammond (2015) suggests that teachers utilize the S.O.D.A. strategy to assist students with managing their emotions. S.O.D.A. stands for stop, observe, detach, and awaken. The strategy entails requiring that students stop and pause rather than simply react to any situation. The next step is to take a breath and use stress management techniques. Afterward, students should detach themselves from the situation and awaken themselves by thinking about the other person's perspective. Culturally responsive teachers provide academic and emotional support partly by using strategies such as S.O.D.A. to help students control their thoughts and listen more carefully to their peers. If students cannot control their emotions, they will not be able to learn in the classroom.

Sirena, Shae, and Scout mentioned the importance of social-emotional learning as a part of culturally responsive instruction. They claimed that it is imperative to help students manage their emotions and learn how to develop their interpersonal skills. Students come to school with issues that extend beyond the classroom, and their social-emotional challenges can impede their ability to thrive academically. Alternatively, students can be successful academically but struggle socially and emotionally. Sirena said, "Sometimes kids are great in academics, but they don't do well because they have a lot going on in their lives. So, they just need an adult to talk to. So social-emotional kicks in. So, understanding the social-emotional and academic needs of a child are important to me." It is important to understand that educators must educate the whole child.

There are several ways the teachers I studied incorporate social-emotional learning strategies in the classroom. Through technology, Sirena and Shae mentioned that they implement

formal emotional check-ins with students to determine how to best support their students' social-emotional growth. To support students' emotional growth, Sirena mentioned that she incorporated affirmations into her lessons. She offered, "I have these affirmations for math, so all kids know that we are doing something difficult, it's just that we are building our brainpower, building our brain muscle and you make mistakes." Affirmations are so important in the classroom when teaching students to have a growth mindset instead of a fixed mindset. Educators want all students to know that they can learn new concepts and learn anything if they persevere. Scout mentioned,

> You don't have to just teach curriculum. You can also teach community and support and communication and acceptance and growth and not just say, this is what we're doing for math. You're going to sit there in that seat. You're not to get up, let them talk about math. Maybe they might find a different way to solve the problem you don't know.

My findings indicate that when teachers step away from the curriculum and attend to social-emotional skills, they can build a trusting relationship with their students because they understand that they care about them as children.

One aspect of social and emotional learning is having an in-depth knowledge of the children in one's classroom. Sirena mentioned the importance of understanding a child's academic and social history to assist with the healing process when they have had past difficulties in school. The healing process is important to address underserved treatment by teachers due to the child's misbehavior or lack of academic performance. Sirena wants to know the child's prior experiences with discipline or academics with other teachers to ensure that they are successful in her classroom. She mentioned that it is important to know if there were previously low expectations for the child. Sirena asserted,

> For example, if they came from a school or the teachers did not have high expectations for them, or they are the only ones called out in the classroom. I think as their third- or fourth-grade teacher, I need to know that so that I can help with the healing process.

Once gaining this valuable information, teachers can work to devise a plan to change the academic and behavioral trajectory of the child.

Caring Atmosphere

Culturally responsive educators understand how to foster a sense of community in their classrooms. Baumgartner et al. (2015) assert, "Emphasis is given to cooperation rather than competition and features cooperative learning strategies, student-initiated discourse, and a sense that all are welcome to participate and present a wide range of views" (p. 49). To take academic risks in the classroom, students must feel comfortable. When a caring atmosphere is cultivated, students will realize that their classroom is a safe place to learn and grow.

One common finding indicated by all of the teachers and administrators I interviewed is that part of creating a culturally responsive classroom entails cultivating a caring atmosphere. To provide students with an atmosphere that fosters inquiry and growth, students must feel comfortable. Sirena said, "Give them that atmosphere where they have the freedom to ask the teacher what they need. I write a lot of notes to kids. You know, special notes. Sometimes it's nothing to do with behavior or academics. It's just to say, I love you." She added that teachers must demonstrate a caring attitude towards students even in nonverbal ways, including listening attentively. She expanded on an atmosphere of care by saying,

> So when kids are talking to me, just listening to them, looking into their eyes and listening to them and not on the computer, I'm not writing anything—just listening. At the beginning of the year, I send them a note welcoming them to my class.

Similarly, Shelia asserted, “it is important to provide students with equitable time with the teacher and listen authentically to all students.” These forms of nonverbal communication allow students to understand that their teachers care about them and who they are and that their voice matters in the classroom.

To establish a culture of caring, culturally responsive teachers note that it is important to allow students to experience their authentic selves and for teachers to be authentic with students. Teachers need to share stories about their life experiences with their students, fostering an authentic learning environment. Sirena mentioned that self-disclosure is essential to providing an authentic environment. She said,

> Self-disclosure makes me a person, a real human person, uh, who is authentic, who does not try to hide her feelings or hide her mistakes. I do share stories about my childhood with them. Like, for example, there was an Asian kid who told me that her grandpa gave her a hundred dollars, but mom said, you’re not keeping it because, you know, that’s the culture. So kids are not allowed to handle money. You just ask the parents and they will provide you with what you need. So her White friends said, no, that never happens. All of my relatives give me money, I get to go spend it in Target. Right. So this kid was puzzled. And then I said, you know, Hey, you know, that’s what happened to me as a kid? You know, I never got money. If I got any money for anything, I would give it to my parents and they would fulfill all my requirements. So, that is a cultural thing, even though the kid is not from India, the kid is from Vietnam. It’s a common cultural theme that goes across some areas in Asia.

Culturally responsive teachers are acutely aware of microaggressions in the classroom, even their own. They work to manage and address microaggressions to foster a safe and caring

learning environment for all students. “Microaggressions are subtle, everyday verbal and nonverbal slights, snubs, or insults which communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to people of color based solely on their marginalized group membership” (Hammond, 2015, p. 47). The culturally responsive teachers in my study were aware of microaggressions to prevent them in the classroom among students. Sirena conveyed,

> So I want to make sure that I kind of prevent or recognize the microaggressions that happen and make sure that I minimize the occurrence of microaggressions. I don’t think I can make it go away because it’s so ingrained in society. Kids learn microaggressions. It’s an internal, internalized bias that exists in a lot of people, including me.

Culturally responsive teachers do not build a classroom community based on what they think a classroom community should be in the abstract but rather on their students as individuals. As teachers build avenues for communication and trust in their classrooms, students begin to get to know their peers on a deeper level beyond just where they sit in the classroom and their names. All the educators in my study mentioned that culturally responsive teachers build a caring atmosphere by learning who their students are as individuals and making their classrooms a reflection of their students’ interests, needs, and cultures. Part of building a community entails encouraging students to learn about peers of different cultural backgrounds. Brianna indicated that she creates a culture of empathy and wants her children to refrain from making assumptions about people. Brianna asserted,

> So, when we are able to really just take a step back and get to know people as full humans and you know pause judgement, I see that students are able to be a little more critical thinkers because they are not just like I think they are because of this. Well, have you gotten to know this community? Well, we can’t make that assumption. Cultivating

empathetic students is a very important aspect of developing a culturally responsive classroom as educators should want students to understand their biases in the classroom and gain a rich understanding of other students' cultures while establishing a caring atmosphere.

As an example of creating a caring and culturally responsive classroom, Brianna decorated her classroom with her students' multicultural bubble maps to honor their individual cultures. Students created Venn diagrams, bubble maps that aesthetically showcased their various identities in their classroom, with each aspect or component of their identity represented in each bubble. After allowing students to brainstorm about their identities, they were also allowed to share their thoughts with their peers. Not only did this activity contribute to developing an inclusive classroom, but it also allowed Brianna to facilitate a rich discussion about multicultural identities. In facilitating a discussion around their identity bubbles, Brianna asked students the following questions:

1. How would you feel if someone ignored one of your multicultural identity bubbles?
2. Can you see how ignoring one of your identity bubbles could cause miscommunication?
3. Do you have more than the five identities you identified?
4. If your five identity bubbles communicate with a group of five others, how many identities are interacting?

Discussions around individual and cultural identities can contribute to developing a caring environment by supporting students with developing empathy for others and helping students to suspend judgments.

