STRONG TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS: A MORE EQUITABLE WAY FORWARD

A disquisition presented to the faculty of the Graduate School of
Western Carolina University in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education

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April 2023

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to all who have made this journey possible. Thank you, Western Carolina University, for providing the opportunity, for pushing my thinking, and challenging me with subject matter that carries such weight; weight that exists far beyond the confines of academia. I look forward to proudly displaying my terminal degree and serving as an ambassador of such a distinguished program.

Thank you to the faculty who pushed me to be my best with every class, assignment, presentation, and counseling session. When we began this program, our world was quickly becoming a different place. We were all struggling to stay afloat in uncharted waters. I certainly did not expect that I wouldn't see the members of our cohort or my instructors in person until my second year in the program. Alas, we stayed the course and learned what it means to be a scholar-practitioner in even the most challenging of circumstances. I will always feel a certain degree of triumph for pushing through such a trying time and will be forever indebted to my professors, classmates, and family for supporting me through it all.

I offer special thanks to my disquisition chair, Dr. Weiler, Dr. Crow, my methodologist, and Dr. Virtue who spent hours editing this paper, even during her time off. I am forever grateful and will never be able to adequately thank you. Your availability and willingness to answer my questions (no matter how ridiculous) were paramount to my success. Dr. Weiler, I am specifically thankful for your wisdom and for the masterful way you coaxed me into getting my thoughts organized in a cogent, digestible manner. Most importantly, I'm thankful for your guidance and patience, particularly at the end when I was in a time crunch and you turned around edits at the speed of light. Dr. Crow, you guided me to make data visualization relevant and

engaging. You always brought a very human side to my work and helped me step back, remember to enjoy the process, and certainly to laugh. I believe that it was not only didactic talent the three of you offered, but most importantly, a genuine passion for what you do. This work matters to you and that was clear at every turn. Thank you to Dr. Pinter for graciously agreeing to serve as my external committee member.

Thank you to my team members at William Lenoir Middle. Your willingness to help me bring these ideas to life was immeasurably helpful. The engagement I saw and the desire to apply what we learned through our studies and discussions was truly gratifying. I look forward to continuing that journey long after I complete this degree and to being catalysts for change in an educational arena that so desperately needs it.

DEDICATION

With love and gratitude, I dedicate this disquisition to my family and mentors. Thank you, Brook, for agreeing to support me through this program, knowing full-well it was going to cause you to be a single mother for the better part of three years. You consistently demonstrated your commitment to me with every additional responsibility you took on. Thank you for believing in me and for always taking time to express how proud you were, even when I didn't act like the person you married. Your love and willingness to take on whatever was necessary is what made this all possible. To Ella, thank you for reading research articles with me and expressing that "this doctorate thing doesn't really seem that hard." Not many 8-year-olds would be that optimistic. You always kept me on track, and I will never forget your note that reminded me it was time to get back to work on my "Doctor-It." Your boundless positivity never ceases to amaze and inspire me. I love you to the moon and back. Lily, thanks for opening doors during Zoom meetings with exuberance, only to make your patented surprise face and slowly backing away. I could always count on you to remind me not to take things too seriously. Your sweet spirit was sometimes the only thing that kept me going. You'll always be my girl.

Thank you, dad, for quietly believing in me behind the scenes. You never seemed surprised by my accomplishments, but still made sure to keep me focused and grounded. The lessons you taught me from an early age are what gave me the drive to always pursue more. You consistently reminded me that if I got a "good education and a good job," I could do anything. Thank you for teaching me work ethic and to never shy away from a challenge. Without you, none of this would have been possible. Mom, thank you for always being there. You have always been my biggest cheerleader. Your pronouncement when I was a senior in high school that you never saw me as "college material" was one of the driving factors behind my pursuit of

academia. I think I've finally proven your assertion to be wrong! Through it all, I never questioned your love and support. Thanks for always being there. To my sister, Joy, thank you for teaching me to value education. You always had a passion for learning and a tireless drive to achieve. I know you always aspired to achieve a terminal degree, but sometimes God has different plans. I dedicate this work to you because I know if you weren't sick, you would be right beside me and preparing to walk across the stage.

For every teacher, professor, supervisor, and mentor, I thank you. None of this would have happened, had it not been for your guidance and the potential you saw in me. Thank you for pushing me to challenge myself and for instilling in me the belief that I could achieve anything. Thank you, Mrs. Luce for telling me as a third grader that nothing was impossible. Thank you for showing me what it really means to be a teacher. Thank you, Dr. Candy Beal for meeting with me as a freshman at N.C. State and convincing me to go into teaching. You changed my life forever. Thank you, Ross Rumbaugh, for being a remarkable leader and for encouraging me to advance my career into school administration. Thank you, Dr. Phipps, for being the best example and mentor I could have ever asked for; you have accommodated my every need throughout this process. Thank you for continuing to teach me valuable lessons every time we speak. Finally, thank you to Robert Semple for showing me that compassion and humanity supersede all other facets of education. I will forever cling to this premise and appreciate you more than you'll ever know.

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ABSTRACT

STRONG TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS: A MORE EQUITABLE WAY FORWARD

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Western Carolina University (April, 2023)

Director: Dr. Jess Weiler

This paper utilizes a disquisition model (Lomotey, 2018) wherein a scholar-practitioner examined the process and outcomes of teacher professional learning that engaged culturally responsive teaching (Bondy, 2007; Brown, 2004; Chang & Viesca, 2022; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2001; Lambeth & Smith, 2016), implicit bias (Mason et al., 2017; Post et al., 2020; Wright et al., 2022), educator positionality (Ortiz et al., 2018), and the Establish-Maintain-Restore method (Cook et al., 2018) to improve teacher-student relationships The field of education has only recently begun exploring the idea that student performance (academic and social/behavioral) is directly connected to teacher-student relationships (TSRs). To build teacher capacity to cultivate strong TSRs, an improvement team used the Learning Forward standards for professional learning to design learning modules and opportunities. . Learning Forward is a framework for adult learning that is research-based, rooted in equitable outcomes, and provides the opportunity for every student to excel (Learning Forward, 2022). Using improvement science (Crow et al., 2019; Langley et al., 2009) and mixed-methods research, the scholar-practitioner assessed the overall effectiveness of the project using pre- and post-survey data. We sought to answer the question “Did the improvement model build teacher capacity to enact caring relationships through culturally responsive teaching and understanding of implicit bias/positionality?” The data show that we achieved that goal. We also sought to know the efficacy of each professional learning module in the areas of design, facilitation, and content.

Results related to the post-surveys after each module showed improvement with each iteration in all three areas. All participants agreed or strongly agreed that the PLC was a good use of their time, was relevant to their practice, contained useful modeling examples, and increased capacity to improve their practice. Team members also noted that the sessions advanced their ability to implement culturally relevant teaching practices.

(This paper is part of a group disquisition project and shares content with a second paper titled, Creating Strong Teacher-Student Relationships to Close Opportunity Gap by Kelsey Adams.)

THE DISQUISITION

Rather than a traditional doctoral dissertation, Western Carolina University requires a "disquisition" as their capstone. The disquisition follows a dissertation-in-practice model wherein the author serves as both a scholar who analyzes improvement efforts and a practitioner—one who participates as a member or leader of the design team enacting the improvement efforts. Developed using the principles outlined by the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED), the disquisition prepares educators for appropriate and specific practices that address problems of inequity within the field of education (Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate CPED, 2022).

The WCU faculty define this process as "a formal, problem-based discourse or treatise in which a problem of practice is identified, described, analyzed, and addressed in depth, including methods and strategies used to bring about change and to assess whether change is an improvement" (Lomotey, 2018). Using improvement science methodologies, the scholar practitioner engaged in plan-do-study-act (PDSA) cycles as a standard for measuring the effectiveness of the chosen improvement initiative (Bryk et al., 2017).

A Note on Terminology

In this paper, I describe three different actors or group of actors. When I use "I" I am referencing work that I have done exclusively. When I reference "the design team" I am referencing the team of educators involved in designing and enacting the improvement work. I served as a "co-facilitator" of this team along with another WCU doctoral candidate, Kelsey Adams. This paper is part of a group disquisition project and shares content with a second paper titled, *Creating Strong Teacher-Student Relationships to Close Opportunity Gap* by Kelsey Adams

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 (Mason et al., 2017; Roorda et al., 2011; 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) and as school trajectory advances and academic demands increase, the affective component is often de-prioritized in favor of subject-based content (Collins et al., 2017).

There is an expressed need for teachers to connect with all their students, especially students who have been marginalized because of their class, race, ability or otherwise (Roorda, 2011). Students who come from White, more affluent, connected families often have relationships with school staff and school system leadership which provides them with privilege, access, and opportunity not afforded to marginalized students. (Gay, 2000; Gay, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Legette et al., 2020; Scales 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 rooted in the "ethic of care" principles (Lumpkin, 2007; Noddings, 1992; Owens & Ennis, 2005; Rabin, 2013; Rabin & Smith, 2016). Relatedly, research supports the use of culturally responsive pedagogy (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Sleeder, 2011) as an affirming practice especially for students of color. A third area of research suggests that teacher awareness (and reduction of)

implicit biases toward students and families can also positively impact TSRs (Mason et al., 2017; Post et al., 2020; Silva-Laya et al., 2019; Wright et al., 2022). It is critical that we lean into this scholarship as we consider the history, the role, and the impact of student-teacher relationships in the classroom. How did we create an educational system without deep consideration for relationship-development between teachers and students?

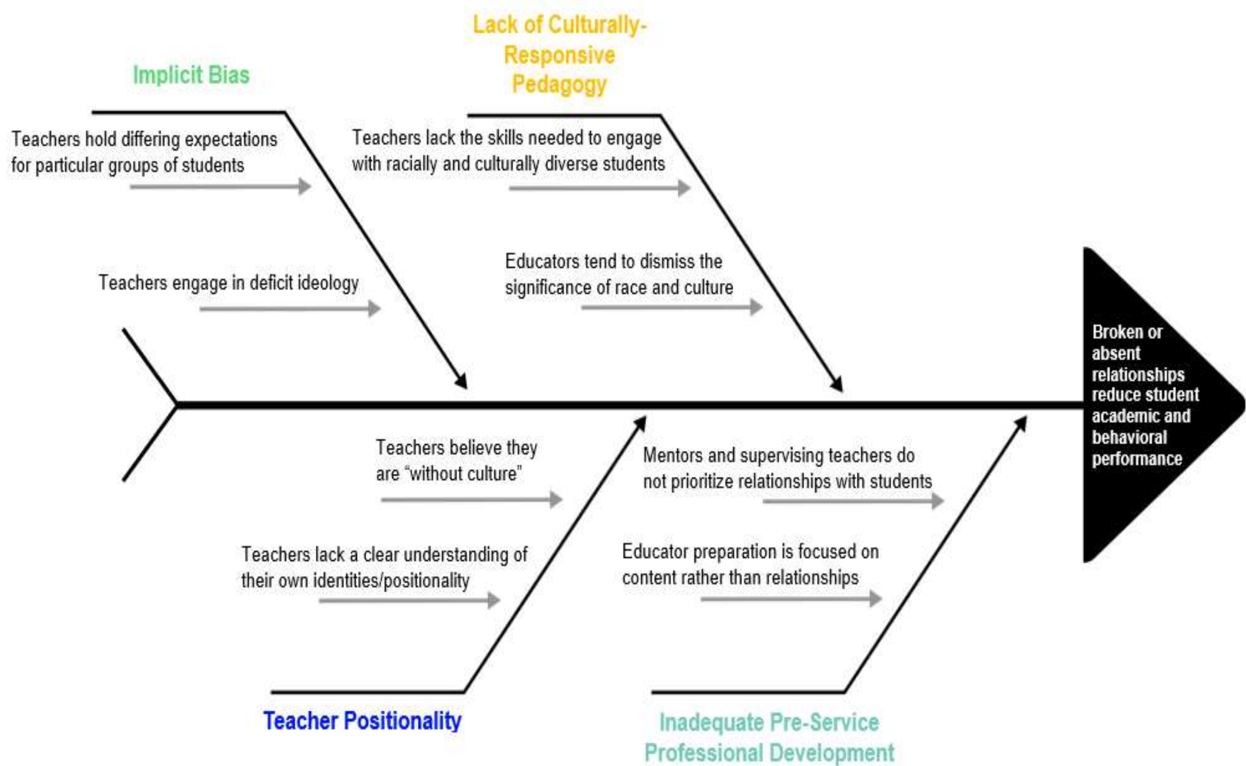
CAUSAL ANALYSIS

In this section, I provide insight into the causes of the problem. 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 design 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: that broken or absent relationships negatively impact students' sense of well-being which adversely affects academic and behavioral performance. On the other hand, when students feel valued and supported, they are far more likely to engage with all facets of school. Engaged students are successful students.

The team used an Ishikawa diagram (1986) or fishbone diagram to facilitate a root cause analysis process. We utilized this figure to guide our thinking and analysis; and 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



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 I do not blame teachers for the lack of strong TSRs. I locate the cause of the problem with the systems that prepare and develop teachers. I 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 nor have they created the conditions necessary to cultivate strong TSRs (Gay, 2000; Goldstein & Freedman, 2003; Kim & Shallert, 2011; Sleeter, 2001).

When performing the causal analysis, I identified five potential contributing 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.

Inadequate Preservice & Professional Development

In the United States, educator preparation and professional development is often guided by content-focused standards (e.g., reading, math, science, etc.) deprioritizing relationship-building and obscuring a preservice teachers' 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

[1] Positionality is the notion that personal values, views, and location in time and space influence how one understands the world. In this context, gender, race, class, and other aspects of identities are indicators of social and spatial positions and are not fixed, given qualities. Positions act on the knowledge a person has about things, both material and abstract. Consequently, knowledge is the product of a specific position that reflects particular places and spaces (Sanchez, 2010). Retrieved from https://sk.sagepub.com/reference/geography/n913.xml

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 both teachers and students (Blad, 2017). Although this trend is changing for the positive, educators are just beginning to understand what "caring" in classrooms looks like and how to include multiple cultural perspectives in that understanding.

As a side but adjoining note, preservice teachers are greatly influenced by the relationships they experience 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 (2000) 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).

To do this effectively, requires a change in teaching practices. Culturally responsive teaching is defined as using the "cultural knowledge, prior experiences, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning more relevant and accessible" (Gay, 2000). Too often, students' cultures are overlooked, students are misjudged, or they are held to a lower standard because their teachers do not seek to understand their culture and how that might manifest in the classroom (Griner & Stewart, 2012). Teachers may not understand behaviors or the sources of behaviors; may misinterpret (dis)engagement with class activities and the curriculum; or may blame students for poor academic performance. The negative effects of uniform teaching (not culturally responsive/engaging only White culture) on racially, culturally, ethnically, and linguistically diverse (RCELD) students continues and often stems from a cultural divide. As previously mentioned, 87% of teachers are White and female, while one of every three students in the United States are of a racial or ethnic minority. This disproportionality (cultural mismatch) underscores the need to train all teachers in culturally responsive teaching practices.

