Elementary Teachers' Experiences with Applications of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

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ABSTRACT

Culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) has been widely promoted as an equity-centered instructional framework; however, limited research has examined how elementary teachers understand, enact, and sustain CRP within contemporary classroom contexts marked by sociopolitical constraint. This narrative inquiry explored the lived experiences of eight fourth- and fifth-grade teachers working in Title I and non—Title I schools to examine how culturally relevant pedagogy was learned, interpreted, and implemented in practice. Guided by Ladson-Billings's framework of academic success, cultural competence, and critical consciousness, the study centered teachers' narratives to illuminate how CRP functioned as a lived and meaning-making practice rather than a prescribed set of strategies. Findings revealed that while collaborators expressed strong moral commitment to equity and student success, preparation related to CRP within teacher education and professional development was inconsistent and often minimal. As a result, culturally relevant pedagogy was often enacted through fragmented, surface-level practices rather than as a comprehensive pedagogical framework. Teachers' meaning making processes were shaped by identity, belief systems, and political context, with many describing fear, hesitation, and professional isolation when engaging issues of race, culture, and equity. Five cross-case themes emerged, highlighting representation as literacy empowerment, community integration, critical dialogue as civic engagement, belief in students' unlimited potential, and the role of teacher identity and spiritual commitment in sustaining CRP. The findings highlight the need for systemic support, collaborative professional learning, and intentional leadership to sustain culturally relevant pedagogy as a shared instructional responsibility.

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DEDICATION

To my parents:

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Chapter I

Introduction

Overview

Race, racism, culture, and diversity have had long-lasting impacts on U.S. society and continue to influence how individuals experience educational institutions and opportunities. Understanding how racialized structures shape daily life is especially important in education, where schooling has historically functioned as both a site of learning and a mechanism for reinforcing inequity. Racism has produced persistent consequences for marginalized populations, including exclusion from equitable access to resources, discriminatory practices, and the denial of full participation in social institutions (Bonilla-Silva, 1997; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). These inequities have continued through systemic and institutional forms of oppression that shape academic experiences and educational outcomes for students of color (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Milner, 2012). As a result, advancing equity and social justice remains an urgent responsibility for educators and institutions, particularly when prior instructional practices have reflected dominant cultural assumptions that limited the academic progress of students from historically marginalized communities (Chapman et al., 2013).

Students' academic performance and school engagement are influenced not only by curriculum and instruction but also by whether learning environments communicate a sense of belonging, affirmation, and cultural relevance. When classroom experiences minimize or disregard students' identities, learners may internalize messages of marginalization that undermine confidence and academic self-efficacy, which can

negatively influence motivation and achievement outcomes (Bandura, 1997; Steele, 1997). Consequently, culturally responsive teaching is often framed as a critical approach for improving educational experiences and reducing opportunity gaps for students of color (Gay, 2018). One widely cited framework is culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP), which emphasizes academic success, cultural competence, and critical consciousness as central goals of teaching and learning (Ladson-Billings, 1995). CRP requires educators to engage students' cultural knowledge and lived experiences as assets in the learning process rather than treating culture as peripheral to academic instruction (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Research has further suggested that developing equitable learning environments requires collaborative work across school stakeholders, including teachers, administrators, and district leadership, to address systemic inequities and improve outcomes for historically underserved student populations (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011; McVee, 2014).

Despite the strong theoretical and practical arguments supporting culturally relevant education, scholarship has also noted limitations in the depth of empirical research focused on how teachers understand and enact CRP in daily practice. Aronson and Laughter (2016) stated that there is "a sufficient body of research" that supports culturally relevant education in classrooms. However, they also noted the limited research on the impact of culturally relevant education as an instructional pedagogy. Similarly, Rowan et al. (2021) indicated that the literature on teachers working with diverse student populations is comprehensive in scope but inadequate in depth and insight. Redding (2019) further demonstrated this gap by analyzing articles published between 2016 and 2021 in the Review of Educational Research and identified only one study that examined

teachers' perceptions of culturally relevant practices. The apparent dearth of research on teachers' experiences implementing CRP underscored the need for this study.

Given the need for a deeper understanding of teacher experiences with CRP, a qualitative narrative inquiry approach is appropriate for exploring how educators describe and interpret their instructional practices and professional meaning-making. Narrative inquiry centers participants' accounts of experience and allows researchers to examine how individuals construct and communicate meaning through storytelling (Merriam,

2002). Prior scholarship has demonstrated the value of teacher narratives for understanding culturally relevant teaching. Ladson-Billings (2009) shared stories from teachers who discussed their experiences working with students of color. Similarly, Delpit (2006) used educator-centered accounts to highlight how teachers' perspectives shape classroom interactions and student learning experiences. These scholars illustrated how teacher voices can clarify the lived complexity of teaching students of color, including challenges, beliefs, instructional decisions, and reflections on equity and cultural responsiveness. Therefore, narrative inquiry was used to address the following research questions:

RQI: What are fourth- and fifth-grade teachers' experiences learning, using, and assessing CRP and its place in the learning environment in which they work?

RQ2: What meanings do participants ascribe to their experiences that contribute to their beliefs and practices related to CRP?

RQ3: How do fourth and fifth-grade teachers apply the meaning they make of their experiences when engaging with others?

Prior to being selected for the study, participants underwent a screening process to ensure they understood their role and the purpose of the study. Participants were interviewed three times following Seidman's (2019) suggested structure. Each interview session lasted approximately 90 minutes, totaling at least 270 minutes per participant. However, participants were asked to attend a fourth interview if more stories or data were needed. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed using MAXQDA, and analysis followed Seidman's (2019) protocol for organizing excerpts, identifying patterns, and synthesizing meaning across participant accounts. Coding procedures were guided by

Saldaña's (2016) recommendations for selecting analytic methods aligned with qualitative designs, including in vivo and values coding to capture participants' language and clarify beliefs, attitudes, and interpretations related to CRP. Findings are presented first in Chapter 4 as narratives that tell participants' firsthand experiences with CRP and, secondly, in Chapter 5 as a cross-case summary of the themes found across participants' stories.

Introduction

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2021) reported that 52.7% of students enrolled in K-12 educational institutions were identified as students of color (i.e., non-White), indicating that current classrooms are diverse in culture, race, and ethnicity. In contrast, the teaching population during the reporting period was 79% White (NCES, 2021). These data suggest that many teachers differ from their students in terms of cultural, racial, and/or ethnic backgrounds. Hawkins-Jones and Reeves (2020) reported that some White teachers have inadequate practice with identifying, modeling, and implementing appropriate levels of cultural competence in the classroom due to these

differences. They further concluded that these factors contribute to the disparities in academic success in students of color. To combat the cultural disconnect between students and teachers, researchers have concluded that CRP should be used in classrooms (Adams & Glass, 2018; Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011; Cooper, 2003). This study was situated within this body of scholarship and examined CRP as an important consideration in contemporary educational practice. Chapter 1 presents the background, purpose, significance, and research questions that provide the foundation for the study.

Background of Study

Ladson-Billings (1995) introduced culturally relevant pedagogy as an equitycentered approach. This framework emerged from her ethnographic research with successful teachers of African American students, in which she recognized the need for an educational approach that valued students' cultural backgrounds and addressed persistent inequities in schooling. Ladson-Billings argued that dominant models of teaching often position African American students as deficient and fail to recognize the cultural strengths they bring to the classroom (Ladson-Billings, 1995). In contrast, culturally relevant pedagogy was framed as "a pedagogy of opposition . . . specifically committed to collective, not merely individual, empowerment" (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 160). To accomplish this purpose, she identified three interrelated criteria: (a) students must experience academic success, (b) develop and maintain cultural competence, and (c) cultivate a critical consciousness that enables them to recognize and challenge social inequities (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Culturally relevant pedagogy is grounded in integrating academic success, cultural competence, and critical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Academic

success refers to students' learning and progress during the school year. When teachers vary their instruction to meet each student's needs while allowing students to demonstrate understanding in multiple ways, student achievement and success increase (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Cultural competence involves students' ability to remain centered in their own culture while also learning about another culture. Understanding cultural competence supports students' ability to view the world through different perspectives (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Ladson-Billings (2009) conducted a study with eight exceptional teachers to highlight and share their extensive success with African American students. Using narrative inquiry to share their stories, she emphasized the importance of cultural competence, stating, "Cultural competence was an important source of connection between the teachers and their students" (p. xi). This observation suggests that teachers should encourage and celebrate student diversity while also providing opportunities for students to learn about and explore the cultures and identities of others.

Critical consciousness occurs when a student draws on both school-based knowledge and knowledge gained from lived experiences outside of school to analyze and resolve real-world problems (Achilleos et al., 2021). Ladson-Billings (1995), drawing on Freire's concept of conscientização, emphasized that culturally relevant pedagogy must cultivate students' ability not only to achieve academically but also to critically examine and challenge social inequities. Achilleos et al. (2021) further emphasized critical consciousness as a multi-stage process involving reflection, political efficacy, and action, underscoring its role in preparing learners to engage meaningfully with issues of justice and transformation. Ladson-Billings noted that without these three core elements in classrooms, teachers are not practicing CRP pedagogy.

Furthermore, Ladson-Billings (1995, 2009) posited that CRP should be used to counteract the ongoing inequities students of color experience, particularly when compared to their White peers, who have historically benefited from greater access to resources, opportunities, and equitable schooling conditions. Therefore, the use of CRP remains essential for supporting the achievement of all students. However, implementation of these pedagogical elements continues to fall short among many teachers (Mason, 2017). Ladson-Billings (2009) indicated that although not all teachers lack adequate knowledge and understanding of CRP, the vast majority are not well versed in this pedagogy. Ladson-Billings (2018) further argued that many teachers were focused on the curriculum rather than on CRP instructional practices that could foster higher levels of proficiency among students of color.

In a systematic review of the literature on teacher preparation programs (TPPs), Rowan et al. (2021) noted that there were insufficient systematic reviews that specifically addressed how TPPs could properly prepare prospective teachers to work with diverse learners. The researchers analyzed 429 articles identified as supporting future teachers with proper coursework to assist with teaching culturally diverse populations. Out of the 429 articles analyzed, 209 articles focused on "teaching about" and "catering to" diversity, rather than focusing on "teaching for diversity." These findings support the need for further research in this area to promote and support the learning of students of color.

The lack of teachers' knowledge of CRP must be recognized if adequate instructional practices are to be implemented to positively impact students. Ladson-Billings (1995, 2009) suggested that teachers reflect on their own experiences and

interactions with students. These reflective processes may enhance and shift instructional practices to encompass and support diverse students in their classrooms. Several scholars have identified barriers to CRP implementation, including limited emphasis within TPPS, teacher bias, and inadequate support within school environments (Endo, 2015; Kumar et al., 2015; Sleeter, 2016). In two separate studies critiquing the effectiveness of TPPs' support, or lack thereof, for working with and teaching students of color, Sleeter (2016) and Bissonnette (2016) both reported that although many TPPs do require one or two diversity courses, the actual learning that takes place is not sufficient for preservice teachers to build relationships and effectively teach students of color.

Bissonnette further explained how these same programs focused on her definition of "niceness," which she believed equated to "whiteness." This "whiteness" was detrimental to preservice teachers, as their thinking of "whiteness" aligned with the problematic, systemic beliefs that did not address race in its entirety. In other words, they were trained to "be nice" by overlaying the behavioral expectations shared by the majority of White people onto their interactions with students. Doing so essentially ignored the contributions and value that students of color could contribute to their classrooms. The paucity of CRP has resulted in a lack of ability to connect, build relationships, and effectively teach diverse students in today's classrooms (Borreroo et al., 2018; Edwards & Kuhlman, 2007; Endo, 2015).

In a qualitative case study, Borreroo et al. (2018) interviewed 13 preservice and inservice teachers to understand their thoughts on CRP and their experiences and opinions regarding inequities in public education when working with students of color. Although participants recognized the importance of CRP, many reported challenges with

implementation (Borreroo et al., 2018). Similarly, Sleeter (2001) reviewed 80 studies identifying how TPPs prepared teachers to work in multicultural classroom settings and concluded that a majority of the preservice teachers who identified as White gained more insight into effective teaching when they underwent field experiences where they interacted with students of color and were introduced to communities that were culturally different from their own. Sleeter further found that these field-based learning opportunities were frequently more influential than diversity courses that relied primarily on textbook instruction. From this research, it became apparent that changes were needed in TPPs to ensure that new teachers were equipped to appropriately teach and address students of color. This report was presented almost 25 years ago, and to date, Keles (2025) study confirmed that the need still exists. Specifically, changing college requirements to include more coursework on diversity, along with additional hands-on opportunities for preservice teachers to work with students of color, could enhance TPP's training and benefit both new teachers and future students.

Teacher bias has also been identified as a factor that can impede effective CRP implementation. Valencia (1997) introduced one form of teacher bias as deficit thinking, which he defined as "…the idea that students, particularly of low-SES background and of color, fail in school because they and their families have internal defects, or deficits, that thwart the learning process" (p. 134). In a study by Kumar et al. (2015), the researchers reported that teachers' biases negatively affected students through both deficit and inferior thinking. Their study included 241 teachers, and data were collected on their implicit biases and beliefs. An Implicit Association Test and a follow-up survey were used to collect and analyze data regarding personal biases. Findings suggest that teachers'

classroom behavior was influenced by conscious or subconscious biases. These biases contributed to students' self-perceptions, leading to "self-fulfilling prophecies" that negatively impact their achievement (Borman et al., 2021, p. 2). Kumar et al. suggested that classroom teachers require deep, self-reflective practices that allow them to identify and address personal attitudes and beliefs regarding students of color, thus minimizing unequal treatment of students of color and preferential treatment of White students. Their research not only helped establish the background of this study but also supported the idea that teacher bias plays a significant role in the treatment of students of color in the classroom and contributes to other obstacles that hinder teachers' ability to implement CRP.

Other hindering factors of CRP include a lack of supportive curricula, time constraints, limited professional development opportunities, and marginal comfort with the pedagogy and attendant instructional strategies (Endo, 2015; Martell & Stevens, 2018; Ukpokodu, 2011). According to Schenke et al. (2017) and Ukpokodu (2011), the absence of understanding the three elements of CRP (academic success, cultural competence, and critical consciousness) results in confusion about how and what to include in instructional practices. Toppel (2015) explained that the focus on CRP was paramount because this pedagogy supports inclusive instructional practices that represent culturally diverse student populations and increases the engagement and achievement of students of color in learning environments. Similarly, Sampson and Garrison-Wade (2011) demonstrated how these experiences and lessons were relatable to students and had positive implications for student learning. Overall, existing scholarship provides

substantial support for the importance of CRP and the continued need to examine barriers that limit its implementation. This foundation informed the purpose of the present study.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of both White and nonWhite fourth- and fifth-grade teachers from non-Title I and Title I schools to develop an understanding of their experiences with and perceptions of CRP. Exploring these teachers' experiences with learning CRP, incorporating it as an instructional strategy, and observing events arising from its implementation in their classes supported the development of narrative accounts that made participants' meaning-making accessible to educators seeking to apply CRP in their own classrooms. As social justice issues have become more prevalent in U.S. society and increasingly politicized within public discourse, it has become imperative that CRP is reflected not only in curriculum decisions but also in instructional practices within K—12 classrooms.

Significance

This study provided a deeper understanding of the underlying hesitance to implement CRP and of CRP implementation success, based on teachers' experiences and perceptions of this practice. The interviews with White teachers and teachers of color yielded findings that informed recommendations for instructional and policy improvements, presented in Chapter 6. These findings contributed preliminary evidence to address the persistent gaps in CRP implementation and offered implications for improving educational outcomes for students of color. The study also identified additional barriers to CRP implementation that have been less frequently documented in prior research.

Additionally, the study supported preservice and in-service teachers by providing information on CRP applications that may influence the classroom experiences of students of color. Research shows that CRP has been linked to positive social and academic outcomes for students (Toppel, 2015). CRP has been instrumental in creating a positive learning environment for all students and teachers when implemented fully and appropriately (Adams & Glass, 2018; Hawkins-Jones & Reeves, 2020; Ladson-Billings, 2009). Understanding teachers' experiences with CRP implementation and their subsequent beliefs about this pedagogy may deepen understanding of how CRP is (or is not) supported in classroom settings.

Through the discovery, analysis, and sharing of narratives from teachers who implemented CRP, this study may offer manageable, accessible strategies that educators can apply to strengthen culturally responsive learning environments where all children can succeed. Relevant literature indicates that culturally relevant pedagogy is a beneficial instructional practice (Haven, 2021; Sampson & Garrison-Wade, 2011). What is less clear is why CRP is not being implemented consistently among schools across our nation. Given the limited scope of CRP implementation research, there remains a gap in understanding the conditions that support or prevent CRP from producing positive effects across diverse groups of students. Consistent and intentional implementation of CRP may help provide the educational system and its students with stronger and more equitable learning experiences aligned with the promises of U.S. education (Gay & Kirkland, 2003).

Research Questions

The central focus of this study is based on the following research questions:

RQI: What are fourth- and fifth-grade teachers' experiences learning, using, and assessing CRP and its place in the learning environment in which they work?

RQ2: What meanings do participants ascribe to their experiences that contribute to their beliefs and practices related to CRP?

RQ3: How do fourth and fifth-grade teachers apply the meaning they make of their experiences when engaging with others?

Definition of Terms

Academic Success: Academic success refers to students' progress and achievement in school and is a core component of culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2009).

Cultural Competence: Cultural competence is the ability to remain grounded in one's own culture while learning about and respecting other cultures (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2009).

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP): Culturally relevant pedagogy is an equity-centered approach to teaching that promotes academic success, cultural competence, and critical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2009).

Critical Consciousness: Critical consciousness refers to learners' ability to analyze inequity and apply knowledge to understand and challenge social conditions (Achilleos et al., 2021; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Deficit Thinking: Deficit thinking is the belief that students—particularly students of color and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds—struggle academically due to internal "deficits" rather than structural inequities (Valencia, 1997).

Implicit Bias: Implicit bias refers to unconscious beliefs that can influence educators' perceptions, behaviors, and instructional decisions toward students (Borman et al., 2021; Kumar et al., 2015).

Narrative Inquiry: Narrative inquiry is a qualitative research approach that examines lived experiences through participants' stories and meaning-making (Merriam, 2002).

Self-Fulfilling Prophecy: A self-fulfilling prophecy occurs when expectations influence behavior in ways that reinforce the expected academic outcomes (Borman et al., 2021).

Teacher Preparation Programs (TPPs): Teacher preparation programs are educator training programs intended to develop preservice teachers' instructional knowledge and readiness to teach diverse student populations (Rowan et al., 2021; Sleeter, 2016).

Title I School: A Title I school is a public school that receives federal funding to support the academic achievement of students from low-income communities (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2021).

Non-Title I School: A non-Title I school is a public school that does not receive Title I federal funding and is often compared with Title I schools for contextual differences in schooling environments (NCES, 2021).

Students of Color: Students of color refers to non-White student populations in U.S. K—12 educational settings (NCES, 2021).

Summary

Chapter 1 established the background, purpose, and significance of this study by introducing the focus of the study, which was teachers' perceptions of culturally relevant pedagogy and the research questions that framed the inquiry. These components emphasized the critical need to examine how educators conceptualize and enact CRP within their professional practice. To provide the theoretical grounding for this work, Chapter 2 introduces the conceptual framework, drawing on Ladson-Billings' theory of culturally relevant pedagogy and related critical perspectives that shape the analysis.

Chapter II

Literature Review

Overview

As introduced in Chapter 1, this study explored the experiences of fourth- and fifth-grade teachers learning, using, and assessing culturally relevant pedagogy across Title I and non-Title I school settings, with attention to how teachers interpreted CRP and described its role in their classroom learning environments (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2009). CRP has been positioned as an equity-centered pedagogical approach that supports academic success, cultural competence, and critical consciousness for diverse learners, particularly students of color (Ladson-Billings, 1995). At the same time, scholars have noted that although support for culturally relevant education is substantial, research examining teachers' experiences of implementation and meaning-making has remained comparatively limited, underscoring the need for studies that center on educators' perspectives (Aronson & Laughter, 2016; Rowan et al., 2021).

Chapter 2 introduces the theoretical framework that guided the study, with attention to critical race theory (CRT) and culturally relevant pedagogy as the primary concepts shaping the analysis. Next, the chapter presents a review of the historical development and core tenets of CRP to build conceptual grounding for the study. The discussion synthesizes scholarship across three recurring areas that influence CRP implementation: teacher preparation programs and professional development, teachers' implicit and explicit biases and beliefs, and instructional practices aligned with CRP.

Collectively, these areas provide a foundation for examining the conditions that support or constrain teachers' use of CRP and contextualize the research questions guiding this study.

Theoretical Framework: Critical Race Theory and Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Critical race theory (CRT) and culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) served as the theoretical frameworks for this study and together formed the conceptual framework, with CRT providing a lens for examining structural inequity and CRP informing how culturally responsive teaching was understood in practice. A conceptual framework provides the necessary scaffolding for a study, clarifying how the researcher makes sense of the phenomenon under investigation (Maxwell, 2013; Ravitch & Riggan, 2016). Ravitch and Riggins (2016) described conceptual frameworks as both a process and a product. Conceptual frameworks require researchers to integrate theory, prior scholarship, and experiential knowledge in order to construct a coherent foundation for inquiry. Similarly, Maxwell (2013) emphasized that conceptual frameworks consist of "the concept, assumptions, expectations, beliefs, and theories" (p. 39) that guide every aspect of the research design. Taken together, these perspectives highlight that a conceptual framework is not a static outline but a dynamic structure that links the research problem, theoretical traditions, and methodological choices.

The conceptual framework is especially important in qualitative narrative inquiry because it relies on the interpretation of stories, experiences, and identities, which requires a framework to provide coherence and structure (Ravitch & Riggins, 2016). A theoretically grounded conceptual framework strengthens the analysis by ensuring that participants' stories are interpreted through established scholarly lenses rather than

treated as isolated accounts (Maxwell, 2013). Because this study centered on teachers' lived experiences and meaning-making related to culturally relevant pedagogy, the conceptual framework aligned directly with the study's narrative design. Maxwell (2013) noted that conceptual frameworks connect the researcher's guiding assumptions and theories to the study's design, ensuring that the research process remains consistent with both its theoretical grounding and its qualitative design.

To fully grasp the importance of CRT, it is necessary to understand its meaning and implications for student education in American schools. CRT is a theory that explains how race, racism, and power are intertwined and create racial inequality for people of color in society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Howard, 2010). In contrast, CRP is an instructional practice that embodies how teachers include multiple facets of their students, such as race, language, community, and family, and use these differences to add value to learning in the classroom (Howard, 2010). Although CRT and CRP are distinct, they are often positioned together in educational research because CRT helps explain how structural inequities shape schooling experiences, while CRP offers a pedagogical approach to supporting equity through culturally responsive instructional practices (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Critical Race Theory

CRT emerged from the convergence of two related fields: liberal civil rights and critical legal studies (West et al., 1995). This intersection laid the early groundwork for CRT as a framework for examining how law, power, and race shape social inequities. Drawing on Bell's (1995) scholarship, CRT was used to challenge traditional Eurocentric assumptions that have historically contributed to the marginalization of disenfranchised

populations. Bell specifically focused on the discrepancies between legal and civil rights pertaining to people of color, arguing that racism persisted despite claims that U.S. institutions treated all people equally. Over time, Bell's foundational ideas were expanded by other scholars and applied more directly to schooling, leading to what is commonly described as CRT in education. Both CRT and CRT in education are used and explained in this study.

As CRT evolved, scholars such as Delgado and Stefancic (2017) articulated six foundational tenets that further define the theory and shape its application across disciplines, including education. These tenets serve as the backbone of CRT and illuminate how race and racism are deeply embedded in the fabric of American life. The first tenet is that racism is ordinary, not aberrational. It is not a rare or isolated event, but a common, everyday experience for people of color (Banaji et al., 2021). This means that systemic racism must be understood as deeply rooted, rather than the result of historical misconceptions. In schools, this manifests in routine disparities in discipline, academic tracking, and curriculum representation (Ahn, 2023).

Second, CRT emphasizes interest convergence, the idea that gains for racial justice only occur when they align with the interests of White people in power. This tenet helps explain why educational reforms benefiting students of color often receive support only when they serve broader institutional or political goals (Bracey, 2023).

Third, CRT asserts that race is a social construct, not a biological fact. Although race has no genetic basis, it carries real-life consequences because society assigns meaning and value to skin color and physical features. In education, this is seen in how

teachers and administrators interpret student behavior, language, or achievement based on perceived racial identity.

Fourth, the tenet of differential racialization highlights how society racializes different minority groups in varying ways across time, depending on economic, political, or social needs. For example, Au (2022) noted that during periods of labor shortages or national security concerns, groups such as Latinx or Asian American communities have been portrayed alternately as threats or assets. These shifting narratives can influence how students from these backgrounds are perceived and treated in schools.

Fifth, CRT emphasizes intersectionality and anti-essentialism, recognizing that people's identities are shaped by multiple factors such as race, gender, class, and sexuality. No person of color is defined solely by their race, and educators must consider the complexity of their students' identities when designing inclusive curriculum and pedagogy (Zhang & Gao, 2024).

Lastly, CRT values the unique voice of people of color, asserting that they have a lived experience with racism that gives them a critical perspective often missing from dominant narratives. This tenet legitimizes storytelling and counter-narratives as valid forms of knowledge that challenge traditional academic discourse. In the context of education, it supports practices that affirm student identity and encourage critical dialogue about justice and inequality. Together, these six tenets provide a comprehensive framework for understanding how race and power operate in schools and society. They extend Bell's foundational insights and offer a more nuanced lens for examining structural inequities that impact students of color every day. The literature demonstrated how CRT provides a framework for understanding historical racism and the long-lasting

impact is has on students of color. This study allowed for exploration on how teachers were able to interpret CRP based on the inequitable framework.

Critical Race Theory in Education

While CRT was being debated and expanded across disciplines, scholars such as Ladson-Billings and Tate contributed to the movement by examining how race functioned within educational systems. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) argued that race had been severely undertheorized in education, even though it shaped many of the disparities experienced by students of color. Building on the work of Bell (1995), Crenshaw (1991), and Delgado and Stefancic (2017), Ladson-Billings and Tate highlighted how structural inequities in schooling continue to disadvantage Black and Brown students relative to their White peers. As CRT became more widely applied, researchers in education defined it as a theory that examines the inequitable treatment of disenfranchised populations, as evidenced by overtly bigoted actions in U.S. school systems (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011; Mette et al., 2016). CRT in education, therefore, demonstrates how culture and race influence the quality of education that students of color receive.

CRT in education is composed of three primary tenets: (a) race as a factor in inequity, (b) U.S. society is based on property rights (interest convergence), and (c) the intersection of race and property creates an analytical tool for understanding social inequity (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Race as a factor of inequity has been discussed as being an untheorized phenomenon due to the challenge of race and racism being accurately acknowledged, along with the lack of importance that society has shown (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Yet, society has used race to classify, categorize, and limit opportunities for people of color since 1916 (Ladson-

Billings & Tate, 1995). Although inequity has also affected other groups, such as those marginalized by gender and class, these experiences have often received broader theoretical recognition, leaving race insufficiently addressed. Ladson-Billings and Tate explained that race-based inequity is clearly visible in school systems.

National data based on dropout and suspension rates clearly show the disproportionate percentages when comparing students of color to White students. In 2022, the dropout rate was 7.9% for Hispanic students, 5.7% for Black students, and 1.9% for Asian students, compared to 4.3% for White students (NCES, 2022). Likewise, in 2020—21, out-of-school suspension rates were 6.4% for Black students, 2.7% for Hispanic students, and 0.5% for Asian students, compared to 2.2% for White students (Howard, 2010; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; NCES, 2023). These disparities illustrate why race must be considered central rather than peripheral in educational analysis. Race as a factor of inequity also challenges the narrative of a meritocratic system that claims to reward effort and ability equally. Delgado and Stefancic (2017) argued that racism is not an aberration but an ordinary, ingrained feature of American society, which makes it difficult to address because it has become normalized. This ordinariness means that discriminatory outcomes are often viewed as inevitable rather than systemic. In education, this results in normalized disparities in funding (Lafortune & Schonholzer, 2024), access to experienced teachers (Kini & Darling-Hammond, 2020), and academic expectations (Santiago-Rosario et al., 2021). CRT, therefore, urges educators and scholars to move beyond surface-level explanations of underachievement and examine how institutionalized racism maintains these gaps. Schools are not neutral spaces; rather, CRT

frames them as racialized institutions that reproduce social stratification under the guise of equity and standards.

U.S. society, being based on property rights, also known as interest convergence, was explained by Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) as the second tenet and a form of injustice in which society had valued property rights over human rights. Historically, property rights were not allotted to people of color, and owning property also included humans as slaves. This description was further transformed into the concept of interest convergence. Interest convergence is a construct of CRT where "racism advances the interests of both white elites and working-class whites" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, p. 39), coupled with the idea that "racial equality will be accommodated only when that interest converges with the interests of Whites in policy-making positions" (Dixon et al., 2017, p. 9). This suggests that certain policies, including those related to education, may be enacted in ways that appear supportive of students of color but ultimately preserve the interests of dominant White groups.

Dixon et al. (2017) best explained this tenet with an example from Bell's (1995) interpretation of Brown v. Board of Education (1954). Bell explained how this law to end segregation was implemented after multiple cases were brought by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), which suggested that White society was an ally in the fight to end injustice in the school system. However, he noted that this controversial issue was only a topic when White society needed to change its stance on people of color, based on reports of Ku Klux Klan (KKK) raids, police murders, and lynching. This example shows how interest convergence has been used in society.

This tenet compels educators and scholars to consider who truly benefits from educational reforms or diversity initiatives. CRT scholars have noted that programs aimed at "equity" are often embraced when they align with White stakeholders' political or economic interests (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). For instance, integration through school choice or charter programs has been framed as progress, but these initiatives often result in resegregation by socioeconomic status, selective admissions, or other gatekeeping practices. These actions preserve privilege while appearing inclusive. Thus, CRT unveils how educational decisions can mask racial inequity under the pretense of reform.

The intersection of race and property combines the first two tenets to explain how inequity becomes embedded in educational practice. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) explained that this intersection can be observed when students are recognized for conforming to societal norms, such as speaking the "King's English." For example, a teacher may reward a student with treats or stickers for speaking proper English.

However, if the student speaks Ebonics, they are corrected, and the proper language is modeled for repetition. Ladson-Billings and Tate also emphasized that inequity becomes visible when comparing schools, where Title I schools and schools in marginalized communities often have less access to resources, facilities, and instructional materials than schools serving more affluent populations (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

Delgado and Stefancic (2017) further explained that the intersection of race and property can be understood as the privileging of Whiteness itself as a form of property, tied to control over resources, decision-making, and cultural capital. Whiteness functions not only as a racial identity but also as a legal and social construct that confers rights,

expectations, and authority. In schools, this is evident in curriculum choices, disciplinary practices, and language norms that reward cultural conformity to White middle-class standards. Students of color are often stripped of their linguistic and cultural assets, while White cultural practices are normalized and rewarded. CRT calls attention to how these inequities are not accidental but embedded in policies and practices that continue to marginalize students of color. Through the lens of CRT in education, CRP has been widely positioned as a pedagogical response that may disrupt inequitable schooling practices by affirming students' cultural identities and expanding access to equitable learning opportunities (Ladson-Billings, 1995). It is with this understanding of CRT in education that provided the perspective to see how participants were able to bridge their CRP implementation experiences that were aligned to the second research question of this study. The literature presented on CRT in education further explored how race impacted students of color in schools. This study allowed for exploration of how teachers use CRP as a way to address these issues. Thus, the second major component of this study's theoretical framework centers on the foundational principles of CRP.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Resolving the issue of inequity in education between White, mainstream students and students of color has historically been an area of concern since Plessy v. Ferguson (1896), Brown v. Board of Education (1954), and as recently as 1971, when schools in Durham, North Carolina, were still segregated after segregation had been ruled against the law. Inclusionary practice initiatives were introduced to relieve students of color and ensure an equal, high-quality education. However, issues of culture and race have continued to be reminders of a shackled heritage where students of color continue to

struggle daily in classrooms. Theorists and researchers such as Banks (2001), Gay (2000), Howard (2010), and Ladson-Billings (1995) have studied, introduced, and discussed various frameworks and strategies to contest previous and current inequities. Specifically, this section addresses the purpose and significance of culturally relevant pedagogy and explains how CRP informed the questions posed to participants and shaped the interpretation of study findings.