Culturally Relevant Teaching Strategies

Culturally responsive teaching is not a bag of teaching tricks; rather, it is a framework for teaching involving strategies culturally responsive teachers use. Hammond (2015) mentions that many countries, such as the United States, have established a foundation of teaching using individualism in schools. But, the cultures of our diverse communities are often built on collectivist teaching strategies. Hammond explains,

> Individualism focuses on independence and individual achievement. Learning typically occurs through individual study and reading. An individualistic society is normally very competitive. On the other hand, collectivist cultures are focused on interdependence and group success. Learning is collaborative and relational. (p. 26)

Culturally responsive teachers employ teaching strategies that appeal to culturally and linguistically diverse students' collectivist cultures.

As part of this study, all the teachers and administrators I interviewed employed or observed culturally responsive teaching strategies in the classroom. Amber and Sirena indicate that the ignite, chunk, chew, and review strategy is an effective strategy to increase student learning. The ignite, chunk, chew, and review strategy involves getting the child's attention through various attention-grabbing strategies. The chunk component involves making information digestible, the chew component involves helping children process the information through unstructured think time and cognitive routines, and the review component consists of playing a game (Hammond, 2015, p. 128).

All participants mentioned that they or their staff utilized the turn and talk strategy to build knowledge and relationships between students. This strategy entails two students having a dialogue about a specific topic. While using this strategy, teachers typically provide each student

with a specified amount of time to share their ideas. In addition to using the turn and talk strategy, Scout and Brianna explained how they provide students with speaking norms and teach them how to engage with their peers using sentence stems. Providing students with sentence stems is particularly important as students need to understand how to articulate their thoughts and participate in productive dialogue. Equity sticks are a way to provide students with equitable talking time during classroom discussion, as mentioned by one participant. This strategy helps teachers equitably divide their time between their students, which is getting to a central concept for culturally responsive instruction.

Furthermore, all of the participants expressed the importance of collaborative learning. Collaborative learning is essential to the growth of all students as students have the opportunity to grow exponentially when they are provided a chance to learn from their teacher and their peers. Students also develop valuable skills such as teamwork. Many cultures are rooted in the collectivist learning approach; therefore, learning cooperatively is often especially essential to minority students' academic growth.

Another culturally responsive teaching strategy discussed by my participants was the importance of incorporating the arts into instruction. Scout discussed the value of different forms of the arts and storytelling as part of her lessons. Additionally, she discussed how she incorporates rap songs, poems, and visuals into her lessons. Scout explained,

> If there is a gap in understanding the language itself, sometimes having the visual support helps. So let's just say we have a flower and in their mind they're thinking, okay, they may not even know what in the world it is. They're thinking of their Spanish word for it. So what happens is we'll offer a picture. So on the word wall, it won't just say flower, it'll have a picture of a flower. A lot of pictures or small things like sight words. And I

> mean, we're not really big on sight words all the time, but in those students that are really in need of language acquisition, there are a lot with more sight word cards or more sight word fluency, as opposed to a nonsense word type situation.

She went on to mention how important language dives are to her English Language Learners. Language dives consist of her English Language Learners learning about the parts of a sentence and how the parts of a sentence work together.

Teachers in my study discussed providing students with choices in their learning and ensuring that these choices were culturally interesting and relevant. Shae indicated that she provides students with choice boards, and the activities presented on the choice boards provide students with various levels of rigor. Additionally, the choice boards are translated into Spanish, permitting students to see the Spanish and English translations of their assignments. Scout gives her students choices on how they will be assessed. As long as students meet the requirements provided on their rubric, they can choose how they are evaluated to meet their educational needs.

Student-Centered Learning

Student-centered learning is an important part of culturally responsive teaching. Baumgartner et al. (2015) note,

> Student-centered learning approaches enable students to exercise initiative and assume responsibility for their own learning. They require students to come together to communicate across communities of difference, and they foster inquiry into problems relevant to their group and to the development of unique solution. (p. 49)

Student-centered learning allows students to grow academically and be in control of their learning journey. Students can incorporate group projects and experimental learning to maximize learning.

All participants agreed that it is important to incorporate their students' voices into their instruction. Sirena mentioned that she allows students and their families to volunteer their cultural experiences during discussions. For example, if a student does not celebrate Christmas, they might be asked to share a different holiday tradition with the class. She does not require that students learn about different cultures through research, as she believes this could be a biased approach to culturally educating students; instead, she leaves it up to the students and families to educate their class on their respective cultures. Sirena also shared an experience wherein she was teaching writing, and a student wanted to share how to write in Chinese with the class. After this student did so, this teacher noticed that all the kids began to develop a curiosity about different languages. Some of the students went home and asked their parents how to write in their home language. However, some students sometimes do not immediately participate in class discussions, perhaps due to a timid personality or even feelings of learned helplessness. Therefore, culturally responsive teachers also engage students one-on-one to incorporate their voices into lessons.

Student-centered learning helps develop a sense of belonging in the classroom, especially when students can identify with shared texts. Shae asserted that she shared fairy tales from around the world with her academic intervention group. Teachers meet with academic intervention groups to provide a scaffolded lesson to provide the academic support that students need. She mentioned how her Hispanic students' faces brightened when they realized that she was reading a story from their culture and that she read the story in Spanish. Additionally, she has found that it is important to include information in her classes about the accomplishments of historical Black indigenous people of color (BIPOC) who may not be as renowned as the familiar historical figures such as Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. or Harriet Tubman. Culturally

responsive teachers foster a sense of belonging within their classrooms partly by using culturally relevant examples and texts.

Culturally responsive educators ensure that their instruction is relevant and engaging to their students. These teachers get to know their students on an individual level, including their interests and passions, and intertwine the unique identities of their students into their instruction. Brianna asserted,

> We are saying that school needs to fit the culture of our students. So we are making sure what we are doing lines up with who they are. By culture, I don't just mean like, oh what foods do you like to eat? Well, holidays, do they celebrate those kinds of things, but like just youth culture in general. Right? So we're making sure we're thinking about what their interests are and let that drive our instruction.

Culturally responsive teachers regularly reflect on the curriculum and determine how to adjust the teaching standards to make the lesson engaging for all students. Scout mentioned,

> It is important to identify where the student is, who the student is, and what they need in the classroom as this is definitely the first step in creating any lesson that might be successful. Also, it is important to help them to learn and to grow while not singling them out and making them feel lesser than.

Culturally responsive instruction is a way to ensure students are included in the learning process. It is not a means to make students feel inferior to one another.

Connecting students' lives to the curriculum also helps students cultivate empathy for others and a richer understanding of the curriculum. Scout said when she teaches students the teaching standard that focuses on how students learn around the world, last year she connected the standard to the crisis that the world was facing—the pandemic. She mentioned that she

included discussion norms before the discourse. As a result, her students were able to make relevant cultural connections to the curriculum. Additionally, Brianna believes that connecting students' lived experiences to the curriculum helped her students develop empathy and, in turn, helped facilitate critical thinking. Students need to learn about other communities, and this should be weaved into the curriculum. In this way, culturally responsive teachers embrace and honor cultures while also making cultural connections to the standards that help build empathy within our students.

Culturally responsive teachers maintain that it is important to reframe the teaching standards in ways that attend to the cultures of the students in the classroom, for example, by emphasizing both the struggles and triumphs of traditionally marginalized groups. Doing so provides students of all cultures a well-rounded perspective into minority students' cultures. Brianna mentioned that teachers should not "just highlight the oppression because a lot of the standards highlight the oppression of Black folks. There are a lot of accomplishments as well." One way to ensure that all students are provided with culturally relevant information is to approach lesson planning by considering whose voices are present and missing from each lesson taught. In this way, culturally responsive teachers provide students with multiple perspectives while challenging them to be critical thinkers.

