

A MULTIPLE CASE STUDY ON THE PHENOMENON OF CULTURALLY  
RESPONSIVE PEDAGOGY IN RURAL WESTERN NORTH CAROLINA

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## DEDICATION

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **A MULTIPLE CASE STUDY ON THE PHENOMENON OF CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE PEDAGOGY IN RURAL WESTERN NORTH CAROLINA**

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As schools have become increasingly diverse, the teaching force has remained mainly White (Brown, 2004). The disparity between students and teachers is seen in schools across the nation, including small, rural schools. Many teachers are unprepared for the reality that their cultural, racial, ethnic, or linguistic backgrounds will differ from those of their students (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011). The issues that can result from these cultural differences require a teaching force equipped with the knowledge of teaching in culturally responsive ways to better meet the needs of their diverse student populations.

Research available informing of knowledge about culturally responsiveness and culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) is focused mainly on urban settings. This study is significant in that it examines four culturally responsive teachers in a rural setting as, according to Arnold, Newman, Gaddy, & Dean (2005) and Cicchinelli (2011), there is very little research available on culturally responsive teachers in rural schools.

Additionally, while the current literature recommends necessary CRP classroom practices, there is very little research that examines these recommendations in practice in

the classroom, even in urban settings (Ball & Tyson, 2011). This study provides an in-depth analysis of the actual practices of four rural culturally responsive teachers and compares those practices with the existing literature as presented in the Characteristic Components of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy Framework (CCCRP). Through an in-depth analysis of four rural classroom teachers, using a qualitative multiple case study informed by a phenomenological approach, the study offers a unique perspective of culturally responsive pedagogy in action. It attempts to shed light on the perspectives and development of rural teachers as to their experiences, attitudes, and beliefs regarding CRP, the CRP practices they use, and how these practices intersect with the research-based principles of CRP.

The analysis of data collected provided an understanding of practices that support current research as presented in the CCCRP Framework. Other findings offer an additional viewpoint to existing literature and are discussed in relationship with current literature:

- 1) care is an integral attitude necessary in cultural responsiveness, though it is not always mentioned in the CRP literature. While some may state that all teachers care, caring is not always present in the repertoire of all teachers;
- 2) according to the four nominated CRP teachers, the teacher education program was not integral to the development of their cultural responsiveness;
- 3) all four teachers found themselves in situations where they felt it necessary to *break the rules* of the school culture; and
- 4) while the characteristic of developing community relations is present in the CCCRP framework, the presence of developing and empowering these relationships is not supported by the data collected in this study.

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

I don't know why we have to keep talking about this diversity stuff," This disturbing comment came from a White, middle class, female student who was not otherwise vocal or objectionable in class. If she were willing to state this out loud, how many others were also feeling it? With the prior discussions we had in class, did she not see the importance and even more, the necessity, of understanding one of education's most difficult struggles, one she would soon face? (Pam Buskey, personal reflection, November 28, 2007).

The remark in this personal reflection is what was often heard in an introductory course in a teacher education program (TEP) at a university in Western North Carolina. Remarks such as these show the naivety of TEP students who are unaware of the realities in today's public schools. Current teachers, however, are in the midst of playing "catch up" with their TEPs, unsure how to meet the needs of their diverse student populations (O'Neal, Ringler, & Rodriguez, D, 2008).

As schools have become increasingly diverse, the teaching force has remained mainly White (Brown, 2004). The disparity between students and teachers is seen in schools across the nation, including small, rural schools. Many teachers are unprepared for the reality that their cultural, racial, ethnic, or linguistic backgrounds will differ from those of their students (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011). The resulting problems from these cultural differences require a teaching force equipped with the knowledge of teaching in culturally responsive ways to better meet the needs of their diverse student

populations. Many university teacher education programs and school districts are looking at culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) as one way of closing this gap. This study attempts to provide a deeper understanding of what it means to teach using culturally responsive pedagogy in rural schools. It aims to shed light on the perspectives and development of rural teachers as to their experiences, attitudes, and beliefs regarding CRP, the CRP practices they use, and how these practices intersect with the research-based principles of CRP.

### **Significance of the Topic**

Today, public schools in the United States are experiencing a demographic change greater than that seen at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Gay, 2000; Genesee, Lindholm-Leary, Saunders, Christian, 2005; Hodgkinson, 2002; U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). Classrooms are increasingly racially and ethnically diverse, with a 2010-11 national student population of 52% White, 24% Hispanic, and 16% Black, 6% other (Ed.Gov, 2012). Two years earlier, in 2008, the national public school population consisted of 55% White, 22% Hispanic, 16% Black students, and 7% other. This was altered respectively from 67%, 11%, 17%, and 4% in 1990 (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2011). In contrast, the teaching staff is 85% White, 7% Black, and 8% other (NCES, 2011; National Education Association [NEA], 2004), and is unrepresentative of the student demographics (Simmons, 2008). Added to the increasingly diverse racial make-up of our schools is the culture of students living in poverty. Today, about 30% of the United States elementary and secondary schools are considered high poverty schools. High poverty schools are identified by 76 to 100% of the school's student enrollment being eligible for free or reduced meals, (NCES, 2011).

These schools are home to one in six of this nation's students. This dichotomy of a diverse student population and a homogeneous teacher population is a concern, especially considering the current national economic situation and the projection that by 2020 there will be no single racial group with a population of over 50% (Marbley, Bonner, McKisick, Henfield & Watts, 2007; Prater & Devereaux, 2009; Villegas & Lucas, 2002a).

This demographic shift is especially being witnessed in rural schools. Rural communities and schools, like many urban and suburban communities, are experiencing a profound transformation (Macartney, 2011). Once viewed as homogeneous, many rural communities have become increasingly diversified culturally, linguistically, and socioeconomically (Johnson & Strange, 2009). Many rural school districts have some of the highest poverty rates in the nation and serve 1.4 million students, 37% who live in poverty (Johnson & Strange, 2009) and many of which are located in the southeastern United States.

Historically, immigrant families entering the United States established homes in urban settings; however, many of today's immigrant families often choose to reside in rural communities (Gibson & Jung, 2006). This is especially true of the Hispanic or Latino population. According to the 2010 Census, 16 percent of the total population was of Hispanic or Latino origin, an increase from 13% in 2000 (Ennis & Albert, 2011). As the fastest growing segment of the rural population (Enis & Albert, 2011; Johnson & Strange, 2009; US Census, 2011; Wells, 1989), the Hispanic population accounts for fifty percent of the 27.3 million increase in total population of the United States between 2000 and 2010, growing by 43 percent or four times the growth of the total population (Enis &



Albert). This study's focus is in North Carolina which has seen a Hispanic population increase of 394% from 1990 to 2000 (Chapa & De La Rosa, 2006; Palmer, 2006). North Carolina now has the third largest rural minority population in the nation (Yaunches, 2007). Western North Carolina (the specific location of this study) has not been exempt from this change, as shown in Table 1 below, depicting the changing population of Western North Carolina over time.

Table 1

Western North Carolina (16 Counties) School Population by Race, 2000 to 2011.

Race	Years			
	2000-01	2005-06	2007-08	2010-11
American Indian/Alaskan Native	1178	1325	1335	1442
Asian/Pacific Islander	617	801	946	966
Black	7,600	8,497	5,476	5,127
Hispanic	2701	5,588	6,735	9,257
White	82,263	80,789	78,461	75,556

Nation Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2013

Teachers and administrators in rural public schools are strongly affected by the increase in diversity and socioeconomic decline. Both veteran and new teachers are asked to meet the challenging cultural and language needs of diverse students, many without proper training or preparation (Abbate-Vaughn, 2008; Brisk, 2008; Herrera, Murry & Perez, 2008; O'Neal, Ringler & Rodriguez, 2008). Many rural educational

leaders recognize this as an issue that is not only permanent, but also growing, as almost one in four births are of Hispanic origin (Child Trends Data Bank [Child Trends], 2011).

With a majority of teachers who are White and an increasingly diverse student population, teacher education programs seek methods to better prepare teachers for the realities of their classrooms (Gay, 2010). Local education agencies (LEAs), too, search for professional development programs to assist teachers with the current diverse classrooms (King, Artiles, & Kozleski, 2009; Trumball & Pacheco, 2005). Many researchers believe that a significant requirement for this preparation is a curriculum that assists teachers, current and future, in unveiling the realities of U.S. society, and in education specifically (Gay, 2010). Milner (2010) states, “preparing teachers for diversity, equity, and social justice are perhaps the most challenging and daunting tasks facing the field” (p. 119) as teacher educators and professional development coordinators must initiate the crucial step of getting teachers to open their eyes to who they are themselves - politically, historically, socioeconomically, and socio-culturally (Gay, 2010; Milner, 2010). This often requires a person to be re-educated (Castro, 2010; Gay, 2010; Le-Roux, 2001). Gay (2010) pointedly states that “problems related to teaching for, to, and through cultural diversity cannot be solved until [the problems] are recognized and confronted, their causes and characteristics are understood, and deliberate strategies for their resolution are developed” (pp. 145-146). For solutions to be formed, difficult discussions about the inequalities and inequities occurring at many levels in education must take place.

## **Need for the Study**

Rural teachers must be better prepared to understand the needs of culturally and ethnically diverse students (O'Neal, Ringler & Rodriguez, 2008). However, seventy-six percent of new teachers report that although their TEP discussed teaching diverse students, the training was insufficient to prepare them for teaching in diverse classrooms (Rochkind, Ott, Immerwahr, Doble, & Johnson, 2008). Many veteran teachers make similar claims (O'Neal, et al., 2008). Courses discussing diversity, multiculturalism, culture, race, and language learning, though evident in some TEPs, have not been intentionally spiraled into the educational curriculum to promote an understanding of the principles and practices of a CRP (Gorski, 2008; Hess, Lanig & Vaughn, 2007; Sleeter, 2001; Walker-Dalhouse & Dalhouse, 2006). Some Local Education Agencies (LEAs), facing student achievement gap issues and high dropout rates, are tackling the issue of training teachers for their classroom challenges through post-university, in-service training (Herrera, et al., 2008), and seeking the assistance of local universities to provide pre-service and professional development training to improve instruction for this growing student population (Ball & Tyson, 2011; Herrera, et al.; Warren & Peel, 2005). Despite such efforts, today's teachers, whether rural, suburban, or urban, do not feel prepared for the demands of their diverse student population (Barnes, 2006; O'Neal, Ringler & Rodriguez, 2008; Sleeter & Milner, 2011; Walker-Dalhouse & Dalhouse, 2006).

Preparing teachers to implement the principles of CRP is one effective way to meet the needs of a diverse, rural student population, providing a more equitable education for culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students. Some university TEPs have made positive strides in preparing teachers for diverse classrooms (Herrera, et al.,

2008). Darling-Hammond (2006) describes several of these colleges and universities (Alverno College; Banks Street College; Trinity University; University of California, Berkeley; University of Southern Maine; University of Virginia; and Wheelock College) and some of their common features including

- a clear vision of good teaching throughout all coursework and student teaching experiences;
- a curriculum focusing on child and adolescent development, learning, social contexts, and content area taught in the context of practice;
- extended field work, carefully developed to support the ideas and practices presented simultaneously through consciously interwoven coursework; and
- strategies helping students confront personal beliefs and assumptions about students and their learning, learning about the experiences of others different from themselves.

While these and other universities are showing positive results from their teacher preparation in regards to CRP, to date, little research follows teachers into the classroom to understand how effective teachers of CRP actually practice (Ball & Tyson, 2011).

Even less research exists within the rural education literature (Arnold, Newman, Gaddy, & Dean, 2005; Cicchinelli, 2011). The purpose of this research is to do both.

Becoming a culturally responsive teacher requires knowledge of theoretically and pedagogically-sound techniques in effectively teaching students who are culturally different from the teacher (Banks, Cochran-Smith, Moll, Richert, Zeichner, LePage, Darling-Hammond, Duffy, & McDonaold, 2005; Bergeron, 2008; Gay, 2010; Sleeter &

Milner, 2011; Prater & Devereaux, 2009; Trent, Kea & Oh, 2008). CRP focuses on understanding and addressing the cultural needs of students by first transforming teachers' cultural knowledge, skills, dispositions, and actions (Gay, 2010; Siwatu, 2005 & 2007; Villegas & Lucas, 2002b; Trent, et al, 2008). Research on diversity and teacher education shows that one must have positive dispositions, attitudes, and beliefs regarding diverse students prior to developing effective practice and efficacy in CRP (Brown, 2004a; Ford, Glimps, & Giallourakis, 2007; Gorski, 2008; Grant & Gibson, 2011; Mahon, 2006; Prater & Devereaux; Siwatu, 2007).

### **Purpose of the Study**

This study seeks to more deeply develop the research on how teachers come to the practice of CRP, as discussed as a need in Ball & Tyson, 2011, and in the specific issues of diversity in rural school classrooms, as discussed as a need in Arnold, et al., 2005; Cicchinelli, 2011. By extension, I conclude that there is a need for research addressing how rural teachers who successfully implement CRP do so. One step in addressing this research gap is to investigate how and why rural teachers implement CRP, and how they learn from their experiences and mistakes. Such an investigation can enhance the understanding of successful practices and pedagogy in rural settings, and also explore the precursors. This study will attempt to fill this gap in the literature through a critical examination of four CRP-nominated teachers in their diverse, rural classrooms.

### **Study Overview**

Culture is one central element of learning. It determines how one communicates, receives information, and processes thinking (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Teachers who understand the importance of this culture of learning use a pedagogy that celebrates the

differences represented in their classrooms. CRP honors the uniqueness of students' cultural references, viewing them as assets to be built upon as opposed to deficits to overcome (Abbate-Vaughn, 2008; Bergeron, 2008). CRP asserts that teachers must be inclusive and non-judgmental of the cultural backgrounds of all students in the classroom (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011; Gay, 2000 & 2002; Villegas & Lucas, 2002a).

Fundamentally, educators who practice CRP acknowledge children for who they are, understand how children perceive themselves, and recognize the truth about how the world receives them, regardless of the cultural background from which they come (Banks, et al, 2008; Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011). Unfortunately, not all teachers have the knowledge to practice this type of pedagogy, or worse, even recognize that different cultures might require adjustments to their pedagogy. Helping veteran and new teachers understand the skill set of a CRP requires significant changes in the TEPs and professional development programs known today, shifts that "far exceed anything done before" (Gay, 2010, p. 60).

This study provides evidence to support the need for CRP through an understanding of culture that entails a discussion on the current and changing demographics of the nation's schools and rural schools specifically. The study then explores the reasons some teachers find it difficult to use CRP. Five basic characteristics of CRP, gained by my own synthesis from current literature, are presented as a conceptual approach to teaching and learning. The five synthesized and analyzed characteristics are: personal awareness and importance of cultural understanding; value of diversity; alteration of instruction, curriculum, and assessments; creation of a culturally compatible classroom; and building effective community relations.

## Research Design

This qualitative study will use a multiple case study methodology informed by a phenomenological approach. Its purpose is to provide a description of the phenomenon of CRP through the experiences of four CRP-nominated teachers practicing in rural schools with diverse populations. Through the phenomenological approach, I plan to explore a deeper understanding of what culturally responsive pedagogy means and how it occurs in the classroom from the perspectives of the four CRP-nominated teachers who use it. The practices the four CRP-nominated teachers use will be explored through multiple, focused observations including teaching practice, student-teacher interaction, and classroom setting; in-depth, open-ended interviews of teachers; and reviews of documents such as lesson plans, assignments, and grading protocols.

This study is designed to answer four questions about the practices of four CRP-nominated teachers working in diverse rural environments:

- 1) What are the experiences, attitudes, and beliefs of four CRP-nominated teachers working in a rural setting regarding CRP?
- 2) How did those experiences, attitudes, and beliefs develop?
- 3) What are the CRP practices of the four rural CRP-nominated?
- 4) How do the CRP practices of the four rural CRP-nominated teachers intersect with the principles of CRP?

The aim is to more richly understand how purposefully selected teachers have come to the practice of CRP, and how they perceive CRP being used in their classroom(s) from a description of the preparation of their lesson plans to the implementation of those lesson plans on a daily basis. It seeks to provide an understanding of how four selected

teachers feel about CRP, how they judge its effectiveness for their diverse student population, and how they make sense of it for themselves.

### **Setting, Participants, and Data Collection Procedures**

The four participants selected for this study are teachers in the K-12 public school system teaching in one of the 18 school systems of region eight located in western North Carolina. Teachers were selected through a theory-based sampling strategy so as to provide “information-rich cases for in-depth studies” (Patton, 1990, p. 169). Through theory-based sampling, I hoped to gain an adequate pool of participants from whom I could learn about the central issues, leading to insights surrounding the purposes of the study (Creswell, 2008; Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Patton, 1990).

As a first step in identifying the sample, I sent an electronic mail correspondence to instructors, student teacher supervisors, and content area supervisors in Colleges of Education at colleges and universities serving region eight in western North Carolina (see Appendix A). The email included a brief description of CRP and the purpose of the study. It requested the instructor to complete a Qualtrics survey (see Appendix B), providing me with demographic information, the name of the nominated teacher exemplifying the five provided culturally responsive characteristics, and a reason the teacher met the given criteria.

Once I had gathered a list of nominated teachers, I ranked the teachers from those who most exemplified teaching with CRP to least, according to a ranking system developed from my list of Characteristic Components of CRP Checklist (see Appendix D). As a final step in the sample identification process, I began to individually contact the highest scoring participants on the list to request their participation in the study,



continuing down the list until a total of four teachers agreed to participate in the study. These four teachers constituted the final multiple case study sample.

As part of the case study, a series of teacher interviews, classroom observations, and document reviews were conducted. At the outset, it was decided that four interviews and classroom observations/document reviews would be sufficient to answer the four research questions for this study, with the understanding that more might be needed to gain saturation of knowledge and deep understanding of CRP practices, the saturation point was determined, upon analysis of data and development of themes, when no new knowledge shared by the teachers further informed the understanding of CRP (Creswell, 2008).

### **Data Analysis**

Throughout the process listed above, I fully analyzed all data collected at each stage. This careful weaving of data and analysis informed each stage of interview questions and observations. Beginning with the CRP framework developed through my earlier research of CRP, I coded, categorized, and located themes to look for meaning in a constant comparison method providing deconstruction, comprehension, interpretation, synthesis, and triangulation of the data (Creswell, 2008; Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Patton, 1990). I also used data documentation, storage, and management, techniques discussed by Huberman and Miles (1994) and Stake (2006), using the suggested three-component analysis procedure of data reduction, data display, and conclusion-drawing/verification.

## Definitions and Acronyms

The following definitions will be used throughout the literature review and discussion. They are provided to give a basic understanding of the terms used and these will be discussed later in detail. Where no citation is given, the definition is an assimilation of the literature.

Term	Acronym, if used	Definition
Culture		“A common set of values, beliefs, and social practices, as well as the group of people who share that similar identity” (Provenzo, Jr., 2009, p. 212).
Cultural Competence		The ability to teach students from cultures other than your own. This requires complex awareness and sensitivity, depth of knowledge, and skills that entail cross-cultural teaching and multiculturalism.
Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students	CLD	Students are from different cultures AND speak different languages than the norm.
Culturally Responsive Teaching	CRT	Purposefully responding to the needs of the many culturally and ethnically diverse learners in classrooms (Brown, 2004a)
Culturally Responsive Curriculum		A curriculum that provides a familiar, cultural base through which individuals can connect new knowledge to personal experiences (Bergeron, 2008)
Culturally Responsive Pedagogy	CRP	A pedagogy that assists and supports the achievement of all students through a culturally supported learning environment (National center for Culturally Responsive Educational System [NCCREST], 2006a).
Diversity (Cultural Diversity)		The many differences existing between groups of people including ethnicity, race, language, socioeconomic status, gender, sexual orientation exceptionalities, religion, among others (National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education [NCATE], 2008)
Ethnicity		Refers to shared traits, usually cultural, such as language, religion, food, dress, music, etc. It is the group to which people say they “belong” (Sadker & Zittleman, 2009)
Hispanic or Latino		“Hispanic or Latino” refers to a person of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin regardless of race (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011).
Instructors		University faculty contacted to assist in gaining access to the sample of CRP teachers.

Limited English Proficient	LEP	Federal Public Law 107-110 defines LEP as a person, aged 3-21 enrolled in a public school whose native language is other than English and who has difficulties in speaking, reading, writing or understanding the English language sufficiently enough to achieve in classrooms (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2010).
Local Education Agency	LEA	More often termed a school district county office, an LEA is a government agency set with the task of supervising instruction and providing educational services to members (usually school aged youth) of a community.
Race		<p>The Miriam Webster dictionary (2011) defines race as “a class or kind of people unified by shared interests, habits, or characteristics” and “a category of humankind that shares certain distinctive physical traits.”</p> <p>Since the 2000 national census, the U.S. Census Bureau, through the Office of Management and budget, used the following categories for race: American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Black or African American, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, White, and Some Other Race. The final category allows for the ease of self-categorization. Census takers selected one or more of these racial categories. Each race groups is then divided into ethnic origins: “Hispanic or Latino” and “not Hispanic or Latino” (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010a).</p>
Social Justice		The Institute for Intellectual Property and Social Justice (IIPSJ) states that there are two aspects of social justice: (1) inclusion of everyone in the full benefits of society and (2) empowerment of people to participate fully in the economic, social, and cultural life of the country (2011).
Teacher		Kindergarten through twelfth grade employees of the public school system nominated to participate in this study
Teacher Education Program	TEP	Programs to prepare and license future teachers, typically in colleges and universities nationwide.

### **The Role and Background of the Researcher**

The impetus for my interest in culturally responsive pedagogy in rural schools began at a very young age. I was raised in a small, rural community with a population of 2500 in northwestern Ohio, graduating with a class of 65, the largest graduating class in decades. My community was considered religiously very diverse by many in the community, though only within the context of Christianity. There was a church of a

different Christian denomination situated throughout the town and in the countryside, lacking only a Catholic church requiring the few Catholic community members to go to a neighboring city about 20 miles away. Aside from this, little other outward diversity existed. There were a few students with different learning abilities, and some lived quietly with their diverse sexual orientation. Some families may have had a bit more or less money than their neighbors, though socioeconomic status differences were not significant. My village was modest in every aspect of rural communities.

Approximately 3% of the students in my school were from Latin or South America, though during my upbringing, they were second or third generation Americans. A migrant population arrived in our school every spring, prepared to plant and harvest tomatoes. I anxiously awaited their arrival, enjoying talking with several of the students who returned every year. In second grade, I remember asking my teacher why Juan sat alone during our time for reading groups. Also, in second grade, I befriended a Jewish girl. I remember going to her house after school, and being interested in the candles she lit during prayer time, asking her questions about her traditions. Unfortunately, her family moved away from our small town without a goodbye. I wonder today the reason for their departure. Likewise, a Black family moved into a new housing development near my house when I was still in elementary school. The children of this family who attended my school were the first Black kids I had ever met. This family, too, moved away, not staying more than a few months in my town. I questioned my parents about these things, and also questioned them as to why I was not allowed to have a boyfriend named Roberto.

I attended one of the largest universities in the nation, and in retrospect, now realize I chose this university because of the exposure I craved to people who were different than myself. I graduated with a degree in education, prepared to teach English to anyone who would listen! After a year teaching in a public school, my husband and I took an opportunity to live internationally where I taught English for three years to Turkish students in Istanbul. Upon our return to the United States, I enrolled in a graduate program to receive a Master's Degree in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages. As a graduate assistant at the English Language Program (ELP) at the university, I taught English to students who spoke as many as 15 different languages from as many or more cultures in one class. After a total of ten years of teaching in the ELP, I was given the opportunity to teach the foundation course for a teacher education program in western North Carolina. It was while teaching the students of this course that I quickly recognized the need for my mostly White class of future teachers to understand cultures different from their own. Through experimenting with ways to expose these teachers to alternative viewpoints about education, I began to read the literature regarding this topic, newly termed for me, called cultural responsiveness. I began to understand my own place on the continuum of understanding different cultures and explore how I could improve upon my own cultural self. In so doing, I dug into how best to assist my students in doing the same. Thus, my dissertation topic, unbeknownst to me at the time, began to surface. Five years later, I bring you this study.

## CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This literature review is a discussion of elements of and the intersection between rural education and culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP). It begins with a brief introduction to the conceptual framework of CRP, defined by five characteristics. This is followed by a discussion of some of the facets of culture and rural culture specifically, including rural poverty and rural education. The review then explores the United States' demographic shift with an analysis of its effects on rural communities, schools, teachers, and students. A broad view of the United States' cultural norms based on a Euro-American viewpoint ensues, with a discussion on the barriers to equitable education for all students resulting from studies regarding Whiteness, White privilege, unintentional racism, stereotypes and stereotype threats, and teachers' deficit thinking and low expectations. This information provides the groundwork for the final discussion regarding culturally responsive pedagogy, including the preparation of teachers for CRP.

### **Culturally Responsive Pedagogy**

Culture is the perceived view of life of a group of people. It determines how one communicates, receives information, and processes thinking (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Teachers who respect the unique needs of the many cultural groups of students in their classes, and use a pedagogy that recognizes student's differing cultural thought patterns as equal to one another, are aware of the power of CRP (Moule, 2012). CRP honors the uniqueness of students' cultural references, viewing them as assets to be built upon as opposed to deficits to overcome (Abbate-Vaughn, 2008; Bergeron; 2008). Gay (2002) defines CRP as “. . . using the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively” (p. 106). CRP asserts

that teachers must be inclusive and non-judgmental of the cultural, linguistic, and social backgrounds of all students in the classroom (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011; Gay, 2000 & 2002; Villegas & Lucas, 2002a), and entails giving extra effort for successful lesson preparation and strategies for teaching (Villegas & Lucas, 2002a; Marbley, et al., 2007).

While plenty of literature is available on CRP, there is not one common description or “list” for a practitioner’s use. A research-based guide delineating the characteristic skills and behaviors of CRP is needed. Through a synthesis of extant research on the characteristic skills and behaviors of CRP by leaders in the field of multiculturalism, cultural responsiveness, and diversity (Brown, 2007; Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011; Diller & Moule, 2005; Gay 2000, 2002, 2010; Ladson-Billings 2001; Lindsey, Graham, Westphal & Jew 2008; Siwatu, 2005; Villegas & Lucas 2002b), I have compiled what I believe are the essential characteristics of CRP for rural educators into the Characteristic Components of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CCCRP) Framework (Appendix D). These characteristics are an inclusive set of values and behaviors of individuals to respond effectively in the diverse settings of today’s rural classrooms and schools. These five characteristics provide a conceptual approach to teaching and learning that promotes:

- Personal awareness & importance of cultural understanding - the teacher’s deep investigation of personal cultural awareness and the effect these beliefs have on others; acknowledging and accepting all people have their own personal culture; and understanding rural culture in particular;
- Valuing diversity - by providing knowledge and skills to help students adapt and function in mainstream culture while maintaining cultural

identity and native language; supporting culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students and assisting others in education to view experiences brought to the classroom as assets as opposed to deficits; and accepting that all cultures, including the rural culture, place importance on sometimes differing values and behaviors;

- Altering curriculum, instruction, and assessments - using rural students' cultural knowledge, experiences, and learning styles; constructing instruction and altering the curriculum to build on contexts rural students can relate to and benefit from; using a variety of assessment techniques to manage student differences, providing multiple opportunities to demonstrate learning;
- Creating a culturally compatible classroom (and school) environment - making learning about cultural groups and their experiences an integral part of the classroom; advocating for the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse CLD students based on the grounds of social justice; assisting rural students to recognize the importance of their own unique culture;
- Community relations – building a community of learners, getting to know students in their lives outside of the classroom; recognizing and incorporating the involvement of parents and family in the classroom; promoting and experiencing the integral link of the school and the rural community.



Fundamentally, educators who practice culturally responsive pedagogy acknowledge children for who they are, understand how children perceive themselves, and recognize how the world accepts them, regardless of the cultural background from which they come (Banks, et al., 2011).

### **Review of Literature Supporting the Need for CRP**

Understanding the need to incorporate a CRP in today's classrooms requires first a discussion on why CRP is necessary; what is happening socially and educationally that begs for a serious analysis and reform in how preservice and inservice teachers are prepared to teach. The discussion that follows will provide an overview of culture, and rural culture specifically, and how this culture affects our schools today. This is supported by the changing cultural demographics in our nation's schools, including the rural schools, as a result of increasing immigration and poverty. Confounding the changing needs in our schools are the unchanging White teaching population and the dominant societal constructions of a "culture of discontinuity," White privilege, stereotype and stereotype threat, deficit thinking, and low expectations inherent in the mindset of many teachers today. This review of the literature will bring full circle the discussion of a need for teachers trained in CRP to more equitably meet their students' needs. Finally, an overview of educating new and veteran teachers in CRP is given.

**Culture.** Understanding culture is essential to the discussion of changing rural schools. This discussion will first define culture, and then rural culture. Education in the rural culture will follow with specific information regarding the importance of education for the future achievement of rural students. As stated by Provenzo (2009), the construct of culture is complex, as there is no clear definition. Culture is perceived as dynamic and

ever-evolving, based on the group's past and the changing needs of the people who make up that cultural group (Gay, 2000).

This study will use the definition of culture taken from the Encyclopedia of the Social and Cultural Foundations of Education (Provenzo, 2009). Culture is defined as “a common set of values, beliefs, and social practices, as well as the group of people who share that similar identity” (Provenzo, p. 212). This definition introduces the complexities of culture and how it is perceived by many different cultures and in many facets of those cultures, globally. Culture is the lens through which life and existence is perceived by a group of people (Diller & Moule, 2005). It is passed down from one generation to the next (Irvine & Armento, 2001), determining how, and why people behave in the ways in which they do (Gay, 2000).

All people, influenced by a cultural group, behave or respond to situations in ways dictated by the group. Cushner, McClelland & Safford (2003) present twelve markers determining cultural identity: ethnicity/nationality, race, gender/sex, health, age, sexual orientation, education, language, social class, social status, geographic region, religion, and exceptionalities/abilities/disabilities. Culture, then, is the classification that helps to define a person and how that person is viewed as unique and diverse (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011; Valentin, 2006). From this perspective of culture, people belong to more than one cultural group, e.g. the Hispanic, Christian female, or the White, gay male. The degree to which a person is affiliated with a culture determines the cultural characteristics they exhibit.

**The rural culture.** The U.S. Census Bureau (2010b) delineates rural areas as those that are **not** [emphasis mine] urban and are defined by geographic features,

population, and proximity to a larger populated area (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010b). The National Center for Education Statistics (2011), supported by the U.S. Department of Education, uses the guidelines established by the Census Bureau to define urban as a populated area with a total of more than 50,000 people; urban clusters as having a population of between 25,000 and 50,000; and rural areas as those not included inside an urbanized area or urban cluster. The Department of Education provides a somewhat tighter guideline, defining rural school districts as those with fewer than 600 students in daily attendance (United States Department of Education [Ed.Gov], 2011). Research about rural schools is complicated partially because of the elusive definition of what it means to be rural (Rural Assistance Center [RAC], 2011). While it is important to understand how society classifies rural in the context of population, it is even more essential to understand rural in the context of culture and society. What does it mean to be rural?

The rural culture, similar to the discussion on culture generally, is difficult to define (RAC, 2011; Ayers, 2011; Harmon & Weeks, n.d.; Herzog, 2005). Within the United States, there is great variability in the appearance of rural (Pendarvis, 2005), and generalizing rural communities is impossible (Harmon & Weeks). Some rural communities have great prosperity with “highly affluent residents,” while others are critically poor (Pendarvis). Some are ethnically diverse while others are outwardly homogeneous. Racially, rural communities in the western United States are known to be home to many Hispanics, Asians, and American Indians. The southern and southeastern regions have a high population of African Americans and a growing number of Hispanics (Cohn, Passel & Lopez, 2011). Even within states of the U.S., there are regional

differences. For example, rural North Carolina's terrain, occupation, population, social, and educational needs are significantly different east to west (RAC).

Rural life, defined by *Rural Myth* or *Rural Utopia* is often idyllically viewed as agrarian people who work hard, live life peacefully and slowly on the family farm, hold strongly to traditional values, and have a deep connection to a supportive community (Frameworks Institute, 2008; W.K. Kellogg Foundation, 2002). Rural family subsistence is often thought of as being agrarian, though only 10% live on working farms and only 12% of employment is considered agricultural in nature (Herzog, 2005). Often, the rural way of life is devalued by stereotyping rural citizens as lacking intelligence and common sense (Pendarvis, 2005). While it may be true that the rural population is not as well educated as the population living in urban centers (Carsey Institute, 2011a), it does not mean that rural people are not intelligent or do not value education. Rural must be understood as it is much more complex than the simple descriptions defined by the general public suggest.

**Education in the rural culture.** Rural is defined differently dependent upon the location, the people, and the agency defining it (Herzog, 2005; Howley, Pendarvis, & Woodrum, 2005). Rural schools therefore require knowledge and support specific to their own challenges and issues (Herzog, 2005). What works in one school context does not necessarily work in the next (Howley, et al.). This means that rural leaders must advocate regionally and nationally for their individual schools regarding policies and distribution of resources. Policies and resources affect rural schools differently than their urban and suburban counterparts (Farmer, Leung, Banks, Schaefer, Andrews, & Murray, 2006; Frintner, n.d.). Woodrum (2005) states that although schools in the nation appear

organizationally the same, they are culturally very different. This is especially true for rural schools.

Approximately one-half of the operating school districts in the nation are classified as rural, educating over a fifth of the student population (NCES, 2007a), a population that is quite diverse and represents many minority groups (Tompkins, 2008) with diverse expectations and needs. Schools in urban and rural districts serve differing roles in their respective communities and have differing stakeholder expectations. Often, parents in rural school communities hold educational goals for their children that are different than those of urban parents (Woodrum, 2005). Administrators and teachers must understand the needs and requirements of their school community. Given that individual rural districts have their own specific needs and support, the recommendation of a “responsive practice” is required; practice that “attends sensitively and productively” to the needs of the particular context (Howley, et al., 2005).

Due to a smaller population and lower property values, the state’s rural schools receive less funding per student than urban and suburban areas (Tompkins, 2008). Expenditures allocated per rural pupil are \$5,107 compared to the average per pupil expenditure of \$7,996 in non-rural areas (Johnson & Strange, 2009), and at the same time, with a greater percentage of this money allocated to transport students to and from schools over large geographic areas (Silverman, 2005). Underfunded rural schools are hard pressed to provide services necessary for at risk and special needs students, and have limited funds for instructional support such as field trips, enrichment, and remediation (Silverman).

Rural schools are also at a disadvantage for hiring and retaining highly qualified and effective teachers. Receiving lower per pupil expenditures is reflected in the below average salaries offered to rural teachers (Howley, et al., 2005; Johnson & Strange, 2007; Silverman, 2005). The more remote and isolated rural areas are less appealing to young teachers who often seek the lifestyle a larger city area can offer, or prefer to teach in the area where they were raised or the university from which they graduated (Sipple & Brent, 2008). Schools in rural areas often expect teachers to wear many hats, including teaching in multiple content areas, making it more difficult for them to meet highly qualified status required by No Child Left Behind (Silverman). As a result, students are often underserved. The rural school curriculum is often slim, with few upper level, special interest, and elective course offerings (Redding & Walberg, 2012; Silverman). But how do these limited resources affect education and teachers in rural schools?

According to the report card for rural schools reported by the National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP), rural schools underperform in the assessments for 4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade reading, math, and science (American Youth Policy Forum [AYPF], 2010), an important indicator for future high school graduation and post-graduate attainment rates. Educational attainment varies according to rural regions across the nation, though two factors are highly correlated to school success and graduate rates: parents' educational attainment and socioeconomic status (Hernandez, 2004). Students raised by parents with low education levels, or in communities providing lower educational opportunities, provide a significantly thinner educational pipeline for their children (Chapa & De La Rosa, 2006). This lack of opportunity limits students' abilities to escape poverty through a job or higher educational opportunities (Carsey Institute,

2011b). Most of today's 21<sup>st</sup> century economy and employment market requires workers who have completed, at minimum, an associate's degree (Harvard Graduate School of Education [Harvard], 2011). Therefore, rural schools must focus on providing more students an education that will apply to the workforce for which they will one day be a part (Carsey Institute).

Rural students nationally have a 73% graduation rate, nearly equal to the suburban graduation rate of 74% and effectively higher than the 59% urban graduation rate. Lagging behind the national rural rate, nearly 67% of North Carolina rural high school students complete high school (Johnson & Strange, 2009). Rural school graduates have a lower college enrollment rate. In 2004, 34.2% of all 18 to 24 year olds attended a degree granting institution of higher learning (NCES, 2007b). Attendance in these institutions for the rural population was 27%, lower than the 37% in cities and suburban areas (NCES). Nationally, in 2004, 34% of urban and suburban adults age 25 and over had earned a bachelor's degree (25.8% in North Carolina), compared to only 21% of the rural population (NCES, 2007c).

### **The Connection Between CRT: The Growing and Changing Population**

**Demographics.** To fully understand the multiple dimensions of rural schools, it is first essential to get a broad view of the dramatic change in cultural diversity – specifically the rise in immigration and poverty – the United States has seen over the past 20 years (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006) and how this change is affecting rural areas. Today's immigrant student population growth is likened to that of the early twentieth century (Gay, 2000; Genesee, Lindholm-Leary, Saunders, Christian, 2005; Hodgkinson, 2002). Likewise, when using the U.S. government's Federal poverty levels as originated

and defined by Lyndon B. Johnson in 1964, there are more children living in poverty today than when President Johnson declared a ‘war on poverty’ in 1964 (Demi, Coleman-Jensen & Snyder, 2010; Edelman & Jones, 2004; Harvard, 2011). When looking at both immigration and poverty within the context of rural communities, the increase is even more dramatic.

**Immigration.** In 1910, 87.4% of the 13.5 million immigrants that had entered this country were of European descent (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). While life and working conditions for those who entered the United States during this time were not simple, this European majority did not experience a major shift in their **basic** [emphasis mine] cultural lifestyle upon entering the U.S. The dominant European American (Euro-American) culture, created by those who had come from Europe, was much the same as their native culture (Capella-Santana, 2003) (see table 1). By the year 2000, there were over thirty million immigrants in this country, 53% from Latin, Central, and South America (U.S. Census Bureau), many living in areas where their cultures and languages were quite different from that of the majority Euro-American. While the percentage of immigrants to total population has decreased in the 90 years for which there is data, (14.7 percent in 1910 to close to 12 percent in 2011), there has been an increase in the number of people from backgrounds different than the dominant Euro-American culture of the United States’ today, as shown in Table 2 (Jensen, 2006; Migration Policy Institute, 2013; Rong & Preissle, 2009). This table presents the changes of the top ten countries of origin of the U.S. Immigrants from 1900 to 2011.



Table 2

*Historical Overview of the Countries of Origin of U.S. Immigrants*

Rank Order	Top Ten Countries	
	1900	2011
1	Italy	Latin America
2	Russia	Mexico
3	Germany	India
4	Ireland	Philippines
5	United Kingdom	China
6	Austria	El Salvador
7	Sweden	Vietnam
8	Hungary	Cuba
9	Poland	Korea
10	Norway	Dominican Republic

The 2010 Census reported that over 23%, or 17.1 million, of all U.S. children live in immigrant households born as first-generation (born outside of the U.S.), and second-generation (born in the U.S. to at least one foreign-born parent) immigrant children (Child Trends, 2011). The United States saw a 62.5% increase of immigrant children between the years 1990 to 2000 (Child Trends). In the eleven years between 1997-98 and 2008-09, the English Language Learner (ELL) population in U.S. schools increased 51% while overall student population increased by only 7.2% (National Clearing House for English Language Acquisition [NCELA], 2011). Over 56% of all first- and second-generation children are of Hispanic descent, constituting the fastest growing population in the nation (Child Trends; Hodgkinson, 2002; Jensen, 2006). One third of all children living in immigrant families are either born in Mexico or have at least one Mexican-born parent (Child Trends, 2011).

