

So, They Really Can Learn Here:
Profiles of Effective Elementary School Mathematics Teachers of
African American Students in Middle Georgia's Title I Schools

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 2022

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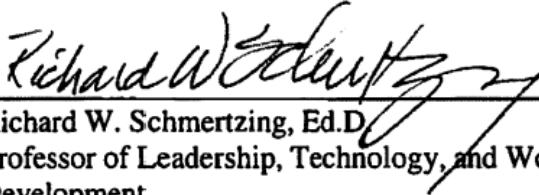
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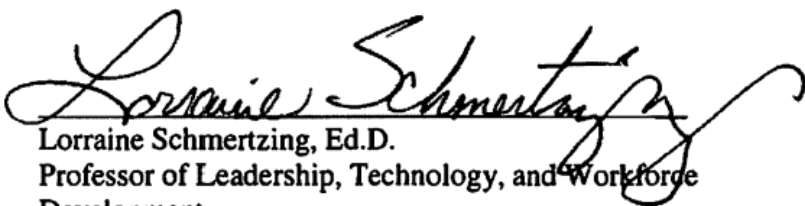
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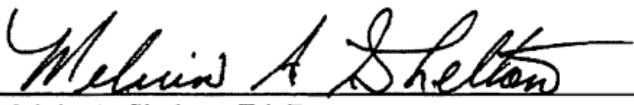
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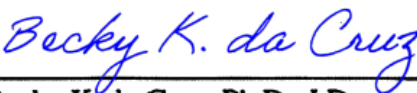
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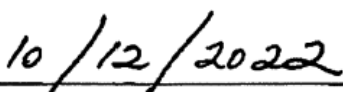
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Abstract

This qualitative study used a narrative inquiry design to generate a counter-narrative that challenges the negative stereotype commonly assigned to Title I schools and amplifies the voices of the students and teachers who are thriving in those school environments while teaching and learning math. I used a criterion-based purposive sample to select five successful math teachers in a local Title I school. Using Seidman's (2019) three-phased interview process, I obtained information about their past and present experiences that helped shape their unique, successful teaching styles. A thorough analysis of the data yielded the following three assertions, which confirmed the body of current literature: effective Title I math teachers must (a) build authentic relationships with parents and students; (b) *choose* to give the students what they need/deserve; and (c) evolve toward a more culturally responsive pedagogical (CRP) way of being. The findings suggest that teachers in Title I schools might see gains like those of the participants in this study by engaging in CRP-based courses and remaining current on the latest educational strategies that have proven helpful for Black and underserved children.

Keywords: Title I, critical race theory, culturally responsive pedagogy, narrative profile

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

There is an old adage that, “When you see a turtle on a fence, he didn’t get there by himself.” Although the identity of the person who crafted those words remains unknown, the depth of its truth runs deep and quite succinctly describes this point in my life. My journey thus far has been a remarkably long one, and during which I have developed and discovered much about myself that without this experience I would never have known. Not only was it a journey of self-discovery and lessons in resilience, but it would not have been possible, were it not for the belief, prayers and unwavering faith of some dear persons whose shoulders and backs have supported me until I could stand on the fence.

Diane Brown, who gave me life and cheered me on every step of the way from my very first college experience until she could go on no longer, and departed this life for greener pastures. She prayed for me many times when I was too exhausted to even eke out a prayer for myself.

Ada Brown, my 91-year-old grandmother of whom I write in these pages and who experienced firsthand the rise and fall of Black-economics, having experienced civility and civil-unrest, and yet nurtured a belief in the possibilities that could be develop and flourish through her grandson and successive generations.

Terrell Brown Sr., my role model, who epitomized what a father should be, and particularly while raising boys in a time when so many households were and are, led by single parents, usually female. To my younger brother Daniel and his family, for making sure that my house was in order when I did not have the time or emotional capacity to

organize it myself. To my youngest brother Stephen, for being a sounding board and unofficial peer editor during those many all-night work sessions leading up to a due date.

Even with the best family support, I cannot overstate the importance of having academically astute supervision, and that was provided in great measure thanks to the efforts of Dr. Richard Schmertzing (Chair), and Dr. Lorraine Schmertzing (Researcher). Your equanimity in the midst of the revision challenges I posed in this dissertation process, did not go unnoticed.

Dr. Markenya Williams who was like a beacon of light to guide me through many rough and stormy phases even while carrying a full workload of your own.

Belzie Guy, my editor from “the true north,” for the many evenings that turned into a new day without us even noticing, all while balancing your personal challenges.

I would not be here writing an acknowledgment, were it not for the actual participants who gave me a vicarious walk through their lives and experiences in Title I schools, and who are living proof of what dedication looks like. Thank you for not giving up or giving in to more lucrative lures and instead choosing to stay and groom successive cohorts for excellence.

I have saved the best for last, because everything I have done or written up to this point in pursuit of this degree was part of the dream of a “coming attraction” that was placed on my heart. Because is that not what faith is about? To my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who not only gives me ideas, but also walks the path with me and when I am exhausted he does the heavy lifting. It is my faith in him that allows me to see the work that I and other Title I teachers do as a ministry and that we are part of a bigger plan of service to all students in whose lives we share.

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

You may write me down in history

With your bitter, twisted lies,

You may trod me in the very dirt

But still, like dust, I'll rise. (Angelou, 1994, p. 163)

In this study, I used what I know from first-hand experiences with the social problem of how Title I schools are viewed in the south as background to explore teachers who were successful teaching math in these circumstances and how it impacts students and teachers. Despite the negative stereotypes that portray teachers and students in high-poverty Title I schools, some exceptional teachers work tirelessly to ensure their students grow significantly each year. Throughout this study, I endeavored to show that despite the systemic inequities the students encounter, students really can learn regardless of the school's rank. The participants' stories in this study counter the master narrative (Stanley, 2007; Taylor, Gillborn, & Ladson-Billings, 2016) that propagates the idea they don't or can't learn like White children. In doing so, the narratives share here are hoped to encourage other teachers by suggesting essential classroom and relationship-building strategies that worked for the participants. In this introductory section of Chapter 1, I explain my connection to the study. I then highlight the study's importance and the goals I hoped to achieve by examining the experiences of five effective Title I elementary math teachers.

Personal Connection

Growing up, I always envisioned myself becoming a teacher. I had detailed mental images of myself standing in front of a classroom, dispensing knowledge just as I had seen it done in all the classes I attended from kindergarten to high school graduation. I fantasized that my students would come to class each day, sit quietly at their desks in perfect rows, and complete their assignments on time with limited distractions, as I did at my private school. Furthermore, I believed that students who displayed inappropriate behavior would quickly curb their aberrant inclinations at the threat of being sent to the principal's office or calling home to their parents. After all, this was the school environment to which I was exposed. I did not know that I grew up in a bubble, which effectually shielded me from many of the experiences commonly shared by the African American students I would eventually teach.

I grew up during the 1980s in a Christian family in Macon, Georgia. My parents were both believers in Jesus Christ (Christians), and attended church multiple times each week. As long as the doors of the church were open, we were there. Their Christian values influenced their decision to place my siblings and me in faith-based schools for our K-12 experiences. Although my school was out of our local neighborhood, I still had a solid connection to our neighborhood and the families who lived there.

My parents purchased the house in which I grew up about a year before I was born, and we lived there until I was about 16 or 17 years old. Our first home was in a relatively quiet, predominately African American, middle-class neighborhood. However, I spent many days at my paternal grandmother's home.

Although my grandmother's home was only about 10 minutes away from the neighborhood in which I grew up, there was a stark difference between the two. Her home was the second on the left after we turned onto her street. It was a 1500 sq. ft. brick, three-bedroom, one-bathroom house trimmed in bright blue and was built in the mid-1950s. The yard in the front of the house was landscaped with large azalea bushes that bloomed a dark pinkish color in the summertime. To its immediate left and right were towering pecan trees, which seemed never to produce pecans large enough to eat. This was the same home in which my dad and his four brothers were raised; however, over time, the neighborhood changed.

Her neighborhood was once a close-knit community full of families who knew and looked out for each other. According to her, although the houses were not mansions, the families took pride in keeping their houses presentable; however, as neighbors got older and moved, the neighborhood began to change.

One noticeable difference was the landscape itself. In my neighborhood, all the houses were occupied, and children were regularly seen playing in the streets. In contrast, her neighborhood rarely had children playing in the streets as most of the families that once lived there had grown older or moved. In fact, next to her home was a dilapidated structure in which a family once lived. Growing up, I remember conducting many treasure hunts there, unbeknownst to any suspecting adults, searching between broken floorboards for gold only to find items such as cast-iron skillets instead. Two more dilapidated houses dotted the nine-house road, but I was never adventurous enough to explore them.

Not only was my grandmother's neighborhood dotted with run-down houses, but it was also in an area known for drugs and gang activity. As the older families died or moved, they were replaced by a younger group of people who were known to host dog fights and freely trafficked drugs. In fact, not even a block away from her home, was a small white house that was frequented often throughout the day and night. Although I cannot recall having any interactions with them, their presence was known. It was not uncommon to hear gun shots during the day or night. We could play in the back yard and in the street in front of her house but were instructed never to go by the white house where "they sell that stuff." Although her house was in an area that was very different from mine, the house itself was full of love, food, and fun.

The 1980s were also a time of accelerated social progress for some racial groups and a time of continued struggle for others. According to the Securities and Exchange Commission Historical Society (n.d.), several critical advances, including the appointment of the first White woman Supreme Court Justice, the first U.S. woman astronaut, and America's humanitarian efforts that led to the fall of the Berlin Wall, occurred. Yet, Jrank (n.d.) reported, the Supreme Court, ruled against a group, which sought to bring a lawsuit on the basis of racial harassment in the private sector. Additionally, funds designated to assist the poor and jobless were significantly cut, and a series of attacks to undermine and invalidate the civil rights legislation that had recently been passed to promote racial equity were launched.

Despite the social injustices still prevalent in the South during the 1980s, I was raised in a middle-class family with two parents who had steady jobs. My parents decided to use most of their earnings to provide food, clothing, shelter, and tuition for private

schooling for their three children. Education was the priority for my parents, and consequently, they did not have the money for us to live lavishly, order takeout regularly, or live in an affluent community. My dad worked at a factory where they made the absorbent linings for disposable diapers, while my mom worked as a physical therapist (PT) for a physical rehabilitation company.

My parents instilled in me the idea of the “American dream,” that if I worked hard and got an education, I could succeed in life just as they had. Though one was raised in a poor rural area and the other in an urban area, both my mom and dad graduated from high school and completed college. In the late '80s and early '90s, my mom launched into entrepreneurship. Rather than work for a company, she opened her own private PT firm, hired workers, and contracted her services to various nursing homes and school districts. As a result of my parents' experiences and upbringing, they stressed that education was our ticket to achieving even more than they had achieved. They believed so strongly in education that after assessing the local school, they decided a private school education would best provide opportunities for upward mobility. Therefore, my formative academic years were spent at a private Christian school where being Black meant that I was a minority.

Being a minority in that school environment did not loosen the connection to my African American heritage. Visits and conversations with my grandparents about their struggles, successes, failures, as well as others of my ethnicity, helped to keep me mentally and emotionally grounded in the plight of African Americans. As a result of my connection to my heritage and a commitment to help others through education, I felt that my “calling” into the sphere of education was a means of giving back to my own

community. When I speak of community, I am not speaking of people who live in a geographical location. I refer to what Merriam-Webster's (n.d.) online dictionary defined as a "group of people who have the same interests, religion, race, etc." I am suggesting a commitment to those of my ethnicity who deserve the same quality education as Whites, although they may not have the funds for private school education as my parents did. I believed that providing students I would one day teach with an exemplary education and being a role model for them would somehow inspire them to want more out of life and by extension provide them with the requisite skills to enter a higher socioeconomic level than their parents or grandparents. Furthermore, I believed, naively perhaps, that the students would and should be grateful, or even thankful, that someone was teaching them things that could help them get to college and potentially alter their social status. My beliefs did not play out as I expected they would, and my experiences were far from the way I envisioned them.

I accepted my first teaching job fresh out of college, at Creekside Elementary (pseudonym), a Title I school not quite 2 miles from my grandmother's house. Although I was familiar with the area and knew some of the parents, I was shocked to see the reality of education in schools serving students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. I had the desks arranged in neat rows and was prepared to disseminate knowledge, but the students were not at all how I imagined. I realized that I was not as *in touch* with my community as I had imagined.

It has been a while since that initial experience and over time I have come to appreciate that throughout my 19 years of teaching in Title I schools, I developed an awareness of the struggles and social norms of those I taught. I appreciate that I am now

better prepared to influence them academically, emotionally, and socially, and be more effective with interactions that encourage them to become better versions of themselves. Within those 19 years, I also became intimately aware of the stigma placed on schools like the one I serve. When people asked where I taught, and I replied, “Creekside,” they would retort with an incredulous tone. “Oh, you teach there!” Fellow teachers would actually say, “I could never teach there.” Even the district news correspondences would highlight schools, teachers, and students in predominately higher socioeconomic neighborhoods, but never cover my school.

Despite the negative stigma attached to Creekside, I witnessed teachers making a substantial difference, both academically and socially, in the lives of the students they taught. Although many of their students did not achieve the benchmark for their grade level, they were impacted and made significant gains each year. I began to wonder why these teachers were not given the same platform or recognition that other teachers were getting. The honored teachers served in schools where students typically were *at grade level or above*, based on standardized tests, while our teachers routinely received students well *below grade level*. Teachers who can work with students who not only perform *below grade level* but are also weighed down with emotional baggage, yet can effect growth considered by the Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE, 2018b) at *typical* or *above* deserve recognition for their work. I knew that this was something I wanted to address in my dissertation but had not fully worked out the details.

It was not until I took an introductory class in qualitative research with Dr. Richard Schmertzinger where I learned of critical race theory (CRT) (Taylor et al., 2016) that I was able to articulate the problem I wanted to address in my dissertation. I wanted

to shed a positive light on these “good” teachers’ work compared to the master narrative routinely cast on teachers in “underperforming” schools.

To further explain the research problem and goals, I divided the remainder of this chapter into two sections. In the first section, titled “Statement of the Problem,” I provide more clarity on the problem and its significance to teachers and students in high poverty neighborhoods and how I will find information to help solve it. I also discuss the research questions and a brief overview of the methods I used to obtain the data. In the second section, titled “Research Goals,” I elaborate on the goals and purpose behind this endeavor.

Statement of the Problem

Preston-Grimes (2010) cited *Let’s Be Honest about Democracy*, a pamphlet printed and distributed in 1939 by the Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). The booklet gave the following hope for the American educational system:

Of all the instruments for government maintenance, the public school is recognized as the most powerful. The strength of America has been in the transformation of people from other parts of the world into American citizens loyal to a new country and to a new way of life full of opportunities for the ordinary person. Building this citizenship has been the duty primarily of the American public school system. It is the backbone of our democracy. (p. 35)

Sadly, some 81 years after its publication, the vision has only come to fruition for a select group of people. Given the preceding statement, two questions come to mind: (1) Who primarily benefits from the American public-school system? and (2) Why do they

benefit while others do not? The answers to these overarching questions should be apparent after reading the following sobering facts about the U.S. educational system.

1. “Inequality in the United States increasingly operates through education – a scarce resource in our knowledge-based economy and a measure that is closely correlated with parental socioeconomic status” (Putnam, 2015, p. 19).
2. “Black students are 2.28 times as likely to be designated as Emotional Behavioral Disorder (EBD) and 2.75 times as likely to be designated with an Intellectual Disability (ID), as were all other ethnic groups” (Harry & Klingner, 2014, p. 2).
3. “. . . one in five African American students will fail a grade in elementary or secondary school, compared to the overall [failure] rate of one in ten [students]” (Carter & Welner, 2013, p. 2).
4. “Poor, Black and Hispanic children are becoming increasingly isolated from their White, affluent peers in the nation’s public schools, according to new federal data showing that the number of high-poverty schools serving primarily Black and Brown students more than doubled between 2001 and 2014” (Brown, 2016, p. 20).
5. “In 2015, 13% of Black students, as measured by the NAEP, were reported as performing at or above the proficient level in mathematics by the eighth grade while White students were performing at a rate of 43% at or above the proficient level” (Duncan, 2019, p. 20).

From this brief list of statistics, it appears that the White population benefits substantially more from the U.S. educational system’s current structure than African Americans. Over the past few decades, researchers such as Burke and Schwalbach

(2021), Delpit (2013), Carter and Welner (2013), Jacob (2007), Lawrence-Lightfoot (1983), Murnane and Steele (2007), Preston-Grimes (2010), Rosales and Walker (2021), Solórzano and Yosso (2002), and others examined possible causes for the apparent discrepancy between African American and White student academic performance. Some of the theories used to explain the differences addressed the effects of segregation and desegregation (Burke & Schwalbach, 2021; Preston-Grimes, 2010), variations of the deficit model/deficit thinking (Valencia, 1997), racism (Zamudio, Russell, Rios, & Bridgeman, 2011), and lack of cultural capital (Knaggs, Sondergeld, Provinzano, Fischer, & Griffith, 2021; Sullivan, 2001). The problem with the preceding theories, except for racism and desegregation efforts, is that in some way, they tended to blame the victim for the discrepancy in results.

Contrary to the indications reflected in deficit-related theories, Delpit (2013) cited a series of studies, which indicated that African babies outperformed White babies in nearly every way for the first 5 years of development. Implications from these studies when considered together, shed new light onto the dismal shadow of the master narrative, which is that African Americans are predisposed to be less intelligent than Whites. If babies of African descent were intellectually brighter or more developed than their White counterparts, what happened to them at age five that slowed or reversed their progress? Being as this is the age that children generally leave home and spend most of the day in a classroom, many have concluded that it must be what we, as teachers, do or do not do in the classroom that moves African Americans on the educational success continuum (Delpit, 2013; Kunjufu, 2002; Rashid, 2009).

With so many studies focusing on the negative statistics related to inner-city Title I schools, I began to think about the elementary school in which I teach. I have seen my share of students who fell under the gloomy shadow cast by the master narrative; however, more than that, I encountered thoughtful students who came to school regularly even when they were sick. I also worked with several teachers (both African Americans and White) who showed a considerable amount of concern for their student's academic and social success. Furthermore, I have seen teachers get classes that performed minimally the previous year, transform the class into a model group of students whose academic performance was strong and social skills were respectful and do so within a single academic year.

I wondered, "What do teachers believe are the key factors necessary for their student's success, and how do they practice those beliefs?" I developed the following initial research questions to serve as my guiding compass while trying to discover how teachers operationalize their beliefs.

1. What are the perceptions, experiences, and practices of successful teachers who work with African American children in underperforming Elementary School Mathematics teachers of African American students in Sunnydale County's Title I Elementary schools? This question allowed the reader and me to experience each participant's unique voice as they shared their insights into their successful classrooms.
2. How do these successful elementary teachers develop classroom climates where students consistently make significant gains mathematically and socially?

3. What are teachers' ideas on effectively teaching mathematics to students of color in elementary school?

As I continued to reflect upon the atmosphere of effective teachers' classrooms at my school, the problem that I wanted to study became clear. The problem was that although there were teachers who were doing an exemplary job helping students become successful, community stakeholders seemed to view all teachers in the school negatively because of the labels placed on the school. This view was causing these teachers' experiences and ideas to be silenced when their knowledge needed to be shared in order to help other teachers with similar student needs. Therefore, in alignment with the works of Gloria Ladson-Billings (2009), Delpit (2013), Kozol (1991), and others who refused to victimize the victims, I chose to challenge the negative light so often shined on inner-city Title I schools. Through this study, I sought to add to the literature about teachers in high poverty areas who teach African American students and create classroom climates that spur the students on to success.

Although I had my speculations, I knew that I needed to hear from these effective teachers to get their perceptions to answer the research questions. I developed the criteria for selecting the participants based on the results of my literature review and used Seidman's (2019) three-phase interview technique to capture their *lived experiences*. Given (2008) and Patton (2002) defined lived experiences as the participants' reflections on events they experienced. In this study, the participants' lived experiences were related to teaching African American students in Title I school who were experiencing poverty.

Once I collected the data, I transcribed the interviews and used reflective memos to document my thoughts (Maxwell, 2013). I later developed a profile for each

participant (Seidman, 2019), and then analyzed the data through three coding cycles to determine the significant patterns and themes within and between the participants (Maxwell, 2013; Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014; Patton, 2002; Saldaña, 2021). More information about the methods used and the process in which I examined the data is found in Chapter 3: Methods. In the next section, I discuss my research goals and my underlying motivations for this study.

Research Goals

According to Maxwell (2013), a researcher should consider three types of goals. In his book *Qualitative Research Design: An Interactive Approach*, Maxwell categorized them into personal, practical, and intellectual goals. I like to think of the goals as the “why” behind the research. Whether the goals define what motivates the researcher to do the study (personal), focus on something that needs to be changed (practical), or seek to understand why something is happening (intellectual), Maxwell contended that the motivation behind the research goals, cannot and should not be separated from the research process. Instead, researchers must be keenly aware of their motivations and draw from them through each phase of research.

To better understand the “why” behind my research, I created a memo based on Maxwell’s (2013) Exercise 2.1 (pp. 34–35). Thinking deeply about my motivations caused me to see just how related the types of goals were to each other and my research. I realized that my personal goals for this project stemmed from my daily work as an educator in a Title I school. Just as Ladson-Billings (2009), in her book *The Dream Keepers*, chose to focus on “what was right with African American students’ education and what happens in classrooms where teachers, students, and parents seem to get it

right” (p. 7), I knew that a positive light needed to be shed on my fellow teachers in urban Title I schools. Contrary to the pervasive stereotype that both teachers and students in Title I schools are lazy or in need of saving, there are in fact, dedicated, hard-working, data-driven teachers who positively impact the lives of children daily. It is my aim that this study will prompt others in the academic community to see and value their work. Additionally, I anticipate that other teachers serving in similar schools will gain insights into positively impacting their classrooms.

My personal goals led to the development of what Maxwell (2013) referred to as intellectual goals. My intellectual goal was to understand precisely what these pockets of “good” teachers were doing in their classrooms, their challenges, motivating factors, and how they were able to see consistent achievement. As I reviewed the related literature, I discovered many studies sought to understand and highlight effective Title I math teachers focused on middle or high schools (Egan, 2008; Perrymond, 2011; White, 2012). Very few studies centered on the teaching of elementary mathematics. Since my work has been primarily with elementary math teachers, I decided to narrow the focus of my goal to elementary teachers to determine if the findings from the research in upper grades held true in the early groups or if there was something new that could be added to the list of practices that worked for previously explored groups.

According to Maxwell (2013), goals can not only be personal and intellectual, but they must also have a practical application. They must seek to make some type of change. As I continued to memo about my personal and intellectual goals, the practical aspect became clear. Not only was my goal to add to the current body of literature that counters the negative stereotypes concerning teachers and students in high poverty, urban schools,

but my objective was to also share practical and relatable insights with teachers serving similar populations. I hope that teachers who read this dissertation emulate the teachers in this study where applicable and that it thereby increases the number of good teachers in schools that need them the most.

After more memos and self-reflection, I consolidated my wonderings and motivation behind the research questions into three-goal statements, namely:

1. Bring attention to the unspoken racial undertones in the educational system while shedding a positive light on teachers successfully teaching children of color.
2. Provide insight to teachers in similar contexts.
3. Understand, from the successful elementary mathematics teacher's perspective, the factors related to his/her approach to teaching African American students and the strategies he/she adopted that contributed to his/her continued success in educating students of color who face socioeconomic challenges and often systemic racism.

Due to my research goals and questions, a qualitative approach was most appropriate. I interviewed the participants using Seidman's (2019) three-phased approach and transcribed and analyzed the data to create what Seidman referred to as narrative profiles. According to Seidman (2019), a profile is the participant's story told in a narrative format containing a plot, conflict, and resolution. A vignette, however, is a shorter excerpt of the participant's own words usually embedded within a narrative account. Although Seidman warned that few interviews would result in a complete narrative profile, both profiles and vignettes "allow [the researcher] to present participants in context, to clarify their intentions, and to convey a sense of process and

time, all central components of qualitative analysis” (p. 128). Egan (2008) and Ladson-Billings (2009) used vignettes to encapsulate the stories of successful teachers in underserved schools. Although Egan’s participants consisted of seven middle and high school math teachers and Ladson-Billings a larger number of participants from various subjects, both used observations and interviews to create vignettes to highlight successful practices. Similarly, in this qualitative study, I used narrative profiles not only to showcase the “good” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997), but to honor the voice of the participants (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Taylor et al., 2016).

Although the research is robust, I have written this paper casually so everyone from the neophyte to the most experienced teacher can comprehend the information. In schools, much emphasis is placed on reading; however, effective mathematics teaching is also needed and can posture a student in a trajectory towards many of the lucrative professions involving mathematics applications. I desire that those who read the authentic stories of mathematics teachers engaged in the work of change will be inspired to reflect on how their beliefs compare to master narratives, how they view students living in poverty, and the effectiveness of their current instructional practices.

Conclusion

As an African American male teacher spending my entire career working in urban Title I elementary schools, I was keenly aware of the plight of teachers and students in schools deemed underperforming by the “powers that be.” I knew that I wanted to counter this problem by focusing on the experiences of good teachers. I believed that by magnifying the voice of teachers in schools that have not received high accolades, I

would be empowering those still trapped in cycles cast by the master narrative or negative stereotypes while addressing a context that is not uncommon in the South.

From my introduction to qualitative research class with Dr. R. Schmertzing, I knew that the interview component of the qualitative design most closely aligned with my goals and research questions. Based on the works of Patton (2002), Miles et al. (2014), and Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997), I determined that critical race theory (CRT) in education and narrative profile approach would be foundational to my study. Chapter 2 examines the conceptual framework that underpinned and directed my study's methods, data collection, data analysis, and the most salient investigations related to my research question.

Chapter 2

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

What you're supposed to do when you don't like a thing is change it.

If you can't change it, change the way you think about it.

Don't complain (Angelou, 1993, p. 87)

This chapter focuses on the conceptual/theoretical framework and how it is defined by various researchers, some of whom agreed (Maxwell, 2013; Ravitch & Riggan, 2017) and others who held opposing viewpoints. A diagram is used to present the elements of the research design and their interconnectedness. This is followed by discussions on experiential knowledge, subjectivity, and its subsets: The Golden Rule I, The Cultural I, and The Alone, but not Alone I. The theoretical framework addresses critical race theory as a social construct and its connection to my work. Related research on the portrayal of Title I schools and the associated myths, form the substance of the remainder of this chapter. In order to articulate the pre-existing components of my life, theory, and literature, I first explain what a conceptual framework (Maxwell, 2013) is, then address each part in detail.

Explaining a Conceptual Framework

Conceptual framework is a term that elicits a multiplicity of definitions. Even among leading scholars in qualitative research, there is some ambiguity surrounding the purpose and the components of a conceptual framework (Crawford, 2019; Maxwell, 2013; Ravitch & Riggan, 2017). For example, the definitions of Ravitch and Riggan

(2017), Maxwell (2013), Marshall and Rossman (2016), and Miles et al. (2014) seemed to include that a conceptual framework should tell why the study is relevant; however, they differed in their perspectives and standards for framework components within a study. These distinct differences between several prevalent authors in the field caused me to narrow down my selection of a comprehensive conceptual framework definition for my study. *Qualitative Research Design* by Maxwell (2013) and *Reason and Rigor* by Ravitch and Riggan (2017) were two major contributing sources that influenced my conceptual framework definition. Therefore, in this section, I will dissect portions of Maxwell's and Ravitch and Riggan's work to support my definition.

