

Case Study of Teachers Using Culturally Relevant Pedagogy with African American  
Elementary Students

A Dissertation submitted  
to the Graduate School  
Valdosta State University

in partial fulfillment of requirements  
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

in Curriculum and Instruction

in the Department of Leadership, Technology, and Workforce Development  
of the James L. and Dorothy H. Dewar College of Education and Human Services

December, 2023

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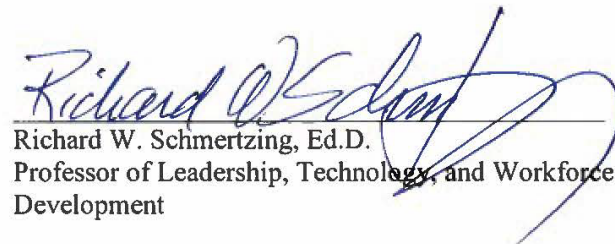
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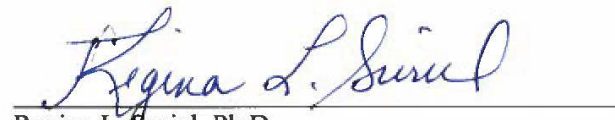
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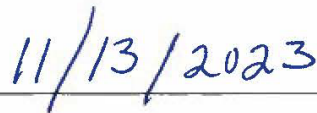
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## Abstract

A qualitative case study was used in this study to gain insight into six elementary school teachers' use of culturally relevant pedagogy. The teachers self-identified as culturally relevant teachers who foster high academic achievement, cultivate cultural competence, and develop critical consciousness in students to help them understand and analyze the world's social order. Through storytelling, interviews, classroom observations, student work, and the participants' reflections on their practices, this study provides a way to describe how teachers use culturally relevant pedagogy in their elementary classrooms and the approaches they use when teaching African American elementary students. The guiding questions for the research are as follows: What are the experiences of six elementary teachers of African American students who self-identify as using culturally relevant pedagogy in urban elementary schools in the South? What practices do these teachers use to help African American students learn? How do teachers of African American students in urban elementary schools in the South implement culturally relevant pedagogy? The findings provide insight into the practices of those who use culturally relevant practices to improve learning for African American students. The findings showed that each participant provided a picture of how they intentionally built positive relationships in their classrooms by showing care, compassion, and affirmation of praise to students, having high expectations, and pushing their students beyond their comfort zone. Several participants shared their overall purpose and source of motivation for teaching. Each participant shared meaningful ways of engaging students and their home culture while cultivating critical thinking and social awareness through critical content. Provided also were commendations for teacher professional learning, aiming to make their practice of culturally relevant pedagogy more impactful.

*Keywords:* academic achievement case study, cultural competence, culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP), critical consciousness, descriptive sketches

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## Acknowledgments

I am grateful to my dissertation chair, Dr. Lorraine Schmertzinger, for seeing the realms of possibilities of my study and offering valuable feedback that enhanced it throughout each revision. Thank you for honoring my Zoom calls and office visits. The brief talks about our families and funny stories helped me enjoy the journey.

Dr. R. Schmertzinger introduced me to the insightful perspectives of Prudence Cater, Dorinda Carter, Lee Anne Bell, and others engaged in the pursuit of changing an unequal system while working within it. Through Dr. R. Schmertzinger's guidance, I acquired valuable tools for navigating the complexities of microaggression and systemic racism and counteracting these dynamics. Integrating discussions of (un)conscious biases and diversity into our coursework fostered classroom settings of respect and tolerance for all individuals. The worthy topics in Dr. R. Schmertzinger's courses facilitated exchanges of experiences and reflective assignments, contributing to my deepened understanding of the challenges confronting students of color and inspiring my dissertation topic. I am thankful for Dr. R. Schmertzinger's teaching approach that acknowledges, honors, and brings visibility to student's lives. The relevance and excellence Dr. R. Schmertzinger brings to the College of Education is unmatched.

I am grateful and honored that Dr. Regina L. Suriel joined my dissertation committee. Dr. Suriel's scholarly achievements and collaboration steered my thinking in ways that challenged and enhanced my research.

Thank you to my parents, Willie Artelia and Christine Margaret Mathews, for giving me life and now guiding and watching me from above. To my sister, scholar, Rev. Rosita deAnn Mathews, for your honesty and time spent reading over my drafts. To my brothers, Artelia' Archie' Mathews and Derrick B. Mathews, who taught me to how to keep going. Thank you to my niece and nephew, Christina and Kamari; our time together is pure joy. To Reginald A. Walker, who remained by my side. To Dr. Osizwe R. Harwell and Xola, I am thankful we reconnected at the perfect time. To my Hampton University friend Dorothy R. McCowen for encouraging me to "Git-R-Done." To Charlotte Coleman-Todd, who prayed with me from the start of the journey to the end. To APS colleagues, Dr. Tiana Holmes, Dr. Claudine Davis, Dr. Corlis Robertson, and Dr. Melanie Mitchell for being my examples; To my elders who emphasized the importance of education, Grandmother Roberta Thomasina Williams, Dr. Greer Wilson, and Uncle Dr. Howard Swanigan. I appreciate the unwavering love and companionship of my cats Brown, Sugar, Jefferson, Greyson, and Denali. Thank you, participants, for agreeing to share your stories during the pandemic. Without you all, I could not have completed this dissertation. Finally, and very importantly, I acknowledge Christ and give all credit to God.

*not by might nor power, but by my spirit, says the Lord. Zechariah 4:6*

## **Dedication**

This dissertation is dedicated to my loving family and friends, who believed I could complete this study. Although a considerable sacrifice, I am very grateful to my family, who always thought I would be able to work, write, and balance life simultaneously.

I also want to honor the several African Americans who have lost their lives due to incidents of police brutality and racially motivated violence: Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, Tyrie Nichols, and countless others. I dedicate this research to them and the vision of a world where Black American children, youth, and adults' lives matter and will be protected.

Finally, to African American students who will flourish academically, socially, and culturally with culturally relevant teaching throughout their educational experiences, may you soar in a nation built by our ancestors and live peacefully in an equitable society.

## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

*We must keep in mind that education, at its best, hones and develops the knowledge and skills each student already possesses, while at the same time adding new knowledge and skills to that base.*

~~~~~Lisa Delpit (1995, pp. 67-68)

For more than 2 decades, African American students across the nation have made purported gains in academic achievement (The Education Trust, 2014). Yet, despite this progress significant gaps exist between marginalized student groups and White American students, and many African American students score below the grade level standards on standardized tests. Mandatory standardized testing was primarily born out of the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act as an accountability measure for teachers and schools regarding student achievement (Shepard, 2008). Since the inception of standardized testing, Black students have persistently underperformed compared to their White American counterparts, ranking below grade level proficiency (Boykin & Noguera, 2011; Gay, 2000; National Center Educational Statistics, 2020). In general, students of ethnic backgrounds who differ from the dominant group—Black, Hispanic, American Indian/Alaskan Native—tend to score *below proficiency* on academic assessments. In 2011, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), eighth-grade White American students scored 274 out of 281, while their Black counterparts scored an average of 249, an achievement gap of 25 points (National Center of Educational Statistics, 2019).

The National Center for Education Statistics (2019) reported that at fourth-grade, the average 2017 NAEP reading scores for White students was 232 and 206 for Black students, an achievement gap of 26 points. The disparity on these assessments underscores the persistence of a 20-year trend and performance gap between Black students and White students (Boykin & Noguera, 2011; National Center of Educational Statistics, 2019; Zhou & Hyslop, 2023).

The term Black generally refers to a person with African ancestral origins. In some politics or power struggles, Black signifies all non-White minority populations. African American also refers to a person of African ancestral origins and has been the preferred term in the United States since the 1970s. Most African Americans are descendants of persons brought to the Americas as enslaved people between the 17th and 19th centuries who are different from those from Africa or the Caribbean in the 20th and 21st centuries (Agyemang, Bhopal, & Bruijnzeels, 2005). In this study, I use the terms Black and White with statistical data and the terms African American and White American in my descriptions of people. I also honored the participants' choice of wording by quoting them verbatim.

In the sections that follow, I will clarify the problem and offer important background to study. To understand this study's background, individuals must recognize key issues in students' performance and academic achievement. Furthermore, it is necessary to grasp the development of *culturally relevant pedagogy* and *culturally responsive teaching* as an opportunity and a solution to improving African American student performance. Through the years, I have seen many culture-related terms used interchangeably. I often see terms such as culture, culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-

Billings, 2009), culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2000), and culturally responsive pedagogy (Howard, 2021) conflated by educators who really cannot explain them or their distinctions. Additionally, in this first chapter, I will share my personal connection to the work, its purpose, significance, and describe my goals (Maxwell, 2013), the theoretical framework, and the contributions this study will make to the field.

### **The Problem at Hand**

In 2021, 7.4 million of 49.4 million public school students were African American (National Center of Educational Statistics, 2023a). A House Bill Advisory Committee Report by Bailey, Dziko, Bergeson, and Davidson (HB2722 Advisory Committee, 2008) about closing the achievement gap stated:

What African American students need is exactly what all students need. They need teachers and school leaders who have high expectations of them. They need a rigorous and relevant curriculum that engages, challenges, and connects the world they know with the world they need to know. They need more math and science, more access to advanced placement and programs for the highly capable, and more support that would help them succeed. They need teachers and school leaders with the skills to connect with them and teach them well. (p. 17)

Some statistics support this statement regarding the need for a solution to the achievement gap. Shores, Kim, and Still (2020) found Black children have lower achievement performance as measured by standardized tests, are more likely to have less experienced or under-prepared teachers, suffer disproportionately from school discipline policies, have less access to advanced courses, are less likely to be selected for gifted and talented classes, are more likely to be assigned to special education, and experience more

grade level retention than White children.

Shores et al. (2020) synthesized the work of the Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC). They concluded that more than just external factors, such as being poor or from households with single or under-educated parents, impacted Black students' lives and contributed to their poor academic outcomes. Shores et al. (2020) argued that "schools are the principal source of disparities because schools create socially relevant categories, and teachers and school leaders sort students into them" (para. 5), creating inequalities. Ladson-Billings (2021a) insisted these out-of-school variables are erroneously read as causes for in-school outcomes. This discussion is vital because many policymakers and supporters of the schools, such as social workers, psychologists, and juvenile justice professionals, promote the school as the solution to student problems. However, Ladson-Billings (2021a) shared the results of these categorical inequalities and painted a clearer understanding of the disparities using the following facts from the research of Shores et al. (2020):

- Black students receive at least one suspension 3.4 times more than their White counterparts. They receive multiple suspensions 5.8 times more than White students.
- Black students receive in-school suspensions 3.2 times more than White students and are placed in special education 1.1 times more often than White students.
- White students are placed in gifted and talented education classes or programs 3.2 times more than Black children and in Advanced Placement (AP) courses 2.3 times more than Black children.

- Black students are retained a grade 2.2 times more often than White students.  
(para. 7)

According to Duncan (2014), “Black [African American] children represent just 18% of preschool enrollment, but 48% of preschoolers receive more than one out-of-school suspension” (p. 3). Additional facts from Partee (2014) included:

- Black students are suspended and expelled at a rate three times greater than White students. Boys receive more than two out of three suspensions, and Black girls also are suspended at higher rates (12%) than girls of any other race or ethnicity and most boys.
- Although Black boys represent 16% of student enrollment, they represent 27% of students referred to law enforcement and 31% of students subjected to a school-related arrest.
- A 2014 study by the Center for American Progress reinforced that low-income students of color not only receive less experienced mathematics teachers but are more likely to have ineffective mathematics teachers. (p. 5)

Ladson-Billings (2021b) referenced data from a report from Education Trust (2013), a national nonprofit that operates to close opportunity gaps that disproportionately affect students of color and low-income families’ data. For example, they stated:

In the case of reading achievement, a mere 12% of African American fourth-graders reach proficient or advanced levels, and 61% have not been taught to even the basic level. The same proportion of African American eighth graders fall below the basic achievement level compared to only 7% who reach the proficient

level or above in reading on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). (p. 1)

These statistics indicate that by the end of high school, these Black students' reading (and math) skills were approximately the same as those of White eighth-grade students (Education Trust, 2013). In a symposium on diversity in the health professions, Darling-Hammond (2001), a scholar who focused on school restructuring, teacher education, and educational equity, argued:

A growing body of research suggests that inequitable distributions of qualified teachers are a major cause of the achievement gap. Recent studies have found that differential teacher effectiveness is an extremely strong determinant of differences in students learning, far outweighing the effects of differences in class size and heterogeneity. Students who are assigned to several ineffective teachers in a row have significantly lower achievement gains—creating differences of as much as 50 percentile points over 3 years—than those who are assigned to several highly effective teachers in a row (Sanders & Rivers, 1996). These studies also find evidence of bias in assignment of students to teachers of different effectiveness levels, including indications that African American students are nearly twice as likely to be assigned to the most ineffective teachers and about half as likely to be assigned to the most effective teachers. (p. 212)

Given the preceding statistics, the status quo for African Americans is wrought with problems. Believing African American students could benefit from the U.S. educational system acknowledging African American children, their cultures, and their values, I use the dissertation as an opportunity to demonstrate how Ladson-Billings (2021b) and other

researchers such as Hill (2009) and Emdin and Adjapong (2018), examined ways of developing knowledge of youth culture, which is evidence of a teacher's willingness to truly engage in the lives of students and honor what those students bring to their classroom experience (Ladson-Billings, 2021b). I went to the teachers themselves to show me how it works.

Ladson-Billings (2006a) suggested that the problem of school achievement for African American children "lives in the schools" rather than in flaws intrinsic to the student. For example, in districts serving African American students who are socioeconomically disadvantaged, I have seen the schools exacerbate the educational disadvantages. These schools suspend, expel, retain, assign to special education, and deny entrance into gifted/talented and AP courses for Black American students (Civil Rights Data: U.S. Department of Education, 2024). This inequality indicates that many disparities result from teacher discretion, which is another problem noted that needs addressing.

Ladson-Billings' (2006a) tenets are essential to document the work of culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) practitioners who teach African American students and do not follow a prescribed "to-do list" but ground their pedagogies in experiential wisdom gleaned from social contexts regarding students, curricula, and instruction. Teachers must shift from believing that success in teaching relies on following specific steps and being the only expert in the classroom. Instead, teachers must prioritize recognizing students' culture and learning how to leverage their culture to engage the students they teach (Gay & Howard, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Milner, 2011; Nieto, 2004). This dissertation is my attempt to facilitate that task.

In my own experience, the urgency of attending to the problems of African American student achievement was apparent when serving as an instructional leader in my school district. I was part of a team tasked with accounting for CRP-related activities in district schools and providing teachers with feedback on their implementation of CRP with students. In a district wide meeting, district leaders discussed a blueprint created to provide teachers with a description of observable student and teacher behaviors while in classrooms. One observable description that was included on the blueprint was CRP. A diverse team of district leaders, teachers, community partners, and scholars determined a definition of CRP. The team also formulated guiding questions to consider while observing the classrooms for evidence of CRP. For example, some guiding questions asked, “Were all students deeply and joyfully engaged in the learning process throughout the lesson?” and “Were all students responsible for doing the thinking and learning in the classroom?” Teachers were expected to demonstrate core behaviors when using CRP, including: valuing students’ unique backgrounds, knowledge, and experiences; utilizing them in lesson design; and, planning multiple connections to diversity, equity, social consciousness, and inclusion issues. Additional behaviors included building students’ skills for participating in rigorous, student-led conversations to achieve conceptual understanding and mastery of the standards.

The diverse team of district leaders, teachers, community partners, and scholars were encouraged to identify culturally relevant teaching practices with their respective schools. Following the blueprint presentation during this meeting, several school leaders and other participants wanted clarification and examples of culturally relevant teaching before implementing the blueprint observation. Although there were questions about

using the blueprint, I was pleased that my school district recognized the importance of providing teachers and school leaders with the tools to connect with students and teach them well. In this meeting, I became eager to know if teachers were using CRP in my school, Curtis Elementary (pseudonym), and whether I could capture evidence of CRP in their classrooms. As I continued reflecting on how to support the teachers, the purpose and significance of my dissertation became more apparent.

The problem was that before I could genuinely support teachers, I wanted to know which teachers identified as using CRP. I knew that some teachers were exemplary in helping students meet and exceed grade level standards. However, I wanted to know which teachers could provide examples of how their use of CRP helped students succeed. Therefore, I sought to find out if and how teachers implemented CRP and what their experiences were using CRP with their African American students within the district. I recognized that their narratives could be captured and added to the literature about CRP as a significant resource for school district professional learning and training. This realization helped to establish the goals and purpose of my study.

### **Background of the Study**

In this section I will provide key considerations on culturally relevant pedagogy that are necessary to frame this study. There are known problems that attempt to explain the reasons for the achievement gap between African American and White American students. Ladson-Billings (2006b) challenged the concept and reframed it as an “opportunity gap.” The significance of the disparity challenges the practice of educators blaming students for their lack of achievement. Ladson-Billings original research also provided real-life models of successful teachers of African American students. Her work

led to new concepts and theories that are sometimes confused or conflated with CRP, and it is important for the study to note the distinctions.

### **Rethinking the Achievement Gap**

Ladson-Billings proposed that using the term “achievement gap” places the responsibility on students when it is not the students that are failing, but rather the education systems around that student that are failing (Jacksonville Public School Fund, 2022). Ladson-Billings focused on the term “achievement gap,” which she evolved to “opportunity gap,” moving the responsibility from the student and onto systemic and institutional factors. Despite the academic gains made by African American students nationwide, the challenge with effective instruction utilizing cultural relevant pedagogy is identifying teaching strategies that are true to the culturally relevant pedagogy theory (Ladson-Billings, 2021a). Ladson-Billings believed that her study has implications for research and teaching practices. She suggested replicating her study to learn more about the practice of successful teachers and their characteristics beyond pedagogical practices for African American and other marginalized students whom schools have poorly served. Interested educational researchers have dedicated considerable time and effort toward studying causes of and solutions for factors related to the achievement gap and issues of African American students performing below grade level standards in K-12 settings. Scholars have attributed environmental (Bravo, Zephyr, Kowal, Ensor, & Miranda, 2022; Yeung & Pfeiffer, 2009), social (Bravo & Miranda, 2021), and genetic (Shifrer & Fish, 2019) causes to this disparity. Many of these studies emphasized persistent challenges in African American student performance but were grounded in frameworks that blame

students rather than consider the education system's inadequacies, which produce vast inequities in educational outcomes (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2000).

### **Blaming, Deficit Thinking, and the Birth of CRP**

In considering the achievement gap and underperformance of African American student over time, it is essential to explore deficit thinking and the conscious and unconscious ways that educators blame students for low performance. Samuel (2020) is a key example of this phenomenon. Samuel (2020) surveyed teachers with 20 to 30 years of experience about what they believe are the factors explaining why White American students, overall, perform better academically than African American students. He found that when given a list of contributing factors for low student performance, genetics, discrimination, school quality, student motivation, parenting, income levels, home environments, and neighborhood environments were more often selected choices by the respondents. Three-quarters or more respondents said motivation, parenting, income, home environments, and neighborhood environments explained student academic performance. Twenty-nine percent said genetics were significant in explaining academic gaps for African American students. Less than half said discrimination played a major role in low student performance. In contrast to these deficit-based arguments, some researchers argue that African American students' academic performance results from shortcomings of the education system (Hale & Franklin, 2010; Siddle Walker, 2001).

One such researcher, Gloria Ladson-Billings (1994), introduced the concept of culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) and challenged the blame- and deficit-based research and response to the achievement gaps experienced by African American students. Her ethnographic study of eight teachers of African American students in an urban area

inspired the construct of CRP. Although she published updated versions of this study in 2010 and 2022, she maintained the premise in each work that CRP “empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (Ladson-Billings, 1994, pp. 17-18). Ladson-Billings continually challenged assumptions about the academic underperformance of African American children by shifting focus from students’ actions to evaluating the effectiveness of teaching practices and education systems.

In her work, *The Dreamkeepers* (1994), Ladson-Billings examined effective teaching practices and captured the pedagogical excellence of successful teachers who helped African American students succeed. She studied eight teachers working in low-income, primarily African American school districts in North Carolina in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Five teachers in the study were African American, and three were White. Ladson-Billings found that teachers in her study were effective because they: (a) were committed to their students obtaining high academic success, which connected directly to CRP’s prescribed focus on achievement; (b) displayed cultural competence in their classrooms by recognizing and using students’ culture in the classroom; and (c) communicated the importance of their students’ academic success. These practices increased students’ self-worth by illustrating the usefulness of their cultural knowledge. In addition, the teachers attended to their own critical consciousness and their student critical consciousness by developing their students’ critical thinking and questioning skills.

Ladson-Billings (1995a) also identified an essential characteristic of the 12-year veteran teachers in her research beyond their effective pedagogical methods. The key

characteristic of the teachers included in her ethnographic study was that they each had experienced a transformative cultural experience that resulted in a personal reassessment of their approaches to teaching African American students. Some teachers had engaged in activist work during the civil rights movement, and others had served as Peace Corps members. The teachers in Ladson-Billings' study used academic content and instructional strategies to affirm differences and empower students to change the status quo (Ladson-Billings, 2000). When all students are valued and their contributions recognized, teachers' use of CRP can encourage students to actively participate in the fight for social change, social justice through social activism, and service (Bassey, 2016). Ladson-Billings' culturally relevant pedagogy is distinct because it focuses on individual and collective empowerment and supports teachers' and students' abilities to critically challenge the social, political, and economic inequities and inequalities.

### **Concepts Related to CRP**

In the last 30 years since Ladson-Billings' original work, many concepts and studies have expanded on or emphasized an element or single component of culturally relevant pedagogy but do not articulate all three of the main tenets. CRP has changed into various iterations, many exhibiting little fidelity to the original theoretical model (Ladson-Billings, 2021b). With an abundance of terms related to cultural pedagogical practices, Ladson-Billings explained that some newer versions of her original concept typically rely on more broad literature selections and images of Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) individuals displayed throughout the classroom. In Banks' (1993) delineation of the dimensions of multicultural education, this type of response is categorized as content integration. This dimension reflects an inclusion of diverse

information without changing the structure of the curriculum. It often takes the form of separate Black history units or features amid an ongoing hegemonic curriculum. For example, a teacher may be teaching a mainstream approach to the Revolutionary War and, in the midst, decide to feature Crispus Attucks, a Black man known as the first person killed in the war. However, that same teacher will not necessarily have students interrogate the paradox of a Black man fighting for the freedom of the White colonists who have enslaved Black people (Ladson-Billings, 2021b). The latter constitutes multicultural education and content integration but is not CRP as outlined by Ladson-Billings.

Alternately, concepts like culturally responsive teaching sound similar and align with CRP but do not focus on all three components (1995b). Although proponents of similar theories are motivated by some key differences, they all promote prioritizing language, culture, prior knowledge, and identities to enhance learning instead of viewing them as barriers. Culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 2009), culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2010), and Howard (2010) culturally responsive pedagogy challenge the prevalent deficit discourses regarding African American student achievement. All value culture, community, and students (Muñiz, 2019). However, the nuances of each construct are important to distinguish. Although each way of educating is powerful, a commonality in these pedagogies is that various cultures should be recognized, acknowledged, and included in teaching and learning. Gay (2010) is another prominent figure in education whose work has supported student learning and academic success for students with diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Gay (2010) coined the phrase *culturally responsive teaching* to emphasize the effective strategies that benefit

African American students. Culturally responsive teaching, as Gay defined it, is: “using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frame of reference and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them” (p. 31). Compared to Ladson-Billings’ framework, Gay’s focused more on instructional strategies and practices used by teachers to make learning more effective for African American students, rather than focusing on how teachers thought about their students. She emphasized teaching to cultural diversity to help students acquire more accurate knowledge about their lives, culture, contributions, experiences, and challenges of various racial and ethnic groups in societies within the United States (Gay, 2013). Gay (2002) used the theoretical foundations of multicultural education but acknowledged that a teachers’ philosophical beliefs and knowledge about multicultural and multilingual learners needed to change in pedagogical skills and practices. To support the changes in pedagogical skills and practices to the classroom, Gay promoted the implementation of culturally responsive teaching (Herrera, Holmes, & Kavimandan, 2012). Culturally responsive teaching emphasizes instructional practices that consider students’ cultural backgrounds, knowledge experiences, and learning styles as assets in the classroom rather than a deficit. It does not explicitly focus on developing critical consciousness in the way that Ladson-Billings articulated.

With these variations in mind, I focused on Ladson-Billings’ original work and its impact while acknowledging the developments of later researchers. As early as the 1990’s, Ladson-Billings (Will & Najarro, 2022) argued that public schools in America were not serving their children and youth of color well, and the argument continues to be relevant over 2 decades later (Emdin, 2016, 2021; Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2021b;

Muhammad, 2020; Nieto, 2000, 2010). In this work, I aim to revisit Ladson-Billings' three components of CRP to argue for the continued need for its tenets to be a practice in today's classrooms. I recognize that although culturally relevant approaches proliferate in the arena of education they are not always as evident in teachers' daily instructional practices (Morrison, Robbins, & Rose, 2008). The absence of these practices continually leaves African American students at risk of academic and socioeconomic inequities (García & Weiss, 2017). Furthermore, a look at many teacher education programs reveals that the focus on issues of equity and CRP is typically shallow and not supported by applied practices, instruction, curriculum, policies, and dispositions of teacher educators (Boutte, 2012; Darling-Hammond, 2000).

Considering the variation in the meaning of these important terms, I wondered what classroom teachers intended regarding the concept of culturally relevant pedagogy and how they utilized opportunities to give students valuable culturally relevant knowledge and information in classroom settings with African American students. Therefore, in this dissertation, I analyze teachers' voices and personal reflections regarding their practices and beliefs, to help move culturally relevant practice from theoretical discourse to meaningful practice and to do so with more intention, commitment, and understanding of African American students.

Before exploring present-day teachers' experiences with CRP, I reflected on my personal story, which was a valuable component of my research. I imagined asking my childhood teacher about her experiences teaching my classmates and me while using what I believed then was culturally relevant teaching. My curiosity about her experience fueled my interest in this study. I also acknowledged how closely my research topic

related to my life as an elementary student and later as an elementary teacher. Reflecting on my experiences in these roles provided sources of insight and guidance in forming my research questions. In the next section, I will explain my connection to the study.

### **My Personal Story**

My motivation for this research stems from my childhood experience as an African American fourth-grade student growing up in an African American community during the 1970s. I attended a predominantly African American elementary school, and in 6 years, four of my six teachers were White American women. During my fourth-grade year, my teacher was a White American woman in her first year of teaching, and all the students in my class were African American. I remember her vividly because she greatly respected my classmates and our families. She held us in high esteem, and many students experienced high achievement and academic success. When I became an educator, I often reflected on her teaching style. I was also curious about her perspective and experiences as a White American teacher of African American students. I remember this educator praising, respecting, and treating us fairly. She was also a lot of fun!

As a child, I could not have known that my teacher was successful because she utilized culturally relevant pedagogical practices; the term was not yet commonplace, and though my teacher may not have realized she was using these practices, she was, and they worked. Her strategies were effective and engaged her students' cultural needs. Reflecting, I realize her teaching was a valuable model to explain CRP to other teachers. Though she taught me in the 1970s, she used the following culturally relevant practices: creating flexible student groups to meet students' academic, social, and emotional needs; assigning culturally relevant homework projects; including students in forming norms for

behavior; and maintaining positive individual relationships with students. For example, when she worked with students individually or in small groups, she bent down and looked directly into our eyes while speaking and listening. She communicated high expectations consistently. She often celebrated our correct responses in class by dancing with us. Her congratulatory reactions encouraged participation in every lesson and challenged us to exceed expectations formed by others for ourselves. She desired to inspire, validate, and foster confidence, perseverance, and academic success. She also took advantage of opportunities to honor our heritage. I remember homework projects requiring us to write or speak about high-achieving or influential African Americans of our choice. Completing the assignments provided opportunities to learn about African American culture and observe my teacher value the historical contribution of African Americans even though she was White. I believe that her approach mitigated behavior management issues in our class. In situations requiring classroom management, she maintained a firm yet fair approach. I have learned through studies that CRP and effective classroom management help mitigate disciplinary disproportionality (Hugh-Pennie, Hernandez, Uwayo, Johnson, & Ross, 2021; Monroe, 2006) and, ultimately, improve post-school success (e.g., college enrollment, reduced rate of dropout, and employment) for African American students with disabilities (Achola, 2019). It seemed my teacher knew that developing caring relationships could positively influence her students' learning experiences. I remember my teacher fondly, and her classroom practices genuinely impacted my education and, eventually, my methods as an educator.

A second reason that I am motivated to conduct this research is my experience as an urban fourth-grade teacher of predominantly African American students. I began

teaching fourth-grade in the 1990s and was excited to occupy the same profession as educators I admired. I initially struggled with classroom management and seemingly low motivation and interest. I knew little about CRP when I began my career as an educator. During my first year, I began to reflect on my experiences with my students and changed my teaching practices. I soon realized my strategies needed to extend beyond positive incentives and extra recess time, which were common strategies among my colleagues. I began to build positive, intentionally trusting relationships with my students, provide opportunities for discussions, plan cooperative learning activities, and incorporate movement during instruction. I cultivated individual relationships, used their knowledge and strengths as foundations for learning, gave continuous verbal and written feedback, and expected high levels of achievement. Using these strategies engaged students and challenged them academically. Like the teachers in Ladson-Billings' (1994) study, I also experienced a transformative cultural experience that led to a personal reassessment of my approaches to teaching African American students. As a result, my students experienced positive learning outcomes and high achievement. Reflection also aided in better understanding my students' needs and how I could use that knowledge to change my teaching to enhance learning opportunities.

I continued to improve my pedagogy as an educator and consistently engaged in reflection as a tool for improvement. Later in my career, I realized my strategies were essential to helping African American students achieve (Irvine & Hawley, 2011). I also now understand that my experience as a fourth-grade teacher was more than "good teaching;" my teaching was intentional in the way I considered the lives of my students and leveraged their culture as I shared things that were valuable to them. I also realize

my fourth-grade colleagues and I were committed to using unnamed pedagogical practices that were culturally relevant, whether we knew to call it that. All teachers can leverage culturally relevant pedagogy and help students exceed the low expectations that society may have for them. Those low expectations of underperformance are only part of the problem this dissertation attempts to address.

### **Purpose and Significance of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore and document the experiences of six urban elementary teachers in the South who self-identify as users of culturally relevant pedagogy with African American students. The findings from this study are intended to guide other educators in similar settings and perhaps different locations in understanding how to implement the components of CRP in the classroom. In alignment with the works of Ladson-Billings (2009), the six participants in this study can serve as exemplars for pre-service and in-service teachers and teacher educators. Further, the effective practice of the participants of this study illustrates how CRP can influence positive student outcomes. The participants' examples offer insight into how to teach the curriculum rigorously and creatively to meet the needs of students. However, what the teachers have done in this study should not be a checklist of actions but rather a reflection of how the teachers serve their communities by learning the needs of their students and connecting with them in meaningful ways. Ladson-Billings (1995a) argued that demonstration of this pedagogy can vary from teacher to teacher. The insights gleaned from this study may also assist teachers with critical reflection and self-assessment about their current teaching practices' effectiveness or lack thereof. The participants' narratives communicate the value of using culturally relevant pedagogy in

stories that make it accessible to all. It is my hope that findings included in this dissertation will improve teacher preparation programs for in-service and pre-service teachers by providing models of intentional and effective practices in CRP in the elementary classroom. I set several specific goals for this research to impact and make a difference in the field of education.

According to Maxwell (2013), goals are essential to a study's coherence. Maxwell (2013) described three goals researchers should consider when designing research, as they influence a researcher's reasons why a study is worth doing. Maxwell (2013) organized the goals into practical, personal, and intellectual categories. Practical goals focus on accomplishing something, meeting some need, or changing some situation. In contrast, personal goals motivate a researcher to perform the study and to change or improve a current condition that has personal meaning. He delineated intellectual goals as ones that focus on understanding something.

The practical goal of this study was to document these teachers' practices to inform those who develop teacher training and professional learning to make teachers more effective when working with African American students. The personal goal was to improve education outcomes for African American students. The teachers in this study describe specific examples of applying CRP instructional methods that connect with African American students. These stories work as models for those interested in this work. The intellectual goal of this study was to better understand the pedagogical practices and experiences of teachers who work with African American students and self-identified as users of culturally relevant pedagogy.

This study is significant because I succeeded in exploring and capturing applications of culturally relevant pedagogy through qualitative data methods that included multiple participant interviews, observations, and student artifacts. The findings from this inquiry affirmed and confirmed that African American students often learn best in personal settings that have relational interconnectedness with others, are structured by high expectations and accountability to self and others and create the social experience of an extended family (Boykin et al., 2005; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 2001; Perry & Delpit, 1998; Willis, 2003). This data was critical because extant literature states that teachers fail to use CRP because they need clarification on what it entails and how to implement it.

This study specifically focused on teachers who self-identified as users of CRP—who may or may not have received professional learning or training. Studying teachers who self-identified as CRP practitioners differed from past studies that reported findings from participants who received training on CRP, who were unfamiliar or unaware of their culturally relevant practices, or those who “feel no need to name their practice as culturally relevant” (Ladson-Billings, 1995b, p. 478). Participants also explained why they elected to use CRP despite having no formal training in the pedagogy. Their narratives detail how they understood the concept through informal learning experiences. I aim to use the findings to equip school districts and teacher candidate programs with information to adjust their training programs to prepare educators to use culturally relevant practices. University teacher preparation programs can also use the findings from this research to create courses to train pre-service teachers in CRP methods. After

considering the study's three goals mentioned (personal, practical, and intellectual), I constructed the final research questions.

### **Research Questions**

Three research questions guided this qualitative exploration of culturally relevant pedagogy:

1. What are the experiences of six elementary teachers of African American students who self-identify as using culturally relevant pedagogy in urban elementary schools in the South?
2. What practices do these teachers use to help African American students learn?
3. How do teachers of African American students in urban elementary schools in the South implement culturally relevant pedagogy?

Answers to these research questions were established in conjunction with a theoretical grounding in culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1994), cultural difference theory (Brown & Brown, 2012; Howard, 2010), cultural competence theory (Moule, 2011), critical race theory, and validation theory. Although a few concepts have been explained in the body of this dissertation, it is important to establish base definitions of relevant words and phrases that are used often in the dissertation.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Maxwell (2013) defined conceptual framework as “a visual or written product that explains either graphically or in narrative form the main things to be studied: the key factors, concepts, or variables and the presumed relationships among them” (p. 18). The conceptual framework is scattered throughout the dissertation in my experiential knowledge, the literature review, and other sections in which I address who I am and

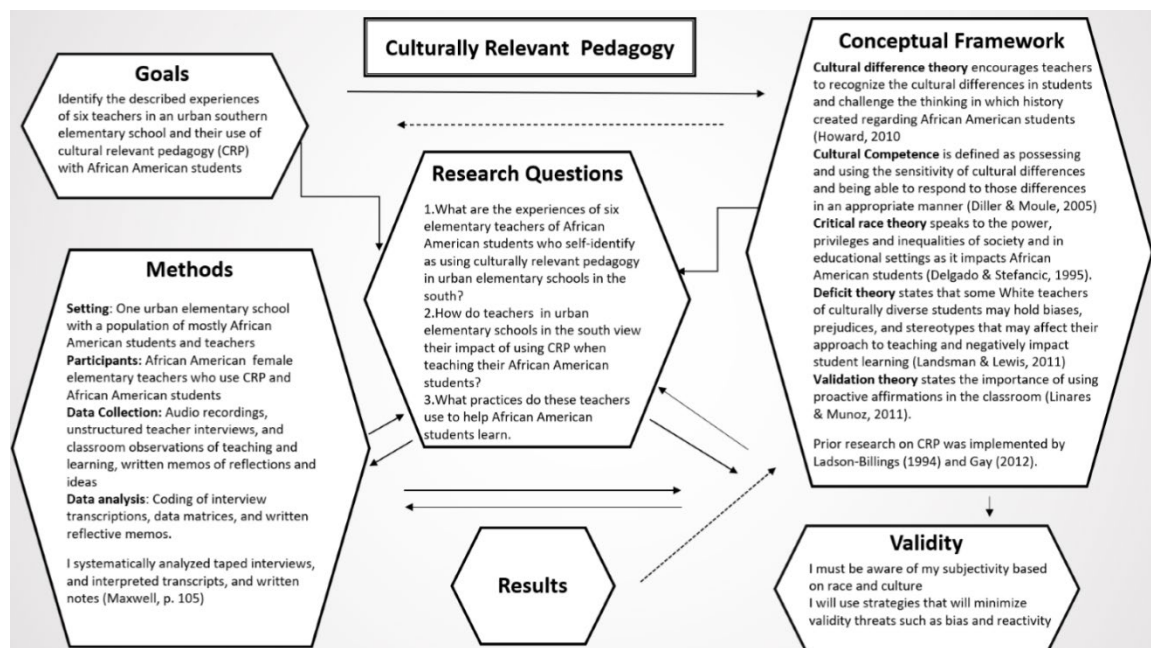
what I knew when I began this dissertation journey. Here, I specifically explain the theoretical ideas that framed the work. The theoretical framings of this study informed the goals, research questions, literature analysis, research design, data methods, and analysis of data collected. The theories guided my understanding and methods of organizing the findings for discussion. The basis of this research study is culturally relevant pedagogy, a “theoretical model that not only addresses student achievement but also helps students to accept and affirm their cultural identity while developing critical perspectives that challenge inequities that schools (and other institutions) perpetuate” (Ladson-Billings, 1995b, p. 469). In addition to culturally relevant pedagogy, I selected four theories to present a comprehensive analysis of the teaching practices used by the study participants: cultural difference theory (Brown & Brown, 2012; Howard, 2010), cultural competence theory (Moule, 2011), critical race theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012), and validation theory (Rendon, 1994).

Cultural difference theory examines the cultural, ethnic, and racial differences among people living in the same society (Brown & Brown, 2012). Cultural competence theory explores the ability to act, think, and feel in ways that acknowledge, respect, and build upon ethnicity, traditions, beliefs, and linguistic diversity (Lynch & Hanson, 1998). Critical race theory explores society’s power, privileges, and inequalities, which is instrumental in highlighting the influence of these factors in educational settings and understanding how they impact African American students (Delgado, 1995). Finally, validation theory guides scholars to examine data that illustrates the importance of using proactive affirmations in the classroom (Linares & Munoz, 2011). These theories helped highlight essential nuances within the data collected. Most emphatically, I used the

theories Milner (2010) recommended to aid with designing a study that answered the research questions and communicated how CRP could foster learning opportunities and positive academic outcomes. Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework of my research and identifies the components and the connections among the components of my research design. The arrows demonstrate these connections. I will go more in-depth explaining each theory's assertion.

**Figure 1.**

*Components of the conceptual framework design*



Adapted from *Qualitative research design: An interactive approach* (p. 10) by Maxwell (2013).

## Cultural Difference Theory

Cultural difference theory illustrates the value of recognizing the cultural differences in students and challenges the deficit ideologies that shape how many teachers perceive African American students (Howard, 2010). Non-deficit models argue that students from diverse backgrounds are not deficient; however, they differ from the

mainstream culture in America (Ford, 1996; Irvine, 2003; Lee, 2007; Moll, 2000). In Western societies, Eurocentric cultures and values generally define standards and normal ways of being. When a culture deviates from these norms, it is considered deficient (Ogbu, 1995; Valentine, 1971) instead of simply equal in value but different. Deficit theories date to earlier than this century.

During the 1930s, social science and biological scientific theories claimed that African American underachievement resulted from faulty genes or intellectual and physical composition (Scott, 1997). Numerous studies in the 1930s and 1940s attempted to explain why African Americans differed intellectually from dominant groups in society (Frazier, 1939, 1949). Deficit thinking describes how some teachers of culturally diverse students hold biases, prejudices, and stereotypes that affect their approach to teaching and negatively impact student academic outcomes (Landsman & Lewis, 2011). During the historical era in which deficit theories were growing rapidly in social, scientific, and academic spaces, some anthropologists and sociologists argued that cultural and ecological compositions rather than genetics were the sources of African Americans' intellectual capacity (Brown & Brown, 2012). The basic premise of these arguments was that cultures may differ from the mainstream, but these differences do not equate to deficiencies.

In the early 1990s, research focused on non-deficit-oriented cultural differences (Foster, 1991; Ladson-Billings, 1995a). Researchers shared many different aspects of schooling and curriculum concerns (Banks, 1993; Gay, 2000), K-12 teaching (Foster, 1989; Ladson-Billings, 1995a, 1995b, 2009) and teacher preparation (Banks et al., 2005). By the 2000s, this literature targeted cultural ways of teaching. Terms such as culturally

responsive teaching (Gay, 2000), culturally competent teaching (Irvine, 1989, 2003), and culturally relevant teaching (Ladson-Billings, 1995a, 2009) described the practice of teaching and emphasized cultural concerns.

In another example of exploring cultural differences, Brown and Brown (2012) conducted a study of university teacher candidates that helped highlight the pervasiveness of deficit thinking. The study also provided tangible solutions to counter this type of deficit thinking. Brown and Brown (2012) asked their education students what knowledge they hoped to gain from their first education course. Many replied that they wanted to learn how to successfully teach students from cultural/racial backgrounds that differed from theirs. Brown and Brown (2012) explained why they thought students repeatedly responded this way, “This belief is rooted in the presumption that African American students require a unique kind of schooling experience that their non-African American peers do not need” (p. 30). Other researchers argued although the belief that African Americans cannot exist within the norm and are deficient is both troublesome and inaccurate, it reflects a popular approach to multicultural education and diversity in classrooms and schools around the United States (Grant & Sleeter, 2008). Better understandings of cultural differences are gleaned by examining knowledge, theories, and histories that challenge commonly held deficit-oriented beliefs about African American students. Brown and Brown (2012) contend that teachers must be trained in ways that enable them to sort through the intricacies of cultural differences.

Cultural difference theory counters notions that African American students cannot learn in the same way as their peers. A better understanding of cultural differences came from examining knowledge, theories, and histories that challenge commonly held deficit-

oriented beliefs about African American students. Brown and Brown (2012) expanded understandings of deficit approaches by explaining that they label anyone who differs ethnically, culturally, racially, ideologically, behaviorally, morally, or experientially as abnormal, unusual, and defiant. Brown and Brown concluded that when teachers valued practices acknowledging cultural differences, they viewed African American students with a greater sense of worth, value, and potential.

Cultural difference theory has been shown through research to be a helpful tool to counter deficit explanations of non-dominant groups; however, critics of the theory caution that it can produce racial knowledge that individuals can homogenize. Homogenizing can be harmful to the educational needs of African American students. A concern related to homogenized groups is that students placed in a lower group often lack the motivation to improve their learning ability. This results from the feeling they form due to not being equal to the students in the higher groups.

Although cultural difference theory can aid with addressing social problems, it could reinforce the assumption that African American students cannot academically succeed at the same level as their White peers (Sleeter, 2008). Brown and Brown (2012) contended that the approaches used by teacher preparation programs they studied illustrated how to effectively use culturally competent approaches so that they do not erroneously homogenize cultures. The best way to counter deficit thinking is for teachers to aim to meet the needs of their students by recognizing and moving from the assumption that African American students cannot academically engage in the same way as their White peers (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2009). Intentionally engaging with diverse cultures prevents homogenization and improves teacher/student experiences.

Other education scholars agree with the findings from Brown and Brown's study that teachers and their pedagogical practices should respect the cultural differences of African American students. These scholars emphasize that teachers appreciate the intricacies and differences of culture and foster socially meaningful learning environments for African American students (Foster, 1989, 1993; Howard, 2001b, 2003; Lee, 2007; Nasir, 2000).

When teachers learn about their students' cultures, it allows teachers to use instructional approaches that help their students be successful. Learning about students involves listening, interacting, and modeling. Examining what teachers experience with their African American students, how they can connect to the culture of students, and how they use culturally relevant teaching practices may help the overall school experiences of African American students (Zakrzewski, 2012). Thus, cultural difference theory directly impacted my work and helped me to explain the development of culturally relevant pedagogy in the classroom.

### **Cultural Competence Theory**

A 2007 study by Public Agenda and the National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality found that 76% of new teachers say they were trained to teach an ethnically diverse student body; however, fewer than four in 10 say their training helps them deal with their challenges (Rochkind, Immerwahr, Ott, & Johnson, 2007). Cultural competence is essential because of a clear correlation between cultural practices and pedagogy (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995a). According to National Center for Educational Statistics, in the 2017–18 school year, 79% of public-school teachers were White and non-Hispanic (2020). Yet, 77% of students enrolled in public school in the United States were Black, and 21% were Hispanic (2020). Researchers found that many

of these teachers had little or no personal contact with cultures different from theirs (Banks et al., 2001; Feistritzer, 2011; Ladson-Billings, 2001; Watson, 2011). Not only are teachers disproportionately White, but the professors in their preparation programs were also. Enrollment at urban schools, where most of these educators teach, is populated with culturally diverse students (Cross, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 2001; Watson, 2011). Additional cultural competence barriers derive from many teachers being middle-aged and far removed from current K-12 teaching environments (Ladson-Billings, 2001). This detachment from K-12 classrooms dampens their ability to interact and have relationships with people different from them. It also inadequately positions them to successfully prepare for the diversity of contemporary classrooms and particularly African American students in urban schools. The disconnect between culturally diverse and White American teacher educators creates a cultural divide (Cross, 2003).

The importance of being culturally competent has also been emphasized in educational research literature. The importance of this concept underscores the necessity of using cultural competence theory to supplement the theories that frame this research. Moule (2011) stated:

Cultural competence focuses on the ability to successfully teach students who come from cultures other than our own. It entails developing certain personal and interpersonal awareness and sensitivities, developing certain bodies of cultural knowledge, and mastering a set of skills that, taken together, underlie effective cross-cultural teaching. (p. 11)

High levels of cultural competence in the classroom require teachers to read and respond to events that begin from cultural differences in students and adults in the learning

environment, such as teaching and having tolerance and respect. It is vital to the success of teachers as cultural minority students account for more than half of all students in U.S. public schools.

Teachers who possess cultural competence and use culturally relevant pedagogy were believed to understand the importance and value of culture in the educational system (Kahn, Lindstrom, & Murray, 2014). Oakes and Lipton (2007), 7 years earlier had already described teachers they deemed to be culturally competent as ones who use “cultural funds of knowledge and practices to enrich both culture and intelligence, instead of the current practice, which is to see cultural knowledge as not useful or as an obstacle” (p. 198). To have cultural competence is to possess and use the sensitivity of cultural differences and to be able to respond to those differences appropriately (Green & Gallegos, 1982; Moule, 2011; Pedersen & Marsell, 1982; Sue et al., 1982). Kahn et al. (2014) studied 105 pre-service teachers matriculating at a public university to investigate factors that influenced cultural competence and beliefs related to diversity. The study investigated participants’ work experiences, meaningful cross-cultural relationships such as experiences living abroad or in a community as a minority, and experiences taking multicultural education classes. The researchers found that cross-cultural relationships and valuing the exercise of self-reflection influenced cultural competence significantly. They also concluded that cultural competence requires awareness of personal beliefs, diverse knowledge, and exposure to multicultural education. These factors were also necessary to teach culturally diverse students. A high level of cultural competence enhances the ability to relate to students and work with them effectively. According to Kahn et al. (2014):

Educators who are not culturally competent can inhibit culturally diverse students from realizing their educational, professional potential, force students to surrender their cultural beliefs and adopt mainstream ones, limit their ability to access the resources necessary to achieve both academic and personal success, and diminish their self-concept because of systematic oppression. (p. 2)

Cultural competence suggests that teachers who acknowledge and learn about differences in students can help students acquire positive beliefs about themselves, their social or ethnic background, and culture (Friendly & Prabhu, 2010). Cultural competence is very closely related to the importance of validating students as a strategy and approach to improving educational outcomes.

### **Validation Theory**

Rendon (1994) introduced validation theory to explain the experiences of low-income first-generation students enrolled in higher education. By describing the characteristics of this population of students, Rendon suggested how to best support their academic achievement (Gildersleeve, Croom, & Vasquez, 2011). For example, validation theory explained how low-income first-generation students succeed in college, have trouble getting involved, and process feelings of invalidation from past experiences or doubts about succeeding (Linares & Muñoz, 2011). In addition, there are several instances where validation theory is cited in the research literature to provide educators and policymakers with strategies to improve student retention, transfer, and academic success in at-risk and underrepresented populations (Bragg, 2001; Castellanos & Gloria, 2007).

Linares and Muñoz (2011) outlined four aspects that form the theory:

- Low-income, first-generation students require validating support strategies, both in and out-of-class, and communities of faculty, counselors, advisers, family, peers, and professionals.
- Student knowledge and experience should be used as a learning resource and be validated in the curriculum.
- Students' identities and occupational roles should be validated.
- A validating team of faculty and counselors can provide students with care, encouragement, support, and critical information needed to transfer and academic skills required to be successful in college. (p. 21)

Validation theory does not endeavor to wield power over students but to modify behaviors in educators' practice so that they are authentically caring and fashion compassion to help students succeed. This theory challenges teachers to work compassionately with students to transform underserved students into powerful learners who overcome oppression and invalidation (Rendon, 2009, as cited in Gildersleeve, 2011). Research has demonstrated that African American students can succeed and become valuable members of learning settings.

One study on validation theory that explored students' transition to college involved researchers and student affairs leaders (Linares & Muñoz, 2011). The sample in this study included a student body diverse in gender, race, ethnicity, and residency. Data were gathered in interviews with groups varying in size from one to eight students from four institutions. These students either attended a predominantly minority community college, a predominantly White, residential, liberal arts college, a predominantly Black, urban, commuter, comprehensive state university, or a large, predominantly White,

residential research university. The researchers of this study were mainly interested in assessing the influences of students' out-of-class experiences on learning and retention. A total of 132 first-year students were interviewed. Open-ended interview questions addressed issues such as their choice of college to attend, their expectations for and the experiences of college, significant people and events in their transition, some characteristics of the transition, and any effects students felt college was having on them (Rendon, 1994). For example, students were asked, "Who are the most important people in your life right now?" Whether students mentioned institutional faculty and staff members, their responses were telling. There were distinct differences in the way that low-income and affluent students experienced the transition to college, and at some point, low-income students began to believe in themselves as capable college learners because some person(s) took the initiative to reach out and help them believe in themselves and their inner capacity to learn. For example, their validating experiences included instances such as when:

- Faculty took the time to learn their names and refer to them by name.
- Faculty gave students opportunities to witness themselves as successful learners.
- Faculty ensured that the curriculum reflected student backgrounds.
- Faculty told students, "You can do this, and I am going to help you."
- Faculty encouraged students to support each other.
- Faculty and staff served as mentors and made efforts to meet with them outside class, such as at the library.

Linares and Muñoz (2011) explained:

The impact of validation on students who have experienced powerlessness, doubts about their ability to succeed, and lack of care cannot be understated. Validation helped these kinds of students to acquire a confident, motivating, ‘I can do it’ attitude, believe in their inherent capacity to learn, become excited about learning, feel a part of the learning community, and feel cared about as a person, not just a student. (p. 15)

Using proactive affirmations to bolster feelings of self-worth, personal development, and self-validation increases the likelihood of success because they help students see themselves as valuable members of a learning community (Linares & Muñoz 2011).

There is reason to believe that validation is critical to all students, and teachers at every level can empower students for success.

### **Critical Race Theory**

According to Delgado and Stefancic (2012), critical race theory (CRT) is “a theory born out of the minds of a collection of activists and scholars interested in studying and transforming the relationship between race, racism, and power” (p. 3). The CRT was created in the mid-1970s as an outgrowth of two earlier movements known as critical legal studies and radical feminism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 1998). Both critical legal studies and radical feminism challenged accepted norms in legal practices. Like its predecessor theories, Ladson-Billings (1998) explained, “CRT begins with the notion that racism is normal, not aberrant, in American society and, because it is so enmeshed in the fabric of our social order, it appears both normal and natural to people in this culture” (p. 11). Many scholars are committed to addressing the issue of racism that contributes to low performance in urban schools (King, 2005;

Ladson-Billings, 1999; Milner, 2010; Noguera, 2001, as cited in Boutte, 2012).

According to Solórzano and Yosso (2001), CRT is defined as:

A framework or set of basic perspectives, methods, and pedagogy that seeks to identify, analyze, and transform those structural, cultural, and interpersonal aspects of education that maintain the marginal position and subordination of [Black and Latino] students. Critical race theory asks such questions as: What roles do schools, school processes, and school structures play in the maintenance of racial, ethnic, and gender subordination? (p. 3)

The CRT challenges the practices of White supremacy and dominant political and social contexts that recreate systems of power vested in individual people. There are several tenets of CRT, as explained by Harmon (2012):

The first tenet stated that racism is normal and embedded in the practices and policies of all institutions. The second tenet stated that racism can be understood by listening to the voices of those who experience it. The third tenet stated that liberalism is a belief that is based upon freedom and equality and, (unfortunately) justice cannot always be served through the legal system. The fourth tenet of critical race theory stated that those who are privileged will work for racial justice if it benefits them. (p. 16)

A fifth tenet argued that differential racialization means that White American individuals are privileged over people of color in most areas of life, including education, and that racism manifests differently per historical era (Taylor, 2009). These beliefs challenge mainstream culture, values, and norms. In education, a CRT lens enables researchers to critically understand the role of race in curriculum design, instructional delivery, class

compilation, administrative practices, standardized testing, school funding allocations, and district line creation (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Like culturally relevant pedagogy, the tenets of CRT align with this study because it validates the narratives and experiences of marginalized groups to understand the world.

Collectively culturally relevant pedagogy, cultural difference theory, cultural competence theory, validation theory, and critical race theory provide the analytical frameworks to glean insights about the culturally relevant practices described by the study's participants. The uniqueness of data from each participant was honored, but these theories guided data interrogations to reveal explicit and implicit meanings.

### **Definition of Terms**

The following terms are essential and relevant to this study. Defining terms and establishing context is critical because some terminology can be perceived as vague or refer to abstract concepts, resulting in misconstrued understandings. Specific definitions are provided for terms that appear throughout this dissertation. I chose these definitions based on the theoretical framework that influenced each component of the dissertation.

**Achievement gap.** “Disparities in student achievement that correspond to the racial, socioeconomic, and linguistic backgrounds of children” (Noguera, 2001, p. 62).

**African American.** A population of the United States with African ancestry (Zakharia et al., 2009).

**African American students.** The preferred term used throughout this study to refer to American students with African ancestry. In some instances, data were collected that may refer to these students as Black or as students of color French et al. (2020).

**Caring.** The student-teacher relationship that goes beyond academics and

focuses on mental, physical, and emotional health and development (Noddings, 2005).

**Culture.** The shared traditions, beliefs, customs, history, folklore, and institutions of a group of people; culture is shared by people of the same ethnicity, language, nationality, or religion; a system of rules that are the base of what we are and affect how we express ourselves as part of a group and as individuals (Wark, Neckoway, & Brownlee, 2019).

**Culturally relevant pedagogy.** “A pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (Ladson-Billings, 1999, p. 382). The term culturally relevant pedagogy is used synonymously with culturally relevant teaching.

**Culturally responsive curriculum.** Core subject content or lessons that are taught in school, which incorporates and honors the culture of the students.

**Differentiation.** Modifying instruction before implementing lesson plans to meet students’ individual readiness levels and instructional styles (Tomlinson, 1999).

**High expectations.** A set of high educational standards that are used as a measure of achievement for all students achieving in a class, school, or school district (Great Schools Partnerships, n.d.)

**Practices.** The strategies, techniques, and methods used in teaching to deliver instruction and impact academic achievement. The word practice(s) is used interchangeably with method(s) (Lipman, 1995).

**Professional Learning.** An important method educators can use to continuously update their knowledge and skill set for teaching students (Indeed, 2022).

**Urban schools.** An institution in or near a town or city, primarily serving poor

and ethnically diverse students in densely populated areas (Forman, 2018).

### **Summary**

In this chapter, I introduced the study by discussing relevant background research and its purpose and significance. I explained my story as an African American female teacher working in urban Title I elementary schools comprising predominantly African American students. As a professional school leader, I know CRP's significance in improving student achievement. I detailed the problem statement, research questions, key terms, theoretical frameworks, limitations, assumptions, and delimitations of my research. In Chapter 2, I will review the literature relevant to this inquiry. I will present the methodology and the data collection methods in Chapter 3 and discuss the results in Chapter 4. Finally, in Chapter 5, I will discuss the findings and their connections to extant literary analysis. Within this dissertation, I establish that understanding the perceptions and experiences of classroom teachers who utilize CRP will provide school districts with valuable insight for implementing professional learning on the topic. Having actual teachers reveal their success stories with CRP can empower others to examine gaps between conceptualization and classroom practices and inform professional learning. This study will identify best practices to include teacher preparation and in-service programs with a content focus on student success and culturally relevant pedagogy.

## **CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW**

*We have a powerful potential in our youth, and we must have the courage to change old ideas and practices so that we may direct their power toward good ends.*