Rural areas reflect similar trends. Whereas earlier immigrants were concentrated in urban locations, today, there is greater migration to rural areas than in the past (Jensen,

2006). Immigrant families, mostly of Hispanic or Mexican-origin, seek employment in such agricultural industries as meatpacking and food processing, along with certain kinds of household manufacturing found in rural locations (Jensen). To date, rural school districts in New Mexico, Alaska, Arizona, and California have a collective ethnic or racial majority group of over 50% (Johnson & Strange, 2009). In eight states, mostly in the south and southeast, nearly 33% of all rural students were from a non-majority group (Johnson & Strange). Thirty six percent of all rural students from North Carolina are from a minority group, 46% of whom live in poverty.

Immigration increases are “more acutely felt in rural communities . . . even if the absolute numbers of newcomers may be much smaller” (Jensen, 2006, p. 7). Rural communities often do not have the infrastructure for the social and economic changes brought by this unexpected population growth. Communities with already small populations can be profoundly affected. Sudden changes may cause fear, anger, and resentment in these closely-knit communities that were, at one time, seemingly stable and content in their homogeneous life (Jensen).

**Poverty.** Poverty, an indicator of the well-being of children, and one of the greatest determiners of educational success, (Destro, 2011; Carsey Institute, 2011b) is also increasing across the nation. Young children afflicted by the negative effects of poverty have poor physical and emotional health, a lower quality of education, and have less access to nutritional and social resources compared to those not living in poverty (Carsey Institute, 2010c). Nationally, 23% of children under 18 lived below the poverty line (\$22,314 annual income for a family of four) in 2011 (Kids Count, 2011). This rate is higher than forty years ago (Carsey Institute, 2010c; Edelman & Jones, 2004; U.S.

Census Bureau, 2011). Seventeen percent of non-Hispanic White, 32.3% Hispanic, and 38.2% of Black children under 18 lived below poverty (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010a). In North Carolina, 28.8% of all children under 18 live in poverty including 14% of non-Hispanic White children, 37.9% of American Indian children, 40.2% of Black children, and 42.6% of Hispanic children (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010b). In Western North Carolina specifically, 29.2% of all children 18 and under live in poverty. These rates are expected to increase, as the economic woes of our nation are not expected to change quickly.

Diverse students living in poverty are most prevalent in the Southeast and Southwest rural communities (Mahaffey, 2009; Carsey Institute, 2010b). In the United States' rural communities, nearly 29% of the children under 18 live below poverty levels, with 13.1% of non-Hispanic White children, 29.5% of Hispanic children, and 32.9% of Black children (U.S. Economic Research Service [ERS], 2011). Looking specifically at rural North Carolina, 46% of all rural youth under 18 live in poverty (Johnson & Strange, 2009) broken down as 10% non-Hispanic White, 29.7% Hispanic, and 25.7% Black children (Rural Data Bank, 2011). As the future of our nation depends upon an educated population, it is important that the educational needs of these children are met, in the hopes of assisting them out of poverty.

Some say that understanding increased poverty is essential to understanding the effects of cultural (mis)understanding (Banks, Cookson, Gay, Hawley, Irvine, Nieto, Schofield & Stephan, 2001). If teachers hope to be effective, they must become knowledgeable about the social and cultural contexts of teaching, and especially about the effects of poverty on their student populations.

## **Changes in Rural Schools**

Rural schools are experiencing overall enrollment increases while non-rural schools have declining enrollments (Johnson & Strange, 2008). Often viewed as culturally and ethnically homogeneous (Johnson & Strange), the nation's, and specifically North Carolina's, rural schools are demographically becoming increasingly more diverse. The changes have caught some rural educators by surprise, requiring them to move outside of the comfort they have always known in order to understand a new student population.

Much of the increasing rural student population can be attributed to immigrants seeking work in rural communities (Jensen, 2006). The rural Hispanic population alone almost doubled from 1980 to 2000, with numbers going from 1.4 million to 2.7 million (Chapa & De La Rosa, 2006; Tompkins, 2008). North Carolina has the highest total rural enrollment in the nation, serving almost 677,000 students, or nearly 50% of the state's student population (Johnson & Strange, 2009). Thirty six percent of North Carolina's rural students are from a minority group, and 7.6% are English language learners, numbers expected to increase in the next decade (Johnson & Strange). North Carolina now has the third largest rural minority population in the nation (Yaunches, 2007). From 1998 to 2008, this state witnessed a Hispanic population increase of 269.8% (NCHELA, 2011).

Not only are Hispanics the fastest growing minority group in the United States, they are also the fastest growing youth population (Alfaro, Umana-Taylor, & Bamaca, 2006; Pew Research Hispanic Center, 2009). More than half of the total population growth was a result of the increase in the Hispanic population that grew by 43%, or four

times the total population of 10% (Ennis et al., 2011). Approximately 45% of Hispanic people living in the United States are between the ages of 10 and 44 compared to 36.4% of non-Hispanic White people (Jensen, 2006; U.S. Census, 2006). The median age of Hispanics is 27, while it is 31 for Blacks, 36 for Asians, and 41 for Whites (Pew Research Hispanic Center). These numbers are important because the future children of these Hispanic youth will likely continue the trend of the fastest growing school-age population, as one out of four of all newborns in the United States are Hispanic (Pew Research Hispanic Center). These children will be attending this nation's public schools within the next ten years (Carsey Institute, 2010a; Villegas & Lucas, 2002a). Predictors indicate that the combined immigrant K-12 student population will "increase from 56.2 million in 1995 to 79.6 million by 2050" (Villegas & Lucas, p. 3), leading to a 58% non-White total school population (Marbley, et al., 2007).

### **Teacher Homogeneity**

While the United States is becoming increasingly more diverse, teachers remain predominantly White. The 2010 teaching demographics were 85% White, 7% Black, and 8% other (Feistritzer, E., 2011). This overrepresentation of a homogeneous population of teachers in a student population that is quite diverse presents problems for schools (Allen & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2004; Arias & Poynor, 2001; Bergeron, 2008; Garza, 2007; Hodgkinson, 2002; Johnson, 2002; Marbley, et al., 2007; Valentin, 2006; Villegas & Lucas, 2002b). Marbley, et al. (2007) question whether teachers acquire the necessary knowledge, skills, and sensitivity toward culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students in their teacher education and professional development programs, and if they

are prepared to meet the challenges of effectively teaching their diverse student populations (p.8).

White teachers, many raised with a middle-class, Euro-American culture, may not easily relate to students from different cultures (Abbate-Vaughn, 2008; Bergeron, 2008; Gay, 2010; Nieto, 1994, 2000). White teachers do not always realize that their own Euro-American culture is pervasive in their teaching practices and that not all ethnic groups successfully learn in the same way (Gay, 2000, 2010; Johnson, 2002; Le Roux, 2001; Marbley, et al., 2007). This disconnection between teachers and students makes it more difficult to “build cultural bridges between home and school for the students” (Villegas & Lucas, 2002a, p. 19). Perpetuating this disconnect, traditional teacher training at institutions of higher learning is based on the same Euro-American culture (Diller & Moule, 2005; Gay, 1997, 2010; Nieto, 2000; Prater & Devereaux, 2009; Sleeter, 2001). Discussed in detail later, some of the resulting effects of this disconnect are White teachers’ expectations that students assimilate into the White-dominant, middle-class culture. This viewpoint may result in the marginalization of the strengths diverse learners bring to our society and schools.

### **Factors of the American Culture Related to the Need for CRP**

This understanding of culture in general, rural culture specifically, and the changing demographics is essential to the discussion of education in America today and the need for culturally responsive teaching. Culture is central to how teachers teach their students. It is also central to how students interact and communicate with one another, as well as understand and learn content. Though the United States is viewed as a land of opportunity for many, the United States American culture often marginalizes and

oppresses those viewed as different (Castagno, 2008). The following sections will discuss the United States mainstream culture, the culture to which, according to Duncan-Andrade (2011), all others are expected to conform.

In the larger context of society, cultural beliefs form the ideologies from which policies and institutions that “serve society” are based (Hollins, 2011, p. 106). Public schools and universities are two of these social institutions and are “gatekeepers for the status quo” (Pang & Park, 2011, p. 69). American school culture is defined by the “cultural values, assumptions, beliefs, heritages, content, decorum, and protocols of European Americans” (Gay, 1997, p. 156; 2010). White, upper middle class, male ideologies and values determine, in large part, what is learned in schools, how it is learned, and the behavioral expectations of students in the hallways, classrooms, and on the sports fields and courts. It is this culture to which all other students – African American, Hispanics, special education, English Language Learners, females – must conform (Gay, 2010). Discriminatory practices, linked to the majority power, privilege some groups of students while at the same time marginalize others (Le Roux, 2001; Weinstein, Tomlinson-Clarke, and Curran, 2004). It is barriers such as these that must be understood to move towards equitable education in this nation (Trent, Kea & Oh, 2009; Villegas & Lucas, 2007). University and college teacher education programs (TEPs) perpetuate these practices by not preparing future teachers to think otherwise (Duncan-Andrade, 2011; Le Roux, 2001; Milner, 2010).

Knowing that the majority of teachers are White and our student population is increasingly diverse, TEPs must consider how to better prepare teachers for the realities of their student population (Gay, 2010). Advocates of CRP believe that one of the most

significant requirements for this preparation is a curriculum that first focuses on the realities of U.S. society in general, and in education specifically (Gay). Milner (2010), states “preparing teachers for diversity, equity, and social justice are perhaps the most challenging and daunting tasks facing the field . . . [and is] an arduous task” (p. 119), as teacher educators must first help their students understand who they are (Gay), their personal “socio-political, socio-historical, socioeconomic, and sociocultural” selves (Milner). To get to this awareness, “re-education” must occur (Castro, 2010; Gay 2010; Le-Roux, 2001). Gay (2010) pointedly states that “problems related to teaching for, to, and through cultural diversity cannot be solved until they are recognized and confronted, their causes and characteristics are understood, and deliberate strategies for their resolution are developed (pp. 145-146).

Most research in preparing teachers for a CRP agree on several key concepts that are essential to understanding injustices occurring in education. The key concepts most often cited are a) whiteness, including a culture of power in a culture of discontinuity; b) white privilege; c) stereotype and stereotype threat; and d) deficit thinking and expectation theory

**Whiteness: Culture of power resulting in a culture of discontinuity.** Schools are a cultural reflection of the greater society, and as a system largely representative of the dominant, White middle-class subgroup that have established norms for verbal and nonverbal communication, interaction, and cognitive behavior (Hollins, 2011; Villegas and Lucas, 2007). Many theorists who speak on “Whiteness” from as far back as W. E. B. Du Bois (1920), to John Dewey (1920), Paulo Friere (1968), Theodore Allen (1976), Dominique Riviere (2008), and Castagno (2008), to name a few, inform that being White



allows one to ignore race and racism, deny oppression inherent in institutions, rationalize meritocracy, and strive to protect the privilege that allows such actions to occur.

Sadovnik (2009) describes schools as the transmitters of specific social identities and constructs that have the ability to "enhance or hinder students' life chances" (p. 738).

While the majority of our educators may have the noblest of intentions, there may be unknown, underlying, and unintentional portrayals of stereotype casting and racism (Ladson-Billings, 2009; Le Roux, 2001). Though White educators may not perceive racism in education, "their lack of self-awareness, their racist conditioning, and their failure to recognize the racist experiences of others impede [this] recognition"

(Donaldson, 2001, p. 6). As a result, albeit unintentionally, some White educators subtly disadvantage racial minority students (Banks & Banks, 2002; Gay, 2000, 2010; Ladson and Billings, 2001, 2009; Le Roux, 2001). Duncan-Andrade (2011) pointedly states, "the fact is, we live in a racist, xenophobic, classist, patriarchal, homophobic society, and this results in our students' overexposure to social toxins" (p. 313). Duncan-Andrade believes that educators must first admit these facts so that a course of action can be set to better prepare themselves "to recognize and respond to the conditions that threaten their students' well-being, and, by extension, their achievement" (p. 313).

Cultural discontinuity results when teachers' and students' expectations and understanding of each other are incongruent due to misunderstandings from cultural assumptions, communication, and behavior (Kidd, Sanchez & Thorp, 2007; Levinson, 2007). Teachers may engage in discriminatory practices such as incorrectly identifying learning issues or behavior problems due to cultural misunderstanding. Bergeron (2008) states that this discontinuity affects students from minority cultures who are not able to

meet the expectations of the dominant culture, placing them at risk of not succeeding in the educational setting. According to Ferri and Connor (2005), there is a persistent overrepresentation of minority children in special needs categories. Teachers must become responsive to the differences these students bring to assist in bridging the gap between students' own cultures and the dominant, less familiar culture of the school (Garza, 2007; Gay, 2000, 2010; Menchaca, 2001).

Delpit (1995) outlines some of the misunderstandings and miscommunication resulting from cultural discontinuity in her discussion of power's effects on culture and conflict. Delpit states that (a) issues of power are enacted in classrooms; (b) there are codes or rules for participating in power; that is, there is a "culture of power;" (c) the rules of the culture of power are a reflection of the rules of the culture of those who have power; (d) if you are not already a participant in the culture of power, being told explicitly the rules of that culture makes acquiring power easier; and (e) those with power are frequently least aware of—or least willing to acknowledge—its existence. Those with less power are often most aware of its existence (p. 24). The White, middle class teacher majority forms a culture of power in the school and classroom. This cultural power is most often unrecognized by those who hold that power. Unfortunately, without being cognizant of its effects, teachers set the stage for their classrooms being seriously inconsistent with the experiences and needs of their CLD students and the emphasis of public schools, e.g. compliance to White culture rules, getting in to honors courses, tests, grades, college entrance (Duncan-Andrade, 2011).

Historically, teachers have had an essential part in the forced assimilation of students to American society (Clayton, 2003; Gorski, 2008; Hollins, 2011; Nieto, 1994).

This forced assimilation attempts to reduce cultural discontinuity, requiring students to give up their home culture and language, requiring them to quickly fit into the school culture (Gorski; Nieto). Though political in cause, and against the desires of many teachers, this continues today as state governments and school districts are asking students to check their culture and language at the doors of the school (Crawford, 2002). This includes the culture and language of all diversity types. Specific to the culture of LEP students, this action is aimed at doing away with Title VII, the Bilingual Education Act of 1968, goals of which were to develop the English skills, **as well as** [emphasis mine] the native-language skills, of LEP students (Sadker & Zittleman, 2011). California, through Proposition 227, and Arizona, through Proposition 203, along with other states, are eliminating Title VII and bilingual education programs from their schools and even banning students from using their native language at all, requiring CLD students to adapt to the school culture without their native language (Ardila-Rey, 2008; Bergeron; 2008; Genesee, et al., 2005; Green, 2003). Language, however, is integral to a student's understanding of her culture, and thereby her self-identification (Bergeron; Green). Depriving a student of her language, an essential requirement for optimum academic achievement and a healthy self-perception (Ardila-Rey; Valdes, Bunch, Snow, Lee & Matos, 2005), is akin to depriving her of the key to a future of engaged employment (Green).

**White privilege.** Cultural discontinuity's presence in schools results from a White faculty unaware of the meaning of White privilege and unintentional racism and the effect of both on their students. White privilege consists of the rights or advantages given to White people that include social benefits beyond those provided to all groups of

people (Landsman & Lewis, 2006; Diller & Moule, 2005). White privilege is so pervasive in the American culture that many people, especially White people, do not even know of, or resist acknowledging, its existence.

Castagno (2008), states that a White person in America is provided privileges of education, social acceptance, and mobility at birth, regardless of socioeconomic status, that people of color must work to achieve. However, many White people do not view themselves as part of a cultural or racial group, nor do they see theirs as a position of advantage. White privilege is largely invisible to those most advantaged by its existence as the Euro-American White culture is the cultural “norm” in America – the norm, according to many, that everyone else should strive to achieve (Hollins, 2011; Jost, Whitfield & Jost, 2005; Landsman & Lewis, 2006). While some call this thought racist or prejudiced, many White people resist the idea of White privilege and do not enter into discussions of the existence of inequalities based on racial privilege (Hollins, 2011; Kidd, Sanchez, Thorp, 2007; Sleeter, 2001). Many White people do not personally feel superior or privileged, possibly because they have never viewed life from outside of their own White culture or their own norm. They do not understand that the privilege of the color of their skin has provided them with freedoms that those from diverse racial groups do not have (Gallagher-Geurtsen, 2007). While many White people are angered by and disapprove of racial discrimination, they do not recognize that they may, in fact, be a part of the role of discrimination (Castagno).

White educators rarely perceive racism in their own actions or in education in general (Donaldson, 2001; Hollins, 2011). Rist (2000) describes how the everyday processes of schooling such as tracking, ability grouping, labeling, unintentional racism,

and stereotyping are directly related to the inequalities visible in education and society today. Teachers unaware of their own cultural conditioning, deceived by their own biases, and unaware of the racist experiences of others, do not recognize the presence of privilege in education (Hollins). Instructional materials, textbook content, historical figures, holidays, and celebrations, selection of school plays and songs, and oftentimes, artwork displayed are all reflections of the White dominant society. Teachers are partly responsible for selecting and promoting the material and curriculum for their teaching, and are therefore responsible for the continuation of exhibiting a culture of power or dispelling it. Likewise, classroom behavior, socialization, and learning expectations are based upon the same cultural conditioning. Thus, by being and remaining unaware of the Euro-American culture of school, White educators perpetuate cultural discontinuity and exhibit *unintentional* racial biases that disadvantage minority students (Moule, 2012).

**Stereotype and stereotype threat.** In addition to understanding privilege and unintentional racism at school, teachers must be aware of the challenge of stereotyping students and the more complex phenomenon of “stereotype threat.” Banks, et al (2001), Diller & Moule (2005), among others, theorize that stereotypes make general claims or judgments about habits, abilities, traits, or expectations that categorize people into a member of an ‘in-group’ or ‘out-group.’ Related to the issue of culture, ethnic stereotypes are taught to children through the normal process of socialization. These stereotypes lead to oversimplifying public thinking about cultural and ethnic group members (Sadker & Zittleman, 2009).

Stereotypes about other cultures are brought to schools by administrators, naïve teachers, and other students as a result of family upbringing, media, school experiences,

etc. that affect their personal, cultural thinking (Abbate-Vaughn, 2008; Gay, 2010).

These stereotypes, says Gay, prevent CLD students from receiving equal educational opportunities from the moment they enter the school door. Stereotypes held about some cultures include an expectation that parents who are poor and of color do not actively participate in their children's school; that black and Hispanic students, especially those from low socioeconomic homes, lack interest in school and learning; that women perform worse on math tests than men; and that students from Asia are best in math and music. These stereotypes "perpetuate myths about life outside of White 'mainstream' America . . . [and] members of both minority and majority groups are negatively affected by these images . . ." (Gay, 2002, p. 109).

Accompanying the debilitating effects of stereotypes is "stereotype threat." Stereotype threat refers to "being at risk of confirming, as self-characteristic, a negative stereotype about one's group" (Steele and Aronson, 1995, p. 797). Stereotype threat, or internalized racism, results when students believe that what they see, hear, and perceive from their teachers, students, and culture in general is accurate. Minority students hear and are affected by spoken stereotypes. They live in fear of making a mistake that will confirm these negative views. In school, this threat is often the cause of intellectual inferiority. No matter the culture, the academic performance of ANY individual will be harmed when stereotype-based expectations infer inferior educational performances. By becoming cognizant of these negative effects, teachers can begin to break the oppressive mold these stereotypes have placed students in for many generations (Aronson, Cohen, McColskey, Montrosse, Lewis, & Mooney, 2009).

**Deficit thinking and low expectations.** Rose (2009) states within two weeks of beginning school, students can tell which teachers like them and which do not; they know who will help them achieve and who will make them dread coming to class. Students are influenced by the attitudes, perceptions, and expectations their teachers hold about them (Noguera, 2003; Gay, 2000; Kirkland, 2011; Villegas & Lucas, 2007). Central to deficit thinking is the teachers' assertion of what they believe students can cognitively achieve, making quick judgments of students, often resulting in deficit thinking and/or low expectations of their students (Milner, 2010). This thinking is often linked to a teachers' monocultural, Eurocentric viewpoint, and negative stereotypes teachers bring with them to the classroom. Deficit thinking inhibits a teacher's ability to provide equitable education to all students (Duncan-Andrade, 2011; Kinloch, 2011).

Some teachers are known to hold lower expectations for some students while pushing others, a phenomenon called unintentional racism (Habel & Ford, 2009). Research shows White teachers tend to have higher academic expectations for their White students compared to students from other cultures, with the possible exception of students from some Asian cultures (Gay, 2000; Hollins, 2011). Research shows that teachers who practice deficit thinking or lower their expectations often make decisions to withhold instruction requiring use of the upper levels of Bloom's Taxonomy based on the 'group' to which a student belongs (Milner, 2010, pp 126-127). Teachers who, even without realization, use this type of deficit thinking stifle student creativity and deep thinking, leading to a loss of interest for learning and passion for school (Milner). As a result, students from minority groups are more highly represented in remedial courses and are more often placed in special education classes than their White classmates

(McMillian, 2003). The large achievement gap and large dropout rate for students from African American, Hispanic, and Native American Indian cultures may also be attributed to the negative effects of deficit thinking (McMillian).

Schools are a reflection of the discriminatory practices seen in the larger society (Hollins, 2010). Therefore, teachers need to understand how the differences that exist in race, socioeconomic status, gender, language, and sexual orientation are linked to the power of the dominant groups, privileging some groups of students and marginalizing others (Hollins, 2011; Le Roux, 2001; Weinstein, Tomlinson-Clarke, & Curran, 2010). Teachers must recognize the existence of White privilege, stereotypes and stereotype threat, deficit thinking, and low expectations in schools. Teachers are responsible for educating all students, and a monolingual, ethnocentric pedagogy denies an equal and equitable opportunity for a great number of students (Gay, 2010).

School districts and teachers that serve the changing student population must be prepared to meet the needs of any student who enters the school doors. To do so requires progressive leadership through organizational change, higher education teacher preparation, and professional development with an intentional focus on understanding different cultures as they present themselves in education. One method for better preparing our educational culture to understand the realities of all students is culturally responsive pedagogy.

### **Culturally Responsive Pedagogy Defined**

Today's mostly White, middle class female teaching corps enter schools where the number of students coming from poverty is on the rise; where students of color are replacing the White majority; where English language learners need specific instruction



conducive to their learning; where the typical middle class teaching mentality ineffectively prepares students for a future of educational and personal success (Chapman, 2011, Hollins, 2011; Kirkland, 2011). These teachers are increasingly serving students from cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds unfamiliar to them and yet these teachers lack the skills required to meet the needs of their students (Barnes, 2006; Sleeter & Milner, 2011; Walker-Dalhouse & Dalhouse, 2006). Many believe it is the students that must change to meet the demands and expectations of America's school culture while others believe that schools and teachers must change by adapting the curriculum and pedagogy to meet the cultural needs of the students (Gay, 2010). Teresa Webster, a principal of an elementary school in Ann Arbor, Michigan stated, "there is no achievement gap, there is a teaching gap" (Teaching Tolerance, 2011). She firmly believes that effective learning lies solely on the shoulders of the classroom teacher, yet 76% report that teaching diverse students was discussed in their TEP, though the training was not sufficient to prepare them for their diverse classrooms (Rochkind, Ott, Immerwahr, Doble, & Johnson, 2008). Culturally responsive pedagogy attempts to meet the conflicting requirements of student assimilation and school adaptation by pulling together the ideals of multiculturalism of the 1970s and the promotion of cultural diversity of the 1980s into one uniform meeting of the minds (Halagao, 2008).

As mentioned earlier, Gay states that teachers must utilize and build upon the cultural lives, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students for successful lesson preparation and strategies for teaching in schools. This requires that teachers must take extra steps to maximize their understanding of their CLD students' culture, language, and family backgrounds (Marbley, et al., 2007; Villegas & Lucas, 2002, 2007).

It is necessary to recognize that all students are members of a culture, a race, and an ethnicity, and as a result bring with them their own dispositions, behaviors, learning abilities and styles (Gay, 2000; Gollnick & Chinn, 2009; Trent, et al., 2008; Villegas & Lucas). Culturally responsive teachers must be able to create an environment that minimizes students' alienation as they attempt to adjust to and participate in the world of school (Ladson-Billings, 2001; Le Roux, 2001; National Education Association [NEA], 2004; Villegas & Lucas, 2002a). CRP, therefore, not only meets the needs of the students of color, it understands the needs of individuals, creates a positive and safe learning atmosphere, and provides the students with the skills to think critically in an intellectual environment.

According to Ladson-Billings (1995), culturally responsive pedagogy involves the interactions between teachers and students at three levels: the micro (relationships as individuals); mid-level (institutional, school practices involving student program placement or disciplinary procedures); and the macro-level (societal). In advocating for students, Ladson-Billings says CRP encompasses three main propositions: (a) Students must experience academic success; (b) students must develop and/or maintain cultural competence; and (c) students must develop a critical consciousness through which they challenge the status quo of the current social order (p. 160). By creating an intellectual, supportive environment, creating a safe place for students to make mistakes, valuing students for who they are and encouraging them to explore their opinions and ideas, all three levels of interaction are supported, and all three propositions are met.

Underlying CRP is the ethic of caring. CRP views the teaching profession as a lifestyle and commitment to humanity more than a job. Teachers that espouse CRP feel

connected and care deeply for the entire beings of her students. Noddings (2002) states caring is a result of the process of face-to-face relationships, attention to students lives both in an out of school, and personally hearing, seeing, or feeling their students joys and concerns. This care extends to caring for students' families, and the community.

Effective teachers who promote CRP value their students' home cultures and what students bring with them to the classroom, viewing their students' backgrounds as strengths and not limitations. "Students are not viewed as culturally deficit or culturally deprived, but rather rich with culture, abilities, and life circumstances" (Hadagao, 2008).

Effective teachers of CRP recognize the importance of spending time establishing relationships with her students and their parents, getting to know each child as an individual, and assisting them in their socialization and identity formation (Hollins, 2011) over preparing and prioritizing lesson plans which ignores the common sense practice of teaching (Duncan-Arnade, 2011). As Delpit (1995) states, "In order to teach, I must know you" and care for you (p. 183).

**Characteristics of CRP.** CRP requires teachers to be equipped with the knowledge, attitudes, and skills needed to create meaningful and effective classrooms for diverse students (Capella-Santana, 2003; Gay, 2002; NCATE, 2008; Phuntsog, 2001). Many researchers (Bergeron, 2008; Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011; Gay, 2000, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 2001; Villegas & Lucas, 2002, etc.) have worked to identify the characteristics of this pedagogy. Determining my working definition of CRP, I filtered the many characteristics found in current literature through the lens of the actions, classroom procedures, and interactions with students that I felt should be visible when observing a teacher in a rural school. I have determined that five characteristics are

integral to an effective CRP. The characteristics are thematically labeled as personal awareness & importance of cultural understanding; valuing diversity; altering instruction, curriculum, and assessments; culturally compatible classroom; and community relations. These five characteristics are discussed in detail below.

**Personal awareness & importance of cultural understanding.** Teachers are cultural beings. Instructional, classroom management, and assessment styles are pedagogically influenced by a teacher's prior experiences and cultural norms (Gay, 2000; Hollins, 2011). Before teachers can understand the cultures of their students, the requirements of their diverse student population, or the effects they have on all of the students in their classrooms, they must first identify who they are as sociocultural beings (Gay, 2001; Hollins; McHatton, Keller, Shircliffe & Zalaquett, 2009; Nieto, 2000; Prater & Devereaux, 2009; Trent, Kea & Oh, 2008; Villegas & Lucas, 2007). This personal reflection requires deep inward thinking, an analysis of the origins of long held personal attitudes and beliefs (Abdallah-Preteille, 2006; Grant & Gibson, 2011), and a wrestling with the resulting realization of the self as individual, community member, family member, church member, or teacher (Olsen, 2011). At times, this realization leads to the difficult unveiling of the self as a "dysconscious" being (Villegas & Lucas, 2002a).

Villegas & Lucas (2002a) provide a continuum of sociocultural consciousness. Generally, a person will find themselves somewhere in the middle of the continuum between the opposite ends of social dysconsciousness and consciousness (pp. 27-39). A person holding dysconscious attitudes is generally unreflective, believing their world/culture is universal, and does not recognize their membership in a race or culture. The dysconscious person does not understand the social organization of White privilege,

its presence in schools, and its effecting discrimination. In contrast, a person holding ‘conscious’ attitudes is aware of the multiple facets that make up the culture and world, recognizing her part as a cultural being. They recognize the privilege awarded to some and not others, and are critically aware of the existence of the inequalities of society at many levels.

Effective CRP educators are located on the ‘conscious’ end of the continuum. To get to this point on the continuum, teachers must begin to recognize the problems associated with the inequalities in society, self-monitor their inner voice, refrain from judgments made towards students different from themselves, and advocate for culturally diverse students. In doing so, teachers will begin to acknowledge and accept all people, understanding that everyone carries their own culture.

A part of cultural understanding is the behaviors that students may exhibit that are misunderstood from the Eurocentric cultural viewpoint. Research conducted on different cultural groups provides insight into “modal cultural styles,” characteristic behaviors developed from the home culture family representative of a cultural group (Scott & Ford, 2011). To avoid possibility of stereotyping, it is necessary to note that not all members of the cultural group portray all of the characteristic behaviors (Scott & Ford). For example, research on Hispanic student behaviors show that many are collectively socialized, preferring to work in cooperative groups to support one another (Tyler, Uqdah, Dillihunt, Beatty-Hazelbaker, Conner, Gadson, Henchy, Hughes, Mulder, Owens, Roan-Belle, Smith & Stevens, 2008). These students need to learn quickly that working together on all classroom activities, especially on tests, is not acceptable. As part of their cultural upbringing, many African American students respond to direct, or explicit, active

commands and often ignore the indirect or implicit, passive commands typical of a White teacher (“sit down” vs. “what should you be doing?”). African American students are more often referred to the office for insubordination than White students as a result of this cultural misunderstanding (Northington, 2007). A teacher is frustrated with her Asian or American Indian student who will not look at her when she asks him direct questions. The teacher finds him to be deceitful and communicates this to him. In actuality, the teacher needs to understand that many Asian or American Indian students are taught to never look a superior in the eye, as the teacher is a superior in their culture.

These are only three basic and well-known examples of cultural miscommunication and discontinuity. From the perspective of the White teacher, unaware of the cultural identity of her students, these Hispanic, African American, and Asian students might be viewed as “problems.” Teachers are responsible for finding accurate information about the cultural behaviors of their students so as to avoid the problems that could arise because of these cultural differences (Brown, 2007; Tyler, et al, 2008). CRP teachers are able to identify the various behaviors exhibited by their students as a result of cultural differences, embracing these differences, and viewing them as the assets that they are rather than deficits that need to be removed from the student. Doing less exhibits intolerance of the experiences and behaviors of the students. As stated by Brown-Jeffy & Cooper (2011), “[CRP] forces one to understand that non-White is as important or is as significant as White: all races are valuable” (p. 74).

**Valuing diversity.** Teachers must learn about their students, develop meaningful relationships with them and value who they are as cultural individuals (Grant & Gibson, 2011; Nieto, 2003; Villegas & Lucas, 2007). Teachers must attempt to understand the

cultures from which students come by doing research, home visits, going to students' local/cultural festivals and events, seeking advice from a cultural leader, etc. Evidence of this knowledge is shared verbally ("I saw you at the Mexican Heritage Festival"), with posters, artifacts, or cultural music played in class. Some say this is appropriate for language arts/English or history classes, but is not for the math and science class. Scientists, biologists, archaeologists, and mathematicians are everywhere around the world. Locating information about successful and important people from students' countries of origin promotes a sense of pride, giving students a possible incentive for excellence in the content area. Additionally, students see a teacher who values them for who they are.

CRP teachers utilize this knowledge to nurture students' abilities, and to further justice and equity (Grant & Gibson, 2011). Teachers see their students' cultures, religions, different languages, sexual orientation, or socioeconomic status as a starting point, an asset to be built upon. CRP teachers value the multiple differences within their classes, recognizing the diversity as opportunities to build understanding of others, critical thinking, and deep analysis through the sharing of multiple ideas and perspectives inherent in a multicultural classroom.

**Altering curriculum, instruction, and assessments.** As teachers become culturally aware, they will recognize the school setting, the curriculum, instructional materials, art or music selections, assessments, and discipline procedures are a reflection of the larger White society (Gay, 1997). CRP teachers adjust their own pedagogy, from the material they present to how they present that material, to better meet the needs of all students in their classes (Villegas & Lucas, 2007). This altered curriculum and

instruction will be representative of multicultural content through which all students will gain diverse perspectives.

Effective culturally responsive teachers will select instructional materials and methods with the students' well being in mind, realizing the importance of organization to be sure the educational needs of students are met and that there is equal representation of material for each cultural group throughout the semester or year (Villegas & Lucas, 2007). This requires critical thought and careful planning on the part of the teacher. Students must see themselves in the curriculum. Students must be able understand that what they are learning relates to them personally; they must be able to find meaning and purpose in the content to become invested in it (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011; Gay, 1997 & 2000). This means that a culturally responsive teacher uses the "worlds" of the students in her classes to paint a picture of the content (Banks, et al, 2001; Bergeron, 2008). CRP teachers create examples from the various students' cultures to support the content being covered. This connects the content to her students while at the same time provides awareness of diverse thoughts, worldviews, and understanding of a variety of cultures and people.

Teachers must be inclusive of all students, especially those who sit quietly, hesitant to participate. A culturally responsive teacher is aware of her students' learning styles, cognitive abilities, strengths, and weaknesses. Culturally differentiating instruction provides optimum instruction for the various levels and cultures of students in a classroom (Banks, et al, 2001) by preparing instructional activities that respond to the varying cognitive and affective needs of the students, as well as inclusive of cultural curriculum that will allow students to connect to the context more readily. For example,



in a math class with a number of CLD students, a teacher must understand her students' language abilities to determine if misunderstandings are occurring because of literacy problems or numeracy problems, and adapt the lessons accordingly. At the same time, when creating math problems, the use of students' cultures assists in bringing relevancy to math concepts in ways that are culturally relevant. By differentiating instruction based on abilities as well as culture, students can see success at whatever their level. Through differentiated instruction based on knowledge of the students, high expectations for each student are maintained.

Achievement, aptitude, and high-stakes tests are often created with White, middle-class students in mind (Sadker & Zittleman, 2009). Evaluating student progress is one of the most essential and frequent actions of a teacher, conducted almost daily on some level. However, creating and conducting effective assessments are skills that are not often taught to teachers. Preparing assessments to effectively evaluate the progress of CLD students is difficult because of the differences in language, learning styles, and cultures (Banks, et al, 2001). Teachers must consider adopting a variety of both formative and summative assessments, allowing students from different cultures and with differing learning styles to demonstrate their learning. This means acknowledging the cognitive and psychosocial development of students (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011) and providing equitable opportunities based on this knowledge. This is a difficult proposition considering the context of the standardized world in which our schools must exist.

Students today are expected to leave school prepared for work or further studies with skills that go far beyond the requirements of uni-dimensional, standardized tests (Harvard, 2011). Students must have both affective (attitudes, values, emotions, etc.) and

cognitive skills (information processing), along with understanding and accepting self, understanding differing cultures, working in groups, forming and expressing opinions, standing up for personal beliefs, etc (Banks, et al, 2001; Sadker & Zittleman, 2009).

Teachers must assist students in attaining these multiple levels of intelligence, many of which are not assessable by a pencil and bubble sheet. A variety of assessments are essential to making sure that students with multiple learning styles and needs, as well as multiple skills and abilities, are accurately measured.

Aligning classroom assessments with activities included in instruction is important. While it is obvious that students must comply with the school's end of grade or end of course standardized assessments, other opportunities must be given to students to share their knowledge. Assessments such as teacher observations, subject portfolios, presentations, exhibitions, and open-ended creative expressions require students to perform in ways that allow for a deeper understanding of gained knowledge.

**Culturally compatible classroom.** The relationship between teacher and student is essential. Rose (2010) states that the single most important element of a student's ability to learn is a quality teacher. Added to this, however, is the teacher's ability to assist in students building relationships with one another, and to create an environment where students are respected for who they are as individuals and as members of a cultural group (Bergeron, 2008; Brown, 2007; Cerecer, 2011; Villegas & Lucas, 2007). By respecting students, teachers demonstrate respect. By upholding the values of all students, teachers demonstrate the importance of self-worth. Through these active behaviors, CRP teachers hold the expectations that students must also respect and value

all members of the classroom, creating a culturally compatible classroom and school environment (Bergeron, 2008).

Culturally responsive teachers instill a positive value of learning about cultural groups, their experiences, and importance in a diverse society. Students exhibit the behavior of a supportive, encouraging unit, and feel a sense of belonging when they are part of a group that has high expectations of academic excellence and cultural understanding for all students (Gay, 2000). CRP teachers look critically at how the classroom and school are managed, seek out the injustices that exist, and act upon those injustices, advocating for the needs of the CLD students in her classroom or school based on the grounds of social justice (Nieto, 2000). Nieto states that we must use the lens of social justice to view how students are educated to give diversity a prominent place in our schools. Students who see their teachers living and acting in the social justice framework gain confidence to stand up for injustices themselves.

By creating a culturally compatible classroom, it is possible that deeper cultural understanding will result— a necessity in the global world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Effective education, taught through an open, culturally responsive pedagogy, will provide students with the realities of equitable access to the freedoms of a socially just and democratic society (LeRoux, 2001; Bergeron, 2008). An effective culturally responsive classroom can work to break the stereotypes inherent in schools today. Cultural understanding and diversity, taught, modeled, and encouraged, will assist in promoting the social consciousness and the social skills that will be necessary to allow our society to compete globally and to thrive as a nation (Banks, et al, 2001; Valentin, 2006).

**Community relations.** Education is viewed as the most significant equalizer of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (NPR, 2011). Through education, individuals are enabled to become effective members of the changing economy and society (Le Roux, 2001). School communities play a role in the preparation of their future members of society. Likewise, schools play a role in sustaining the livelihood of the community (Theobald, 2005). Schools, led by culturally responsive educators, reach out first to the family/parents of their students, to extend the classroom culture, incorporating the experiences and expertise of parents and family into units of study (Nieto & McDonough, 2011). For some teachers, this means home visits or off-school ground meetings with families. It could also mean an occasional evening activity to allow for the involvement of parents unable to participate during the school day due to personal responsibilities. Activities such as these allow teachers to get to know students' families more intimately, which provides deeper understanding of the students' cultural knowledge. At the same time, students see a teacher who cares about them, allowing them to feel comfortable in their relationship with the teacher. CRP teachers build the bridge from home to school that is deemed essential for educational success (Nieto & McDonough).

Schools and CRP teachers must also reach out to the larger school community, making life-learning connections for the students. This "place-based education" results in students understanding the needs of a community, but also allows the community leaders to realize the nature of the diverse youth living within the community. John Dewey stated, "Democracy must begin at home" (as cited in Saito, 2003). In this respect, home is the classroom, extending out to the community. Through the understanding of working within a community, being a part of something larger than one's self, sharing

cultures and understanding each other, students can begin to see how culture works, or can work, in the larger society.

Horace Mann believed “education, beyond all other devices of human origin” to be “the great equalizer of the conditions of men – the balance-wheel of the social machinery” (as quoted in Sadker & Zittleman, 2009). Following this belief, then, efforts must be made to provide equitable educational support for all children, regardless of their backgrounds (Bergeron, 2008; Ford, Grantham & Whiting, 2008; Garza, 2007; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). The future success of all youth in U.S. schools depends upon the equal education of all children. More importantly, the future welfare of our nation is dependent upon more effectively helping all students graduate from high school, especially those from culturally diverse backgrounds. This means reversing the current dropout rate recorded at 4.2% for Asian/Pacific Islander, 5.1% for non-Hispanic White, 8% for Black, 12.4% for American Indian/Alaska Native, and 15.1% for Hispanic students (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). We must begin to focus on fully preparing teachers to be culturally responsive to their racially and culturally diverse students’ needs (Allen & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2004; Bergeron, 2008; Brown, 2007; Johnson, 2002; Kidd, Sanchez, Thorp, 2007; Marbley, et al., 2007; Price, 2002) both through our teacher preparation programs and through quality professional development.