This selection was not easy; however, after reading and reflecting on the various explanations of a conceptual framework and the influence of multiple conversations with Drs. Richard and Lorraine Schmertzing, my dissertation Chair and Researcher respectively, I gravitated towards the models outlined in *Qualitative Research Design* and *Reason and Rigor*. Maxwell (2013) defined a conceptual framework as “the actual ideas and beliefs that you hold about the phenomena studied whether written down or not” (p. 39). Maxwell further described it as a conglomeration of, “the research problem, [the researcher's] experiential knowledge, existing theories, pilot [study], and exploratory research” (p. 44). Maxwell's work helped me to understand the value in sifting through the current body of research to find theories and research methods that others had used in studies similar to mine. I used what I gleaned from published journals and articles which largely supported the theories of Maxwell (2013) and others, and applied this new found knowledge to the lessons learned from day-to-day interactions in Title I school settings.

Like Maxwell (2013), Ravitch and Riggan (2017) provided a comprehensive exploration of a conceptual framework. Ravitch and Riggan (2017) defined it as “an argument about why the topic one wishes to study matters, and why the means proposed to study it are appropriate and rigorous” (p. 4). They also agreed on the importance of actively using current research and theories to “construct” meaning as needed (Maxwell, 2013; Ravitch & Riggan, 2017). Furthermore, Ravitch and Riggan postulated that the conceptual framework was the overarching construct that included the researcher’s personal goals and interests along with a literature review that encompassed what they termed as *topical research* (related literature found in journals, dissertations, etc.) and *theoretical frameworks* (formal or constructed theories that explain on a larger scale what’s going on) (Ravitch & Riggan, 2017).

Although both Maxwell (2013) and Ravitch and Riggan (2017) emphasized the importance of the conceptual framework in explaining all the influencing beliefs, written or unwritten, that describe the how and why of the study, they differed in their beliefs about a theoretical framework. Maxwell (2013) used the terms *conceptual framework* and *theoretical framework* interchangeably, while Ravitch and Riggan (2017) reasoned that the theoretical framework and topical research are subsets of the literature review.

I was quite conflicted about which concept I would use until I read a section in Maxwell’s (2013) book that emphasized the researcher as an active role in developing the conceptual framework. Maxwell explicitly cautioned the researcher against forcing his or her thoughts and beliefs about the topic and implications from external influences to formulate an artificial phenomenon. Instead, Maxwell urged his readers to truly make sense of the relationships between their experiential knowledge and the preexisting

theories found in the associated literature. Even if it meant taking viewpoints from different theories and merging them into a new theory that clearly describes the importance and validity of the research. This advice helped me solidify my working definition of a conceptual framework.

Therefore, I merged components of Maxwell's (2013) and Ravitch and Riggan's (2017) thoughts on a conceptual framework to develop a working definition for this dissertation. Based on this merger, my working definition of a conceptual framework includes an explanation of why this research is necessary, the ideas (internal or external) that I used to shape my beliefs about the study, and the existing literature surrounding this research topic. In the remaining portion of this chapter, I will present my experiential knowledge, as defined by Maxwell (2013), and the literature review, as defined by Ravitch and Riggan (2017), which will include the theoretical framework that underpins this work and related literature.

Ravitch and Riggan's (2017) and Maxwell's (2013) suggested thought experiments caused me to gain a deeper understanding of how each component of the conceptual framework was interrelated. Figure 1 shows how I envisioned the relationship between my personal experiences and internal biases, which Peshkin (1988) referred to as *subjectivities*, existing theories, and related research.

I chose to use a circular diagram to illustrate how my experiences, the theoretical framework, and the literature are interrelated because each component directly impacts the other. I included theoretical influences, which include my own subjectivities and experiences as well as established theories, directly above the topic to be the north star. Because the researcher is the instrument and constructs the codes in qualitative research,

how I made sense of the relationships surrounding my topic were to the study. Moving clockwise, I placed teacher pedagogy as the second component.

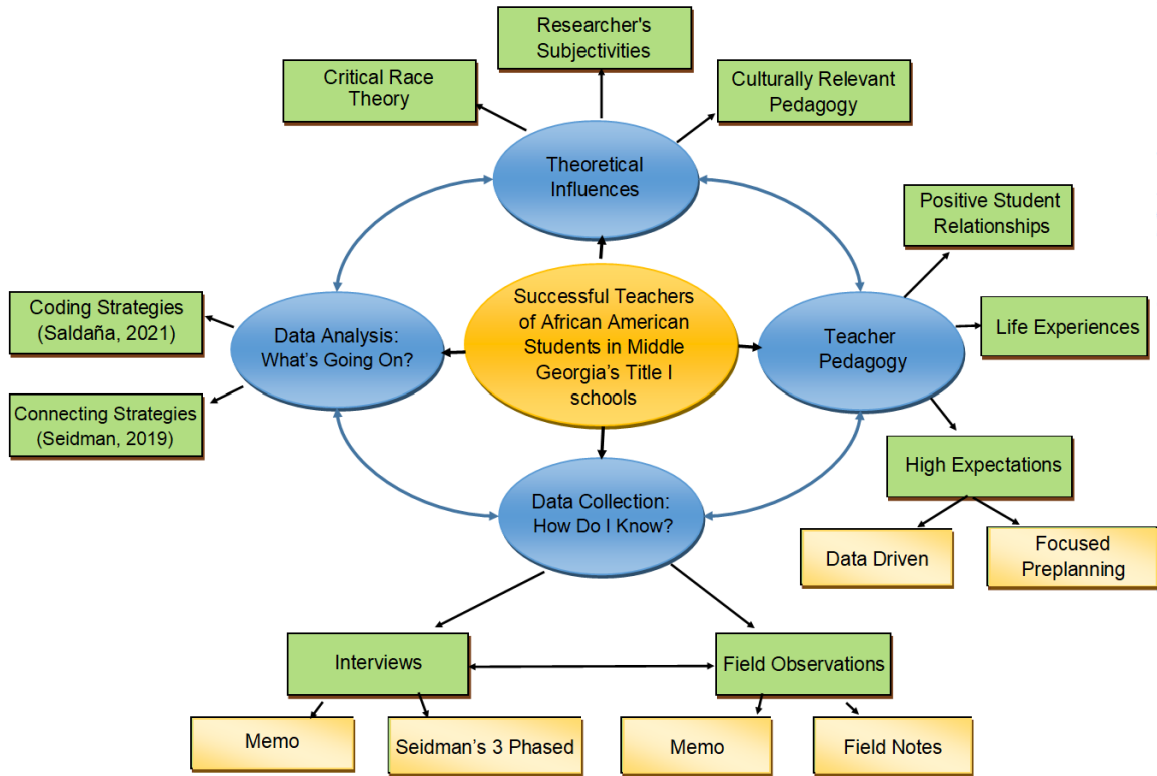


Figure 1. Components of the conceptual framework design.

The research questions were constructed to determine the participant’s views and experiences in teaching mathematics to Title I students; therefore, I believed their thoughts, experiences, expectations, and instructional practices would be critical in the study. Continuing in the clockwise motion, are data collection and analyzation. Due to the nature of this qualitative study, interviews, memos, and field observations were the best means of collecting the necessary data. Afterwards, I envisioned transcribing the interviews and using coding cycles to construct categories and themes. Although I described the diagram in a linear manner, the circular design implies that the process is recursive. Something noticed in one area can spark revitalizing any number of the other

research components. In the subsequent sections, I provide further insight into each component of the conceptual framework in Figure 1.

Experiential knowledge. Maxwell (2013) described experiential knowledge as “what you bring to the research from your own background and identity” (p. 44). To guide me in unearthing my personal identity and background knowledge, I used Peshkin’s (1988) thoughts about subjectivity along with Maxwell’s Guide (2013) Exercise 2.1: “Researcher Identity Memo” to begin developing my thoughts. In this section, I have included reflective memos on my subjectivities followed by my personal connections with working with students in Title I schools.

Subjectivity. In an article titled “*In Search of Subjectivity – One’s Own,*” Peshkin (1988) defined subjectivity as, “an 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). According to Peshkin (1988), even the most skilled researcher cannot conduct a study without the influence of his/her own subjectivity. Rather than proceed blindly as if their subjectivities did not exist, Peshkin (1988) recommended bringing them to light to ensure a greater degree of objectivity in the decision-making processes.

My personal motivations for this study stem directly from my cultural experiences growing up as a middle-class African American male. Although I experienced many of the privileges of being born into middle-class status, my parents kept my brothers and me rooted in aspects of our cultural and historical heritage. They expected us to exceed their educational and social status level; therefore, they viewed receiving education as vitally important. They also taught us that we should appreciate our ancestors’ sacrifices, which

made it possible for us to have access to education. These influences and a strong religious background merged to create some of my most fundamental *Subjective I's* (Peshkin, 1988). Three of the fundamental subjectivities that most directly influenced my study were: *The Golden Rule I*, *The Cultural I*, and *The Alone, but Not Alone I*.

The Golden Rule Subjective I. One of the basic tenets of the Christian faith is showing love for one another. Just as the church is a part of African Americans' rich cultural history, the ideologies espoused by Christianity have become part of my subjective perspectives. One such ideology is the golden rule: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" Luke 6:31 (*King James Version*). There are other similar expressions throughout the Bible that charge Christians to care for the less fortunate and treat others with even greater respect than they would themselves. I have come to interpret these ideologies as mandates for being fair and respectful to others as well as standing alongside those whom the majority have cast away.

My Golden Rule Subjective I, is what drives my need to maintain order and fairness. In the field of education, it fuels my desire to see students, regardless of race, class, physical, or mental ability, be treated equitably. When I speak of treating students equitably, I am referring to the practice of providing all students the appropriate scaffolding to be successful. Regardless of whether the scaffolding is in the form of resources, more individualized instruction, enrichment activities, or a teaching style to which the student can relate; all students deserve to receive the support they need.

In fact, this subjective perspective played a significant part in selecting my research study and theoretical framework. When I realized that the African American students were struggling and falling further behind their peers primarily because of the

lack of effective teaching (Ladson-Billings, 2014; Minor, Desimone, Phillips, & Spencer, 2015; Seidman, 2019), it triggered a response from the Golden Rule Subjectivity within me. Considering that I believe all students deserve an equitable learning experience, I hypothesized that gathering experiences of teachers who are effectively teaching African American students and spreading the stories of their strategies of instruction to other teachers who instruct African American students from low socioeconomic backgrounds would provide tools, resources, and inspiration to motivate other teachers to offer learning experiences that are more effective than what they may be doing.

The Cultural Subjective I. Closely related to fairness is my cultural subjective I, stemming from my early childhood. My grandparents played a key role in my development. I was privileged to have both paternal grandparents, a paternal great-grandmother (both lived in the city), and a maternal grandmother and great-grandmother, who lived in a rural area during my early years. I can remember sitting and listening intently as my grandmothers would tell stories of what it was like growing up during the Jim Crow Era. My grandmother, who lived in rural Georgia, would tell me of their struggles sharecropping and eventually owning their own plot of land where they had to grow nearly everything they ate. My grandmother who lived in the city would talk about the restaurants and businesses African Americans were not allowed to enter; the second-hand books they used in school; what it was like walking to school as White children rode the bus and threw things out the windows, and other acts of injustice she suffered.

Listening to their experiences gave me a sense of cultural pride that I was African American. In addition to the connectedness I felt, it also provided me with a lens through

which I could spot acts of injustice. I found myself identifying with the causes of other African Americans as my grandparents would tell me, “We [African Americans] needed to look out for each other.”

My Cultural Subjective I, in conjunction with the Golden Rule I, is what led me to teach at a Title I school located in a predominately African American neighborhood. Although I had a choice of whether I would teach in the private or public-school setting, I chose to teach where I felt I could make more of an impact on my ethnicity. I remember being approached by Mr. Short (pseudonym), the principal of the private school I attended from kindergarten to 12th grade, soon after graduating college. Mr. Short was not only the principal, but also my former teacher. While visiting, he asked if I would consider coming on staff. I now realize how big of a risk he was taking because I would have been the first African American teacher to teach at that institution. However, I could, but would not accept the offer because I knew I wanted to give back to my community. My parents believed they had to sacrifice financially for my brothers and me to go to a private school because of the negative reputation of the schools in my area.

With that consciousness indelibly etched in my mind, I chose to teach at the Title I school in the same neighborhood as my grandmother’s house because I knew the parents did not have the means to send their students to private schools, but deserved just as good an education or better than what was offered in a private school setting. I wanted to be one of those who came back to provide a way out of poverty through education.

Alone, but Not Alone Subjective I. As a child, one of the middle-class privileges I experienced was going to a kindergarten through 12th grade private school. Because there were so few minorities attending, I always felt the need to perform well to represent

my ethnicity positively. I was naturally an introvert; therefore, I did not see a need to blend in with the clique. I was cordial and spoke but did not spend extra time outside of school with my classmates except for two. I was alone, but not alone.

This phenomenon extended, to some degree, even to people who shared my background. As a consequence of not attending a public school, I spoke “standard” English, and had a different dress code. My peers often accused me of “acting White.” It was not until later that I learned to relax my vocabulary style depending on the target audience. This, combined with the fact that I enjoyed listening to older African American men and women talk about our cultural heritage, meant that when around my peers and ethnicity, I was alone, but not alone.

Yet another example of this subjectivity is my status as a teacher. I always wanted to become a teacher. My journey into the teaching profession was most likely akin to many of my traditional middle-class peers. I navigated through the educational system without any major offenses, learned the rules, helped other students learn the skills, graduated high school and college, passed the required tests to obtain certification, and began teaching. One of the major differences between other teachers and myself is that I am an African American male. However, this identifier often causes me to be categorized as a double minority. According to a data report by the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES, 2019), during the 2015-2016 school year, males only composed about 23.4% of the teaching population, and African American male teachers only 7%. These findings are indeed a national reality that I have observed. It sometimes feels lonely. However, this data report reminds me that I am not alone in the education profession and that my presence matters.

I chose to include these examples of subjectivity to illustrate the balancing act of class, culture, ethnicity, and gender. Due to my experiences, I can empathize with both the middle-class teachers and the students they teach. I also included my reflections on subjectivity so that I would personally remain aware of my feelings and would not impose them on the participant and track both the positive and negative influences on all aspects of my work, especially the validity. In addition to these subjectivities and the parts of my life they represent, my teaching experiences are key to understanding me as the researcher.

Teaching. As I reflect on my first year of teaching, 19 years ago, I entered the fourth-grade classroom nervous yet confident that I would help the 29 students learn grade-level standards. After all, I had been a good student and learned about the latest strategies for teaching reading and mathematics. I was sure that my personal connection to the neighborhood, being a male educator and of the same ethnicity as my students, would ensure that I had few classroom management issues and that I could give each child the gift of a good education. Although my perceptions about mastering teaching were skewed, my purpose, passion, and commitment were not, which ultimately led me to my dissertation topic.

I can vividly remember my first day of teaching; I was fresh out of college, and as I drove up to the school, I can remember the exterior façade. The building was a grey cinder blocks structure with what looked to be tiny, square, glass-blocked peepholes for windows. On one occasion, a local school board member even remarked that “it looked like a prison.” However, I felt comfortable because I was familiar with the area. The school was in the vicinity of my grandmother’s neighborhood, and I knew the principal

personally. However, neither the familiarity with the neighborhood nor 4 years of college preparation prepared me for the class of 29 African American fourth graders in a small, compact classroom.

It was the first time I had sustained contact with a public-school setting aside from the observations and student-teaching in college. The students were not at all how I expected. I assumed that my Blackness along with strict rules and consequences would be enough to gain the respect of the students and have them value what I was offering, but, again, that was far from the truth. They had their own language, music, family dynamics, and thoughts about school. The students' reading abilities ranged from beginner to grade-level readers. I am not sure how much they learned from me that year, but in retrospect, I learned a great deal from them.

That year, I learned I was not as in-touch with the community as I previously believed. I knew that the elements of the "opportunity gap" existed long before this term was coined. However, I had no idea how expansive it was until the honeymoon period of the first couple of weeks in the school year had worn off. I began to see firsthand the impact that economic status and access to high-quality instruction had on student success and outcomes. Unfortunately, I experienced the reality shock of observing many children who entered school below grade-level expectations. I had gained the book knowledge of how to teach but desperately lacked the experience needed to help bridge the gap for my students who were struggling. Even though I implemented instructional practices from Wong's (1997) book, *The First Days of School*, such as maintaining predictable schedules, planning for every second of the day, and being consistent with routines, these strategies did not seem to suffice.

When reminiscing over that first year of teaching, there is one student that I often think about with shame and regret. Kevin (pseudonym) was one of my lowest academically performing students. He was a short, stocky, quiet African American boy with a low-top fade haircut, which was very popular in the African American community at the time. He was about a year older than many of his classmates. As the year progressed, I noticed that although many of the other students came to school with the latest fashion and tennis shoes, Kevin seemed to wear the same shoes and rarely sported new clothes.

Additionally, as I graded his assignments, I noticed that he struggled to read basic grade-level words that all fourth graders should have been able to read with ease. He was better at math, but his reading challenges hindered him from reaching proficiency in this subject also. Since I was only familiar with engaging with students who were thriving at or near academic grade-level expectations, I mistakenly believed that I could assign all students the same task and expected them to complete it proficiently without intensive remediation. I remember moving his desk closer to me so that I could help him more frequently than I did with other students.

Kevin was not the only student with gaps in learning, but his story exemplified the academic challenges that many of the students in my class faced. In addition to the academic challenges, there were behavioral concerns. Despite the posted classroom rules, consistent schedule, and focus on academic skills, something still seemed to be missing from my instructional practices and overall impact. My aunt, a veteran teacher, had warned me not to crack a smile the first 9 weeks; however, I intrinsically knew that I had to do something to gain a deeper connection and build a rapport with my students. I

presumed that if the students knew that I was concerned about more than their academic life, they would care more about what I was teaching and asking them to do. Therefore, I began to ask the students questions during recess and lunch about their weekend, what sports they played, and things that interested them. Upon questioning my students, I learned that Angel (pseudonym), had a beautiful voice and regularly sang solos at her church, Johnathan (pseudonym), played baseball for a local recreational league, and Richard (pseudonym), was an artist. Whenever they invited me, I would visit their games and churches to show support as often as my schedule allowed.

Contrary to the narrative spun that parents with low income are not engaged in or do not value their child's education, I found that my students' parents wanted them to learn and would provide as much support as they could in the ways that they could. Not many came for parent conferences, but they were very supportive when I called about behavior or academic concerns and would remind their children of the classroom expectations. Although the academic challenges were still present, the classroom atmosphere changed for the better. However, when I was forced to comply with the pressure of preparing for the state-mandated end-of-year Criterion-Referenced Competency Test (CRCT), the culture and climate of my classroom quickly reverted. I could tell a downward behavioral shift emerged in the classroom towards the end of the school year, as I began to focus more on academic skills, but I did not know what was causing the change. While calling a parent about a behavioral concern, I recall the parent saying, "I don't know what's going on with Wanda (pseudonym). At the beginning of the year, she used to come home every day talking about Mr. Brown and what she did in school, but now she does not say anything about you or school," the parent continued.

At the time of our conversation, I could not find the connection between why Wanda and some of her other classmates' behaviors shifted. All I knew was that they had changed, and I had to incorporate more of an authoritarian teaching style to maintain order so that I could teach the skills they needed for the upcoming CRCT. I then began to notice how certain classes still seemed to run like well-oiled machines. Students were learning, taking pride in their classroom roles, and even running the classroom when their teacher was not in the room. I knew I had the knowledge and ability to deliver the content and felt that I had the heart and commitment necessary, but I still felt something was missing.

The following year, I accepted a position as the Academic Mathematics Coach at the same school. In that capacity, I conducted professional learning workshops, modeled math lessons for the teachers, and co-taught lessons. This allowed me to work with many teachers and spend time in their classrooms. I observed teachers on both ends of the spectrum. I saw classrooms where minimal to no learning occurred, those who made significant achievement gains within a year, and those in between. The difference was not in the students' academic background because the neighborhood school comprised 99% African Americans and 100% who received free or subsidized lunch.

I speculated that the difference had to be in what the teacher was doing to foster an environment where the students could be successful. I asked myself, what were these good teachers doing in their classrooms to foster social and academic yearly growth consistently? Why were these teachers not being celebrated on a larger platform? and what advice would they give other teachers serving similar populations?

As time progressed, I encountered more good teachers who served in schools like mine, and this only added to the multiplicity of questions I continuously pondered, such as, “Why are they not being recognized for the work they are doing?” I noticed that the district correspondences typically highlighted schools in suburban neighborhoods with high test scores and students whose parents were middle to upper-class citizens. Rarely did they highlight the positive achievements of teachers or students in my school or those with similar populations. Although we served a population usually looked down upon due to failing test scores and perceived disciplinary issues, I knew there were pockets of teachers who consistently made significant gains, both socially and academically. They were, no doubt, in the profession for the students, and deserved the same or greater recognition than those who taught students who started day one of school with the resources, exposure, background knowledge, and support they needed to be successful.

My countless experiences stemming from being a first-year teacher in a high-poverty Title I school, along with those gained during my continued work with teachers and students in the same population, sparked the earliest interest in my dissertation topic. Although my dissertation questions did not occur until some 14 years later, the framework was being laid the first year that I taught. However, it was not until I took an introductory class to qualitative research with Dr. Richard Schmertzling that I learned of critical race theory (CRT) and my framework began to come together even more. Eventually I knew it would be a significant theory in my dissertation. CRT provided me with a conceptual lens and terminology to articulate a fundamental goal of my research. Components of CRT and its application in education are explained in the subsequent section titled *Theoretical Framework*.

Theoretical framework. One of the key pieces of conceptual framework is theory. In my discussion of key theoretical components that influenced me, I also note how theory is used within a conceptual framework.

Positioning theory in conceptual framework. Maxwell (2013) explained that prior theory is essential in research because it provides a “road map” to help the researcher understand an occurrence. However, Ravitch and Riggan (2017) referred to prior theory as a theoretical framework in their work. They described it as a function of the literature review that helps us understand the interrelationships between the phenomena being observed and “support[s] the relationships embedded in the conceptual framework” (p. 11). With a more comprehensive understanding of the role of a theoretical framework in the research process, I searched for and reviewed current research articles and dissertations centered around my topic to examine the theories behind their research, and I found that most of them used critical race theory to explain the relationships which they found. Additionally, I recalled my experiences and background. I reflected on my evolution and growth as an educator.

Many of my preconceived notions about teaching and learning shifted drastically as I journeyed from a novice to a veteran teacher. As I navigated this doctoral program and reflected on my past experiences and future aspirations, I knew that combining the frameworks of Maxwell (2013) and Ravitch and Riggan (2017) would complement my study well. Furthermore, based on the literature and the goals of my research, I determined that critical race theory and its application to educational systems aligned well with (or helped to explain) the circumstances related to the stifling of good teachers in inner-city schools.

Critical Race Theory (CRT). According to Taylor, Gillborn and Ladson-Billings (2016), critical race theory (CRT) began as an offshoot of critical legal studies (CLS). CLS theorists saw laws and the justice system as a means of perpetuating an unjust system. In their view, the laws were established in the judicial system by the majority (White) to maintain a power structure that favored them by “covering injustices with a mask of legitimacy” (Taylor et al., 2016, p. 2). Although CLS theorists challenged the notion of a just justice system, they did not include race as a factor or propose practical changes (Taylor et al., 2016).

In response to CLS theorists’ failure to adequately address the issue of race or to reimagine a more equitable system, legal scholars such as Derrick Bell, Charles Lawrence, Richard Delgado, and Kimberlé Crenshaw began taking the principles CLS and using race as a primary lens for dissecting education (Taylor et al., 2016; Zamudio et al., 2011). They gave credence to their discourse by citing several cases where legislation involving affirmative action, school desegregation, and other inequities addressed by the Civil Rights Movement were stalled or rejected in the courts (Crenshaw, 2019; Shor, Calton, & Cattaneo, 2018). This movement started what later became known as critical race theory (CRT). Bell and his constituents argued that a racist power structure was deeply engrained in the very practices and systems Americans held dear and must be altered.

Although there is some debate, most authors agree on five basic tenets of CRT. These tenets include the idea that (1) race is a social construct (2) racism is normal (3) there is a convergence of interest (4) the importance of storytelling and counter-stories, and (5) Whites have benefited from laws designed to protect civil rights (Crenshaw,

2019; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Hartlep, 2009; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Taylor et al., 2016). Among the first to apply these tenets to the educational system were Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995). In their article titled “Toward a Critical Race Theory of Education,” Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) detailed how race played a vital role in the disparity between the educational opportunities of African Americans and their White counterparts. The disparity has been evidenced through the reverse effects of desegregation laws, the direct correlation between property taxes and neighborhood school funding, sanctioning of views and dress codes of the majority, the funneling of minorities through lower education tracts, and the high expulsion rate of African American students (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). In the remaining portion of this section, I will describe how each tenet has impacted my viewpoint of why effective teachers in Title I schools are often overlooked and what can be done to shed a more positive light on their efforts.

CRT tenet 1. One of the foundational tenets of CRT is the idea that race is socially constructed (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Oluo, 2019; Taylor et al., 2016). According to CRT proponents, the racial classifications commonly used today were not grounded in scientific or biological realities; instead, they were constructed as a way for those in majority to maintain their status and wealth (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Oluo, 2019; Taylor et al., 2016). Knox (2010) in his book *The Races of Man: Fragment*, and more recently Herrnstein and Murray (1994) in their book *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life*, claimed scientific evidence that the White race was superior to the darker races intellectually and physically due to the process of natural selection. These authors and others within their school of thought promoted a commonly

accepted stereotype that because of the darker races inadequacies, they were destined to serve the White race and be confined to the bottom of the caste system. Armed with this knowledge, Whites were emboldened to kill and enslave members of darker races to gain more wealth and power (Oluo, 2019).

Additionally, since it is a social construct, it has been adjusted throughout history to fit the current needs of the time (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Kivel, 2017; Oluo, 2019; Taylor et al., 2016). According to Kivel (2017), “Whiteness is a constantly shifting boundary separating those who are entitled to have certain privileges from those whose exploitation and vulnerability to violence is justified by their not being White” (p. 19).

One example of this can be found as far back as the 1700s when the Pilgrims arrived on this continent. According to Rogers and Bowman (n.d.) and the National Museum of African American History and Culture (n.d.), the Pilgrims had White indentured servants and African American enslaved people. Before this time, race was more along the meaning of “kin,” and White was not used as a racial identifier. When those enslaved began to join forces to revolt against the rich White powerful, those in power created a law adjusting the class system to unite Whites against African Americans who were outnumbering them. This law stated that anyone without a drop of African or Indian blood was White. During the mid-1900s, the concept shifted to determine that the Chinese would be considered Black in the eyes of the law while Mexicans would be considered White and allowed all the privileges of Americans (Kivel, 2017).

Another example can be seen shortly after the end of segregation in the South. The same type of rhetoric was used to make changes to the racial code in the American laws that anyone with a drop of Black blood would be considered African American

(Middleton, Roediger, & Shaffer, 2016). Ladson-Billings presented an even more compelling example when she acknowledged the “constantly shifting boundaries” of Whiteness during presentations at prestigious conferences (Taylor et al., 2016). The irony is that although she is an African American woman, she was treated as if she were White at the presentation; however, outside of the conference when sitting in a lounge, she was thought to be one of the help. This perception remains a daily reality experienced by many African Americans in social settings because of the constructs that Whites have implemented to create racial barriers.