Pedagogy that Disempowers

Some teachers utilize pedagogical practices that treat students unfairly, thus disrupting relationships. (Cook-Harvey; Darling-Hammond; Feldman, 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 students' individual interests (Rabin, 2013). Standardized testing is another example wherein collaboration is discouraged in favor of competitive and individualistic dispositions (Rabin, 2013). A third example is the use of traditional grading practices. Traditional grading practices have restricted educators from developing more humanizing and valid practices to evaluate student progress (Feldman, 2018; 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. The current system perpetuates an environment in which traditionally marginalized students have a much harder time making connections and tend to fall behind students of the dominant culture group (Grinder & Stewart, 2012). To reach all students and to provide equitable learning opportunities, educators and educational institutions will have to acknowledge their role in perpetuating the problem and take the necessary actions to address it.

Culturally responsive teaching is a critical practice and one that will play a pivotal role in closing the opportunity gap (Rubin et al., 2016).

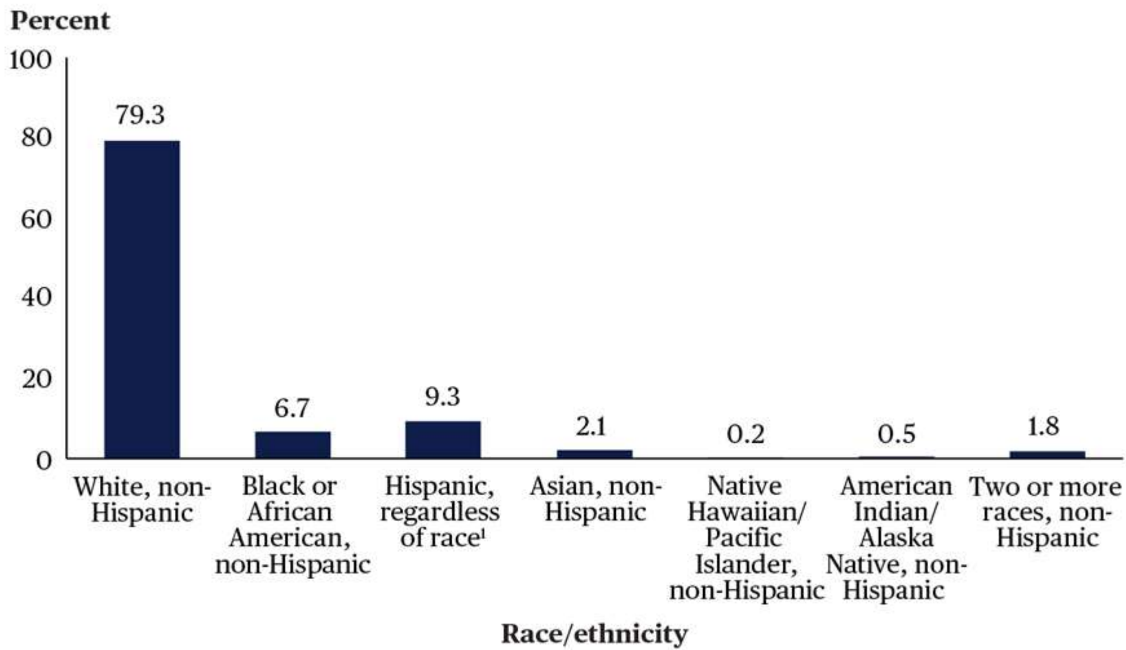
Despite the actual diversity of identities across the US and within its communities, many schools continue to reflect White, European, and middle-class viewpoints, values, and ways of being (Gay, 2013; Kayser et al., 2021; Sleeter, 2016,). The dominant culture is so deeply ingrained in the structures, 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 important to note, however, that some teacher preparation programs have committed to a social justice orientation and do prepare teachers to be culturally responsive (Sleeter, 2016). However, as stated by Harris et al. (2020), teacher education still appears to play a role in maintaining racial disparities.

A corollary to this disparity is the underrepresentation of teachers and school staff who share the same racial/ethnic identity with their students. A report from the United States Department of Education (2020) shows that in the years 2017-2018, the teaching workforce was made up of 79% White teachers (See Figure 2). This is particularly salient in schools where students’ racial makeup is more diverse (See Figure 3). The racial, ethnic, and cultural differences between teachers and their students can potentially interfere with academic and social outcomes and create barriers between the school and its students and families (Banks, 2013; Caspe et al., 2011; Kayser et al., 2016). This divide is the result of a “cultural mismatch” wherein lower-socioeconomic-status and nonwhite students are at a distinct disadvantage because

teachers and schools tend to embrace White middle-class standards of acceptable behavior and academic ability. White teachers tend to view non-white students through the lens of racial stereotypes and prejudice. Most often, this results in lowered expectations and an assumed disinterest in school, all of which lead to inequitable outcomes for students of color. (McGrady & Reynolds, 2013). On the other end of the spectrum, students who share socioeconomic or racial/ethnic backgrounds with their teachers tend to have better behavioral outcomes and academic grades.

Figure 2

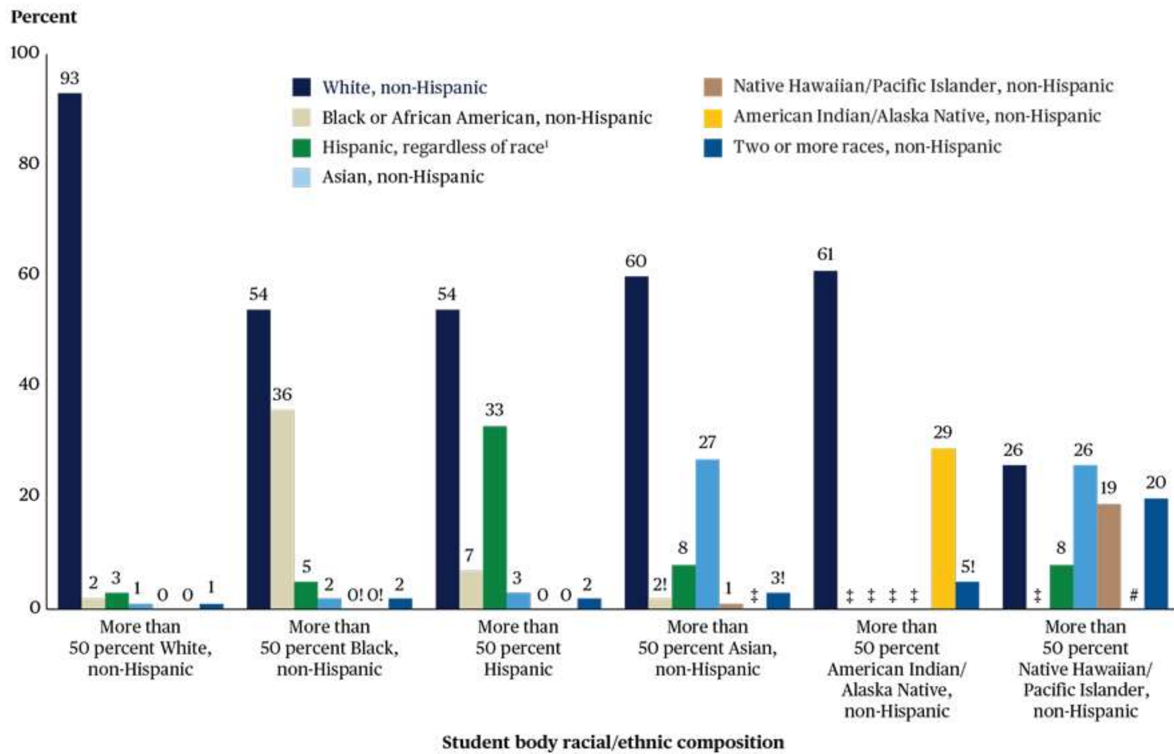
Teacher Race/Ethnicity



Note. From *Race and Ethnicity of Public-School Teachers and Their Students,* National Center for Education Statistics, 2020 (https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2020/2020103/index.asp)

Figure 3

Student Body Racial/Ethnic Composition as Compared to Teachers



Note. From *Race and Ethnicity of Public School Teachers and Their Students,* National Center for Education Statistics, 2020 (https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2020/2020103/index.asp)

Teacher Positionality to Students, Families, & Communities

Current systems have failed to build the capacity of our teachers to create and enact systems that meet the needs of a wide range of students across multiple and intersecting identities (Chen & Phillips, 2018; Post et al., 2020). *School Leadership and Racism: An Ecological Perspective* (2018) posits 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, nor how this influences their

relationships with students. Research shows that White, English speaking, female, middle-class teachers 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 that we recognize how our own identities and positionality influence the relationships and academic outcomes of our students.

While it is important that teachers understand the background of their students, it is equally important that they understand their own identity and positionality (Mason et al., 2017; Roorda et al., 2011; Scales et al., 2020). In the United States, the demographic profile of a teacher or preservice teacher candidate reflects that of European American, middle-class, monolingual, white female, who may have little sustained or substantive experience with people of color (Gay & Kirkland, 2010; Sleeter, 2017). Many students attend schools that are comprised of members of the same ethnic group. This is most prevalent in urban settings where students of color make up most of the student body (Gay & Howard, 2000). Additionally, many teachers practicing within these regions do not share the same residential backgrounds of 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, having no culture.” Ladson-Billings challenged their characterization asserting that these 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, White

culture. 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 when they are presented with the diverse and unfamiliar reality, views of students can turn negative or encourage a deficit- ideology. (Add Gorski here; 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 groups of students, the ways 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).

One has a deficit ideology (Gorski, 2010) if they justify outcome inequalities by pointing to “deficiencies” (typically innate) in marginalized communities (Gorski, 2010). This stems from a conditioned worldview in which certain groups of people are asked to assimilate to the dominant culture. It is a maintenance of a social order and construct that justifies outcome inequalities.

This conditioning and molding into the status quo are perpetuated in schools. Assumptions are often made of students based on their socioeconomic status, race, religion, gender, first-language, ability, and sexuality among others. These assumptions are typically inaccurate and focus the problem on the student and family, not the institution. One such example is the assumption that low-income families are disinterested in their child(ren)'s education. This erroneous assumption is often fueled by the parents' inability to be involved at school in the ways the educators at the school expect. However, a parent's absence at a school event (e.g., open house) could be the result of a lack of transportation or a conflicting schedule with work. Rather than blaming parents or ascribing to preconceived notions, it would serve educators well to examine the structural factors/deficits that contribute to the problem. This can have a profound effect on the relationships that teachers are able to develop and sustain with their students and families.

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) 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). This knowledge is often internalized and negatively impacts the students' sense of self-efficacy for learning. 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).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

In this section I include the theoretical frameworks that undergird my research including. critical race theory and critical whiteness studies; both are described below, including their relationship to this work.

Critical Race Theory

Kimbelé Crenshaw, who coined the term Critical Race Theory and is considered one of the foremost experts on the topic contends that CRT is difficult to define in simple terms. In an article by George (2021), she notes that critical race theory

> …cannot be confined to a static and narrow definition but is considered to be an evolving and malleable practice. It critiques how the social construction of race and institutionalized racism perpetuate a racial caste system that relegates people of color to the bottom tiers. CRT also recognizes that race intersects with other identities, including sexuality, gender identity, and others. CRT recognizes that racism is not a bygone relic of the past. Instead, it acknowledges that the legacy of slavery, segregation, and the imposition of second-class citizenship on Black Americans and other people of color continue to permeate the social fabric of this nation (p. 1).

This holds particularly true for the policies and practices impacting people who are experiencing poverty and persons of color (Capper, 2019). Leaning into Derrick Bell and Kimberly Crenshaw, Capper describes the six tenets of CRT: permanence of racism, whiteness as property, counter storytelling and majoritarian narratives, interest convergence, critique of liberalism, and intersectionality. To begin, the theory posits that racism is permanent meaning it will never be eradicated in society; instead, it takes another form but upholds White supremacy. It also

contends that racism has a conscious and unconscious way in American life. The second tenet is the idea of Whiteness as property. Whiteness has racialized privilege wherein White racial identity ensures allocation of private and public benefits. Next, CRT maintains the need for counter storytelling against majoritarian narratives. Counter storytelling aims to cast doubt on the validity of the accepted narrative and draws attention to the realities and narratives of Black, Brown, Indigenous, and other People of Color (Capper, 2015). Tenet four examines interest convergence. This suggests that significant progress for Blacks is only achieved when their goals and aspirations are consistent with that of their White contemporaries. Fifth, is the critique of liberalism which challenges the concept of neutrality evidenced in laws that uphold color blindness and meritocracy. Finally, Critical Race Theory attests to the idea of intersectionality. Intersectionality is the acknowledgement that people have discriminatory experiences because of multiple identities. For example, a Black woman will encounter double discrimination on the basis of both her race and her gender. Using the six tenets as a framework, educators can work toward the identification of racist policies and practices.

Critical Whiteness Studies

Critical Whiteness studies is based upon the work of researchers from various disciplines who seek to investigate the phenomenon of Whiteness; how Whiteness is used, transmitted, maintained, and impacts the relationship between races (Matias & Mackey, 2016). Giroux (1997) reiterates the works of bell hooks saying that in research Whites are willing to analyze how they are perceived by Blacks but do not analyze how Whiteness is a social mechanism that has been used to mask, produce, maintain, and regulate power.

Teachers who are White, middle-class, and do not see themselves as part of a culture (White culture) rarely involve themselves in critical self-reflection about their positionality

toward others who identify differently. This blindness to Whiteness tends to negatively impact students of color. (Ladson-Billings, 2001; Thorsteinson, 2018). Being White is not merely about biology, it is about an entrenched system of power and privilege. In our society, people with ethnic and cultural identities outside of the dominant group may find themselves choosing practices of Whiteness over their own cultural ways of knowing and being because the rejection of Whiteness comes at a significant cost (Ladson-Billings, 2001). Teachers (particularly White teachers) need to understand the concept of Whiteness to create a classroom and school setting that includes curriculum and pedagogical practices that recognize and actively engage all student's cultural values and practices. It is imperative that teachers consciously seek ways to serve all students starting with a lens that goes beyond one cultural way of knowing.

LOCAL CONTEXT

In this section I include background information on the school and community where I completed my improvement initiative. I conducted the improvement work at a rural middle school in Western North Carolina: Happy Days Middle School (HDM) (pseudonym). With a racially diverse student population, I saw a clear and distinct need to work with teachers to learn how to strengthen relationships with students, especially those who have different cultural experiences. Below, the context of HDM is discussed, including a description of the community, basic demographics, and a presentation of the data related to the problem at hand

Happy Days Middle

Happy Days Middle School serves 6th through 8th grade students and is embedded into a relatively small city of around 18,000 people (US Census Bureau, 2022). It is a Title I, federally funded school due to the high number of students from low-wealth families. (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%). The surrounding community is relatively diverse and similarly divided with a White population of 72%, a Black population of 12.5%, a multi-racial population of 6%, and a Latinx population of 9.5% (US Census Bureau, 2022).

Happy Days Middle draws from a district that consists of mostly upper-middle class families (mostly White) and lower income families (mostly Black). White families and Black families live in separate neighborhoods often divided by racial lines. Many of the Black students and families at Happy Days live in subsidized housing and use public transportation. Conversely, most White students live in affluent areas and have additional means.

