CREATING STRONG TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS TO CLOSE
OPPORTUNITY GAPS

A disquisition presented to the faculty of the Graduate School of

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By

Kelsey Williams Adams

Chair: Dr. Jess Weiler

Assistant Professor of Educational Research

Human Services Department

Committee Members:

Dr. Robert Crow, Methodologist

Dr. Emily Virtue, Educational Leadership Assistant Professor and Program Director

Dr. Holly Pinter, External Committee Member

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this disquisition to my parents, Steven and Pamela Williams. Thank you for providing a life that has allowed me to have the opportunities many others do not have. Thank you for loving me, supporting me, and encouraging me. I am proud to call you Mom and Dad. There are no others like the two of you, and for that I am thankful.

To my in-laws Terry and Cynthia Adams, thank you for all the help and support you have provided. I appreciate how you both have selflessly given and taken me into your family and treated me as your own.

To my husband Tyler H. Adams, you are another of God's anomalies. I will never understand how I ended up with someone who loves others so selflessly. I am the luckiest girl in the world, though, and I am so thankful God picked you for me. You are always the "calm in my storm," and for that I am thankful. I appreciate every nudge, push, and shove toward the pursuit of bettering myself. You deserve just as much celebration for the selflessness, encouragement, love, and understanding (of my bad attitude) you have shown during this endeavor.

Finally, to my children, you are the reason why I choose to do what I do. You are the future, and my job is to work to make the world you will live in better. Thank you both for serving as inspiration. You are my everything.

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ABSTRACT

CREATING STRONG TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS TO CLOSE OPPORUNITY GAPS

Kelsey Williams Adams, Ed.D

Western Carolina University (March 2023)

Director: Dr. Emily Virtue

This paper utilizes a dissertation-in-practice model (Storey et al., 2015) wherein scholar-practitioners examine the implementation of teacher professional learning in the areas of culturally responsive practice (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2001; Brown, 2004; Bondy, 2007; Lambeth & Smith, 2016; Chang & Viesca, 2022), implicit bias (Mason et al., 2017; Post et al., 2020; Wright et al., 2022), and the establish-maintain-restore method (Cook et al., 2018) to improve teacher-student relationships. Educators are just beginning to understand a seemingly obvious connection: student performance is largely predicated on teacher-student relationships (TSRs). The quality of TSRs has been associated with students' social functioning, behavior, engagement in learning, and academic achievement (Roorda et al., 2011; Mason et al., 2017; Scales et al., 2020). The professional learning modules utilized in this improvement work engage the research and standards for adult learning framed by Learning Forward (Learning Forward, 2022). I employ improvement science methodologies and traditional mixed methods to evaluate the effectiveness of the professional learning interventions. These methods include quantitative survey data, qualitative focus group data, and field note data. Evaluation findings indicate that one of the four goals for the improvement initiative was met, and qualitative sources revealed additional themes: a) teachers connect culture with relationships, (b) teachers yearn to learn about culturally responsive practices, and (c) dialogue contributes to learning and relationship building.

THE DISQUISITION

In academia, those who embark on a doctoral journey traditionally demonstrate their work through a dissertation. A dissertation serves as the culminating work of a scholar related to an area of interest in their scholarship.

At Western Carolina University, the "dissertation" is known as the "disquisition." This dissertation-in-practice model was developed in conjunction with the principles established by the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED). The CPED (2022) framework "prepares educators for the application of appropriate and specific practices, the generation of new knowledge, and for the stewardship of the profession." This process is reflective of ground-breaking work meant to distinguish the Ed.D from the Ph.D (Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate CPED, 2022). The major tenets of the CPED framework are implementing educational leadership for equity and social justice; preparing leaders to make a positive difference; cultivating collaboration and communication skills to support diverse communities; providing field-based opportunities to explore problems of practice; developing meaningful solutions to problems; integrating practical research and knowledge; utilizing theory to create systemic change; and placing emphasis on the generation, transformation, and use of professional knowledge (Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate, 2022).

The disquisition process employs a traditional research methodology as well as improvement science, which is a user-centered evaluative methodology based on the premise of continuous improvement (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020; Bryk et al., 2015; Langley et al., 2009). This process uses short cycles known as plan, do, study, act (PDSA) to evaluate change, guide revisions, and further the development of the improvement initiative (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020;

Bryk et al., 2015; Langley et al., 2009). A design team also facilitates part of this process.

Specifically, the scholar-practitioner leads the design team through stages in the improvement

science process that are meant to bring about change. The final product in this reiterative process

is the paper itself, which serves as a user-centered guide for practitioners who are considering

implementing similar work within their educational community.

(This paper is part of a group disquisition project and shares content with a second
paper, Strong Teacher-Student Relationships: A More Equitable Way Forward by Ryan
Cooper).

INTRODUCTION

Educators are just beginning to understand a seemingly obvious connection: student performance is largely predicated on teacher-student relationships (TSRs). The quality of TSRs has been associated with students' social functioning, behavior, engagement in learning, and academic achievement (Roorda et al., 2011; Mason et al., 2017; Scales et al., 2020). Schools face serious difficulties in adequately and concurrently attending to academic *and* socio-emotional needs (Athanases & de Oliveira, 2014; Nasir, Jones, & McLaughlin, 2011). As school trajectory advances and academic demands increase, the affective component is often eroded, and conflict in teacher-student relationships increases (B. A. Collins, O'Connor, Supplee, & Shaw, 2017).

There is an expressed need for teachers to connect with all their students, especially those who have been marginalized by class, race, ability, or other factors (Roorda, 2011). Students who come from more affluent connected families often have relationships with school staff and school system leadership that provide them with privilege and opportunities not afforded to marginalized students (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Gay, 2009; Scales et al., 2020; Legette et al., 2020).

Scholarship has also shown that teachers lose out when relationships are strained. A study conducted by Spilt et al. (2011) revealed that broken or absent relationships between teachers and students have a negative effect on teachers' professional and personal well-being. There is a multitude of research that supports the positive effects of strong TSRs that are rich in "ethic of care" principles and practices (Noddings, 1992; Lumpkin, 2007; Owens & Ennis, 2005; Rabin, 2013; Rabin & Smith, 2016), including culturally responsive pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 2006) and awareness of implicit biases toward students and families (Mason et al., 2017; Post et al., 2020; Silva-Laya et al., 2019; Wright et al., 2022). It is critical that this scholarship is

emphasized as the history and role of student-teacher relationships in the classroom is considered. How was an educational system created without deep consideration for relationship-development between teachers and students?

Causal Analysis

After a problem is identified, it is important to explore its causes. To identify the aim of the improvement intervention, the design team conducted a root cause analysis, which is an analysis that helps scaffold the thinking of the team to determine why a problem exists (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020). After an exploration of the research, the design team agreed on the problem at hand: broken or absent relationships reduce a student's sense of belongingness and thus their learning engagement and academic performance (Roorda et al., 2011; Mason et al., 2017; Scales et al., 2020; Pham et al., 2021).

The team used either an Ishikawa or fishbone diagram to facilitate their root cause analysis process. The fishbone diagram was developed by Karu Ishikawa in 1986. The design team utilized this figure to guide our thinking and analysis as well as to visually represent the primary and secondary factors contributing to our problem of practice (Bryk et al., 2017; Langley et al., 2009). Figure 1 represents the causal analysis conducted by the design team.

Figure 1

Fishbone Diagram
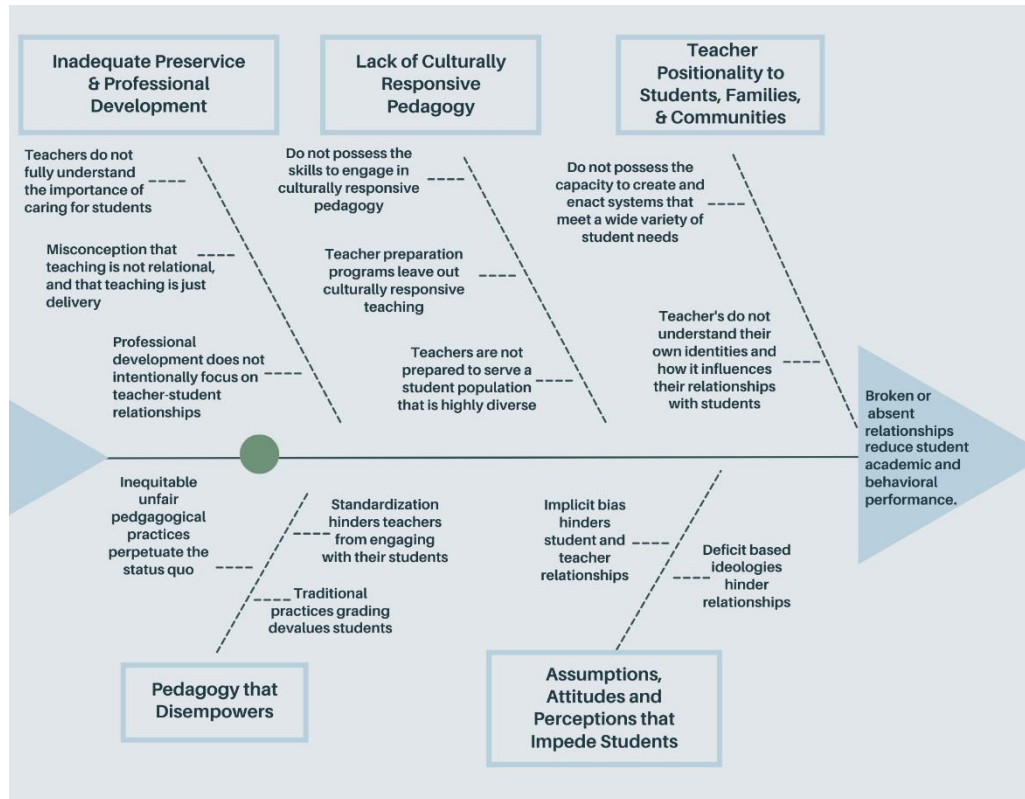
Note. The figure above is a fishbone diagram also known as an Ishikawa diagram. The diagram is used as a visual aid to perform a root cause analysis.

The head of the skeletal structure contains the problem: broken or absent relationships reduce student academic and behavioral performance. Each bone behind (to the left of) the head represents a potential cause of broken or absent teacher-student relationships. At a glance, it appears that the primary source of the problem lies with teachers. Let it be clear that we do not blame teachers for the lack of strong TSRs. Rather, we locate the cause of the problem within the systems that prepare and develop teachers. We suggest that many of the systems (and the leaders within those systems) preparing and developing teachers to work with students (e.g., teacher preparation programs, state standards/evaluation systems, professional development systems, state policies) have not emphasized the importance of strong TSRs or created the conditions necessary to cultivate them (Gay, 2000; Goldstein & Freedman, 2003; Kim & Shallert, 2011; Sleeter, 2001). When performing the causal analysis, we identified five potential contributing factors or causes: a) some educator preparation programs and professional development efforts do not place enough intentional emphasis on the importance of relationship building (Hallam et al., 2003; Rabin, 2013; Wright et al., 2019); b) some teachers do not recognize, or are not encouraged to acknowledge, the exclusion of non-white students in curriculum/do not include culturally relevant instruction (Lambeth & Smith, 2016); c) some teachers are not aware of their own positionality,[1] which can negatively impact relationships with students (Kim, 2013; Wright et al., 2019); d) some teachers do not consider the ways in which their pedagogy can disempower and discourage the learner, which adversely affects relationships (Rabin, 2013); and e) some teachers hold beliefs that marginalize, disadvantage, and disempower students.

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[1] [1] Positionality is described as "gender, race, class, and other aspects of our identities are markers of relational positions rather than essential qualities" (Maher & Tetreault, 1994 p. 118). "This definition encapsulates the fluid and complex nature of identity, and suggests that it can be formed, shaped, refined, and reshaped through our interactions with others" (Holmes et al., 2020, p. 4)

Inadequate Preservice & Professional Development

In the United States, educator preparation and professional development is often guided by content-focused standards (e.g., reading, math, and science) that deprioritize relationship-building and obscuring a preservice teacher's awareness of the critical need to establish caring relationships with students as a condition for their success. This is especially true for their awareness of relationships with students whose identities differ from their own (Rabin, 2013). The literature reports that teachers identify as caring and that "caring" is often their main reason for entering the teaching profession; however, they do not fully understand the importance of care (Goldstein, 1999). It is often assumed that the ability to care is innate—that it cannot be nurtured or taught (Owens & Ennis, 2005). Owens and Ennis (2005) explain that many teacher-education programs and professional development programs often fail to address the ethic of care (Noddings, 1992) and how it impacts the educational journey of teachers and students (Blad, 2017). Although this trend is changing for the positive, we are just beginning to understand what "caring" in classrooms looks like and how to include multiple cultural perspectives in that understanding.

Furthermore, preservice teachers are greatly influenced by the relationships they have experienced with their teacher educators, mentors, and others who were part of their teacher education journey (Kim & Schallert, 2011). Goldstein and Freedman (2003) found a connection between preservice relationships and relationships with students. If a preservice teacher does not build strong relationships with those who supervise and instruct them during their courses, then those individuals may not build strong relationships with the students in their classroom (Goldstein & Freedman, 2003).

Lack of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

Some teachers do not possess the knowledge or skills necessary to engage in culturally responsive pedagogy (Chang & Viesca, 2022). Culturally responsive pedagogy is defined by Geneva Gay as

> the behavioral expressions of knowledge, beliefs, and values that recognize the importance of racial and cultural diversity in learning. It is contingent on…seeing cultural differences as assets: creating caring learning communities where culturally different individuals and heritages are valued; using cultural knowledge of ethnically diverse cultures, families, and communities to guide curriculum development, classroom climates, instructional strategies, and relationships with students; challenging racial and cultural stereotypes, prejudices, racism, and other forms of intolerance, injustice, and oppression; being change agents for social justice and academic equity; mediating power imbalances in class rooms based on race, culture, ethnicity, and class; and accepting cultural responsiveness as endemic to educational effectiveness in all areas of learning for students from all ethnic groups. (p. 31)

Despite the diversity of identities across the US and within its communities, schools reflect White, European, and middle-class viewpoints, values, and ways of being (Kayser et al., 2021; Sleeter, 2016; Gay, 2013). The dominant culture is so deeply engrained in the structures, ethos, programs, and etiquette within our schools that it is simply seen as "the norm" or the right way to do things (Gay, 2000). In the context of our history, race is characterized as one of the most powerful, pervasive, and problematic manifestations of human differences, and some educators too often dismiss or neutralize its significance and the impact it has on the learning community within and across our classrooms (Gay, 2013).

It is also important to note that some teacher preparation programs have committed to a social justice orientation and prepare teachers to be culturally responsive (Sleeter, 2016). However, the majority of teacher preparation programs continue to prepare mostly White teachers (64% across institutions), even though White students make up less than half of those being served in K-12 schools (United States Department of Education, 2022; see Figure 2). Furthermore, a report from the National Center for Education Statistics (2020) shows that the teaching workforce consisted of 79% White teachers (see Figure 3). The racial, ethnic, and cultural differences between teachers and their students can potentially interfere with academics and social outcomes while creating barriers between the school and students and families (Kayser et al., 2016; Banks, 2013; Caspe et al., 2011; Coleman-King et al., 2021).