Race is socially constructed; however, its impact is real (Middleton et al., 2016; Posey-Maddox, 2014; Rogers & Bowman, n.d.). Cultural biases developed around race continue to impact all the systems of American life through stigmas, prejudices, and misconceptions. I have personally seen all of these within the educational system. I have witnessed educators speak ill of parents regarding their involvement in their child’s academic journey. Some have insinuated that parents are not involved because they are lazy or unconcerned about their child’s education. However, many fail to consider that some parents are unable to attend school events such as conferences, athletic competitions, award ceremonies, or field trips because of their work schedules or inhibitions based on their experiences as students. Stigmas, prejudices, and misconceptions are not foreign to many African American parents. They often encountered these traumatic experiences as adolescents matriculating through the public school system. Unfortunately, many of these systemic issues are still being perpetuated within 21st-century classrooms.

Research by Conner (2021), Howard (2016), Monardo (2019), and White (2012) indicated that White teachers interpret African American boys' actions as intimidating, threatening, violent, or disrespectful although non-African American male students can perform the same actions and not be viewed as intimidating, threatening, violent, or disrespectful. Furthermore, I also witnessed teachers deliberately lower their expectations for their Brown-skinned students living in poverty because they believe they cannot be proficient at the required standards.

Theories linking race to intellectual aptitude were eventually disproved by several studies, such as one described by Delpit (2013), where young African American babies outperformed White babies during their first 5 years. Delpit (2013) argued that if the ideas espoused by Knox (2010) and others were true, then the African American babies should have been deficient from birth. Even though theories have been disproven and there is concrete evidence that race is a fluid, socially constructed idea, the stigma and injustices associated with it have become tangible and woven into the fabric of America's consciousness. The acceptance of the status quo without critical reflection has led the dominant narrative to become normalized.

CRT tenet 2. The second tenet of CRT is that racism is a normal part of American society rather than an outlier embraced by a select group of people. Since its inception, CRT has been used in many disciplines to reexamine what is deemed "normal" by those in power (Taylor et al., 2016). Proponents of CRT recognize that the idea of race and racism has been so normalized in America's culture, that it seems natural (Taylor et al., 2016). This normalization of racism exists in every system, including the political,

legislative, judicial, and educational systems. One does not have to look back too far in America's historical records to see how racism has been normalized.

In Chapter 1 of *Foundations of Critical Race Theory*, Taylor et al. (2016), Ladson-Billings documented how the normalization of racism in American culture began as early as America's conception. She pointed to the U.S. being built on the capitalist idea that property equaled wealth. Property was held by rich White people who in turn were granted the ability to vote, seek gainful employment, become elected officials, and determine the rules of how this country was run (Taylor et al., 2016). In this system, African Americans were considered property and did not have the same rights as others. When court rulings ended slavery, there was still a push against African Americans owning property and becoming actual citizens with equal rights.

Jim Crow Laws of the South bolstered by the 1896 Supreme Court ruling of "separate but equal" in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, legalized a normalized societal construct set by the decisive majority. Racial discrimination relegated Blacks and other people of color to live in inadequate housing and communities, receive education in separate dilapidated school buildings, work menial paying jobs, and pay excessive amounts for rent or home ownership (Burke & Schwalbach, 2021; Ebony, 1966; Gorski, 2013; Hornsby, 1991; Jim Crow Era Timeline - Jim Crow Museum, n.d.; Monardo, 2019; Owens, 2018; Roithmayr, 2014).

Even in the Northern states, the great migration of African Americans from the South in hopes of equality could not escape the miseries imposed by normalized racism. Incidents such as Tulsa's 1921 Riot, as described by Messer, Shriver, and Adams (2018), illustrate how deeply racism has been ingrained in our government systems. This riot

occurred when the neighboring White community became threatened by the African American Greenwood community's wealth and found an occasion to destroy, loot, and plunder Greenwood's businesses, churches, and homes. According to Messer et al. (2018), members of the White community were encouraged and aided by the local police in causing millions of dollars' worth of property damage, killing approximately 300 Greenwood residents, and arresting countless others. Relatively little aid was given towards rebuilding, and to date, descendants of those who survived have not received reparations.

Although we rarely hear of lynching in today's news, the year 2020 cast a national spotlight on the darkness of racism within our existing culture (Chavez, n.d.). Incidents such as the murders of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and Rayshard Brooks sparked numerous protests and serious conversations about the racism that still exists. More attention has even been given to the educational system. In my 19 years as an educator, I have witnessed firsthand the embedded racism and microaggressions within the system. Schools titled Urban or Title I are often stereotyped as low-performing schools prone to disciplinary issues, while suburban schools are typically known for high test scores and consistent academic achievements (Taylor et al., 2016). While this phenomenon is not based solely on zip codes or urban versus suburban, the root causes of these academic inequities and disparities are imbalances of resources brought about by the notion of racism.

CRT tenet 3. A third tenet of CRT proposes that changes that are beneficial to minorities only occur when there is a convergence of interest among the White majority (Crenshaw, 2019; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Hartlep, 2009; Ladson-Billings & Tate,

1995; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Of the many cases Bell (2004) pinpointed as demonstrating a convergence of interest, none was more shocking to me as the researcher as the one involving *Brown v. Board of Education* (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Taylor et al., 2016). In this landmark case, the Supreme Court sided with the African American non-majority group amid the Jim Crow Era. The Supreme Court ruled that schools and the military could no longer segregate based on race. They ruled that Brown's daughter could attend the school near her home in a predominately White area instead of going to the African American school on the other side of town.

In his book *Silent Covenants: Brown v. Board of Education and the Unfulfilled Hopes for Racial Reform*, Bell (2004) theorized that this "victory" was not based on merit alone. Instead, it was due to the negative publicity the U.S. was getting after World War II (WWII). Bell (2004) explained that when African American soldiers arrived back from defending their country, they suffered the same injustices they faced prior to leaving.

The Whites, especially those who returned from war, saw the African American as a threat to their jobs and feared upward mobility; therefore, they refused to allow African Americans to obtain lucrative jobs, continued to enforce segregation, and inflicted countless injustices on the Black race. Bell (2004) further explained that reports of these atrocities became news headlines overseas, and other nations began to lose respect for America as a "superpower." To turn the tide of public opinion and keep America's reputation, Bell (2004) contended that the Supreme Court saw this case as an opportunity to inject damage control into a situation that was rapidly gaining embarrassing momentum. The ruling ordered desegregation, but did not include explicit directions, implementation timelines or enforceable consequences; neither did it address

the underlying causes of racism that contributed to the systematic economic grievances that created segregated neighborhoods (Brown, 2016; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Gold, 2016).

Shortly after the *Brown v. Board of Education* verdict and the enactment of several other Affirmative Action laws stemming from this decision, America began demonstrating sentiment that we, as a nation, had done enough to ensure racial equality in the educational system (Taylor et al., 2016). According to J. Pierce (2013), since no more schools openly discriminated based on race and there was some degree of representation of non-majority individuals in prestigious positions; many seemed to believe Affirmative Action laws were no longer needed due to their specific focus on race. This type of posture was also seen in as recently as in 2008, when Sunnydale County (pseudonym for the county in which I conducted my research) reversed the law which allowed students attending “failing” schools to transfer to other schools in the district that were deemed “proficient” by the Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) scores. AYP originated from the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, which became America’s second major school reform law during President George W. Bush’s administration in 2001. Schools were rated on a letter scale based on their performance on the end-of-grade state test. Under previous school reform laws, students could transfer if the school had adequate space and transportation was not a barrier. However, because the district board members believed they had done enough to address the racial inequities, students were forced to attend the schools in their communities or zip code boundaries.

While some celebrate the idea of children attending neighborhood schools and not having to be bussed to schools across town, it has become another face of resegregation

(Burke & Schwalbach, 2021; DeRoche, 2020; Ebony, 1966; Freeman, 2019; Hornsby, 1991; Johnson, 2006; Monardo, 2019; Owens, 2018; Roithmayr, 2014; Rothstein, 2018; Whitehurst, Joo, Reeves, & Rodrigue, 2017). Individuals' neighborhood directly correlates with their economic status; therefore, families within the same economic bracket tend to live within the same cluster. Statistics revealed that individuals earning the least amount of income are typically brown-skinned people (Robson, Schiess, & Trinidad, 2019; U.S. Census Bureau, 1995). This concentration of Black and Brown residents meant that, once again, schools were segregated along racial lines, thereby keeping students of color experiencing poverty away from schools with affluent White children (Kozol, 1991; Lewis & Diamond, 2015).

Within Sunnydale County and similar environments, I noticed a convergence of interest demonstrated by the merging and rebuilding of newer schools within areas stricken by poverty. Although the facilities were newer and larger, they seemed to be a way to compensate the families affected for being educated with others of like socioeconomic conditions. While the buildings are a striking contrast to the surrounding landscape, little attention has been given to the systematic racism embedded in our economic and educational systems. These systemic barriers have led to *Segregation 2.0*. Additionally, the inequities of the quality of the teaching staff that typically work in these schools remain disproportionately filled by young, White novice educators who are fulfilling requirements for student loan forgiveness, and schools that lack basic needs for day-to-day operations. Therefore, systemic change is difficult to achieve and some individuals choose to continue with the status quo of underperformance.

CRT tenet 4. To effect change, CRT principles use a fourth tenet, which employs the art of storytelling and counter-stories to bring awareness to the White majority. Storytelling is foundational in the African American culture and has been how African American forefathers/ancestors passed down their cultural history to their descendants throughout the generations (Patton, 2002; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Tate, 1997; Taylor et al., 2016). Since the art of storytelling is so natural to African Americans and other minorities, these stories are used to personify the experiences and make the voices of those whom the White majority have tried to silence, heard (Patton, 2002; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Tate, 1997; Taylor et al., 2016).

One of the earliest uses of storytelling in CRT was by Bell (1989). In one of his earlier books titled *And We Are Not Saved*, Bell (1989), used fictional characters and events to mirror the harsh reality of racism in American culture. Through a compilation of chronicles, Bell drew attention to racial discrimination in how America's founding fathers designed the constitution to protect the White majority, the unequal representation of African Americans in the political system, the unfulfilled promise of racial equality, and the reactions of the White majority to solutions that would empower the African American community at a loss of their power and wealth. All the stories recorded in *And We Are Not Saved* pointed to the idea that laws alone could not resolve the systemic racism that exists in American culture. Although many Americans, like Graglia (1988) who in his book review of Bell's work, patently refused to acknowledge that such injustices existed in the U.S., for others Bell's (1989) work had a glaring effect as it came as an eye-opening shock.

Another category of storytelling is counter-stories, told in the form of profiles. The primary difference between storytelling and counter-stories is that the goal of the latter is to share stories of non-majority citizens who are exceptions to the stereotypes cast by the master narrative (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Taylor et al., 2016). When an author uses this type of method, he/she interviews a participant and shares their authentic experiences from a first-person point of view. This not only amplifies the voice of the participant, but also fosters a sense of pride in individuals marginalized by the majority.

Although there are several authors who have effectively used counter-stories to contrast dominant beliefs about those marginalized by society, Ladson-Billings (2009), with her book *The Dream Keepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children*, continues to serve as an inspiration for many. Ladson-Billings chose the participants by cross-checking a list of teachers recommended by parents of African American students with principals and teacher colleagues. Rather than focusing on the negative statistics rehearsed by the dominant culture, she interviewed and observed a total of eight teachers between 1989 and 1991 who challenged their African American students to achieve greatness while maintaining a classroom atmosphere where students did not want to miss school (Ladson-Billings, 2009). The vignettes (a series of short excerpts from an interview written in narrative style) she crafted for each participant served as a reminder that there are good teachers who inspire despite the negative stigma attached to schools serving African Americans living in poverty and who insist on excellence. Additionally, Ladson-Billings determined that each teacher demonstrated an aspect of what she termed *culturally relevant teaching* (CRT), which I will describe in more detail in a subsequent section of this chapter.

Just as Ladson-Billings (2009) observed teachers who teach in a way that captivates and motivates African American students to become proficient academically and socially, I too have noticed math teachers who can reach African American students living in poverty. Research indicates that teachers in schools typically serving Title I schools lack experience, resources, and are more likely to be ineffective than teachers in schools with more affluent families (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Carver-Thomas, Kani, & Burns, 2020; Gorski, 2013; Kozol, 1991; Sutchter, Darling-Hammond, & Carver-Thomas, 2019); yet it is not the case for all teachers in Title I settings. Some teachers realize the vitally important role they play in the lives of the students they teach and ensure they have the professional and social knowledge needed to be most impactful to their students. In my 19 years in education, I have personally encountered many elementary instructors who are an exception to the statistical data. The experiences and knowledge shared by the five elementary math teachers highlighted in this dissertation were re-storied by me after spending hours interviewing each in order to serve as counter stories to the dominant narrative.

CRT tenet 5. A final tenet of CRT is that Whites have benefitted more from laws designed to protect the civil rights of African Americans and other non-majority citizens than those for whom these laws claim to be intended (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Roosevelt, 2015; Taylor et al., 2016). One example of this tenet at work was seen in the disproportionate benefits of the 1960s and 1970s affirmative action legislature for White women. Research from Taylor et al. (2016) and Aniagolu (2012) revealed that rather than African Americans, White women benefitted the most from affirmative action laws. Data from the U.S. Census Bureau (1995) revealed that the percentage of African Americans

employed was slightly higher than any other race during the 1970s, but quickly dropped to having the lowest percentage compared to Whites and Hispanic populations. Similarly, between the 1970s and early 1990s, African American women enjoyed higher percentages of employment until the mid-1990s when they dropped down to the second-highest employment percentage when compared to White and Hispanic women. More White women were hired than their African American counterparts even though African Americans comprised a larger percentage of the overall eligible workers (Pierce, 2013).

However, some studies like Button, Bakker, and Rienzo (2006) determined that White women were not directly impacted by affirmative action. In that study the researchers concluded that White women could not have benefitted from affirmative action laws because their educational background and experience precluded them from needing such laws.

Although White women may have more formalized education and experience, CRT proponents raise a valid counterargument by questioning the system itself and the embedded racial stereotypes which cultivate White privilege to the point that White women are more likely to be chosen (Aniagolu, 2012). J. Pierce (2013) explained it best, when she indicated that surveys and even in-depth interviews were not fully reliable when determining if and to what extent racial undertones occurred between members of different races. In her opinion, the interviewees, especially middle and upper-class Whites, may harbor racist thoughts and actions but not express their true feelings for fear of public scrutiny.

The White benefit aspect of CRT is also evident in the educational system. One example of the White majority benefitting from resources designed to assist African

Americans and other non-majority students can be found in the recently publicized debate over school choice and vouchers to attend private schools. Many Americans embrace the idea of vouchers and parental choice as the answer to escaping schools with failing reports (Logan, 2018); however, others have viewed it as another tool for de facto school segregation (Chapman, 2017; Giersch, 2019; Smith, 2019). Shortly after the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) ruling, many Whites began to acknowledge that they could not legally have separate but equal schools which promoted flagrant discrimination based on skin color. Those who had enough economic wealth began withdrawing their children from public schools and enrolling them into private schools for fear of mixing with African Americans or under the presumption that the quality of their children's education would be diminished (Logan, 2018; Pierce, 2021). Other Whites began moving to other neighborhoods as minorities began to purchase homes in their neighborhoods, which in turn created the "need" for schools to be built near their neighborhoods (Owens, 2018). This phenomenon, known as *White flight*, drastically decreased the number of White children attending schools in certain areas to the point that segregation was re-established (Hornsby, 1991; Logan, 2018; Rotberg, 2014) White children were still enjoying the benefits of public education in segregated spaces.

The effects of White flight and the fifth tenet of CRT can be seen within Sunnydale County (S.C.). During the 1960s, a court ruling against S.C. called for desegregating Sunnydale County School District (SCSD). To aid in the process, in 1978, the courts ordered that SCSD rezone attendance regions and allowed for Majority to Minority (M-to-M) transfers. M-to-M transfers allowed and provided transportation for students who were the majority in a school to transfer to schools where they were the

minority (*Adams v. Board of Public Education of Bibb County*, 2007). Eventually, litigation limited the number of transfers when schools were already at capacity and required the parents to provide transportation. According to *Adams v Board of Education* [2007] 5:63-CV-1926, in 2006, a final court proceeding ultimately ended M- to-M- transfers, thus confining students whose parents lack the economic resources to relocate to a more affluent neighborhood, and forcing them to attend their local schools regardless of the academic regression.

As recently as early 2012, in Georgia, segregation in the form of “school choice” began to spread exponentially. Under the G.A. Code § 20-2-2068.1 (2015), more than 441 state-approved charter schools operate under their own constitution, yet they are funded through the local Board of Education (Georgia Department of Education, n.d.). Northside Charter School (pseudonym), which opened about eight years ago in the more affluent section of the county, became the first charter school in S.C. I remember how they plastered advertisements for parents and students in the traditional schools. Due to the application process and acceptance requirements, the charter school quickly grew into a predominantly White school where only about 30% of its 1,825 students are non-majority (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020-2021). Based on CRTs 5th tenet, the majority White population of Northside is not only benefiting from the laws meant to bring about desegregation, but also from funds allocated to public schools while not being subject to the same supervisory board as other schools. They also benefit from the 243 students who receive additional Title I funds designed to assist students living in low-income environments.

In summary, as I began to reflect on my research topic, I wondered: (a) what caused the SCSC to sink to its present condition (b) why schools with majority African American students always seemed to be mentioned in a negative light and (c) why the good teachers in these schools infrequently received recognition at the district level for their work? I knew what my subjectivities led me to think but needed to know how other scholars had postulated topics similar to this research. CRT and its five tenets helped to bring context and clarity to the historical background associated with the challenges of educating African Americans in a system which in many ways was constructed for the benefit of the White majority. While the tenet that stated that racism is normal, gave voice to many conversations I had in private, the idea that race is a social construct and those in majority only help the non-majority when it is mutually beneficial; and that Whites usually benefit more from laws designed for equality than those it was created to protect, caused me to think differently about the various initiatives and BOE decisions regarding school zones and consolidation. Finally, the CRT tenets not only explained the connection to the past and provided another lens through which I would filter experiences, but the tenet describing the importance of storytelling and counter-stories also provided the most logical method to amplify the voice and stories of the five participants who are exceptions to the master narrative cast by the dominate members of society. The remaining sections of this chapter on the conceptual framework will elaborate on key findings from related studies that influenced my research.

Related Research. As I continued my search for information that would deepen my understanding of factors that influenced the condition of Title I schools like the ones in this research and the plight and success stories of the dedicated teachers, I revisited the

works of Maxwell (2013) and Ravitch and Riggan (2017). I also looked for gaps in the literature that this research could fill. In subsequent divisions of this chapter, I will detail research about the conception of Title I schools, math standards and instruction, what the master narrative says about teachers in U.S. Title I schools, programs and initiatives, historical data about schools in the South, effective counter-stories, and effective teaching strategies for African American students.

Conception of Title I schools. Having worked in Title I schools for almost 20 years, I already had thoughts that evolved through the years about why students in Title I schools struggled to meet academic standards. Some ideas were from personal observations and interactions with teachers and students, while others were from district workshops designed to help teachers better understand the students and their culture. However, to understand the dynamics of the Title I schools I was studying more fully, I deemed it necessary to locate literature that provided historical context and current statistics. I had to be sure that the ideas I brought to the study were not simply based on my experience but grounded in current research.

Critical race theorists believe racism is a normal part of American culture and that those who are in the majority (Whites) only make changes to the system when it is mutually beneficial (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Taylor et al., 2016). CRT principles coupled with my query caused me to wonder if this same phenomenon impacted Title I schools. A review of the literature revealed that Pres. Lyndon B. Johnson (LBJ) introduced the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA) as part of his administration's "war on poverty" (Ebony, 1966; Gamson, McDermott, & Reed, 2015; Guthrie, 1968). ESEA, consisting of six sections referred to as Titles, was designed to

address the educational differences between students living in poverty and students in the middle class. Under the Title I section, federal funds were to pay half of the educational expense of students living in poverty, while Title IV prohibited racially segregated schools from receiving funds (Gamson et al., 2015; Osborne, 1965).

True to CRT tenets, the passing of ESEA directly resulted from a convergence of interests stemming from that day's political and racial tension (Gamson et al., 2015; Guthrie, 1968). The school districts needed additional funding due to economic strains; however, Pres. Linden B. Johnson saw ESEA as a way to also benefit African American students being neglected (Barr & Parrett, 2009; Gamson et al., 2015; Guthrie, 1968; Kober & Rentner, 2020). ESEA was the second major educational law passed in American history since 1837 when the U.S. created the first Board of Education (BOE) and mandated elementary for all (White) children (Barr & Parrett, 2009; Kober & Rentner, 2020). Three factors stimulated such national focus on the plight of students living in poverty and contributed to ESEA's formation. According to Gamson, McDermott, and Reed (2015), the factors were: (1) a series of books and articles that highlighted the drastic differences in America's schools, such as Harrington's (1962) *The Other America: Poverty in the United States*; (2) a change in America's opinion in the role of the federal government in education as evidenced by *Brown v. BOE*; and (3) the national and international visibility of the civil rights movement that resulted in the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Under Title I of ESEA, African American and White students living in poverty received additional funds if the school districts could say they were not segregated.

ESEA and *Brown v. BOE* (1954) seemed to be a step in the right direction providing positive outcomes. One of the most significant accomplishments of these two Bills was their impact on the desegregation efforts of the 1960s (Gamson et al., 2015; Guthrie, 1968). Many school systems refused to abide by the decision at first. However, to receive the federal-aid, schools had to demonstrate that they were (a) voluntarily desegregating, (b) already desegregated, or (c) were following the court order of desegregation (C. Q. Almanac, 1965; Gamson et al., 2015). The need for additional funds spurred districts around the U.S. to “desegregate” by bussing African American students to predominately White schools.

Although ESEA was grounded in the belief that providing funds to schools would be the catalyst to equalizing education in America and all citizens reaped the benefits, some suggested that there were critical flaws in ideology and execution of the bill (Gamson et al., 2015). One major flaw was that ESEA did not address the root causes of segregation (Ebony, 1966; Gaille, 2019). Nearly 9 years prior to ESEA and *Brown v. BOE* (1954), Du Bois (1935) advocated for African American schools where the students could take pride in their heritage and warned of the dangers of closing them down only to transplant them in schools taught by White teachers. Du Bois stated, “... I am no fool; and I know that race prejudice in the United States is such that most Negroes cannot receive a proper education in White institutions” (p. 328).

Morris (2004) reported that many African American neighborhood schools were shut down because of ESEA and *Brown v. BOE* (1954), and students were bused to White schools. Just as Du Bois (1935) predicted, closing African American schools not only caused harm to the African American sense of community but resulted in the

displacement of many African American teachers (Morris, 2004). Rather than directly addressing the systematic racial injustices, ESEA, in essence, provided a compromise between the African American students' need for updated, functional schools and the need to receive funding that would allow the school system to educate its [White] students.

Another example of a type of compromise was the bill's language and practices surrounding its enforcement (C. Q. Almanac, 1965; Gamson et al., 2015). According to C. Q. Almanac (1965), the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW) required, at the very minimum, that school systems show a "good faith start" by integrating first grade, kindergarten if applicable, the lowest grade in middle school, and the lowest and highest grade in high school. Because of the racist attitudes of many Americans, especially in the South, most schools only integrated at minimal levels. The African American enrollment nearly doubled in integrated schools in the South; however, a closer look revealed that only 7.5% of all African American school-age children were enrolled in school at all. Of the 7.5%, even fewer African Americans attended schools with a majority White enrollment (C. Q. Almanac, 1965).

To further complicate matters, although the government mandated desegregation and tasked HEW with enforcing the laws, HEW became more preoccupied with preserving its relationship with the local boards than ensuring the school districts complied with the segregation mandates (Gamson et al., 2015). The obsession with maintaining the old ties combined with the general resistance to integration has resulted in compromises rooted in the convergence of interests. As a result of these compromises, there have been slow, limited changes in the educational system that have not yielded

substantial results in dismantling segregated schools. The discrepancies can especially be seen within Southern states (C. Q. Almanac, 1965; Gamson et al., 2015; Monardo, 2019).

Title I schools and the (de) Segregated South. The schools included in this study are all located in the Southeastern U.S. therefore, I found it necessary to explore literature centered on Title I schools in the South. Although there were several books and articles where the authors explained what they perceived as causal relationships, I narrowed my search to articles based in Georgia or those states comparable in size and Title I statistics.

A review of the literature revealed a correlation between the status of Southern Title I schools and historical events dating back to the reconstruction era, resistance to court-mandated desegregation, redlining, White flight, and school choice (C. Q. Almanac, 1965; Brown, 2016; Chapman, 2017; Ebony, 1966; Gamson et al., 2015; Hornsby, 1991; Kozol, 1991; Monardo, 2019; Pierce, 2013; Smith, 2019). Other researchers theorized that the inequities in Title I schools can be attributed to economic differences (Owens, 2018) and cultural deficiencies (Pierce, 2013; Sullivan, 2001). In this section, I analyze possible explanations for the condition of Title I schools in the south.

Poverty is associated with low test scores (Boatwright & Midcalf, 2019), high incarceration rates (Western & Muller, 2013), mental illness (Kromydas, Thomson, Pulford, Green, & Katikireddi, 2021), and other systemic injustices. Since more than one-third of American citizens live in the South and it is home to over one-half of the African American population (Robson et al., 2019); it stands to reason that Title I schools in the South tend to educate more non-majority students living in poverty than in other sections of the United States (Morris, 2004; Robson et al., 2019). Because Southern states contribute more to the U.S. economy and job growth is more robust than other regions

(Robson et al., 2019), one might imagine that individuals living in Southern states would be more affluent. However, Robson, Schiess, and Trinidad reported that citizens “in the deep south are less likely to escape poverty than in other regions” (p. 19). Further, Kids Count (2020) data revealed that about 50% of all fourth-grade non-Title I students could read *proficiently* as compared to about 25% of Title I students who could read *proficiently* during the same time period. More specifically, Georgia, where the school systems in this study are located, educated more African American students in Title I schools than several larger Southern states, including Texas (Kids Count, 2020).

Some researchers attributed poverty and low test scores to cultural deficiencies and a lack of self-application to their studies (Johnson, 2006; McCall, 2013; Payne, 2003; Young, 1958). When applied to education, as coined by Young (1958), *meritocracy* ascribes that if students work hard enough and apply themselves, they can enjoy success regardless of their status of wealth or class privileges. Under meritocracy, those who work hard are rewarded with good grades, while those who do not work hard enough are penalized with low achievement. As a result, those who score low on assessments are personally blamed for what is deemed their shortcomings, which a person who practices meritocracy would claim led to the low scores.

Young’s ideologies are the sentiment of most academic professionals because it mirrors ideas embedded in America’s capitalistic society (Gold, 2016; Pierce, 2013). Although it is easier on the conscious to believe that anyone who wants to do well can “pick themselves up by their bootstraps” based on their own willpower and fortitude, one must consider, metaphorically speaking, that some do not have boots, straps, or even the limbs needed to pull themselves up. Critical race theorists counter the victim blaming

approach and offer systematic racism and marginalization processes as better explanations for discrepancies in scores.

One historically-grounded explanation for the gap between African American students' measured performance in Title I schools and students in non-Title I schools stems from American racial prejudices dating back to "Jim Crow" laws (C. Q. Almanac, 1965; Gamson et al., 2015; Hornsby, 1991; Monardo, 2019; Pierce, 2013; Pierce, 2021). According to Gamson et al. (2015) and Monardo (2019), one of the terms of Southern states' readmittance after the civil war was that each state could determine their local constitutions. Georgia and other southern states immediately began enacting laws that unfairly separated African Americans from Whites and relegated African Americans to minimal paying jobs.

African Americans were forced to live in certain sections of towns and subjected to subpar housing, schools, and little chance of escaping this caste system. Laws forbidding African Americans from owning property, voting, holding public offices, and other constitutional rights prevented them from amassing capital, which could be passed down to their children (Gorski, 2013). Generational poverty, as described by Gorski, has led to concentrations of families living in similar neighborhoods, which fed into and shaped the racial make-up of Title I schools. Although some may move from their neighborhoods in which they grew up, the effect of generational poverty typically causes the families to land in similar conditions.