Culturally relevant pedagogy gained prominence in scholarship on Black education when Ladson-Billings (1995) argued for equitable instructional experiences for students of color. CRP has been identified as advantageous to students of color because it merges students' authentic and genuine lived experiences with their learning experiences" (Hawkins-Jones & Reeves, 2020, p. 41). As Ladson-Billings explained, this pedagogy is supported by three tenets that assist students of color in the classroom: (a) academic success, (b) cultural competence, and (c) critical consciousness. Academic success is a concept in which teachers help students take ownership of their learning and choose to succeed and achieve in the classroom. Cultural competence is described as enabling students of color to maintain their cultural identity and integrity while teachers include students' home cultures in the classroom. For example, understanding that language and socio-economic status should be considered when teaching diverse student populations. Finally, critical consciousness provides students with opportunities to analyze the injustices and inequities in daily life (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Ladson-Billings (1995) explained that educators must be open-minded and accept responsibility for the proper implementation of CRP and its influence on education,

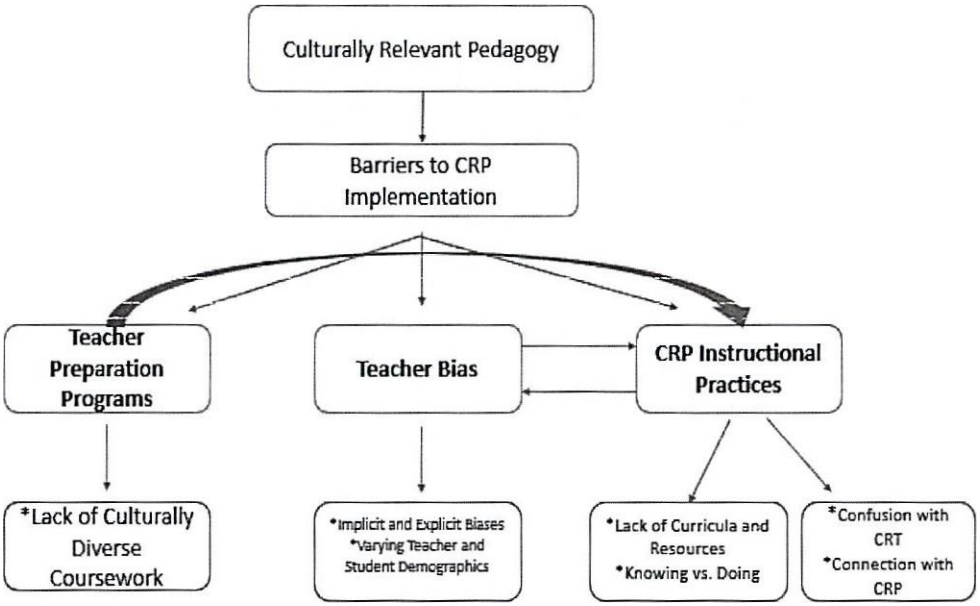
specifically students of color. Engaging in conversations about the structural inequities in the classroom provides a starting point for examining these realities and experiences (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Understanding the importance of CRP in the classroom will provide teachers with opportunities to be explicit and intentional with their instructional practices (Lakhwani, 2019). Listening to teachers, both White and of color, in both Title I and non-Title I schools will provide the groundwork for understanding how teachers implement CRP as part of their instructional practices. This study also examined how teachers' experiences with CRP shaped perceptions of the pedagogy and influenced instructional decision-making. Using CRT and CRP together supported the examination of barriers to implementing CRP, including whether additional instruction and professional learning could strengthen teachers' application of this pedagogy, and whether administrative pressures or community climate shaped teachers' willingness to engage in culturally responsive practices.

The connection between CRT and CRP provided a foundation for understanding teachers' real classroom experiences. While the theoretical framework highlights how systemic inequities shape what teachers believe and how they teach, it also underscores the need to examine how these ideas unfold in everyday practice. This section of the literature review allowed for a seamless alignment to the first research question which asked about teachers' experiences with CRP in their current learning environments. To build on this understanding, the following sections explore how CRP has developed over time and examine three major areas that continue to influence its implementation: (a) teacher preparation programs, (b) teacher bias, and (c) CRP instructional practices. Together, these areas help explain the barriers that often prevent teachers from

consistently and confidently applying culturally relevant pedagogy in their classrooms. CRP literature served as an instructional response to promote inclusive practices for students of color and also addressed approaches to dismantle educational injustice. The effectiveness of CRP as a mandatory practice further solidified the need for this study. Figure 1 outlines the components of the conceptual framework that grounded this study.

Figure 1

Concept Map of Literature Review



History of CRP

Ladson-Billings' (1995) theory of culturally relevant pedagogy emerged as a direct response to the persistent inequities that have historically marginalized students within America's public education system. Her work challenged the traditional, one-size-fits-all approach to teaching by highlighting how race, culture, and social context influence student learning and achievement. Ladson-Billings defined CRP as an approach that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes. This pedagogy moves beyond

superficial multicultural celebrations and instead centers students' lived experiences as valuable knowledge to be honored and incorporated into daily instruction.

The purpose of CRP is to create classroom spaces where all students, particularly those from historically marginalized backgrounds, can thrive academically while maintaining a strong sense of cultural identity. This framework promotes a shift in mindset from viewing diversity as a challenge to recognizing it as a strength that enriches both teaching and learning. CRP also positions educators to see themselves as agents of change who can help dismantle systemic barriers that hinder equity in education. Over time, Ladson-Billings (2009, 2014) and others scholars, including Gay (2000) and Paris (2012) expanded these conversation, noting that culturally relevant, responsive, and sustaining pedagogies all share a common goal: ensuring that students of color are not merely present in classrooms, but genuinely seen, valued, and provided access to the tools of academic success.

Ladson-Billings (1995) identified three foundational pillars within CRP: academic success, cultural competence, and critical consciousness. Together, these domains represent a holistic vision for teaching that seeks not only to improve achievement but also to restore dignity, agency, and purpose to all learners. She further explained that the resistance to, or the dismissal of, CRP as a common instructional practice can widen opportunity gaps between students of color and the mainstream population. As a result, disproportional numbers of students of color continue to demonstrate lower proficiency rates than their White peers. Adams and Glass (2018) described CRP as the "bedrock of excellent teaching" (p. 1 1) in their qualitative study with three college professors examining how teacher educators' experiences shaped their application of CRP. Their

findings showed that misunderstanding the idea and significance of CRP in the classroom leads to incorrect implementation and perceptions of this pedagogy, and therefore concluded that if teachers do not fully understand CRP in classroom settings, the effects can be harmful to students of color, rather than beneficial. Adams and Glass further argued that CRP should be strategically planned for and prepared for in teacher preparation programs (Adams & Glass, 2018). Based on the significance and importance of CRP, assisted in supporting this study that explored teachers' experiences with and applications of CRP.

Teacher Preparation Programs (TPPs)

In most cases, teachers are trained for their jobs in college-based teacher preparation programs. Sleeter (2016) found that although programs require learning CRP in one course, preservice teachers are not prepared to work with diverse students. Scholars have attributed this lack of preparation to insufficient training, inadequate coursework, and too few hands-on experiences that allow preservice teachers to develop effective instructional practices for students of color (Adams & Glass, 2018). One barrier to teachers implementing CRP in the classroom is that preservice teachers may complete only one class to meet the university's diversity requirements in education (Sleeter, 2016). Although these concerns were raised nearly a decade ago, recent work indicates the same conditions endure. Systematic reviews and contemporary analyses continue to identify fragmented, stand-alone coursework, limited opportunities for enactment, and insufficient institutional support for CRP in teacher education (Gulya & Fehérvári, 2024; Miller et al., 2024).

Adams and Glass (2018) expressed additional concerns beyond the limitations of a one-course diversity requirement, arguing that many teacher preparation programs lack coursework that meaningfully addresses culturally relevant pedagogy and provides authentic learning experiences for preservice teachers. In their qualitative study conducted at a large urban university in the southeastern United States, they interviewed three faculty members who taught in an elementary education program. Findings indicated that these teacher educators often struggle to translate culturally relevant pedagogy from theory into practice due to limited institutional support and inconsistent program design. As a result, new teachers frequently entered the profession feeling unsupported and underprepared for the diversity of current classrooms.

In a separate study, Andrews and Gutwein (2017) concluded that to bridge the gap students identified between teacher training and effective practice, teacher education programs must provide intentional coursework that centers CRP and affirms culturally diverse student populations. In their study, they conducted interviews and focus groups with 64 middle and high school students from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, including Black, Latina/o, and White students. Their findings indicated that many of these students viewed their teachers as lacking the cultural awareness and expectations needed to effectively support learners of color. Recognizing this gap between perception and practice, Andrews and Gutwein recommended that teacher education programs should provide intentional, CRP-focused coursework that incorporates authentic cultural experiences and prepares future teachers to meet the needs of diverse classrooms.

Relevant research in the conceptual and theoretical literature on CRP also supports that CRP should be explicitly taught in preservice teacher programs (Brown-

Jeffy & Cooper, 2011). However, Andrews and Gutwein (2017) also recommended that the prescribed coursework should go beyond adding more courses and include embedded fieldwork experiences that provide preservice teachers with opportunities to interact with students of color and to hear the voices from a student of color's perspective. Similarly, Endo (2015) suggested that it is advantageous for preservice teachers to have experience with service-learning projects involving students of color, as these experiences add value to their professional repertoire and shift their perceptions of working with diverse student populations. Endo argued that hands-on experiences often shape teacher learning more effectively than text-based coursework alone because they provide opportunities to engage with real students, real communities, and real instructional challenges. She concluded that these experiences positively impact preservice teachers' understanding of the importance of CRP in the classroom and can increase their knowledge of this pedagogy. Edwards and Kuhlman (2007) shared a similar perspective, supporting authentic interactions during learning experiences with preservice teachers and students of color.

Despite these recommendations, scholars have noted that many preparation programs still fail to provide repeated, meaningful opportunities for preservice teachers to develop their knowledge and confidence in CRP. Bissonnette (2016) explained that the current coursework for teacher preparation programs lacks multiple opportunities for new teachers to own and expand their attitudes towards CRP pedagogy and practice. These implications solidify the idea that teacher preparation programs should include coursework and requirements that focus more deeply on pedagogies such as CRP and

should provide CRP opportunities that allow preservice teachers to engage in dialogue, discussion, and experiences that embody their learning (McVee, 2014).

In similar studies on teachers' perceptions of CRP in the classroom, researchers reported findings comparable to those of teachers and administrators regarding their attitudes and beliefs toward TPPs and how they prepare preservice teachers for professional practice (Gichuru et al., 2015; Maye & Day, 2012). Findings indicated that most participants believed their collegiate experiences did not foster an understanding of how to teach culturally diverse student populations, nor did they provide a foundational blueprint for the elements of CRP (Gichuru et al., 2015; Maye & Day, 2012).

Another potential benefit of restructuring requirements in TPPS is that service-learning experiences can provide preservice teachers with opportunities to cultivate humility and engage in deeper reflection about different cultures (Tinkler & Tinkler, 2016). Tinkler and Tinkler (2016) concluded that these self-reflective thoughts could inspire a shift away from previous negative perceptions of students of color towards more inclusive thinking when these encounters occur in the classroom. This shift in perception is also closely connected to the implicit and explicit biases teachers may hold about their students.

Overall, the findings from the reported studies support the contention that service-learning experiences and projects are beneficial not only for preservice teachers but also for the students with whom they work. These experiences contribute to teacher development in two primary ways. First, service-learning experiences provide instructional strategies that support diverse populations and make learning inclusive for students. Second, these experiences lead to critical self-reflection where negative biases

can be identified, addressed, and adjusted to make the necessary shift in mindset. Without changes to these institutional practices, newly certified teachers may continue to feel underprepared to support diverse learners through culturally responsive instruction (Islam & Park, 2015). The research presented regarding TPPs directly related to how teachers were able to apply meaning of their experiences with others. Without a strong foundation of learning CRP in TPP, the discourse when engaging with others, fellow teachers and students, was addressed with the third research question of the study. These ongoing concerns support the aim of this study, which is to determine whether teachers' perceptions are influenced by inadequate training in culturally relevant pedagogy.

Teacher Bias

Teacher bias is another factor that can impede proper CRP implementation, as unidentified negative biases can promote inferior thinking, leading to poor instruction for students of color. Kumar et al. (2015) stated that personal thoughts and biases can inadvertently be cast on students of color in the classroom, creating negative effects and impacts on their learning. These biases produce barriers to implementing the tenets of CRP, such as building relationships and creating comfortable learning environments for students (Kumar et al., 2015). Similarly, Borman et al. (2021) noted that these biases influenced students' self-perceptions, leading to "self-fulfilling prophecies" (p. 2) that negatively affect their classroom achievement.

As evidenced by Kumar et al. (2015), teachers require deep reflective practices to identify and address their personal attitudes and beliefs about students of color. The researchers further demonstrated that these beliefs allow for unequal treatment of students of color and preferential treatment of White students over non-White students.

Kumar et al. also noted that these ideals align with detrimental stereotypes that teachers, consciously or subconsciously, project into the classroom. Tinkler and Tinkler (2016) similarly argued that teachers need humility in their own thought processes regarding cultures that are different from their own. Fergus (2017) extended this discussion by clarifying that bias alone is not the primary harm; rather, it is the enactment of bias through teacher responses, differential treatment, and lowered expectations that produces negative academic consequences for students of color.

The application of these negative beliefs is characteristic of deficit thinking and has been the subject of research. As a consequence of deficit thinking, teachers' behaviors rely on continuing assumptions derived from the various stereotypes that imply students of color and their families are responsible for their own inequity in classroom experiences (Almager, 2018; Andrews & Gutwein, 2017). Andrews and Gutwein (2017) defined deficit thinking as stemming from historical oppressive behaviors and actions that have supported white societal values and norms, which have undermined people of color. From this perspective, deficit thinking can lead teachers to adopt low expectations and interpret students' behaviors and academic performance through a lens of perceived inadequacy. Fergus (2017) provided evidence supporting this concern, reporting that non-Black teachers held expectations that were approximately 30% to 40% lower for students of color than for White students. The findings also indicated that expectations for Black male students were lower than those for Black female students.

Almager (2018) reported that these personal biases associated with deficit thinking influence instructional decision-making and lower teachers' expectations for diverse student populations. Almager proposed that White teachers may struggle with

these beliefs more so than teachers of color due to limited exposure to their own understanding of race, culture, and diversity in their own classroom experiences. Borman et al. (2021) contributed to this discussion, suggesting that White teachers may misjudge and undervalue the academic capabilities of students of color. However, Almager noted that students do not necessarily require teachers of similar backgrounds; rather, they need teachers who are empathetic and knowledgeable about their cultural backgrounds. Teacher biases can lead to faulty and inaccurate opinions when interacting with students of color (Cooper, 2003). Gay and Kirkland (2003) further explained that when teachers are unable to identify their own cultural prejudices, they may struggle with making the necessary changes to engage, instruct, and communicate effectively with their students. These beliefs can perpetuate negative learning experiences and directly affect students' achievement and self-efficacy beliefs (Cooper, 2003). In alignment with Tinkler and Tinkler (2016), Cooper (2003) prescribed critical self-reflection as an avenue to deter these deleterious thoughts, which are detrimental to the students they affect.

These biases not only affect current classroom achievement. Borman et al. (2021) observed that there are long-lasting effects that also contribute to the abilities of students of color to have sustainable, positive experiences as they continue in their academic careers. The researchers noted that multiple factors contribute to positive learning experiences, including social-emotional learning, which mainstream students can also benefit from. However, Borman et al. (2021) argued that when students of color are victimized by teacher bias, these experiences are lackluster in comparison to their White counterparts. Teacher bias, therefore, plays a critical role in how teachers view their

students of color. If these biases are negative, the outcomes become detrimental to student success and their classroom experience.

Across multiple studies, researchers have identified that the major precursor to the application of these debilitating mindsets stems from teachers not understanding, reflecting, or examining their own identities or values and their significance to the relationship with the students in their classrooms (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 201 1; Haven, 2021; Hawkins-Jones & Reeves, 2020). As a result, teachers may subconsciously act out unjust treatment to their students of color. Andrews and Gutwein (2017) suggested that to preempt dispositions associated with deficit thinking, teachers need to examine their own implicit and explicit biases related to classroom instructional practices during TPPs. Similarly, Haven (2021) recommended that teachers examine their own beliefs and values to develop a cultural critical conscience. This point reflects an additional goal of the present study: to examine whether teachers recognize deficit-thinking patterns that constrain their ability to embrace culturally diverse learning environments and implement CRP as a best practice. Scholars suggested that teacher biases and deficit thinking directly impacted the success of students of color and teachers' ability to properly implement instructional practices that support inclusive practices. It is with this concern that establishes the importance of this study with how teachers recognized and reflected on their beliefs in relation to CRP.

CRP Instructional Strategies

This focus area highlights suggested strategies for implementing CRP in classroom practice while also addressing ongoing debates about whether CRP should be treated as a packaged curriculum. In addition to challenges related to teacher preparation

programs and teacher bias, researchers have found that teachers struggle with integrating CRP due to the lack of supportive curricula, time constraints, deficient professional knowledge bases, and minimal levels of comfort with this instructional strategy and pedagogy (Endo, 2015; Martell & Stevens, 2018; Ukpokodu, 2011). Haven (2021) highlighted the issue of CRP, stating that it is "crucial" to implement these practices by being aware of students' cultural backgrounds when teaching. This lack of cultural awareness validated the idea that CRP implementation is of paramount importance, as this pedagogy supports inclusive instructional practices that represent culturally diverse student populations and increase engagement and achievement of students of color when present in learning environments (Toppel, 2015). These experiences and lessons are relatable to students and have positive implications for student learning (Sampson & Garrison-Wade, 2011). Piper (2019) further described CRP as an essential component of all classrooms, confirming that when it occurs in current classrooms, it helps diminish the inequitable experiences and levels of success between mainstream students and students of color. She further suggested that implementing CRP in the classroom evens the playing field for all students by delivering unbiased instruction.

One significant obstacle to implementing CRP in the classroom stems from current curricula that do not challenge historical, Eurocentric societal beliefs (Borrero et al., 2018). Thus, teachers struggle to merge prescribed curricula with CRP (Toppel, 2015). Borrero et al. (2018) argued that curricular reforms should include viewpoints, suggestions, and ideas from current teachers on the actions needed to change the curricula most teachers are required to use in their daily instructional practices. They also noted that teachers often lack materials and resources to support inclusive cultural and

instructional practices. Toppel (2015) echoed this concern, arguing that the necessary and appropriate CRP teacher resources are not readily available for teachers to use. She further argued that the lack of appropriate CRP resources impairs teachers' ability to integrate their current required curricula with CRP practices. Martell and Stevens (2018) noted the need for curriculum reform that makes it easier for teachers to use CRP in the classroom. They stated that although teachers are willing to instruct using CRP, current curricula do not support teachers' efforts to implement this practice efficiently and effectively. In addition to non-supportive curricula, Endo (2015) also noted that time restraints make it difficult for teachers to implement CRP. These time constraints are felt by teachers due to other mandated and observed instructional practices they must follow, further limiting their time to plan for this implementation.

Despite these challenges, scholars have also proposed strategies to support effective CRP implementation. Lakhwani (2019) suggested that in-service teachers need professional development opportunities to learn and build their teacher toolbox with strategies for effectively implementing CRP. She argued that ongoing professional development sessions allow teachers to reflect on their instructional proficiency. Ukpokodu (2011) similarly recommended that teachers be provided with multiple opportunities to engage with CRP through professional development. When teachers receive adequate and meaningful training, they are more likely to feel confident in implementing CRP and to build authentic relationships with diverse student populations (Toppel, 2015; Ukpokodu, 2011). Relationship-building is a core expectation of CRP and is central to its successful implementation (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Toppel (2015) further

noted that building relationships through CRP lays a foundation for increased student engagement, which directly impacts student achievement.

Although teachers struggle to integrate prescribed curricula with CRP, scholars have identified avenues to make connections that benefit students. For example, Roberts (2010) suggested that using culturally relevant critical teacher care (CRCTC), a variation of CRP, can address cultural, social justice, and social injustice issues in a classroom environment built on conversation and dialogue between teacher and student. Roberts also suggested that this practice can strengthen relationships that lead to benefits for the student, such as improved attendance, engagement in learning, and achievement.

Another set of strategies to support CRP implementation was offered by Sampson and Garrison-Wade (2011) and García and García (2016). Sampson and Garrison-Wade argued that culturally relevant instruction and activities should incorporate students' cultures, homes, communities, and cultural experiences. They also explained that these elements should be reflected throughout the classroom and not just in instructional materials and activities. The researchers further explained how CRP can be implemented through all content areas. For example, in social studies, they described how providing scenarios relevant to students' cultures supports and builds connections between students and the material in ways they can relate to. García and García similarly concluded that CRP should and can be implemented with linguistically diverse students. They suggested that students' home languages can be incorporated into content areas such as literacy through the use of culturally inclusive texts and cultural artifacts, thereby embodying CRP in classroom instruction. This research aligns with Ladson-Billings' (1992) assertion that culturally relevant teaching must span various content areas to create critical thinkers

and produce students who can view society with a laser-focused lens, viewing life and its experiences through diverse perspectives. Using a variety of texts and primary sources that represent diverse cultures has also been identified as a way to implement this practice in English language arts (Ladson-Billings, 1992). The researchers further noted that these CRP practices can increase student engagement and academic achievement when implemented with fidelity, practice, and expertise (García & García, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 1992). Providing opportunities to consider alternative perspectives is another potential strategy for teaching social studies, along with offering students primary sources and texts that present the stories and experiences of oppressed populations (Martell & Stevens, 2018).

In the area of math, Ukpokodu (2011) contended that mathematics teachers should move away from common practices that treat this content area as monolithic and aligned with mainstream populations. He argued that such instructional methods and practices fall short of meeting the needs and learning styles of culturally diverse populations. Ukpokodu explained that teachers must have some understanding of how different student populations learn, especially in mathematics, where it was noted that problem-solving and beginning inquiry occur differently. Students of color begin to solve mathematics problems from a cultural lens, an angle that is relevant and mirrors their cultural norms (Ukpokodu, 2011). To include CRP in mathematics discourse, Ukpokodu recommended that teachers ensure learning experiences and instruction focus on material that reflects students' cultural backgrounds.

As a result of CRP implementation across various content areas, teachers will become comfortable with their CRP instruction and will build relationships with diverse

student populations (Toppel, 2015; Ukpokodu, 2011). Gay (2000) emphasized that there should be meaningful relationship building between teacher(s) and students. This special relationship and the resulting bonds are considered a "hallmark" of teachers who implement CRP and are also regarded as a necessary practice that is modeled and expected during its implementation (Gay, 2000, p. 48; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Toppel (2015) similarly noted that building relationships through CRP lays a foundation for increased student engagement, which directly impacts student achievement. Roberts (2010) suggested that culturally relevant critical teacher care (CRCTC), a variation of CRP, be used to address cultural, social justice, and social injustice issues in a classroom environment built on conversation and dialogue between teacher and student. She stated that this practice can strengthen relationships and lead to benefits for the student, such as improved attendance, increased engagement in learning, and greater achievement.

However, scholars have cautioned against viewing CRP as a set of discrete strategies that can be superficially applied. Mason (2017) argued that the fallacy in understanding CRP is that many think it can be done simply. He concluded that the focus of this pedagogy should be on behaviors that model a way of being, rather than a prescribed curriculum to be simply taught. Thus, teachers would need to be trained in specific behaviors in order to properly adopt and implement CRP in the classroom. Adams and Glass (2018) furthered this argument, stating that being a culturally relevant teacher is an innate trait that manifests in one's teaching. These perspectives raise critical questions addressed in the present study: whether teachers perceive CRP as a practice that can be developed through learning and reflection, or as an inherent orientation toward teaching. These perspectives also addressed all three presented research questions, which

aimed to identify the experiences, meaning, beliefs and interactions that all encompass CRP. This research showed the complexity of CRP implementation as it addressed effective strategies and also instructional challenges. The findings presented by the scholars supported how this study explored how teachers were able to address both of those factors in their lived experiences.

Conclusion

Teacher preparation programs should begin developing multiple courses focused on diversity in the classroom to address the unpreparedness of new and future teachers (Borreroo et al., 2018). As indicated in this literature review, many scholars have identified teacher preparation programs as the "starting point" for addressing the inequities that follow inadequate training for one of the most essential professions in our communities (Borreroo et al., 2018; Edwards & Kuhlman, 2007; Endo, 2015; Islam & Park, 2015). In addition to expanding teacher preparation programs to include more courses on diversity, teacher bias should also be addressed. Teachers should be able to identify biases that negatively affect their ability to teach students of color and focus on becoming more accepting and understanding. According to Kumar et al. (2015), Borman et al. (2021), and Toppel (2015), teacher bias is a limitation to educational equity. Once these limitations are acknowledged, educators are better positioned to engage meaningfully with culturally relevant pedagogy. This shift benefits teachers and students because the implementation of CRP will provide high-quality, inclusive education for all students (Gay & Kirkland, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

De Silva et al. (2018) examined how understanding students' cultural beliefs and values in CRP can increase the success of students of color in classrooms. Piper (2019)

described CRP as an essential component of all classrooms, noting that it is currently used and helps diminish the considerable differences in experiences and successes between mainstream students and students of color. Piper further suggested that implementing CRP in the classroom evens the playing field for all students by delivering unbiased instruction. However, CRP instruction must come from teachers and educators who are self-aware and willing to learn. This pedagogy is not a practice that just occurs by "happenstance"; rather, it stems from accepting a new way to view students of color in the classroom. Effective implementation of CRP also requires educators to engage in dialogue that critically examines inequities related to race, curriculum, and instructional practices, while remaining focused on improving educational experiences for students of color. These experiences, both negative and positive, have longstanding effects on students of color, underscoring the importance of continued scholarly inquiry in this area.

Summary

In summary, the conceptual framework that guided this study was grounded in both CRT and CRP. Together, these frameworks provided the foundation for understanding how teachers' lived experiences influence their perceptions and implementation of equitable instructional practices. CRT established the lens through which issues of race, power, and systemic inequity were examined, while CRP offered a pedagogical model that centered the academic success, cultural competence, and critical consciousness of all students. Building upon this framework, Chapter 3 details the qualitative research design and narrative inquiry methods used to explore these questions in depth. It outlines the participant selection process, data collection procedures, and analytic strategies employed to ensure rigor and trustworthiness. Chapter 3 also explains

how researcher positionality informed interpretation and analysis, linking theory to practice in the pursuit of culturally responsive and socially just education.

Chapter III

Methods

Overview

Building upon the CRP and CRT in education framework presented in chapter 2, this study employed a narrative inquiry research design to explore and retell collaborators' experiences with implementing CRP in their classrooms. This approach aligns with Kim's (2016) description of narrative inquiry as a means of understanding human experience through story and meaning-making. Narrative research design is defined as the retelling of participants' experiences through a lens that combines the researcher's story and perspective (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam, 2002). The narrative is taken from a participant as a "recounting of events" (Kim, 2016) and, as Merriam (2002) described, is the story generated by the researcher, told through the lens of the participants.

Narrative research designs provide an in-depth look at the experiences of participants that can be used to talk about their "journeys, decisions, successes and failures" (Patton, 2015, p. 128) related to a phenomenon or process of interest. While scholars have generally agreed on the foundational principles of narrative inquiry, this study drew primarily on the work of Kim (2016) and Connelly and Clandinin (2020) to provide greater clarity and methodological direction. Kim framed narrative inquiry as a method for understanding human experience through story and meaning-making, which can be retold to shed light on the area of interest. Connelly and Clandinin emphasized the

role of temporality, relationship, and place in shaping lived experience. Drawing from both perspectives strengthened the design of this study by foregrounding participants' meaning-making while also attending to the temporal, relational, and contextual dimensions that shaped each collaborator's story.

Experiential Knowledge

Experiential knowledge is based on the personal experiences the researcher brings to her/his specific study, adding value and credibility (Maxwell, 2013). My personal experience has allowed me to see myself as a student of color and a teacher of color, both of which have been challenging for me as a child and as an educator. My earliest experience that began to shape the way I see the world happened when I was in elementary school. As an elementary student, I became very aware of what it felt like to be alone and different in a classroom and in an entire building. I was the only Black student in my elementary school. There were no Black teachers or any other teachers of color. I remember that we were assigned to present a report on historical figures, and one of my classmates was assigned to research Harriet Tubman. His response, in front of the entire class, was, "Why do I have to look up that 'nigger bitch'?" I knew that word was extremely bad, but when my teacher simply told him not to say it, I questioned whether it really was that bad. Since the teacher did not address it in class, I figured I should not tell my parents to avoid creating further problems for me. I remember thinking that maybe since I am also Black and female, I too am a "nigger bitch." The shame and embarrassment I felt in that moment have been a constant reminder of why I believe this study is important for educators. If my teacher had been well-versed in CRP, that situation could have been handled and addressed in a multitude of ways. First, the

mention of Harriet Tubman should not have been the first time my class was introduced to or saw someone Black in class. No student should feel they are less than their classmates because they are different. Nor should a student of color feel unsafe in school with a professionally educated and trained teacher.

When I began teaching in an all-Black, Title I school on the south side of Atlanta, I cultivated and lived out my passion for teaching young Black students who reflected my own identity. I put up pictures of famous Black leaders, such as Malcolm X, Angela Davis, and Maya Angelou, around my room so my students could see people who looked like them. I spent countless hours aligning and integrating my required instructional standards with our culture, ensuring my instruction was relatable and relevant to my students. I used literature from Langston Hughes to teach English Language Arts, and basketball statistics from Michael Jordan and LeBron James to teach math. I wanted to ensure that my students were exposed to as many similar faces as possible because I believed it was possible. I attended my students' football games, skating parties, and BBQs so they knew I cared about them in and out of our classroom. Their community was also mine, and I needed them to know I was not scared to visit them in their "hood.', I taught them about the importance of our battle against racism and how education empowers us as a people. Further, education allows us to defy the odds and break the narratives that society already created for many of us. Despite these efforts, my school closed down. Why? Because we were an underperforming, low-income, 100% free-lunch (not reduced) school in one of the poorest areas of Atlanta, lacking funding, support, and resources to help our kids succeed.

After transitioning to a new district, feelings of isolation resurfaced, this time more intensely. Being an adult was more challenging than being a child. I believed that I had an obligation to speak on the untruths and myths that I saw and heard many teachers discuss when referencing the students of color in their classrooms. This school had a diverse student population. The student demographic makeup was about 50% Black, 25% Asian/lndian, 15% White, and 10% Latinx. However, the teaching population was 89% White and 11% Black. The conversations that I overheard were appalling and horrific. Conversations such as, "They shouldn't breed these kids if they can't take care of them," and "I don't expect too much," and "Just push them through until they break the law." This was a school where Black History Month was considered optional because administrators did not want to "put anything else on their teachers' plates." I was reminded, yet again, why I was so extremely uncomfortable around most White people that I worked with, and also why I advocated so hard for these Black and Brown boys and girls. There was such a stark difference between working with an all-Black staff and student population in Atlanta, compared to an almost all-White staff and mixed student population in my current school district. I knew in that moment that if I was unnerved and mirrored a recluse as an adult who "knows" how to regulate emotions, process, and navigate through challenging situations, I could only imagine how the students of color felt. It only took me a short while longer to realize that "how" I was teaching was different than most of the teachers in that building.

During this time, I began my own inquiry into teaching and instructional methods and pedagogies that support students of color. I was introduced to Gloria Ladson-Billings and began my pursuit to learn as much as possible about CRP. I wanted to be deeply

grounded in this pedagogy because I knew that introducing it into my school or gradelevel meetings would provoke many questions. Sadly, I also knew that those questions would not truly be about the pedagogy, but about me as a Black woman, doubting my ability, intelligence, and right to be taken seriously. Luckily, there were some outlier teachers who were conscious and aware, both Black and White, with whom I was able to collaborate and share ideas for making positive instructional changes in our classrooms. These experiences thwarted my passion to understand why teachers do not implement CRP in their classrooms. I decided to ask teachers questions and listen to their stories to learn how to present information that can positively impact our classrooms. My experiential knowledge highlights both the challenges and possibilities of working alongside teachers to make meaningful instructional change. These experiences reinforced my commitment to understanding why CRP is not consistently implemented in classrooms and shaped the questions this study sought to address.

Research Design

One of the goals of this study was to gather and share teachers' stories about their experiences implementing CRP. Through these stories, both unique experiences and shared patterns in CRP implementation emerged. This approach aligns with the work of Ladson-Billings (2009) and Delpit (2006), who used storytelling to capture teachers' experiences and provide nuanced insight into educators' perceptions and practices. Through participants' narratives, connections emerged between teachers' beliefs about CRP and their instructional decisions, allowing for the theorization of how teachers' understandings of CRP are shaped by their lived experiences with the pedagogy.

Teachers' beliefs were grounded in their actual enactment of CRP rather than abstract or theoretical knowledge alone. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) described narrative inquiry as the study of experience understood through a three-dimensional narrative space composed of temporality, sociality, and place. These dimensions acknowledge that people's stories are shaped by (a) temporality, the sequence of past, present, and future experiences that provide a sense of continuity; (b) sociality, the personal and interpersonal relationships that influence meaning; and (c) place, the specific physical and contextual settings in which experiences occur. Considering these elements supported an understanding of how teachers' narratives developed over time, within relational contexts, and across educational settings, forming coherent stories with a beginning, middle, and end.