Figure 2

Percentage of Distribution of Race/Ethnicity Among Teacher Preparation Program Completers and the K-12 Student Population:

2018–2019 (US Department of Education, 2022)
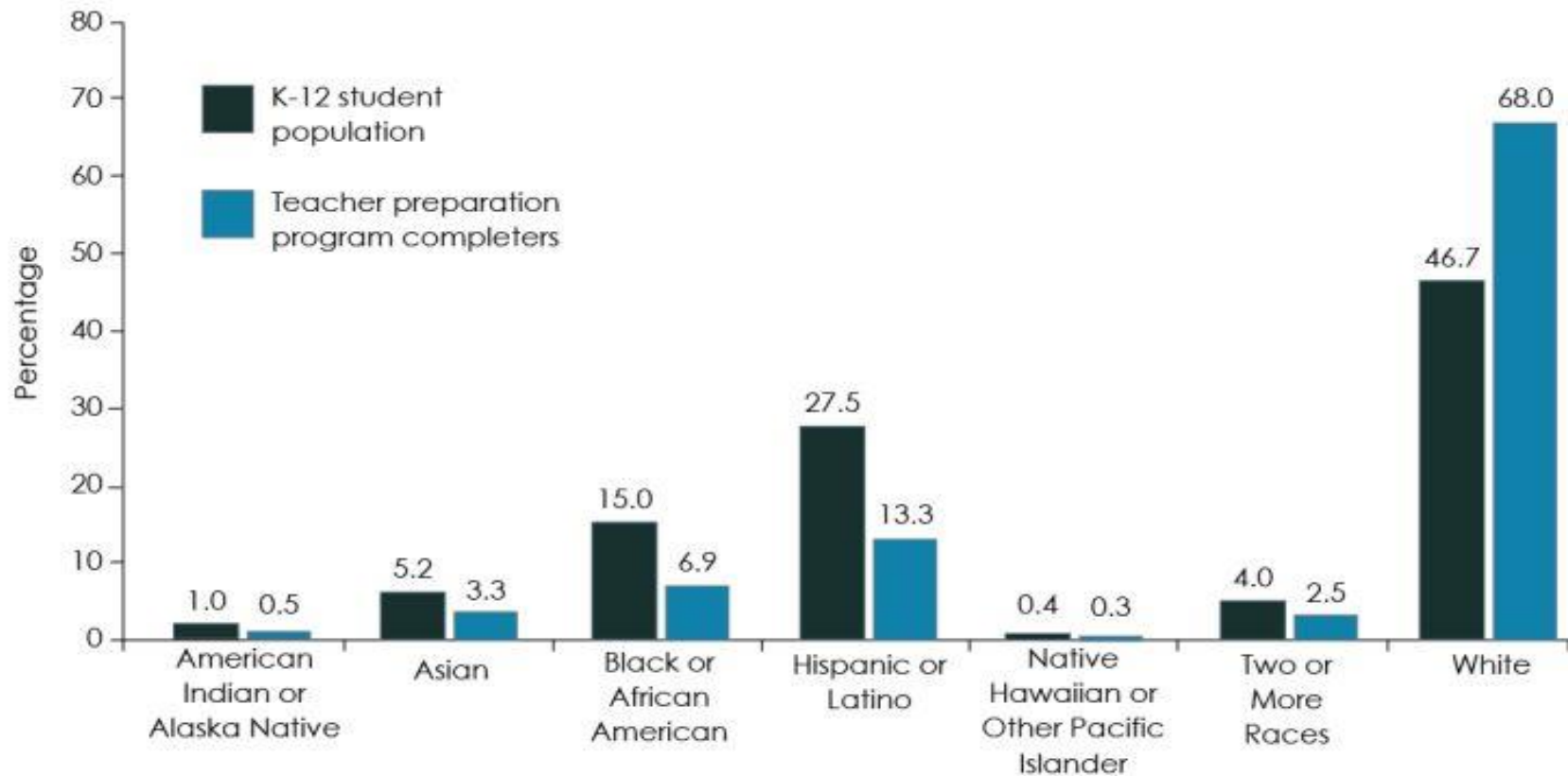
Note. In a report produced by the United States Department of Education Office of Postsecondary Education (2022), the figure above describes the percentage of distribution of race/ethnicity among preservice teaching program completers in the United States compared to the race/ethnicity of the K-12 student population in the United States.

Figure 3

Percentage of distribution of teachers by race/ethnicity and the race/ethnicity of students at their school: 2017–2018 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020)

Percent

Legend:
- White, non-Hispanic
- Black or African American, non-Hispanic
- Hispanic, regardless of race[1]
- Asian, non-Hispanic
- Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, non-Hispanic
- American Indian/Alaska Native, non-Hispanic
- Two or more races, non-Hispanic

Student body racial/ethnic composition
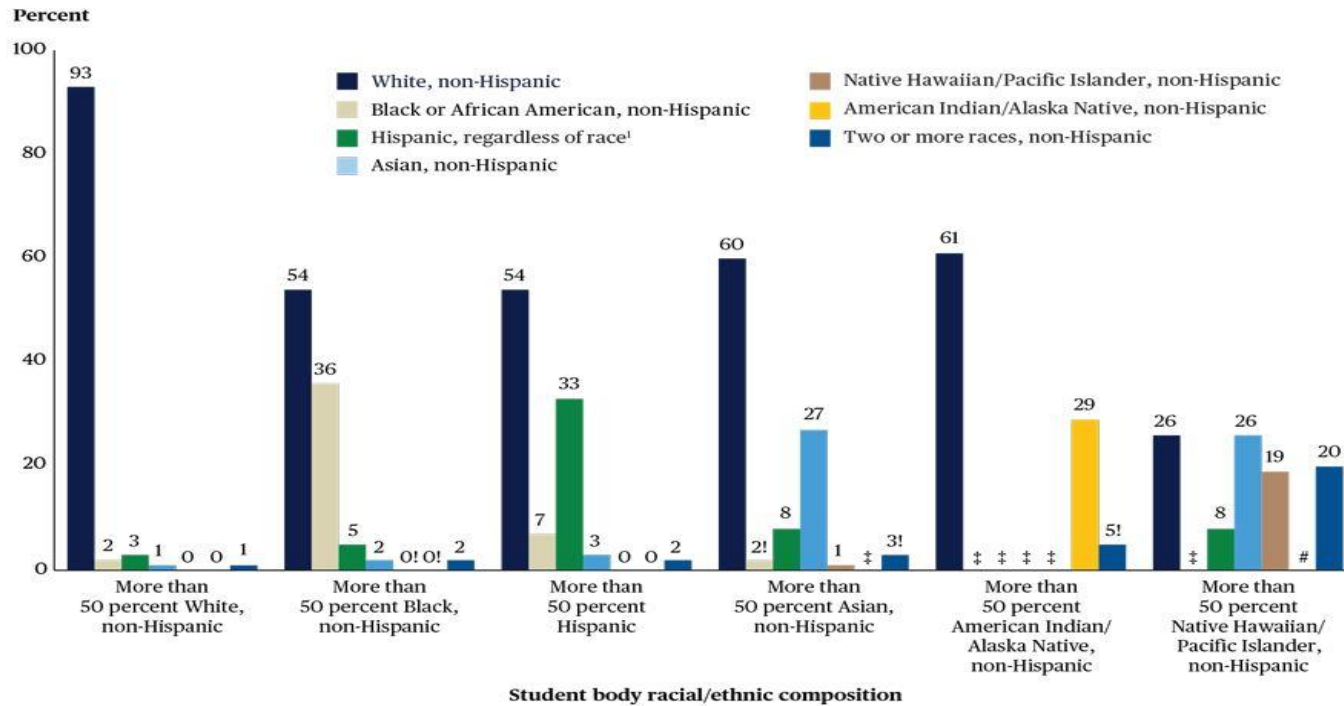
Pedagogy that Disempowers

Some teachers utilize pedagogical practices that treat students unfairly, thus disrupting relationships (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018). Students who feel they have been treated unfairly, excluded, or not supported are likely to harbor negative feelings toward their teachers. For example, in most public schools, there is a push toward standardization that discourages teachers from engaging with students' individual interests (Rabin, 2013). Standardized testing is also discouraged in favor of competitive and individualistic dispositions (Rabin, 2013). Likewise, traditional grading practices have restricted educators from developing more humanizing and valid practices to evaluate student progress (Mahmood & Jacabo, 2019). For example, teachers might give extra credit points to students who attend outside events, such as art performances. Students from families with limited means may not have access to costly art performances and are subsequently denied the opportunity to earn points and raise their grades.

Gay (2002) speaks to the concept of pedagogy as one that cannot be separated from student-teacher relationships: both are intertwined. Teachers must have a knowledge base regarding the cultures and backgrounds of all students in their classrooms, including cultural values and traditions, communication styles, learning modalities, prior learning experience contributions, and relational patterns. This knowledge must inform their curricular and pedagogical choices.

Teacher Positionality to Students, Families, and Communities

The capacity of teachers to create and enact systems that meet the needs of a wide range of students across multiple and intersecting identities has not been built (Post et al., 2020, Chen & Phillips, 2018). *School Leadership and Racism: An Ecological Perspective (2018)* states that the capacity to understand multiple and intersecting identities of students begins with a deep

understanding of self. Teachers do not always have a clear understanding of their own identities and positionality or of how these factors influence their relationships with students. Research shows that teachers who are White, English speaking, female, and middle class disproportionately outnumber teachers of color even in schools with mostly Black and Brown students (Lambeth & Smith, 2016; Valencia, 2010). This is a problem because many of the White teachers are teaching from a singular viewpoint—one that recognizes their own cultural values but not the cultures of the communities in which they serve. It is important to recognize how our own identities and positionality influence the relationships and academic outcomes of our students.

While it is essential that teachers understand the background of their students, it is dually important that they understand their own identity and positionality (Roorda et al., 2011, Mason et al., 2017, Scales et al., 2020). In the United States, the demographic profile of a teacher or preservice teacher candidate reflects that of a White, European American, middle-class, monolingual female who has little sustained or substantive experience with people of color (Gay & Kirkland, 2010; Sleeter, 2017; Billingsley et al., 2019). Additionally, many teachers practicing within these regions do not share the same residential backgrounds as their students, let alone the same demographic backgrounds (Gay & Howard, 2000; Gay & Kirkland, 2010). Finally, Ladson-Billings (2006) shares an instance with a group of her White, middle-class, monolingual preservice teaching students, where they describe themselves as "regular, normal, [and] having no culture." Ladson-Billings challenged their characterization, asserting that these teaching students perceived others as "abnormal or irregular." This brings to light the reality that many individuals in society do not recognize themselves as cultural beings. Far too many teachers believe they are without culture because they resemble and participate in the dominant culture.

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Accordingly, they do not see value in recognizing culture despite the positive impact it can have on all students in their classrooms (Ladson-Billings, 2006).

How teachers think about their students is a central concern in successful teaching. Often, teachers have a romanticized view of teaching and students. When they are presented with the diverse and unfamiliar reality, views of students can turn negative (Ladson-Billings, 2006).

Assumptions, Perceptions, and Attitudes that Impede Students

Implicit bias is a predictor of student academic outcomes (Inan-Kaya & Rubies-Davies, 2021). When teachers hold differing expectations for particular groups of students, the way in which the teacher engages, supports, and teaches those students varies (Peterson et al., 2016). In the educational environment, implicit bias is characterized by unconscious stereotyping, interacting differently with students who represent marginalized groups, and having lower expectations for students who are not representative of the dominant group (Inan-Kaya & Rubies-Davies, 2021). Research has shown that teachers who hold low expectations for students based on implicit bias spend less time responding to student questions, make less eye contact with those students, and show reduced warmth and friendliness toward students during interpersonal interactions (Peterson et al., 2016).

Deficit ideology refers to assumptions and dispositions that reach beyond the individual (Gorski, 2011). This ideology is an oppressive worldview and ideology woven into educational institutions across the United States. It encourages compliance through oppressive educational experiences and a social order based on cultural assimilation (Valencia, 2010; Gorski, 2011) and has become further engrained through the professional development strategies of Ruby Payne and her book, *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*. Payne's book provides "hidden rules"

amongst "social classes" that she feels explain how each "social class" places certain values on education (Payne, 2005). This is an example of the most catastrophic form of deficit ideology, wherein teachers mistake differences for deficits (Gorski, 2018). This results in "victim blaming" and does not consider the structures within our schools that prevent poor students and students of color from accessing education (Valencia, 2010). Victim blaming leads to discounting the motivation of students and their families' support in their educational journeys (Valencia, 2010; Gorski, 2011; Gorski, 2018). When educational institutions uphold these beliefs, the way they engage students of color and students of low socioeconomic status and their families creates tension between the school, the student, and the home (Valencia, 2010; Gorski, 2011; Gorski, 2018). In return, this impedes students of color and culturally diverse backgrounds and those of low socioeconomic status from accessing education in the same ways as their majority white middle-class peers (Valencia, 2010; Gorski, 2011; Gorski, 2018).

A student's learning is dependent on the academic experience provided by their teacher, and when teachers hold unknown discriminatory views toward students, the achievement gap is exacerbated (Rubies-Davies, 2015). This, in return, leaves students vulnerable to stereotype threats. Stereotype threats (Steele, 2006; Anderson & Martin, 2018; Coleman-King et al., 2021) can be described as an emotional tax that is imposed upon students from marginalized backgrounds who come into our schools with knowledge of the stereotypical labels imposed upon them by their White peers and White educators (Aronson et al., 2002; Anderson & Martin, 2018; Coleman-King et al., 2021). In addition to the application of a stereotypical gaze from others, students of color (for example) may be fully capable of learning at high levels but have internalized well-known stereotypes that suggest they are not competent learners as compared to

their White peers. A lack of self-efficacy for learning can negatively impact their school performance (Steele, 2006; Coleman-King et al., 2021).

Research shows that negative stereotypes play a significant role in the underperformance of students who do not represent the White norm (Aronson et al., 2002; Anderson & Martin, 2018).

Theoretical Frameworks

This disquisition has been informed by critical race theory and critical whiteness studies; both are described below, including their relationship to this work.

Critical Race Theory

CRT posits that race is a social construct that has been normalized and that any advances for people of color must serve the interests of White (dominant) people (Delgado & Stefanic, 2017). Amid the current political controversy around critical race theory, and leaning into its originating scholars (Derrick Bell, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, Patricia Williams, Cheryl Harris, Richard Delgado, and Mari Matsuda), Gloria-Ladson Billings (2021) emphasized that "Race has been a constitutive element, an organizational principle, a 'praxis' and structure that has constructed and reconstructed world society since the emergence of modernity" (p.1).

One of the systems within society that is influenced by race is the education system. In education, CRT helps educators confront racial inequities in both policy and practice. Examples include incorporating and providing valid stories of people of color, overcoming the concept of *colorblindness*, and working to eliminate interest convergence as a motivation for change (Lazar et al., 2012).

Racism within K-12 education is sustained in various ways, beginning with curriculum. In our schools, the educational experiences and curriculum predominantly reflect the experiences of the white upper-class male (Swartz 1992; Taylor, Gillborn, Ladson-Billings, 2023). Ladson-Billings (2023) uses the example of how, in the K-12 curriculum, Rosa Parks is portrayed as a tired seamstress, which reduces her work as a social justice activist who confronted segregationist ideology. Likewise, Martin Luther King is represented as a folk hero instead of an accomplished scholar and activist whose vision of social justice was extended beyond the United

States. This is known as the danger of a single story (Muhammad, 2020). Furthermore, it is important to consider access to gifted and talented courses, which typically exclude racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse students. This exclusion occurs because such courses uphold the idea that difference from the majority equates to the racist narrative of deficiency (Ferrell & Black, 2019).

CRT is also meant to dismantle the inequitable structures that surround some of the pedagogical and instructional methods used within the classroom. In education, some teachers utilize teaching methods that they consider to be race neutral; however, these methods end up reflecting a deficit-based perspective of racially, culturally, linguistically, and socio-economically diverse students (Valencia, 2010; Gorski, 2011; Gorski, 2018; Taylor, Gillborn, Ladson-Billings, 2023). CRT ask that teachers confront race in education and understand its saliency in the success of students from diverse backgrounds (Ladson-Billings, 2001; Lazar et al., 2012; Gay, 2018; Love, 2019; Muhammad, 2020; Taylor, Gillborn, Ladson-Billings, 2023). It also calls for the use of teaching methods that incorporate the narratives and culture of culturally diverse students, view students through an asset-based lens, utilize culturally responsive teaching practices, and prioritizing and maintaining teacher-student relationships (Ladson-Billings, 2001;Lazar et al., 2012; Gay, 2018; Cook et al., 2018; Love, 2019; Muhammad, 2020; Taylor, Gillborn, Ladson-Billings, 2023).

CRT in K-12 education also seeks to dispel traditional assessment methods and high-stakes testing that remains part of federal and state policy. Throughout history, intelligence testing has been utilized as a method of subordination, exploiting poor White and Black individuals to uphold the status quo (Ladson-Billings, 2023). The K-12 system also continues to overly rely on the results from high-stakes testing to measure student performance (Muhammad,

2020). Standardized test scores and grades do not explain student underperformance and are simply a symptom of a broken system rather than a cause or solution (Gay, 2018). Nonetheless, most of these performance measures determine outcomes and access to education and professional opportunities in adulthood (Muhammad, 2020).

Critical Whiteness Studies

It is also necessary to acknowledge the concept of critical Whiteness from historical and present racism engrained in educational policy and practices (Matias and Mackey, 2016; Sleeter, 2005; Solomona et al, 2001). This theory is based upon the work of researchers from various disciplines and seeks to investigate the phenomenon of whiteness. Specifically, it considers how whiteness is used, transmitted, and maintained as well as how it impacts relationships between races (Matias & Mackey, 2016). Giroux (1997) reiterates the works of bell hooks, asserting that in research White people are willing to analyze how they are perceived by Black people but do not examine how whiteness is a social mechanism that has been used to mask, produce, maintain, and regulate power. Teachers who are White, middle-class, and have little understanding of their own culture (and its relation to others) rarely involve themselves in critical self-reflection about their own positionality, which can result in culturally relevant lens being limited or rejected. This practice tends to negatively impact students of color (Thorsteinson, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2001). Being White is not merely about biology; it is about a system of power and privilege. In our society, people with ethnic and cultural identities outside of the dominant group find themselves choosing whiteness over their own personal identities because the rejection of whiteness comes with a cost (Ladson-Billings, 2001)**.**

<center>**Local Context**</center>

I conducted this improvement work across two rural schools in Western North Carolina: Happy Days Middle School and Wonder Years Elementary School (both names are pseudonyms used to maintain confidentiality). Below, each context is discussed separately and includes a description of the community, basic demographics, and presentation of the data related to the problem.

Happy Days Middle

Happy Days Middle is Title I and federally funded due to low-wealth demographics. It serves students from sixth through eighth grades and has a 71% free and reduced lunch rate. The school maintains a relatively diverse student body with a White population of 68%. Other represented racial and ethnic groups are Black (14%), multi-racial (9%), and Latinx (9%).

Wonder Years Elementary

Wonder Years Elementary is also located in Western North Carolina. It is also identified as a Title I school and receives federal funding for economically disadvantaged students. The school has a free and reduced lunch rate of 73.3%. Wonder Years Elementary has a population of 51% White, 36% Latinx, and 4% Black students.