Critical Thinking

Culturally responsive educators want their students to not only understand the curriculum in the classroom; they also want their students to be able to take the skills that they have acquired and apply them to their everyday lives. Culturally responsive educators aim to cultivate a critical consciousness within their students. Students are encouraged to critically analyze our society in such a way that prepares them to be active citizens who help to eliminate the inequities in our

society (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Supporting students' ability to think critically about the world around them is an important component of culturally responsive instruction.

Culturally responsive instruction supports students' ability to think critically in a range of contexts. Shelia, Brianna, and Supriya mentioned that it is important to assist students in developing their ability to be critical consumers of information. They emphasized that it is important that students not only use this skill to read academic texts, but they should be critical consumers of all information they receive, including stereotypes or negative messages about their culture that might be perpetuated in the news and popular culture. Brianna asserted, "we are helping them engage with literacy, not just, okay you have to read this novel because you're in fifth grade but interrogating and critically thinking about text around them. So, students should be critical consumers of news articles and magazines, etc."

Socratic seminars are one way my participants discussed promoting critical thinking in the classroom and supporting students in developing their critical consciousness. Socratic seminars are formal discussions that occur in the classroom based on a specific text. Students can participate in discussions with their peers and critically think about a topic during these seminars. A Socratic seminar is not a debate. Culturally responsive teachers facilitate discussion around controversial issues in society to help students understand the world and how to think critically and advocate for change. Brianna offered a thoughtful example of connecting critical thinking and cultural responsiveness:

> I always use a shared text of some sort that we're going to ground our conversation in. When I taught fifth grade, my first year teaching fifth grade, we had a whole day where we had a conversation about the take a knee movement because that was really popular. And I had a lot of kids that loved sports at the time. So, I paired my social studies

> curriculum with my ELA curriculum to ask and answer questions about the key details of an article. I presented a very nonpartisan kind of article. We read this article together and then I asked the students if they agreed or disagreed with the movement. The students had to do some writing and reflecting. Before we had any type of conversation, I utilized a modified version of the Courageous Conversation about Race protocol. The modified protocol is stay engaged, speak your truth, experience discomfort, accept and expect non-closure.

Brianna further discussed how it is important to ask students the following questions to help them become critical consumers: "Ask students, what is this text telling you? What does it assume that you already know? And how does this shape your worldview?"

The educators in my study identified supporting students in developing a critical consciousness about our world as an essential and foundational component of culturally responsive teaching and learning. One of the goals of culturally responsive teaching is to help students develop their own worldviews and articulate their beliefs to others in and outside of the classroom.

Barriers to Implementing CRI

Many factors make it difficult or impossible for teachers to try to incorporate culturally responsive instruction. Participants indicated that these factors include: the rigid teaching curriculum; the lack of opportunities for teachers to learn the knowledge and skills they need to facilitate culturally responsive instruction, including gaps in some teachers' willingness to engage in "self-work;" dysfunctional Professional Learning Communities (PLC), parental beliefs and communication challenges; and lack of resources.

Rigid Curriculum

Sirena and Scout expressed that it is challenging to discuss different cultural topics as they do not want to go outside of the rigid pacing of the curriculum that teachers at their school are expected to follow. They mention that it takes courage to discuss different cultural topics with your students as it can be unsettling to discuss controversial topics such as racism. Sirena indicated that the pacing of the curriculum could also leave little time for crucial conversations. Furthermore, the curriculum that teachers must follow does provide boundaries for teachers. While these boundaries do not necessarily preclude discussing cultural topics with students, these boundaries mean that teachers must approach discussions on these topics with both flexibility and consideration to ensure that these discussions fit the standards they must follow. Sirena explained,

> when I say, 'curriculum being a fence,' I have used the metaphor of a fence in a school playground. We all have to stay inside the fence, but we have the autonomy to choose any play equipment we want. The boundary of a common curriculum and standards helps ensure that all kids at the same grade level learn the same skills and concepts. But the tools (the play equipment) to attain learning goals can be chosen by all stakeholders in the students' success, including students themselves. The play equipment is used metaphorically as the 'how' of teaching based on student needs and data.

Brianna, in turn, indicated that cultivating a critical consciousness in students can feel like a challenge because her school's curriculum seems to have been established to protect White people's feelings. Moreover, she mentioned that many White parents had expressed concern about how the curriculum will be taught because they ultimately want to shelter their students from hearing different and difficult parts of American history. Hyper-focus on this concern

comes at the expense of protecting and effectively teaching all students about the contentious moments of our shared history, especially when we discuss topics such as enslavement and discrimination within U.S. History. Brianna believes that the teaching standards are taught in a very biased manner that harms students of color.

Similar to Brianna, Sirena mentions that she wishes that the curriculum incorporated more elements of culture. She indicates that there is a lot of cultural healing that needs to be done in our society. She feels that the curriculum needs to change so that we can facilitate healthy and effective healing. As can be gleaned by Sirena's, Scout's, and Brianna's comments, culturally responsive teachers provide a more well-rounded perspective when instructing students relative to teachers who use more "traditional" practices when teaching the curriculum.

Brianna noted that the curriculum at her school generally does not present minority students' cultures in the best way possible. Brianna asserted,

> We use the ELL education and one of the units in second grade was all about highlighting schools around the world. However, all of the schools that came from countries where people look like us were not highlighted in the best way, it was very stereotypical images. I'm wondering if we can connect with our families who identify as immigrants and connect with them to see if they can highlight some of the awesome things that are going on in their school communities where they went or places they know of.

It is important to reframe the teaching standards. As a culturally relevant teacher, it is important to reframe the teaching standards and refrain from solely emphasizing the struggles of minority cultures' races while also highlighting unique strengths and accomplishments. This provides students of all cultures a well-rounded perspective into minority students' cultures.

Brianna went on to say, “Don’t just highlight the oppression because a lot of the standards highlight the oppression of Black folks. There are a lot of accomplishments as well.” She also believes it is important for culturally relevant teachers to highlight the triumphs of members of minority cultures. One way teachers can ensure they provide students with culturally relevant information is to approach lesson planning by considering whose voices are present and missing from each lesson taught. In this way, teachers are providing students with multiple perspectives and challenging them to be critical thinkers.

Lack of Knowledge and Commitment to Self-Work

Teachers’ lack of knowledge regarding self-understanding and culture can also be a barrier as well. Most students, by nature, are very curious. Many teachers can assert that their students constantly respond to their teachers’ answers with requests for explanations. Teachers must be able to answer the students’ questions or feel comfortable facilitating thoughtful, productive conversations that will lead students to consider and evaluate answers for themselves. Participants mentioned that a lack of knowledge prevents teachers from pursuing crucial conversations due to feeling unequipped to respond. Shae and Sheila noted that it could be hard to continue to consistently develop these skills because there is a lack of consistent, new, district-level professional development opportunities. Shae more specifically mentioned that there is a selection process for many available professional development sessions, meaning that only a few teachers get to participate in these types of sessions. If teachers had more opportunities to receive ongoing professional development, they might feel more equipped to handle conversations that require students to challenge their thinking about the inequalities in our society and their ability to make a difference.

Teachers' own childhood experiences can also create a barrier to incorporating culturally relevant instruction. Three teachers mentioned that they had a very traditional K-12 educational experience rooted in individualism. Notably, for many teachers, their K-12 experience is the only model for teaching that they have other than their teaching internship before entering the classroom. Teachers who are solely exposed to traditional pedagogical approaches in these experiences will likely adopt this type of approach in their own career, as it is likely the approach that comes most naturally to them. This would suggest that, for many teachers, culturally responsive instruction is likely something they have not gained substantial experience with, which means implementing this type of instruction will likely require significant thought and effort. Consistent with this notion, Scout indicates that fostering a culturally responsive classroom environment requires intentionality, creativity, and a willingness to break away from traditional practices. For example, Scout indicated that when she was in school, students were required to sit in rows, but after getting her own classroom, she has been intentional about facilitating collaborative learning through her seating arrangement. She wants students to look at each other and talk and be comfortable where they are learning.