Kim (2016) expanded on this idea by emphasizing that narrative inquiry not only recounts experience but also interprets it through meaning-making. She argued that stories become research data when they are examined for how people construct and reconstruct their identities and values through lived experience. In this study, those processes were evident as teachers reflected on how their professional identities and instructional decisions evolved during CRP implementation. Using both Kim's and Clandinin and Connelly's perspectives provided a multidimensional understanding of how teachers' experiences unfolded and connected, ensuring that their voices were presented as whole, evolving stories rather than fragmented accounts.

According to Clandinin and Connelly (2013), narrative inquiry encourages researchers to engage deeply with participants' lived experiences in ways that foster reflection and authenticity. Through this process, participants revisited meaningful

moments that shaped their teaching philosophies, allowing the stories themselves to guide the researcher toward themes of growth, struggle, and transformation. These narratives revealed how participants' experiences informed their attitudes toward CRP and their recommendations for its inclusion in schools. Prior to collecting these narratives, a pilot interview was conducted to refine the interview process and support the overall study design.

Pilot Interview

A pilot interview was conducted with an individual who shared characteristics similar to those anticipated for study participants. This process provided valuable insight into qualitative interviewing, researcher bias, and assumptions that could influence data collection. At the time of the pilot interview, the researcher was enrolled in a doctoral program at Valdosta State University and sought to gain experience interviewing individuals of color to better understand how educational experiences are shaped by race. As a first formal interview experience, the pilot interview served as both a learning opportunity and a required coursework component, allowing practice with interview structure and questioning techniques.

This pilot interview was conducted prior to finalizing my research topic and design. The purpose was to gain firsthand experience as a qualitative researcher while exploring issues related to race and education—an area that would later be connected to CRP. The participant was an African American male in his sixties who had previously worked in education and could recall his earliest experiences with racism in school. Interview questions included prompts such as, "Can you describe your earliest memory of a time when you felt treated differently in school because of your race?" and "Do you

think those experiences affected your approach to education or your success later in life?" While the participant acknowledged instances of racial bias, he also emphasized the encouragement and high expectations he received from certain teachers. This challenged my earlier assumptions that all Black males of his generation experienced schooling primarily through deficit or exclusionary lenses.

As the interview progressed, several planned questions naturally prompted deeper follow-up questions. This demonstrated the fluid nature of qualitative interviewing and highlighted how rich data often emerge when participants are given space to expand their narratives. The pilot interview also highlighted the importance of balancing openness with focus, particularly in managing interview time and maintaining alignment with research aims. Reflection on the pilot interview reinforced the value of open-ended storytelling in surfacing perspectives that structured or quantitative approaches may overlook. Insights from this experience directly informed the design of the full study, including refining interview prompts and developing follow-up questions that encouraged narrative depth and meaning-making related to teachers' experiences with CRP. Overall, the pilot interview strengthened the design of the full study by clarifying the types of questions that elicited the richest narrative data and by supporting the development of follow-up prompts.

Setting and Participants

The setting for this study was a large school district in a Southern metropolitan area that housed both Title I and non-Title I elementary schools. The district is referred to as the Cedar County School District (CCSD). As defined by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), Title I schools receive federal money to support students

identified as falling below the national poverty line, which is determined by the United States government, or as having a certain population of students who are receiving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). For a school to qualify as Title I, more than 40% of its students must meet this criterion. Non-Title I schools are those that do not meet the criterion for receiving federal funds because fewer than 40% of their students fall below the poverty line (NCES, 2021). Both Title I and non-Title I elementary schools were represented within CCSD.

Participant recruitment began after Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was sought from both Valdosta State University (VSU) and the Cedar County School District. Approval was granted by the VSU IRB; however, full approval from CCSD was not obtained to the extent required to recruit participants directly from district schools. This limitation necessitated a modification to the recruitment strategy but did not affect the study's data collection procedures once participants were identified. To address this barrier, an alternative recruitment method was implemented using social media. A revision to the IRB application was submitted and approved by the VSU IRB, resulting in a Protocol Exemption Report (see Appendix A). Following approval, a Facebook group was created to solicit volunteers. A brief researcher introduction and description of the study's purpose were posted, resulting in 23 teachers expressing interest in participating.

Initial communication with volunteers followed recruitment procedures outlined by Maxwell (2013). Interested teachers received an email introducing the researcher and outlining the study's purpose, expectations, and participant responsibilities. Volunteers were then directed to complete a brief demographic questionnaire administered through Qualtrics (see Appendix B). The questionnaire collected information related to race,

gender, years of teaching experience, educational background, experience in Title I and non-Title I schools, and participants' definitions or understandings of culturally relevant pedagogy.

Eighteen teachers completed the demographic questionnaire. Responses were reviewed to support the study's goal of examining experiences across race and gender. During this stage, it became evident that most respondents were White women, which presented challenges to achieving a balanced participant pool. The intended composition included representation across four groups: White teachers, teachers of color, male teachers, and female teachers. Purposeful selection decisions were made to include both teachers of color and White teachers, as well as male and female participants, to the greatest extent possible.

The participant pool was narrowed to eight teachers who best met the study's criteria and reflected diversity in background and experience. Selection criteria included a minimum of two years of classroom teaching experience and evidence of familiarity with or implementation of culturally relevant pedagogy as reflected in survey responses. Although two Black male teachers were initially selected, one withdrew due to unforeseen circumstances, resulting in one Black male participant in the final sample. Selected participants were contacted individually via email to confirm their willingness to participate, review the study purpose, and schedule interviews. After informed consent was obtained, interviews were conducted at mutually agreed-upon times and locations. Participant demographic characteristics are summarized in Table l.

Table 1

Participant Demographic Information

Pseudonym	Age and Gender	Race	Grade Level	Years of Experience	Type of School	Notes
Miles	331M	Black/Korean	4th	9 years	Non-Title 1	Doctorate Degree
Jocelyn	44/F	Black	5th	23 years	Non-Title 1	Specialist Degree
Constance	31/F	White	5th	9 years	Title 1	Master's Degree
Louise	45/F	White	5th	19 years	Title 1	Master's Degree
Leslie	35/F	White	4th	13 years	Non-Title 1	Specialist Degree
Amy	30/F	Black	4th	10 years	Title 1	Master' s Degree
Julie	41/F	Black	5th	6 years	Title 1	Bachelor' s Degree
Ryan	36/M	White	5th	12 years	Non-Title 1	Master's Degree

Purposeful sampling, as described by Patton (2015), was used to select participants from those who volunteered for the study. Purposeful sampling allows researchers to identify "information-rich cases for in-depth study" (Patton, 2015, p. 264). Patton stated that a smaller sample size is advantageous for certain types of qualitative research, including narrative studies; therefore, the target sample size for this study was eight to ten participants. This smaller sample size supported an in-depth examination of participants' beliefs and experiences rather than a broader, surface-level analysis across a large number of participants.

Patton (2015) also noted that there are multiple types of purposeful sampling models. The specific type of purposeful sampling used for this study falls under the description of a matched comparison. This type of purposeful sampling is used to compare groups that are matched to identify explanations for their differences. To implement this

approach, the initial pool of 23 volunteers was organized by race, grade level, and the type of school in which they worked, based on information from the demographic survey. Fourth- and fifth-grade teachers were identified as the target population. These grade levels were selected because they allow for flexible integration of culturally relevant pedagogy within elementary curriculum standards. Race was also a key consideration, as it was used to determine whether experiences with and perceptions of CRP differed between White teachers and teachers of color. Finally, participants who indicated that they were presently using CRP in their classrooms were sought.

Once participants were identified and selected, procedures recommended by Seidman (2019) were followed to establish familiarity and rapport. Initial face-to-face meetings were conducted to explain the purpose of the study and review the three-interview series structure. Participants were provided with an informed consent document outlining the use of pseudonyms and audio recordings. The interview consent script was reviewed in detail, and permission to record interviews was obtained. Participants were given the opportunity to ask questions prior to data collection, and all questions were addressed.

These initial meetings also helped reduce potential discomfort arising from differences in social identities between the researcher and participants, a concern noted by Seidman (2019). Seidman explained that at times there can be mistrust between researchers and participants based on race and ethnicity. Because collaborators represented diverse racial identities, it was important to ensure participant comfort and trust. Establishing this face-to-face meeting set the foundation for a positive research

relationship, which was essential given the sustained engagement required throughout the three-interview series.

Research Relationship

Narrative inquiry research requires that the "researcher is the primary instrument" while engaging and participating in collecting the data (Merriam, 2002, p. 5). Because of this role, it was important to establish relationships to ensure an equitable experience. An equitable experience occurs when both the researcher and participants value the study's purpose and understand that all contributions bring individual benefits. This experience fosters shared and mutual respect between researchers and participants (Seidman, 2019). To ensure this relationship, participants were referred to as collaborators, reflecting their active role in co-constructing meaning and contributing to the study. This terminology and framework align with Kim (2016), who stated that collaborators play an intricate role in their interviews and contributions during the study. Thus, she recommended that there should be a natural closeness and respect that is built between researchers and collaborators. This natural closeness is a "close and intimate" relationship that develops as interviews, meetings, and conversations occur during interactions between the researcher and collaborators (Kim, 2016, p. 100). She posited that this close relationship is one of the most important aspects of narrative inquiry, leading to mutual comfort, honesty, and a safe space between the researcher and collaborators. Establishing this positive research relationship supported productive interview sessions and encouraged collaborators to share authentic, reflective accounts of their experiences. These interviews served as the primary data collection method and were essential for generating the rich in-depth narratives required for a focused, meaningful narrative inquiry study.

Data Collection

The data collection process in this study involved multiple qualitative methods to capture each collaborator's lived experiences in a detailed and authentic way. These methods included research journaling, memoing, and in-depth interviews. Each approach served a distinct purpose but worked together to support a comprehensive understanding of how teachers conceptualize and implement CRP. While classroom observations would have added depth and context, they were not feasible due to safety protocols and district clearance restrictions that limited external access to classrooms at the time of data collection. Nevertheless, the combination of written reflections, analytic memos, and recorded interviews provided rich data that captured both teachers' actions and their reflections on those actions.

Research Journaling

Research journals were used as a primary data collection and reflective tool during the interview process. To minimize distractions and maintain engagement with collaborators, a one-word notation system was developed to quickly mark ideas, emotions, or statements that require follow-up. This system kept the focus on the collaborators' narratives while preserving opportunities for probing questions and clarification. Research journals were also color-coded by collaborator to support organization and to document immediate reflections following each interview session. As suggested by Seidman (2019), taking notes in a research journal is an effective way to collect specific data that an audio recording cannot capture. The journal was used to record collaborators' expressions, shifts in tone, emotional responses, and moments that warranted further reflection. This practice also supported active listening by helping the

researcher remain focused and engaged throughout the interview process (Seidman, 2019). Additionally, journaling facilitated real-time clarification during interviews when responses required elaboration.

The journaling process took place before, during, and after each interview session. Before each interview, the journal was used to record preparatory reflections, including mindset, expectations, and awareness of potential bias. During interviews, brief and discreet notes were recorded using the one-word system to mark salient moments without interrupting the conversational flow. Following each interview, reflective entries were expanded to capture impressions, emotional tone, and contextual details related to the interaction. These reflections were typically completed shortly after interviews, allowing for fuller elaboration while the conversation remained vivid.

In addition to recording verbal exchanges, attention was given to nonverbal communication and gestures that revealed additional layers of emotion, such as pauses, laughter, changes in tone, or expressive movements. For example, during one interview, a collaborator began to gently cry while describing her upbringing and early life experiences. The collaborator quickly wiped her face, smiled through her tears, and asked, “You got some tissue, girl?” This moment was immediately recorded in the research journal as part of the interaction. Capturing these moments allowed later transcripts and analyses to reflect not only spoken words but also the affective dimensions of the interviews. Journal entries documented observational notes, while analytic memos were used to engage in deeper reflection and interpretation of emerging meanings across interviews.

Memoing

Memoing served as an additional analytic tool to support data collection and interpretation in this study. As described by Maxwell (2013), memos are written reflections that help researchers think through their studies by fostering ongoing analysis, questioning, and idea development. Memos differ from note-taking in that their purpose is not to record events but to stimulate analytic thinking and reflexivity. According to Maxwell (2013), memo writing supports the development of an internal dialogue that encourages researchers to think, rethink, and refine emerging ideas throughout the research process.

In this study, memoing was used across multiple phases, including study planning, review of CRP literature, engagement with narrative inquiry methodology, and throughout data collection and analysis. Memos were particularly useful during the analytic phase, as Maxwell (2013) recommended their use to support deeper thinking and interpretation when working with qualitative data. Memoing during analysis facilitated stronger conceptual connections across interviews and supported the development of more nuanced interpretations of the data.

Memoing functioned as an extension of the reflection process. While journaling helped capture observations, memoing was used to explore what those observations meant. Memos were typically written after reviewing interview transcripts or revisiting journal notes. Initial memos often began as brief reflections, questions, or reminders and were later expanded into more developed analytic insights related to collaborators' narratives.

Consistent with the typologies described by Miles et al. (2020), three types of memos were used in this study: methodological, reflective, and analytic. Methodological memos were used to record procedural decisions and identify follow-up questions for subsequent interviews. For example, one collaborator mentioned that she sometimes felt awkward discussing certain cultural topics with students of color. In that instance, a methodological memo was used to note the need for clarification in a later interview session. Reflective memos captured emotional and personal reactions, often in response to moments that resonated with experiences common among educators working in culturally diverse settings.

Overall, memoing enabled movement beyond collecting data to engaging with the lives and experiences of the teachers who participated in this study. Each memo became a bridge between the conversations and the larger meaning those stories held. Since memoing occurred shortly after the interviews, the two processes often overlapped. As each collaborator's story was reviewed, memoing was used to capture moments, ideas, and emotions that might otherwise have been lost in transcription.

Interviewing

Interviewing served as the central method of data collection for this narrative inquiry study because it allowed each collaborator's voice, story, and experience to evolve authentically. In narrative research, interviews are not simply tools for gathering information; they are opportunities to build relationships and co-construct meaning between the researcher and the collaborator (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Kim, 2016).

Through storytelling, collaborators can share the contexts of their lives—how they teach, lead, and navigate the educational spaces that shape their identities. This

conversational process aligns with the heart of culturally relevant pedagogy, which values personal experience as a source of knowledge and learning (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2014). The interview process created opportunities to listen closely to teachers' lived experiences and to understand the personal, cultural, and professional influences that shaped their perceptions and implementation of CRP. In keeping with the idea of narrative inquiry, each interview became a collaborative exchange grounded in trust, reflection, and mutual respect. The focus was not only on collecting data but also on creating space for authentic dialogue that honored each collaborator's truth.

To provide a consistent structure for these conversations, Seidman's (2019) three-interview series was used. This model is designed to guide participants through stages of reflection that move from experience to meaning. It was well-suited for this study because it aligned with both the goals of narrative inquiry and the principles of culturally relevant pedagogy. The three-interview structure supported collaborators in examining connections among their life histories, classroom practices, and evolving beliefs about teaching. Interview questions were open-ended to allow the collaborators to fully tell their stories and describe their experiences in response to the questions.

Open-ended questions prompted them to "take any direction" with their responses, so they did not feel boxed in by assumed or expected responses (Seidman, 2019). Prompts such as "explain" and "describe" were used to encourage the collaborators to elaborate on their thoughts on any questions or ideas that required clarification or could lead to a deeper conversation. Along with open-ended questions, the interviews were conducted with careful attention to active listening, minimal interruption,

tolerance for silence, and reflexivity when clarification was needed or when assumptions risked shaping interpretation.

The goal of the first interview was to establish context by exploring each collaborator's life history. Seidman (2019) described this stage as an opportunity to help participants reconstruct and reflect upon the experiences that led them to their current situations and identities. Therefore, collaborators were encouraged to share their personal and professional journeys, including the influences, motivations, and challenges that shaped who they are as educators. This initial stage encouraged them to reflect on the people, experiences, and events that shaped their identities and their decision to enter the teaching profession. Seidman explained that by beginning with life history, researchers create space for participants to position themselves within the social and educational environment, making it easier to later understand how those experiences influence their current beliefs and practices. This opening interview was not meant to focus on teaching itself, but rather on the journey that led each collaborator to the classroom.

Following IRB approval and proposal acceptance, the first set of interviews was conducted. During these conversations, collaborators responded to open-ended questions (see Appendix C), designed to elicit details about their life histories. These questions provided the background information necessary to place their stories and histories in the context of the study and of their broader lives. This initial set of interview questions was also used to help establish a friendly, comfortable rapport by laying a foundation of trust and openness that encouraged authentic storytelling and reflection.

The second interviews (see Appendix D) were conducted as close to one week later as possible, although one interview had a larger gap due to scheduling conflicts.

Seidman (2019) noted that this one-week separation between the sets of interviews provides the interviewer time to rethink the first and reset for the second, while also allowing time for reflection and to pique their interest from the first interview without becoming disconnected from the study. During this interval, interview recordings were reviewed and transcribed to identify potential follow-up questions and areas requiring clarification in subsequent interviews. These interviews focused on collaborators' experiences with CRP and included more substantive CRP interview questions. The questions were specifically related to the teachers' experiences, beliefs, and understanding of CRP. Based on collaborators' responses, follow-up questions were used to probe more deeply into the beliefs, decisions, and realities they described.

Seidman (2019) emphasized that the second interview centers on the "concrete details of participants' present lived experience," bridging what they shared about their past with how those histories influence their current practices. For this study, that meant exploring how collaborators enact culturally relevant pedagogy in their classrooms, how they build relationships with students, design inclusive lessons, and respond to cultural and linguistic diversity. At this stage, the goal was not to evaluate their understanding of CRP, but to gain insight into how they interpret and apply it within their daily work as educators. They were encouraged to share classroom moments, decisions, and interactions that revealed their beliefs and values in action. This deeper exploration aligns with Seidman's framework by transforming reflection into tangible examples of meaning-making, offering a richer and more authentic understanding of culturally relevant pedagogy in practice.

In the third interview, the collaborators reflected on their previous interviews to make meaning of their experiences and stories within the context of this study (see Appendix E). This final conversation allowed collaborators to synthesize their thoughts, connect earlier experiences, and articulate how their beliefs and practices aligned with the principles of culturally relevant pedagogy. Seidman (2013) described the purpose of the third interview as an opportunity for participants to "look at how the factors in their lives interacted to bring them to their present situation" (p. 22). Therefore, this interview guided collaborators toward reflection, encouraging them to think critically about how their cultural identities, classroom practices, and lived experiences influenced their understanding of teaching and learning.

This stage of the interview process was intentionally designed to provide closure and give collaborators space to examine growth, transformation, or tension that evolved throughout their narratives. During these reflective discussions, many collaborators connected their stories to broader themes of equity, representation, and professional identity. In addition, two collaborators participated in brief follow-up conversations to clarify or expand upon earlier responses, ensuring accuracy and completeness of their narratives. These follow-up exchanges strengthened the narrative integrity of the study and allowed participants to confirm or refine their interpretations of their own experiences.

By the conclusion of the three-interview series, a comprehensive picture of each collaborator's journey had emerged. Their stories, challenges, and reflections revealed how they make sense of teaching and learning through a culturally relevant lens. Seidman's model provided the structure needed to move beyond surface-level responses

and into meaningful storytelling that honored each collaborator's lived experience. By the end of the third interview, the conversations felt complete and connected, capturing both growth and understanding. Following the completion of all interviews, the study moved into the transcription phase, which served as the bridge between data collection and in-depth analysis. Table 2 provides a schedule of the interviews.

Table 2

Schedule of Interviews

	Interview 1		Interview 2		Interview 3		Interview 4	
Pseudonym	Date	Length	Date	Length	Date	Length	Date	Length
Miles	9/30/2025	96 min.	10/10/2025	87 min.	10/21/2025	71 min.	10/30/2025	34 min.
Jocelyn	10/1/2025	92 min.	10/11/2025	93 min.	10/22/2025	86 min.		
Constance	10/2/2025	87 min.	10/13/2025	98 min.	10/23/2025	80 min.		
Louise	10/3/2025	91 min.	10/14/2025	91 min.	10/24/2025	84 min.		
Leslie	10/4/2025	84 min.	10/15/2025	86 min.	10/22/2025	75 min.		
Amy	10/7/2025	78 min.	10/16/2025	90 min.	10/26/2025	83 min.		
Julie	10/8/2025	93 min.	10/17/2025	97 min.	10/27/2025	88 min.		
Ryan	10/9/2025	93 min.	10/18/2025	88 min.	10/28/2025	90 min.		

This section outlines the data analysis process used to examine the collaborators' narratives, research memos, and journal notes. MAXQDA software, embedded memos, and code matrices were used to organize and interpret the data. To provide a clear overview of each step in the analysis, this section describes the transcription process, the methods used to code and categorize the data, and the analytic strategies employed to construct each narrative. The data analysis process for this narrative inquiry study was designed to capture the depth and meaning of each collaborator's story while maintaining alignment with Gloria Ladson-Billings' (1995, 2014) framework of

culturally relevant pedagogy. A multi-layered analytic approach was used to interpret the collected data in a way that honored participants' voices while systematically identifying patterns across narratives.

Data Analysis

Following the completion of all interviews and transcription, the analysis proceeded through two cycles of coding. The first cycle employed in vivo and values coding to honor the collaborators' voices and lived experiences, identifying significant words, beliefs, and expressions drawn directly from their narratives. The second cycle focused on categorizing and pattern development, grouping related codes to uncover broader meanings that reflected CRP's three domains: academic success, cultural competence, and critical consciousness. The final stage connected these categories to overarching themes that illuminated how collaborators conceptualized and implemented CRP within their classroom practices. The following sections describe each part of this process in detail, beginning with the verification and preparation of the interview data for analysis.

Transcription

As Seidman (2019) recommended, researchers benefit from transcribing or directly engaging with their own data, as these processes deepen their engagement with participants' words and promote early familiarity with recurring ideas. Engaging directly with the transcripts enabled a closer, more reflective interaction with the data from the outset, while ensuring consistency with MAXQDA's verbatim transcriptions. To properly capture the collaborators' stories and maintain the authenticity of their voices, each interview was recorded using a professional digital recording device to ensure clarity and

fidelity. Recordings were uploaded to MAXQDA immediately after each interview rather than after the completion of all three interviews for a single collaborator. This approach allowed timely review and reflection before subsequent interviews, supporting continuity within each collaborator's narrative and informing follow-up questioning.

Once uploaded, MAXQDA produced an initial verbatim transcript. A thorough manual verification process was followed, during which the audio was replayed multiple times, often reviewed line by line, to ensure that every word, pause, and inflection was accurately represented. Careful attention was given to tone, emphasis, and rhythm, marking moments of emotion, laughter, or hesitation that reflected meaning beyond the words themselves. During transcription, nonverbal communication from the field notes and research journal was also incorporated. These entries were recorded immediately following each interview and included gestures, posture, and facial expressions that enriched the collaborators' stories. For example, during Julie's second interview, she placed her hand over her heart and paused when describing her students' accomplishments, whispering, "This is why I teach." That gesture was noted within brackets in the transcript to preserve its emotional significance. Similarly, Amy's laughter while describing her classroom routines was recorded as nonverbal annotations, and Leslie's change in tone while discussing inequities in her district was marked to emphasize the gravity ofher reflection. These nonverbal elements, though subtle, provided vital insight into how each collaborator conveyed meaning and emotion through both language and movement.

In keeping with the conventions of qualitative narrative research, all transcripts were kept verbatim, reflecting the collaborators' natural speech patterns. Grammar and

syntax were not corrected, as doing so might have altered their authentic voices. However, minor filler words, such as “um” or “you know,” were occasionally omitted when they did not contribute to meaning or expression. Each transcript thus represented a genuine and respectful account of the collaborator’s own language, preserving both individuality and integrity.

After each transcript was finalized, a final accuracy review was conducted by relistening to the audio recordings in their entirety while reading the corrected transcript line by line. This final step ensured that no words or phrases were misplaced and that each transcript aligned perfectly with both the recording and the journal annotations. Through this intentional process (verifying immediately after interviews, replaying audio for confirmation, integrating nonverbal data, maintaining verbatim accuracy, and completing a final listen-through), each transcript reflected not only what was said, but how it was said. This process upheld the study’s commitment to narrative authenticity, trustworthiness, and the cultural integrity of each collaborator’s lived experience. Once transcription was complete and each narrative was verified for accuracy, the next stage of analysis involved coding and categorizing the data. This process enabled the systematic identification of patterns, concepts, and meanings across interviews, providing a foundation for developing themes aligned with culturally relevant pedagogy.

Coding and Categorizing

In qualitative research, coding serves as both an interpretive and organizational act that transforms raw text into meaningful segments (Saldaña, 2016). This coding process allowed me to examine the collaborators’ stories while maintaining fidelity to their language, experiences, and intentions. Through careful coding, patterns emerged

that revealed how teachers conceptualized and enacted culturally relevant pedagogy in their classroom practice. vonsistent with the approach described by Miles et al. (2020), coding occurred in two distinct but interconnected cycles. The first cycle emphasized in vivo and value coding to honor each collaborator's exact words and expressed beliefs, ensuring that participant voice remained central to interpretation. The second cycle involved categorization, in which recurring ideas and value statements were grouped into broader conceptual categories that reflected shared experiences and perspectives. These reflective steps align with the evolving nature of narrative inquiry, in which each stage of analysis deepens understanding of the stories shared and requires moving back and forth between narratives and meanings to construct coherent thematic interpretations (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Kim, 2016).

In this study, the coding and categorizing process also operated as a bridge between the collaborators' lived experiences and the study's theoretical frameworks of culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2014) and critical race theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Through this work, the data were organized by significance to highlight how teachers' beliefs, practices, and reflections intersected with questions of equity, culture, and identity in their classrooms. The following sections describe each coding phase in greater detail, beginning with in vivo coding to honor the collaborators' own voices and lived experiences.

In Vivo Coding

In vivo coding was intentionally chosen as the first analytic step in this study because it honored the collaborators' own words and maintained the integrity of their lived experiences. This approach allowed for preserving the collaborators' language and

emphasizing their experiences, while value coding captured their beliefs, attitudes, and commitments related to teaching, culture, race, and equity. MAXQDA's labeling and color-coding features helped manage the codes and organize the data across interviews.

Following Saldaña's (2016) guidance, in vivo coding was used to "capture the meanings inherent in people's experience" (p. 106), allowing teachers' precise words and phrases to remain central to the analytic process. This method was particularly important given the cultural and emotional depth of the collaborators' narratives. The words they used, often rooted in their identities as teachers of color or allies, carried nuances of frustration, joy, and resistance that could not have been captured through paraphrasing. Grounding the analysis in collaborators' literal phrasing ensured that meaning, intent, and tone were preserved before interpretation occurred.

As Saldaña (2016) and Merriam and Tisdell (2015) both emphasized, in vivo coding is especially well-suited for studies that seek to prioritize participant voice and meaning-making. In this study, it provided a foundation for identifying recurring linguistic patterns that revealed how teachers framed their beliefs about students, curriculum, and justice-oriented teaching. The collaborators' words often carried emotional resonance, such as moments of laughter, hesitation, or tension. Each of these revealed as much about their pedagogical identity as their explicit statements about CRP.

In narrative inquiry, language is inseparable from identity; it reflects culture, emotion, and the sociopolitical context from which the speaker speaks (Kim, 2016). Creswell and Creswell (2018) explained that researchers who engage deeply with participants' phrasing move closer to the "essence of meaning" (p. 177) that defines qualitative research. This approach aligned closely with the goals of this study: to elevate

teachers' authentic voices and honor the ways they articulated their beliefs, challenges, and instructional practices related to CRP. Direct quotations from each collaborator's interview are presented first to illustrate how in vivo coding preserved their exact language, which Saldaña (2016) considers best practice.

Across collaborators, academic success was frequently articulated through intentional instructional choices that expanded access, affirmed student capability, and supported long-term growth. For example, Miles' statement, "I try to expose my children in different forms of literature outside of just what is prescribed to us," was coded in vivo and analytically categorized as broadening access to curriculum, reflecting an effort to extend learning beyond mandated materials. Similarly, Jocelyn's comment, "I push my students to think deeper, to ask questions that go beyond the text," was coded as critical thinking as growth, emphasizing academic rigor as a pathway to student development. Constance's assertion that she ensured students knew they were capable "no matter their background" was coded as belief in potential, underscoring high expectations as an equity-oriented practice. Comparable expressions of academic success also appeared in Louise's emphasis on maintaining high expectations, Leslie's focus on differentiated instruction for access, Amy's framing of care as academic support, Julie's articulation of a growth mindset, and Ryan's commitment to lifelong literacy development.

Cultural competence across collaborators was most often enacted through representation, affirmation, and the intentional inclusion of students' cultural identities in classroom spaces and learning experiences. Miles' statement that he stocked his classroom with books reflecting student demographics was coded as representation in classroom libraries, highlighting identity affirmation through instructional resources.

Jocelyn described projects that invited families to share traditions, which were coded as community involvement in learning. Constance's celebration of cultural holidays such as Diwali and Lunar New Year was coded as affirming diversity, while Louise's inclusion of global traditions reflected a global perspective in the classroom. Leslie's practice of displaying student work in multiple languages was coded as multilingual affirmation, and Amy and Julie similarly emphasized cultural pride and family narratives as central to learning. Ryan's use of sports and music to connect with students was coded as using student culture as a bridge, illustrating how cultural relevance supported relational engagement.

Critical consciousness emerged through collaborators' awareness of systemic inequities, their willingness to engage in difficult conversations, and their efforts to affirm student voice. Miles' reflection on political pressures surrounding book bans was coded as awareness of systemic resistance, demonstrating recognition of broader forces shaping educational practice. Jocelyn's statement that she did not avoid conversations about protests was coded as courage in addressing social issues. Constance emphasized fairness and justice in the classroom, which was coded as justice-oriented teaching, while Louise described facilitating dialogue around the Black Lives Matter movement, which was coded as engaging activism through dialogue. Leslie's decision to share her own family's immigration story was coded as personal narratives in civic teaching, and Julie's focus on connecting historical and contemporary protests was coded as linking activism to curriculum. Ryan's emphasis on affirming that students' voices matter was coded as encouraging civic engagement and voice. Amy's reflection on navigating

political identity in the classroom further illustrated how personal positionality intersected with instructional awareness.

These narrative excerpts show how collaborators enacted culturally relevant pedagogy across instructional, relational, and sociopolitical dimensions. The alignment of in vivo codes, condensed categories, and CRP domains revealed consistent patterns in how teachers conceptualized and implemented culturally relevant practices within their classrooms. Table 3 presents a consolidated overview of this analytic process and the cross-case patterns that informed this study's findings.

Table 3

Cycle 1: In-Vivo Coding

Collaborator	In Vivo Excerpt	Initial Codes	Collapsed Category	CRP Domain
Miles	I try to expose my children to different forms of literature outside of just what is prescribed to us.	Broadening access to curriculum; exposing students to diverse texts	Expanding curriculum access and representation	Academic Success
	I stock my room with books representing the demographics of my students.	Representation; culturally responsive materials	Representation in classroom libraries	Cultural Competence
	Politics is playing a huge role in our school system… rebellious parents are trying to fight the system of making sure that books are banned.	Awareness of systemic resistance; political awareness	Recognizing sociopolitical forces in education	Critical Consciousness
Jocelyn	I push my students to think deeper, to ask questions that go beyond the text.	Critical thinking; inquiry-based learning	Promoting higher-order thinking	Academic Success
	We do projects where families	Family engagement; cultural sharing	Building community	Cultural Competence

	come in to share traditions.		through family involvement	
	When students ask about events like protests, I don't shy away.	Addressing current events; courageous teaching	Encouraging open discussion of social issues	Critical Consciousness
Constance	I make sure my students know they are capable, no matter their background.	Confidence building; belief in student potential	Affirming student capability and growth	Academic Success
	We celebrate cultural holidays in class, like Diwali or Lunar New Year.	Cultural celebration; inclusivity	Affirming cultural diversity	Cultural Competence
	I show them that fairness and justice apply to the classroom, too.	Fairness; justice-oriented teaching	Modeling equity and fairness	Critical Consciousness
Louise	I hold my students to high expectations.	High standards; academic rigor	Maintaining high expectations with support	Academic Success
	We learn about traditions from around the world.	Global awareness; inclusion	Promoting global perspectives in learning	Cultural Competence
	We had discussions about the Black Lives Matter movement.	Social justice dialogue; activism	Engaging activism through classroom dialogue	Critical Consciousness
Leslie	I design lessons so all learners can access them.	Differentiation; equity of access	Designing equitable instruction	Academic Success
	We display student work in multiple languages.	Language inclusion; affirmation	Affirming multilingual identities	Cultural Competence
	When immigration came up, I shared my own family's story.	Personal narrative; vulnerability; civic awareness	Using personal experience to teach social issues	Critical Consciousness
Amy	I give extra attention in the mornings to students who need it.	Care; responsive support	Demonstrating care through individualized support	Academic Success

	We celebrated Diwali, and students were so proud.	Cultural pride; affirmation	Encouraging cultural affirmation	Cultural Competence
	The last election was hard; as a Black woman I wanted Harris to win.	Political identity; transparency; representation	Exploring personal identity in sociopolitical contexts	Critical Consciousness
Julie	I believe all kids can learn if given the chance.	Growth mindset; belief in potential	Building student confidence through opportunity	Academic Success
	We do projects about students' family stories.	Family engagement; cultural relevance	Centering family and culture in learning	Cultural Competence
	I help students understand protests in history and today.	Connecting past and present; critical reflection	Linking activism to curriculum	Critical Consciousness
Ryan	I want my students to be readers for life.	Lifelong literacy; intrinsic motivation	Fostering enduring academic habits	Academic Success
	Sports and music help me connect with them.	Cultural bridging; relational pedagogy	Building relationships through shared interests	Cultural Competence
	I tell them their voices matter.	Empowerment; civic engagement	Encouraging voice and agency in students	Critical Consciousness

The excerpts displayed in the tables highlight how each collaborator's words shaped the foundation of this study's analysis. Preserving their authentic phrasing ensured that meaning was drawn directly from their lived experiences, providing a natural bridge to the next phase of coding—value coding—where their beliefs, motivations, and commitments to culturally relevant pedagogy were interpreted more deeply. By centering collaborators' own language, in vivo coding enabled meaning to be drawn from their lived and linguistic realities rather than researcher-driven interpretations. This method established the emotional and cultural foundation for all subsequent analysis.