<center>**Theory of Improvement**</center>

I posited the following theory of improvement to guide the implementation and evaluation of the team's improvement work: research-informed professional learning for teachers in the areas of culturally relevant pedagogy (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2001), implicit bias, and the establish-maintain-restore method (Cook et al., 2018) will build teacher capacity and efficacy in the area of relationship-building. Although it is too early to analyze the student

outcome data, I hope that this increase in teacher capacity and efficacy will result in students'

increased sense of belonginess and engagement with learning, which is the ultimate aim.

AN IMPROVEMENT INITIATIVE TO BUILD STRONGER TEACHER-STUDENT

RELATIONSHIPS

In this section, I detail the improvement initiative to build stronger teacher-student relationships including a) a description of the design team, b) drivers for change, c) research supporting the improvement work, d) outcome goals, e) a description of the professional learning modules, and f) the implementation plan with a timeline.

Design Teams

A design team is utilized to address improvement within the system. Such a team consists of key stakeholders within the organization that will develop and guide the improvement initiative. A design team is necessary in this user-centered method of evaluation, and in complex organizations it needs to represent various parts of the organization (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020). Therefore, the design team must be composed of those who are closest to the problem as well as those who can see it from a broader perspective (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020). A design team was established during the summer of 2022. In the improvement project, this team is representative of stakeholders within the organizations that are closest to the problem and those who have a bird's eye view of the problem (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020). The design team was composed of a Student Services Director, the principal at Wonder Years Elementary, a third and fourth grade teacher from Wonder Years, a sixth grade teacher from Happy Days Middle School, and the social worker from Happy Days Middle. These individuals were chosen to serve based on their knowledge of the school and districts, their expertise as professional educators, and their willingness to lead and bring about change within their organization.

Drivers for Change

In this section, I provide the design team's driver diagram, which reflects our theory of improvement. A driver diagram is a tool that represents the design team's working theory of practice. It is a source extending from causal systems analysis that allows the improvement team to use a common language and coordinate efforts related to the shared improvement initiative (Carnegie Foundation, 2022).

The driver diagram addresses primary and secondary drivers related to the goals the design team sought to achieve. The figure also shows the change ideas that support the improvement initiative. The driver diagram extends thinking from the fishbone diagram/causal analysis. In the fishbone diagram, we determined three potential causes to address. Each impeded teachers from using culturally responsive pedagogy and cultivating caring relationships with their students. The focus of this improvement initiative is on professional learning and building teacher efficacy to cultivate strong caring relationships with students.

The driver diagram is presented as Figure 4. It begins with the aim, which was to increase the use of culturally responsive pedagogy and proactive relationship-building strategies. Next, we identified the primary driver, which is the central focus of the improvement initiative to address the aim. The primary driver is addressing teacher efficacy to understand and enact caring relationships with students. Moving to the left in the diagram, we identified the secondary drivers. The secondary drivers are the necessary improvements and directly relate to improving the primary driver. We determined that we need to increase teacher capacity to understand and enact caring pedagogical practices and culturally relevant pedagogy as well as teacher identity and the impact it has on implicit bias. Finally, we included the change ideas, which are the ways in which we will enact change upon the primary and secondary drivers.

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Figure 4

Driver Diagram
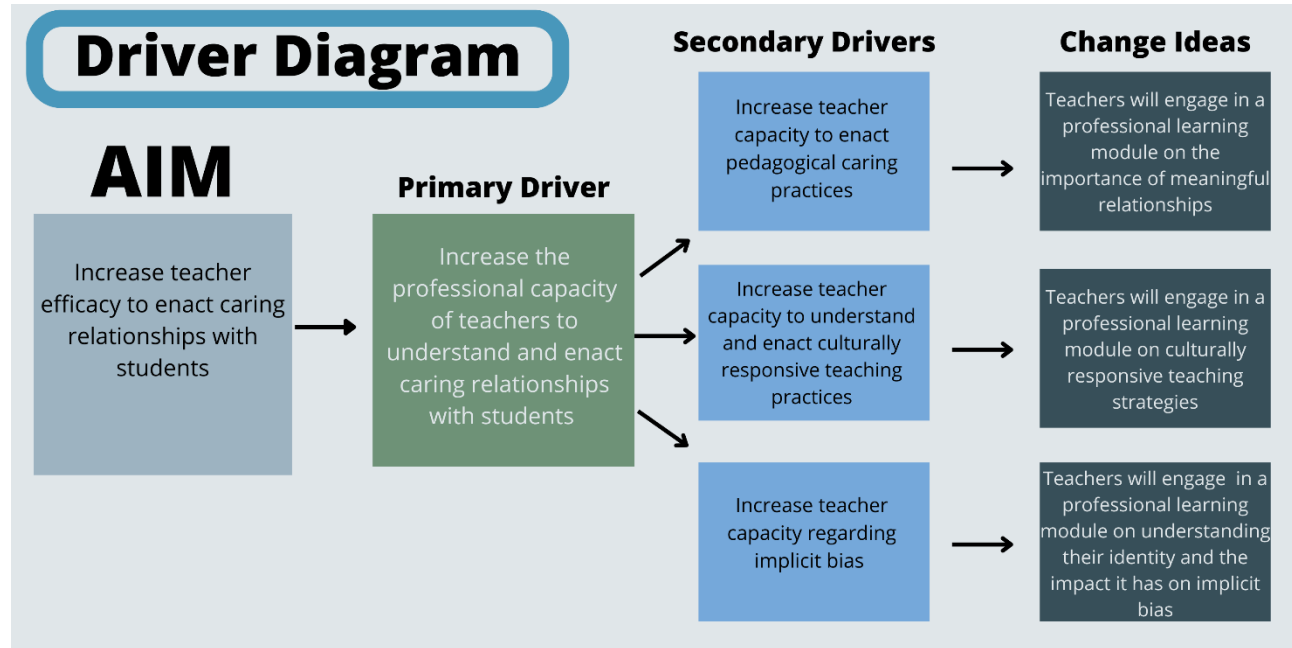
Note. The figure above is the Driver Diagram described in the *Drivers for Change* section.

Research Supporting the Improvement Work

In the following section, I share some scholarship that supports the primary components of my improvement initiative. Four strands are provided: a) research-supported professional learning, b) the influence of strong TSRs on student belongingness, c) the influence of strong TSRs on student learning and engagement, and d) culturally responsive teaching practices.

Professional Learning

I utilized elements from Learning Forward's *Standards for Professional Learning* (Learning Forward, 2022) to design professional learning modules that were used to facilitate learning discussions during professional learning community (PLC) meetings. *Standards for Professional Learning* was developed through years of research conducted by Learning Forward:

> The evolution of evidence and insights about educator and student learning requires periodic updates to Standards for Professional Learning. Learning Forward has over time sustained a revision process that leads to this fourth iteration of standards in 2022. In 1994, the National Staff Development Council (which became Learning Forward in 2010) recognized the need to lead the field in setting research-based guideposts that established a common understanding of high-quality professional learning. (Learning Forward, 2022)

The Learning Forward framework is composed of three categories: rigorous content for each learner, transformational processes, and conditions for success. Within the framework, there are 11 standards that outline a system for creating high-quality professional learning. I utilized elements from this framework to build professional learning modules for teachers. Equity is a driver for the framework (Learning Forward, 2022), and all standards within this framework are linked to equity and ensuring that equitable outcomes for students are at the forefront of

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professional learning. Therefore, I felt that this was the most effective way to design professional learning opportunities for the participants. When teachers understand equitable methods and differing aspects of their students through professional learning, they can embrace and build relationships with their students, families, and communities (Learning Forward, 2022). Furthermore, when teachers engage in the transformational process of prioritizing equity during professional learning, specifically by addressing their own biases and beliefs and collaborating with colleagues, there are more equitable outcomes for students (Learning Forward, 2022). Finally, when teachers engage in the standards related to "Conditions for Success," teachers work together to ensure that expectations regarding equity are established, and they create structures that ensure equitable access to learning for all staff (Learning Forward, 2022). They also build a culture of collaborative inquiry where they engage in continuous improvement, build collaborative skills, and share the responsibility for student learning (Learning Forward, 2022). In this category, teachers also establish an inclusive vision for professional learning and understand the importance of evidence-based professional learning experiences (Learning Forward, 2022).

While the Learning Forward framework creates conditions for the equitable outcomes of students, research has also found that professional learning, when conducted in a collaborative environment, is highly effective and powerful in building teacher capacity (Ronfeldt et al., 2015; Goodard et al., 2007). Scholarship has also confirmed that traditional collaborative learning is more powerful when an inquiry-based approach is combined with individual and collective learning (Timperly et al., 2014; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). Therefore, when designing the professional learning modules and PLC opportunities, I ensured that I chose module content that would evoke curiosity and create an opportunity for that curiosity to be discussed.

Strong TSRs Create Belongingness

Students who feel they belong are more likely to demonstrate not only higher levels of engagement but also academic growth and achievement (Legette et al., 2020). Belongingness refers to a perception of acceptance, appreciation, and understanding by others (Riley & White, 2016). The literature shows a connection between positive TSRs and students' perceptions regarding their ability to fit into the context of their classroom and school (Legette et al., 2020, Scales et al., 2019). A student's sense of belonging can also be connected to their level of engagement, academic achievement, and motivation (Scales et al., 2019).

The literature describes the concept of learner-centered education and suggests that such education facilitates a sense of belonging (Lumpkin, 2007). Learner-centered education places the learner at the center of their education through shared decision making, supporting students to make meaning for themselves, facilitating responsibility taking, and promoting self-awareness and self-monitoring (Lumpkin, 2007). According to the literature, caring teachers facilitate a sense of belonging in their classrooms using learner-centered education that creates a reciprocal dynamic (Lumpkin, 2007; Owens & Ennis, 2005).

Strong TSRs Improve Student Engagement in Learning

Engagement is multidimensional and encapsulates behavioral engagement, emotional engagement, and cognitive engagement (Quin, 2017; Roorda, 2011). Students who feel a sense of closeness with their teacher are more likely to demonstrate positive behavioral engagement, including compliance with classroom rules and increased time on tasks. Students also demonstrate more emotional engagement when they have a positive teacher-student relationship. Furthermore, students recognize when they are valued, understood, and respected (Lumpkin, 2007). Finally, students who have a strong and positive relationship with their teacher

demonstrate more cognitive engagement. Students who demonstrate cognitive engagement have a more positive outlook regarding school and are more likely to be open to attempting more challenging tasks (Chong et al., 2018, Quin, 2016).

Literature surrounding TSRs also examines the influence that relationships have on the academic achievement of students (Rubie-Davies, 2010). TSRs that are characterized by closeness and warmth have a positive influence on academic achievement (Sabol, 2012). Strong positive TSRs are especially important for students of color, students with disabilities, and students of low socioeconomic status regarding their overall academic achievement in school (Legette, 2020). The literature notes that when such students experience poor relationships with teachers, they underperform academically and are placed on trajectories that label them "academically at-risk" (Split et al., 2012). Conversely, higher academic achievement in school is typically associated with more positive, strong, and close teacher-student relationships (Mason et al., 2017). According to the literature, teachers who nurture relationships with their students based on the ethic of care (Noddings, 1992) affirm a students' efforts and talents (Lumpkin, 2007).

Culturally Responsive Teaching Practices

Literature related to the use of culturally responsive teaching practices demonstrates that racially diverse students must see themselves as part of the school community and curriculum through the integration of their cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives if they are to be taught more effectively (Ladson-Billings, 2001; Gay, 2018). Scholarship also asserts that culturally responsive teaching practices (CRTP) allow students to maintain their cultural identities and connectedness to their ethnic communities, leading to increased student interest and engagement in learning (Ladson-Billings, 2001; Gay, 2018).

The literature regarding CRTP notes that a community is created within classrooms that authentically use CRTP. Community is produced when teachers weave expectations and skills together to create an environment where the class rises and falls together (Ladson-Billing, 2009; Gay, 2018). CRTP helps students acquire knowledge of self and others and develop the essence of humanity, which is when people know, respect, and relate to each other (Ladson-Billings, 2001; Gay, 2018, Muhammad, 2020). Academic success for all students becomes nonnegotiable and ensures that students are productive members of their communities (Ladson-Billings, 2001; Gay, 2018). It also instills in students the knowledge, power, and skills needed to challenge the social orders that oppress students from diverse backgrounds (Ladson-Billings, 2001; Gay, 2018).

Finally, the literature reiterates that care, love, and respect are at the heart of CRTP (Muhammad, 2020). Literature regarding CRTP encapsulates the ethic of care and what it means to be a caring teacher (Ladson-Billings, 2001; Gay, 2018). The scholarship of Geneva Gay (2018) and Gholdy Muhammad (2020) reiterates that care is a pillar of CRTP. When students experience teachers that care, students rise to the occasion and perform at high levels that reach beyond academic performance (Gay, 2018).

The Improvement Process

Outcome Goals

In the following section, I outline the outcome goals for this improvement process. These goals helped guide the improvement process.

- At the conclusion of the professional learning module on culturally responsive teaching strategies, 70% of teachers will describe two culturally responsive competencies and report how they plan to implement those strategies in their classroom.

- At the conclusion of the professional learning module on implicit bias, 70% of teachers will articulate how their racial and ethnic identity has played a role in accessing literature and curricula and how those experiences have shaped their educational view regarding racially and ethnically diverse students.

- At the conclusion of the professional learning module on the establish-maintain-restore method (Cook et al., 2018), teachers will successfully demonstrate an EMR strategy to help them evaluate and reflect on relationships with students.

At the conclusion of all professional learning modules, teachers will report the importance of intentionally creating strong TSRs.

Professional Learning Module I: Culturally Responsive Teaching

I built a professional learning module consisting of Chapter 2 from Geneva Gay's *Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory, Research, and Practice*. In this chapter, teachers read that culturally responsive teaching is validating, comprehensive, multidimensional, empowering, transformative, and emancipatory and that it personifies the classroom experience for students (Gay, 2000). During their study of this chapter, participants learned about the roles and responsibilities of the teacher, which are broken down into three categories: cultural organizers, cultural mediators, and orchestrators of a social context for learning.

Participants then read an article titled "Creating a Culturally Responsive Early Childhood Classroom" from the Edutopia database. This article furthered the participants understanding of Chapter 2 in Gay's book and served as a quick guide for teachers regarding culturally responsive teaching strategies. The teachers were given two weeks to read the chapter and the article. Subsequently, we met for a learning group (professional learning community), where participants participated in a guided discussion on their learning from the module content.

According to Learning Forward, professional learning that occurs in a learning community results in increased educator effectiveness and increased student performance.

Professional Learning Module II: Proactive Relationship-Building Strategies

I then engaged teachers in a professional learning module that included a presentation on an Nel Nodding's "The Caring Relation in Teaching." This material provided participants with an overview of care ethics as well as the foundational skills of listening, thinking, and creating a caring climate as well as a guideline on how to extending the caring climate beyond the classroom.

Following this, I convened a PLC. During the PLC, I provided opportunities to discuss new learning from the presentation and article. I then introduced teachers to the establish-maintain-restore method (EMRM), a research-based practice that has shown to have had a positive impact on teacher-student relationships by improving behavioral and academic outcomes for students (Cook et al., 2018). I focused on the relationship tracking tool of the EMRM (Cook et al., 2018). Finally, I had teachers complete the *Equity and Triage Reflection Tool* (Cook et al., 2018) on their own and share their results.

Professional Learning Module III: Implicit Bias, Positionality, and Identity

To address implicit bias, I created a professional learning module on positionality. Teachers read a chapter selected from *Bridging Literacy and Equity: The Essential Guide to Social Equity Teaching* by Lazar, Edwards, and McMillion. Teachers began this module by reading Chapter 7, "Transforming Teachers," which introduced the participants to confronting their own biases, reflecting on identity development, exploring how teacher identity influences pedagogy, and considering the way teachers view and respond to their students. The participants then read Chapter 3, "Toward the Pursuit of Identity," from *Cultivating Genius: An Equity*

Framework for Culturally and Historically Responsive Literacy by Gholdy Muhammad. From

this chapter, teachers introduced to the idea of confronting deficit-based ideology. Teachers then

learned about the importance of identity development in students and the significance of

unpacking their own history, identities, biases, assumptions, and tensions with racism

(Muhammad, 2020).

I continued using the Learning Forward framework in this module and followed the same

format of providing teachers with peer-reviewed articles and articles from reputable professional

sites. I also provided teachers with a set of reflection questions and specific activities from the

readings to focus on for use in the professional learning discussion. Finally, I followed up with

teachers by participating in a professional learning discussion.

Implementation Plan

The design team developed the following implementation plan (Table 1). This plan

allowed us to implement the improvement interventions in a timely manner and provided a

schedule for conducting intentional evaluation processes (PDSA cycles).

Table 1

Implementation Timeline

Date (2022)	Action Steps
October 5–6	Assemble professional learning community (PLC) members and establish norms. Administer first survey.
October 7–16	First professional learning module assignment. October 17 PLC meeting.
October 20	Conclude 1st PLC cycle. Meet with design team to evaluate PLC Feedback Survey 1.
October 24–31	Second professional learning module assignment. November 1st PLC meeting.
November 2	Conclude 2nd PLC cycle. Meet with design team to evaluate PLC Feedback Survey 1.
November 3–13	Third professional learning module. November 14 PLC meeting.
November 28	Culminating focus group meeting.