### **Teacher Preparation and Professional Development**

As a society, many Americans hold great expectations for teachers to competently educate any student that enters the classroom and to prepare all students with the skills required to prepare them to be productive citizens. This is not as straightforward as it seems as evidenced in the previous discussion on diverse cultures, including ethnicity,

language, and poverty. Most visibly, in 2004, 50% of all public K-12 schools in the United States had students whose native language was not English and/or who were English Language Learners (ELL) (Ardila-Rey, 2008). As many states are no longer funding bilingual education programs, there is a great need for all mainstream, content area teachers to be culturally responsive (Ardila-Rey, 2008; O’Neal, et al., 2010) from the moment the ELL students enter their classrooms. Teachers cannot wait for their students’ English proficiency to improve to acceptable “academic” classroom levels before teaching them the content of the curriculum. According to Gay (2000), language and content must happen simultaneously.

Ladson-Billings (1994) states that while the changing demographics is evident and there is increasing knowledge on issues that surround diversity, teacher preparation at any level continues to be substandard (p. 114). Cultural responsiveness, therefore, “must be moved from the margins to the mainstream” (Grant & Gibson, 2011, p. 34) of teacher education programs, district professional development programs, and thinking about school curriculum in general. Preparing teachers to meet the needs of ALL students begins in teacher education programs (TEPs) at Institutions of Higher Education (IHE), although it must be continued through professional development as in-service programs.

**Teacher education programs.** Aragon, quoted in Le Roux (2001), believes “. . . the true impediment to cultural pluralism is that we have a reality of culturally deficient educators attempting to teach culturally different children” (p. 46), exemplifying, according to Grant & Gibson (2011), the need to seriously evaluate the preparation of new teachers and the support of current teachers. However, Cochran-Smith, Davis & Fries (2005) state that most IHEs have made few broad-based changes that will make a

difference in preparing future teachers. They continue that, while there is an awareness of the need for change, most IHEs are doing only what it takes to comply with their institutional accreditation standards. Most IHEs “. . . ‘do’ diversity as add-on curricula, rather than promote an awareness of and appreciation for cultural diversity as a central mission” (Abbate-Vaughn, 2005, p. 179). Therefore, IHEs struggle to prepare a culturally responsive teaching force for the realities of today's classroom (Grant & Gibson, 2011; Kea, Campbell-Whatley & Richards, 2004; Noel & Sable, 2009; Zeichner, 2006).

Some school districts implement professional development (PD) programs as a hopeful panacea for pedagogical change for in-service teachers, to help culturally and socially "re-educate" them to better meet the needs of their diverse student population (Donaldson, 2001; Prater & Devereaux, 2009). To reach these goals, TEPs and other professionals are taking a more serious look at the system of education and its role in society (Hollins, 2011). Through "critical pedagogy" teachers are challenged to critically examine the social issues of racism and power in education, with a goal of creating a more democratic, equality-based classroom (Noel & Sable, 2009). Teacher preparation and teacher re-education through professional development programs are viewing culturally responsive pedagogy as one way to reach the goals of a more equal and equitable educational system for all students (Hollins, 2011). Culturally responsive pedagogy, however, is easier to talk about than it is to put into action.

In many teacher education programs, each department (i.e. grade level, content, psychology, sociology instructors) has their ideals for what needs to be taught to future teachers. Systematically and intentionally focusing on the goals of preparing future

teachers to become culturally responsive is not always viewed by licensing programs as paramount when placed against these competing needs (Valentin, 2006). Many say there are simply too many courses that students *must* [emphasis added] take to become proficient in their subject/grade level area. More important to this discussion of course offerings in CRP, however, is that university instructors themselves are not familiar with the concept and the practice (Chapman, 2011; Pang & Park, 2011; Prater & Devereaux, 2009; Villegas & Lucas, 2002b). Currently, almost 80% of the nation's full-time university TEP faculty is White, 7% Black, 4% Hispanic and 6% Asian/Pacific Islander (NEA, 2010). Professors who themselves have had little experience in working with diverse populations or who are not well-versed in cultural responsive pedagogy do not feel comfortable in teaching students about it (Gorski, 2008; Hollins, 2011; Pang & Park, 2011). Added to this issue is the discomfort that some faculty members feel about approaching contentious issues, especially those dealing with race/racism and sexuality/LGBTQ, to name a few. These topics are known to make some students and instructors uncomfortable, causing dissension in the classroom and possibly leading to poor student evaluations for the university instructor (Ambe, 2006; Prater & Devereaux, 2009).

Along with the discussion of how to include CRT in an already crowded curriculum and with instructors who are hesitant to teach such courses, there is an additional concern of course and curriculum effectiveness. Though there is evidence that multicultural/intercultural education and its derivatives have been present in education since 1930 (Banks & Banks, 2002), there is still work to be done. Culturally responsive pedagogy is rarely infused throughout a TEP in an intentional and systematic way,



involving faculty member input and a spiraling or mapping of the curriculum (Ambe, 2006; Brisk, 2008; Grant & Gibson, 2011; Hollins, 2011; Rao, 2005). This intentional infusion, termed *transformative multicultural pedagogy*, results in a curriculum that is centered on the realities of a pluralistic society (Ambe). Most TEPs require one course discussing diversity and one field experience amounting to seven to fourteen hours in a diverse setting to comply with university accreditation licensing requirements (McHatton, Keller, Shircliffe, & Zalaquett, 2009). Often, a single course on multiculturalism or CRT is classified as an “extra” or an elective. Studies done on the effectiveness of promoting cultural awareness after one required course on multiculturalism concluded that preservice teachers had not acquired the skills necessary to show sensitivity to cultural differences (Brown, 2004b; McHatton, et al; Valentin, 2006).

**Professional development.** Today’s schools are charged with the huge responsibility of ensuring that their teachers are appropriately prepared for their student population. Dynamic leadership at building and district levels must be proactive in conducting professional development opportunities to promote CRP practices for all teachers in the district. Additionally, IHEs must assist school districts to develop and implement PD programs, providing the necessary support for meeting the demands of the changing classroom (O’Neal, et al, 2008). Together, the school district and IHEs can work together towards the common goal of improving student achievement for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

Developing cultural competence through professional development requires a well-informed, dedicated faculty with the support of committed leadership (Lindsey, Robins & Terrell, 2003). In addition, time is required for teachers to receive training,

time that must be provided by supportive administrators. Becoming a culturally responsive teacher or a culturally proficient school district is the result of perseverance to a goal and the presence of knowledge to meet those goals. Effective results from professional development require more than a single session of training (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005). Research on professional development informs that working with like-minded educators over a long period of time, along with “coaching” from knowledgeable professionals provides the most effective change in practice (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2004).

Through the support of district level administration offices, opportunities for substantive professional development programs designed to meet the needs of CLD students should be implemented for the most effective transformative cultural experiences (Denevi & Carter, 2006). This cannot be achieved without the collaboration of all levels of public school education: K-12 teachers, school level administrators and district level offices, school leadership and teacher preparation programs (Pang & Park, 2011).

Although the task of preparing culturally responsive teachers is not an easy one, it must be seen as a priority in our TEPs (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2004).

Understanding from the perspective of different cultures must be viewed as essential to the preparation of our future teachers, as the success of their culturally diverse future students is at stake (Grant & Gibson, 2011; Hollins, 2011; NCCREST, 2006b).

Becoming culturally responsive must be infused throughout the curriculum of the TEP, and training must be systematic to cover the depth and breadth of the issue (Cochran-

Smith & Fries, 2011, Hess, et al, 2007; McHatton, et al, 2009; Pang & Park, 2011) so as not to be repetitive and “lost through integration” (Robinson & Ferfolja, 2007, p. 856).

## **Conclusion**

CRP, and the characteristics proposed, while essential for any good teaching, can assist in creating a quality, empowering classroom where there is successful learning for all students. Ascribing to these qualities assumes teachers look below the surface of all of their students’ eyes, skin, or hair color, and teach all students based on their needs. To be fully responsive to diverse students requires gaining a deep respect for the child sitting at every desk in the classroom. Teaching with a cultural knowledge base about students at the forefront, academic achievement for students can improve.

Educators today need to understand the incredible diverse population – racially, ethnically, culturally, and linguistically – the nation’s schools support. Gay (1997) states that it is imperative that teachers make a decision to be active participants in the role of the future success of the nation and receive effective knowledge, preparation, professional development, and support in culturally responsible pedagogy.

The literature regarding multiculturalism and cultural responsiveness is extensive and broad. There is research that informs of the characteristics of a culturally responsive pedagogy, the traits of culturally responsive educators, and the importance of both towards educating all students to their fullest potential. However, as Nieto and McDonough (2011) stated there are “too few studies concerning teacher practice in diverse classrooms” (p.380). They believe that, essential to moving forward in preparing future and in-service teachers, more research is required, focusing on what is actually occurring in the classroom. “We will not know what is effective until there is more

research of teacher practice in actual classrooms” (Nieto & McDonough, p. 380). Sleeter (2001) agrees, stating that research must follow new teachers into their classrooms to more informatively link teacher education to professional development (p. 102).

Phuntsog (2001) states that an important area for future research is one that identifies and describes what classroom teachers consider effective culturally responsive teaching strategies (p. 52).

The need for further research in the area of effective CRP practices is highlighted in this literature review and establishes the purpose of this study: a) What are the experiences, attitudes, and beliefs of effective CRP teachers in rural settings regarding CRP? b) How did those experiences, attitudes, and beliefs develop? c) What are the CRP practices of successful rural teachers? and d) How do the CRP practices of successful rural teachers intersect with the principles of CRP? These questions are key to understanding CRP in action.

### **CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY**

This chapter presents a detailed description of methodology used in this study. A review of the research purpose and the questions are given, followed by the research design, description of setting, case participant selection and sample, and data collection and analysis procedures.

#### **Research Purpose & Questions**

The purpose of this multiple case study methodology informed by a phenomenological approach was to more fully explore and understand the experiences, attitudes, and beliefs of four rural CRP-nominated teachers, and how these particular rural teachers come to the practice of culturally responsive pedagogy in rural school classrooms. It also looked at how four rural CRP-nominated teachers who successfully implement CRP do so and how the CRP practices intersect with the principles as presented in the Characteristic Components of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CCCRP). This investigation was intended to enhance the understanding of successful practices and pedagogy of four CRP-nominated teachers in rural settings, and also explore the precursors. This study was meant to fill a gap in the literature through a critical examination of four CRP-nominated teachers in their diverse, rural classrooms.

This study was designed to answer four questions about teachers' practices with culturally responsive pedagogy in diverse rural environments:

- 1) What are the experiences, attitudes, and beliefs of four CRP-nominated teachers working in a rural setting regarding CRP?
- 2) How did those experiences, attitudes, and beliefs develop?
- 3) What are the CRP practices of the four rural CRP-nominated?

- 4) How do the CRP practices of the four rural CRP-nominated teachers intersect with the principles of CRP?

### **Research Design**

Qualitative researchers attempt to more fully understand a person's actions, their stories, and the interconnectedness of the two (Glesne, 2011). Denzin and Lincoln (2005) state that qualitative researchers study events in their natural setting to attempt to understand a phenomena in terms of the interpretations that people bring to them. Qualitative inquiry, according to Rossman and Rallis (2012), is "rooted in empiricism . . . obtained by direct experience through the physical senses" (p. 5). My desire to understand how teachers use CRP, therefore, requires a qualitative methodology because it allows me to speak personally with teachers about their use of CRP, observe their pedagogy in action, and understand more fully how CRP benefits students.

**Multiple case study.** The case study's essential purpose is to deeply explore a unique and particular case (Glesne, 2011; Rossman & Rallis, 2012; Stake, 1995). It is "bounded" by the strictures that make it its own case (place, time, and event) (Creswell, 2013). Case studies require the gathering of data through in-depth observations of participants, interviews, and documents to aid in understanding a larger phenomenon (Glesne; Rossman & Rallis). Case study discussions allow readers to experience the issue through the rich descriptions provided (Rossman & Rallis).

Multiple case studies occur when a single study contains more than one case (Yin, 2009), with the purpose of forming a collective understanding of and gaining deep insight into an issue by comparing and describing that issue from several perspectives (Creswell, 2008). Multiple case study design requires replication across cases to ensure the use of

similar methods so as to “seek the commonalities across cases, as well as differences” of the phenomenon (Rossman & Rallis, 2012, p. 103).

**Phenomenology.** A phenomenological approach examines the essential experience of an individual or group of individuals who share an experience of a specific phenomenon (Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Rossman & Rallis, 2012). Phenomenology, according to Giorgi (2010), is the study of the “experiential world of an individual” (p. 5), with the aim of a deep, rich, accurate, and clear description of this specific phenomenon as a person experiences it (Finlay, 2009; Marshall & Rossman). Phenomenological research methods are “responsive to both the phenomenon and the subjective interconnection between the researcher and the researched” (Finlay, p. 7) to deeply understand the experience through systematic observations and descriptions of the phenomenon (MacLeod as cited in Giorgi, 1997).

Hycner, as cited in Groenwald (2004), stated that phenomenologists reluctantly impose specific steps on the methods of phenomenological research (p. 6). However, Groenwald believes that guidelines are necessary. The phenomenological method is comprised of (a) phenomenological reduction, often used synonymously with bracketing, where the researcher sets aside her own personal understanding and presuppositions of the phenomenon that could influence views of the study’s data; (b) in depth, rigorous description; and (c) a search for the interconnection of meaning consistently shared between participants (Creswell, 2013; Groenewald, 2004). It is the goal of the phenomenological study to (a) gain a deep understanding of what the participants experience, (b) delineate how they experience what they experience, and (c) determine the commonalities of their experiences (Patton, 1990). Moustakas (1994) asserts

phenomenology is both process and product that, unveiling information about the phenomenon, allows for greater awareness for the researcher and the reader.

**Multiple case study informed by phenomenology.** Multiple case studies and phenomenological methodologies complement one another in that they both study multiple individuals experiencing similar phenomena, use interviews as a source of data collection, interpret data naturally, form natural observations across data sources, and present deep, rich descriptions of the outcomes for a more complete understanding of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013).

In the context of this research, a multiple case study informed by a phenomenological approach was used to gain an in-depth understanding of how teachers in Western North Carolina used culturally responsive pedagogy. Phenomenology kept the research focus specifically on the teaching practice of CRP, guiding the interview process. The multiple cases allowed for the deep exploration of the cases to form a collective understanding of CRP from multiple perspectives: in-depth, open-ended interviews of teachers; multiple, focused observations of teaching practice; student-teacher interaction; and classroom setting including room décor, student displayed work, etc.; and reviews of documents such as lesson plans, assignments, and grading protocols. The case was “bound” by the physicality of the rural location of each school as all of the schools were located in western North Carolina. Additionally, the case was bounded by each teacher’s use of CRP in their rural classroom.

### **Ethical Consideration**

**Participant protection.** The interview questions asked in this research prompted deep reflection and disclosure about each teacher’s life history. Some of the questions



elicited emotional reactions that caught some of the teachers by surprise, which in turn could have left some participants feeling vulnerable. As a result, it was imperative that the identities of all participants be protected. From the onset of this study, deliberate attention was given to the steps necessary to ensure the confidentiality and privacy of each participant.

Those teachers that were selected as participants were told their participation in the study was voluntary and were assured that they could withdraw at any time for any reason. Participants were informed that their identity, and that of their school, would remain confidential, with no link to any identifying personal information. At the beginning of the interview process, the participants agreed upon a pseudonym for both themselves and the school in which they work. These names were used throughout the study, including this written document, so as not to reveal identities. Great attention was given in the process of writing the research findings to be sure that no identifying information was disclosed about the teachers or the schools in this study.

Prior to data collection, a *bracketing interview* was conducted between a professor knowledgeable of CRP and me. This interview provided a personal awareness of my views on CRP that I could return to as necessary and assured personal bias did not enter into the analysis of the teachers' interviews and observations, or the writing that followed. It was essential that the perspectives of the teachers were accurately portrayed and that there was no misinterpretation or misrepresentation of their words, actions, and interactions. In my writing of each case, I attempted to describe situations involving teacher peers and students as generally as possible to respect the privacy of all concerned while maintaining the significance of the *story*. After completing the portraits, the

teachers were given the opportunity to *member check*, validating the accuracy of the account. Throughout the interviews, I assured the teachers they would have the ability to remove any portion of their story if necessary. Through these actions, I assured the teachers I respected their privacy and the stories they shared.

All data collected, including audio recordings of interviews, interview transcripts, classroom observations field notes, document reviews, and all other extraneous data produced throughout this study was securely stored in a university office. Two years after the conclusion of the study, the data will be destroyed.

### **Setting**

This study was conducted in the K-12 public schools of the geographic area of western North Carolina (WNC), situated in the Great Smoky, Blue Ridge, and southern Appalachian mountains. The four participants selected for this study were teachers in the K-12 public school system teaching in one of the 18 school systems located in western North Carolina's region eight (see Figure 1). Region eight was selected because 15 of the 16 counties are considered rural (Rural Data Bank, 2012). Limiting the study area ensured that there was a large pool of teachers working in traditional, rural environments to draw from for the current study. This area is also considered culturally rich, being the heartland of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians and later European settlers, many who have preserved their traditional cultures (AdvantageWest, 2011). Western North Carolina's population has increased by about 20% in the past ten years. A large part of this increase has been the result of about a 400% population increase of Hispanic families and individuals since 1990 (AdvantageWest), most seeking employment in construction, agriculture, and the tourism industry (Burgess, 2010). This increase in population is

reflected in the public schools of this area. This cultural complexity, as well as the rurality of the area, provided a setting aligned with the purpose of the study.



*Figure 1.* Study Area, North Carolina Region 8, (Western Region Education Service Alliance [WRESA], 2013).

## Participants

Creswell (2008) states that the number of people selected for a study and the sites visited will vary from one study to the next, depending on the knowledge desired, purpose of the inquiry, and what can be done given the time and resources available. For case studies Creswell (2013) recommends between one and four cases and for phenomenology, multiple interviews with at least five people. Yin (2009) states the number of cases in a multiple case study design depends upon the complexity of the issue under study and the certainty desired about your results. For a phenomenological study, Giorgi (2008) recommends at least three participants to allow for clarification and variations of the phenomenon under review. Taking Yin's and Giorgio's guidelines into consideration, with an understanding that I would conduct in-depth interviews, followed immediately by classroom observations and document reviews for supportive evidence,

five cases were adequate to provide the detail and description necessary to deeply understand CRP. I believed that five participants would allow enough information, as stated by Creswell (2008, 2013), to triangulate the data for trustworthiness and validate the findings of the data if similar.

While my participant goal was five, four rural teachers agreed to participate in this study, all currently employed in western North Carolina public schools. From conversations with university instructors and one committee member of this study, there was a fear that I would be unable to find enough teachers who were truly culturally responsive. Therefore, the study did not delimit teachers based on subject taught, as I feared doing so would have limited the number of teachers available for the study. The participants included one high school English teacher in a traditional public school setting, one high school History teacher in an alternative school, one middle school Special Needs/Academically and Intellectually Gifted teacher in a traditional public school setting, and one elementary/middle school Special Needs teacher in a traditional public school setting. Chosen participants had been employed in public school settings ranging from nine to 22 years.

**Sampling approach.** A theory-based sampling strategy was used to purposefully select teachers as a way to provide “information-rich cases for in-depth studies” (Creswell, 2008). According to Patton (1990), theory-based sampling, often used in social science research, allows for in-depth research on a specific phenomenon of interest. Specifically selected informants recommended potential participants they knew who met a set of provided criteria with the intention of leading to insights surrounding the purposes of this study (Creswell; Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Patton). Theory-based

sampling assured access to teachers who were thought to be representative of a particular type of teacher, defined by the theoretical construct of CRP.

As a first step in identifying the sample, websites of the College of Education departments of all nine university or college systems in region eight were consulted to identify the instructors, student teacher supervisors, and content area supervisors. Email addresses and phone numbers for 369 faculty members affiliated with teacher education were retrieved from the university websites. Electronic mail correspondence (Appendix A) was sent and included the purpose of the study and a brief description of CRP. The email requested recommendations for names of teachers identified as exhibiting culturally responsive characteristics. The email included an online survey link (Appendix B), and the instructor was asked to complete a questionnaire providing demographic information of themselves, the university, and their culturally responsive teacher recommendee. The instructor was asked to provide a detailed reason why the teacher they were recommending met the given CRP criteria. Once the survey was completed, an email was sent to thank them for their participation and assistance. After two weeks, if no response was received, a reminder email was sent (Appendix E) requesting their input and including the original information and survey link. Of the 369 emails sent, 26 completed survey responses including names of nominated teachers; 36 responded that they did not know teachers who met the criteria; and 293 did not respond at all, giving a 17% response rate. From those who did respond, a total of 43 teachers were nominated, as some instructors recommended more than one teacher who met the criteria.

With the assistance of a dissertation committee member, and prior to reading the responses submitted by the instructors, a rubric was developed to rank the nominated

teachers based on the Characteristic Components of CRP Framework (CCCRP) (see Appendix D). It was determined that instructors would more likely be able to identify the *Think* and *Speak* CRP components from discussions held in a university class setting, as teachers often talk about their ideals and opinions about cultural responsiveness.

Likewise, in a university classroom setting, it is more difficult to determine how these thoughts and spoken words are put into action. The *Act* components are only “visible” to those instructors who have carefully planned assignments requiring deep reflection about events and/or with intentions of exhibiting these actions, or to those who have visited teachers’ classrooms and have seen these teachers in action. With this thinking, a weight of one point was given to the components included in *Think* and *Speak*, represented by a teacher who (a) understands everyone has a culture; (b) strives to understand the world around them; and (c) recognizes students’ background/culture are assets, rather than challenges, to be built upon in the classroom. A weight of two points was given to the components included in *Act*, represented by a teacher who (a) addresses differences thoughtfully and with intention both in interaction and in lesson planning; (b) values relationship building, creating an inclusive classroom environment; (c) creates awareness and takes action to remove bias and stereotypes from the classroom in both curriculum and interaction; and (d) sees parents and the greater community as educational partners. These descriptive components, with their accompanying point value, became the column headings of the rubric.

The rubric was finalized with a column titled *Description*. This column contained the instructors’ descriptions of the nominated teachers and was gained from the online survey data that had been exported into a report. All disclosing information from the

report was hidden, including the name of the university instructor nominator and the nominated teacher, school name, or grade level/subject area taught, as it was important that nothing interfere with an objective selection process. Initially, I scored the descriptions on the rubric and tallied the columns to determine a CRP “score” from one to eleven. After I had scored the teachers one time and to assure that the scores and ranking were reliable, I requested one of my committee members familiar with CRP to score the descriptions. We discussed each of the component criteria in the Think, Speak, and Act columns to assure clarity. The scoring was completed three times by me and one time by my committee member. From the scores, a rank ordered list of the descriptions was created. While the top fifteen teachers were always consistent, some of the results varied in the exact order in which they fell. Feeling confident of the top fifteen, the identifying information was revealed and the next stage of securing participants began.

**Case selection and recruitment.** After determining the rank order of the teacher selection (an average of all scoring attempts), one to fifteen, an email message was sent to each of the principals of all of the top fifteen teachers, informing him/her of the nomination of their teacher and requesting consent to allow their teacher to participate in the study (see Appendix F). As it was important to the study not to disclose to the participants the true nature of the study to prevent socially desirable responses, the information sent to the principal never mentioned culture, cultural responsiveness, or any other term that might allude to CRP. Instead, the principals were told that their teacher had been nominated because they were considered to be most successful in teaching all students in their rural classrooms. The email asked for the principal to sign a consent form to allow their nominated teacher’s participation in the study as well as consent to

allow their teacher to be contacted to solicit their desire and consent to participate. In some cases, the principal discussed the nomination with the teacher to determine the teacher's interest in participation; others did not. Seven principals consented to the participation of their nominated teacher; two stated they (or their teacher) were not interested; one teacher had moved out of the study area; two teachers had taken principal positions in area schools; and three did not reply.

As a final step in the sample identification process, the first five highest scoring teacher participants whose principals had given contact permission were individually emailed requesting their participation in the study. The email cover letter to the teacher (Appendix G) stated they had been nominated by their university instructor for exceptionally meeting the needs of *all* students and that they would be an excellent participant for this study. Attached to the email was a document (Appendix H) that provided further details of the study. As with the information provided to the principal, neither the cover letter nor the detailed document mentioned culture, cultural responsiveness, or any other term that might allude to CRP as the purpose of the study. The letter requested the teacher complete the consent form included in the correspondence if interested in participating.

The rank ordered list of teachers were contacted until the intended total of five teachers agreed to participate in the study. Four teachers gave consent for their acceptance of participation. Because I had exhausted the top fifteen nominated teachers, and because four participants were considered sufficient for an effective case study (Creswell, 2013), the decision was made with consultation from my committee members



to reduce the number of participating teachers to four. These four teachers constituted the sample for this study.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

An established timeline was followed to collect data from in-depth, semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and reviews of documents created by the teachers and completed by the students. The following sections describe the processes taken to create the interview and observation protocols, conduct interviews and observations, and finally disclose the true intent of the study. The initial interview was conducted at the end of the first semester of the 2012-13 school year. Subsequent interviews and three observations were completed in the two-month period at the beginning of the second semester and between January and March. A final observation was scheduled in May, after the analysis and writing of the cases, allowing time to reflect on anything missing in terms of support for the CRP components.

**Interviews.** Some phenomenological researchers (Fischer, 2009; Wimpenny & Gass, 2000) state phenomenology requires the researcher acknowledge they are a part of the research, and accept that the knowledge of the researcher cannot be separated from the research being conducted. Englander (2012) states the aim of phenomenological research, through the use of the interview, is “to encounter the phenomenon via the person’s description,” being present to both the phenomenon being researched, and the participants themselves. This view accepts the use of a semi-structured interview guide as a means to keep a focus on the phenomenon under study (Wimpenny & Gass). The presence of the interviewer/researcher is to “lead” the interviewee with questions followed by probing questions that result from their responses. These responses attempt

to get at the essence of the phenomenon as opposed to directing the questions seeking more prescribed responses (Englander). The goal of the phenomenological interview is to gain enough information to describe as deeply and accurately as possible the lived experiences of the participants being interviewed (Englander; Groenewald, 2004). This knowledge guided the development of the interview protocols for this study.

***Interview protocol.*** All interviews were recorded and used a general, semi-structured, yet open-ended, guideline. This assured concepts established for each interview were covered and provided consistency among interviewees. The interviews' open-ended nature created a conversation between the participants and me, and allowed enough flexibility for them to openly discuss their experiences. The purpose of the first interview was introductory – to establish rapport and to get to know each individual as a teacher and a person. Subsequent interview questions were determined to gain knowledge of significant CRP concepts, as displayed in Appendix D (CCCRP), each interview having a more specific intention based on the research questions guiding the entire study and seeking knowledge on the phenomenon of CRP, exploring these teachers' self-descriptions of how they use CRP, what factors these teachers attribute to their arrival at teaching with a CRP, how they learned to teach through a CRP, and how their teaching practice has changed and adapted. The intended purpose for each interview was 1) to get to know the teacher as a person and as a teacher, gaining general information, educational background, teaching experience, choice of teaching as a career, and influences affecting their teaching; 2) to reveal experiences of the teachers since they entered the profession including challenging, memorable moments, the importance of relationships with students, the role of the teacher, student, and parents; 3) to understand

influences related to experiences before the teacher preparation program, probing more deeply into why the teachers believe and act the way they do; and 4) to understand influences of teacher preparation, previous interview data and observation outcomes to understand the teacher and his/her motivations more deeply.

I shared each set of interview questions with at least two colleagues prior to conducting the interview. In doing so, I informed these colleagues of information I had gained from the previous interview/s, the gaps I was seeing in data needed to answer my research questions, and the intended focus for the next interview. As I found that some of my research questions were possibly philosophical in nature, the feedback gained from the peer reviews ensured that what was asked would not be too nebulous, and yet open enough to allow the teachers to formulate spontaneous responses for the difficult questions, and ultimately providing me with the necessary data for my study.

***Interview Sessions.*** The research relationship with each of the four teachers began with the first interview. This interview was an icebreaker, gaining general background information about each teacher, and preparing for the deeper, more personal questions to come in later interviews, as I knew it would be necessary to dig deeply into possibly personal memories to uncover what made these teachers teach the way they do. My easy probing of their professional lives, asking general personal questions, sharing some of my own personal experiences, and getting the participants to laugh with me allowed me to quickly establish an easy rapport with all of the participants. Three of the four teachers stated they felt the interview sessions were therapeutic for them, and that they had never been able to speak so openly about their teaching. The easily developed rapport allowed for a conversation to occur, rather than a question followed by an answer.

An honest, open dialogue that grew with each interview allowed for a depth to the knowledge gained. My desire was to be the seeker of their knowledge, as Glesne (2011) states “casting yourself as learner . . . casts the respondent as teacher . . . that enhances the respondent’s satisfaction with being interviewed” (p.84).

At the close of each interview data collection period, and prior to leaving the interview site, logged field notes were taken through the use of a recorder. As a reminder for later reflection, impressions not recorded during the interview were given, making note of emerging thoughts and themes resulting from the interview. The first three interviews were transcribed as soon after each interview as possible, logging notes in a field notebook when new thoughts presented themselves during this process. For the fourth interview, a transcription service, NoNotes.com, was used to transcribe the conversations. Once an interview had been transcribed, analysis of the data began, using an open coding system for exploring themes in the data. This early data analysis of the interviews assisted in creating the interview protocol for the next meeting.

Four formal interviews were conducted with each teacher. Additional email correspondences occurred as necessary to gain knowledge of teaching achievements, lesson planning, and other teaching processes that did not require a formal face-to-face interview. Interviews lasted from one hour to two hours and fifteen minutes. Informal conversations (not taped) also occurred, either before or after class observations, or before or after interview sessions, for which notes and thoughts were logged through a recording device. Several times, a participating teacher would think about something discussed either in an interview or during a class observation, and send an email to clarify his/her thoughts. As well, during the process of writing case descriptions, an email

correspondence was sent asking for clarifying information from the teachers. In all, over 20 hours of interviews were held to complete this study.

**Observations.** Observations provide an opportunity to gain firsthand knowledge of a phenomenon under study by recording such things as actual behaviors, ways of speaking, interactions between people, and physical setting. Observations can also confirm or disconfirm that information presented by others is accurate. For this study, observations were used as one aspect of triangulation, to verify that the information the teachers espoused in the interviews were accurate, bolstering the trustworthiness and credibility of the data collected.

For each observation, an observation protocol was used to focus the intention of the time in the classroom, as well as to provide the structure for the minute-by-minute fieldnotes. The observations allowed me to spend time in the field to more deeply understand the culture of the teachers' classrooms and the phenomenon of CRP in action, supporting and verifying the information about the teachers' pedagogy as stated in the interviews. I was able to observe the relationships the teachers had established with their students; the concern, excitement, or laughter shared between students and teacher, and students with one another, and instructional differentiation, among many other components of CRP.

***Observation protocol.*** The observation log created to record observations was very general in nature. Research to locate an observation or evaluation protocol that was focused on CRP assessment failed. Personal communication with Hawley (2012) confirmed this finding, as he stated "I do not know of any evaluation instrument that deals adequately with diversity, much less CRP." To initiate the protocol development

for the purposes of this study, Creswell's (2008) guidelines were used including knowing the observer's role, allowing a reciprocal comfort level between observer and observed, and stating length of observation. The observation protocol (Appendix I) included background information, observation expectations, and contextual information of the classroom, all completed prior to entering the classroom. The protocol also incorporated a formatted chart including three columns to log time, observation comments and thoughts, and reflections at the conclusion of the observation. All four teachers cooperated in opening their classrooms for observations.

***Observation procedures.*** The classroom observations were conducted for the purpose of confirming or disconfirming, and corroborating or rejecting the information gained in the interviews. The observations were scheduled either at the conclusion of each interview, or through the use of email or phone conversations. A focus for each observation based on the data collected from previous interviews was determined prior to entering the classroom. Specifically, observations were used for the purpose of seeking evidences of practice, talking/communication patterns, classroom management styles, etc. as discussed in the interview. Entry to the classroom prior to the start of class allowed me to observe the classroom arrangement and teacher preparations prior to the students arrival in class.

Each teacher selected for this study was observed at least three times over the course of two months. The observations were scheduled to allow for an opportunity to observe at different times of the teaching day (and therefore with different students), as well as to gain a sense of the teacher's varying approach in terms of culturally responsive methodology. No class/group of students was observed more than one time. Several

times the teachers informed me of something interesting they were doing in their classes for the week. An attempt was made to observe those suggested classes. The times and days of the other lessons were randomly chosen. This random selection of classes/students allowed insight into the teachers' practice, watching them in different settings, and between classes.

Prior to the observation, expectations for the class, the teacher, and the students were written in the observation log. I recorded my pre-observation thoughts immediately prior to the interview. These pre-observation preparatory moments provided a focused attention on the intentions of the classroom observation. Entering the school building at least ten minutes prior to the start of each class allowed additional and important information, such as interactions between students and teachers in the halls, main office and other common area activities, conversations between teachers, students, and administration and staff. Observations began prior to the start of each class and continued a few minutes after each class ended. Minute-to-minute observation notes were taken exclusively on a lap-top computer, using the observation protocol (Appendix J) prepared prior to entering the class. The time was logged periodically throughout the lesson so as to keep track of when events occurred. A field notebook and pens were readily available for additional notes or drawings. The notebook was used to assist in remembering events, classroom areas, classroom set up, names of students, and where they were sitting, etc.

**Document review.** In addition to observing and interviewing, at times, the teachers were asked to provide samples of their teaching documents as used in the classes. These documents included various assignments and instructions given to

students created by the teacher and were included as part of my data set. These documents provided further data for exploring the teaching practices of the selected teachers. Along with the interviews and observations, the document reviews added an element of the triangulation necessary to support the research allowing a deeper understanding of the phenomenon, allowing a more richly supported description of CRP. Notes were taken in the margins of these documents as necessary, as themes, emerging patterns, or concepts were identified as relating to my research questions.

Pictures of each classroom were also taken at the first observation and again if something changed in the classroom from one observation visit to the next. Documentation of the changes captured was made in the field log. Pictures captured only the classroom, wall hangings, student-produced projects or writing, decorations, book selections, etc., excluding any photos of students, based on the guidelines of the signed consent (Appendix K).

### **Trustworthiness**

There are multiple indicators for the quality of qualitative studies. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), a research study's trustworthiness is essential when determining its worth in its field of research. In qualitative research, the credibility of the conclusions depends on "the ability and effort of the researcher" (Golofshani, 2003). Trustworthiness involves establishing credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Creswell (2008, 2013) and Lincoln and Guba (1985) maintain that it is necessary for qualitative researchers to accurately assess the findings of qualitative data, and provide the following verification procedures: prolonged engagement and persistent observation, triangulation, peer review or debriefing, negative case analysis, clarifying



researcher bias, member checking, rich, thick description, and external audits. Creswell (2013) recommends researchers “engage in at least two” of the eight in any one study. Throughout this study, four of the listed procedures towards validity and credibility measures were taken to assure the study results were trustworthy and transferrable.

**Peer Review.** Professional colleagues assisted in providing an external check on the data analysis at several points in the study. Prior to data collection, a committee member assured the teacher selection process was sound and there was consistency in the method used to determine the case sample. The Qualitative Research Group (QRG) at Western Carolina University, a group of faculty and graduate students with an interest in qualitative research methodology, provided feedback on the proposed data analysis procedures to ensure the results were trustworthy and credible. At a QRG meeting, I presented a written description of data analysis procedures and provided examples of the analysis conducted. The questions asked during the meeting, as well as the process of answering those questions, led to further defining the data analysis process. The members present at this meeting concluded that the process described was appropriately well planned.

**Member checking.** Member checking was used throughout the study. During the interview process, and after the first interview, teacher feedback was solicited for clarification of responses to earlier questions. Additionally, prior to beginning the cross-case analysis of the data, teachers were given an opportunity to read and provide feedback on their “teacher portrait.” As well, the teachers were able to provide feedback on the findings (Chapter 4). The responses given were valuable in assuring that the teachers were represented appropriately and the data was presented accurately.

**Triangulation.** The use of a variety of data sources is an effective method to provide corroborative evidence of findings (Creswell, 2013). This triangulation of data improves the validity and reliability of qualitative studies (Golafshani, 2003) and can strengthen a study's transferability (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Triangulation occurred through use of open-ended, guided interviews, classroom observations, and document reviews.

**Rich, thick description.** The researcher's ability to provide detailed descriptions of the data collected and the participants of the study allow readers to transfer the study's outcomes to other settings. I provided rich, thick description of each teacher to accurately and deeply tell their story. I also fully described the process of cross analysis of data between all participants, allowing a profound understanding of the themes and assertions made. I intend for this rich, thick description to support findings that can be transferred to other settings and future CRP studies.

Yin (2009) states that through the use of multiple sources of data collection (peer review, member checking, triangulation, and rich, thick description), multiple measures of the phenomenon under study are provided resulting in greater overall quality of confirmable research.

### **Data Analysis**

Stake (1995) says analysis of data has no set beginning moment, but is necessary at the moments that are most important to the researcher (p. 71). Creswell (2013) informs the "processes of data collection, data analysis, and report writing are not distinct steps in the process – they are interrelated and often go on simultaneously" though he states "the analysis process conforms to a general contour" (p. 182). This contour, as

described by Creswell, is a visual spiral whereby the researcher moves in “analytic circles rather than using a fixed linear approach” (p. 182). Creswell’s spiral consists of managing the data collected; reading and memoing the database, and reflecting on thoughts presented during the process; describing, classifying, and interpreting data into codes and themes; interpreting the data to the overall meaning of the data; representing and visualizing the data (pp. 182-188). A full analysis of all data collected using the described spiral was conducted throughout the entire study and at each stage.

**Overview.** During each interview, and with the use of Audacity, a computerized audio-recorder program, I was able to be a more fully engaged participant in the conversations with each teacher, taking notes on the interview protocol as necessary. Immediately following each interview, I transcribed the conversations verbatim, returning to the written notes and writing further reflections in my field notebook as necessary. Once the transcription was complete, I began the process of coding the data using Atlas.ti for initial emerging concepts. From the transcripts, notes taken, and emerging codes, I began to formulate the questions for the next interview and prepare the observation protocol for the next classroom visit. When possible, I conducted the classroom observation a week following the interview and transcription process. I took minute-by-minute observation fieldnotes through use of a computer and then reflected on the observation immediately afterward on a phone recorder. I listened to these reflections the evening of the observation, and took further notes in my field notebook. I also analyzed the fieldnotes through Atlas.ti, using the emerging codes. The journal assisted in processing data, and the reflections taken on a phone recorder, assisted in the tracking of ideas, dates, and reflections outside of the actual interviews and observations. These

notes and reflections were continually reviewed. This process continued with each interview and classroom observation.

Guiding the process of analyzing the data and determining this case study's larger themes, followed Creswell's (2013) template for coding a case study (p. 209). I immersed myself into each individual case first, analyzing the context and description for each teacher to determine individual themes. Determining a clear picture about each teacher, I then completed a cross-case theme analysis which led to the study's assertions and generalizations.