My finding suggests that to be a culturally responsive teacher, one must have undergone self-work to facilitate instruction properly through this lens. This includes reflection on one's own experiences and how they may have led to outdated assumptions about what good teaching and learning resembles. Teachers also must understand that inequalities in our society can put BIPOC students at a disadvantage. Culturally responsive teachers must also help students understand inequities and help students develop into citizens who can help make this society a more equitable place for everyone. Brianna mentioned,

> There's a lot of self-work. I think people don't want to go to all of these professional development [sessions], but are you spending that much time plus more doing the self-work really interrogating yourself, right. When a Black student is doing something on the carpet, are you asking yourself if a White student was doing that would I be as frustrated? Why am I frustrated that the Black students do it? That is where it comes in. You could have a great library, but if you are not a culturally responsive educator at heart, it does no good.

Culturally responsive teachers believe that all students can learn. It is up to educators to change their teaching tools to meet the needs of our minority students. In the hospital, the patients with the most critical cases are given to specialists to devise a plan. Similarly, students who need the most support must be given the most prepared instructors. Instructors who have undergone reflective self-work, including understanding how their own privileges and identity shape their experiences, are prepared to facilitate culturally responsive instruction. My findings suggest that it is important for educators to evaluate their implicit biases. Educators must evaluate what they believe about all kids. Additionally, culturally responsive teachers continuously reflect on how their biases impact their students and change their way of thinking due to their self-reflection. Scout indicated,

> I think sometimes it is harder for people to move past the barrier of their bias. I have some colleagues who are born and raised very southern. And by that, I mean the very deep-seated manners, 'yes ma'am' and 'yes, sir.' I am a military child, I do say 'yes ma'am' and 'yes sir' to my elders, but I don't tell my students that they have to do that because that may not be their culture.

Notably, Scout's response does suggest that she was aware of some potential implicit biases she may have. For instance, based on her own cultural experiences, she may be inclined to view a student who addresses her with "yes ma'am" as more respectful than another student, as might any other teacher with similar experiences. However, awareness of this bias suggests that Scout might be able to challenge this inclination and recognize that a student's failure to use "yes ma'am" may not be a signal of respect but may instead just reflect that "yes ma'am" was never a part of their culture.

Dysfunctional PLCs

Professional learning communities (PLCs) are an excellent way to support sound instruction in the classroom; however, my participants suggested that dysfunctional PLCs can hinder the integration of culturally relevant instruction. Sirena and Scout mentioned that they had explained the purpose of culturally diverse instruction to their teammates only to find that their teammates were uninterested in incorporating these ideals. As a result, Sirena asserted that she feels discouraged from providing students with some types of instruction, particularly when she knows that not all students within the grade level will receive the same instruction. For example, if one teacher on the grade level is discussing a racially charged subject matter based on a text read in class, she feels it is important for all students within that grade level to receive similar teacher-facilitated discussions.

Sirena shared that some teachers within her PLC still uphold ideals of White supremacy, which makes it challenging to proceed with culturally responsive instruction. Sirena further disclosed that it is harder to promote culturally diverse instruction as a minority teacher. She mentioned,

> … last year I struggled with my team to just have them understand the point of culturally responsive teaching. But when other teachers (nonminority) bring in the same thing, there is more acceptance. But I feel like I haven't even been accepted as a team member because I am a person of color, so anything I say is not concrete or dependable. Just because I look different or sound different in my teaching style, because I grew up in a country where I was not taught to maybe teach.

Sirena's experience suggests that unsupportive colleagues and an unsupportive PLC can represent barriers to implementing culturally relevant instruction. These barriers may be especially pronounced for teachers of color presenting the topic of culturally responsive teaching with the members of the PLC. Tensions can result in the PLC not being able to implement this form of teaching collectively at each grade level.

All participants noted that belonging to unsupportive PLCs makes it difficult for teachers to adhere to one of the central aspects of culturally responsive teaching: being a reflective practitioner. Sirena mentioned that sometimes her PLC is not helpful during this reflection process when trying to determine strategies that will best support her students' growth. She finds that reaching out to parents and asking them to support their child's success has been most beneficial.

Parental Beliefs and Communication Challenges

Parents play a crucial role in educating their children. They are often an invaluable resource for teachers. Unfortunately, parents can also be a barrier to implementing culturally responsive instruction. Some parents do not embrace diverse cultures, a fact exemplified by an experience that one of my participants shared in which she found herself having to explain her

actions when a White parent negatively reacted when they thought she was attempting to incorporate Indian culture into her instruction. Sirena shared this experience:

> Once we were doing a physics project and um, we needed space for it. So what I did was take the legs from the table. The tables were low, you know, and students were sitting on the floor doing their work. And the tables were there for the next two or three weeks, the project was force and motion. After 2 days there was a parent who emailed me saying, 'What are you trying to do here?' And when I spoke to the parent, they thought it was a cultural thing that I was trying to impose on them, but it was not. And then they emailed the principal about it, so she came and asked me, like, 'what is going on?' I told her that it was not permanent. That is only for the next two or three weeks. I cannot help it, but this thought comes to my mind that if it had been a White teacher, would it have been a different story?

Ultimately, not all parents are open to their children embracing various cultures. This, in turn, can make some teachers feel apprehensive about attempting to incorporate cultural activities into their classrooms.

Brianna, Scout, and Sirena all mentioned making contact with parents is an ongoing challenge. Per these participants, a lack of parent communication presents an issue to culturally responsive instruction as it impedes teachers' ability to adhere to the culturally responsive instruction principle of teaching the whole child. It can also trigger implicit biases that make it difficult for teachers to fully commit to adopting principles of culturally relevant instruction around being aware of implicit biases, a point mentioned by Brianna. As a measure against negative implicit biases around difficulties with communicating with parents, Brianna indicated that she chooses to believe that parents do not want to be actively disengaged and that they all

care deeply about their children. Instead, she tries to recognize that various life priorities might prevent them from partnering with her to improve their child's educational experience.

Language barriers also present a challenge to effective communication with parents. Indeed, Scout explained that it is important to provide support for students and provide support for parents so that parents can help their children. For example, because she wants parents to have some knowledge of what is occurring in the classroom, she has also started teaching lessons through video support and breaking down the pacing of what students are learning in each unit. She has found that parents have benefitted from this practice. However, she noted that building bridges between parents and teachers in ways such as this can be a lot of work.

While culturally responsive teachers take on critical conversations about societal issues to challenge the inequality within our world and promote a critical consciousness within our students, parents—particularly White parents—can be opposed to teachers integrating these types of critical conversations in the classroom. One reason for this opposition may be parents' fear that their children will be indoctrinated with information that opposes their beliefs. Consistent with this, Shae asserted when she incorporated racially charged or challenging information into her lesson, she did feel that she had to walk a very strict line with her students as this is a sensitive topic for our society.

However, participants did mention that open communication with parents surrounding crucial conversations is essential. Parents need to understand explicitly what teachers are planning to teach so they can be prepared to follow up with their students on any conversations that occur in the classroom. Shelia shared how she made parents of the students at her school aware that teachers would be having racially based conversations with their children. Specifically, she invited parents to her school on a Saturday afternoon for a couple of hours so

that her teachers could explain and demonstrate how they planned to incorporate race-based conversations in their classroom. Parents were also provided an opportunity to ask questions and engage in discussions around the planned conversations; parents were also made to understand that race-based conversations would be a part of their child's school's identity going forward. Brianna similarly mentioned how essential it is for teachers to clearly communicate to parents their goals for talks about sensitive issues. Brianna said,

> At this point I am not trying to indoctrinate children. I am not trying to make them think a certain way. However, I'm trying to help them think critically through whatever we're doing. So, just being transparent with parents and letting them know this is what we're doing and then breaking it down for them.

Scout concurs that transparency is essential when it comes to discussing sensitive topics with parents. She indicates, if made aware, parents can even be a part of the learning process at home. Scout asserts that she has provided parents with reading passages in advance of sensitive conversations with her students. She has provided articles that include historical information and parallels to what is happening today. Comments from my participants suggest that having conversations with parents before teaching sensitive material can help maintain an open line of communication and foster trust between parents and teachers.