~~~Mary McLeod Bethune (Bethune, McCluskey & Smith, 2001, p. 61)

In this chapter, I further explore culturally relevant pedagogy and the primary topics significant to teaching African American students with CRP. Furthermore, I examine studies on the practice of CRP, including implications for using it to educate African American students. The theoretical underpinnings and topics are essential to studying teachers who self-identify as using culturally relevant pedagogy with African American students. Culturally relevant pedagogy has emerged as a growing body of literature connecting culture, teaching, and learning. Researchers have offered it as the solution to meeting the diverse needs of urban elementary school students (Aronson & Laughter, 2016; Gay, 1980, 2013; Jacobs, 2019; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995b, 2014; Milner, 2010).

In reviewing the literature, I was aware that my thinking could become biased, and such a bias could cause me to become less open to my data collection. Therefore, I reviewed the literature before, during, and after collecting the data. Continually studying the literature did, as Marshall and Rossman (1989) suggested, help disrupt my bias with an interplay between the review of literature findings on teachers' use of CRP. In this literature review, I discuss the history and conceptualization of CRP and related theories,

such as critical race theory and multicultural education. From there, I provide an in-depth exploration of the relevant research on educating African American students, including the emergence of African American schools, the disparities in student achievement, and the practices of teachers of African American students. In this first section of the literature review, it is critical to provide an overview and understanding of culturally relevant pedagogy through a historical lens.

### **Historical Context of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy**

Several terms have been used to reference culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP), such as culturally responsive pedagogy, culturally appropriate, culturally congruent, culturally sensitive, and multicultural education (Irvine & Armento, 2001). Ladson-Billings (1994) defined culturally relevant pedagogy as “a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (p. 382). Additionally, this term described “a theoretical model that not only addresses student achievement but also helps students to accept and affirm their cultural identity while developing critical perspectives that challenge inequities that schools (and other institutions) perpetuate” (Ladson-Billings, 1995b, p. 469). The terms come from different philosophical orientations and share a goal: students’ success.

In this section, I will address the following key concepts: (a) culturally relevant pedagogy in detail and its historical context, (b) critical race theory as it relates to CRP, and (c) literature on multicultural education and its distinction from CRP. Using a critical lens, I note persisting questions about equality raised by CRP. In my review of the research, I further refine critical race’s theoretical and conceptual exploration, which

provide context for this study.

Researchers believe that if teachers and educational leaders are not taught about CRP, they may have simplistic views of what it means to teach in culturally relevant ways (Sleeter, 2012). Ladson-Billings (2006a), in a shared interaction with an audience of future teachers, stated that a common misconception when engaging with CRP is believing that successful teaching is primarily about what to do. Ladson-Billings further explained that successful teaching is mainly about how we think—about our students, their communities, broader social contexts, curriculum, instruction, and the role of the teacher (as seen in Escudero, 2019). Just as people practice democracy because they think and believe in its fundamental principles and ideals similarly, teachers who practice culturally relevant pedagogy do so because it aligns with their beliefs (Ladson-Billings, 2006a).

Educators teach students who bring an enormous range of diversity into the learning environment. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to the work of teaching. Teachers must be mindful of the span of identities and needs of the students they teach. It is a practice to encourage, support, and produce students' learning opportunities (Milner, 2010). Ladson-Billings (2006a) emphasized that routines and procedures alone will not provide African American students with the education they deserve and noted that culturally relevant pedagogy, a way of being or thinking, manifests into ways of doing. Escudero (2019), who leads the national work Teach for America does around culturally relevant pedagogy, stated:

CRP is not something that incorporates an add-on to our teaching—it is the foundation that grounds and informs every aspect of our instructional practice; it

is the lens through which we approach our work. Therefore, CRP cannot be boiled down to a set of specific strategies, a checklist for lesson planning, or a specific curriculum because all of these must be directly connected to and informed by a teacher's specific set of students—who they are as people and as learners, their communities, their history, and their context. (p. 4)

Culturally relevant teaching stands on the principles and practices of freedom, equality, and social justice (Bassey, 2016). Bassey (2016) concluded that it is an educational practice that makes it possible to connect education and social justice and create spaces for needed discussions around social change in society. In some cases, teachers' ideologies must be uprooted and replaced with equitable alternatives for all students. Bassey (2016) observed that Ladson-Billings went into the classrooms of successful teachers of African American students “to examine both the political and the practical” (p. 3), and noted her assertion that:

I wanted to see not only why a certain kind of teaching helped the students to be more successful academically but also how this kind of teaching supported and encouraged students to use their prior knowledge to make sense of the world and to work toward improving it. (p. 3)

Ladson-Billings (1995a, as cited in Bassey, 2016) concluded the teachers were successful because they utilized students' culture as a vehicle for learning, focused intensely on student learning, were creative, developed cultural competencies, and cultivated socio-political awareness in their students. Even with the history of CRP, the question remains: Why is CRP so infrequently used in classrooms populated with African American students (Ladson-Billings, 1995a; Muñiz, 2019)? Some teachers want to implement

culturally relevant pedagogy and are unsure where and how to begin. Thus, there remains a need to address the development of culturally relevant pedagogy in teachers who are still determining how to manifest CRP.

Teaching in culturally relevant ways requires teachers to focus on students' academic and personal success as individuals and collectively (Escudero, 2019). Using CRP ensures students engage in academically rigorous curriculum and learning, feel affirmed in their identities and experiences, and develop the knowledge and skills to engage critically with the world and others. Despite the benefits of CRP, researchers have stated, "It remains true that far too many Black students have their cultural ways of knowing treated as barriers in the learning process; they have their ability and potential questioned, and they encounter educators who proclaim: 'I don't see color!'" (Muñiz, 2019, p. 11).

Ladson-Billings (1995b) defined culturally relevant pedagogy (or culturally relevant teaching) as "a theoretical model that not only addresses student achievement but also helps students to accept and affirm their cultural identity while developing critical perspectives that challenge inequities that schools (and other institutions) perpetuate" (p. 469). The commitment to CRP requires teachers to focus on their students' learning, develop their cultural competence, and increase their sociopolitical or critical consciousness (Ladson-Billings as cited in Fay, 2019). Ladson-Billings commented, "You can't do one or two and say, 'Oh, I'm being culturally relevant.' You've got to do all three things. It really has to do with a philosophical outlook towards one's approach to teaching, not simply doing an activity" (Fay, 2019, p. 1). This CRP commitment requires three components:

1. Students must experience academic success/ high achievement.
2. Teachers and students must develop and maintain cultural competence.
3. Students must develop consciousness to challenge the society in which they live critically.

These three components work in tandem with one another. Student learning and achievement is one of three priorities a culturally relevant teacher acknowledges.

The first component of student learning and achievement requires the teacher to explicitly set and hold high expectations for the academic achievement of all students. The teacher deeply understands the content and teaches it based on who their students are as learners. For example, Ladson-Billings (2017a) described student learning as demonstrable growth in required subjects and she emphasized that teachers must focus on academic mastery. Good, culturally relevant teachers see the goal for every student to achieve. These teachers create a net to catch all students rather than a sieve through which only a tiny percentage can succeed.

Another component is cultural competence. According to Ladson-Billings (2017a), the teacher is a firm grounding in one's learning culture while acquiring fluency in at least one more culture. Cultural competence requires the teacher to understand the culture and its role in education. This approach also requires teachers to take responsibility for learning about their students' culture and community and interrogate their identity, culture, biases, and privilege to assess and strengthen their instructional practice critically. In 1988, the phrase "mirrors and windows" was first introduced by Emily Style (Style, 1988). Style (1988) created the "Windows and Mirrors" concept as a framework for building an inclusive curriculum for students (Maparyan, 2018). Rudine

Sims Bishop, a multicultural education scholar, later coined the phrase “windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors” to explain how children see themselves in books (Bishop, 1990).

A mirror is a story that reflects one’s culture to hold up their reality and help build identity, whereas a sliding door allows the reader to enter the story and become a part of the world. A window is a resource that offers a view into someone else’s experience to see the realities of others. According to Escudero (2019), mirrors and windows are evident when cultural competence is evident in the classroom. For example, a teacher could provide opportunities for students to see themselves reflected in the classroom by introducing literature and materials that reflect their culture to help them build their identity. Using students’ culture as the basis for learning allows students to recognize and honor their own culture while learning the culture of others. As scholars and authors explained:

Becoming culturally competent takes time and requires us to position ourselves as learners. We don’t have to know everything about every group of people to engage in this work, but we need to be willing to learn and ready to facilitate learning about cultures in our classrooms. (Souto-Manning, Llerena, Martell, Maguire, & Arce-Boardman, 2018, p. 13)

Critical consciousness is the last component of CRP, a term interchangeably used with sociopolitical consciousness. Critical consciousness can be used to identify, critique, and challenge the social forces that produce inequity and oppression (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995a, 2000). According to Gist, Jackson, Nightingale-Lee, and Allen (2019), this component requires that teachers see

teaching as a political act (hooks, 1994) and schooling as an opportunity to prepare students to critique and correct oppressive structures (Ladson-Billings, 1995b). It also requires that teachers educate themselves on personal and sociopolitical issues within their communities and the world while also educating their students (Escudero, 2019). The intent is to help students see themselves as change agents. When students see themselves as transformers, they are empowered to alter oppressive structures through involvement in civic matters (Ladson-Billings, 1995b).

Ladson-Billings commented in an interview with Fay that culturally relevant education is more than celebrating Black History Month or offering an ethnic studies class. Instead, she explained, it means “giving students space to talk about an event like the police killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, MO, and letting students choose to investigate problems that affect them rather than teachers setting their own social justice agendas in the classroom” (Fay, 2019, para. 5). Although there are benefits to developing critical consciousness in school, little research has explored how schools can develop African American critical consciousness (El-Amin et al., 2017).

Culturally relevant teaching can promote positive ethnic-racial identity and attitudes toward others (Aldana, Rowley, Checkoway, & Richards-Schuster, 2012; Dessel, Rogge, & Garlington, 2006; Spencer, Brown, Griffin, & Abdullah, 2008). For example, 74 African American adolescent girls participated in a study to determine the effects of an intervention that promoted cultural factors protecting African American youth from the adverse effects of racism. There were 36 participants in an intervention group, and the remaining 38 were in a control group. Administered to both groups were pre and post-tests to assess intervention effects. The findings revealed that the

intervention significantly and positively affected ethnic identity, racism awareness, collectivism, and liberatory youth activism. The African American girls in the culturally relevant after-school program scored higher in ethnic-racial identity exploration and commitment when compared with a control group. The African American girls in the intervention group were also more aware of racism and more likely to engage in activism (Thomas, Davidson, & McAdoo, 2008). In addition, critical consciousness could also be an entry for motivation and achievement for marginalized students.

The eight teachers Ladson-Billings' described as successful teachers of African American students were successful because they utilized students' culture as a vehicle for learning; they firmly focused on student learning; they were creative, developed cultural competencies, and cultivated socio-political awareness in their students (Ladson-Billings as cited in Bassey, 2016). Escudero (2019) agreed that CRP is a philosophical outlook toward teaching that informs teachers what, how, and why do what they do. Further, it ensures students engage in academically rigorous curriculum and learning, feel affirmed in their identities and experiences, and develop the knowledge and skills to engage the world and others critically.

### **Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and Critical Race Theory**

In Chapter 1, I introduced critical race theory and its key tenets. Here, I will further explore the relevant literature and the connection between culturally relevant pedagogy and critical race theory. To restate, critical race theory explores society's power, privileges, and inequalities (Delgado, 1995). Critical race theory has taken the main stage in educational discourse because it frames the impact of systemic inequities and social power dynamics on institutions of teaching and learning (Ladson-Billings,

1998). Essentially, critical race theory in education argues that racism is systemic and prevalent and presences itself, for example, when educators perceive African American students or other non-white groups as inherently deficient.

Ladson-Billings argued that to the field of education in the United States, the lens of critical race theory (CRT) must be engaged as a premise of culturally relevant pedagogy (as cited in Love, 2015). In her argument, Ladson-Billings stated one primary function of schooling is to foster citizenship. When questioning how citizenship connects to race, the construct of CRT is helpful, especially since many African Americans are marginalized students in urban schools (Boutte, 2012). Boutte (2012) stated it is essential to realize that the deeply rooted nature of racism is still visible and that successful models of urban schools will help the repair of student academic disparities. One way to change the direction of urban schools is to harness the role that teachers play in reversing social and political narratives.

Hayes and Juarez (2012) exposed why culturally relevant pedagogy is not evident in one teacher education program. They expanded on how ideas of the dominant culture are perpetuated in teacher education programs and often describe African American students as “at risk” and academically deficient. Consequently, pre-service teachers enter the teaching profession with negative, preconceived notions about African American students’ academic and behavioral success. Even, as classrooms become increasingly diverse, teachers’ views of these students are often based on ideas of deficiency (Jett, 2012). Because the dominant social group is White, this deficit or blame-based lens impacts the entire field of education, including pre-service and in-service teacher education. Accordingly, if teachers enter the field with negative racial beliefs, critical

race theory suggests that deficit beliefs about non-White students most often go unchallenged. Ladson-Billings shared in an interview what a culturally relevant teacher understands:

We're operating in a fundamentally inequitable system — they take that as a given. And that the teacher's role is not merely to help kids fit into an unfair system, but rather to give them the skills, the knowledge and the dispositions to change the inequity. (Fay, 2019, p. 1)

As mentioned by Hayes and Juarez (2012), to teach all students, not just those who primarily reflect the U.S. White mainstream society, teachers must have the knowledge, disposition, and skills to effectively implement and assess a culturally responsive pedagogy (Gay, 2000; Ware, 2006).

More recently, in a community blog focused on educational excellence and equity, Kayser (2021) described the push by many schools nationwide that has brought increased attention to the work that Ladson-Billings started 20 years ago. Kayser (2021) suggested:

The unrest and protests of summer 2020, coupled with the COVID-19 pandemic, laid bare the injustices historically resilient students and communities had faced for decades in the U.S. Many activists and advocates harnessed the momentum and pushed for K-12 schools to be antiracist and provide equitable experiences for all students. (p. 1)

The upheaval of the COVID-19 pandemic that caused school shutdowns left many students without instruction. As school districts across the United States continue to assess the depth of the unfinished learning caused by the 2020-21 school year, it is

essential to consider the substantial disparities that resulted (Dorn, Hancock, Sarakatsannis, & Viruleg, 2021). Students of color and low-income students suffered the most. Ladson-Billings (2021b) asserted:

Although many educators and policymakers insist that we have to get back to normal, I want to suggest that going back is the wrong thing for children and youth who were unsuccessful and oppressed in our schools before the pandemic. (p. 69)

To her point, students in majority-Black schools ended the school year 6 months behind in math and reading, while students in majority-white schools ended up just four months behind in math and three months behind in reading (Kayser 2021). Ladson-Billings (2021b) went on to say, “And in the midst of this terrible despair, it offers us a chance to rethink the doomsday machine we have built for ourselves. Nothing could be worse than a return to normality” (Roy, 2020, p. 10). Instead, embracing critical race theory and unpacking its tenets poses an opportunity to help educators reframe their views and beliefs and think differently about systematic inequities in student learning. With a deepened understanding of critical race theory, the ideal next step is to engage culturally relevant pedagogy as a pathway to meaningful change for African American and other non-white students, thus departing fully from the deficit-based views and ideas that blame students for low academic performance.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2023a) during the fall of 2021, over half of students from the following racial/ethnic groups attended public schools where the combined enrollment of students of color constituted at least 75% of total enrollment: Hispanic (61%), Black (59%), Pacific Islander (53%). Now in history,

America's classrooms are widely considered multicultural spaces. Just as critical race theory has an important relationship that supports the practice of culturally relevant pedagogy, multicultural education is a precursor and important related concept to examine and discuss next.

### **Multicultural Education and CRP**

Multicultural education is often mentioned or misconstrued in relationship to culturally relevant pedagogy. Although sometimes used interchangeably, there are distinct differences between the two. These terms are similar because they are both educational approaches that recognize and affirm students' cultural differences (Ortiz, 2012). Also, both terms consider the importance of language, race, ethnicity, and the role that each has in school and society. These concepts, however, are not the same (Ortiz, 2012; Rychly & Graves, 2012). Multicultural education includes an idea, an educational movement, and a process (Banks, 1997). Banks (1997) stated, "Multicultural education incorporates the idea that all students — regardless of their gender or social class and their ethnic, racial, or cultural characteristics — should have an equal opportunity to learn in school" (p. 3). Another idea incorporated into multicultural education is that some students have a better chance of learning if teachers mirror their cultural characteristics in the classroom (Banks, 1997). The primary goals of multicultural education are to increase awareness of global issues, encourage critical thinking, and prevent prejudicial thinking and behaviors.

James A. Banks is known as the father of multicultural education and for his research on improving race and ethnic relationships and their influence on schools throughout the United States ("University of Washington College of Education", n.d.).

Banks' work aimed to help teachers see how their instruction influenced culturally and linguistically diverse students. Stated in other words, "diverse cultures become conduits or filters for teaching academic knowledge and skills students are expected to learn in school, as well as to enhance their personal, social, cultural, and civic development" (Rychly & Graves, 2012, p. 45). Banks (1997) explained that as an educational reform movement, multicultural education involves changes to the entire school's educational environment to reflect diverse cultures.

Banks (2016) argued that there is mismatch between culture, curriculum, and student population. Banks (2016) explained that, historically, textbooks convey the myth that "African Americans had not contributed significantly to the development of American history" (p. 12). Similarly, Au, Brown, and Calderon (2016) also explained that the histories of official school curricula have negatively impacted the lives of young students of color by reproducing an inexplicable feeling that one's life, experiences, history, and knowledge are not valued. These researchers reviewed textbooks and found an overrepresentation of history stories of White men. Other populations have been represented as inferior and with cultural deficits (Au et al., 2016; Goodwin, Cheruvu, & Genishi, 2008; Valdes, 1996, as cited in Souto-Manning et al. 2018). Other researchers have found that when students do not see their histories in lessons, they receive messages that their ways of being and behaving are not as important as those of other students (Heineke, Papola-Ellis, & Elliott, 2022; Pulimeno, Piscitelli, & Colazzo, 2020). Capers (as cited by Aviles, 2019), wrote, "Books can shape how children view themselves, others, and the world and how they will form self-identity . . . When children do not see themselves represented by a curriculum, it sends them a message" (para. 11).

Books convey what is important and what matters. Seeing themselves in books establishes them as people who matter and establishes their role in society. As a result, diverse students become disengaged (Souto-Manning et al., 2018, p. 23). Gay (2002) believed that quality teachers in diverse schools include multicultural content that responds to the students' ethnic backgrounds. Like Gay, other researchers emphasized the need for teachers to value all students and utilize their cultural differences as strengths in classrooms. Banks et al. (2001) also advised teachers to promote antiracist behaviors to build class communities and encourage students to make positive changes in the world. To this end, multicultural education is a predecessor to culturally relevant pedagogy. However, multicultural education focuses more on content and the inclusion of diverse cultures, more than the pedagogy, beliefs, and strategies of effective instruction for all students.

Jimenez, Guzmán, and Maxwell (2014) found that teachers' and school leaders' perceptions of multicultural education had a significant role in determining how students responded to the implementation of multicultural education in their classrooms. The researchers analyzed three South Texas educators' and school leaders' open-ended, semi-structured interview data regarding implementing multicultural education. Using qualitative means, they discovered that the participants perceived multicultural education as an opportunity to become more aware of their culture and learn the culture of others. The participants also shared various strategies to develop multicultural education in their classrooms. They also discussed that one of the most significant benefits of multicultural education was that most students become academically successful. Each participant mentioned that one limiting factor in implementing multicultural education was the

teachers' need for more knowledge and understanding of their students' cultural diversity. Scholars also agree that when educators lack multicultural understanding, misconceptions often are created, which consequently lowers the educational expectations of their students (Nelson & Guerra, 2014; Parrish & Linder-VanBerschot, 2010; Sleeter, 2001). This lack of cultural understanding of students' cultural diversity contributed to a desire to share this finding to create higher expectations of African American students.

Banks (1999) discussed four approaches that move teachers toward quality multicultural curriculum use. This includes the contributions approach, the additive approach, the transformation approach, and the social action approach. The contribution and additive approaches are the least effective, involving surface level inclusion of other cultures such as holidays, food, heroes, and heroines. When these cultural aspects are presented without discussing their significance to students, an incomplete account of history is reinforced (Harmon, 2012). However, with the transformation and social action approaches, introducing multicultural content in the classroom is critical to helping children construct their identities and feel like valued members of society. Still, the key distinction to note is that culturally relevant pedagogy more explicitly challenges inequities and racial bias and argues for a fundamental change in teachers' views, beliefs, and practices. For example, one characteristic of culturally relevant pedagogy is that teachers adjust traditional teaching practices to reach students with learning styles other than the mainstream culture. Considering the identities of students and integrating this knowledge into instructional practices builds on the premises of multicultural education but culturally relevant pedagogy makes this effort explicit, actionable, and non-

negotiable. Knowing who these students are is essential because evidence shows that the American public education system is not meeting diverse students' needs (Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2009).

Whereas multicultural education can often be additive, and content focused, CRP examines and challenges teachers thinking as a path to successful student outcomes. Ladson-Billings (1995a) stated that culturally relevant teaching is evident in how teachers see themselves and others, structure their social interactions, and view knowledge in their classrooms. Rychly and Graves (2012) explained:

Education that is multicultural can be delivered to a classroom containing students from the same culture; the content presented is representative of various cultural perspectives. On the other hand, culturally responsive pedagogy must respond to the cultures present in the classroom. (p. 45)

Knowing the difference between these two terms helps identify specific behaviors that make these teachers successful in teaching culturally and linguistically diverse students. A prospective teacher inquired about culturally relevant pedagogy and multicultural education and expressed to Ladson-Billings (2006a) that she had been told about multicultural education, "but nobody is telling us how to do it!" (p. 39). Ladson-Billings (2006a) responded, "Even if we could tell you how to do it, I would not want us to tell you how to do it" (p. 39). Ladson-Billings (2006a) continued:

The reason I would not tell you what to do is that you would probably do it! In other words, you would probably do exactly what I told you to do without any deep thought or critical analysis. You would do what I said regardless of the students in the classroom, their ages, abilities, and their need for whatever it is I

proposed. (p. 39)

Ladson-Billings emphasized that no one approach works because teachers teach students who are all different. Teachers should be aware of all students' needs and the various social contexts that have shaped their experiences and teach accordingly.