Value Coding

After completing the first cycle of in-vivo coding, value coding was employed to examine the deeper moral and pedagogical beliefs underlying collaborators' words. During this second cycle of coding, initial codes were revisited, refined, and reorganized by merging overlapping ideas and grouping them into more conceptual categories. While in vivo coding captured what teachers said, value coding illuminated why they said it by foregrounding the beliefs, motivations, and guiding principles shaping their instructional practices. As Saldaña (2016) explained, value coding "reflects a participant's values, attitudes, and beliefs, representing their perspectives or worldview" (p. 131). In a study focused on teachers' lived experiences, Chen (2024) found that educators' personal and professional histories shaped the belief systems that guide their practice. Similarly, in this study, value coding served as a vital bridge between collaborators' language and the belief systems that informed their actions.

Value coding was particularly significant because CRP itself is grounded in values, beliefs in equity, high expectations, and cultural affirmation (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2014). Coding the values embedded in teachers' narratives enabled examination of how their personal beliefs shaped instructional decisions, classroom climate, and relationships with students. This process also revealed tensions between teachers' aspirational values and the realities of working within restrictive educational systems.

After identifying initial value codes across all collaborators, MAXQDA was used to cluster similar codes under broader conceptual categories that reflected recurring beliefs and commitments. Using MAXQDA, value codes were color-labeled and grouped under the three CRP domains (academic success, cultural competence, and critical

consciousness), with an additional category for reflections that extended beyond the framework. Codes expressing shared moral or instructional values, such as advocacy, inclusion, and high expectations, were merged to form condensed categories within the CRP domains of academic success, cultural competence, and critical consciousness. This analytic process clarified how individual statements of belief converged into collective themes about what teachers value and how those values shape their practice. The sections that follow present how collaborators' values aligned with each CRP domain, illustrating how belief systems informed their enactment of culturally relevant pedagogy.

Academic Success

Teachers consistently emphasized the inherent ability of all students to achieve when provided with support and representation. Julie stated, "I believe all kids can learn if given the chance," reflecting a value of high expectations grounded in a growth mindset. Constance stated, "I make sure my students know they are capable, no matter their background." This statement similarly conveyed her moral stance that every child deserves the same level of belief and effort from educators. Ryan echoed this sentiment in saying, "I push them harder because I know they can handle it," revealing a conviction that rigor is a form of care. Together, these codes demonstrate how belief in students' potential was inseparable from teachers' notions of academic success.

Cultural Competence

Many collaborators believed that culture should be visible, celebrated, and central to classroom learning. Jocelyn affirmed this through her statement, "We do projects where families come in to share traditions," expressing her commitment to community-based learning. Similarly, Amy described how celebrating Diwali made her students "feel

proud," a reflection of her value that representation fosters belonging. Leslie's statement, "We display student work in multiple languages," captured her belief that linguistic diversity is a strength. Across narratives, cultural competence emerged not merely as an instructional approach but as a moral commitment to honoring students' full identities within academic spaces.

Critical Consciousness: Commitment to Justice and Student Voice

The value codes associated with critical consciousness emphasized teachers' belief in the necessity of dialogue about equity, fairness, and civic engagement. Miles expressed frustration with systemic resistance when he stated, "Parents are trying to fight the system of making sure books are banned." This statement demonstrated a value of advocacy and resistance. Ryan affirmed the power of student agency, stating, "I tell them their voices matter," while Louise reflected on teaching social issues, explaining, "We had discussions about the Black Lives Matter movement." These examples illustrate how teachers' moral and political beliefs shaped their willingness to engage students in critical inquiry despite potential controversy.

Additional Codes

Several value codes extended beyond the CRP framework, revealing beliefs tied to identity and purpose. Jocelyn's reflection, "Teaching is part of my calling, not just a job," reflected a deep spiritual and ethical commitment to her work. Miles' selfdescription, "As a Black, Korean, and gay man I gained a sense of self," expressed the intersectional value of authenticity and representation. Amy's statement, "I show up to students' events outside school," revealed a relational ethic grounded in care. These

codes reflected not only pedagogical beliefs but also the emotional and identity-based values that sustained their practice.

Through value coding, it became evident that each collaborator's enactment of CRP was deeply connected to personal convictions about equity, humanity, and justice. The teachers' belief systems influenced how they viewed students' potential, approached curriculum, and defined success. As Saldaña (2016) noted, value coding provides a window into "the heart of meaning," revealing not only what participants do but why they do it (p. 132). This study clarified how teachers' moral and cultural orientations informed every aspect of their pedagogy. Table 4 displays the first cycle of value coding.

Table 4

Cycle 1: Value Coding

Collaborator	Value Excerpt	Value Code	Collapsed Category	CRP Domain
Julie	I believe all kids can learn if given the chance.	Belief in equity; high expectations; growth mindset	Commitment to equitable learning opportunities	Academic Success
Constance	I make sure my students know they are capable, no matter their background.	Confidence building; belief in capability	Affirming student potential and effort	Academic Success
Ryan	I push them harder because I know they can handle it.	Rigor as care; persistence	High expectations as an act of care	Academic Success
Jocelyn	We do projects where families come in to share traditions.	Family and community engagement	Building learning through cultural connection	Cultural Competence
Amy	Celebrating Diwali made my students feel proud.	Representation; affirmation	Centering joy and pride in cultural identity	Cultural Competence
Leslie	We display student work in multiple languages.	Linguistic inclusion; belonging	Valuing multilingualism as cultural wealth	Cultural Competence

Miles	Parents are trying to fight the system of making sure books are banned.	Advocacy; resistance; justice	Challenging systemic inequity	Critical Consciousness
Ryan	I tell them their voices matter.	Empowerment; agency	Encouraging student activism and civic voice	Critical Consciousness
Louise	We had discussions about the Black Lives Matter movement.	Equity dialogue; awareness	Fostering courageous conversations on social justice	Critical Consciousness
Jocelyn		Moral purpose; vocation	Teaching as ethical and spiritual commitment	Additional Codes
Miles	As a Black, Korean, and gay man … I gained a sense of self.	Authenticity; intersectionality	Valuing identity as source of strength	Additional Codes
Amy	I show up to students' events outside school.	Relational care; community connection	Extending care beyond the classroom	Additional Codes

After the first stage of value coding, a second analytic process was conducted to merge overlapping belief categories into broader conceptual groupings. This analytic move reflected the shift from individual value statements to the collective ideas that define culturally relevant pedagogy in practice. Through this process, related codes such as high expectations, care, and equity were combined into a unified construct, "equity and care as pedagogical ethic." Similarly, belief categories tied to cultural visibility and belonging merged into "representation as cultural responsibility." Table 5 illustrates this second-level condensation of value codes across CRP domains.

Table 5

Second-Level Condensation of Value Codes Across CRP Domains

CRP Domain	Collapsed Categories from Table 4	Second-Level Conceptual Groupings
Academic Success	Commitment to equitable learning opportunities; Affirming student potential and effort; High expectations as an act of care	Equity and Care as Pedagogical Ethic: The conviction that academic rigor, fairness, and emotional support work together to ensure every child's success.
Cultural Competence	Building learning through cultural connection; Centering joy and pride in cultural identity; Valuing multilingualism as cultural wealth	Representation as Cultural Responsibility: The belief that students thrive when their identities and cultures are authentically visible and affirmed in curriculum and environment.
Critical Consciousness	Challenging systemic inequity; Encouraging student activism and civic voice; Fostering courageous conversations on social justice	Teaching for Justice and Agency: The belief that classrooms must engage students in understanding and confronting inequity while nurturing their power to act.
Additional Codes	Teaching as ethical and spiritual commitment; Valuing identity as source of strength; Extending care beyond the classroom	Identity and Purpose in Practice: The understanding that personal identity, authenticity, and moral purpose sustain teachers' commitment to equity and culturally relevant pedagogy.

Cycle 2: Categorizing

After completing the first round of coding, the analysis progressed into the categorizing phase. This stage focused on bringing together similar ideas and pieces of language from the collaborators to see what larger meanings they revealed. Saldaña (2016) described this phase as the analytic shift from labeling what participants said to interpreting what those words represented conceptually. Building on the in vivo and value codes generated during Cycle 1, the coded data were revisited in MAXQDA and examined for patterns and connections across collaborators' stories.

While the first cycle helped capture each teacher's words and values, categorizing served as the bridge that brought those details together into a clearer picture. Some codes that looked different at first turned out to express the same belief or practice once I

looked more closely. For instance, phrases like “students saw themselves in a book,” “representation builds confidence,” and “texts must reflect who they are” all pointed toward a shared understanding of representation and identity in the classroom. These expressions were therefore grouped into the broader category of representation and student voice. As Miles et al. (2020) noted, this stage of analysis involves looking carefully at what connects participants’ experiences and organizing them into categories that reflect those common understandings.

Memo writing supported this phase of analysis by documenting analytic decisions, emerging questions, and reflections about why particular codes belonged together. Each memo acted as a short reflection on why certain ideas belonged together and what they revealed about culturally relevant teaching. Moving iteratively between the codes, memos, and collaborators’ words helped maintain fidelity to the participants’ voices while allowing larger conceptual patterns to emerge.

The Categorizing Process

In this study, cross-case analysis was essential. CRP emphasizes interconnected domains of academic success, cultural competence, and critical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2014). Examining how these domains manifested across multiple teachers revealed both common assurances and variations shaped by identity, context, and lived experience. Without cross-case analysis, findings would have remained fragmented within individual cases; through cross-case comparison, the analysis gained coherence and explanatory depth (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Cross-case analysis also served as a strategy for establishing rigor. Saldaña (2016) emphasizes that qualitative coding must move from the “particular” to the “general,” and

themes gain credibility when they are supported across multiple collaborators. Systematic comparison of collaborators' narratives made transparent how findings were developed while still capturing the complexity of individual experiences. For example, one teacher emphasized representation through literature, another through family engagement, and another through global projects. Yet across cases, these efforts aligned with CRP's broader commitment to affirming student identity.

Equally important, cross-case analysis revealed tensions and contradictions. Narrative inquiry does not assume uniformity. Instead, it treats dissonance as instructive (Seidman, 2019). In this study, some teachers engaged critical consciousness directly, while others expressed hesitation or uncertainty. These differences addressed the challenges of practicing CRP across varied school contexts, particularly amid political polarization and book bans (Paris & Alim, 2017). Ultimately, cross-case analysis functioned as a bridge between collaborators' individual narratives and the broader implications of the study. It demonstrated that CRP is not a static framework but a dynamic practice, lived differently by each teacher. While commonalities, such as the importance of representation, emerged consistently, the analysis also recognized individualized approaches shaped by teachers' identities and professional environments. Table 6 presents the broader thematic cross-case matrix that synthesizes these patterns and divergences across collaborators.

Once codes were brought together, patterns were examined to determine how teachers' experiences aligned with Gloria Ladson-Billings' (1995, 2014) three domains of CRP. Each coding cycle was revisited, and recurring ideas became increasingly visible across collaborators' narratives. For example, phrases such as "meeting students where

they are" and "building confidence through small successes" consistently reflected how teachers supported academic growth. These ideas were grouped together as academic empowerment and differentiation. Likewise, statements describing "sharing family traditions" and "creating space for students to bring in their culture" were grouped as cultural affirmation and belonging.

Table 6

Broader Thematic Cross-Case Matrix

Domain	Themes Across Collaborators	Representative Quotes
Academic Success	Representation as Literacy Empowerment; Academic success as confidence building; High expectations with care	"Children saw themselves in a book." (Miles) / "It's not about the test, it's about building their confidence as learners." (Jocelyn) / "I push them harder because I know they can handle it." (Ryan)
Cultural Competence	Family and community integration; Affirming multilingualism; Global perspectives	"Families come in to share traditions." (Jocelyn) / "We display student work in multiple languages." (Leslie) / "We learn about traditions from around the world." (Louise)
Critical Consciousness	Navigating systemic resistance; Courage in addressing social issues; Dialogue on civic life	"Parents are trying to fight the system of making sure books… are banned." (Miles) / "We had discussions about the Black Lives Matter movement." (Louise) / "I don't avoid politics when students bring it up." (Ryan)
Additional Themes	Teacher identity and reflection; Emotional and spiritual labor; Recognition and legacy	"As a Black, Korean, and gay man… I gained a sense of self." (Miles) / "I cried in the first interview because I realized how deeply this work affects me." (Jocelyn) / "Winning Teacher of the Year showed me I was making a difference." (Julie)

As these categories were compared across collaborators, it became evident that the domains were not discrete. Instead, they overlapped and reinforced one another. Teachers who emphasized cultural identity and representation also tended to stress student achievement, confidence, and engagement. This pattern affirmed Ladson-Billings' (2014) assertion that culturally relevant pedagogy is inherently interconnected;

culture, learning, and justice are not separate instructional goals but mutually reinforcing elements of effective teaching. Memo writing was used throughout this phase to document analytic decisions and emerging interpretations. Memos supported reflection on why certain ideas were combined and how they connected to collaborators' experiences. As Saldaña (2016) noted, this reflective process transforms coding into an active dialogue with the data. Memoing functioned as that dialogue, allowing deeper engagement with the collaborators' words and clarifying how their narratives shaped the analytic direction of the study.

As categories became more clearly defined, the underlying beliefs about teaching and learning embedded in teachers' language also became more apparent. For instance, codes such as "students saw themselves in a book" and "they light up when they see their culture represented" were combined into a category that showed how representation in classroom materials builds confidence and engagement. That category later developed into the theme "representation as literacy empowerment." In another instance, phrases such as "parents visit to share family traditions" and "students teach us words in their language" formed the category cultural competence as community integration, highlighting how teachers made space for families and students to share who they are.

These examples show how each category served as a stepping-stone toward broader themes that captured the spirit of culturally relevant pedagogy. The analytic process extended beyond sorting or labeling data; it involved understanding how teachers' stories intersected and what those intersections revealed about their instructional practices. Table 7 provides a visual example of how individual codes moved from the

first cycle of analysis into categories and finally into overarching themes that aligned with the three CRP domains.

Table 7

Example of Category Development from Codes to Themes

First-Cycle Codes (In Vivo & Value)	Cycle 2 Categories	Evolving Theme	CRP Domain
"Students saw themselves in a book." "Texts must reflect who they are." "Representation builds confidence."	Representation and Student Voice	Representation as Literacy Empowerment	Academic Success/ Cultural Competence
"Parents visit to share family traditions." "We display work in multiple languages." "Families are part of our classroom community."	Cultural Affirmation and Belonging	Cultural Competence as Community Integration	Cultural Competence
"We had discussions about Black Lives Matter." "I tell them their voices matter." "We talk about what's happening in the world."	Encouraging Critical Conversations	Critical Dialogue as Civic Engagement	Critical Consciousness
"Every child can learn." "Meeting students where they are." "Confidence through small successes."	Academic Empowerment and Differentiation	Belief in the Unlimited Potential of Students	Academic Success
"I reflect on how my background affects my teaching." "Teaching is a part of who I am." "My faith helps me stay grounded."	Reflection and Identity in Practice	Teacher Identity and Spiritual Commitment	Evolving/ Additional Theme

Seeing the codes organized into categories helped illuminate the broader ideas reflected in collaborators' narratives. These emerging patterns guided the transition into the next stage of analysis, during which the categories were further refined into overarching themes. Through this analytic process, a set of cross-case themes emerged that reflected how collaborators conceptualized and enacted culturally relevant pedagogy across diverse classroom contexts. These themes were grounded in participants' narratives and aligned with Ladson-Billings' (1995, 2014) three domains of academic success, cultural competence, and critical consciousness, while also capturing areas that extended beyond the framework. The themes are presented and interpreted in Chapter 5.

Theme Development

The process of categorizing brought structure and clarity to the many voices represented in the study. By organizing the first-cycle codes into meaningful categories, patterns emerged that reflected how teachers live out the principles of culturally relevant pedagogy in their classrooms. These categories helped move the analysis beyond isolated statements toward a deeper understanding of the shared beliefs that guided collaborators' work with students. As the data were revisited, these categories evolved into broader themes—concepts that captured not only what teachers said, but what their words revealed about their commitments, challenges, and growth as culturally responsive educators. The next phase of analysis, described in the following section, focuses on how these categories developed into the second-cycle themes that anchor the findings of this study.

Evolution into Themes (Second-Cycle Coding)

After the categories were reviewed and checked for accuracy and alignment, I entered the next stage of analysis. This stage focused on developing themes that captured the larger meaning embedded in the collaborators' stories. While categorizing focused on organizing similar ideas into conceptual groupings, theme development involved interpreting what those categories revealed collectively about teachers' beliefs and practices. This step represented a shift from grouping ideas to interpreting what those groupings revealed about teachers' beliefs and practices. As Saldaña (2016) explained, second-cycle coding invites the researcher to "see the forest for the trees" and identify the broader patterns that unify the data. Each category was revisited and compared across collaborators, revealing recurring ideas that consistently aligned with the principles of CRP.

To support this process, a word cloud was generated to visualize recurring terms across both the first and second coding cycles. Prominent words such as representation, reflection, identity, culture, belonging, and equity surfaced repeatedly, symbolizing the core ideas embedded in teachers' narratives. These terms reinforced patterns that had already been identified through manual analysis, confirming the centrality of cultural affirmation, reflective practice, and equity-minded teaching. Visualizations such as word clouds provide an additional layer of analysis by making relationships between words and concepts visible. As Miles et al. (2020) noted, visual displays such as these strengthen analytic rigor by allowing researchers to "see the data" and examine patterns that might otherwise remain implicit. In this study, the word cloud highlighted how teacher identity, representation, and reflection consistently intersected across collaborators' experiences

with CRP. These visual analyses further laid the foundation for interpretive integration, in which connections among themes and the CRP framework are explored in greater depth. Figure 2 presents a visual representation of coded language across collaborators.

Figure 2

Visual Representation of Coded Language Across Collaborators

This chapter detailed the analytic process used to move from raw narrative data to meaningful interpretation. Through systematic coding, categorizing, and thematic connection, the analysis illuminated how teachers described their instructional practices, relationships with students, and commitments to equity. The findings demonstrated that culturally relevant pedagogy is not enacted through isolated strategies, but is embedded across everyday interactions, instructional decisions, and reflective practices within the classroom. Examining collaborators' narratives revealed the multiple ways culturally relevant pedagogy was brought to life through relationships, curriculum choices, and intentional engagement with students' identities and experiences.

Guided by the principles of narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Kim, 2016), these stories honored the voices of teachers as knowers of their own experiences. Each narrative highlighted how teachers' backgrounds, beliefs, and contexts shape their understanding of teaching and learning. Together, these accounts offer a personal and interpretive look at culturally relevant pedagogy as described through the collaborators' own words and lived experiences. Chapter 4 presents the collaborators' individual narratives.

Chapter IV

Personal Narratives

Overview

The description of the methods process in chapter 3 outlined the upcoming significance of collaborators' stories. Narrative inquiry is a powerful method for exploring experiences through storytelling, allowing individuals to express their unique perspectives and interpretations of the world around them (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Kim, 2016). Researchers who use narrative profiles often seek to uncover deep layers of meaning and interconnection within individual stories and across cultural contexts, aiming to understand how personal and social narratives shape identity, beliefs, and behaviors. The variety of viewpoints and the richness of self-disclosure offer an alternative perspective on what it means to live in the world. This perspective fosters empathy and critical engagement, particularly in education, where understanding experiences different from one's own is essential. In this way, narrative inquiry highlights the human dimension of educational practice and underscores the importance of stories in both personal and collective growth.

According to Mishler (1986), narratives are not simply messages carrying meaning, but rather a framework in which meaning is constructed. He stressed that the interview's discourse is collaboratively constructed by the interviewer and the respondent, with the questions and the answers influenced by their interaction. Therefore, narrative inquiry attends to both what is told and the telling of personal history, cultural context, and social life. Merriam (2002) contended that qualitative researchers must

attend to the meanings people attribute to their experiences and to the ways in which they are linked by power, identity, and culture. This stance highlights the significance of context in providing meaning to participants' experiences and the social structures that frame and constrain those experiences. Seidman (2013) further suggested that in-depth interviewing is well-suited to tapping into educators' circular life experiences, particularly in educational research. He described storytelling as an act of meaning-making for both the individual sharing the story and the listener, a process that invites reflection, interpretation, and connection. Through this process, narratives become a means of understanding how experiences unfold over time and how individuals make sense of their professional and personal journeys.

This chapter narratively profiles participants' voices and is compiled to show identity as a dynamic interplay among background, context, and lived experience. These narratives are not standalone; instead, they are located within wider sociocultural contexts, resonating with Mishler's (1986) appeal to consider narratives as socially and culturally scaffolded. Through narrative inquiry, the chapter foregrounds voices that are often marginalized or absent within dominant educational discourses, creating space for alternative meanings, critical reflection, and possibilities for change in education. The narrative profiles were developed from participants' interview transcripts and were shaped through a process of narrative "restorying" to strengthen coherence, readability, and narrative flow. The intention of this approach was to preserve participants' meaning-making and voice while presenting each account in a way that allowed readers to engage the participants as whole persons situated within specific social and professional contexts (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Kim, 2016). Although the narratives were edited to reduce

repetition and improve clarity, the accounts remained grounded in participants' descriptions of their lived experiences. Pseudonyms were used for all participants, and identifying details were removed or generalized to protect confidentiality.

Miles

Miles is a 33 -year-old Black, Korean, gay male educator whose journey into teaching is deeply rooted in his complex childhood, his lived experiences navigating identity, and his academic pursuit of understanding CRP. His life story reflects resilience, adaptability, and an ongoing commitment to ensure that students from diverse backgrounds see themselves reflected in the curriculum and classroom environment. I met him at his school, where his presence immediately caught my attention. He appeared to look more Asian than Black, a detail I made a mental note to ask about later, as I could relate to navigating life as someone of two different races who is often mistaken for Latinx, even though I am Black and White. He wore jeans and a blue-and-white jersey-style T-shirt, and his black hair and glasses gave him a calm, collected look.

A proud and active member of Phi Beta Sigma, a historically Black fraternity, he carried himself with the quiet confidence of someone firmly grounded in his identity. Early in our conversation, he reassured me that he understood my position as a researcher, noting that he had completed his own doctoral degree just two years earlier. That simple acknowledgment created an immediate sense of connection and understanding between us. The following narrative profile was constructed from Miles's interview transcripts and presents his story in first-person voice to preserve meaning and coherence.

Childhood and Early Identity Formation

When I think back on my childhood, I always say it was more complex than most. I was born to a Black father and a Korean mother, and growing up in the 1990s meant navigating who I was in a world that mostly understood race in Black-and-White terms. My parents divorced early, so I lived with my mom, but my dad stayed active in my life. My mom spoke very little English and struggled financially while raising me alone, and we relied on food stamps. We grew up very poor. My childhood also meant moving around a lot because of my father's military career. I lived in Louisiana for two years, then Germany for six, and eventually we settled in Georgia, where I still live today. I was a military kid for a little bit, just trying to get myself acquainted with Georgia life. It was interesting. Those moves exposed me to different cultures, but they also left me trying to figure out where I fit.

In school, I often felt disconnected from the curriculum, particularly through reading. The books I was given in elementary school never reflected who I was or what I cared about. I hated reading when I was young; all you saw were white children—blond hair, brown hair—something like that. I didn't see myself in the Boxcar Children or Goosebumps books that filled the classroom. Because of that, reading felt more like a task than something meant for me. Later, that lack of representation became one of the biggest reasons I centered culturally relevant literature in my own teaching and even in my doctoral work.

Pathway to College and Teaching

Higher education was never guaranteed for me. My dad made it very clear that military service was not an option. Because he had served in the military, he told me,

"You can do whatever you want, but you're not doing the military." So I really had two choices: either go to college or get a job. Watching my older brother go to college influenced me, and even though we didn't have much money growing up, I decided to pursue higher education, too.

I started out majoring in anatomy and physiology, thinking I would go into something medical. But I found out very quickly that it wasn't for me. My worst class—or the one I disliked the most was anatomy and physiology. I struggled, and it didn't feel like the right path. Everything changed when I was 19 and took a job as a summer camp counselor at the YMCA. That was the first time I ever worked with children, and it became an epiphany for me. I really enjoyed being with those kids and being able to be that person for a child who needed someone. That experience shifted everything. After that, I moved into education, and something finally clicked. When I started my education program during my last two years of college, it just felt right. It felt like this was exactly where I was supposed to be. Wanting to be a role model—especially for boys who didn't have male teachers in elementary school—solidified my commitment to becoming an educator.

Teaching Career and School Contexts

I've now been in education for eight years. I've taught mostly fifth grade, but I've also taught kindergarten and third grade. I've worked in three different school districts—three years in Raymond County, four years in Gatorsville County, and now in my present county. Because I've taught in both Title I and non—Title I schools, I've been able to see firsthand how different the educational experience can be for students depending on where they go to school.

When I think about my Title I experience, the biggest thing that stands out is how many of my students were Hispanic—about 75% and many of them came in as level one English learners. Some of them arrived with no English at all. That came with a lot of responsibility, because I was trying to help them learn a new language while also trying to meet academic expectations. Parental involvement was almost nonexistent, and we didn't have PTA support. Like I always say, all of our money comes from government funding, from our pockets, or from administrators.

My current school is a non—Title I school, and the difference is clear. Parents are involved, there's more money, and resources aren't always a struggle. But that comes with its own challenges, too. Sometimes we get entitlement. We get children who believe they can do what they want because their parents have money. So neither environment is perfect. Each one has its strengths and its problems, and sometimes I wish I could combine the best parts of both, the parental support versus the behavior.

Being one of only two Black male teachers in my school is something I think about a lot. Sometimes I feel like it's a disservice because, again, our school is filled with so many ethnicities and races, and we feel like the teachers should also reflect that. I see how the male students, especially, gravitate toward me. They come to me for advice, for mentorship, just to talk. That always reminds me why representation matters so much in education.

Doctoral Research and Understanding of CRP

My doctoral work really solidified the way I think about and practice culturally relevant pedagogy. I earned a doctorate in Educational Innovation with a concentration in elementary education, and my dissertation focused on multicultural literature. I used Gloria

Ladson-Billings' theory of CRP as my framework, looking at how rural elementary teachers selected and implemented multicultural literature in their classrooms. For me, CRP is essentially integrating the culture into what children are doing, whether it's through the literature we choose, the curriculum we design, or the way we structure our lessons. CRP means going beyond the scripted curriculum and bringing in texts and topics that reflect students' lived experiences and cultural backgrounds. I always tell people, I try to expose my children to different forms of literature outside of just what is prescribed to us. We talk about Langston Hughes in fifth grade. We talk about Louis Armstrong. We really go into detail about our history.

I also think a lot about how CRP has evolved into culturally sustaining pedagogy. It's not just about making learning relevant; it's about actively sustaining students' cultural identities. Like I say, we're not trying to just be relevant to the children, we're trying to sustain what they're learning.

Implementation of CRP in Practice

I'm very intentional in my classroom practice. I make sure my room is filled with books that represent the demographics of my students, whether they're Black, Hispanic, or Indian. I also adapt my teaching style so it connects with how my students see and experience the world. Sometimes that means pulling from social media language or trends to make content feel accessible. I try to really use terminology or verbiage that students are more familiar with, that they're kind of used to within social media, versus just a paper-to-pencil book.

I also design projects that let students center their own cultural identities. One example is when I had them create their own countries, government, culture, geography,

everything. That project allowed them to pull from their heritage, their interests, and their creativity. I remember watching how some students highlighted traditional cultural practices, while others leaned into pop culture or fantasy. All of it was valid because it reflected who they were. Students were excited because they were able to implement their own understanding of their own culture.

The biggest impact I've seen, though, comes from using culturally relevant literature. I've watched it change student outcomes. I had Hispanic English learners who started the year unable to read, and once I gave them books that reflected their culture, they grew so much. A child that goes from no English to being able to read up to like a first, second grade level, to me, I feel like that happened because children saw themselves in a book and said, "Okay, I kind of see myself, and I want to continue to read."

Challenges and Barriers to CRP

Even with how committed I am to culturally relevant pedagogy, I still face a lot of challenges when I try to implement it. One of the biggest ones is the generational cultural gap. My students are growing up in a world that looks very different from the one I grew up in, and sometimes the lessons I think will resonate with them just don't. It's not the fact that the lesson failed. It was the fact that it wasn't as impactful to the children. And so we got to go back to the drawing board.

Another major challenge is the political climate. Teaching in a conservative state means I've had to witness book bans and deal with parents who resist inclusive or culturally relevant materials. I see it all the time: Politics is playing a huge role in our school system. Rebellious parents are trying to fight the system of making sure that books that don't fit this ideal society are banned. I feel like it's a huge distraction from what we

should actually be doing, helping kids learn to read. Instead of banning books, we should be focusing on literacy.

I also think the system itself is a barrier because most teacher preparation programs don't teach CRP at all. In my own undergraduate and master's programs, I never had a single course on multicultural literature or culturally relevant pedagogy. Most of the time, it's online [programs] they don't ever get programs that support CRP. If we really want equity in education, that has to change. In my mind, every teacher should know about Gloria Ladson-Billings.

Evolving Teaching Identity

The deepest part of my journey has been my evolving sense of identity. Being Black, Korean, and gay means I've often felt like I don't fully belong anywhere. In my interview reflection, I talked about how American society doesn't always make room for people like me. Most things are Black or White [issues] when we talk about things, but not a space 'for real for real' for gay people that fit that dynamic.

There have been times when I've masked or hidden pieces of who I really am because I didn't feel like schools—or society—would fully accept me. But those experiences have also shaped my determination to show up for students who are navigating their own identities. I want to be an ally for students of color, for LGBTQ+ kids, and for any child who feels like they're living in between. I want to make sure that the children do not have to fight with their own identity as well. Being part of this study pushed me even deeper into that reflection. Through the interviews and the process of telling my story, I gained a sense of self for myself; it helped me better understand who my identity is as a person, not just as an educator, just as an individual. I see my role now

as breaking cycles of exclusion and making sure that every child who walks into my classroom feels seen, valued, and supported.

Teacher's Reflection

I realized how much this study pushed me to think more deeply about my practice and about myself. I think, since the study began, the one thing I really reflected on is making sure that every individual or student is heard. That commitment—to truly listen and create space for all voices—has become a guiding principle in how I teach. As my school community has grown more diverse, I've had to constantly reexamine how I reach students across different cultures. I found myself asking, How can I target my Indian students and my Asian students in a way that they're also feeling special and unique in their own way? Reflection stopped being something I did occasionally and became a daily responsibility, shaping how I think about equity and inclusion in my classroom. Being part of this study also helped me better understand myself. I've felt the weight of being Black and Korean, and of navigating my identity as a gay man in spaces where acceptance isn't always guaranteed. But through this process, I gained a sense of self for myself; it helped me better understand who my identity is as a person, not just as an educator, just as an individual. That clarity strengthened my purpose. It made me even more determined to make sure that no child in my care ever feels invisible or excluded because of who they are.

Looking back, what stands out most to me is how my journey blends empathy with resolve. I'm not satisfied with surface-level teaching or sticking strictly to scripted lessons. I lean into creativity, criticality, and cultural responsiveness. My growth isn't defined by titles or credentials, even though I've earned many, but by my willingness to

see every student and uplift them. For me, success has never been just about academic proficiency. It's about creating a space where children know every single day that their voices matter, their cultures belong, and their identities are affirmed.

Researcher's Reflection

As I reflect on this journey, I realize that listening to my participants has changed me as much as it has illuminated their stories. Entering this study, I believed I already had a solid grasp of what CRP meant. After all, I had been practicing it in my own classroom for years, making sure my students felt seen, cared for, and supported. But as I gathered these narratives, I began to see CRP with new eyes. It is not just a method of teaching; it is a way of knowing, a way of being with students that demands ongoing self-examination and an openness to growth.