It is important to measure the success of improvement in formative and summative ways. In this section, I discuss the measures used and results gathered for both formative evaluation (assessment during the improvement process) and summative evaluation (assessment after the improvement process or major stages of the improvement process). I employed both qualitative (focus groups) and quantitative measures (surveys) which are described below. Subsections include a) my positionality; b) participants; c) formative evaluation measures, results, and findings; and d) summative evaluation measures, results, and findings.

My Positionality

As a scholar practitioner invested in this work, it is important to note my positionality in relation to the context. Building strong relationships with all students has served as a foundation for my work as a School Counselor. In addition, I reflect most educators serving students in K-12 education. I am White, middle-class, and cisgender. It is important that in this work, I acknowledge that I have experienced privileges related to my race and class. It is also imperative to note that, in relation to becoming more critically conscious of the role I play in the success of students, I have participated in capacity building related to critical race theory, implicit bias, culturally responsive teaching practices, and discovery of identity and positionality. I feel that to better serve students it is important to engage in reflection on how to incorporate these practices within the educational setting. Furthermore, I have leaned into the scholarship of Black scholars (Ladson-Billings, Gay, Muhammad) to further my learning and deepen my understanding of the inequities face by racially diverse students and pedagogical practices that cultivate strong teacher-student relationships. As a scholar practitioner, it is also important to work with fellow

educators to increase their understanding of these practices and how they can work toward better serving racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse students.

Participants

With a co-facilitator, participants were selected using a purposeful sampling method. Participants were teachers with whom facilitators had established relationships. I also solicited volunteers to participate in my research through a school-wide presentation where I provided a brief description of the improvement work and process. I then requested that those who wanted to participate turn in their informed consent. It is important to note that present demands (conflicting responsibilities) in education made it difficult for a number of the participants to attend some of the PLC sessions. Therefore, a description of participants for each PLC session and the final focus group follows.

PLC Session 1 Participant Details

PLC session one included four teacher-participants from Wonder Years Elementary and eight teacher-participants from Happy Days Middle School. The teacher-participants from Wonder Years Elementary were all White and female. One of the teacher-participants taught pre-Kindergarten, two of the teacher-participants taught fifth grade, and one taught Kindergarten. Furthermore, two of teacher-participants were in their fifth year as a classroom teacher, one of the teacher-participants was in her 16th year as a classroom teacher, and one of the teacher-participants was in their 18th year as a classroom teacher. The teacher-participants from Happy Days Middle reflected the following profile: six White female teacher-participants, one Black female teacher-participant, and one male teacher-participant. The teacher-participants from Happy Days Middle included seventh grade teachers, eighth grade teachers, choral director, AIG specialist, school social worker, school counselor, and assistant principal. The years of teaching

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experience for all teacher-participants from Happy Days Middle ranged from 9–35 years working in education.

PLC Session 2 Participant Details

PLC session two included two teacher-participants from Wonder Years Elementary, and both teachers were White and female. One teacher is a Kindergarten teacher with five years of classroom teaching experience, and one teacher is a fifth grade teacher with five years of classroom teaching experience. The teacher-participants from Happy Days Middle School included one White male teacher and four White female teachers. The teacher-participants from Happy Days Middle included an eighth grade teacher, choral director, school social worker, school counselor, and assistant principal. The years of teaching experience ranged from 9–30 years.

PLC Session 3 Participant Details

PLC session three included two teacher-participants from Wonder Years Elementary, and both teachers were White and female. One teacher is a Kindergarten teacher with five years of classroom teaching experience, and one teacher is a fifth grade teacher with five years of classroom teaching experience. The teacher-participants from Happy Days Middle School included one White male teacher and three White female teachers. The teacher-participants from Happy Days Middle represented the following academic areas: eighth grade teacher, AIG specialist, school counselor, and assistant principal. The years of teaching experience ranged from 9–30 years of experience.

Focus Group Participants

The focus group session included two teacher-participants from Wonder Years Elementary, and both teachers were White and female. One is a Kindergarten teacher with five

years of classroom teaching experience, and one is a fifth grade teacher with five years of classroom teaching experience. The teacher-participants from Happy Days Middle School reflected the following profile: one White male teacher-participant, two White female teacher-participants, and one Black female teacher-participant. The teacher-participants from Happy Days middle represented the following academic areas: eight grade teacher, seventh grade teacher, school counselor, and assistant principal. The years of teaching experience ranged from 9–35 years.

Formative Evaluation Measures, Results, and Findings

Effective improvement requires ongoing evaluation, and evaluation ensures data-informed decision-making throughout the improvement process. I engaged in the principles and processes of improvement science, which is a user-centered evaluative methodology based on the premise of continuous improvement. Improvement science uses short cycles known as plan, do, study, act (PDSA) to evaluate change, guide revisions, and further the development of the improvement initiative (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020; Bryk et al., 2015; Langley et al., 2009). Langley et al. (2009) provide a model for the improvement process known as the model for improvement. It includes three key questions to guide improvement efforts within the PDSA cycle: a) "What are we trying to accomplish? b) "How will we know that change is an improvement?" and c) "What change can we make that will result in improvement?". The PDSA cycle used for the improvement work is depicted in Figure 5.

Figure 5

Plan, Do, Study, Act Cycle Diagram

Threshold for Change-
Design Team Makes
Changes if Met

PD Module Content & PLC
Discussion Guidelines
Developed

Act

Plan

PDSA
Cycle

Study

Do

Design Team Evaluates
PLC Feedback Surveys

Participants Read
Content & Engage in
PLCs
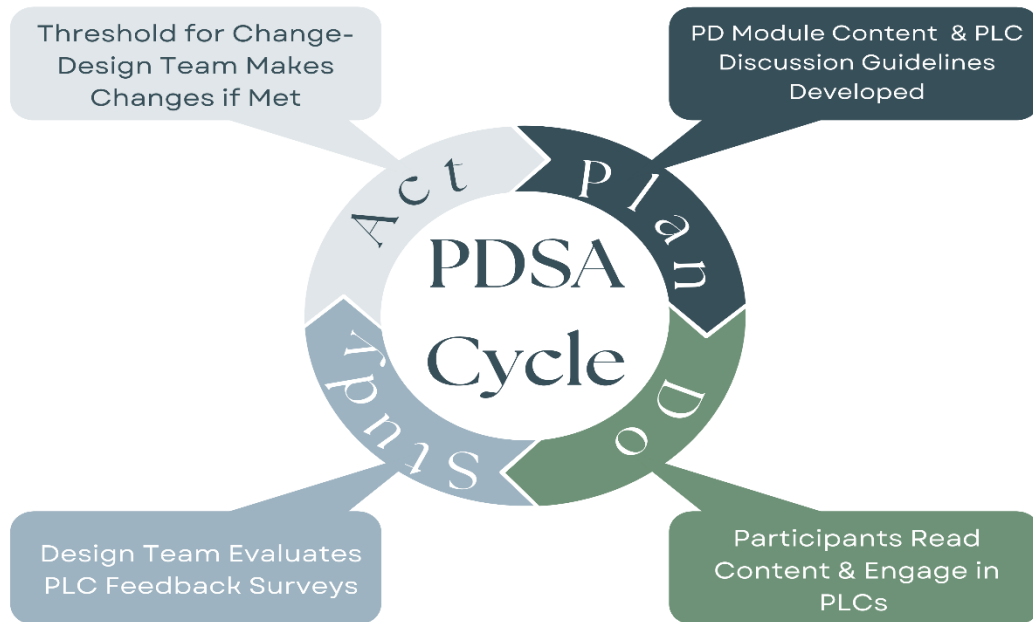
Note. The figure above represents the Plan, Do, Study, Act cycle utilized during the formative evaluation of this improvement work.

PLC Cycle 1: PD Module 1

At the conclusion of each PLC session, participants were asked to complete a PLC feedback survey to help the design team evaluate the teachers' perceptions of the module content and the PLC discussion. Using surveys allowed me to assess the participants' thoughts more directly (Tan & Siegel, 2018). This survey provided teacher feedback and was used as an evaluative tool to guide adaptations moving forward and improve facilitation of the subsequent PLCs. The design team analyzed the data from the survey using a frequency count and set a threshold for determining whether adaptations would be needed. We determined that if 60% of participating teachers disagreed or strongly disagreed with the amount of content, the process, or

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the context of the meetings, we would make changes to those areas in the next module before beginning the next PLC cycle.

The first PLC feedback survey revealed that most participants felt the PLC session advanced their learning related to culturally responsive teaching practices. In Figure 6, the bar graphs show that 12.5% of the participants strongly agreed, 75% agreed, and 12.5% neither agreed nor disagreed that the sessions' activities increased their capacity to improve their practice. The bar graph also shows that 37.5% of teachers strongly agreed, and 62.5% agreed that the session advanced their development of culturally responsive teaching practices. Furthermore, 100% of participants felt that they could use the module content to teach others after the PLC session. Finally, 50% strongly agreed, and 50% agreed that the session was useful and practical (see Figure 6).

Figure 6

Advancement of Learning Feedback for PLC Session 1
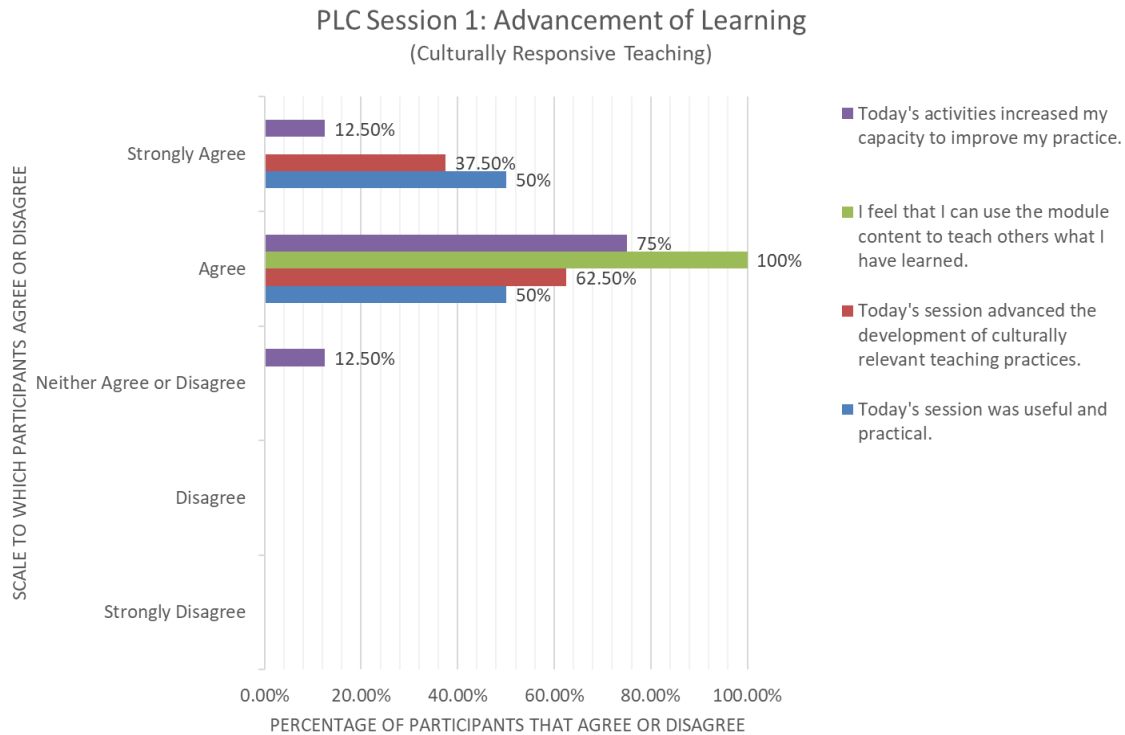
The participants also provided feedback on the facilitation of the first PLC session. Most of the participants reported that they either strongly agreed or agreed that the session objectives were clearly stated, it was aligned to the objectives, time was allocated effectively to deepen the participant's understanding, participant experiences were incorporated into the session, and the facilitators modeled appropriate instructional strategies. Figure 8 depicts the feedback regarding the facilitation of the first PLC session: 62.5% of participants strongly agreed, and 37.5% agreed that the session objectives were clearly stated. Furthermore, 62.5% of the participants strongly agreed, and 37.5% agreed that session was aligned to the objectives. Participants were also asked if they felt time was effectively allocated for deepening their understanding of the presented material: 50% strongly agreed, and 50% agreed with this statement. Additionally, participants

were asked to provide feedback on whether the facilitators included their experiences in the session: 37.5% strongly agreed, and 62.5% agreed with this statement. Finally, participants were asked to provide feedback on the facilitators modeling appropriate instructional strategies: 50% strongly agreed, and 50% agreed with this statement (see Figure 7).

Figure 7

PLC Session 1 Facilitation Feedback

PLC Session 1: Facilitation Feedback
(Culturally Responsive Teaching Practices)

The survey that was given to the participants upon the conclusion of the first PLC session also included a section on the module content (see Figure 8). When asked about their understanding of the module ("readings with ease"), 13% of the participants strongly agreed, and 50% agreed. Thirteen percent of the participants neither agreed nor disagreed, and 25% disagreed that the module readings were understood with ease. The group was equally split

between either strongly agreeing or agreeing that they were able to read the module content before the meeting. Finally, participants were asked about the relevance of the module content to their teaching practice: 75% of the participants strongly agreed, and 25% of the participants agreed that the module content was relevant to their teaching practice (see Figure 8).

Figure 8

Module 1 Content Feedback

Module 1: Content Feedback
(Culturally Responsive Teaching)
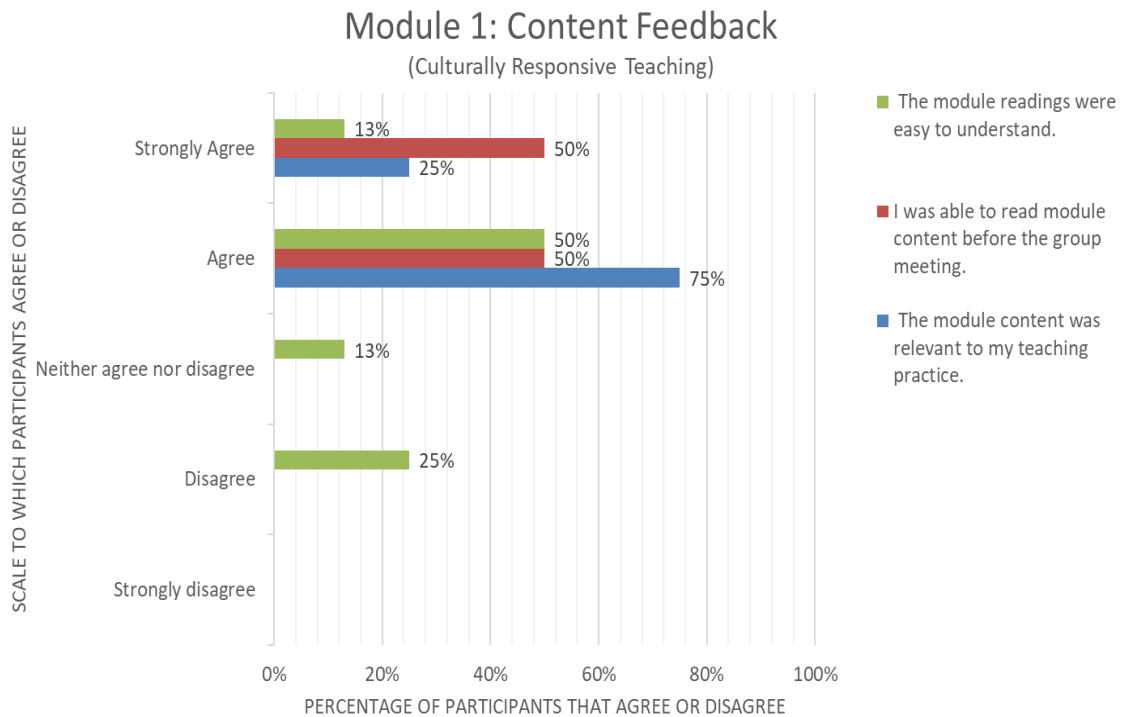
The participants reported on the most helpful and least helpful information from the module and sessions on the PLC feedback survey. The participants reported that the most helpful parts of the learning sessions were a) discussion amongst the group, b) hearing varied perspectives from participants relating to the use of culturally responsive practices, and c) guiding questions that were provided to accompany the readings. Feedback on the "least helpful

information" from the module or session was provided by only one participant who shared that "the readings were very lengthy and dense."

PLC Cycle 2: PD Module 2

The design team reviewed the data from the PLC feedback survey to adjust the second module. The design team determined that we would provide the participants with the planned reading "The Caring Relation in Teaching" by Nel Noddings. From the feedback, we learned that some of the readings were perceived as lengthy and dense. The design team considered those comments and provided an alternative to the selected article in a prerecorded presentation that provided an overview of its contents. Participants would still participate in the previously planned establish-maintain-restore method (EMRM; Cook et al., 2018) learning activity during the PLC session.