History and Review of The Problem at Happy Days

Students of color have consistently underperformed academically at Happy Days. While the school (as an aggregate) has traditionally performed well on standardized tests, students of color have not. In the 2021 – 2022 academic year, only 18.1% of Black students and 30.3% of Latinx students met expected academic growth. Though White students also underperformed at 41.1% (NC School Report Card, 2022), there is still a marked difference. Happy Days has gone to great lengths to improve academic outcomes for their students. They have implemented Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (NC DPI, 2023) which is intended to target specific deficits for students in the areas of academics and behavior. Educators also regularly review student performance data. However, educators have not attended to the data associated with non-White group performance. The federal government requires demographic reporting, and the school district holds and provides those data. However, Happy Days Middle has historically looked only at academic performance overall and implemented remediation/enrichment opportunities to help all students meet proficiency. The school has not engaged in any initiative to intentionally target the achievement gaps or to improve teacher-student relationships.

Accordingly, I believed that this school was a perfect site for implementing the improvement initiative. Moreover, I believed it was an opportunity to grow with my design team and the participants. As a school leader, I consistently seek to do what is best for my students. When looking at the data, it seemed obvious that we were not paying close enough attention to minoritized students. I must make every attempt to learn and understand the challenges these students face and acknowledge the role our school plays in perpetuating inequities.

The schools alone are not responsible for this situation. State and federal government policies have played a role. Involvement of the federal government in the affairs of local school

districts continues to manacle many public-school units. Even though the federal government allocates money and resources into states to assist with public education costs, the No Child Left Behind Act has left an existing imprint focusing schools on improving standardized tests scores (No Child Left Behind Act [NCLB], 2001). While standardized tests may have value, placing sole focus on them precludes states, districts, schools, and teachers from focusing on other areas of need, like TSR development, for example. After the NCLB legislation, the "Every Student Succeeds Act" was introduced (Every Student Succeeds Act [ESSA], 2015). ESSA was designed to ensure a quality education for all students and was aimed toward equity and improving outcomes for marginalized students. This legislation attempts to address the previously unrecognized disparities impacting students experiencing poverty, minoritized students, students who receive special education services, and those learning English as a second language. ESSA afforded states slightly more autonomy than did NCLB allowing them to decide on assessment measures for their schools if they fell within the framework provided by the federal government (Mathis & Trujillo, 2016). While focusing on something like TSRs would be far too granular for federal legislation, it would be helpful if federal and state legislation to left room for states to do so. Within ESSA, there are sections that emphasize the creation of a positive school climate and providing students with the supports they need to succeed academically and socially. Certainly, strong TSRs are a means to such ends. The law also includes provisions to support students' social-emotional well-being that includes funding for mental health services and resources for the implementation of positive behavior interventions and supports.

Though it is important to note the role of the federal government and its impact on public education, most of the public-school funding and regulations come from state-level government. In North Carolina, The power lies across three groups: a) the State Board of Education (SBE)

which sets policies and ensures the allocation of resources provided by the General Assembly legislation; the General Assembly, which sets policies and allocates funds through legislation; And the Governor's Office which influences policy, proposes initiatives, and exercises veto power over the General Assembly's legislation. The last purveyor of power is the Department of Public Instruction which is responsible for carrying out the directives of the SBE and the General Assembly. DPI is also responsible for adhering to all federal and state requirements including testing, accountability, curriculum, state licensure, and personnel issues. These state agencies play a vital role in public school operations and ensuring equity and equality (Public School Forum Of North Carolina, 2022).

It is important to briefly note the present political climate that is impacting public education in the state of North Carolina and could lean into improvement efforts that focus on improved outcomes for marginalized students. There has been a tremendous pushback on the inclusion of critical race theory in schools. To be clear, CRT is not taught in K-12 schools. It is a legal framework for analysis used in graduate programs. However, it has been mischaracterized to serve political purposes and fuel a "culture war." As recent as February of 2023, the NC House of Representatives is reviewing a bill (HB 187) that would ban public schools from teaching that systemic racism exists. This is in direct contradiction to a system that claims to ensure equity and equality. Much of the 2022 mid-term election was rooted in anti-CRT views and how to keep it out of North Carolina Schools. There is now a bill- a formal policy that prohibits CRT in North Carolina. The bill notes that North Carolina teachers are prohibited from promoting concepts that suggest America is racist or that people are inherently racist or sexist (for example). It also includes language that says an individual, solely by virtue of his or her race or sex, bears no responsibility for actions committed in the past by other members of the same

race or sex (Childress, 2023). Pending legislation, such as HB 187 will make equity work challenging in this state, but it does not reduce the need for it.

My Positionality: Scholar-Practitioner

Part of taking responsibility is acknowledging my identities and positionality. I am a White, English-speaking, non-disabled, middle-class male. As a result, I am limited in my understanding of the experiences of those who identify differently. I must seek input and participation from school and community members across identities to truly represent our students and families. I must also recognize my role as a principal. I have a significant amount of decision-making power and my role as a supervisor can influence those around me. I will keep this power differential in mind as I facilitate the design team's improvement work and collect evaluation data from teacher participants.

THEORY OF IMPROVEMENT

Leaning into the research literature, I posited the following theory of improvement to guide the implementation and evaluation of our 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 with students. Although it is too early to analyze the student outcome data (whether relationships have improved in ways that impact academic performance), I hope that this increase in teacher capacity and efficacy will result in students' increased sense of belonginess and engagement with learning (my ultimate aim).

An Improvement Initiative to Build Stronger Teacher-Student Relationships

In this section, I present the improvement methods and process. I include a description of the design team, drivers for change, research supporting the improvement work, and a driver diagram.

Design Team

A design team is utilized to address problems and enact improvement efforts within the organizational system. It is made up of key stakeholders within and surrounding the organization that will develop and guide the improvement initiative. A design team needs to represent various parts of the organization giving voice to all stakeholders (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020). Therefore, the design team needs to be composed of those who are closest to the problem and those who have a bird's eye view of the problem (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020).

For this initiative, a design team was established during the summer of 2022. The design team was composed of a third and fourth grade teacher from Wonder Years Elementary, a sixth-

grade teacher from Happy Days Middle School, and the social worker from Happy Days Middle. Two design team facilitators including myself (principal of HDM) and another doctoral student (school counselor at WYE). Kelsey and I worked on this project jointly. These individuals were encouraged (and agreed to volunteer) based upon 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

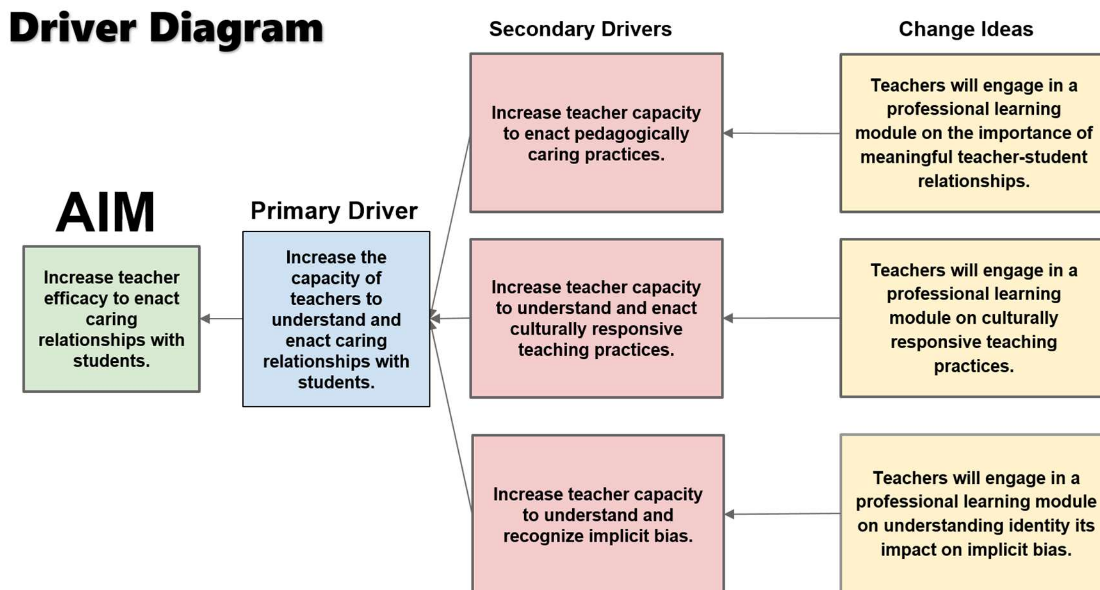
In this section, I provide our design team's driver diagram which reflects our theory of improvement. A driver diagram is a tool that represents our working theory of practice. It is a source extending from our causal systems analysis that allows our improvement teams to share in a common language and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

The driver diagram addresses the primary and secondary drivers related to the goals we sought to achieve. The figure also shows the change ideas that support the improvement initiative: a) Teachers would engage in a professional learning module on culturally responsive teaching strategies. b) Teachers would engage in a professional learning module on the importance of meaningful relationships. c) Teachers would engage in a professional learning module on understanding their identity and the impact it has on implicit bias. In our fishbone diagram, the team determined three potential causes. Each impeded teachers from cultivating deeper, caring relationships with their students. For this disquisition, I chose to focus upon professional learning to build teach efficacy to cultivate strong, caring relationships with students.

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

Figure 4

Driver Diagram



RESEARCH SUPPORTING IMPROVEMENT WORK

In this section I include four strands of literature supporting the improvement work: a) support for effective professional learning, b) belongingness, as it applies to TSRs, c) the impact of TSRs on student engagement, and d) culturally responsive teaching practices including its relationship to TSRs.

Professional Learning

I utilized elements from Learning Forward's *Standards for Professional Learning* (Learning Forward, 2022) to design professional learning modules. The *Standards for Professional Learning* were developed through years of research conducted by researchers, associates, and employees of 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 eleven standards that outline a system for creating high-quality professional learning. The design-team utilized elements from this framework to build professional learning modules for teachers.

Equity is a driver for this framework (Learning Forward, 2022). All standards within this framework are linked to equity and ensuring that equitable outcomes for students are at the forefront of teacher professional learning. (Learning Forward, 2022). When teachers engage in transformational processes that address their own biases and beliefs and do so through collaboration with colleagues, the result is 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 (Learning Forward, 2022). These standards also help to build a culture of collaborative inquiry where educators 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). Specifically, I leaned into the following standards: equity practices, equity drivers, learning designs, and implementation. The material and design of the professional learning modules were centered on the ideas presented in each of those standards.

Strong TSRs Create Belongingness

Students who feel they belong are more likely to demonstrate higher levels of engagement and are also more likely to demonstrate 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).

Included in the literature is the concept of learner-centered education and that learner-centered 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 by promoting self-awareness and self-monitoring (Lumpkin, 2007). According to the literature, caring teachers facilitate a sense of belonging in their classrooms by using learner-centered education that creates a reciprocal learning 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 task (Mason et al., 2017; Scales et al., 2020). Students also demonstrate more emotional engagement when they have a positive teacher-student relationship. 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 with low socioeconomic status regarding their overall academic achievement in school

(Legette, 2020). The literature notes that students of color, students with disabilities, and students with low socioeconomic status who experience poor relationships with teachers underperform academically and are often 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 relationship (Mason et al., 2017). Teachers who nurture relationships with their students based on the ethic of care (Noddings, 1992), according to the literature, affirm a students' efforts and talents (Lumpkin, 2007) thus strengthening the relationship.

Culturally Responsive Teaching Practices

Culturally responsive teaching is defined as using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning more relevant and accessible (Gay, 2000). Non-White students are sometimes overlooked, misjudged, or held to a lower standard because teachers lack skills and knowledge on how to serve them (Griner & Stewart, 2012). Rather than consider the source of the issue, teachers tend to blame the students for lack of engagement and assumed misbehaviors. The absence of culturally responsive teaching continues to have a negative impact on racially, culturally, ethnically, and linguistically diverse (RCELD) students.

These students are faced with an environment that precludes them from full participation and access. Subsequently, they have a much harder time making connections and tend to fall behind students of the dominant culture group (Grinder & Stewart, 2012). To reach all students and to provide equitable learning opportunities, educators and educational institutions will have to acknowledge their role in perpetuating the problem and take the necessary actions to address

it. Culturally responsive teaching is a critical practice and one that will play a pivotal role in closing the opportunity gap (Rubin et al., 2016).

THE IMPROVEMENT PROCESS

In this section, I include a) outcome goals, b) the design of the learning modules, c) the implementation plan and process, and d) the implementation timeline.

Outcome Goals

I have listed four goals that the design team hoped to achieve as a result of this improvement initiative. The methods for monitoring these goals are described in the evaluation section of this paper. Although the ultimate outcome of this work was to improve students' sense of well-being and learning-efficacy to improve their academic and behavioral performance, it was not attainable in the short time span allotted for the disquisition process. I envision the work completed in this initial improvement effort as a first stage in a sustained improvement process – one that carries on beyond this disquisition. The goals for the period of the improvement work include:

- At the conclusion of the professional learning module on culturally responsive teaching strategies, 60% 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, 60% of teachers will articulate how their racial and ethnic identity have played a role in accessing literature and curriculum; 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.

Learning Modules

In this section I describe three different phases of the work corresponding with three different professional development modules/learning sessions. The three modules include: culturally responsive teaching, proactive relationship-building strategies, and implicit bias/positionality/identity. The content for each module has research that supports its connection to the development of strong TSRs. The co-facilitators/design team located the content for each module from four sources: a) Geneva Gay's book *"Culturally Responsive Teaching* (2000), b) an Edutopia article entitled *"Creating a culturally responsive early childhood classroom"* (2021), c) an article from the Oxford Review of Education entitled *"The Caring Relation in Teaching"* by Nel Noddings (2012), and "d) *Bridging Literacy and Equity"* by Lazar et al. (2012). We chose the content because Gay is a foremost expert in the areas of culturally responsive teaching and pedagogy. Her work perfectly outlines the purpose, method, and importance of the strategy. We chose the article from Nel Noddings because she is the pioneer of the concept of care which is axiomatic to TSRs. Finally, we chose the content from "Bridging Literacy and Equity" because it illustrates a logical tie between teaching practices and equitable outcomes.

We utilized the Learning Forward framework in each module and followed the same format of first, providing teachers with research-supported readings; second, asking them to self-reflect in a short survey; and third, having a reflective dialogue with their PLC to solidify or extend their learning.

Professional Learning Module I: Culturally Responsive Teaching

We built a professional learning module consisting of content from Chapter two of Geneva Gay's book, *Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory, Research, and Practice*. In Chapter two of Gay's book, teachers read that culturally responsive teaching is validating, comprehensive, multidimensional, empowering, transformative, emancipatory, and that it personifies the classroom experience for students (Gay, 2000). During the 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 social context for learning.

Participants then read an article titled "Creating a Culturally Responsive Early Childhood Classroom" from the Edutopia database (Todd, 2021). This article furthered our participants' understanding of Chapter two in Gay's book. It also served as a quick guide for teachers who sought to access the culturally responsive teaching strategies. Teachers were given two weeks to read the chapter and the article. We then met as a learning group (professional learning community) where participants participated in a guided discussion on their learning from the module content. The team discussed the following questions:

- What did you discover?
- Where are we going?
- Where are we now?
- What did we learn today?
- How do we move learning forward?