What surprised me most was how much I learned about myself. For 18 years, I have carried the identity of a teacher, one who shows up early, stays late, and puts her students first. But engaging in this research, I discovered another layer of my professional identity: I am also a storyteller, an interpreter of voices, and a bridge between lived experience and academic knowledge. Collecting, coding, and shaping these accounts into narratives required me to step back and let my participants lead, while also stepping forward to analyze and honor their words. In doing so, I began to recognize that my role as a doctoral student is not separate from my role as a teacher; it is an extension of the same commitment to equity and truth-telling.

This study also sharpened my awareness of how personal experience shapes professional purpose. As a Black woman teaching in today's classrooms, I often see things in very black and white terms. Not because I do not recognize the struggles of

other communities of color, but because I have lived my life through the lens of racial oppression and systemic inequity. I was naive, however, in realizing how deeply oppression extends to those who identify as LGBTQ, and listening to Miles describe his reality as Black, Korean, and gay opened my eyes to layers of marginalization I had not fully considered. I felt a deep sense of empathy for him, not only because he is Black, but because he has had to carry multiple identities in a society that often refuses to accept them all. His story pushed me to expand my understanding of what it means to create inclusive spaces and reminded me that CRP cannot stop at race; it must account for every identity students bring into the classroom.

Closing this reflection, I recognize that I am leaving this study different from when I began. My understanding of CRP has deepened, not only in theory but in lived practice. More than that, my sense of purpose as an educator-scholar has been renewed. This journey has reminded me that education is not just about standards or assessments. It is about creating spaces where every child, every teacher, and every story matters. In carrying these narratives forward, I am reminded of my own: one of persistence, conviction, and a belief that teaching, at its core, is an act ofjustice.

Jocelyn

Short and petite in stature, Jocelyn greeted me with warmth the very first time we met. Her friendly nature was immediately evident in her huge smile and in the small gestures that revealed her generosity, like when she offered to buy my coffee as we stood in line together. We met at a Starbucks on the border of Cobb County and Atlanta, where she arrived straight from work, still dressed in a matching jumpsuit. A Black woman in her mid-40s, she carried herself with an energy and personality that I would later realize

matched those of the other career paths she had once considered pursuing. Even before our conversation began, it was clear that Jocelyn's presence commanded attention, balancing both approachability and strength.

Life Story: Childhood and Upbringing

When I think back on my childhood, the word that comes to mind is heartbreak. My life changed completely when my mother passed away. My siblings and I had to leave New York and move to North Carolina to live with extended family. Being so young and having such a shift in a dynamic of location and then moving with family that I knew, but didn't know that well, that was heartbreaking. Even through all of that hurt, I was grateful that my siblings and I were kept together. We could have easily been separated, and the fact that we weren't meant everything to me.

In the middle of all that instability, school became my refuge. It was the one place where I felt grounded, where rules and routines created a kind of stability I didn't have at home. School was like my safe haven. It was the place I went that provided solace. There was more routine at school than there was at home. In the classroom, I could be someone different, someone not weighed down by everything happening in my life. School gave me space to imagine a different version of myself and what my future could be.

There was this one time when I was asked to describe my childhood in a song, poem, or metaphor, and I immediately thought of Tupac Shakur's line, "A rose that grew from concrete." That was me. That's how I survived—growing, stretching, blooming in a place where nothing was supposed to thrive. Thinking about that gets me emotional. I'm getting a little emotional. Where's your tissue, girl? But even after all these years, those

memories are still so raw with me, because they shaped the determination that pushes me forward even now.

College Life and Pathway into Teaching

As I got older, I knew education was going to be my ticket. I had family members who were talented and intelligent, but many ended up stuck in low-paying jobs or becoming parents early. I wanted something different for myself. I knew I had to grow up to be somebody. I knew that for me, my ticket was going to be education. Being a first-generation college student meant I had to carve out my own path.

When I got to college, I majored in communications because I was drawn to how people interact, how we write, and how we express ourselves. All of those classes where I learned about the power of communicating were intriguing for me. Writing classes especially helped me find my voice. Growing up in predominantly white schools, I never wrote honestly about my life. I never was really honest about my life in my writings. But in college—around diverse peers and professors who encouraged authenticity—I finally started sharing my real story. Everybody has a story, and you can write about it and be confident in telling your story.

Not everything was enjoyable. I remember disliking the tedious parts of research courses, especially constantly having to switch citation styles. Still, my undergraduate years made it clear that education really was the pathway to becoming the person I wanted to be. What's funny is that I didn't originally plan to become a teacher. After graduating in 2002, I thought about law school and even started preparing for the LSAT. What shifted everything was joining Teach for America right after 9/11. Suddenly, I found myself standing in an Atlanta classroom, looking at my students, and instantly

recognizing myself in them. When I saw those kids, I saw me. What was supposed to be a two-year commitment turned into my life's work. I realized not only was I good at teaching, I could also be a catalyst for change, helping children see education as their own ticket forward.

Teaching Journey in the U.S. and Abroad

Over the past two decades, I've taught in four different schools. I started my career in Alabet Public Schools, working in two elementary schools over nine years. Those were the years that shaped me—years that grounded me in equity, representation, and making sure every child felt seen. After that, I wanted something new, something bigger, so I moved to the United Arab Emirates. I spent seven years there as both a teacher and a school leader. Teaching internationally brought a whole new set of challenges. Almost all of my students were ESOL learners. Their home language was Arabic, but everything in school was in English. And then there was the role wealth played. Many families relied heavily on private tutors, which caused a lot of tension between what students were learning at home and what we were doing in school. There were moments when I felt like we pretended in school because real systemic change felt impossible. But even with the challenges, I valued that experience. It opened my eyes to how different countries handle learning, equity, and culture.

When I came back to the United States, I joined a school in Mayle County in 2018, and I've been teaching second grade here ever since. My time abroad changed me, especially when it comes to work-life balance. I saw cultures where your identity wasn't tied to your job. I brought that lesson home with me. I want to work. I do it well. I make money to sustain my lifestyle. But also, when I leave work, I want to be done with work

and continue to live. Teaching is important to me—it's service, it's purpose—but it's not the whole of who I am. I try to model joy, balance, and living fully for my students, too.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

My understanding of culturally relevant pedagogy has grown a lot over the years. I first learned about it after college, and for me, it meant holding high expectations for every student, no matter their race or background. As a Black woman, thinking back on my own schooling, I can remember times when my culture and identity weren't represented at all. Learning about CRP gave me the language to make sure my students would not feel invisible the way I once did. I see CRP as something woven into culture itself—race, language, gender, lived experiences. It requires real reflection. Teachers have to examine their values, their assumptions, and their stereotypes if they want to build authentic practices. To me, CRP is both a mirror that helps students see themselves and a window that helps them see others. But I've also had moments where I questioned whether what we were doing was really authentic or just surface-level. My biggest concern was, "Are we going to really do the work to understand the culture, to learn about the culture, to engage with students, or is it still going to be overshadowed by the stereotypes that I may have, the biases that I may have?"

In my classroom, I try to integrate CRP in small but intentional ways that affirm who my students are. I make sure my materials show all kinds of representation — multicultural markers so kids can draw themselves accurately, images in my PowerPoints that feature children of different races. Nine times out of ten, it's going to be a group of white kids, so I intentionally look for pictures of Black, Latino, and Indian children so my

students see themselves. When I write assessments, I use student names, even the difficult ones, because identity deserves to be honored every day.

One moment that really stayed with me was during an assessment with a young Indian student. Other teachers had been calling him Michigan because they couldn't pronounce his real name, Vishagan. I refused to do that. I told him, "Names can be very … it's identity. It's who you are. You don't have to change the pronunciation of your name." Honoring a child's name is the least we can do.

I'm proud of my students' academic success, especially my students of color. To see that you can do well academically, I was very proud. I want others, especially those I work with, to see that those kids can succeed and be successful academically, not only in sports. For me, CRP is about shifting narratives so our children are celebrated for their brilliance, not just for athletics or good behavior. But I'm also honest about the challenges. Standards, testing, and timing make it hard to carve out the space to learn students' cultural backgrounds. The challenge is finding the time to really make sure I understand the students' cultural backgrounds and experiences, but also the time for kids to give me their perspective, because everything is so timed. And in my school, CRP is hardly ever talked about. After Ahmaud Arbery's murder and everything that happened in 2020, I expected more conversations. Instead, silence became the elephant in the room. I honestly cannot say that there has been a time when CRP was discussed. And that silence is its own barrier. CRP takes courage. It takes effort. It takes work.

Evolving Teaching Identity

Over my 22 years in education, my teaching identity has really been shaped by my commitment to change and my need for balance. I've stayed in this field because it's stable,

it provides security, and because I truly believe teaching is a way of touching the future. I know what it means for children to see a Black woman in front of them. I want children to see successful people who look like them doing, being teachers, doing great things. I take joy in the small moments—when a child finally masters a skill after weeks of work, or when students realize they can succeed academically and not just in sports. To see that you can do well academically, I was very proud. But I'm also honest about the frustrations. There are inequitable expectations for students of color, attendance policies that don't always honor teachers' real lives, and a school system that avoids honest conversations about race and culture.

Being part of this study gave me a different lens; it pushed me to think more intentionally about the norms in my classroom and the real-world connections I make with my students. When you know better, you do better. I'm more mindful now about affirming identities, creating safe classroom spaces, and weaving culture into my teaching. And I want to encourage my colleagues to do the same, not from judgment, but from empowerment. Educating is a community career. We're all working together for a common goal.

Teacher's Reflection

By the conclusion of this study, I had undergone a meaningful shift in perspective. The conversations gave me a different lens, and they pushed me to reflect on my daily practices and the overall climate of my school in ways I hadn't before. As a veteran teacher, I was used to thinking about lessons and student outcomes—what worked, what needed improvement—but this experience made me go deeper and think about how culture, identity, and equity were, or were not, woven into my teaching.

Before the study, I often thought more about standards, pacing guides, and the typical demands of the classroom than about CRP. But the conversations made me pause and reconsider my priorities. When you know better, you do better, and now I see my teaching through a lens of inclusivity and affirmation. What once felt optional—adding a cultural perspective, being deliberate about representation, honoring a student's name—now feels essential. One of the biggest realizations for me was that CRP begins with creating a safe and affirming classroom space. Small choices, like insisting on pronouncing a child's name correctly or using images that reflect my students' racial and cultural diversity, matter deeply. Those decisions are acts of affirmation that tell students they belong, and they shape a child's sense of self. This experience also made me confront the silence around CRP in my own school. Conversations about culture and bias rarely happen, even after moments like the murder of Ahmaud Arbery, which affected me and my students. That silence has become the elephant in the room. The study made me think about how to begin those conversations in ways that are not accusatory but empowering, ways that help my colleagues see CRP not as criticism but as a path toward student success. The study also shaped how I see myself beyond the classroom. It changed the way I move through the world—at the grocery store, the farmer's market, or when I go to plays and performances. I pay closer attention to representation, culture, and equity everywhere. I feel like it has made me a better educator and a more thoughtful human being.

Educating is a community career. We're all working together for a common goal. I want my colleagues to see the impact of CRP without fear or defensiveness. For me, the next step is moving from personal conviction to collective practice—making sure all

children not only learn, but feel seen, valued, and affirmed. In many ways, my reflection mirrors my entire life story: a journey shaped by loss and resilience, silence and voice, invisibility and affirmation. Just as I found refuge and transformation in education, I want my students to experience school as a place where they can grow, thrive, and be fully themselves.

Researcher Reflection

Meeting Jocelyn was both inspiring and challenging for me as a researcher because of her vibrant, confident presence. Yet beneath that presence were stories of heartbreak and resilience that still brought her to tears decades later. I could not help but feel connected to her as a Black woman navigating the world of education, trying to hold on to joy and balance while also carrying the weight of representation. Watching her smile and laugh at Starbucks, so willing to offer kindness even in small ways like buying me coffee, I never would have guessed that her early life had been shaped so much by loss. Her vulnerability in saying, "I'm getting a little emotional. Where's your tissue, girl?" reminded me how heavy our pasts can remain, no matter how far we have come.

What struck me most in listening to Jocelyn was her honesty about the struggle between what she knows is right and what the system often demands. I recognized myself in her when she admitted that sometimes standards, pacing, and testing overshadow culturally relevant teaching. As educators, we know what our students need, but the structure of schooling does not always allow for it. Her awareness of how CRP is too often the elephant in the room resonated with me deeply. I have been in those same meetings, in those same silences, where important conversations about race, bias, and expectations were avoided. It made me reflect on how often Black educators are the ones

asked to carry the load of naming injustice and pushing for equity, while others remain silent.

I also admired how Jocelyn brought her global perspective back into her classroom. Her time abroad changed how she views both teaching and living, reminding me that our profession cannot consume our entire identity. That balance is something I continue to wrestle with personally, wanting to give my students everything, but also needing to preserve space to live and breathe outside of school. Listening to her talk about work-life balance as an intentional choice helped me reflect on my own boundaries and the importance of modeling a full life for our students.

Ultimately, Jocelyn's story reminded me of the strength and fragility that coexist in all of us. She is a rose that grew from concrete, but she is also someone who still feels the cracks beneath her feet. As I reflect on her journey, I am challenged to consider how I can use my position as a researcher, teacher, and Black woman to create spaces where stories like hers are not just heard but valued. Jocelyn affirmed for me that CRP is not a choice; it is an act of survival and affirmation for our students. Her story calls me to keep pressing for courageous conversations, not only in my own work but also in the broader field of education.

Constance

I first met Constance at her school, where she welcomed me with a friendly and open demeanor. In her early thirties, she carried herself with a quiet confidence, her shoulder-length brown hair framing her face. She was pretty and dressed comfortably in flowing pants and a simple graphic T-shirt. Our conversation started easily, her warmth

immediately apparent, and it was clear that she brought the same approachable authenticity to her classroom as she did to our meeting.

Childhood and Early Life

I describe my childhood as carefree, a time filled with long afternoons outside, laughter with my siblings, and a strong sense of stability. I lived in a cul-de-sac, and I just was outside playing all the time. Growing up in a two-parent household gave me a real sense of safety and support. I feel like I had a really nice childhood—lots of playing, lots of support. Even though my childhood was full of play, my family had firm expectations around education. My mother dropped out of school at 14, and that shaped the way she raised me. She dropped out of school when she was 14, so it was not an option for her; I was going to do well no matter what needed to happen. Homework always came first, and if I struggled, she made sure I had tutors. Education was part of our family legacy, too. My grandfather was a principal and later an area superintendent in Atlanta.

For both parents, school was the biggest thing for me. I embraced those expectations. I've always been a nerd who genuinely loved school. I loved school. I still love school. And unlike many of my peers, I never questioned whether I would go to college. It wasn't an option; you had to go to college. But I also wanted to, because I wanted to be a teacher.

College Years and the Path to Teaching

College was both formative and challenging for me. I naturally gravitated toward early childhood and education classes, especially anything that was about children and how they learn. I still remember my world literature teacher from high school; she made her classroom a safe place for me when things were tough at home, and that stayed with

me when I went off to college. My path to teaching wasn't always straight, though. I dated somebody who was thirteen years older than me, and at one point, I just didn't want to be in school anymore. I wanted to get married. I told myself, I'm gonna not be a teacher. I don't want to do this. After a semester away, I realized how wrong I was. I was like, "Just kidding. I love school, and I want to be a teacher."

Then, in my senior year, eight days before graduation, I didn't turn in an assignment after spring break. My professor told me, "That's the last straw; you're not graduating." I was like, "Excuse me? Graduation is in eight days. I have a dress, my family's coming, my mom's paid a lot of money for this party." At the time, it felt devastating, but now I call it the best thing that ever happened to me because it forced me to reflect on my priorities and my resilience.

My education program also introduced me to CRP in a way that shook me. I took a diversity and equity course that, at first, offended me. Being this white woman from the suburbs, I was so offended. I was like, "You'll never tell me I'm racist." We did a privilege walk, and the questions were things I had never thought about: Did you have books? Did your parents both have jobs? Did you live with both parents? Did your parents talk to you about college? When we looked at where we were standing, she said, "That's your privilege." I had never thought about any of that. I was like, "What are you talking about? I'm not privileged." But it completely opened my eyes to things not everybody has.

I was also part of what my university called an urban education program. We took our classes inside Title I schools, co-taught by professors and practicing teachers. All two years of my program were spent in those schools. I don't like the term urban ed now, but

it really prepared me to teach in diverse, low-income schools. Later, I had to redo my student teaching at an affluent, predominantly white school, and I realized how much I hated it. Those classrooms didn't look like the world to me. There was a need for diversity. There was a need for teaching children about the world. That experience confirmed for me the kind of schools I wanted to teach in.

Teaching Journey

I've been teaching for seven years now, all at the same school. I started in fifth grade and then moved into kindergarten, which is where I found so much joy in helping students unlock literacy. When I teach a kid how to read, it opens their world to let them be able to do anything. I've always said, if you can read, you can do anything. I love seeing how the things I teach show up in their play. When I hear them say things like, "It's okay to make a mistake," or "Just try your best," it really hits me. Those moments remind me that teaching is about way more than academics; it's about the way kids begin to see themselves and each other.

Even with all of that joy, the work can be frustrating. When a kid clearly has these needs, and there's so little we can do because of the hoops, it's really, really frustrating to me. My preparation in both Title I and affluent schools showed me such a clear difference in what classrooms look like depending on where kids live. It was crazy to see the difference in everything that goes on in a classroom. My current school feels like a mix. There's strong parent involvement, but also a lot of kids who lack basic needs. That combination has made me more flexible and empathetic, and it's helped me understand how systems of advantage and disadvantage shape the way kids learn.

Understanding and Practicing Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

My definition of culturally relevant pedagogy is rooted in representation and reflection. It's knowing the kids in your classroom and their backgrounds and the things that are important to them, and incorporating those things into your lessons instead of just recycling old things year after year. But it can't stop there. It's also exposing them to things that are different—teaching your kids not only about themselves, but about others. For me, CRP also requires teacher self-awareness. It's about realizing your own biases or internalized stereotypes and breaking those down before you even come into the classroom. That work started for me in college when I had to confront my privilege, and it continues now as I intentionally seek out resources and perspectives from educators of color.

In my classroom, I implement CRP in both simple and meaningful ways. I make sure my library has books that represent my students' backgrounds, and I make sure the images on my walls show diverse children. Representation really matters. I also incorporate holidays from multiple traditionsJewish, Hindu, Christian — so students see their families honored while also learning about others. My commitment goes beyond surface-level celebrations. When a mother told me her child identified as a transgender boy, and my administrators said I could not use his preferred pronouns, I refused to go along with that. Supporting a child by using their preferred pronouns is a way that you can save their lives. So I closed my door and did what I knew was right. I supported him and let him be who he was in my classroom. The change was incredible. They are the happiest, most successful version of themselves. Their mom said she didn't care about the

academics this year. That her child had blossomed and loved themselves. That is success for me.

I also think about my fifth graders, the year a Muslim student was ridiculed. Instead of moving past it, I sat with them for three hours and helped them talk through religion. For three hours, I sat and talked to ten-year-olds about religion, and they all said, "Well, your religion sounds like mine." I had kids who were Hindu, Muslim, atheist, agnostic, and Christian that year. Those kids sat for three hours on the floor and talked about religion that adults could never do. That moment reminded me what CRP actually looks like when kids are given tools to lead with empathy.

I push back with adults, too. When I was told to skip a page in a book about families because it mentioned two moms or two dads, I said no. If you want me to teach about families, I'm going to teach about families. Why should my kid, who has two moms, be excluded from this conversation? I know my insistence makes people uncomfortable. Most of the time, it's teachers making sure that they feel safe and comfortable, and they get really annoyed when I push the boundaries. But I keep doing it because these kids matter to me. Who they are matters to me.

Evolving Teaching Identity

Over the course of my career, I've evolved from someone who just loved school into someone who sees teaching as a form of justice. I've learned that culture is not only about race. It's about family structure, gender identity, and all the different pieces that shape who a child is. Your culture is not just about your race, and being intentional about choosing people and materials that reflect all the cultures in my class, not just race, really matters to me.

As I've grown, I've also become more willing to speak out. Reflecting on it has made me realize why it's important to me and why it's important to my kids, but it's also made me more willing to speak out. Even when I know what I say might not be well received, I'm confident enough now to share it anyway because I know it can leave a lasting impact. My identity as a teacher is grounded in relationships. When somebody so highly regarded to a child cares about what the child cares about, they understand that they are important. It builds their self-confidence. It builds their confidence in who they are as a person, not just in their skills. That's what I try to create in my classroom, a place where kids feel safe, seen, and valued.

Teacher Reflection

By the end of these conversations, I felt like the study brought me full circle to what I learned back in college about privilege, identity, and teaching for equity. I used to get defensive in those diversity classes. I remember saying to myself, "You're not going to tell me I'm racist." But over time, those classes opened my eyes to how privilege works and how kids' experiences are shaped by circumstances they can't control. Talking through my journey reminded me why it's important to stay grounded in that awareness.

Through participating in this study, I feel an even stronger responsibility to check my own biases and to make sure my students' lives are represented authentically in the classroom. It's knowing my kids and making sure that who they are is reflected in what we do. I also know the courage it takes to support students, even when policies or administrators push back. I've lived that—choosing to affirm a transgender student's identity even after being told not to. For me, those moments, choosing a child over a rule, show what it really means to be an educator.

Looking back, I see my growth not only as a teacher but as a person. It's about me realizing that I have to keep learning, too. This study reminded me that CR_P isn't a checklist; it's a daily commitment to seeing kids fully. And honestly, this process reminded me why I'm here. It's to make sure kids know they are enough.

Researcher Reflection

What stood out to me most about Constance was her openness to change and her courage to act on what she believes is right for children. From our first meeting, she was direct and unguarded, willing to talk about her early resistance to ideas of privilege and racism, and how that resistance later gave way to real growth. That honesty is rare, and it revealed a teacher who does not try to present herself as perfect but as someone still learning, unlearning, and pushing herself forward.

Her stories revealed a kind of bravery that resonated deeply with me. Whether it was affirming a transgender student when the district told her not to or refusing to erase families with two moms from her classroom discussions, Constance consistently chose her students' humanity over her own comfort. I saw in her an educator who is not simply doing CRP because it is expected, but living it out in her choices, even when those choices come with risk.

Listening to Constance also stretched my own thinking. She reminded me that culture is layered and cannot be reduced to race or ethnicity alone. For her, culture includes family, gender, religion, and the everyday identities children carry into the classroom. That insistence on a broader view of culture made me pause and reflect on the ways I sometimes default to narrow definitions. She challenged me, as a researcher, to expand my own lens of what it means to create belonging.

As a Black woman, I recognized the weight of what she risks by speaking out in spaces that reward silence. But unlike others who may stay quiet, Constance leans into the hard conversations and confronts the discomfort head-on. Her willingness to grow, to listen, and to stand firm for children impressed upon me that CRP is not only about what we teach, but also about how much we are willing to risk to ensure that every child feels seen and valued.

Louise

I first met Louise, a 45-year-old teacher, at a public library, a neutral spot we chose halfway between her and my location. She had shoulder-length blonde hair and blue eyes. She wore a plain white dress that flowed past her knees, embroidered delicately at the top. A small brown leather purse was worn across her body. On her feet were simple Birkenstock-like shoes. She looked very wholesome and pleasant.

Life Story: Childhood and Background

I grew up in Warner Robins, a small town in Middle Georgia, where my family's history ran deep, and the rhythms of rural life shaped my earliest memories. It was both military and rural because of the Air Force base nearby the biggest employer in town — and the peach and pecan orchards that surrounded us. I remember lots of orchards and just kind of seeing development happen, but especially when I was little, it felt very rural and small. My community was overwhelmingly white, with very few people of color. My town was very homogeneous growing up, and I always strove for more. I felt school was my way to get there. Those realities of military culture, agricultural life, and limited racial diversity shaped the way I understood community and fueled my determination to leave.

My grandmother played a huge role in my early connection to schools. My grandma was a permanent substitute. She always had a job in a school all my years growing up. Because of her, I always heard teachers' stories and saw what it looked like to be committed to a school community. Teachers would say things like, "Oh, I remember teaching your mom and your uncle," reminding me how deeply schools were woven into my family's story. My uncle, who went into academia, was a powerful role model. It was just me and my brother, no cousins. So he was our next generation to look up to. He set that example of college as this doorway to other experiences. My parents hadn't gone to college. My dad tried junior college for a year while playing baseball, but entered the workforce at 19. I carried an internal expectation. I was going to be the one who left home.

I always wanted to move away and go to college. I always put more importance on school than even my parents did. I set my sights on UGA, knowing the HOPE Scholarship was my only way to get there. It wasn't an option for me to stay home. I wasn't willing to live at home and go to school. I had to have the HOPE to pay for it. That determination pushed me through high school and made it clear that leaving Warner Robins was the only path I was willing to take.

College and Early Career Path

When I got to UGA, I was so ready to be exposed to something different. I thought the campus would be completely unlike my hometown. But when I got there, I realized, at least what people looked like, you know? I thought it was going to be different, but a lot of people still looked just like me. I loved the independence and the academics, but looking back, I can say that up until this point, I had a very limited

exposure and a very limited definition of what diversity is. I thought I would see more, but I didn't really realize that until after college.

I originally went into occupational therapy, but when I found out I'd have to transfer schools to finish the program, I switched to speech pathology so I could stay in Athens. I actually really liked the major, especially the professors who opened up my world a little. I took a class on the Aztecs and Mayans with my roommate—it wasn't related to my major, but it was incredible. The professor had traveled, and it was just a part of history I hadn't learned about in high school. But my clinical work made something really clear: I loved working with kids in the schools—doing hearing screenings, being around the energy of classrooms—but I did not love the hospital setting. I liked doing hearing screenings with kids at elementary schools, but I didn't like going to a hospital and doing a barium swallow. That's when I started realizing that maybe I belonged in a school instead.

My first job after graduating was as a paraprofessional in a pre-K classroom. Wow is right, I always say when I think about that year. Definitely not four-year-olds, but I liked the school environment. I liked just being in a school. I liked the vibe of it. I knew this was where I wanted to be. That year showed me what I had been resisting; I really did want to be a teacher.

Teaching Journey

I've been teaching for eighteen years now, almost all of them in Cobb County. I spent 12 years at my first school, a Title I campus on the Cobb—Douglas line, before transferring in 2018 to the school where I teach now, which isn't Title I but is definitely

socioeconomically diverse. Over the years, I've taught second, fourth, and fifth grades, but upper elementary is where I've served the longest.

My first school shaped me in so many ways. I didn't have a traditional student teaching experience, so that paraprofessional year and my first classroom were really my training grounds. I was surrounded by young colleagues who were in the same place as me—no families yet, no marriages, just pouring ourselves completely into teaching. We were pretty young professionals, and we poured ourselves into those little babies. It was affirming to see everyone so committed. That school also used its Title I money in ways that truly benefitted kids. There was a lot the school was able to do with those resources, and it reinforced for me how much equitable funding matters. It really does shape student outcomes.

My current school looks different on paper, but the needs are still very real. It's not a Title I school, but there are parents busting it to pay rent. It's a socioeconomically diverse community with a large Latinx population, a significant Black population, and many first-generation immigrant families. The demographics have changed, but the responsibility to meet students where they are is the same. What has kept me in the classroom all these years is the joy I get from the kids. The kids are never the turnoff for me. That's where I find my joy. The paperwork, the documentation, the systematic issues, those can be draining. But when I've got kids at my table, and they say something that cracks me up, or I see a lightbulb moment, that's what makes everything worth it.

At the same time, I've seen how frustrating the system can be. A lot of times, systematic decisions are made that do not reflect the best interests of kids. The people

making decisions are not the stakeholders in schools. That can be very demoralizing. But my focus always comes back to my classroom and the children who walk into it.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

I don't think I heard about culturally relevant pedagogy until graduate school. Working with Dr. Allison Shleak, who researched the overrepresentation of African American males in special education, made me stop and think, "Why do we think these kids aren't achieving? Maybe it's not them. Maybe it's something I could do differently to showcase their abilities." I've always understood CRP as a mindset, not a checklist. It's the responsibility of a teacher to represent groups that may not be widely represented and to provide opportunities for kids to gain perspective. It's not a box you check off. It's the mindset you bring to learning and teaching. In my classroom, I bring CRP to life through the texts I choose, the read-alouds I select, and the way I give context to the standards. I've tried to be very mindful with the texts we read, not just one month out of the year. It's about widening perspectives.

My own growth has required personal reflection, too. Early on, I was maybe uncomfortable being a white teacher in a room full of Black kids—not with the kids themselves, but more self-conscious with parents, because I never wanted to seem like I was the spokesperson who knew it all. Over time, I learned to model humility. Now I feel okay saying, "I don't know," and showing them that I'm learning too. I also recognize the barriers: time, rigid curricula, and teacher fears. There's often that unsettled energy of, "Can I read this book? Can I talk about this? Will I be supported?" But once I reached the point where I felt comfortable explaining why I do what I do, the barriers were the barriers. I'm going to do it because I know it's best for kids. Ultimately, CRP is

inseparable from preparing students for the world. It's best practice in creating good humans in our world. I want them to be good world citizens, not ethnocentric, but globally minded. People who look like us are just a tiny part of it.

Evolving Teaching Identity

I used to fight the idea of becoming a teacher. People would always say, "You'll be a great teacher," and I pushed back for a long time because I didn't want it to just be assumed, especially since my grandmother worked in a school. But through experience, I realized teaching wasn't something I inherited; it was something that found me. Now, my identity as a teacher is centered around my students and the joy they bring. The kids are why I stay a teacher. Becoming a mother has shaped how I show up, too. I still see my students as learners, but I also see them through the eyes of a parent. I've also learned my boundaries. I have no interest in managing adults full-time. I can't imagine not being in the classroom in some way. Maybe one day I'll teach in a college setting, but my heart really is in the elementary classroom.

Over the years, I've grown from a young teacher who felt unsure of herself in front of parents into someone confident enough to embrace discomfort, advocate for kids, and push back when something isn't right. My resilience, joy, and persistence shape who I am as an educator. And success, to me, isn't just test scores. It's what students bring to our conversations, the reflections they write, and the confidence they develop. That's real success.

Teacher Reflection

I could see how much my practice had shifted since I first entered the classroom. Early in my career, I often felt uncomfortable as a White teacher in a predominantly

Black school. It wasn't the kids, but I worried about how parents would see me. I didn't want to come across as if I thought I knew everything. Over time, and especially through this study, I came to see that humility isn't a weakness but a strength. Now I'm okay saying, I don't know. And I think that shows my kids that we're all learning together.

Participating in the study helped me reflect more intentionally on what CRP means in my practice. It's not a box you check off. It's the mindset you bring to learning and teaching. I've become more mindful in my text selections, making sure the stories my students encounter aren't limited to one culture or one month of the year. It's about giving context to the standards and widening perspectives. For me, CRP is about preparing children to be globally minded and empathetic citizens, not just test-takers.

I felt grateful for the chance to pause and consider my growth. Teaching has been a journey of learning just as much as leading. The kids are never the turnoff; they are the joy. This study reminded me that my role isn't only to teach academics but to cultivate good humans, children who will carry forward lessons of compassion, openness, and belonging.

Researcher Reflection

Meeting Louise reminded me of the complex ways identity, upbringing, and professional life intertwine in the making of a teacher. At first glance, she carried herself with a wholesomeness and simplicity that seemed almost unassuming. Yet, beneath that exterior, her story revealed a depth of conviction and a steady evolution of purpose. As I listened to her describe her small-town childhood, rooted in a predominantly white, rural community, I was struck by the self-awareness she developed over time. Louise openly acknowledged that her upbringing had not exposed her to much cultural diversity, and I

respected the honesty with which she named that limitation. For me, as a Black woman who has always viewed the world through a racialized lens, her candor reminded me that growth often comes from recognizing what we did not know and being willing to lean into discomfort.

What resonated most was how Louise described her journey from reluctance to clarity. She did not begin her career with teaching in mind; instead, her path meandered through speech pathology and paraprofessional work until she realized that schools felt like home. In her words, "I liked the vibe of it. I liked just being in a school." I heard the echoes of my own recognition that the classroom is more than a workplace; it is a community, a space of possibility. Louise's sense of belonging in education, even after resisting the idea for so long, reminded me that some callings cannot be denied.

I also reflected on the ways Louise positioned herself within CRP. Her understanding of CRP grew gradually, shaped not by teacher preparation programs but through graduate study and her lived practice in classrooms. As she spoke about choosing diverse texts, contextualizing standards, and creating safe spaces for difficult conversations, I saw the alignment between her intentions and the demands of this work. I also admired her willingness to admit that early in her career, she was uncomfortable as a White woman teaching mostly Black students. That kind of honesty takes courage, and it allowed me to see the evolution of a teacher who has learned to replace hesitation with humility. Her growth resonated with me personally, because it mirrored the truth that none of us arrive fully formed; we are all learning, unlearning, and reshaping as we strive to do right by children.