Lack of Resources

Brianna and Sirena mentioned that a lack of resources could be a barrier to incorporating CRI. Additionally, sometimes it can be challenging to find books with different multicultural experiences that meet the reading levels of all of their students, as students must be able to understand the text.

Lack of time, often a somewhat hidden resource, can also be a barrier to cultivating culturally responsive instruction. Brianna mentioned that when students' interests drive instruction consistent with student-centered instruction, it becomes nearly impossible to recycle lessons and entirely necessary to continually craft new lessons. Unfortunately, however, Brianna and Sirena mentioned that time is a resource that many teachers lack.

Successes

All participants indicated that culturally responsive instruction was successful with students and that they could feel the difference it makes in their classrooms. However, it can be hard to relate the elements of culturally responsive instruction to a standardized assessment. Many educators believe that standardized assessments are inherently biased and will never present adequate results for minority students. Rather, the teachers in my study relied on anecdotal data, perceptions of student academic comfort levels increasing, student work samples, and positive feedback from the school community to showcase that students are benefiting from culturally responsive instruction.

Because culturally responsive instructors strive to develop the whole student, the benefits of this approach are not always evident through standardized testing. It is unlikely that standardized testing would be able to evaluate student success by CRI standards. Supriya asserted,

> It's not the big test data always, but it's like the little anecdotal notes and the street data that we have about the kid that shows that a kid is doing better than what, where he, or she was at the beginning of the year.

Brianna expressed her belief that standardized testing is fundamentally racist. She feels that, until it is revamped, standardized testing is incapable of adequately measuring all students'

learning and performance. Instead of using standardized testing, Brianna advocates measuring student success according to their individual goals and tracking student growth via formal and informal documentation. Brianna shared,

> Their definition of success is what drives and what drives you every day, I guess. So, success may not be for every single student that we're passing a state-mandated test. But are you seeing how your students can grow in different ways? Because I feel like what I tell people all the time, standardized testing is racist. You can put that on my grave. Like I do not believe that there should be the measure of which we punish and appreciate students. So, as a culturally responsive educator, you know, students are more than a test score, you know, that they are a full, entire human and you're seeing them for all of the assets that they bring into the classroom.

Brianna and Scout suggest that culturally responsive teaching leads to increases in students' level of confidence. Scout, for example, reported seeing a big change in her students, especially her English Language Learners, after she began to incorporate culturally responsive instruction. Specifically, she reported that when she began integrating student-centered instruction, she started noticing her students' work ethic increasing, and they also began to become more advanced students academically and socially. Scout indicated,

> I have seen confidence mostly, when kids can't speak the language very well, they tend to not speak much at all. They tend to feel like they can't understand, they can't do it. But, when I started to change the way that I deliver things or what I accepted, as, you know, evidence of their learning, I noticed they become more confident. And when they become more confident, they try a little harder and the harder and harder that they try the better and better they get, the more, more they grow.

Observations such as these suggest that teachers tracking changes in student confidence over time is one way to measure student success with culturally responsive instruction. If a student continuously grows academically and loves school when they did not previously at the start of the school year, that certainly suggests that a teacher's pedagogical strategies are working. Brianna mentioned that she supports incorporating student identities in the classroom, and she assists her students with feeling comfortable discussing issues of race. At the start of the year, students were apprehensive about discussing racial topics, but as the year progressed, students became more comfortable discussing race. She observed student success with normalizing race in the classroom and helping them see people as their full selves.

Looking at student work samples provides another way to measure students' growth through culturally responsive teaching. The digital portfolio that Washington County has initiated showcases student work over time. Students can see their work from every grade level. Additionally, students can self-select what they want to put into their digital portfolio, which helps them be active participants in tracking their progress throughout their school career.

Culturally responsive teachers know that their instruction impacts their students when some parents begin to notice and provide positive feedback. Sheila said,

> The community notices the work we do. So there are lots of families that value that and note that. I've had parents reach out to say, you know, thank you so much for embracing societal issues, like what happened with George Floyd or just things that sometimes happen in the community. I say, look, we value all people.

Additionally, Amber also indicates the community of Honey Bee School has been positively impacted by the school's focus on racial equity, and parents have expressed satisfaction with the school's goals. She goes on to say that they have a parent who joins their monthly equity

meetings and then shares with other parent community members. My findings indicate that teachers' anecdotal data, student academic comfort levels increasing, student work samples, and positive community feedback are all examples of students benefiting from culturally responsive instruction.

Summary

The findings from my study support much of what we know about culturally responsive instruction from the literature. I found several characteristics of a culturally responsive classroom that stand out: relationships between students and teachers, a focus on social and emotional learning, an atmosphere of caring, student-centered learning, relevant curriculum, culturally responsive teaching strategies, and pedagogical strategies that support the development of critical thinking. At the same time, there are barriers to incorporating CRI into instruction. My participants mentioned the curriculum, in-depth knowledge, lack of self-work, dysfunctional professional learning communities, lack of parent support, childhood educational experience, and lack of resources as barriers. Lastly, culturally responsive teachers measure their students' success through anecdotal data, increased student confidence, and digital portfolios. In the next and final chapter, I put my findings in conversation with the literature, draw some conclusions, share recommendations, and reflect on the study overall.

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of my study was to better understand the challenges and successes that educators encounter when incorporating culturally responsive instruction into their classrooms. I conducted a qualitative study and interviewed four teachers and two administrators who employ culturally responsive pedagogy. I also explored artifacts that they shared related to their work. My goal was to analyze the experiences of teachers as they incorporate cultural responsiveness in their classrooms. All of the participants have participated in professional development focused on cultural responsiveness. Additionally, all of the participants were teacher-leaders within their respective schools or were administrators. The study was guided by the broad question, "What does culturally responsive instruction look like when it is implemented in an elementary school classroom?"

I conducted semi-structured interviews with four teachers and two administrators from Washington County to answer my research questions. Washington County has embraced culturally responsive pedagogy and encourages all of its teachers to participate in professional development that supports this teaching framework. All of the interviews were held on the Google Meets platform. In addition to the interviews, for each participant, I reviewed a lesson plan, student artifacts, or photographs of teaching strategies, all of which helped to provide additional evidence of the teacher's culturally relevant practices.

Based on my research and observations of teachers and administrators, I found several characteristics of a culturally responsive classroom: supportive relationships between students and teachers, a focus on social and emotional learning, an atmosphere of caring, student-centered learning, culturally relevant curriculum, and pedagogical strategies that support the development

of critical thinking. At the same time, some barriers to incorporating CRI into instruction currently exist. My participants identified the following as contributing to barriers to implementing CRI: outdated and White-centered curriculum, lack of in-depth knowledge and self-work among colleagues, dysfunctional professional learning communities, lack of parent support, and lack of resources. Lastly, culturally responsive teachers measure success through anecdotal data, increased student confidence, and digital portfolios.

Research Questions Answered

My research study included one overarching question: What does culturally responsive teaching look like in the elementary classroom? Additionally, I was interested in the challenges and barriers teachers encounter to be culturally responsive and how they assess their work in CRI.

The foundation for CRI is building relationships with students. Hammond (2015) states that we should form learning partnerships with students to encourage students to open up and show that teachers genuinely care about them, both in how they feel and what they have to say. According to Hammond, the learning partnership consists of the following equation: rapport plus alliance equals cognitive insight. A teacher must establish an emotional connection with each student and build their trust. Then, the teacher must build an alliance to show the student that they are working together to learn content, build learning strategies, and overcome learning challenges. As this occurs, the teacher will learn about the student's thinking routines. The student also becomes aware of their thinking, which will assist the teacher in supporting the student's academic growth. The goal is to get dependent learners to be open and vulnerable to show the areas where they need more support, in part so that teachers do not have to determine

this information utilizing test scores. The process of understanding learning needs begins with building a rapport with a student.