According to Learning Forward, professional learning that takes place in a learning community results in increased educator effectiveness and increases student performance (Learning Forward,

2022). At the conclusion of Module 1, participants completed a survey regarding the design, facilitation, and content of the module (Appendix D). They completed the same survey for the other two modules.

Professional Learning Module II: Proactive Relationship Building Strategies

We then engaged teachers in a professional learning module that included a presentation on an article by Nel Noddings titled "The Caring Relation in Teaching." This presentation and the article provided participants with an overview of care ethics (Noddings, 2012) as well as the foundational skills of listening, thinking, creating a caring climate, and extending the caring climate beyond the classroom.

Next, we convened a PLC meeting. During our PLC meeting, co-facilitators provided opportunities to discuss new learning from the presentation and article. We 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 - improving behavioral and academic outcomes for students (Cook et al., 2018). We focused on the relationship tracking tool of the EMRM and had teachers complete the tool on their own and share their results (Appendix J). "EMRM as a heuristic that guides their intentional efforts to engage in relationship building practices as part of their ongoing interactions with students" (Cook et al., 2018). The EMR phases can fluctuate over time depending on changes in the student–teacher relationship. The EMRM method demonstrates how to create, sustain, and, when necessary, rebuild relationships with students. At the conclusion of the module, participants completed the same survey on the design, facilitation, and content of the PLC (Appendix D).

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

To address implicit bias, we 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 (2012). Teachers began this module by reading Chapter seven, “Transforming Teachers.” Chapter seven introduced our participants to confronting their own biases, identity development, how teacher identity influences pedagogy, and the way teachers view and respond to their students. Our participants then read Chapter three, “Toward the Pursuit of Identity,” from *Cultivating Genius: An Equity Framework for Culturally and Historically Responsive Literacy* by Gholdy Muhammad. From this chapter, teachers read about confronting deficit-based ideology. Teachers then read about the importance of identity development in students and the importance of unpacking their own history, identities, biases, assumptions. (Muhammad, 2020). For the final time, participants took the PLC feedback survey (Appendix D).

Implementation Plan

With the design team, we developed the following implementation plan. The implementation plan allowed us to implement our improvement interventions in a timely manner and provided a schedule for conducting intentional implementation and evaluation processes (PDSA cycles).

Table 1

Implementation Timeline

Date (2022)	Action Steps
October 5th-6th	Assemble Professional Learning Community (PLC) members and establish norms. Administer first survey.
October 7th-October 16th	First Professional Learning Module Assignment. **October 17th PLC Meeting.**
October 20th	Conclude 1st Module Meet with Design Team to evaluate PLC Feedback Survey 1
October 24th-October 31st	Second Professional Learning Module Assignment **November 1st PLC Meeting**
November 2nd	Conclude 2nd Module Meet with Design Team to evaluate PLC Feedback Survey 1
November 3rd-13th	Third Professional Learning Module **November 14th PLC Meeting**
November 28th	Conclude 3rd Module Culminating Focus Group Meeting

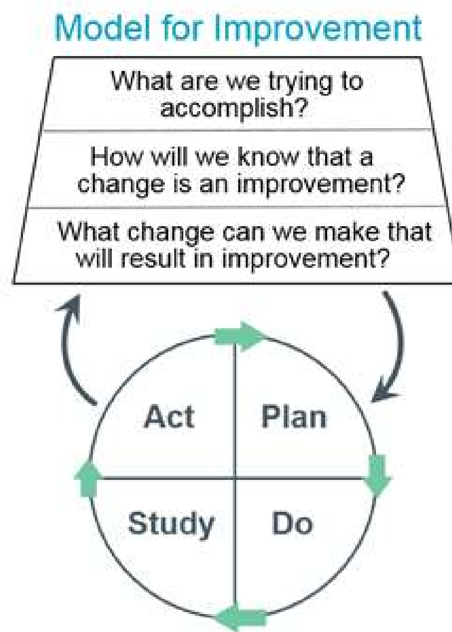
EVALUATION OF THE IMPROVEMENT INITIATIVE

In the following section, I discuss both the formative and summative evaluation methodologies employed. This section includes participants; data collection measures and processes for formative evaluation (process, driver, and balancing measures); and data collection measures and processes for summative evaluation (outcome measures).

Improvement science 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) cycles to evaluate change, guide revisions, and further the development of the improvement initiative (Bryk et al., 2015; Hinnant-Crawford, 2020; Langley et al., 2009). Langley et al. (2009) provide a model for the improvement process known as the Model for Improvement. The model includes three key questions to guide the improvement efforts within the PDSA cycle (Figure 5). The first guiding question in this model is “What are we trying to accomplish?” More simply put by Hinnant-Crawford (2020) “What is the problem we are trying to solve?” Next, we ask, “How will we know that a change is improvement?”, and finally, “What change can we make that will result in improvement?”

Figure 5

Model for Improvement



Note. From Langley, G., Moen, R., Nolan, K., Nolan, T., Norman, C., Provost, L., & Safari, and O'Reilly Media Company. (2009). *The improvement guide: A practical approach to enhancing organizational performance, second edition* (1st ed.). Jossey-Bass.

Plan

For this step, design/improvement teams come together to have dialogue on an organizational problem and explore ways to intervene to invoke a positive change. Ideally, this happens with a group of people who represent the organizational community, are closely connected with the issue, and have insight into the issue (Crow et al., 2019). For the "Plan" stage of the cycle, our team looked at the demographics and needs of the schools we intended to use for the improvement project. We all agreed that training teachers and school staff in culturally responsive teaching, implicit bias, positionality, and the ethic of care would be of tremendous benefit at both locations. To determine how best to implement the training, the team leaned into

the Learning Forward (2022) framework for professional learning. We created learning modules that were rooted in collaborative inquiry, equity practices, and learning designs (Learning Forward, 2022). We then had to look at a realistic timeline for completing the modules and use this to determine the material and resources we would use to train the participants. Finally, we had to create an assessment method for determining the effectiveness of the modules regarding design, facilitation, and content. We would use this feedback to adjust subsequent learning modules.

Do

For this step, the team implements the intervention chosen and designed in the Plan phase. The intervention can either modify a current practice or implement a completely new one. (Crow et al., 2019). For the "Do" stage of the cycle, our team assembled a group of teachers from two schools who agreed to participate in three learning modules. Participants were given two weeks to complete each module. They were provided with articles and chapters to read as well as guiding questions to be used for discussion for a culminating PLC meeting that would occur at the end of each module. The PLC time was used to discuss what the participants learned, still had questions about, and could possibly introduce into their practice. These discussions were used to gauge understanding and richness of learning. Lastly, the participants completed surveys indicating their thoughts on the module design, PLC facilitation, and module content. We used this feedback to modify (if necessary) the following modules.

Study

The "study" stage of the improvement cycle requires the team to assess the enactment of the intervention (the "do" stage) through data collection and analysis. It is an opportunity to reflect on the data and consider changing or modifying the improvement work scheduled for

subsequent cycles (Crow et al., 2019). For the “Study” stage of the cycle, our team looked at the results from the post-module surveys to determine how effective it was. We used participant feedback on the design, facilitation, and content of the module. The team used this as an opportunity to adjust and make sure the participants were getting as much as possible from the improvement initiative. Since there were a variety of responses from each participant, we had to look at trends to ensure that any changes were truly necessary. We compared results from each of the three post-survey areas to identify anything that may require attention or, conversely, things that worked well and should continue.

Act

For the “act” step, the team responds to the evaluation findings learned in the “study” stage. This is an opportunity to make adjustments that will better suit the next iteration of the improvement plan. The team may also discuss how to replicate the results and the possibility of larger-scale implementation (Crow et al., 2019). For the ‘act” stage, our team took the survey results and used them to make modifications to subsequent modules. For example, at the conclusion of the first module, some participants noted that the readings were almost too much to complete in the amount of time they were given. Accordingly, the team adjusted for module 2 and lessened the amount of reading. In the ‘study’ phase, we also took note that participants liked the module design as well as how the PLC meetings were facilitated. In this case, we kept those areas the same in the remaining modules.

Participants

All prospective participants were invited via email to an information session regarding the research activity. In the information session attendees were given detailed information on the improvement initiative. They were provided with informed consent forms after a comprehensive explanation of the process and were also told that volunteering did not guarantee selection. After participants were secured, I assured them that participation was completely voluntary, had no evaluative measure, and was completely independent of their employment with the school system. I was strategic in choosing volunteers for a few reasons: 1) I wanted people who were already well respected by the faculty. 2) I wanted as much cultural diversity as possible (though the staff demographics limited my options). 3) I wanted someone who had or could build the capacity to sustain the work and continue it into subsequent school years. Five volunteers agreed to participate including an eighth-grade science teacher with 18 years of teaching experience, a music teacher with 24 years of teaching experience, a seventh-grade social studies teacher with 29 years of teaching experience, a school social worker with 19 years of experience, and a school counselor with 12 years of experience. There was limited diversity within the participant group (Table 2). The teacher and staff participants agreed to take part in three professional learning modules on pedagogically caring practices, culturally responsive teaching, and understanding of implicit bias/positionality to improve their abilities to serve and relate to their students. They would be the recipients of the improvement work and would ideally be able to introduce the strategies they learned into their own practice as they learned about them.

Table 2

Participant Information

Professional Role	Race	Gender Identity
Music Teacher	White	Cisgender Female
School Counselor	White	Cisgender Female
School Social Worker	White	Cisgender Female
7th Grade Social Studies Teacher	Black/African American	Cisgender Female
8th Grade Social Studies/Science Teacher	White	Cisgender Male

DATA COLLECTION FOR FORMATIVE EVALUATION

The teacher participants and I agreed on a timeline in which to conduct the three learning modules and that they would provide feedback in the form of pre-surveys, post-surveys, and short answer (Padlet) responses. This feedback (data) would be utilized to assess ("study") the improvement process and to allow the design team an opportunity to "act" on those results.

Driver Measure

A driver measure gives feedback on the intervention related to the desired outcomes (Crow et al., 2019; Langley et al., 2009). For each module, I provided a post-survey that would tell the design team about teacher learning for the specific module. This information would tell us if the professional learning was building teacher capacity. I began with a pre-survey (Appendix B) to ascertain baseline data for the participants' familiarity and understanding of the content in the learning modules. By establishing what the teachers and staff knew about the material prior to the learning module, the design team could determine learning needs and growth areas specific to the content provided in the modules. For example, if the participants were already familiar with implicit bias, I could revise and introduce a related or extension topic instead.

Process Measure

A process measure is used for determining if an intervention or system is performing as planned (Langley et al., 2009). In improvement science, a process measure is a type of performance measure that is used to assess and monitor the performance of a specific process or system within an organization. It is a quantitative measure that helps to evaluate how well a process is functioning and identify areas where improvements can be made.

To ascertain this information, each participant filled out a post-survey at the end of each professional learning community (PLC) meeting. (Appendix D). Each survey consisted of Likert type scale questions related to module content, facilitation, and design. Using surveys allows for assessing participants' thoughts more directly (Tan & Siegel, 2018). The survey asked their opinions on the time participants had to prepare and to participate in the PLC, our ability as facilitators to make the content relevant, my ability to model the strategies we discussed, and finally, whether the PLC provided them with knowledge and skills to improve their practice. I then analyzed the data from the surveys using descriptive statistics (averages). In the planning phases, the design team determined that if 60% of participating teachers disagree or strongly disagree with the amount of content, the process, or the context of the meetings, we would make changes to those areas in the next module and to the modules themselves meetings before beginning the next module.

Balance Measures

Balancing measures are measures that show unintended consequences because of an improvement initiative. Improvement work should not have an adverse effect on participants and should not present a reduction in performance levels in other areas (Langley et al., 2009).

For balancing measures in this project, I wanted to explore curricular pacing. I was curious to know if time spent on professional learning to build better relationships with students would have an adverse effect on the teachers' ability to remain on pace with the standard course of student work and to effectively teach the grade or subject area standards by which they are evaluated. I did not make this measure known to the participants prior to conducting the module. Interestingly, it was brought up by participants in PLC meetings which opened up discussion and

confirmed that it was a measure worth exploring. Although it has been established quite clearly through research that strong TSLs have a positive impact on student achievement (Wang & Kuo, 2018), I wondered if the inchoate stages of forming and sustaining those relationships may come at the peril of time that is typically dedicated to instruction. To measure this, I gave the teachers and staff a simple, one question survey after Module 3. I had teachers report whether they felt that the implementation of the new strategies they learned had a significant effect on their ability to maintain pacing for teaching standards (Appendix F). Ideally, these data would suggest whether the enactment of the professional learning modules should be altered or discontinued altogether.

DATA COLLECTION FOR SUMMATIVE EVALUATION: OUTCOME MEASURES

An outcome measure is a standardized way of measuring results of research and/or interventions (Langley et al., 2009). Outcome measures tell us whether the change(s) associated with the improvement work contributed to the desired outcome. In this case, did we achieve the following goals:

- At the conclusion of the professional learning module on culturally responsive teaching strategies, 60% 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, 60% of teachers will articulate how their racial and ethnic identity have played a role in accessing literature and curriculum; 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.

To formally determine if the outcome goals were achieved, I compared the results of a pre- and post-test. I first administered a pre-survey (Appendix C) as a baseline measure before participants began the professional development sessions. I used the same survey at the conclusion of the last module to determine if the desired outcomes were met. The pre-survey established a baseline informing us on what prior knowledge the participants were bringing the

project. The survey questions asked teachers to report their understanding of a) culturally responsive teaching; b) personal identity and bias; c) using EMR, and d) the importance of intentionally building strong TSRs. At the conclusion of the last module, the same survey was administered again. A comparison of the pre and post-test data would tell us if the goals were achieved (Figure 15). Before discussing the data analysis techniques applied and the findings, I present a table (Table 3) that provides a summary look at the evaluation measures/data collection tools used to evaluate this improvement work.

Table 3

PDSA Cycle/Modules and Measures

Dates	Balancing Measures	Process Measures	Outcome Measures
Module 1 (Oct. 10-17)		Module Evaluation Survey __________ Descriptive Statistics	
Module 2 (Oct. 24-Nov. 1)		Module Evaluation Survey Short-Answer Responses __________ Descriptive Statistics Inductive Coding	
Module 3 (Nov. 7-14)	Curricular Pacing Survey __________ Descriptive Statistics	Module Evaluation Survey __________ Descriptive Statistics	Post-Survey __________ Descriptive Statistics

Note: Adapted from Crow, R., Hinnant-Crawford, B. N., & Spaulding, D. T. (2019). *The Educational Leader's Guide to Improvement Science: Data, design and cases for Reflection*. Meyers Education Press.

DATA ANALYSIS

I analyzed the following data sources: a) survey results from each PLC meeting, b) transcripts of short answer responses to survey prompts, and c) survey results from a culminating survey. I discuss the data analysis techniques employed for each of the measures.

Driver Measures

I used pre- and post-survey data (from a Likert scale) to determine what the participants knew and/or were familiar with in the areas of culturally responsive teaching, implicit bias, positionality, and the ethic of care both before and after the initiative. Specific to these areas, participants were asked to rate their confidence/comfortability/awareness with the following: 1) enacting culturally responsive teaching practices, 2) using the establish-maintain-restore method, and 3) positionality and implicit biases. To analyze these data, I used descriptive statistics (frequency counting and percentile value comparisons). These data would provide an indication of whether we were achieving the desired improvement.