**Coding.** Creswell (2013) states a "prefigured" coding process is often used, but advises researchers must be prepared to use additional codes that emerge during data analysis. For the first sets of data for each teacher (interviews, observations, document reviews, and memos), I used the components defined in the CCCRP chart to guide the initial coding, knowing that I would not limit myself to these codes. As the data set grew larger with each interview and observation, I analyzed, coded, categorized and located themes from each participant using Creswell's (2008) six steps: (a) reading the transcripts, field notes, etc., getting an initial sense of the data; (b) dividing the data into segments of information; (c) coding by way of labeling segments of information with a word or phrase that describes the meaning of the text; (d) grouping similar code words and collapsing the codes into a list that is manageable; (e) returning to the data to see if new codes emerge; and (f) reducing the codes to a list of five to seven themes (pp. 251-252). I then began to conduct a cross participant analysis, looking at all of the cases together, weaving the data together into a uniform synthesis where possible. As I

analyzed the codes and returned to the data, I added more codes as they began to emerge. Appendix L shows the codes used for this study.

**Interpreting the data.** After transcribing and coding each data set, I ran a report using Atlas.ti's query tool. I produced a report for all of the codes for each individual teacher and then again as an entire study. This query produced a compilation of all of the quotations for each code, allowing a second analysis to identify themes and sub-themes. From this analysis, I placed these codes and themes into tables and diagrams to visually see commonalities that deserved to be considered (Yin, 2009). I was sure to consider all of the evidence in each of the cases to assure that all research questions were addressed. From this deeper analysis, more dominant themes began to emerge.

Miles and Huberman (1994) as cited in Creswell (2013) support the use of counting codes in qualitative research. Creswell suggests knowing the frequency of codes can be an "indicator of participant interest in [that] code" (p. 182). I used Atlas.ti's query tool to run a report on the number of times a code was used for each teacher individually and then for all of the teachers together. I used this report to support the analysis of codes and themes I had already. This report allowed me to organize how I presented each teacher's case description. In each case, the quantitative data corroborated with most dominant themes I had determined from the code and theme reduction analysis.

**Representing the data.** Throughout the analysis process, I continued to return to the questions guiding the study. For questions one and two, I used the coded analysis conducted on the individual cases. This analysis is presented as findings as Teacher Portraits in chapter four. To assure that I had captured each teacher accurately, I sent the

written description to each teacher for member checking (Creswell, 2008, 2013; Yin, 2009). Questions three and four required an analysis across all of the cases. To answer questions three and four, I used the frequency data report to confirm the most prevalent CRP practices used by all four teachers, comparing those to the CCCRP table. The analysis for these questions is also presented in chapter four.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS**

Chapter Four presents the multiple case studies of the individual CRP-nominated teachers interviewed and observed for this research and the ways in which their practices align or do not align with the pedagogical characteristics of a culturally responsive teacher. These details are a result of the analysis of all of the interview transcripts, classroom observations, field notes, and document reviews. I answer research questions one and two by introducing and discussing each CRP-nominated teacher as an individual case. For each case, I first present the school district and individual school demographics in order to provide a sense of the rural setting where they teach. I then present an in-depth portrait of each CRP-nominated teacher that reflects their experiences, attitudes, and beliefs of teaching all students in the rural classroom. This portion of the portrait answers the first question of the study, what are the experiences, attitudes, and beliefs of effective CRP teachers in the rural setting regarding CRP? I conclude each case by sharing how the CRP-nominated teacher's past experiences have influenced their culturally responsive practices to answer the second question of the study: How did the experiences, attitudes, and beliefs develop? Cross case analysis of the four cases is then used to describe how these themes support or negate the characteristics of CRP as presented in the research. This cross case analysis provides a response to research questions three and four, the CRP practices of rural CRP-nominated teachers and how these practices intersect with the principles of CRP.

### **Case One: Elizabeth Westall, Rosenthal Intermediate School**

**School demographics.** Rosenthal School, located in Benton, NC, is set in mountainous western North Carolina and is one of four kindergarten to eighth grade

schools in the Arlington County Schools that feed into the district high school. Arlington County is a small area defined as rural based on the nation's census designation of less than 200 persons per square mile. The county has a total population of 40,271 and a student population of 3,722, while Rosenthal has a population of 707 students.

Rosenthal's average class size ranges from 13 to 25 students compared to the state average of 18 to 20 students. Of the 46 teachers in the school, 98% are fully licensed, and 100% are highly qualified, compared respectively to the state averages of 94% and 98%. Twenty-six percent hold advanced degrees, compared to the 27% state average, and 12 of the 46 are National Board Certified compared to the average of 10 across the state for schools with similar grade ranges (North Carolina Public Schools Department of Instruction [NCDPI], 2012).

Rosenthal was designated a "School of Distinction" in the 2011-12 NC School Report (NCDPI, 2012). This classification is based on the school's performance on the state's end of year tests, providing a percentage of students performing at grade level. This designation informs the local and state community that 80 to 90% of the Rosenthal students had passed the test for that year. Looking more deeply into the Benton community and demographics, Table 3 represents informative data about Arlington County and student achievement as compared to the state of North Carolina for the 2012 school year (NC Rural Economic Development Center [NCREDC], 2012; NCDPI, 2012). Additionally, Table 4 shows the student demographics of this rural community (NCREDC; NCDPI).



Table 3

*Demographic Data of Arlington County and North Carolina*

Category	Arlington	North Carolina
Poverty Rate	19%	17%
Child Poverty	26%	25%
Food Assistance	10%	14%
Free and Reduced Lunch (total district, 2009-10, up from 48.7%, 2005-06)	54.6%	53.7%, up from 48.4%, 2005-06
Graduation Rate (2012)	84%	80%
Students taking SAT	46.4%	68%
Average SAT score (2012)	1,011	997
math & comprehension 2006-2010		(Nat'l Avg, 1010)
Citizens w/ < HS Diploma	21%	16%
Citizen's w/ HS Diploma	33%	28%
Citizen's w/ AA	8%	8%
Citizen's w/ BA or BS	27%	26%
Unemployment Rate	10%	11%

Table 4 *Rosenthal Student Demographic*

Category	Rosenthal	North Carolina
American Indian	9%	1%
Asian	1%	2%
Black	2%	21%
Hispanic	6%	8%
White	82%	65%

Rosenthal is a modest school, uniquely constructed as a campus of six large pods and several mobile units. The pods are circular shaped buildings containing a grouping of classrooms housing a combination of grade levels in the elementary grades, and subject areas in the middle school grades as well. There is also a pod for the gymnasium, a cafeteria, and administrative office/entry arena. Each pod has multiple doors around the perimeter and a main door connecting the pod to an interior hallway. This interior hallway connects all the pods, which is also the perimeter of the library located in the center of the entire building. All pod doorways open to one of six library doorways.

The website at Rosenthal states that the school and the employees of the school are committed to improving all aspects of education that occurs there, to “make each child’s school experience as successful and rewarding as possible.” Rosenthal’s vision is *“Working together with a heart for kids to build tomorrow's leaders, with a mission devoted to ensuring that each child will strive to achieve his/her highest potential”* with the challenge of helping the students to be the best they can be academically, athletically, and in other extracurricular, and fine arts pursuits. This was obvious as I walked through the school, looking at the announcements of activities occurring in all three of these areas.

As I stood in the doorway of one pod, I could hear quite well what was academically occurring all around me. The large, individual classroom pods are partitioned off with cabinets or bookshelves that demarcate each of the teachers’ classrooms. While these items are representative of walls, walls they are not. Very

audible throughout the pod were teachers presenting lessons, students asking questions, excitement over something achieved, or laughter about something shared. Walking to the center of the pods, it was exciting to see teaching and learning in action.

Athletically, I could see signs that the basketball season was finishing successfully for both males and females; I saw signs in the halls and around the gym door cheering on the teams for the season's tournament. A poster reminded students to sign up for the school's baseball and softball teams, as well as the countywide track team. There was also evidence of extracurricular academic groups, as the Battle of the Books group was meeting one afternoon I was at the school. As well, a science group, organized and run with the assistance of parents, met in one of the pods after school. Additionally, practice for a soon-to-be performed musical had students excited.

Visiting the school at different times for observations and interviews, I was able to view a very active office where parents and/or community members felt comfortable checking in to either volunteer their time in a classroom, library, or other activity or to attend an event being held during or after school. One such volunteer event, the Rockin' Readers, brings community members, many of whom are retired, to the school to read to students. On one occasion during after school hours, a group of teachers gathered for physical activity led by one of the physical education teachers. At another time, the PTO members met for their monthly meeting. A lot of activity took place here, before, during, and after school.

Elizabeth is a Special Education teacher. She teaches eight classes a day. Six of those classes are in her classroom where students come to her for quiet attention, and the other two are inclusion classes where her students join mainstream classes with student

peers. The fifth grade students she works with all come to her class for assistance. Four of Elizabeth's sixth grade students meet with her in her class, while the rest are included in the mainstream classes where she supports their learning in those courses. In all, Elizabeth has 25 students.

### **Elizabeth's Experiences, Attitudes, and Beliefs**

**Elizabeth: the path to teaching.** Elizabeth was born in upstate South Carolina and lived there until she got married. She has been teaching for twelve years, the first six years of which were in South Carolina. She has been at Rosenthal since she and her family moved to North Carolina. As a youth, Elizabeth avoided the idea of becoming a teacher, though her family recognized her destiny of being a classroom teacher even as a very young child. Her parents said she was always teaching, even if to her stuffed animals.

Somewhat of a rebel as a high school student, she said, "Very little motivated me besides hanging out with friends. School was not fun . . . or interesting. I skipped class a lot . . . leaving at lunch and my study hall, [and not returning]." Her high school principal decided to give her more structure to her school day, and so required her to assist the special education teacher during her study hall. Elizabeth said, "I think that his intention was punitive . . . I'll just put her down here in this special ed hall." Punitive or not, Elizabeth "fell in love with those kids. I fell in love with that teacher, and how she taught those kids." She said, "These were severe and profound kids, and every day they learned something from her. And as I spent time in that classroom . . . they were learning something from me! I was *hooked* [emphasis added]!"

Elizabeth was found in the Special Education class her entire junior and senior year as the teacher's assistant. She said, "My friends teased me and gave me a hard time," but she didn't let that stop her. She said, "I went to the Special Olympics with these kids. I just became their friend." Elizabeth solidified her decision to major in Special Education through a summer camp for students and adults with special needs. She said, "It was just the right place for me, I just loved that group of kids [and people]." She went to college with the intention of becoming a Special Education teacher. Many different people told her that special education teachers do not stay in the classroom long, and suggested that she diversify her teaching license. She took this advice, and received a special triple certification from her university in elementary education, early childhood education, and special education, though, she said, "I have never had any interest in teaching in the regular classroom."

Elizabeth continues to improve her teaching today through coursework and professional development. Due to the convenience of an offered program at a local university in South Carolina, Elizabeth chose to get her Master's Degree in Elementary Education three years after she began teaching, though if she had to do it over again, she says she would have chosen otherwise. She said, "I would go for a reading specialist or math . . . I wish I had a Master's in math."

Elizabeth has found her professional passion in helping students who are differently abled learners. She says, "I love what I do, and I will not be in a regular classroom . . . I think this is the job I'll have . . . until I'm old and gray and walking with a walker." Asked why she likes being a special education teacher, she says,

“I like the challenge of something new every day. I think that is what the EC classroom is. Some days we are dealing with emotions, and some days . . . with behavior. And some days, we are just dealing with that math problem that won’t go away.”

**Elizabeth the classroom teacher, introduced.** Elizabeth found early in her teaching career that while she saw she was effective with her students in the self-contained classroom, she saw the need to get them mainstreamed into the regular education classrooms. She said, “I saw a real *need* [emphasis added] . . . for the kids who didn’t have severe disabilities to be mainstreamed in the classroom and fit in.” Including students into mainstream classes has since become one of her driving passions as a teacher, as she believes it is the best thing for the students socially. At the second school where she taught, an Intermediate school, she said she and a few other teachers took this challenge and began changing the special education program from self-contained to inclusion classrooms. As a result, they began seeing a difference in the education of the students. When she arrived at Rosenthal, she said the administration had started with inclusion on a limited basis and some teachers were skeptical. With Elizabeth’s commitment and another teacher’s desire to make inclusion work for students, other teachers were willing to give it a try.

As a teacher of students who are differently abled, Elizabeth says she is constantly driven to learn more so she can be a better teacher, especially in math and reading. She says, “I want to stay at the forefront of learning, learning what I can so that I can bring [my students] to the best they have.” She is currently taking a course with the North Carolina Department of Instruction to become a math foundations trainer for the county.

This course is helping her see the importance of “understanding how working with math is getting these kids more interested in math, and opening up their brains . . . to learn math conceptually . . . to give them a concrete understanding before moving to the abstract.” She is also becoming a teacher leader in reading. She believes that learning more herself will allow her to be more effective with those teachers who have her special needs students in their classes.

**Elizabeth’s teaching attributes.** Elizabeth sees herself as her students’ biggest supporter. She says she first builds a relationship with her students by showing them she cares for and respects them, letting them know she is there to assist them in whatever they need. She meets the students’ needs by understanding them, their learning capabilities, and holding realistic expectations of them. She supports all students at Rosenthal by advocating for them educationally whenever she can. Elizabeth continues to learn every day and is finding her voice as a leader educationally in different content areas, but in standing up for issues of equity and justice as well.

***Passion.*** As I sat with Elizabeth through multiple interviews, and watched her in action during observations, passion is one of the first words that came to my mind. Elizabeth is passionate about being the best teacher she can be for her students, and just as importantly, for the students she does not specifically teach at her school. Her passion spills over into the other areas of her teaching attributes to be described below, but it is important to recognize the passion she exudes. Elizabeth is most descriptively passionate about being an advocate and a nurturer for her students, especially in the areas of her philosophy of inclusion for her students, homework expectations and grades, and a

realistic, non-punitive, positive behavior system. It is this passion that makes her unique in her teaching.

Some of this passion is a result of her natural personality for “taking up for others,” as well as from personal experiences she has had with her high school teachers who unfairly gave grades or treated students unequally. She said, “I spent a lot of time in trouble [as a kid] because I’m a reactive person and I get angry when I’m mistreated or not respected, and so I can have a smart mouth . . . and I talk back.” This sees itself, though in a developed, action-oriented way, in the school today as she “stands up for kids” in multiple ways such as assisting teachers in understanding the specific needs of a student, trying to get a teacher to understand the effect of a 0 on homework, or providing students with school materials if they need it. She claims she is still “finding her voice” as a leader in her school, as she seeks ways to say things that will make a difference. Every day she continues to try.

Her passion comes through in her discussions about her teaching philosophy of inclusion. Elizabeth believes that including her students in the mainstream classroom is essential to their progress socially and educationally. She is so passionate about inclusion that she says, “It’s hard not to say inclusion is not best for everyone, but it’s not. There are definitely kids that have such disabilities that they need a systematic phonics program [or one-on-one math assistance] every day.” The difficulty is scheduling and determining the ones that need to be pulled out of the regular classroom to work with them in a contained classroom, and those that can go into the mainstream class where she is there to assist. But once in the inclusion classroom, she says,



“Immediately they are reading better, they are achieving more, they are more motivated, because the kid next to ‘em, that’s what they are doing, that’s what they are expected to do. And they just - you do what the herd does - that’s what humans do. And so inclusion is a beautiful model for seeing growth. You have to have teachers that support it, and schedules that support it, and obviously, a school that supports it.”

*Care and respect.* Elements of care and respect were inseparable in Elizabeth’s discussions of her students. In describing herself, Elizabeth often explained her gauge for actions towards students and words spoken as “if I wouldn’t want my own child spoken to that way or treated that way or given that kind of consequence, I don’t give that kind of consequence.” Often, she said, “would I want someone to treat me this way?” If the answer is no, she determines another way of handling the situation at hand. At this point, Elizabeth hears herself saying, “How can I change this? How can we teach people to respond to students the way they want and need to be responded to? Ultimately, I want some compassion.”

Elizabeth says that watching her students

“fail over and over again makes me want to find a different way. Makes me want to find a different way to motivate them, and I think motivation and having a dog in the fight is the key to getting anybody to be successful - in a job, in a career, in a school. I think at this age, being interested in [whatever we are doing] is essential, if I can just get them there.”

For her, the most important thing for her students is to have her “in front of that class, getting a good lesson, quality instruction, and motivating students to want to be at school.

It is not about sitting in front of my computer, giving them worksheets, while I do paperwork for their IEPs.” She says, “We need to give ‘em the best we can give ‘em while they are here. And make them want to be here.”

Part of that, for her, is respecting her students enough to try to remove the social stigmas associated with being in a pull-out classroom. She says, “as a resource teacher, when I would go to pick up kids from their regular classroom, they were often embarrassed to come to me. I could hear them go ‘here I go to the special ed teacher.’” She stated that if she had behavior problems it would be from those kids who were embarrassed. This realization turned to giving the students some control over their situation. She said,

“Giving them some power – just letting them come to class without me coming to pick them up - that was a big deal . . . if just allowing them to walk to me instead of me going to get them is less embarrassing, maybe they will be less embarrassed if they could see that they are not the only ones that need help.”

She believes her included students were able to see that even AIG kids struggle every now and then, “giving them even more confidence and power over their growth, over their academics, they felt less identified.” In the end, she believes she gets so much more respect from her students, and so much more respect from other kids. This results in fewer behavior problems. Being in this respectful environment induces more respect. She says her students “like being with all of their peers, so they really toe the line. They don’t want to go back to the pull out model.”

Continuing the discussion about the respectful environment, Elizabeth says, “It is important for her classroom to be a place where kids can talk to me, ask me questions,

and feel safe.” She says she has students who come to her first class that haven’t had breakfast. She states emphatically, “I feel like that takes precedence over my fractions lesson, making sure they’ve been fed. So taking care of those basic needs, those emotional needs, before I address their academic needs is really important.” She keeps food in her closet for just such occasions. She believes she promotes an atmosphere of trust with her students, allowing them to come to her without a feeling of judgment. This atmosphere allows her to start their day with care before attempting the lesson for the day.

That she is a person of import to her students is obvious in many ways. Students come to her for many things and in situations where they feel they need help that no one else can give. Elizabeth tells of a potentially humiliating moment for one of her students. The student asked her teacher if she could go see Elizabeth. The teacher tried to assist, but the girl said “I just need to see Ms. Westall.” Elizabeth said, “When she got to my door, I was in the middle of a class . . . and I could tell that she needed something . . . So I just took care of her,” helping her, with no questions asked just as Elizabeth would want to be helped if she were in a similar situation.

An example of this respect and care is obvious when discussing her action points around student preparation and homework. About some teachers with whom she has worked, Elizabeth says, “Some . . . are real rigorous, real punitive, and reactive. I like to see myself as positive and proactive.” She finds that she does not react to what she considers the little things, like not bringing a pencil to class. She says, “I don’t make a big deal if they don’t have materials . . . I keep plenty of pencils, plenty of paper, making sure that they have what they need to be successful . . . If they need to go to the

restroom, I'll leave them go to the restroom.” She says many teachers establish such specific and confining rules that so much time is spent on issuing consequences that take away from the more important time of teaching. Instead, Elizabeth says that she spends time talking with her students about respecting other people's time and helping them to understand the real life lesson of “treat me the way you want me to treat you conversations.” She believes if “I respect their time they are going to respect my time.” She says, “Just give them a pencil. That's like three cents these days? Just give ‘em a pencil and move on. I don't let *those* [emphasis added] things take up class time.” Elizabeth realizes that many teachers would say that her laissez-faire approach on this point is a

“demonstration of . . . letting them get away with not coming prepared. Not holding them accountable or teaching them responsibility. I don't know, I just think it's a little thing, doing little things for them . . . little things that make a child feel successful.”

Again, she brings it back to real life by saying, “How would you feel if you went to a meeting and didn't have a pencil and you were docked pay for it?” In the end, she said, “You would just ask your coworker for a pencil! That's what real life is.” She says, “I definitely think you get more with honey than with vinegar, and so if you make kids feel like it is a sweet place to be, you are going to get more [from them].”

Elizabeth finds other ways to teach her students responsibility. She sets up time throughout the day with students to come to her class for assistance to do homework, and she says, “I make it their responsibility [to come to my room]. If I'm going to be here to help with [their] homework, it's [their] responsibility to come back [to my room for help]

or to let me know if they can't." She says she knows many students don't have opportunities to get help at home, and that getting homework completed is a real problem. She wants to make sure that they have assistance if they need it, she says,

"because I want them to do well. I want them to continue on in education, and go to HS, and not drop out . . . and so that they can see education as important. So that they can read and be independent and take care of their home finances, and not need their parents to keep doing it for them forever. I want to produce independent citizens. So that they are ready for it."

Elizabeth says students are so often punished for behaviors that she does not consider major infractions. She says instead, she works toward treating her students positively, and they give her positive behaviors as a result. Punishment completely undermines her set goal of helping to "improve [her students'] self esteem and self concept." She states, "I think when we treat them positively, they feel better about themselves and are willing to try things. Harping on them doesn't work. I have to model what I want them to do and how I want them to be." It is this positive role modeling that she believes establishes the parameters of behavior in her classes.

Homework and grades are another area that Elizabeth finds she uses her philosophy of first thinking about the students' needs prior to setting a reward or consequence. Elizabeth says, "Homework is a huge pet peeve of mine." She knows there is a place for homework, but feels it should not be so heavily weighted in a student's grade. For the younger grades, she feels that homework should be given to complete during class time. She believes that so often students do not have enough support at home to complete their homework.

“What happens at home should not affect what happens at school, but it does so much of the time. So, if you get home and you have four brothers and sisters to take care of, that shouldn’t result in you failing your math class.”

She continues, “My students know if they can’t get their homework done, or a project completed, for whatever reason, they can come to me for help. If they need materials for a project and are unable to purchase the materials, she works to get what they need.” She says,

“I like being that person [they can come to for help]. I like having that connection to my students. And so, if I can get here early enough to help somebody with homework, if I can get here early enough so that they don’t get that consequence for not doing their homework, I’ve helped them achieve.”

Elizabeth has similar sentiments in support of all students regarding grades. It is her hope that one day, there will be a deeper awareness of the effect of removing points from a student’s homework assignment for irrelevant reasons, or giving a 0 for not turning something in. She realizes the work she does with students provides supplemental grades to their mainstream courses, so the impetus is somewhat different for her. She says, “But I still keep grades for [my classes] as well . . . and I’ve never given a 0.” In advocacy for students, she says she has engaged in conversations with teachers who have been almost gloating about giving a student a poor grade. She said she overheard two teachers speaking about giving a student a score of 30, “and he got 20 points for putting his name on the paper.” She said, “I felt like I just needed to share my two cents,” and she explained the poor score from the student’s perspective, including the fact that the students’ not taking the opportunity to make corrections on the assignment

was not entirely the fault of the student. She said, “What motivation would a student have to do the work when even with corrections the most the student could make was a total of 65, still a failing grade.” The teachers said they were trying to teach the student responsibility, asking “When do we teach responsibility?” to which Elizabeth replied, “When they have to be responsible. And right now, mom is responsible. You need to give her the opportunity to be responsible for her child. Yeah, he may have made a mistake, but it shouldn’t cost him his grade.” She said, “I totally lost that conversation. Eventually they ignored me and walked away from me and didn’t want to hear about it.”

A similar situation occurred when a young teacher spoke to her about her frustration of a parent calling to complain about her taking ten points from her child’s grade for neglecting to put their name on their paper. Elizabeth said,

“It wasn’t even for not putting their name on the paper. Students are required to write their name, write their student number, and then highlight it. It was 10 points if you did all three of those things. So you might have your name and the number, but if you didn’t highlight it, to remind yourself to put your name and number, that’s the point of the highlighting, you’d lose 10 points.”

Ten points takes a grade down an entire letter grade. Elizabeth says, “That is a procedure that needs to NOT affect somebody’s grade. If you have a 96, and I take 10 points off, that’s an 86. You just went to a C from an A.” Elizabeth says, “I’m comfortable enough to say this is my opinion - I don’t think you should be giving 0s, or taking points off for these reasons. I don’t think you should give a kid a grade they can’t work back from.” And, she says, this is for any students, not just the students she works with. Elizabeth says, “I want the teachers to have my same philosophy.” It is this advocacy for students

and her willingness to stand up for them in a punitive system that shows that she cares and respects her students. She also knows that she is incapable of making changes without school policies that provide the structure for that change. It is in this area that she seeks further knowledge and strength.

***Relationship building with students.*** Elizabeth builds relationships with her students through the care and the respect that she shows them. Part of this relationship comes from always being there when her students need her, but also through the conversations she has with them. She begins her class with words to engage them in conversations about their lives. She says, “How was your Thursday?” or “What about that game the other night?” She builds a calm classroom atmosphere where students know they can share thoughts and life with one another. Elizabeth also shares things about her life with the students. She says, “I try to talk about what my life was like [as a kid] so they can [relate to me and know I understand them].” She continues by saying that she “talks about things I’ve done on the weekend, or talk about places I’ve been when we are reading, and when it comes up. When I can, I make a connection to help them make connections from their reading.”

Equally important to sharing with the students is using the information she has learned about them when they have shared with her. She says, “Finding what they are interested in is the key to getting them to be successful in school. So, I find their interests and teach them math through [this interest]. I find reading materials through something they are interested in.” Elizabeth uses this as a springboard for learning.

When Elizabeth began teaching, she says she “didn’t see the correlation between learning and how I treated them, and how I reacted to situations and how I spoke to



them.” Today, she realizes that this is essential to her being able to get her students to trust her and to build the relationship necessary to help them learn. She says she believes that she has developed compassion, and states, “If we just had compassion for children, we would talk to them differently. I now always have compassion” which assists in building relationships and ultimately better teaching and more learning. Elizabeth says,

“I don’t want them to remember me as the teacher that constantly harped on them about completing their work, or constantly harped on them about having a pencil for class, or constantly harped on them about being present or being tardy. I want them to remember me for being the person that helped them figure out that a fraction was less than one, or that a fraction and decimal are the same thing, or how to read a chapter book. I want them to remember that I was there to help them be successful, and not that I was there to aggravate them.”

An example of her compassion is her conversation with Sam, a young boy in her class. He came into her class to continue to work on a math test. During his regular math time, while taking the test, he was to answer the questions he knew and put question marks next to the things he felt he was unsure about. At his seat, looking at his test, she asked him, ‘Why do you have so many question marks on your paper?’ She did not ask him this question in an accusatory way. She spoke to him quietly, simply questioning him, as question marks on his test meant he really did not know a concept on the test. He said, “I have questions about these.” Her response to him was that she bet he knew more than he thought he did, and it would be best that he not turn the test in with so many questions. She said, getting down at an eye-to-eye level with him, “Maybe I can help. I’m going to spend some *special* [emphasis added] time with you!” Special was said in a

loving way, not in a degrading or sarcastic way. As a result, they worked through the test, and he had very few question marks left on his test paper.

***Differentiation.*** Much of Elizabeth's teaching day is differentiating, from lessons for individual students to lessons she co-prepares with the mainstream teacher in the classes where her students are included. She admits that being a teacher of children with diverse needs, she always seeks ways to differentiate for her students as they all have many different and specific needs. Her goal is to know her students well enough as individuals to understand their educational needs, but just as importantly to know their individual interests. With this knowledge, she is able to find different ways to motivate them. She says motivation is "the key to getting anybody to be successful"

One way to arm herself with ways to motivate students is to take advantage of professional development opportunities, use of modern technology that assists in capturing students' interests, and working with her teaching colleagues. She says she fights to keep the importance of the quarterly assessment systems and bigger end of grade testing requirements at bay, believing that much of what she sees occurring has the potential of taking us "back to teaching blue birds and black birds and dodo birds . . . we learned years ago that that's not the best way to teach." Her impetus to implement inclusion, and her ability to teach through differentiation with the mainstream teachers with whom she works, allows her to see the effectiveness of the inclusive pedagogy. She says her close association with other teachers allows the two of them to "sit down and plan a lesson together, [to] know what [they] are doing. Then [for me to] take a piece of that lesson and adapt it for the EC students and provide modifications."

Elizabeth believes her struggles as a math student in school have allowed her to be a better teacher today. She understands the frustrations of a teacher talking in words that make no sense to her. As a result of the professional development she attends, she is beginning to understand why she was not able to grasp math concepts as a younger person. Today's teaching requirements have moved math from being taught procedurally to conceptually. Understanding the differences of these strategies has shown Elizabeth where differentiation can play a part. She says for teachers of special needs students, teaching math conceptually is more common, as teachers have always worked to figure out how to teach "to really get that concrete understanding of math before moving to the abstract." Now that she is learning how to do this herself through the math foundations courses she is taking through the state department of instruction, she is better able to bring these concepts alive for her students. Elizabeth wants to continue to learn how to teach math better, always seeking out other opportunities. She says, laughingly,

"I don't know if that's making me some kind of teacher nerd or not . . . I'm interested in getting my kids interested. And I see how working with math is getting these kids more interested in math and opening up their brains. So I need to go back and take these classes . . . Education is changing. And I'm not ready to get old - and keep doing what I did. I want to stay at the forefront of learning. Learn what I can so that I can bring to them the best they have."

This instructional knowledge, combined with the differentiation strategies, is obvious in the content classrooms. During observed lessons, two teachers supported one another in the classroom, the content area teacher instructing, while Elizabeth walked around the room to assist students. As necessary, Elizabeth inserted suggestions to the

class as she saw students struggle, knowing what might assist the students. Elizabeth definitely supported the content teacher, but was not afraid to step in as necessary to make learning easier for her students, and all students. It appeared to be a seamless, choreographed relationship. What was most beautiful during the entire observation was that there was no distinction observable between those who were and were not Elizabeth's students.

For Elizabeth, when she works in inclusion, she makes a point to work with all of the students in the class who may be struggling in the lesson. She says it is wonderful for her students to see that she teaches anyone in need. As Elizabeth puts it, her students know they have an IEP. She says, "They know they have accommodations. But . . . they like it when I'm helping somebody else when they are 'getting it', because they're getting the concept and their neighbor who is not EC needs help." This also assists students who are not on an IEP but might be at risk for not doing well, as it gives them "that extra support they need. It helps them."

***Expectations.*** Elizabeth's role as a teacher of exceptional children is to know where her students are educationally and cognitively, and push them to the next level. Her most important desire is that she creates a place for her students to come every day, "a place where they feel safe, confident, and respected, where they want to participate and raise their hands, and where they are learning and making progress." She holds these goals as expectations that she must meet. Her attention to the details of these expectations is obvious when looking at her room. The created learning environment is a place of comfort with tables set in a circle, each one with two chairs, an overstuffed sofa, organized cupboards and bookshelves, educational posters, and other educational items.

This classroom is one of organization, as well as one of freedom; students came into the classroom, knew what to do to get started for the lesson, yet had the freedom to sit where they preferred. At one observation, students were engaged and asking questions, Elizabeth attended to her students' educational understanding as she would get down on their level, look them in the eye, and usually smile at them, as they engaged with her in their learning. During another observation, one of Elizabeth's classes came in while she was not yet finished with her previous lesson. These students never interrupted her, and instead went to the center of the pod to the 'computer room' and began working without a sound. They were unnoticed and busy on their language arts assignment by the time Elizabeth began looking for them five minutes into their class time. It would appear her personal expectations of a comfortable, free classroom were being met.

At the same time, she sets goals for her students and pushes them to meet those goals. During one observation, she said to her class during a discussion about a student unsure of how to complete an assignment, "It's OK if he didn't know; it's ok if you don't know. It is not OK if you don't ask." As she continued to work through the assignment, students asked more questions and engaged in the work. As she worked one-on-one with a group of students, she began by directing the conversation, and responding to their comments with excitement and animation, but soon pulled back, provoking independence from the students to respond to each other's questions. Real learning was occurring.

As described earlier, Elizabeth's behavioral expectations are followed well by the students. She states she very rarely has to implement the behavioral punishment system established by her grade levels. She says,

“I think you have to model what you want them to do . . . if I speak to them positively, they are going to speak to others positively. If I reward for good behavior, then they are going to demonstrate that good behavior more often . . . And I *very* seldom put a check in their planner. I think you save checks for really, really bad behaviors.”

Elizabeth says she would like to say she holds as high of an educational expectation for her included students as she does for the mainstream students. She says, however, “I don’t necessarily expect that they are all going to pass their end-of-grade test, though I do expect that they will show more growth in an inclusive setting than they did in the pull out setting. I think having confidence will drive achievement.” As for the students she works with that are not in the included classes, she holds the expectation that they will meet the growth established by their IEP, and then some. She holds these expectation as the standards by which she and all of her students will strive to achieve.

***Respecting others’ cultures.*** Elizabeth strives to understand the needs of her students through a deeper awareness of their lives at home. She recognizes that students battle many issues earlier than what they should have to. She states she knows she has to introduce her differently abled kids to vocabulary, experiences, and concepts because “this child has not been exposed to things at home.” This understanding allows her to be realistic about her students, providing them basic needs in the classroom prior to the start of school if necessary, while at the same time, pushing them to learn more and be prepared for life. She says she always makes sure students know she is there to support them, and she says, “I make sure that they have what they need to be successful . . . not making a big deal [if they don’t have materials].”

### **How Experiences, Attitudes, and Beliefs Developed**

Elizabeth had what she considers a normal upbringing with a solid family, and an education that she considers nondescript. She remembers personal experiences in her youth that have assisted in bringing her a better understanding of the students she teaches today, and allows her to be a better teacher as a result.

**Childhood.** Elizabeth says, “I am defined more by my family than anything else” as she tells of the importance she holds for her immediate and extended family, and her respect for her parents. She says her parents instilled in her and her brother great personal values and the importance of education, though neither of her parents were formally educated beyond high school.

Elizabeth grew up “very middle class,” as her father owned a small hardware store in Baltimore, a suburb of a large city in South Carolina. Baltimore felt like a small town to Elizabeth. Her mother worked outside of the home as a customer service manager for different companies in South Carolina. Her maternal grandmother played a large role in her life, as she was there to pick up her and her brother from school and to take them to practices and lessons as necessary. Elizabeth remembers not wanting for too much more than what she had in life.

**Moments of real learning.** As a child and into her teenage years, Elizabeth recalls times that she bullied others. Most of her bullying was a result of “taking up for [her] brother.” Bill was four years younger than Elizabeth, and she found herself taking care of him at school and church events. She said, “I definitely feel like I spent my childhood taking care of him, and bullying people back who bothered him.” She says he

was picked on for “being different, not being exactly like everybody else.” It wasn’t until Elizabeth was in her mid twenties that Bill told his family that he was gay.

Elizabeth also is tormented by the memories of bullying kids herself. In particular, she and some other friends picked on a few girls in middle school who were “the underdogs.” She says, “I remember we were mean . . . just not being nice to them, not letting them be part of our group.” Today, she states, “I’m ashamed of this.” But she uses these moments to talk with her students about bullying, saying, “how you treat people today is going to be a factor for the rest of your life.” She says, you might not think it matters, “but it’s going to matter when you’re grown up, and it does.”

She said that the times of seeing her brother treated badly, and her own treatment of others, has had a great effect on how she treats others today, and the support that she gives her own students. She has turned her own experiences of bullying into advocacy for those who are being treated badly. She says, “I think I am still taking up for people,” though today it is in a more productive, less physical manner. She believes some of the reactions of support that she has not only for her students but also for any student who is mistreated, comes naturally as a result of her childhood. She says,

“I’ve had to go head to head with teachers . . . or administrators to make them see that these kids (and often their parents) who are the underdogs, helping them to see what they can achieve, and what we can do for them.”

Elizabeth struggles today in how to contain her visceral reaction to instances of disrespect and injustice, and moving her actions instead towards something meaningful and productive. As a growing leader, she still questions, “how can I change it, what can I do” to make things better? The questions she asks daily.



**Personal Values.** Elizabeth said, like education, “Going to church was not an option for me.” Church played a very big role in her youth. She said, “We were in church Sunday morning, Sunday night, and Wednesday night. It was not an option for me.” Many of those in her social group were also members of her church, so she said, “I was OK [with going].” She says, “I loved going to church camp, church basketball, church choir.” As a teenager, she says, when she was going through her more rebellious stage, her parents insisted on her going to her church youth activities. Her boyfriend during this time had a questionable reputation, and she knows her parents were aware of this. She says of her parents,

“they allowed that relationship to happen, because, not allowing it to happen would have been – I would have either done it behind their backs, or . . . So they were allowing that relationship to happen, but, forcing me to not let that be my only outlet; forcing me to still see my friends from church; forcing me to spend time at my grandma’s house; forcing me to go to church camp in the summer.”

She says some of her most influential people in her life were from her church, especially her church choir director. Elizabeth grew quite contemplative and thoughtful while talking of this time, her eyes looking upwards as she sought memories of her experiences at church camp, as this was “a huge place where I developed into who I am.” She says camp was her summer activity, her social group, and where she was able to be with her friends, as so many of them were from church. As she grew older, she became a camp counselor for the younger grades. She said, “I would go [to camp] for my age group, as a high schooler, and then also go back as a counselor for the younger kids. And I think . . . church camp . . . It’s where we just had fun.” But, she said, it is also where

she really began to understand social groups. She said she remembers trying to fit in at church camp, and possibly where she began to pick on other kids. She quietly spoke about her desire to “be with the cool kids. I wanted to be in their cabin. And that’s what they did, so I did it, too!”

Along with discussing her personal value of her faith, Elizabeth several times alluded to her political persuasions as well. She would comment about her more conservative political views during times when she realized that what she was saying was not conservative as defined by society. There were times that she would say, “I sound like a Democrat, for goodness sakes,” laughing. Examples of these moments were when she spoke of her students from families who were quite poor and who she felt needed support or assistance, but more importantly, understanding from all teachers. She showed her frustrations regarding teachers who spoke out negatively about students whose parents were on public assistance. On a more personal note, she spoke of her brother’s opening up to their family about his sexuality, and her family’s unconditional support of him, “I mean we’re coming from the south, Southern Baptist, Republicans. They [her parents] were not raised to think what they think [regarding supporting her brother’s sexuality]. And they have loved him through this, and he would never have thought they were going to.” And Elizabeth is one of Bill’s biggest supporters today.

**Schooling/Teacher memories.** Elizabeth seems to have had a typical public education experience. She went to what she considers a small high school, with a graduating class of about 200 students in the suburb of Arcadia, SC. She said she had both good and bad teachers, though as mentioned earlier, school just didn’t interest her that much. She said some teachers tried to push her to do better, telling her she should be

in the honors English program, but she said, “I just didn’t want to. I just wanted to get by.” She said, however, “It wasn’t an option not to do well in school.” If Elizabeth or her brother needed assistance in learning, her parents paid for a tutor. She remembers her math teacher as one who “was not open to helping me,” and as she was failing the class, she was tutored to pass with a 69.5%. She states her compassion for students who struggle with math and her desire to learn how to teach them better comes from her own past experiences as a struggling math student.

She also was accused of cheating in high school, though she says, “I was NOT cheating.” A group of her friends had stolen a test, and because of her association with them, she was accused along with them. She was given a zero on the test, destroying the grade she had, making it next to impossible to pass the class. The teacher gave her an opportunity to pull her grade up to a C with a very difficult challenge, which she took. Studying very hard to complete the work required of her, she barely passed the class. She looks back now and wonders if this experience has resulted in her belief that “if you mess up one time, it should not affect your entire grade.” She says she refuses to give a student a zero on any work, and she now attempts to persuade her peers to do the same.

**Analyzer.** Elizabeth considers herself an analyzer. She says, “I worry about things . . . how can we change this, how can we make this a more positive place, how can we teach people to be more positive.” She says some might think her “minding other people’s business,” but for her, it is how she figures things out for herself, and how she works to make things better – for her and for others. To Elizabeth, however, she feels her weakness is not always taking action in situations that she knows are bothering her to make her perspective heard. She often said, in our time together, “I don’t know what to

do to change it.” Elizabeth says things occur daily in the school between students, conversations between teachers, many things that she overhears or sees, that make her stop and shake her head. She says, “I get mad when people aren’t treated right. But the question she now asks is, “How can we fix it.” She says, “I didn’t confront that person today, because I think that person would be pretty confrontational back to me.” She continues to work on finding the proper words to say in reply that would be considered appropriate and not cause more problems for the situation or for her. She contains her first instincts to lash out, those impulsive first reactions that as a youth caused her problems, and that today would make her seem completely irreverent.