Ladson-Billings (2006a) continued to explain that “no one tells us how to do democracy; we just do it” (p. 174). Similarly, teachers who practice culturally relevant pedagogy do so because it is consistent with their beliefs and who they are. While this is true, there is still a great opportunity for the field of teacher training and professional learning to help educators distinguish the different concepts and integrate them practically in their classrooms.

In a qualitative study, Durden, Dooley, and Truscott (2016), explored a teacher preparation program designed for diverse classrooms and how their experiences shape their preparation as culturally relevant teachers. The primary focus of the study was to examine the course assignments that prompted their thinking on issues related to oppression and educational inequity within the context of learning to teach diverse students. A secondary focus was to examine the two Black candidates' reactions and reflections on courses that did not focus on race-related assignments. The study included two elementary teacher candidates' written and spoken reflections regarding their conceptions of culturally relevant teaching. The review of their reflections examined how Black racial identity may vary within teacher education programs. The questions asked were: What do elementary teacher candidates' thoughts reveal about their racial identity, and how might their racial identities contribute to developing concepts about culturally relevant teaching? The researchers conducted three interviews with each of the

two participants. The first interview drew on their beliefs and reflections on CRP. Next, in a second interview, they discussed their culturally relevant lesson at the end of their teacher candidate program. The third interview captured their experiences with and understanding of CRP. Durden et al. (2016), however, found that the candidates drew on racial experiences even when they were not given opportunities during their course. One candidate confronted his bias and developed a racially accepting view of all backgrounds. The other candidate arrived at the teacher candidate program with affirming racial regard. However, she left with the perception of how negatively the public regarded minorities. This candidate felt CRP could challenge the inequalities she experienced during her teacher education program. The results showed that both teacher candidates' racial identities were the basis of their conceptions of CRP. The researchers suggested that teacher education programs face the task of equipping teachers to effectively educate students with diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, unique skills, talents, and life experiences. Two other studies showed that teacher candidates of color reflected their racial experiences when racism and equity were introduced (King, 1991; Paris & Alim, 2014). This suggested that pre-service teacher education programs hold the potential to offer numerous chances for candidates to contemplate and link their racial identity experiences to their evolving culturally relevant pedagogy.

### **Educating African American Students**

Ladson-Billings (2021c) shared the current condition of African American children in the United States during a virtual conference sponsored by the Centering of Black Children and Education. Ladson-Billings (2021c) provided data that 3.7% of African American children under 18 were in poor health. In 2019, 8% of African

American children under 18 lived in a household where no parent completed high school (National Center of Education Statistics, 2020). Ladson-Billings emphasized that not finishing high school does not make a person a bad parent, but it may mean that person has fewer resources to support children through high school and college. Data showed that 56% of children lived in mother-only households, but only 9% lived in father-only homes (2021c). In 2019, 30% of African American students in the United States lived in poverty (2021c). The median African American family owns \$3,600 in assets, 2% of the \$147,000 wealth of the median White family (Children's Defense Fund, 2019). Wealth is a channel of opportunities and is essential to avoid educational disparities (Beyer, 2019). Ladson-Billings (2007) explained that earnings ratios provide insight into individuals' current (and past) economic situation. Still, they do not account for the long-term impact of income inequalities accumulating over time. Ladson-Billings (as cited in 2007) referred the economists Joseph Altonji and Ulrich Doraszelski (2005):

The wealth gap between [Whites] and [Blacks] in the United States is much larger than the gap in earnings. The gap in wealth has implications for the social position of African Americans that go far beyond its obvious implications for consumption levels that households can sustain. This is because wealth is a source of political and social power, influences access to capital for new businesses, and provides insurance against fluctuations in labor market income. It affects the quality of housing, neighborhoods, and schools a family has access to as well as the ability to finance higher education. The fact that friendships and family ties tend to be within racial groups amplifies the effect of the wealth gap on the financial, social, and political resources available to [Blacks] relative to

[Whites]. (p. 1)

The above statistics illustrate a reality teachers encounter when educating children. African American students are compared to White students with income and wealth. Ladson-Billings (2021c) shared additional concerning statistics, “More than half of the nation’s homeless families are African American. One in six African American students does not know where their next meal is coming from. This is the current condition of our children” (6:58).

Despite the overall low ranking in their public school district, the students of the eight teachers in Ladson-Billings’ foundational study (1995b) performed higher than those who did not receive the same instruction. In the classrooms of her study, student success was not limited to achievement on standardized tests. Ladson-Billings (2006a) refined her use of the term academic achievement to clarify misconceptions about standardized testing. She remarked, “What I envisioned is more accurately described as student learning . . . what it is that students actually know and are able to do as a result of pedagogical interactions with skilled teachers” (Ladson-Billings, 2006a, p. 34). For example, the students in her study could read, write, speak, compose, and problem-solve at high levels of rigor. Culturally relevant pedagogy requires teachers to meet students’ academic needs. Using culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) does not allow teachers to choose between connecting to the students in the classroom or teaching at rigorous levels and expecting them to achieve academically (Aronson & Laughter, 2016). Ladson-Billings (1995a) stated, “The trick of culturally relevant teaching is to get students to choose academic excellence” (p. 160). However, there are other important considerations regarding African American student success.

Like most other students, African American elementary males are enthusiastic about learning in the early years of their formal schooling. However, by the time some African American boys are 9 years-old and in the fourth-grade, they have less desire to remain in school than in their earlier elementary years (Polite & Davis, 1999). The middle school years spanning ages 9 to 13 present particularly significant challenges in terms of physical, emotional, and social transitions for these students (Yaffe, 2011). According to Yaffe (2011) “As they grow toward adulthood, societal stereotypes of Black men as uneducable and criminal undermine Black boys’ self-esteem and can shape teachers’ attitudes towards them” (p. 1). Other researchers believe that various negative reasons decrease the desire to remain in school, such as school failure, special education assignments, suspensions, expulsions, and violence (Anderson, 2008; Howard, 2008; Polite & Davis, 1999). It is important to note that not all African American boys have a reduced desire to remain in school. However, one consistent factor linked to the gap in achievement is the lack of engagement among African American male students in school (Carter, 2003; Polite, 2000).

Additionally, Polite and Davis (1999) explained that African American children become more aware of inequity as they age. They want to leave the dominant culture of practices and values and become respected by their peers (Smith, 2005). When these young, successful, early elementary males are in late elementary school, they suddenly struggle. To this end, schools can reshape the educational experiences of African American males is to implement teaching practices that reflect the experiences and cultures of African American males to enhance their engagement.

Although many culturally relevant teaching studies are determined from the

researchers' or teachers' perspective rather than the students (Howard, 2001b), studies have considered students' perceptions of their teachers. For example, quantitative research by Byrd (2016) investigated students' perceptions of culturally relevant teaching and school racial socialization with academic outcomes and racial attitudes. The participants included 315 diverse 6th-12th-grade recruited students. Male, female, White, Latino, African American, and Asian students were asked to complete an online survey. The research question asked, how do students' perceptions of teachers' use of culturally relevant teaching and school racial socialization relate to students' academic outcomes and racial attitudes? The hypothesis was that perceptions of more constructivist teaching practices, cultural engagement, cultural socialization, promotion of cultural competence, support for positive interaction, and critical consciousness socialization would be associated with better academic outcomes and positive racial attitudes.

Byrd (2016) measured culturally relevant teaching in two ways to find the most critical aspects of culturally relevant education for positive student outcomes: through general measures of constructivist teaching practices and cultural engagement and with specific measures of school racial socialization. Using two subscales, culturally relevant teaching and the degree to which teachers used innovative methods, such as real-life examples, pictures, and videos when teaching, making previous connections, and creating a respectful climate were measured. Some examples of survey items included: "My instructors try to find out what interests me" (Byrd, 2016, p. 3) and "My instructors use examples of my culture when they are teaching" (Byrd, 2016, p. 3). Similarly, Byrd used a scale to measure the school climate for diversity. Some example of survey items from Byrd (2016) was, "At your school, you have chances to learn about the history and

traditions of your culture” (p. 3) and “Teachers encourage students to make friends with students of different races/ethnicities” (p. 4). Using a Likert-type scale, another tool indicated students’ self-concepts relating to their membership in an ethnic-racial group and measured attachment to their ethnic group. For example, “I have a strong sense of belonging to my own racial/ethnic group.”

Byrd’s findings on diverse teaching practices resulting in better outcomes supports literature on student-centered, authentic instruction (Newmann, Marks, & Gamoran, 1996; Saye & Social Studies Inquiry Research Collaborative, 2013, as seen in Byrd, 2016). Byrd also found that when teachers incorporate real-life illustrations and try to align with their students’ interests, it leads to increased student engagement. Byrd made a connection that these bonds that teachers make with their students, not only enhances the learning experiences but also plays a role in diminishing stereotypes and fostering better intergroup relations (Aronson & Bridgeman, 1979; Pettigrew, 1998). Byrd concluded, “These findings indicate that a direct focus on race and culture in the classroom is beneficial” (2016, p. 6).

In contrast to Byrd’s hypothesis, encouraging cultural competence was linked with less awareness of racism and critical consciousness socialization was related to lower feelings of belonging (2016). Byrd’s study empirically showed how culturally relevant teaching impacted a racially diverse setting in which teachers fostered an appreciation for diverse cultures by using teaching approaches that connected with students’ lives to improve academic results. Overall, Byrd’s hypothesis was partially confirmed. To further Byrd’s findings, the United States can lead to actions aimed at achieving an awareness of cultural competence and critical consciousness in schools.

## **The Emergence of African American Schools**

Before the Civil War, education for Black Americans in the United States was illegal. Newly freed Black Americans organized their schools and embraced the belief that education was their right as citizens. However, few Black Americans received an education before public schools opened (Siddle Walker, 1996). After the opening of public schools, the establishments for Black American children were financed poorly and disregarded. By the 1870s, Jim Crow laws legally ruled that schools become racially segregated. In 1896, separate public schools for Black and White students resulted from the Supreme Court decision of *Plessy v. Ferguson*. This decision continued to disadvantage Black American students and deprived them of equal education. Then, after continuous struggle, persistence, and determination, access was gained to public education. Organizations, such as the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), ensured progress. United States schools were legally desegregated in 1954 by the Supreme Court decision of *Brown vs. Board of Education*, which overturned *Plessy vs. Ferguson* and stated that “separate educational facilities are inherently unequal” (Howard, 2002, p. 11).

The U.S. school system continues to struggle with issues relating to the equal education of African American students. Although less than half of the U.S. population are people of color, most students in urban schools are non-white (de Brey et al., 2019). The number of students of color receiving subpar educational experiences is a part of the crisis of urban schools. According to Anyon (1997), students in urban schools fail to reach the national average and drop out at alarmingly high rates (Lippman, 1996, Logan & Burdick-Will, 2017).

The mention of urban schools often conjures up deeply etched images of graffiti, rundown facilities, overcrowding, disorderly conduct, dangerous corridors, drug dealers, low or no teacher expectations, uninvolved parents, poor test scores, high poverty levels, students of color, and a host of other negative imagery (Boutte, 2012, p. 519). Racial violence against African American children and youth has increased. Over the course of a 16-year study, 140 children lost their lives because of police intervention, with firearms involved in 113 of these cases (Perez, 2020). Notably, 93% of the children who tragically lost their lives were male. As a result, racial violence flows into African American communities, including neighborhoods, churches, playgrounds, and parks. Unfortunately, violence is woven into urban schools and classrooms across the United States (Johnson, Bryan, & Boutte, 2018). It is not to say that urban school areas are the only demographics with these descriptions; it is not a generalized perception that all urban schools are alike. Many media stories focus on the grim state of urban schools, and history provides a starting point for the emergence of urban schools (Anderson, 1998; Siddle Walker, 1996).

The U.S. Census Bureau, the primary source of labor force statistics for the U.S. population, estimated in one class alone that of the 4.25 million ninth graders who enrolled in high school in 2012, 935,000 (roughly 22%) would drop out before graduation in 2016. These statistics are consistent regarding annual rates (NYU, 2018). In 2020, the high school dropout rate was 5.3%, an increase of 1.19% from 2019 (USAFacts, 2023). From 2010 to 2021, the status dropout rate among Asian individuals aged 16-24 consistently remained lower than other students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023b). Furthermore, the dropout rates for Asian and White

populations were below those of Black, Hispanic, and American Indian/Alaska Native (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023c). These statistics require teachers at each grade level to be responsible for solving the significant social, economic, and cultural problems resulting from high school dropout rates in underperforming urban schools.

Most urban schools, which serve African American students, are high-poverty settings (Ingersoll, 2001; National Commission for Teaching and America's Future, 2003, as cited in Charner-Laird, 2006). The state of urban schools suggests that much more is needed to improve African American students' success. Milner (2011) and Boutte (2012) urged that educators who want to stop the negative vision for urban children may find culturally relevant teaching promising. Boutte and other researchers suggested that at the classroom level at least, there is evidence to suggest that culturally relevant pedagogy can dismantle the systemic racism that undergirds many instructional, curriculum, disciplinary policies that serve to continuously revive and recycle the contemporary and historical trends in urban schools (Ladson-Billings, 1994, 2009; Milner, 2010, 2011; Swindler Boutte & Hill, 2006). Additionally, teachers must dispel deficit myths about students in urban schools and professional learning (Boutte, 2012; Milner, 2008). One way to do this is to create professional learning and teacher education programs to explain that urban and deficit are not synonymous (as seen in Boutte, 2012; Milner, 2008; Picower, 2009).

When considering the need to include culturally responsive pedagogy in teacher education, the curriculum often reflects a lack "demographic urgency" for the needs of urban schools (Villegas & Davis, 2008). However, Gist et al. (2019) believed that the

growing racial, ethnic, and linguistic diversity of the U.S. population requires urgent attention to ensure culturally responsive and sustainable pedagogy for students of color in the United States. Gist et al. (2019) mentioned that this growth, situated in a U.S. context, has historically disenfranchised and marginalized students of color (cited by Ladson-Billings, 2006b) and continues to create inequitable educational opportunities for culturally and linguistically diverse student populations in the first quarter of the 21st century (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 2018). To transform urban schools into vibrant learning environments, teachers and students must view urban school settings as rewarding and successful (Boutte, 2012). In addition, Boutte (2012) stated teachers must remain open to learning about and from urban students to dispel the deficit myths.

One way to change urban schools' current state is through professional learning. Professional learning can improve instruction, school performance, and student engagement and support the implementation of pedagogies (Wei, Darling-Hammond, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009). Another way to change the current state of urban schools is by involving university programs and schools in the United States. New teachers who hold the potential to bring that change focus on the "learning power and potential of our diverse and talented students" (Borrero, Ziauddin, & Ahn, 2019, p. 23). The number of new teachers attending urban schools continues to grow (Kaiser, 2011). Consequently, those responsible for training and preparing culturally responsive teachers have limited experience working with diverse student populations. As a result, scholars have emphasized the need for culturally responsive professional learning for teacher educators that involves critically reflecting on their practices and beliefs about diversity (Prater & Devereaux, 2009; Underwood & Mensah, 2018). There is a contingency of

these teachers entering the profession to bring more equitable educational experiences back to their communities and radically change the education they received in their community schools (Kohli, 2012). They are the agents that may close the gaps in education.

### **Disparities and African American Students**

Ladson-Billings argued that there is not an achievement gap but rather an education gap (2006b). Ladson-Billings explained further that:

According to the National Governors' Association, the achievement gap is a matter of race and class. Across the U.S., a gap in academic achievement persists between minority students and their White counterparts. This is one of the most pressing educational-policy challenges that states currently face. (p. 3)

Other researchers posited that the achievement gap results from the inequitable quality of service rendered to culturally diverse students situated explicitly in high-poverty urban schools (Perry, Steel, & Hilliard, 2003). As noted by Darling-Hammond (2019), federal and state governments hold the capacity to effect substantial change that can lead to increased equity and sufficiency in school funding. The federal government can support districts in hiring and retaining well-prepared teachers in urban schools through strengthening teacher preparation, implementing induction and mentoring for new teachers, facilitating ongoing professional learning, as well as ensuring comparable salaries and working conditions. These differences can be witnessed because the teaching staff in most urban schools are more than likely to be first-year teachers who lack cultural competence and are more commonly the least qualified (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2011).

Additional research provides some explanations as to why gaps continue to exist. During the COVID-19 pandemic, K-12 teachers abruptly shifted to teaching virtually using an online platform due to schools closing. As a result, issues related to the “digital divide,” which is the growing gap in internet access between underprivileged individuals, the urban and rural poor, older people, children, and disabled members of society who are without access to computers, the internet, or digital resources and the wealthy population who have access (Van Dijk, 2006) occurred. Although these gaps have always fallen along racial and socioeconomic lines, this gap has exacerbated inequities during virtual schooling (King & Gaudiano, 2020). Overall, non-White school districts receive an average of \$23 billion less than predominantly White school districts, despite serving roughly the same number of students (Edbuild, n.d.). According to a 2019 study from Edbuild, a school funding research group that closed in June, Biden reported that between 2005 and 2017, the Title I budget of \$350 billion was underfunded (Edbuild, n.d.).

Smith (2005) explored factors that contribute to the underachievement of students of color and offered practices that culturally proficient school leaders can use to build a school culture that may positively impact the academic achievement of students of color. She wanted to find out how to meet the academic needs of a culturally and linguistically diverse student population and how school leaders more successfully address the academic needs of students of color in their schools. African American, Hispanic, and economically disadvantaged students in California were underachieving academically, and this state reflects the academic landscape for children of color in the United States’ national dilemma. Schools in California have not succeeded in educating students of color or poor students. Smith found that Asian and White American students performed

about twice as well as students who are African American, Hispanic, or economically disadvantaged students. Smith found that several factors contributed to the underachievement of poor children and children of color (EdSource, 2003; Kober, 2001). There has already been a strong correlation between low socioeconomic status and student achievement. However, there are also links between various school factors and underachievement (Howard, 2002). Wrong perceptions of African American students may be evident through a:

lack of respect and acceptance for cultural diversity (Howard, 2002; Revilla & Sweeney, 1997); low expectations for underachieving students (Steele, 1992); poor relationships between teachers and students (Sadowski, 2001); and a sense of advantage or privilege not benefiting all prevents the necessary changes from occurring in schools (Beswick, 1990; Gordon, Piana, & Keleher, 2000; Weissglass, 2001). (Smith, 2005, p. 22)

One major limitation in Smiths' gathering of data was the assumption that all African American students are economically disadvantaged (Al Dabbagh, 2020). Smith believed that schools need leaders who are culturally proficient and who can create culturally proficient schools. Lindsey, Robins, and Terrell (1999) addressed the needs of all students, and defined cultural proficiency as:

The policies and practices of an organization or the values and behaviors of an individual that enable that agency or person to interact effectively in a culturally diverse environment. Cultural proficiency is reflected in the way an organization treats its employees, its clients, and its community. (p. 21)

Gaps in access to school resources among different racial and socioeconomic

lines exist. According to a 2019 study from Edbuild, a school funding research group, most non-White school districts received an average of \$23 billion less than predominantly White school districts, even though they serve approximately the same number of students. Although not all low-income schools are predominantly African American or Latino students of color, this unequal funding, at the state and local levels, maintains well-resourced schools in primarily White American neighborhoods. In contrast, those districts that mainly serve African American, Latino, and low-income White American students struggle to finance basic supplies. In the next section, student learning related to culturally relevant pedagogy will be explored.

### **Teachers of African American Students**

Successful teachers of African American students use various methods in their teaching approaches. The pedagogy of culturally relevant teaching builds upon recognizing the importance of using students' cultural references in all aspects of learning (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Ladson-Billings proposed three main components of culturally relevant pedagogy:

- student learning and academic success,
- students' cultural competence to help develop positive ethnic and social identities,
- support with students' critical consciousness or their ability to recognize social injustices.

Utilizing all three components will ensure classroom practices support students' interests, knowledge, and everyday experiences, essential to their academic success and community connectedness. A culturally relevant teacher must focus on each component.

Aronson and Laughter (2016) found in their research on culturally relevant pedagogy in teacher preparation programs that an increased focus on high-stakes testing and accountability has minimized pre-service teachers' exposure and training in CRP. Despite the lack of focus on CRP in teacher preparation programs, some teachers identify as practitioners of CRP. Thus, my research asks what experiences we can learn from teachers who self-identify as using CRP, even if they lack formal training.

Culturally relevant teachers have high expectations and believe that all students can succeed. For example, Gertrude Winston, one of the eight participants in the study of Ladson-Billing (2009), stated that all students are "successful at something. The problem is that school often doesn't deal with the kinds of things they can and will be successful at" (p. 49).

Forman (2018) completed research with African American urban elementary teachers who had over 17 years of experience. Data was collected using one-to-one interviews with four urban elementary school principals, in addition to the collection of stories of five African American urban elementary teachers whom their principals selected. These teachers were considered successful in teaching African American students. Major themes found from the teacher interviews were (a) progressive teaching philosophy, (b) integration of technology, (c) differentiation, (d) cooperative learning, (e) culturally responsive curriculum, (f) high expectations, (g) caring, and (h) other mothering. The results of this qualitative study challenge other teachers to examine the methods they use to teach African American students in urban schools to be academically successful. In addition, these findings can promote culturally relevant pedagogy to decrease the opportunity gap. None of the teachers mentioned using culturally relevant

teaching practices or whether their descriptions of what they did in their classrooms aligned with culturally relevant teaching practices. However, they believed in the same teaching practices as those used with culturally relevant teaching.

The skills of some teachers go far beyond their roles as instructors (King, 1993). They serve as role models, parental figures, and advocates at work. They tend to build relationships with students of color that help them feel connected to their schools. In the classroom, they tend to be “warm demanders,” holding all students to high expectations academically and as members of a disciplined learning community (Ware, 2006). Because of their ways, they also enhance cultural understanding among colleagues of different races and backgrounds (Villegas, Strom, & Lucas, 2012).

Several observational and qualitative studies agree in their findings and conclusion that African American students learn best in environments with personable and relational teachers who are like family (Boykin, 1983, 1994; Willis, 1992, 1998). The extended family-like relationship between students and teachers stemmed high expectations being met for all students and accountability for themselves and others (Delpit, 1995; Hale-Benson, 1986; Hilliard, 1997, 1999; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 2001; Murrell, 1993; Willis, 1995).

Researchers Love and Kruger (2005) believed that successful teachers of African American students create a relational and personal environment. However, according to Love and Kruger (2005), there had never been a study that measured the culturally relevant beliefs of successful teachers who taught African American children, nor how their beliefs varied with student achievement. Therefore, they created a study examining teachers’ beliefs and how they varied with student achievement. Their research goals

were to create survey items that measure teachers culturally relevant beliefs from Ladson-Billings (1994), sample beliefs of those who teach primarily African American children in urban public schools and ascertain which teacher beliefs correlate with higher student achievement. Love and Kruger (2005) developed the survey adapted from Ladson-Billings (1994) to measure teachers' culturally relevant beliefs. Twenty-five of the 48 statements in the survey were from the beliefs and practices of the teachers in the Ladson-Billings (1994) study. Love and Kruger (2005) conducted two studies measuring teachers' culturally relevant beliefs and determining which ones correlated with higher student achievement.

Love and Kruger (2005) surveyed teachers in six urban schools serving African American students. Five of the six schools were in the southeastern part of the United States. The remaining school was in a university-based program. All six schools served free and reduced lunches, with four schools having 95% of the students receiving free and reduced lunches. This study's participants comprised 244 teachers, paraprofessionals, counselors, principals, instructional specialists, and media specialists.

The statements from Ladson-Billings (1994) centered around high expectations, cooperation, interaction among students, community connections, a commitment to education, and the importance of students' race, ethnicity, and learning culture. The survey statements on Love and Kruger (2005) centered on six dimensions of belief: knowledge; student's race, ethnicity, and culture; social relations in and beyond the classroom; teaching as a profession; teaching practice; and student needs and strengths. Additionally, Love and Kruger (2005) built upon the assertion of Boykin (1983, 1994, 2001) and Willis (1995) that "an African-centered learning environment emphasizes a

relational learning style and a pedagogy that has its roots in a universal spirituality that connects all beings” (p. 88).

In the first study by Love and Kruger (2005), participants completed the survey in their respective faculty meetings. A 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 0 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree) reflected Ladson-Billings’ study. The second study by Love and Kruger included two of the six participating schools and 50 of the 244 participants from the first study, all of whom were K-5 teachers. Love and Kruger’s second study (2005) correlated the survey items from Study 1 with students’ achievement scores. After the 50 teachers administered the Iowa test of basic skills (ITBS), a standardized achievement test often used in reading, math, and language arts, to all students in grades K-5, Love and Kruger (2005) correlated the scores for each test separately with the teacher’s beliefs. Then, they examined the relationships between teacher beliefs and student achievement.

The results of Study 1 revealed that 95% of teachers endorsed the idea that learning from students is as important as teaching them. Regarding students’ race, ethnicity, and culture, participants agreed that students’ race, culture, and ethnicity are important in teaching. The results revealed that at least half of teachers with more than 20 years of experience and who attended Historically Black colleges and universities (HBCU) expected to be a good match and to connect with all their students each year. They also agreed that the use of peer learning strategies to prepare their students for collective thinking, growth, and understanding.

Regarding the statements relating to teaching as a profession, the participants responded favorably to teaching in urban settings. Most participants endorsed the

culturally relevant statements relating to the practice of teaching such as, “Teaching is like an art; it involves dramatizing from the concrete experience to the conceptual level of understanding” (Love & Kruger, 2005, p. 91).

Participants endorsed all five culturally relevant statements regarding the needs and strengths of students. The following statements in this dimension were:

- The individual needs of the children are an important part of my planning effective lessons.
- Excellence is a standard that exists independent of individual differences.
- Every student I encounter is successful at something.
- Every child that comes to me, no matter how poor, is brilliant.” and
- I work with some of the most important people in the world, my students.

Nine of the 48 statements in the survey correlated with some measure of achievement. Of the nine beliefs, one was from the knowledge dimension, four were from the dimension of social relations, one was from the teaching profession, two from the teaching practice, and one from the dimension of students’ needs. These beliefs correlated with standard achievement and are listed as:

- It is my job to disseminate knowledge to my students.
- Every year some students can be expected not to be a good match for me; they may, however, succeed with someone else who better meets their needs.
- One student’s success is success for the whole class, and one student’s failure is failure for us all.
- Testing is an individual assessment; however, test results of an individual reflect on the group’s efforts toward helping the individual learn, as well.

- I hardly ever see or hear from the parents of children in my classroom.
- My purpose for teaching is to give something back to the community in the same way I was given an education.
- Sometimes I play the role of student and allow students to teach the class.
- With enough repetition, drill, and practice, students will attain a passing grade.
- Every student I encounter is successful at something.

The result in the total sample of this study (Love & Kruger, 2005) showed that only one belief from the dimensions of knowledge related significantly to students' success in reading and math. Although participants generally agreed with successful teachers in previous studies, the findings showed that the participants in this study differed regarding the role of the teacher as the disseminator of knowledge (Ladson-Billings, 1994, 2001; Willis, 1995, 1998). Participants in this study endorsed repetition, drills, and practice. They believed in the importance of students' race, culture, and ethnicity in their teaching and related world events to students' lives. Finally, the teachers affirmed the two "color-blind" statements, meaning they did not distinguish students' color or culture; instead, they saw just children correlated with reading achievement and student success.

More specifically, in findings from Love and Kruger (2005) Study 1, the participants agreed that learning from students is as important as teaching them to think critically. The participants, most of whom taught older students, expected students to come to class with content knowledge. This expectation was different from effective teachers in prior studies.

The participants in the total sample were ambivalent regarding social relations, particularly about how much they expected students to be responsible for one another and teachers' ability to connect with all students. However, most teachers with 20 or more years of experience affirmed that they could connect with their students. Further, the teachers in this study who attended HBCUs tended to believe that they could connect with their students, which opens an opportunity for further investigation regarding school climate and teacher education programs on HBCU campuses.

The participants in this study did not necessarily hold students accountable for one another's success, as may be expected in a traditional African American extended family context (Littlejohn-Blake & Darling, 1993). Teachers from prior studies (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Willis, 1995) felt responsible for all children at their school and expected students to take responsibility for one another. However, these studies have not distinguished how responsible teachers believe students should be for one another's learning.

Specifically, in Love and Kruger (2005) Study 2, teachers who disagreed that one student's success or failure did not mean success or failure for the whole class were likely to teach students with higher reading scores. The most consistent statements from the dimension of social relations were those regarding peer-learning to facilitate understanding and parent involvement. In Love and Kruger (2005) Study 1, the participants felt strongly about parents being actively involved and motivated. In Study 2, participants who saw parent involvement in the classroom taught students who scored higher than their peers on reading and math achievement tests. Ladson-Billings (1994) found that teachers who prioritized social relationships in the classroom and students'

families and communities created effective learning environments.

Regarding teaching as a profession, both studies endorsed the belief that teaching was where they belonged and that an urban school was the choice. Overall, the endorsements were congruent with successful teachers' beliefs in prior studies (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Willis, 1995). Love and Kruger (2005) implied that there might be multiple pathways to successfully teaching African American students, and teachers may hold various beliefs. However, more research on the ways classroom interaction and philosophies of teaching contribute to the differences in student outcomes will be helpful for practical teacher training.

There are qualitative and observational studies that found students often learn best in relational environments and when teachers have high expectations and accountability for themselves and others, which is like what is present in an extended family (Boykin et al., 2005; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 2001a, 2010; Perry & Delpit, 1998; Willis, 2003). At elementary schools where African American students performed higher than expected on standardized tests, it was found that the teachers held positive attitudes, high expectations, and positive extended family relations. The teachers felt responsible for themselves and their students as if they were their own (Love & Kruger, 2005).

The literature endorsed the position that when African American students encounter teachers of the same ethnicity, they experience a connection to their sociocultural lives more so than if they are taught by White American, middle-class teachers (Pang & Gibson, 2001). As documented by Milner (2006), African American teachers are far more than someone students can emulate because they bring a variety of similar attributes, such as family histories and diverse experiences, often omitted from the

utilized curriculum and texts. These cultural elements, in turn, increase student engagement and academic achievement and consequently decrease disciplinary issues for African American students (Wilder, 2000).

Moreover, the lack of cultural and social connections and experiences among teachers of different ethnicities from their African American students may result from failed standardized test scores, lower academic expectations, higher disciplinary actions toward African American students than non-African American students, and a more significant number of special education referrals (Naman, 2009). While there are capable teachers of other ethnicities who have been able to meet African American students' needs, research confirms that African American teachers possess similar cultural influences. Therefore, they can address the cultural norms that can increase achievement among African American students.

In many cases, it is unlikely that African American students will have an African American teacher who may understand the cultural values and characteristics they bring to the classroom (Howard, 2001a). Research shows that every student wants to be treated equally by their teachers, regardless of race, ethnicity, class, and other social characteristics (McGrady & Reynolds, 2013). Unfortunately, substantial scholarly evidence indicates that teachers evaluate African American students' behavior and academic potential more negatively than White American students (Alexander, Entwisle, Cadigan & Pallas, 1987; Downey & Pribesh, 2004; Ehrenberg, Goldhaber, & Brewer, 1995; Morris, 2005; Sbarra & Pianta, 2001). Cultural misunderstanding for many African American students results in negative labeling, and academic underachievement thus becomes a part of their experience in school (Howard, 2001a). However, Nieto

(2004) emphasized that a teacher having the same race or culture as a student does not make her culturally relevant. For example, when Ladson-Billings (2006a) began documenting the practices of teachers who achieved success with African American students, she commented she had no idea that the notion of good teaching would associate with the concept of a heroic isolate, occurring once or not often. However, there are components of CRP in many teachers.

Ladson-Billings (1994) identified culturally relevant characteristics that encourage teachers to examine their practices and beliefs. Ladson-Billings (2006b) stated that teachers should think about pedagogical practices and understand theories to succeed. One successful teacher who drew on practical, theoretical insights was Hill (2009), a White American teacher, who successfully used hip-hop during his English literature lesson because of its connection to the cultural experiences of his students. Hill focused on the relationship and identity work students had to make between themselves and various aspects of hip-hop culture (e.g., rap, music, turntablism, graffiti, breakdancing, fashion, language). This research is known as hip-hop based education. Hill researched how hip-hop shaped his students' experiences, in and outside of school, and how he could use popular culture to construct racial and national identities of people who have lived in the same generation. As a result, Hill taught them to build and contest memories and engage in discourse about their identity.

Luke (2020) conducted the study in eighth-grade English language arts classrooms. In one of the middle schools, of the 3,121 students, 76% were White American, while 24% were a minority or African American. The teachers in this study were responsible for teaching English Language Arts and reading during their class

periods. The study researcher was one of the teachers who taught English language arts and reading. Luke (2020) wanted the perspectives of eighth-grade students on what constituted the personal traits of a good teacher. Personal qualities included social and relationship-building and professional characteristics such as focusing on knowledge, instructional techniques, and classroom management. Luke (2020) focused on the students' poetry, essays, and metaphors about what makes a good teacher. Additionally, Luke (2020) used grounded theory to frame the study. She highlighted the adjectives, phrases, and examples within their descriptive writings of good teachers, such as strong-minded. Luke added similar descriptors compared to the students and found that the students' descriptors fell into three main categories: personal, professional, and interpersonal. One student described her teacher in an essay, "Mrs. Price is a good teacher because she helps you by explaining. She will help you until you get it." (Luke, 2020, p. 116). The same student also described this teacher as caring and continued writing, "She loves all of her students, and she shows it. She is always making sure we are okay" (Luke, 2020, p. 116). Luke found that the students described good teachers as having combined qualities such as caring, loving, helpful, inspiring, and interactive. Based on her data, good teachers demonstrate interpersonal attributes that connect students to their teachers and learning in both professional and personal ways.

Culturally relevant teaching shares the features of constructivist, student-centered, and authentic learning practice (Newmann et al., 1996; Richardson, 2003; Yilmaz, 2008) and connects course content with students' prior knowledge. One feature of learning is evident when people actively construct or make their knowledge by using their experiences. As it is culturally relevant, teaching involves embedding students' home

lives, communities, and cultural funds of knowledge. In other words, in students' households, there are at their disposal a wide variety of skills, knowledge, and competencies within their lives and community history. Ladson-Billings (1995a) and Sleeter (2012) argued that the features of culturally relevant teaching, such as its focus on academic achievement and valuing students' interest and knowledge, are qualities of good teaching. However, these practices of good teaching are less often seen for African American students, so achievement gaps continue.

Another example of understanding and using pedagogical practices and theories was evident in Bennett's (2012) study. Bennett investigated eight White American pre-service teachers' knowledge of CRP as they tutored urban elementary African American children in writing at a community center. The pre-service teachers were part of a field study at a university. Bennett conducted interviews with the pre-service teachers individually and as a focus group. The teachers also answered weekly task questions about CRP that revealed insight into their understanding. Bennett explored their knowledge of culturally relevant pedagogy through the lens of teachers: (a) recognizing their conceptions of themselves and others, (b) understanding the significance of connecting and sustaining meaningful relationships with students, and (c) connecting learning to students' lives (Grant & Ladson-Billings, 1997; Ladson-Billings, 1992b). The review of this area of research on White American teachers of African American students suggested that bias can sometimes negatively impact student success. Yet, appropriate social and cultural awareness can positively impact African American students. Many of these studies only made initial findings. More research on White American teachers and how they use reflective practices that can improve African American student outcomes is

needed. In the next section of the literature review, I will provide some ideas and insights that can help with the instruction of all teachers regarding experiences, culture, and practices when teaching African American students (Landsman & Lewis, 2011).

Hammond (2015), a teacher educator, defined culturally relevant teaching, culturally responsive teaching, and culturally responsive and sustaining as variations of the same thing. In an interview with Bauer (2021), Hammond explained:

I just want to say upfront, culturally responsive teaching, some people call it culturally responsive and sustaining, some people are talking about culturally relevant, these are all variations of the same thing. Just like COVID variants. It's all COVID. But the reality is this is an algorithm. So, it is not so much a set of strategies as I could just rattle off. But just like in math, we talk about an algorithm being a set of numbers and processes and procedures and operations coming together synergistically. (para. 29)

Hammond (2015) spent one day per month with a group of beginning teacher support providers. The support providers consisted of veteran teachers who coached, supported, and mentored new teachers during their first 2 years in the classroom. While working with them, Hammond (2015) realized that the support providers she helped could not clearly define culturally responsive teaching nor understand what it was. Hammond wrote about demystifying culturally responsive pedagogy and clearing myths. The first myth, culturally responsive teaching, motivates students of color. Hammond (2018) explained Ladson-Billings' definition of culturally relevant pedagogy, "What is important in her definition is the fact that CRP is about the intellectual, social, and emotional foundations of learning. It isn't about entertainment or heroes and holidays.

It's not a gimmick" (para.13-14).

Culturally relevant pedagogy goes beyond teaching about different races and cultures. Instead, CRP supports all students with connections to and with these differences. Hammond (2018) reiterated that CRP is not the next myth; being culturally relevant requires a teacher to master the details of every culture represented in his classroom. However, as Hammond (2018) explained, individuals may only need to focus on two or three different cultures and find where their norms, values, beliefs, and ways of doing intersect and overlap. Furthermore, individuals must understand the diversity within a racial or cultural group.

Another myth is that culturally relevant teaching is about respecting the "culture of poverty" (Hammond, 2018, para. 22). According to Hammond (2018), poverty is not a "culture." No one chooses poverty as a lifestyle. Instead, they live in poverty because of the effects of systemic oppression. A culturally responsive teacher understands that, acknowledges this reality, and then uses this information simply as one of many cultural reference points when helping students make meaning of new concepts or develop new skills. Another myth is that only teachers of color can be truly culturally responsive (2018). Hammond (2018) explained, "Being a culturally competent educator is less about your racial background and more about developing what we call 'a cultural eye,' a way to look at the cultural differences in the classroom and respond to them positively and constructively" (para. 26).

Further, Irvine (2010) discovered that many teachers have only a cursory understanding of culturally relevant pedagogy, and their efforts to bridge the cultural gap often fail. These well-meaning educators often assume that culturally relevant pedagogy

means acknowledging ethnic holidays, including popular culture in the curriculum, or adopting colloquial speech. Many are afraid to extend beyond that. Irvine (2010) also found that some teachers believe the following additional myths:

- Only teachers of color can be culturally relevant.
- Culturally relevant pedagogy is not appropriate for White American students.
- Caring teachers of diverse students have no classroom management skills.
- Culturally relevant pedagogy aims to help diverse students “feel good” about themselves.
- Culturally relevant teachers attend to learning styles by addressing African American male students’ need for kinesthetic activities or allowing Asian American students to work alone. (p. 58)

Another misconception is that culturally responsive teaching builds relationships and self-esteem. While healthy relationships and student self-esteem are necessary factors in setting the stage for learning, they do not directly increase students’ ability to do more challenging academic work (Román-González, Pérez-González, & Jiménez-Fernández, 2017).