At the end of the second PLC cycle, we reviewed the data related to the PLC session and how the session advanced the participants' learning. Figure 10 illustrates the participants' feedback regarding how the second PLC session advanced their knowledge regarding proactive relationship building strategies. Eighty percent strongly agreed, and 20% of the participants agreed that the session advanced their knowledge of culturally relevant teaching practices. Furthermore, 80% of the participants strongly agreed, and 20% agreed that they felt they could use the module content to teach others (see Figure 9). Additionally, 60% strongly agreed, and 40% agreed that the activities in the session increased their capacity to improve their practice. Additionally, 80% strongly agreed, and 20% agreed that the session advanced their knowledge of culturally responsive teaching practice. Finally, 80% strongly agreed, and 20% agreed that the second PLC session was useful and practical (see Figure 9).
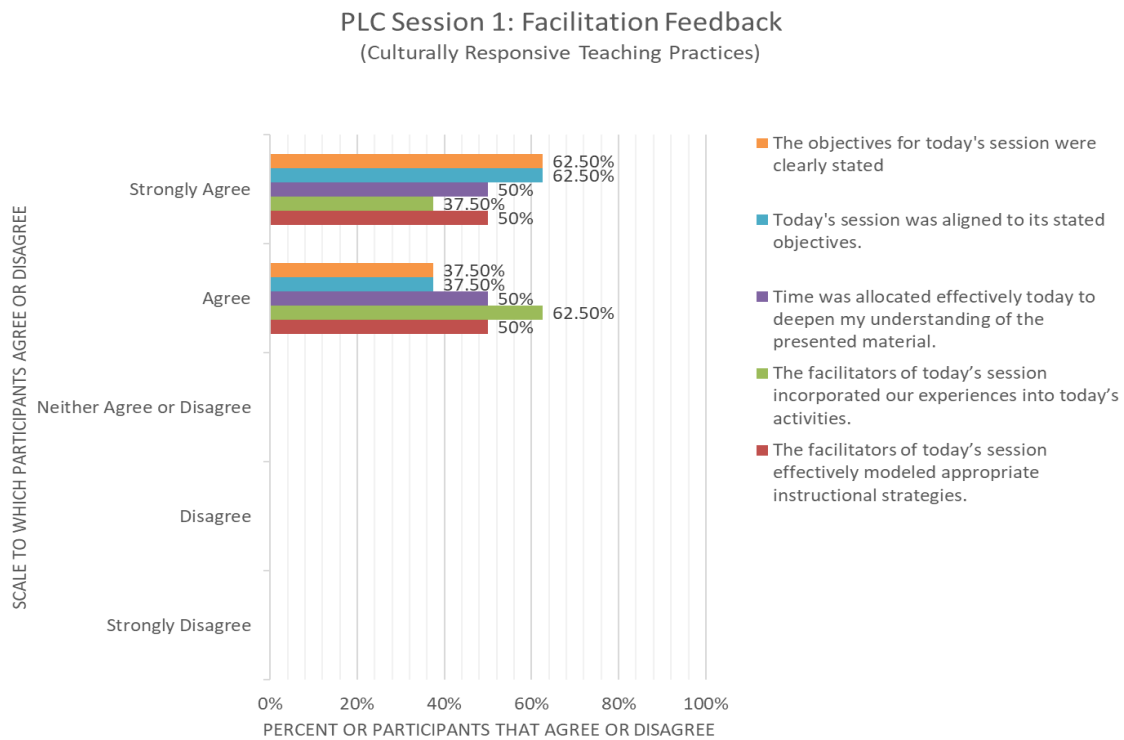
Figure 9

Advancement of Learning Feedback for PLC Session 2

PLC Session 2: Advancement of Learning
(Proactive Relationship Building Strategies)

SCALE TO WHICH PARTICIPANTS AGREE OR DISAGREE

- Strongly Agree: 80%, 60%, 80%, 80%
- Agree: 20%, 40%, 20%, 20%
- Neither Agree or Disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

PERCENT OF PARTICIPANTS THAT AGREE OR DISAGREE

0.00% 20.00% 40.00% 60.00% 80.00% 100.00%

Legend:
- ■ I feel that I can use the module content to teach otherswhat I have learned
- ■ Today's activities increased my capacity to use to improve my practice.
- ■ Today's session advanced the development of culturally relevant teaching practices.
- ■ Today's session was useful and practical.

On the PLC evaluation survey, participants provided feedback on the facilitation of the PLC session. When asked about the objectives of the session being clearly stated, 80% strongly agreed, and 20% of the participants agreed that the objectives were clearly stated. Eighty percent of the participants strongly agreed, and 20% of the participants agreed that the session was aligned with the objectives. We also asked participants to provide feedback related to whether time was effectively allocated for deepening their understanding of the content. Sixty percent of the participants strongly agreed, and 40% agreed that time was effectively allocated. Participants were then asked if the session incorporated their experiences into the activities of the session: 80% strongly agreed, and 20% agreed that the session incorporated their experiences. Finally, participants provided feedback on whether the facilitators of the session modeled appropriate

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instructional strategies: 80% of participants strongly agreed, and 20% agreed that the facilitators

of the second PLC effectively modeled appropriate instructional strategies (see Figure 10).

Figure 10

PLC Session 2 Facilitation Feedback

PLC Session 2: Facilitation Feedback
(Proactive Relationship Building Strategies)
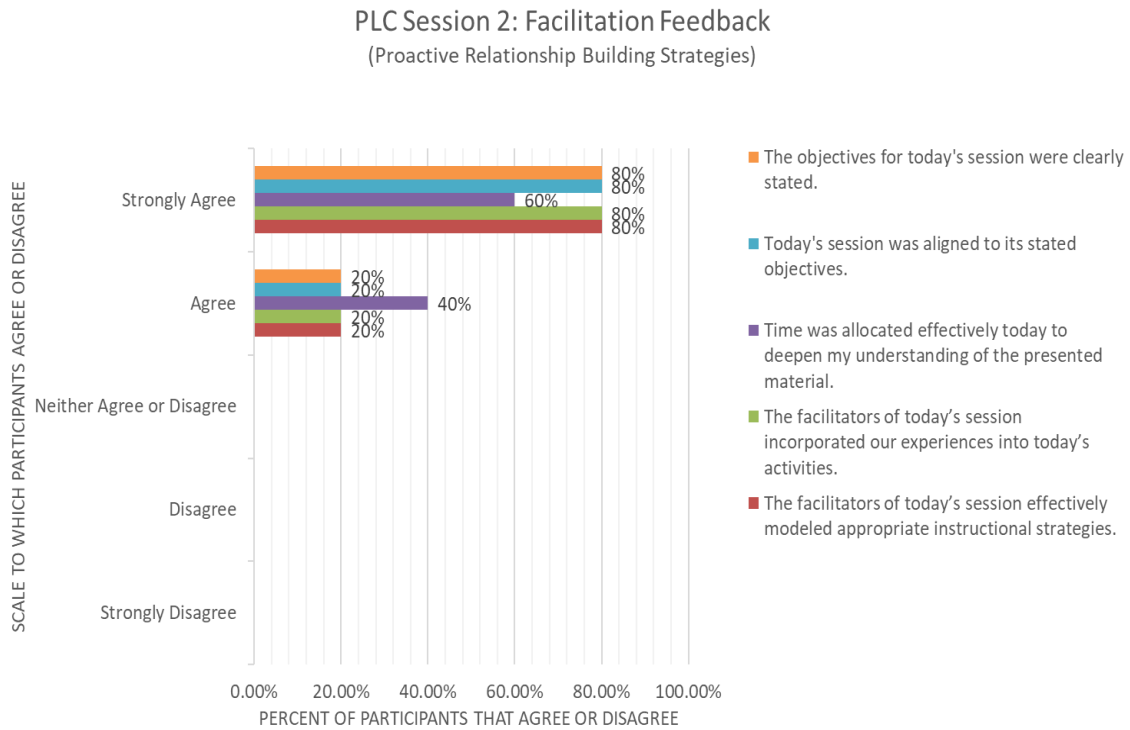
The final section of the survey was related to the content of the module. I again assessed

the participants perception of the readability of the module contents. This time, 60% strongly

agreed, and 40% agreed that the module contents were easy to understand. The participants also

strongly agreed (80%) and agreed (20%) that they were able to read the module content before

the session and that the module content was relevant to their practice (see Figure 11).

Figure 11

Module 2 Content Feedback

Module 2: Content Feedback
(Proactive Relationship Building Strategies)
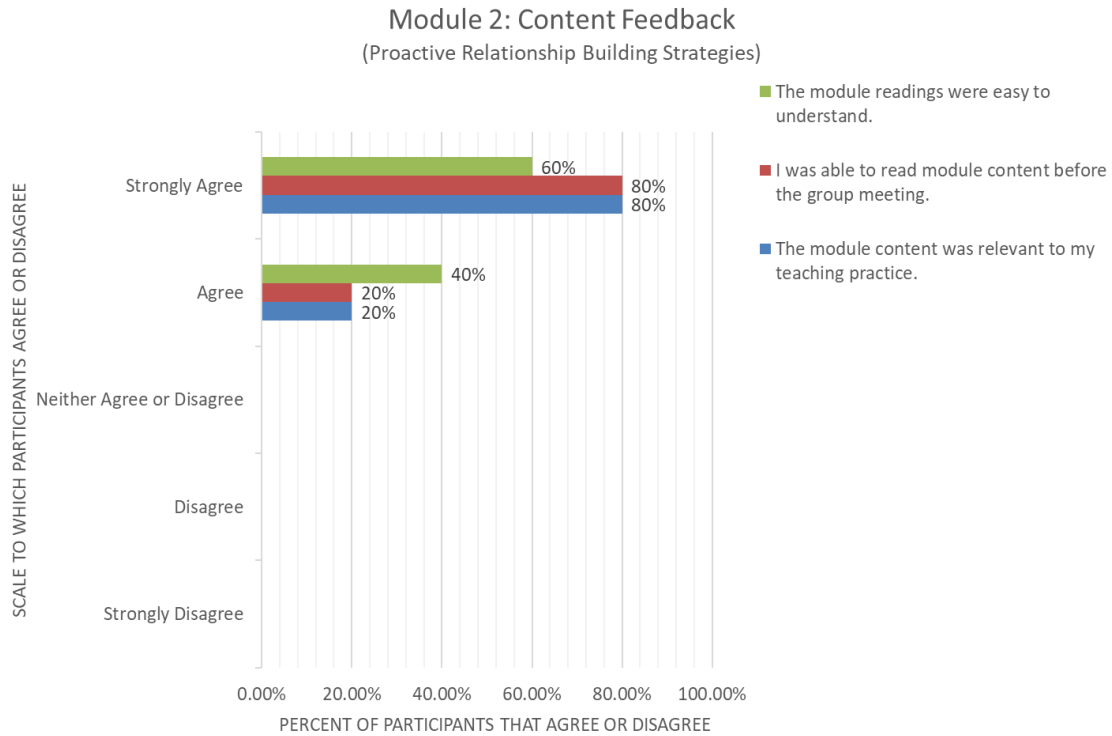
The design team reviewed the results above and considered the comments related to "the most helpful" and "the least helpful" items from the PLC session and module. One participant stated that the presentation (provided along with the readings) was helpful, and another stated that the session was organized and concise. The design team decided that changes to the upcoming module, and PLC were not necessary since the threshold for change was not met. We also determined that we would not make any changes because the feedback showed that we were moving in the right direction.

PLC Cycle 3: PD Module 3

For Module 3, I asked participants to read a) the chapter "Transforming Teachers" from *Bridging Literacy and Equity: The Essential Guide to Social Equity Teaching* by Lazar, Edwards, and McMillion and b) the chapter "Toward the Pursuit of Identity" from *Cultivating Genius: An Equity Framework for Culturally and Historically Responsive Literacy* by Gholdy Muhammad. I also had participants fill out a chart related to their personal identity and asked them to bring the results to the session. Participants were then asked to attend another PLC session to discuss the readings and their findings from the identity chart.

At the end of this PLC cycle, participants again provided feedback regarding the design, facilitation, and advancement of their learning related to the PLC session and the contents provided in the module. The survey data revealed that 86% of the participants strongly agreed, and 14% of the participants agreed that they felt they could use the module contents to teach others. Additionally, 71% of participants strongly agreed, and 29% agreed that the activities in the third PLC session increased their capacity to improve their practice. Furthermore, 86% of participants strongly agreed, and 14% agreed that the third PLC session advanced the development of culturally relevant teaching practices. Finally, 86% of participants strongly agreed, and 14% agreed that they felt the third PLC session was useful and practical (see Figure 12).

Figure 12

*Advancement of Learning Feedback for PLC Session 3*
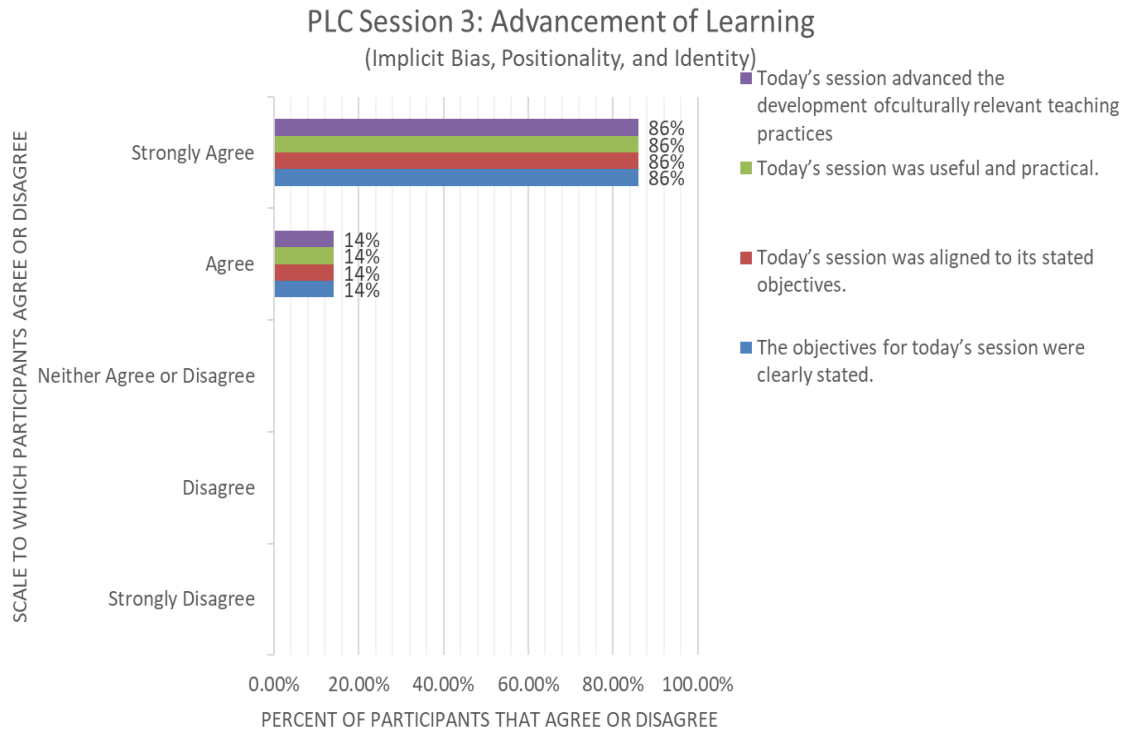
In addition to feedback given on the advancement of participant learning, I received feedback on the facilitation of the PLC. The participants responded to whether the objectives for the session were clearly stated: 86% strongly agreed, and 14% agreed that the objectives were clearly stated. Furthermore, 86% of participants strongly agreed, and 14% of participants agreed that the session was aligned to the stated objectives. I also asked participants if they felt time was allocated effectively in the third PLC session: 83% strongly agreed, and 17% agreed that time was allocated effectively. Additionally, participants were asked if the facilitators incorporated the experiences of the participants into the session. In response, 83% strongly agreed, and 17% agreed that they felt their experiences were incorporated into the session. Finally, 86% of

participants strongly agreed, and 14% of participants agreed that the facilitators modeled

appropriate instructional strategies in the session (see Figure 13).

Figure 13

PLC Session 3 Facilitation Feedback
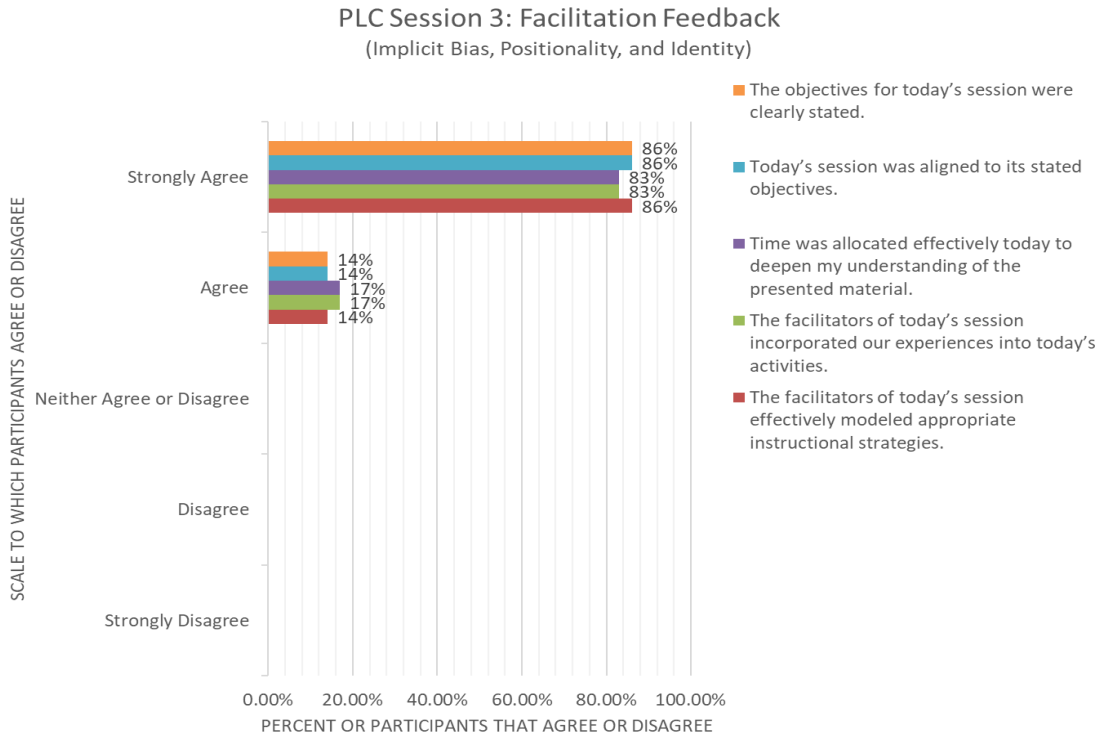
As in the previous PLC cycles, the last section of the survey provided feedback on the

content of the module. This section of the survey was important as the design team decided not

to revise the module contents due to the feedback provided in the first and second PLC cycles.