The racial prejudices of the powerful White majority in education have continued well past the "Jim Crow" era. To illustrate the depth of systematic racial oppression in Georgia, I relied on the work of Monardo (2019), Hornsby (1991), and the C. Q.

Almanac (1965). Following the *Brown v. BOE of Topeka, Kansas* ruling in 1954, Georgia began introducing laws that denied state aid to schools that desegregated (Hornsby, 1991). In 1958, nearly 4 years later, the NAACP sued the Atlanta Board of Education for continuing to operate segregated schools. According to Hornsby (1991), no judge resolved the case for more than a decade. When the case was heard, the judge ruled that Atlanta schools were not in compliance, however, they were allowed to submit a plan that would have taken at least 12 years to fully integrate.

In 1961, Georgia's governor was forced to rescind the law against providing funds to integrated schools due to convergence of interest as Whites voted what was best for UGA (Hornsby, 1991). Hornsby explained that a separate court case allowed African American students to enroll in the University of Georgia (UGA). Rather than dissolve the state college, the governor offered a compromise that allowed parents the choice to attend private schools or other schools in the event theirs was integrated and allowed local boards to determine criteria for school transfers as well as decide whether to close desegregated schools. One positive outcome was that African Americans were allowed to enter public schools K-university level; however, the negative effect was that "freedom of choice" clauses provided an out for those who did not want to attend racially integrated schools. In conjunction with the "free choice" provision of the law, stipulations such as ability and personality testing were attached making it "easier to go to Yale than to transfer from one public school to another in Atlanta" (Hornsby, 1991, p. 29). In other words, the process and the paperwork were so onerous and exhausting that it was not commonly accomplished.

The war against integration of schools continued even after dropping the law prohibiting state funds to integrate schools and after ESEA's 1965 stipulations for receiving federal funding (C. Q. Almanac, 1965; Hornsby, 1991; Monardo, 2019). School systems that chose to integrate only did so at minimal levels. In Atlanta, between 1961 and the end of the 1962 school year, a grand total of 10 high schools were integrated out of the hundreds of Atlanta high schools (Hornsby, 1991). According to Hornsby, the racial demographics of the integrated high schools consisted of 44 African American students and nearly 11,000 White students.

As a result of a court order, in 1973 Atlanta schools finally reached a desegregation plan to integrate all schools (Monardo, 2019). Monardo further explained that to do this, school officials decided to take three of the desegregated Black schools and disperse them into the 20 White segregated schools that still existed. The after-effect was most disastrous for the African American community. African American students were bussed out to other neighborhoods rather than White bussed into theirs. This significantly decreased the number of African American teachers and administrators and increased closure of many schools, which were valued staples in the African American community. Even as late as the 1990s Georgia was involved in a suit about a school board yet to desegregate (Monardo, 2019). Although some would like to dismiss explanations that offer racism as a causal factor, looking at historic patterns in Georgia and other states gives credence to the explanation, and its application to other issues.

The racial prejudices that gave rise to "Jim Crow" laws that sought to suppress African Americans through the censorship of knowledge via segregated schools also gave rise to the next set of influencers in the housing market. Public school enrollment in

America has been determined by school zones determined by local school boards (DeRoche, 2020; Ebony, 1966; Rothstein, 2018). Although many [White] Americans had been taking advantage of Franklin D. Roosevelt's (FDR) housing acts during the 1930s, unfair housing practices called *redlining* ensured that African Americans and other minorities were not approved for housing loans within certain neighborhoods (Burke & Schwalbach, 2021; DeRoche, 2020; Ebony, 1966; Rothstein, 2018; Vavrus, 2017). Considerations for being approved for a home loan at a good rate and in a neighborhood of your choice depended on race factors, such as if your race was the majority in that school zone and if you were part of the race that comprised the neighborhood (Burke & Schwalbach, 2021). African Americans who qualified for home loans were sold homes at higher prices with higher rates than if they selected older homes in less affluent neighborhoods, while Whites were sold newer homes in suburban areas for lower interest rates and lower costs than Blacks were offered (Burke & Schwalbach, 2021; Roithmayr, 2014).

The combination of events from *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* (1954), the Civil Rights Act of 1964, ESEA in 1965, to the Fair Housing Act of 1968, and a series of housing acts in the 1970s designed to eliminate racial profiling in the housing market accelerated White flight and enabled Whites to move away from neighborhoods to which Blacks moved (Burke & Schwalbach, 2021; DeRoche, 2020; Ebony, 1966; Freeman, 2019; Hornsby, 1991; Johnson, 2006; Monardo, 2019; Owens, 2018; Roithmayr, 2014; Rothstein, 2018; Whitehurst et al., 2017). Once federal laws extended African Americans the opportunity to purchase homes, they began moving into historically White neighborhoods. Once Whites started feeling the full impact of

desegregation of schools, there was a mass exodus leaving schools as segregated as they were during the Jim Crow Era. Rather than segregation by law, it took on a new name of *de facto* or residential segregation (Lewis & Diamond, 2015). Since school funding depends on neighborhood property taxes, the changing landscape resulted in a decrease in real estate value, less money to maintain the schools, and noticeable differences in the quality of education between urban and suburban schools (Burke & Schwalbach, 2021; DeRoche, 2020; Ebony, 1966; Freeman, 2019; Hornsby, 1991; Johnson, 2006; Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Monardo, 2019; Roithmayr, 2014; Rothstein, 2018).

Certainly today, no school district would blatantly admit to segregation, and neither would a realtor or bank admit to redlining, but the unjust system birthed by racism still exists. Instead of being segregated by law or redlining, public schools are being segregated by the cost to live in communities that are zoned for the “good” schools (Burke & Schwalbach, 2021; Chapman, 2017; DeRoche, 2020; Lewis & Diamond, 2015). Those who cannot afford to live in the affluent neighborhoods (some White, but mostly African Americans and other minorities) are herded into often overcrowded Title I schools. To be considered a Title I school, at least 35% of the student population must be living below the national poverty average (Georgia Department of Education, 2018c); therefore, schools in neighborhoods of high poverty are usually considered Title I schools. Eventually, schools in African Americans, high poverty, urban neighborhoods were stigmatized as “bad” schools while schools in predominately middle-class, suburban, White neighborhoods were considered the “good” schools. In the next section, I will examine this and other stereotypical myths about Title I schools and the children that attend.

Title I schools as portrayed by the master narrative. According to Stanley's (2007) research about master narratives, a master narrative is a "script that specifies and controls how some social processes are carried out" (p. 14). In America, the master narrative is told from the perspective of the White majority who have created the spoken and unspoken rules that govern this country (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Common features of master narratives, also called dominant narratives, include silencing, ignoring, and vilifying the minorities to meet the needs of the majority group in power (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

Race is a social construct that was created by the White- majority to perpetuate dominance, violence, wealth, and power. Additionally, racially biased master narratives have been used in education for years to explain cultural and academic differences between majority and non-majority students (Delpit, 2013; Gorski, 2013). As cited by Gorski (2013), some researchers have attributed stereotyping others to a mental proclivity to view one's own experiences as diverse and therefore generalize other groups of people who are different from themselves as the same within the group. Gorski (2013) further explained that, overgeneralizing the perceived actions and intentions of a select few individuals to that of the whole community has led to faulty assumptions about students and parents living in poverty as well as the schools, which the students attend.

In Paul Gorski's (2013) book *Reaching and Teaching Students in Poverty: Strategies for Erasing the Opportunity Gap*, he detailed four types of cultural and intellectual myths propagated by the dominant narrative about Title I schools. These deficient, laden myths consist of beliefs that (1) the students do not value education (2) the poor are lazy (3) students living in poverty have linguistic deficiencies, and (4)

parents are ineffective and inattentive to the child's academic needs (Gorski, 2013). These judgmental, stereotypical dispositions and narratives about African American students and families have been dominant filters for White educators. In fact, some of the most widespread myths propagated by the master narrative include judgments about the parent's work ethics, cultural values, and attitudes towards their children's education, while others focus on their mental and cultural deficits (Delpit, 2013; Gorski, 2013).

While teachers and community members may be well-intentioned and have a genuine concern for the students, some have fallen into the trap of blaming the victim. The concept of merit, which presumes that individuals have the same opportunities for success, is one of the cornerstone ideologies of American culture (Gold, 2016; Pierce, 2013; Shor et al., 2018). When individuals do not perform well, it is attributed to their lack of ability, commitment, persistence, or some other deficiency in their character, hence the term *deficit thinking* (Gay, 2018; Paris, 2012; Shor et al., 2018). Although many assumptions and misconceptions about students living in poverty have been based on statistical data, the resulting conclusions, often received as facts, fall short of considering the systematic racial barriers designed to keep the wealthy White majority in power (Delpit, 2013; Gorski, 2013; Khalifa, Gooden, & Davis, 2016; Paris, 2012; Shor et al., 2018; Walker, 2011).

Researchers showed evidence of a large discrepancy between African American and White students' performance on standardized testing (Benford & Smith, 2021; Boatwright & Midcalf, 2019; Lewis & Diamond, 2015). In a 2019 report by the U.S. Department of Education (U.S. DOE), results from 2017 reading and mathematics NAEP assessments showed that in both subjects, African American and Indigenous Americans

scored significantly lower than their White peers (de Brey et al., 2019). When investigating a statistically significant difference between Title I and non-Title I students' test scores on the state level, both Heier (2011) and Ross (2016) conducted quantitative studies on their state's end-of-year standardized test. Heier (2011) studied the fourth-grade reading and mathematics results of the 2009 Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) using individual t tests and Cohen's d testing analysis. Similarly, Ross examined third-grade reading and mathematics results for Georgia's Criterion-Referenced Competency Test (CRCT) during the 2013-2014 school year. Both researchers found a statistically significant difference in reading and mathematics scores between Title I and non-Title I students.

Based on the statistical data, those steeped in the ideas of the master narrative could offer any of the four myths Gorski (2013) listed as an explanation. However, other researchers have disproven or offered a more plausible explanation for the differences in recent years. The remainder of this section will offer counter-examples to the myths and possible explanations for score differentials that are rooted in critical race theory.

Myth 1: The students do not value education. Often, teachers and administrators perceive low test scores, defiant or nonchalant dispositions, falling asleep in class, and inattentiveness as a lack of valuing education. Rather than examining the teaching methods or instructional curriculum, it is easier to blame the motives and values of children living in poverty because, after all, many think there is nothing wrong with the

educational system in America. Critical theorists, however, pose another question that leads to a different explanation. Could the issue be the system itself, not the students?

According to Gorski (2013), the statement that students and parents living in poverty do not value education is false. In multiple studies, parents were just as concerned about their child's education and stressed its importance as wealthier parents (Chavkin, 1989; Compton-Lilly, 2004; Fink, 2017; Gorski, 2013).

Research also contradicts the sentiment that minority students do not value their education (Anderson, 2018; Compton-Lilly, 2004; Gorski, 2013). In a 2018 report titled "*A Seat at the Table: African American Youth's Perceptions of K-12 Education*," Dr. Meredith Anderson and peers at the United Negro College Fund (UNCF) presented evidence from a survey targeting African American and Latino youth ages 16-20. Approximately 1,700 youth whose household income was under \$40,000 responded from the targeted cities of Atlanta, Los Angeles, Oakland (CA), Long Beach, Chicago, and Philadelphia. In the report, Anderson discovered that about 70% of the participants believed education was crucial while only 43% felt safe at their schools. The respondents also indicated that attaining higher education was a priority.

In a separate study, Stuckey (2019) analyzed the perceptions of approximately 13,000 fourth and fifth graders in an urban, Mid-Western school district. The students completed a Likert Scale school climate survey about their perception of effective teaching, teacher expectations, classroom environment, safety, parental involvement, and six other related questions during the school year. Her goal was to determine if there was a statistically significant difference between how students in Title I and non-Title I students viewed their educational schooling experience. After conducting an independent

sample *t* test on each of the nine questions, she determined that the results were similar on every question except questions about high expectations and parental involvement. Students in Title I schools indicated that their teachers did not have as high expectations as students in non-Title I schools. Title I students also expressed a lower degree of parental support than their peers.

If student and parent values are not the issues, as Anderson (2018), Gorski (2013), and Stuckey (2019) all confirm, then the issue must lie within the teachers' perceptions and instructional practices. The research confirms that if the teachers have low expectations for their students and believe the students either do not care or are not intellectually capable of meeting the grade-level expectations, the students will respond accordingly (Chavkin, 1989; Delpit, 2013; Fink, 2017; Heier, 2011; Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Vavrus, 2017). Teachers must pivot from using instructional strategies, such as direct instruction and ability tracking that do not challenge the students to think more critically and abstractly, to creating more hands-on, culturally relevant experiences designed to foster higher-order thinking skills (Gorski, 2013).

Myth 2: The poor are lazy. The second myth addressed in this paper is that poor people are lazy. Since America's systems are founded on meritocracy, those who do not perform well are considered lazy (Knoester & Au, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 1995a, 1995b; Mijs, 2015; Rogalsky, 2009; Shor et al., 2018; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Many U.S. citizens believe those who receive food and housing assistance are slothful and wonder why they do not just get a job (Gorski, 2013). Critical theorists, however, would answer that question with the question, "Why can't they find a good-paying job?"

Although there are many different explanations presented by critical theorists, the systemic racist system underlining America's capitalistic society lies at the root (Panayotakis, 2014). In Panayotakis' article, she explained that in a capitalistic society, the privileged with the most capital employ whatever means necessary to make a profit, regardless of whom it affects. In terms of poverty, jobs, and joblessness, the system is set up such that big companies and the wealthy elite will continue to provide their workers with as little compensation as possible and provide as few benefits in order to maximize profits.

Given the historical facts about our country's capitalistic society, it is logical that Gorski (2013) contended that those experiencing poverty work as hard or harder than others. With nearly half of America's jobs paying minimal wages with little to no benefits, those living in poverty, either because of an opportunity gap in the educational system or not having the same connections as wealthier people, are often forced to work longer hours or have multiple jobs to sustain their families (Babic, 2016; Rank, 2021). To complicate the situation, if an extended illness or an emergency arises, individuals experiencing poverty can be thrown into a downward debt spiral because little to no paid time off is provided. Thus, the cycle is continued, especially in the South, where the poor work hard under the guise of attaining the American dream only to see their sons and daughters experience the same level of wealth as they attained (Robson et al., 2019). To effect change, we must rid ourselves of the myth that poor people are lazy and engage in the work of providing access to the same opportunities the wealthy enjoy because of inherited privilege.

Myth 3: Students living in poverty have linguistic deficiencies. Scholars have studied language and sought to pit one expression as more desirable or worthy than another for many years (E. J. Johnson, Avineri, & Johnson, 2016; Paugh & Riley, 2019). Languages and dialects other than the language normalized by the wealthy majority were considered substandard and devalued (E. J. Johnson et al., 2016; Paugh & Riley, 2019). For example, in the 1960s and 1970s, linguistics developed verbal deprivation and intelligence deficit theories which informed the classification “Speech of children learning African American English (AAE) [also known as Ebonics] to be pathological by comparison with the children learning Standard American English (SAE)” (Paugh & Riley, 2019, p. 298).

Of the many linguistic studies offering verbal deficits to explain the lack of student achievement on standardized tests, Hart and Risley’s (1995) book *Meaningful Differences in the Everyday Experience of Young American Children*, remains the most currently espoused explanation by those influenced by the master narrative. In their book, Hart and Risley (1995), reported their differences as they observed participants' interaction with their babies for an hour a month over a 2.5-year period.

Based on the data observed, they postulated that children from a higher socioeconomic status (SES) were exposed to approximately 30 million more words and received significantly more feedback than children from lower SES. When administered a standardized reading test, children from the higher SES performed substantially better than their peers. As a result of their findings, districts across the United States, including Sunnydale School District, began touting the findings and attempted to close the

Language Gap by implementing reading initiatives for students experiencing poverty (E. J. Johnson & A. Zentella, 2016; E. J. Johnson et al., 2016).

Although many studies have shown evidence that students experiencing poverty enter school less advanced in reading than other students and that the slow start could impact future attainment, Gorski (2013) proposed that it was not due to a learning gap or to the parent's lack of concern for the child's education. Instead, he pointed to the type of educational experiences a child receives when attending school. Teachers who believe that their students have a language deficit will produce students with language gaps (Gorski, 2013; Paugh & Riley, 2019; Ross, 2016). Paugh and Riley (2019), however, directed their attention to detailing how the errors in collection of data, transparency of analysis, and the researchers' ignorance to linguistic studies rendered Hart and Risley's (1995) "learning gap" ungeneralizable.

Regardless of SES, students enter school having already acquired vocabulary. Although they may not be as well versed in SAE as others, we must not dismiss but respect their language. While we do provide students tools that will allow them the ability to fluidly change types of speech depending on the situation, we must do so in a way that honors the vocabulary they already have (E. J. Johnson et al., 2016). By honoring our student's cultural language and creating authentic, culturally relevant experiences for students to apply their knowledge, we can help dismantle the myth that students arrive at school with a language gap and change the academic trajectory of students experiencing poverty.

Myth 4: Parents are ineffective and inattentive to their child's academic needs.

Statements such as "These parents don't care if [the child] fails," "They can't be

interested in their child's schoolwork because he/she never turns in homework," and "If his mom spent as much time getting him to do his schoolwork as she did buying him new clothes, he would be passing his classes," are all examples of statements directed at what those in the majority class see as a lack of parental engagement in their child's academic life. Other statements such as "If you'd pay as much attention to your work as you do on social media, you'd be an honor roll student;" "He/she is just lazy;" and "they spend more time with their parents outside of school than they do with me ... all I can do is teach them while they are here," are all examples of comments used to explain why a student is not excelling academically (Gorski, 2013).

It is true that parents in Title I schools do not usually attend school functions to the degree that non-Title I parents attend. However, it is equally true that many of the parents encounter barriers such as having jobs that do not offer flexible hours or paid leave, adequate transportation, and suffered negative childhood educational experiences which prevent them from being present (Compton-Lilly, 2004; Gorski, 2013).

The master narrative and Title I schoolteachers. A voluminous amount of research describes the statistics surrounding teachers in Title I schools. Of the studies examined, the recurring statistics involved teacher shortages, certification status issues, years of experience, and attrition rates (Carver-Thomas et al., 2020; Garcia & Weiss, 2020; Gorski, 2013; Howard, 2016; Kozol, 1991; Sutcher et al., 2019). In his books *Visible Learning for Teachers* (2012) and *The Applicability of Visible Learning to Higher Learning* (2015), John Hattie, shared findings from his meta-analysis of more than 900 books, articles, journals, papers, and other literature about achievement. He indicated a strong positive correlation between effective use of high leverage

instructional strategies, many of which significantly affect achievement than the student's extracurricular life. Furthermore, his evidence suggested that effective teachers are the single most crucial factor for students to succeed academically regardless of their SES.

Although every school needs experienced teachers who effectively use the high-leverage instructional strategies Hattie (2012) referenced, they are most desperately needed in Title I schools. However, the sobering reality is that students attending Title I schools do not typically have access to those teachers (Carver-Thomas et al., 2020; Garcia & Weiss, 2020; Gorski, 2013; Howard, 2016; Kozol, 1991; Sutchter et al., 2019). Teachers at Title I schools typically are novice teachers with less than 5 years of experience, have transferred from another field, are working towards an education degree, or are not certified to teach the core subjects (Carver-Thomas et al., 2020; Gorski, 2013). Sutchter, Darling-Hammond, and Carver-Thomas (2019), reported that between 2016 and 2017, approximately 87,000 teachings positions were filled by teachers who were not certified. Compared to non-Title I schools, the non-certified teachers were twice as likely to be hired by Title I schools (Gorski, 2013).

Of the certified teachers at Title I schools, many have only attained bachelor's degrees (the minimal degree necessary for certification) and are unprepared for the job's demands. Additionally, very few acknowledge that many novice teachers have entered Title I communities after completing certification programs, based on incentives such as the criteria of qualifying for Teacher Loan Forgiveness Programs (Milanowski et al., 2009). This phenomenon is almost equivalent to placing a soldier fresh out of boot camp on the front line of a battle after the enemy has almost invaded the territory when Navy Seals are needed. Many teachers do not remain at the Title I schools because of the

stressful working environment, the disconnect with the students, disciplinary concerns, accepting another position, or deciding to leave the profession entirely.

A final issue of discussion central to the conversation of Title I teacher portrayal by the master narrative is the alarming rate of “*teacher attrition*” and “*teacher turnover*” (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Carver-Thomas et al., 2020; Kozol, 1991; Sutcher et al., 2019). For this research, teacher attrition is defined as individuals who leave the teaching profession, while teacher turnover refers to teachers moving from one school to another (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Carver-Thomas et al., 2020). The increased demand for teachers placed on the educational system due to population increase, decrease in teachers graduating from teacher preparatory programs (Sutcher et al., 2019), and increase in attrition rates due to retirement and pandemic (Carver-Thomas et al., 2020) are all factors that have exacerbated national teacher shortage.

More and more teachers are leaving the profession for a variety of reasons. One reason cited was the pandemic itself (Carver-Thomas et al., 2020). In an article titled “Sharpening the Divide: How California’s Teacher Shortages Expand Inequality,” Carver-Thomas et al. (2020) revealed that 20% to 30% of teachers who answered a *U.S.A. Today* poll reported they were thinking of retiring because of the pandemic. Although there is a push to get back to normal and districts have eased their mask mandates, many teachers are unwilling to risk their health atop the other stressors that naturally accompany teaching. Other teachers are leaving the profession for better-paying jobs, and because U.S. public schools are funded mainly by property taxes, teachers in Title I schools tend to be paid less than teachers in more affluent districts (Carver-

Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Carver-Thomas et al., 2020; Kozol, 1991; Sutcher et al., 2019).

Still, another reason teachers leave can be traced to “*inter-district*” inequalities. I have personally witnessed new teachers in Title I schools transfer to other more affluent schools in the district after the first or second year. Reasons supported by research in Carla Claycomb and Willis Hawley’s (2000) article “Recruiting and Retaining Effective Teachers for Urban Schools: Developing a Strategic Plan for Action,” included a lack of connection with their class, increased disciplinary issues, pressure from administrators to comply with district initiatives, and a chance to teach in a more affluent school (district). Students who attend Title I schools are affected the most by teacher attrition and turnover (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Gorski, 2013; Kozol, 1991). When teachers leave Title I schools, a vacancy prompts the principal to search for a replacement. During the search, it is not uncommon for a class to go without a certified teacher for an entire school year (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Carver-Thomas et al., 2020; Gorski, 2013; Kozol, 1991; Sutcher et al., 2019).

In recent years, to compound the situation, states have relaxed their criteria for hiring teachers and included individuals without teacher certification in the selection process. In the case of a Title I school, when a replacement selection is made, assuming the national statistics hold true, the teacher will most likely be another novice with or without a full teaching certificate. For students who already enter school desperately needing experienced teachers, this does nothing but further widen the opportunity gap.

Mathematics standards and their impact on Title I students. Legislatures have tried to address what some refer to as the “achievement gap” (Ross, 2016; Stuckey, 2019)

or “racial gap” (Martin, 2009) by creating national standards that call for equity among racial groups (Bartell et al., 2017; Greer, 2018; Hawks, 2019). Both terms compare test scores of African Americans and other minorities to Whites. In an article titled “The 50 Year History of the Common Core,” Greer (2018) explained that the 1963 enactment of ESEA, provided funds to schools that served students living in poverty; however, it provided no clear standards or guidance for using the funds. It was not until after NAEP began publishing drastic differences between U.S. scores and those of other countries that a commission was formed in 1989 to challenge states to increase the rigor in their teaching expectations. A few years later, the Improving America’s Schools Act (IASA) of 1994 allowed each state to develop its own set of content standards that clearly outlined knowledge and skills every student should master (Greer, 2018).

Although the groundwork had been set, the most expansive change came because President G. W. Bush signed the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) act of 2001 (Greer, 2018; Hawks, 2019; Mukhopadhyay & Greer, 2017; Noguera, 2008). With its laudable goal for all students, regardless of race, ethnicity, and social background, to reach proficiency by 2014, NCLB was filled with grand expectations but lacked many of the social reforms needed to accomplish the goals (Hawks, 2019; Jones, 2009; Noguera, 2008).

Under NCLB, states reported the results of their end-of-year standardized test and were tasked with making yearly incremental advances towards meeting the 2014 goal. Teachers and schools who did not make the incremental goals, known as Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), suffered consequences: being marked a failing school, a negative teacher review, and losing Title I funding (Hawks, 2019; Mukhopadhyay & Greer, 2017). In Georgia, while NCLB was enforced, Title I schools that either scored in the bottom

5% or had a within school gap between subgroups and did not make AYP for consecutive years, were designated as “*Priority*” or “*Focus*” schools. Priority and Focus schools worked with the GaDOE to improve their scores; however, if they did not improve within a given amount of time, there was a possibility that the state would take over the school (The Governor’s Office of Student Achievement, 2013).

For Title I schools, the mandates of NCLB and the recently legislated Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA) have become a double-edged sword rather than a roadmap to equity. States committed to higher expectations for all students in mathematics either developed their own more rigorous math standards or adopted the more recent Common Core State Standards (CCSS). Georgia’s standards, called Georgia Standards of Excellence (GSE), even streamlined and pared down expectations within each grade band for students to develop a deeper and more robust knowledge of math (GaDOE, 2016). GSE developers acknowledged that “all students must have the same opportunity to learn and meet the same high standards if they are to access the knowledge and skills necessary in their post-school lives” (GaDOE, 2016, p.3); however, instead of overhauling the dated system filled with systemic racism, the focus, just as the rest of the country, quickly diverted to “helping” (blaming or fixing) African Americans and other minorities living in poverty (Hawks, 2019; Mukhopadhyay & Greer, 2017).

At first glance, working to increase the scores of underperforming African Americans and minorities so their scores are comparable to their White counterparts may seem noteworthy. However, doing so inherently implies something wrong with those underperforming and must be modified to be viewed as mathematicians (Hawks, 2019). Those ascribing to the master narrative have accepted the belief that there is something

deficient in those who do not perform as well as White affluent students, and developed instructional programs funded by Title I money designed to remedy their defects. However, contrary to best practices and intervention models that outline strategies for successful systems of support, that accommodate whole-child development, growth, and mastery, many states instead, chose to remediate (fix) underperforming math students' scores. They attempted to do so by adopting poor instructional methods that used explicit, direct instruction curricula; workshops grounded in a cultural poverty belief, and engaged heavily in exclusionary practices which negated high yield instructional theories and practices (Gorski, 2013; Khalifa, 2018; Rogalsky, 2009).

Ineffective teaching practices and beliefs were embraced by the master narrative surrounding Title I schools. According to research, teaching styles that elicit higher-order thinking and are more hands-on teaching models have a greater impact on student academic success than rote, direct instruction (DI) strategies (Gorski, 2013; Hattie, 2012). Although Gorski (2013) reported that DI had only proven effective in mastering lower-order skills, and despite their inability to address the higher-order thinking skills the standards demanded, districts continued to use intervention programs geared towards DI of basic skills. In defense of DI, T. Kim and Axelrod (2005) explained that scripted DI programs (1) were birthed out of work with students who struggled academically (2) considered the learning gaps and incrementally scaffolded the students to independent mastery, and (3) were grounded in standards. However, without a more balanced approach, students who need the most support will continue in a cycle of only mastering remedial skills while never fully mastering their current grade level skills (Nicholson, Bauer, & Woolley, 2016).