**Becoming a parent.** For Elizabeth, the most profound changes in her teaching have come since she has become a mother. Multiple times in our discussions, she would return to a comment such as “I ask myself how I would want my own children treated.” Early in her teaching, Elizabeth does not believe she thought about the specific needs of her students. She says, “It’s definitely post-parenthood.” Today, as a result of knowing her own two children, and loving them deeply, she says about her students,

“These kids are somebody’s everything, you know. And I want them to feel safe . . . I recognize their value, their value to somebody else. And if I thought somebody was not giving my child every chance he had, then I would – I don’t think I realized how much my parents cared and loved me until I had my own . . . I look at every child differently today.”

Elizabeth works to treat her students with the respect and compassion that she hopes teachers would offer her own children. She says, “It’s the least I can do.”

### **Elizabeth: Conclusion**

Elizabeth is a teacher that makes every moment the best she can. Her dedication to her students and her school help to define her role as the teacher she is and the positive advocate she hopes her students will remember. Her ability to respect her students for who they are, to take them every day the way they come to her, and help them see themselves as positive contributors to the school, their families, and eventually society is admirable.

### **Case Two: Grace Harmon, Mountain Trace High School**

**School demographics.** Set in the mountains of western North Carolina, Mountain Trace High School (MTHS) is the only high school in this small, rural county school district. MTHS is located in McComb, North Carolina. This county is defined as rural based on the nation's census designation of less than 200 persons per square mile. Mountain Trace has a total population of 13,981, while McComb is home to 1,426 people and the high school enrolls 573 students. The high school's average subject area class size ranges from 19 to 22 students compared to the state average of 18 to 20 students. The average daily attendance at MTHS is 94%. The school has 48 teachers, of which 96% are fully licensed and 98% are highly qualified, compared respectively to the state averages of 94% and 98%. Twenty three percent hold advanced degrees, compared to the 27% state average, and 12 of the 48 are National Board Certified compared to the average of 10 across the state for schools with similar grade ranges (North Carolina Public Schools Department of Instruction [NCDPI], 2012).

MTHS was designated a "School of Progress" in the 2011-12 NC School Report (NCDPI, 2012). This classification is based on the school's performance on the state's

end-of-year tests, an indicator of the percentage of students performing at grade level. This designation informs the local and state community that 60 to 80% of the MTHS students had passed the test that year. Looking more deeply into the Mountain Trace community and MTHS's demographics, Table 5 represents informative data about the Mountain Trace community and student achievement as compared to the state of North Carolina (NCREDC, 2012; NCDPI, 2012).

Table 5

*Demographic Data of Mountain Trace and North Carolina*

Category	Mountain Trace	North Carolina
Poverty Rate	19%	17%
Child Poverty	28%	25%
Food Assistance	19%	14%
Free and Reduced Lunch (total district, 2009-10, up from 55.3%, 2005-06)	64.3%	53.7%, up from 48.4%, 2005-06
Graduation Rate (2012)	80%	80%
Students taking SAT	48%	68%
Average SAT score	956	997 (Nat'l Avg, 1010)
Citizens w/ < HS Diploma	21%	16%
Citizen's w/ HS Diploma	33%	28%
Citizen's w/ AA	10%	8%
Citizen's w/ BA or BS	19%	26%
Unemployment Rate	15%	11%

Table 6 (NCDPI, 2012) shows the demographics of the student population of this rural community, confirming that the stereotype of the rural population being "White farmers" is not the norm for this community.

Table 6

*MTHS Student Demographic*

Category	Mountain Trace	North Carolina
American Indian	26%	1%
Asian	1%	2%
Black	1%	21%
Hispanic	4%	8%
White	66%	65%

At the entrance of the school, a prominent sign states the school's mission statement: "Mountain Trace County School District is dedicated to providing a superior learning environment for students of all ages and providing a springboard to success in higher education and the world at large." I walked into the front lobby of this school and immediately was met with a sense of friendship and security, where students greeted one another with warmth and frivolity. Entering the main office to check in as a guest, several of the office staff laughed with students, calling each of them by name, asking about family, events, and engaging in small discussions. Teachers entering the office joined in. The first day I arrived, the office assistant asked one of the students in the office to walk me to Grace's class. He gladly obliged and, smiling politely, talked with me as we walked the short distance to her classroom.

The school library is found in the center of the building with glass walls to allow all who enter to see the importance of this place of work and learning. Each time I entered the school at different times of the day, students were using the library for research, course work, or group collaboration. To the left of the library are steps leading

down to the classrooms on the lower level of the school. Like the library, many of the classrooms have partial glass walls. Glass provides a prominent representation of transparency and openness. An interior hallway wall, one of the few with little glass, is fully covered with murals of students' favorite literary quotes and their artistic depictions painted by the art teacher and students. Walking through the hallways of this school I saw engaged students and teachers in action. It appeared that learning was occurring.

### **Grace's Experiences, Attitudes, and Beliefs**

**Grace: the path to teaching.** Grace is a fifteen-year veteran at Mountain Trace High School (MTHS) and graduated from MTHS in the 80s. Grace "fell into education." Becoming a teacher had not crossed her mind as she left high school, though she had no idea what she was supposed to do at that point in her life. She remembers, "Nothing had occurred to me, with what I was going to do with my life. I was going to read books and listen to music, and look at art. That's what I was going to do." Going to college had not been prominent in her plans. She said, "I thought about it [going to college], but nobody ever had, in my family. So there certainly wasn't a direct path." Grace got married at eighteen, like many girls her age, and then decided to try college at the age of 20. She enrolled in a private, liberal arts college in western North Carolina. After her first year, she knew that she would no longer be able to afford that college, and transferred to a state university to complete her undergraduate degree in English where she received the Nomad Poetry and Nomad Fiction Awards. While she was working in a factory after college, she received the English Speaking Union Scholarship Abroad award to travel to Scotland for six months to study James Boswell and Samuel Johnson, 18<sup>th</sup> century authors, to walk in their footsteps, and understand their writings more deeply. Upon her



return, she was offered a position at a community college to teach English to non-English speakers, her first real introduction to the world of education. It was through this position and conversations with her sister, a teacher in a rural school, that the seed of teaching was planted. She and her sister would speak “about issues in education . . . especially poverty, and about the way out of poverty being education.”

Grace continued with her own education, receiving a Fellowship to Columbia University where she earned her Master’s in English. Upon her return to North Carolina, she was hired to teach English at a private residential high school. Grace loved her time at this school and said the students at the private school were wonderful.

But most of them came from upper middle to upper class homes, and most of them had at least one parent who was involved and supportive. And they didn’t really have needs that weren’t met. And so, working with them was primarily working with students, and helping a group of people bring forth their potential and allowing them to achieve it. That’s what I saw as my overall goal. But there were other people there that could do just as fine a job as I could.

After four years teaching at this school, Grace decided to leave in order to pursue a Master of Fine Arts degree. Concurrently, she taught several courses as an adjunct instructor at the same university, as well as courses at a local community college. It was at this point that she found herself at a crossroads that would change her professional path. Several positions at her MFA institution had opened, as well as an English teaching position at Mountain Trace High School. The possibility of teaching at MTHS excited her for several reasons: the security a public education position would have for her family, and the possibility of teaching young students from working class families.

When I understood there was going to be a position here [at MTHS], I realized this would be a unique opportunity for me to work with kids whose backgrounds were so similar to my own. And I knew what had helped me to have options. And I thought I could really help these kids have those same options. Whether they chose to go one route or another didn't matter, as long as I knew I understood them well enough to say 'this is what I have to offer you,' and I could feel really good about it. So I felt like – I guess to put it in a nutshell, I felt like this is a place where what I had to offer could really have some kind of an impact – more so.

**Grace the classroom teacher, introduced.** During class, a young student who was a mother told Grace she would be unable to come to school the next day to take a test because her childcare had fallen through. Without much thought, Grace said, "Bring your baby to class." The girl worried about her other classes, to which Grace told her to speak to her other teachers and see what they said. She said, "We'll make it work," and they did. The young woman came to school, took the test, and when the child began to get a little fussy Grace said,

Just give it to me while all of you are taking the test because I can walk around with the baby as easily as I can walk around without a baby. So I got to walk around the room for about 45 minutes with that wonderful baby while they took their test.

Grace stated this was one of her most memorable hours as a teacher!

***Grace at MTHS.*** Upon entering Grace's classroom, there is an immediate understanding that language and literature are the subjects taught. Books are orderly on

the many bookshelves, the walls are tastefully covered with literary quotes, pictures, and thought provoking posters, and vocabulary words are on the board. This classroom feels like a peaceful, happy place, as students enter chatting with one another, sitting in their seats, and gathering their class materials. Some students come in tired and immediately put their head on their desk. From these initial observations, a typical class is about to begin.

Grace greets each of her students with a warm welcome as they enter, expressing her desire to be with each of them. “How are you today? Several of you told me you were tired. How come?” or as a student comes in late, she goes directly to him and says, “How are you Tim? Are you OK?” There is genuine care in her voice, but just as importantly, Grace is physically close with this student, bending down to look directly at him to speak to him. Grace makes a point to be present with her students, acknowledging students by first saying their name, so as to let them know they are important to her.

Grace talks about how she wants her students to see her when they enter her classroom:

I try to be somewhere in the middle of the room or in the back of the room instead of in that little space at the very front, you know, the safe teacher’s space. So I try to be out there so that they know this is the classroom where the teacher moves around in here.

Mutual respect between teacher and students is evident. As I had the opportunity to get to know Grace in the classroom, respect is one of the most obvious attributes that defined her as a teacher. Grace has a deep understanding of who she is as a person and teacher, and through this, she is able to understand her students and build a strong, trusting relationship with them. Grace respects her students as youth, but she also respects the

cultures from which they come, as she is from this same culture. Her knowledge of each individual allows her to know which way to push her students, or when to provide alternatives to the assignments or procedures for the class.

Grace believes it is her responsibility to be truthful with her students, sometimes speaking the “harsh truths” that get a student’s attention. She says, “Sometimes I say things in class I shouldn’t say. But I try to for a good cause . . . [because] language can shock you, jolt you, and wake you up.” One example of this is after giving a writing assignment, she states, “Do not write anything inappropriate. No racism and no gay bashing – it makes me sick.” It is through this honesty that she is able to make students aware of the realities of their world, and to help them see their potential as people. She says she offers her students an understanding of “who they are.” She states, “I have a good idea of the big picture because of what I read and what I’m drawn to.” At the same time, this knowledge, and her ability to speak honestly allows her to speak about stereotypes, negative comments, and biases common in today’s student population.

Grace is respected not only in her classroom but also throughout the school. In the school halls, students not currently in her classes greet Grace with smiles and waves. On one visit, we were walking in the library and one student engaged her in conversation, sharing his excitement over voting for the first time. She said, “I am so proud of you, John. You are expressing your rights!” Other students said good morning respectfully and shared pleasant student/teacher conversations.

**Grace in the classroom.** On my first visit to MTHS and my introduction to Grace, I observed the procedures of a well-run classroom. Before class, as students entered her classroom, she provided a genuine welcome of “good morning, my dear

students.” Many students, in response, welcomed her with, “Good Morning, Ms. Harmon, did you have a good weekend?” In another conversation with a group of students, I heard Grace say, “How are you today? Several of you told me you were tired? How come?” The students replied with the reasons they were tired, to which she gave her understanding and empathy. The small talk that occurred before class provided evidence of a group of people who respected one another. Grace began the class promptly after the bell rang, speaking softly yet with command. Her first directive, “please get out your materials if you want to. And if you don’t want to, thank you for being compliant.” Some students smiled or laughed, but all of the students were either willing or in compliance that day. This simple comment from the teacher, and the reaction of the students, shows the mutual respect present in this room, yet also is an example of the quiet control she has in the class. During my first observation, I noted that no word Grace said was wasted. In my notes, I wrote, “[Grace] speaks so quietly and fast, students HAVE to listen so as not to miss anything.” The *skinny*--the agenda for the day’s lesson--was written on the white board at the front of the classroom, and she moved seamlessly from one activity to the next. One time, I found that I had not heard her transitioning directive as it was spoken so quietly and embedded within the previous task. The students, however, did not seem lost at all. I wrote “These students are so obviously attending to her every movement and comment,” an observation I made on each of my visits.

Grace realizes the importance of keeping today’s students engaged. She said, “My lessons have variety in that they change gears four or five times per block.” The agenda, however, tends to be consistent from day to day, as she begins the lesson with

something to settle students and to prepare them for the day's agenda, followed by questions or comments, returning the previous day's work and time to read comments written on the work returned, grammar or vocabulary, literature, and a written response from the reading. The consistency from one day to the next, and the clear expectations established at the beginning of the semester and each class, helped her students know what they are supposed to be doing with each task.

During class time, students work individually or in pairs/groups. Grace walks around the room to assist with their questions, or talks to them either about the assignment or about things occurring in their lives. Grace is constantly present for her students. Not once did she sit behind her desk to do *teacher work*. A student entered the class late, and there was no negative comment to greet him. She went directly to him, and said "Is everything OK, Joe?" There was genuine care in her voice and her face. Often, I would see her kneel down beside a student, pat them on the back, and look them in the eye to show her attention to their need. She made a point of being in close proximity to them, as she said their names to let them know that they were important to her. Her actions were not overly dramatic, but were natural, seeming to come from her heart. She even made light of these actions, saying, "Do you want me to walk around and speak encouraging words and pat you on the head?" Some of the students smiled at her, and others joked back with her. During one observation, a student said, "I hate it when teachers pat me on the back. It scares me." Grace said, "You don't want me to pat you? That's OK." But the student said, "You can, just no one else. It scares me." While I visited this school, there were so many moments of clear affection and respect given and

received between Grace and her students. The students were so obviously important to this teacher and vice versa.

**Grace's Teaching Attributes.** The reality of teaching in the rural community of MTHS is that many of the students are struggling. Students come daily to this school from extremely harsh conditions, and bring with them significant personal issues: pregnancy, violence, family separation, poverty, etc. Reaching beyond the daily lives of the students, getting them to see they have something to be proud of, is difficult. However, Grace perseveres. Grace depends upon many attributes she believes are essential to meeting the needs of her students. First and foremost, Grace respects her students as individuals. This respect is gained through intentionally building relationships with each of them, accomplished through her daily conversations and work with them, and as a result of the care she shows. She maintains that she hones this relationship through the honesty with which she speaks with each of her students, the respect she holds for the students' cultures, and her ability to differentiate her lessons and assignments to reach each individual appropriately.

***Relationship building with students.*** Grace talks of the importance of building relationships with students as one of the keys of her teaching. She states that without a relationship, learning is meaningless.

If you don't have that relationship, everything you are offering them is an abstraction. And I think that if you have that relationship and you convince them that it is going to **help** them to know what you offer, that it's not an abstraction, it's something, maybe not tangible, but it's something that has significance, it has relevance, but they have to trust you to believe it. And that's where the

relationship component is. If they don't trust you, it doesn't matter what you say or do. It doesn't mean anything; especially with poorer kids.

With many of the students at MTHS, this relationship is difficult to build. According to Grace, in one of her classes of 25 students,

Eight students have either had a child, or are going to have a child, now. Two of the students were in jail for armed robbery; one is out now, and one is still in jail. And one of them has been through rehab, unsuccessfully. Two of them are taking each other to court, because they got in a fight. This is a class of 25 kids.

These students bring a lot of life with them when they enter her classroom, and many draw a line that is difficult to cross. Grace, however, attempts to breach this line, slowly and intentionally.

Grace realized the importance of building relationships and caring for her students in her second year at MTHS. She remembers working with a classroom of students who were taking her course for a second time, helping these students who were having exceptionally difficult personal moments. These students were one of her roughest classes and she said she had struggled with them a bit. She said one of the boys had

said something really awful to me that I had to respond to . . . I sent him outside of the class. When I went outside . . . he was crying. He said 'my mom is breaking up with her boyfriend and he is the only dad I've ever had and I just can't take it.

Grace said the young man apologized to her. This incident has made a lasting impression on her as she said, "I realized, and should have realized before, that so much of what you



see in the classroom has nothing to do with the class and everything to do with the child trying to come to terms with something difficult.”

While Grace was out talking with this boy, the principal had come to her class to announce that Grace was the recipient of the Teacher of the Year Award. As she walked into the classroom, the students stood up and applauded her achievement, genuinely happy for her. She said,

I remember being in shock that they would be that glad for me, about anything.

And, so that feeling, that was the beginning of that feeling that these kids were responding to me as a human being. . . . [it] was the beginning of me thinking that working on the relationship with them could feed me as well . . . that they could reciprocate.

It was at that time that she realized the importance of the relationship between student and teacher, and that if that relationship was there, “they could do the work. They WOULD do the work.” She finds that because she connects with the students on a personal level, and respects each individual, connecting with each one of them individually, she is able to reach her students in a way that many other teachers who have them do not.

Grace says she is fortunate to teach a discipline that allows her to require her students to write. Through her writing, she is able to begin the nugget of this relationship she seeks. During the time of this study Grace had a student in her class for the first time, “who has struck me for years, when I would see her in the hallway, as a kid who is really suspicious of others, who wouldn’t respond when I would say hello in the hallways.” Grace said, “She would just look at me, like she would just size me up . . . the first couple

of days [in class] she wouldn't respond to anything I'd said." Grace said this girl would turn in a couple of pieces of paper for assignments with only a little bit of writing. Grace, who saw an opportunity, said, "And this is always the best way for me as an English teacher to begin creating a relationship. I write a comment on the paper that's specific . . . using the student's name." Grace found that the girl would turn in another paper, and after corresponding with her this way a couple more times, she said, "I could really see she's got a good brain. And so, I wrote on that paper, 'Lisa, you have an excellent brain.'" This continued several times, when Grace wrote, "why have you never taken an honor's class?" Now, when the girl is in class, "**she** volunteers for a couple of responses. So it's seeing that spark, making them see that spark, and making them believe that you are not . . . this is not nonsense." Grace believes you see things in your students and you let them know you see it. The result, she believes, is that this girl is "beginning, I hope, to see that she can trust me, because I'm really looking at her, seeing something that's there, that maybe she didn't even know was there. But it creates the relationship. I can see it developing. I hope."

Another way Grace builds relationships with students is through the assignments she gives, and actually doing the assignment along with them so that they can see her struggle. In her AP English IV class, she assigned the students the task of writing their own villanelle, sestina, or sonnet. While she provided the students time to work on these in class, Grace sat at her desk writing her own, putting her work on the smart board behind her so that they could see her creating, crossing out, adding to, and experimenting with the same language that they were expected to use. She even said, "all right, guys, let's get going. I've really got to work [on my sestina]." This attitude of "we're all in

this together” allowed for the building of a deeper relationship. As well, the students were not afraid to try out new words, new ideas, and therefore new challenges. They used their language playfully with each other and with Grace. Comments such as “there’s nothing bulbous about Joe” or “Yes, Mike, that’s right. It needs to be profound, and beautiful,” showed that she was helping them to experiment. At the same time, they felt comfortable in the classroom to take the challenge of experimentation. They knew she cared enough to work with them and help them be better at whatever it was they were working on.

***Caring.*** Grace cares deeply about the students in her classrooms. She worries about what they go to when they leave school. She recognizes that when she returned to MTHS after fifteen years of being away, she thought she was coming back to a school where students would be similar to who she was as a teenager. She knows now that “it’s pretty different. Far more different than I would have thought it was.” She says that today’s MTHS students are

poorer in terms of family than I was. Maybe a little more means economically . . .  
but they are also vastly different in that the family system here is broken . . .  
[they] need something they just aren’t getting.

One of her purposes is helping give them what they need. When I asked her what caring about her students looks like, she said,

When I look at an individual, I try before I begin doing anything, having any expectations, I try to ascertain where that student is and go from there. So, if I have no background on a student . . . I am already beginning to try to figure out what that student needs from that class as soon as we begin having an interaction.

So, caring about my student for me means working with them based on where they are and beginning at that point. And it would look like, to an outside observer, I would hope, it would look like respect for the individual, and it would look like kindness, and it would look like, perhaps, I hope, high expectations, but always beginning with that base line of where that student is now.”

Simple examples of this are evident minute by minute in her classroom. Grace often kneels down to talk to her students quietly, looking at them in the eye, and giving them a slight touch, saying such things as, “is everything OK, Blair?” or “Are you tired, Kirsten?” to let the students know she noticed that they were struggling. At other times, she would excitedly compliment with, “Joe, you did well on this [literary interpretation], and I don’t think Dickinson’s easy.”

Grace shared a more complex example of her caring, as experienced with a student in her advanced placement literature and composition course. “This girl is really bright,” said Grace, “and is also very troubled, as she is showing signs of self-destruction in terms of her grades.” The students had been assigned a presentation for the class, and Grace knew that this student was not prepared, though the assignment had been given two weeks earlier. Grace contemplated whether or not to make the girl give the presentation. In her words, she thought,

Which is going to be kinder? To demand that she do what every other student has to do, or to understand that she has missed two days this week for God knows what sad reasons. And I decided that the kinder thing to do would be to make her present.

Grace decided that all of the students had known about the assignment for two weeks, and some students were losing respect for this young woman because she was failing to do any of her assignments. Grace concluded that the girl had done something to prepare, though she knew she was not fully ready. Her thinking was,

So I'll see what she has accomplished and I'll hold her feet to the fire. I decided that was the kinder thing. I knew that not doing so would have said that I had lower expectations for her than the other students. And that would have fed their beginning lack of respect for her, I think, if they saw that I was not going to demand that she do what they do. And because I want her to understand that no matter what's happening in her life outside of the classroom, that if she wants to have options for herself, she's going to have to meet expectations of other people. That's just a reality. And I don't want her to think I don't expect much of her. Because I still hope.

The student presented, and while it wasn't perfect, something of greater importance was accomplished.

***Meeting the needs of all students.*** It is very important to Grace to attempt to meet the individual needs of her students, in one way or another. She recognizes how the system of schooling is a paradox, as she sees that all students must meet the same requirements, though the playing field is not level. She says, "some students have to go so much further in order to meet the requirements . . . and while I want them to be held accountable, I understand it is not fair." And so, she differentiates, from creating assignments for students based on their needs, to letting students have a voice and a choice. Students also work in groups, sometimes of their choice, sometimes appointed by

Grace, though even then, all is not set in stone. During one observation, I heard Grace say, “Work in the same group as yesterday, though if you think you are not working in a group as brilliantly as you, you can switch groups. I will help you.” I asked Grace why she believes she has the focus of meeting each student’s individual needs and her reply was, “I suppose I’m not sure if anybody else will. And maybe five other people are doing that, but maybe nobody is. But, I’m somebody. So, if somebody has to do it, it might as well be me. I’m there with them.”

She has also realized that meeting the needs of her students means that her goal is no longer about getting her students to desire to read or write, or to love literature the way she does. Instead, teaching is about getting the students to believe in themselves. She elaborates,

To get an individual to see that there is something worthwhile in him or her and to continue to try to reach the potential of that, to see that it is worth reaching that potential, and that they occupy a niche here that nobody else does. They have something to offer that nobody else does. If I can just get them to see it – that is what education is about to me.

Grace continually experiences the importance of this student-teacher relationship at Mountain Trace.

Open mindedness and a nonjudgmental approach are also attributes that are essential in meeting the needs of her students. She notes that she has had students in her classes who were 20 years old, who were clearly in the school for purposes other than learning literature, math, or any other subject. She says that those kids have troubles with some classes, “but when they are in a classroom where you see them as a human being,

and don't just judge them as a drug dealer, even **they** seem to have something to offer and something to add." Having a relationship with these students definitely "changes the way that I handle students." I asked how she is able to reach these students. She resorts to getting students to write, allowing her to see a side of students that might not be seen in other classes. Through their personal writing, Grace is able to respond with comments in the margins of their papers, beginning a conversation,

And that conversation continues throughout everything they write, whether it be short answers or a response to a novel, or a comic strip that they draw . . . any of that becomes a part of the conversation. And so, as I get to know them, they begin to respond to someone looking for the best they have to offer. And whatever part of them that has been judged, I wouldn't say they leave it behind, because we all carry issues with us based on that, but what's responding in the classroom is very frequently the best of them, of whatever it is they think that I and their classmates have begun to see. So it becomes not really about content, it becomes about what can this young person do that nobody else has seen. What is their unique contribution, and how can I tease it out of them, so that they recognize it in themselves and carry it with them.

***Honesty and high expectations.*** To allow her students the ability to see their own potential, Grace feels it is her responsibility to be very honest and hold high expectations of them. For Grace, these two go hand-in-hand, as part of her honesty with the students is reflected in moments when they are not meeting their own potential. She is willing to tell her students "you're ignorant, but ignorance can be addressed. Stupidity can't. You're not stupid, you're just ignorant. So let's address this." She then teaches them the

difference. Grace says that her conscience requires her to be candid with the students. Teaching, for her, has gone beyond subjects and verbs and metaphors. It is her responsibility to hold students accountable and to help them see in themselves what is worthwhile. Grace believes that holding her students responsible “is dependent on my own integrity . . . I have to do this with every kid.” She states, “my conscience says that when I see something that I know is not going to help that child along, I have to tell the child what it is. Or the class, or whomever.” And she does.

I may be the only adult they’ve ever heard say if you are a racist, you’re an asshole. I don’t know. Well, yeah, I do know. I think not enough people have said that to them. Not enough people have said that the reason that you learn grammar is not so that you can conjugate a verb. The reason you learn grammar is because people judge you by how you communicate. And nobody wants to be judged – especially as less than what they are. I think they need to hear this.

Grace states that the students will use racial epithets with each other jokingly, not taking it offensively. However, she finds that she is offended. She has struggled to get used to the ways of this student culture. Early in her teaching career, she found that if she were going to be effective with her students, she would need to be honest with them – always – and give them the option to learn more. She says it has taken her many years to get to this point, but she has finally been able to turn the spoken words she considers hurtful into a kind of comedy with the students. For example, when one student calls another a ‘fag,’ Grace tells them that that language is totally unacceptable in her class, and continues, “but you **should know** that psychologists say that there is a degree of homophobia that comes out when students say that to each other, and if you don’t know



what homophobia is, you should look it up.” Not only is she showing her students what is acceptable language in her class, she is also providing them an education and the beginning of a discussion. Grace says that they realize, after talking with one another, that “I am saying both I don’t approve, and I am also saying you might be what you say you hate.” She finds she copes with offensive comments through humor, as it is more effective with the students. She realizes that in her honesty with students, she at times walks a very fine line, making herself vulnerable to community outcry. She says, however, that she is willing to take that risk, and often prepares for the consequences that she may one day have to deal with.

Part of the development of unwrapping ignorance is an understanding of self. Grace understands, the more she reads and learns about her students, that “so much of what they do and say comes from, not to be too dramatic, but comes from their pain.” She says she has had to learn how to do interesting and positive things with that pain. She says, “as long as you are not hurting somebody else, you can turn it into humor, or you can turn it into art, or you can do something creative with it like write about it.” She sees often, however, that they turn a lot of their pain into humor. She says that in her study of poverty, she understands that this is a generational poverty value. Grace attempts to take her understanding of poverty and the Appalachian culture and teach her students about it.

Looking through Grace’s classroom bookshelves, it is obvious that she seeks to assist students in understanding themselves through literature. Such titles as *The God of Small Things*, by Arundhati Roy, *A Yellow Raft in Blue Water*, by Michael Dorris, *Their Eyes were Watching God*, by Zora Neale Hurston, and *Burning Bright*, by Ron Rash,

inform that Grace hopes to allow the students to explore their personal culture through the eyes of the characters presented in the stories. Grace believes she is able to offer her students a realistic idea of who they are, and a presentation of the “big picture” because of what she has read and what she is drawn to personally. Everything else she is able to give them “is details that fill in between those two.” When asked to describe what that big picture looks like, Grace says it comes down to “the inevitability of death and what you do with your life before that time.” She says that life gives us one turn, and she asks the students, “What are you going to do with that turn? How are you going to use it?” On her wall is a quote from Mary Oliver that exemplifies this belief: “So, tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?” Grace says she will sometimes say things like this to them in class. She says that some of the students look startled, and she knows, then, “it was a good thing to say. And some of them look like they don’t want to hear about this.” She likes that this startles students, as it gets them to think. She says, “. . . and on my evaluation, they sometimes will say something about it . . . and say ‘you teach us about life’.” And so, she knows she is successful.

To this effort, Grace does everything that she can to prepare her students to think independently and intelligently, no matter the classes she is teaching. She sets her expectations high for all students, and says she expects that all students will do the work in class that she assigns them. She attempts to get the students to understand that this work is helping them “grow and get through what they will have to get through.” She hopes that the work they do will propel them on to the next phase of their life more prepared than they would have been otherwise.

An example of the expectations she holds came through the work she and fellow teachers in other disciplines did to equally teach the same curriculum expectations of high-powered private schools. Through cross-discipline/team-teaching approaches to learning, these rural teachers pushed their students to reach the same curricular and academic heights of those students who were heading to Ivy League colleges. “We wanted our academic rigor to be similar to what a kid might be getting in a school where they were paying \$35,000.00 a year to get their education.” These teachers set their goals to the upper level and saw achievement. As teachers and administrators have changed, Grace is no longer working towards this same endeavor, though she saw the success that had occurred when the teachers were collaborating. She is, however, continuing to work her own experiment, giving her mainstream classes “much the same [curriculum] as I give my honors students and it’s very interesting to see what’s going on. . . . I do see the same success in terms of classroom management, and them seeing possibilities of themselves . . .” Holding high expectations for all students is a given in Grace’s opinion.

***Respecting others’ cultures.*** While Grace has lived outside of North Carolina, and has traveled elsewhere, she made a conscious decision to return to and teach at Mountain Trace High School. When the opportunity came for her to return to her alma mater as a teacher, she decided to take it. Grace states, “I am passionate not only about teaching, but about teaching Appalachian students, and about this region in general. I am from here, left here, and came back here because I wanted to.” Grace respects the culture from which she and her students come. She sees this culture as worthy and an asset to respect. She hopes that her experiences as a student in this school will make her more capable of understanding the needs of the students that arrive in her classroom today.

While Grace has come to understand the students she has today are, in fact, facing much different issues than she did as a student over thirty years ago, her goals of helping them to see that their choice of staying or leaving Mountain Trace are the same choices she made. She hopes to reveal “being here is an option for my students, not a requirement.” She wants them to understand that if their choice is to stay in their rural community, it is a good choice. However, she does not want them to feel that this is their only choice.

“I don’t disapprove [of this choice] at all. That’s one of those, you know, if that’s what they want to do with that one turn they have, that’s absolutely up to them. I would like them to have options. And if they choose that option, it’s a viable option. I watch the world become more and more fragmented, and families become more and more fragmented. And it’s touted as a virtue that people teach, work, and live all over the world. People seem to think it’s a wonderful thing. Well, it is. And you have those options, and you can do that. But it is equally as wonderful to say this is my tribe, and I’m not leaving. I’m gonna – this is my universe. I’m gonna know my back yard, ‘cause it’s just as wonderful a place as [somewhere else].

At the same time, Grace recognizes the many difficulties that are pre-set before her students enter her classroom and that can inhibit their success. These barriers are often a result of the culture from which her students come. Such systemic barriers as parental level of education, the broken family, poverty, violence, drugs, and teen pregnancy are all realities about which Grace speaks are part of the culture of her students. She is prepared to push her students beyond these limitations, as she finds that “sometimes ignorance is embraced for the sake of protecting themselves . . . they just

don't know, and they don't know what they don't know. Or they don't care that they don't know." Grace believes she has a real insight into what these young people need in order to believe in themselves. She knows that other teachers may stick to the discipline they are supposed to teach, and only teach them the tools of the discipline or that this discipline is valuable. But Grace has realized that she must go further than that. She strives to have them understand their humanity, "what the play *Our Town* makes you see: both your smallness in this universe and your hugeness in this universe." This attempt to get her students to have a different perspective on their own lives does have an effect on her students, says Grace, as she says, "kids get a lot out of that . . . they care about truth and beauty – and ability. They think it's a big deal. They want somebody to say this is what human beings can be." Grace knows that her students have to compare themselves to kids whose

parents take them to the opera, and talk about culture at the dinner table, and EAT dinner together, and think about what they are eating. Knowing that our kids might never have that at home, but that we could at least make them aware that these were possibilities and values that other people had, and they could either choose them or not choose them, but [these things] were valued by people historically.

While Grace does not expect, nor is it her goal, that her students will all have middle class values, she wants them to know of those values, as they are important to the world that exists outside of MTHS.

***Classroom culture.*** The classrooms I observed informed me that Grace successfully created a culturally compatible classroom, where respect, above all, was

visible. Respect was shared between teacher and students, as would be expected. However, respect between students was also extraordinarily evident. While this relationship was more prominent in courses of the upper classmen, she said it was developing in the sophomore class she teaches. Grace says she is “working” on her sophomore students. Her ideal of modeling respect for the students, and expecting them to follow her lead was evident in a story of a tense moment in class. After a short break from class work, something was said that caused tension. “Two huge big sophomore boys” began quarreling, though they were still seated. Grace said,

So I thought there’s still a moment here that I have to keep this from turning into a fight. I was bodily standing between them and saying, ‘the two of you have to stop,’ and then I said, ‘I treat all of you with respect and you have to treat each other that way, too.’

This was enough to stop the students from coming to blows and even gained an “I am sorry, Miss Harmon” from one of them. As a teacher who continually strives to seek humanity in her students, this has not always been an easy task. Students say mean things, are racist at times, and lash out in anger. Grace has found that the best thing she can do is to confront this anger head on, with honesty and truth.

***Parent/Community relationship.*** Grace sees herself as a kind of bridge between the school, teachers, and parents, but those gaps are difficult ones to span. Parents of high school students are generally not as involved as they once were in elementary school, and a lot of parents do not come to the school or respond to communications. She has found that some parents will respond to emails, but most don’t have computers.

Those who do turn up for Open House or other school events, seek her out to tell them what is ahead for their child and for them as a parent. Grace says,

. . . they know that my family's from here, and they also know that I teach, and I've gone away. . . . A lot of them are very afraid for their kids to leave home, that they'll lose them. And they are right. That is usually what education does. In some way you lose your kid. And so they are really afraid. And sometimes they need to be reassured that this will increase the possibilities that their child could have a good life, but it does not necessarily mean that their child will discount everything that they've taught them.

Grace is an example of an educated Mountain Trace child who is now attempting to educate other Mountain Trace children.

Grace had what she would call a normal childhood. Like most kids, she knew nothing different. The following section is a description of Grace's life before teaching. A portrayal of the Murray family is given including the effects of poverty, rural life, religion, reading, early and high school education, and diverse exposures to people and places. These elements affected who she is and how she teaches today.

### **How Experiences, Attitudes, and Beliefs Developed**

**Family and poverty.** Grace was raised during the 60s and 70s in a very rural area of western North Carolina. Her father was in construction and often was not able to find work. As Grace remembers, in her home it was "mostly famine, but it was feast or famine . . . if there was any feast, it was very brief. I watched them [my parents] struggle." Grace's mother stayed home with their five children. Most of Grace's

childhood, the family of seven lived in a doublewide trailer. Often, extended relatives, a great aunt and two great uncles, also lived with them.

Growing up, Grace has memories of difficult times, and at times there was violence to overcome in her household; however, she never doubted love's presence in her life, saying, "My parents loved us fiercely." Both of her parents modeled love, each in their own way. She was often amazed at how her parents were able to provide special moments, given the financial stresses they were under. For example, her father, recognizing Grace's desire and ability for art, gave her a collection of Norman Rockwell paintings, "the only artist he knew". He didn't have the money for such "extras" but he wanted to provide his daughter with opportunities. There were also special memories of her father going to the store and surprising the children with a candy bar on his return, again, a special moment, as they all understood how tight their finances were. Her mother also recognized the importance of reading in Grace's life, and gave her books when possible. Her mother was the source of stability and security in her life.

**Rural life.** Grace recalls that her family was not unlike many other families she knew. "Everybody was as poor as we were except for one family." Grace and her family lived an insular existence in the rural countryside, far from the town, and did not often see neighbors or others except when going to school or into town for some purpose. There was community involvement in the schools, as Grace can remember a core group of people who did things together. She believes, though, that there was a difference, a socioeconomic difference, between those who lived in town and those from the outlying areas. She grew up in a time before there were many "outsiders" who were coming to Mountain Trace. "There pretty much were only the people who lived in Mountain Trace,



who had businesses. And then there were the really poor people who lived in the hollers, and the ones who were struggling.”

To Grace, no one seemed so terribly different from her and her family, except for one middle class family who lived in her rural area who tried to reach out to them, asking to take them to church. She says, “but they really frowned upon our lives. And we felt that, and we felt the condescension. They cared, but it was a very judgmental caring. So, it fomented resentment more than anything else.”

**Religion.** Other memories of her childhood are attending a fundamentalist church with her family beginning when she was around thirteen. Grace recalls going to this nondenominational, charismatic church where “people spoke in tongues and were taken by the spirit. It was chaotic. I hated it. [My older sister] hated it, and I think my younger siblings hated it, too.” Grace enjoyed going to the service for the purpose of listening to the minister’s sermons intently to identify the metaphor in the story. “I always enjoyed a metaphor . . . I would be fascinated when they used a good metaphor. And then it sparked an interest in theology.” Her maternal uncle, who was “kind of a hippie, and who lived in Germany for a while” lived in a commune in Charlotte. Grace would sometimes spend a weekend with him in the summer, and he spoke to her about religion. He gave her C.S. Lewis’s book *Mere Christianity*, continuing her interest in theology, and built upon it. She says, “I’ve been a religious skeptic for years and years, but that interest in theology led me to say, ‘I’m just going to try and believe’ and THAT has helped me enormously.” She says this personal study into religion has helped her in her life, but also in her teaching as well. With her evolving understanding of religion, she says “when I look at my students, and the ones I know have done something cruel to

someone, or . . . animals, or . . . are doing [things] that are just horrible,” if she can remember, “that too is a child of God,” helps her to see them differently, and “to try and back away from harsh judgments when I don’t understand their circumstances.” She says she took time away from going to church for a portion of her life, but now attends a church where the minister is a “wonderful story teller, most often about being a good human being.” This continues to assist her in life and teaching.

**Reading.** Named for a character in one of her mother’s favorite books, Grace has always had a love of books, a gift she was given by both of her parents, as well as the extended family that lived with them, as the adults were all avid readers. Grace remembers her father building an addition to their house: a small room for a fireplace with bookshelves on either side. The bookshelves were empty for a while, in anticipation of the set of 100 Greatest Classics they would one day hold. Once the books arrived, Grace, at seven or eight, can remember her desire and her impatience to one day read them - “all of them.” She says, “my mother would order books for us like *Gulliver’s Travels Illustrated*, and they would be read aloud to us . . . so, we would all pile around to hear whatever book my great aunt was reading to us.” Grace believes this is “huge, huge, in who I am and my ability to talk and write.” She says, “Definitely my parents, and that extended family, and their love of books had a huge influence on me.”

As Grace became an independent reader, she also sought out quiet places for her reading, often going into the woods near her home on summer days. She speaks of the books she reads today and how they influence her teaching. She keeps books close by from which to choose, depending on the mood of the day or the teaching need of the moment. Such authors as Kelly Gallagher’s, *Readicide*, Paul Tough’s, *Whatever It*

*Takes*, or any of Jonathan Kozol's books have assisted her in understanding the needs of her students. She says reading books such as these "feeds her passion," of teaching her students and assists her as she continues to form and change into the teacher she is becoming and needs to be.

**Schooling/Teacher memories.** Grace states that her small elementary school in the mountains in a more rural part of the county employed teachers "who were used to kids just like we were. There didn't seem to be anything unusual about our circumstances [to them]." The school was very small, and "the teachers seemed to come and go. There wasn't much stability at this little school, I don't think." She does have wonderful memories, however, of one elementary teacher in Florida, and several high school teachers from MTHS. All of these teachers provide definite influences on her teaching today.