Finally, I was struck by Louise's commitment to her students, which served as her anchor in a profession often weighed down by systemic frustrations. She stated, "The kids are never the turnoff for me," and that statement stayed with me long after our conversation. It reminded me of why I began this study in the first place: to highlight the teachers who, despite obstacles, remain grounded in the joy and brilliance of their students. In Louise, I saw a teacher who values relationships above bureaucracy, who recognizes inequities yet chooses to act in the interest of children, and who defines success beyond test scores. Her story left me reflecting not only on the necessity of CRP but also on the power of authenticity and perseverance in sustaining a teaching identity.

Leslie

When I first met Leslie, it was at her school, a large campus that looked more like a junior college than an elementary building. The moment I walked inside, I was struck by its size and presence. It was not a Title I school. To enter, I had to stop at the front office, where four staff members greeted me warmly. All of them were women, two Black and two White, and together they created a welcoming atmosphere. When Leslie appeared, she was wearing a dress that fell just to her knees, styled in a way that was very Vera Bradley—ish. Her brown shoulder-length hair framed her face neatly, and she carried herself with a professional demeanor.

Leslie's Childhood

I grew up in Greenville, South Carolina, and the first things that come to mind are happiness and family. I had a very nice childhood. Both my parents worked, I have a sister, and I had lots of friends in the neighborhood. I went to our public schools, right in

my neighborhood, back at home, and it was good. School was always really important in my house. In the afternoons, I would do homework all the time, even with my friends.

My elementary school was around the corner from my house; everybody went there. With both of my parents being college-educated, and my dad having a graduate degree, it was never a question whether I was going to college. That was the expectation.

College Years and Broadening Worldview

My dad has a graduate degree, so that was always what was going to happen. I never considered not going to college. That was just the expectation. But college was also the first time I really saw diversity. Growing up, everybody kind ofjust looked like me. College opened my eyes to what the rest of the world looked like, especially when I started doing practicums and saw some of the inner-city schools in Columbia, South Carolina. I didn't really understand what that looked like before then. I had been in a very closed bubble from my childhood.

Those field experiences changed everything for me. I had always pictured myself teaching in a school that looked like the one I grew up in, a predominantly white, middleclass school where I felt at home. But once I actually got into those practicum classrooms, I realized that wasn't really my passion. I found myself drawn to diversity and different backgrounds, and I started to appreciate those differences in a new way. College became the bridge between the sheltered world I grew up in and the realities of the classrooms I was stepping into. Seeing inequities up close reshaped my purpose. I realized I wasn't meant to just recreate the kind of school I came from. I wanted to teach in a place where I could help kids feel like they belonged, where I could affirm who they were, and where I could support students whose lives looked very different from mine.

Teaching Journey

I've been teaching for fourteen years now, and I've taught in three schools—first, second, fourth, and fifth grades. My very first teaching job was in a Title I school, and that experience shaped me right away. The biggest struggle was when kids didn't have the family or at-home support they deserved. There's only so much you can do, and you can't fix everything, no matter how much time or energy you pour into it. But it taught me that if I'm going to show up for kids, I have to show up for the whole child, not just the academic part.

After that, I moved to Fairfax, Virginia, and it was a completely different world. It was a very highbrow community. It was racially diverse, but mostly different Asian ethnicities and Hispanics, maybe about 50% Caucasian. A lot of the families worked for the federal government, and most were very educated, very wealthy. It was diverse, but not socioeconomically diverse at all. I actually missed that part from my first school. That range of perspectives mattered to me.

My current school is where all of those experiences come together. Our kids are a mix of African American, Asian, and White, but our staff is mostly White women, maybe 15—20% teachers of color. Our students? About 40% African American, 20 to 25% White, and around 30% Asian. Teaching here pushes me to think deeply about representation and how I connect with kids. The world needs more people who genuinely care and understand difference, and I think that's part of why I stay. I connect with them on a different level, and they connect with me on a different level because we're all coming from different places. Appreciating that and fostering that in kids is something that keeps me in education.

What brings me the most joy is seeing kids succeed. When they finally connect with what you're teaching or have that spark moment, that's what I love. And when kids come back years later and talk about what they learned with me, or tell me they loved my class, or that they miss me, that means everything. Those moments remind me that this work isn't about test scores. It's about shaping lives.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

I really haven't had a lot of training in culturally relevant pedagogy. I wasn't explicitly taught it in college, and none of the districts I've worked in have provided any real professional learning around it. Even though nobody ever sat me down and said, "This is CRP," I've always felt like it mattered, like it was something I needed to figure out on my own. For me, CRP starts with knowing my kids as people, not just as a data point, not just another seat in the room, but knowing their backgrounds, what makes them click, the things that matter to them. Kids learn when they feel seen and valued, and that's always been the heart of my teaching.

I'm very aware of who I am when I walk into a classroom. I come from a very stereotypical upper-middle-class white family, and I know the world is built for people like me. As open-minded as I try to be, that's still going to make it harder for me to fully understand the experiences my students bring. Sometimes, it's hard to connect because I don't know what they're going through. But I try to bridge that gap by being open-minded, talking to families, asking questions, listening, and letting them know I'm in their corner. Building community and communication, that's the most important thing in my room.

I've also tried to bring CRP into the curriculum. We had an art history unit that focused almost entirely on European artists. I remember thinking, "That's not enough." So we added African art, Asian art, African American artists, and we widened the lens. And I felt like I did right by my students. If we hadn't made those changes, some of them never would've seen themselves in any of that content. At this point, I would define CRP as teaching with everyone's background in mind and appreciating all cultures, not just one. It's honoring where kids come from, understanding that our differences make our classroom stronger, and using those differences to build better humans. It also means making sure every part of my classroom reflects the cultures that are represented and working with my team so we're all moving in that direction. Culturally relevant pedagogy makes a classroom a better place for everyone. It helps kids become more globally minded, more aware, more compassionate. And honestly, it makes instruction richer. It just makes teaching better.

Evolving Teaching Identity

I've become a lot more aware of who I am as an educator over time. I know I come from a very stereotypical upper-middle-class White family, and the world we live in is built for people like me. No matter how open-minded you try to be, it's still hard to truly open your eyes to other cultures when you didn't grow up experiencing those things yourself. Sometimes it's hard for me to connect with my students because I don't always know what they're living through. But I'm committed to learning. Being open-minded, talking to families, listening to parents, understanding where they're coming from, that matters to me. I want my kids to know I'm in their corner. I want their families to know that.

Through this study, I've gained so much more confidence in addressing CRP in my teaching and with my team. I understand now that it's something that needs to be considered consistently across all subject areas, not just pulled in when it feels convenient. It has to be the starting point. I see myself now as someone who can speak up about it, someone who can help remind others that representation and respect matter. Culturally relevant pedagogy makes the classroom a better place for everybody. It helps kids become more globally minded and aware of differences. It makes instruction richer. And I want to be a part of that, not just for my students, but with the teachers I work alongside.

Teacher Reflection

I started to really recognize how much my understanding of CRP had grown over time. When I first entered the profession, I had never been formally introduced to the term or trained in the concept. I've never been explicitly taught it. It was never part of my coursework or any district I've worked in. But through experience and reflection, I realized CRP was already woven into my daily practice. For me, it has always started with knowing my students, not just as another data point or another body in the room, but truly understanding their backgrounds and what makes them click.

Being in this study gave me the confidence to be more intentional, not only in my own instructional decisions, but also in how I show up with my peers. I've gained much more confidence in being able to address CRP within my own teaching, but also with teammates and other teachers. I understand now that it's something that needs to be considered consistently in all subject areas, across all grade levels, and that reminder has shaped the way I collaborate. I've also had to sit with the humility of my own

background. I come from a very stereotypical upper-middle-class White family, and I know that the world we live in is built for people like me. No matter how open-minded you are, that reality makes it hard to truly see the experiences of other cultures. That awareness pushes me to listen more closely, to build stronger relationships, and to challenge myself to make sure what I teach reflects the lives of all my students. Even small shifts, like reworking an art history unit to include African, Asian, and African American artists, feel like doing right by them. I felt proud of that work because I knew my students wouldn't have been exposed to those things otherwise.

I realized how much I've grown, as both a teacher and a learner. I don't see CRP as an extra responsibility anymore; it's the foundation of teaching. Culturally relevant pedagogy makes the classroom a better place to learn for everyone. It builds students who are more globally minded, more aware of differences, and more confident in their identities. For me, this journey has been less about mastering a framework and more about finding my voice as an advocate. Someone committed to making sure every student in my classroom is recognized, valued, and empowered.

Researcher Reflection

Meeting Leslie at her school reminded me of the stark differences in the teaching world. From the moment I stepped into her school, I noticed a difference in her setting compared to that of some of the other participants in this study. Her environment carried a sense of privilege. Both in appearance and in access to resources, she herself embodied that same preparation and steadiness. What stood out most to me, however, was how openly she spoke about the gap between her own upbringing and the lived realities of many of her students. That kind of honesty is not always easy to voice, especially for

White educators who are used to being centered within the educational narrative. As I listened to Leslie, I could sense both her security and her unease. She was secure in her identity as an educator who loves her students and wants them to succeed. Yet she also recognized that her perspective is shaped by privilege, and that this privilege creates blind spots in her ability to fully see her students' experiences. Her willingness to sit in that tension, rather than glossing over it, impressed me. She said plainly, "The world that we are in is built for people like me," a statement that revealed not only awareness but humility. That acknowledgement alone demonstrates growth because many teachers never reach the point of naming how systems are structured around them.

I also noticed that Leslie's growth was not framed by formal professional development or training in CRP. Instead, it emerged from her practice and her reflections. Watching her rework a lesson in art history to include artists beyond the traditional European canon was evidence of her evolving lens. It was a small shift in content, but it carried a powerful message about who deserves to be seen and celebrated in classrooms. That kind of intentional adjustment speaks to the heart of CRP.

What I carry forward from my work with Leslie is the reminder that growth often begins with honesty. She did not posture as an expert, nor did she dismiss the importance of cultural awareness. Instead, she leaned into discomfort, acknowledged her privilege, and sought to learn alongside her students. For me as a researcher, it reinforced the idea that CRP does not unfold in one uniform way. It looks different depending on context, history, and identity. In Leslie's case, her story illustrates that even without formal training, a teacher can begin to do the work by listening, reflecting, and being willing to disrupt the narratives that have long dominated school spaces.

Amy

I first met Amy in a coffee shop in Smyrna, Georgia. The shop was crowded, with mostly White patrons scattered across the tables, though a few couples and other people of color were present. Amy was a pretty young Black woman with her dreadlocked hair resting over her shoulders. She wore jeans and a graphic T-shirt depicting a Black woman. In that moment, I could sense she was someone who moved through the world with both conviction and openness. Meeting her in that space, one where she stood out, set the tone for understanding who she was as a teacher, a woman, and a Black educator.

Early Childhood

I was raised in a two-parent household in a middle-class neighborhood. There wasn't a lot of diversity where I grew up. It was majority African American, but we were considered middle class. I went to public schools, one year-round school, and then my middle and high schools were regular traditional schools. The year-round school felt beneficial for our family dynamic because my mom was a stay-at-home mom. If you're not familiar, the year-round schools were nine weeks on, three weeks off all year long. I did that from kindergarten to fifth grade, and once I got to middle and high school, it was more of a traditional schedule, but with block classes—those long 90-minute classes.

My school was kind of like the movie Mean Girls. Girls can be really cliquish. The popular girls: you knew exactly who they were. I was somewhere in the mid-pop area. You just always knew who the actual popular girls were, and they were a little snooty. I didn't have a bad experience, but in middle and high school, I was trying to find myself. I wanted to fit in without losing who I was because I was, I mean, I still am, a preacher's daughter. That was probably the biggest part of my middle and high school experience. I was trying

to fit in but realizing I didn't really fit with the people I thought I wanted to. Where I grew up, the teachers were diverse. It was a good mixture of male and female, Black and White. I don't remember too many Latino teachers, but the area wasn't heavily Latino either.

Becoming a Teacher

Both my parents were teachers. By the time I was born, my mom was a stay-at-home mom, but before that, she taught shorthand and computer classes. My dad has always been a music teacher. He's taught all levels, even at a juvenile delinquent school, and now he teaches at a K—12 charter school. Watching him work with those kids had a huge impact on me. It was wild to see how much they loved him, how much respect they had for him, but then they'd be ready to fight somebody else. It was really crazy to see, but it made me realize the kind of difference a teacher can make.

I always knew I wanted to work with kids, but at first, I thought I was going into the medical field. Then I realized they're in school way too long, and I needed something that fit me better. Teaching felt right. I started working at summer camps through Durham Public Schools when I was about seventeen or eighteen, just to make sure I really liked it. After those summers, I knew this was the field I wanted to go into. My dad is still a music teacher today, and for a long time, I thought I would follow in his footsteps and teach music too. Education runs through our family. One of my sisters is a speech pathologist, another used to work as a secretary in a middle and high school. Pretty much all of us, except one, have been in education in some way.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

In my classroom today, I model in both big and small ways. If a child is struggling, I'm not going to let that go. I'll sit with them after everyone else has left, and

we'll work it out. Sometimes it's math, sometimes it's reading, but mostly it's confidence. I remember one student who wouldn't make eye contact and barely spoke in class at the beginning of the year. After weeks of sitting with me one-on-one, they finally raised their hand. The first time they answered out loud, the whole room clapped. That's what I live for. I could see the change in their body language from slouching and whispering to sitting taller and joining group discussions. It's that moment when they realize, I can do this. That's when I know I've done my job.

Building a sense of belonging is just as important as academics to me. I pay attention to how my kids walk into the room in the morning. If someone looks heavy or withdrawn, I don't rush past it. I'll stop, kneel beside them, and check in. One morning, a student came in with their head down, and when I asked quietly what was wrong, they told me what was happening at home. That's what teaching is. You can't teach a standard if you don't see the child first. This shows up in the way I celebrate my students' lives. When Diwali came around, I invited a few of my Indian parents to come in and share the holiday with the class. My Indian students were glowing. They felt seen, like school was their space too, and the other kids learned so much.

I make sure our materials reflect my students as well. I'm intentional about book choices, posters, and even the media we use. BrainPOP videos started adding different accents, names, and family structures, and that mattered to my kids. They heard themselves. Those little things go further than people realize. These moments can be harder. During the last election, a lot of my kids came in talking about how much their parents loved Trump. As a Black woman, that was tough. I had my own feelings. I was hoping for Harris, but I also knew my role. I had to help them talk without pushing my

ovm views. That's not easy when who you are is political. I focused on helping them listen to one another and think about why people believe what they do. I show up for my kids outside the classroom, too. I go to their basketball games, soccer matches, and even birthday parties. When they see me in the stands cheering for them, they know I care about them as people, not just students.

Something I've been reflecting on lately is finding more ways to help my kids collaborate and share perspectives respectfully. I want them to learn how to talk to one another, how to listen, and how to honor differences. I also use writing as a way for them to share who they are. One of our personal narrative assignments asks them to write about a family tradition. It could be a holiday, or it could just be something their family does. When they share those traditions, we all learn. Even when it's something I've never heard of, I love hearing them explain what it looks like in their home.

I know I still have room to grow. I try hard to make my lessons inclusive, especially as an African American woman, but sometimes I realize I haven't centered all voices as well as I could, especially my Hispanic kids. I'm learning to be more conscious about creating lessons where everybody gets to share their voice and their opinions. I'm still learning, but I'm committed to it every day.

Teacher's Reflection

I feel like I've gained a better understanding of what culturally relevant pedagogy actually is. I started researching more about it and trying to be intentional when it comes to my lessons. That intentionality has deepened my appreciation for the diversity in my classroom and even sparked a personal desire to travel more. It makes me want to actually travel more and see more, so that when we have these conversations, I can have a

better connection with my kids. Teaching has become not only a way of shaping young minds but also a catalyst for my own growth and curiosity about the world.

I can see that my teaching identity has shifted significantly since my first years in the classroom. Early on, I was focused almost exclusively on covering standards and making sure my students passed assessments. Over time, I realized that true teaching requires me to connect deeply with my students' lives and experiences. When I first started, I thought my job was just to make sure they could read and do math. Now I know my job is to make sure they feel like they belong, like their voices matter, and like they can be leaders. That is the heart of how my pedagogy has evolved.

As I think about where I am now, what stands out most to me is the balance of conviction and humility in my teaching. My work is not about perfection, but trying every day to honor my students' voices, cultures, and dreams. I believe success means more than test scores. For me, it means raising children who know they matter.

Researcher Reflection

As a researcher, I was struck by Amy's openness and honesty throughout our sessions. She did not present herself as someone who had mastered CRP but as someone committed to learning and improving. Her willingness to admit where she fell short, particularly in considering the needs of students from cultures outside her own, resonated deeply with me. Amy's reflections aligned closely with Gloria Ladson-Billings' (1995, 2014) framework, particularly in her efforts to balance academic success, cultural competence, and critical consciousness.

What stood out most was Amy's recognition of the tension between intent and fidelity in CRP. She wanted to implement inclusive lessons, but she also realized that true

cultural responsiveness required more than intent. It required deliberate practice, research, and humility. This mirrors much of the scholarship in the field, which emphasizes that CRP cannot be reduced to surface-level inclusion but must be integrated meaningfully into pedagogy (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Amy's story revealed how teachers navigate these tensions in real classrooms, where competing demands and personal identities shape their practices.

Her growth throughout the study also highlighted the transformative power of reflection. By the third interview, she had shifted from tentative guesses about what CRP meant to an intentional practice informed by research and experience. This evolution reflects the importance of professional development and ongoing dialogue for educators seeking to implement CRP with fidelity. It also demonstrates the personal impact of such growth: Amy's desire to travel and broaden her worldview showed how CRP can reshape not just classrooms but teachers themselves.

Amy's story contributes to the broader field by illustrating a teacher's lived experience in becoming culturally responsive. Her narrative challenges us to see CRP not as a destination but as a journey, one that requires vulnerability, persistence, and a willingness to see both the strengths and the shortcomings in one's practice. As a researcher, I left our conversations not only with data but with a deeper respect for the courage it takes to teach with cultural relevance in mind. Amy's journey is a testament to the ongoing work of building classrooms where all students feel seen, valued, and prepared for the diverse world they inhabit.

Julie

I met Julie at a Panera in Cobb County, where she greeted me with an infectious smile that immediately put me at ease. Dressed casually in her school T-shirt and stretch pants, with her hair braided neatly and black glasses framing her face, she exuded warmth and authenticity. At 40, Julie is a Black woman, wife, and mother of three, balancing family life with her calling as an educator. She has been teaching for over eleven years, and from the very first moments of our meeting, I felt that I was in the presence of someone who carried both joy and faith into every aspect of her life and classroom.

Childhood and Early Life

I grew up in Los Angeles, spending my early years living with my grandmother and my mother in a neighborhood right on the edge of Compton. My community was full of contradictions. We had neighbors who worked hard to protect the children around them, but we also faced the harsh realities of poverty and under-resourced schools. My mom never trusted the schools in our neighborhood, so she enrolled me in Gardena through school choice. I still remember the daily commute. I would sit in the car looking at the houses as we passed through different neighborhoods, wondering, “Why are we going so far?” But once I got there, I understood that I had to do what I needed to do to be there.

As a child, those rides across neighborhoods taught me more than I realized at the time. I became aware that some kids had access to better opportunities simply because of where they lived. School became my refuge. It was a place where I discovered my love for English and writing. I loved being able to write and get my thoughts on paper, especially because I had been told for so long that I wasn’t a good communicator. Writing

gave me a voice at a time when I often felt unheard. Math, on the other hand, was more of a challenge for me. Numbers just weren't my thing; writing was where I thrived.

Moving between schools and neighborhoods also made me adaptable. Walking into new environments taught me how to read a room quickly and figure out where I fit. I use that skill now to help my students feel like they belong the moment they step into my classroom. Those early experiences finding my voice and learning resilience became the foundation of my teaching philosophy.

Early Dreams and Shifting Paths

As a child, my dreams changed as I grew. When I was ten, I was die-hard convinced I was going to be a doctor. By the time I turned 17, I had decided I was going into the Air Force. But as graduation got closer, my ambition shifted to survival. I started college at Santa Monica City College, but trying to balance work and school became overwhelming. My heart wasn't in my classes because I needed money to survive first. That was a struggle many of us in L.A. faced growing up.

I stepped away from school and focused on working for a while, even spending time in banking, before eventually becoming a mother. It was my children who brought me back to education. When my kids started school, I realized I needed something more. Seeing the love they received from their teachers—and how much they thrived in that environment—made me want to be that person for someone else. Watching their joy reignited my desire to teach, not only for myself, but for the futures of other children.

Becoming a Teacher

My journey into teaching was definitely unconventional, but every step shaped how I see my students today. I actually got my start after seeing a sign that said: "Bus

Drivers Needed." At 5' 1 ", I hopped on that bus and drove it for two years. I always laugh when I think about it. But even then, I was already practicing the kind of teacher I would become. I knew every single kid's name who stepped onto that bus—elementary, middle school, and high school. I knew their names, they knew mine, and we would roll down the street with music playing. They knew Miss Julie had them.

Being behind that wheel taught me early that relationships and recognition come before anything academic. After that, I worked as a media specialist paraprofessional in the school library, and that's where I really saw the power of literature to affirm identity. I remember putting the right book in a child's hands and watching their face light up, like they finally saw themselves. Those moments reminded me that representation matters more than people realize.

I eventually went back to earn my education degree at the University of Phoenix, but I'll be honest, my coursework didn't prepare me for culturally relevant pedagogy. Unfortunately, in my undergraduate work, nothing truly taught me how to bring culturally relevant content into the classroom. It was kind of brushed under. Even with that gap, I came into teaching with lived experience and a determination to make sure no child in my room ever felt overlooked.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy in Practice

I define culturally relevant pedagogy as making sure kids know that their beliefs, culture, and feelings matter and should be celebrated. For me, CRP isn't an add-on—it is the foundation of my teaching. From the very start of each year, I introduce cultural celebrations. We begin with Hispanic Heritage Month, and I take an entire week where we explore different countries. We read Green is a Chili Pepper, chop ingredients, and

make guacamole together. It's fun, and it's learning, and it's belonging all at once. I extend this same practice to Native American history, Hanukkah, Ramadan, and I weave Black history throughout the entire year instead of isolating it to February. My classroom is not a place where you only see yourself once a year during a holiday or heritage month. I make sure my students see themselves every single day.

But for me, CRP goes much deeper than food or holidays. I embed it in my academic units and daily routines. During our 1B unit on goods, services, and scarcity, I reframed the conversation to reflect the lived realities of my students. I talked to them about how scarcity looks different in different parts of the world and even for different people right here in our ovvn community. In doing so, I was able to address CRP without singling out any one group of people. The kids drew their own conclusions and added thoughtful ideas that helped deepen their understanding of scarcity. Those conversations didn't just build academic knowledge; they helped my students develop empathy and think critically about fairness, access, and inequity.

My CRP practices also show up in the materials and environment I create. I am intentional about the books I choose, making sure my students see themselves reflected in literature every day. I believe stories have the power to affirm, to inspire, and to teach resilience. The images on my walls, the bulletin boards, and the way we start the day during morning meeting all signal belonging. Every choice communicates whether students matter—the walls, the shelves, the routines. All of it matters.

My pedagogy is as relational as it is academic. I greet every child intentionally and pay attention to who might need a little extra encouragement that day. I show up at their athletic events and birthday parties, not because I feel obligated, but because I see

that as part of CRP. Their identities and their lives outside of school are just as important as what happens in the classroom. By being present, I reinforce that their full selves are seen, celebrated, and supported. In practice, my approach to CRP is a seamless blend of cultural affirmation, rigorous academics, and relational care. It isn't a single strategy; it's a way of teaching that ensures every student in my room knows they are capable, valued, and included.

Challenges and Barriers

Even with all the success I've had in the classroom, I'm honest about the obstacles I face. I work in a beautifully diverse school, but most of the teaching staff is white, and that sometimes shapes deficit assumptions about students of color. On top of that, I feel the pressure from administrators to avoid anything that might be seen as controversial. It's very much a "don't get me in trouble" model. And I understand why some teachers stay silent; many of us are living paycheck to paycheck. Without this job, where would we be? If you get blackballed because you're teaching kids about the Montgomery Bus Boycott, or you're reading about sit-ins at a lunch counter and someone gets offended, suddenly you're in a position where you have to defend your job.

Sometimes. I feel like I'm walking a tightrope trying to teach truth, honor my students' cultures, and still not step on any toes. But I can't ignore who my kids are just to make adults comfortable. At the end of the day, the choice always comes back to my students' right to see themselves and their histories respected and honored.

Evolving Teaching Identity

My teaching identity has been shaped by inequity, resilience, and my determination to affirm every child who walks into my classroom. From the little girl

riding through Gardena watching the houses change, to the teacher who now insists that every student know that they are enough, my journey has always been about growth and purpose. Over the years, my colleagues and community have recognized that dedication. I was nominated for—and ultimately awarded—Teacher of the Year at my school, an honor that affirmed not just my skill, but the impact of my commitment to students. For me, that award wasn't about personal recognition. It was validation that the way I teach—culturally relevant, student-centered, and grounded in love—matters.

My teaching identity continues to evolve as I face new challenges and opportunities, but the core of who I am remains steady. My commitment to culturally relevant pedagogy isn't optional; it is the essence of who I am as a teacher. It shapes how I plan my lessons, how I speak to my students, and how I show up for them every single day.

Teacher Reflection

Reflecting on my journey, I've realized just how much this process has pushed me to think differently about my own practice. After speaking with you, I found myself reflecting on how I can be even more intentional about teaching culturally relevant information to my students. My goal now, more than ever, is to make sure the young minds I serve know that they are enough. Their beliefs, their culture, and their feelings matter and should be celebrated as such. I've also learned that even our standard units can become culturally relevant when they are taught with intention. In our last unit on goods and services, budgeting, and scarcity, I talked with my students about how scarcity shows up in different parts of the world and for different people in our own community. By doing that, I was able to address CRP without singling out any one group. The kids drew

their own conclusions and added thoughtful insights that deepened their understanding of scarcity.

To me, CRP is non-negotiable. Making kids feel included and understood is our job. Helping one child feel seen doesn't mean anyone else has to feel ashamed. We teach CRP with intention, foresight, and sensitivity. Through this work, I've gained a new sense of awareness that I plan to use to better reach my students. This process has made me stop and think every day about what I'm doing and why I'm doing it. It's not just teaching anymore; it's purpose.

Researcher Reflection

Listening to Julie's story gave me pause in both personal and professional ways. The image of her as a child riding in the back seat, watching houses change on the way to school, stayed with me. It symbolized resilience and inequity. The awareness that opportunities often depended on circumstances outside her control. That resilience now informs the lens through which she teaches. Her unconventional journey into teaching, from bus driver to librarian to classroom teacher, sharpened her commitment to relationships and belonging. Knowing every child by name on her bus or watching students' faces light up in the library revealed her gift for making children feel seen. Teaching, for Julie, was never a straight line, but the winding path prepared her to embrace students as whole people.

Her work with CRP challenged me as a researcher and teacher. Julie does not just talk about CRP. She enacts it in tangible ways: through food, books, classroom celebrations, and carefully constructed lessons. I was struck by her story of making guacamole with students, not because of the activity itself, but because of how she used

joy and shared experience to affirm belonging. At the same time, her honesty about challenges resonated deeply. Her words about the "don't get me in trouble" model reflected a climate of fear, yet she pressed forward anyway. Her courage reminded me that teaching is often an act of resistance, choosing to affirm a child's culture, refusing to erase history, and telling the truth when it is uncomfortable. Julie's story reaffirmed for me that CRP is not an abstract concept but a lived practice that requires intention and bravery. Her narrative underscored the urgency of preparing more teachers to implement CRP with fidelity, especially those who enter the profession without this preparation. Julie's journey is both a testament to the transformative power of CRP and a call to action for educators who aspire to truly see and honor their students.

Ryan

I first met Ryan after school at the building where he teaches. He was waiting for me in the lobby. He had a red beard and was short in stature. At first, as he walked me quickly to his classroom, I wondered if he did not want others to see him with me. That initial impression shifted once I learned that Ryan is a runner, and his fast pace was simply a reflection of his lifestyle. In conversation, his wit came through immediately, layered with a sense of confidence and a touch of sarcasm. Mid-thirties, White, and openly gay, Ryan presented himself as someone both unapologetic about who he is and deeply invested in his role as an educator.

Childhood and Early Life

I grew up in a very small town in central New Mexico, the kind of place with about 8,000 people and truly in the middle of nowhere. We had one elementary school, one middle school, and one high school. Everybody went to school together, and it was

the kind of town where everybody knows everybody and, honestly, everyone is related to everybody. My dad came from a large family—nine children—so our family was well known in the community. You're not just a number in a place like that. Everybody knows who your people are. Even though my town was rural, it was surprisingly diverse because of the New Mexico Institute of Mining and Technology. You had people from all over the world living there: international students, professors, researchers, and that mix created an environment where I grew up surrounded by what I always describe as the smartest of the smart and the poorest of the poor, all mixed together.

My own schooling was a blend of challenges and really meaningful inspiration. Our district was ranked at the bottom of the bottom almost every year, but I still had excellent teachers, especially in English language arts and history. I'm not a math person. English language arts has always been my strength. Writing was my strength. Many of my teachers had been in the classroom for decades; some of them even taught my parents before they taught me. That created a real sense of continuity and deep community roots. My parents weren't college-educated, but they instilled in me the importance of higher education from the beginning. For them, college wasn't an option; it was an expectation. They would say, "You are absolutely going to go, so do whatever you've got to do to get there." Like a lot of millennials, I absorbed that college-or-bust mindset from both my family and society. Even though I started college undecided, I knew education was the path forward for me.

College Years and the Path to Teaching

When I started my undergraduate studies at New Mexico State University, I didn't have a clear major in mind. I spent my first year taking general courses because, honestly, I had absolutely no clue what I wanted to do. Looking back, I laugh at that time in my

life. It was actually my friends who first suggested education. They kept telling me I had the skills to be a good teacher. When I thought about how naturally teaching swimming and golf lessons came to me, I realized I genuinely enjoyed getting someone to learn something. Parents would even tell me I was different than everyone else in the way I connected with their kids.

I ended up pursuing a dual bachelor's degree in elementary and special education. I gravitated toward special education because I've always had a heart for students with disabilities, but I liked that the program prepared me for both areas. One part of my undergraduate program that stands out now is the required multicultural education course. In every single field experience lesson plan, we had to include a culturally relevant component, literally every single lesson, even dividing fractions. At the time, I didn't fully understand why it mattered. It just felt like a requirement we had to check off. But years later, I realized how important that expectation was because it forced me to think about representation and meaningfulness in every subject I taught.

My graduate degree, which I completed online through Arkansas State University, didn't emphasize multicultural education nearly as much. I've always believed that difference had a lot to do with geography. New Mexico has an incredibly diverse population, and when the majority of the student population is not white, the work simply demands more. Y/here I completed my graduate program, not so much.

Teaching Career

My teaching journey spans nine years and four schools. My very first position was in a multi-age classroom in Las Cruces, New Mexico, where I taught third, , fourth and fifth grades all together. I still remember walking into that room my first year

with six third graders, a group of fourth graders, and a group of fifth graders all learning side by side. It was trial by fire. I had to figure out differentiation, organization, and relationship-building across age groups all at once. The following year, I moved into seventh-grade special education, and because we were so understaffed, I also taught two sections of eighth-grade history. The start of my career was, honestly, a disaster. It felt like everything was all over the place. But even in the chaos, I kept going because I really believed I could make a difference.

Over time, I found my stride in upper elementary, especially in fifth grade. Most of my career has been in Title I schools with high percentages of English learners and students from low-income families. I remember having thirteen active ESOL students in my last homeroom parents who didn't speak English, parents who were incarcerated, parents who had been deported. In so many cases, you become the only solid adult in a child's life. That responsibility grounded me, but it also exhausted me.

When I moved to my current school, the contrast hit me immediately. Here, the kids have everything they need. And yet, it's the same district. The inequities between schools are astronomical. For me, teaching has never been just about academics. It's about being a consistent presence in my students' lives. Every year, there's always one student whose trajectory you can completely change. And honestly, that's the only thing that keeps me going.

Understanding and Practicing Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

CRP is inseparable from knowing my students deeply. Instruction and pedagogy are why we're here, but if you're not making learning meaningful to each and every individual kid, then there's no purpose. You can go through the motions, but that's

literally all you'll be doing if you don't connect with them. I mean, it all starts with conversation. That's really how it has to begin. When you first ask kids a question, they're going to give you the answer they think you want to hear. You have to help that filter fall away and say, "No, actually tell me how you really feel." When they start sharing honestly, that's when you can tailor lessons and discussions to their lives.

One example I'll never forget happened this year. I had a student who chose to research why neighborhoods are still segregated and where that comes from. The conclusion he came to on his own was slavery and that the system was intentionally built this way. Did I guide him there? Yes. But did he take it and run with it? Absolutely. That moment is one of my greatest accomplishments as a teacher. Without those discussions, none of that can happen. You don't just get there without guiding conversations.