In addition to the heavy reliance on direct instruction for remedial purposes, many teachers have also subscribed to the master narrative's stance on cultural poverty, which blamed the marginalized group's cultures for their deficiency. A prime example of the widespread acceptance of the master narrative was the rise of Ruby Payne and her workshops on poverty. During the late 1990s and early 2000s, Payne and her associates began traveling from state to state and district to district conducting professional learning based on Ruby Payne's (2003) book *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*. The workshop's premise was that poverty had its own culture that educators must learn so they could effectively foster relationships with the students and ultimately teach them the "middle-class codes" they need to be successful in school and life (Payne, 2003).

Although many of the generalizations she made were blatantly racist, Whites and African American teachers serving in traditionally underserved Title I schools accepted them as truth and continue working from that mindset in Title I schools today. One of the travesties of embracing cultural poverty theories while teaching African Americans and other students living in poverty is that it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Students will perform how their teachers expect them to perform, which Steele (2011) refers to as a "stereotype threat," thereby the cycle continues.

Another example of how ineffective teacher practices condoned by the master narrative have negatively affected Title I schools is the daily exclusionary practices that teachers use. In his book titled *Culturally Responsive School Leadership*, Muhammad Khalifa (2018) described how teachers who knowingly or unknowingly acquiesce to the systematic oppressive systems within education, frequently exclude already marginalized students from access to instruction. Khalifa categorized these customs into direct and less

direct exclusionary practices. More direct exclusionary practices included in-school suspensions, out-of-school suspensions, zero-tolerance policies, law enforcement policies against students, and student deal-making that allows students to be present in class but disengage from learning (Khalifa, 2018, p. 85).

Other exclusionary practices are often more long-term but less direct. Khalifa's (2018) list of less direct exclusionary practices included

- grade retention
- constant disciplinary referrals
- not welcoming parents and community members [within the school/district]
- not engaging minoritized neighborhoods/communities
- not valuing non-White behavior, cultural capital, aesthetic language, or dress
- emotional abuse (e.g., shaming, teasing, tokenizing, and dismissiveness)
- hostile treatment of students (e.g., ridiculing, harassment, denial of oppression, and ignoring)
- allowing students to disengage. (pp. 85-86)

The effects of direct and less direct exclusionary methods being applied disproportionately to African Americans and other Brown-skinned minorities continue to widen the existing opportunity gap (Brunn-Bevel & Byrd, 2015; Khalifa, 2018; Khalifa et al., 2016).

Despite NCLB's vow to decrease the gap between African Americans and White achievement scores, nearly 20 years later, the most recent NAEP (2021) long-term trends and the NCES (2019) *Status and Trends Report* showed that African Americans scored disproportionately lower than other races. The preceding section thoroughly explained

how ideas grounded in systematic racism have pervaded the master narrative and devastatingly affected Title I schools' students. High expectations alone cannot and should never reshape the inequity of hundreds of years. For all students, regardless of race, ethnicity, or abilities, to be successful math students, we must direct our focus onto high expectations accompanied by the social and cultural changes that are not addressed by the master narrative. Furthermore, an abundance of related research highlights studies and teaching strategies that have challenged the master narrative and proven that students of color can and will be successful socially and academically despite the bleak picture painted and will be explored in the following section.

Counter-stories and the master narrative. CR theorists use counter-stories from marginalized individuals to challenge the status quo, tell the stories of those silenced, and appeal to the humanity of those in the majority race (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Hawks, 2019; Taylor et al., 2016). Regardless of the obstructions racist majorities have positioned along the path towards equity, many African Americans and people of color have refused to become part of the negative, deficit-ridden statistics promoted by the master narrative. There are mathematics teachers in “failing” Title I elementary schools whose students live in poverty, and face the same challenges as other students in similar conditions; nevertheless, the teachers consistently elicit/foster consistent academic and social success. A review of related literature resulted in the discovery of journal articles, dissertations, and books that indicated that teachers in Title I schools who had higher student success rates implemented variations of Ladson-Billings’s (1995b) culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) teaching strategies and beliefs (Egan, 2008; Gay, 2018; Gorski, 2013; Khalifa, 2018; Kozol, 1991; Ladson-Billings, 1995a, 1995b, 2009; Mukhopadhyay

& Greer, 2017; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Tate, 1997; Ukpokodu, 2011; Xenofontos, 2019).

Counter-narratives and culturally relevant/responsive pedagogy in math. Gloria Ladson-Billings, one of the premier scholars in CRT, rejected the deficit-driven master narrative and began searching for what was right and good about African American students rather than focusing on what was wrong and how they were deficient compared to their White counterparts (Ladson-Billings, 1995b). While on this quest, she primarily interviewed, observed, and recorded eight teachers who taught African American students in a small Northern California school district (Ladson-Billings, 1995b). After analyzing the data and discussing it with the participants of the two-year inquiry process, Ladson-Billings (1995b) developed a culturally relevant pedagogy. Ladson-Billings built her newly coined pedagogy on getting teachers to truly understand each student's culture to build relationships that allowed them to center instruction on the student capital they brought into the learning experience. She divided the pedagogy into three main themes (1) the teacher's commitment to student achievement (2) the perseverance of the student's cultural competence, and (3) involvement in the cultural critique of social injustices beginning with those found within their communities (Campbell, 2021; Ladson-Billings, 1995a, 1995b, 2014).

As time progressed, other researchers built upon the Ladson-Billings' culturally relevant pedagogy. Among others, two variations consisted of *culturally sustaining pedagogy* (Ladson-Billings, 2014; Paris, Alim, Genishi, & Alvermann, 2017), which centered around protecting students' language and cultural practices, and Geneva Gay's (2018) *culturally responsive pedagogy*, which added more practicality to Ladson-

Billings's original pedagogy. Of the two pedagogies listed in this paragraph, I found Gay's (2018) culturally responsive pedagogy more like Ladson-Billings' (1995b) original pedagogy than culturally sustaining pedagogy. Both Ladson-Billings's (1995b) culturally relevant and Gay's (2018) culturally responsive pedagogies emphasized a commitment by teachers to expect and insist on high academic performance from students; a commitment to preserve and encourage students to maintain their cultural identities while achieving academic excellence; and a commitment to develop the students' critical mindsets and social activism (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1995b; Zhu & Peng, 2020).

Some scholars use culturally relevant and culturally responsive synonymously (Zhu & Peng, 2020), however, there is a slight difference. Ladson-Billings' mainly addressed African American students living in poverty, while Gay's culturally responsive pedagogy expanded the idea of culturally responsive teaching to all ethnic groups marginalized by society (Mensah, 2021). Although I am aware of the differences and that this study examines teachers of African Americans, I chose the more inclusive term of culturally responsive pedagogy because it included African Americans and other students of color. The following section includes the most salient research from studies that explored teacher beliefs and practices in excelling Title I math classes. The results were valuable in helping me make predictions about what I may have found in the participants' classrooms.

Several researchers documented culturally responsive practices and a critical mindset as a factor in Title I students' academic success in mathematics or that can be applied to the mathematics classroom (Egan, 2008; Gorski, 2013; NCTM, 2014; Tate, 1997; Ukpokodu, 2011). I classified the results into three overarching categories (1)

expectations and strategies for high academic success (2) validation of cultural funds of knowledge, and (3) engagement in critical mindsets that lead to social activism. Each category is described in the remainder of this section.

Expectations and Strategies for High Academic Success. As previously alluded to, high expectations for mastery coupled with culturally responsive teaching strategies was a common theme in the classrooms of Title I teachers whose students perform better than their comparable peers (Egan, 2008; Gay, 2018; Gorski, 2013; Khalifa, 2018; Kozol, 1991; Ladson-Billings, 1995a, 1995b, 2009; Mukhopadhyay & Greer, 2017; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Tate, 1997; Ukpokodu, 2011). Some teachers have professed to have high expectations for all their students yet continued to either use direct and indirect exclusionary practices that deny students access to high-quality instruction (Khalifa, 2018) or fall into victim-blaming.

However, to truly have high expectations for students whom society has written off, one must do the daunting work of reflecting on their beliefs and expel misinformed beliefs about their student's capability. Therefore, Ukpokodu (2011, p. 53) suggested that teachers first ask themselves questions such as "Who is learning math in my classroom, who is not, and why? What is my expectation for each of my students in mathematics learning? How am I scaffolding instruction for student mathematics learning? (and) What social and community issues am I integrating into mathematics curriculum and instruction?" to determine if their expectations were high for all students.

Although high expectations and a strong belief in the capacity of all children to learn were noted as essentials for success, both factors whilst important are not by themselves nearly enough (Egan, 2008; Gorski, 2013; NCTM, 2014; Ukpokodu, 2011).

In research critiquing the Common Core State Standards of Math, Bartell et al. (2017) praised high expectations and the pathway to a deep conceptual understanding of mathematics found within the standards. However, the authors also criticized policymakers for not providing substantial steps leading to repealing the systemic racial prejudices that directly affect student achievement in marginalized groups. Bartell et al. (2017) also suggested that teachers, schools, and districts include culturally responsive teaching practices to bring about equity in access to quality instruction. Effective teachers were observed to have combined their high expectations with teaching strategies that capitalize on the students' *funds of knowledge*, also known as prior knowledge and experiences (Clark et al., 2014; Egan, 2008; Gorski, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 1995a, 1995b; Tate, 1997; Ukpokodu, 2011).

Researchers noted that no one-size-fits-all strategy worked for every student who lived in poverty and attended a Title I school. However, they described general teaching dispositions and instructional practices that led to high student achievement when combined with a culturally relevant approach (Gorski, 2013). These strategies and dispositions included the following: incorporating music and motion into lessons (Bartell et al., 2017; Benford & Smith, 2021; J. Kim & Pulido, 2015; Mark & Id-Deen, 2020); asking higher-order questions and, using student-centered approaches (Benford & Smith, 2021; Xenofontos, 2019); intentionally creating moments that allowed students to learn and use mathematical vocabulary (Egan, 2008; Tate, 1995); establishing a safe classroom environment where participation is non-negotiable (Benford & Smith, 2021; Egan, 2008; Xenofontos, 2019); and encouraging students to demonstrate their understanding in different ways (Bartell et al., 2017; Benford & Smith, 2021).

I also noticed that each of the dispositions and strategies listed above correlated with Hattie's (2012) highly leveraged instructional strategies. Based on personal observations and a review of related literature, I speculated that other effective Title I teachers would use many of the same strategies.

In addition to the instructional techniques, the effective teachers listed in the research were committed to community activism and social justice, and encouraged their students to recognize local injustices and become active in their communities (Bartell et al., 2017; Egan, 2008; Gorski, 2013; Khalifa, 2018; Khalifa et al., 2016; Xenofontos, 2019). Pre-service mathematics teachers in Koestler's (2010) study developed lesson plans that incorporated social justice, included their home life into lessons, and insisted upon mastery of mathematics skills because of the role math plays in social/economic uplift. Other researchers encouraged teachers to engage in critical reflection and use anti-racism stories and discourse standing against injustice (Wiggan & Watson, 2016), and plan extra-curricular activities that position the school and families together against community injustice (Bartell et al., 2017; NCTM, 2014; Xenofontos, 2019).

Within their classrooms, they pulled from the students' funds of knowledge (Bartell et al., 2017; Egan, 2008; Gorski, 2013; Khalifa, 2018; Xenofontos, 2019), validated and acknowledged their cultural identities (NCTM, 2014), and partnered with parents and community members (Gorski, 2013; Khalifa, 2018). In the subsequent paragraphs, I have provided a brief description of each theme so the reader can better understand the culturally responsive methods used within the classrooms.

In research by Khalifa (2018), effective Title I administrators and teachers who embraced a critical pedagogy were aware of the role cultural capital played in education

and developed ways for students to use their funds of knowledge to acquire the academic skills presented. While some researchers used cultural capital and funds of knowledge interchangeably, Cho and Yi (2018) and Oughton (2010) documented distinct differences. Both terms underscored the role of family and culture; however, according to Cho and Yi (2018), cultural capital was a more critical approach that brought attention to society's economic and social repercussions of accepting or rejecting the experiences of particular groups of people. Traditionally, upper-class White individuals profit from the advantage. Conversely, funds of knowledge primarily focused on ways community-based knowledge could be used to recontextualize the curriculum and teacher instructional practices (Cho & Yi, 2018; Khalifa, 2018). According to Khalifa (2018), teachers who intentionally used their students' funds of knowledge developed relationships that allowed them to use everyday experiences to present the content more authentically. They realized the disadvantage their students faced because of society, refused to believe the master narrative, and used the student's own culture and experiences to push them to academic success.

According to Khalifa, Gooden, and Davis (2016) and Mukhopadhyay and Greer (2017), by acknowledging their students' funds of knowledge as real and valuable, effective teachers also validated and acknowledged their students' sense of cultural identity. Cultural identity is defined as an "identification with, or sense of belonging to, a particular group based on various cultural categories, including nationality, ethnicity, race, gender, and religion" (Center for Intercultural Dialogue, 2014). School, in most cases, exists to perpetuate society's values where the overarching goal has been conformance (Xenofontos, 2019). Tyson (2011), in her book *Integration Interrupted:*

Tracking, Black Students, and Acting White after Brown, explained, from a historical perspective, the social and academic practice that led African American students to equate education to Whiteness. She asserted that practices such as tracking and the cultural norms enforced at school after *Brown v. BOE* (1954) affected how some African American students viewed themselves concerning their educational journey. However, effective Title I teachers in Khalifa et al. (2016) and Mukhopadhyay and Greer (2017), helped students validate and maintain their cultural identities while they pushed them towards academic and social success.

Helping students maintain their cultural identities required teachers to partner with parents and community members (Gorski, 2013; Khalifa, 2018). The premise for culturally relevant teaching is a deep understanding and connection to the communities and cultures in which the students exist. In Khalifa (2018), the principal of a local school in Detroit led by example and challenged the teachers to divorce the use of exclusionary practices for cultural infractions.

For example, instead of suspending (in-school suspension or out-of-school suspension) for defiance of authority, teachers were asked to find ways to get the student to use those leadership skills to stand against forms of injustice within their community or school. Teachers also partnered with community members to make the lessons realistic (Gorski, 2013; Khalifa, 2018). A teacher invited a local carpenter who explained his trade and how he used angles when studying angles. The teacher used that authentic experience to allow the students to see successful African Americans and as a foundation for their unit on angles. The result of this bold and different leadership style was evident through scores as well as student and parent reflections.

Conclusion

A review of the literature revealed that wealthy, White men created rules and social norms that benefitted them while marginalizing others throughout American history. These norms, which dictated what was and what was not accepted, are seen in every system of government. In the legislative and judicial systems, rulings such as in *Plessy v. Ferguson* where separate was considered equal and *Jim Crow Laws* of the south set legal precedents that African Americans and other Brown-skinned individuals were somehow “second class” citizens. The systemic racial injustices found in law were also found in discriminatory housing practices after the Civil Rights Act of 1965. Segregation went from being legally enforced to being *de facto* segregation due to the areas where African Americans were allowed to live.

Systemic racism found in legal, political, and housing systems, to name a few, was also evident in the educational system. The literature described schools as an institution designed to perpetuate and reproduce cultural norms rather than being a place that encourages self-awareness and critical thinking. When racial segregation was legal, racism was displayed through unequal teacher salaries and separate, underequipped schools for African Americans. After the ruling of *Brown v. BOE* (1954), African Americans were bussed to White schools to comply with federal mandates of receiving Title I funds, African American teachers were displaced, community schools were closed, and African American students were still treated inequitably. Individuals not conforming to the expected cultural norms were excluded by ridicule, shaming, suspension, and expulsion practices. These practices are disproportionately aimed at African Americans and other marginalized groups. As a result of years of systemic injustices, Title I schools

have become schools that usually serve students, mostly marginalized individuals, who live in poverty. They have also been stigmatized as low-performing academically and having large numbers of inappropriate behaviors.

Having worked in Title I schools for nearly 20 years, I noticed that teachers and students were performing opposite of the stereotypical norm. I decided to conduct this research study to find patterns in what effective math teachers of Title I students were doing in their classrooms to ensure academic and social success. A literature review revealed that successful Title I teachers used culturally responsive teaching strategies founded on critical race theory. Influenced by the critical race theory, they reexamined the norms that the master narrative had set in society, recognized the students' injustices, and constructed lessons and classroom environments rich in their students' cultures. Although I found articles and books that included participants in reading/language arts and math subjects in middle and high school, very few highlighted effective mathematics teachers in elementary grades. Therefore, I believe the results of this study add more information to the literature than currently exists.

This conceptual framework contained my experiential knowledge, subjectivities, the theoretical framework that undergirded this study, and a review of related literature. Of the established theories in academia, critical race theory best explained why effective Title I mathematics teachers typically did not receive the accolades they deserved. The literature revealed that effective Title I teachers in various content areas used culturally relevant teaching styles and engaged in activism against injustice within the school's community. Relatively few studies premiered elementary mathematics teachers;

therefore, this study will enhance the current literature. A description and explanation of each step in my research process are detailed in Chapter 3.

Chapter 3

METHOD

Out of the huts of history's shame I rise

Up from a past that's rooted in pain I rise

(Angelou, 1994, p. 164)

In an effort to remain transparent throughout the research process, this chapter details the step-by-step process in which I engaged while developing the participant and setting criteria, selecting participants, collecting, transcribing, analyzing, and presenting participant data. I also explain how I accounted for issues that posed concerns about the validity of my study.

Maxwell (2013) presented a thorough overview of the processes involved in conducting research in a qualitative study. He balanced explaining the components involved while being careful to leave the researcher's autonomy in decision-making. After completing Maxwell's Chapter 5 reflection exercises and rethinking my (1) research design (2) the type of relationship I would have with the participants (research relationships) (3) the criterion for who would be involved in the study (participant selection) (4) how I would collect the data (data collection) and, (5) how I would decode the data (data analysis), I redesigned my approach to use narrative inquiry (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006; Merriam, 2002; Patton, 2002) with the criterion-referenced site and participant selection (Patton, 2002). In alignment with my approach, I chose to gather data by interviewing (Seidman, 2019), followed Saldaña's (2021) suggestions for

analysis, and employed Seidman's (2019) ideas to construct narrative profiles as counter-stories to the master narrative. Each component of my research methodology is detailed in subsequent sections of this chapter.

Narrative Inquiry

A *narrative* (or story), at its most basic level, is “about life and living” (Green, Camilli, & Elmore, 2006) and usually involves a retelling of events from the first-person perspective that includes a beginning, middle, and end (Merriam, 2002). However, to get a deeper understanding of the processes involved in narrative inquiry, I referred to sections in Green, Camilli, Elmore, and Elmore's (2006), Merriam's (2002), and Patton's (2002) books that described the design and provided examples of its use. Narrative inquiry, according to Connelly and Clandinin (2006), involved either the participants (re)telling their experiences (phenomenology) or the researcher recording notes while living out the experience (ethnography). The more widely used method of obtaining data, also used in this study, was the participants telling their stories. Traditionally, this could be done through a variety of formats, including, among others, interviews, art, graffiti, notes, and printed text (Butina, 2015; Merriam, 2002; Patton, 2002). In my work, I used interviews as my primary data gathering technique.

Narrative inquiry, to be effective, must include a joint investigation of three standard features Connelly and Clandinin (2006) labeled as “temporality, sociality, and place” (p. 479). The authors referred to temporality as describing the event or participant in the past, present, and future context. In this study, it was essential to provide perspective and background to the teachers' experiences and, for clarity's sake, to frame it corresponding to their past, present, and future. Connelly and Clandinin (2006) then

described sociality as the researcher's attention to the participant's attitudes, beliefs, and social conditions in which the participant(s) is(were) situated. The sociality feature related to research questions that focused on the participants' perceptions of teaching in Title I schools, their beliefs about the differential achievement outcomes between African Americans and Whites, and their values or attitudes statements made during the interviews. In addition to temporality and sociality, Connelly and Clandinin (2006) described the term place as "the specific concrete, physical, and topological boundaries of [the] place where the inquiry and events [took] place" (p. 481). A description of the place was also critical to the research study because of the focus on teachers in Title I schools.

To gather the data, I used the three-phase interview approach suggested by Seidman (2019) to create and ask structured and open-ended questions and journaled reflections of the interview immediately afterward as well as during transcription. After interviewing the five participants, I continued analyzing the data using narrative analysis because of its intended effect of causing the reader to transcend the content of the interview and become compelled to be a change agent in issues related to the phenomenon presented (Riessman, 2008).

Research Design

I began my journey into this qualitative research design long before my doctoral program at Valdosta State University. It originated with me noticing that Title I schools, such as the one in which I taught, rarely received recognition for the hard work of teachers and students that I observed occurring daily. Initially, I intended to continue a variation of a quantitative action research project I had completed while earning my master's degree. The previous research studied whether direct instruction or cooperative

learning methods significantly affected student achievement in Title I schools. However, while learning about qualitative research designs, I realized that I had a greater desire to magnify the voices of those who were being silenced. I decided that I would achieve that mission by conducting a qualitative study detailing the lived experiences of effective Title I teachers and what they perceived to be the influencing factors of their continued success.

In defining lived experience, Given (2008, p. 489) described it as the participant's, "experiences, choices, and options and how those factors influence one's perception of knowledge." She also emphasized how lived experiences, "are shaped by subjective factors of their identity including race, class, gender, sexuality, [and] religion . . ." Patton (2002), however, defined lived experiences as "some phenomenon" that someone has "directly experienced" (p. 104). Based on Given's (2008) and Patton's (2002) explanations, I knew that those directly working with the students would be the only ones who could give the rich details needed to highlight and provide insight into the daily experiences. I just needed a systematic way to gather their stories and learn about their perceptions.

Reading Maxwell's (2013) book gave me insight into how I would begin my research process. Having resolved CRT as my theoretical framework, I knew that I needed to commit to a research design that best correlated with my project and informed the methodology I employed. During the Advanced Qualitative Research Methods class at Valdosta State University, I learned about portraiture design as explained in Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot and Jessica Hoffman Davis' (1997) book *The Art and Science of Portraiture*. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis's method centered on searching for "what is

good” (p. 9) within any situation despite how bad it may appear. Portraiture seemed to be the perfect fit, and at that point, I decided to use portraiture with its rich descriptive data collection and analysis techniques to guide the research methodology. However, due to COVID pandemic restrictions, I could not do in-person interviews or conduct the field observations vital to obtaining the rich, thick data used to create individual portraits of the participants.

Given the confines brought about by the COVID pandemic, I chose an alternate design and reimagined my study. I reviewed Patton’s (2002) and Merriam’s (2002) books on qualitative research methods to better understand the other potential design methods. I then narrowed my options to a primary *interpretive qualitative study* (Merriam, 2002), a *case study*, and *narrative inquiry* (Merriam, 2002; Patton, 2002). After oscillating among the three designs, I ultimately decided against the basic design because its primary purpose was to determine how the participant(s) view their world and the meaning they ascribe to it (Merriam, 2002). I decided against a case study for similar reasons. Although the event or phenomenon was limited to a particular subset of teachers, I could not spend the time gathering needed information from the classrooms. My research aimed to impact change; therefore, I chose to use the narrative inquiry design.

Research question evolution. My research questions (RQ) became more evident as I engaged in the research process. I began with only two RQs about effective Title I teachers’ experiences, perceptions, practices, and classroom climate. Later, based on what I found in the literature review, I added three other questions that specifically focused on the effects of culturally relevant teaching on their classroom environment and their ideas on teaching mathematics more effectively to students of color. However, as I

developed the related interview questions, began engaging in the interviews, and revisited Maxwell's (2013) thought exercise: 4.1, I finally determined the research questions I actually answered.

The culmination of a widened perspective based on the literature review, interview results, and Maxwell's (2013) thought exercises caused me to realize that one of my RQs was too leading and could be answered by the first two questions. Rather than directly asking how the teacher's experiences related to culturally relevant teaching, I decided to delete that question and tweak my first to include the perceptions, experiences, and practices of effective Title I teachers. I believed that if I included that direct question as one of my core RQs, I would decrease research bias and be more open to seeing factors from the teacher's perspective. After tweaking the questions to reflect this change, I arrived at my final RQs. The remaining sections of this chapter present the final version of the RQs answered in this study, describes the methods used, and addresses validity issues.

Research questions. To address the gaps in the current literature surrounding the experiences of effective Title I teachers of mathematics in elementary grade levels and to add to the already existing research about effective teachers in Title I schools, I used the following questions to guide my work

1. What are the perceptions, experiences, and practices of successful teachers who work with African American children in underperforming Elementary School Mathematics teachers of African American students in Sunnydale County's Title I Elementary schools? This question allowed the reader and me to experience each

participant's unique voice as they shared their insights into their successful classrooms.

2. How do these successful elementary teachers develop classroom climates where students consistently make significant gains mathematically and socially?
3. What are teachers' ideas on effectively teaching mathematics to students of color in elementary school?

As Patton (2002) suggested, I intentionally chose a small population of five teachers to conduct in-depth interviews and manage transcription, coding, and analysis of the resulting voluminous data they generated. However, before I collected, analyzed, or presented the data, I developed a criterion set, initiated a research relationship with individuals directly impacted by the study, selected the participants, and, as referenced by Maxwell (2013, p. 90), further “negotiate[d]” the research relationship with each participant.

Setting selection process. Before contacting and initiating a research relationship with participants and those who would direct me to them, I developed a set of criteria based on my research questions and goals. A careful review of Patton's (2002) and Tashakkori and Teddlie's (2010) works revealed that purposeful sampling was needed to select the best teachers who would provide the most authentic experience. Therefore, I compiled a list of criteria that specified qualities present in the model district, school, teacher, and class from which I chose participants. The criteria and rationale follow:

District and school criteria. Rather than identifying Title I schools the Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE) recognized for their achievements; I intended to search for the counter-examples in schools negatively labeled due to their standardized

test scores. Under the recently implemented College and Career Ready Performance Index (CCRPI) guidelines that replaced No Child Left Behind's (NCLB) Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) measurement of school success, schools not showing adequate growth (as evident on the end-of-year standardized test) were labeled as either *Comprehensive Support and Improvement (CIS)*, *Targeted Support and Improvement (TSI)*, *Promise School*, or *Turnaround School* status (GaDOE, 2018c). I targeted urban districts with at least five schools that fell into one of these four categories. By studying these schools, I believed I could compose powerful profiles that countered the negative stigma associated with the labels.

All the schools targeted needed to have students of color as the majority and be a Title I school identified as having a *CSI*, *TSI*, *Promise*, or *Turnaround School* status. I chose these criteria because the literature suggested that one of the characteristics of struggling urban, Title I schools was that they typically served a large population of students of color (Cholewa, Amatea, West-Olatunji, & Wright, 2012). Consequently, I included a large percentage of students of color to ensure that the school matched the desired demographics.

Another characteristic was that low socioeconomic status (SES) plagued struggling schools serving high populations of students of color (Kena et al., 2014). According to the Department of Health and Human Services (2021), eligibility for receiving free and reduced directly correlates with poverty; and the U.S. Department of Education (2014) mandated that 40% of the student population must be eligible for free and reduced lunch to be classified as a Title I school. The upward mobility of people of color has increased the chance that some schools may have a large percentage of students

of color but not suffer from being *economically disadvantaged*. Therefore, in addition to the previously listed criteria, the schools needed a population of at least 80% of the students eligible to receive free or reduced lunch. Doubling the percentage required by the GaDOE ensured that only schools with the most concentrated populations of economically disadvantaged students of color were represented. After developing the criteria for the local school, I turned my attention to the characteristics of the classroom teacher.