How, then, do teachers operationalize CRP? According to Ullucci and Battey (2011), in college, pre-service teachers often learn about multicultural education and diversity in university settings. However, many rarely learn how to put these concepts into practice. For example, Ullucci and Battey (2011) studied White American teachers of African American students in urban schools. Ullucci and Battey (2011) observed the teachers for 45 minutes to 2½ hours on how they applied CRP in their classrooms. Each teacher was observed four to six times a semester and interviewed three to four times. Ullucci and Battey (2011) grouped the findings into academic content (what teachers

chose to teach) and teaching strategies (how teachers taught their students). Ullucci and Battey (2011) shared examples of how each teacher operationalized CRP in his findings, with both categories revealing ways CRP operated. The findings of the academic content revealed that teachers included culturally diverse content through reading, acting, role-playing, and art. For example, second-grade students created a cultural museum to collect cultural artifacts from home to display in class. The teachers also taught cultural content representing most of their class's students. Teachers' decisions like these were necessary because many textbooks left out all Americans' history, culture, and points of view. In addition, teachers emphasized ethnic identity and allowed students to share their home cultures in meaningful ways, allowing those identities to be recognized.

### **Summary**

This literature review explored the relevant topics that frame my research questions and the overall direction of this study. To set the stage, I began by establishing a broad understanding of culturally relevant pedagogy and the history of African American education and schools. I then turned to disparities experienced by African American students in public education in the present. I concluded by examining some best practices and experiences of teachers who serve African American students. This review of literature frames my research, an in-depth examination of six teachers who self-identify as using culturally relevant pedagogy with African American students in a public-school setting. Inquiring about CRP specifically can assist in codifying best practices and integrating lessons learned into targeted professional learning for teachers of African American students.

In my 31 years in public education, I have noticed that teachers who demonstrate

caring for students have better classroom engagement and more time spent on teaching and learning. Their use of care made me curious about the other elements of CRP that could improve student achievement. It is vital to understand what teachers who use CRP in their classroom do and why because the shift from unconscious best practices to the intentional use of CRP could hold great promise for improving the educational outcomes of African American students. The literature advances the research question by establishing and connecting CRP with historical and present-day challenges and successes in African American education. Finally, the research clarifies the urgency and progression of effective teacher practices, perspectives of successful teachers, and insights that could improve professional learning and coaching for teachers.

In the next chapter, I outlined my research methods and design, detailing my data collection and analysis approach. Finally, I provided an overview of the setting and descriptive sketches of the study participants, my role as a researcher, and the considerations of researcher subjectivity.