CRP also means addressing representation directly. When I think back to my multicultural education course, the biggest takeaway was that representation matters. The voices need to be heard; they need to be represented. In my current school, though, I see a huge mismatch. I've never seen a school with so many White teachers, yet we have a large African American student population. Representation matters. A diverse staff signals that. I also recognize gaps in my own practice. I've reflected a lot on my tendency to focus heavily on my African American students without giving the same intentionality to others. I think about my students from other countries; I could have done so much more to make learning meaningful for them, instead of centering on only one group. It's about everybody. That reflection reminds me that CRP isn't a checklist. It's a commitment to continually do better for all cultures and identities.

There are systemic obstacles, too. The curriculum we have to teach is whitewashed, and with new restrictions, it's going to get worse before it gets better. We're being told to censor conversations that are entirely appropriate, not just in schools, but everywhere. Nothing is going to change until people are willing to have those conversations. Living and teaching in Georgia complicates CRP even further. We live in the South, and racial bias is very real. It's very present in education. You hear comments in hallways, in meetings, and you quickly learn who is a safe space and who is not. A lot of the time, practicing CRP means choosing quiet resistance. Which basically means knowing when to push and when to protect your job. Even with all these challenges, I'm committed. Either your heart is in this work, or it's not. Either you have the passion and drive to figure it out, or you don't. And the people who can't be bothered with that truth don't need to be in this profession.

Evolving Teaching Identity

My teaching identity is shaped by my lived experiences and the ways I've grown as an educator. I've always seen myself as a facilitator rather than a lecturer. Someone who empowers students to take charge of their own learning. When I think back to the segregation research project, that moment stands out as one of my proudest accomplishments. Me stepping back, allowing them to lead, and watching them use their voices. That's probably the biggest accomplishment I've had in the last ten years.

My identity as a gay man and as someone who grew up in a multiracial, majority Hispanic community also shapes how I view marginalization, representation, and the importance of being seen. There are experiences I cannot fully understand, like the African American experience, but that's why having diverse teachers and leaders matters.

I think about my African American principal and how much she offers our students. She's going to be able to understand and relate to them better than many others ever could. Representation matters in leadership just as much as it matters in the classroom.

I'm also aware of my blind spots. This study made me reflect on how I really reach some kids, but not all of them. I think about my Indian students and how much more I could have done to make learning meaningful for them. I haven't made as many changes as I want yet, mostly because of time, testing pressures, and everything else that pulls at teachers. But I know I need to do better for future groups. Ultimately, I see my teaching as a way to prepare the next generation to fix what is broken. The system has to change, and I know I'm going to have to do that work through my students. They are the ones who will have to fix these things socially and politically. In some ways, it feels a little too late for me, but my role is to empower them to become the people who can make that change.

Teacher Reflection

I felt genuinely grateful for the chance to speak honestly about my experiences. I really do feel like I can make an impact with what I've shared; maybe it can help other people. It's hard to talk about some of this, but in an interview setting where I can authentically say what I need to say, there's a chance that someone might read it, take something from it, learn from it. That's really the biggest victory for me. Reflecting on my practice also pushed me to confront the areas where I need to grow. I realized that I often focus heavily on meeting the needs of my African American students, and while that's important, I need to be more intentional about supporting others. It's about

everybody. CRP has to be expansive and inclusive if it's going to have any real, lasting impact.

At the same time, teaching in Georgia brings its own challenges. Conversations about race and inequity are restricted in ways that make honest dialogue difficult. You have to know who is a safe space and who is not. You hear things in meetings and in the hallways that remind you very quickly that racial bias is still deeply present. This study gave me a rare platform to speak without hesitation, and that meant a lot.

In the end, my reflections show exactly who I am as a teacher—someone who balances wit, sarcasm, and sincerity with a deep sense of responsibility. Even with the systemic barriers, I keep pushing for classrooms where every student feels safe, valued, and represented. And honestly, the work is worth it if even one student's trajectory changes. Every year there's just one. That conviction is what keeps me going.

Researcher Reflection

Meeting Ryan reminded me that teaching is as much about navigating context as it is about teaching content. From the very beginning, I noticed his brisk walk and quick mannerisms, which I initially read as guardedness. Later, I learned it was the pace of a runner, and in many ways, that image stayed with me throughout our conversations. Ryan moves quickly, not just physically, but in thought and conviction. His wit, sarcasm, and confidence were ever-present, but beneath them I saw someone deeply reflective about the inequities of the profession.

As I listened to Ryan talk about his small-town childhood in New Mexico, I was struck by how different his formative years were from my own. He described a place that was both rural and diverse, a contradiction that shaped how he sees communities and

students. When he spoke about college being a non-negotiable, I understood the weight of those expectations and how they led him to teaching, even though the path was not immediately clear. His story reminded me of how many educators arrive in the classroom not through an early calling, but through a gradual recognition of what they are meant to do.

What stood out most to me was his honesty about his blind spots. Ryan admitted that he has centered African American students in his culturally relevant practice but has overlooked others, such as his Indian students. That level of self-awareness, to say out loud, "I could have done more," is not easy, yet it reveals a teacher willing to grow. It made me reflect on how often teachers assume they are practicing inclusivity when, in reality, their focus remains too narrow. His words prompted me to reflect on my own assumptions as both a teacher and a researcher.

As a Black woman, I also felt the weight of his words when he spoke about teaching in Georgia, where bias is very much a thing. His caution about knowing who is a safe space resonated with me. I know too well what it feels like to choose words carefully and measure truth against what others are ready to hear. Ryan gave voice to that tension in a way that was both sobering and courageous. I walked away from these interviews not only seeing him as a strong teacher but also as someone still in the process of shaping how he shows up for every student. His story reaffirmed for me that CRP is not a fixed practice out a living, breathing commitment to do better each year.

Conclusion

This chapter served as the heart of this study because it held the full narrative accounts of each collaborator. These stories were not just simple summaries of their

teaching lives; rather, they offered textured, lived experiences shaped by real classrooms, real students, and real histories. Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) conception of narrative inquiry emphasizes remaining close to lived experience and honoring participants as whole individuals whose stories cannot be reduced to isolated excerpts or discrete codes. Presenting the narratives in full allowed collaborators' voices, emotions, and reflections to stand on their own before the introduction of cross-case analysis. This approach created space for future readers to meet each collaborator authentically, as educators navigating the daily realities of teaching.

These narratives also informed the direction of the thematic findings that follow. Kim (2016) explained that narrative inquiry moves from story to meaning through careful attention to connections across individual accounts. Through sustained engagement with each narrative, patterns, tensions, and shared commitments emerged, naturally informing the themes presented in Chapter 5. The collaborators' stories illuminated teachers' experiences with culturally relevant pedagogy in ways that abstract frameworks alone could not capture. Their reflections, memories, and examples served as both the data and the interpretive lens, grounding the analysis in their lived realities rather than in abstract theory.

Chapter 5 presents the themes that emerged across collaborators' narratives. While each journey was distinct, reading across the narratives revealed meaningful points of connection—moments where their experiences spoke to one another and deepened my understanding of what individual CRP experiences looked like in practice. These themes will be presented with the intention of honoring the stories while also offering a clearer picture of the collective insights drawn from them.

Chapter V

Themes

Overview

Chapter 4 presented narrative profiles of each collaborator to foreground the contexts of their teaching lives and classroom experiences. Those narratives centered collaborators' lived stories and situated their work within the social, cultural, and institutional realities of their classrooms. Building on those narrative accounts, Chapter 5 presents the cross-case thematic findings that emerged through the categorizing analysis of interview transcripts and research memos. This chapter focuses on shared patterns in how collaborators described their beliefs, instructional practices, and lived experiences implementing culturally relevant pedagogy in elementary classrooms.

Using a systematic coding and categorization process, interview transcripts across all eight collaborators were analyzed to identify repeated ideas, shared experiences, and meaningful patterns within the data. First-cycle in vivo and values coding were used to preserve collaborators' language and belief systems, followed by second-cycle categorizing to group related codes into broader conceptual categories. These categories were then synthesized into themes that represented collective meaning-making across narratives rather than isolated individual experiences. Through this iterative analytic process, themes were constructed to capture how collaborators understood their work, their students, and their professional identities as culturally relevant educators.

The themes presented reflect alignment with Ladson-Billings's (1995, 2014) three domains of CRP: (a) academic success, (b) cultural competence, and (c) critical consciousness, while also acknowledging patterns that extended across those domains. Rather than functioning as discrete or isolated instructional behaviors, collaborators described culturally relevant pedagogy as an integrated and relational practice shaped by identity, belief, and moral purpose. Together, these themes provide a thematic account of how collaborators navigated academic success, cultural competence, and critical consciousness within their daily instructional practices.

Connection Between Research Questions and Themes

The thematic findings in this chapter are intentionally organized to align directly with the three research questions guiding this study. Each theme was developed through systematic categorization and analysis and represents cross-case patterns that address how collaborators experienced, interpreted, and enacted culturally relevant pedagogy in their classrooms. Table 8 shows the connection between the research questions and the themes.

Table 8

Connection Between Research Questions and Themes

Research Question	Theme
RQI : How do elementary teachers describe their experiences implementing culturally relevant pedagogy in their classrooms?	Belief in the Unlimited Potential of Students
RQ2: How do elementary teachers describe the meanings they ascribe to their experiences that shape their beliefs and instructional practices related to culturally relevant pedagogy?	Teacher Identity and Spiritual Commitment
RQ3: How do elementary teachers apply the meanings they make of their	Cultural Competence as Community Integration; Critical Dialogue as Civic

experiences when engaging with students, families, and school communities?	Engagement

The themes represent shared patterns that emerged across collaborators' narratives. Although each collaborator's story reflected distinct classroom contexts and personal histories, their accounts revealed common ways of understanding and enacting culturally relevant pedagogy. These shared meanings formed the foundation for the thematic organization of the findings presented in this chapter. While each theme is presented in a distinct section, the themes are not mutually exclusive. Rather, they reflect interconnected dimensions of collaborators' lived experiences and pedagogical commitments. Across narratives, collaborators described instructional decisions that simultaneously embodied multiple themes, illustrating how culturally relevant pedagogy was enacted through overlapping practices of academic support, cultural affirmation, and critical awareness. In the sections that follow, each theme is presented through collaborators' narratives to preserve the integrity of their individual stories while foregrounding cross-case patterns in beliefs and classroom practices. Direct excerpts from collaborators' interviews anchor each theme in lived experience and illustrate how culturally relevant pedagogy was enacted across diverse classroom contexts.

Theme 1: Representation as Literacy Empowerment (Academic Success/Cultural Competence)

Representation emerged as a central feature of literacy instruction, shaping both student engagement and academic confidence. Collaborators did not describe representation as a superficial effort to diversify classroom materials; instead, they framed culturally responsive literacy practices as intentional commitments to affirm students' identities, foster belonging, and support academic success. This positioning

aligned with Ladson-Billings's (1995, 2014) assertion that culturally relevant pedagogy promotes academic excellence while affirming students' cultural competence and lived experiences.

Several collaborators emphasized the role of classroom libraries and instructional materials in affirming students' identities and strengthening literacy development. Miles intentionally broadened students' access to literature beyond district-prescribed texts, so they could encounter stories that reflected who they were and whom they could become. He stated, "I expose my children in different forms of literature outside ofjust what is prescribed to us," and further explained that he ensures students see themselves in classroom libraries by "stock[ing] my room with books representing the demographics of my students." Leslie echoed this commitment through visible classroom practices, noting that she "display[s] student work in multiple languages," which affirmed multilingual identities and positioned linguistic diversity as a valued component of academic learning. These practices reflected Muhammad's (2020, 2023) historically responsive literacy framework, which emphasizes identity development and literacy as tools for empowerment and academic success.

Other collaborators highlighted the integration of family and cultural narratives into literacy instruction as a way of sustaining students' identities and strengthening classroom communities. Jocelyn described classroom projects in which "families come in to share traditions," positioning family knowledge as instructional capital rather than peripheral experiences. Julie similarly explained that her students engaged in "projects about students' family stories," directly embedding lived experiences into academic learning. These practices reaffirmed Paris and Alim's (2017) culturally sustaining

pedagogy, which asserts that culturally grounded instruction affirms students' identities while promoting engagement, agency, and academic persistence.

Representation also emerged as a moral and protective act rather than simply an instructional choice. Collaborators were acutely aware of the social and political contexts in which their students were being educated, including curriculum restrictions, book challenges, and public debates that often questioned whose stories were "appropriate" for classrooms. Within this climate, collaborators described their commitment to representation as a form of advocacy and quiet resistance. By intentionally centering culturally responsive texts, multilingual displays, and family narratives, they sought to protect students from internalizing messages of invisibility or inferiority. Representation communicated to students that their lives, languages, and histories were worthy of academic study and public affirmation. In doing so, collaborators positioned themselves not only as instructors but also as cultural guardians who worked to preserve students' sense of belonging, dignity, and academic self-belief.

When students do not see themselves reflected in the curriculum, collaborators believe they may internalize deficit messages about whose knowledge and experiences are valued in academic spaces. By centering culturally responsive texts, multilingual affirmation, and family-centered narratives, collaborators created literacy environments that fostered confidence, belonging, and academic persistence. Together, these findings illustrate how representation functioned as literacy empowerment.

Theme 2: Cultural Competence as Community Integration (Cultural Competence)

Cultural competence emerged across collaborators' narratives as a sustained pedagogical commitment to integrating students' families, languages, traditions, and lived

experiences into the everyday life of the classroom. Rather than positioning culture as an occasional celebration or peripheral acknowledgment, collaborators described community knowledge as instructional capital that shaped classroom climate, relational trust, and students' sense of belonging. This understanding aligned with Ladson-Billings's (1995, 2014) assertion that culturally relevant pedagogy affirms students' cultural competence by honoring home knowledge and community practices as legitimate foundations for learning.

Across classrooms, collaborators intentionally opened instructional spaces to family knowledge and lived experiences. Jocelyn explained that "we do projects where families come in to share traditions," while Julie described how "we do projects about students' family stories," positioning family narratives as central classroom content. These practices blurred traditional boundaries between home and school by inviting families into the academic community. Moll et al.'s (1992) funds of knowledge framework supports this approach by asserting that households contain historically accumulated bodies of knowledge that serve as powerful instructional resources when integrated into schooling.

Multilingualism also emerged as a visible and valued dimension of classroom life. Leslie shared, "We display student work in multiple languages," publicly affirming students' linguistic identities and positioning language diversity as intellectual wealth rather than an instructional deficit. Amy echoed this emphasis on cultural affirmation, reflecting that celebrating Diwali allowed her students to feel "proud." These practices aligned with Paris and Alim's (2017) culturally sustaining pedagogy, which emphasizes sustaining students' cultural and linguistic practices as pathways to belonging,

engagement, and persistence. García and Kleifgen (2018) further asserted that honoring students' full linguistic repertoires strengthened classroom access and participation.

Collaborators also described integrating students' cultural interests and lived experiences as relational and instructional bridges. Ryan explained, "Sports and music help me connect with them," which illustrates how cultural relevance fosters trust and engagement. Constance similarly described celebrating cultural holidays such as Diwali and Lunar New Year as ways of normalizing cultural visibility within classroom life. These practices aligned with Gay's (2018) research, which emphasizes that culturally responsive teaching must draw on students' cultural frames of reference as a foundation for instruction.

Importantly, collaborators framed community integration not only as an instructional strategy but also as a protective and moral act. Within sociopolitical climates marked by curriculum restrictions and contested narratives, Miles acknowledged that "parents are trying to fight the system of making sure books are banned," underscoring tensions surrounding whose stories were permitted in classrooms. In response, collaborators' commitment to centering family narratives, multilingual displays, and cultural celebrations functioned as quiet acts of advocacy that shielded students from internalizing deficit-based or silencing messages. Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth framework affirms this practice by identifying familial, linguistic, and aspirational capital as forms of knowledge that challenged dominant deficit perspectives.

When community knowledge was integrated as curriculum, classrooms became spaces of affirmation, belonging, and relational trust. Collaborators described increased participation, confidence, and peer connection when family narratives, home languages,

and cultural traditions were visibly honored within classroom life. Together, these findings illustrate that cultural competence in practice served as a form of community integration, shaping classrooms into culturally sustaining communities that affirm students' identities and lived experiences as central to schooling.

Theme 3: Critical Dialogue as Civic Engagement (Critical Consciousness)

Critical consciousness emerged across collaborators' narratives as an essential dimension of culturally relevant pedagogy enacted within elementary classrooms. Collaborators intentionally created spaces for students to engage in dialogue about social issues, identity, and community realities. These conversations were not framed as optional extensions of the curriculum but as necessary pedagogical practices that supported students' developing sense of agency, voice, and civic responsibility. This understanding aligned with Ladson-Billings's (1995, 2014) assertion that culturally relevant pedagogy must cultivate students' critical consciousness by fostering awareness of social inequities and encouraging civic engagement.

Across classrooms, collaborators facilitated discussions that centered students' lived experiences as legitimate sources of knowledge. Ryan explained, "We had discussions about Black Lives Matter," emphasizing that these conversations allowed students to articulate personal experiences and observations connected to racial identity and community realities. Rather than avoiding politically sensitive topics, collaborators framed dialogue as an opportunity to validate student voice while teaching respectful discourse and critical listening. Julie reinforced this practice by consistently reminding students that "their voices matter," positioning participation as a civic right rather than a classroom privilege.

Collaborators also described intentionally scaffolding critical dialogue to support emotional safety and developmental appropriateness. Jocelyn explained, “We talk about what’s happening in the world,” noting that conversations were structured through guided questioning, journaling, and reflective writing to help students process complex topics. These structures supported movement beyond surface reactions toward deeper reflection and collective meaning-making. Ginwright’s (2018) work on radical healing supported this approach, asserting that culturally responsive spaces that acknowledge youth emotional experiences strengthen civic identity development and agency.

Collaborators also described critical dialogue as a bridge between academic learning and real-world relevance. Constance shared that current events were intentionally integrated into social studies and literacy instruction, allowing students to analyze news stories, discuss social issues, and practice argumentative reasoning rooted in lived realities. This integration reframed critical dialogue as academic engagement rather than distraction, reinforcing Duncan-Andrade and Morrell ‘s (2008) assertion that critical pedagogy strengthens both sociopolitical awareness and academic rigor.

Critical dialogue was also described as a protective practice within increasingly restrictive educational climates. Miles emphasized the importance of establishing classroom norms that safeguarded student expression, particularly when external pressures discouraged conversations about race, equity, and social justice. By affirming students’ voices, civic participation was positioned as beginning with the right to be heard. Yosso’s (2005) community cultural wealth framework supports this practice by identifying resistant and navigational capital as assets that empower students to challenge inequity and advocate for themselves and their communities.

Collaborators observed that sustained engagement in critical dialogue influenced student confidence, peer relationships, and self-advocacy. Students became more willing to question ideas, support one another, and connect classroom learning to their lived experiences. Rather than viewing civic engagement as future-oriented, collaborators described students actively practicing civic agency through discussion, reflection, and collective problem-solving. Together, these findings illustrate that critical dialogue served as civic engagement, cultivating students' emerging identities as inforrned, reflective, and socially aware members of their communities. Through intentional scaffolding, emotional safety, and curricular integration, collaborators enacted critical consciousness as an everyday pedagogical practice rather than an isolated instructional moment.

Theme 4: Belief in the Unlimited Potential of Students (Academic Success)

Belief in the unlimited potential of students emerged across collaborators' narratives as a foundational pedagogical stance that shaped how instruction, feedback, and relationships were enacted. Collaborators consistently rejected deficit-oriented assumptions and instead framed every child as capable of academic growth, intellectual excellence, and personal development. This orientation aligned with Ladson-Billings's (1995, 2014) assertion that culturally relevant pedagogy required teachers to hold high expectations while simultaneously providing the instructional support necessary for students to meet those expectations.

Across classrooms, collaborators described this belief as shaping how they approached differentiation and academic scaffolding. Ryan emphasized that "every child can learn," explaining that this conviction guided his instruction and led him to resist lowering expectations based on labels or prior performance. Rather than simplifying the

curriculum, he described adjusting pacing, modeling strategies, and providing targeted support so that students could access rigorous content. Leslie similarly noted that building confidence through intentional scaffolding allowed students to experience success that gradually reshaped how they viewed themselves as learners. She explained that "those small wins make them start believing they can actually do it."

Collaborators also described how belief in students' potential was communicated through language and feedback. Jocelyn explained that she intentionally frames mistakes as learning opportunities rather than failures, noting, "I make sure they know messing up does not mean you are not smart." Amy echoed this approach, describing how celebrating effort and improvement helped students internalize positive academic identities. She reflected that when students are publicly affirmed for their growth, they become more willing to participate, take on challenging work, and advocate for their learning needs.

Belief in students' potential extended beyond academic performance into emotional and relational care. Constance emphasized the importance of recognizing how external stressors could impact academic performance, explaining, "Sometimes, what they are dealing with outside of school affects what they can do in here." By intentionally checking in with students and providing emotional support, she worked to ensure that personal challenges did not become permanent academic barriers. Louise similarly described affirming students' cultural and linguistic identities as academic assets, reinforcing the view that multilingualism and cultural difference are strengths rather than limitations.

Importantly, collaborators framed their belief in students' unlimited potential as a moral and advocacy-oriented commitment. In contexts shaped by testing pressures and

deficit-based narratives, collaborators intentionally resisted language and practices that framed students by perceived limitations. Ryan explained, “Labels do not define my kids,” emphasizing that his instructional decisions are rooted in possibility rather than prediction. This orientation aligned with Yosso’s (2005) concept of aspirational capital, which identified hope, resilience, and future orientation as critical resources that sustain students’ academic engagement despite structural barriers.

When students consistently experienced affirmation of their potential, collaborators observed noticeable shifts in confidence, participation, and persistence. Students became more willing to take academic risks, seek help, and speak up in class discussions. Together, these findings illustrate that belief in the unlimited potential of students functioned not only as an instructional stance but also as an equity-centered commitment that positioned every learner as capable, valued, and academically powerful.

Theme 5: Teacher Identity and Spiritual Commitment (Additional Meaning-Making Theme Across CRP Domains)

Although this theme extended beyond a single domain of culturally relevant pedagogy, teacher identity and spiritual commitment were intentionally positioned as additional meaning-making themes that informed how collaborators understood, enacted, and sustained academic success, cultural competence, and critical consciousness across their teaching practices. This theme emerged across collaborators’ narratives as a central meaning-making force that shaped how culturally relevant pedagogy was understood and sustained over time. Collaborators described teaching as more than a set of professional tasks. Instead, they framed it as an extension of self, anchored in personal values, lived experiences, and an internal sense of purpose. This framing aligned with recent

scholarship that described teacher identity as dynamic, socially constructed, and continually shaped by context, emotion, and professional relationships (Bacova et al., 2023; Rushton et al., 2023).

Across narratives, collaborators emphasized that their personal identities influenced not only what they taught but also how they interpreted students' needs and how they sustained themselves through challenges. Jocelyn's reflection, "teaching is part of who I am," captured a recurring cross-case pattern in which identity and practice were inseparable. Amy similarly articulated the internal work of identity awareness when she stated, "My background affects how I teach," illustrating how collaborators understood culturally relevant pedagogy as rooted in self-knowledge rather than reduced to strategy. Recent research shows that teacher professional identity is significantly associated with commitment, satisfaction, and a sense of calling, all of which contribute to sustained engagement in demanding teaching contexts (Wu et al., 2024).

Spiritual grounding emerged as an additional layer of meaning-making that supported resilience, vocational clarity, and emotional steadiness. Louise's statement, "My faith helps me stay grounded," echoed the descriptions of other collaborators, who saw faith as a stabilizing force that supported perseverance and emotional balance. Recent peer-reviewed studies similarly indicated that spiritual leadership and spiritual direction are positively associated with teacher well-being, resilience, trust, and organizational commitment (Li et al., 2025; Miles & Marburg, 2025).

Collaborators also described reflection as a disciplined practice that strengthens identity clarity and pedagogical alignment. Ryan's statement, "I reflect on how my background affects my teaching," illustrated how meaning-making operated as

continuous interpretive work rather than a one-time realization. Recent research shows that teacher identity and reflective practices are significantly related to resilience, professional satisfaction, and adaptive functioning in complex educational environments (Ellis-Robinson et al., 2025; Zhang et al., 2024). Additional scholarship also identifies teacher identity as a motivational resource closely connected to emotional labor and professional persistence (Ntim, 2023).

Importantly, collaborators positioned identity and spiritual commitment as protective anchors in moments of vulnerability and institutional strain. Rather than presenting identity as static, their narratives reflected ongoing negotiation of self in response to social change, pressure, and moral responsibility. Bacova et al. (2023) similarly found that teacher vulnerability and identity work intensified during periods of social and institutional uncertainty. Together, these findings illustrate that teacher identity and spiritual commitment functioned as meaning-making frameworks that shaped how collaborators interpreted their professional roles, sustained emotional resilience, and reinforced culturally relevant pedagogy as both a pedagogical and moral commitment that cut across academic success, cultural competence, and critical consciousness.

Summary

The themes presented in this chapter revealed that culturally relevant pedagogy was enacted by collaborators as an integrated, relational practice rather than a collection of isolated instructional strategies. Across narratives, collaborators described fostering academic success by sustaining belief in students' unlimited potential while simultaneously affirming cultural competence through the intentional integration of family knowledge, language, and lived experiences into classroom life. These practices

were further deepened by the cultivation of critical consciousness, as collaborators created spaces for dialogue that encouraged students to engage with social realities and develop civic awareness. Underlying these instructional commitments were collaborators' personal identities and spiritual grounding, which functioned as meaning-making anchors that shaped how they sustained their work, interpreted challenges, and maintained moral purpose.

The thematic findings also revealed existing understandings of culturally relevant pedagogy by illustrating how CRP was enacted not only through instructional decisions but also sustained through the relational, emotional, and spiritual dimensions of teaching. Collaborators' narratives reveal that culturally relevant pedagogy functioned as a lived and evolving practice shaped by personal histories, moral commitments, and contextual realities rather than as a static set of strategies. These findings highlight how teachers' meaning-making processes influenced how CRP was interpreted, adapted, and sustained within elementary classrooms, particularly within sociopolitical contexts that at times constrained culturally affirming practices. As such, the findings of this study offer insight into the nuanced ways culturally relevant pedagogy was experienced, negotiated, and preserved by teachers committed to equity-centered instruction.

Chapter 6 builds upon these findings by situating the themes within existing literature on culturally relevant pedagogy and related equity-centered frameworks. The chapter interprets how the thematic findings align with, extend, and complicate current scholarship while also addressing implications for teacher preparation, professional development, and classroom practice. In addition, the chapter examines the limitations of

the study and offers recommendations for future research aimed at strengthening culturally relevant teaching in elementary education.

Chapter VI:

Discussion and Implications

Overview

This chapter advances the study from chapter 5, the presentation of findings, to analytic interpretation by examining the significance of the thematic results within the broader literature on culturally relevant pedagogy. Whereas Chapter 5 presented crosscase themes grounded in collaborators' narratives, Chapter 6 situates those findings within existing theoretical and empirical scholarship to examine how culturally relevant pedagogy is conceptualized, enacted, and sustained in contemporary elementary classroom contexts. Across narratives, collaborators did not describe culturally relevant pedagogy as a scripted set of instructional strategies or a checklist of classroom practices. Instead, they framed it as a deeply personal and relational approach shaped by teacher identity, professional preparation, lived experience, and sociopolitical context. Their stories reflected commitment, hope, hesitation, and determination, revealing both the promise and the complexity of culturally relevant teaching in real classroom settings.

This chapter examines how the study's findings align with, extend, and complicate existing research on culturally relevant pedagogy and related equity-centered frameworks. It further considers what collaborators' experiences suggest about teacher preparation, professional learning, and classroom practice within today's educational climate. In doing so, the discussion moves beyond summary to articulate broader meanings, applications, and contributions to the field. While all of the teachers expressed

a genuine commitment to supporting all students, particularly those from historically marginalized communities, their understanding and application of CRP varied widely in both scope and depth. This understanding supports Ladson-Billings' (2014) observation that CRP has been widely accepted in rhetoric but remains inconsistently applied in classrooms. For example, one collaborator stated, "I like to bring in fun activities from different cultures. We do a lot around food and holidays." While such practices may foster inclusion, they do not necessarily engage students in critical curricular connections to lived realities. This approach aligns with Paris and Alim's (2017) critique of "whitewashed multiculturalism," in which culture is acknowledged superficially, rather than leveraged as a tool for critical engagement or academic empowerment.

Similarly, another collaborator remarked, "I consider myself culturally responsive because I love my students and try to celebrate their holidays." Although this reflects care and attentiveness to a specific student, Gay (2018) emphasized that culturally relevant pedagogy is not simply about recognizing cultural differences. CRP requires educators to search for and implement equity-centered practices aligned with instruction and curriculum. To address these complexities, this chapter presents a synthesis of the study's findings, discusses its limitations, and offers recommendations for future research that can strengthen educators' capacity to create equitable and culturally relevant learning environments.

Revisiting the Purpose and Methodological Foundations of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of both White and non-White fourth- and fifth-grade teachers from non-Title I and Title I schools to develop an understanding of their experiences with and perceptions of CRP. Grounded in teachers'

lived experiences, this study examined how educators described their engagement with CRP, how they incorporated it into their instructional practices, and how classroom experiences shaped their understandings of culturally relevant teaching. Using a narrative inquiry design, collaborators' stories were collected, analyzed, and storied to make the meanings of their experiences accessible to other educators in ways that could be applied within their own classrooms. This design centered teachers' voices and emphasized meaning-making as a primary analytic lens, enabling the study to capture not only what teachers did but also how they interpreted and responded to their professional experiences related to CRP.

As social justice issues have become increasingly visible and simultaneously politicized within educational contexts, this study was situated within a critical need to understand how CRP is understood and practiced in real classroom settings. The inclusion of teachers from varied racial identities and school contexts allowed for examination of both conceptual differences and commonalities across Title I and non—Title I settings. Although the number of collaborators was limited, the study provides foundational insight into how educators understand CRP and how those understandings shape classroom practice.

This study was guided by the following research questions:

RQI: What are fourth- and fifth-grade teachers' experiences learning, using, and assessing CRP and its place in the learning environment in which they work?

RQ2: What meanings do participants ascribe to their experiences that contribute to their beliefs and practices related to CRP?

RQ3: How do fourth and fifth-grade teachers apply the meaning they make of their experiences when engaging with others?

The research questions guided both the analysis and the organization of this chapter. Rather than presenting findings as isolated themes, the following sections address each research question directly to illuminate how collaborators experienced, interpreted, and enacted culturally relevant pedagogy within their classrooms. The discussion begins by examining teachers' experiences learning, using, and assessing CRP in their instructional contexts.

Research Question 1: Teachers' Experiences Learning, Using, and Assessing CRP

Collaborators' experiences revealed significant gaps in formal preparation in culturally relevant pedagogy, particularly in teacher preparation programs and professional development contexts. The majority of collaborators reported completing no more than one general diversity course during their undergraduate teacher preparation programs, and none described sustained or explicit coursework focused specifically on culturally relevant pedagogy. The absence of structured CRP preparation extended into collaborators' professional contexts. None of the collaborators described schoolwide conversations or professional development initiatives focused on culturally relevant pedagogy. Discussions related to race, culture, and equity were consistently described as limited or avoided altogether within their school communities, often due to administrative hesitation or perceived political sensitivity.

Taken together, these findings suggest that collaborators entered and remained in the profession without sustained institutional guidance for understanding CRP as a comprehensive pedagogical framework rather than as an isolated set of strategies. This

lack of structured preparation shaped not only what collaborators knew about CRP, but also how confidently they could assess their own practice. Without explicit preparation or shared professional language around CRP, collaborators often relied on personal intuition and informal learning, leading to uneven enactment and uncertainty about instructional impact. These patterns align with scholarship suggesting that when CRP is not systematically embedded within teacher education and professional learning, educators are more likely to adopt surface-level approaches rather than sustained, equity-centered practice (Ladson-Billings, 2014; Sleeter, 2017).

Research Question 2: Meaning-Making and Beliefs Related to Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Across collaborators' narratives, meaning-making emerged as a deeply personal and reflective process shaped by identity, internal beliefs, and sociopolitical context. All collaborators expressed a strong moral commitment to "do the best" for their students and described culturally relevant pedagogy as important to their professional purpose. Collaborators also described internal struggles when discussing issues of race, equity, and social justice in their classrooms. Several White collaborators voiced discomfort engaging in conversations about race with students of color, expressing concern about appearing uncredible or unintentionally causing harm. These findings illustrate that collaborators' beliefs about CRP were not formed solely through professional preparation, but were deeply influenced by personal identity, lived experience, and perceptions of social risk.

Meaning-making often occurred through internal reflection rather than collective professional dialogue, positioning CRP as a moral commitment rather than as an

explicitly taught pedagogical framework. This internalization of CRP contributed to emotional labor, self-doubt, and hesitation, particularly for White collaborators navigating conversations about race and equity in politically sensitive contexts. Research similarly suggests that when educators are not provided with structured opportunities to critically examine race, power, and positionality, they are more likely to experience uncertainty and fear that constrain their engagement with equity-centered teaching (Castro et al., 2019; Souto-Manning, 2021).