The first criterion teachers needed to possess was being a teacher with at least 3 years of experience. In his article addressing issues concerning the lack of effective teachers in urban classrooms, Jacob (2007) indicated that years of experience played less of an essential role in predicting student success after the third year of teaching. Although the National Center for Analysis of Longitudinal Data in Education Research (CALDER, 2010) cited exceptions where first-year teacher productivity gains were more significant than experienced teachers, the author did confirm that, on average, teachers with three or more years of experience tended to have better results than teachers with fewer years of experience. I initially searched for teachers with at least 3 years of experience within the same Title I school. However, after talking with my dissertation chair, I expanded my search to include those with 3 years of experience but may or may not have spent time in the same Title I school.

In addition to having at least 3 years of experience, the teachers also needed to be recommended by a building administrator, designee, or another teacher as producing academically and socially successful students. Although some information can be accessed through the state's public test accountability platform, the teacher's code of

ethics and other privacy laws prohibited me from accessing teacher ratings or individual student academic or behavior data. Therefore, I needed to rely on recommendations from building-level individuals who had the most interactions with the teachers.

Knowing for what I was looking and after gaining IRB approval (See appendix A for the letter), I identified school districts and schools meeting my criteria. Then, I initiated my research relationships by contacting the district and school-level personnel responsible for granting access to their people so I could begin recruiting.

Setting. I browsed through the state accountability records to find school districts that met my criteria and found seven school districts I could contact. At the onset of this study, I envisioned meeting face-to-face with the participants to conduct the interviews. The distances between my home and the school districts ranged between 19 and 162 miles. I immediately began to think of the time involved in travel and interviewing the participants and decided to contact representatives in Sunnydale County (pseudonym), the district closest to me.

The Sunnydale School District is in a city located in Georgia. Although the U.S. Census Bureau (2021a) reported that approximately 60% of Georgia's population were White and about 33% were African American, in the Sunnydale School district, over 50% of the students were African American, and about 40% were White (Education demographic and geographic estimates, 2019). The remaining students were classified as two or more races, Asian, Hispanic, and Native American. Sunnydale Elementary's (pseudonym) demographics were completely different than the states. Additionally, the school district contained 22 elementary schools, all of which receive Title I funds (GaDOE, 2019a)

Ultimately, all five teacher participants were employed in the Sunnydale School District. The year prior to beginning the data gathering phase of my study, three of the participants taught at Creekside Elementary (pseudonym) while the other two were employed at Greenview Elementary (pseudonym) a little less than 2 miles away. Due to their close geographical proximity, both schools educated comparable student demographics of 100% free and reduced lunch (GaDOE, 2019a) and over 99% African American students (GaDOE, 2021). Sunnydale School District cited overspending per pupil at Creekside as a reason to merge the two schools and rename it Sunnydale Elementary School. By the time of the interviews, all five participants had taught at Sunnydale Elementary.

The combined student population of Sunnydale, a pre-kindergarten through fifth grade school, was approximately 700 students. Unlike the 2017 national statistics that indicated about 77% of teachers were women, and of that percentage, 79% were White, and 7% were African American (National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 1987-2018), approximately 86% of the teachers at Sunnydale were African American women. A more detailed account of the school and community setting is detailed in Chapter 4; however, in the next section, I detail the process of how I selected the participants.

Participant Selection Process. Once I selected the school district, I had to develop some type of what Maxwell (2013) called a *research relationship*. According to Maxwell (2013), a research relationship is based on mutual respect between all parties involved. The relationships in research like mine are pivotal to success and requires a give-and-take process where the researcher and participant become co-constructors of knowledge (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). Aware of the importance of good first

impressions and knowing research relationships with the participants were critical, I first created research relationships with the gatekeepers, consisting of supervisory individuals, such as principals, instructional coaches, and district personnel.

The Gatekeepers. Both Seidman (2019) and Marshall and Rossman (2016) used the term gatekeeper to refer to the one who has the power to grant access to the participants. The gatekeepers' ability to decide whether to allow access necessitates the development of a healthy relationship between the gatekeepers and myself. In this study, the district's IRB committee members and the school principal were considered gatekeepers. These key people could approve or stop the research in the school or district.

Sunnydale school district had an Institutional Review Board IRB (See Appendix B for approval letter) similar to Valdosta State University (VSU). My previous research projects did not need approval because they were action research studies implemented in my classroom and designed for my personal growth as a teacher. However, because this project included interviews, teacher observations, and published work to disseminate what I learned, I obtained approval from the system IRB before contacting prospective participants.

Contacting school district representatives. In my 19 years as an employee, I witnessed much negative publicity aimed at district leadership, teaching and learning practices, and test scores. Within the past few years, there was a resurgence of negative reviews plaguing the district. In efforts to protect the rights of the district employees and students and the district's image, the school board enforces a strict procedure used to

determine whether individuals are allowed to observe or conduct research in schools under their jurisdiction.

I contacted the board representative and scheduled a time to meet with this information in mind. I remember the day as if it were yesterday. I anxiously yet confidently approached the wooden door at the Board Office. I knocked on the door with my speech in mind and my VSU IRB approval documentation. I had been by this door several times while attending meetings but had never had a reason to stop.

As I pushed the door open and entered the relatively small reception area, I noticed the familiar name of the man sitting at the desk. I immediately recognized that he was the Senior Analyst in the district. Although we had not personally met, I had been in a few district workshops where he presented data concerning student achievement. His brother and I were part of the same organization in college as it would happen. He informed me that I would be meeting with him since the IRB chair was ill.

Somehow, this calmed my raging nerves. I rattled off the speech I had committed to memory. I explained that I was a graduate student at VSU seeking to conduct research in the county. My research would be in Title I schools and emphasized that I wanted to bring a positive light to the district. I indicated that my goal was to gain information to help other elementary teachers employed in Title I schools in high-poverty areas, highlight the exceptional teachers found within our district, and uphold ethical procedures. Then I showed him documents certifying VSU's IRB approval, tentative interview questions, informed consent letters, and letters to principals and identified teachers.

Although neither the district's name nor the teachers' names would be shared, I could tell by the look on his face that he was relieved that I geared my research toward shedding a positive light on the district. He asked me a few questions about selecting the participants since the district's IRB members would not be able to share information about the teacher or student's scores. I assured him that it would be based on colleagues' observations and, most of all, the teachers themselves would volunteer to participate. Seemingly pleased with the answers, he assured me he would pass the information on to the IRB committee and wished me luck.

The IRB committee meeting was held only a few weeks after submitting my request. To my delight, my request to begin research was approved. After obtaining approval, I immediately contacted the principals of schools matching the criteria detailed in the site and participant selection portion of this proposal. As a site-based elementary school instructional coach in the district, my position allowed me greater access to the principals, district intervention coaches, and other school-based instructional coaches. Each of these gatekeepers held a key that could access potential participants.

Contacting principals and intervention coaches. The principals have a direct role in allowing me to conduct research at their school. From my readings, I knew I would need the building principal's insider perception of the school climate because, in theory, she or he should have a finger on the school's pulse. Although the principals did not provide teachers' names, they did know if they had teachers in their building who demonstrated these characteristics and could allow me to contact the staff via email, post letters, or speak during a faculty meeting. I began with Maxwell's (2013) thought exercise on developing research relationships to structure my relationship with the

building gatekeepers. The following excerpt from my reflective memo provides details of some of my earlier musings.

Reflective memo for Maxwell's (2013) exercise 5.1

In the words of an adage, "you do not get but one first impression."

Therefore, beginning with the initial contact with the building principals, I will seek to foster healthy, reciprocal relationships by respecting their position, time, and guidelines for conducting research at their school. I know that as a district, we have a tight schedule with testing. From my position on the leadership team at my local school, I also realize that many principals have a hectic schedule and a list of demands such as board initiatives, teacher evaluations, walk-throughs, discipline issues, and even staffing concerns.

What can I do or say that would cause the principal to want to open the school up to another set of eyes? How would I like someone to approach me if I were in her or his position? What I say and do in an initial contact is crucial because I do not want to be an imposition or perceived as a threat or an outsider there to evaluate their leadership ability or staff's effectiveness. (Reflective memo, January 9, 2018)

After further thought and reflection on my research topic, question, and design, I decided to use a similar speech to the one I used in my meeting with the district representative when meeting with the principal. I highlighted myself as a passionate college student and local teacher whose aim was to shed a positive light on their elementary schools and our school district.

I began emailing building principals of schools who met the research criteria with a great sense of optimism. I thanked them for their efforts as educational leaders and empathized with their struggles in the email. I also gave an overview of the research topic and emphasized that the study's design shed light on the successes within his/her school and district. I was sure that the reader would be happy to respond and begin searching for research participants within their school.

Much to my dismay, I did not receive any replies. I then reached out to the second set of gatekeepers. I asked the district interventionists who oversaw those schools and a few school-based coaches I knew who worked in schools of interest. Each of them seemed eager to assist. However, months went by without a new lead or reply from a principal. While waiting for a reply, I spoke with Dr. Schmertzing about the lack of response. In our conversation, he asked me about my selection criteria. I explained that one of my criteria was that the teacher had 3 or more years in the same Title I school. I based my thoughts on information I read that stated the teacher's impact could not truly be measured until the third year of teaching (Jacob, 2007). His comments would change the trajectory of my research. The following excerpt from my reflective memo of the conversation provides details of some of my thoughts.

Reflective memo for a conversation with Dr. Schmertzing about participant selection:

I am glad Dr. Schmertzing was in town long enough to meet with me on a Saturday after his class. After thinking about our conversation, I realized how narrow my focus had been. I had narrowed my scope of participants down to the point where it was improbable that I would get any participants.

When I read Jones, 2007, I misconstrued the article to advise that the 3 years of teaching had to be at the same school. This one criteria point had disqualified teachers who could have potentially contributed to the research project. Having talked with Dr. Schmertzing, I now know how unrealistic this would be today, especially in underperforming Title I schools.

I am intimately acquainted with the struggle inner-city schools face to get and keep effective teachers. Teacher turnover is typically higher in inner-city schools. In my experience, more times than not, the selected teachers are either just coming out of school or displaced, provisional teachers. After being hired, there is no guarantee that they will stay past a year or even make it to the end of the year.

I would not say it to Dr. Schmertzing, but I could not help but think of a conversation with a fellow coach and a district interventionist. Each person mentioned a few people they believed would be a good fit, but they were either new to the school or had not worked there for 3 years. Just to think, I turned them down because of this.

He also unearthed a second misconception in selecting participants for qualitative research. I have been so used to quantitative research methods that I did not realize I had superimposed the idea behind random sampling onto qualitative research. I was overlooking teachers in my building, whom I had personal knowledge of their effectiveness. I did not think I was supposed to use them because they were too convenient. Somehow, I thought this would cast doubt on my selection of research participants.

I have gained so much of an understanding in this short time. I now understand that if the teacher has at least three years of service in a Title I school setting, they may participate in the research project. It only makes sense that if they have spent 3 or more years in a Title I school, they have had a chance to prove their effectiveness and sharpen their craft as a teacher. I also am clear that geographic location does not serve as a factor in participant selection. Teachers within my school can participate. If only I could go back in time.

(Reflective memo, November 30, 2018)

Armed with this new understanding, I began my second round of reaching out to gatekeepers and teachers as participants. After another year of no response, I finally decided to start with a person I already knew - my newly appointed principal. I was not sure of her leadership style or whether she would be willing to allow me to conduct research during this transitional year. Despite my uncertainty, I made an appointment to meet with her.

As I walked into the office, I could not help but think of my previous principal and how certain I would have been of the outcome if I had asked her these same questions. I greeted her with a smile and customary salutation. She seemed to have a welcoming demeanor, so I continued with my script.

I informed her that I was in the final stages of my doctoral program at VSU and needed her permission to conduct research at the school. I explained the purpose of the study, selection criteria, RQs, and how it was an opportunity for teachers in her building to impact positively other teachers' experiences by participating. When I finished my script, I waited for her answer. She began by congratulating me and sharing her

dissertation project when she received her doctorate. She offered to provide support, which helped solidify our working relationship between her, as the gatekeeper, and myself.

Selecting participants. True to CRT's theoretical lens, one of the primary goals of this research study was to spotlight classroom teachers whose students excelled academically and socially in schools that the majoritarian story portrays as deficient. Therefore, to gain such insight, I chose to use purposeful sampling based on the criteria I developed (Patton, 2002; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010). Once I had the building administrator's approval; was more aware of my thoughts, beliefs, and biases; and had a finalized list of criteria, I set out a second time to solicit participants. I started by asking teachers within my own building that I knew encapsulated the criteria. It was sort of a perfect storm. District officials merged two schools who typically rated as underperforming into one school. The merger gave me personal access to teachers I had been trying to reach out to through other gatekeepers.

My new role as an Early Intervention Program (EIP) teacher within the school allowed me to travel throughout the building working with children in almost every grade level. This flexibility allowed me to see teachers in action and get an idea of which teachers who were new to the building I considered to be solid teachers. After a few months, I felt that I had made enough observations to ask teachers to participate in my research.

In total, seven teachers in the building plus two more who had transferred to another school stood out as excellent math teachers. I emailed the teachers who transferred and personally spoke with the teachers within my building. As I interacted

with the teachers, either personally or via email, I tried to monitor my subjectivities and biases when they came into play.

Of all three subjectivities that I am aware, the one that I constantly had to monitor was the Alone, but not Alone subjective I. Spending time alone since childhood conditioned me to be comfortable being by myself; the thought of reaching out to participants and conducting one-on-one interviews with people I did not know as well as others took me out of my comfort zone. I found myself constantly encouraging myself that the teachers did want to participate and share their stories, despite the years of dead ends. The conversation I had with Dr. R. Schmertzling was also helpful for me in putting the task into perspective. I would often think about that conversation while communicating with teachers.

When I spoke with each teacher, I began by introducing the key goals of my study. I tried to emphasize their selection based on what I and others perceived to be consistent, effective teaching strategies, which resulted in their student's academic and social achievement in the face of obstacles. I had years' worth of informal observations for some teachers to support my statements. For others, I could deduce from just a few months of observations that their students showed large academic and social gains.

I assured each participant that her identity would be confidential unless she explicitly gave permission and expressed a desire to have her name published. I also expressed my intent to *do no harm* as I was a fellow teacher in the same setting. My interest as a researcher and African American male educator was to shed a positive light on the positive practices found in the district and within our school.

Since this was a new and different year combining two schools, I believed the time factor involved in a research project would be of great concern. I made sure that I addressed this issue by pledging that the time factor would be minimal on their part. Should they agree, we would conduct three 60 to 90-minute interviews spaced out and centered around their schedules. I would also schedule two times to sit and observe a lesson in progress. There would be no extra preparation time needed.

Additionally, given that teachers typically enter the profession with a desire to “make a difference,” as Dr. L. Schmertzing (personal communication, November 30, 2018) reminded me, I concluded my request by appealing to the participant’s inner desire to support other teachers and students in similar situations. I did this by informing them that although their names would not be shared, their experiences and the things they did with their students could inspire other teachers in similar settings. Participating in this project would help them potentially inspire countless students and teachers who may read the final product.

Of the nine teachers contacted, five teachers agreed to participate. Each of the participants seemed happy to contribute and share their experiences. Having worked with Ms. Ramonda, Ms. Dedicated, and Ms. Keisha in various roles over 3-10 years and observing their dedication and results, I decided to ask them first. When asked to participate, Ms. Dedicated remarked, “I was wondering why you had not already asked me.” She was one of the teachers that I would have asked from the onset yet had not because of the misconception I had regarding participants. I felt rather sheepish explaining why I had discussed the project with her but not asked about her participation until then.

After speaking with the first three participants, I followed up on a recommendation and asked Ms. Shavon to participate. The snowball sampling design (Naderifar, Goli, & Ghaljaie, 2017; Patton, 2002), where a participant refers to another participant by word of mouth, ultimately resulted in my fifth participant. Ms. Shavon recommended Ms. Jasmine, who also was a teacher at Sunnydale.

The participants were all females who ranged from 7 to 18 years of teaching in Title I schools. I have provided the characteristics of the five participants in Table 1. One of the most remarkable findings was that all five participants had dedicated their teaching careers to educating students in Title I schools.

All of the selected participants taught mathematics. The teachers' grade levels ranged from second through fifth grade. Ms. Jasmine, a second-grade teacher, taught all subjects; however, we focused on math achievement and instruction during the interviews.

Table 1

Characteristics of Teacher Participants

Participant	Years Teaching	Number of Schools	Years in Title I Schools
Ms. Dedicated	13	3	13
Ms. Jasmine	13	4	13
Ms. Keisha	7	1	7
Ms. Shavon	18	4	18
Ms. Ramonda	12	3	12

Note: Adapted from “A Narrative of African American Males Taught Mostly by White, Female Educators” by J. L. Conner p. 59. Copyright 2021.

Research Relationships. During the interview, I continued building research relationships with each participant. We could not meet face-to-face because of the COVID pandemic; however, I continued to monitor my actions as we conversed through

texts and via the Zoom tool for video conferencing. One tool I used to self-monitor was reflecting on questions posed. Maxwell (2013); Patton (2002); and Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014) all encouraged this type of reflection. Questions such as, What kinds of relationships have you established? How do you plan to develop and negotiate them? How will you be seen by the people you interact with . . . ? How can this be influenced by status and power differences? and What explicit agreements do you plan to negotiate . . . ? all helped frame my thoughts as I continued negotiating the relationships with the participants. The following excerpt from my reflective memo from Maxwell's Exercise 5.1 provides an example of my thought process on co-piloting relationships.

Before becoming an elementary school mathematics instructional coach and later becoming an EIP teacher, I began my career in education right out of college as a fourth grade teacher who taught all core subjects. I can vividly remember the struggles I faced and the triumphs during that year as I sought to integrate my experiences as a student and the theoretical knowledge gained through my teacher preparation program with the practical experience of teaching 29 fourth graders with varying personalities and academic accomplishments. I remember the joy of teaching, especially when I saw the "light come on" and the horrors of staying current with the required paperwork.

As an EIP teacher who does not have a homeroom, I have worked with and had direct interaction with four of the participants for at least 2 years. During that time, I believe we have established a good working relationship. I call it a working relationship because our conversations are mainly about students, lesson plans, and other school-related activities. Although some

participants had friendships beyond the workplace, I did not have that type of relationship with any of the participants. I think that it can help both facilitate and impede the study. It can facilitate by maintaining a level of professionalism during the interviews that will help keep the interviews from becoming more conversation than interviews. However, it also can impede the study because of the lack of prior extended one-on-one conversations causing the interviews can become impersonal, awkward, and full of unintended silence.

How will I ensure a balance of professionalism and personality in the interviews with participants of the opposite sex? I want to ensure the participant is comfortable and at ease sharing their experiences, even while using Zoom. I will most likely need to develop some type of agreement that will add a layer of comfortability to the participant, such as negotiating the use of the video option, the time frame of the interview, and access to interview questions before the interview. (Reflective memo, January 15, 2021)

The preceding memo allowed me to think more deeply about my relationship with each participant and better attend to or anticipate their needs. Although I would be asking questions, in the forefront of my mind, I was assessing the level of anxiety and nervousness both internally and externally. If I believed the level was too high, I would make a statement or comment to spark a laugh and lighten the conversation. I also attempted to balance the awkwardness of allowing wait time by inserting filler words such as “uh hum,” “Oh,” “I see,” and asking probing questions like “how did that make you feel” or “can you elaborate.”

The exercise also reminded me of how vital the participants' needs and desires were in the research process. I tried never to lose sight of the participants' investment throughout my correspondence with each. As contributors to the dissertation, the participants were as dedicated to seeing it through as I was. Their investment could be seen when participants passed me in the hallway and asked how the dissertation was going, when was the following interview, or just to tell me that they had thought of something else to share since our last meeting. On one occasion, Ms. Keisha expressed that she had already decided to participate before I finished explaining. She indicated that spotlighting schools like ours resonated with her, and she was willing to spend as much time as needed to share her experiences.

I also did practical things to help navigate and foster the research relationship between the participant and myself. Among other things, I was certain to call or text well in advance of the meetings to confirm our sessions and remained cognizant of the time spent during the interview. I wanted to respect their time and the responsibilities they had away from school. I also reflected on Seidman's (2019) warning to avoid turning the interview into a therapeutic session. I did this by limiting my interjections into the interview and tried not to reinforce the participant's responses.

I continued referencing Maxwell's (2013) Exercise 5.1 and negotiating relationships with the participants throughout the interview process. Thankfully, all participants remained willing to complete all three interviews. Five participants worked well for a participant count as it was sufficient to get an idea of the types of interactions within the setting yet not overwhelm me with the amount of transcription, coding, and analysis required for each participant.

The study's setting and participant selection section detailed the process I used to select the participants. It began with how I developed criteria that mirrored the RQs and goals and how I used them to identify school districts and schools to target. It continued by explaining how the five teachers were selected from a local school district matching the criteria and concluded with a discussion of how the participants and I maintained a research relationship. Once the participants were selected and the relationship established, the data collection process began. The subsequent sections detail the interview, transcription, and analysis process.

Data Collection. Once the participants had been selected, the next phase was to collect the data. Although the type of data and methods of data collection in qualitative research is different than in quantitative studies, the information collected still has to be gathered systematically and believably. According to Maxwell (2013) and Patton (2002), one way to ensure the data is sound and provides a deep understanding of the phenomenon being studied is to collect information using multiple ways. A few of the most common data collection methods are observations, interviews, research memos/journaling, and mixed methods, which collect and analyze quantitative and qualitative data (Maxwell, 2013; Patton, 2002). Since my goal was to learn from the participant's perspective what makes an effective Title I math teacher in elementary, I primarily used interviews, research memos, and, due to COVID-19 restrictions, my interactions with the participants as observatory data. The combination of these two data collection methods helped me to get a deeper understanding of the relationship among the participant's experiences, their teaching style, and students' success.

A change of plans. Ideally, I would have also conducted classroom observations to provide another layer of rich data that could be analyzed; however, just as I was scheduling interviews and observations, the county transitioned to virtual learning for all students. This transition was due to the spread of COVID-19, a pandemic that no one expected and for which I certainly had not planned. The virtual model adopted by the county required teachers to post instructional videos and assign classwork on Canvas, a virtual learning management system. The teachers allocated a block of time where students could meet with them; however, many students in high poverty areas lacked consistent Internet service. As a result, the district did not require the students to log in during the class meeting. Students could log in at any time during the school week to view instruction and complete assignments.

Virtual school meant no face-to-face interviews or classroom observations. I wondered if this would affect my participants' desire to follow through with the project. I called the participants and suggested we omit the classroom observations but continue with the interviews by conducting all interviews via Zoom, a tool for video conferencing. If the participant agreed, the Zoom tool allowed me to see the facial expressions as they shared their experiences. It also provided greater convenience for the participants and allowed me to create visual and audio recordings of the meeting to review for transcription. All five participants agreed to these terms; however, only two teachers felt comfortable being videoed. The other participants left their cameras off. By the end of Summer 2020, I had conducted all the interviews.

Interviews. I began the interview process by contacting each participant to set up dates and times (See Table 2 for when and how long each interview lasted). During the

follow-up to the initial contact, I also reviewed a general overview of the research project and expressed the need for consent. During the first interview, I read the consent letter and received consent. I then emailed a copy of the consent form so they could have it to read.

Table 2

Participant Interview Schedule

Participant	Interview 1		Interview 2		Interview 3	
	Date	Duration	Date	Duration	Date	Duration
Ms. Shavon	2/12/20	40	2/9/20	60	2/26/20	55
Ms. Keisha	3/3/20	64	3/11/20	62	3/17/20	52
Ms. Dedicated	3/25/20	55	4/1/20	90	4/8/20	75
Ms. Ramonda	4/16/20	45	4/22/20	50	4/28/20	45
Ms. Jasmine	5/6/20	50	5/14/20	65	5/20/20	50

Note. Time duration is shown in minutes.

Once we agreed upon the date and time, I emailed an invitation to the Zoom video conferencing tool with a secure code. The secure direct link was an extra safeguard to the sessions. As the meeting organizer, I also ensured that no one entered except the participant. In total, the 15 interviews ranged from 45 to 83 minutes. I used the Zoom tool to record the audio from meetings and video interactions of those who agreed to use the video feature. Recording the meetings allowed me to listen and focus more attentively and quickly ask follow-up questions because I knew it was recording. The meetings' length varied depending on the participant's schedule for the day or if technical issues occurred.

According to Connelly and Clandinin (2006), narrative inquiry must incorporate the aspect of time, experience, and place. They further asserted that those three nuances were fundamental to narrative inquiry. Therefore, I needed to use a data gathering

method to amass a sizeable amount of data for each dimension. Seidman's (2019) three-phased 90-minute interview process perfectly aligned. Throughout each phase of the interview, I gained information that contextualized each participant's practices in terms of their past, present, and desired future experiences. The first two interviews centered mainly on their past and present experiences, while the final interview focused on their future and connected/clarified connections from the previous interviews.

In concurrence with Seidman's (2019) format, the first interview focused on the participant's background experiences. I asked semi-structured, open-ended questions designed to help me understand how the participants' past experiences influenced their teaching style and decision to teach in an urban setting. These and other questions centered on understanding the participant's life experiences in relation to the research study (see Appendix C). For example, asking Ms. Ramonda to recall an average day in her house growing up revealed that her desire to establish order and regiment in her classroom stemmed from her mother's organizational skills and her feeling more productive in structured environments. Although I asked the question to give the reader context to the participant's life outside the classroom, the ensuing conversation was very informative.

The second focused on recreating present experiences related to the topic. I focused on facilitating the participant in recounting instances or stories centered on her current classroom environment to help others understand the classroom dynamics. To do this, I posed questions about her experiences during a typical school day or math lesson from beginning to end, the development of lessons, experiences with the students, and

other inquiries designed to unearth the teacher's pedagogy and rationale (see Appendix C).

A few key questions I posed that yielded valuable data across all participants were, "What practices have you implemented to ensure your students experience success?" "What are some things you have done to get and keep students engaged in learning?" and, "What are essential elements that make a class go smoothly?" Although some participants gave similar answers, they had unique methods to achieve their goals. For example, a common answer to keeping their classrooms going smoothly included building relationships with students; however, each teacher had a different way that she related to the students. I discuss this further in Chapters 4 and 5.

During the final interview, I focused on reflecting and connecting meaning to shared experiences (Seidman, 2019). I asked questions that would connect the pieces from the experiences shared throughout the two previous interviews. I posed open-ended questions centered on how the participant believed past experiences relate to her current teaching style and student achievement (both academically and socially). I also asked questions regarding advice and speculations about the future (see Appendix C). Questions that required a deeper reflection on events and motives resulted in increased wait times between responses and my follow-up questions. Although silence was uncomfortable, the added wait time allowed the participant more time to explain. In many instances, it resulted in a new layer of understanding or reexamination of events pushed back into the subconscious memory. One of such examples was in an interview with Ms. Dedicated. In the first interview, I asked her if she recalled an instance where she was affected by racial aggressions or microaggressions as a child. Her response indicated that she could not

recall it affecting her as a child. Later, during the third interview, after asking a connecting question, she said that she had been thinking about the question I asked and remembered and reconstructed a time that race affected her during her schooling. Our interaction during the final interview added credence to Seidman's assertions about the importance of respecting the three-phase interview process.

I wanted to use the participant's voice to highlight the fact that despite the negative perception of Title I schools, there are teachers who are making substantial gains each year. One way to capture that was the narrative inquiry model. This model provided structure for a well-rounded view of not only the "what" aspect of teacher's practice, but the "how" and "why" of their work. Seidman's approach was crucial in gaining access to that rich data, which allowed the development of participants' voices essential in profiles (Zhu & Peng, 2020) that I used as CRT counter-narratives (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Taylor et al., 2016). His interview protocol let me structure my questions in a way that methodically captured the participant's inner voice and the surrounding contextual information. I relied on previous observations and interactions to gain further insight into the participant's world.