## **CHAPTER III: RESEARCH METHODS**

*We honor those who walked so we could run. We must run so our children soar. And we will not grow weary.*

~~~~~President Barak Obama, 2015 (Obama, 2015)

In this chapter, participants and setting, data collection, and analysis are detailed with examples to demonstrate how my thoughts influenced what was done. Beyond the data gathering and analysis procedures and details about the reliability and validity, I recognized my role as a researcher and the importance of acknowledging and monitoring my subjectivity. I kept a researcher journal with memos that tracked my thinking throughout the study. The memos are italicized interspersed in this chapter to show the evolution of the work.

### **Research Design: Case Study**

The primary approach for this research was the case study (Stake, 1995). I chose the case study approach after reading Merriam and Muhamad (2000), which was a qualitative case study that presented descriptions of Malaysian culture as seen through the experiences of Malaysian people. The descriptive nature of their work was something I hoped to mimic as I shared the experiences of my participants. Merriam and Muhamad (2000) collected data through interviews and informal observations of settings then used in-depth descriptions to make their participants' experiences come alive for readers. Inspired by Merriam and Muhamad's case study and the descriptive narratives they

captured in their interviews, I too collected data through multiple participant interviews and presented that data in a fashion like Merriam and Muhamad's study.

I used an instrumental case-study approach (Stake, 1995). Instrumental refers to a particular case examined mainly to provide insight into an issue or to redraw a generalization (Stake, 1995). However, I took liberties with the boundaries of the case, which is discussed in Merriam's (2002) qualitative research book. First, I considered the six individual teachers as a case unto themselves in order to honor their voice and maintain the unique context and experiences of each person. Highlights from each person's case are presented in Chapter 4 as sketches. I considered a "sketch" to be a shortened form of what Seidman referred to as a vignette. The school's case, where each teacher worked, and subsequent analysis yielded theories that are presented in Chapter 5.

### **Context**

While serving as an instructional coach at Curtis Elementary School (pseudonym), I found it interesting that the achievement scores of this school moderately increased after 3 years of chronically low performance. Curtis Elementary served 99% African American elementary students and had a positive climate. Witnessing this increase made me curious to learn what was going on there and what type of teaching contributed to these improvements. There had been a high turnover of teachers at Curtis Elementary (pseudonym). First-time African American female serving as principal, of this relatively newly hired staff of teachers. After 3 years of her principalship, student learning was turning around in this once low-performing school. I first wanted to know more about the causes of the gains in student learning. What experiences were students having that helped them to be more successful and encouraged them to work toward

improvements? How did each teacher who self-identified as a culturally relevant teacher impact the students' learning? I hoped finding answers to these questions and provide valuable insight. I quickly realized my research questions needed attention. Therefore, through this study, I sought to gather data to generate descriptive stories that could inspire others to improve teaching and learning outcomes with African American students and discover themes related to practice that may inform those wanting to change.

### **Research Questions**

My research questions evolved as I moved through my research journey. They transitioned from student learning to teacher beliefs, to the role of CRP in the students' learning to what I have here. I began creating research questions about the beliefs of teachers who used CRP with African American students.

After learning more about CRP, I aimed to widen my lens to hear about the participants' experiences and, from that, concluded that their beliefs would stem from their life experiences. Dr. Richard Schmertzling reinforced my decision to broaden my observations because having participants who had read about CRP and have a foundation for using it was needed to gain the answers to my questions and satisfied my curiosity. Adding to the research of using culturally relevant pedagogy when teaching African American students in elementary school, I began my journey to explore how teachers came to understand CRP and how they transfer their knowledge of it to application in classrooms with African American elementary students. My research questions were as follows:

1. What are the experiences of six elementary teachers of African American students who self-identify as using culturally relevant pedagogy in urban elementary schools in the South?
2. What practices do these teachers use to help African American students learn?
3. How do teachers of African American students in urban elementary schools in the South implement culturally relevant pedagogy?

Being familiar with Curtis Elementary as it was the school that originally inspired my interest in this topic, knowing that I could observe teachers there and having an awareness that teachers had been aware of CRP, I needed to then consider who at the school might be helpful at answering my research questions.

### **Participant Selection**

Maxwell (2013) discussed the strategy of purposeful selection and the circumstances under which it is appropriate. He identified goals for purposeful selection and the circumstances under which it is appropriate. The first goal for using purposeful selection in my study was “to select groups of individuals with whom [I] can establish the most productive relationship, ones that will best enable [me] to answer [my] research questions” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 99). The second goal was to select participants who purposefully capture the heterogeneity in the population. Therefore, I chose individuals who represented various years of teaching, taught different grade levels, and attended various colleges and universities. The third reason for carefully selecting participants was to choose individuals who understand CRP and whose life and classroom experiences could help answer my research questions. The goal validated my intent to select willing and motivated teachers to discuss their teaching practices in the classroom.

Allowing these three goals to reinforce my participant selection process, I began thinking about seeking volunteers. I intended to use at least six participants for in-depth interviewing.

I was looking for teachers at an elementary school with a high African American percentage of students and teachers who understood culturally relevant teaching, used culturally relevant pedagogy, self-identified as culturally relevant teachers, and were female. The following excerpt from my reflective memo provides some details of my thoughts:

*After talking with Dr. Richard Schmertzing about participant selection, I became clear about choosing participants and the setting. Dr. Richard Schmertzing said, "I think we want people (participants in my study) who say they practice CRP, read about CRP, and have a foundation of CRP. The literature needs to know what teachers who say they use CRP are doing. How would you know if they read about CRP or had some training? Also, how will you know the depth of their training before interviewing?" Dr. Lorraine Schmertzing led me to consider making a flyer with the criteria that could be publicly displayed so everyone has an equal opportunity to volunteer. I took the advice of Dr. Lorraine Schmertzing and created a flyer that indicated participant requirements.*

The requirements were that the participants be African American, female, a teacher of elementary students, understand culturally relevant pedagogy, and self-identify as a culturally relevant teacher. The criteria included a time commitment of three 1-hour interviews and two classroom observations. I posted the flyers in areas within the elementary school such as the teacher restrooms, the cafeteria, and the main office because of the potential for large numbers of teachers to read the flyer. Then I selected

from the volunteers based on the teachers who called to tell me that they were interested in volunteering.

In an email that I sent to the potential volunteers, I provided a one-page summary explaining my study and inviting their definitive participation. I did not require participants to be experts in using CRP; instead, I was more open and inclusive of teachers who self-identified as culturally relevant teachers rather than being narrow in participant selection. In phone conversations, each participant shared where they first learned about culturally relevant pedagogy and why they were interested in sharing their experiences. I focused on females only for my study because they comprised 77% of public-school teachers in 2017-18 (NCES, 2022). Based on criteria and phone conversation I selected my participants. After gaining permission from VSU IRB (see Appendix A) and the principal of the urban elementary school selected, I posted a flyer to recruit teachers who use CRP in their classrooms with African American students. Within 5 days of posting the flyer, eight teachers showed interest in participating and agreed via email to participate in the research.

Creswell (2014) stated that targeting a specific number of participants in a qualitative case study was unnecessary. However, from Creswell's review of many qualitative studies, he recommended that case studies include four to five participants. I began interviewing eight teachers to attend to Seidman's (2013) warnings and avoid not having enough data to make sense of the teachers' experiences. After the first series of interviews, two potential participants said they would not have time to commit due to other duties and responsibilities in the school. However, six teachers remained in the study. The six remaining teachers ranged from having 3-28 years of formal experience in

a classroom setting. At that point, I was ready to recreate an interview schedule and begin gaining insight into their experiences. Unfortunately, my plan to interview and observe participants in their physical classroom to better understand and capture the setting in which the participants interact, was interrupted before it got started.

Immediately, after securing participants, the COVID-19 pandemic hit in full force. Classrooms worldwide were impacted from early 2020 through the 2021 school year while I was attempting to gather data. As a result of the virus, the students were quarantined to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and being infected with the virus. Many students attended school online for instruction and finished out the school year instead of going to the actual classroom setting in person for instruction. Meeting face-to-face was not an option for anyone during my study. Therefore, I made adjustments to the data collection process. Online interviews were the primary source of data collection, some participants shared artifacts electronically during the interviews, and the observations were conducted via ZOOM, a video conferencing platform. Table 1 provides the participants' names, the dates and duration of the observed lessons. Their students' grade levels, and a description of the task and student work completed after the observed lessons.

**Table 1.***Virtual Lessons Observed*

| Participant | Date of online class observation | Length of time in minutes | Subject observed              | Grade | Task and/or student product                                                                                                                                                                   |
|-------------|----------------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------------|-------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Regina      | May 4                            | 30                        | English Language Arts         | 4     | Identify main idea using the article about Ramadan                                                                                                                                            |
| Regina      | May 5                            | 30                        | English Language Arts         | 4     | Identify which details in a text are the most important                                                                                                                                       |
| Octavia     | May 6                            | 30                        | Social Studies                | 5     | Explain why personal spending and saving decisions are important                                                                                                                              |
| Alexis      | May 6                            | 30                        | Math                          | 5     | Place value                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| Alexis      | May 13                           | 30                        | Math                          | 5     | Identify which details in a text are the most important                                                                                                                                       |
| Nova        | May 13                           | 60                        | English Language Arts<br>Math | 1     | Ask and answer questions/identify common two-dimensional shapes (e.g., rectangles, squares, rhombuses, triangles, trapezoids, hexagons, circles) draw shapes that possess defining attributes |
| Octavia     | May 13                           | 20                        | English Language Arts         | 5     | Determine the opportunity costs of your goal                                                                                                                                                  |
| Evva        | May 14                           | 45                        | Writing                       | 3     | Flint contaminated water crisis article                                                                                                                                                       |
| Evva        | May 19                           | 30                        |                               | 3     | Opinion writing letters to your mayor about the Flint water crisis                                                                                                                            |
| Brianna     | May 3                            | N/A                       | Art                           | K-5   | Student work samples uploaded online and Jean Michael Basquiat work sample                                                                                                                    |

*Note.* Each participant was observed teaching two lessons with their students. Brianna shared student work samples as she did not have virtual classes.

While teaching virtually during COVID-19, the expectation was for students to use their Chromebooks provided by our school district to log onto their virtual platforms and participate in live lessons with their teachers. During some observed lessons, at the most, 13-15 students were present. Rarely ever did every student in the participants' classes attend their virtual lessons on any given day. According to the participants, the reasons for students' absences stemmed from a lack of reliably fast internet, unsupervised challenges, and the psychological impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in general. I used additional data-gathering techniques, such as collecting students' work and interviews.

The six participants selected for my study worked at the same school where I was employed as an instructional coach, Curtis Elementary. It is a K-5 public school in a southeastern state in a school district where 72% of the school district students are Black, 16% of students are White, and 12% of students are Hispanic, Asian, or two or more races. My role as instructional coach was to support classroom teachers during the regular school days in all content areas, including classroom management. Before beginning my study, I did not know five of the participants other than by name because another instructional coach at Curtis Elementary supported them, although I did have a cordial professional relationship with all six. Therefore, I understood the participants' perspectives and began to build relationships. According to Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffmann Davis (1997), empathy supports the formation of research relationships. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffmann Davis (1997) discussed the importance of a researcher or portraitist imaginatively building research relationships and putting oneself in the participants' place, experiencing their hurt, anxiety, emotions, and thoughts. For portraitists, empathy is an important and central element of relationship building.

Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffmann Davis (1997) believed that, when listening and responding to participants, the portraitist can try to understand their perspectives and even though I was not constructing Lawrence-Lightfoot's type of portraits, I wanted to maintain that type of relationship with participants.

I made efforts to understand my participants' perspectives throughout the study. I thought extending empathy was important because I witnessed how they worked to overcome the challenges of transitioning to remote teaching when schools closed due to COVID-19 pandemic. The participants scrambled to change their classrooms into virtual learning environments in a matter of days, a practice many had never experienced. In a matter of days.

When interviewing my participants, I listened as they expressed how they managed their anxiety and teaching their students from home. The following is a memo describing the empathy that I extended to build relationships:

*I appreciate the time when my participants and I can chat briefly before the interviews begin. Usually, the participants talk about their challenges with students logging on consistently and strategies they have been using to teach certain skills digitally. The opportunity to check in and show that I see them pivoting to make virtual learning engaging and efficient is noticed. I want them to know that I see them during this difficult time. Because it is a sensitive time, I hope they feel appreciated and supported during this unprecedented time and as they offer that same empathy to their students.*

Other times, before the interviews, the participants and I discussed our families, vacations, and things we looked forward to in our personal lives. I began to realize the

affinity between myself and each of the six participants was becoming evident based on the genuine conversations that occurred without the need to patronize them. Trust and rapport developed and helped to build confidence in the interview process. As long ago as 1954, Hyman et al. explained how an interviewer paying attention to and being interested in participants experiences often inspired them to reconstruct personal and sensitive situations in the interviews, which is something that happened in my research. As a result of my efforts at relationship building, the participants shared openly and with emotion even from the start in Interview 1.

### **Data Collection**

Data was obtained from several sources and in multiple ways, including individual interviews, direct observations of the participants' lessons with students via Zoom video conferencing, and pertinent artifacts such as student writings, drawings, and classroom assignments. Memoing in my researcher journal generated another important data source. Each will be discussed in upcoming sections.

### **Interviews**

Stake (1995) noted that interviews are essential elements of an instrumental case study. Therefore, I used Seidman's (2013) three-phase interview approach to collect data about the experiences and strategies employed by teachers who use culturally relevant pedagogy with African American students. Additionally, I collected data on how teachers view the impact of using CRP with African American students to achieve academic success, cultural competence, and critical thinking. Teachers' stories of life experiences and their descriptions of how they use CRP in classrooms with African American students provided a general understanding of how each participant moved from

not knowing to then learning about and using CRP. The information I gathered can help guide professional learning and allow teachers to develop practical ways to implement culturally relevant pedagogy to enhance learning, make learning relevant to all their students' lives, and create opportunities to empower African American students through their education. To accomplish this several research questions were established to guide the work.

Patton (2002) stated that the purpose of interviewing is to find out what is on the minds of people and to gather their stories. Maxwell (2013) noted that “although observations provide a direct and powerful way of learning about people’s behavior and the context in which this occurs, interviewing can also be a valuable way of gaining a description of actions and events” (p. 103). Seidman (2013) explained, “The root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience” (p. 9). Seidman (2013) also stated that “at the heart of interviewing, research is an interest in other individuals’ stories because of their worth” (p. 9). For these reasons, I decided to collect the bulk of my qualitative data by interviewing the participants using Seidman’s (2013) three-interview series.

Before conducting the interviews with participants, I ran a pilot interview with a few teacher colleagues. The pilot interviews helped me do as Stake (1995) suggested and reflect on the substance of information received from the interviewees, flag any concerns, gaps, or issues, and discern the relative appropriateness of the questions for my study. In reflecting on my pilot interviewing experiences, I revised the interview questions (see Appendix B) to ensure an efficient and thorough data collection process (Seidman, 2013).

The three-interview series structure afforded me the opportunity to elicit information on the teachers' life history in the first interview, their current experiences with CRP and teaching in the second interview, and the meaning of their experiences in the third interview (Seidman, 2013). The choice of using the three-interview series aligned with Stake (1995), who explained that case study reporting is not simply storytelling but is either "a chronological or biographical development of the case, a researchers' view of coming to know the case, or a description one by one of several major components of the case" (p. 127). Table 2 illustrates the dates and the durations of each interview with my participants. The list includes the duration of each interview in minutes, and the names of the participants are in the order in which the interviews occurred.

The data collected in the first set of interviews was derived from eliciting information about each teacher's life history. The questions allowed the participants to share their personal, familial, and educational experiences. I used Maxwell's suggestion for incorporating past tense questions that referred to events in the participants' lives to elicit concrete examples. The data collected in the second set of interviews was derived from gathering information about their teaching experiences. The questions allowed participants to describe their experiences with CRP practices in the classroom with African American students. They elicited descriptions of the teachers' classroom instruction and information regarding their relationships with students and educators (Seidman, 2013). In addition, there were opportunities for participants to describe their experiences using CRP practices in the classroom with African American students. Finally, the goal of the third interview, as Seidman (2013) pointed out, was for

participants to talk about “the intellectual and emotional connections between their work and life experiences” (p. 22) on the topic of CRP. Questions in the third set of interviews allowed the participants to reflect on the meaning of their described experiences. I asked questions such as: “What outcomes do you expect to see as a result of using CRP with African American students?”.

**Table 2.**

*Participant Interview Schedule*

| Participants' Names | Date 2020 | Interview Number | Duration of Interview |
|---------------------|-----------|------------------|-----------------------|
| Tracey              | April 28  | Pilot Interview  | 90                    |
| Nova                | May 1     | 1                | 90                    |
| Alexis              | May 1     | 1                | 79                    |
| Octavia             | May 1     | 1                | 86                    |
| Brianna             | May 2     | 1                | 92                    |
| Evva                | May 4     | 1                | 80                    |
| Regina              | May 4     | 1                | 84                    |
| Octavia             | May 8     | 2                | 90                    |
| Alexis              | May 8     | 2                | 90                    |
| Brianna             | May 9     | 2                | 100                   |
| Nova                | May 9     | 2                | 90                    |
| Evva                | May 11    | 2                | 88                    |
| Regina              | May 11    | 2                | 90                    |
| Alexis              | May 15    | 3                | 73                    |
| Octavia             | May 15    | 3                | 82                    |
| Brianna             | May 16    | 3                | 98                    |
| Evva                | May 18    | 3                | 92                    |
| Regina              | May 19    | 3                | 85                    |
| Nova                | May 23    | 3                | 70                    |

*Note.* Time duration is shown in minutes.

As is clear from Table 2, all participants' first interviews were completed before moving on to any second interviews. All second interviews were completed before starting the third round of interviewing everyone.

As Seidman (2013) suggested, the length of time between each person's three interviews was approximately one week. The length of space between the interviews

provided time for the participants to reflect on their experiences and allowed the three-interview series structure to work as Seidman (2013) designed it. To reflect on the interviews, the length of space between them also allowed time for me to listen to the digital voice-recorded interviews, read the transcribed content, and write notes on key ideas, which was a technique suggested by Stake (1995).

The interview questions were a combination of semi-structured and open-ended questions. The open-ended questions allowed the participants to use whatever experiences they wanted to describe their practices. Patton (2002) noted “open-ended questions and probes yielding in-depth responses about people’s experiences, perceptions, opinions, feelings, and knowledge,” were an important interview approach if a researcher wanted to obtain the type data for which I was looking (p. 354). Therefore, I worked to structure my interview guides to facilitate this. For example, I asked, “When I walk into your classroom, what do I see?” I developed the questions (see Appendix B) to allow participants to “reconstruct their experiences and to explore their meaning” (Seidman, 2013, p. 94). I developed the questions as a guide for me as an interviewer to ensure each participant had the same opportunities to respond to prompts. I then decided which information to pursue in greater depth. I used prompts, like “Please tell me a story about that experience.” I used this prompt sparingly because I could see that my participants struggled to tell details in order with a beginning, middle, and end structure. So instead, I targeted specific experiences using, “Please talk more about that.”

When I wanted the participant to elaborate upon a topic, I relied on probes prepared with the goal to explore further what a given participant had shared (Seidman, 2013). Seidman (2013) believed studying the participants’ words too long could make

them uncomfortable and more likely to modify what they were trying to say to fit what they thought the interviewer wanted to hear. Seidman (2013) explained that too little time exploring might leave the interviewer unclear about what the participant shared. As the interviewer, I kept this in mind and strived to hear the participants' experiences without making them uncomfortable. For example, a participant asked if my beliefs about African American students had changed. Then, she asked if I could share my beliefs. After I shared the story, which I detailed in Chapter 5, she grappled to make meaning of her initial thinking about students that had changed. She finally shared that she initially believed art was accessible to all. However, after teaching, she realized that was not the case—that art is not highly regarded. Furthermore, that revelation empowered her to share more. I wrote the following memo,

*I will try not to be disappointed if the interviews don't turn out how I expect them. I am only collecting data, and whatever I collect will be sufficient to analyze some of their culturally relevant approach to teaching. I am still uncertain if any of the participants will implement all the practices of culturally relevant pedagogy that can lead to students having more academic success. Then again, they may be. I hope to learn what the participants are concerned about and if they are doing too much of a reduction of CRP in their classroom. I am interested in each teacher's story to inform the administration, college pre-service, and other teachers on what steps they could take to push students intellectually.*

Immediately after the interviews, I memoed about how the parts of the interview connected to what I wanted to learn. I needed Patton (2002) along with Dr. Richard Schmertzing's advice and coupled the valuable interview data with the observation,

student work, and memo. Because I am African American, I was concerned participants may tell me what they thought I wanted to hear since I am part of the study racially, so I added observations in order to see the teachers in action. This also helped alleviate concerns of my racial influence during the interviews.

### **Observation of the Lessons**

To understand what CRP looked like in action, I went into the online classrooms to observe as an insider. I could have captured answers to my research questions using just interviews. However, observations enriched my understanding of what my participants did in addition to their interviews. All but one participant did not teach virtually; however, she assigned classwork through Google Classroom, an online portal teachers use to set, mark, and return assignments. For example, the students uploaded photos of their art assignment to Google Classroom. I was granted access to the participant's Google Classroom instead of a Zoom session. In addition to the interviews and observations, I examined instructional artifacts as additional data sources. I will share what I discovered while writing the participants' stories. Additionally, there was value in learning things that the participants did not share during their interviews, and I gained a more comprehensive view of their experiences using CRP.

My role as an instructional coach at Curtis Elementary requires me to observe teaching and learning daily. Part of my role as an instructional coach is to observe teachers and students, look for strategies that maximize student engagement and learning, and provide teachers with feedback on their lesson. However, Patton (2002) mentioned that a person equipped with functioning senses does not make that person a skilled observer. When I observed the participants in my study, I relied on observing as I do as

the instructional coach. I recorded descriptions of what I observed, the teachers' actions, and how students responded to what occurred. I wrote my observations and noted the teachers' questioning, teaching visuals, small group support, learning targets, and instruction. Beyond observing those things, I gathered information from different kinds of data. For instance, I captured the participants' own words when speaking with students during the lessons; I observed what happened during the lessons and what did not occur during the lessons (Patton, 2002). I used a graphic organizer to note the words of students and teachers. Both observations of what occurred and what did not occur were valuable data for answering my research questions, which was clear in looking through my research journal.

### **Researcher Memoing Journal**

According to Maxwell (2013), memoing is a critical way of developing ideas. I did as he suggested and included my reflections, ideas, and questions about meanings of a topic or what may have been a valuable insight (Maxwell, 2013). Throughout the entire research process, using memos helped me realize how intricately everything related. I realized early in the process that I needed to record all my thoughts and reflections in a detailed manner, or they would get lost. Rather than lose them, I wanted to use them in the data analysis process to keep my bias in check. These memos were kept in a researcher journal that was small and durable enough to be carried everywhere I went while conducting my research. They were written in addition to my observation notes, participant transcription, and class artifacts as data and proved important as I processed, analyzed, and made sense of participants' stories. For example, during the data collection process, notes were taken before, during, and after interviews; following Stake's (1995)

suggestions, these notes were added to the researcher's journal as memos that began shaping the overview as well intricacies of each case. It was clear to me how Maxwell (2013) notion that memos written while conducting the study helped organize my reflections and analytical thoughts researchers have. I experienced memoing that way. The memos also reminded me of aspects that may be important during data analysis, such as why I did something a certain way, the adjustments I made in doing it, and the things I threw out. Saldaña (2016) suggested memos could trigger reflection on a meaning deeper than one's original assessment. I also wrote memos to capture my thoughts about the interviews and any strong reactions inspired by what participants said. The brief time I had between interviews allowed time for this thinking to happen. Other times I memoed about how my research journey was going in general. For instance, the following memo described my anxiousness:

*I feel very distant from the students and teachers. For the past 2 months, the school system has opened schools between certain hours to drive by to pick up computers for students to ensure every kid had a device during the shelter-in-place due to the COVID-19 pandemic. For the past 3 weeks, teachers and students have been preparing to teach virtual live lessons instead of continuing to upload assignments to student platforms to complete them independently of the teacher. The participants did not anticipate having to teach their students online when they agreed to be observed for my study. They have not complained about being at home and not having what they may need to teach, nor have they asked to change the interview times. Overall, each participant is committed; however, each participant has agreed to continue to be interviewed via Zoom. I begin my*

*interviews tomorrow, and I am anxious to see how many students show up for class.*

This memo illustrates how the teachers at Curtis Elementary responded to the cancellation of in-person classes due to COVID-19 and the impact of the school closure on my fieldwork. The student work samples that I observed were from the virtual classrooms of Evva, Regina, and Brianna. Brianna asked her students to produce colorful collages using home materials, and Regina asked students to read a passage. She asked them to identify the main idea and supporting details. Evva's students wrote a letter to their mayor responding to the Flint water crisis and suggestions for keeping water safe from contamination in their communities. Each artifact allowed me to gain additional information regarding the teacher's expectations of the students and the nature of the conversations between students and the participants and their students.

### **Artifacts**

The student work that the teacher assigned was always completed after the lesson, and students logged off Zoom conference. In some lessons, the students read their work aloud, or the teacher presents the student's work on her screen using a document camera to reflect it. The share screen feature on Zoom allowed all the students to see another student's work, making the lesson more collaborative. The work samples provided data about student learning and insights into student thinking. None of the participants in the study shared students' graded assignments during the virtual class. All assignments were without teacher correction or editing. However, the teacher provided the student with feedback to push the students to understand better the skills taught and, ultimately, independence in the learning process.

The variety across these four data-gathering techniques helped me gain reliable data for my analysis. The process of gathering data using the three-interview series structure was my main data-gathering method; however, observations, my journal, and artifacts of student work also contributed to the material I processed during data analysis. Before analyzing the data analysis, the data transcription of the interviews was an essential step after the interviews.

### **Data Analysis**

After I began gathering data, informal analysis persisted in my mind, which is why I recorded in my researcher journal as memos. When I officially began analysis, coding and memoing remained important. My most significant learning curve in the dissertation process was conducting my first attempt at data analysis. The data analysis process involved transcribing, coding and categorizing data, creating biographical sketches (see Chapter 4), and constructing themes from participant data. Each is explained in sections that follow as well as how issues of validity were addressed. Memos that aid in understanding of the work are spread throughout the section.

Analyzing data concurrent with its collection helped me mitigate the likelihood of data piling up and not being analyzed (Maxwell, 2013; Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). Analyzing data concurrently with the data collection also helped me think of strategies for collecting new and better data in real-time (Miles et al., 2014). For example, I adjusted my interview questions and interview techniques to improve my process. I changed the question, “What strategies do you use to impact African American students’ learning?” and replaced it with, “What teaching strategies do you use to impact African American students’ learning?” My goal was to create case narratives of teachers

that provided detailed, rich descriptions of the meanings of the teachers' lived experiences.

### **Transcribing the Data**

During the interviews, I was certain to use two devices each time I recorded an interview. Along with Apple iPhone 13 recording, I used Zoom video conferencing meetings to record and capture the participants' physical features. I was unfamiliar with MAXQDA, and learning to input data was not feasible for me to learn and apply quickly. Rather than spend hours attempting to use the software. Many would call that old-fashioned, but it gave me a greater familiarity with my data and ownership and engagement in the analysis process. I initially began transcribing by hand the first participant's first interview. I spent hours rewinding my cell phone recordings of the interview and rewinding my Zoom recordings to capture our interview. It required hours of listening to the recordings and transcribing the words accurately. It was important for me to transcribe every word and pause my interview to honor the participants' voices. I did not conduct an in-depth analysis as I transcribed by hand to avoid imposing meaning from one participant to another, but I did memo on initial thoughts I was having about the data. I also considered the relevant connections to my research question as I transcribed the interviews and memoed on them in my journal. Transcribing by hand eventually became too time consuming so I rethought my decision to transcribe by hand and hired a reliable audio-to-text transcription technology service that delivered speech-to-text transcripts. The service was called Transcribeme and returned transcripts within 3-5 days. This software was within my budget and made the process faster once I began using it. I uploaded the one interview to the software, and when the transcribed interview

returned, I was pleasantly surprised to see the results. After receiving the completed transcripts from Transcribeme, I listened to the interview several times to check the accuracy of the transcript. I noticed that when participants mumbled or sounded muffled, the Transcribeme service did not always accurately capture what the participant said. Therefore, I listened to each interview and error-checked the transcribed data myself. In some instances, I needed to check both the Zoom and phone recordings to decipher the participant's words. Overall, I was happy with the product and uploaded all my interviews from my iPhone to Transcribeme. Using a transcription service allowed more time to write memos and think deeply about the interviews. While waiting for the transcripts to be completed by the service, I reviewed the completed transcribed interviews, made notes, and added descriptions of the participants' facial expressions and body language from the Zoom recordings. Nonverbal language, like facial movements, can sometimes uncover true feelings about a specific circumstance (Seidman, 2013). I documented the essential participant information to describe demographic variables such as age, grade level taught, number of years teaching, and university attended within a table. This information provided context for the analysis and interpretation. Upon receiving the transcriptions from the service and checking for errors, I felt confident in the accuracy of the transcriptions.

After completing the interviews and before coding, I read all the transcripts as a story. Then, I reread them with my interview and research questions to ensure my analysis centered on my original research questions. Also, before coding, I used highlights to mark passages related to my research questions. I repeated this method each time I read the transcript. I also used memos to record my thoughts about the beginnings

of my data analysis. I remained open to learning from participants' experiences captured during the interviews. I jotted down my first impressions and wrote my memos in complete sentences. I did not abbreviate my thoughts and ideas to remember my exact thoughts later. For example, during one of my interview recordings, I began processing and jotting memos in the margin:

*Octavia is convinced that getting students to want to learn does not happen automatically. She constantly huddles in small groups with her students, chatting with them about things that concern them such as their family life, sports, and their goals. She does not view her students as robots but as whole children.*

I was also attempting to organize what I was hearing from participants with my literature review in a way that made sense and would help me to enter a theoretical conversation in a meaningful way and connect a major part of the literature.

Saldaña (2016) suggested coding one participant's data at a time, and then progressing to the second participant's data. Charmaz (2008) suggested that line-by-line coding "promotes a more trustworthy analysis and reduces the likelihood of imputing your motives, fears, or unresolved personal issues to your respondents and your data" (p. 94). As I began coding, I remained open to what I would find. I engaged what Saldaña (2016) advised with line-by-line coding of one participant's data at a time and then progressed to the next participant's data while considering these questions: What do I see going on here? How do participants talk about characterizing and understanding what is going on? Thinking, transcribing, and memoing guided me as I moved from data gathering to data gathering to data analysis.

## Coding

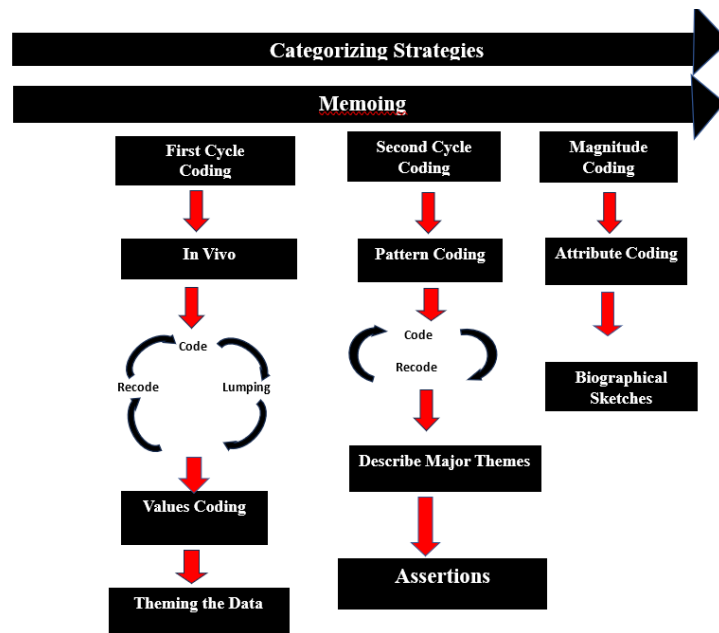
While determining which codes to apply to my study before beginning my interviews with participants, Dr. Richard Schmertzinger suggested I read about the various approaches in *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers* by Saldaña (2016) to become more acquainted with different coding methods. The chapters on coding methods were helpful, and after referencing this text, I revisited my selected methods. I decided which methods to use and was eager to begin the first coding cycle I hoped that my knowledge of CRP would be sufficient to develop some coding categorizing strategies but not deter me from capturing new insights participants brought to light during my analysis. According to Maxwell (2013), categorizing strategies often occur in the early stages of data analysis when data is broken apart and coded into sections of the data.

Coding is the transitional process between data collection and more extensive data analysis (Saldaña, 2016). “All coding is a judgement call” because brought to the process are “our subjectivities, our personalities, our predispositions [and] our quirks” (Sipe & Ghiso, 2004, as seen in Saldaña, 2016, p. 8). The purpose of coding was to take things apart, show similarities among participants, and capture new insights (Maxwell, 2013; Saldaña, 2016). I selected Saldaña’s forms of *attribute coding*, *in vivo coding*, and *values coding* for the first cycle. For the second cycle, I used *pattern coding*. Then, as an outcome of these coding methods, I themed the data using a phrase to note what the recurrent pattern meant. In the second cycle, I grouped similar codes after getting to know the data better through in vivo and values coding. These codes were assembled to determine *pattern codes*. I sought to remain open throughout creating categories based

on the participants' words. Categorizing refers to marking what is of interest in the text and/or areas emphasized by participants. I applied categorizing strategies through coding, several rounds of code mapping, and recoding. A basic process of codifying the data in this study is illustrated in Figure 2.

**Figure 2.**

*Data Analysis Procedures*



*Note.* A streamline of codes-to-assertions model is shown for this research.

Figure 2 provides a snapshot of the methods used to code my participants' interview data and the steps for the first and second cycles of analysis.

**Pre-coding/Preliminary coding.** I took the opportunity during the first read of my transcriptions to pre-code. I pre-coded the transcriptions using a pen and underlining significant words and phrases that stood out to me. I used an Excel spread sheet to list the initial words that I pre-coded. I continued reading the data as it was collected and handwrote some preliminary words in the margins of the interview transcripts for

analytical consideration later as was suggested by Liamputtong and Ezzy (2005). These preliminary jottings helped me begin to see the relationships between the codes and how they connected into the categories (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3.**

*Example of Preliminary Coding*

| 1  | A List of Preliminary Codes                                   |
|----|---------------------------------------------------------------|
| 2  | encouragement/ compassion/care                                |
| 3  | relationships                                                 |
| 4  | high expectations/ relevant expectations                      |
| 5  | Affirm/ Praise                                                |
| 6  | Professional Development/ or lack of                          |
| 7  | help one another/ class community/peer teaching               |
| 8  | love where i am I am where i am suppose to be                 |
| 9  | SEL/ circle time                                              |
| 10 | List of Preliminary Codes                                     |
| 11 | Music                                                         |
| 12 | visual cultural classroom environment/ African American books |
| 13 | Teaching the Whole Child                                      |
| 14 | choice                                                        |
| 15 | cultural difference                                           |
| 16 | clear class routines . stucture and expectations              |
| 17 | All students can learn                                        |
| 18 | success                                                       |
| 19 | dedication                                                    |
| 20 | use instructional strategies to make relevant                 |
| 21 | tick tock/ social media                                       |
| 22 | critial thinking                                              |
| 23 | Art reduces stress covid 19                                   |
| 24 | Use of manaipulatives                                         |
| 25 | Family Background                                             |
| 26 | defining CRP                                                  |
| 27 | HBCU                                                          |
| 28 | teaching Career                                               |
| 29 | Public/ Private/Cultural schooling                            |
| 30 | start in career did/did not teach in African American schools |
| 31 | feedback                                                      |
| 32 | continuous intervention needed                                |
| 33 | reading can't be taken for granted                            |
| 34 | striving to do more                                           |
| 35 | Degree in something other/ other jobs                         |
| 36 | keeping thier attention                                       |
| 37 | impactful teachers/ teacher has influenced me                 |
| 38 | lack of college preparation                                   |
| 39 | must get parents invovied                                     |
| 40 | students are natrually competitive                            |
| 41 | PBIS cultural relevance                                       |
| 42 | engaging with culture                                         |

*Note.* A figure from an Excel sheet illustrating pre-coding and preliminary jottings of the participant's interview transcripts.

Before settling into my formal coding cycles, I practiced with two of the participants' data, I noticed the array of individual codes associated with the participants' responses and became concerned that I would have too many codes. As I continued with the in vivo coding, I noted the codes that stood out to me and were interesting while

capturing the words and phrases of the participants in my research journal. Later, I still felt overwhelmed with the number of different codes I collected after coding each participant's first interview. After further research, I was armed with a new understanding. Litchman (2013) proposed that most qualitative studies in education will generate 80-100 codes that could be organized into 10-15 categories and subcategories, eventually synthesizing into five to seven major concepts (p. 248). With 90 codes, I believed I could organize the coding further by creating a list of topics. Grbich (2013) recommended systemizing three codes by grouping them to consolidate meaning and develop explanations. For example, "encouragement/compassion/care" was one topic, and another was "helping one another/class community/peer teaching." I aimed to winnow the number of groups to explore and create an overarching theme from my data later. I did not discard the remaining codes that appeared only once and were unconsolidated because they could have held value later. Alvesson and Kärreman (2011) cautioned when codifying patterns with a narrow focus, thus oversimplifying the analytical process. Saldaña (2016) pointed out that the remaining codes still had significant meaning and could provide insight later.

I reverted to counting the frequency of phrases being used by participants in their interviews to try to group codes and recognize the magnitude of their presence. Magnitude coding was an asset to enhance what Saldaña (2016) referred to as the "approximate accuracy" words such as *often*, *somewhat*, and *not at all* suggest the presence of something. Magnitude coding enhanced the description of the frequency with which participants referred to a code. Figure 4 shows magnitude codes and the

process used to keep track of the number of times the participants mentioned a particular word or phrase to describe their experiences using CRP.

**Figure 4.**

*Example of Magnitude Coding*

| 1  | Topic                                                         | Frequency |
|----|---------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| 2  | encouragement/ compassion/care                                | 20        |
| 3  | relationships                                                 | 13        |
| 4  | high expectations/ relevant expectations                      | 13        |
| 5  | Affirm/ Praise                                                | 11        |
| 6  | Professional Development/ or lack of                          | 7         |
| 7  | help one another/ class community/peer teaching               | 7         |
| 8  | love where i am I am where i am suppose to be                 | 6         |
| 9  | SEL/ cirlice time                                             | 6         |
| 10 | celebrate culture/art/ history                                | 6         |
| 11 | Music                                                         | 5         |
| 12 | visual cultural classroom environment/ African American books | 5         |
| 13 | Teaching the Whole Child                                      | 4         |
| 14 | choice                                                        | 4         |
| 15 | cultural difference                                           | 4         |
| 16 | clear class routines . stucture and expectations              | 4         |

*Note:* Figure 4 illustrates a sample list of topics that the participants frequently talked about during their interviews.

Magnitude coding helped my confidence grow because I could see evidence in the frequency counts that my suspicions about items of importance were justified. Next, I launched into detailed coding of all transcriptions, organizing the tasks into two cycles.

Coding is the primary categorizing strategy in qualitative research (Maxwell, 2013), and the method used in my first cycle of formal detailed analysis. While coding my participants' interview transcripts, I thought about the larger patterns and the larger units of analysis alongside the decontextualizing of the data into codes. By continuing to note events over time in each participant's life, such as their relationships, unforeseen events, and outcomes of their decisions. I was essentially conducting categorizing and connecting analysis simultaneously (Maxwell & Miller, 2008). My first cycle of coding consisted of attribute, in vivo, and values coding methods of analysis that Saldaña (2016) recommended for early analysis of qualitative data.

## The first cycle of coding.

*Attribute coding.* I chose to read the passages in the transcriptions and mark the parts I thought would paint a picture of the participant using a narrative form for the reader when I got to the point of putting together sketches of them. I crafted the biographical sketches in the same narrated order as during the interviews (see Chapter 4). This order helped me maintain the context and meaning of each participant's story. I chose attribute coding because it is particularly useful when there are multiple participants with a variety of data (Saldaña, 2016) to describe the characters' basic information and contexts such as their age, gender, ethnicity, education, and marital status and other variables of interest. I used an Excel sheet to organize the participants data sets and revisited the information for future categorization, exploration of interrelationships, analysis, and interpretation (Lofland, Snow, Anderson, & Lofland, 2006). Figure 5 is an example of a descriptive list of attributes used to further analyze the information of a participant and the practices that occurred in her classroom, which is a related component of the study.

**Figure 5.**

### *Example of Attribute Coding*

|    |                                                                                                                   |                  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|----|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|
| 1  | DATA SET FOR NOVA                                                                                                 |                  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 2  | PARTICIPANT                                                                                                       | NOVA             |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 3  | AGE:                                                                                                              | 35               |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 4  | GRADE LEVEL:                                                                                                      | 1                |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 5  | ETHNICITY:                                                                                                        | AFRICAN AMERICAN |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 6  | A10 GENDER:                                                                                                       | FEMALE           |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 7  | PEER INSTRUCTION ( shared work, brainstorming before writing)                                                     |                  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 8  | CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES (a list of Nova's classroom practices)                                                       |                  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 9  | MATH MANIPULATIVES                                                                                                |                  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 10 | PEER INSTRUCTION                                                                                                  |                  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 11 | MORNING CHECK-INS                                                                                                 |                  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 12 | QUIET MUSIC PLAYING                                                                                               |                  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 13 | POSTED WORK                                                                                                       |                  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 14 | RANDOMLY TAKES PICTURES OF STUDENTS DOING WELL TO SEND HOME TO PARENTS ( one form of celebrating student success) |                  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 15 | SNACKS                                                                                                            |                  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 16 | AFRICAN AMERICAN READ ALOUDS                                                                                      |                  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |

*Note.* Figure 5 provides a data set of attribute codes and descriptions for Nova and her classroom practices in an Excel format.

In addition to the basic descriptive information, I entered in the Excel sheet as attribute codes, I read through the transcriptions carefully and began marking the passage of interests that would provide key passages and information related to the participant's life experiences that inform their use of CRP. Rereading the interview transcripts gave me a keen eye to mark the passages for more information to build out their characterization.

As I began developing narrative descriptions of individual participants, I found considerable overlap in their experiences, and the relationships were more than individual occurrences. I noticed relationships between their perspectives and worldwide views and their assigned meaning to and use of CRP. I noted the connections to inform my interpretation of the new insights that could be used in my final analysis and used to promote understanding of themes in Chapter 5. After pulling out the straightforward descriptive attributes of each participant, I turned to their actual words to help understand their experiences.

*In Vivo coding.* Saldaña (2016) explained in vivo coding as the identified meaningful quotes from interviews and observations. Saldaña further explained the words that participants generate in qualitative data are assigned a code depending on the meaning one wants captured (2016). After I identified sentences, phrases, and paragraphs within the participants' transcripts that described their experiences with CRP and stood out to me, I used in vivo coding to choose the actual language of the participants or "the terms used by [participants] themselves" (Strauss, 1987, p. 33). I chose and coded a passage that described the participants' experiences with CRP. One example was when I coded a passage about a participant's CRP professional learning.

Codes such as “never took courses” or “I learned this myself” were assigned to capture the essence of this passage, which was significant to the participant’s meaning. This analysis is called *lumper coding* because only one *in vivo* code is applied to an entire paragraph or passage of text, creating an overarching broad code. I used *lumper coding* to draw out the participant’s words and place them in parentheses beside the passage. Using the participants’ helped language helped capture their meaning and honor their unique and important voices.

To initially organize the various *in vivo* codes, I created an Excel spreadsheet (see Figure 6). I assigned groups and categorized them with a topic. For example, the *lumper coding* “never took courses” or “I learned this myself” were given the topic “Lack of Professional Development.” I reminded myself in a memo that noted further analysis concerning my participants’ experiences around the lack of professional development. I also used the Excel spreadsheet to organize the passages in categories under the topic.

**Figure 6.**

*Example of In Vivo Coding on an Excel Spreadsheet*

| 1 | Topics                                                                                                                    | ( Regina)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               | (Brianna)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|---|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 2 | 1. All Participants self-identified as practicing CRP, but lacked formal training.                                        | 1_p5 I learned this myself... I am looking for PD like this but I don't really see any.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 | 1_p11 You know what, I am going to be honest and tell you development outside of graduate school about culturally rel and I used it on my own. I don't ever think I have taken any c                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| 3 |                                                                                                                           |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         | 3_p15 Well, I think that culturally relevant pedagogy, to me respectful, teaching your students about cultures in a respect like - excuse me - that curiosity comes in because you also w teaching, and make sure you're doing it in a respectful mann African American school, it's good to teach the students spe expose them to your European artists, Latino artists, Asian a there in the world because as I'm sure, it sounds really clich know if this sounds right or wrong. But I think that COVID is really are |
| 4 | 2. Most participants named experiential learning, veteran teachers, and intuition as source of Cultural relevant training | 3-p.3 I've always been culturally relevant just the fact that, especially for me, I've lived in many different-- I've lived in Georgia, I've lived in Maryland, I've lived in DC, I've lived in Pennsylvania, I've lived in North Carolina. So I've been pretty much all up and down the East Coast and I've had to learn many different cultures, many | 1_P2But I will honestly say in an unconventionally way, My entire cc relevant pedagogy                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |

*Note:* Figure 6 shows the *lumper coding* and *in vivo coding* of participants’ interviews.

When coding, I also created preconstructed ideas for codes and categories from the literature in my literature review. For example, Hammond (2015) realized that the teachers she led could not clearly define or understand the meaning of CRP. Because of the review of this literature, I wanted to know how my participants defined culturally relevant pedagogy and looked for opportunities to use in vivo coding to analyze their quotes. Another advantage of in vivo coding is that analyses within a particular case make the contextual relationships with other cases more manageable.

Table 3 includes the transcript passages and in vivo codes associated with italicized codes that I created. I copied the passages of the in vivo codes into my Excel spreadsheet to review and keep track of the codes generated by my participants. I used these codes during the second coding cycle when I reanalyzed my initial coding. The opposite of lumping the data is splitting the data into smaller codable moments (Bernard, 2011) which is also illustrated in Table 6.

Both lumping and splitting data have their advantages (Saldaña, 2016). I found that lumping the data was a good place to get me started with analyzing the data. It was not overwhelming to lump the data. Reanalyzing and splitting the data next required a deeper focus on the transcriptions. However, I was ready for this approach of analyzing the data line by line after my initial work with lumping the data. Further breaking down the participants' data helped me to learn more about the participants and their stories. Values coding was another appropriate method for the study's analysis. That enabled me to capture data reflecting the participants' attitudes, values, and beliefs, adding to the depth of their stories and answering the research questions.

**Table 3.**

*Transcript Text for each In Vivo Code*

| Participant | In Vivo Code                                             | Transcript                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|-------------|----------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Octavia     | “helps to build pride in them”                           | I celebrate our culture and history daily by, ‘Okay. This day in Black History—’ We’ll do that when we go to the website. And we’ll study that. And then some of them will even say, ‘I didn’t know that this person did—’ I say, ‘Yes.’ Yeah. They learn a lot. And that <i>helps to build pride in them</i> , to know that. Because a lot of them, ‘Hey. My uncle, my dad, whoever, is in jail.’ And I tell them, especially the boys, I say, ‘That’s not a pathway for young black men. Let me teach you your history, your true history.’ Even with African culture, going to Africa, the African culture, teaching them about, ‘This is where we come from, our people, our race of people.’ ‘Well, they may sell us—’ and then I said, ‘Look. You can look at any culture in the world, if your tribe is conquered, then they’re going to make you, their slaves. Because they want you to learn their way of life. But you have to know that we have a sense of greatness.’ (Octavia Interview 2, Pos. 4) |
| Regina      | “see and visualize every aspect of life”                 | Not just African American experiences but crazy alien fantasy but then also books like <i>Sarah Plain and Tall</i> . You know the girl on the frontier. I want them to <i>see and visualize every aspect of life</i> that there could be. I try to keep a big variety but then I also have a lot of informational books that have articles and stuff. I have one about Miami. Whatever they are interested in. I try to keep in there. (Regina Interview 2, Pos. 3)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| Brianna     | “not just going to expose my students to just Black art” | And being that I did get my master’s degree and multiculturalism is a big part of teaching art. Because you are not just teaching art or African art, you are teaching art all over the world. You have to be able to know about these different cultures. And be able to explain it to the children. So, I do see myself as a multicultural teacher because I am <i>not just going to expose my students to just Black art</i> or European art or anything like that. I am going to show them art around the world. And my philosophy on that is I want to help prepare students because that is true to who we are. (Brianna Interview, 1 Pos. 3)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| Evva        | “everybody is not the same”                              | I have Hispanic students in the class. They may walk into the classroom, and I may say, ‘Hola.’ And the kids, the African American kids, will say, ‘Hola. Hola. Hola.’ I don’t allow other kids to make fun. That really burns my butt [laughter]                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |

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when kids are teasing other kids. Alex, they used to talk about his hair. But that presented a whole lesson within itself, like people have different textures of hair. We talk about how the girls would wear braids in their hair. And it just opened up another door for them to understand that *everybody is not the same*. So my main goal in the classroom is to make all students feel comfortable as far as their culture (Evva Interview 2, Pos 8)

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*Note.* Table 3 shows *In Vivo Codes* with lumping and splitting of data.

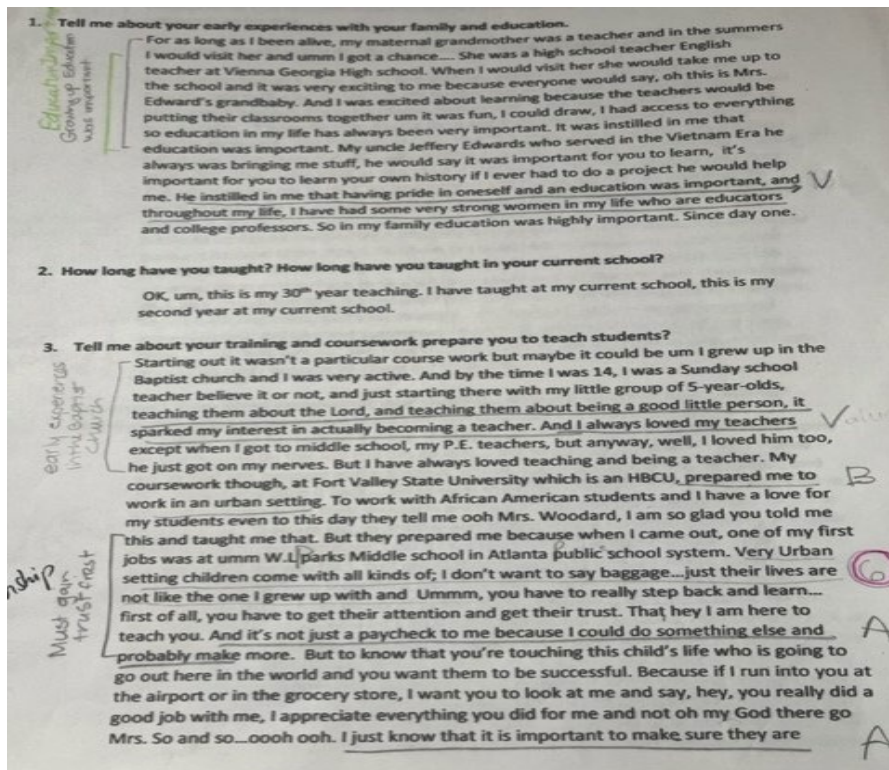
**Values coding.** A compatible method to in vivo coding is values coding (Saldaña, 2016). I decided to apply another coding method for thoroughness and to give a richer perspective of my data. I further analyzed what my participants valued and how their values connected with culturally relevant pedagogy using values coding (Miles et al., 2014). Values coding is the application of codes or categories to qualitative data that reflects a participant's perspective or worldview (Saldaña, 2016). Saldaña recommended in vivo coding and values coding for interview transcripts to attune oneself to participant perspectives and actions. There are three different types of related codes that may reflect the participants' values. These three types of codes identify the participants' values, attitudes, and beliefs, representing their perspectives. According to Miles et al. (2014), value is the importance we attribute to another person, thing, or idea. Attitude is how one thinks and feels about oneself, another person, an item, or an idea. Moreover, belief is part of a system that includes values and attitudes, personal knowledge, experiences, opinions, prejudices, morals, and other interpretive perceptions of the social world.

The data for the values coding was derived only from each participant's interview transcripts. When applying values coding, I used the space in the margin of each participant's transcriptions to handwrite the value codes (see Figure 4). I used the exact transcript copies with my handwritten in vivo coding from the first round to handwrite

my value codes. I distinguished the value codes by using the letters V (value), A (attitude), and B (beliefs) within the in vivo coding. When applying values coding, I had to remain aware of my own thoughts and feelings and my own subjectivity as a researcher. It was also challenging to distinguish which label to use because of the likeness of the three value codes. However, when coding the participants' interview data that began with words such as "I feel," "I think," "I believe," "I love," and "I think it is important," it became more obvious which code to apply to their judgments of what was important, what they thought or felt about something and their acceptance of what was true. Figure 7 includes an example of the in vivo and values coding of a participant's interview transcript.

**Figure 7.**

*Example of Handwritten Values Coding*



*Note.* A figure of handwritten units of values coding.

I reviewed the transcripts to ensure that nothing was overlooked and that I thoroughly exhausted my first step to my coding and analysis of values. I went through the transcript a second time to make sure that I coded the participants' statements with the best code that reflects the participants' values, attitudes and beliefs. Once I "coded the units according to values, attitudes, and beliefs," (Saldaña, 2016, p. 133) I analyzed the meanings of each participants' type values coding. The process of values coding helped me reflect upon the interview data and determine the participants' thoughts, feelings, and actions used to implement CRP to help African American students learn. Figure 8 illustrates a participant from Curtis elementary who shared her experience using CRP during one of her three interviews with me as the researcher:

**Figure 8.**

*Example Figure of a Participant's Values*

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p>1 Being able to be relatable to your students. I remember when I first started teaching. 2 I made it my business to listen to the music they listened to, to watch the cartoons that they watched, to learn the dances that they loved to do because it made me more relatable. 3 So I think cultural pedagogy is being relatable and having expectations above what they think they can do.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | <p>1 V: be relatable to your <u>students</u></p> <p>2 V: listen to the music they listened to, to watch the cartoons that they watched, to learn the dances that they loved to <u>do</u></p> <p>3 B: having expectations above what they think they can do.</p>                                                                                                                          |
| <p>4 Don't think just because this kid is poor or comes from a horrible home background that he's not going to be about nothing. 5 Put those expectations up there. 6 Not baby expectations, not just the bare minimum, but make them do. That's about it. That's what I think?</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | <p>4 A: not going to be about nothing.</p> <p>5 A: Put those expectations <u>up</u></p> <p>6 A: not just the bare minimum, but make them do</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| <p>7 I know what my experience is. I know how it <u>feels</u> to not be the best at something or to not have something. 8 And I wasn't the smartest kid in my class, but between my parents and the teachers, I knew <u>that</u> I could do just about anything. 9 So I understand <u>their</u> experiences. I understand their pains. I also have a background in social work, so I've seen where <u>some</u> kids come from and I leave all judgement behind. I don't look at a kid and expect that he or she is going to be a certain way because that's what I heard about that kid or that community. I'm that auntie. I'm that mom. 12 And I think that it's important that they have someone who can bring them new experiences but look just like them. 13 That's why I think that one of our teachers has a library with all African American inventors.</p> | <p>7 A <u>not be</u> the best</p> <p>8 B between my parents and the teachers, I knew that I could do just about <u>anything</u></p> <p>9 V I understand their experiences.</p> <p>10 B leave all judgement behind.</p> <p>11 V I'm that auntie. I'm that <u>mom</u></p> <p>12 B new experiences but look just like them.</p> <p>13 V. a library with all African American inventors.</p> |

*Note.* A figure of values codes used in a participant's interview transcript.

This example of values coding includes each type of values unit and is based on what was stated in her interview. After coding the units of the participants' transcripts with values coding, I categorized them and reflected upon their significance. Common values that I noticed during coding were:

- student teacher relationships
- honor students' experiences
- empathy
- personal responsibility
- literary texts should mirror students' experiences

Some of the recurring attitudes were:

- challenging one's own deficit thinking
- treating students as if can exceed expectations
- demanding academic excellence in students
- relating and connecting to students' lives

And finally, some of the important beliefs that participants shared included:

- all students can meet high-expectations
- student can reach high-self efficacy with support of teachers
- one's teacher experiences inform practice of CRP

After applying both in vivo and values coding I was ready to begin the second cycle coding. During this method, I identified a more specific and smaller list of categories and themes.

**Second cycle coding: Pattern coding.** Coding is a cyclical act. Rarely is the first pass or first cycle of coding data attempted perfectly. Once a code is applied to a data point during first cycle analysis, it is not a fixed representation but a dynamic and malleable process. Saldaña (2016) explained second cycle coding as that phase of

analysis where the researcher reorganizes and reanalyzes data coded in the first cycle methods. He further noted that pattern codes are “explanatory or inferential” ones that identify a theme, configuration, or explanation. Saldaña (2016) recommended that pattern coding could combine much material from the first coding cycle into a “more meaningful parsimonious unit of analysis” (p. 236). During this phase, I used pattern coding to add clarity to my in vivo codes, values codes, categories and thoughts. I also began constructing themes that would frame the presentations of data in Chapter 5.

Saldaña (2016) described the method of pattern coding as grouping the summaries into a smaller number of categories, themes, or concepts. The goal of the second cycle pattern coding process was to produce and develop major themes of the research. Pattern coding was helpful during the initial analysis and later as the interview process continued, as I noted the recurrent experiences among the participants. Pattern coding allowed me to organize the codes from the first cycle, which helped me form an outline of results, extract meaning, and guide me through my conclusion. Initially, I had over 150 codes in the first cycle and the pattern coding process helped me to sift through, make connections and explain the trends that were emerging from my interview transcripts. Pattern coding allowed me to process some of the culturally relevant pedagogy approaches described in their classrooms. As I began grouping codes, I was able to make inferences and connections to my research questions. The most frequent and similar codes would become the major themes and outcomes of the research.

First, I reorganized my first cycle codes (values and in vivo) into groups based on their similarities. I noticed patterns among participants, but also individual experiences that varied greatly. For example, I saw trends in how teachers used various strategies to

facilitate their peer learning and collaboration among their students. The participants discussed how their students listened to one another, built class communities, and facilitated peer teaching. Then, I went through each participant's interview transcripts and assembled similarly coded words and phrases in the transcript, sometimes taking the codes directly from the participants' words and placing the codes in quotations. Next, I assigned a statement about the participant-coded passages. For instance, one example of my patterned codes was what the *participants drew from life experiences to shape their practice of CRP. Some participants commented that their HBCU experiences prepared them to be culturally relevant. Their statements, shared during their interviews,* described how they became culturally relevant. Their stories told of how nothing that they learned came from professional development or learning. *One* participant shared, "I just know that it is important to make sure they are successful. So, they can have a successful life. I think that my undergraduate at an HBCU prepared me for that". Another participant shared, "I honestly don't feel like I learned culturally relevant pedagogy in any staff development. I feel like that is something that just comes based on the environment and you learn it from the people you are around. I haven't experienced any professional development in that. I conducted the same analysis for each participant. After gathering the direct quotes, I found relationships between codes. I created an Excel spreadsheet to organize my codes and the participant quotes from each interview. Figure 9 illustrates the most prominent patterns narrowed down to eight related topics.

**Figure 9.**

*Prominent Codes*

|    |                                                                                                                                     | Octavia | Regina | Brianna | Alexis | Ewa | Nova |
|----|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------|--------|---------|--------|-----|------|
| 2  |                                                                                                                                     |         |        |         |        |     |      |
| 3  |                                                                                                                                     |         |        |         |        |     |      |
| 4  | self-identifies as practicing CRP                                                                                                   | X       | X      | X       | X      | X   | X    |
| 5  | experiential learning, veteran teachers, and intuition as source of cultural relevant training                                      |         | X      | X       |        |     |      |
| 6  | reading research, conferences and networking as a source of learning about CRP                                                      | X       | X      | X       | X      | X   | X    |
| 7  | life experiences (education, travel, family) that shape their CRP                                                                   | X       | X      | X       | X      | X   | X    |
| 8  | sense of commitment and connection to African American culture and people                                                           |         |        |         |        |     |      |
| 9  | unconscious bias language and deficit thinking toward African American students, based on socioeconomic background and class status |         |        |         | X      |     |      |
| 10 | awareness and ownership of initial bias and judgement of disenfranchised, poor and working-class students and families.             | X       | X      |         |        | X   |      |
| 11 | common teachers' practices supporting learning for Africa American students                                                         | X       | X      | X       | X      | X   | X    |

*Note.* Pattern coding results from the participants' interviews during the second cycle of coding.

These topics were then connected and reorganized to create meaningful and explanatory themes that answer my research questions.

**Theming the Data**

Saldaña (2016) defined a theme as the outcome of coding. By categorizing the data, I decontextualized it, meaning I looked for what was similar and different in the participants' experiences and what they valued, including their attitudes and beliefs related to their best practices. I aimed to know their ideas about how they used CRP and then looked for their recurrent experiences with using CRP. I connected participants' experiences, using extended phrases or sentences identifying the sections of data and their meanings. Through planned interview questions such as, "What do you think culturally relevant pedagogy means?" The themes I created in the margin of the texts were an outcome of the in vivo coding and some developing ideas at a latent level. DeSantis and Ugarriza (as cited in Saldaña, 2016, p. 199) proposed that a theme brings

meaning and identity to a recurrent [patterned] experience and its variant manifestations” in qualitative research.

After analyzing the data and developing thematic phrases that identified what my data was about, why things were done the way they were, and what it meant, I created a cohesive narrative, which led to a deeper understanding of the participants’ everyday classroom occurrences. Maxwell and Miller (2008) explained that the categories generated through coding are typically linked into larger patterns; this subsequent step can be seen as contiguity-based, but the connections are made between the categories rather than between segments of actual data. Fracturing data and rearranging them in categories facilitating comparison can lead to organizing data into broad themes.

Maxwell and Miller (2008) suggested that reordering the data in categories can create analytic blinders, preventing the analyst from seeing alternative relationships in the data. Therefore, there needed to be several rounds of coding, particularly in connecting relations. The themes that I examine in my final analysis (Chapter 5) focus on the following topics:

1. building positive relationships
2. establishing high expectations
3. having a sense of purpose and connection
4. using critical content instruction

Additionally in Chapter 5, I will explain subthemes that came out of my analysis, and a few topics that were infrequent but important to discuss in this study.

Throughout the entire research process there were other important considerations for me to keep in mind; my role in the work and the influence of my subjectivity being a potential for bias were key among them. Researcher bias is one concern related to

validity of any research outcomes. In the next section, I will address validity issues and how I recognized and minimized the effects of researcher bias, reactivity, and other ethical concerns.

### **Validity and Reliability**

When conducting research, it is important that the data collected is accurate and has measured what it was intended to measure (Mertler, 2009; Stake, 1995). As the researcher, it is essential to use procedures that explicitly address validity to ensure the study is credible. To address and increase validity during my study, I wrote a memo to address the most serious threats. The memo described what occurred and why serious threats occurred as I created the descriptive sketches and analyzed the data. The memo and strategies also dismissed plausible threats to my interpretation and explanations. The memos and strategies also help the reader understand how my values and expectations influence the conduct and conclusion of the study. The unavoidable threats to my study were researcher bias/reactivity, the effect of the researcher on the study. Since my personal bias may threaten the validity, before sharing findings, the readers need to know my identity as the researcher, my interest in this topic, and my bias in this study.

I transcribed interviews verbatim and did not rely solely on my memos and notes despite my belief in their relevance. Stake (1995) explained that there could be a substantial amount of uncontested description to describe a case, thus increasing accuracy and minimizing threats. For example, to increase validity, while sorting and analyzing my participants' transcripts, I did not focus on data samples that confirm their thoughts, expectations, or personal experiences. I used several methods, including triangulation, member checking, and exploring my subjectivity and bias. According to Sipe and Ghiso

(2004), “All coding is a judgment call” because brought to the process are “our subjectivities, our personalities, our predispositions [and] our quirks (as cited in Saldaña, 2016, p. 8). While sorting and analyzing data, the researcher may focus on data samples that confirm his/her thoughts, expectations, or personal experiences.

Because of my bias, I attempted to minimize it by recognizing that I, like any researcher, have preconceived notions. Since I wanted my conclusions to be valid, I followed the suggestions of Maxwell, who combined triangulation, feedback, and rich data. Further, I identified potential ways that I might influence what the participants shared about their work as culturally relevant teachers of African American students (Maxwell, 2013). In doing so, I strived to minimize subjectivity or bias in the interview process.

### **Researcher Subjectivity**

Peshkin (1988) defined subjectivity, another term that is preferred is bias, as the “amalgam of the persuasions that stem from the circumstances of one’s class, statuses, and values interacting with the particulars of one’s object of investigation” (p. 17). Peshkin (1988) explained that one’s subjectivity is like a garment that cannot be removed and is present in both the research and non-research aspects of our lives. I confronted what may have influenced the process or conclusion of this study. I searched my subjectivity to avoid accidentally including any bias as I conducted the interviews and observations. Peshkin (1988) also stated that acknowledgments and assertions are insufficient when searching for bias. Additionally, he argued that we should actively seek out subjectivity in the research process to see how it may shape inquiries and outcomes. Researchers should systematically seek out their subjectivity, not

retrospectively when the data have been collected and the analysis is complete, but while their research is in progress. Peshkin (1988) described that one way to do this is to self-monitor how I feel regarding my awareness of subjectivity. To keep the integrity of my study, I used an identity memo to reflect upon what I may misinterpret is happening in my study and why these may be serious threats.

As a female teacher, my positionality as an African American conflicted with that of the hosts in my research of African American female teachers. As my participants shared their experiences with me, it was impossible for me not to think of my own experiences as an African American student and teacher. Reading Maxwell (2013) and thinking about his view on subjectivities in his studies was helpful in my research. Maxwell (2013) wrote that Strauss (1987) recommended “mine your experience, there is potential good there!” (p. 45). My experiences as an African American student equipped me with the knowledge and skills needed academically. However, the highlights I remembered were few, and those I remember all had to do with something about the culture, being valued, and believing in yourself. I liken all those memories to culturally relevant teaching in my elementary school.

Although my teachers provided what I know now as efficient practices and educational experiences, the personal challenge I can remember was a lack of relationships and culturally relevant teaching year after year. During half of my time in elementary, although I was very extroverted, I felt unvalued, unchallenged, unnoticed, and an average achiever as a student. The costs of undertaking this study made me consistently aware that, as an African American student there were missed opportunities to benefit from the practice of CRP.

I may have received from years of culturally relevant teaching. I did not assume that my experiences as a student, teacher, or researcher of CRP were the same as those of my participant. Therefore, I yielded to my thoughts, which allowed me to go deeper into the issues of their stories. However, my experiences provided insight into the sources of my participants' stories. To keep the integrity of my study, I used an identity memo to reflect upon what I may misinterpret is happening in my study and why these may be serious threats.

I reflected on my personal goals and experiences as a student, teacher, and instructional coach. These three dimensions of my life have influenced my thoughts about what was considered a culturally relevant teacher. In my fourth-grade year, I experienced a teacher whom I identified as culturally relevant. As I reflected on my participant selection, I began to think about what I already knew about them from serving in the same school and to judge whether I believed they embodied the CRP beliefs and characteristics I valued. My bias left me wondering if what the participants shared would be something I would learn new or if the things they shared would be things I already knew about CRP. I became aware of my "judgy" inclination as a threat and addressed it by memoing some of my thoughts.

*Before reading through the interview data, I hope to be non-judgmental and freely read about their experiences to learn from them [the participants]. I constantly reassess my thoughts when I do not analyze their stories with a clear and unbiased mindset. Reflecting reminds me that there is no perfect or correct experience and that the data collected will help meet my study goal of adding something to what I have already learned about CRP. I will keep pre-existing*

*assumptions and judgmental thoughts to a minimum. I returned with an openness to understanding the participants' experiences today. I focused on my goal, remained open to other perspectives, and gained an understanding of the particularly relevant information to my research questions. If I had not been aware of this, I fear I might have missed the consequences of not maximizing the opportunities to learn from the participants.*

As a member of the elementary staff, I knew each of my participants before the research began. I served as the instructional coach for one of my six participants, yet I had adequate trust with the other five colleagues and participants. My relationships with my participants are distant to avoid making assumptions. Seidman (2013) mentioned that having too much rapport with a participant could be possible, which can cause the participant to engage intellectually but not reveal the truth, such as when the interviewer and participants are strangers. The participant may be more willing to be open about personal matters and critically reflect on the interview questions when being interviewed by someone they do not know. Although overwhelmed with the demands of distance learning, the participants in this study were still willing to share their experiences, reflect on identities, and share the cultural wealth, knowledge, and skills they saw students bring to school that stretched them as teachers while at the same time, exposing their weaknesses and their strengths humbled me.

I was a curious researcher who genuinely wanted to know about them. I did this by listening more than talking when interviewing. I listened more than talk during our conversations directly before and after our interviews. I also asked real questions, and some participants said, "Thank you for asking me those questions. You are really making

me think.” Another participant said, “I really want to give you some context before answering those questions, may I?” I took what they had to say seriously and listened for words that described their experiences. One participant used the words supportive and a frame of reference to convey that she provides students with background knowledge throughout the day so they would not fall behind the other students when learning. I followed up by exploring the meaning of the participants’ stories and extended sincerity and comfort during our times together. What was helpful was that it was my last year at the research site as an instructional coach. Because I was leaving, I believe it enabled each participant to be less concerned about whether I perceived their responses as showing. Their lack of anxiety supported the development of our relationship as interviewer and participant.

**Reactivity.** Reactivity in data collection occurs when a researcher generates data about a situation with a response. In other words, the ongoing research affects the research participants by diverging from their routines when the researcher is present or telling the researcher what they think she wants to hear. As the researcher, when interviewing and observing teachers, I anticipated that the participants would try to answer my questions based on how the questions led them. After writing my questions, I realized a few questions and follow-up questions could have impacted their answers and influenced the direction of the response tool (see Appendix B). For example, I asked one participant, “Would you describe your beliefs about African American students that have changed?” The participant paused for an extended time, seemingly constructing a response. I waited and did not want to interrupt her thoughts. Yet, I realized this question might need clarification because it was unclear to her. Then the participant

asked, “Can I ask you?” “Can I ask you that question, and you give me an example from your personal experience?” I knew my words and expressions would influence her response. Seidman also mentions the consequences of sharing personal responses with participants, “Sharing that experience in a frank and personal way may encourage the participant to continue reconstructing their own in a more inner voice than before” (Seidman, 1991, p. 66). To limit reactivity, I provided a simple and brief story to move the interview forward as necessary. The verbatim translation that follows provides the details of the needed nudge:

Researcher: Would you please describe your beliefs about African American students that have changed?

Brianna: Can you expand on that question?

Researcher Yes: Do you have any beliefs that you’ve had about African Americans that have changed, or anything that you once thought and now think differently, or, as sentence starters, I once believed . . . , but now I believe—?

Brianna: Can I ask you? Can I ask you that question, and you give me an example from your personal experience?

Researcher: Certainly, during my first year of teaching, my fourth-grade student’s mother and father invited me to their house for dinner. I was shocked and honored that a family would ask their teacher to come to their home. I never experienced that as a child, but I thought this would be an excellent way to support this African American female student socially and emotionally. After dining with her family, I examined my thoughts after my visit and realized that I felt supportive and had some sympathy for my class of students. I don’t know – I

almost felt sorry for them because they lived in a poor neighborhood. I don't know - I just felt like they were missing something. However, I learned that although many of my students were not on grade level according to standardized tests, I didn't need to feel sorry for them because they came from very loving households. So, I began to believe in giving them more of what they already had. They were rich with parents who wanted the best for them. I began to believe I could provide them with experiences that would make them prepared, like high-quality daily lessons. I changed my focus about what they didn't have-- and focused on what they had and not being sympathetic, like, 'Oh, you don't have this. You don't have that.' My mindset changed, and instead of my negative thinking that I was filling gaps, I added to their already full life experiences. I built upon what they had: family, extended family experiences, community bonds, friends, etc. I had to think differently about their rich lives. Yeah, that was my new belief. That was my experience.

Brianna: That was amazing. I can share a story it is very different from yours and more on the superficial side, but I didn't know that art was accessible to all children (and she continued sharing).

Although sharing my story contributed to building rapport, it could also distort what the participant might have said if I did not share my experience. Additionally, after some reflection, I realized my question was a leading question that needed rewording. I changed some questions to avoid prompting participants in the direction of a particular assumption that may end up in an outcome that may result in biased answers. So, as I interpreted the data, I created memos to consider the reactivity that occurred and

apparent. A final step to ensure the quality of my data analysis is the use of multiple sources, methods, and strategies, also known as triangulation.

### **Triangulation**

*Triangulation* in research means using several datasets, methods, theories, and/or researchers to address a research question. Triangulation methods are combined to strengthen the validity of a study and mitigate research biases. Miles et al. (2014) explained, “Triangulation among complementary methods and data sources produced generally converging conclusions. If not, the procedures for reconciling the differences and their results are explained” (p. 313). I used two forms of triangulation: triangulation of sources and analysis triangulation of data sources (Patton, 2002). The data sources I used compare and cross-check the consistency in patterns of the participants’ experiences over 3 weeks. I first spoke with administrators familiar with the participants and their use of CRP with their African American students. I then compared the information I received from the participant with the data from the administrators. Between both sets of data, I looked for inconsistencies and consistencies. Comparing consistencies and inconsistencies contributed to the credibility of my findings (Patton, 2002). I asked the participants to review my analysis and react to what I described and concluded. I then used the participant feedback to help confirm the findings (Patton, 2002).

I also used a form of triangulation involving several methods or data sources (Patton, 2002). I checked interviews against written evidence, such as personal stories of participants in Ladson-Billings (1994). To corroborate and align meaning, the participants in my research provided their definitions of culturally relevant pedagogy during the last interview. I minded experiences that confirmed CRP practices and

teachers' experiences in both studies. The purpose of corroborating is to understand how teachers who use CRP with African American elementary students describe their experiences. This method of triangulation may not lead to a single consistent picture; instead, triangulation of data sources contributes to the credibility of my findings (Patton, 2002). I asked the participants to review my analysis and react to what I described and concluded. I used the participant feedback to help confirm the findings. After the study, the participants' stories and experiences may serve as resources for ongoing conversations around the information captured in their interviews.

To further increase the validity of my research, I used member checking. Member checking involves asking the participant to examine their words written in my data for accuracy (Stake, 1995). Maxwell (2013) pointed out that member checking is the most important way to avoid misinterpreting participants. For example, member checking avoids misinterpreting the meaning of what participants say and serves as a way of identifying my biases. I member-checked by providing transcriptions of the participants' interviews after the completion of the study. The feedback I received affirming the accuracy of their statements in my transcriptions is evidence of the transcripts' accuracy. Allowing the participants to read their written interview transcripts may change their story during the data collection. However, gathering accurate data is the goal (Miles et al., 2014). I shared the details of my research with the participants to determine the credibility of the study (Neuman, 2009). Further, I solicited feedback about my conclusions from the people I was studying, as gathering data from these multiple sources increases the credibility of my findings. As a part of my research methodology and analysis, I wanted to bring forth a picture and visibility of the

participants that was authentic and relatable to the reader. I explored the areas of portraiture and profiles to create meaningful sketches of each teacher in the study.

### **Creating Biographical Sketches**

Initially, I aimed to use portraiture by Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffmann Davis (1997) as my primary research design and create portraits of participants prioritizing their voice and goodness. I then also considered using Seidman's interview protocol for qualitative research to develop participant profiles, which are complete chronological life stories in only the participant's voice. In the end, I framed my interviewing approach with ideas from both, but constructed biographical sketches instead.

In portraiture, the researcher provides a space for participants to elaborate their voices and narrate their experiences in a particular setting. Stories are sought that document and illuminate the complexity and detail of a unique experience or place. This method is often used with the hope that the audience will see themselves reflected in the story (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffmann Davis, 1997, p. 14). Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffmann Davis (1997) developed this method of inquiry and documentation to capture the complexity of human experiences by exploring subjects' lived experiences. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffmann Davis (1997) described their research practice as portraiture or painting with words. This method is used when a researcher wishes to produce a complete picture of an event or person that tells as much about a subject as its research. What is distinctive about portraiture, unlike many methodologies, is that it intentionally seeks to discover "goodness" rather than "objectivity." Goodness refers to the many elements that make up the parts that equal a whole. The whole includes people, structures, relationships, beliefs, goals, intellectual substance, and will.

Moving from the Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffmann Davis (1997) vision of positive framing, artful narration, and comprehensive re-telling of the participant's story, and away from Seidman's (2013) approach of meaningful complete, first-person profiles that include only the voice of the participant, I built biographical sketches from my critical reflections. This approach allowed me to analyze my interview data accurately and efficiently then glean important components of context and personal experiences to present each character to readers in a way that allows readers to identify characters that are like or different from participants. In so doing, the reader is enabled to apply information shared in findings in ways with which they most closely identify.

### **Summary**

This chapter provided a detailed and comprehensive discussion of my research. The process of collecting data, transcribing and analysis were new and in-depth steps for me as a researcher. Keeping regular reflective memos, awareness of subjectivity and other threats were essential as I completed two cycles of data coding and funneled my research and participant stories into concise themes. I discussed the formation of participant sketches to capture and represent each teacher in a full and robust manner. In the next chapter, I will present each teacher's sketch. Descriptions of each teacher, including her demographics, personal experiences, and beliefs allow readers to engage the teachers "in their own words" using direct quotes from their interviews. Each sketch is followed by a researcher reflection in which I narrate prominent themes and similarities across the biographical sketches.

**CHAPTER IV:**  
**MEET THE PARTICIPANTS**

*“The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat,  
the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead  
them.”*  
*Isaiah 11:6*

~~~~~ (Holy Bible, New International Version, 2011)

In this chapter, I provide descriptive sketches of each teacher in my study and a brief overview of my research methods and data collection process. I describe six African American women teaching in a large urban city in the Southern United States. I present a biographical sketch of each participant, Brianna, Alexis, Nova, Regina, Octavia, and Evva, to describe the participants in this study descriptively. The participants were teachers from one school district. All interviews and classroom observations occurred via the Zoom Internet-based online conference tool within their homes and online classes because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Each participant appeared comfortable during the interviews; however, I sometimes needed to probe to elicit further details. I assigned pseudonyms to each participant in the study. I focused my inquiry on elementary classrooms and the relationships between elementary teachers and their students. To provide a detailed answer to the research question: *What are the experiences of six elementary teachers of African American students who self-identify as using culturally relevant pedagogy in urban elementary schools in the South?* I present sketches of each

participant that highlight key experiences in their lives that led to their use of CRP. The participants' sketch was composed using each participant's three interviews.