Balance Measures

I used a simple, one question survey noting the degree to which applying the learning strategies from the modules in the classroom affected their ability to cover their curriculum at an appropriate pace (None, Somewhat, Extreme). Participants responded to this question after attempting the EMR method with their students. To analyze these data, I used descriptive statistics (frequency counting, mode, and percentile value comparisons). I used the most common response (mode) to the survey question to determine if participants felt that curricular pacing was affected by implementing the EMR method. Ultimately, the goal would be to weave

teaching the required standards together with the caring practices outlined in EMR, though we were unable to explore implementation to this degree during our improvement project.

Process Measures

To analyze the process measure data, I utilized surveys with Likert scale-type questions to assess the effectiveness of the facilitators, the relevance of the content, the design of the modules (Appendix C). Surveys were analyzed with each module using frequency counting from post-surveys and inductive coding from short-answer questions. I chose to use frequency counting for the Likert scale survey questions because it was the simplest means for garnering insight into trends among participants. To analyze these data, I used descriptive statistics (means). I was able to use the responses to determine need for change or to continue established practices. Using the answers with the most responses, I could note trends and patterns that would serve in shaping changes during the iterative process of creating the learning modules. I used Likert scale-type questions and means because I felt it would be the most efficient way to get feedback needed to move the project forward. Given the condensed research period, I needed timely, reliable data that I could use to improve the process for the team and participants.

Outcome Measures

I wanted to know exactly what the participants knew before we conducted the improvement initiative and what they learned and felt comfortable applying after the initiative. I used descriptive statistics to analyze change over time. T-tests have proven to be an effective way to analyze change in a single group (Tanner, 2012), but given the small sample size of only 5, a t-test would likely be unreliable. I needed a concrete data set to measure the effectiveness of the improvement initiative and using basic, comparative statistics provided the information in a clear and concise format that is easy to interpret.

RESULTS

In the following section, I provide the results garnered from data analysis.

Driver Measures

I used driver measures to answer the question "Did the improvement model with learning modules and PLCs build teacher capacity to enact caring relationships through culturally responsive teaching and understanding of implicit bias/positionality?" Data analysis revealed that participants became more familiar with these strategies and increased their confidence to apply them to practice. Using pre- and post-initiative surveys as well as post-surveys at the end of each learning module, the data showed that favorable responses increased in the areas of design, facilitation, and content with each learning module. This was also true of all 15 pre- and post-survey questions which increased by an average of 1.59, indicating that the initiative achieved its intended outcome.

Balance Measures

For a balancing measure, I asked participants if their first attempt at implementing the strategies they learned, specifically EMR, had an ill effect on their ability to teach their content at the required pace. The data showed that 25% saw no problems with pacing, 25% saw a moderate issue with pacing, and 50% noted a slight issue. These data were collected after only one week of implementation, so I would still label them inconclusive as the sample size was small (5 teachers) and it was the teachers' first attempt at implementing EMR.

Process Measures

Results from the process measures were collected through surveys after each PLC. The survey questions remained the same for each cycle and were specific to the areas of design,

facilitation, and content. This provided a means by which to gather timely feedback and update/revise the subsequent learning module. Using the responses from each Likert-type question, we used averages to determine areas of success and areas in need of improvement. The results proved promising as each iteration of the learning module rendered evidence of growth within the participants. While the number of respondents who marked strongly agree increased with each cycle, the most important takeaway is that by the third module, 100% of participants marked agree or strongly agreed in each of the measured areas with one exception. Overall, the improvement initiative appeared to be effective as growth was noted in every substantive area within the survey.

Module 1

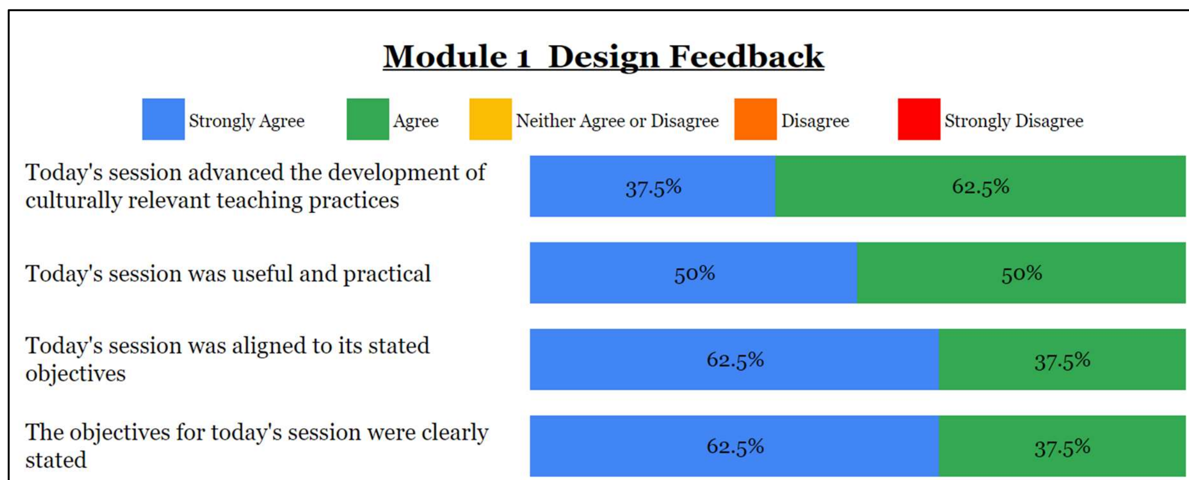
Using the post-module survey (Appendix C) we gathered feedback on the PLC learning module on culturally responsive teaching from the participants in the areas of design, facilitation, and content. We would then use the feedback to modify (if necessary) module 2. All participants completed the survey and, using means, we determined which areas needed revision. The module content feedback survey indicated that the participants felt the readings were a bit too complex with 37.5% reporting that they were difficult to understand. With these results in mind, the reading selections were modified for modules 2 and 3.

For the PLC design, 100% of participating teachers reported that the either agreed or strongly agreed that the module increased their understanding of and ability to practice culturally responsive teaching, that the session was useful and practical, that the session aligned to the module's stated objectives, and that those objectives were clearly stated at the beginning. This provided valuable feedback as we moved into the next cycle because we had data to show that the first iteration design was effective and could be used again. Of note, however, and an area

that we hoped to improve in the next module was that only 38% of participants strongly agreed that the session advanced their understanding of culturally relevant teaching practices while 62% agreed. Though both responses offer evidence of efficacy, we hoped to see more participants strongly agree that they would be able to apply what they learned in their own setting (Figure 6).

Figure 6

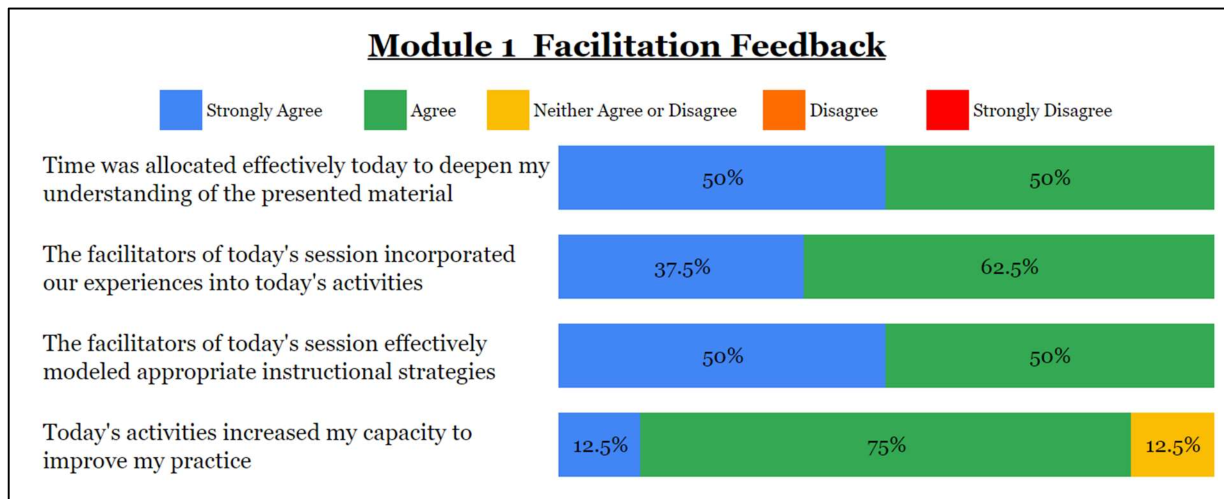
Module I Design Survey



For the facilitation category, 100% of the team reported either 'agree' or 'strongly agree' in the following areas: 1. Time was allocated effectively to deepen my understanding of the material. 2. The facilitators incorporated our experiences into the activities. 3. The facilitators effectively modeled appropriate instructional strategies. However, 13% of participants neither agreed nor disagreed that the module increased their capacity to improve their practice. This number was well below the team's established threshold of 60% for revisions, but still worth noting because it stood in contrast to every other facilitation question where all participants either agreed or strongly agreed (See figure 7). This feedback told us that we needed to put a bit more focus on how teachers could implement this in their own classrooms.

Figure 7

Module 1 Facilitation Feedback

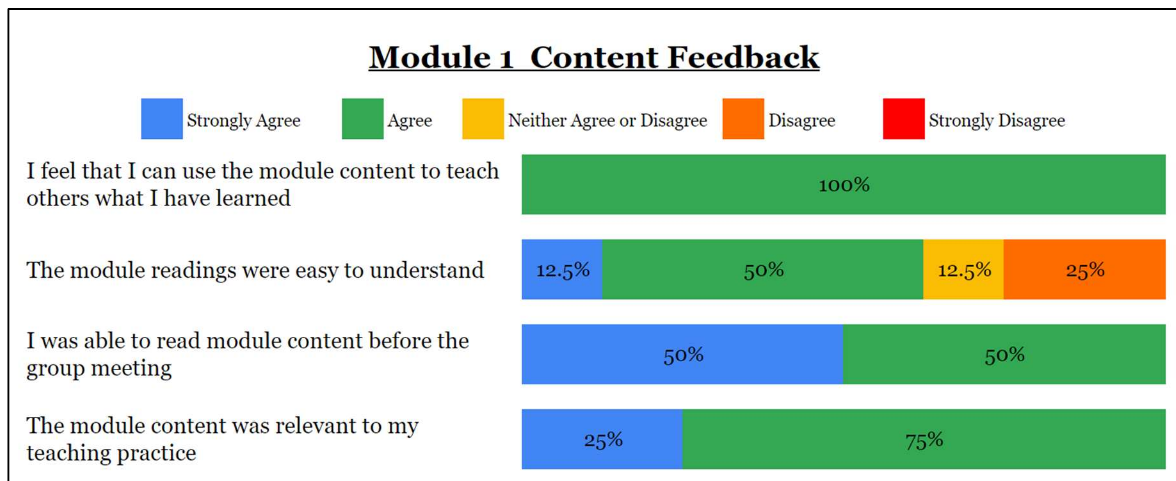


Finally, and most significant for module 1, was the feedback on the module content (See Figure 8). For this section of the survey, participating teachers and staff members were asked to report their thoughts in the following areas: 1. I feel I can use the content to teach others what I have learned. 2. The module readings were easy to understand. 3. I was able to read the module content prior to the PLC meeting. 4. The module content was relevant to my practice. It was promising to see that 100% of participants either agreed or strongly agreed that the module content was relevant to their individual practices. Also encouraging was that all participants agreed or strongly agreed that they could use the content to teach others, which I will explore further in the implications section. 100% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that they were able to complete the reading and module content prior to the meeting. Lastly, and of particular importance was the participants' response on whether content readings were easy to understand. Though 63% of participants either agreed or strongly agreed that it was, that left a 37% who did not. Among each of the survey areas and questions, this one stood out. The participants had not reported a response of "disagree" to any of the previous questions. This was an unexpected

outcome as we felt the material was not particularly dense or difficult to understand, but given our consistent immersion in academic literature, it is likely that our perception would be different than those who aren't reading this type of material on a consistent basis. In addition to the feedback surveys, open discussion among team members solidified this opinion with participants noting that the articles were very academic and sometimes difficult to follow. Ultimately, we felt there to be enough evidence to change the amount of reading in the next module and to find material that would be easier to consume. In this module, participants were asked to read a 28-page chapter from *Culturally Responsive Teaching* (Gay, 2002) and a 2-page journal article entitled *Creating a Culturally Responsive Early Childhood Classroom* (Todd, 2021). Learning that the 28 pages were the primary impediment, we reduced the total reading for module 2 to a single, 11-page article.

Figure 8

Module I Content Feedback



Module 2

Using the same feedback surveys in the areas of design, facilitation, and content, we gathered information on module 2 which was rooted in the concept of care. We also utilized a short answer KWL activity in this cycle to isolate areas where participants were knowledgeable, what they still wanted to know, and what they learned. I obtained this information using a Padlet online response tool (Appendix D). Using basic inductive coding, which consists of analyzing actual participant responses and isolating concepts or themes as they emerge (Maxwell, 2018), We were able to narrow down that team members learned more of the importance of authentic communication with students. Specifically, they learned to truly listen to their students and try to better understand their perspective with one participant sharing that “misconceptions can occur when teachers simply say they know how a student feels, but how often do we really take the time to try and understand what is really going on and how to help the student emotionally.” Given this level of understanding of this module’s topic, the third module focused solely on implicit bias and positionality and did not include follow-up activities on student-teacher communication and care.

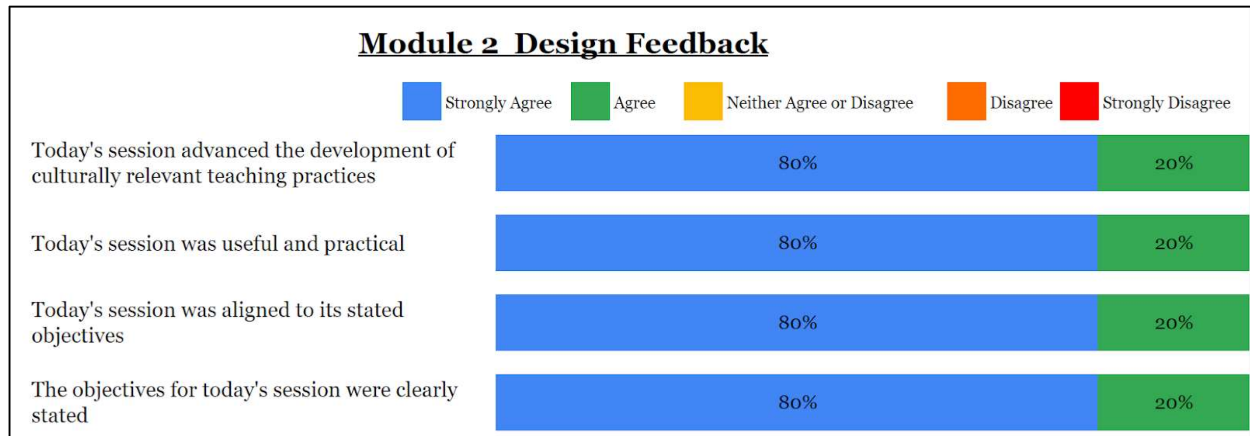
As previously mentioned, we opted to shorten the reading and selected a text that would be easier to read and retain. The original plan was for the participants to read two articles: *The Caring Relation in Teaching* (Noddings, 2012) and *How to Develop True Care: Three Interviews with Nel Noddings* (Yokota et al., 2019). After learning that the first module content was a bit too much, the participants only read the Noddings article as it still encapsulated the crux of what we wanted them to learn. Participants were also provided with a recorded summary of the material in the event they did not have time to read and analyze the text. The desire was for the team members to wrestle with the text at a deeper level and to be able to apply it to the context of the

EMR method. Once again, participants provided feedback on the design, facilitation, and content of the module. We asked that the team members consider the revisions that were made from Module 1 when responding to the feedback survey.