When Grace was young, her family moved to Florida several times for employment on a construction job. One of these moves occurred when she was in second grade. Grace's earliest memory of a teacher who really cared for her was in a Florida school. There, the students in her class often made fun of her, as she had a very strong Appalachian accent. She remembers walking daily to a classroom down the hall where a teacher, a Cuban immigrant, opened her door and heart to this little girl from the mountains. Grace recalls Miss Rio settling her in to a pillow-lined reading nook and saying, "what book would you like to read?" offering her a selection of books. This room was a place of peace and safety for Grace, and she looked forward to going there every day. Grace emotionally recalls her final day at the school and with Miss Rio. Grace was unaware that this was her last day, saying "I was just a kid who was always out of it." A

loudspeaker announcement interrupted her reading, requesting that Grace go to the office. Miss Rio came over to her, hugged her, and handed her one of her favorite books, saying, “Take this with you. It’s for you.” Written on the inside cover of that book were the words, “To Grace, who can do anything.” Grace tells that this is one of her first memories of care shown by someone outside of her immediate family and one that reminds her that she hopes she is that caring, memorable teacher for her students.

Grace commented that it is easy to remember teachers that were not good to you or others. She likes to remember those who were momentous in a positive way. Two teachers at MTHS were significant to who Grace is today, both as a person and as a teacher. Mr. Green, her art teacher in high school, showed great care and compassion for the students at the school, as did her English teacher, Mrs. Riley. According to Grace, they both had the ability to be nonjudgmental of their students. “They did not judge students based on something that the student **could not** help.” However, Mr. Green would “get very upset with students who he knew could do outstanding work and then wouldn’t do it.” Mr. Green and Mrs. Riley “respected and they expected.” Dawn recalls that Mr. Green was a teacher who “both managed to be our teacher, and command our respect, but also to laugh WITH us, and be part of our conversations. He wanted to know about his students’ families, and what he could do for us . . .” These fine teachers guided Grace through high school and have provided her with attributes of teaching that she attempts to emulate today.

**Experiences with diversity.** Grace was raised in her own Appalachian culture, and in a culture of poverty. Her experiences outside of this community came with her moves to Florida and Charlotte with her family, where she met students who were very

different from her. She says her life in Florida was “vastly different. There was, at the time, desegregation going on, bussing, and race riots. It was a fascinating place to be. I didn’t know what was going on as a child. I was in shock. Then we came back here – so real, real interesting contrasts.” As stated earlier, the students at her school were much like she was, with some Cherokee Indian students in her class. While in high school, one African American family with three boys came to Mountain Trace. She became very good friends with Steve, the valedictorian of her class. Once she left to go to college, she then met students from many different cultures. Otherwise, her education allowed her the opportunities to travel both nationally and internationally.

***Personal influences.*** Grace feels extremely fortunate that she has always had a “cadre of colleagues who . . . are committed, who have a great sense of humor, and are really, really passionate” for the kids who are here, and for education. She says that being around these professionals “made me realize this is a group of people who are going in the same direction that I’m going, and I can learn from them.” She believes that this has been huge in her movement to becoming the teacher she has become.

### **Grace: Conclusion**

Grace believes that, psychologically, she is a person that needs to be needed. She also realizes that she, personally, must have a sense that she is doing something to make the world a better place. The opportunities she is given to have an effect on students and possibly make their lives better, and thereby the world a better place, give her life deeper meaning. Grace has definitely impacted the Mountain Trace High School, and therefore, the Mountain Trace community. In so doing, she is making the world a better place.

### **Case Three: John Perron, Walker Alternative School**

**School Demographics.** Walker Alternative School, located in Treamont, NC, is in the Putnam County School district. Putnam County is a small area defined as rural based on the nation's census designation of less than 200 persons per square mile. Putnam County has 87 people per square mile, and has a total population of 33,090.

Walker Alternative School (hereafter Walker) is set on the perimeter of Treamont, NC in an older, yet welcoming building. Walking into the building, I was received with smiles and assistance by administrators, teachers, and students alike. In the several visits I made to the school, there was a noticeable calm in the building making for a pleasant atmosphere. In North Carolina, alternative educational settings are defined as

“safe orderly, caring and inviting learning environments that assist students with overcoming challenges that may place them ‘at-risk’ of academic failure and disruptive behavior so that they can learn, graduate and become productive community contributors. The goal of each program and school is to promote high quality and rigorous academic and safety programs through the development of individual student strengths, talents and interests” (North Carolina Public Schools, 2012).

Walker, to me, represents this definition well.

Putnam County's student population is 3,677, while Walker has a student population of 99 students. As Walker is a small alternative school for 6<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> grade students, there are 16 full-time professionals in the school including the nine teachers for a student to staff ratio of 8:1. 100% of these teachers are fully licensed and highly qualified, compared respectively to the state averages of 93% and 96% for schools

like Walker. Thirty three percent of these teachers hold advanced degrees compared to the 29% state average. One of the nine is National Board Certified compared to the average of five across the state for schools similar to Walker (North Carolina Public Schools Department of Instruction [NCDPI], 2012).

Walker has a graduation rate of 25%, lower than the state average for similar schools (NCDPI, 2012). In discussions about this low graduate rate and reading about the public schools in this area, it is reflective of the difficult economic times of the community in the past ten years. The population of Treamont has had a 14% increase since 2000, mostly driven by retirees wishing to move to the mountainous area of Putnam County (Census, 2012; NCREDC, 2012). The economic stability of the area has seen a major shift since 2000 with manufacturing jobs declining from 2700 to under 500 today. Now, tourism and the service sector has become the driver of the economy. This has altered the workforce requirements significantly, resulting in an increased unemployment rate of greater than the reported 10%, as many who have been forced out of the labor sector are no longer counted in these ratings. Looking more specifically into the Treamont community and demographics, Table 7 represents informative data about Putnam County and student achievement as compared to the state of North Carolina (NCREDC, 2012; NCDPI, 2012).

Table 7

*Demographic Data of Putnam County and North Carolina*

Category	Putnam	North Carolina
Poverty Rate	16%	17%
Child Poverty	29%	25%
Food Assistance	13%	14%
Free and Reduced Lunch (total district, 2009-10, up from 44.2%, 2005-06)	55.7%	53.7%, up from 48.4%, 2005-06
Free and Reduced Lunch at Walker	85%	
Homeless students at Walker	20-25%	
Graduation Rate (2012)	82%	80%
Students taking SAT	46.4%	68%
Average SAT score (2012) math & comprehension 2006-2010	1,011	997 (Nat'l Avg, 1010)
Citizens w/ < HS Diploma	14%	16%
Citizen's w/ HS Diploma	30%	28%
Citizen's w/ AA	9%	8%
Citizen's w/ BA or BS	27%	26%
Unemployment Rate	10%	11%



Additionally, Table 8 shows the student demographics of this rural community.

Table 8

*Putnam County Student Demographic*

Category	Mountain Trace	North Carolina
American Indian	0%	1%
Asian	0%	2%
Black	4%	21%
Hispanic	3%	8%
White	91%	65%

Walker Alternative School was considered the “Highest Performing Alternative School in the state of North Carolina” during the 2010/11 school year (School Improvement Plan Website). The school’s website states Walker “is committed to providing Putnam County with responsible and healthy citizens through academic and career-technical education provided in a safe and caring environment” (school website). In addition, the atmosphere at the school seems to uphold this vision, as teachers were in the halls, engaged with the students. Likewise, students were equally engaged with either other students or teachers and administrative staff. Each visit, I remarked at the feeling of support and care at this school.

Walker’s website informs viewers that it works with the community to improve the education of its students educationally and through extra-curricular events. Some of this community support comes from the community social safety and support agencies typical for any school. Other examples of community driven supports are the collaboration between the school and the public library to begin providing students access to books for leisure reading, as Walker does not have a library. As well, work with a local Boy Scout group has provided material and labor to build a stage in support of a

drumming group at the school. In addition, the administration and staff at the school are working hard to make sure that Walker is a safe place for the students to come.

### **John's Experiences, Attitudes, and Beliefs**

**John: The path to teaching.** John Perron has been teaching for twenty-two years, over twelve of which have been with the Putnam County Schools. John began teaching middle school in the areas of social studies, reading and physical science in Georgia. In 2000, he moved to Putnam County where he taught social studies and science at the middle school for seven years. In 2007, he made a switch to Putnam County's Walker Alternative School where he now remains teaching high school civics, American History, and World History. He says, "I am the Social Studies department!"

John began his professional career in journalism. He received his undergraduate degree in Journalism from a Georgia university and worked for eight years in the television and film industry, five of which was in the tape department as a tape editor and field cameraperson at Cable News Network (CNN). John began seeking different professional avenues in the mid 80s, contemplating applying to the University of California at Santa Barbara and a move to California to study religion with a focus on Shamanism. While on a college campus in Georgia, John had a lengthy conversation with a man who was in the education field. John remembers the man saying to him, "the real teaching is not done at the collegiate level; it is done at the elementary and high school levels." After this conversation, and only a little bit of contemplation, John began taking courses towards a Master's Degree in Social Science Education. Through this program, he also received his teaching certificate. He said, of his sudden switch to education, "It was like one of those moments you have where lightning goes off." He

said “My wife was working on her masters at the University of Georgia in Athens. I looked into the program and applied . . . [because] it has a huge education department.” He said, “We lived only minutes from the university . . . I was paying her way through, and so as long as I was there, I figured I might as well [get my degree, too].”

**John the classroom teacher, introduced.** As a result of this career switch, students who have had the privilege to be in John’s classes have been blessed. He has not only taught, but has been an active faculty member at each of the schools where he has taught. He has provided his expertise as the coordinator, mentor, or advisor for multiple student academic and extracurricular groups, coaching several different sports teams, as well as professional, school-wide committees, leadership responsibilities and mentoring student teachers. John says, “I’ve done a lot. I was one of the people always volunteering [often] because no one else volunteered.”

John has been recognized as the Teacher of the Year twice in Putnam County, once in 2003-04 while teaching at the Middle School, and again in 2010-11 while at Walker Alternative School. Additionally, he was honored as the 2005 Middle School Association Teacher of the Year for western North Carolina’s Division 8. His quality teaching has definitely been recognized. John has also received several grants, the Bright Ideas Grant four different times, the North Carolina State Science Grant, and the Putnam County Education Grant. In 2007 and 2010, John was a Fulbright recipient. In 2007, John traveled to Japan funded by the Japan Fulbright Memorial Fund Teacher Program. In 2010, he was honored as the Fulbright-Hays Seminar participant in Brazil. John was also chosen to join the Goethe Institute Transatlantic Outreach Program for the summer of 2013, taking him to Germany. These awards not only provide John high recognition

of his contributions to the teaching profession, he also gained perspective of life and education internationally.

Entering John's classroom, without the presence of John himself, one would get the immediate impression of organized chaos. There is hardly a space not taken by some poster or art work, educationally related or otherwise. John's social preferences are represented in several places through musical posters or album sleeves, political cartoons and signs, and other paraphernalia. Older pieces of technological equipment are placed throughout the room on carts or on shelves, some that have the appearance of recent use, and others that are used for fun decoration. Student textbooks and other resource books are stacked on bookshelves. Most importantly, however, are the many examples of student work posted on the walls, hanging on the walls, and sitting on window ledges, desks, or tables. These works of student creativity speak loudly of the activity that occurs in this classroom and are a verification of the type of teacher that John is said to be.

While one may enter this room and get a feeling of disorganization, the presence of the master teacher in the room brings a sense of calm that defies the activity that must have occurred to create many of the 3-D projects sitting around, and the posters and projects on the wall. John's very quiet and calm yet commandeering manner directs your attention to what he is saying. John's presence in the class is one of sincerity. He is genuinely glad his students are in the class for the day and makes sure they know they are recognized. He is heard talking quietly with individual students, saying, "How are you doing, girl?" or "Lisa, are you alive? I know you worked late last night." This is a man who knows his students well, knows the lives that they have outside of the classroom, and is there to help them achieve.

**John's Teaching Attributes.** When asked what he thinks students would say about him as a person and a teacher, he says, "I am friendly, and easy going . . . and I care . . . and I want [students] to do the best they can and I love them, I guess. I try to give a lot of love to my students." These would be the exact words that I would use to describe John Perron, as these are the actions that I heard in the interviews and saw in the classroom observations as I spent time with this teacher. Some of his most important attributes are his ability to build relationships with his students through his caring attitude and the honesty and respect he shows them, understanding the students' lives outside of school, differentiating his lessons and assignments, and holding realistic expectations for each of them.

***Relationship building with and respecting students.*** So much of John's day-to-day actions are about building relationships with his students. John says he tries to meet the students where they are, to get them to understand where he is, and go from there. He works on the interpersonal relationships in multiple ways, mostly by trying to let them know he is their teacher and his purpose is to teach them, and that he understands and respects them. He says, "If I don't meet 'em [at their level], I won't get any work out of them – I won't get anything done, that's how humans work."

John claims he gets to know the students from the minute they enter his class, learning what they are about, what they know and don't know, and respecting where they are. John states, "Everyone has their own learning style. Some people are shy and don't want to work with people. Some people work better with others. Some people love working with partners because it hides their inability to do work and their partner helps them." He says he understands this about his students, and he respects what they need.

One example of this is when Stephen walked in late to class. John said, “Stephen, what’s up. Why are you late, son?” Stephen, without attitude, said, “I was in the office. It was about my behavior, I guess it is unacceptable.” John looked at him for a few seconds, and then moved on by saying, “OK, get your computer up. I’ll get you going on this. Take your hat off. I know you just got here.” John’s belief is that adding to the young man’s problems by getting angry at him for being late to his class, or asking him questions about his unacceptable behavior, wouldn’t make him want to learn anything about history. Instead, he moves the student on. He may come back to the discussion about the students’ behavior at a later time, but the point of this student entering the class is not the moment to do so.

Another indication of John’s respect for his students became obvious during a first block classroom observation. John had spoken of respecting the student’s opinions and choices earlier in our conversations, so evidence of this was essential to this study. This evidence came early in the observation. The announcements came over the school loudspeaker, and the students partially listened as is typical at many schools. Once the announcements had been given, the students were asked to stand for the Pledge of Allegiance and all conversation stopped. One student stood while the rest of the students, all very silent, sat in their seats. Asking John about this later, he said he has been offering this choice for some time, and most students choose not to stand. He said,

Students have to learn to make choices. They need to know who they are . . . I let them choose whether to participate in the pledge because the Supreme Court has ruled several times that students do not have to stand to say the pledge. The rest of the legal cases are mixed on whether it is even constitutional.

Several students, overhearing the conversation, said that they had been forced to stand for the Pledge for so many years it no longer meant anything to them. They were quiet and respectful otherwise, and they liked the choice. Some may say that this would not be the appropriate choice to offer the students, but John believes he is teaching history and civics. What better place for the students to be able to make that choice.

The observed classroom atmosphere was one of equality, respect, and friendliness by all. There seemed to be no social groups in the classes, but instead, the teacher and students were a unit and comfortable with one another. Students were laughing and working together. It was during this activity time that John worked to make personal contact with each of the students. He discussed the activity that had been assigned, but he included a bit of personal touch at the same time, one student at a time. He says, "I go to each student every day. I'll say something to every child . . . in every class."

John connected with one student, Chuck, who had been gone from class for several weeks. John began to ask Chuck questions about his return, if he was glad to be back, and if he was struggling to catch up with his schoolwork. They spoke about the 15 books that Chuck had read while he was gone and John said, "I've got a few I think you'd like." Chuck said, "It's good to be back. I don't want to be gone for that long again." John said, "Chuck, you need to be doing this at your age [holding his arms out towards the classroom]. You need to get it done. You need a career, Chuck. You're too smart." Chuck said, "I know, and I know what I want to do. I want to be a nurse." John was encouraging, saying, "I can see you as a nurse. I would say that fits you." It wasn't until a later conversation that I'd had with John that he told me that the reason Chuck had missed so much school was because he'd been in jail. John hadn't seen Chuck prior to

the moment of his return to his class that morning. I was not able to detect that there was anything unusual about Chuck coming back to class after his time in jail, John continued on with his care and his expectations with this student as if he'd seen him yesterday. He says, "I take 'em when they come to me. I'm glad to see them when they are there." As a result of this attitude, the relationship he builds with them continues to grow.

John says he loves working with his students at Walker. He says he's worked with advantaged children in both of the middle schools where he has taught. He taught Academically and Intellectually Gifted (AIG) classes in both states as well. While he was in Georgia, he said, "I realized one day anyone can teach them [gifted students]." He said he gave his AIG students a test that he really hadn't prepared them for, and they all did really well on it. He said, "They can decode a test, they know how to do roots words, they can break words down. The lower level kids, if I'd given them that test, most . . . would have bombed it. They don't have those skills." John respects and appreciates the students he now works with and says, "I don't know – [they] affect me. I feel more valuable doing what I'm doing than [what I was doing at the middle school]. I just think I'm making a more valuable contribution to society." John is being true to who he is at Walker Alternative School.

***Caring.*** "Without the care," John says, "relationships are impossible." There is no doubt that John cares for each and every one of his students. John says Walker is not just a dumping ground for behavior kids as some alternative schools seem to be. He says most of the kids at Walker are not bad, but are low-level learners with some sort of learning disability. More importantly, he says, "many of these kids' home lives are atrocious. They have no support at home." He says many have absentee problems that



result from their home life. John says his goal, as well as that of other faculty and staff at Walker, “is to, with love, mold them.” He says he does this by modeling, and “I just tell them how much I care for them and stuff. And tell them I want them to succeed . . . so with the combination of showing them some love, showing them they can do the work, giving them some confidence, they’ll stay [in school]. Do they graduate? Some of them do; a lot more than you would think. I love these kids.”

John says that because so many of his kids come to him from parents who yell and scream at them, or hit them, or are doing drugs, he believes they need an adult “who is modeling behavior for them the way it should be. Showing them what love is and that you respect them.” One day, a boy in class said, “I hate that kid.” John immediately stopped class and spoke to the boy about his words. He said, “You don’t say that, it’s not right,” and told him why. He says he stops class a lot. “I’ll just stop what we’re doing and talk about it.” To John, this is where his real teaching occurs.

John tells of one of his own mentors at Walker. This man goes around to the students saying “I love you, man” to all of the students, girls and boys, with the greatest sincerity. John says, “. . . it won’t sound sappy [coming from this man]!” More importantly, the students “get a lot out of this, they really do.” Though John himself is not so free with saying that he loves his students outright, he shows them through his actions that he loves and cares for them deeply. When asked what John thinks the students receive from this, he said, “Maybe this is my hippie dippiness – but I think they get energy out of it. Besides self-affirmation, they get that somebody else loves them – really does, genuinely – it’s like they get an energy. It makes them feel better.”

John says, “I care about [the students’] work. I care that they do their work, and I care that they act correctly.” He says he lets them know he cares by “touching them, letting them know I’m kind, you know, giving them a positive self-image, and reaffirming that I value every one of them. Modeling . . . proper behavior. You know, all that combined.” Asked to give me an example of this, he says, “I make small talk with them in-between lessons, and I ask them about their personal life, and I let them know, by doing that, that they matter more to me than just teaching them a subject.” He says touching them is very important to him, “very carefully, of course,” he says, but he says, “I do it to everybody and they see that.” He says,

“Every day I’ll say something to every child, and make eye contact with them. I’ll go around to each one, and if I forget sometimes, I’ll go later after I’ve lectured, and talk to them. And that’s real important. I think that’s just as important as the actual teaching.”

Some of his ‘talk’ is just banter, but it is all with the effect that the students know he cares or notices something about them. Things such as, “You got some nice shoes there. Did you get them for Christmas?” or “How’s it going Josh, are you alive? It seems like you’re kind of out of it today,” or “That’s a cool cup there, girl! Is that new? Are you drinking tea or coffee?”

One girl in his class works after school, as do many of his students. This girl in particular had worked the night shift and had not yet gone home to go to bed. John had multiple concerns for her. At the beginning of class, when she walked in a bit late, he welcomed her to class, made mention to the class that he was proud of her for coming to school, though she’d had no sleep, and got her started on the work they were doing. As

for his concern for her, he said, “That is against the law, you know that don’t you?” When she didn’t say anything, he said, “Just do the best you can. I’m sorry you are working so hard like that.” In speaking out loud about this, some of the other students began to show their support for this girl. There was a feeling of understanding and compassion for the young woman, but an unspoken sense of reality for many of them at the same time. One student went up during an activity and discussed her job with her. John spoke to them both about needing to know the law, and keeping themselves healthy. There was obviously more going on in this lesson than learning about the Federalists. John says, “Nothing’s easy. Like I said, everything’s individual. I can’t help but think it [the students’ realities] sucks, but I still have to teach these kids. And hopefully I’ll show them that not all adults are degenerate, or act strange, and that there are different ways of looking at things, of living.”

John told a few more stories about the lives of his students, as he says that so many of the kids have a story. He says, “So, yeah, we try to make Walker a home. A lot of these kids think of Walker as their home. There’s normality here, there’s a lot of love and support. There’s a free breakfast . . . and a lunch.” John simply hopes that while they are with him, they know that they are cared for and that something of value and of goodness is sinking in.

***Honesty.*** John commented several times in our conversations about the importance of being honest with the students. He says, “I never lie to them. These students, you just have to be honest with them. They spot a phony a mile away.” John says the students ask him questions about life in general, his opinions, and about who he was as a younger person. John says, “I always tell them what I believe. I won’t lie to

them.” He believes that if he is honest with them in these types of conversations, they will know that he is honest with them in all conversations.

John talks with the students about their life now and their life in the future. John says, “The sad thing is, the kids have no concept. They come to me and they say, “Oh, wow, I’m making so much money. I’m making \$7.25 an hour. And I’ll look at them and say, ‘You can’t live off of that. That’s not a future!’” He hopes that by being honest with them, he will get them to understand that their time in school is important, and that by graduating they may have a better possibility to get something more than a minimum wage job. So many of the kids he teaches will need to be making a living as soon as they leave high school. Many of them are already trying to support a family. He says, “Unfortunately, that [\$7.25] is all they’ll have around here.” He struggles with how to help them face their own reality.

From what I was able to view in the observations, it would appear that the students know that John is not a phony. There was something pure and respectful in the reciprocal relationship between teacher and students. There was no disrespectful jeering from the students, trying to get their teacher off track from the lesson; not one moment of disrespect at all, even when John had to work hard to get some students to pay attention, or even to wake up in class. It appeared to me that the relationship between students and teacher was reciprocally honest. It was healthy.

***Understanding others’ cultures.*** As is so obvious, John respects the students in his classes. He respects the fact that they come to school every day, despite the difficult lives that some of them lead. He respects that many of them have chosen to come to Walker because they just didn’t fit into the mainstream high school atmosphere. He

enjoys working with these kids. “Do I get joy out of my work? Yeah! It’s very interesting. Alternative kids are really, really interesting.

John says that he appreciates the cultures from which some of his students come. He says some of the students he has are just from a typical “lower-middle class country background with just a different value system [than mine].” He says he respects the mountain kids with parents who hold “the traditional values of the south, like you know, I’m going to work for myself, I don’t need anyone to help me, I like to hunt, I like cars, you know.” He said that though education is not their highest priority, it is who they are and he can respect their values. He struggles, however, with respecting the culture from which some of his other students come. He speaks in reference to the parents who are raising his students, and the choices that many of the parents are making. He is very clear to say,

I respect [the students], but not so much their backgrounds and the attitudes [as a result of the parents who raised them]. Their attitudes aren’t positive, and they don’t have a strong sense of values . . . It’s a different culture. Do I condemn it? No. But, it’s hard to understand. It’s a weird dysfunction. You don’t condemn it, but you don’t approve of it.

I asked him how he separated these feelings out, and how he made sure he treated the students equally and respectfully. He said, “I just do. They’re not their parents. They’re themselves. I love the students,” and he wants the best for them. He said, “This is why I got into teaching. I thought that . . . they needed a different kind of voice . . . an open minded voice that wouldn’t tell them parrot party lines.”

John recognizes the intelligence that so many of his students have as something other than “school smart.” He speaks of Justin, a student in his class, respectful of the working class background he comes from. John said,

He’s intellectually bright. His parents have nurtured him in a lot of ways that middle class parents just wouldn’t understand . . . his parents get into information, and they like to learn, but it’s different. It’s more about guns. Justin is an expert in guns. He’s an expert on military history. His dad loves military history. So, they don’t - he’s not brought up with things like novels, or stuff like that. It’s a cultural knowledge, and that, too, is important.

***Differentiation and realistic expectations.*** John says differentiation is at the forefront of his lesson preparation. He said one of his most memorable moments as a teacher was his first year of teaching and realizing how different students truly are. He said he remembers discussing this in his teacher education courses, but getting into the classroom, he saw how the “usual approaches don’t work with all kids – and then there are so many different variations and gradations of students. You have to use a different variety of methods to get through to all [of the students] in a heterogeneous classroom.” He says,

I’ve tried to incorporate every single method there is from Socratic discussion, to making movies, to worksheets, to art activities. I try to focus on hands on, whether it is cutting and pasting, or producing something with technology. I always try to end with a product. I like products, because the majority of kids don’t like worksheets. I learned that real quickly. I mean they do, on the one hand, because they don’t have to think. But projects make them understand the

subject matter. So, it was the realization that everybody is so different that one approach doesn't work. If you just do worksheets, lecture, worksheets, lecture, you are only getting through to some- and most of them won't remember [what you are trying to get them to learn].

John is not a proponent of textbooks. He believes that much of the textbook material, especially when he first began teaching, does not represent the history that he prefers to teach and he does not approve of the reading level or the language used in textbooks. Since he began teaching, he has used a lot of different materials to create the lessons he presents, saying, "I make my own. I'll read [the required texts], rewrite it, modify it, and then we'll use that instead of the textbook." In so doing, he says, "the reading will be on the sheet I've typed, and the questions that I've written to go along with it." He says with a chuckle, "I steal stuff from a lot of places."

John discussed how he differentiates his lessons based on the needs of the students. He said he determines the students' abilities early on in the semester by "watching them, very carefully, over time. I can usually tell pretty quickly. I've been teaching 22 years." He continues,

I do simplify [the assignments] sometimes, but the *work itself* [emphasis added] I expect them to do, and so I don't cut back on that. I set it at a level I believe they can do. And then I adjust it based on my individual interpretation of the child. So like, if I think they [individual students] can't do as much, I won't go as hard on them.

He also says, “I grade very subjectively, and I don’t always use rubrics.” When asked how he determines grades, he said it often depends on the quality of the work the student turns in compared to their ability level, which John has assessed.

John has gotten into many philosophical questions with administrators of his school regarding grades and whether or not a student has achieved the grade they have received in John’s class. The question asked is, “are you sure they got an A in your class?” or “How do you know they got an A in your class?” John’s reply is mostly simple. He says, “He’s got an A, he does the work. I tell him what to do and he does it, and it’s high quality by his standards.” The question that follows is, “Does he know the material?” And John’s reply is, “He doesn’t always pass the test, but his work is always such high quality that he’s got an A.” He continues with,

“What you memorize is irrelevant. What is most relevant is your character and how hard you work. To me, character education with these kids is very important. Are they going to remember the date of the Bacon’s Rebellion? Most of them don’t remember squat. They don’t. That’s why they are at Walker. But then, what do adults know? And that’s the whole key to teaching to me. . . Most adults don’t remember anything they learned, including educated adults . . . What do I teach? I hope to make memorable for them somehow.”

John believes that education today is too regimented. He says he believes in John Dewey’s philosophy, “Let the kid learn what he wants to learn . . . Beyond the mild form of cultural literacy [that every person should know], I think kids should learn what they are interested in. If they want to be a welder when they’re older, let them learn about metal. Let them learn about solders and electronics, and stuff like that.” John believes



that kids like those he works with every day would benefit from a good vocational education program, and, he believes, “you should not go to high school more than your junior year max. Why do these kids need four years of math and four years of history?” Life is already beginning for these kids in so many real ways. Extending high school beyond this age is not providing anything more than what they’ve already gotten; and requiring them to remain in school allows for a greater potential of their not receiving a high school diploma.

He said, in preparing himself to become a teacher, “I always swore that I would never [ignore students or treat them badly].” He says that when honing his skills as a new teacher, he remembers what originally drove him was his desire “to be a different teacher, to be a teacher that was 180 degrees different than what I experienced. Did I become that? I don’t know.” He believes, as he gets older, that he is not like them. He believes he is not boring, like so many of his instructors have been. He says in his teaching, he tries to bring relevance to a system that forces irrelevancy. John says teaching is an art, but he says, “Most people do it as a craft. Sometimes I can do it as an art, but most of the time I’m a craftsperson.” Reaching to the level of artistry means that

I see something I am doing works, and I know it works. It’s not only that they are learning it but also they are taking it to a higher level, and they understand it. Not just memorizing it. They see connections . . . So the art is trying to figure out how to make them understand it and make those connections.

### **How Experiences, Attitudes, and Beliefs Developed**

John was raised, “very middle class . . . slightly towards upper middle class, maybe” as he puts it. His parents both earned undergraduate degrees, and “in fact my

mother has a Master's degree, which is unusual for that time," says John. His father began as a salesman in upstate New York, and progressed to a district manager, and eventually a regional manager for various corporations. From there, he began a "Rep Business, where he represented various corporations." His mother also eventually worked outside of the home for a large corporation. He said, "We lived in the suburbs of Atlanta . . . and my parents weren't ever really hurtin' for money, but they couldn't blow it. They had six kids!"

John says he was influenced greatly by his father, a huge sports fanatic, who taught him "to stick to things, and to fight hard," and his mother who instilled in him "to love knowledge, and to be interested in things." He said, "My mother also taught me to always care about people. My mother is big into that . . . [she is] extremely religious . . . she's Catholic." He said his mother taught care through "modeling, and constant talk . . . [at] conversations at dinner . . . and the work she did at church; just how she behaved towards other people." John believes his core values are much like those his mother shared with him.

**Childhood.** John says about himself, "my memory of the past is dim at best . . . I don't know why." John was born in New York and moved to Atlanta when he was eight. He is the oldest of six children. He says, "I have four sisters . . . and my brother is the youngest. So there are six of us – a Catholic family!" He and the three older sisters went to Catholic schools growing up. He graduated from the only Catholic high school in Atlanta at the time.

John's paternal grandmother, Nanny, played a big part in his life. She came with her husband to the United States from Italy and spoke broken English. He spoke

respectfully and lovingly of her several times in our conversation about his past. Outside of his grandmother, and several of his maternal uncles, John does not speak much of his childhood.

John says, “Morality has always played a large part in my life, because I was brought up that way.” Morality and empathy were spoken about several times in our conversations regarding how he teaches. He attempts to positively influence his students to be good and moral human beings through modeling and discussions with them about social issues in the nation and world today. Being raised by his very giving mother, and educated in a Catholic school, he also said, “I have great empathy . . . my mother had it, too.” He believes empathy can be taught, but that it is part of who you are as a person – your personality. He says, “I think people have a tendency towards it . . . That’s why I like teaching. I think I have great empathy for people . . .” Through modeling and being empathetic, John believes he can teach his students how to be better people.

**Religion.** While the Catholic religion was very central to his youth, John has since taken a different viewpoint. He says beginning his senior year he realized that “religion helps certain types of people. It totally disrupts and maims certain people. And the rest of the people don’t need it . . . It’s a replacement of something else.” He says, “Some people drink, some people have a hobby like skiing or golf, some people do religion. My mother has religion. And it works for her.” John says, “I’m not an Atheist. I think that is as bad as a religion. I don’t poo poo religion . . . just don’t push [your religion] on somebody else.”

When asked about his religion, as John says his students ask, he says, “I tell kids up straight. I always do. I tell them I’m Agnostic. I became an Agnostic in college.

And then they're curious about what that is." He says that this conversation is actually a good teaching experience. He says, through the curriculum, they talk about all of the religions. This was evident as one of the student projects displayed in his room was a banner with 'flags' representing many different religions with an explanation of each.

**Political Viewpoint.** Early in and throughout our conversations, John stated he was a "progressive liberal." He stated his liberalism as a reason for believing in the abilities of his students and for doing many things he does in the classroom. He said, "I'm very liberal. I think people, their needs should be met." He believes this is why he likes working with the Walker students. He says he likes to work with kids who struggle, who may not have been given every advantage in life, because

they don't have [all of] those skills. I've got to work with the needy kids . . . I'm an idealist. I'm very liberal. I feel like society is only as good as its lower members. And you need to raise up the lower income people.

**Schooling/Teacher memories.** As already discussed, John was raised in the only Catholic school in Atlanta in the 60s and 70s. He says that the discipline was very strict in his school. He claims, "It's hard to describe [my schooling] because it's all I understood. It's all I had." He knows, like with all educational experiences, he had some really good teachers, and some not so good teachers. Most of his teachers were nuns, though his favorite teacher was his sixth grade history teacher who was not a nun. He believes the reason he likes history today is because of this teacher. She stands out to him because "she was fair, yet strict . . . and very advanced for her day in her teaching methods. She let us do skits and group work, which I had never done until then."

John says he was always “an outsider. I always sat in the back of the class and sort of scoffed at everything.” He said that was his “masque persona” though he is not sure why he was this way. He says he makes very few close friends, “That’s just how I am.” He claims that teachers often ignored him, “probably because I was always stand offish, and distant, and quiet.” He remembers being in the “Sweathog” class (taken from the 70s television weekly drama show *Welcome Back, Kotter*). While he claims he was “in the class with all the worst kids, sitting in the back of the room, me and all the hoodlums,” there is an attitude of *me and them* coming from John, that he was not really a “hoodlum.” He says, “I was not like them at all. I was just a passive-aggressive kid.” He said “I was such a bad student in high school. I hated high school. It was so boring to me.” For John,

it was not that I couldn’t do the work; it was I’m not going to do this because I don’t like it. The other guys were against the system because they couldn’t read, or whatever it was. For me, and a couple of others like me, it was because it was so bad, so boring. I had some good teachers, but I thought most of school was boring. It bored the living hell out of me. I hated high school, I hated a lot of my college classes, and some of the material was so exciting.

The teachers that positively stick out to him were teachers that gave him their time – one-on-one time. He believes this is an area of teaching in which he is successful with his own students as well.

John went to college immediately following high school. He said, “It was just expected.” All of his siblings also went to college. He says, of his college experience, that he found most of his university classes quite boring, much like in high school. It is

the experience that you have to go through to get to the next level. From these experiences of what are, to John, considered mediocre, came his desire to never be mediocre. In his classroom, a quote from a Van Morrison song hangs on the wall: *You have to fight every day to keep mediocrity at bay*. He strives to teach his students not to be mediocre – “to be *arête*, the Greek word for excellence.” He tells them, “If you are going to do it, do it well.” This would define John’s philosophy of teaching well.

**Experiences with diversity.** Though John grew up in suburbs of large cities – New York, Atlanta, and Chicago – he said that he was not exposed to much in the way of how the world really lived, especially bigger cities. He grew up in a middle class household, with middle class neighbors in his suburb, attending Catholic schools where most everyone was also Catholic. He says his life was “very white.” In fact, he said, “I never knew African American kids until I was in high school, and they were all educated like me, because they went to a Catholic school.” While there were Catholic elementary schools throughout the city and in the suburbs, there was only one Catholic high school that all of the elementary schools fed into.

To this day, John has not had a lot of personal relationships with people outside of his own White, middle class culture. He says it is not because he has consciously chosen for it to be that way, but that it just is that way. He stopped in his thoughts, contemplating those words. He said, “I’m still awkward around African Americans at times, because I never grew up with them. I will always see them as ‘other’ no matter how hard I try. Not racist-wise, but psychologically.” Asking John to explain this, he said,

I've just not been around many different people, and African Americans until I was fourteen. It was very odd. . . . But because I'm super liberal, I deliberately have always been a proponent of African American students, and always actually help them more than I do the white kids, usually.

He says this is subconscious for him. Asking him why he thinks this is true, he said, because so often they are behind the eight ball, just because of their racial past in the south. So I figure they need more attention from white people that are positive role models. Black kids and I have always gotten along, I think because I am so liberal. They can sense that.

### **John: Conclusion**

John teaches because he loves his students and wishes to make a difference in their lives, even if that difference is a small one. He believes he makes a difference through understanding who they are as people and providing them an opportunity to learn interesting content in an interesting way. John believes he relaxes the atmosphere of his class to a level of education from years gone by, as he believes that today schools are not nearly relaxed enough. He says some kids can be "pushed and challenged as hard and as high as you can [give it to them], but it doesn't work with the majority of the other kids." John says, "I think we should not lower [our standards and expectations] but not get so uptight over [them]." He says it is more important to teach kids to think about things that are meaningful. He says, "Teach them who Thomas Jefferson is, but why should we have to require our students to know how to analyze Jefferson related to Locke. You are kidding me, my kids are worried about where they are going to eat next . . .". And with this, John understands and respects his students, cares about their well-being, and

supports their learning through differentiating lessons and assignments. Where his students are concerned, John is always and forever realistic about the realities of their lives, allowing this to be his guide for teaching.

#### **Case Four: Theresa Johnson, Rosenthal Intermediate School**

Theresa Johnson teaches at Rosenthal Intermediate School and is a peer with Elizabeth Westall. The discussion of Rosenthal Intermediate School and Arlington County as presented in Case Study One apply to Theresa Johnson's Case.

#### **Theresa's Experiences, Attitudes, and Beliefs**

**Theresa: the path to teaching.** Theresa has been teaching for nine years, eight of which have been at Rosenthal. Theresa came to teaching from the corporate world, and she has found she loves her second career. Though she had considered teaching during her undergraduate work, her academic advisor and others persuaded her to stray away from what she now sees as the natural career for her.

Theresa holds an undergraduate degree in Geology. While she loves the sciences and geology, she found that it was not a practical choice as far as getting a job out of college. Her first professional employment was with a national hotel chain where she was hired as a sales agent. She worked in sales for some time, but soon found herself as an employee trainer for the corporate office that had a desire to be the leader in corporate training. At this same time during the early 1980s, there was also an emphasis for hiring employees with disabilities. As Theresa began doing corporate employee training, she found she had employees with many different learning abilities, and realized she had a great affinity for working with those who were differently abled. She said,



I enjoyed doing all of the training, but I really enjoyed working with those who had disabilities . . . or who were elderly – retirees – who were a challenge to train, especially on the computer . . . because they had never – some of them had never seen computers before . . .

Theresa remembers one of her directors stating about her training abilities, “I think you’ve found your niche,” laughing, though fortuitous in retrospect.

Theresa continued a career in corporate training, as she moved from the hotel industry to working for an insurance company as a representative for an education association. Theresa was the trainer for this company, though before she could begin training, she had to work “behind the scenes writing the training manual” translating the insurance texts into “layman’s language for a side-by-side comparison for the training manual.” Theresa found this work “really boring until [she] actually got to do the training with the teachers.” Her teaching days began much sooner than her work in public school classrooms.

**Theresa the classroom teacher, introduced.** After several years of corporate training, Theresa took a few years off to stay home with her two boys. When her youngest son was in kindergarten, she says she got a job “tutoring kids at a nearby elementary school and loved teaching kids to read. I just loved it so much and realized . . . I really wanted to do that.” A grant at a local university “hooked [her] up with a degree, and started [her] teaching Special Education.” The university’s lateral entry program allowed her to receive a teaching certificate while simultaneously getting her master’s degree in Special Education. Theresa stated,

I really felt a calling [to teach]. I really love working with kids. I love seeing the spark when they learn something. I mean it is very gratifying to me to think that I have helped a student learn a new skill . . . or a new reason to do something or not to do something . . . I just enjoy being around students.

Theresa, with her science background, describes her teaching in a behaviorist way. She states that one of the most important aspects of teaching for her is that she knows she is touching the lives of kids and helping them grow. However that is just part of it for her. She says,

“it’s kind of a symbiotic relationship . . . I have to get something out of it . . . just meeting the challenge, knowing that I’ve accepted a challenge and have been somewhat successful at it, and that there’s a feeling of gratitude and accomplishment there. So I think it comes from both ends. It’s a give and take. I get something and they get something. Hopefully what they get is more long lasting and affects their lives greater than just their moments with me. . . . I just really, really get a sense of accomplishment and that I’ve contributed something . . . a sense of appreciation for what I’ve offered to the world as a result of what I’ve given.”