Through my research, I confirmed that building supportive relationships is the foundation of CRI, as all of my participants mentioned relationship-building as a central part of CRI. Building relationships with students is paramount because, as my findings suggest, no other part of culturally responsive instruction can occur without this component being fulfilled. My participants suggested that all teachers should ask their students about their culture. Students should not be caused to feel that they are experts about their culture, but teachers should get to know their students' perspectives based on their culture. Participants also suggested that teachers should be the lead learner in the classroom. Students must be able to become vulnerable during the learning process. Teachers also need to model this vulnerability. Teachers should be able to admit when they have made a mistake or are unsure about an answer; this makes students feel comfortable during the learning process and will help them build a trusting relationship with their teacher. Lastly, participants suggested that teachers use multicultural activities and decorate their classrooms with the products students create. This will allow teachers to get to know their students and create a caring atmosphere.

In addition to building good relationships and rapport with students, intentionally incorporating social-emotional learning into instruction can profoundly impact student outcomes. My participants described several practical ways to incorporate social-emotional learning strategies into their classrooms. For example, teachers incorporate social-emotional check-ins with their students. These check-ins can be conducted in person or through technology. Additionally, participants discussed the importance of learning about students' prior experiences with discipline or academics with other teachers to succeed in their current classroom.

Furthermore, participants discussed using S.O.D.A. as a strategy in the classroom as a way to manage their emotions. Culturally responsive teaching focuses on the whole child, not just their academic identity. Therefore, social-emotional learning is a huge part of this framework. Students must understand that teachers care about their emotional well-being and their academic progress.

Educators must also support students in developing interpersonal relationships with peers in the classroom. Educators should seamlessly incorporate social-emotional learning into their daily instruction to help students acquire necessary interpersonal skills. Hammond (2015) states that when trust is established in the classroom, the brain is free for other creativity, learning, and higher-order thinking. To build trust, teachers must listen carefully and openly to their students, modeling this behavior so that students learn to listen similarly to their peers. Actively listening to students is a way to support them emotionally. Culturally responsive teachers understand the emotional lives, challenges, and struggles their students encounter outside of school. Hammond expounds on active listening by insisting that teachers listen with grace. She argues that educators should listen with compassion, suspend judgment, and honor students' cultural ways of communicating. One of the participants, Sirena, discussed the importance of incorporating affirmations into her lessons. She mentioned that she has affirmations for mathematics, so all students know they are doing something difficult, but they are building brainpower.

Another hallmark feature of culturally responsive teachers discussed in the literature and evident in the teachers' pedagogical practices in my study is establishing a caring atmosphere. Students need to feel valued and have the opportunities to establish trusting relationships in their classrooms. Additionally, culturally responsive teachers realize that some of their students have experienced challenges in previous grade levels, and they strive to form a community within

their classrooms. Therefore, teachers must cultivate supportive and even loving environments. All of the participants in my study agreed that they needed to get to know their students personally and make them feel comfortable in their classrooms. Sirena mentioned that teachers need to become vulnerable with students by providing examples from their own experiences in life to bring the curriculum alive. Students appreciate when they are allowed to connect to teachers in this way—to see them as approachable and genuine people—which promotes a caring and loving atmosphere.

Drawing on the philosophy and pedagogical strategies of culturally responsive pedagogy allows teachers to connect with students on different cultural levels, partly because they have studied some aspects of the cultures of the students in their classes. Culturally responsive teachers can make relevant connections among the curriculum and their students' cultures, drawing on culturally relevant and recognizable examples. Students can see themselves in the curriculum and connect with the information that they are learning. Many of my participants provided their students with texts that allowed them to see themselves, such as books centered on African American characters. My findings are consistent with current research, illustrating that students must see themselves meaningfully in the curriculum. This is a way for students to understand that they belong in the classroom and our larger society.

My findings and the current literature suggest that other ways to implement culturally responsive instruction include allowing students to incorporate project-based learning and collaborative learning. Dominant cultural and educational norms tend to center individuals. Students are tested, sorted, and ranked in schools and are often in implicit and explicit competition for grades, teacher attention, and academic rewards. However, many minority cultures have a more collectivist orientation to the world and way of learning. An individualistic

society is based on competition and individual achievement, while a collectivist society focuses on learning as a collaborative process that you engage in with others (Muhammad, 2020). Thus, a culturally responsive classroom looks a bit different than what many people have been conditioned to see, where "doing your own work" is valued above working with others to achieve shared goals.

Culturally responsive teachers provide a platform for students to cultivate a critical consciousness. These teachers teach their students the processes for thinking and provide literature that they can connect with and respond to, often on a personal level. Additionally, teachers provide texts, materials, opportunities, and experiences related to their students' identities and center their culture. They provide students with opportunities to think critically about societal issues and how they can be changemakers. The existing research explains the importance of challenging students to think about how they can solve societal injustice through asking questions, researching information, taking stances on issues, and acting on their knowledge. Students need to understand the curriculum and how to apply what they are learning to their everyday lives. Muhammad (2020) expresses the importance of instilling criticality into students as a part of her equity framework: "it is important for students to read text to understand power, authority and anti-oppression. The goal of criticality is to have the capacity to read, write, and think in the context of understanding power, privilege, and oppression" (p. 12). Furthermore, Muhammad believes that it is important for students to see injustice and work toward social transformation. The participants in my study shared Muhammad's orientation towards understanding power and working toward social justice. We must teach students to be critical consumers of information, learn about injustice, and be willing to change our society.

Barriers to Incorporating CRI into Instruction

The current curriculum is one of the major reasons teachers do not incorporate culturally responsive instruction. Some teachers feel that CRI is just one more thing they must do, adding it to a long list of items they need to cover. The research suggests that culturally responsive instruction is the vehicle by which teachers provide the instruction. Brianna and Sirena both mentioned that there is much cultural healing that has to take place in our society before students can learn well. Culturally responsive teachers provide a well-rounded curriculum to students. Teachers determine whose voice is missing within the curriculum and present that perspective. Brianna mentioned an interesting point about how the current curriculum too often protects the feelings of White children. Currently, debates are raging about legislation regarding Critical Race Theory and the implementation of this framework in schools. Many conservative legislators have drafted legislation to prevent critical race theory from being taught in K-12 classrooms. Many Conservatives believe that this theory causes individuals to be intolerant of other groups and requires that we focus on our differences more than our similarities as individuals. Some legislators focus on policies and practices in education that lead to persistent racial inequalities in education. While critical race theory is not a synonym for culturally responsive teaching, it does provide some of the orienting ideas and foundation for this approach (Sawchuk, 2021). According to the participants, culturally responsive teachers are not trying to brainwash students into believing that America is a horrible country and not a country of which we should be proud. Culturally responsive teachers want to provide their students with different viewpoints and challenge them to form their own opinions.

Shae, Shelia, and Sirena agree that the lack of knowledge surrounding culturally responsive teaching is one reason why more people do not center their pedagogical approaches in

this educational framework. Washington School District provides some professional development, but culturally responsive teachers and those who desire to become more culturally responsive seek continuous professional development. If teachers received more professional development, especially about translating the theory of cultural responsiveness into specific practices in the classroom, they might be more willing to engage in critical discussions in the classroom with their students more regularly. Additionally, the number of multicultural courses that are taught in teacher preparation schools should be increased. These courses should help teachers prepare students for effective dialogue and collaboration across differences, not simply exposing students to other cultures. As such, they should include more hands-on experience and activities. According to Sleeter (2001),

> Research shows that didactic presentations of other cultures are not helpful and often reinforce stereotypes of students of color. It was found that tutoring students of color could be helpful for preservice White teachers to provide them with cultural insight regarding their students' lives and it also revealed their stereotypes. They will often find that parents of color are just as concerned about their students' academic development as other parents. (p. 10)

Additionally, it is hard to determine how the experiences provided by an institution that is embedded with institutional racism will help to dispel myths and stereotypes; but, it is better to provide these courses than not.