Once again, 100% of participating teachers/staff members had positive feedback on the design of the module. Team members either agreed or strongly agreed that the module continued to advance their understanding of culturally responsive teaching practices as perceived through the lens of care. 100% of team members agreed or strongly agreed that the PLC session was useful and practical, that it was aligned to its stated objectives, and that the objectives were clearly stated. It was interesting to note, however, that even though there was 100% agreement or strong agreement in each area of design, all questions had an even split of 20% agreement and 80% strong agreement. (Figure 9). This was important feedback because it showed that a growing number of participants felt strongly that the PLCs were a good use of their time and that they were gaining valuable information from them. Of equal import is that module 2 improved over the first one in the area of understanding culturally responsive practices. We hoped to improve on the 37% of respondents who strongly agreed in this area and was able to do so as in this module with 80% of participants who responded with strongly agree. It was reassuring to see progress in this area as this was certainly a primary goal for the improvement initiative.

Figure 9

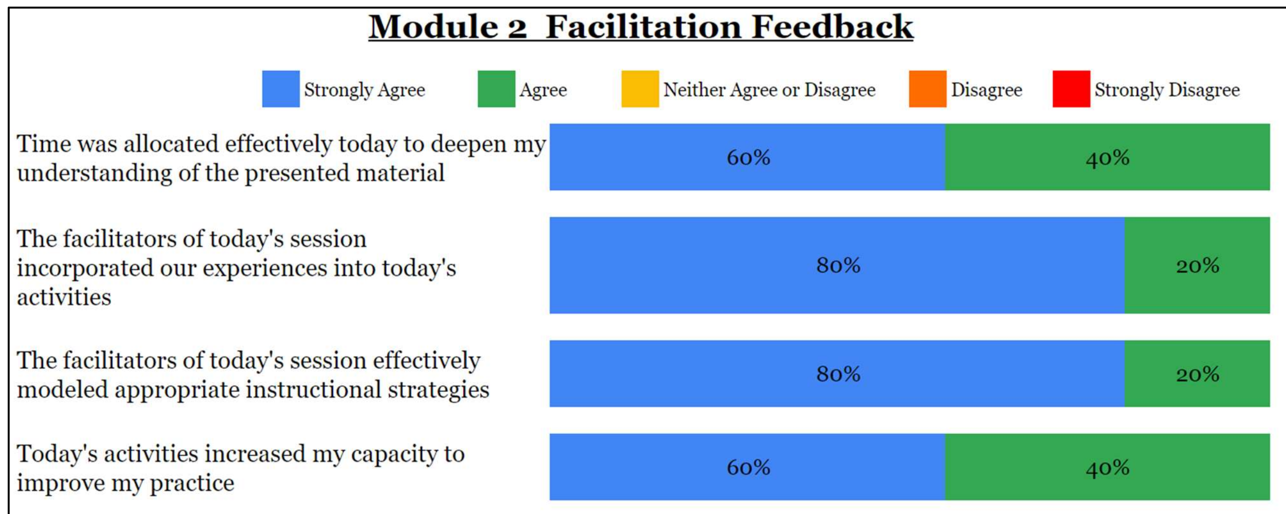
Module II Design Survey



For module 2 facilitation, there were slight improvements. The percentage of the teacher participants who strongly agreed in the areas of time allocation and its effectiveness in deepening their understanding of the material increased to 60% from Module 1 where 50% strongly agreed. In module 2, 80% of participants reported that the facilitators incorporated their experiences in the module's activities. This increased from 38% in Module 1. In Module 1, 50% of respondents strongly agreed that the facilitators effectively modeled appropriate strategies. This increased to 60% in Module 2. While Module 1 had 13% of participants report they neither agreed nor disagreed that the module increased their capacity to improve their practice, this fell to 0% in Module 2, an obvious improvement. (See figure 10)

Figure 10

Module II Facilitation Survey

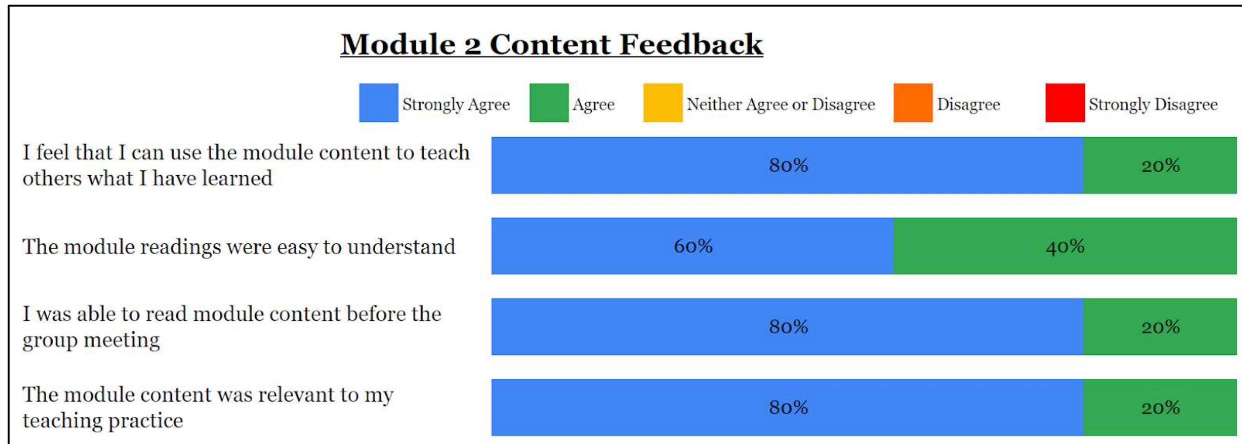


A target area for improvement in module 2 was content. In the first module, we noted that the teacher/staff participants felt that the reading was a bit challenging to cumbersome. To address this, we selected a shorter text and also provided a recorded video that summarized the reading for those who may not have had time to complete it. 100% of respondents reported that they either agreed or strongly agreed in the following areas: 1. I feel that I can use the module content to teach others what I've learned. 2. The module readings were easy to understand. 3. I was able to read/view the module content prior to the meeting. 4. The module content was relevant to my practice. (Figure 11) The primary takeaway here was that we moved from 13% of participants who neither agreed nor disagreed and 25% who disagreed that the module readings were easy to understand to 100% who agreed or strongly agreed. Since this was a targeted area for improvement, it was reassuring to see that the efforts to make the material easier to access and understand were realized. In the comments section of the survey, team members responded favorably to the pre-recording of the material as well as the length and complexity of the text

with one participant noting that she felt more comfortable contributing to the PLC conversations because she understood the material better.

Figure 11

Module II Content Survey



Module 3

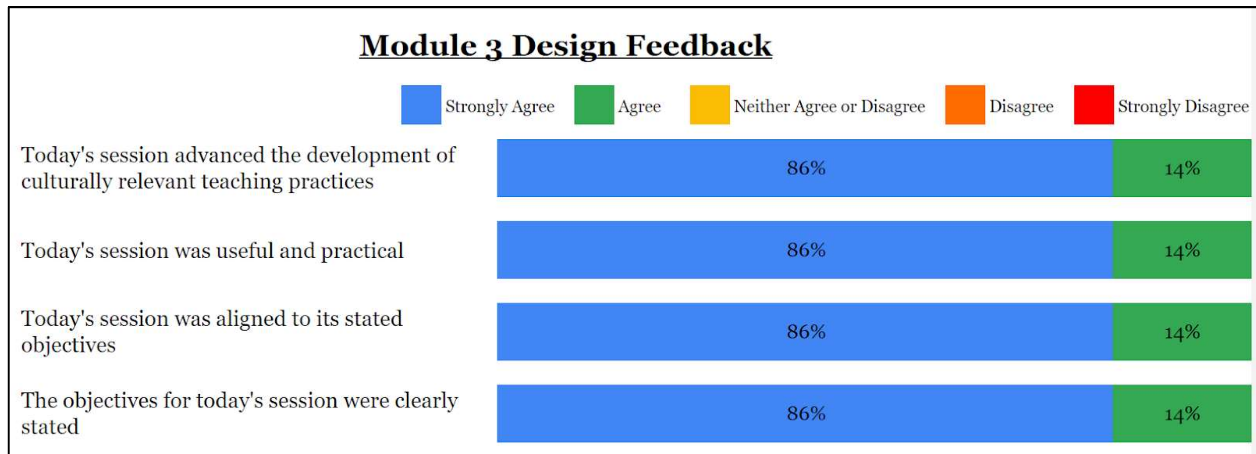
The final module study was on positionality and socio-cultural identity using work from Lazard et al., (2012) and Muhammad (2020). Participants also read "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack" by Peggy McIntosh (1989). Team members would once again discuss the readings and complete a final feedback survey. This particular module involved material that we knew would evoke some emotion from our participants and accordingly, we were anxious to see their feedback.

Module 3 showed continued improvement in the area of design. 100% of teacher participants agreed that the session advanced their understanding of positionality and identity, that the module was useful and practical, that it was aligned to stated objectives, and that those objectives were clearly stated (Figure 12). In Module 2 80% of respondents strongly agreed in each of these areas. That number jumped to 86% in Module 3. The number of respondents in

Module 2 who agreed with each of the areas was 20% and that number dropped to 14% in the latest iteration. Most importantly, the number who strongly agreed was up 49% over Module 1. The continued improvement shows promise for future application of the content.

Figure 12

Module III Design Survey

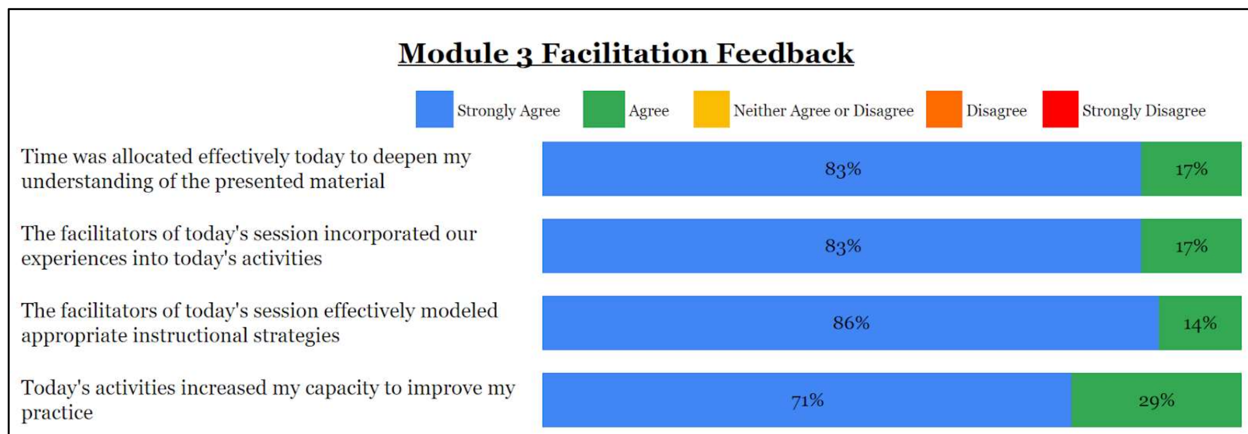


The data concerning the facilitation of Module 3 continued a positive trend with 100% of participants either agreeing or strongly agreeing in all feedback areas. (Figure 13) In Module 1, 50% of participants felt time was allocated effectively to deepen understanding of material. This rose to 60% in Module 2, and finally in Module 3, 83%. These data provide evidence that we, as a design team, were moving in the right direction. The percentage of participants who strongly agreed that the module incorporated their own experiences improved from 38% in Module 1, to 80% in Module 2, to 87% in Module 3. This is significant because it means that participants are more likely to take what they learned and apply it. Participants who strongly agreed that the facilitators effectively modeled instructional strategies was at 50% in Module 1. The percentage grew to 80% in Module 2 and finished at 83%. Lastly, team members who strongly agreed that the module increased their capacity to improve their practice was 71% for Module 3. This was an

increase from 13% and 60% in Module 1 and 2, respectively. As evidenced by the feedback results, I am confident that the team would achieve better results with any subsequent PDSA cycles.

Figure 13

Module III Facilitation Feedback

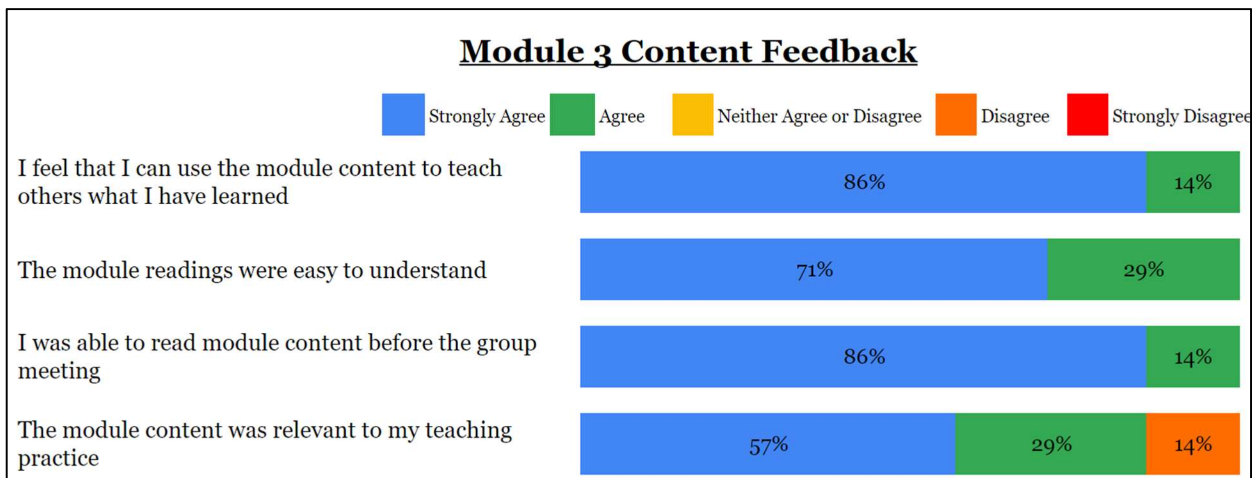


Module content feedback showed positive trends overall, as well. (Figure 14) 86% respondents strongly agreed that they could use the module content to teach others in Module 3. This was a massive improvement over Module 1 in which no participants strongly agreed that they could do this. While that percentage increased to 80% in Module 2, it continued to show improvement. Learning from feedback in the first module, the team adjusted difficulty and complexity of module readings. Only 13% felt the readings were easy to understand in Module 1 and even though that number rose to 60% in Module 2, the last module landed at 71%. Interestingly, the percentage of team members who reported being able to read the module content prior the PLC session dropped to 57% from 80% in Module 2. This may be attributable to the time of year as Module 3 ended around the midterm of the second quarter of the school year which often requires more of teachers and staff. It should be noted that even at 57%, it was

still an improvement over Module 1 where only 45% were able to complete the readings. Though there was a bit of a dip in the progress of team members being able to complete readings prior to the PLC, there was a continued improvement in the number of participants who strongly agreed that the module was relevant to their professional practice. In Module 3, 86% strongly agreed in this category. This continued the trend of improvement with the category garnering 22% in Module 1 and 80% in Module 2. In three of the four feedback areas, there was continued improvement with each module.