Research Question 3: Application of Meaning Through Advocacy and Professional Engagement

Collaborators' narratives revealed that the meanings they made of their experiences with culturally relevant pedagogy shaped how they engaged with colleagues, school communities, and broader professional contexts. All collaborators reflected on personal and professional growth and articulated a shared sense of responsibility to "do better" for their students. This shared sense of responsibility often manifested as individualized advocacy rather than as coordinated collective action. Collaborators frequently positioned themselves as personal advocates within their classrooms while simultaneously expressing uncertainty about how to extend CRP beyond their own instructional spaces. The absence of schoolwide structures, leadership support, and collaborative professional learning communities limited opportunities for CRP to become a shared institutional commitment. As a result, equity-centered teaching remained dependent on individual teacher initiative rather than embedded within organizational practice. This pattern aligns with broader literature that underscores the importance of

collective responsibility, leadership support, and shared professional vision for sustaining culturally relevant pedagogy over time (Gay, 2018; Sleeter, 2017).

Summary of Findings (Cross-Case Synthesis)

This study revealed that while collaborators expressed strong moral commitment to supporting all students, their preparation to implement culturally relevant pedagogy with fidelity was inconsistent and often limited. The majority of collaborators reported minimal formal coursework in culturally relevant pedagogy during their teacher preparation programs, with most describing only one general diversity course and little to no sustained professional development focused on CRP. This lack of preparation left many collaborators feeling ill-equipped to translate culturally relevant pedagogy from theory into practice. Several collaborators reflected that, early in their careers, they struggled to connect curriculum to the identities, cultures, and lived realities of their students, a challenge they attributed to inequities in curriculum materials and to their limited preparation to address them through CRP. In contrast, collaborators of color described drawing on personal lived experiences to inform their instructional practices, expressing a shared sense of "relatedness" with their Black students that they believed supported culturally responsive teaching, even in the absence of formal CRP coursework. White collaborators more frequently discussed their Latinx and Indian students than their Black students and expressed that more explicit preparation related to CRP would have provided clearer guidance for connecting curriculum to diverse students, families, and colleagues.

Although collaborators demonstrated practices that resembled aspects of culturally relevant pedagogy, these practices often lacked theoretical grounding, leading

to inconsistent implementation and uncertainty about their impact on student learning and success. One collaborator stated, “We read about equity, but never practiced it. I didn’t know how to translate theory into my teaching.” Only one collaborator demonstrated deep familiarity with CRP as a comprehensive pedagogical framework, a level of understanding developed through doctoral-level study rather than formal teacher education or district professional development.

Meaning-making emerged as a central component of collaborators’ engagement with culturally relevant pedagogy. Collaborators described culturally relevant teaching as shaped by identity, belief systems, and sociopolitical context. While they expressed strong commitment to equity-centered teaching, many also described self-doubt, hesitation, and fear associated with engaging in conversations about race, equity, and social justice. These internal struggles were intensified by political pressures, professional vulnerability, and the absence of schoolwide support structures.

Collaborators further described applying their commitments to culturally relevant pedagogy largely in isolation. Few described collaborative spaces within their schools where CRP was openly discussed or supported. Instead, teachers often carried the responsibility of equity-centered teaching individually, navigating institutional constraints, political sensitivity, and limited leadership support. These findings suggest that sustaining culturally relevant pedagogy requires not only individual commitment but also collective responsibility within school communities. Without coordinated leadership, shared professional learning, and intentional collaboration, teachers remain isolated advocates rather than members of a unified, equity-centered instructional culture. Taken together, these findings highlight the complex interplay between preparation, belief

systems, institutional context, and professional collaboration in shaping how culturally relevant pedagogy is understood, enacted, and sustained within elementary classrooms.

Limitations of the Study

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of this study. These limitations are directly connected to the researcher's positionality, the broader sociopolitical climate surrounding education, and collaborators' varying levels of familiarity with culturally relevant pedagogy.

CRP Awareness

One limitation of this study was the collaborators' uneven understanding of CRP and the extent to which it was understood as a comprehensive pedagogical framework. Although all collaborators completed an online survey indicating that they used CRP in their classrooms, multiple interviews revealed that some were more well-versed in CRP and had a different understanding of this pedagogy than others. A commonality found was that most collaborators were, in fact, using CRP but were not adhering to all its tenets, or had limited exposure to what it looks like in the classroom.

One collaborator was well-versed in CRP and spoke freely and confidently about this pedagogy. Importantly, this depth of understanding was not attributed to teacher preparation programs or district-level professional development. Instead, it resulted from independent scholarly engagement during doctoral study. This collaborator provided deeper, clearer reflections than the other participants. This collaborator discussed the shift from CRP to culturally sustaining pedagogy, a newer extension of CRP that focuses on preserving and strengthening students' cultural identities in schools.

In contrast, the other collaborators largely described fragmented practices that reflected components of CRP rather than its full framework. Although these educators expressed genuine care for students and described classroom strategies intended to support diverse learners, they often struggled to define or articulate all three tenets of CRP: academic success, cultural competence, and critical consciousness. Many collaborators were unfamiliar with Ladson-Billings's (1995) foundational scholarship and lacked explicit theoretical grounding for their instructional decisions. As a result, CRP was frequently enacted as a collection of isolated strategies rather than as an integrated pedagogical orientation.

This uneven awareness reflects a broader structural limitation in how culturally relevant pedagogy is positioned within teacher preparation programs and district-level professional learning. When CRP is introduced as a single course, a checklist of strategies, or an abstract philosophy without sustained application and mentoring, educators may believe they are implementing CRP while lacking the theoretical grounding and pedagogical tools necessary to enact it with fidelity. Ladson-Billings (1995, 2014) has long cautioned against the dilution of CRP into surface-level practices, noting that such misinterpretations undermine its transformative potential. The findings of this study reflect this same concern. Consequently, collaborators' self-reported use of culturally relevant pedagogy must be interpreted within this context of uneven preparation and diluted exposure. This limitation underscores that the findings of the present study are shaped not only by individual teachers' beliefs and intentions but also by systemic gaps in how culturally relevant pedagogy is taught, supported, and sustained within teacher education and professional learning environments.

Researcher Positionality

A related limitation concerns the researcher's positionality and the ways race may have shaped interview dynamics and participant disclosure. Although four of the collaborators identified as Black, the researcher's positionality as a Black woman may have influenced interactions with White collaborators. While intentional efforts were made to establish relationships grounded in mutual respect and to invite authentic, honest responses, it is possible that some collaborators experienced discomfort or restraint when discussing issues related to race, equity, and culturally relevant pedagogy. Despite intentional efforts to build relationships grounded in mutual respect and to encourage authentic, honest responses, some collaborators may still have felt uneasy about fully disclosing their thoughts. White collaborators, in particular, may have moderated their language or offered responses they believed aligned with perceived expectations rather than fully articulating their unfiltered perspectives. Such dynamics are well documented in qualitative research, where participants' perceptions of a researcher's identity can shape candor, disclosure, and narrative positioning.

This limitation reflects the complexities of race in research relationships, where participants' perceptions of the researcher's identity can create subtle pressures that influence candor and disclosure. This framing also mirrors what collaborators themselves described in their professional contexts. In addition, this possibility parallels what some of the collaborators themselves described when reflecting on their own professional experiences. Just as they expressed feelings of discomfort or even inferiority in conversations about race, the same type of tension may have surfaced during my interviews with them. Recognizing this limitation reinforces the notion that issues of race

and power are not abstract concepts but lived realities that shape interactions in both classrooms and research contexts. The researcher's role cannot be fully detached from the sociocultural dynamics under examination, particularly in a study centered on race, identity, and equity-centered pedagogy. This study was conducted during a period of heightened political sensitivity regarding education, including national debates on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). These broader sociopolitical conditions likely influenced not only classroom practices but also the context in which collaborators interpreted questions and shared their experiences.

Political Climate

A final limitation of this study relates to the broader sociopolitical context in which the research was conducted. The current state of education in America has undergone drastic changes recently, including the elimination of DEI initiatives by the president, the restructuring of the Department of Education, and attempts to disband the Department of Education (Perera et al., 2025). This study was conducted during a period marked by heightened political scrutiny of diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives and by shifting national discourse on curriculum and educational policy. Due to these changes, there has been a significant shift in teachers' thoughts and abilities to feel at ease with providing CRP instruction. This was evident with the teachers interviewed. All expressed fear of being caught teaching or discussing certain topics with their students, unsure exactly what could lead to consequences or reprimands. They consistently described fear and uncertainty about discussing topics related to race, culture, and equity in their classrooms.

Collaborators frequently described an ongoing tension between what they believed was pedagogically and morally appropriate for students and what they perceived to be institutionally acceptable. This sense of constraint contributed to hesitation, self-censorship, and instructional caution, limiting opportunities to fully enact culturally relevant pedagogy. These findings suggest that the political environment may have constrained educators' instructional autonomy regardless of their individual commitment to equity-centered teaching. The current political climate and state of education may also help explain why school districts across the nation are not implementing professional development focused on CRP. It is possible that these federal mandates may punish districts or superintendents if this type of pedagogy is being presented nationwide as an accepted pedagogy. When culturally relevant pedagogy is not publicly acknowledged or supported at institutional or policy levels, educators are left without the structural guidance necessary to implement it confidently or consistently.

These conditions created a pervasive sense of professional limitation, often described by collaborators as having their "hands tied." The perceived lack of institutional support and the broader restructuring of educational priorities created a sense of professional constraint, limiting educators' autonomy to engage fully in culturally relevant teaching practices. This limitation underscores that the findings of this study were shaped not only by individual beliefs and preparation, but also by a national climate that continues to influence what is possible within contemporary classrooms.

Recommendations for Future Research: Recommendations for Teacher Preparation Programs

The findings of this study highlight the need for systemic, sustained, and collaborative approaches to culturally relevant pedagogy in our education system. Future research should not only continue to document the value of CRP, but also examine how it can be more firmly embedded into TPP and professional development. The collaborators in this study entered the classroom with varying levels of knowledge and understanding of CRP, and much of their learning occurred through personal experience or self-directed study rather than formal preparation. Although collaborators demonstrated strong moral commitment to supporting students, their limited preparation, uneven understanding of CRP, and professional isolation reveal critical gaps in how culturally relevant pedagogy is taught, supported, and sustained within schools and teacher preparation programs.

As evidenced in this study, CRP was not consistently positioned as a central feature of teacher education. Collaborators most often encountered CRP as a single diversity-focused course intended to satisfy graduation requirements rather than as an integrated pedagogical framework that connects theory, practice, and reflection. As a result of its absence, these collaborators, along with other new teachers, were challenged with making daily instructional choices that impact diverse learners. Embedding CRP throughout teacher education coursework can support preservice teachers in developing a deeper understanding of academic success, cultural competence, and critical consciousness as interconnected pedagogical commitments rather than isolated strategies. Repeated opportunities for application, reflection, and feedback can help future teachers

move beyond surface-level inclusion toward sustained and meaningful culturally relevant teaching practices.

Recommendations for Professional Development and School Leadership

Future studies should explore how in-service teachers can be supported to share the responsibility of implementing CRP with their colleagues, rather than carrying the work in isolation and feeling overwhelmed. Throughout this study, it was evident that while individual collaborators demonstrated a strong commitment to CRP, they often bore the responsibility alone within their school communities. Teachers who are committed to CRP can feel frustrated in their school communities if they are the only ones who are advocating for students of color. Without a shared vision among a team, school, or district, this pedagogy will, by default, be of importance only to teachers who are encouraged, dedicated, and understand CRP. Supporting teachers in this work requires intentional frontloading that promotes collaboration and shared accountability. Professional learning communities, cross-grade-level teams, and schoolwide initiatives can serve as the foundation for teachers to reflect together, share resources, and problem solve challenges related to CRP.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research should examine the coursework required to support or hinder CRP's integration into teacher preparation programs. Additional studies are needed to highlight programs that have successfully embedded CRP across multiple courses and field experiences as evidence of the importance of this pedagogy. Without such research, the burden will continue to fall on individual teachers to seek out CRP on their own. Future research should also explicitly investigate why many teachers do not enact

culturally relevant pedagogy in practice, even when they express moral commitment to equity and inclusion. Existing literature suggested that resistance to CRP is not simply a matter of unwillingness but is shaped by fear of political backlash, lack of institutional support, insufficient pedagogical preparation, and uncertainty regarding how to translate theory into classroom practice (Castro et al., 2019; Patfield et al., 2023; Souto-Manning, 2021). Future qualitative and mixed-methods studies should examine how teachers' perceptions of risk, preparedness, and professional vulnerability influence their decisions to limit, avoid, or dilute CRP implementation. To address these questions, future studies should employ longitudinal qualitative designs, mixed-method approaches, and comparative case studies that follow preservice and in-service teachers across varied school contexts to examine how CRP knowledge, belief systems, and instructional enactment develop over time. Research questions should explicitly investigate how teacher preparation experiences, professional learning opportunities, and school leadership practices shape teachers' capacity and willingness to implement CRP with fidelity (Achilleos et al., 2021; Sleeter, 2017; Souto-Manning & Winn, 2022).

In addition to the suggested qualitative and mixed-methods studies, future research should also explore a quantitative study that follows historical assessment data of students who directly participate in CRP implementation studies. Since one of the tenets of CRP is specifically focused on academic success, researchers could track assessment data over time to determine if there is an increase in academic growth. Researchers could also track assessment data for students who receive intentional and routine CRP and compare it to students who do not receive CRP.

Research shows that when teachers engage in sustained, collaborative professional development around equity and CRP, they are more likely to implement these practices with fidelity and sustain them over time (Gay, 2018). Future studies should therefore examine models of professional development and school leadership that successfully cultivate a culture of shared responsibility for CRP. Finally, future research should directly examine how the three core dimensions of CRP (academic success, cultural competence, and critical consciousness) are differentially understood and enacted in classroom practice. Multiple studies have indicated that critical consciousness is consistently the least understood and most difficult dimension for teachers to implement, particularly in politically constrained educational contexts (Achilleos et al., 2021; Ladson-Billings, 2014; Sleeter, 2017). Future studies should therefore investigate how teachers conceptualize, avoid, negotiate, or attempt to enact critical consciousness within contemporary classrooms, and how institutional constraints, leadership practices, and community context shape these efforts. Such research would provide essential insight into why CRP is often reduced to surface-level cultural inclusion rather than enacted as a transformative pedagogical framework.

A Call to Action for the Education Profession

Based on the narratives from this study and previous research, multiple changes are needed in our education system for educators to truly impact learning for students of color. Although immediate systemic change is not easy, I believe that colleges and school districts nationwide can support initiatives that lead to long-lasting change. Four action items can catapult CRP implementation into schools: (a) courses and experiences in TPPS, (b) teacher discourse regarding biases, (c) CRP frameworks created by school

districts using texts and resources that promote integration across content areas, and (d) ongoing professional development. This work must begin with TPPS, as this is the foundation for how teachers understand and implement CRP.

In higher education, TPPs need to incorporate multiple opportunities for students to be immersed in CRP. Every collaborator shared a commonality: a lack of coursework and experiences focused on teaching diverse populations. This shared experience left multiple collaborators without a strong foundation for teaching students whose backgrounds differed from their own. Their limited understanding of CRP created instructional challenges for them and academic challenges for their students. All collaborators expressed a strong desire to engage in courses and hands-on experiences that foster this instructional pedagogy.

TPPS should have tiered CRP courses that advance in depth and understanding as future teachers progress through their programs. It should not be limited to simply one required class. This tiered structure supports the case for integrating CRP into teachers' teaching practices. To demonstrate teachers' understanding of CRP, hands-on experiences should also be considered throughout the progression of TPPs. These experiences will allow future teachers to apply their understanding of CRP with students, giving them real-life opportunities to make natural shifts and changes to their instructional delivery. This intentional experience moves beyond surface-level understanding of CRP and provides classroom contexts for application. To reiterate, CRP courses in TPPS explain why this pedagogy is important, and the hands-on opportunities support the how to implement CRP. Although this action piece can be considered the initial step, future

educators must engage in critical self-reflection to examine their own biases before entering their first classroom.

Another crucial component of this transformative task is that teachers must address all biases before entering a classroom. As some collaborators mentioned, their childhood upbringing and elementary school experiences were markedly different from those of their students. This inadvertently impacted how they perceived and interacted with diverse student populations. Collaborator Constance specifically struggled with understanding that she indeed had a privilege that was not shared by people of color. Through self-reflection and discourse with other teachers at her school, she realized she did, in fact, model deficit thinking.

District officials and principals should provide a safe space at the beginning of the year, along with ongoing check-ins, to ensure that teachers are not allowing personal biases to influence their instructional practices or interactions with students of color. Prior to the school year starting, all teachers should be provided with classroom scenarios to see how they would appropriately address challenging situations without allowing biases to impact the treatment of students. These specific exercises will enable colleagues to critically reflect on themselves and further discuss strategies to disrupt and address biases.

Additionally, district and school officials should invite speakers to discuss the importance of addressing these biases in a non-threatening and supportive environment, highlighting the impact that unaddressed biases can have on students of color. This activity may also lead to other teachers sharing their personal experiences, what they have witnessed other teachers doing, and possibly even stories of students who may have

confided in them about negative experiences with teachers. These opportunities promote reflection and accountability, both of which are essential for advancing CRP. However, this alone is insufficient. The district officials responsible for supporting this initiative must also actively provide the necessary structures and guidelines to facilitate CRP implementation.

To make a smooth transition toward implementing CRP, district officials from various content areas need to work together to create a framework that can be easily incorporated into the required curricula. Using the three components of CRP, instructional opportunities should be provided to promote student success, allowing teachers to naturally embed this pedagogy into their daily practice. Every collaborator noted that no resources were provided to support CRP and expressed concern about using resources not vetted by their districts due to potential negative ramifications. Most counties provide frameworks for all content areas that teachers are expected to follow; therefore, CRP must be included within these frameworks.

As every collaborator mentioned, the importance of using texts to incorporate certain parts of CRP was paramount. Thus, using texts would be advantageous for district officials since text adoptions and purchases of text sets occur often. District content specialists should work collaboratively to ensure that diverse text sets are integrated across multiple disciplines. Every content area, including math, requires multiple resources that teachers use to model specific standards, and CRP-aligned resources should be included. This inclusion would ensure that all teachers across the district have the same access to implement CRP with fidelity, rather than fragmented instruction due to a lack of a common framework or vetted resources.

Providing these resources to teachers would not only increase teachers' confidence in implementing CRP but also ensure that all students receive cohesive and equitable learning experiences. In addition, embedding CRP into an instructional framework reinforces its importance as an ongoing instructional priority rather than something optional. While resources and frameworks support the structured approach required to implement CRP, ongoing professional development is also an imperative action item to help teachers continue developing and applying CRP in their instructional craft.

Professional development is integral to the teaching profession. As evidenced by the collaborators, all participated in yearly professional development focused on the four main content areas: reading, math, science, and social studies. Professional development that supports CRP should be ongoing throughout the school year and follow a structure similar to TPPs, integrating learning and application. At the start of the year, teachers should be engaged and reminded of the significance of CRP. As the school year continues, they should incorporate their knowledge and understanding of CRP into their classrooms. At this stage, the district-provided CRP resources should be introduced and consistently utilized. As most teachers are evaluated using rubrics and checklists, adapted versions should be used to support CRP implementation and provide teachers with non-threatening, constructive feedback. During ongoing PD, administrators should highlight effective practices and identify areas for improvement as teachers implement CRP. These four action steps provide a sustainable path to the proper implementation of CRP across school districts, ensuring equitable education for students.

Conclusion

This study examined how eight fourth and fifth-grade teachers experienced, understood, and enacted culturally relevant pedagogy within their classroom and school contexts. As student populations continue to diversify and social, cultural, and political dynamics shape educational spaces, culturally relevant pedagogy remains a critical framework for supporting equitable teaching and learning. Race, culture, and ethnicity remain central to students' identities and lived experiences, underscoring the ongoing need for instructional approaches that affirm students academically, culturally, and socially.

Findings revealed that culturally relevant pedagogy is frequently approached through surface-level practices rather than as a comprehensive pedagogical framework grounded in academic success, cultural competence, and critical consciousness. The current state of the education system has left many teachers uncertain about which practices and conversations are acceptable in increasingly politicized educational environments. The simplest conversations and collaborations regarding best practices have now become unsafe due to personal safety concerns, beliefs, and opposing political views. The uneven understanding of CRP, coupled with political pressures and institutional constraints, created environments in which teachers often bore the responsibility for equity-centered teaching in isolation.

Despite these challenges, collaborators demonstrated ongoing reflection, personal growth, and a developing sense of responsibility to advocate for their students and themselves. Teachers described engaging in continuous meaning-making as they navigated tensions between instructional values, institutional constraints, and moral

responsibility. These findings suggest that while individual commitment remains essential, culturally relevant pedagogy cannot be sustained through individual effort alone. Meaningful and lasting implementation requires systemic commitment, intentional professional learning, and collaborative school cultures that position equity-centered teaching as a shared responsibility. By centering teachers' lived experiences, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how culturally relevant pedagogy is navigated in contemporary elementary classrooms. The findings highlight the urgent need for structural changes in teacher preparation programs, professional development models, and school leadership practices to support educators in implementing culturally relevant pedagogy with clarity, confidence, and fidelity. These changes are essential for creating equitable learning environments that honor students' identities, promote academic success, and foster critical engagement in education.

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Appendix A:

Protocol Exemption Report

Institutional Review Board (IRB)
for the Protection of Human Research Participants

PROTOCOL EXEMPTION REPORT

Protocol Number: 04344-2022 **Responsible Researcher:** Deborah Oliver Pearson

Supervising Faculty: Drs. Richard and Lorraine Schmertzing **Co-Investigator:** n/a

Project Title: *Elementary Teachers' Experiences with and Applications of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy.*

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD DETERMINATION:

This research protocol is **exempt** from Institutional Review Board (IRB) oversight under 45 CFR 46.101(b) of the federal regulations, **category 2**. If the nature of the research changes such that exemption criteria no longer apply, please consult with the IRB Administrator (irb@valdosta.edu) before continuing your research study.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS:

- *Upon completion of the research study all data (e.g. data, pseudonym list, email lists, transcript, etc.) must be securely maintained (e.g. locked file cabinet, password protected computer, etc.) and accessible only by the researcher for a minimum of 3 years. At the end of the required time, collected data must be permanently destroyed.*

☒ ***Please submit any documents you revise to the IRB Administrator at tmwright@valdosta.edu to ensure an updated record of your exemption.***

Elizabeth W. Olphie *12.11.2023*

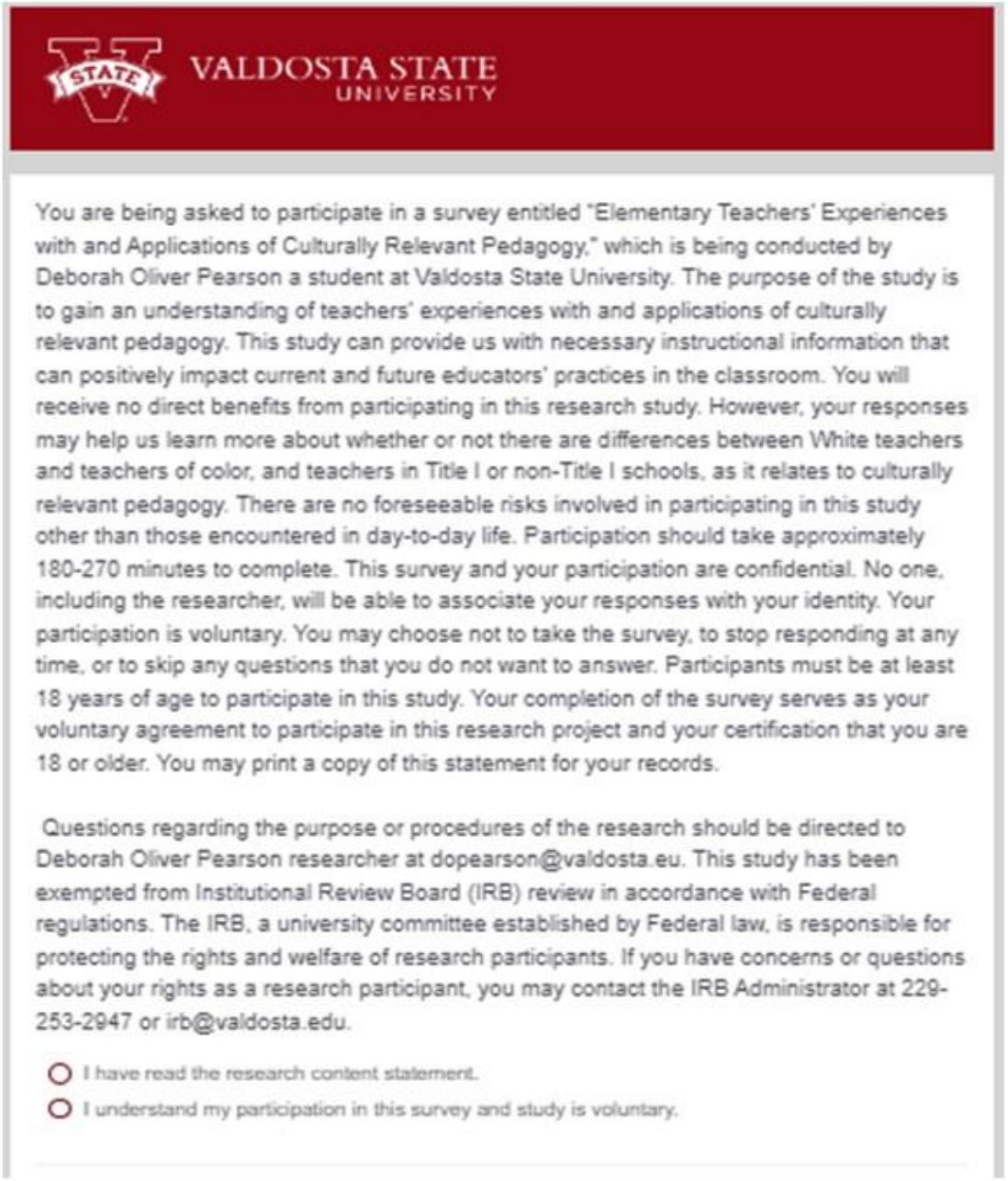
Elizabeth W. Olphie, IRB Administrator Date

Thank you for submitting an IRB application.
Please direct questions to irb@valdosta.edu or 229-259-5045.

Revised: 05.02.16

Appendix B:

Qualtrics Survey



VALDOSTA STATE UNIVERSITY

You are being asked to participate in a survey entitled "Elementary Teachers' Experiences with and Applications of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy," which is being conducted by Deborah Oliver Pearson a student at Valdosta State University. The purpose of the study is to gain an understanding of teachers' experiences with and applications of culturally relevant pedagogy. This study can provide us with necessary instructional information that can positively impact current and future educators' practices in the classroom. You will receive no direct benefits from participating in this research study. However, your responses may help us learn more about whether or not there are differences between White teachers and teachers of color, and teachers in Title I or non-Title I schools, as it relates to culturally relevant pedagogy. There are no foreseeable risks involved in participating in this study other than those encountered in day-to-day life. Participation should take approximately 180-270 minutes to complete. This survey and your participation are confidential. No one, including the researcher, will be able to associate your responses with your identity. Your participation is voluntary. You may choose not to take the survey, to stop responding at any time, or to skip any questions that you do not want to answer. Participants must be at least 18 years of age to participate in this study. Your completion of the survey serves as your voluntary agreement to participate in this research project and your certification that you are 18 or older. You may print a copy of this statement for your records.

Questions regarding the purpose or procedures of the research should be directed to Deborah Oliver Pearson researcher at dopearson@valdosta.eu. This study has been exempted from Institutional Review Board (IRB) review in accordance with Federal regulations. The IRB, a university committee established by Federal law, is responsible for protecting the rights and welfare of research participants. If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the IRB Administrator at 229-253-2947 or irb@valdosta.edu.

- ○ I have read the research content statement.
- ○ I understand my participation in this survey and study is voluntary.

How would you describe yourself?

- American Indian
- Alaska Native
- Asian
- Black or African American
- Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
- White
- Other:
- Prefer not to respond to this question

How long have you been employed as a teacher in education?

- 0-5 years
- 6-10 years
- 11-15 years
- 16-20 years
- 20-25 years
- 25+ years

How long have you taught 4th grade?

- 0-5 years
- 6-10 years
- 11-15 years
- 16-20 years
- 20-25 years
- 25+ years

How long have you taught 5th grade?

- 0-5 years
- 6-10 years
- 11-15 years
- 16-20 years
- 20-25 years
- 25+ years

In how many schools have you worked in as a teacher?

- 1
- 2-3
- 4-5
- 6+

Has your teaching experience been in Title I, non-Title I, or both?

- Title I
- non-Title I
- Both

Where did you grow up?

Where did you attend college?

Please define or describe what you consider "culturally relevant pedagogy."

→

VALDOSTA STATE
UNIVERSITY

If you are interested in speaking with me about your experience, please provide
First Name:
Email Address:
Phone Number (if you prefer I contact you via text or phone):

→

VALDOSTA STATE
UNIVERSITY

We thank you for your time spent taking this survey.
Your response has been recorded.

Appendix C:

Interview Questions Session 1

All interview questions included in this application are intended to be samples to demonstrate the types of questions that will be asked and prompts that will be used in interviews. Due to the emergent nature of qualitative research and the conversational style that will be used in interview the words will likely not be verbatim as listed here.

1 . Tell me about growing up.

a. What are the first things that come to mind when you think about your youth and childhood?

b. How did school fit into the picture? What movie, book or song title would you say characterized those years? Why?

2. What led to your decision to go to college?

a. What was that a journey like?

b. Most/least favorite classes? Why?

c. What similarities or differences stand out to you about life, relationships, self, education across those two time periods?

d. In what ways did these things influence your decision to become a teacher?

3. How long have you been in education?

a. Describe your most favorite memory from college days? Least favorite? Why?

b. What similarities or differences stand out to you about life, relationships, self, education across those two time periods?

c. In what ways did these things influence your decisions to become a teacher?

4. In how many schools have you taught? What levels?

5. Why did you become a teacher?

a. How does this reason relate to why you stay a teacher?

b. What do you experience in your job that truly excites you?

c. Describe the details of a few times that has happened.

d. How about what upsets you? Describe a situation that you recall.

e. Tell me about the school you were in before (the one you are not in now).

Similarities/Differences? What prompted the move?

6. Has your teaching experience been in Title I or non-Title I schools?

7. Please define or describe what you consider culturally relevant pedagogy.

8. Tell me about the populations that are in your school. Are they similar or different from your own K-5 school experience?

a. Teachers?

b. Students?

c. Administrators?

9. How would you describe your current school and the teacher, student, and administrator population?

Questions regarding the purpose or procedures of the research should be directed to Deborah Oliver Pearson at dopearson@valdosta.edu. This study has been approved by the Valdosta State University Institutional Review Board IRB for the Protection of Human Research Participants. The IRB, a university committee established by Federal law, is responsible for protecting the rights and welfare of research participants. If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the IRB Administrator at 229-253-2947 or irb@valdosta.edu.

Appendix D:

Interview Questions Session 2

1. Tell me what you know about culturally relevant pedagogy.
2. What type of experience did you have with culturally relevant pedagogy in your undergraduate or graduate coursework?

a. What were your thoughts about this pedagogy?

b. Describe how your professor introduced this pedagogy.

c. Tell me what concerns you might have had while learning about CRP.

3. Talk to me about CRP in your classroom.

a. How do you implement CRP in your classroom?

b. Describe an experience when your students of color achieved academic success. Tell me how you felt during that moment. What do you think contributed to their success?

c. Explain how you support your students' identities. What challenges do you face when providing this support? Tell me about a time that you believe you were uncomfortable.

Tell me a time that you believe you were successful.

d. Tell me about how you address real-world problems that may result in social inequalities. What do you believe are barriers to addressing these problems? How do you overcome these barriers?

4. What motivates you to implement this pedagogy in this classroom?

a. What are some resources that you find beneficial?

5. Explain how your team or school discusses this pedagogy.

a. Tell me how you feel when this pedagogy is discussed.

b. Describe a meeting when this pedagogy was discussed, and you walked away feeling empowered. Describe a meeting when you walked away feeling discouraged.

6. What are your thoughts about why teachers implement this pedagogy? What are your thoughts about why teachers do not implement this pedagogy?

Questions regarding the purpose or procedures of the research should be directed to Deborah Oliver Pearson at dopearson@valdosta.edu. This study has been approved by the Valdosta State University Institutional Review Board IRB for the Protection of Human Research Participants. The IRB, a university committee established by Federal law, is responsible for protecting the rights and welfare of research participants. If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the IRB Administrator at 229-253-2947 or irb@valdosta.edu.

Appendix E:

Interview Questions Session 3

1. Tell me about something that you have reflected on since we began this study. How has this impacted your teaching craft?
2. Describe a recent lesson where you purposefully made sure that you implemented CRP. Explain how you felt when you made that change.
3. How would you go about explaining your success with CRP to other teachers?
4. You told me the story of doing_____. Based on that experience, how do you make sense of that? Why did you . . . ? What do you think was the take-away from the experience for both you and the other person?