Brianna indicated that many teachers do not want to take the time to develop themselves as culturally responsive teachers. Much work needs to be done by teachers introspectively, learning about their own biases and dispositions, before these teachers can provide students with a true culturally responsive educational experience. Teachers should identify the biases that they

possess. Just as Gloria Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) suggest, teachers must be able to identify the inequities in our society and our students need to be provided with the skills to think critically about the teaching standards that they are learning. According to my findings, teachers need more support in learning how to present information to students without attempting to indoctrinate them with their opinions. McDonough (2009) found that while a novice teacher incorporates critical race consciousness into their teaching, they go through three phases, but not always linearly. First, the teacher reflects on their racial identity. A teacher must explore their group membership, the privilege they possess and bring into the classroom, and their ability to take an anti-racist stance. Second, the teacher can identify institutional racism within the school or our society. Third, the teacher encounters challenges to engagement despite their knowledge about how racism happens and how they participate in it, often implicitly or subconsciously. Teachers may encounter discomfort and guilt as they discuss issues of critical consciousness. They must be willing to navigate discomfort to undergo an internal transformation before becoming effective culturally responsive teachers.

Scout and Sirena both mentioned that a dysfunctional environment, especially in terms of the professional learning community, can prevent a teacher from being culturally responsive. Within schools, many teachers share lesson plans to ensure every student within a grade level can interact with the curriculum similarly. However, if the teacher's team has not embraced culturally responsive teaching, shared lesson planning can be detrimental to a prospective culturally responsive teacher because they will not be able to craft their lessons using this teaching framework. This is one of the reasons why culturally responsive teaching should be a school-wide initiative.

Parental support is a significant component of culturally responsive instruction. However, my findings suggest that teachers feel that there is a lack of parental involvement at times. Although it is important to continuously think of ways to keep parents involved and be transparent regarding what students are learning about in the classroom, it is important to construct ways for parents to become involved with their children's instruction in a culturally responsive manner. Parents are stakeholders in their child's educational experience and should be included in their learning experience.

Three participants mentioned that their previous educational experience impacted the education that they provided their students, and not always positively. The participants stated that they had a more lecture-based experience as a child. Then as a teacher, they initially proceeded to utilize "the banking model" of instruction because that is what was modeled for them. Preservice teachers must receive in-depth training on culturally responsive teaching and substantial modeling of this approach in their own education. CRI should be integrated seamlessly into teacher education programs.

A lack of resources, such as time and funds, has always created challenges for educational leaders within public education. Brianna stated that time is a valuable resource; teachers do not often have the time to individualize lessons to meet the needs of all of their students. That is why it is so important for culturally responsive instruction to be a school-wide initiative so that teachers can share lessons within their professional learning communities, grade levels, and school-wide. Also, legislators and school board members need to understand the importance of culturally responsive instruction to allocate more funds to schools. Schools need additional funds to purchase literature that reflects their students and creates more diverse educational experiences for students.

Measuring the Success of CRI

Culturally responsive teachers in my study measured success through anecdotal data, increased student confidence, and digital portfolios. Culturally responsive teachers are focused on relationship building with students, increasing their love for learning, and supporting students' ability to learn collaboratively. These teachers have found that this approach to learning is best captured by anecdotal data because standardized tests promote individualism and do not illustrate the range of ways that students grow when lessons are culturally responsive. Some of the most important lessons that students learn when teachers take this approach are not easily measurable. Culturally responsive teachers have found that culturally relevant lessons increase their students' love for learning, increasing their confidence. Scout mentioned her ability to relate the curriculum to her students has given some students confidence to participate in class activities. My findings suggest that teachers can measure their students' confidence over time to assess the effectiveness of their lessons. Culturally responsive teachers should examine student work samples to make certain that they are growing academically. If students learn through artistic expression, narrative writing, and developing greater ownership over their own education, teachers should find ways to document these changes. Lastly, parents are important stakeholders. They should also notice an improvement in their children's academic progress.

Discussion and Implications

Incorporating culturally responsive pedagogy on the elementary level is very similar to implementing it at the secondary level. However, the lessons we learn from one level can be adapted for different levels. Educators need to build relationships with students and cultivate classrooms focused on love, understanding, and acceptance. Students should be the focus of the instruction at any educational level. Conversations surrounding difficult topics must be presented

based upon a child's developmental level. Although it is important to be transparent with parents, I argue that this is even more important at the elementary level when students have fewer life experiences and are more impressionable. Within the elementary classroom, culturally responsive teachers determine how they can take their students' lived experiences and infuse them into their lesson plans to make learning come alive for their students.

Maintaining high expectations for all students is an important component of culturally responsive education. Culturally responsive teachers of BIPOC students have to combat the deficit thinking that many teachers express. Some believe that students' cultural ways of being are a deficit instead of an advantage, not something educators can utilize to strengthen their curriculum. Maintaining high expectations for students is critical when tracking students educationally is becoming even more prevalent.

Culturally responsive teachers shine a light on racism, particularly colorblind racism, White privilege, and forms of institutional racism. To be culturally responsive means to begin to disrupt some of the inequities that we encounter within our school systems. Culturally responsive teaching requires that educators focus on their students, socially-emotionally and academically, and is a way for teachers to put critical race theory into practice.

When teachers reflect on their beliefs or biases about children and think about their beliefs and how they impact their practice, institutional racism is minimized. Additionally, when teachers embrace their students' differences and incorporate various cultures and perspectives into their instruction, they break down the barriers of Whiteness and colorblind racism. Lastly, but most importantly, when a teacher genuinely cares for each child and realizes that the child has the knowledge that they need to be successful in life, the forces of institutional racism will crumble in our school systems.

Limitations

While I learned much about culturally responsive teaching from this study, there were also some limitations. The two biggest limitations are sample size and how the Covid-19 pandemic complicated the lives and work of my participants. I had to revise my planned data collection strategies due to the Covid-19 pandemic. I planned to conduct my research study in the spring of 2020; however, the district where I conducted my study denied all research studies during the early stages of the pandemic. The principal of one of my schools felt that her staff members were overwhelmed due to the pandemic, such as being forced to shift to virtual teaching.

Additionally, many of the teachers did not feel comfortable participating in a research study, as they felt it was one more task to add to their growing list of tasks. Instead of having my planned eight to ten teacher participants, I had four teachers from two different schools and two administrators participating in the research study. I could not get all of the participants from one school, so I changed my focus to the four teachers within one school district. Additionally, I could not conduct interviews within the school or visit the schools because of the pandemic; this prevented me from observing the classroom and school environment, which I had hoped to do. Instead, I collected data through the Google Meets platform. Also, instruction had changed during the pandemic from previous years, so even though teachers were still trying to use culturally responsive practices, they did not have the number of artifacts that I would have liked to have collected.

Another limitation is that I could not interview elementary-aged students; it would have been interesting to gather their perspectives on culturally responsive teaching. It would have been interesting to learn how students feel their teachers provide a culturally responsive

educational experience. This could have been an additional layer of information that would have provided insight into educators' practices.

I was also unable to incorporate the parents' perspectives into my study. I would love to have understood BIPOC and White parents' perspectives on the culturally relevant pedagogy framework in elementary school classrooms. It would have been beneficial to understand their feelings about their child's academic, social, and emotional growth concerning their teacher's use of culturally responsive approaches.

Recommendations for Practice

I would recommend that teachers study culturally responsive education more systematically and work to integrate it into their classrooms. As part of this, teachers need to employ active listening in their classrooms consistently. Participants mentioned how they focused on their students as they talked to show them that what they were saying was valuable, which helped build relationships with students. I think we will learn more about our students' culture if we actively listen to them and suspend judgment. We can also use this information to incorporate our students' lived experiences into the curriculum.

To cultivate a caring environment, the participants in my study taught me the importance of teachers disclosing some of their cultural identities and life experiences to students. This helps to create an authentic classroom environment. Additionally, teachers should model interpersonal skills and vulnerability with their students, which does not always happen in the classroom.

I would also recommend providing teachers with professional development that helps them develop a sophisticated background in culturally responsive instruction and a comprehensive understanding of the triumphs and struggles of marginalized communities.

According to my research, many teachers do not feel comfortable with critical discussions due to the lack of professional development.

Most importantly, we need to have effective professional development that requires teachers to evaluate how they feel about all students, work to identify and disrupt unconscious assumptions and biases, and recognize how they circulate in society. All teachers in a school setting must be highly encouraged to undergo this "self-work." We want all of our students to receive a similar educational experience; therefore, it is important that all professional learning communities complete "self-work."