Figure 14

Module III Content Survey



OUTCOME MEASURES

Utilizing pre- and post-survey data I hoped to determine if the participants learned more about and felt more comfortable implementing caring practices using CRT, positionality, and implicit bias. The data revealed that all teachers reported growing in their confidence, familiarity, awareness, and understanding of the presented materials with an average scale-score increase of 1.59 (Figure 15). Areas with the most improvement include Familiarity with Establish-Maintain-Restore Method which grew from 80% of participants being unfamiliar in the pre-survey to 100% extremely familiar in the post-survey. Familiarity of Implicit Bias which grew from 65% unfamiliar to 80% extremely familiar in the pre- and post-surveys respectively. Awareness of Positionality with 60% being unaware in the pre-survey to 85% reporting aware and 15% reporting extremely aware in the post-survey (Table 4).

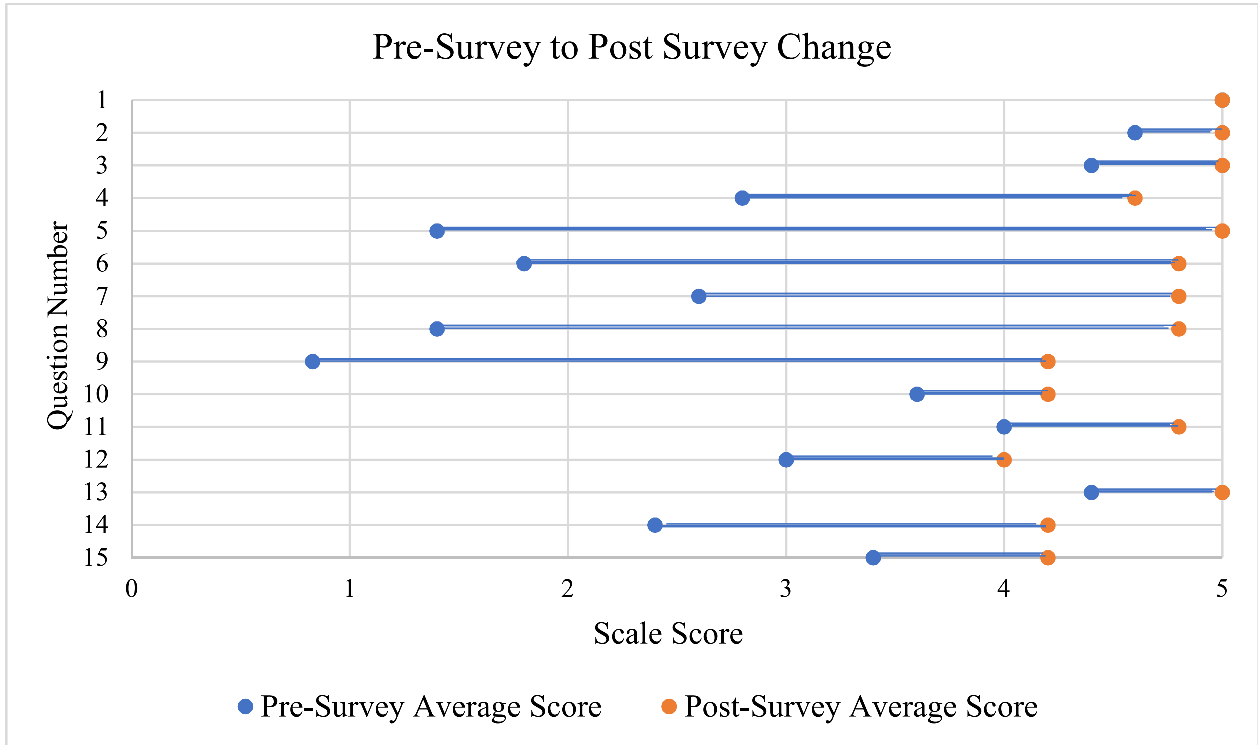
Table 4

Notable Pre- and Post-Survey Data

	Establish-Maintain-Restore Method Familiarity	**Implicit Bias Familiarity**	**Positionality Awareness**
Pre-Survey	80% Unfamiliar	65% Unfamiliar	60% Unaware
Post-Survey	100% Extremely Familiar	80% Extremely Familiar	85% Aware 15% Extremely Aware

Figure 15

Pre- and Post-Survey Data



DISCUSSION

My analysis of the evaluation data supports the notion that professional learning modules can increase capacity in the areas of care, culturally responsive pedagogy, positionality, and implicit bias. The acknowledgement that participants wanted to learn more and explore ways to implement the strategies into their own practice was reassuring.

Fortunately, the participants were open to learning more about and implementing strategies to assist with the aforementioned areas. They expressed an understanding of the impact such strategies could have on their students. With each PLC, the participants demonstrated increased knowledge and understanding and began to see applications that would flow into their own practices. Each member also expressed a desire to continue forward with the work even after the last module was complete. Additionally, they understood that this is not the work of one person. Addressing the areas of caring relationships, CRT, and implicit bias/positionality will require teams of individuals who are committed to change. Consequently, they were also ready to begin enlisting others to serve in the same capacity.

Limitations

It is important to note that there are limitations to these findings and that they may not be generalizable or applicable to all school settings. First, the size of the participant sample was small, and the scope of the work was limited. However, the positive results suggest that the work might serve as a springboard for a larger-scale effort.

In addition, it was also limited by the fact that only one person of color agreed to serve on the design team. Critical voices were not represented.

The outcomes for teacher understanding were positive but we still know little about the enactment of that learning in the classroom. Teacher implementation needs to be studied. In the future, it would be helpful to engage in the same improvement work, but across a wider spectrum of schools in the school district. The equity work cannot be confined to a single middle school. In fact, it would ideally begin in the elementary or even pre-school setting, which is something that should be discussed with the directors of those institutions.

Sustainability

In order to continue moving the work forward, it is imperative that all voices are heard. In this improvement initiative, there was very little diversity. To continue the work, we will need multiple perspectives from people who can share their own lived experiences and how we can work to enact caring relationships to equitable ends. Once such way to accomplish this would be to bring more than just educators into the conversation. There are many leaders, business owners, and community members of color who have a vested in our schools and the students we serve. Perhaps having PLC meetings off campus at local community centers or places of business would provide an atmosphere where people would feel more comfortable meeting and discussing these topics. Adding input from BIPOC community members to the already established PLC model could really propel the work forward. Ideally, as more people are educated in the ethic of care, culturally responsive pedagogy, and implicit bias, the initiative can spread on a larger scale. It would be crucial to sustainability for respected professionals and community members to take on the work and share its impact. Collaboration will be key as will getting the buy-in from people who are respected in the school and school community.

IMPLICATIONS

Implications for Practice

This improvement initiative and its concomitant results has several implications. Among them are the need for teachers, both beginning and veteran, to be educated in the ethic of care. Though most teachers would argue that they care about their students, few have been taught intentional, research-based strategies (like EMR) for accomplishing this.

Another area for growth is educating teachers on culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP). At the beginning of the improvement project, less than half of the participants new what CRP is. After the project, not only did all participants understand it, but they also felt prepared to implement it in their own settings. The participants in this study were notably unaware of culturally responsive teaching/pedagogy. Members relayed that this was not part of any undergraduate or graduate work of which they had been a part. Another means to addressing equity in schools, training teachers in CRP would undoubtedly serve students who struggle to relate to their school environment and their instructors (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Armed with the knowledge of how to create culturally responsive classrooms, teachers are better equipped to bring *all* student experiences into the classroom, even those with which they are not familiar. It also affords students the opportunity to learn and socialize as individuals and not assimilate into a White norm (Will & Najarro, 2022). Culturally responsive pedagogy gives every student a chance to relate and succeed. It takes education away from maintaining a status quo in which students are containers of knowledge that instructors fill and into place where it serves critically conscious and humanized learners (Freire et al., 2020). Providing teachers and school staff with these tools would set them apart as catalysts for change.

Positionality and implicit bias, along with CRP are all trainings and experience that could have far-reaching, positive effects on marginalized student populations. Though the teacher and staff participant groups were small, they all agreed that applying what they learned in the modules could have a tremendous impact on their students. As evidenced by the data, the participant group is far more aware of their own positionality and implicit bias and having completed the learning modules. It stands to reason that including this training in pre-service teaching programs would have a positive impact on students. In the meantime, having a group of respected teachers and staff who have completed training could be the opportunity to implement such trainings on a larger scale and possibly even have them lead it.

While it is conceivable that undergraduate programs could utilize care strategies in their programs, I feel like it would certainly be a worthwhile effort for school districts to train new teachers. The participants in my improvement initiative had never had any formal training in this area. In fact, most did not realize that there was research that provided strategies for them to use in their classrooms. After reading selections from *The Caring Relation in Teaching* (Noddings, 2012), their eyes were opened to the complexity of relationship-building and to truly understanding their students, particularly those with whom they share little commonalities. If this were something that could be instilled in pre-service teachers, there would likely be far-reaching benefit. Applying care strategies requires educators to examine themselves, their practice, and how they relate to every student they serve. This is extremely valuable for students who are typically overlooked or held to a lower standard (Gorski, 2011). Being intentional about caring for students and providing genuine interactions with them will improve student outcomes (Mason et al., 2017; Roorda et al., 2011; Scales et al., 2020). This is a relatively simple way to address the complex problem of operating equitable schools and classrooms.

A last implication, and one that shouldn't be understated is the team's exposure to and understanding of improvement science. While it was not part of the surveys that they took, no one on the team had heard of improvement science prior to our project. The team certainly saw the value in its iterative process and noted that they could see it being utilized in other capacities. This could open doors to countless improvement initiatives if the teachers and leaders were to be informed about its purpose and applicability.

Another significant implication is the impact of teachers and school staff learning and applying improvement science. Certainly, improvement science is a reliable way to measure progress in a large-scale initiative, but also serves in multitudinous capacities of classroom operation. Teachers and school staff could measure their own efforts to implement the strategies they learned over a longer period of time. They could establish their own PLCs to learn and discuss ways in which they are applying the ethic of care (EMR), culturally responsive pedagogy, and using their knowledge of positionality and implicit bias to change the experiences of their students. Since improvement science is formulaic, it is easy for practitioners to make sense of results, especially when using PDSA cycles (Crow et al., 2019, Langley et al., 2019). The educators in my design group have a new capacity to understand improvement science and its applications; this should reap benefits in years to come.

On a macro-scale, the results of this project speak to the need of universities and other institutions of higher education to embed these topics and strategies into the fabric of their programs. It will take many studies like this one, put into the hands of policymakers to usher in change. However, this will require these individuals to admit there is a problem. The last time something of this magnitude took place in the world of education was the publishing of *A Nation at Risk* (1983). The impetus for a closer examination of the role and quality of education in the

United States at that time was a nuclear arms race. It is going to take influential groups who eye the egregious injustices toward marginalized students with the same level of seriousness to bring about improvement. However, growing the number of studies that point to a need and highlighting data to support it would be a critical first step. While the governing of schools in America is steeped in policymaking and politics (Horsford, et al., 2019), any necessary change starts with a select few. Those few must have the courage to speak out and speak loudly about the need for change.

Implications for Policy

Policies are typically the result of values (Taylor, 1997). In order for policy change to occur in the area of culturally responsive pedagogy, the ethic of care, or implicit bias, policy makers are going to have to assign value to it. Training teachers who implement these strategies in their classrooms and share their stories with others is a fundamental beginning. Moreover, if traditionally marginalized students begin to show improvement in the areas of academics, attendance, and overall school engagement, people will take notice. It will take a grassroots movement on the part of practicing educators to move the initiative forward. In this application, the most likely policy change would be the training and mentorship provided to beginning teachers. Obviously, it would be better to see all teachers receive training, but a slight addition to the operating policies of the beginning teacher program at the district level could have a tremendous impact. In an ideal scenario, this would be coupled with educator preparation programs that also provide exposure/training in the same practices. A policy that requires educating pre-service teachers and school staff on culturally responsive teaching would have untold impacts on marginalized student populations.

I think that using the current improvement initiative as a springboard could carry some weight in my current school district. Education is a very data-driven enterprise and being able to show and present the positive changes that occurred with the design team could be a way to get the attention of policymakers. Those policymakers can use this improvement initiative to consider current policy and ways it discriminates against some learners. For example, they could read the same articles the design team provided and learn about the strategies put forth by Gay (2002), Noddings (2012), and Muhammed (2020). It would be an opportunity to open their eyes to the problem, just as it did the participants. It is also conceivable that offering policymakers a model that has already shown success with their employees would incite discussion on future policy development. Doing so would be a critical step in admitting and addressing inequitable student experiences.

It is important to reflect upon the present sociopolitical context in North Carolina and the backlash against "CRT" and how that presents a barrier for this work. Public schools are at the mercy of law and policy makers. Accordingly, they are limited in what they can do because operating outside the confines of established policy can often result in withheld funding. In order to function within the law and still move forward with equity work, schools and school systems could focus more on the ethic of care (Noddings, 2012) and use the model to help reach marginalized populations without explicitly teaching Critical Race Theory. If the path we take to equitable outcomes looks different than what we originally thought, that doesn't mean it can't be done. The concept of care casts a wide net and could very well be the door to creating fair and equitable learning environments for *all* students.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTITIONERS

It takes a great deal of courage to move ahead with this work given the present political context. It's also uncomfortable for many people because it challenges the status quo which benefits many of those in power – those who have the power to change it. However, an educator's obligation should always lie with his or her students. In the following sections, I offer four recommendations: 1) engage in professional learning that facilitates strong TSRs despite the resistance, 2) conduct open conversations with teachers and staff about the need for change, 3) support classroom enactment of intentional relationship-building, and 4) make equity work a priority.