### **Descriptive Sketches**

All participants were African American women teachers working in a K-5 public school in an urban area in the southeast United States. All participants worked in the same school, Curtis Elementary. Participants ranged in age, grade level, educational background, and years of teaching experience. Table 4 contains basic descriptive information, such as each participant's age, grade they are currently teaching, and number of years teaching. The sketch of each participant also includes the pseudonym I established for privacy and discretion. Pseudonyms, such as for their hometowns, were used to keep their identities confidential. In addition to demographic factors such as age and race for context, I included other factors such as childhood experiences, family background, and professional experiences in the descriptive sketches to provide "thick descriptions" (Patton, 2002, p. 437).

A thick description, according to Denzin (1989):

does more than record what a person is doing. It goes beyond mere facts and surface appearance. It presents detail, context, emotion, and the webs of social relationships that join persons to one another. Thick descriptions evoke emotionality and self-feelings. It inserts history into experience. It establishes the *significance* of an experience to the sequence of events, for the person or persons in question. In thick descriptions, the voices, feelings, actions, and meanings of interacting individuals are heard. (p. 83)

The detailed interpretations in this study include complete descriptions of participants and settings to facilitate thoughtful descriptions of their use of culturally relevant pedagogy with their students. A breakdown by pseudonym for all demographic info is found in Table 4.

**Table 4.**

*Participant Demographics*

| Name    | Age | Home-town (Region) | Current Grade | Content Area  | Highest Degree Earned | University Attended Undergraduate/Masters | Yrs Teaching | Yrs at Current School |
|---------|-----|--------------------|---------------|---------------|-----------------------|---|--------------|-----------------------|
| Brianna | 31  | SE                 | K-5           | Art           | Masters               | HBCU/PWI                                  | 5            | 2                     |
| Alexis  | 41  | Central Eastern    | K-3           | All (Sp. Ed.) | Masters               | HBCU/PWI                                  | 9            | 1                     |
| Nova    | 35  | SE                 | 1             | all           | Masters, Specialist   | HBCU/PWI                                  | 8            | 2                     |
| Regina  | 31  | Mid-Atl.           | 4             | all           | Masters               | PWI/ PWI                                  | 8            | 2                     |
| Octavia | 54  | SE                 | 4             | all           | Masters, Specialist   | HBCU/PWI                                  | 31           | 3                     |
| Evva    | 54  | Eastern            | 3             | all           | Masters               | PWI/PWI                                   | 25           | 10                    |

*Note.* All participants were African American and female working in an urban K-5 elementary school

The key information in Table 4 shows that each participant attended at least one predominantly White institution (PWI), each participant had at least a master’s degree, only one participant taught a single subject, and two participants taught for more than 25 years while the other participants’ taught for less than 10 years. In addition to the critical information shown here, each participant contributed stories that spoke for themselves.

Each participant’s biographical sketch begins with an introduction and contextual data. I include the natural language of the participants in the section “Using Her Words,” by grammatically indicating quoted passages with quotation marks or block quotes. Afterward, I provide a reflection as the researcher, establishing a cohesive picture of each teacher.

### **Participant 1: Brianna**

Brianna is a 31-year-old art teacher born and raised in the South. Brianna left her hometown, taught overseas for 2 years and in the United States for 5 years, and now resides in one of her city's oldest historic districts. Her neighborhood is filled with young professionals near one of the city's largest parks. Brianna described her home as "beautiful" and "solid." Her teaching experiences include teaching English in Japan at a high school, three elementary schools, and an adult night school. Before her overseas teaching experiences, she taught art in an urban middle school. Brianna taught elementary school for the first time in the United States the year I interviewed her. Currently, she teaches art to 450 K-5 students. Brianna is small in stature yet a deep-voiced African American woman with "big" energy. Brianna grew up in a middle-class community with a family that valued education. Her mother obtained a doctoral degree and became a university professor. Her mother also taught in the same urban school district where Brianna works. Brianna's grandfather was a teacher and later the president of a college. She shared that coming from a family of teachers influenced her significantly.

**Using her words.** Brianna's mother exposed her to different cultures, and her father traveled often. One way her father would bond with her was by studying Kung Fu. Brianna noted, "He would take a Kung Fu course every Saturday. I studied it for 11 years. This experience gave me exposure to Asian culture, which influenced me as I got older." Later in life, Brianna studied language arts as an undergraduate at a Historically Black University, and her love for culture developed. She enrolled in four French courses and participated in a study abroad in Paris for one fall semester. She recalled:

During my time in Paris, I visited one museum after another. My education overseas opened my eyes to be aware that in the world, many types of art display culture around the world. I was interested in European art but being exposed to more indigenous cultures resonated with me.

Once she returned from her study abroad, she wanted to change her major and study art. She recollected:

The only reason I did not choose to study art was that I was aware of the stigma that you'll be a starving artist, but I realized that after I came back from Paris, I wanted to study art. When I graduated from college with an art degree, I knew that I needed to go back and get a teaching degree.

While in grad school, Brianna pursued an education degree and continued to study abroad. She studied education in China, taking many courses that allowed her to learn about different cultures and multiculturalism. She explained:

I can talk about different cultures and explain them to children. I see myself as a multicultural teacher because I am not just exposing my students to just Black art or European art. I am showing them art around the world. And my philosophy on that is to help prepare students to be global citizens because that is true to who we are.

Not only is Brianna a lover of art, but she is also a fan of hip-hop. She uses elements of hip-hop, such as referencing the fashion style of rappers and creating drawings of fashion inspired by popular artists of color in her instructional lessons. Brianna shared a strategic move during one of her lessons to guide students in their exploration of Black artists:

I am not big on hip-hop, but I try to focus on it because of the kids. I just know that Jay-Z and a lot of artists reference Basquiat in their raps and music. And I want the kids to know that is important. I am teaching you this art because this is someone that is highly celebrated not just in the world but by other famous Black people. If they know that Jay-Z likes him, of course you are going to like him. Basquiat is someone that you see his art and name printed on clothes and apparel, he is just so famous. I'm like you need to know who this person is because that will give a sense of pride; this is a Black man, who makes all this beautiful artwork. So, there is a sense of pride.

**Researcher reflection.** During the interview, I noticed Brianna's warm laughter when she spoke of her early years and her candidness about her training, beliefs, and teaching practices. Brianna acknowledged that her college education was positive. Still, she felt that what she learned about culturally relevant pedagogy was primarily learned in graduate school and that her instructional practices were based on her understanding of CRP. Brianna valued being aware and respectful of other cultures as a child. Thus, she felt her students would benefit from broad cultural knowledge and embody confidence about their history and culture when interacting with others. Likewise, Brianna's cultural and self-awareness led to her curiosity and ability to embrace all cultures. Her self-awareness led to teaching others about African American history.

Brianna's meaningful use of hip-hop and pop culture was evident in her version of culturally relevant pedagogy. For Brianna, it was a way to connect with her elementary-aged learners through contemporary popular culture. She helps students understand that hip-hop has opened new art forms and approaches to existing artistic

practices. Brianna referenced hip-hop artists not as a hook to motivate the students; instead, she used it as a learning tool.

Some scholars, such as Beauboeuf-Lafontant (1999) and Dixson (2002), have extended Ladson-Billings' work to include new, positive, and more dynamic views of youth culture. Ladson-Billings believes culture is fluid, and CRP reflects fluidity. Ladson-Billings has also moved and evolved in new ways that require us to embrace a more dynamic view of culture (2014). Ladson-Billings (2017b) reconceptualized culturally relevant pedagogy involving the teacher's engagement in youth culture, making room for how students see and experience the world. Ladson-Billings argued for using hip-hop music as a practice and extension of culturally relevant pedagogy and a valuable instructional approach for teachers with a meaningful understanding of how to use popular culture without insult or misappropriation. Ladson-Billings believes hip-hop can be deployed to engage in conversations to develop new pedagogical strategies. Although Brianna is respectful and aware of the culture and differences in the school and local community, more is needed to make her culturally competent (a precursor to CRP). Cultural competence is understanding, communicating, and effectively interacting with people across cultures. Cultural competence encompasses:

- being aware of one's own world view.
- developing positive attitudes toward cultural differences.
- gaining knowledge of different cultural practices and world views.
- developing skills for communication and interaction across cultures.

## **Participant 2: Nova**

Brianna believes that knowing culture can improve her students' self-image and achievement. Brianna has an appreciation of cultural diversity. She used this teaching strategy as part of her pedagogy to convey her belief in cultural value and competency. Like Brianna, Nova believes in the value of cultural competence. Nova has gained fluency and facility in at least one other culture. With eight years of teaching experience, Nova knows the benefits of her students being able to communicate with people in many different places and circumstances.

During the summer, Nova created a recycled tire seating area as a cozy alternate seating option for her students. Nova is a newly married African American woman who sees her students as her family and nurtures them as though they were her natural-born children. Each week, she brings her students a wagon filled with bags of snacks to celebrate their achievements and a productive week of teaching and learning. Nova uses children's literature to guide her students into lessons on sociopolitical issues around diversity. For example, in one lesson, she discussed some of the histories of racism in public schools by introducing Ruby Bridges (the first African American child to attend an all-White public elementary school in the South after the Supreme Court ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education*). Nova used an example of the mob of screaming segregationists to explore current events. She often takes opportunities during social studies lessons to increase awareness of sociopolitical issues.

Nova also promotes the values of acceptance, respect, and appreciation of all differences. After her first year of teaching in a racially diverse school system in the United States, she moved to Abu Dhabi, where she taught first-grade reading, math, and

science. After some time, Nova was clear that her overseas teaching experience was inspiring her to return to the United States to support African American students. Three years later, Nova was ready to return to the United States. Her experience in an urban elementary school was challenging during her first year back in the States, but this did not shift her commitment.

**Using her words.** During Nova's first interview she described the reason for returning to the states and choosing to teach in a predominately African American school.

I felt that it was time to come back home and teach. Now I feel like it is where I am supposed to be. I was used to having a diverse group of kids [*before her Abu Dhabi teaching experience*], as well as being in a diverse working-class community. But I wanted to do more, and [*eventually*] being overseas made me want to see my students [*in the United States*] excel more because they looked like me, and I did not want them to be left behind because of their race or ethnicity. The biggest thing was—and I'll tell anybody. A lot of people often ask me why did I come back from teaching overseas, and I'll tell them all the time that I spent 3 years giving my all to a culture that I knew nothing about when I first went there. And I realized that it was time for me to come back and give to kids just like me that would—I just felt like they would appreciate it more if I were here giving back to my own kids versus how it was overseas because overseas, I was doing it because it was part of my job. But I realized that I was getting a lot of validation from those administrators and teachers and things. So then I said, 'Well, I need to take the same [*practices*] back to where I'm from. So, I just wanted them [African American students] to be kind of given the same

opportunity from me that I gave these other kids that were nowhere near as culturally connected to me as these kids would be.

Nova also believes that helping students become aware of sociopolitical issues may encourage them to speak out against injustice when they are older. She helped her students in the United States make connections between the Ruby Bridges lesson and the case of Ahmad Aubrey, a 25-year-old Black man who was pursued and killed by three armed White American residents of a coastal south Georgia neighborhood in 2020, and the protests that followed.

I observed Nova's social studies virtual classroom lesson on Ruby Bridges and Ahmad Aubrey, which was approximately 15 minutes long. Nova began the lesson with a review of the previous day's lesson. In the last lesson, the students learned that Ruby Bridges is a historical figure in American history. They learned about her bravery as she was the first child to integrate into a formally all-white elementary school. They discuss how parents taunted and shouted at her as federal agents escorted her into the school on her first day. This lesson provided new learning because they had yet to learn that students of different races did not attend the same school. Nova began the new lesson by projecting a picture of Ahmad Aubrey. Nova asked, "Has anybody seen this person before on the news?" One student answered, "I have." Another student chimed, "I have, too. There were two people chasing him, and he was killed by some bullies. His name is Ahmad Aubrey." Nova replied, "Yes, by two bullies who made very bad choices." I could feel empathy as the students were silent for a moment. Then, Nova read aloud a text in conjunction with the topic of this lesson.

Nova designed and prepared this lesson as an extension to help students build knowledge about history while simultaneously building their ability to connect to the challenges we still face today. In an interview, Nova reflected upon this lesson and shared, “I definitely felt during the current events lesson that they were challenged to think critically” I shared my thoughts about the end of Nova’s lesson in a reflection.

**Researcher reflection.** During my virtual classroom observation, Nova connected to current and historical events with the book *Skin Like Mine* by Perry (2016). She intentionally used a relevant text that offered a cultural lesson that empowered and encouraged students to love themselves just as they were created. She helped the students make personal connections to their lives. In the lesson, Nova also wanted students to discuss the importance of compassion, which she believes will help her students become caring leaders and dependable friends now. I was intrigued as she nurtured the development of cultural competence within her classroom. She values the opportunity to allow her first-grade students to ask questions about issues at the core of their concerns. Throughout the year, Nova attended to the deep cultural concerns of her students’ community, increased engagement, and helped students feel empowered about what they were learning. Nova’s practices suggested what Ladson-Billings (2006a) articulated:

Teachers who foster cultural competence understand that they must work back and forth between the lives of their students and the life of the school. Teachers have an obligation to expose their students to the very culture that oppresses them. That may seem paradoxical, but without the skills and knowledge of the dominant

culture, students are unlikely to be able to engage that culture to effect meaningful change. (p. 36)

Nova expressed a connection to her students after successfully teaching abroad and a commitment to nurturing African American student achievement. She further articulated and actively demonstrated the practice of critical consciousness, a key component of CRP.

Irvine (2010) argued that teachers should use relevant materials because it helps students connect their heritage and customs to new classroom material, which helps achievement. Ladson-Billings critiqued how elementary grade literacy efforts in the United States tend to ignore a text's sociopolitical context and focus on teaching techniques and strategies. Teachers, parents, and community members often believe that literacy is needed to obtain jobs and advancement. As a result, early literacy development is usually reduced to battles over methods for teaching reading. Ladson-Billings believed that none of these issues address the poor literacy performance of African American students. Ladson-Billings (1992a) asked, "Is it possible that a more holistic sociocultural approach to literacy can hold some promise of development of literacy among African Americans?" (p. 381). Ladson-Billings mentioned Taylor (1989), who suggested that teachers "must use and develop literature and orature that make sense and meaning for African American students" (p. 381). This literacy must develop technical, social, political, and cultural skills. Nova's deliberate and meaningful use of engaging literary texts that reflect her students' culture is the hallmark of her culturally relevant practice.

### **Participant 3: Alexis**

Alexis is 41 years old and has taught in the public school system for 10 years. She is a special education teacher who provides small group instruction for students with IEPs (individualized education plans). Typically, she pulls students from their regular classrooms to provide instruction in a small setting. Alexis grew up in an inner-city neighborhood and recalled her elementary education in a Muslim community school as rigorous. Her teachers demanded academic excellence, and she believes her educational experiences were intense. Alexis attended an HBCU and earned a bachelor's in television production. Although her first career interest was in mass media, she later changed her major to education. Alexis shared that she had her son while in college, which caused unforeseen delays and impacted her career plans. She initially planned to intern in the media field but was unable to do so because of her responsibilities as a mother. Alexis went on to earn a master's degree in special education and specialized in emotional behavior services at a predominately White institution (PWI).

**Using her words.** Alexis described her students who are mainstreamed at Curtis Elementary School. She acknowledges their current skill levels while emphasizing how they must be taught.

So I have a caseload of 10 students, but I do a resource class from about 14 to—the most is at 14 students, in that small group. My students have deficits with some behavior problems. We have more significant learning delay developments there, so my fourth- and fifth-graders are on kindergarten to first-grade level, usually no higher than second-grade reading. So, they're two to three levels behind reading and also math. So, I have to be able to find ways to teach the

standard but, on their level, but still expose them to what their peers are doing in the general ed classroom.

Although Alexis instructs her students on a lower level, her expectations for her students with IEPs are still high, just as her most beneficial educational experiences were demanding and rigorous. She explained, “By the time I reached fourth-grade, I remember being ahead of most of my peers who attended public schools.”

Alexis explained that her experience being raised by a single mom and living in a neighborhood in the community surrounding her current school helps her to understand and relate to her students rather than pity them.

As a teacher of urban African American students, I know what it is like to live in a crime-ridden, poverty neighborhood. Some emphasize and say, “Oh, it is so sad.” But I know what it is like . . . there are a range of emotional states. You have to make sure you have a whole student there to teach. I can’t teach you if you’re worried about your mom or you’re worried about having food at home. You have to deal with the whole student emotionally before you can get to them educationally in inner cities because . . . they’re dealing with so much more than the classroom.

Like Brianna, Alexis has moved beyond caring and compassion and utilizes popular culture and cultural relevance to connect with her students. She stated:

I love to make up problems that incorporate the names of the students in them just because that grabs your attention. If you hear your name, you want to know: why is my name being called? And that’s just in any adult or a child. So I do that a lot. I incorporate some of the teachers’ names in the problems because they want

to know why Miss such and such is doing such and such. Again, that's making it relevant to them. It's all about relevance. And culturally, if you're talking about money, you may have to break it down to, "Hey, Two Chains," or something of that nature. If it's relevant to them, culturally it has to be kind of hip-hop, and it has to be current, sometimes, for them to engage with you, and you can really get a conversation out of them. And then they can start thinking outside of the box, and they'll say, "Oh, well, no. I don't think he'd do that." And you, "Hey, why?" Just to get a few open-ended questions in there to make them think a little more critically. So one, I make sure that it's relevant to their immediate (life) by using their name, people that they immediately know. And then culturally current to maybe something that they may not know about that person, but they know of them. And it's something that they know of that culture, and it's something that they can relate also. But it's all down to relation and relevance when you're dealing with urban inner-city kids.

Overall, Alexis explained that "she does not hold her tongue" or cower when speaking on behalf of what she believes is best for student achievement. She asserted:

But when you're coming from a level of just plain love, and it sounds cliché, it sounds Hallmark Channel-ish, but it's true, if you show students that you love them and care for them, they will respond. It may not be immediate. It may not be what you want. It may be so hard . . . .

**Researcher reflection.** Alexis clarified that she did not learn how to be a strong teacher from her formal college experiences. As she attended school while caring for her son, she was offered a pre-K teaching position. Alexis could attend college, work in

education, and prepare her son for school in this setting. As a result of her experiences, she decided to go into education. Alexis considers herself a strict disciplinarian regarding the learning environment, adding that the students do not have the time for or luxury of off-task behavior. She feels that living and working in the inner city is about connecting with students beyond the primary curriculum, which may explain why she is a huge advocate of social-emotional learning. She believes in getting to the students emotionally before educationally. When planning lessons, Alexis finds real-world examples for applying learning concepts that are also culturally relevant; this could be as simple as making up math problems that incorporate her students' names to grab their attention, read-aloud texts that represent different cultures, or filling the classroom library with books from different cultures. Her no-nonsense approach, balanced by an ethic of caring and creative instructional plans, has made her successful with her students and an example of culturally relevant pedagogy.

#### **Participant 4: Octavia**

Octavia is a 54-year-old teacher of fourth-grade students. She teaches all subjects and has been at her current school for 3 years. The 31-year teaching veteran grew up in a small town in the South. Her maternal grandmother was a teacher, and Octavia visited a high school in the deep South during the summers, where her grandmother introduced her to teachers and made a big deal about her. During those summers, she basked in a caring and compassionate atmosphere where she enjoyed being around books and accessing paper and writing tools. She stated, "Everything exposed me to the way my grandmother related to her students." It was instilled in Octavia early that she should learn her history. Her strong women figures were family members who were educators and professors, so

with that same care, Octavia is a teacher that opens up to her students as if they are her own biological children.

**Using her words.** Octavia remembers growing up with encouragement from extended family and community. She shared about neighbors remarking:

Oh, this is Mrs. Edward's grandbaby!' In my family, education was highly important, since day one. You understand that child's culture . . . you understand them as a whole person. Where they are coming from. And then the ABCs and 123s is easy. Because they want to please you. They see you as a person who understands them and respects them and wants to see them do well. And that you are there on a daily basis in their life every day.

Octavia continued to speak about the importance of cultural value and high expectations of her students:

Once you understand the child's culture, you can put the standards on them . . . [and] they will meet the standards. This child, one day, is going to be somebody great. And make them feel that way. And tell them that. It is hard sometimes, but we really have to focus and tell the kid, 'Hey, you are going to be great. I believe that you are going to be great. Now you have to live up to it.' So, you always have to think, 'This little person might have the cure for cancer; this person may become President one day.' And you keep that in the forefront of your mind. And even though they are being difficult, it is hard to do it because we are all human, but we try to focus and say, 'Hey, this child is going to be great, so I have to nurture them and always take them under my wing and focus them on doing great things.' You have got to be able to compete in a global world. So,

‘Hey, I am going to push you and push you hard because you have got to know these things. You’re not my child but you’re my future, and you’re mine, and I want my future to be a good one.

**Researcher reflection.** Octavia was one of the participants with the most teaching experience. However, being a veteran teacher did not mean she was set in her ways. Instead, she seemed more confident and secure in her ability to nurture student success. Octavia’s student-centered approach to teaching is complemented by high expectations and sincere belief in her students’ capacity for success. She does not just stop with affirmation and positive expectations. Octavia demands rigor and stretches his students to go above and beyond, and they are willing to take risks and try harder because she has made them feel safe.

#### **Participant 5: Regina**

Regina is a 31-year-old fourth-grade language arts teacher. Her grade level is departmentalized by content area, and each of the four class sections meets for 90 minutes before rotating throughout the other teachers’ classrooms. Regina has lived in many places, including a small town in the South, a Midwest city, and a bustling East Coast metropolis. While in elementary school, she lived in the South and remembered having an excellent experience with one teacher who pushed her into reading poetry and doing some much-needed journaling. She explained that there was much unrest in her home life. Regina channeled her difficulty toward a love for reading and finding her voice through journaling. She believes that having a voice is part of being a successful student. Regina is very vocal and remains tuned in to what is happening in the school community.

**Using her words.** I can say I really had a really good experience with my literature teacher in sixth-grade. She really pushed me and got me into poetry, and that was a time when I really needed to do some journaling, and there was a lot of stuff going on with my home life. So, I think that kind of experience led me into having a love for reading and I think that is why I am so attracted to umm being a reading teacher vs. being any other teacher because I have a love for it. So, it is definitely because of that experience. I forgot the teacher's names, but I will never forget what she looks like or definitely anything like that. The most important influence on achievement is the teacher making sure that kids' voices are heard, especially in the assignments and the things that they're doing. The teacher has to have patience and always begin on all those encouraging words and pushing, pushing, pushing. I just want them to talk about their wonderings, how things are affecting their community, and ask questions if they are not sure of what is going on.

You also have to know how you can bring the students' wants, needs, cultural backgrounds into that academic success and how you can do it all at the same time. And if you are not doing both at the same time, it is not really culturally relevant because if you are planning all these activities and ideas and the kids don't relate to it, to understand it, it is not about them, you may not see the data that you want . . . so you got to know to keep your finger on the pulse to know what they need and want. I tried to incorporate current events in our class every day. So that is why we were doing holidays . . . we usually don't get to do holidays like we want to so I thought it was a really good opportunity this week to study some cultural holidays and they use to the things they see around them but may not know what is going on. We read an article about the

coronavirus. I just try to keep things current so they can understand what we are doing in class is a part of their world. Even though it is a classroom at the desks . . . it is the same thing.

**Researcher reflection.** Regina was enthusiastic about her practice of CRP and making meaningful real-world connections for her students each day. Her language arts class provided rich instruction opportunities reflecting both students' home culture and current events. Regina also integrates current events, often reminds her students about African American history, and discusses how current history is being made. She always wants her students to stay connected and aware of the events in their city and state.

During Regina's interview, she shared her desire for her students to be able to talk about their wonders and ask how things are affecting their community when they are not sure what's going on in their community. Regina wants her students' voices heard, which is an example of Ladson-Billings' component of sociopolitical (critical) consciousness (Fay, 2019). The importance that Regina attaches to students talking about and investigating things affecting their community rather than setting her agenda for the classroom is CRP. Regina's interpretation of culturally relevant pedagogy is built upon all three tenets: high expectations for students, developing cultural competence, and critical consciousness. Regina attempted to describe CRP, as Ladson-Billings defined it, "as a threefold approach to ensuring that all children are successful" (Ladson-Billings as cited in Fay, 2019, para. 8). She also said, "You've got to do all three things."

Regina's classroom is filled with displays of prints from old calendars that featured famous artists such as Frank Morrison, who is known for his urban modernist, graffiti-inspired paintings. She also displays a timeline of African American historical

events from the Civil War explaining the historical milestones of African Americans in a way that can be applied to the students' challenges. Overall, the culture of her classroom is of equality and shared community. A study by Ramirez (2012) found that Latino students enjoyed texts highlighting their culture in a social studies classroom. Ramirez (2012) concluded that culturally relevant texts help minority students make personal connections to the material while also making them feel as if the material applies to their lives. Similarly, Regina has taken the initiative in the language arts classroom to utilize texts, strategies, and activities that convey a high value for her students' culture.

**Participant 6: Evva**

Evva is a 54-year-old third-grade teacher and a 25-year veteran in her school district. She has a stern demeanor and treats her students as if they were her own children. She helps her students develop self-esteem and reminds them that all students are unique, never comparing them to others. Her early career experiences included working as a daycare director and a social worker. Evva mentioned several times that she wished she could have attended an HBCU. She felt she may have learned more about culturally relevant pedagogy there than at the predominantly White institution she attended. Evva earned a bachelor's degree in early childhood education and a master's in social work. Evva initially delayed taking the certification test but always wanted to be a teacher.

**Using her words.** Evva explained her earlier grade-school experiences and recalled her parents' commitment and the discrimination she faced as one of only two African American students in her elementary classroom:

My mother walked me to school and picked me up every day. I still have two friends that I went to school with, two boys, they are men now, and we keep in touch. School was very important in my household. Both my parents . . . my mom had a high school education. My dad had a sixth-grade education. I went to school in the neighborhood until 1974, and then we were bussed out into the White neighborhood schools. I was there until my senior year in high school. My mom was a stay-at-home mom until my youngest sister was 13 years old, then my mom started working. My dad always worked. My mom was involved in the school and our school day, taking us to school, picking us up from the bus stop, and my mom also volunteered in the school. My mom was one of the only Black parents in the PTA. There were quite a few experiences, but I did have a few experiences where White students would call me a Nigger. I was usually one of two Blacks students in a classroom, but I do remember the teachers being kind. Never issues with the teachers. If there were issues, they were with the students. But in my third grade. I said to myself that I wanted to be a teacher because I had an awesome third-grade teacher. Her name was Ms. Morris, and she was a beautiful soul. I remember her features right now. (She smiles as she reminisces.) She was a heavy-set White woman with this hair with a flip. And she had nubby fingers, but she would always stroke your hair and pinch your cheek or tap your head. And she always had something nice to say. I think she was the person that made me say, 'I want to be a teacher like her.' [When I went to college] You see, I didn't go to an HBCU, so I don't know that life, but I was not taught in college [about African American culture]. We had one Black

Studies (course), but it was an elective. But in HBCUs, those classes are embedded (with culture), not their curriculum. That is something that I have learned. I am going to be 110% honest; I don't really remember the coursework. I can tell you though, it was nothing like how I learned to teach now. It took a few years [after graduating from college] until I had enough confidence in myself to take the state's certification test. I was afraid to take that test. If I had taken that test right outside of college, I would have been teaching 10 years longer. I would have probably been ready to retire at this point in my life. I don't know why I was so fearful. When I took it, I passed. Had to do with maturity and confidence. And I determined that I wanted to teach with the Board of Education.

**Researcher reflection.** Evva knows how challenging life can still be for some African American students. She believes there are still many social inequities in the world, so she never puts any students down or makes them feel less worthy. Evva is a firm and somewhat strict teacher. I noticed that to focus on academic instruction and student excellence, Evva needed to develop effective classroom management without outside intervention. During my observation, Evva's students were consistently engaged and on task while she instructed. Evva's virtual class began with 15 eager faces on the screen. Evva was teaching an instructional standard on opinion writing. Evva found texts on the water crisis in Flint, MI. She thought it would be good to use CRP to draw on content that respects the culture of students while providing insights into the larger society and developing critical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 2006b).

Students in her third-grade class were instructed to read two passages. One was about the water crisis from 2014 to 2019 in Flint, Michigan. The improperly treated

water caused the old pipes to corrode and leach lead into the drinking water of almost 100,000 people living in Flint, causing a national emergency. The second passage was about the necessity of water for the human body. Before the lesson, Evva prepped her students by uploading the passages into Google Classroom so they could pre-read the two texts before logging into their virtual lesson. I observed Evva during a lesson that was not a part of a Black History curriculum but rather a typical instructional activity created for her students. She chose a topic that explored issues of some culturally inclusive content involving a community of people representing most of the students in her classroom. According to Ladson-Billings, there are times when “building critical consciousness moves away from what kids really care about” (Ladson-Billings, 2019, para.12, as cited in Fay, 2019). However, in this case, Evva did not want to do work only she was interested in; instead, she attempted to follow her students’ lead. As a result, she transformed instructional standards on opinion writing into a robust moment of culturally relevant practice.

### **Summary**

Nearly 30 years after Ladson-Billings’ work in *The Dreamkeepers* (1994), I have attempted to re-examine the concept of CRP in elementary classrooms to see what these six teachers knew and how they implemented it. In Chapter 5, my thematic analysis of teachers who self-identified as using culturally relevant pedagogy will capture what I learned about their definitions, practices, and implementation. Without formal training from their school district, or supplemental professional development, these self-identifying CRP teachers are doing their best to make way for their students, hoping their approach might create change beyond their classroom.

In Chapter 5, I discussed the data collected in this study. I presented an examination of the data and findings to substantiate the claims in this study. I used the coding, memos, and observations and established the themes and implications for the practice of culturally relevant practice. The themes, findings, and outcomes offer descriptive value and direction for the professional development and professional learning of in-service and pre-service teachers of African American students.