**Theresa in the classroom and at Rosenthal.** Theresa began teaching as the Special Needs teacher at Rosenthal, teaching students with various learning abilities. After several years as a teacher of differently abled students at Rosenthal, she began to pursue a license to teach another group of differently abled kids: Academically and Intellectually Gifted (AIG). Her ninth year of teaching began her first experience as an AIG teacher, though she has yet to finish her licensure program.

At Rosenthal, Theresa has grown into the teacher she is. She remembers her first year of teaching as significantly troubling, as she taught in a new charter school. This school was a rurally located charter schools, one of 16% of all of the U.S. charter schools located in rural areas (Gulosino, 2011). Theresa said the school “[had many] kids that had severe behavior problems, and who I was not prepared to deal with.” She said the support system was not there to help these kids, nor did it know how to help a new teacher, “it was just too new.” The home lives of some of her students were difficult for her to imagine, as many came from extremely poor home lives. They “came to school angry – really angry. And they were angry because of their circumstances . . . because they couldn’t read . . . because their parents weren’t doing right by them.” Theresa knew she needed to try to teach them in the construct of where she was, but she didn’t know exactly what that meant for her. She remembers the teachers she was working with were very behaviorist in their methods of dealing with the students, with a strict system of rewards and punishments. She also instinctively knew that this was not what these students needed. Theresa soon realized that in the setting she was teaching, and with her teaching philosophy becoming more apparent, she was not going to be successful in helping these particular students at this school. This school was an introduction to who she was *not* [emphasis added] as a teacher. As a result of this experience, she began seeking a place that supported the teacher she thought herself to be. She was hired at Rosenthal, and this move has allowed her to practice her philosophy of teaching students constructively, and in the supportive manner of understanding their needs and working towards getting the students to see success with their own different way of learning.

Theresa believes that as a teacher she is most influenced by the educational desires she holds for her own biological children. She says she thinks about “how I would want them treated in the classroom as far as respectful dialogue . . . [thinking] is this something I would want my kids to have done?” She believes the students she has in her classroom also influence her greatly, as she makes sure to know each of them individually and is constantly thinking, “what would reach [these kids] most effectively . . . what would most engage them?” This type of thinking determines the themes she chooses to work with, the books she has them read, the lessons she teaches them, the activities they do, and just as importantly, the activities they don’t do. While the curriculum guides her in developing her lessons, she is not controlled by it or the testing that takes place in the schools today. She attempts to work with the testing requirements, not allowing it to confine her ability to teach effectively.

**Theresa’s Teaching Attributes.** For Theresa, finding her “philosophical axis in the whole landscape” of teaching special needs students has been challenging yet rewarding. She feels she has been blessed with some effective mentors that have assisted her in “figuring out what to do . . . and what not to do” to become the teacher she is today. For Theresa, her passion for treating students respectfully and fairly drives much of what she does. Often times, her biggest challenge of the day is helping other teachers understand what the young kids in the school need, as students and as human beings, and helping teachers treat all students justly. As the teacher of students who learn differently on both ends of the learning spectrum, she uses the IEP with the teachers as the tool to bring up issues of injustices and better methods to assist their learning. She continually discovers and hones her advocacy voice as she learns how to be effective standing up for

the rights of all students in a small school. She finds that she most often strives to be a positive role model for all who are around her. She says oftentimes it is better to let one's actions speak more loudly than to be heard pounding the table on issues.

Theresa says, "I am a Pollyanna . . . I always think everything's going to be just fine. I'll just deal with it . . . and do the best I can." This is how others, including students, view her, as she seeks ways to help others in her school or students come to her in times of troubles.

Theresa holds high expectations for herself and her students. These expectations are held lofty for all of her students, while not compromising building relationships with her students, as she believes this to be crucial to being an effective teacher. Along with these expectations is the requirement that people are meant to be respected and not judged. It is for this reason that she firmly believes she confronts social issues the moment they occur from bullying in the hallway to issues of racism and intolerance. Theresa respects her students as people with hopes and dreams, and treats them as she also wishes to be treated. Allowing students to see her as a person is one way she believes they are able to respect her. She says she shares selected stories of her life with her students, allowing them to see her as a person outside of the school day. The "give and take" of life stories allows for a more natural student-teacher relationship in the classroom

Theresa looks at situations in a holistic manner, recognizing that life is not black and white, saying, "This is not the real world." Therefore, she analyzes systems that are currently in place and makes sure that these systems do not negatively affect the students. If she believes that the system is counterproductive, she is willing to adjust the system

herself so that it fits more readily with her own philosophy as a person and a teacher. In so doing, she believes that she is assisting her students to also be more thoughtful about what they do on a day-to-day basis, and to understand how their actions affect others. She says, “I work a great deal on acceptance, helping students see they have a place and belong.” To do this, she keeps in touch with parents, working with them to assist in reaching goals with their kids and helping them understand the needs of their child.

***Expectations.*** Theresa has high expectations for herself as a teacher and for other teachers she works with. Just as importantly, she holds high expectations for her students. It is high expectations that enable her to be successful with her students, and allow her to be a role model with her peers. After her first couple of years in the classroom, she found teaching to be so much easier. She said, “Once you know who you are, once you’ve established what you think is the right thing to do in certain cases with students, it’s easier” to maintain high expectations of yourself and others.

Theresa requires her students to work hard, but think harder. She believes that one thing that defines her teaching style is her ability to make her students work for the answer. She tries hard NOT to give them the answers to questions, but makes them go through a process of questioning and answering until they come up with their response. She says, “I just feel like if they figure it out on their own, it is more powerful and more long lasting - and it’s just truer to them.” Her main objective for her students is ‘to just get them to think about things in a way that they hadn’t thought about before . . . I’m just trying to get them to **think** [emphasis added] right now.” She gets to this level of thinking by using Paideia seminars and Socratic questioning. She says, “This type of teaching just comes natural to me, I don’t know why! Probably because that’s the way I

like to do things.” She says she uses this method of teaching with all of her differently abled classes.

She also says that she tries to push her students beyond mediocre work. Recently, after reading responses the students wrote to an assignment, she said they had a conversation where she said, “You guys all have really good ideas. You all are going to change the world. I’m so excited that you are . . . going to be some of the people that are in charge of MY future. But, you know what, if you can’t explain what you mean, if you can’t communicate with people why things are the way they are, you’re not going to be as effective as you could be.” She said the class began a long conversation about this, and how they could do better. She said it was so exciting for her when the students “got it!” The students reworked the assignment for improved communication. She says she hopes it is these types of conversations that they remember.

Theresa states that one of her biggest challenges in teaching so far, both as a special education teacher for students with a learning disability and as a teacher for students who are academically gifted is setting expectations for herself and for her peers. As for her first eight years of teaching, she said, “There were just so many kids . . . with reading problems. So many kids just weren’t reading. Teachers weren’t expecting them to, and so they didn’t.” Theresa says that it has been unacceptable for her to believe, “that I could not get the kids to perform higher, and that I couldn’t get the teachers to understand that this child had an intellectual disability.” She said it has been a struggle for her to get teachers to understand the needs of these students, and that they need to alter their teaching for them, even if just a little bit. She said some teachers still believe students “absolutely come to the classroom equally able and that the classroom is a level

playing field.” She says some teachers have such unrealistic requirements of students and are therefore quite punitive as a result. Theresa says,

There are teachers that believe that everybody needs to do everything the exact same way. They don’t believe in different abilities, they don’t believe that culture influences ability, so they don’t believe that some kids can’t do things

Therefore, she has worked with some who believe that there should not be any difference in how kids are taught. They “don’t even believe that there should be differentiation, so if you don’t believe in it then how can you accommodate for [your students]?” Theresa continues to try to be influential nonetheless.

***Treating all students fairly.*** For Theresa, fair treatment of all students is essential. She believes this is one of the foundations for everything else she does with her students. Not only does she strive to treat all students fairly, she expects other teachers to do so as well. Theresa makes this her purpose every day. Theresa seeks opportunities in her classroom to make sure students’ voices are equally heard. She consciously makes sure that she equally chooses students to answer questions. Growing up, she distinctly remembers teachers in her schools “not treating everyone fairly, or being equally kind,” and this has had a lasting effect on the teacher she is today. Theresa says even as a new teacher, she attempted to treat students as fairly as possible. It is something that she has always consciously done, probably a result of her experiences growing up. She says, “It’s naturally who I am.”

Theresa states that working in a small rural school holds challenges for students and teachers alike. One of those challenges for Theresa is making sure she remains nonjudgmental about her students. She states that in a small school, a teacher often



personally knows the students or the students' parents. She says, "If you are from Arlington County, chances are you probably have kids you know in your classroom . . . one of your relatives, you have a coworker's child, someone from the county office's child, someone from church." Often, Theresa sees this as a challenge as this can promote the "practice of treating some students better than others." She sees some teachers "turn a blind eye" to the actions of some students, and come down hard on other students for a similar action. She says, "The kids with affluent parents are the kids who often get treated better." Theresa is sure to say that this attitude is not seen with all teachers, and "often times, it is not purposeful. But you know where that child comes from, so your expectations might be a little different." Theresa, aware of what can occur, and aware that without meaning to, it is possible to treat students unfairly, says, ". . . I try to fight it – I hope that I don't do it – I try to be aware of it all of the time. Am I treating everybody the same?" Because she asks herself these questions, she has an internal reminder that she has the potential for being unfair. She feels this awareness allows her to believe that she is following her beliefs of always treating students justly.

Instead, Theresa says she must "consider where every child comes from and really just start thinking about what's best for that child - daily." She tells the story of a child whose home life was unbelievably detrimental and abusive. She says that the child was acting out in school as a result of his upbringing. He lived with his father and stepmother, and they often did not feed him as a form of punishment as they thought he was overweight. In her description of this child, Theresa said,

He would do anything for food. He would steal money to buy food, he would steal food from people, from teachers. He would lie, he would cheat, he would

steal . . . I mean really, he needed food . . . [His parents] made him walk down the mountain carrying a mattress on top of his head as a form of punishment.

At school one day, a dollar was taken from a teacher's desk. Though the affected teacher knew of this child's home situation, Theresa said, "She could not see past his affective disorder." The teacher "sought harsh punishment for this child, to teach him a lesson." In Theresa's opinion, there was no consideration of this child and the home life from which he came. Theresa does not dispute that consequences should have been given for the action, but she says that "this child was publically humiliated, and that was the last thing that he needed." She believes that a teacher must take a nonjudgmental attitude when working with any student; and that there must be consideration of "what is best for each individual child with an emphasis on how to maintain their dignity." She said, "I saw that child lose his dignity, and it really hurt." It hurt the students, and it hurt her as his teacher. She says from the incident with this student, she seeks to "understand students more . . . to try to get more insight into their home life and the things I need to know that help to understand who they are as people."

She says that while the situation described above was with a student who came from a very poor family, she says it is just as important to understand the students who are from affluent families as well. She says she has many students who are "under so much pressure to . . . perform for [their] parents." She says she has one student whose siblings were high performing students who received great scholarships to attend college. She states that this student is not able to perform at that same level, and his parents are pressuring him and the school. She said, "it is starting to affect him emotionally. And,

um, It's really starting to bother me. I feel his tension almost every day . . . he just seems - I sense sadness and he's crumbling!"

***Relationship building with students.*** For Theresa, having positive relationships with students is "the key to good teaching." To her, a person may have great knowledge of content and may have good classroom management abilities, but will not be an effective teacher without the necessary

connection with students . . . If you don't have a good relationship . . . if you can't talk to them, or let them know that you are concerned about them, and that you are there for them, then you are just not going to get anywhere.

The amount of time spent building that relationship, especially in the beginning of the year, "cannot be understated," as far as Theresa is concerned.

Theresa builds this relationship with the students both individually and in her classes as a whole. She believes she has different relationships with different classes, depending on the makeup of the class and the needs of the students in the class. Some classes she finds she is more formal with than others, as she determines some students in those classes need more structure. In other classes, she is able to have a more free relationship, joking more often with the students. But to do this, she says, a teacher has to have knowledge of what the students need. "Having a sense of when they're upset, and when to call upon someone or when not to; when to ask someone if there's something wrong or when not to." This all requires, she says, taking the time to really get to know the students, to listen to them talk.

Theresa utilizes the school's "interest inventory to get to know the nuts and bolts of the students." Part of this activity is goal setting. She says getting the students to talk

about their goals really allows her to see inside the students. She said, “If you know what a student’s goals for the year are, and you know what’s important to them, you [begin to really] get to know that student.” As she sits down to talk with students about their goals, she says, “it’s intimate. When you are actually writing with the kids, and you’re talking about your own goals with them, there is an intimate thing that happens . . . I end up sharing part of mine, too.” Getting the students to write is essential to her knowledge of them, as the writing assignments continue the unveiling of the student-teacher relationship.

For Theresa, while it is essential for the students to feel comfortable with the teacher, just as important in the relationship is for the teacher to feel comfortable with the students. She says that she has seen teachers that do not have this level of comfort with the students, and it is as if the teachers have a “them against me mentality” that is not productive and does not promote a healthy environment. She believes her sharing some of who she is with the students assists in their combined comfort level.

Theresa has found that she prefers to manage her classroom discipline in such a way that makes the students responsible for their behavior and at the same time shows she respects their ability to control themselves. She believes that systems that reward and punish students with check marks and steps send the wrong message to the students. She says,

It makes kids work for a goal that we don’t want kids to be working for. Do you want kids to not excessively talk because of the threat that they can’t go outside for 10 minutes? No, you don’t want them to talk excessively because you want them to focus on learning. I feel like it is just so artificial. And, I think it destroys

the teacher child relationship. It's like a 'gotcha,' it's such a gotcha. Instead, I truly feel that the best way to keep kids from doing what you don't want them to do is to give them stuff that you do want them to do.

Engaging students in meaningful, productive activities, and giving them time where they may talk or move around alleviates so many discipline problems.

Equally, giving students the freedom of choice allows the students to maintain some of their own control. For example, students are able to select their own seats in her class. While this allows the students to feel some sense of freedom, it also allows her to have some control. She says when students get loud or do not do their class work, she assigns seats to allow them the opportunity to regain their sense of control. She says, "I feel like I get more out of them if I have them sitting where they want to sit."

Theresa says she always keeps her sense of humor. She says, "We really do a lot of laughing [in my classes]." When she does get "mad" and has to raise her voice for one reason or another, she says "it lasts literally minutes, and then I have to say 'now you've caused me to use my mean voice,' and we all break out laughing." For Theresa, it is this type of attitude that allows her to have a virtually trouble-free classroom. This is not to say that there are no issues in her classes, as she discusses the typical peer group stresses of most middle school kids that sometimes result in acting out in the classroom. But the relationships she has built with the individual students and the classes as a whole allow getting through these issues in a more humane way.

Part of Theresa's philosophy of building relationships with students is treating the students with the respect that any human deserves, and getting the students to treat others

with that same respect. She says she has to build this classroom culture intentionally, as it is definitely not intuitive for young students to always treat others respectfully.

***Classroom culture.*** As stated earlier, Theresa attempts to influence her peers through role modeling. She also uses role modeling to help her students treat one another respectfully and to create the classroom culture she believes promotes learning. She speaks about the difficulties she has with one of her particularly competitive classes. She says, somewhat facetiously, that her students “are working on their college scholarships right now, as 7<sup>th</sup> graders!” She says they “have in mind what they want [to do], and they are working on their success for getting into college . . . and they are competitive, sometimes hurtfully.” Theresa works with the students to respect one another for all their strengths and weaknesses. She does this through literature and writing as the springboard for open discussions, but she hits contentious issues, personal and social, “head on.” She says if she thinks she needs to stop a lesson to talk about something important going on in the class, she “confronts things immediately, especially racism and intolerance . . . outside of the realm of literature.” She says, “Sometimes these conversations can’t wait.” She says she had these types of conversations “more in my EC classes than [with my AIG classes].” The conversations continue, however, as students’ developmental levels are always in progress. Not all students in the class at the time of the discussion are ready to hear and understand the lesson in the conversation being held. So patiently, Theresa repeats it as necessary, the next week or even the next day, if necessary.

These conversations, however, assist in building the classroom environment that allows students to be themselves and learn more optimally. Students need to “know they have a place, to feel like they belong.” She says she works hard to make sure that the

students know “their opinions and what they have to say is appreciated and valued. [Where] no one is afraid to say anything because they fear people will make fun of them.” She believes that she has this type of a classroom. She says, “I think I do. I hope I do.”

Along with this differential treatment, comes the “teacher talk” about students from one year to the next, or one classroom to the next. Theresa consciously makes sure that her students have a fresh start every year in her classroom. While it is difficult to keep one’s ears closed to all of this teacher talk, which includes both good and bad conversations about students, Theresa hopes to give each of her students the opportunity to create their own destiny in her classes. In fact, she claims, “every day is a new day” with her. If she has had a difficult moment with a student one day, she is sure to let those moments go the next day. She believes every student has an equal chance to bring forth her best effort every day.

The only time I found Theresa leaning towards sounding judgmental was when she spoke about a particular group of students that did not always treat other students respectfully. Theresa mentioned several times that she struggled to be open-minded with some of the “jocks” in her classes. These comments seemed to center around one or two student athletes who were described as being outwardly disrespectful to other students in the class considered less socioeconomically advantaged. Theresa was most upset about the negativity these boys portrayed to other students, but she commented several times that they were athletes. Even then, Theresa was aware of her feelings towards the “culture” of these athlete boys and made sure she was treating them respectfully and responsibly. As an example of this, Theresa tells of one student in particular that many

teachers have difficulty getting along with. She said, “He is just one of those students.” She talks with him daily when he arrives in her class, works with him respectfully, and builds that relationship she believes is so crucial. One day, she heard this boy commenting to the group he was working in, “Mrs. Johnson is the only teacher that likes me.” Theresa said, “it breaks my heart!” She talked with his other teachers, informing them of his perceptions, believing it would be something that she would want to know if a student said that in another person’s classroom. She says, “no students should be disrespected by their teachers.”

***Respecting others’ cultures and meeting the needs of all students.*** For Theresa, getting to know the student in school also means she works to know of the student’s life outside of school. She says, “Understanding students more . . . seeking insight into their home life . . . these are the things I need to know,” as it allows her to meet the needs of each student individually. Theresa believes that often, people inaccurately think that special needs students are from backgrounds of low socioeconomic status. She says having educational needs that require special education crosses all barriers . . . kids who need educational assistance “run the gamut. You can’t pigeon hole [different learning abilities]. I mean learning disabilities and mental disabilities can occur in any population and to anyone.” Theresa also reminds that being academically gifted can also occur in these same populations. She stated,

I have had students who live in mansions, literally . . . and I have had students who lived in an outdoor building that you would buy at Lowes. I have had students from all of these walks of life. Students whose parents were physicians,



university professors, all the way to students whose parents can't read one word - not even one.

Theresa is prepared to understand all who come to her class as people and understand their needs as students.

Theresa also recognizes that sometimes, students need a bit of understanding from adults. Working with middle school students, she understands the difficult time of life between being a being child and a teenager, and all of the emotion and hormones that go with it. She is sure to treat all students, those in her class or not, as she would hope others would treat her own boys. As this advocate, she steps in to assist when she feels it necessary. Recognizing the sound of panic one afternoon, Theresa ran interference for ten boys late from a specials class. Their book bags had been left in the last class they had been in and they knew that interrupting this particular teacher was a sure punishment for them all. Theresa assessed the situation and decided to help these students out. She realized that the specials teacher, not a regular classroom teacher, had let the students out late, and did not give them an excuse to assist them. Theresa felt these students should not be punished for this, and so, knocked on the teacher's door, interceding for them. Theresa said, "these boys were just reluctant to knock on your door because they thought they were going to get yelled at, and I told them that you would understand that they couldn't help [being late]."

Theresa says she often runs similar interference for students. She says she tries to be 'politically correct' while modeling the way she believes students should be treated, allowing others to see that it is really not a problem to treat students respectfully and with dignity. She says sometimes, in the middle of all of the hustle of school, "teachers – they

don't see it themselves when it happens. They don't." It is her role, she feels, to help them see.

### **How Experiences, Attitudes, and Beliefs Developed**

Theresa was raised in a very rural area of Virginia to blue collar parents. Growing up in a rural life has assisted in her understanding the school in which she now teaches, the community in which she lives and the parents and students she sees most every day.

**Childhood.** Theresa had what she considers a very normal childhood. Her father worked in the coalmines of Virginia and her mother worked in the cafeteria at the local school. She had two brothers who were several years older than her. Neither of her parents graduated from high school, though her mother did achieve an Associate's degree. She needed certification to be the cafeteria manager, and at that time, was able to attend a local community college without a high school diploma. Theresa says of her mother, "She's a very, very bright lady. It makes me very sad that she did not graduate from high school because she . . . has a very strong business head and math skills."

Both of her parents were "prolific readers," and were supportive of her getting an education beyond high school. Though neither of her brothers was academically inclined, it was evident early on that Theresa was. She remembers her parents marveling at her ability to read at a young age. They always "told me I could go to college, and they fostered that."

Theresa's father was in a traumatic coal mining accident when she was in the second grade, altering their lives significantly. His leg was badly mangled and he was left unable to bend it at the knee. He had hoped to be able to go back to work for the

mines in some capacity, though this was never possible. Instead, he went back to his family industry of farming, staying busy around the house, raising apple trees and the family garden. Theresa said that, “there was a bit of a switch of the roles [for her parents]” as her father did the grocery shopping and was home when she got home from school, but she said, “It worked for us. It was good.”

Another traumatic event in Theresa’s family was the death of her oldest brother in a construction job accident when she was in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade. She remembers her brother as vivacious and outgoing. This loss had a great affect on her, even today, as she speaks of it.

When Theresa was in the eighth grade, she began dating Rick, also from her county. They dated throughout high school, though he graduated when she was in the eighth grade. He went to college as she was going through high school, and as soon as she graduated, at 18, they married. She said, “It was a different time then, and there.” She said, “Rick supported me intellectually and kind of opened up some doors for me that would not have been opened had I never known him.” She said, “My parents, who I loved dearly, their world was pretty small, all in all. They never really had very many experiences and didn’t know too much of the world outside of [our] county. . . and had no desire to.” Rick was from the “exact same background I was from, but he was reaching further into the world to learn things.” Rick talked to her about things she believes she would not have thought of otherwise, and tutored her in the advanced math courses at her school. She says, “I don’t think I would have taken those math classes” had it not been for his influence. She believes she would have gone to college if she had not known Rick, but she believes he opened doors and strongly influenced her as a young teenager.

He also influenced her to take classes in the science field at the beginning of her college career. She says, “That kind of really went against what I thought I really wanted to do with my life, but that, and some other things, transpired to cause me not to major in education, and I majored in Geology.”

Theresa had extended family that also influenced her. She spoke of family who lived in the same county community. Her mother’s parents did not live close to them, but Theresa’s family would travel to see them. Theresa said, “my grandfather treated us like absolute Kings and Queens when we went [to Florida] to see them. They just loved us to death. And we loved them.” Another mention of a family member that influenced Theresa had an “aunt who was mentally disabled” who introduced her to the world of people who are differently abled.

**Rural life.** Theresa grew up, in her words, “in one of the most rural of rural counties that you can have.” She says there was not one traffic light in the entire county. There was no real community or town where she grew up, though she knew all of the people in her county, and all of the students in her classes. Her community was really those who went to her church, as “most everybody did go to church.” She says, “I knew them all, I knew every one of them well. I knew where they lived from kindergarten on.” There, your living location was defined by “the ridge you lived on.” The people you saw most, she said, were those who lived on “your” ridge. She stated, “I spent summers not even having one other conversation with another person my age.” She said it would be an exciting day if she went to the store and saw one of her classmates. Though she knew everybody in her county, and it was known “if somebody would get hurt or sick . . . or if a baby was born,” she said, “you just had to go out of your way to see them.”

Living in this type of rural county where mining was the main source of employment, it is somehow easy to assume that there is not a lot of wealth, and that most people have a similar socioeconomic level. In speaking with Theresa about this, she says, “I never really thought about it before.” She says, when you grow up, things just are the way they are. Looking back, she says, “I guess our house was one of the nicer houses in my community,” as she remembers staying the night with a girl when she was young, amazed at the living conditions of this family, and recognizing that she had it a bit better. However, she rationalizes by saying, “I think my parents probably spent money, and a lot of time and energy, on having a nice place to live.” She says, “We didn’t do vacations. And my mother still thinks it’s a sin to spend money on going to the movies. Oh, my goodness. I still don’t tell her I go to the movies!” Her parents were extremely careful with their money, and what they did have, they put into their house and food. They canned everything from “kraut, to meat, to vegetables.”

Theresa truly lived what would be considered the stereotypical life of a rural person, though large farms were not prevalent in her geographic location. The way of life was seen as rural, the employment of the area, however, was mining. She was raised going to church, which also played a large part in her life.

**Religion.** Theresa says, “Most everyone went to church” and she was raised in the Baptist church. She continues to attend church as an adult, though believes she has a rather liberal outlook on religion. She says that she has raised her children in the church, though she has never told them, “This is the only thing, the only way.” Being consistent with her constructive philosophy of teaching, she believes that they must determine what is right for them.

**Schooling/Teacher memories.** Theresa has vivid memories of her years in public schools. She recalls teachers who were ineffective, and some she would now consider mean. But she also remembers those that were successful with her, and that she now sees as someone to emulate.

Theresa attended a small rural school from kindergarten through seventh grade. There were several K-7 schools that fed into one consolidated high school that unusually began in the eighth grade. In comparison to people she has talked to since her high school days, she realizes now “the few opportunities [she had] for any type of enrichment, or anything. I was really sheltered,” she said.

Though sheltered, she says she had some very good teachers who exposed her to quality education. While she does not have fond memories of many of her early elementary teachers, she distinctly remembers a seventh grade teacher who took her under her wing. She said, “She was a good teacher . . . [who was] just really nurturing, and really caring, and very sweet. [She] taught me a lot, and you know - it was just really good” and made a difference for her educationally. In high school, she also had an English teacher she said “was young, she was an outsider. She got that job and she moved to our little community and came in.” Theresa remembers this teacher as a little bit different than the norm at her school. She said, “She taught us literature, she really made it come alive for us . . . she would talk to us about anything if we stayed after . . . she just really built up the relationship.” Theresa reflects, “I just didn’t realize a teacher could be that outgoing and caring and just take an interest in students for who they were.” She says, “I know I’ve said all these bad things about my high school, but looking back,

I'm really impressed with the level of the teaching - especially of the Language Arts teachers."

One of the things that Theresa has taken away from her personal school experiences is making sure that she provides students with equal treatment based on the needs of the students. She said, "One thing I disliked about most of my teachers that I say were awful is that they *didn't* [emphasis added] treat students the same . . . those male teachers - they were not equally kind to everyone." She especially remembers athletes being given special privileges, or not having to do an assignment or take a test because they had a game to prepare for, or to perform. She said, "The rest of us all went to the ball game and cheered for those athletes just as hard, but we all had to take the test." These comments about teachers having *pets* reflect Theresa's practice of making sure she does not do this. She says there are students that her heart goes out to more, and that she may give a bit more attention to on a particular day, because they are in need of it at that moment. She doesn't believe, however, that this could be misconstrued as having pets in her classes. Theresa says, "The things our teachers do really do affect us."

**Experiences with diversity.** One element of Theresa's sheltered life was the lack of diversity she experienced. Most of the families in her community were the same socioeconomically. While there may have been some who were better off, or worse off than her family, it was not significant. Religiously, there was not a lot of difference either. Most families attended a Christian church, usually the one located most closely to them on their ridge. Racially, she was raised with other White families. Her first interaction with a Black person was in the eighth grade, when she went to high school.

All of the Black families in the county lived in one community and went to one K-7 school that was fed into the high school.

Part of Theresa feeling sheltered played out in understanding the racial tensions of the 70s and 80s. Theresa said, “I was not even aware that racism could be a problem [in schools] in the way I am aware of it now. It wasn’t something discussed.” Theresa knows, however, that she became friends with some African Americans from that school, just like she did kids from other feeder schools. She said, “Bussing didn’t affect us, because there was only one high school, and they came to the high school like everybody else. No one questioned it.” And she finished by saying, “from my perspective, they were treated as equally as any other. It would be interesting to ask Joe [one of her African American friends] how he remembers it today.”

**Political views.** Theresa strongly believes that her desire to meet the needs of all of her students has as much to do about her political viewpoints as anything else. Theresa considers herself to be very liberal politically. She says, “I think you have to wonder why people are the political persuasions that they are.” She believes that “conservatives would say that every person is responsible for themselves, and there should be few supports –or no supports – for them. You’re responsible for yourself, sink or swim.” Theresa believes that teachers like her see that students come to the classroom with so many obstacles. She says,

some [students] can’t get their homework done because there’s nobody there at the house to help them do it. Either because there is no one there that CAN do it . . . perhaps the parents WON’T help them. Perhaps the parents are gone



somewhere, at work, so that child is there by themselves and they can't do their homework.

Theresa believes there are some who still hold the individual child responsible for their work, even though they have no help. Theresa states, "The whole personal responsibility versus understanding that there is more to [being successful] – and I don't just mean homework, I mean also supplies, and all the things that make school go good for a certain group of kids." She says,

"I believe it takes an adult. It takes a caring responsible adult in a child's life to make them be successful in school . . . at least in the early grades . . . And if there's not that caring responsible adult there at home, then I would say that *that's* [emphasis added] the thing that influences teaching more. Whether or not you still hold the child responsible, or whether or not you try to put other supports in place for them, such as giving them time in the morning to do their work, or providing them with another book to have at home, or something – those other kinds of supports."

It is these things that Theresa feels sets her apart from other teachers in her school.

**Personal challenges and real life learning.** Theresa believes that being so sheltered as a young person has made it hard for her to judge situations accurately as an adult. She states, "I have a real hard time making a decision about people or things" because growing up, she didn't have to worry about judging people. Everyone was just already known. Then, as she left her little community, she began to see that "there's another way of living." She found these eye opening experiences to remain with her. Today, one would never know that she grew up having few experiences with the bigger

world. Though she keeps her youth's experiences as a reminder that "you really just never know what a child has come from, either that morning, or just historically." She says it is hard to know what has been put in front of her students,

"Whether it's a child who's been potentially abused, or neglected, or just is in abject poverty. Or if it's a child whose parents just don't have any parenting skills other than to give them everything they want. And that's pretty sad, too, if you really think about it."

### **Theresa: Conclusion**

Theresa believes she holds two things as essential in teaching. She says, "What the kids know and what they need in order to get to a certain place." Whether that place is the end of grade testing, preparation to get the students ready to face their next grades in school, or to face their future, she asks, "Where are they now? Where do they need to be?" She says,

It is not always what they need academically, it may be what they need emotionally and behaviorally and all those things together; to try to get to that end point . . . we do the best we can.

Theresa gets there by treating her students with dignity, respect, and care. And her students are better for her being there.

### **Research Question Three: CRP Practices of Successful Rural Teachers**

The four cases of this study, presented and described in detail in this chapter, show some differences between teachers and schools, though the real significance is in the similarities in characteristics that these teachers share in how they attempt to meet the needs of their students through their personal practice and pedagogy. The data analysis

process of the interview transcripts, observation field notes, and document reviews led me to determine the most dominant themes. As I took notes, I wrote the themes that most significantly stood out to me as practices representative of these four teachers. Using AtlasTi, I also conducted a numerical analysis of the codes, determining the frequency these codes were used during the coding phase of the analysis. While I recognized the limitations of using the numerical analysis in this qualitative study, as discussed in chapter three, this analysis lent this study an alternative lens through which to view these teachers. From both the list I had created and the code frequency list, I determined the CRP practices common among these four teachers. In response to question three of my study, “What are the practices of successful CRP rural teachers?” I present a thorough discussion of how these four CRP nominated teachers represent each of these practices. Then, to answer question four, I discuss how the practices of these teachers intersect with the principles of CRP as laid out in the Characteristic Components of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CCCRP) Framework discussed earlier in this study.

The similarities that exist between these teachers are broken down into two sections: similarities represented and not represented on the CCCRP Framework. The similarities not represented on the CCCRP Framework are 1) the reasons they became educators; 2) their purposes of education; and 3) the significance or insignificance of their teacher education programs to their becoming culturally responsive teachers. More representative of the CCCRP Framework presented in chapter two are the capacity to which the four teachers hold the following characteristics as integral to their ability to meet their students needs: Care, including compassion and empathy; holding realistic expectations and understanding the needs of each individual; building relationships with

students; understanding others' cultures; mutual respect; honesty with students; differentiation of instruction and assessments, more so than curriculum; and willingness to break rules. I will first discuss the similarities not represented on the CCCRP framework before moving to those characteristics that are.

**Reason for going into education.** Like many teachers, Elizabeth, Grace, John, and Theresa chose to become teachers because they hoped to give back to society something valuable and wonderful. All four believe in this same value, but they also seek to gain something in return.

John began teaching because he wanted to provide “a different kind of voice . . . an open minded voice that wouldn't tell [the students] parrot party lines . . .” He has worked in several capacities in the Treamont school district from middle to high school, and has taught all levels of students from struggling to *gifted* learners. He chose to teach at the Alternative School, noting, “I've got to work with the needy kids . . . I'm an idealist. As a liberal . . . I feel like society is only as good as its lower members.” He believes it is necessary to assist those poorer kids in specific ways, as they are

dropping out at the lower levels while the high kids are always the same, like a flat line . . . I just think I'm providing a more valuable contribution to society . . . I like the Alternative kids; [they] are really, really interesting.

Grace chose to teach in a very poor, Appalachian rural school as she felt she could have a significant impact on students from backgrounds similar to her own. She said, “I knew what had helped me to have options. And I thought I could really help these kids have those same options . . . to see in him or herself what is worthwhile.” Grace wants her students to know what they are capable of, and to be proud of their choice of staying

in or leaving Mountain Trace. Grace says, “Probably psychologically, I’m a person that needs to be needed. And I also need to feel like I am doing something that is making the world better . . . It gives my life meaning.”

Elizabeth also believes she became a teacher to “make *the place* better . . . for all children.” By place, Elizabeth means the school she is currently teaching in, but by extension, she also means the community her students live in, and therefore the greater society. She believes her true purpose is to help her students be successful, and that they can contribute at whatever level they choose to do. She wants her students to know that she believes in them. She says, “I want them to remember that I was there to help them be successful, and not that I was there to aggravate them.”

Theresa found herself returning to a small, rural community when she moved to the mountains of North Carolina, where she says she feels at home. Theresa says she “really felt a calling” to teach and that, “I really love working with kids. I LOVE seeing the spark when they learn something.” She gets great gratification when she knows she has helped a student achieve and she enjoys being around students. However, Theresa also views teaching as a symbiotic relationship. She claims, “Probably no one does anything too much just to give other people opportunities. It’s a give and take. I get something and they get something. So, for me . . . meeting the challenge, knowing that I’ve accepted a challenge and have been somewhat successful at it,” allows her to feel gratification and accomplishment. She says it is important “that I’ve contributed something and that I see kids getting something and understanding something that they might not have before . . .”

**Purpose of education.** As new teachers take the helm of their classrooms, they tend to have an idealistic view of their purpose as teachers and the overall purpose of education. Usually this purpose is *textbook* clear. As teachers experience life in the classroom, their purpose of education goes from idealism to realism. Veteran teachers John, Grace, Elizabeth, and Theresa each have formulated their own purpose as they have experienced life in the classroom with their students.

For John, “the purpose of education is to help [students] be able to function as valuable members of society.” He stated this purpose after much processing of the historical purpose of education and the more philosophical purpose and organization of schooling. He hopes to assist in their becoming contributing members by helping them “be mature and trustworthy and just good people that can help further the aims of the society.” John believes he is being successful with these goals by teaching his students that:

There is more than one version of the truth and that there is no truth in a lot of cases . . . Am I making better citizens? Yeah, I think doing the work they do . . . enables them to improve their skills so they can get job . . . [He has] made some of [his] kids better thinkers . . . by challenging their views . . . [and] hearing a different viewpoint in [his] class.

The purpose of education for Grace has changed over the years. It is no longer about getting the students to love reading like she does, as this is “a side effect—icing on the cake.” Instead, it is “to get an individual to see that there is something worthwhile in him or her and to continue to try to reach the potential of that.” Grace hopes that her students will be able one day to “see that it is worth reaching that potential . . . that they

occupy a niche . . . that nobody else does, and they have something to offer that nobody else does.” Her greatest desire is for her students to see this.

For Theresa, the purpose of education is to “. . . provide people . . . with the tools to be responsible members of their society” and to prepare people who can “think . . . outside the box; people who know the difference between what they can do, what they can’t do, and what is right and wrong.” Theresa instills this practice in her students as she “tries not to give her students answers” outright. She says she is always guiding her students to come up with their own answers, and she creates lessons that incorporate this type of thinking. In the end, she believes she is often successful in getting her students to think on their own.

Elizabeth believes the main purpose of education for her students is to provide a safe place for her students to come to, and to allow them to be successful in their growth plan every day. She says, “They will grow, they will do better, and know more than they did in September about reading . . . math . . . social studies, science, and physical education.” Just as importantly for her, she believes the purpose is to allow her students “to feel respected by their teachers and their peers . . . by all of their teachers.”

**Significance of the teacher education program.** All four teachers participating in this study went through a teacher certification program. However, Theresa, John, and Grace do not have teacher education undergraduate degrees. Theresa has a degree in geology, John in communication, and Grace in English. All three of these teachers held jobs prior to deciding to get their teaching license, two in corporations, and one as an adjunct in a community college and a university. Elizabeth is the only teacher in the study who received a four-year undergraduate degree in education with a teaching

license. All four teachers have a Master's Degree, and Grace has completed two. Additionally, all four have continued to further the knowledge of their profession, either through adding additional certificate areas to their license, through professional development bringing advanced leadership opportunities, or prolific reading in their educational areas of interest and need.

During discussions with the four teachers in this study, the term *culturally responsive pedagogy* was never used. The word *culture* was mentioned only a few times. I never asked the teachers about their opinions regarding their use of a culturally responsive pedagogy directly. Keeping consistent with the structure set out for this study, I instead used the words *meeting the needs of all students*. The conclusions regarding the significance of the teacher education program (TEP) in developing their CRP, therefore, are a result of what was both spoken, as well as not spoken about their TEPs.

All four teachers completed their licensure programs at least nine years ago. Each spoke about the length of time that had occurred since their coursework, the amount of real classroom learning that had since taken place, and their ability or inability to remember the significance of their licensing program. However, while the TEP may have been crucial in creating some aspects of their teaching—notably methods of teaching reading, math, and science—it was not a significant contributor to the culturally responsive teachers they are today.

When asked how they believe they have come to be the teacher they are today, they stated that much of who they are in the classroom is just who they are as people. They indicated that they are caring, responsive people in general, and that carries into the



school. They all describe the day-to-day practice of teaching, the trial and error of being successful, and the significance of failing in the classroom and with students, have led them to understand students for who they are and to work to meet their needs. As Elizabeth concluded, “[it] is the humane thing to do.” These teachers live by the belief of “treating others as you wish to be treated.”

The characteristics not represented on the chart described in chapter two do not indicate practices that influence how these teachers meet the needs of their students. The following practices are more closely associated with the CCCRP chart.

Analyzing the codes from the interviews, observations, and document reviews, most of the teachers shared the top ten codes, though with a few outliers. These codes are indicative of the most important practices both observed and discussed. When totaling all of the codes, the ten most frequently used codes were caring, expectations, building relationships with students, knowing what students need, recognizing others’ cultures, respect, differentiation, honesty/being realistic with students, treating students fairly, and creating a positive classroom environment. Figure 2 visually describes these codes, indicative of the CRP actions, as valued by each teacher.