Once again, the survey results did not indicate a need for change. When asked about the

readability for the module, 71% strongly agreed, and 29% agreed that the readings were easy to

understand. When participants were asked about their ability to read the module content before

the session, 57% strongly agreed, 29% agreed, and 14% disagreed that they were able to read the

content before the session. Finally, the survey question related to relevancy for participants'

teaching practice revealed that 86% strongly agreed and 14% agreed (see Figure 14).

Figure 14

Module 3 Content Feedback

Module 3: Content Feedback
(Implicit Bias, Positionality, and Identity)
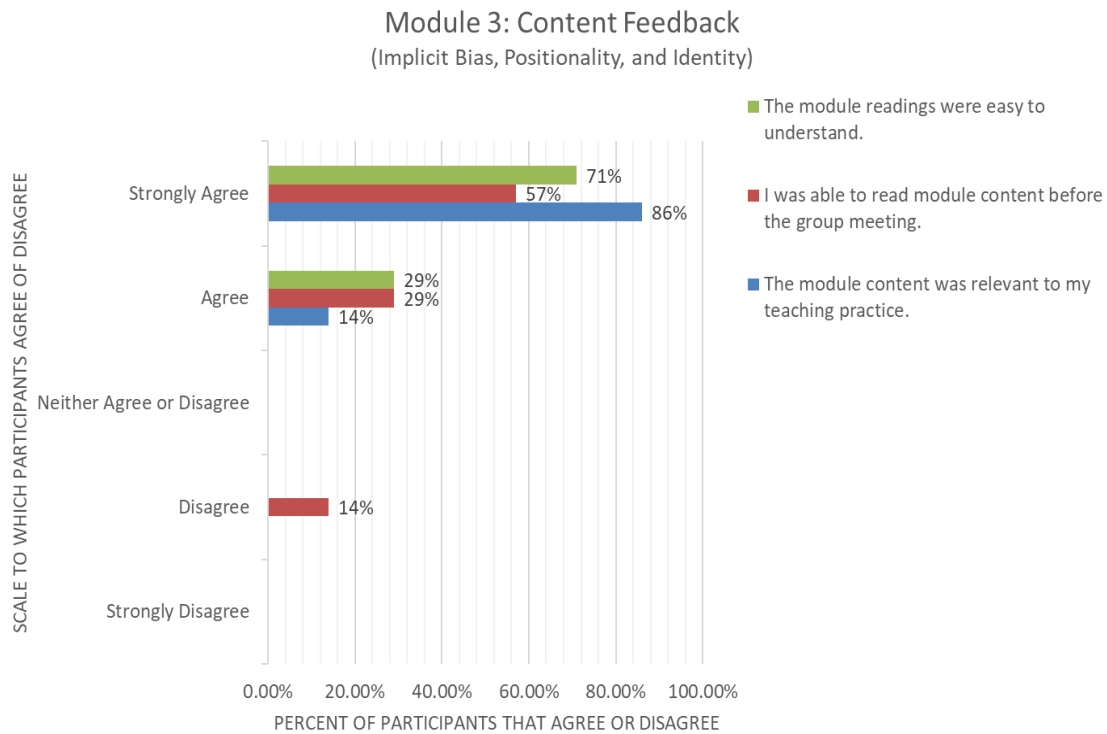
Formative Evaluation Findings

Overall, the PLC reflection surveys demonstrated that participants believed the module

contents, PLC design, and PLC facilitation advanced their knowledge regarding the topics

covered in each module. I reviewed these results with the design team at the conclusion of each

PLC cycle, and each time the design team found that we did not fall at or above the threshold for

change (60% of teachers disagreed or strongly disagreed with the amount of content, the process,

or the context). However, the design team did choose to alter the second module to better serve

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the participants after reviewing feedback from Module 1 (a presentation of the module content was recorded as an option for participants in lieu of reading the article). In doing this, an increase in the number that reported they strongly agreed with the module content, PLC design, and PLC feedback was noted on the modules that followed.

Summative Evaluation Measures, Results, and Findings

Summative evaluation employed qualitative data analysis of focus group transcripts, PLC transcripts, and guided reflection surveys. Data was analyzed using a coding process that consisted of three rounds (see Figure 15). The coding process began with a round of open coding, which consisted of a line-by-line analysis which identified a descriptor for each line. Next, a second-round coding (selective coding) took place, where the identified descriptors were placed in categories. Finally, a third round of coding was conducted. From this final round of coding (axial coding) themes were developed based on the categories. This coding process was applied to the transcripts from the focus group and PLCs, and the Guided Reflection Surveys.

Figure 15

Example of Coding Process taken from PLC #2 Transcripts
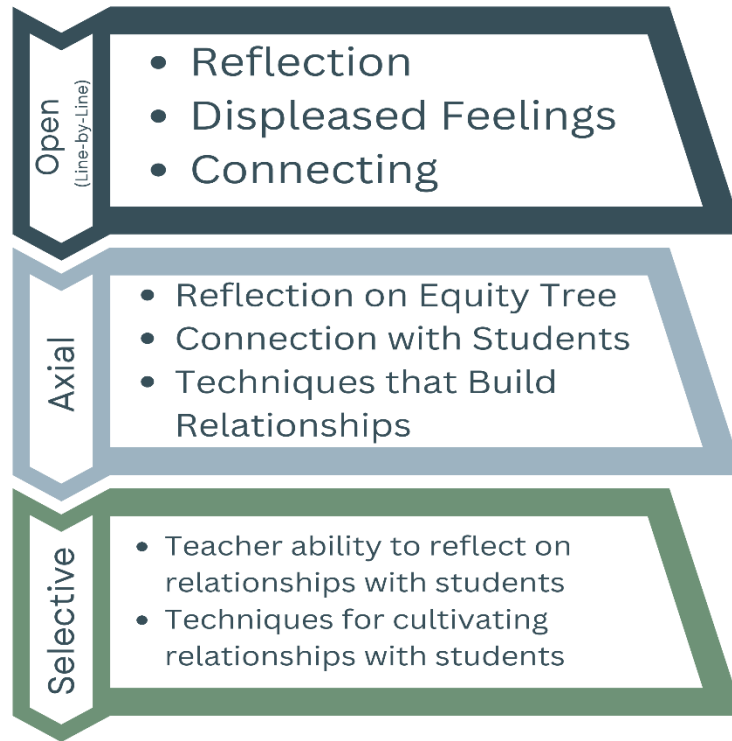
Note. The figure above is an example of the coding process utilized in the analysis of the transcripts from the second PLC. Beginning at the top, the first section of the figure represents descriptors that were assigned during the first round of open coding. The second section demonstrates the categories developed during that round. The third section represents the themes developed during the third round and final round of coding.

Focus Group

A focus group was conducted at the close of the three professional development sessions. The focus group participants included two teachers from Wonder Years Elementary and four teachers from Happy Days Middle School. The focus group discussion spanned one hour and was facilitated using the list of questions below. The session was recorded, transcribed, and

coded. However, analysis indicates the conversation that ensued was organic. Due to the organic

conversation that occurred, I was not able to draw overall conclusions or themes. Below are the

findings from the conversation, which are aligned with the following questions: a) what was your

greatest takeaway from Module 1, b) what was your greatest takeaway from Module 2, and c)

what was your greatest takeaway from Module 3? The focus group session was only able to

address the first question in the list below due to time constraints.

- What was your greatest takeaway from Module 1…Module 2…and Module 3?

- What information did you find least valuable from Module 1…Module 2…and

  Module 3?

- What information did you find most valuable from Module 1…Module 2…and

  Module 3?

- How have you changed your classroom/overall practices as an educator as a result

  of your participation?

- Do you see yourself utilizing this new learning moving forward? If so, how?

- What activities have helped you develop this understanding of the importance of

  cultivating strong relationships with students?

- Would these modules have been beneficial during your preservice teaching

  program? If so, why? If not, why?

- What should we have examined further?

- What should we have spent less time on?

When participants were asked about their greatest takeaway from Module 1, only one

participant shared her thoughts. She noted how she was attempting to incorporate her students'

backgrounds into the classroom by having her students share about their traditions. This

participant stated the following: "It's easy for me to think about my culture or what my family does for the holidays, but I always think it's really important to let the kids share what their families do. It's just really interesting because I feel like so often you might just kind of focus on like what your family does, but giving them an opportunity to share their traditions and what they do is really important because we have really different things going on just within our small classroom" (White, female, classroom teacher, 5th). This was the only response that was provided as a takeaway regarding module 1.

When asked about their greatest takeaways from Module 2, three respondents shared. One respondent reflected upon an event in his classroom that day. He observed that, he would be entering the restore phase of a relationship with a student, he had to remove this student from his class. He mentioned that due to this he would be in the restore phase with that student for a while. He made the following statement: "I'm going to have to be in the restore phase tomorrow after a situation that happened in my class with the student. So, um, for the most part it's been pretty good. He doesn't set the world on fire as far as getting work accomplished but hasn't been a problem until. And then I had to kick him out of class. So, we'll be restoring for a while, probably, based on the student" (White, male, classroom teacher, 8th). While this did not explain a takeaway from the module, the teacher demonstrated reflection on the relationship using the information he gained from the PLC discussion on proactive relationship-building strategies.

Concerning the topic of proactive relationship-building strategies, another participant shared the following: "When I did that activity, I thought about the kids who, to me, it's easier to form those relationships with, and it kind of surprised me when I really started thinking of those names. Because it was mostly boys who have behavior issues, and that get in trouble the most, because I'm typically talking to them the most. I'm out in the hall with them. I'm working with

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them to fix their behaviors. And I realize at the end of each year, those are the students that stand out to me the most. That I had the best relationship with. I would say overall. And the kids who kind of get left behind when it really comes to me building a true relationship with them, are the ones who come to school, do their work and have good behavior, which was kind of weird to think about because they kind of just blend in" (White, female, classroom teacher, 5th). This participant, in reference to learning about proactive relationship building strategies, was reflecting on those students who she builds strong relationships with and those who she is leaving behind by not proactively building relationships with them. This prompted another teacher (White, female, classroom teacher, kindergarten) to share a similar story. A White female classroom teacher shared that she feels she builds relationships with all her students but that her relationships with her students who have difficult behaviors are those who she builds stronger relationships with.

When participants were asked to provide input on their greatest takeaways from Module 3, one participant shared about a situation that occurred with a Hispanic student in the classroom. She spoke about how she had called the parents one day bragging about how well he was doing, and the next day she had to call and explain that he was in trouble for punching another student. The student's family made the comment that she was racist. She went on to say "it's just really hard to be in a situation. Because it's almost like, what do you say? What do you do? I always try to self-reflect and make sure it's not." This teacher was describing a situation that has caused her to self-reflect on her decisions as an educator when working with students of color and having to discipline them. She expressed how hard this situation was and that she did not always know the appropriate thing to say or do.

Another participant followed with commentary on being perceived as racist toward her own racial ethnicity. This participant is a Black female classroom teacher. She shared the following: "When faced with those types of what have you? It cuts both ways for me as a person of color. I go through a whole gamut of emotions. It infuriates me, first of all, that they cannot appreciate that I'm doing my job. And that even in doing my job, I'm trying to help your child" (Black, female, classroom teacher, 7th). The same participant noted that "when that tiff is thrown at you that you were racist or what have you, that for me, sometimes it makes me feel guilty. And I don't know that made you feel that that way. And I'm sure that the guilt is, spawned by different sources. Mine is, have I lost touch? Am I too far removed from them? You know, whoever they are. Both of these articles, chapter three and chapter seven, talk about the other and othering. And, you know, there are times where I have to question. I have found myself questioning, am I too far removed from them? Is it that I can't relate? Is it that I don't even want to relate, or what have you? And those are some very hard questions. To grapple with, in inwardly" (Black, female, classroom teacher, 7th). This teacher explained further: "Don't think that those types of conundrums are only unique to, to you all, to Caucasians or the majority race, because it's not. When you are a person of color and you have excelled academically. When your family has basically excelled economically. It really places you on the horns of a dilemma, to be honest with you, because you find yourself really living in two different worlds" (Black, female, classroom teacher, 7th). This participant went on to say that "no one can tell your story" (Black, female, classroom teacher, 7th) and noted people of color must wear many hats in the communities they interact with daily. She then shared the following: "All I can do is tell you that those little brown and black kids in your room. They're in a unique space, and that's not to excuse them. Because believe me, I don't excuse them in my room. But at the end of the day, there are

times that I can take off that educator hat, and I can somewhat see. I think one of the phraseologies in one of these articles is, I can unmask them. I can unmask myself, and I can relate" (Black, female, classroom teacher, 7th). At this point in the focus group, the conversation shifted away from sharing takeaways from module three. This participant continued the conversation, and her thoughts become organic and moved away from the purpose of the focus group. I then stopped the focus group because we were reaching the allotted time the group had agreed upon.

PLC Transcripts

PLC Transcripts were also coded line by line using the same guiding questions from Glaser (1968, 1998) and Charmaz (2006). A second round of coding (axial coding) was performed. This round of coding connected the initial codes (e.g., preservice experience, reflection, privilege) and synthesized them into categories (culturally responsive teaching practices in preservice experience, connection and care, and reflection on privilege). At the conclusion of the second round of coding, overall themes were developed related to the data.

Professional Learning Community 1: Culturally Responsive Teaching Practices

Analysis of the transcript from the first PLC revealed one overall theme from the discussion and commentary that is worth noting for the purpose of this disquisition. The first theme was "lack of exposure to culturally responsive practices." The second theme was titled "wondering" due to the reflections provided by two teacher participants where each was "wondering" how things could have been or "wondering" how to move forward with the learning. The subsequent paragraph provides details from the transcript data.

Upon analyzing the transcript from the first PLC, I found that four out of the 10 teachers shared about their experience in their preservice teaching program in relation to a lack of

coverage of culturally responsive teaching practices in their programs. One participant observed that culturally responsive teaching practices were discussed as she furthered her education but not during her time in her preservice teaching program. Another participant expressed the following about her program: "I've never heard of it. Not while I was in college" (White, female, classroom teacher, 5th, Wonder Years Elementary). Two others shared the same sentiments.

Further analysis of the transcripts revealed that, in relation to culturally responsive teaching practices, one of the teachers felt this information would have be helpful in a previous position: "I wish, I had this years ago. I have worked at a migrant Head Start, that is all Hispanic families. I was the only Caucasian person in my classroom. It is definitely, a different environment to what I teach now. To be able to have been more culturally responsive with the students that I had would have been nice" (White, female, classroom teacher, pre-K, Wonder Years Elementary). This statement reflects a lack of exposure to these teaching practices, and upon reading the module contents and participating in the discussion, this teacher feels she could have served families differently had she known more about culturally responsive teaching practices at that time.

Finally, analysis of this transcript also revealed some commentary worth noting regarding the use of culturally responsive teaching practices. One of the teachers expressed her concerns and frustrations related to the application of culturally responsive practices and acceptance of the use of these practices. This teacher shared that she felt that the discussion on these practices was academic in nature and wondered whether these practices were practical in our schools, particularly given the current political climate regarding the terminology from the readings (e.g., culturally responsive). She shared the following: "I'm wondering, especially with the societal dynamics today, how much pragmatism there is. How can we really reach and be

honest in our approach to diversity, to diverse members of our classes, of our school populations. When the societal winds are blowing diametrically against that. With a lot of the books for instance, that are being banned, with people wanting to constrict" (Black, female, classroom teacher, 7th, Happy Days Middle School).

Professional Learning Community 2: Proactive Relationship-Building Strategies

The analysis of the transcript for the second PLC, proactive relationship-building strategies, revealed four overall themes in the discussion. The first theme I found upon analyzing the transcript was "teacher ability to reflect on their relationships with students." The second theme was "teachers are challenged in establishing relationships with students when they are departmentalized or teach multiple grade spans." The third theme was "techniques for cultivating teacher-student relationships." Finally, the fourth theme was "connections generate reciprocal care."