**CHAPTER V:**  
**DISCUSSION OF MAJOR THEMES**

*It is your responsibility to change society if you think of yourself as an educated person. And on the basis of the evidence—the moral and political evidence—one is compelled to say that this is a backward society.*

~~~~~James Baldwin (Baldwin, 1963, para. 19)

In Chapter 4, I used descriptive sketches to introduce the study participants and create a multi-dimensional view of their teaching style, personality, and beliefs. Also, I included my initial reflections as a researcher. As I wrote Chapter 4 and developed a broad picture of each teacher, along with her background, ideas, and teaching practices, I was able to capture and describe her unique experiences. The coding and categorizing strategies of my analytic framework allowed me to identify and explain how these teachers implemented CRP and focused on the most prominent and recurring themes that I found. The coding strategy also captured the most common practices aligned with Ladson-Billings' (2022) definitions of CRP and identified the emerging gaps and opportunities.

While creating the biographical sketches, I began understanding the participants as a group and how teachers who self-identify as using CRP with African American elementary students implement practices and help students learn. In Chapter 5, I will go further and provide a descriptive analysis of my research findings and explore the most significant implications of this case study.

## **Discussion of Primary Themes**

The purpose of this study was to explore and document the experiences of six urban elementary teachers in the South who self-identify as using culturally relevant pedagogy with African American students. The findings from this study may inform professional development and guide educators in similar settings seeking to integrate the components of CRP in their classrooms. Additionally, I conducted this study because it is important to document the work of CRP practitioners who work with African American students and ground their pedagogies in experiential wisdom gleaned from social contexts regarding students, curricula, and instruction (Ladson-Billings, 2006b). Building from the stories and experiences of the six teachers, in this chapter, I explore my research question: How do teachers implement culturally relevant pedagogy when teaching African American students at an urban elementary school? I analyzed the qualitative data with memos and categorizing strategies. In addition, I coded the overlapping ideas and practices of the participants to form the topics and salient elements of how these teachers practice CRP, which constitute major findings of this study. In this section, I present four major topics that were most prominent in my analysis and have the following topics at their core: building positive relationships, establishing high expectations, having a sense of purpose and connection, and using critical content instruction.

### **Topic 1: Building Positive Relationships**

In one form or another, all six teachers discussed and demonstrated an intentional effort to build positive relationships in their classrooms. Building positive relationships was the primary topic of this study and was coded 44 times from participant interviews.

Positive relationships appeared primarily in two areas: expressions of compassion and care; and the practice of giving praise or affirmation. Each participant began their stories by discussing and giving examples of intentional efforts to focus on and build positive relationships as a foundation and daily classroom practice.

**Building relationships of care.** Several participants shared practices that indicated they were deliberate about showing care and compassion toward their students. Their intentional practice of care established connections with students. By engaging in intentional practices of care and compassion to connect with their students, the teachers in the study set a foundation for a positive relationship. The participants described ways that they established trust with their students, and in turn, the students strived to meet the high expectations of their teachers and the standards of excellence they formed for themselves. Ladson-Billings (1995a) articulated that culturally relevant teachers demonstrate a connectedness with all students and describes these teachers as intentionally creating social interactions to help students succeed academically. Some participants shared ways they established compassionate connections with their students.

Octavia described her style of care often occurring during the morning community meetings. Although there is a curriculum that helps facilitate a topic, Octavia adds her perspective on life. She explained:

You have to get them to open up to you. So, you have to be a teacher with patience, understanding, and a willingness to let students open up enough where they can show you who they are and what they need. And have a tolerance as well because it is not going to be easy. Personally, we just have a round table. I help them to pull all their seats in a circle. I just talk to them. There's no

different formula or anything like that. I just talk to them. So just nurturing them, that's my strategy. It's nurture . . . and encouragement and empowerment and love and sometimes I have to tough love them but, letting them know, "I am here for you. Yes, I get crazy [passionate], yes, it is ok, but you have to understand why I am getting crazy because you have got to do this" . . . [When I asked her what she meant by what they have got to do, she replied, 'achieve.']

Octavia provided an example of a conversation during a round table meeting. She indicated that, in many cases, students were not hesitant to share things that were challenging at home. There was a closeness when dealing with one another's problems that was a part of her classroom culture. Octavia shared:

I want to know why you didn't do your homework. Because if they couldn't do their homework, they could have had a family emergency. They may not have had anyone who understood if. They could have gotten home, and their lights were off. Who knows, but just giving them that opportunity to catch up and get back with the group.

Octavia credited her student's success to her nurturing classroom style. Her relationship with her students is a clear strength that leveraged engagement has contributed to their success.

Another example of a teacher who demonstrates caring is Brianna, who tries to connect with all students. Although some teachers unconsciously favor those students perceived to be most like themselves in race, class, and values, culturally relevant teaching means consciously working to develop commonalities among all students (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Brianna exhibited connections during circle time. She recalled:

They helped me understand that talking to students one-on-one and in circle time helped me talk with students when they would become defiant. And learning how to have more empathy and not taking it that seriously when they are acting out. And realizing that there could be some other issues like for example, I remember my instructor talking about how sometimes kids act out because of the Maslow law of needs because you have to figure out what their needs could be. I remember having a third-grade student that was being defiant and disrespectful and I remembered the research and when the teacher asked me to go down the checklist. What do you think would be a key motivator? What is the trigger? Why is the student acting this way? Then I asked her . . . I know before that lesson I wouldn't have thought to ask her, 'Did you have breakfast this morning? No. Well, there you go; you're hungry.' And I know it sounds really simple but, that is not my background, and I didn't come from that. So, I am not going to be aware of that. And so, their professional developments have helped me to have more empathy and be more mindful.

Like Brianna, Nova described herself as caring, passionate, and sensitive. The sensitivity and awareness of her students' physical needs and her willingness to help provide some of the material needs for personal/body care exemplify Nova's approach to making her students feel cared for and safe in her classroom. Nova explained:

I like to say that you have to be sensitive. So, I always try to be very sensitive and empathetic to my students' situations and the things that they may bring to me because I feel like if they feel like I'm sensitive and I'm empathetic and they can trust me, and they'll feel like I care about their well-being outside of just being

educated. So, you most definitely have to come with those characteristics. So, sensitive, for me, would be, for example, if I'm watching one of my students in the classroom, and I know that they have been wearing the same thing, or their clothes are soiled, or they don't smell as decent as they should, I would go out the next day and maybe purchase them something to put on and then I feel like I have made a huge difference in their learning. So that sensitivity is of me wanting them to feel comfortable and kept.

Evva described a different reason for implementing care. She shows care by being a parental or "auntie" figure. She sees herself utilizing a nurturing, "motherly" personality as she helps her students navigate life as she imagines their mothers might. She has a strong bond with her students, as if they were family members. Evva shared:

I treated them the way I would have treated my own children. I was very passionate about their education and them being better than where they came from. I have always worked in an urban setting. So, I was dealing with students with pretty rough backgrounds, single-parent homes, for lack of a better word, I kept it real with them. I think that that was appreciated. I was trusting. It may not sound like a strategy but that is how I relate to them and get them to believe in me. I have students that I communicate with now through social media because they remember their teacher back in the day. I allowed them to call me Ms. Evva. In the beginning my principal said you should not let them call you by your first name, but at that time I was married, and my last name was [difficult to pronounce] and they would just mess that up, so I said you know what just call me Ms. Evva, and it worked.

Evva cares for her students and sees them practice that same care toward one another as they help each other during learning activities. She even gives them opportunities to re-teach the lesson to one another in their own ways.

Alexis, like Evva, emphasized an urgency to help students achieve. Her style of care expressed that her upbringing significantly impacted the urgency for students' achievement in a Muslim private school system. Alexis believes that if her students are learning this, that is caring. Her push for wanting students to learn comes from a place of caring. She stated:

I am a strict disciplinarian when it comes to the learning environment just because you don't have time. I can love on you. I can give you those things. But it wouldn't be loving you if I didn't give you an education. So, we have to do the basics first.

Demonstrating care is an essential part of establishing a positive relationship with students. Experts have recognized the power dynamics in the classroom, and the positive value relationships can have in establishing a balance between students and teachers. Emdin (2016) stated:

In successful relationships outside the classroom, the people in the relationship typically see equal value in one another. In traditional classrooms, however, teachers have most of the power because of their role as teacher. This power imbalance silences certain students. By distributing some of their power to students by allowing them to teach, teachers can build strong and respectful relationships with students. This increases student engagement with content and builds a path toward academic rigor. (p. 42)

The teachers in this study recognized and showed care to establish trust, safety, and positive relationships in their classrooms.

**Using affirmation and praise to build positive relationships.** Five of the six teachers interviewed used affirmation and praise every day. Octavia provided an example of how asking a student to deliver a message to the front office helped build positive relationships. She mentioned how good they feel when they know that their teacher can trust them and how proud that student felt after completing the errand. She explained, “It is something small, but in their life, it is a big accomplishment. ‘I did it. Octavia trusted me to walk to the front office and walked all the way back.’ They are just so positive and happy.” Octavia explained why almost any affirmation helps to build positive relationships. She stated:

It impacts them because as a group of people, we receive a lot of negative stereotypes, a lot of ‘you can’t do this’ and ‘you can’t do that,’ but when you empower a child, just giving them something and not letting them fail at it.

Octavia also mentioned she celebrates culture and history daily by saying things such as, “Okay. This day in Black history . . .” Octavia continued, “And we’ll study that. And then some of them will even say, ‘I didn’t know that this person did \_\_\_\_’ ‘I say, ‘Yes. Yes.’ Yeah. They learn a lot. And that helps to build pride in them.”

Beyond building cultural pride within her students, Octavia tries to show them their options beyond being a reality actress or actor, an athlete, or a rap star. She shared that she tells her students, “All those things are okay, although there are other ways for you to get to where you want to go.” She expounded further:

There's more for you to do. You can be a scientist. You can do \_\_\_ but just teaching them to look, this person, this super soaker gun that you—a water gun you guys love to have at a pool and that at the family reunion spraying everybody was made by a Black man. So was, the cellphone . . . designed by a Black man. So, know that there's other ways for you to get to where you want to go besides just being an entertainer or an athlete, which nothing's wrong with those things if you can get it. But have a backup plan. Have something more available to yourself.

Octavia continued:

Many of them don't attend church, so it's not that structure, where surrogate big momma is there. So, I'm trying to instill it that way. And I am going to say, "Be smart, be good and learn something today. And when you get back, we are going to discuss what you learned." And we do. We get around to it. That validates them and makes them say, "Oh you know, I just did this, but she thinks I am important. My teacher hugs me and believes it." Or when they get there, and they slow up that gives me a chance to hug them. Go ahead, get ready for your day, you are going to be smart, good, and learn something. Just let them know that they are important to me. Enough for me to stop and say that to them.

Octavia's practice of validating her students with positive words and hugs constructs a regular practice of affirmation that undergirds her culturally relevant approach.

Nova explained that using praise and affirmation is a strategy that creates emotional safety and trust with her students. She also provides verbal feedback in one-on-one conferences to help them discuss growth and improvement. Nova explained:

I give my students a lot of praise, whether it is a small accomplishment or a big accomplishment. I let them know that what they achieved and tried to achieve was awesome and that they did an excellent job. I try to give them individual feedback so they will know what they did well and right so they can improve on it. I also establish a rapport with my students; that is important. I established that on the first day. I want them to be comfortable with me. And know that I have their best interest at heart, and I want them to learn. I want them to succeed, and once they see that, they'll say, ok, well, Ms. Nova really does care about me. She wants me to be great. I encourage them and say, "Hey, from 7:30 until 2:30, you are with me, and I love you, and I want you to do your absolute best." I would say in my classroom, I use a lot of encouraging words. I tell my kids that they are important, that they're special, that they are extremely smart. I do a lot of high fiving, and a lot of hugging. I let them know that what they're doing is worth it. I just feel like I can make a difference. I am making a difference because I can see the growth in my kids, and I am not going to give up on them. They know that I am going to do everything in my power to make sure that they master a certain skill. So, I just reassure them that I care and believe in them it is a huge thing, believing in them.

Nova encourages her students continuously, and her affirmation and praise are rooted in high expectations. She told me about one student who required much time and affirmation to break through self-doubt and indifference. Nova said:

I have a student now, and he had already been stereotyped from the beginning. He had come to first grade with a track record from kindergarten. He had already

been labeled by most. He had already made a name for himself. When he came to me, they said he is not going to do anything. He is not going to want to learn, his parents don't care. And so, what I had to do was let that student know.

'Listen, you CAN do this. I am not sure what you have been told but you can do this work. It may not be at the same timing or the same level as your peers, but you can actually complete the tasks. So, I had to do a lot of work one on one with this student. Most work was one-on-one. It was very seldom that this student could do whole group instruction, so what I had to do was one-on-one work all the time no matter what I was. No matter if that was writing sight words or completing a math addition problem. I literally had to pull a chair up to that student and tell him, "Hey you're going to use these manipulations to complete the tasks." When we first started off, it was like she just wants me to do my work; she doesn't care.

Nova's approach to helping students develop the skills needed to succeed was built upon care, and the students recognize this eventually.

Regina uses the practice of affirmation to keep her students motivated and encouraged. Affirming students increased their willingness to attempt rigorous tasks and persevere when learning tasks feel difficult. She noticed that her students begin to anticipate her praise and affirmation, which lets her know that it is meaningful to them.

She shared:

Every time we do, like after children ask some questions, I'll make sure to congratulate them and let them know what exactly they did correct. Sometimes I'll give them feedback on what they need to change, especially in the beginning

of it I try to focus on what they've done right to boost their confidence and make them feel that they're part of the class. 'I want to come in Ms. Regina's class.' Or, 'I know when I get in the reading group, I've got something to say, and I know she's going to be excited. Ooh, ooh, wait until you hear what I've got to say and it's going to be like what I said.' Even things that I hear them saying lets me know they feel good about what's going on in the classroom.

Regina also acknowledged that affirming students and keeping them motivated can be draining and demanding on teachers. She recognized her emotional toll and the necessity to rejuvenate and return each day prepared to do it again.

I can say this year I've spent a lot of emotions. This group of children I think had been very emotional. So, every day during SEL people tend to have these elaborate stories that are going on in their life. And then once class starts, I have a lot of those feelings of I want to opt out, I don't want to do the work, I don't feel like it. So, me, I have to pour in a lot of motivation and a lot of helping them see the future and wanting them to get motivated into doing the work and that can take a lot. By the end of the day, I am really tired by the time I go home because I'm giving each and every child that motivation . . . so it is a lot going through day-to-day as a teacher, but you grow how you recharge, and you come back in next day ready for it again.

Despite any initial self-doubt or reluctance among her students, Regina effectively uses praise and affirmation to nurture and improve academic confidence in her students.

While Octavia, Nova, and Regina spoke much about praise and affirmation in theory, Brianna and Evva shared examples of this practice. Brianna's affirmative

practice centered around showing appreciation and showcasing examples of quality student work. She found creative ways to use technology to highlight assignments during virtual instruction due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Brianna shared:

I always try to thank the students for what they did because everyone wants to be appreciated for working hard. And once they have finished the lesson—and I thank them because, oftentimes—one thing I’m trying to work on is on pacing. Not all of the students finish their assignments. And so, I have to continue to move on to different lessons. So, I’m also thanking them for managing their—time management as well or managing their time and pacing. And so, for the students who complete their assignments, do the exact thing they’re asked, adhered to the craftsmanship expectations, the ultimate validation I give them is showcasing their work on the bulletin board. And I’m super excited because one of the things I’ve learned during this coronavirus break is I have found digital galleries, and I can showcase their work online.

Evva noted that students desire and value affirmation from teachers even when they act like they do not care. Evva explained:

I guess just the fact that they act as though they don’t care or they don’t want to be smart or they don’t want to be great. They act like that, but in essence, they really do want recognition. They want to be rewarded, and they can do—they can do the things that you ask them to do. And I noticed that when it was time for Honors Day, a student would really get upset because they didn’t receive an award, and I could see that it was something that they really wanted.

The theme of affirmation and praise recurred throughout the interviews. I realized this practice was not isolated but directly connected with the topic of high expectations, which I will discuss next. In the following section, I will unpack how teachers in the study moved from verbal affirmation and praise to tangibly establishing and reinforcing high expectations.

## **Topic 2: Establishing High Expectations**

All participants in the study spoke extensively about high expectations and pushing their students beyond their comfort zone and toward high achievement. Whereas positive relationships often provide the foundation for culturally relevant practice, high expectations are like bricks or building blocks of a daily classroom commitment to CRP. Culturally relevant pedagogy commits to developing critical consciousness in students, grounds itself in cultural competence, and connects to students' home culture and the world. Most importantly, it requires the belief that all students can learn. The topic of high expectations was coded 21 times. The teachers in this study shared the many ways they embody such a belief by challenging, encouraging, and guiding them toward high achievement.

Ladson-Billings (1995a) found that while many researchers, such as Banks and Grambs (1972), Branch and Newcombe (1986), and Crooks (1970), focused on improving the self-esteem of African American students, academic competence is the foundation that needs to be established in all students. Ladson-Billings (1995a) believed that academic achievement must be established first, as this shared idea was evident in the eight teachers who participated in her study. In addition, all teachers demanded that their students achieve academic excellence. Finally, Ladson-Billings (1995a) concluded

that culturally relevant teaching required that teachers prioritize meeting students' academic needs and not just making them "feel good." Ladson-Billings (1995a) explained the actual goal of culturally relevant teaching is to get students to "choose" academic excellence. Each of the teachers I studied exemplified having high expectations. In this section, I will focus on each of them.

Octavia tries to build foundations of excellence by giving students simple executive functioning tasks to build students' confidence to tackle issues and challenges. For Octavia, high academic achievement begins with enhanced self-awareness and making them feel like they were all able to succeed. I asked Octavia to tell me more about how she empowered students to achieve, and she explained:

If they do . . . ok, we are going to start over. I have plenty of poster paper, whatever, let's get it right. You can cry, here is some tissue, now let's do it right. But once it is finished, I tell them, 'Look at the awesome job you did. Look how great you are.' It does something for them, it goes into their spirit. And one day, 10 to 12 years from now, they will remember the voice in their head that said, 'Look how great you are. You hung in there, you worked very hard, you got this. I got you. You did it, look at you.' They will remember that. You are building a foundation and I want a firm foundation.

Ultimately, Octavia goes beyond her confidence in her students' ability to model the perseverance and practice that undergirds high achievement. She talks and walks her students through tasks, builds on positive relationships and affirmation, and helps them reflect on their accomplishments so they can repeat them.

Regina uses individual student data meetings to discuss goals and performance and establish expectations for academic growth. She stated:

I am data-driven. As soon as the year starts, we talk about what are the expectations for their grades. Where they were in their previous grade, and what they can do to build-up to the proper capacity, so I think since kids are competitive by nature and once they see the number up [they think], “I want to get to 800; I want to get to 900.” It keeps that drive in them. So, just having those conversations about data is what drives the success in my classroom.

Regina added that viewing academic success broadly helps her differentiate performance goals for her students. She argued that teachers need to engage student data and make student-specific and cultural considerations to garner academic success. Regina starts with general expectations for how her students engage in learning. Her standards are unwavering, so the students become accustomed to high accountability and their ability to rise to the occasion in any setting. She said:

Even letting kids know, you do have a future. But I have some expectations for you. When the kids came in the other day, the expectation was to make sure you are ready for class. You are fully dressed; you have your camera on. The expectation is that you are ready. Why? Because so many of us are not ready for many things in life, so we have to be taught those things. I just can’t assume they are going to do it; I have to set the expectation for them and let them know what I expect. If I let a child just do what they want, they won’t learn that, and then they will go into the world expecting something different. And that is not how it is

going to be. So, I try to match my expectations in the classroom with what they will see in the world. So, it is not a big difference when we get out here.

Finally, Regina pointed out that in addition to high expectations and high accountability, involving parents is essential to maintaining such standards and cultivating high student performance:

If the teacher is planning with their needs in mind, they really shouldn't have any way to opt out of work. So, I have the belief that if you keep that parent in that triangle, then that child has, I will say in my experience, more success of changing. I haven't, in my experience yet, have had a child on their own just kind of turn a leaf. So, I will say definitely keep those parents involved. In the children that I have seen changed, I've seen it be because of a really good working relationship between myself, the child, and their parents.

Overall, clear data-driven goals, high accountability, and a circle of support around each student are the hallmarks of Regina's approach to high expectations.

Like Regina, Brianna's use of a craftsmanship rubric in her art classes helps students be aware of their progress on assignments. She uses this strategy to encourage students to strive for excellence when finishing tasks. Brianna spoke about how she concretizes high expectations in her art classroom:

I have a board that says craftsmanship, and what I did is I printed out about 20 fish, just blank goldfish, and I colored them in. I have for each art tool, I have one for crayons, paint, colored pencils. Then I have level one, which is horrible looking, coloring outside of the line. Scribble scrabble mess fest. Then I have number two, which a lot of kids are comfortable doing this, they have really light

colors. They are coloring inside the lines so light that you cannot even see it. Then I have level three, which is what I expect, which is solid colors, and everything is colored in. And so, I am always referring to them to refer back to this and I say, 'Hey, are you coloring level three? Is that level two?' So, they need that visual and that is helped too because as I said before, I realized early on especially when I would say color darker, and if they don't have an example, if they don't see what it is, they are not going to do it. And so, while their art buddies are checking in on them, on the foundations, I am walking around, cause I never sit.

Although Brianna models the use of her rubric and considers what the art task should look like, it is about the process. She mentioned that constructive feedback on making something even more beautiful could help students reach high expectations. Brianna wants them to have time to do as much as possible for themselves. She wants students to collaborate and discuss what they could do differently to get high-quality work, a transferable skill. Brianna shared:

And oftentimes, with the level three craftsmanship expectation I have, it requires more time. So, I have learned to be more flexible and realize that in order for me to get the quality work I want from them. I have to be open to them when they tell me Ms. Brianna, 'I need more time.' Or I will extend the class period. And that is another reason why I do the art buddies because the art buddies force them to slow down and take time. Because literally, the first couple weeks of school: mess. And they tell me, 'It's art.' And I say, 'No, that is not. That is not art. I want you to make something that is beautiful and presentable. And of course, I

don't want to limit you, if you prefer to color a certain way, you can. You can do that at home. But when you come to my class you are receiving a grade on this.'

Brianna's art class is an exploratory space in which high expectations are applied to techniques and strategies. She acknowledged that students are expected to hold to external conventions of art. She cultivates a standard that includes helping them enjoy the process while building their work ethic. She stated:

And one thing that is important to expect is the best out of children because it shows that you care about them. It actually shows that 'hey I see something in you that you may not necessarily see in yourself,' and the great thing about art education is that I am not teaching a university class. When you are an art major, you are expected to draw a certain way. You are expected to do things exactly; I am teaching an introductory art class to the youngest kids. I am trying to introduce art to them, and hopefully, they will take that with them as they progress and get older. I want them to enjoy the art-making process. And the art-making process doesn't mean it has to be perfect. It is ok to make mistakes. It is ok to experiment with something. I still expect it to be good. And that I say correlates to work ethic. It is good to have a good work ethic and to do things well and finish things. Because one thing I have learned. That is a skill too.

Brianna connects her high expectations to her practice of caring for students and wanting to see everyone succeed. Her distinction is that beyond expecting them all to succeed, she scaffolds and guides them, fostering the tools they will need to meet her high expectations. Brianna explained:

I do think, at the end of the day, regardless of race, I think that all kids will rise to the occasion if you expect them to. If you don't expect them to accomplish anything, if you allow them to just give mediocre work or not do the assignments, of course, they're not going to excel. But if you set that high standard from the beginning, I think that any kid, regardless if Black, White, Asian, will be able to rise to that level of excellence.

For Evva, high expectations were less evident. Still, she indirectly talked about this topic as a way of setting examples for students, being open and modeling how to work through mistakes and correct them and offering high consistency for her students. Evva felt strongly about these habits of character and sets the tone for high expectations. She explained:

I fall short sometimes for many different reasons, but my kids see me, if I don't know a word, how to spell a word, the meaning of a word, I problem solve in front of them and I say, "I don't know what that means. Let me check it out." When I put up posters or charts, my handwriting is neat. So my expectation is that your handwriting is going to be neat, readable. I come to school, and I'm dressed a certain way. No, I don't wear a uniform, but you don't see my clothes hanging off of me. You don't see me not clean. You don't see my hair a mess. Another thing, as small as it might seem, there's plenty of kids that wear glasses or need to wear glasses. But they don't wear their glasses because it's not cool.

After discussing how she never wants to embarrass anybody, Evva shared how she models a growth mindset because students tend to withdraw when singled out and feel like they do not understand what is happening:

Or I don't know the answer to something, be open to saying, "I made a mistake," or, "Let's find out together." A lot of times I used that statement, "Let's find out together because I don't know everything," and I want them to know that I don't know everything. "I'm learning every day just like you, and I want to be excited about learning new things." I'm human just like they are. I think that makes me more relatable. I make mistakes. Humans make mistakes. But I think the best thing that I could do is show them that, one, it's okay to make a mistake. And two, how can I go about making it right? So, I'll take them to the side, and I'll say, "Hey, looks like you're having a bad day," or, "Looks like you're not feeling too well. I get it. Sometimes I come in like that—so you can take it easy."

Evva also discussed how consistency is a hallmark of high expectations. She continued:

But still, back to expectations, set an expectation that if you're having a bad day, you have a few minutes or you have some time to yourself, but you have to get it together. I believe that you have to be consistent. Consistency is really key. I haven't really taught other students, but I know that consistency is key for the students to learn. And I've fallen short of being consistent on certain things. But, I've always been consistent in them knowing that when they come into my classroom, that it's a safe environment. They do know the routines. I'm consistent with routines.

Finally, Evva uses "friendly competition" among students to encourage them to aim higher by seeing their peers perform and strive to do their best. Eva said:

I think a bit of friendly competition, which I introduce to my students. Not for anyone to be against another student or dislike another student, but just to kind of

give them that push to see that somebody else could do it. Same age as me, same kid as me, I can do it too. Whether it's a spelling bee in the classroom, whether it's posting grades up on the board and showing grades on the Promethean board.

Nova is a teacher who promotes high expectations as she gives consistent messages and feedback based on her genuine confidence that all her students will succeed. She utilizes proximity and anonymity to encourage a doubtful student before embarking on a challenging task. Nova explained:

Before the lesson starts or after the lesson, I might have to pull a child over really closely and be like, 'Hey, we're getting ready to do this. We're getting ready to do this story lesson. I need you to sit on the carpet. If you feel that you need to be close to Ms. Nova, then come and sit closer to me, because I need your undivided attention. I need you to be ready.' So sometimes, I have to have one-on-ones, but for the most part, I can have a whole group expectation. But I always let them know before I start teaching what I'm expecting them to get out of the lesson and what I am actually teaching them and what I'm expecting for them to learn during the lesson and what I'm expecting to—the feedback that I want from them. Like, 'I want you guys to provide me feedback. I want you to tell me what you've learned, and I also want you to be comfortable enough to ask me questions if you don't get it.'

Nova not only invites feedback from students to create a reflexive relationship of improvement, but she also uses these moments as a "check for understanding." This practice builds both self-awareness and confidence among her students. She expanded:

I was like, “Okay. Everybody, hold up your paper. Let me see what you did. Is everybody \_\_\_ or so? We’re going over all these answers. Well, did everybody make 100? Is everybody excited? If you didn’t make 100, did you at least make a 90 or did you make an 80?” And everybody’s hands—and so he raises his hand, and he was like, “Ms. Nova, I didn’t.” And I was like, “Well—” He was like, “And I’m so sorry.” And I was like, “Well, why are you sorry?” He was like, “Because, honestly, it was my fault. You told us everything we needed to do.” He was just like, “But I was just in La La Land.” He was like, “I just couldn’t come back.” I was like, “Well, do I need to go over the lesson with you again?” He was like, “No, no, no, no, no, Ms. Nova. No. Please don’t.” He was like, “I got it.” He was like, “When I turn my assignment in, I’m going to show you that I have it.” So, he was just . . . he wanted to learn. He was like, “I just have to be honest.” When I got home, I had to call back some colleagues to tell them because I just thought it was so hilarious how he was just, “I’m so sorry. I know I wasn’t doing . . .” He was so dramatic. But because I’m always setting the tone and the expectation for my kids, “I need your best. I need you to give me your absolute best.” And he knew that he didn’t give it to me. He wanted to make it known like “I’m sorry that I didn’t give it to you, but I did have it.”

Nova is a teacher who promotes high expectations as she gives consistent messages and feedback based on her genuine confidence that all her students will succeed. She utilizes proximity and anonymity to encourage a doubtful student before embarking on a challenging task.

All the participants cultivated high expectations for their students in unique ways. The salient connections include building confidence, reflectiveness, reference to student data or previous performance, the scaffolding of rubrics, clear expectations, and modeling. The teachers also connected their high expectations to the practice of care, and affirmation or praise, which builds students up to face challenging academic tasks and increases accountability.

### **Topic 3: Having a Sense of Purpose and Connection**

Several teachers shared in-depth confessions of their overall purpose and source of motivation for teaching. Similar to high expectations, there were 20 mentions coded related to teacher purpose and connection to African American students. All study participants identified as African American, and many talked about the importance and realization that they wanted to “give back to” or support the success of African American students and the communities from which they came. In some cases, class differences were mentioned, and deficit language was used to describe the experience and perception of African American students and their families. However, in other cases, participants recognized cultural and regional differences even within the same race. Accordingly, they found it necessary to move beyond their racial commitment and feeling of connection to learn more and bring forth the value of the student’s home culture into the classroom and their instruction.

Nova’s time abroad, teaching international students, helped clarify her sense of purpose and commitment to teaching African American students. She explained:

I feel like that is where I am supposed to be. Sometimes I think, oh I don’t want to do this anymore, but it is about who they need. They need teachers, coaches,

and people that care about them in addition to their parents. This was definitely a challenge, and I took it. I was not going to let it defeat me and I fell in love with it.

Nova connects her role as a teacher to her upbringing and cares for those in her family.

She stated:

It was my job to take care of everybody. And so, my students became my children. Each child holds a different personality, so it is so fun and interesting to be around them. They almost become your own children, so you laugh at them and with them sometimes and kinda get to learn each other so I don't know . . . so I go into my classroom and close the door and I'm like this is our home this is where we are. This is us together, this is where we live, this is where we'll be all day, so we get comfortable with one another. And they kinda respect that space. You treat them like, hey this is your classmate be this is someone you are living with . . . so they become your family. They become all my little children, and it is like wow, if you were really my child, would you be this way? They are funny and very enjoyable to be around on a good day (laughing).

Nova recognized that the many hours spent with her students resulted in a significant impact and great responsibility to her students. She said:

I'm the biggest influence on my students' education because even though they live with their parents or that type of thing, they spend a lot of their daytime with me. Because I'm even their parent from 7:30 to 2:30, or 7:30 to 3:00. I'm their parent. I'm their teacher. I'm their counselor. I'm their motivator. So, I would

say that I'm that just for the many hats and the roles that I have to play while they're with me.

Alexis discussed her commitment to African American students and the importance of being authentic when serving her students because she speaks from experience of having a similar background, culture, and upbringing in an urban environment. She stated:

If I am going to give myself, I am going to give myself to someone who needs it and not to those who don't. And I want to give myself to them. I don't want to give a phony persona of that. I can put on what I need to for other cultures, to feel accepted or feel not threatened. And other than urban settings, you feel like you have to put on airs for people to accept you. They don't want you to be angry. And I am not being angry, I am just being myself.

Essentially, Alexis wanted to be her most authentic self. She named her reluctance to assume the dominant mainstream culture's social and communication styles. Next, she explained that injustice and inequity create a shared experience for African Americans, including her students. Alexis noted:

That's just how a lot of Black people are if you are growing up in the United States of America; we have had a different path and a different fight. So, how we look at life is different. How we relate to people is different. And how we look at society is different. And that is just too exhausting to always have to explain that if I were in another setting. It is too exhausting to be anything but yourself all the time.

Alexis also has a positive perspective on parents and families and the importance of building connections, especially with those parents of culturally and linguistically diverse students. She made several suggestions on how to support and build partnerships with students and their families:

Have ongoing participation in dialogue with students, parents, and community members on issues important to them, along with the inclusion of these individuals and issues in classroom curriculum and activities. Know the environment of your students the most. If you plan to connect with them, you have to know their lives outside of your classroom, to almost an obsession.

Octavia shared her desire to remain in her urban area and not depart to teach in a suburban neighborhood. She said, “I wanted to live in the city, I always had a love for African American people, and it just fit. Automatically for me.” Octavia retold a story about students staying with her in the classroom after a violent incident occurred nearby and not being deterred or scared off to teach elsewhere:

“Oh, Mrs. Octavia this guy got shot down there we’ve got to wait until they move him out of the way so we can go home.” And this is how they said it, like it was an everyday thing and then they asked, “Can you help me with my homework?” And they would have to stay for an extra hour or two you know, to shelter in, but to them it was ok. This happens in my neighborhood all the time. And every year they would ask, “Well, are you coming back [next year]?” And I would say, well of course I am coming back. This is my school.

Regina spoke similarly to Octavia and Nova about choosing to teach African American students in an urban setting despite any perceived challenges. Regina explained:

I felt like I would have more of a connection with an urban setting because they had a background similar to mine. And I felt like I could relate to them more. It is definitely not for the faint-hearted. You got to have some stamina working in an urban setting because there are many challenges, but if you are creative and innovative. You will have success. It will just take planning and some thought.

In Brianna's interviews, she referred to connecting to African American students and utilizing her content area, art, to connect to all students. She noted:

As Blacks we are very creative people. I love at Trevor Arnett Library at Clark Atlanta are these huge panels painted by Hale Woodruff. He was a Black professor at Clark Atlanta, and he was also a muralist and he studied with the amazing Diego Rivera who was Frida Kahlo's husband, the Mexican artist who painted those political murals in Mexico. But he painted a series of murals about the importance of art and the history of art from Africa. And how it came into America.

She included the culture and history of Latino artists. For Brianna, culturally relevant teaching means consciously working to develop commonalities among all students (Ladson-Billings, 2009).

Like Nova, Evva connected to her students and saw them as her children. This parental connection motivated her to give her best and to go above and beyond by approaching academic instruction with a culturally relevant lens. Evva stated:

I just wanted to educate my people, my babies. I believe that, I am not saying that White students need to be taught by White teachers and Black students need to be taught by Black teachers. I just feel like I have more of an understanding of Black students, and I wanted to be a part of their education. Of how they are taught. So, I just try to make it meaningful and relatable in terms like that. Relevant, I try to, again, relate it to things that's going on today, in our world today. We've had conversations in regard to the presidency. And what I find is that kids will repeat what they hear their parents say. So, although I had to make some corrections, I allowed them to voice their opinions. So, I think that that was relevant for them.

Evva recognized the challenges she faced working in underserved schools, but rather than being deterred, she revisited her ethic of caring and doubled down on her commitment to her profession and to teaching African American students. Evva said:

I genuinely care. I always come back the next day and I say, "Yesterday was yesterday, this is a new day." I stand at that door and there are days that I don't even want to hug students, but I do. I stand there and I greet them, and I give them the option of not hugging if they don't hug back, it is fine. Because some kids are just not used to that. And I don't make anyone like me or hug me, but I do let you know that I am not going to hold on to something that happened yesterday. I genuinely care and that is demonstrated because I return every year, because I know I can go to another school, but my preference is to be with students who can relate to me. I genuinely care. I don't want these kids to have a bad life; I want them to be successful people that I am proud to talk about. I have

students that I proudly talk about like students that I started teaching, those students are graduating now. And I talked about them, and I remembered the type of students that they were. I was invited to two graduations. I have sent gifts. I have students who did not go on to college but who have become great parents. If I didn't, there are plenty of jobs that I could do.

Finally, Evva restated the sense of family she enjoys with parents and students and her unconditional love for students despite any flaws or challenges.

I was able to establish relationships with parents, so I was like a family member so the strategies I used were able to be relatable. They could talk to me. There were students I fell in love with. I kept it real with them. I think that that was appreciated. I was trusting. It may not sound like a strategy but that is how I related to them and get them to believe in me. There's some that are like this and some that are like that. They are very inquisitive, there are some that are lovable. There are some that are hard to like. I love them all.

#### **Topic 4: Using Critical Content Instruction**

Topic 4 was coded 17 times, was that many teachers in the study engaged in what I will call critical content instruction. Participants shared a range of meaningful ways to engage students and their home culture while cultivating critical thinking and social awareness. For example, some teachers designed instructional lessons around social issues and current events in the news. In contrast, others integrated popular culture, music, and entertainment to connect with their students' interests and age groups. Others drew upon culture, history, and art to get their students thinking, engaged, and achieving standards-based instructional goals. These approaches to bringing critical topics and

content to the classroom evidenced the participants' understanding and application of critical consciousness in students, the final building block of culturally relevant pedagogy.

Octavia has always believed that she could make a difference in the lives of African American students as a teacher. Octavia reflected upon her experiences in her first year of teaching middle school. She felt her historically Black college prepared her for her inner-city public school teaching experience. Octavia reflected upon what she discovered had worked as she began teaching. She said, "First of all, you have to get their attention and get their trust. That, hey, I am here to teach you." For Octavia, teaching her students to think critically involves thinking about their life skills. Stressing the need to think critically so they would not be fools caught their attention, causing them to want to learn. For example, she used a social studies lesson on the Puritans and the old Deluder Satan Act of 1647 as an entry point for discussing personal empowerment. She explained, "The Puritans valued literacy highly; they believed all individuals should be able to read and interpret the Bible to obtain an education and be well-informed so as not to be tricked into sinning by the Devil." Octavia compared this historical narrative to current events and contemporary society and how individuals must be educated and think critically to have a successful life.

I observed Octavia reading the story of Bass Reeves (a formerly enslaved person who became the first African American deputy U.S. Marshall). I chatted with her about the text selection and why she chose to read it with her students. She shared, "I think my students may like to know about him." Octavia's classroom was filled with African American stories, such as the story of Bass Reeves and *Bad News for Outlaws*, written by

Vaunda Micheaux Nelson (2014). She has a love for Black children's authors especially. In her virtual classroom, she read to her students from *The Ghost of Sifty-Sifty Sam*, a humorous tale about a hungry ghost written by African American authors, Medearis and Rogers (1998), and shared information about the author to make the read aloud even more relevant. She sees literacy as freedom and believes teaching Black history benefits students, not just during Black History Month but all year, even in the simple forms of a read-aloud or a conversation during circle time.

Regina described her use of critical content and social justice as being able to make decisions. Regina believes that African American students need to think critically more than ever. She feels she is responsible for teaching students both facts and how to think for themselves. She believes that with the current social unrest due to police brutality and the COVID-19 pandemic, students of all ages need to develop an accurate understanding of African Americans. She exhibited this in her instruction by consistently keeping her teaching relevant. She explained:

I keep my instruction relevant because I bring in current events full circle. If we were talking about the main idea, I would be talking about the coronavirus right now. I would be reading articles and trying to figure out important points in it so in that way it doesn't feel like work. They are learning about the world. It would be something that they were learning if they were at home. So that keeps it relevant. And a lot of times they will say, "Oh I saw that on the news and my grandma . . ." and that will make them get into it more.

Regina also ensures she connects the academic curriculum to everyday life skills that her students will need. She stated:

I always try to cross-reference a lesson to a skill they will see as an adult. So, if I was talking about grammar, I would link it to when you are applying for a job and filing out an application. I will equate myself to their boss and I will say, ‘A teacher is like a boss and your boss will be looking for mistakes. At school, you get a grade, but in the real world, you may not get that job’. I try to make it so whatever we are doing, they don’t think this is something I will never use again. They will understand what I am doing is related to my future.

She used the COVID-19 pandemic as a current events topic to foster critical thinking and decision-making for students and a way to practice skills they have developed during reading instruction. Regina explained:

So, I want my students to make those types of decisions no matter where they are at, they can sit down and critically think about a situation before they make a decision, and I say that because like right now, the governor is telling us to stay inside but go outside, and we have to teach people to make their own decisions because if the deaths are rising, more people are getting sick, but they are saying to open up, maybe I shouldn’t go out. There are a lot of people who are not able to make those types of decisions. So, I want my students to make those types of decisions no matter where they are at they can critically think about a situation before they make a decision. And we practice that a lot in reading. When we are close reading texts and breaking down different reasons, opinions, and finding the evidence in texts.

For Regina, the ability to clearly communicate and hone public speaking skills is central to what and how she teaches her students. She noted:

Those are the biggest skills, and then also being able to speak clearly and communicate. Once they do make a decision, can you communicate what you are thinking about that decision? That comes from practicing speaking, which is why I had that U-shape set up in my classroom so they can speak all the time even without that nervousness of standing up. And then also through their writing, that is where they practice a lot of their communication. Everyone has their own ways and their own personalities, and they also have their own voice whether they know they have it or not. Sometimes I have to coax it out of them. They all have their own views, voices, and personalities and I love that.

Finally, Regina integrates vocabulary instruction by deliberately selecting words teach the meaning of and for students to interact with the words in meaningful classroom discussions. Regina shared:

We [Regina and her students] really focus on the definitions and concepts first, so we make sure that we have that before we start discussing things and relating things among ourselves. And if I really don't have the time to get into the vocabulary and concepts, sometimes it is harder for them to go into depth. I also try to bring in any outside world pictures, videos, anything that would help them feel closer to the concept so that they could go deep.

Nova uses child-friendly language to help her young students "make meaning" on difficult topics. She shares a discussion with one of her students working to understand the concept of racism. Nova shared:

Because sometimes, you have to respect the fact that people don't like to use such words as racism so soon and so early. So, she was like, 'They were being

bullies.’ But I definitely felt during the current events that they were challenged to think critically. But even when we got into the book, when I was asking them questions about, ‘Does it matter if my skin is the darker version of your skin?’

You still should treat people respectfully. We were able to talk about the issues of race.

Brianna is one of the teachers who connected with her students very effectively.

In an interview with Fay, Ladson-Billings provided advice to a teacher who wanted to talk about something like this but wasn’t sure how (Ladson-Billings, 2019, as cited in Fay, 2019) explained:

You have to have a space in the classroom where kids feel free to say, ‘Hey, did y’all see this thing on the news,’ rather than have the teacher say ‘There’s racism in the society. Sometimes the kids are just not there. And again it gets back to, we’re not there for our agenda. We should be there to let students know that whatever is of concern to them, they ought to feel free to bring it here because we’re going to talk about it, we’re going to try to make sense of it, . . . what are the kids’ experiences they are to be able to have these conversations. (para. 5)

Brianna, who always wears make-up and dresses conservatively, wore professional attire during our virtual interview. I asked her about her instructional practices, academic content, and what other teachers should know about teaching African American students. [She thought aloud and whispered something to herself...]

A hard one (laughter). Thank God I have a cup of coffee. Okay. All right. I can answer that question. Yeah, that’s a heavy one. But I think that I can relate to just my experiences teaching in Georgia, of course, but also teaching overseas as

well. I think that there's some—I don't think that teaching Black kids is all that different from teaching other children. But I do think that it is very important that we see ourselves and you use relevant pedagogy, and you make sure that when you are teaching to Black children that you are including topics and things that they would be interested in, like in their community. And it is not just Black History Month. But just in general, maybe even adding cultural songs that they like, or—because I know in middle school, I had to kind of up my rap game a little bit and just learn even fashion and things like that, know what the kids were really interested in to really connect with them.