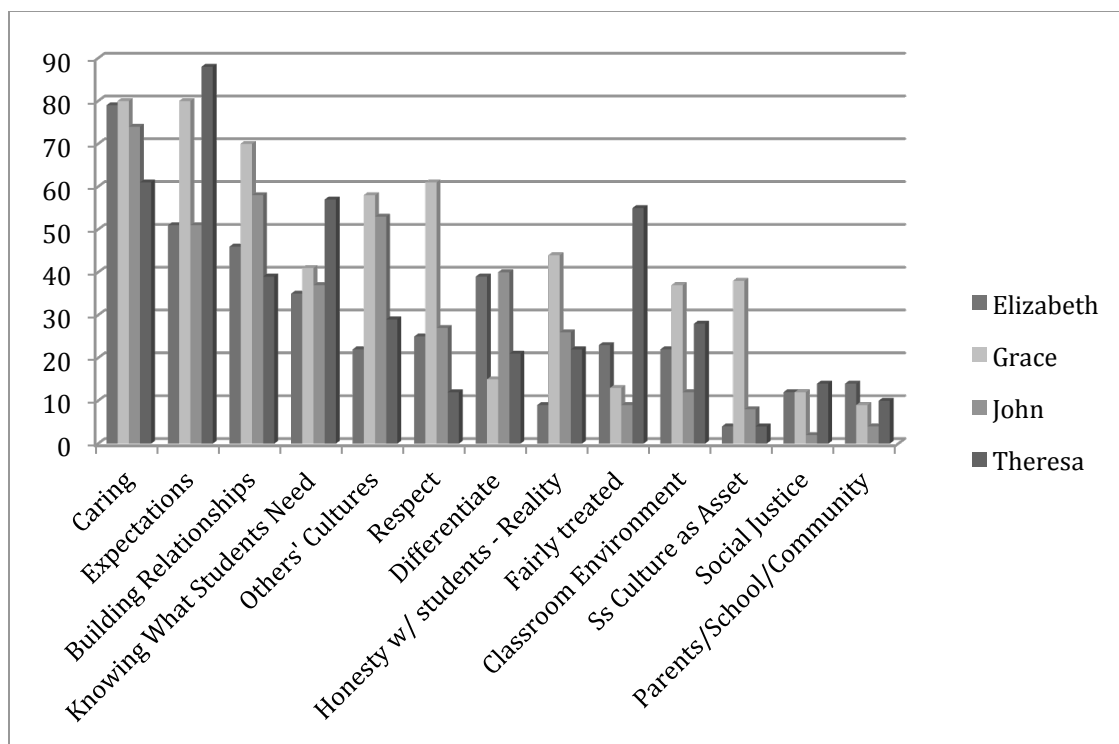


Figure 2. Top thirteen codes from data collected

**Care: Compassion and empathy.** According to the data collected in this study, care was numerically most often attached to words spoken or actions observed, both collectively and individually. According to the data, care, as expressed most often through compassion and empathy, is essential to how these four nominated teachers represented being a culturally responsive teacher. There is no doubt that these two characteristics drive the actions of all four of these classroom leaders. Without compassion and empathy, the participants stated, teachers are not able to get at the essence of the needs of their students. It is this compassion and empathy that, in Elizabeth's words, "sets her apart from other teachers."

Theresa and Elizabeth specifically noted that compassion and empathy are a result of being a parent and of the desires they have for the education of their own children. After having children, they believe that they interact with students differently based on how they want their own children to be treated by their teachers and their school. For Elizabeth, the constant mantra of “how would I want my child treated” guides most all of her decisions with all students, even those who are not in her classes.

As compassionate and empathetic teachers, it is not surprising that all four believe in the importance of creating meaningful relationships with their students.

**Holding realistic expectations and understanding the needs of each individual.** While holding high expectations for all students was the second most important characteristic coded in this study and knowing what students needed was fourth, it is important to note that half of all of the phrases coded *knows what students needed* also included *expectations*. This is important as these four nominated CRP teachers believe it is paramount to know their students individually before they are able to hold realistic expectations for each of them. To achieve this understanding of their students, these four teachers are always present for their students, get to know their students first as people and students second, and allow their students to know of their importance to them. Additionally, all four teachers recognize the impact of their students’ home lives on their learning and attempt to be a consistent force in the lives of their students.

Getting to know each person in their class as an individual was a consistent goal for all four teachers, regardless of the number of students they had each semester. Asked how they determined individual student needs, all four teachers spoke of the

conversations they had with the students on a daily basis. Some of these conversations occurred through the lesson of the day as a result of a discussion stemming from the lesson or through a writing assignment. Others occurred during the daily class period while students were doing an extension activity. These teachers spent time listening to and talking with students before, during, and after class. Notably, their time while at school was fully devoted to students. During observations, each of them made appointments with their students before or after school or during lunchtime to make up for assignments missed or to improve content understanding. Each teacher helped their students be better learners, but just as importantly, to be better people.

Through understanding each person as an individual, these four teachers recognized that teaching the required content was secondary to the relationship with the students and assuring that each student knew that they were important to their teacher. While grades are required, these teachers never lost sight of the importance of the students and what they needed to achieve those grades. Through this belief and knowledge of each student's life and abilities, the teachers maintained high expectations that were realistic for each of the students, as well as for themselves.

All four teachers are acutely aware that some of their students come from very dysfunctional home lives and that what occurs in their students' personal lives affects them in school. These teachers understand that the support received at home, or having no support, can directly impact students' attitudes in the classroom, the amount of schoolwork accomplished, and ultimately the success of the student. As Elizabeth repeatedly says to her peers, "what occurs at home should not affect grades achieved at school." Theresa said,

I always have to come back to the fact that you just never know what a child has come from, either that morning or just historically. You never know what has been put in front of them. Whether it's a child who's been potentially abused, or neglected, or just is in abject poverty, or if it's a child whose parents just don't have any parenting skills other than to give them everything they want.

These four teachers believe one very important role they play in the classroom is to be a source of consistency in their students' lives. Grace says, "I want to provide them a stable and safe environment where they can come and can know it is going to be the same adult behaving professionally, day after day." This consistency involves holding expectations of each student constant with an always upward push. Grace stated she determines what she knows "their lives are like and what is most likely to hold their interest and be of significance to their development as human beings with potential and worth." Then she looks for what she knows "they are capable of doing, with just a little bump up to increase the challenge, if only by a fraction."

All four of these teachers know what students can do and urge each one forward accordingly based on the given abilities of the students. That may mean that they hold higher expectations for one student than they do for another, but the expectations themselves are individually realistic. As John states,

You meet them where they are, and where you need to meet them, to get them where they need to be, or where they can be . . . Nothing's cut and dry. Nothing's easy. I set it at a level I believe they can do. And then I adjust it based on my individual interpretation of the child. If I think they can't do as much, I won't go as hard on them. Everything's individual.

John says he may simplify or alter assignments for some students, “but the WORK [emphasis added] I expect them to do, and so I don’t cut back on that.” He says “I’ve had kids that [come from] backgrounds [that] are horrible . . . I can’t help but think it sucks, but I still have to teach [them].” So he works with them.

Grace said that high expectation were an element of respecting the students, adding that neither of these is possible without building a relationship with students.

**Relationships with students.** In the analysis of the data, the code *classroom environment* was used more than 50% of the time along side of the code *building relationships*. For the CRP teachers in this study, creating a positive classroom environment went hand in hand with building positive relationships. All four teachers in this study make creating meaningful relationships with their students a priority. For example, Grace says, “without a relationship, everything else is an abstraction,” and Theresa stated that having a relationship with students is “the KEY to good teaching . . . if you can’t talk to them, or let them know that you are concerned . . . then you are just not going to get anywhere.”

Several specifically spoke about the need to let the students know that, as John stated, “They matter more to me than just teaching them a subject.” Grace says, “If they don’t trust you, it doesn’t matter what you say or do, it doesn’t mean anything; especially with poorer kids.”

I noted in several field notes, that the teacher was being a “genuine person.” These four teachers liked to be in the presence of their students--they obviously liked them. All of the teachers laughed *with* their students. Theresa stated, “I feel lucky in that I’ve had this little time with them. I just find them interesting.” At the same time, John

is clear to say, “I’m distant as far as I’m friendly **with** them, but I’m not their friend. They’re my students. Some teachers don’t get the difference.” This difference is important in building relationships with students, as they know these teachers are adults they can depend upon.

Each teacher, in their own way, created a relaxed atmosphere in the classroom, either through gentle touches on the back, carrying on personal conversations with the students, laughter, and gentle joking. In all of the classes, there was simultaneously a calm learning atmosphere with mutual support, mutual care, and usually met goals. In each classroom, there was an overwhelming presence of the teacher, not as a dictator of a group, but as a director of an orchestra. Each teacher, even during quiet seatwork, or active group work, used every moment of the class time to have an effect on the learning occurring. During these moments, the teachers were not always directing the content being learned, but were influencing personal realizations, supporting struggles of individual students, or simply being the cheerleader they needed to be. Grace said when instances occur that require her orchestrating the conversation down an alternate path, she does that through “teasing them and making fun of them, and moving it that way. And sometimes [she does] that by simply saying, “stop this, we have to take this in a different direction.” She said she usually directs the conversations subtly. Regardless, relationships, in all instances, were being built, solidified, or strengthened.

All four of the teachers in this study have assisted student teachers, mentored newly hired teachers, or have been teacher leaders. As new teachers have come to their schools, several of these veteran teachers analyzed that a common missing element for some new teachers was that they were not able to build relationships with their students.

Theresa commented that these teachers “weren’t comfortable with the kids . . . It was a ‘them against me’ mentality . . . having a relationship is so important . . . and part of that relationship is that YOU have to feel comfortable, too.” In my observations, these four teachers felt comfortable with their students and their classroom.

**Others’ cultures.** Each teacher in this study provided evidence of valuing the importance of culture in the classroom, the school, the community, and of the bigger world. Each teacher spoke of appreciating the culture of southern Appalachia of hard working, family-oriented people. They also discussed the diversity in their schools: Native American Cherokee, African American, Mexican, and Central and South American, and White students, as well as the many other cultures that exist in each of the schools including religion, sexual orientation, learning abilities, and one of the most prominent, socioeconomic status. These cultures are present in all of the schools I visited. The four teachers I worked with appreciated the diversity that was present in their schools and respected the individual students and their personal heritages and cultures. Grace is extremely passionate about helping her students appreciate and respect their personal culture, holding as essential her desire for her students to understand who they are in their culture and have the choice to stay and respect their own “own back yard.”

For John and Grace who have been teaching in their school districts for over ten years, there is a more recent crossing of lines as both students and teachers are moving into the area from *outside*. The student culture, and therefore school culture is changing. Each teacher discussed the importance of understanding the personal culture of their students as essential to fully understanding the student and their individual needs, and



that these two cannot be separated. Elizabeth and Theresa both spoke of not passing judgment on their students. Grace said that “so much of what [her students] do and say comes . . . from their pain.” John pointed out that knowing what their home lives are like allows him to understand his own significance in his students’ lives. He said, “I show them, through my actions, a way that you can behave that is [different]. Modeling is important.”

Each teacher in this study recognizes their students’ personal culture in different ways and to different degrees, but all use the knowledge of the culture to assist in meeting the needs of the students. Another important aspect of understanding the students’ cultures, says John, is recognizing that not all kids are going to respond to what the teacher has to offer. John says you have to know them well enough to know, on a day-to-day basis, what you can expect out of them, and how far you can push them. A student who comes to his class one day who has had a rough night for whatever reason is better being in class than not. He “takes them the way they come” and that may mean that they need to grab a moment of sleep during class so they can function better. He said if it becomes a chronic occurrence, he discusses this with the student and resolves it that way, on a one-by-one basis. One other way of knowing kids is through one of his teacher behaviors of touching kids on the shoulder, arm, or back, or carrying on small talk. He says, “I touch them to let them know I care . . . but some kids will pull back from you. I just learn not to touch them [or talk freely to them].” He claims this physical touch allows him to understand where students have been in their lives, and how far he can go with them. This knowledge, to him, is essential.

Grace spoke of the importance of the realization that the culture is changing in these rural communities. Some parents have not kept pace with the changes or are fearful to embrace the changes as they come. She said that for some parents, who have never themselves had educational opportunities, do not understand how their influence could increase their child's options. Oftentimes, because parents do not know of the options available, they do not recognize that their child has educational potential. She also recognized that, "sometimes [parents'] ignorance is embraced for the sake of protecting themselves." Parents fear their children will leave home and that they will lose them. Grace says, "And they are right. That is usually what education does. In some way you lose your kid. And that is frightening for a parent" who does not understand what is *out there*. Grace says it is her responsibility to be the bridge for the parents, to let them know that education does not mean that they have to lose their children.

All four teachers spoke of understanding the community culture. John and Grace spoke of helping their students understand the culture from which they come and to be realistic about their lives and their futures. John's desire for his students was to help them see their potential to get their diploma and move from their small town, as there is very little job growth or employment opportunities. Grace, on the other hand, sought to make her students aware of their potential and opportunities, one of which is saying "this is my tribe, and I'm not leaving. This is my universe . . . my backyard . . . and it's a wonderful place." Elizabeth and Theresa, who teach younger students, do not have the pressure of the immediacy of their students' futures as major responsibilities. However, they both recognize their importance in preparing their students to be responsible members of the community.

These four CRP nominated teachers varied in their stated respect for the family cultures from which many of their students come, and all spoke of having conflict with some attributes of that culture on one level or another, outside of class, and within their classes and school. John stated bluntly, “I respect the students. I do not respect all of the parents of these students and the lives that they are leading. How can I respect their lifestyle of selling drugs, choosing to live on welfare, and bringing their children up in this environment?” These students, John says, are surviving despite the culture in which the parents are raising them.

While I visited the schools and classrooms, I remarked how infrequently I saw students making any negative comments to ANY students for reasons of cultural differences. In John’s classes, I wrote how the students seemed “cohesive and respectful to one another” and made similar notes in Grace’s classes. Theresa’s AIG classes did show signs of students making judgmental comments, and Theresa herself mentioned these issues. For these students, it appeared to be more competitive in nature. For example, they competed to be the first to answer questions, or about whose answers were better. For Elizabeth, there was nothing outwardly noticeable in the observations, but she noted in the interviews that she always made sure that her students, most who were from poorer backgrounds, had the materials they needed to be successful in their classes. She said she makes sure she always has paper and pencils for her students in order to prevent potential teasing, or even to prevent other teachers giving them consequences for not coming to class prepared. Theresa says these behaviors are a result of others not understanding the culture from which her students come. The students themselves felt no judgment towards one another.

Finally, Grace says her students jokingly make racial epithets to one another, and though the students do not seem to take offense to these comments, she found it hard getting used to. She says she struggled to understand the fine line of “letting people know that [she] didn’t think [this] was acceptable, but also letting them know that [she] understood they might take it differently than [she] did.” She says, with her students, she has “finally been able to turn what they say to each other into a kind of a comedy” while at the same time trying to teach them what is culturally acceptable. As stated previously, all teachers make sure that any contentious and derogatory comments are managed at the moment of the infraction and discussed fully, even if that means stopping the day’s lesson.

**Mutual respect.** The teachers in this study expressed respect for each individual student. This was visible in multiple classroom observations. Respect was shown by their actions, in the ways they spoke to the students, in the ways that they stood up for students to other students, teachers, or administrators, and in understanding many aspects of their home lives.

All four teachers discussed an understanding of the need for respect in the relationship with all students. This respect was reciprocal: by respecting students they also gained respect from students. This was accomplished through consistent interactions with the students and trust that the teacher was being genuine. The students never had to doubt the behaviors of the teachers, as there was always consistency day-to-day in words spoken and actions toward individual students and as a class.

Along with the consistency of the teachers’ actions and words were the expectations of the students and the class. This consistency supported the mutual respect

shown by all. Students in the classes I observed fully knew the expectations of the teachers. Each class had a set agenda for the day, in most cases written for all students to see. This set the tone for the classes, and the students knew the path of the hour. When given an assignment, the students knew the time frame in which it was to be completed. At one point in Grace's class, a student said, "what if I don't feel like doing this." Her reply was respectful in tone and effect. She said, "It's no skin off of my back. If you're OK with the grade, I'm OK with the grade." She later said that this is important to her, as turning the responsibility of the students' actions over to the students tells them that she has no control over them, and instead, they are in control and make their own decisions. Similarly, John says in teaching about politics and history, he tells his students "I don't care what you believe - you can believe what you want. I just want you to know about what is going on today." It is important to allow the students to feel control over what they take from his classes.

Several of the teachers in this study spoke about the fallacy of *controlling* a classroom. Grace and Theresa both made comments that controlling students is not possible in the definition of the word, especially when many of the students are much bigger and stronger than their teachers. Teachers have no real control, they say. The control comes from respectful human relationships. With respect, they say, you can usually talk sense with students who are being difficult.

Finally, in the area of respect, all four teachers stand up for the honor of their students in multiple ways. Depending on the age of the student, this respect could be shown through providing classroom materials needed to complete assignments or activities to avoid *punishment* with other teachers. It could also be guiding a female

student about to “mash [a male student’s] mouth for telling her to shut up” to make a decision to wait until she was off of school property to react and so avoid a detention. In the latter case, Grace wanted her female student to know that she respected the decision to be angry and the desire to react. She also respected the young lady for making the decision to sit down without violence. Grace believes she sat down because she was given an option of when to fight instead of being told *not* to fight.

All four of the teachers in this study clearly respected the ability of their students to come to school every day, despite the responsibilities that many of them have at home. Grace said for her, it is important “to have a sense of humor and understand that my class is not the only thing in their lives.” Elizabeth repeatedly said, “What happens at home should not reflect what happens at school . . . if you get home and you have four brothers and sisters to take care of, that shouldn’t make you fail your math class.” She respects her students’ home lives and makes it possible for them to get their homework done in school. John gives no homework to his students and Grace gives no homework to her non-honors classes. John stated, “They are at school eight hours a day . . . they have a life outside of school . . . many just trying to survive. More schoolwork does not make sense.” Grace echoed Elizabeth, stating:

My students’ home lives are so chaotic that I--and many others with whom I teach--do not ask non-Honors classes to do homework. If we do, they do not do it, and they fail. So I plan to give them as much meaningful information as possible within a ninety-minute span.

The respect which all these teachers in this study show toward their students is definitely an attribute that sets them apart. Honesty with the students is one other quality that all four of these teachers share.

**Honesty.** Each teacher has a reputation for responding honestly to both students and peers. Usually, conversations with students revolve around social issues such as racism, bullying occurring in the classroom or school, disrespect shown to a student or teacher, or, depending on the age of the students, social behavior in general.

High school students often wish to know their teacher's opinions about life. They want to know if their teachers have ever smoked pot, or what they think about religion. Elementary students are curious about teachers' personal lives, wondering what their weekends are like, or if they were bullies when they were kids. What may not be typical are the honest responses from their teachers, who share stories from their lives to both teach a lesson, and to inform their students that they lived through many of the same experiences as today's students. It is a connection point for students of all ages, something that they can relate to; it allows the students to see their teachers as people.

Teachers' honesty with students about their personal lives is one thing; being honest with students regarding the students' abilities or behaviors is another. If a student is behaving in such a way that demands a response, these teachers speak of giving unemotional, and more importantly, honest responses. They all stop classroom lessons to address issues *head on*, telling the students why they feel the way they do. All four teachers never ignore a situation that they know they should address, even if they fear where the conversation might take them. Instead, each takes the opportunity to utilize the teachable moment. Elizabeth says she needs to discuss contentious issues often, as all

students are not cognitively or emotionally ready to hear the lesson in the moment it is given. She will, if necessary, stop next week's lesson to repeat the conversation. The teachers are prepared to take on these moments as they come. Sometimes the conversations induce a stark statement that may be reactionary on the teacher's part but has a dramatic effect on the students. Grace says she knows the power of words, and uses her words effectively, to make an impact. It seems the four teachers, in their own way, do the same.

The teachers interact differently outside of the classroom. Although they engage peers in delicate conversations as necessary, they may attempt to be more politically correct when doing so. Each of the teachers shared stories of having found themselves in a teacher's workroom or lunch table expressing viewpoints that run counter to the dominant teacher culture. These issues may be about understanding the realistic abilities of students, homework, a behavioral action plan, how one gives grades, or even what grades mean in general. The common theme in all of these debates is fair treatment and realistic expectations of all students. All four teachers find themselves in conversations with their peers and administrators either standing up for the students in their classes, students in general, or even their own personal practices.

**Differentiation.** At minimum, all four teachers differentiated the way they instructed the content they were teaching and the manner in which they assessed that content. Depending on the subject area, the curriculum was also differentiated. For Elizabeth, differentiation was a given, as she is the Special Needs teacher and supports her students' learning in their core courses. The other three teachers feel more bound by



the state curriculum and therefore are not as free to differentiate the books read or the historical content taught.

All teachers make sure their lessons are well-planned with an agenda visible for the students. Grace says, “My lessons have variety in that they change gears four or five times per block,” as was typical of all the observed lessons in this study. From short presentations of new content, usually through PowerPoints or a Promethean Board, to seatwork, group activity, and assignments to support understanding of new content, these teachers all worked hard to make their classes interesting, modern, and fun. Elizabeth says she constantly comes at her content through different teaching strategies, affirming that, “I am never going to plan just an auditory lesson or just a visual lesson; every lesson is going to have pieces of both.”

As stated earlier in this section, these teachers differentiated assignments based on the abilities and needs of the students. From allowing a teenage mother to bring her baby to class so she could take a test, to creating a completely separate assessment for a student unable to read, these teachers worked hard to assure that learning was occurring at a level appropriate to the individuals in the class. Rarely, according to these teachers, do students perceive this differentiation as unfair.

In contrast, helping their teacher peers to understand the necessity of differentiation can be a challenge. Two teachers in this study spoke about the fact that not all of the teachers in their school espouse differentiation. Theresa stated, “[other teachers] believe that everybody needs to do everything the exact same way. They don’t believe in different abilities. They don’t believe that culture influences ability, so they don’t believe that some kids can’t do things.” In instances where teachers share students

and attempt to assist in helping a student learn better, there is difficulty in getting all teachers on the same path of best instructional practice. For the teachers in this study, they say they continue, every day, to help their students overcome these instructional hurdles.

Differentiation is not just about learning and assessing. Elizabeth advocates for her students by helping her peers to understand that sometimes students must also be disciplined differently. She says she consistently tries to educate others that when a child “has been battling depression and anxiety and is diagnosed with an oppositional defiant disorder,” you have got to discipline them differently. She continues, “You have got to know the function of their behavior and you have to respond to it appropriately.” Several of the teachers lamented that differentiation is a long way from being common practice.

**Willingness to break rules.** One unexpected yet interesting finding is that each of the four CRP nominated teachers is willing to break some organizational rules and to go against cultural norms of their peers and of the school. They did this in a myriad of ways. John gives students the choice of standing during the Pledge of Allegiance and Grace allowed a baby to be brought into the classroom. She also allows a student to take her test in the classroom, in defiance of her IEP, because the student expressed a need to stay in the class. Each of these actions violated specific school policies. These teachers also broke cultural norms. Less contentious actions include not following discipline procedures; not following a grading rubric or system, instead giving grades based on the work and effort put into an assignment.

In effect, defying established rules and norms allows these teachers to stay true to who they are as people. It allows them to be responsive to each of their students

individually, to hold constant their ethics and values of treating each individual as a person worthy of finding their way in the world and helping them down the path of doing so. For these teachers, these are the most important aspects of being a teacher.

### **Other Practices**

While all four of these CRP nominated teachers shared the practices described in the previous section, other practices were important to some, but not others. These practices are described below, and the significance of these differences will be addressed in Chapter 5.

**Choice of teaching position.** Grace and John had been teaching students who were considered gifted, Grace at a private, residential school, and John in a rural middle school. They both commented that they realized anyone could teach these students, saying they felt their skills could be better utilized with students in a setting where the students' talents were not being recognized. Grace said, "there were other people there that could do just as fine a job as I could." Today, they are teaching in schools with high numbers of low socioeconomic families. They believe that they have been able to make a more significant impact on their current students.

**Use of textbooks.** John and Elizabeth spoke about using their districts' textbooks. While Grace and Theresa did not speak out against textbooks, they never mentioned them when speaking about the books they used. Instead, they discussed individual novels or nonfiction. I did, however, see the use of an anthology in Grace's high school English class, as I would have expected. John criticized textbooks for their inappropriate reading levels and inaccurate content. Elizabeth insisted that there is so much more available that is specifically representative of the students' interests and

desires that she uses the technology she has in the classroom to access more culturally relevant materials.

#### **Research Question Four: CRP Practices and Intersection with Principles of CRP?**

In chapter two, I presented the CCCRP Framework (Appendix D). This table synthesizes the knowledge gained from researchers in the field of cultural responsiveness in the classroom and includes the most important characteristics that any culturally responsive teachers should espouse. While coding the raw data of transcripts, field-notes from classroom observations, and document analysis, I did not allow the characteristics in the CCCRP to confine the codes and themes. I provided in-depth descriptions of the most prominent CRP practices of the rural teachers in this study in answering the first three research questions. While many of the characteristics and practices of the teachers are identical to those presented in the chart, there are some substantive differences. In answering the fourth question, the practices of successful rural teachers presented in questions one through three above are compared and contrasted with the principles of CRP presented in the CCCRP.

I will discuss both the commonalities and differences of the teachers' characteristics as compared to the chart. The five characteristics are personal awareness and importance of cultural understanding; valuing diversity; altering instruction, curriculum, and assessments; culturally compatible classroom; and community relations. For each of these five characteristics and their accompanying components presented in the CCCRP, I will summarize the representative teacher descriptions already discussed in the previous questions. For those characteristics that have not been previously presented, I will respond more in-depth.

**Personal awareness and importance of cultural understanding.** John, Grace, Elizabeth, and Theresa showed signs of being reflective, self-analytical, and aware of where they have come from culturally. Their awareness of themselves allows them to understand how their own personal culture has effected who they are as people, and how this knowledge allows them to better understand their students who are also from distinct cultures. The teachers all spoke of understanding how the students' cultures, especially their socioeconomic status, affected their students in the classroom. Each teacher spoke of attempts to better understand their students by seeking guidance from their school counselors, meeting the students' families, and getting to know their students as individuals. This knowledge assisted these teachers in individually meeting the needs of their students.

**Valuing diversity.** While all four teachers provided evidence of valuing diversity, they did not all meet each component as presented in the CCCRP chart. The character components for this section are importance of building relationships; understanding students as cultural individuals; recognizing students' background and culture are assets to build upon; recognizing students' community is important in understanding their background; and recognizing diversity is present in every subject area.

**Importance of building relationships.** All four teachers believe in and enact the importance of building a relationship with their students. This component was a significant finding in this study as one of the most important aspects for all four teachers. Ample descriptions of how each of these teachers enacted this component are provided in the discussion for question three.

**Understanding students as cultural individuals.** These CRP nominated teachers recognize that their students are all cultural individuals and, as discussed above, respect the heritages from which these students come. The significant element discussed with this component is that while the teachers all respected the students as individuals, and respected the southern Appalachian culture and other cultures represented in their classes, not all of the teachers equally respected each of their student's familial cultures. As John so poignantly stated, "How can I respect [some parent's] lifestyle of selling drugs, choosing to live on welfare, and bringing their children up in this environment?"

**Recognizing students' community is important in understanding their background.** All four of the teachers either live in or are personally connected to their school's community. Grace is the only teacher of the four who does not live in the school's district, though she grew up in the district. Grace, John, Theresa, and Elizabeth all discussed the importance of the students' communities in their lives. When there is a community event, these teachers are generally present, seeing and being seen by their students. Three of the four frequent the same community businesses or churches, and often see current and past students who work in the community.

These four teachers are all intimately aware of the influence of the community on the school, as they spoke about the personal culture of the community in their students' lives. There was evidence of the teachers consistently using the students' personal experiences and lives in the community in their lessons, asking students questions that elicit deeper understanding of the students' lives. One teacher spoke of using interests of the students in math examples, and all of them utilized different aspects of their students'

cultures either through readings selected, examples chosen, or simply in discussions held in the class.

**Recognizing diversity is present in every subject area.** None of the teachers spoke specifically about the recognition of the presence of diversity in every subject area, though most spoke about diversity in the content area in which they taught. Diversity in any manner was not discussed, neither in a positive or negative manner. Unlike the research presented on urban classrooms regarding diversity in the classroom, the rural teachers in this study did not verbalize diversity in the rural classroom as a separate or unique concept.

**Altering instruction, curriculum, and assessments.** All four teachers amply differentiated their lessons based on the needs of their students. These needs may have been for cultural reasons, cognitive abilities, or simply recognized needs. Theresa and Elizabeth were special needs teachers, and therefore, differentiation of lessons, instruction, and assessment was second nature. John and Grace seem to understand the need to differentiate early in their teaching, as neither hesitated to alter assignments or lessons if the need arose, even in the midst of a lesson. John spoke of differentiating the assessment of assignments. While Grace did not mention altering the assessments themselves, she spoke of differentiating the setting of where she gave students their assessments as a result of the students not wishing to be seen as different than their student peers. All of the teachers spoke of upholding their expectations of each student, and that while these expectations themselves may be differentiated, the assignments set met the required expectations.

**Culturally compatible classroom.** John, Grace, Theresa, and Elizabeth all worked

towards creating a culturally compatible classroom including relationship building; students sharing culture and viewing others as culturally important; and removing bias and stereotypes from the classroom.

**Relationship building.** As fully described in question four, it is essential to all four teachers to personally build a relationship with each student. Relationship building between students in the classes is an extension of this. These teachers all used the word modeling in their discussion of the importance of creating an appropriate, compatible atmosphere. During my classroom observations, the students seemed very comfortable with one another. In most classes, there was an atmosphere of friendship and support. There appeared to be no problems with students sharing who they were and being themselves amongst the group. The observation field notes included comments such as, “Students seemed to know and understand each other well . . . There was familiarity and camaraderie; support and genuine care.”

There was some evidence of students’ willingness to share their personal culture either through their presence in the classroom or through classroom discussions stemming from the lesson of the day. Young mothers brought their babies to the school, usually to share the joy they felt over their child with friends, teachers, and staff at the school. Grace requested a student bring her baby into the class so that the student could take a test. A student came to school with no sleep after working a third shift waitressing job. Another student returned to school after a lengthy absence due to a jail sentence, speaking openly with his teacher about his desire to finish school and continue his education beyond high school. Students consistently shared opinions, likes, and dislikes. Students shared their lives.



In three out of the four teachers' classrooms, either through the interviews or my classroom observations, I saw no evidence of a student belittling another student's personal culture; though teachers did mention of this happening. During these times of sharing, times of struggle, or moments of possible discomfort, students were receptive and supportive. In one of Theresa's classes, the students were more competitive with one another and would make hurtful comments or facial expressions that were disrespectful. Theresa continually works with her students to express the need to be supportive of one another, to share that no one person is better than another, and to show that all people have something to contribute to the class, the school, and society. She believes she is making progress.

**Remove bias and stereotypes from classroom.** All of the teachers spoke about instances where they advocated for students who were being mistreated due to stereotypes or biases. In each instance, the teacher spoke of their immediate action to stop the negative behavior. Grace told of how she boldly and honestly talked with perpetrating students about the *ignorance* of their comments. In one case, several students were choosing a *Gothic* lifestyle in a time and place where being Gothic was not understood. Grace elaborated, "[It was] right after Columbine . . . the classroom [was] already dysfunctional." The class did not accept one of the male students in particular. They said, "He's a sick freak" to which Grace adamantly stated, "It is treating people like that that makes them a sick freak!" She says she remembers having a lengthy conversation, and though she doesn't "know if it helped or not, [she] definitely felt like he needed somebody to intervene honestly on his behalf." Grace says holding conversations such as these makes a difference for the kids in her classes who are

listening and are ready to understand a different point of view. “Not holding these conversations, however, helps no one,” she says.

**Community relations.** Separate from understanding how a community affects the students, discussed in Valuing Diversity above, community relations involved reaching out to the community and involving the parents and community at large in meaningful relationships and as educational partners. The components as stated in the CCCRP chart are developing school-community relationships; empowering parents as educational partners; and empowering the community as educational partners.

This characteristic was not integral to John, Grace, Elizabeth and Theresa’s cultural responsiveness. The teachers did not offer a significant amount of data regarding incorporating the community into their classes and did not speak about community relations. Each teacher spoke of the importance of involving students’ parents or guardians, and discussed their own roles as being the bridge between the parents/students’ home lives and school. All of the teachers spoke about the phone calls made to parents to inform them of their child’s performance, either for positive or negative feedback. John states he makes a phone call to each of the parents at least twice a semester, and sometimes more. Elizabeth and Theresa each spoke of the importance of the parent or guardian in their students’ IEP meetings, stating how parents at Rosenthal were present at these meetings in support of their children. This was an improvement in comparison with other schools in which they have taught.

Aside from reaching out to the parents or guardians regarding grades, IEP meetings, or the occasional behavior problems, the four teachers did not discuss much about parent or community involvement. John and Grace both commented that parental involvement

at the high school level is usually nonexistent. That is typical in most high schools. At the middle school level, Elizabeth and Theresa either did not have parent involvement, or they did not feel it essential to their classroom cultural responsiveness.

In this area, culturally responsive teachers often incorporate the community in the curriculum through educational projects and mentorships, either bringing community members into the school or sending students out to the community. This type of relationship was not discussed by any of the teachers in this study.

### **Summary**

The accounts of the four teachers presented in this study represent teachers who live the characteristics of culturally responsive teaching to varying degrees. Their teaching exemplifies care, high expectations based on the abilities of the students, the desire to build relationships with students, valuing students for the people they are and the cultures from which they come, respect, honesty and differentiation. Their willingness to openly advocate for their students is honorable and significant.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS**

This qualitative multiple case study informed by a phenomenological approach set out to provide a description of the phenomenon of CRP through the experiences of four CRP-nominated teachers practicing in diverse rural schools. My intention was to gain a deeper understanding of culturally responsive pedagogy in the rural environment and how rural teachers come to be culturally responsive. Through multiple open-ended interviews and focused classroom observations, I explored the teaching practices, student-teacher interactions, and classroom cultures of teachers identified as culturally responsive.

This chapter begins with a general discussion of the study's findings. The discussion pulls from the research outlined in Chapter Two, which supports the need for culturally responsive pedagogy in increasingly more diverse rural settings and provides a framework for looking at culturally responsive practice in the rural setting. This discussion also builds on chapter four, in which teacher interviews and observations provided rich data addressing the four research questions:

- 1) What are the experiences, attitudes, and beliefs of four CRP-nominated teachers working in a rural setting regarding CRP?
- 2) How did those experiences, attitudes, and beliefs develop?
- 3) What are the CRP practices of the four rural CRP-nominated?
- 4) How do the CRP practices of the four rural CRP-nominated teachers intersect with the principles of CRP?

The Characteristic Components of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CCCRP)

Framework (Appendix D) is used to guide the analysis of the data collected to answer

these four questions. The data both lends support to and challenges elements of the framework's theoretical representation of culturally responsive practice in a rural setting. Chapter Five concludes this study with a reflection of CRP research and significant contextual elements present and missing in the praxis of these four CRP-nominated teachers.

### **Significance of the Study**

The majority of CRP literature focuses on urban settings. This study is significant in that it examines four culturally responsive nominated teachers in a rural setting. Additionally, while the current literature recommends necessary CRP classroom practices, there is very little research that examines these recommendations in practice in the classroom, even in urban settings (Ball & Tyson). There is less research available on culturally responsive teachers in rural schools (Arnold et al., 2005; Cicchinelli, 2011). This study provides an in-depth analysis of the actual practices of four rural culturally responsive teachers and compares those practices with the existing literature. Through an in-depth analysis of four rural culturally responsive classroom teachers, I offer a unique perspective of culturally responsive pedagogy in action.

### **Discussion of Study Findings**

The research as presented illuminates current practices of four rural CRP-nominated teachers. Some of these practices support current research as it exists and is discussed in a general overview of the findings associated with each question. Other findings offer an additional viewpoint to existing literature and are discussed in relationship with current literature. Four additional viewpoints, as a result of this study are presented here as associated with each research question: 1) in response to question

one, and then discussed further in response to question four, care is an integral attitude necessary in cultural responsiveness, though it is not always mentioned in the CRP literature. While some may state that all teachers care, caring is not always present in the repertoire of all teachers; 2) in response to question two, according to these CRP-nominated teachers, the teacher education program was not integral to the development of their cultural responsiveness; 3) in response to question three, all four CRP-nominated teachers found themselves in situations where they felt it necessary to *break the rules* of the school culture; and 4) in response to question four, while the characteristic of developing community relations is present in the CCCR framework, the presence of developing and empowering these relationships is not supported by the data collected in this study.

**Important findings on questions one and two: The experiences, attitudes, and beliefs of effective CRP teachers in rural settings.** Several findings from this study merit further discussion in response to the first and second guiding questions. The first question guided the investigation of the experiences, attitudes, and beliefs of effective CRP-nominated teachers in rural settings. The second question asked how those experiences, attitudes, and beliefs developed. While the descriptions of all four CRP-nominated teachers detailed in chapter four highlight the experiences, attitudes, and beliefs of each individual teacher, each teacher in this study brings a slightly different viewpoint of what it means to be culturally responsive.

***Experiences.*** Not surprisingly, the CRP-nominated teachers in this study all brought different personal experiences with them to the classroom, influencing the kind of teachers they are today. My hope was to isolate some experiences that were similar

enough to inform their cultural responsiveness. A similarly shared type of experience was not evident from data collected in this study. Grace and Theresa were raised in very rural areas and were from working class backgrounds. Most of the families and children of their area were also from these same types of families, with very little diversity as far as socioeconomic status, race, and culture were concerned. John and Elizabeth, on the other hand, were from middle to upper middle class families, raised in a suburban setting, with a more diverse population, especially once in high school. Elizabeth, Grace, John, and Theresa had experiences that either positively or negatively affected how they viewed education, religion, or life in general, but no experiences that were profoundly similar enough to make a general statement on their cultural responsiveness.

All of the CRP-nominated teachers were reflective about their lives, their teaching, how their schools are managed, how students are treated, and most importantly how they treated students. Essential to their growth was the importance they placed on either outside reading or additional courses/professional development to gain deeper insights into their profession, their students, and their abilities to meet their students' needs. All four either are currently taking or have taken courses to further their teaching licenses or to further their knowledge base. In looking at their resumes, all four have taken on leadership roles in their schools, continually striving to improve themselves as people and educators.

***Attitudes and beliefs.*** While there may not have been specific shared experiences illuminating cultural responsiveness, the four CRP-nominated teachers in the study did share similar attitudes and beliefs. Analyzing the codes from the interviews, observations, and document reviews, most of these teachers shared the top ten codes,

though with a few outliers. These codes are indicative of their most important attitudes and beliefs about their teaching and their students. When totaling all of the codes, the most frequently used codes were caring, expectations, building relationships with students, knowing what students need, recognizing others' cultures, respect, differentiation, honesty/being realistic with students, treating students fairly, and creating a positive classroom environment. Care, discussed in detail later, was not a separate characteristic presented in the CCCRP framework used to guide the study, though this research supports its importance to the concept of CRP. Tables 9, 10 and 11 show a side-by-side comparison of these characteristics.

Elizabeth deviated from these top ten codes in that she held social justice and the importance of parents and community relationships (ninth and tenth ranked) as more important than her being honest with her students. Important to recognize also is Grace's deviation from the top ten by her eighth highest code of seeing the students' cultures as assets to be built upon, the only one of the teachers who outwardly stated this as an important aspect of her purpose in teaching. For Theresa, the importance of social justice in the equal treatment of students and understanding the effects of socioeconomic status on students' abilities to perform ranked ninth and tenth respectively, before respect for students. Interestingly, both Elizabeth and Theresa teach at the same school and both spoke of instances where students were not treated equally and fairly. Thus, as culturally responsive teachers, social justice would be held as an important belief for them. Figure 2, presented in chapter four, provides a visual understanding of the teachers' ranking of the top codes, extended to thirteen to include the top ten for each teacher.