The first theme found within the transcript was that teachers are able to reflect on the relationship status between themselves and their students. This was done in conjunction with an establish-maintain-restore (Cook et al., 2018) known as the equity triage tree. Teachers were asked to rank what they felt was their current relationship status with their students. On the bottom branches of the tree, they were to list the students who they have had to put forth very little effort to establish relationships with. The middle branches were those students who they were working to "establish" relationships with, and the top branches were those students who the teacher was working to "restore" a relationship with. Three out of seven teachers provided a reflection on the current status of their relationships with their students.

One of the three that reflected on her activity stated: "Looking at the tree, I think it's a really good visual to think about where my students would be. I feel like with my homeroom,

I'm with them more for the morning, when they are coming in for breakfast. I have my first block with them, and science with them. I then have them for second load. So it's a lot easier for me to form more meaningful relationships with that group of students because with my other group of students, I'm just teaching" (White, female, classroom teacher, 5th, Wonder Years Elementary).

Another teacher provided this reflection: "I've worked with my seventh and eighth graders for a couple of years, so I feel like we're in the maintaining stage. But with my sixth graders, I'm still trying to learn who they are, you know what their likes and dislikes are. I have kind of a unique experience because I see them for three years, and I tend to spend more time in sixth grade at the beginning of the year so I can establish those relationships" (White, female, AIG specialist, Happy Days Middle School).

A fellow teacher at the same school shared this reflection: "As I was writing down my restore, maintain, establish, I am still establishing relationships with my sixth graders. At this point in the year. When I wrote down the ones who that I feel like I've really maintained very strong relationships with, I've found it is the most difficult kids. I just found that interesting that for me, the strongest relationships I have with my students are the ones that are probably not easily making relationships with a lot of teachers" (White, female, choral director, Happy Days Middle School).

The second theme I found during my analysis was that three of the seven teachers spoke about difficulty with forming relationships with students when faced with departmentalization or teaching across grade spans. One teacher, who teaches math, expressed that "if you are communicating with just numbers, I feel like I have a really hard time getting to know them (students). I am truly just saying numbers all day and they're giving me numbers back. I have

truly realized I have to take a lot of extra time with that group just to kind of have everyday discussions" (White, female, teacher, 5th, Wonder Years Elementary School). Two of the teachers from Happy Days Middle shared these same feelings, noting that it is difficult to get to know students when you are required to work with multiple grade levels.

The third theme found upon analysis of the transcript data was two of the seven teachers discussing techniques that have worked for them in the past. One teacher shared that he plays a game at the beginning of each year called "two truths and a lie." He speaks about how this game allows him to reach his students, even those who are not what he describes as a "typical A" student: "Two Truths and a Lie, that was my introduction, like a get to know you activity. I'm a big heavy metal fan, and most kids, 90% of them, think that's the lie. Then you have those kids, not to stereotype, but some of the kids that listen to the same music I listen to, are not necessarily your "A" students if that make sense. You kind of make a connection with your students" (White, male, classroom teacher, 8th, Happy Days Middle School). This teacher felt that this technique allowed him, at the beginning of the school year, to proactively begin establishing relationships with his students.

Finally, another participant shared that when an advisory time was part of the schedule at her school, this was a built-in time that seemed natural for relationship building: "Whenever middle schools were really based on the middle school concept and we had advisory, that was just a natural build in way to get to know kids. I feel, I miss that and I feel like we have missed the mark in making that time an intervention time as opposed to a relationship building time" (White, female, assistant principal, Happy Days Middle School).

The final theme drawn from the analysis of the transcript data is what I called "connection generates". Two of the seven teachers described how the connection between

teacher and students generates mutual respect and reciprocation in care. One teacher expressed the following: "Forty days in, I still have good relationships with them, even if I do have correct their behavior, they seem to respect it and not get mad" (White, male, classroom teacher, 8th, Happy Days Middle School). In addition to this statement, a fellow teacher shared that "nobody cares how much you know, till they know how much you care" (White, female, assistant principal, Happy Days Middle School).

Professional Learning Community 3: Implicit Bias, Identity, and Positionality

From the analysis of the third PLC meeting, I was only able to identify one theme during my analysis, which was "teachers understand White privilege is not about the socioeconomic status of Whites." Teachers were asked to reflect on the questions from Peggy McIntosh's (1998) paper "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack." Two of the five participants reflected on how their privilege is not shaped only by their socioeconomic status and that those who are white and perceived as socioeconomically disadvantaged still have White privilege. One teacher stated that "sometimes people will say, I'm White, but I wasn't privileged because I grew up poor. I guess, this just kind of puts it into perspective. It's not just about money. That list of the seven things tells you other things, on how we were privileged" (White, female, classroom teacher, 5th, Wonder Years Elementary). The second teacher who shared an observation related to this theme stated "I have issues with, even though money might have been an issue, we still have many advantages, I think of number five in particular. I can turn on the television or open the front page of the paper and see people of my race widely represented. I think that's one especially in our school, we have so many Hispanic children. They don't turn on the TV and see a lot of people like them or they look in the paper and don't see a lot of people like them. We just

sort of take that for granted" (White, female, classroom teacher, Kindergarten, Wonder Years Elementary).

Guided Reflection Surveys

I also collected guided reflection surveys from participants in PLCs one and two. Participants were asked to answer the following questions: (1) what did I know prior to reading, (2) what did I learn after reading, and (3) what am I wondering? Participants were asked to complete reflection surveys so I could gather information on participant background knowledge related to the module and PLC topics. I also wanted to gather further data on what participants had learned from the module readings and PLC discussions. Furthermore, I wanted to know if the readings and PLC discussions left them with questions related to the readings or the discussion. The responses to the questions were collected using an online platform (Padlet) that participants accessed through a link provided at the beginning of the PLC discussion.

The guided reflection surveys were also coded line by line using the same guiding questions from Glaser (1968, 1998) and Charmaz (2006). A second round of coding (axial coding) occurred. This round of coding connected the initial codes (e.g., relationships, learning, wondering) and synthesized them into categories (new learning for teachers, importance of relationships, what could this mean for students). It is important to note that responses were reported anonymously; therefore, direct quotes have not been triangulated.

Guided Reflection Survey: Culturally Responsive Teaching Practices

From an analysis of the guided reflection surveys gathered during from the first PLC, prior to reading and participating in the PLC, three out of the five teachers knew before reading the module contents and engaging in the PLC that building relationships with students is important. One teacher commented the following: "I knew that relationships are important to

effectively reach various groups of students." Two out of the five teachers knew before reading the module contents and engaging in the PLC that incorporating cultural differences is important. A teacher left the following comment regarding the importance of incorporating cultural differences: "Cultural diversity is important and each student should be treated as an individual and the classroom should be inclusive." Finally, one of the five teachers understood before engaging in this module and discussion that classrooms should be more inclusive, and one of the five teachers understood that students need to feel a sense of belonging.

Responses to the second guided reflection survey question (What I learned…) revealed that three out of the five teachers understood the need to have more inclusive classrooms. The following observations were shared by those who responded: "teachers need to get to know their students, their background, and family situations so they can make sure their classroom is inclusive for all their students;" "we should be more inclusive;" and "it is very important to have an inclusive classroom." In response to this question, one of the five teachers shared that they learned "getting to know the background of your students will help foster relationships and learning." Finally, two out of the five teachers shared that using culturally responsive practices impacts student learning. Those teachers noted the following: "I learned that there are many ways that cultural responsiveness benefits student outcomes," and "being culturally responsive can positively impact learning."

Finally, in response to the guided reflection survey question (What I am wondering…), participants had a range of responses. One teacher asked, "if all teachers could incorporate this into their classroom, what would the school system look like?" A second response considered "what learning would look like if this type of teaching was successfully carried out." Another responded, "what does this look like in other school settings?" A fourth teacher stated, "I wonder

how successful our students could be if this happened across the board?" Finally, a fifth

responded with "I wonder if the positive relationships at our school have influenced our success

as a school?"

Guided Reflection Survey: Proactive Relationship-Building Strategies

From my analysis of the guided reflection survey from the second PLC, when

participants responded to the question "what I knew prior to reading," four of the six responses

connected the importance of relationships with the academic outcomes of students. One

participant provided the following response in relation to this topic: "building relationships with

students was important to success in the classroom." Another response from a participant was

that "building relationships furthers learning."

The analysis of the responses to the prompt "what I learned" revealed that three of the six

participants provided responses for this prompt. Of the three that provided responses, two made

statements about the importance of communication. One participant observed the following:

"Something that stood out to me was the importance of dialogue to truly understand how

students feel. Misconceptions can occur if we simply say 'I understand how you feel.' We need

to take the time to really understand what is going on in order to help a student emotionally."

Another participant, regarding this, stated that "keeping communication open is important." The

third response to this question was related to learning the importance of listening. This

participant made the following statement: "I learned that I need to let my students know that I am

listening to what they are actually saying."

Finally, the prompt "what I wonder" included responses from six participants. Analysis

of this prompt revealed that two of the six teachers were wondering how proactive caring

practices would change school or classroom climates. One respondent shared, "I wonder how

different the school climate would be if every teacher had a 'caring relation' with their students, especially the difficult students." Another considered, "I wonder how the climate of the classroom could change if all teachers would build positive relationships." Two of the six teachers, in response to this prompt, wondered how they could meet the needs of all their students. One respondent provided the following query: "I wonder how we can focus on all of our students' needs emotionally and accomplish curricular goals at the same time." Another stated, "I wonder how we can meet all of the relational needs children have, especially since these types of needs have been amplified due to COVID." Two addition responses to this prompt were "what would change if teachers developed a caring relationship with students from the first day?" and "I wonder how much more effective my students would learn if I could focus on their emotional needs as much as I focus on my assessments and pacing guides."

Coding Across Data Sources

These findings articulate what I found when looking across the three qualitative data sources. Four themes were revealed: a) teachers connect culture with relationships, (b) teachers yearn to learn about culturally responsive practices, and (c) dialogue contributes to learning and relationship building (see Appendix A).

Teachers Connect Culture with Relationships

The participants connected the use of culturally responsive teaching practices with relationship-building, citing in the focus group and PLC discussions that part of building relationships with students is being able to bring students' cultures and experiences into the classroom. The participants also spoke many times on how utilizing culturally responsive practices contributes to equitable classrooms and school environments. They also considered the difference between "seeing" students as individuals and taking it a step further to "incorporate"

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the students' individuality into the classroom and teaching practices: "We definitely need to be more inclusive and teach differently so that the students that maybe don't have the same experiences as the majority of the students in the school, have opportunities that they may not have had before, so that they can feel a part of and feel valued."

Teachers Yearn to Learn about Culturally Responsive Practices

The participants connected their learning in the module and PLC discussions to their preservice teaching programs. In the analysis of PLC and focus group transcripts, we found that four out of the nine participants felt their preservice teaching programs did not incorporate culturally responsive practices into their coursework and that it would have been helpful to their work as teachers. One participant who spoke on her preservice program described not hearing about culturally responsive teaching practices until graduate school, and even during that time it was sparsely covered. Participants also revealed that their knowledge of working with students from various backgrounds was acquired out of curiosity and wanting to ensure that all students were successful. One participant spoke about working in a school with a large population of students of color and wishing they had more formal knowledge on how to better connect with students and families who are different from their own. The participants also acknowledged that no formal training was ever provided by their districts regarding the utilization of culturally responsive teaching practices.

> I don't really feel like they really taught you the things about the cultures that you may need to know to be successful in your classroom, and that can really change depending on, the population that you serve. So, it's kind of one of those ongoing things that you have to learn about on your own.

Dialogue Contributes to Learning and Relationship Building

Another major theme revealed in the analysis of my qualitative data was that the participants understood the importance of dialogue for their individual and collective learning. The idea that dialogue leads to deeper understanding was prevalent throughout the analysis of the qualitative responses and guided reflection survey.

In addition to talking with colleagues, all participants spoke on the importance of their interactions and conversations with students. Some participants shared that caring relationships with students require a genuine investment in the conversations they have with them. Two of the participants spoke about the importance of dialogue with students who have difficulties with behavior to build the relationship even when those students present challenges in the classroom. One teacher noted, when reflecting on the relationships with her students, that the students who she is consistently talking to (because they are not coming to school, not completing their work, or are getting in trouble) are the ones who she has the strongest relationships with, which is not necessarily the case for those who "blend in."

I also found that students would return to those teachers who provided them with genuine conversations and dialogue during the school day, sometimes asking for guidance. In relation to the importance of dialogue, the participants noted that it was important for dialogue to occur to avoid misconceptions. Additionally, the participants shared that students completely change their posture and engagement when they are responded to with care and respect:

> Something that stood out to me was the importance of dialogue to truly understand how students feel. Misconceptions can occur if we simply say, 'I understand how you feel.' We need to take the time to really understand what is going on in order to help a student emotionally.

Self-Reflection is a Key Component of Educator Improvement

My analysis of the PLC discussions, focus group, and guided reflection survey also revealed that the opportunity for self-reflection is a key component of learning about how to better serve students. Self-reflection first appears in the PLC discussion on culturally responsive practices. Two of the teachers in my guided reflection survey mentioned the need to reflect on the topics they are covering in their classrooms and how they are covering those topics. Another participant shared how reflecting upon students who are identified for special programs has helped her to question service-delivery, specifically for students identified as academically and intellectually gifted (AIG). This participant spoke about the need to reflect on these programs, specifically in her school, because they are not inclusive or representative of the entire student body. This participant mentioned that, as someone responsible for overseeing these programs at their school, they need to reflect more on inclusivity. This participant further observed that being more inclusive in AIG programs begins with reflecting on teaching practices. If teaching practices only consider practices that are inclusive of the majority, students are placed at a disadvantage and under-identified. Therefore, those who do not fit the majority demographic are left feeling undervalued and uncared for.

Self-reflection also became part of the discussion during the second PLC. Part of this discussion included an activity on the establish-maintain-restore Method (Cook et al., 2018). Participants were asked to think about their students and rank them from the easiest to establish relationships with to the most difficult. We then asked participants to share their thoughts. During this discussion, the participants began to self-reflect on what they were doing or not doing that was causing them to have trouble reaching those students who they ranked as most difficult. Participants also began to self-reflect on their day-to-day practices within their

classroom. One participant brought up a time she felt she did an excellent job in connecting with her students to establish and maintain relationships with them. However, she then began to reflect on her current situation of being a departmentalized teacher where she is responsible for only teaching one subject and how she feels that she struggles to communicate and build relationships with a larger group:

> You are so consumed with imparting the knowledge and making sure that they are conversing in your discipline or subject area. I'll speak for myself that, oftentimes, I am so, for lack of a better word, caught in making sure that they are totally adept at the areas that I'm teaching or whatever that I don't tend to focus that much on the relationship building. As much as I should, admittedly, and there's something lost with that.

Summative Evaluation Findings: A Summary

This improvement work included data from three different qualitative sources. Three rounds of coding were conducted to determine the primary findings from each of the three sources. These findings were used to determine whether the goals set for this initiative were met. The findings from the focus group revealed that, overall, conversation was organic. Due to this, I was unable to connect the categories to determine the primary findings from the focus group. In the focus group, one participant spoke about a culturally responsive practice that she had implemented, and toward the end this same also reflected on a situation that had occurred with a student. Another participant provided feedback to the focus group member who was reflecting on a student situation.

The findings from the PLC discussions revealed that, in the first PLC, one of the primary findings was the lack of exposure to culturally responsive teaching practices felt by participants. Also, participant "wonderings," which were related to reflecting on prior experiences and

moving learning forward, were significant. The findings from the second PLC discussion were as follows: a) teacher ability to reflect on relationships with students, b) teachers are challenged in establishing relationships with students when they are departmentalized or teach multiple grade spans, c) techniques for cultivating teacher-student relationships, and d) connection generates reciprocal care. Furthermore, the finding from the third PLC was as follows: teachers understand that White privilege is not about the socioeconomic status of Whites. All qualitative data sources were considered for a third round of selective coding. The final round of coding connected the categories together, and four primary findings were identified: a) teachers connect culture with relationships; b) teachers yearn to learn about culturally responsive practices; c) dialogue contributes to learning and relationship building; and d) self-reflection is a key component of educator improvement.

The findings from the guided reflection survey from the first PLC were that prior to reading three out of five teachers knew building relationships with students is important. Likewise, two out of five teachers knew before reading that incorporating cultural difference is important. One out of five teachers also knew classrooms should be more inclusive, and one out of five teachers understood students need to feel a sense of belonging. Additionally, three out of five teachers reported that they learned classrooms need to be more inclusive, and one out of five learned that getting to know the backgrounds of your students helps foster relationships. Additionally, two out of five teachers learned that using culturally responsive practices impacts student learning. Moreover, participants shared a range of responses related to what they were still wondering about upon the conclusion of the module and PLC.

The findings from the second guided reflection survey show that, prior to engaging with the module content and the discussion, four out of six participants knew about the impact

relationships have on the academic outcomes of students. Additional findings from the second self-guided reflection survey revealed two participants cited learning the importance of communication after engaging with the module. Furthermore, participants who responded to the survey question about what they were left wondering shared that they were considering the following issues: how proactive caring practices would change school/classroom climates, how they could meet the needs of all their students, what would change if teachers developed relationships with student starting on the first day, and how much more effectively students would learn if teachers could focus on their emotional needs as much as they focus on academics.