Brianna uses hip-hop music and culture in her art class with meaning and intention, being sure not to mimic or appropriate youth culture in ways that could be offensive. This misstep that other teachers make at times is something Ladson-Billings explained in a virtual conference (2020 PBS Wisconsin's Educator Connection Live):

I don't want you to use hip-hop; I want you to be hip-hop and what does that mean? That is, stay fresh. Don't keep trying to teach the same thing over and over, that's a hallmark of hip hop is to stay fresh. The other thing that is a hallmark is to flip something out of nothing; in other words, take something old and learn something new and be resourceful. . . . I much rather you be hip-hop than to pretend to appropriate hip-hop (PBS Wisconsin's Educator Connection Live, 2020, 1:01.26).

However, Ladson-Billings admitted, “I am not going to be the dope MC; that is not who I am. Engage them and just teach them that you value their culture. Use hip hop to connect” (PBS Wisconsin's Educator Connection Live, 2020, 59.51). Like Ladson-

Billings, Brianna admitted to not being an expert on hip-hop but used it to connect with some of her students. Brianna is also clear that art is a content area that offers multiple opportunities for critical and creative thinking. She explained:

Especially when we live in an age, where this is a completely creative age.

Where the 20th century notion of education is quickly falling into dust and now, with this virtual learning we are having to do, creativity is so important. It is so important to teach children to use these 21st century skills. Being able to use critical thinking and imagine things that they cannot see. Cause I know that we are capable of doing that. And I know that the arts is one of the ways it can help with that.

Evva began by sharing about a challenging activity in which she engaged students and modeled the historical practice of segregation. She stated:

While we were talking about Martin Luther King, Jr. and the word *segregation* came up in a story, and what I did was I had a few students of Mexican descent on one side, and I put the African Americans on another side. I said only these students will get a good grade. I divided them by the shoes and clothes that they had on. I just used a whole lot of different scenarios. The students understand that segregation means to separate groups of people not only on the basis of the color of your skin but also by the community that you live in or by the clothes that you wear. I think it was more in-depth than just separating Black from White. It was a wonderful, wonderful response from them. They were full of questions because they wanted to know why it happened to Black people. And I didn't say

all White people hate all Black people, because I don't believe that. The explanation that I gave them was it was some people that didn't like Black people. She was careful but intentional about having honest conversations with students about past and present racial violence, using primary sources for class discussions. Evva said:

All that stuff that they sugarcoat in the social studies books, I go to the videos. I like them to see it for real because, especially now, even with the things that have been happening where young Black men have been wrongly killed and put in jail. And I relate that to our kids. I relate to that. My main thing is keeping it real with them.

Evva also related to her students by her awareness of popular culture and her sense of fashion. She said:

When I was younger, I was very much relatable because I was up on the same type of music that they listen to, the same type of dances that they did. My style of dress was something relatable. They saw me as how they would see me as how their parents dress or their aunties or the people in the neighborhood. I was able to establish a relationship.

To learn more about her instructional practices, I asked Evva to share what others should know about teaching elementary African American students. Evva responded:

I would say make time before you go in a classroom to understand the culture, and I think our culture is very diverse. There's a culture in hair; there's a culture in the way someone dresses, the way someone speaks, the way someone accepts a new person into the tribe with the community. Be aware of those nuances. I also would say be flexible and open to learning new things and making mistakes and

owning up to a mistake that's made. Or if it's not a mistake, maybe a misconception, be open to learning new things and understand that there's a lingo [or a way that you may need to be] or you need to become used to.

Evva described how she is a teacher who searches for knowledge she likes to students to see her passion for learning. She said:

There have been plenty of times when I have said, 'Let's find out together.' A lot of times I used that statement, 'Let's find out together because I don't know everything,' and I want them to know that I don't know everything. 'I'm learning every day just like you, and I want to be excited about learning new things.'

When I observed Evva's instruction, she appeared to aim for students to fully understand when something was unjust. She did not push students to believe one way or another. Instead, she asked, 'How does that make you feel? What should happen to these people because of their neglect?' Evva offered her students information from various perspectives to form an informed analysis and an opinion of what occurred due to the Flint, Michigan, water crisis. Her goal was to have students engage in social action by writing a letter to their mayor. Researchers have suggested critical consciousness can be a gateway to academic motivation and achievement. This theory proved true in Evva's class.

Although the problems students try to solve in their lives are not always as severe as police shootings, the pandemic, and other injustices, the teachers have engaged students in persuasive topics such as making choices regarding school uniforms, playground equipment, or lunch options. When students ask why they need to learn something, Ladson-Billings explained, "A typical teacher's response is something like,

‘You’re going to need this next year’” (Ladson-Billings, 2019 as cited in Fay, 2019, para 12). Ladson-Billings (2019) continued:

Culturally relevant teachers say, ‘OK, here’s why you need to know this: if we’re going to change this, if we’re going to speak to this level of unfairness and inequality, then you need some tools.’ Most teachers wanted students to do some political work and to question things. You need to be able to read, and you need to be able to write so that you can speak directly to this. (para. 13)

When children are given a greater sense of purpose and opportunities to share knowledge of their culture (assets) this may lead to critical thinking about our society, resulting in powerful instructional conversations. The assets that teachers and students bring to school can produce meaningful teaching and student learning, that builds critical awareness of social and cultural matters of the present and future.

### **Topic 5: Using Unconscious Deficit Thinking and Bias Language**

Inadvertently, there were teachers whose language and narrative to describe their care and concern included instances of *deficit language and deficit thinking*. This was coded 11 times. In White teachers, this trend might be considered paternalistic or even racist by some definitions. I mention this because in the complexity of marginalized groups there can be unconscious bias and judgment of oneself and those of one’s cultural or racial group. Culturally relevant pedagogy exists to challenge and undo these practices and ways of thinking and speaking about African American students. In some interviews, participants struggled to find clear language to discuss their experiences and aspirations with African American students, and their concerns related to their local neighborhood, socioeconomic background, and class status. One teacher grappled with

the language or framework for describing her students who faced challenges or struggles in their home lives. When referring to the students she encountered in a middle school classroom, she did not want to refer to them students-as “having baggage or issues.” Working through the difficulty of describing her students, she referred to her own status, growing up middle class, as different from her experiences. This teacher stated:

Their lives are not like the one I grew up with, and umm, I really had to step back and learn, very urban setting children come with all kinds of; I don't want to say baggage; just their lives are not like the one I grew up with. A lot of times our children receive . . . even from their own parents . . . “you stupid, you not this, you're just like your dumb daddy, blah blah blah.” You are building a foundation and I want a firm foundation you can do it. You are not weak. Come on, you got this.

This teacher inadvertently generalized and stereotyped her students and their parents, although her greater intention is to provide reinforcement using positive affirmations.

Similarly, another teacher struggled with overgeneralizing her students' socioeconomic status as she attempted to discuss the importance of making relevant connections between real life and academic content. She shared, “Kids in urban populations don't see any immediate gratification in an education, so if you can't break it down and make it something that you do see that's immediate, you are not going to get their attention.” Additionally, she described the disproportionate number of upper elementary students receiving special education services and performing below grade level:

My students have deficits with some behavior problems. We have more significant learning delay developments there, so my fourth- and fifth-graders are on probably kindergarten to first-grade level, usually no higher than second-grade reading. So, they're two to three levels behind reading and also math . . . but when you're dealing with, I'll say, a population where 70% are a year and a half to two years below, that's almost impossible.

The challenge with these descriptions is that, despite the best intentions of the teachers and the shared racial and cultural background, the teachers describe the problem and criticize the students, the parents, and their environment, rather than speaking about the systemic issues and disparities that create such conditions. The teachers sometimes even describe the challenges to the learning environment as insurmountable. Culturally relevant pedagogy advocates adequate cultural competency, which means using unbiased lenses to view students, their families, and communities as having inherent value and agency.

One teacher attempted to refer to the generational cycles and educational gaps some parents of African American students' experience. She said:

But then once I began to teach these students, I realized that a lot of their parents didn't even have the educational background to be able to help them. So, it kind of changed my mind so that instead of just thinking, 'Well, they don't want to,' instead of, 'I'm going to try and help them to because they actually don't know how to teach you this concept that I'm trying to have you learn.'

While this teacher made a positive shift from judging her students and assuming they do not want to learn, she also misrepresented parents of African American students in urban

settings by inferring that all or most of them cannot and do not support and encourage academic performance. While this may be the case for some students, the social conditions that African Americans face in urban settings are much more nuanced. She continued:

I don't know if they're going to eat. And I know the school provides them with a snack or something or food. But typically, they don't eat it because they are like, 'Ugh, what's this? I don't want that.' So, they'll throw it in the trash. So, I typically give my kids a snack every day, and I'm able to fund that because I'm either [inaudible] of course. I have friends that kind of support my classroom, so they'll buy snacks. They'll send me money and say, 'Hey, go to Sam's and get a [inaudible] for your kids,' or I'll buy them [inaudible]. And at first, it was a reward system, so I'd say, 'You had a great day. You can have a snack.' But then I started to feel bad. [inaudible] 'Well, they need to eat, so I got to give everybody a snack,' and so, yeah, it went from reward to everyday-type thing.

While this demonstrates care for her students and nutrition and food scarcity are legitimate concerns for many families, the teacher's vantage point is one of concern and perhaps pity based on an assumption about most versus some of her students. Culturally relevant pedagogy suggests treating and viewing students with dignity and worth rather than pity and helping them become a part of the solution for the challenges around them.

One of the veteran teachers discussed when she began recognizing her assumptions about her students' misbehavior as a barrier and how she shifted her perspective. She stated:

Once I understood that he's not that angry or that bad, and I understood that he feels inadequate, then I had to change the way I dealt with him. And sometimes it worked, sometimes it didn't, but he also had a lot of outside issues. So, by and large, to answer that question, I think that the kids are—every kid has potential, where I used to think that they all didn't have potential. I would see a kid walk through the door and after a couple of days I already, in my head, not verbally saying this to anyone, but I would say, 'I already know what kind of kid that is.' And sometimes I was on point, but a lot of times that kid showed a whole different kid. So that first impressions are not always the impressions that stay with them.

This teacher's honesty and reflectiveness about her prejudice and bias are important because they demonstrate the development of her critical consciousness and help her grow and improve. She also ascribed limiting gender norms for her students when describing reading interests and book choices.

I think a lot of the boys really enjoy the wrestling books and the sports books. And the girls were really into—I don't know the title of it, but there were a lot of these little fairy books, fantasy books. So that was the thing in the library. Well, when they would go pick out books from the library. Either a sports-related book or something girly, or it could've been something that was read in class.

While not all boys like sports, nor all girls like fairies and fairy tales, catching this generational gap in social norms and expectations is essential to being a lifelong learner and mastering culturally relevant pedagogy. The veteran teacher self-corrected and

admitted that she held false assumptions and judgments about parents and families, disproven in the past year. She noted:

I used to think that a lot of parents didn't care, and they didn't make an effort to come to school to see about their kid. They didn't make a phone call to see what's going on if they couldn't make it up to the school. But this time period of this virtual teaching, I've seen inside homes, and they're not as messy or unkempt as I would think they would be. There are parents that are disciplining their kids.

One teacher was openly aware of these challenges and more conscious of bias than the other teachers interviewed. She confessed that she is constantly learning about her students, which is one characteristic that she describes as a culturally relevant teacher. She used what is known about her students' culture to help them achieve success but was concerned that what she did not know may keep students from succeeding. She explained that teachers of African American students should be primarily concerned with being mindful of bias. She explained the value of parents in the learning process and the importance of high engagement and motivation with clarity and affirmative language. She said:

I understand that with our students, I know that school says otherwise but, I know with our population if you don't reel the parents in and get them excited, the kids don't get as excited, so in my 7 years of experience, I have gotten the parents involved about what we are learning and what the activities are the kids' goals, that student has done better than a student who does not have family participation so that is one of my biggest things.

She further articulated the importance of openness, consideration, and embracing difference:

Well, if it's somebody from a different culture, not using biases or stereotypes to drive your classroom, having to go and getting to know every child, getting to know what they love, what they don't love and, like I said, using that into your instruction, into your curriculum. So, you can't go in there expecting to talk about the Confederate flag, even though that may be your history and you're very proud of it, that's not going to translate very well into an African [American] classroom. That doesn't mean I'm sure that they will be offended by that, but it doesn't mean that somebody is trying to offend you, it just means that you have to be open to other cultures and other cultures may look at different things in different ways. So, a lot of openness.

The patterns and language that I found stemming from my interviews expose the importance of tooling teachers, even those African American like their students, to embrace a critical lens and more thoughtful and value-added language to describe their students, parents, and the communities from which they come.

#### **Topic 6: Lack of Formal Training on Culturally Relevant Pedagogy**

The final topic which was coded nine times was lack of professional development. Some teachers said they never received formal professional development in culturally relevant pedagogy and practice. Others recalled pre-service learning but little additional training when they became teachers. This gap in formal training is relevant because participants, at their very best, engaged in their understanding of CRP, sometimes aligned with Ladson-Billings' definitions. In other places, they may have

benefited from more training, guidance, and coaching on the theory and practice to be most effective.

All participants self-identified as practicing CRP, but none had formal training. Although all understood it, they admitted they lacked formal CRP training in college or professional development. The common conceptions of affirmation, praise, relationship, compassion, care, high expectations, reciprocity, and contemporary popular culture are seen in these classrooms despite a lack of professional development on CRP.

All participants shared that although they majored in education as undergraduates, they did not recollect having a class that introduced CRP. Two participants who attended an HBCU as undergraduates shared that they never had a course focused on CRP. What they had in common was that they knew CRP was self-learned. Some participants drew from life experiences such as education, travel, and family to shape their training: one teacher named research, conferences, and her own experience as a source of learning about CRP. There was limited evidence that professional development or professional learning was available to learn about CRP. One participant shared that she did have much training on CRP. According to Banda and Mpolomoka (2018), education and training are interrelated concepts, that can be misleading if used synonymously. A “training endeavors to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to perform job-related tasks. It aims to improve job performance in a direct way” (Truelove, 1992, p. 273, as cited in Masadeh, 2012). According to Manpower Services Commission (1981), the term education encompasses “activities which aim at developing knowledge, skills, moral values and understanding required in all aspects of life rather than knowledge and skill relating to only a limited field of activity” (cited in Masadeh, 2012, p. 17).

Education changes the behavior of people. Colleges must provide courses on CRP and training if necessary. Although the conceptual frameworks of multiculturalism and cultural relevant pedagogy have been studied, defined, and developed, facilitation of culturally relevant pedagogy can remain a vague, abstract, and elusive concept (Ladson-Billings, 2006b; Paris, 2012).

Teachers must continue studying the pedagogical tools and strategies sustaining CRP since many teachers struggle, including those with the best and most motivated intentions (Ladson-Billings, 2000, 2006b; Paris, 2012; Sugarman, 2010). Instead of courses that challenge teachers to learn about and embrace the cultural identities of African Americans, most teachers found their sociopolitical consciousness was gained from media, hip-hop, and recounts of racial incidents. No critical frameworks were spoken of besides personal and community experiences. Instead, the participants were determined to sharpen their astuteness, unpack their bias, and incorporate culturally relevant teaching as the foundation of the best instructional practices to impact the outcomes of students.

A lack of formal professional development in CRP is not inherently negative. Ladson-Billings developed her framework by observing what excellent teachers of African American students did naturally. Her study included teachers with different interests, strengths, management styles, and racial backgrounds. Still, formal training on culturally relevant pedagogy holds great opportunities for mastery of the practice and greater buy-in and student impact.

Alexis described her culturally relevant practice as something intrinsic:

I have never had it taught period. It all comes from me. I don't think they teach teachers how to . . . if you are not from an urban setting, I don't think they would know how to teach teachers how to matriculate into an urban setting you have to know it. You have to feel it, you have to taste it, and if you don't, it can't be taught.

She also drew her practice and standards from her own educational experiences as a student and the high standards of her Muslim private school. She stated:

I started out my first educational background at an all-Muslim Sister Clara Muhammad, which all Muslim schools are named after the wife of the Honorable Elijah Muhammad, Sister Claire Muhammad, in Washington DC. So, I started school there. And I can tell you, they're very intense; they believe in pushing academically for excellence. So, I started out probably above most public-school students, which once I got in public schools by fourth-grade, I was lightyears ahead of most of the public-school students, just because of the different approach to education that you can give and not only a private school but a religious private school. So that's you know, a lot stricter, and a lot more rigorous and a lot less excuses. Because they require excellence.

Although Octavia had no college classes that discussed CRP, attending an HBCU prepared her for work in the urban school setting. She gives her students the same care she received at her university. Octavia explained:

I just know that it is important to make sure they are successful. So, they can have a successful life. I think that my undergraduate studies at an HBCU prepared me for that. You understand that child's culture. You understand them

as a whole person. Where they are coming from. And then the ABCs and 123s are easy. Once you understand the child's culture, you can put the standards on them, and they will meet the standards. Because they want to please you. They see you as a person who understands them and respects them and wants to see them do well. And that you are there on a daily basis in their life every day.

Alternately, Regina attended a college she felt did not prepare her to teach urban African American students. She continuously tries to learn independently and admitted that, although she aims to learn more about CRP, professional development opportunities have been difficult to find. Regina stated:

To be honest, college did not prepare me to teach our population of students. I think in hindsight that is what the program was supposed to do, but I remember the program being very. . . kind of like an overview of how to teach and really going into depth. I would say doing my own personal research, looking into different teacher blogs and YouTube channels, seeing what people were currently using, helped me the most I would think. I learned this myself. . . I am looking for a PD like this, but I don't really see any.

Regina also noted that culturally relevant teachers must know about many cultures in addition to their own. She described how being around so many different cultures during her childhood helped her to be comfortable with all races of people while loving her own race:

I've always been culturally relevant, just the fact that, especially for me, I've lived in many different—I've lived in Georgia; I've lived in Maryland; I've lived in DC; I've lived in Pennsylvania; I've lived in North Carolina. So, I've been pretty

much all up and down the East Coast and I've had to learn many different cultures, many different dialects. Even though we all speak in English, what the accent is in Maryland, they may say 'momma' up there, and then down here it's something totally different. So, I've always had to kind of assimilate all cultures, all races, because I've been up and down. When I went to college, I didn't go to an HBCU, I went to a PWI school, so I had to immerse into their culture when I was going to school there. So, I've just been around a lot of different groups, and I'm not an Army [brat]. Well, a lot of people asked me, "Are you an Army brat?" No. It wasn't that. I just moved around a lot. So that's why I always felt like I was always culturally relevant.

Regina also shared her definition of CRP:

CRP is understanding the culture of these students, but understanding what academic success looks like in a classroom, and being able to use those things interchangeably, and making sure that while you're trying, getting academic success, you're utilizing their cultural values, and using that in your instruction.

She explained that having her students see someone that looks like them makes them more comfortable. Regina noticed they would call her 'momma' often because of how comfortable they felt in class. She expanded:

Every year you come to school, there's people that don't look like you, they don't have the same values as you, they're scared of you because of the media, because of the news or what have you, that could be hard. And that can, I think, over the years make children shut down and feel like they have no part in the education system. So, if they come in and they see people who look like them, people who

dress like them, people who like the same TV shows as them, I think they're more willing to open up and relate and even take risks in the classroom. I think if you're not comfortable you're not going to take those risks. If you see somebody that looks like your mom, you're more willing to say, 'Okay.' So that's why they even sometimes got momma. I mean, oh, oh, I'm sorry. I've been there all the time. I doubt they would do that with somebody who wasn't the same culture or race as them.

Brianna spoke intensively about how she cultivated her practice without formal training in CRP. Like Regina, Brianna described what she knows about CRP as self-taught:

You know what, I am going to be honest and tell you that I don't think that I have ever taken a professional development outside of graduate school about culturally relevant pedagogy. It was exclusively done in graduate school, and I used it on my own. I don't ever think I have taken any courses, no.

Brianna explained that CRP is mainly about being aware of other cultures and teaching students about their own. She spoke about teaching students to respect different cultures and being curious teachers. Brianna explained:

Well, I think that culturally relevant pedagogy, to me of course, is, one, being aware of other cultures and being respectful, teaching your students about cultures in a respectful way, right? It is so important that you — that's why I feel like — excuse me — that curiosity comes in because you also want to be aware of what you're teaching, how you're teaching, and make sure you're doing it in a respectful manner as well. I think that, of course, in a predominantly African

American school, it's good to teach the students specifically art about Black artists. But it's also important to expose them to your European artists, Latino artists, Asian artists. It's good to be able to expose children to what's out there in the world because as I'm sure, it sounds really I, but we live in such a rapid globalized society. And I don't know if this sounds right or wrong. But I think that COVID is helping people to realize that we are all in this together, we really are. But I will honestly say in an unconventional way: my entire collegiate experience has prepared me for teaching culturally relevant pedagogy. I think that my experiences help me to be culturally aware, especially the fact, as I said before, the art world is still a very Euro-centric world, like it or not. And so, unless you actively go out of your way to learn about other cultures and talk about them in your classes, you can't get away with just teaching about you being an artist and that's that. So, I think that that is — pretty much my whole academic background encompasses why I've chosen to use culturally relevant pedagogy in my classroom.

Brianna learned from her mother that caring for students involves having high expectations and exploring other cultures. She stated:

So, I come from a family of teachers. So that definitely had an influence on me because as I said before my mother was a classroom teacher, and she taught third and fourth grades. And so how she raised my sister and I, was exposing us to different cultures. I learned that first from home with my mom because my mother was a teacher and I also learned that when I was going through my

program at Georgia State. The importance of expecting the best out of your students.

Finally, Brianna explained that her professional, educational, and life experiences help her to model being a lifelong learner and an example for her students:

I think that when you think that you know everything as a teacher, you become stagnant because, in truth, knowledge and education is always evolving. There's always something new that you can learn. And when you bring that back to the classroom, the kids, I feel that they—it helps them to realize that 'I need to learn too.' And it makes them enjoy that acquisition of knowledge. I think that curiosity is one of the biggest things that educators can help to teach their kids because that, in essence, creates a lifelong learner. And I think curiosity, that's a good one.

In an interview, Ladson-Billings (2021c) explained the three components of culturally relevant pedagogy and why incorporating all three is critical. She explained component 1 as student learning (achievement) -- what students know in the fall or the beginning of their grade vs. what they can do in the spring or at the end of the year. Critical consciousness, component 2, relates to the student's ability to solve real-life problems using the skills and knowledge school affords. For example, can they write a letter to the editor or use other literacy skills to address concerns? Ladson Billings (2021c) defined cultural competence as the third component reflecting students' understanding of their language, customs, traditions, and beliefs while developing an understanding of another culture. According to Ladson-Billings, students who are

members of mainstream culture need to build knowledge of cultures besides their own to function in a multicultural and multilingual world.

Overall, the participants in this study exhibited commitment and reflectiveness in their broad classroom experience and approach of culturally relevant practices. Their honesty, interest, and desire for additional training in CRP speak to the urgency and necessity of more formal professional development for pre-service and in-service teachers. In addition, I sought to glean insight from what these teachers currently do in their classrooms each day, illuminate the good, and build on the opportunity to improve student outcomes by committing to broad and wide-scale professional development on culturally relevant pedagogy.

## CHAPTER VI: CONCLUSION

*“There is no normal life that is free of pain. It’s the very wrestling with our problems that can be the impetus for our growth.” ~~~~~Fred Rogers, (1995)*

My original goals of the study centered on improving practices in teacher professional development specifically related to culturally relevant pedagogy and were motivated by my desire to improve the experiences of African American students. This desire was inspired by my early school experiences with an effective and caring fourth-grade teacher, who happened to be White American. I later recognized that my fourth-grade teacher used elements of CRP without knowing it. This made me curious about how teachers of African American students implement effective, instructional practices; their awareness of CRP; and what shapes their practice of CRP. My hope was that examining teachers’ understanding of and practice of CRP could help to develop and fine tune more comprehensive and aligned training on CRP for all teachers. To accomplish those goals, I developed research questions that, when answered, could help me make assertions about how to enhance CRP training to increase the number of teachers using it and improve the effectiveness of those who already use it.

## **Research Questions Revisited**

These research questions focused on experiences with implementations of and practices related to CRP. First, I wanted to know, What the experiences of six elementary teachers of African American students who self-identify as using culturally relevant pedagogy in urban elementary schools in the South were. I wanted to learn about participants' backgrounds and understand how this impacted their teaching practices. To answer this question, I interviewed each participant three times probing for stories about descriptions of experiences they believed influenced their current teaching practices. The teachers shared formative life experiences that influenced their ideas and practices about teaching African American students. Some teachers described early experiences with racism and discrimination, positive family experiences that affirmed self-worth, pride and education. Others shared impactful college experiences and travel abroad that shaped critical consciousness, and the need for cultural competence in the classroom and in the world. Capturing the experiences of these teachers helped to understand how they built their practices and pedagogy for teaching. Because they self-identified as practitioners of CRP, understanding their experiences was important for this research. The participants' verbatim words were used in Chapters 4 and 5 to share these experiences. I found that their introduction to and development of CRP varied. Some of them had taken college courses or workshops on CRP and related topics, and others felt that they learned about CRP intrinsically.

Beyond discovering similarities and differences in life experiences, I specifically attempted to answer, "How did six teachers of African American students in an urban elementary school in the South implement culturally relevant pedagogy?" After multiple rounds of coding and categorizing data during which I focused on CRP implementation strategies and learned that the participants' practice of CRP was founded on an ethic of caring, positive affirmations, and a warm classroom environment. There was also a recurring belief in the potential and ability of their African American students. The teachers' ethic of caring and belief in their students' potential was rooted in a sense of connection and service, or the notion of giving back to their communities. For example, teachers used classroom rituals that reinforce relationship, collaboration, and perseverance. Some teachers curated classroom libraries that included diverse and inclusive representation and described a sense of connection and responsibility to support and "give back" to African American students. All the participants established an affirming classroom culture founded on the expectation of high achievement of African American students.

Again, I relied on my coding analysis to find, "What practices did these six teachers use to help African American students learn?" It was clear to me that they made instructional and content decisions to intentionally include critical topics students found meaningful, cultural topics to which students could relate, and included them by reframing history to uplift the place of people who looked like them rather than degrade it. Alexis, Octavia, and Nova implemented practices that showed cultural competence

with the mirrors and windows strategies described by Escudero (2019). For example, books that reflected their students' culture and supported their identity, such as *Crown: An Ode to the Fresh Cut* by Derrick Barnes (Barnes & James, 2017), validate the experiences of being in the barbershops across the country and *Esperanza Rising* by Pam Muñoz Ryan (Ryan, 2000), a story that details the experiences of Mexican migrant families. Evva and Regina implemented high expectations for all students with vocabulary exercises and scaffolding strategies that helped build confidence and access to descriptive and expressive language. Similarly, Brianna and Nova used peer teaching practices to facilitate academic ownership. Participants engaged in critical content instruction to cultivate critical consciousness in their classroom to facilitate the development of critical consciousness in students. This included lessons on current events, relevant historical content focused on accuracy and curiosity, exposure to diverse and representative culture and artistic content reflective of African American students. Specifically, Brianna used personalization and put students' names into content lessons and used hip-hop lyrics to connect further. Overall, the participants' practice of CRP was varied and not every teacher had the same approach.

### **Assertions**

The prominent themes of this study and the direct words of the participants illustrate their ways of being and thinking, which drives their practice of culturally relevant pedagogy. Although CRP is not a list of instructional practices, the participant

interviews, classroom observations, and student work, the students' voices provide examples of how six teachers used culturally relevant pedagogy.

The participants at Curtis Elementary ensured that students learned by differentiating instruction, building relationships, and using reflective instructional practices. The six teachers in the study identified as using culturally relevant pedagogy and their experiences were critical factors in their implementation of CRP. All of the teachers were able to create a culturally relevant environment. Also, each participant had high expectations for students and wanted students to have high expectations for themselves. High expectations may seem simple or obvious, but it cannot be taken for granted that every teacher starts with these high expectations. All of the participants in the study were African American women, and all exhibited each of the three tenets of CRP. However, they all could strengthen at least one component of CRP. Existing research confirms that it is common for educators to think and act with bias and unconscious deficit thinking. With reflection practices, social and cultural awareness, and accountability, all teachers can rethink their biases to shift their negative beliefs about students. In my study, some teachers were conscious of biased language and embraced the need to reframe assumptions, language, and deficit thinking.

Although you do not have to be formally trained to practice and implement culturally relevant pedagogy, formal professional learning on CRP's three tenets can be beneficial to institutionalizing its practice. Effective use of all three CRP tenets may require teachers' development and coaching and adequate time for teachers to accept and

integrate into their practice. Because the study participants were willing to share their practices, I noted what culturally relevant teaching looks like and invited future researchers to study and discuss ways to improve professional learning on CRP nationwide. I specifically emphasized that professional learning could include:

- Reading the research on CRP.
- Coaching from teacher-mentors.
- Group study of the original text, *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children* by Ladson-Billings (2002).
- Examining what made the Dreamkeepers (teachers) successful.

Professional learning includes guided reflection, peer learning, formal training and observations, and curriculum development of critical content.

### **Implications for Practice**

This research has broad implications for teacher development. At the university level, pre-service teachers have the time to learn the principles and practices of CRP with more opportunities for reflection and visioning for their future professional practices.

At the school district and classroom level, in-service teachers can build on their current experiences and insights to explore the components of CRP but have greater urgency to adopt practices to impact their current students. I recommend focusing on cultural competence and curriculum and instruction for pre-service and in-service teachers that include short, strategic exercises for pre-service and in-service teachers to

help them examine critical consciousness and self-reflect meaningfully. Table 5 provides a suggested path for preparing teachers in the field of teacher education.

**Table 5.**

*Pre-Service Teachers (University Level)*

| <b>Pre-Service Teachers (University Level)</b>                                                                                                                                                                          |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Foci/ Priorities for Professional Learning on CRP</b>                                                                                                                                                                | <b>Example Practices for Professional Learning on CRP</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Focus on examining mindset, beliefs, and values</li> <li>2. Unpack deficit language and beliefs</li> <li>3. Research curriculum models and instructional practices</li> </ol> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Enroll in at least two required college courses to learn what CRP is and attend a lab with students to use CRP while being observed teaching. Use observational written feedback to reflection on practice.</li> <li>2. Create an annotated bibliography with sample lesson plans with CRP.</li> <li>3. Use tools to help students become aware of personal unconscious bias. Embed CRP practices to be used during student teaching.</li> <li>4. Memo personal journey of using CRP</li> <li>5. Read <i>The Dreamkeepers</i> to examine critically and discuss the Ladson- Billings' book.</li> </ol> |

*Note.* This list was constructed to suggest a sample framework of coursework for pre-service teachers preparing to use culturally relevant pedagogy.

I hope every pre-service teacher program aims to prepare teachers to commit to culturally relevant teaching with students. The list of courses and exercises in Table 5 is a suggested focus for pre-service teaching programs when preparing teachers to use culturally relevant pedagogy in their teacher education programs and beyond their coursework. The listed items are not intended to be followed in any particular order; however, each course or exercise prompts pre-service teachers to think about race,

explore their own racial identity, and assist them in evolving into high-quality teachers with critical perspectives who have high expectations for all students, and take race and culture into account when teaching. Table 6 is another list that suggests the work of in-service teachers in classrooms or educators at the district level looking for ways to impact their understanding of culturally relevant teaching.

**Table 6.**

*In-Service Teachers (School and District Level)*

| <b>In-Service Teachers (School and District Level)</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Foci/ Priorities for Professional Learning on CRP</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                               | <b>Example Practices for Professional Learning on CRP</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Explore existing practices - high yield changes</li> <li>2. Create impactful curriculum and instructional changes</li> <li>3. Examine personal bias and unpack social inequities and build critical consciousness</li> </ol> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Read <i>The Dreamkeepers</i> to examine critically and discuss the Ladson- Billings' book.</li> <li>2. Collaborate in ongoing professional development to learn what CRP is and how it can be implemented in elementary settings</li> <li>3. Participant on regular peer observations and debriefs on the use of CRP in elementary classrooms.</li> <li>4. Use tools to help students become aware of personal unconscious bias.</li> </ol> |

*Note.* This list was constructed to suggest a sample framework of coursework for in-service teachers preparing to use culturally relevant pedagogy.

School leaders must create the time for professional learning as teachers share their backgrounds, examine their feelings on teaching African American students, and ways of applying culturally relevant pedagogy in classrooms. The suggestions in Table 6 are for in-service teachers and district-level leaders who want to implement CRP. Acquiring

knowledge about CRP and how to implement it is a personal journey that each person can take.

### **Directions for Future Research**

Further studies in this area could begin by expanding the sample size to determine the greater validity of the themes identified and explore new outcomes from a large sample of teachers. A larger sample size would also yield more insight into the range of CRP practices used by teachers who self-identify as using CRP. Expanding teachers' nationalities and experiences will also yield a variety of perspectives in addition to those of African American teachers. I am also interested in a deeper dive into the practice of building critical consciousness and the impact on curriculum development across subject matters. Explicit training and professional development on CRP could amplify this component for teachers and transform how students critically engage in the classroom across subject matters. Engaging in critical issues holds great creative opportunities for teachers and students alike. Also, the COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on the way students learn. Examining how teacher-student relationships changed positively or negatively with the shift to virtual learning could be crucial. Classroom community and positive relationships are important to CRP and look different in person.

The most prominent opportunity that I found in this research was the opportunity to broaden professional development. The teachers in the study had a basic understanding of CRP and had suitable lessons that integrated CRP into their instruction. However, there were gaps in how teachers viewed class/income differences between

themselves and their students (i.e., deficit language); some were strongest in one area of CRP versus all three components. The practices they embraced yielded positive feedback from students. Still, formal professional development and professional learning on CRP promises to engage more staff (rather than those with personal buy-in). Moreover, it could ensure an aligned and effective implementation of CRP school-wide. In addition, a coordinated approach to in-service teacher training on CRP could promise an increase in positive social and academic outcomes for African American students.

### **Limitations**

A key limitation of the study is the sample size. This study only recruited teachers from one school. This study used a convenience sample of six teachers in the same school district and elementary school building. The sample size and experience of the teachers provide descriptive data but are not generalizable. Instead, this study offers initial themes and new questions to explore for future studies with a larger and more representative sample. The elementary school size resulted in a small sample pool for participant recruitment. The final sample, six teachers, was relatively small. A benefit of a small sample size is that it afforded the opportunity to deeply explore data to yield rich insights and thick descriptions of the culturally relevant practices. Another limitation of this research is that all participants were African American women. I recommend sampling a pool of diverse teachers from different cultural, ethnic, and gender backgrounds. By diversifying the participant pool, new insights, including strategies to

empower students to achieve academically and see themselves as change agents who recognize the injustices that exist in the world, may be gained.

Also, my data collection season began in the Spring of 2020 at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, schools experienced closures, families' quarantines, scheduled hybrid and at-home learning models, and other changes to keep students safe. Despite social distancing, I accessed classrooms virtually, observed instruction, and conducted virtual interviews using the Zoom communication tools amid the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the COVID-19 pandemic presented a unique context that might not reflect the typical teaching experience of most teachers.

Due to COVID-19 school closures, I could not see culturally relevant practices in person, as students needed to be in their classroom spaces differently than expected. For example, students were tasked with uploading assignments virtually, learning to operate the chat, and using Zoom features such as the microphone and reaction prompts to align speaking and listening opportunities. I could not experience, see, or feel the room in its entirety or capture the nuances of student-student or student-teacher interactions. Capturing these real-life experiences could have provided a more authentic emic perspective. In addition, as teachers experimented with practices to engage students in meaningful ways in remote learning environments, families faced events in the world, such as the Black Lives Movement protests and the uncertainties of COVID-19. Nevertheless, the evidence of instructional practices during this time and the integration

of culturally relevant pedagogy held great value for building resilience and emotional safety for students in an unparalleled time in history.

### **Assumptions and Delimitations**

I assume that participants were honest and thorough in reporting their narratives. Data is contingent upon participant transparency and self-reporting. A second assumption is that teachers who self-identified as using CRP had knowledge of culturally relevant practices and were familiar with implementation modalities. The school site and convenience sampling comprise this study's delimitations. The school does not mirror the nation's average demographic of public schools. The K-5 public school in this study serves predominately African American students, that make up 95% of the student body. Though the data provided valuable insight into the implementation and experiences of CRP for educators working with African American students, the findings may not be generalizable to all elementary schools.

### **Final Thoughts**

The mandate for the educational and political future of African American students is to develop quality professional teachers who use CRP and who can teach effectively in a culturally diverse world (Gardner & Mayes, 2013). The participants in this study evidenced the positive practices and strategies that were most effective with African American students. Their ideas and approaches to the classroom community, relationships, and critical content instruction are the stories that all teachers need to hear. Creating a safe emotional environment, building critical consciousness, and developing

the cultural humility and competence to work with students from various cultural, social, and economic backgrounds are the essentials of the culturally relevant pedagogy needed in our nation's schools. Codifying the successful practices of everyday teachers holds promise and opportunity for closing the achievement gap. Most importantly, there is great potential for a coordinated and systemic approach to professional development on cultivating high achievement through culturally relevant pedagogy. Doing so is an impactful way to improve the overall academic experiences of African American students in America's urban schools.

### **Summary**

Academic achievement, the first component of CRP, acknowledges that the primary function of a teacher's role is to cultivate the minds of their students. Most of the participants thought of meaningful ways to build students' knowledge and had high expectations. The participants' beliefs and values were the foundation for practices that ensured all their students were able to experience academic success in the classroom. The second component of CRP is cultural competence. Cultural competence requires that teachers learn about culture broadly and the cultures of their students to assess and strengthen their instructional practice critically. Participants in the study shared, and sometimes reflected on, their attitudes about their students, and the importance (and the limitations) of shared racial identity. Teachers found some cultural similarities with students, as well as socioeconomic differences. This required their awareness of their perspectives and a willingness to listen, learn, and reflect on their relationships in the

classroom. The final component of CRP is critical consciousness. Most teachers used sociopolitical awareness in their classrooms and integrated this awareness into instructional content. Critical consciousness required teachers to educate themselves and integrate sociopolitical issues impacting their lives, communities, and the world.

The participants at Curtis Elementary ensure that students learn by differentiating instruction, building relationships, and reflective instructional practices. The prominent themes of this study and the direct words of the participants illustrate their ways of being and thinking, which drives their practice of culturally relevant pedagogy. Although CRP is not a list of instructional practices, the participants interviews, classroom observations and student work provide examples of how six teachers thought about their use of culturally relevant pedagogy. The six participants in my study taught African American students with their academic and social needs in mind. Their lived experience, including their CRP training, are described individually and then collectively as teachers who self-identify as using CRP.

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**APPENDIX A**

**IRB Approval**

# APPENDIX A

## IRB Approval



### *Institutional Review Board (IRB) For the Protection of Human Research Participants*

#### PROTOCOL EXEMPTION REPORT

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**Protocol Number:** 03575-2017                      **Investigator:** Kimberly Mathews  
**Supervising Faculty:** Dr. Richard Schmertzing  
**PROJECT TITLE:** *A Case Study of Teachers' Experiences and Use of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy with African American Elementary Students in Urban Schools (title revised 01.22.20).*

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#### INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD DETERMINATION:

This research protocol is **Exempt** from Institutional Review Board (IRB) oversight under Exemption **Category 2**. Your research study may begin immediately. If the nature of the research project changes such that exemption criteria may no longer apply, please consult with the IRB Administrator ([irb@valdosta.edu](mailto:irb@valdosta.edu)) before continuing your research.

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#### ADDITIONAL COMMENTS:

- *Upon completion of the research study all data (transcripts, survey forms, data lists, etc.) must be securely maintained (locked file cabinet, password protected computer, etc.) for a minimum of 3 years and only accessible by the researcher.*
- *The Consent Statement must be read aloud to each participant at the start of recording. The recording must include the researcher reading the statement. The transcripts must document that the researcher read the consent and that the participant agreed to participate.*
- *Exempt protocol guidelines permit the recording of interviews provided the recordings are made for the sole purpose of creating an accurate transcript. The recordings must be deleted immediately upon creation of the transcript. Recordings are not to be stored or shared.*

*If this box is checked, please submit any documents you revise to the IRB Administrator at [irb@valdosta.edu](mailto:irb@valdosta.edu) to ensure an updated record of your exemption.*

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*Elizabeth Ann Olphie*                      *11.30.2018*  
Elizabeth Ann Olphie, IRB Administrator

*Thank you for submitting an IRB application.  
Please direct questions to [irb@valdosta.edu](mailto:irb@valdosta.edu) or 229-253-2947.*

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Revised: 06.02.16

**APPENDIX B**

**Three-Interview Series**

## **APPENDIX B**

### **Three-Interview Series**

#### **Interview One: Focus on Life History**

1. Tell me about your early experiences with your family and education.
2. How long have you taught? How long have you taught in your current school?
3. Tell me about your training and coursework prepare you to teach students?
4. What teaching strategies do you use to impact African American students' learning?
5. Name some instructional strategies that have been effective in teaching African American elementary students.
6. What made you choose an urban school district in which to work?
7. What have you learned about culturally relevant pedagogy in your professional learning, staff development, or continuous education?
8. What are some of the influences that professional learning has had on your practice as a teacher of African American students?
9. What do you believe are the most important skills to teach your students? Why are those skills important?
10. What do you believe about your capacity to make a difference in the academic achievements of African American students?

#### **Interview Two: The Details of Experience**

1. How do you describe your students?
2. Tell me about your classroom environment.
3. How do you communicate your learning expectations to your students?
4. How important is it to have high expectations?
5. How much input do you have in curriculum choice regarding what is taught, when, how, and how long?
6. Tell me 2-3 culturally relevant strategies that you use in your classroom.
7. How are students' culture, history, and language celebrated in your classroom?

8. Describe your classroom library and the literature selections that you make for your class.
9. When determining how to teach content, on what materials do you rely?
10. How do you make your content meaningful, relevant, and challenging?

### **Interview Three: Reflection on the Meaning**

1. What should educators know about teaching African American students?
2. What beliefs do you have about useful strategies for teaching African American students and their potentials?
3. Describe any beliefs you have had about African American students that have changed.
4. What are the most important influences on student achievement?
5. What is your definition of a successful student?
6. What characteristic is the most important to have as a culturally relevant teacher?
7. How does validation look in your classroom?
8. What in your life event motivated you to use CRP?
9. What professional or educational experiences have helped you understand culture?
10. Describe or walk me through a typical day.
11. What do you think culturally relevant pedagogy means?
12. Why do you choose to use culturally relevant pedagogy with African American students?