Observations. To better understand a phenomenon, the researcher typically enters the environment and observes as an insider involved in the daily activity or as an outsider who remains somewhat distant (Patton, 2002). Unable to visit the classroom, I had to rely solely on the participant's stories and observations from video recordings of the interviews and my classroom observations leading up to the research project.

I could see clues from the facial expressions of those who agreed to the video feature. I could tell if the participant seemed nervous, happy, sad, or distracted by other

things and know to alter the conversation accordingly. I could also see if the two participants who used their cameras made gestures while talking. Additionally, I realized that I would need visual cues during the coding phase of data analysis. For example, during one interview, Ms. Dedicated spoke about her “why” behind teaching. In the conversation, she mentioned that teaching was “a calling” and “God had led her” into the field of education. While she referenced being led, she glanced up towards the room’s ceiling. I made a mental note during the interview and wrote a memo afterward to solidify the moment.

For teachers who did not use the video feature, I had to rely on their voice inflections and my observations from previous years. All five participants ended up at the school where I taught, which gave me an advantage I would not have had interviewing someone in a different county or school. As the participants spoke of their classroom procedures, I remembered certain instances that supported their stories. For instance, during the second interview, Ms. Keisha explained how she allowed her students to choose when they were ready to retake tests when they believed they had enough sessions with her and understood the skill. I remembered an occasion when I worked with Ms. Keisha to create the assessment to which she was referring. After the interview, I wrote a reflective memo about the instance and verbally confirmed that my previous observation matched what she recalled. In short, the process of reflecting and writing memos on previous observations and then cross-checking with the participant augured well for times when I was unable to be physically present.

Researcher memos and journaling. After each interview, I immediately stopped to memo about what had transpired during the interview. I used the MAXQDA software

program to record things that stood out to me, clarify questions I wanted to ask in the following interview or reflect on my role in the research relationship. I knew that having preconceived thoughts about what I would find could skew what I heard or saw. So with each interview, I continued to ask myself, “Is this what she is saying,” “Could there be another possible explanation,” and “Am I imposing what I think onto what she is trying to say?” I used respondent feedback or asked summarizing questions to ensure that I accurately recorded the participant’s thoughts or beliefs. The participant would say yes, that is what I meant, or clarify their statement until I had the most accurate representation. The participants also permitted me to contact them if I had questions about a word or phrase I could not distinguish and verify my transcription accuracy.

An illustration of where writing memos and asking myself probing questions required me to revise my thoughts was with Ms. Shavon’s interview. During one of the interviews, I recorded two events in the wrong order chronologically, which left a lingering question in my mind. I asked myself, “is this what she really means, or is there something I am missing?” At the end of the next interview, I relayed my thoughts to her and asked for clarification. She replied, “Most of it is right, but the order is off.” That detail helped clarify why she felt so passionately about spending individual time with her students. In that instance, I knew what I saw and heard had filtered through my researcher bias and miscued what she meant. In addition to reflecting and constructing memos, which Maxwell (2013) considers a step in data analysis, I went through multiple data analysis cycles guided by Saldaña’s (2021) book on coding.

Data Analysis. According to Maxwell (2013) and Seidman (2019), data analysis should not be compartmentalized into something separate from data collection. Data

analysis is present from the literature review to the final product because thinking is present. In order to make sense of the data, I transcribed the interviews and coded salient words, phrases, sentences, thoughts, and actions by highlighting them and giving them descriptive names. To help methodically organize the codes, I employed categorizing and connecting strategies described at length throughout this section.

Transcription. Before beginning the first interview, I purchased a subscription to Otter.ai, a voice transcription software, to assist me in the transcription process. It was the most reliable software within my price range. I knew this would not be 100% accurate, so I anticipated having to return and make corrections. I uploaded each audio file recorded during the Zoom video conferencing meetings into the Otter.ai platform. Within minutes, Otter.ai rendered a transcription of the recording. The transcription included time stamps and noted whether the participant or researcher spoke. As I suspected, there were many places where the technology omitted words or decoded inaccurate words and phrases; however, it did keep me from transcribing every word.

I listened to the audio recording while reading the document created by the voice transcription software. The transcription process was long, arduous, and time-consuming. I spent many nights and weekends listening to the recordings, playing them back, correcting or retyping sections of the transcript, and ruminating over observations of the participant's facial expressions or gestures. This process allowed me to focus on the conversations' nuances. As seen in Figure 2, the process also allowed me to continue data analysis by jot wonderings, memos, reflections on my subjectivities, and connections to the stories.

During transcription, I used the comment feature of the Otter.ai to note phrases and words that each participant seemed to reiterate throughout the interviews to keep a record of my thoughts and rationale of why I created a code. Figure 2 shows how I highlighted a transcript section and created a memo. In the memo, I describe why I believed I would use her exact words, “I’m living my dream,” as an *in vivo* code and the pattern I noticed.

I also began creating attribute codes that are used to identify descriptive information that is slightly statistical such as the interview number, participant demographics, and years in education (Miles et al., 2014, p. 79). I used these codes to organize the participants’ data and codes. Table 1, which I used to display the teacher’s characteristics, demonstrates how I used attribute codes. The transcription and creation of codes on the transcription software were my initial thoughts and earliest attempts to use codes to make sense of the data, but the process was far from over. Several more iterations of reading and listening to or watching transcription recordings were needed resulting in adding other types of codes, deletion of others, and strategies for making sense of the remaining codes I created.

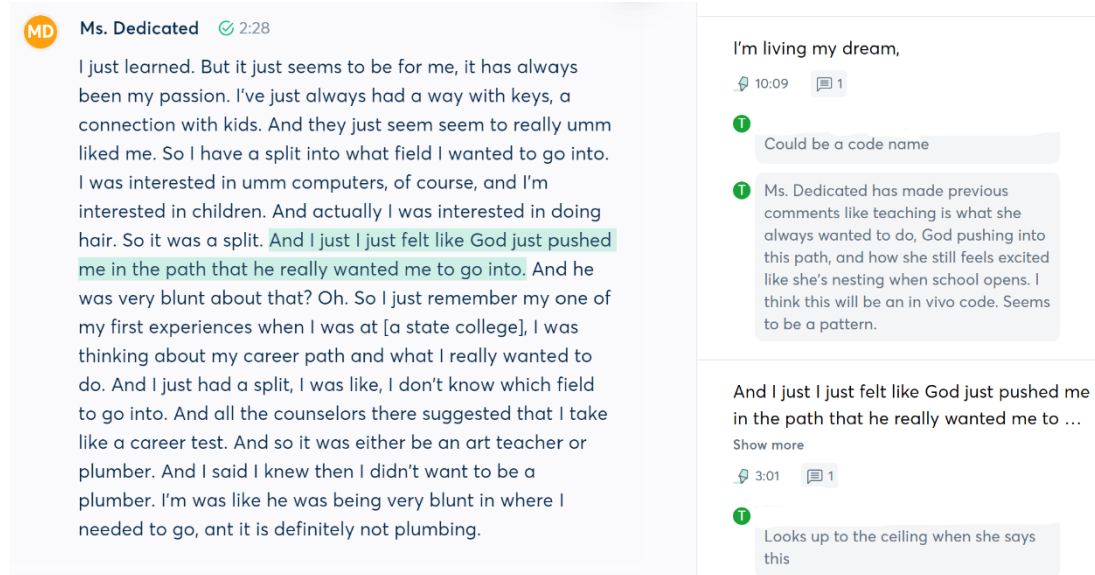


Figure 2. Screenshot of a reflective memo using the Otter.ai software

Code categorization: The process. According to Maxwell (2013) and Maxwell and Miller (2008), categorizing strategies are part of first cycle coding and involves chunking the data into smaller parts (codes) and then reorganizing them into succinct groups based on similarities. The categories are often compared internally and between groupings (Maxwell & Miller, 2008). In my study, I used this type of organizational method to extract essential data about the participant's beliefs, core values, and teaching methods.

Confident in the quality of the transcriptions, I imported the documents into MAXQDA, a software program designed to store data, facilitate coding, and create reports. This program allowed me to organize and easily store and access the interviews, codes, themes, and memos I created. I also purchased Johnny Saldaña's (2021) book, *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Research*, after a meeting with Dr. R. Schmertzling. Saldaña's (2021) book became my coding Bible. Rather than reading the book from beginning to end, I began at the end with Appendix B. Saldaña's Appendix B provided a

brief description of research designs and the types of coding strategies used by researchers to accompany that research design. Afterward, I searched Appendix A for descriptions and reference pages associated with the types of coding commonly used in narrative analysis. The categorizing strategies employed included, among others, *in vivo*, values, versus, emotion, narrative coding, and *themeing* the data.

Figure 3 provides a visual of the coding process from beginning to end. The double-sided arrows denote that the process was cyclical. At any point during the process of reading and re-reading, listening and re-listening, viewing and reviewing the transcripts, I could spot a different type of code to add more depth and breadth to the participant’s story. Although it begins with interview transcription and ends with the development of themes, the process was recursive. This flow chart was completed for each of the five participants.

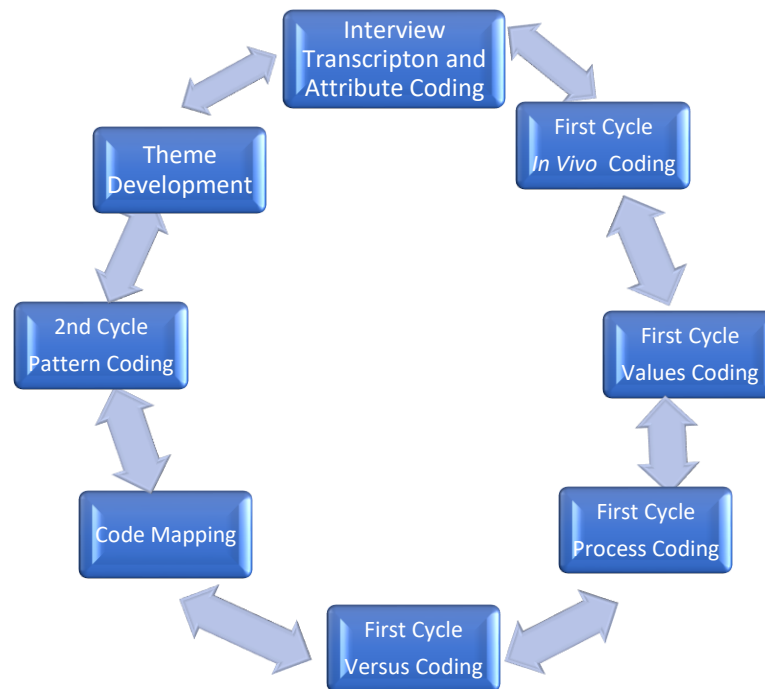


Figure 3. Participant flow chart for coding interviews. The flow chart visually depicts the path taken in the coding process.

In vivo coding. To make coding more manageable, I divided the transcripts into smaller sections to closely attend to the text and dedicated a set time each day for coding the data. I continued my first coding cycle by analyzing each interview with the provisional codes I suspected would surface in my mind while attending to repeated phrases and noteworthy statements. Next, I directed my attention toward my primary technique of in vivo coding (Miles et al., 2014, p. 74; Saldaña, 2021, p. 137).

I relied heavily on this coding strategy because its codes were created based on the participants' exact words or phrases. For example, in two of the three interviews with Ms. Shavon, when speaking about her motivation for teaching, she repeated the phrase "when I see them, I see me." I immediately knew this would be a code and wondered how it would play into the theme development. During Ms. Dedicated's interview, she referred to teaching as "my passion" or "I'm living my dream." I have presented a sample of in vivo coding and correlating excerpts from the transcript for three of the participants in Table 3 Phrases such as these added to the study's authenticity and credibility and helped me clearly relay the participant's voice.

Values codes. Saldaña (2021, p. 167) defined values codes as "codes to qualitative data that reflect a participant's values, attitudes, and beliefs, representing his or her perspectives or world view." After coding an interview using in vivo coding methods, I read and listened to the transcript again and applied the values coding strategy described by Saldaña (2021) and Miles et al. (2014). Even though I had already labeled a few values codes while coding in vivo, I believed reviewing the transcripts multiple times would reveal important segments that I may have overlooked in the previous reading.

Table 3

Example of In Vivo Coding of Participant Interviews

Participant	Interview Transcript	In Vivo Codes
Ms. Dedicated	But it just seems to be for me, it [teaching] has always been my passion ¹ . I've just always had a way with kids, a connection with kids ² . And they just seem to really liked me.	¹ “MY PASSION” ² “CONNECTION WITH KIDS”
Ms. Keisha	My kids ¹ , and I understand that we are a family ² . I tell them on the first day of school, this is your family. These are your brothers and your sisters, I'm like your mom. We are a family ³ . . .	¹ “MY KIDS” ² “WE ARE FAMILY” ³ “WE ARE FAMILY”
Ms. Shavon	So, I pretty much grew up like my students ¹ . And I think that's why for me, as a teacher where I could relate to my kids ² so much, because when I see them, I see me ³	¹ “GREW UP LIKE MY STUDENTS” ² “RELATE TO MY KIDS” ³ “WHEN I SEE THEM, I SEE ME”

Values coding labeled the participant's *attitudes*, *values*, and *beliefs* (Miles et al., 2014; Saldaña, 2021). The authors described attitude as the participant's thoughts or feelings about something, and values referred to the importance a participant gives to something. Beliefs combined the participant's values, attitudes, and experiences. I knew I needed to apply this type of code to provide more insight into the participant's way of viewing a successful classroom. Based on their words, I could discern what they believed to be important. This was needed to amplify the participant's voice within the narrative profile.

For example, in Ms. Ramonda's first interview, she expressed that she and her siblings were treated differently than her other cousins as a child. She used that story to

explain why she was so vocal against bullying. I believed this was a striking statement and coded it as an attitude values code. I also created a comment that explained why I created the code and the connection I saw. Table 4 includes an example of a values code created from one of Ms. Ramonda's interviews. Using values coding allowed me to include another layer of the participant's personality and focus more deeply on their thoughts and beliefs.

I then used the emic phrases to add to, revise, combine, or delete codes and definitions from the initial list of codes I thought would be evident in the participant's transcripts based on the literature review. During each step, I made anecdotal notes explaining my rationale, any relationships that I noticed between groups, and any codes that did not appear to fit into a category. I knew that I was faithful to the participants' stories and the present data when I did not use some predetermined codes I created or attempt to force them upon the transcript.

Process codes. One of the objectives of this study was to determine what effective Title I teachers were doing in their classrooms. I believed that the discoveries could positively impact other teachers in similar situations. However, to understand those processes, I needed to use what Saldaña (2021) and Miles et al. (2014) identified as process codes. This type of code documents a physical or conceptual action that occurs over time. It uses a gerund phrase as the code.

Table 4

Example of Values Coding of a Participant's Interview

Participant	Values Code	Transcript	Comment
Ms. Ramonda	A: LIKE STRUCTURE	I like structure. I like a clean classroom. I want everybody to have whatever they need so that they can be the best successful student that they can be. (Ms. Ramonda, Interview 1, Pos. 202)	Previously, Ms. R said that her mom valued structure and linked it to her teaching style. Here she explicitly states that she likes structure. She also links structure and cleanliness to students getting what they need and being successful.
Ms. Shavon	V: DATA NOTEBOOKS AS A TOOL FOR ACADEMIC SUCCESS	I feel like the data notebooks is a great tool. And having those data talks is a great tool, because they know if I if they know where they are, and where they need to be, they have an idea of, it's not just gone, I can't just rely on Ms. S to do this not just Ms. S, I got to work with her too, because she's not one that has to take these weekly test or taking the STAR test. I got to know this stuff on myself. (Ms. Shavon, Interview2, Pos. 104)	I could have coded this as a belief or attitude, but I finally decided to code this as V: Data notebooks as a tool for academic success because it shows where she stated data notebooks were important in students knowing where they were, and they needed to be academically. It does give me some solace that Saldaña stated that a single phrase could be coded in different ways depending on the perspective in which it was coded.
Ms. Jasmine	B: TEACHING IS RECIPROCAL	. . . somebody that knows that it's not about them. It's about the children. They're understanding they're flexible. They know that they have just as much to learn from the students, as you know, we have to teach them. (Ms. Jasmine, Interview, Pos. 26)	I'm identifying this segment as a belief code because it shows that Ms. Jasmine "personally feels is true about someone" (Saldaña, 2021, p.168). She believes that teachers must be willing to learn from their students. It may be related to life-long learner's code.

Note. V = value code; A = attitude code; B = belief code

I used process codes in my analysis as I read or listened to the transcript and noticed areas where the teacher was engaged in what I considered a novel action. One example of a process code came from Ms. Shavon's interview. I asked her, "What are some things you have done to get and keep students engaged in learning?" She mentioned

a particular math skill that she needed the students to grasp during her response. She described how she found or created a rap that went along with the lesson's content. She also explained how students' learning styles and interests determined how she used that strategy to teach concepts. I coded that story as USING RAP TO TEACH because it was culturally relevant to her students and was not something I have observed many teachers do. Her decision on whether or not to use that strategy depended on the students.

Versus codes. Saldaña (2021, p. 174) defined versus codes as codes that “identify in dichotomous or binary terms the individuals, groups, social systems, organizations, phenomena, processes, concepts, etc., in direct conflict with each other.” Since the fundamental goal of my study was to show that there are good teachers and exceptional students in what society deems as the worst schools, I anticipated that I would generate versus codes from the transcripts. However, I was careful not to force this presumption onto the participant's stories. Versus codes were ultimately developed in four of the five participants and helped to strengthen the authenticity of the profiles used as counter-narratives.

A few of the versus codes I constructed included US VS THEM, CURRICULUM VS CONNECTION, ADMINISTRATIVE DEMANDS VS INSTRUCTIONAL PLANNING, and BAD VS ANGRY STUDENTS. Each code represented a different dichotomy that teachers in Title I schools may face. US VS THEM contrasts schools in different economic neighborhoods, CURRICULUM VS CONNECTION speaks to the disconnect between the need to teach the curriculum and the need to build connections with students, ADMINISTRATIVE DEMANDS VS INSTRUCTIONAL PLANNING contrasts the added job requirements and being able to prepare for students, and BAD VS

ANGRY STUDENTS addresses the mischaracterization of students of color experiencing poverty. I describe in detail the process I went through to develop the code US VS THEM.

The initial development of the US VS THEM stemmed from an interview with Ms. Jasmine. During the interview, she made the following statement:

Thinking about where I've always taught, (pause) and kind of like, you know, *one side of town versus the other side of town* [emphasis added]. You can see the *difference in the schools* [emphasis added]. You can see the difference in the attention that even the board itself places on the school and [how] other schools were always being highlighted and honored for this than the other. But I just feel like, if we have the same resources that they did, we could kind of do the same things. But, because our funding was different, or (pauses) the resources weren't the same, that kind of limited the things that we could do. And the things that the students could achieve.

They might not say it, but there's definitely a line. There's definitely a *this side of the track and that side of the track* [emphasis added], even speaking like at professional development, and we would talk and I would (pauses) they would complain about something [at their school]. I was like, well, you know, come (pauses) would you ever *come teach over here* [emphasis added]? [They would reply,] Oh, no, *I can't teach over there* [emphasis added]. Answers like that, that teachers give is another reason why I stay because I know there's teachers out there that wouldn't do right if they were to come teach our babies; and I don't

want you around them anyway if that's how you feel. (Ms. Jasmine, Interview 3, Pos. 54)

Within the excerpt, I identified and italicized three to four instances where Ms. Jasmine used dichotomous language to compare types of schools. I could have coded each instance using as versus codes and used the exact words as I would if using *in vivo*; however, I decided to code them as US VS THEM. That code seemed to apply to the examples as she compared US, Title I teachers/schools, and THEM, non-Title I teachers/schools. Versus codes provided insight into the critical theory piece of the study; however, they did not specifically account for the participant's motivation as to why they teach.

Each type of first cycle categorization code examined until this point helped me see different facets of the participant's life experience. I needed those dynamics to begin understanding the person who was the exceptional Title I teacher. Figure 4 presents a visual of prevalent codes from Ms. Ramonda's interviews and shows how MAXQDA can help bring attention to the most recurring codes. The next step was to categorize the codes I created.



Figure 4. Ms. Ramonda’s interview codes. This figure displays codes applied seven or more times within the interview. Bolder phrases represent greater frequency than smaller phrases.

Code mapping. After completing first cycle coding for each set of interviews, I followed Saldaña’s (2021) model of code mapping. I exported codes from the MAXQDA software for each participant’s three interviews into a blank word document, as seen in Figure 5.1 I also exported the coded excerpt and any memos or comments onto a separate document and cross-referenced the two to ensure I stayed grounded in the participants’ words. Figure 5.2 illustrates the MAXQDA export detailing the codes, memos, and comments used as a compass. After exporting the code list, I eyeballed the codes to determine which codes were so similar that they could use the same code. Next, I began the second iteration by clustering related codes into categories and penning a short memo detailing my rationale. Usually, I conducted two to three iterations of clustering to create categories.

giving them my all
 good at math in HS
 "I don't know if I can teach at a school like this"
 know their teacher loved math
 "Like home when I'm at work"
 M: Brother- "you get tne book smarts"
 M: God grades because Career choice\Describing path to becoming a Teacher
 Mom's involvement in ed
 Motivation_REASONS TO TEACH\Always wanted to be a teacher
 Motivation_REASONS TO TEACH\Education as a calling
 Motivation_REASONS TO TEACH\grew up like my students
 Motivation_REASONS TO TEACH\I'm living my dream
 Motivation_REASONS TO TEACH\it has always been my passion
 Motivation_REASONS TO TEACH\M: empathetic disciplining
 Motivation_REASONS TO TEACH\M: Prayer_Religious convictions
 Motivation_REASONS TO TEACH\M: Students need support
 Motivation_REASONS TO TEACH\Passion for teaching
 Motivation_REASONS TO TEACH\wanted to work with kids
 Motivation_REASONS TO TEACH\worked wel with children before teaching
 Parental involvement in Education

Figure 5.1. Ms. Dedicated's sample of code mapping. This figure is a snapshot of the alphabetized codes created from her interviews.

Possible theme\Category\Code	Coded Segments & Comments
Motivation_REASONS TO TEACH\it has always been my passion	<p>it has always been my passion Ms. Dedicated\Interview 1: 28 - 28 (1)</p> <p>This selection is an <i>in vivo</i> code where she specifically states that teaching is her passion. She also added a quantifier saying that it has always been her passion. This seems to be related to her motivation to teach.</p>
Motivation_REASONS TO TEACH\I'm living my dream	<p>I'm living my dream Ms. Dedicated\Interview 1: 48 - 48 (1)</p> <p>This selection is an <i>in vivo</i> code where she specifically states that "she's living her dream." To me, this says that it is what she has always wanted to do. This seems to be related to her motivation to teach.</p>
Motivation_REASONS TO TEACH\Education as a calling	<p>they need teachers who are willing to go that extra mile to go beyond that regular, um, some people say nine to five, but for us that 8 to 4 that calling is a you know, it's accepting that this is a calling and that, you know, God has placed in a position to impart on students lives, that will leave a lifetime impression. Ms. Dedicated\Interview 3: 20 - 20 (1)</p> <p>She's giving examples of what an exceptional teacher would do. The then adds her religious convictions to the conversation stating that it "is a calling" I can see this as a values code as well. This seems to be related to her motivation to teach.</p> <p>I just I just felt like God just pushed me in the path that he really wanted me to go into. And he was very blunt about that (laughs)? Oh. So, I just remember my one of my first experiences when I was at Georgia Southern, I was thinking about my career path and what I really wanted to do. And I just had a split, I was like, I don't know which</p>

Figure 5.2. Sample of Ms. Dedicated's MAXQDA report. This figure is a snapshot of the codes, coded segments, and comments used to stay grounded during the code mapping process.

Pattern Coding. After creating categories, I began second cycle coding using Saldaña's (2021) and Miles et al.'s (2014) explanations and examples of pattern coding, the process of grouping similarly coded passages into one code, as a guide. I reviewed the codes and categories grouped during the code mapping process, looking for related categories among the categories. As I completed the task, I continued to cross-reference the document containing the excerpts from the transcript guarding myself against manipulating a code or category to fit into a broader category or theme. To further guard against researcher bias, I asked my writing coach to critique me as I explained the codes and categories I created. Figure 6 visually represents how I grouped similar codes into one overarching code. The next step was to organize the categories into themes.

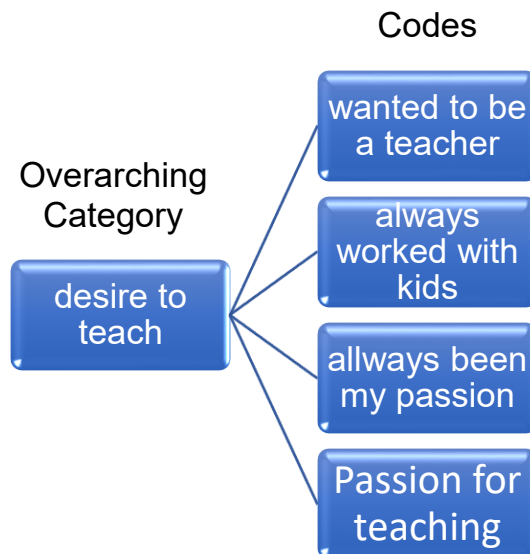


Figure 6. Example of Ms. Dedicated's pattern coding.

Themeing the data. The final step in coding each participant's transcripts was creating themes based on the context of the participant's story and the categories created as described by Saldaña (2021). Figure 7 provides a visual of the process of creating

themes. I generally looked for three or more related categories to generate a theme for the participant. As a result, I considered some codes as outliers and did not place some of them in categories that constituted a theme. However, after conversing with Dr. Lorraine and Dr. Richard Schmertzing, I realized there was more to theming than finding related concepts. My dissertation chairs reminded me that there is also beauty in dissonance. Codes and categories that did not seem to fit or that I considered outliers could be as vital in meaning-making as the other codes that fit nicely together. Therefore, when the participant's words were so impactful or created a disruption in the patterns created, I used them as themes despite not reaching the code quota I set. Ms. Ramonda's interview provided an example of an outlying category becoming a theme. I have presented individual participants' themes in Chapter 5.

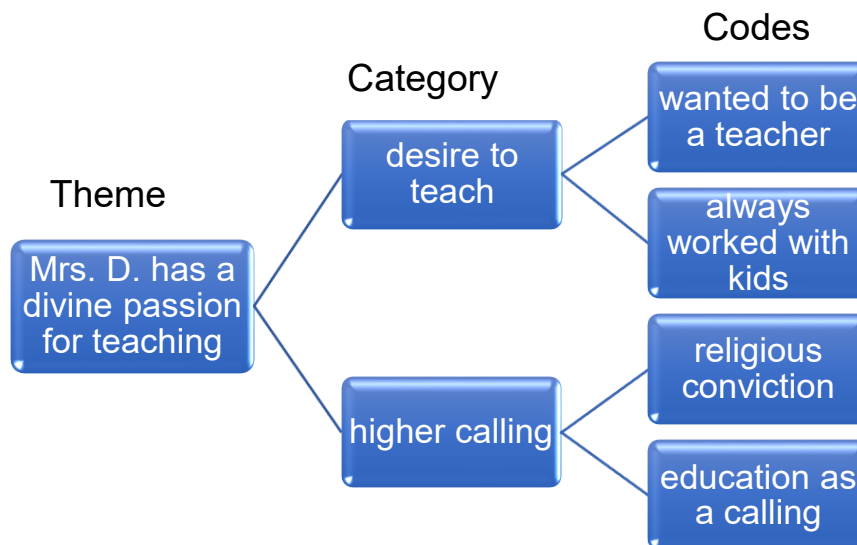


Figure 7. Ms. Dedicated's interview from codes to categories to themes. This figure outlines a sample of the second cycle coding process. It shows how I grouped codes into categories and categories into themes on a small scale.