Finally, all qualitative data sources were considered for a third round of selective coding. The final round of coding connected the categories together and four primary findings were identified: a) teachers connect culture with relationships; b) teachers yearn to learn about culturally responsive practices; c) dialogue contributes to learning and relationship building; and d) self-reflection is a key component of educator improvement.

Upon analysis of the transcripts from the PLC discussions and the final focus group, I concluded that one out of the four goals set for the improvement initiative were accomplished. The goals were:

- *Outcome Goal #1:* At the conclusion of the professional learning module on culturally responsive teaching strategies, 70% of teachers will describe two culturally responsive competencies and report how they plan to implement those strategies in their classroom.

- *Outcome Goal #2:* At the conclusion of the professional learning module on implicit bias, 70% of teachers will articulate how their racial and ethnic identity has played a role

in accessing literature and curricula and consider how those experiences have shaped their educational view regarding racially and ethnically diverse students.

- *Outcome Goal #3:* At the conclusion of the professional learning module on the establish-maintain-restore method (Cook et al., 2018), teachers will successfully demonstrate an EMR strategy to help them evaluate and reflect on relationships with students.

- *Outcome Goal #4:* At the conclusion of all professional learning modules, teachers will report the importance of intentionally creating strong TSRs.

Outcome goal one, at the conclusion of the professional learning module on culturally responsive teaching strategies, 70% of teachers will describe two culturally responsive competencies and report how they plan to implement those strategies in their classroom was not met. I drew this conclusion based on the data from the transcripts from the first PLC session and from the focus group. My analysis of the transcript data revealed that participants were not given the opportunity to describe two culturally responsive practices and discuss how they planned to implement them. Therefore, this goal was not achieved. Seventy percent of participants in this study did not describe two culturally responsive competencies, nor did they articulate how they would implement these strategies within their classroom.

Outcome goal two, at the conclusion of the professional learning module on implicit bias, 70% of teachers will articulate how their racial and ethnic identity has played a role in accessing literature and curricula and consider how those experiences have shaped their educational view regarding racially and ethnically diverse students was also not met. I drew this conclusion from the analysis of the PLC and focus group data. This data revealed that none of the participants connected how their racial and ethnic identity has played a role in accessing literature and

curricula and how those experiences have shaped their educational view regarding racially and ethnically diverse students. I tried to facilitate this connection with teachers using the excerpt from Peggy McIntosh's (1998) paper "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack," specifically pages 110 –111, and the "Accessing School Valued Discourse" checklist on page 116 of *Bridging Literacy and Equity: The Essential Guide to Social Equity Teaching* by Lazar, Edwards, and McMillion. However, teachers did not connect how their racial and ethnic identity has played a role in accessing literature and curricula and how those experiences have shaped their educational view regarding racially and ethnically diverse students.

Outcome goal three, at the conclusion of the professional learning module on the establish-maintain-restore method (Cook et al., 2018), teachers will successfully demonstrate an EMR strategy to help them evaluate and reflect on relationships with students was met. At the conclusion of the professional learning module on the establish-maintain-restore method (Cook et al., 2018), three teachers successfully demonstrated an EMR strategy (Equity Tree Reflection Tool). I drew this conclusion from analysis of the PLC transcripts and the focus group transcripts. During the PLC, reflections were provided by three teachers. A White female classroom teacher from Wonder Years Elementary described that she felt building relationships with her homeroom was much easier than her other class:

> With my homeroom, I'm with them more. For the morning, when they're coming in for breakfast. I have my first block with them, and I have science with them. Which is where more of my students have more fun, with a lot of our hands on stuff, and then I have them for second load. I feel like it's a lot easier for me to form more meaningful relationships with that group of students, because with my other group of students, I'm just teaching.

Another teacher, who teaches a span of grade levels, reflected on the relationships with her students using the tree diagram:

> I'm the AIG specialist, so I work with sixth, seventh, and eighth grade in math and in reading. And I find that this time of year especially, I'm still getting to know my sixth graders. I've worked with the seventh and eighth graders for a couple of years, so I feel like we're kind of maintaining, we're in that maintaining stage. But with my sixth graders, I'm still. Still trying to learn who they are, how they learn you know, what their likes and dislikes are (White, female, AIG specialist, Happy Days Middle School).

The same sentiments were expressed by another teacher who taught several grade spans. She felt that she developed the strongest relationships with her most difficult students:

> I'm still establishing relationships with my sixth graders, you know, at this point in the year. But when I wrote down the ones that I feel like I've really maintained a very strong relationship, I've found that they're probably the more difficult kids. They're the kids that are. The ones that are most difficult to make those relationships with. So, I just found that interesting that for me, the strongest relationships I have with my students, are the ones that are probably not easily making relationships with a lot of teachers.

Outcome goal four at the conclusion of all professional learning modules, teachers will report the importance of intentionally creating strong TSRs was not met. I drew this conclusion from analysis of the PLC transcripts and focus group, which did not reveal that teachers understood the importance of intentionally creating strong TSRs. From my analysis, it was also clear that teachers were not given the opportunity in the PLC discussions and focus group to explicitly talk about the connection between intentional relationships and overall improved outcomes for students.

LIMITATIONS

Before discussing the findings of my study, it is important to discuss the limitations for using the findings. One limitation to these findings is that they may not be generalizable or transferable to another school, district, or group of educators. The group of participants in my study were participants who volunteered to be part of this research. It is possible that less willing educator-participants might have provided different data. Additionally, the sample size was small and only two educational contexts were studied.

Another limitation is that the data collected was not sufficient for determining whether the improvement initiative goals were met. Although the data I was able to collect was valuable to our learning and process, I recommend (in a subsequent section of this paper) that more time and targeted questions should have been provided to ensure sufficient data. With respect to the PLC conversations, more time needed to be given to these discussions. Additionally, while each discussion in this study utilized a set of guiding questions, the first and third PLCs and the focus group did not adhere to the guiding questions. During the focus group, a participant monopolized the last 30 minutes of the conversation. Although, as the data collector, I take responsibility for this divergence, I did not feel that it was appropriate to extend the conversation given the agreement I had with the participants to keep them for only an hour. Honoring educators' valuable time is an important component of relationship-building. I realize that this came at a cost to the evaluation results.

Allowing participants to organically engage in conversation (without much prompting or guidance from me) also caused moments of pause in the focus group conversation and excluded the voices of some participants. If I were to do this work again, I would ask participants to

participate in a round robin fashion to ensure that all voices were heard. Furthermore, each of the discussions would be moderated more stringently, meaning I would listen more closely to the responses to see if the prompts were being answered. If not, I would redirect the conversation.

A third limitation to this study is the fluidity with which participants participated in the PLC discussions and focus group. While there were participants who participated in each of the discussions, some participants did not participate consistently in the PLC discussions or focus group. This could be due to constraints from their careers, family, or life. However, if this study were to be conducted again, participants would need to be present for all meetings. I recognize the importance of having each individual represented in the data gathered in the discussion. When one individual is absent from the discussion, it is a missing piece of data.

A final limitation to this study is the amount of time given to implement and enact this improvement initiative. Participant data may be missing due to their inability to finish the module readings in time for the PLC discussion or because not enough time was given to participants to discuss the content during the PLC sessions.

IMPLICATIONS

In this section, I provide the implications I gleaned from the data that I was able to collect and analyze. Three sections are presented with implications for a) educational leaders who are considering professional learning for improved TSRs, b) teacher preparation, and c) researchers.

Implications for Educational Leaders

Educational leaders should consider using improvement science to drive improvement within schools and within districts. As mentioned previously, improvement science is a user-centered evaluative methodology based on the premise of continuous improvement (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020; Bryk et al., 2015; Langley et al., 2009). This work demonstrates that improvement science can be used to facilitate an improvement initiative within schools using plan-do-study-act (PDSA) cycles, which are part of the improvement science framework.

The reiterative nature of the plan-do-study-act (PDSA) cycles is demonstrated in this work, and they are a valuable tool for educational leaders and their teams. These cycles, and the examination, reflection, and modification that occur within the cycles, as demonstrated in this work, allow for educational leaders and their teams to ensure that improvement initiatives and interventions are driving improvement and are not negatively impacting other areas in the process.

This work demonstrates that a segment of the establish-maintain-restore method (EMRM) related to relationship tracking can be successfully used by teachers. Teachers in this study utilized the *equity tree reflection tool* to determine their relationship status with the students in their classrooms.

Implications for Teacher Preparation

Research has shown that some preservice teaching programs are content focused and leave out intentional curricula around building relationships and culturally relevant practices (Rabin, 2013). Although it was not my area of focus, participant responses leaned heavily into this need. One of the discussions revealed that there is a gap related to teacher capacity to understand and enact CRTP. Participants spoke about this learning gap and the desire for knowledge of culturally relevant teaching practices before entering into their classrooms.

Implications for Further Research

Unless purposeful steps are taken, marginalized students will not receive the education they deserve; intentional steps must be taken for schools to become equity minded (Theoharis, 2007). Therefore, scholarship regarding cultivating TSRs with culturally responsive teaching practices, proactive relationship building strategies, and understanding of implicit bias, positionality, and identity must continue. This could potentially rectify the imbalance currently faced in schools.

Extant literature on the importance of relationship-building and some of the findings from this work suggest that continued research should focus upon teachers' ability to understand and enact culturally responsive teaching practices (CRTP). My study did not yield the intended results in this area; however, studies indicate that when these practices are utilized to fidelity that the education outcomes for all students are greatly improved (Ladson-Billings, 2001; Gay, 2018; Muhammad, 2020).

More research is warranted on the use of EMRM. This method, designed by Cook et al., is relatively new. Their study indicated that this method resulted in significant improvements in

student teacher relationships (Cook et al., 2018). Other studies have been conducted since then and have had similar results (Duong et al., 2019; Haydon & Kennedy, 2022). Another study found that when applied to targeted groups (racially, linguistically, and culturally diverse), participants responded positively to the use of the method for establishing teacher-student relationships (Duong et al., 2022). Therefore, continued research in this area could greatly benefit those seeking a framework to cultivate teacher-student relationships in their schools.

Finally, while my study did not yield the intended results, extant literature substantiates the need for further research in this area. In the United States, White female teachers represent the majority of educators in schools and are often teaching a highly diverse group of students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). Research also indicates that some of those teachers hold erroneous beliefs about racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse students (Peterson et al., 2016; Inan-Kaya & Rubies-Davies, 2021)

Social justice work is built upon respect, care, recognition, and empathy and is meant to alter broken systems to advance the inherent human rights deserved by all who serve or are served by these systems (Theoharis, 2007). My disquisition work seeks to embrace social justice educational leadership (SJEL). One tenant of SJEL is addressing and eliminating marginalization in schools (Sarid, 2021; Theoharis, 2007). SJEL also calls for leaders to be relationship-driven (Furman, 2012). The work demonstrated in this disquisition was meant to build the relationship between teachers and students.

Recommendation #1: Consider Using the EMRM Method

Using the work outlined in my disquisition could provide a way to transform the culture of a school, especially the use of the establish-maintain-restore method (EMRM; Cook et al., 2018). This area of my improvement could possibly result in furthering the enactment of teacher-student relationships and potentially eliminate marginalization. Research conducted by other scholars does suggest that EMRM is an effective method for cultivating teacher-student relationships, even with students from diverse backgrounds (Cook et al., 2018; Duong et al., 2019; Haydon & Kennedy, 2022; Duong et al., 2022)

Recommendation #2: Give the Work More Time

Another lesson learned from this process is that more time needs to be given to the work outlined in my disquisition, specifically module content and PLC discussions length. In the future, it would be important to consider holding multiple sessions or rescheduling sessions based on participant attendance to ensure that all participants are represented in the data. When participants were missing from discussions, it was difficult to gauge their understanding of the

content. It was also a challenge to understand whether participants understood how different aspects of the content are related. Greater focus needs to be placed on the content covered in my disquisition work (CRTP, proactive relationship building strategies, and implicit bias, positionality, and identity). It is my recommendation that educational leaders only cover one module per school year. This would allow for extended examination of the content and for discussion of the content to occur frequently and more often. I hypothesize that if this were to occur a much larger impact and shift in school culture would be felt by the teachers and students, leading to more equitable outcomes for all students.

Recommendation #3: PLCs are Meaningful to Adult Learners

PLCs are meaningful and an effective use of time. These conversations furthered my learning as an educational leader on the importance of creating opportunities for educators to work and learn in collaboration with one another.

The PLCs were designed using Learning Forward's *Standards for Professional Learning* (Learning Forward, 2022). I chose this framework because it equity driven, is transformational, and includes inquiry-based learning. While my work only demonstrated that one of the four goals set for this improvement initiative were met, transformation did occur. This transformation is demonstrated in the additional findings from this study, which show teachers connected culturally responsive practices to relationship building. Teachers also understood that they had gaps in their learning related to culturally responsive practices, and those gaps need to be filled to better serve students. Teachers also spoke about how dialogue contributes to learning and relationships. Finally, teachers understood that self-reflection is a key component to educator improvement. These findings could potentially be transformational when enacted in classrooms and lead to improved outcomes for all students.

Recommendation #4: Become Familiar with Improvement Science and Consider Using It

As a scholar practitioner who engaged in scholarship utilizing improvement science, I recommend that educational leaders become consider using with this process as an inquiry strategy. Improvement science is user-centered and based on continuous improvement. Improvement science is an effective way to lead improvement. It goes beyond setting SMART goals and monitoring data related to those goals. Improvement science engages stakeholders and creates accountability. The use of improvement science in this work allowed for stakeholders (the design team) to identify multiple measures (driver, balancing, and process) for driving improvement, reflect upon the data, and refine the improvement based on data from those measures.

CONCLUSION

Extant research and the limited data from this work suggest that collaborative professional learning intended to cultivate strong teacher-student relationships is critical. Moreover, strong relationships are a necessary foundation for the success of students of color. White teachers must bridge cultural gaps with students of color and enact culturally relevant practices so that students feel recognized and valued.

This need is widespread as schools today are more racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse than ever before (United States Department of Education, 2022). Yet, White teachers still comprise 79% of the teachers serving students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). Previous scholarship suggests that some of these teachers enter classrooms unprepared to teach racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse students, which hinders such students from accessing education in the same manner as their White peers (Kayser et al., 2016; Banks, 2013; Caspe et al., 2011; Coleman-King et al., 2021).

This disquisition presents a professional learning framework built on theory and scholarship meant to proactively cultivate teacher-student relationships. While the results and findings only demonstrate that one of the four goals was met, there were additional findings that shed light on this work and provide some useful information. If the opportunity gap forced upon students of color is to be removed, it is imperative that educators continue to explore relationship-building through culturally relevant pedagogy in both research and practice.

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APPENDIX A

Participants Excerpts (PLC Discussion, Focus Group, Field Notes)

Series Number	Category	Theme	Excerpts
1.	Teacher Connect Culture with Relationships	Connection using CRTP	*Teacher chose a culturally responsive text incidentally and watched it change her relationship with her students and her class—* "it really changed, the course of my class and my relationship with those students because it, it really fit where they, where lots of those students were. Even the ones, the students, who necessarily couldn't relate to the conversations that we had. I think it helped them to build a different level of respect for the students in the class, that really could relate to that main character." (White, Female, Assistant Principal, Happy Days Middle School)
		Student's sense of belonging	"We definitely need to be more inclusive. and teach differently so that the students that maybe don't have the same experiences as the majority of the students in the school, have opportunities that they may not have had before, so that they can feel a part of and feel valued" (White, Female, AIG Specialist, Happy Days Middle School).
2.	Teacher's Yearn for CRTP	Lack of CRTP in Preservice Training	" I don't really feel like in college they prepare you for all of the cultures or groups that you might experience" (White, Female, Classroom Teacher, Wonder Years Elementary).
		Responsibility for one's own learning (CRTP)	" I don't really feel like they really taught you the things about the cultures that you may need to know to be successful in your classroom, and that can really change depending on, the population that you serve. So it's kind of one of those ongoing things that you have to learn about on your own" (White, Female, Classroom Teacher, Wonder Years Elementary).
3.	Dialogue Contributes to Learning and Relationship Building	Dialogue with students	"The kids who, to me, it's easier to form those relationships with, and it kind of surprised me, when I really started thinking of those names. Because it was mostly boys who have behavior issues, and that get in trouble the most, because I'm typically talking to them the most" (White, Female, Classroom Teacher, Wonder Years Elementary).

		Dialogue with students	Something that stood out to me was the importance of dialogue to truly understand how students feel. Misconceptions can occur if we simply say "I understand how you feel." We need to take the time to really understand what is going on in order to help a student emotionally (White, Female Classroom Teacher, Happy Days Middle School).
4.	Self-Reflection is a Key Component to Educator Improvement	Reflecting on special programs	"I'm in a lot of different classrooms, one of the things with our program is, we don't have a lot of diversity with the AIG students that are in our program." (White, Female, AIG Specialist, Happy Days Middle School)
		Reflecting on barriers to caring relationships	"You are so consumed with imparting the knowledge and making sure that they are conversing in your discipline or subject area. I'll speak for myself that, oftentimes, I am so, for lack of a better word, caught in making sure that they are totally adept at the areas that I'm teaching or whatever that I don't tend to focus that much on the relationship building. As much as I should, admittedly, and there's something lost with that." (Black, Female, Classroom Teacher, Happy Days Middle School)