Recommendation #1: *Engage in Professional Learning that Facilitates Strong TSRs Despite the Resistance*

The data show that many of our participants were largely ignorant to the crucial topics of care, culturally responsive teaching, and implicit bias. However, when they studied the concepts and the literature presented, they were compelled to act. I was a bit surprised to see how open the participants were to taking action on difficult issues like the ones we presented. It is advisable to not (especially as a leader) make assumptions about resistance from employees. Inevitably, there will be resistance on some fronts, but it is not everyone and many could simply be waiting for someone else to take the initiative. Nearly all the participants in this study became excited at the prospect of becoming a change agent. Giving teachers and school staff formal opportunities to learn the importance of and how to establish meaningful relationships with *all* students is well worth the time and effort. Moreover, it is a type of professional learning that can consistently be revisited and tracked. The power of learning communities is critical to propelling the work

forward as evidenced by this study. This is an easily sustained practice and one that could be embedded into a school's culture. Ideally, it would start with a school leader serving as the facilitator and a participant group of teacher-leaders within the school. This could be done with the intention of transitioning to a PLC model that is led *by* teachers and staff *for* teachers and staff. In contrast to the way this study was conducted, I think it would be beneficial to slow the entire process down. If it were possible to spend each quarter of the school year on a different PLC topic, participants could dig deeper into the literature and have more opportunities for implementation in their own classrooms.

Recommendation #2: *Have Open Conversations with Teachers and Staff about the Need for Change*

This work begins with leaders who educate themselves and then impart their knowledge to the people around them by embodying and exemplifying change. The work continues with teacher awareness, continues with practice in the classroom, and culminates in practices beyond the classroom. The nexus of change, however, is conversation. It takes a courageous school or district leader to speak to employees about topics that many try very hard to avoid. This study began with inviting teachers and school staff to participate in equity-focused work that would challenge their thinking and, at times, be uncomfortable. Introducing the topics included in the project didn't make for easy conversations, but they were crucial conversations that ultimately led to a group of professionals who are equipped to serve every student who enters their classrooms. Accomplishing a goal of this importance and magnitude cannot happen without first opening the doors to honest communication about the problem. The scope and sequence of the work is predicated on those who are willing to act and what those people do to equip others. They must then coach and support their colleagues and employees to ensure sustainability. Good

leaders are risk-takers who are willing to facilitate equity-based conversations with people who have the power to make a tangible impact. This is the harbinger to authentic change.

Recommendation #3: ***Support Classroom Enactment***

A dominant conclusion drawn from the improvement initiative is just how unaware the educators in the design team were of the areas of care, culturally responsive teaching, and positionality/implicit bias. Team improved substantially in these areas as demonstrated by the data but learning of the topics is a crucial first step in putting them into practice. These improvement areas are challenging, controversial, and take a great deal of courage and humility to enact. Each one should be presented carefully and provide educators with usable strategies for implementing it into their own classrooms/practices. It would be ideal for learning communities to try the same strategies and report back at scheduled intervals in order to improve upon their last implementation efforts. In the case of the design team in this initiative, they are prepared to use improvement science to accomplish that goal. Utilizing the "train the trainer method" (Nakamura et al., 2014), those who participated in my improvement initiative would be poised to share with and facilitate PLCs with colleagues, the district level, and beyond. To accomplish this, I plan to entreat my design team members to do just that. They will host their colleagues, sharing what they learned, and providing professional development for the remainder of the teachers at the school. I hope to track the data in a similar fashion to what I did in the current initiative. Ideally, with each person trained, the educators who were affected would grow exponentially. An implementation of this magnitude would take a substantial amount of time but would be well worth the effort. If awareness is the first step, training will meet the need. If the second step is implementation, the support of widespread practitioners and PLC members will meet the need.

As with any other worthwhile endeavor, it starts on a small scale and, if fostered properly, stands to become a sweeping change.

Moving forward, it would be of benefit to have more time in PLC meetings to discuss the readings and bridges to practice. In trying to honor the time that team members volunteered, meetings often felt truncated and would likely, with more time, would have led to deeper conversations. It would have been helpful to explore exactly how participants either did or would like to implement the strategies into their classrooms and most certainly, the impact those strategies held. Time to brainstorm and share ideas and experiences would have moved the process along and provided more substantive feedback that could be used quickly. Additionally, focusing on one topic for an extended period and being more immersed in the individual strategies would allow for a deeper understanding of each area. For example, each module was roughly two weeks and then the team moved on to the next topic. Considering the gravity of these issues, a slower pace of learning for each area should help the participants support each other and implement with fidelity (Langley, et al., 2009). Certainly, any time a group can spend more time studying a topic, the more familiar and comfortable they will feel with it. Given the sensitive nature of this problem, participants would surely appreciate more time to process, reflect, and apply. For example, two participants were unable to finish the assigned reading for module 3 prior to the PLC meeting. This is certainly feedback that would be used moving forward when selecting material for the team to study. Even with reducing the amount of reading with each module, it still posed a problem for some participants. This points to the need for more time given the complexity of the topics we studied.

Recommendation #4: ***Make Equity Work a Priority***

If leaders make it known that the work is important, pressing, and necessary, the cogs begin to move. I recommend that school-based and district-level leaders use this study and others like it to point toward the pervasiveness of the problem. Leaders must make it clear to everyone that the work is a priority. Our study showed that making equity the center of an initiative yields positive change. Teachers in the participant group were open to learning more about ways educators are failing marginalized students and then took what they learned and put it to use with their students. This began with choosing to make equitable outcomes the source of professional development. Once leaders make known that a school is going to operate with equitable ends in mind, projects like the one in this study will be easy to sustain and expand. Demonstrating their commitment by studying research like that presented in this paper as a faculty would be a great first step in ushering in change. This would be a logical segue into collecting school-specific data and examining their individual practices as part of a PLC model. It is an effective method for helping teachers and school staff isolate ways inequities originate and persist (McNair et al., 2020). The most important aspect of prioritizing equity work is that it starts with the organizational leader. Leaders have influence and using it to promote improved student outcomes through the lens of equity should be non-negotiable.

DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Explore the Relationship Between Strong TSRs and Student Outcomes

This study revealed the effects of equity-based PLC learning modules on teaching practice. The results were positive, but there is certainly room for further research. For example, using teacher attitude and outcomes from this project, it would be helpful to for scholars to apply these principles in other settings to determine student outcomes. Using the work of Rubies-Davis (2010) and Legette (2020), researchers could focus more on student performance after teachers and other educators are equipped to practice strong TSRs. This would be especially helpful if it were a longitudinal study with younger students and their performance over time. Perhaps it could be juxtaposed with students who had teachers with TSR training later in their academic careers. In addition, researchers could examine college and career paths for these students when compared to similar demographics who did not have teachers whose practice is rooted in care and equity. The impacts of this work are far-reaching and if the strategies used to train teachers could be directly linked to student outcomes across a variety of areas, it could awaken the need for wholesale change. Ultimately, it is all about meeting students where they are in a way that gives them access to the curriculum and school experience.

Explore the Impacts of Culturally Responsive Teaching Over Time

It would be beneficial for scholars to take a closer look at the nexus of why marginalized students experience (sometimes unintentional) discrimination and what addressing the problem would mean for students as they move through school. As Noddings (2012) attests, teachers have to move beyond assumed student needs. Teachers who are trained in CRT can act on real needs and this would almost certainly have a positive impact on marginalized students over time. Once

teachers and other educators are aware of and act to correct their deficits, researchers could follow a cohort of students who had substantial and consistent exposure to culturally responsive teaching and compare their experience to another cohort who did not. Like the study of TSRs on student outcomes, a study of marginalized students and their experiences could be the catalyst for changing teacher preparation and district professional development to include CRT. Roorda et al. (2011) have clearly demonstrated that TSRs and ensuring students connect with their school experience has a positive impact. However, we need more targeted research on what those impacts look like as students progress through school and into the later stages of their lives. With so many marginalized students falling behind because of White norms in the school setting (Gay, 2000), substantive evidence to demonstrate long-term impact on those students could lead to a change in the current school structures.

Explore the Impacts of Including TSRs in Preservice Teaching Programs

Albeit ostensibly unintentional, few preservice teaching programs place emphasis on TSRs or culturally responsive teaching strategies. Further, many teacher education programs appear to play a role in maintaining racial disparities (Harris et al., 2020). While this is an area in need of attention in many institutions, some programs are committed to equitable outcomes and strong TSRs (Sleeter, 2016). Future researchers could focus on the experiences of teachers and students from preservice programs that feature TSR preparation and compare those to the many who do not. This study and others like it affirm the impact a trained and prepared teacher can have, but this has happened after they are already practicing professionals, oftentimes many years into their careers. If scholars could explore the impact these teachers have from year one and over a multi-year period, it would be an excellent baseline for comparison. It would also be advisable to study the experiences of students in preservice programs with focus on TSRs and

how prepared they felt before student teaching or entering the teaching profession. Would potential employers view these students more favorably given their training? Research should span higher education impact, practicing teacher impact, student performance impact, and school system employment/performance impact.

CONCLUSION

Taking time to truly understand and establish meaningful relationships with students is one of the most important things an educator can do. It has the power to change the entire trajectory of a child's life. It is imperative we educate ourselves on the cultures, values, and history of all the students we serve. There is no other way to adequately provide equitable educational opportunities. It takes the commitment and work of courageous educators to make this happen; educators who will dismiss vulnerability and examine themselves, their opinions, their implicit biases, and their positionality to operate fair and equitable classrooms. When armed with these skills, teachers can truly care for their students. They can establish and sustain authentic relationships which often have lifelong impacts. Most people can immediately call to mind a teacher who made an impression on them. Unfortunately, not everyone had that experience and the implementation of the strategies outlined in this paper could change that. Indeed, many students have negative or even traumatic memories of being in the classroom. Just as caring teachers and adults tend to have a positive impact on the lives of young people, teachers and adults who are insensitive or say and act in hurtful ways will leave young people with wounds that sometimes never heal. The individuals who are being prepared to stand in front of young people, teach them, and influence them must be fully prepared to do so. It begins with an understanding of the role each school employee plays; that they have an individual responsibility to educate themselves in the field of equity as it applies to the student experience. It ends with the belief of *every* educator that *every* child deserves the chance to connect with their school, their teachers, and the world around them.

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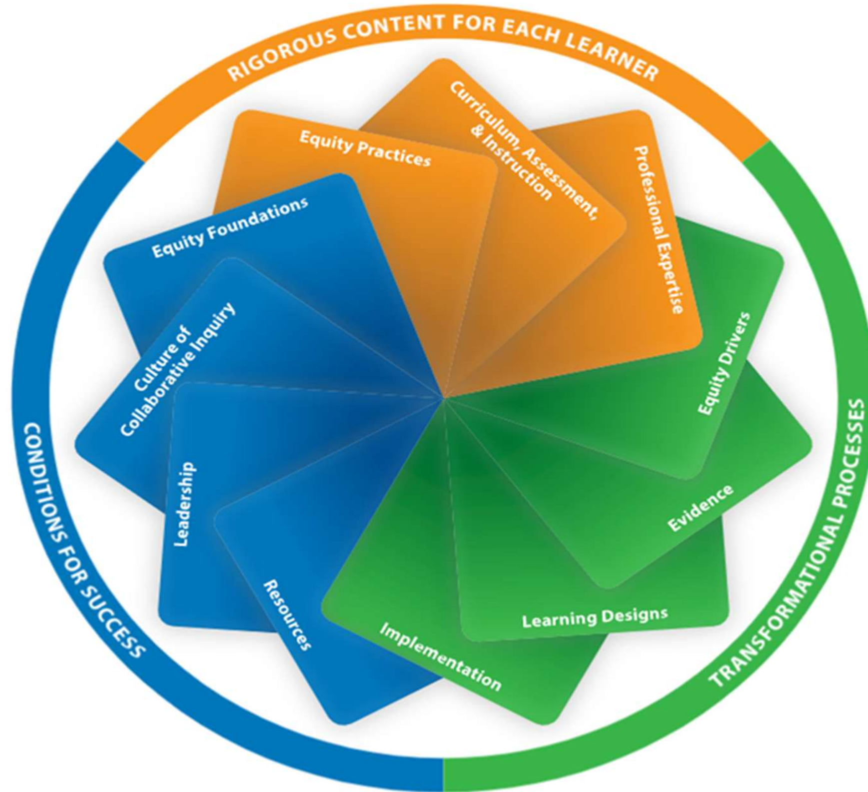
APPENDICES

Appendix A

Learning Forward Model



Appendix B

Process Measure: Participant Qualtrics Survey
(Completed at the beginning and end of the improvement project)

Response Scales (5 Point):

Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neither Agree nor Disagree, Agree, Strongly Agree

Not at all Familiar, Slightly Familiar, Somewhat Familiar, Moderately Familiar, Extremely Familiar

Not at all Aware, Slightly Aware, Somewhat Aware, Moderately Aware, Extremely Aware

1. I understand the importance of having positive relationships with students
2. I understand the importance of having positive relationships with culturally diverse students. (Black and Brown students, students with disabilities, and students of low socioeconomic status
3. I understand the impact I have on students in my classroom/office
4. I understand how my positionality and identity influence my teaching/counseling practices
5. I am familiar with the Establish-Maintain-Restore method
6. I am familiar with culturally relevant teaching practices
7. I am familiar with the term implicit bias
8. I am confident enacting culturally responsive teaching practices
9. I am confident utilizing the Establish-Maintain-Restore method
10. I am comfortable creating positive, strong relationships with ALL students
11. I am comfortable creating a classroom environment that is accepting of ALL learners
12. I am comfortable creating a classroom environment that is equitable for ALL learners
13. I am aware off my own implicit biases

14. I am aware of my own positionality

15. I am aware of the cultural backgrounds of my students

Appendix C

Process Measure: Participant Qualtrics Survey
(Completed at the end of each PLC module in the improvement project)

Response Scale (5 point):

Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neither Agree nor Disagree, Agree, Strongly Agree

Design:

1. Today's session advanced the development of culturally relevant teaching practices
2. Today's session was useful and practical
3. The objectives for the session were clearly stated
4. Today's session was aligned to its stated objectives

Facilitation:

1. Time was allocated effectively to deepen my understanding of the presented material
2. The facilitators of today's session incorporated our experiences into the module activities
3. The facilitators of today's session effectively modeled appropriate instructional strategies
4. Today's activities increased my capacity to improve my practice

Content:

1. I feel I can use the module content to teach others what I have learned
2. The module readings were easy to understand
3. I was able to read the module content before the group meeting
4. The module content was relevant to my teaching practice

Appendix D

Process Measure: Padlet Survey

1. What did I know prior to the reading?
2. What did I learn?
3. What do I wonder?
4. Did the reading evoke any strong feelings regarding your teaching practice or your experience during your preservice teaching program?

Appendix E

Balance Measure: Participant Pacing Survey

Scale:

None, Slight, Moderate, Extreme

1. To what degree did focusing on the ethic of care and implicit bias in your classroom practice effect your ability to cover academic curriculum?

Appendix F

Establish Maintain Restore Reflection Form

Establish-Maintain-Restore Relationships

Establish (E): the relationship is currently characterized more as an acquaintance because a sense of trust, respect, and connection has not been established with the student.

Maintain (M): the relationship with the student is secure and characterized by a sense of trust, respect, and connection.

Restore (R): the relationship with the student has been strained/harmed due to a negative interaction and there is a need to restore the relationship back to its previous state through a skillful interaction.

Instructions: The aim of this reflection form is to examine the relationship status with each student. Using the above definitions as a guide, list each student you are supporting and place a check mark in the cell that best captures the relational phase (establish, maintain, or restore) you're in with each of the students. Once completed, you will discuss with others in the PLC group.

Student	Establish Phase	Maintain Phase	Restore Phase	Notes