Recommendations for Future Research

In the future, we need more extensive research case studies of culturally responsive teachers at the elementary level, both what they do and the impact of their actions on student learning. We need more studies that shadow effective practitioners. This would provide novice and veteran culturally responsive teachers with more pedagogical tools to utilize in the classroom.

Also, we need more research on the impact of professional development on staff. There is much professional development provided to staff and many different programs and models that districts can select. However, it is uncommon for school and district leaders to follow up with teachers to learn about the impact and effectiveness of the PD and to determine how they utilized that information in the classroom. We need more ongoing, research-based, and comprehensive culturally responsive teaching professional development in all schools.

Final Thoughts

As I get to the end of this study, I have reflected on the process, the findings, and what it means to be culturally responsive in education more broadly. Throughout this dissertation

process, I have learned the importance of being flexible and having patience throughout the research, especially navigating challenges out of my control. At the start of the research process, I changed my research question because I was not very interested in researching effective professional development; therefore, it was important to find a topic that would captivate my attention. Later, I had to delay my research study one year due to the pandemic.

The most intriguing part of my study was learning from the participants how they develop a critical consciousness within their elementary-aged students. I enjoyed understanding how they utilize developmentally appropriate text, provide students with a safe environment to conduct their conversations, and incorporate sentence starters and other strategies to initiate discussion. I enjoyed understanding how important parent communication and involvement are to the work of these teachers, especially parent support for critical and sometimes difficult conversations with their students. The work of the teachers in my study helped me to understand in a more accessible way how as educators, we can work to dismantle color blindness and Whiteness in our classrooms.

It was interesting to learn how each educator was willing to be vulnerable with their students and share parts of their lives related to the curriculum. This is something that I have done at the high school level, but without thinking deeply about its potential pedagogical and socio-emotional value. For example, I have sometimes incorporated experiences from my childhood or overseas travels to add depth to a topic discussed in my classroom; these elementary educators used a similar approach with their students. After listening to my participants, I was reminded how important it is to be open and even sometimes vulnerable with your students, helping them build a trusting relationship with you.

Also, learning about the importance of incorporating social-emotional learning into instruction at the elementary level was enlightening for me. In addition to conversing with students as a secondary teacher, to build a relationship with them, I would learn a lot about their emotional wellbeing by reading a journal that I asked students to complete weekly. The teachers in my study gave me additional strategies for connecting with students both in and outside of the classroom. It is important to teach students how to handle their emotions and how to interact with others. Social-emotional learning is a part of culturally responsive instruction. Students must be able to understand and control their emotions and build relationships with others, as there is no way that students will be able to work collaboratively with others or have a caring atmosphere if they are not in a good mental space.

Right now, I am wondering how school and district leaders might be creative in coming up with opportunities to develop cultural knowledge and competence, for example, through potential study abroad experiences to broaden the educational experiences of culturally and linguistically diverse students. Currently, study abroad experiences are offered somewhat widely to students in secondary schools; it would be interesting to learn about the potential benefits of supporting the elementary classroom curriculum in schools of predominantly culturally and linguistically diverse students. Second, I am thinking about how we can promote a national or global virtual elementary school experience that allows students from various backgrounds to come together to learn from one another. We need an educational experience grounded in culturally responsive pedagogical practices and challenges students to express themselves to a diverse peer group. Instruction could be provided in a culturally diverse manner digitally. Third, I wonder if it would be advantageous to design a curriculum that could be taught in K-12 schools around the nation that promotes cultural diversity to all students. This could be a 15- to 20-

minute core curriculum that could be presented to students to expose students to different cultures and diverse perspectives to every child, no matter their zip code. Before receiving this curriculum, all educators could be required to participate in a standard culturally responsive professional development. This type of curriculum is essential as every child needs exposure to different cultures and ways of thought. Most of the time, disagreement stems from a lack of cultural understanding.

Fourth, educators need more resources and strategies to help promote culturally responsive learning at home. We should provide culturally responsive assignments that any parent can participate in and expand learning opportunities to the community. Students spend much of their time in schools, and the remainder of their time is spent with their family and in their community; therefore, the community is extremely influential in a child's life. We need to support students' understanding of the curriculum by using important stakeholders in their lives as the vehicle to doing that.

Finally, I think educators could use social media more effectively to promote relationships with students and build cultural responsiveness. We should use social media to build relationships in a manner that can be monitored online with students, as our students spend a lot of time on social media. We can promote the curriculum online and encourage students to express their perspectives. Additionally, educators and school and district leaders could utilize social media to promote cultural awareness in schools. We can utilize social media to provide more culturally relevant education. For example, maybe we could capture our students' life experiences and share them through a platform that could allow teachers to seamlessly integrate these students' experiences into a standard social-emotional curriculum for students.

Reflecting on this dissertation study as a whole, if I had an opportunity to do this research project again, I would incorporate students' perspectives into the project. This would require additional permission from the school district that might be challenging to obtain, but the students' perspectives would be extremely valuable. Students could provide insight into their experiences within the teacher's classroom. Also, I would consider observing within the school and classroom environment. Additionally, I would consider conducting a single focus group of teachers who have been trained in culturally responsive teaching.

This research study was enlightening for me and allowed me to learn more about a framework essential for every classroom teacher to employ. We must provide every child in America an opportunity to be successful. Culturally responsive education is one way to increase the academic performance of all students, with a focus on culturally and linguistically diverse students, while dismantling institutionalized racism in our schools and promoting a loving atmosphere for all students to learn.

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APPENDIX A. ADMINISTRATOR INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What are the short-term and long-term equity goals for Honey Bee School?
2. What is culturally responsive instruction?
3. Why are you interested in incorporating culturally responsive pedagogy as a school-wide initiative?
4. What has been your personal experience with culturally responsive instruction? What are some of the challenges that you have encountered with CRI within the school?
5. What professional development has been provided?
6. How have teachers been instructed to use the information gathered from professional development?
7. How do you measure the effectiveness of the PD?
8. How have you assessed culturally responsive instruction in the classroom?
9. Where would you say that most of your teachers are currently along the cultural proficiency spectrum?
10. What is your biggest challenge while implementing this teaching approach within the school?

APPENDIX B. TEACHER INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Background/Own Racial Identity & Experiences (Part 1- First Interview)

1. Where did you go to college?
2. What was your major?
3. How long have you been an educator?
4. How long have you worked at Honey Bee School?
5. What grade level do you teach?
6. Describe your teaching style.
7. What is your ethnicity?
8. Where are you along the spectrum of cultural proficiency?
9. Can you describe a time when you first realized your racial identity? If so, please elaborate on this question.
10. What have been the advantages and disadvantages of your racial identity?
11. Describe in as much detail as possible how your racial identity has affected your life.

Teacher Education and Professional Development

12. How did your college/university embrace culturally responsive instruction?
13. What professional development have you taken part in to increase cultural responsiveness in the classroom? How did you experience this PD? What did you take from it to apply in your classroom?
14. How do you utilize the professional development provided to shape your pedagogy?
15. Is there professional development that you feel will be helpful?

School Equity Goals

16. What are your school's short-term and long-term equity goals?

Introductory Questions to CRI

17. What is culturally responsive instruction?

18. What does it mean to be a culturally responsive teacher?

19. What value does culturally responsive instruction provide?

20. How do you prioritize culturally responsive instruction in comparison to the other many demanding responsibilities?

Culturally Responsive Instruction in the classroom (Part 2- Second Interview)

21. What have you done to support the education of minorities in your school? Have you found this to be challenging?

22. If you can, describe a lesson that went well that was infused with culturally responsive pedagogy.

Possible Successes with CRI

23. What are specific examples of successes that you have found with working with the CRI approach?

24. How do you know that CRI is effective in your classroom?

Possible Challenges of Implementing CRI

25. What stops you from integrating CRI in your lesson?

26. What are the specific challenges that you face when attempting to incorporate CRI?