Theme cross comparisons. After creating codes, categories, and themes within each participant, I compared themes across each participant to determine overarching themes. This final step was imperative in the quest to determine, from the teacher’s perspective, what caused the effective teachers to continue to succeed in spurring our Title I students to obtain significant gains yearly. As seen in Table 5, I used Maxwell’s (2013) suggestion to aid me in this process of creating a matrix consisting of categories or themes. Once I developed the patterns, I wrote a short narrative detailing the process and understandings gained and asked the participant to check for accuracy.

Table 5

Matrix of themes across participants

Theme	Ms. Dedicated	Ms. Jasmine	Ms. Keisha	Ms. Shavon	Ms. Ramonda
Passionate about teaching Title I students	X	X	X	X	X
Teaching styles influenced by formative years	X	X	X	X	X
Student interests + data-driven instruction = student success	X	X	X	X	X
A co-constructed classroom culture	X	X	X	X	X
Focused on emotional and social skills	X	X	X	X	X
Combatting racism with CRP		X	X	X	X
Choose to meet student needs	X	X	X	X	X
Participants value being lifelong learners	X	X	X	X	X
Divergent Theme					
Teachers display CRP viewpoints and deficit thinking			X		X

Note. The X’s in the chart denote a central theme in the participant’s interview.

This section has detailed my path from data collection to data analysis through categorizing strategies. Although using categorizing strategies is the dominant method in qualitative analysis, Maxwell and Miller (2008) cautioned against relying only on categorizing strategies when creating narratives, profiles, or using a grounded theory approach. In the subsequent section, I detail how I used connecting strategies to display the data in the form of narrative profiles.

Connecting strategies. While categorizing strategies replace the original context of the data with categorical structures, connecting strategies are necessary to understand the data in context and connect the relationship, within context, into a coherent whole (Maxwell, 2013, p. 112). In their article examining the differences between categorizing and connecting strategies, Maxwell and Miller (2008) further explained connecting strategies as methods of “reducing,” or as Saldaña (2021) termed condensing, data to identify relationships that tie that data into a coherent narrative account. Therefore, to elevate the participants’ voices, after taking the data apart and categorizing it through detailed coding, I went back and applied connecting strategies as described by Maxwell and Miller (2008).

Within the topic of narrative inquiry, there were connective strategies used to make meaning of the data gathered. Three of the most prevalent methods were narrative analysis, which uses the story as data; conversation analysis, which studies naturally occurring dialogue; and discourse analysis, which focuses on the broader meaning of the participant’s words or the cultural influences from which it stems (Wells, 2011).

The narrative analysis approach was the type of connecting strategy that best aligned with the end goal of creating a story told using the participants’ own words that

reconstructed first-hand experiences of exceptional Title I mathematics teachers (Maxwell & Miller, 2008; Seidman, 2019). According to Maxwell and Miller (2008), the purpose of narrative analysis is to examine the data with a holistic intent. They further explained that although this approach used categorizing strategies to break the data into manageable chunks, the objective was to condense the data into the most important parts of the participant's experiences. Those experiences were then reorganized using literary conventions such as plot, conflict, resolution, and chronology (Maxwell & Miller, 2008, p. 468).

Narrative analysis also best suited my research structure because of its intended effect of causing the reader to transcend the interview content and become compelled to be a change agent in issues related to the phenomenon presented (Riessman, 2008). This aspect of the analysis also aligned with my research goal to bring positive attention to the good teachers, push against the dominant negative narrative, and provide insights to other teachers who serve similar populations.

In short, I wanted to create profiles of each participant that pieced the teacher's stories together with a clear beginning, middle, and end that stood out as a counter-story (Seidman, 2019). Therefore, I used the participant's transcripts as the data source in this study. Using the connecting and categorizing strategies listed in Seidman (2019), I distilled each participant's transcripts into essential elements that gave perspective to the their stories. After reconstructing the essential elements based on the interview context, I created narrative profiles for each participant. In the remaining portion of this section, I included a more detailed explanation of how I used the connecting strategies found within narrative analysis to create profiles.

Data presentation. Because the use of profiles best aligned with my research goals and included practical connecting strategies needed to craft the participants' stories, I chose Seidman's (2019) book as a guide due to its straightforward delivery and step-by-step instructions. I followed his procedures without deviation to display the resulting stories as a blend of first-person profiles that could stand alone with minimal researcher interjection (Seidman, 2019).

First, I used the MAXQDA system to label the passage based on things related to my topic that stood out to me. This step was done when I used categorizing strategies to label words and phrases the participant repeated, attitudes, values, beliefs, and aspects of their childhood to adult life. Next, I used Microsoft Word to create two copies of the transcript. I kept one copy intact to always refer to the context in which the words were spoken.

Following Seidman's (2019) design, I used the Word feature to cut the highlighted sections and paste the labeled sections into a different document consisting only of the passages I found most intriguing and captivating. Seidman suggested that the resulting document should have been between one-half and one-third of the original document; however, my document; was a little more than half the size of the original document. To get the interview to the point where it could stand alone as a profile, I had to do at least one more round of narrowing the data than Seidman prescribed. After reading the new document with a more critical eye, I narrowed the document even further by cutting and pasting stories that I believed to be more essential than the other stories. Finally, I was ready to continue with the process.

I continued to follow Seidman's advice and re-read the transcript. Although I created labels, Seidman (2019) advised me not to become so attached that I could not rename based on new insight. Re-reading caused me to see how many categories and events were related. I quickly jotted down my thoughts as a memo so I could track my thinking and provide added validity to my research study. When I was sure I had found the connections, I reorganized the stories into a beginning, middle, and end narrative

As the researcher, I made minor adjustments to profiles so that the participant's identity would not be compromised and sparingly inserted words or phrases to help support the logical progression of the profile. These words or phrases are bracketed in Chapter 4. All five narratives resulted in profiles.

The data analysis section described the steps from collecting the data to explaining how I created the final narrative profiles. *In vivo* coding, process coding, values coding, and other categorizing strategies yielded first cycle codes. Codes were then organized alphabetically, mapped, and grouped into related categories. I then used the second cycle pattern coding process to create themes cross-checked with the other participants. Finally, the connecting strategy of narrative analysis was employed to render a profile of the participants' experiences in their own words. In the next section, I address issues of validity and the safeguards that mediate the effects of researcher bias and other ethical concerns.

Validity

Since the researcher is the instrument in a qualitative study, it becomes essential that the researcher puts procedures in place to add to the credibility and validity of the research design and results. Throughout the study, I interwove memo examples and

detailed each action that led to creating themes and, ultimately, profiles. The areas of credibility and reliability that directly impact my study include researcher bias, reactivity, and ethical concerns. In the following section, I summarized my efforts to be fully transparent throughout the data collection and analysis process.

Researcher bias. According to Maxwell (2013), Miles et al. (2014), Patton (2002), and Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997), in qualitative studies, the believability of the information contained and the credibility of the researcher are more accurate perceptions of validity than its typical quantitative connotation. Not only was I the instrument, data collector, and data analyst, but my voice was also used to shape the rendering of the participant. Therefore, I realized that researcher bias would pose the greatest threat to the validity of my results.

In order to address the threat of researcher bias, from the initiation to the conclusion of my research study, I asked myself, “How can I be wrong about this?” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 123) and “What other explanation could there be?” By forcing myself to be mindful of contradictory explanations, I began setting the framework to address validity during every study phase. This included initial predictions of the factors involved in creating an atmosphere of success in the participants’ classrooms, assumptions made during observations, coding, forming patterns, and ultimately, the profile itself. I sought to address researcher bias by developing a profile, collecting rich data, writing analytic memos, collaborating with content experts, and layering data (triangulation).

As a reader of this study, you may be uncertain of my ability to obtain, interpret, and objectively recount the participant’s view of what contributed to her or his students’ consistent success both academically and socially. In order to address these concerns, I

included a self-portrait describing subjectivities stemming from early childhood experiences as a middle-class African American male in a Christian household, my respect for my African American heritage, and experiences as an elementary school classroom teacher, mathematics instructional coach, and now Early Intervention Program (EIP) teacher in a Title I elementary school. I believed that being transparent about the subjective lenses through which I typically viewed events would enable the reader to understand my connection to the study and make an informed decision about its believability.

I collected information-rich data from interviews and analytic memos written throughout the research process in addition to the profile. I included these to remain as transparent as possible through the process.

Lastly, to reduce the threat of researcher bias, I layered the data (also known as triangulation) by comparing the analyzed data of interviews, memos, personal conversations, and informal classroom observations before the COVID pandemic (Maxwell, 2013; Patton, 2002). I also cross-checked my analysis of each participant's transcripts for parallel and deviant themes that may enhance my research credibility. In addition to researcher bias, I remained mindful of how my biases may affect how I ask questions or influence the participant.

Reactivity. According to Maxwell (2013, p. 124), reactivity is “the influence of the researcher on the setting or individuals studied.” In quantitative research, especially when interviewing participants, there is a greater need to understand the interactions between the researcher and the participant (Maxwell, 2013). As the researcher, I was what quantitative researchers call the research instrument; therefore, I knew I needed to

be cognizant of how my word and actions influenced the participant's response or the direction of the interview. I realized that my biases and subjectivities could have a bearing on the types of questions and follow-up questions I asked or did not ask. Therefore, within the interview, I attempted to provide enough context for the participants to understand the question and respond without the questions being too leading. I would only get the answers I expected to hear if the questions were too leading.

To help negotiate the degree of reactivity present within the interview process, I used the semi-open-ended RQs approved by my dissertation committee. I endeavored to balance the questions asked with the natural flow of the conversation. At times, I realized from their answer that the participant did not interpret the question as I intended. In those cases, I allowed the participant to continue with her answer. Those answers often highlighted their teaching styles, beliefs, or motivations. After the participant answered, I would give a little more context to the question, always being sensitive that I rephrased it so that it would not be too leading. Additionally, to preserve the authenticity of the interview, I transcribed the interview verbatim, including many of the "uhs" and "umms" and ellipses for extended pauses. I used the verbatim transcription and recording to reflect on and monitor my influence on the participants.

A simple yet impactful example of me being mindful of my influence on the participant's answers is in an interview with Ms. Ramonda. At the beginning of the first interview, I asked Ms. Ramonda to share some information about herself. Although I had explained the purpose and goals of the research paper, she responded by telling me how many years she had taught and followed up by asking for clarification about the type of information I was requesting. At that moment, I knew that I had not given enough context

for her fully answer my question. After I went back and gave more context to the question, the response that followed was so noteworthy that I used it as a code. The verbatim excerpt that follows provides more details.

TB: So I guess we'll go ahead and begin. So if you could just begin by telling us a little about yourself, how long you been teaching, anything like that you'd like to begin by sharing?

Ms. Ramonda: Okay, so I have been in education 12 years. This upcoming school year will make my 13th year . . . pre k, kindergarten, fourth grade, and fifth grade. Now, those are my. . . Are we talking about the educational aspect and experience or are we just talking about personally when you say, tell you more about myself?

TB: Anything you'd like to share?

Ms. Ramonda: Okay, let's see.

TB: Okay, because, uh, I don't know if I shared this with you or not, but by the end of it, what I'm trying to do is to create, to like paint a picture of the whole person. You know, the experiences they bring to the table, not only the day-to-day classroom stuff, but the experiences that the person brings; because all of that makes up who you are, and, and the teaching style that you have, I believe. So, anything that you share would be great.

Ms. Ramonda: Okay, well, I think it's also important to add that I am a mother of one. However, I currently have three additional children in the household. The oldest one, he just finished high school, and he's going into the Air Force, thank God (chuckles). So I'm down to three children. And, I think that has a lot to do with what type of person I am in the classroom because I will say this, in the

beginning, I was a certain type of teacher. But, when I became a parent, I kind of had a little bit more connection with some of the parents' concerns because I was a parent. I knew how we felt, and I think I became a little bit more empathetic toward the parents and their concerns. Yeah. (Ms. Ramonda, Interview 1, Pos. 8-24)

In addition to attending to validity issues by monitoring reactivity, I also ensured that I remained ethical in my dealings with the participants.

Ethical concerns. The major ethical concerns regarding my study primarily centered on the participant selection and data collection processes. To address this concern, I kept the names of people confidential so they could be open without fear of repercussions. One way I attended to ethical concerns was by using pseudonyms within the research paper, transcripts, and data collection software to keep the identities of the principals, district intervention coaches, and teacher-participants confidential. I only used the actual participants' names if they told me to use them; however, I still used pseudonyms for the names of the school, school district, and other identifying information. Additionally, I used the blind carbon copy (BCC) feature when sending emails requesting participants. Hence, no one knew any identifying information about any of the participants.

To keep the information confidential, I locked the data away in a safe while I was not analyzing it during the data collection. I also used pseudonyms instead of the actual names of schools, districts, or participants. Additionally, before the study began, I obtained IRB approval from Valdosta University and the local school district. Regarding the interviews, due to limitations caused by the Pandemic, the participant gave verbal

informed consent that specifically stated her approval for me to record the interview. I will destroy the recordings after 3 years.

Remaining mindful of the validity issues throughout the interview, data collection, and data analysis processes compelled me to stay true to the practice of reflective memoing. Throughout each section of this chapter, I included reflective memos, tables, diagrams, and figures, each accompanied by my thoughts leading up to a decision. Although no one can eliminate validity concerns in qualitative inquiry, I endeavored to be as transparent as ethically possible so the reader could have enough information to make his or her own decision on the trustworthiness of the results.

Conclusion

This study aimed to understand, from the participant's perspective, how effective teachers in high-poverty Title I schools were able to consistently motivate their students to make substantial academic and social gains. Using the narrative inquiry design as my methodology, I began by selecting a school district matching my research criteria to invite teacher participants. I then interviewed the participants using Seidman's (2019) three-phased interview process to gather experiences and practices in their own words. Analyzing the data using categorizing and connecting strategies resulted in themes that reflected the participants' rationale and practices they believed essential to their continued success. Those themes were then used to construct profiles using Seidman's (2019) step-by-step process for creating profiles, presented in the next chapter.

Chapter 4

PARTICIPANT PROFILES

“There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you.”

(Hurstun, 1996, p. 176)

This chapter begins with a description of the community and school setting in which the participants work. The description is provided to assist the reader in developing an intimate view of the teachers' physical surroundings as well as the teaching and learning environment. After the setting description, each participant is profiled. Each profile contains an introduction to the participant her student test scores, and details of how we became acquainted. The profile itself is then presented using participant's actual words to provide greater authenticity and an added nuance of her personality. Within profiles, any clarification I added is bracketed to indicate it was not in the transcripts or memos. Each profile then concludes with my reflections on the interviews.

Introductions and reflections are italicized to remind the reader that I wrote them.

Each participant in this study had her unique personality, background, and teaching style. Nevertheless, they were all known for their ability to foster growth in students attending Title I schools in high-poverty areas. The participants' perspectives yielded stories that varied in the shared interactions, the amount of background information, and even how they retold their experiences.

Community Setting

Participants Ms. Shavon, Ms. Dedicated, Ms. Keisha, Ms. Jasmine, and Ms. Ramonda are all elementary teachers who served in one of two Title I schools (Creekside and Greenview) located in different areas of the same community. The two schools merged just before I began gathering data, and all participants then taught in the combined Sunnydale Elementary School. Therefore, at the time of the interviews, all five teachers worked at the same school. Rather than include a similar community and school description before each profile, this and the following section introduce the community and school setting that applies to all participants.

Sunnydale Elementary (SE) is nestled in the Southeastern part of the United States of America (U.S.A.). Sunnydale is a Title I school with nearly 100% of its students qualifying for free or reduced lunch. It is one of 22 elementary schools within this district. Sunnydale has been a staple in the community since it opened in 1990. Sunnydale is located within an urban community with a combination of low-income housing complexes and single-family homes. Within the school's attendance zone boundaries, several convenience stores, liquor stores, gas stations, and/or dollar stores exist, many within walking distance of Sunnydale.

Convenience and liquor stores have not always had a pronounced presence in this community. In fact, Ms. A. Brown, a resident in this community since the 1960s, recalled a day when there were two chain-operated grocery stores along with locally owned drug stores and fresh fish markets within the school district. Today, however, this is not the case. Convenience stores are more accessible and within walking distance than grocery stores. Several studies have shown evidence that neighborhoods with low and declining

SES have a high concentration of convenience stores compared to more affluent neighborhoods (Ohri-Vachaspati et al., 2019). These convenience stores often carry processed and sugary foods and drinks rather than healthier choices. While convenience stores are quite suitable for items that families may need in emergency situations and/or for minor household needs, the presence of these stores can often perpetuate cycles of poverty within communities and cause many health-related issues. According to Walraven (2010), besides the economic barriers, those living in poverty have environmental barriers such as malnutrition, lack of accessible quality healthcare, subpar living conditions, and cultural nutrition habits that they must maneuver to maintain a healthy lifestyle. Based on the implications of Walraven's research, low SES status, per capita income level, families within the Sunnydale zone have these same barriers that could impede academic and social success achievement.

Alongside the fact there has been limited access to higher quality stores, hospitals, banks, fitness centers, and other community needs, the current state of the Sunnydale community is far more treacherous than it has ever been. My grandmother and I can recall several community landmarks that no longer exist. During the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, there were several Black-owned businesses within the boundaries of the Sunnydale community. Black-owned businesses are typically categorized as businesses with 51% or more of the stock, interest, or equity owned by individuals of African descent (U.S. Census Bureau Public Information Office, 2011). Although Black-owned businesses have increased in the last 10 years, they only account for approximately one-tenth of the U.S. businesses (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021b). The lack of tangible resources coupled with the systematic racial aggressions and microaggressions perpetuated in

America's systems play a significant role in why so few African American-owned businesses are established, flourish, and prosper (Gold, 2016). The absence of these business has negatively impacted the landscape, the upkeep, the pride, the safety, and the resilience of the community.

In fact, Ms. A. Brown recalled the names of several local previously Black-owned businesses within the community. However, many have been purchased by non-Blacks, or they have been completely demolished and are now replaced by chain brands such as Dollar General, Little Caesar's Pizza, Exxon Gas, Big Daddy's Liquor Store, Goodwill Thrift Shop, and many more. The local fish market, soul-food restaurant, neighborhood pharmacy, retail shops, nightclubs, and other businesses are no longer located within the school zone or have permanently closed.

While driving through, I could not help but reminisce about my formative years visiting my grandmother, who lives in the community. How well do I remember riding with my grandmother through the neighborhood to get to her church only a few blocks from her house or stopping by the local African American-run "fish house" for one of their signature fish sandwiches. No more than 20 years ago, this community had several churches, three local restaurants, one fast food restaurant, a recreational park with a swimming pool, a major grocery store, and even a bank, all within the school attendance zone. I took a drive around to see what was still in place.

Although I recognized many of the churches and businesses still in existence, there have been some changes. Of the approximately 20 churches in the school zone, nearly 30 % of them originally frequented by predominantly White members (referred to as White churches) moved out of the community and sold to African American

congregants (referred to as Black churches). As I continued to drive, I also noticed that three of the Black churches had closed, and only two had built new constructions, such as a family life center (gymnasium) or a new sanctuary in the current neighborhood.

I continued my drive and noticed that some businesses had opened while others had closed. I remember there being a bustling Piggly Wiggly, a Kroger, a nursing home, Family Dollar, a gas station, a locally owned diner, coin laundry mat, Dollar General, lumber company, Nu-Way hotdog and fast-food shop, a Black-owned record shop, and a couple of retail clothing stores within a mile's radius of the school. To get an even deeper perspective, I interviewed my grandmother, a 70-year resident, about other stores once located in the neighborhood. In our interview (A. Brown, personal communication, May 15, 2021), Ms. Brown reminisced about two other grocery stores that followed Piggly Wiggly, a locally operated pharmacy where "all my boys worked" that would deliver medication to the houses, a shoe shop, locally owned nightclub called Rail'N, and a fresh fish market that had an employee that "could clean some fish."

She also mentioned an incorporated city within the major city that was around the corner from SE. This little city, in her own words, "even had a police station that was as big as this bathroom (laughing and referring to her small 6 by 4 feet bathroom)." The town was a mass of shotgun houses adjacent to a mill that made cloth. It was a Whites-only town and only Blacks who worked at the lumber plant were allowed to enter. Their job was to coat utility poles with preservatives to keep them from rotting. With a tone of sadness, she remembered, "cancer took out all of those men that worked there."

I continued my exploration of the school zone and realized that there was only one pharmacy and one optometrist business within the school zone. Using the school as

an epicenter, the nearest hospital in proximity to the school was about 2 miles away on the outskirts of the school zone. A 5-minute drive from the school led me on a journey through two very distinct landscapes. As I began my trek, I immediately noticed a dilapidated house opposite the school. I remembered when a student I taught lived in that large, white, wood-siding house trimmed with black that sat what seemed to be 5 feet off the ground. When you looked across the street, you could see the massive brick chimney reaching from the ground to the top of the house. The family had to move because of a house fire, and the house remained unoccupied.

The conditions of SE are unique; therefore, it is essential to analyze the statistical information surrounding the state and county population, race, poverty, and incarceration rates in which Sunnydale dwells. According to the results of the 2020 Census, the state's population is about 10.7 million (U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Georgia, 2020). Of those citizens, approximately 60% are White, 33% African American, 10% Hispanic/Latino, and 2% self-identified as two or more races (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021a, 2021c). In Sunnydale County, however, over half of the population are African Americans, about 40% identify White, and the rest are of Hispanic and Asian descent (Education demographic and geographic estimates, 2019). To further complicate the conditions based solely on their race students at SE must traverse on their quest to receiving an equitable education. Families within this school zone also deal with high poverty rates. In 2019, the rate of poverty in the South was 12% as opposed to the national poverty rate of 10.5%; yet in Sunnydale County, approximately 25% of the residents live below the poverty threshold (Semega et al., 2020; U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Macon-Bibb County, Georgia, 2020). This is more than twice the rate of

those living in the south and two and one-half times as large as the national average. Given these facts, students of SE are more prone to have greater difficulty being successful both socially and academically within the current system of education (Boatwright & Midcalf, 2019; Payne, 2003; Wang & Yang, 2020). This phenomenon of having a higher concentration than the national or state norm also appears when analyzing the incarceration rate.

During the calendar year 2020, the Georgia Department of Corrections (2021, p. 4) report indicated that about 10,000 people [about 10% of the state's population] were incarcerated. Compared to the state's average of 33% African Americans, if the incarceration rates were equally distributed between the different ethnicities, one might assume that their representation within the correctional department would be similar, yet the data compiled presents quite a contrasting difference. About 50% of the population of those incarcerated are African American, with the largest portion being males. In Sunnydale County, there are approximately 2,000 inmates confined in state and local detention centers. Additionally, this county's population has 51% living in single-family homes compared to 23% nationally (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021b, 2021e; U.S. Census Bureau, single-parent households with children, 2021). The high number of single-family homes and students with at least one parent who has been incarcerated add another layer of stressors to the students of SE. These combined factors have been linked to emotional and behavioral difficulties (Bradshaw, Creaven, & Muldoon, 2021). The following section will discuss students' academic challenges in the Sunnydale School Attendance Zone (SSAZ).

School Setting

As stated previously, Sunnydale is a Title I school, with nearly 100% of its students qualifying for free or reduced lunch. Before the 2019-2020 school year, Sunnydale existed as Creekside and Greendale Elementary schools. These two schools, located within a 5-mile radius of each other, served similar student demographics. As reported by their state's Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) score and now the newly created CCRPI under ESSA laws, both schools' ratings were typically lower than the county and state's performance data. In fact, between the 2012 and 2019 school years, Creekside and Greendale received scores that were less than half of the state's average (Governor's Office of Student Achievement, 2021). The 2019-2020 school year combined the two schools to form Sunnydale.

In addition to the stigma placed on Sunnydale because of their low test scores, SE has been frowned upon because of the number of disciplinary infractions as reported by the Georgia Department of Education. According to The Governor's Office of Student Achievement (n.d.), of the discipline referrals recorded during the 2019 school year, approximately 14% of Creekside's referrals resulted in in school suspension (ISS) and 81% in out of school suspensions (OSS). Greenvew Elementary reported approximately 38% of their discipline actions resulted in ISS while 42% ended with OSS. These discipline rates are in some instances higher than Sunnydale County's discipline rates of 42% ISS and 47% OSS. A deeper dive into the data revealed that most of the actions due to disorderly conduct or student incivility (Georgia Department of Education, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018a, 2019b).

The large number of discipline referrals is consistent with research supporting the idea of children experiencing poverty in addition to having an incarcerated parent; lower reading and math scores; negative behavior outbursts; mental illnesses; feelings of isolation, shame, and other emotional baggage (Boatwright & Midcalf, 2019; Bradshaw et al., 2021; McCormack, White, & Cuenca, 2017; Turney & Goodsell, 2018). In his research article, Shaw (2016) not only addressed the academic and psychological effects but brought awareness to the generational cycle of poverty caused by the mass incarceration of young, poor African American and Latino males and the families left behind. The unique situation of students attending SE may seem bleak to the onlooker, yet there is still cause to hope that students can really learn here.

As I drove up to Sunnydale Elementary, I saw what looked to me like a large, staggered rectangular building. This was the former site of Creekside Elementary. It was the first year that Creekside and Greenview were consolidated into SE. The building was beige, stucco trimmed at the bottom with brick trimmed with off-white. Large square and rectangular windows allowed me to peer into the colorfully decorated cafeteria. The parking lot was paved and had signs reserving spaces for teacher of the month, secretary, principal, and assistant principal. I remember wondering how many times any of my participants had occupied the teacher of the month spot.

Having worked in the school system and at this very school, my mind wandered back to how this building looked before the exterior renovation. Before the makeover, the building's shape was the same, except instead of a stylish tan, off-white, and burgundy color pallet, the building was grey. It was built with grey cinderblocks. In place of large rectangular and square windows, were small cubical block windows scattered across the

front of the building. In a meeting to decide to consolidate Creekside and Greenview into the Creekside structure until a new building could be erected. One of the school board members even remarked that it looked more like a prison than a school. In a particular correspondence, a former staff member, recalled that at the time it was initially built, the main reasons the Whites in the school zone would not send their children to the school was because of the number of African Americans that would be there and the prison like look of the building. While the exterior of the building has received a face lift, the economic and racial demographics of the school remained the same.

It is without question that the students who are enrolled at SE come with a lot of societal baggage: low-SES, poverty, exposure to violence and crime, healthcare needs, hunger, and so much more (Cooper, 2016; Walraven, 2010). However, this reality does not limit the commitment to excellence that the teachers, staff, and administrators exhibit towards the students. In research from Hattie (2015, p. 4), who studied over 1,200 of meta-analysis studies related to teaching methods, he reported teacher estimates of achievement (1.62 effect size) and collective teacher efficacy (1.57 effect size) have greater positive effects on student achievement than home environment (.52 effect size) and socioeconomic status (.54 effect size). The dedication of exceptional teachers within SE can clearly be seen by a focus on academic growth from one school year to the next. Each year, both schools made positive gains in moving students from the *did not meet/beginning category* to the *developing, meets and exceeds/proficient/distinguished* categories. In fact, during the 2019 school year, Creekside alone made more gains than the state or county (Georgia Department of Education, 2021). Georgia Department of Education (2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018a, 2019b) discipline reports also show a

decrease in referrals, especially in Creekside school when compared to the period before the consolidation of schools. Throughout the remainder of this chapter, I describe the process and structure of the profiles constructed for the five phenomenal educators as they share highlights from their practices, strategies, routines, and systems in their own words.

Profiles

I interviewed Ms. Dedicated, Ms. Keisha, Ms. Ramonda, Ms. Shavon, and Ms. Jasmine about their experiences while teaching in a Title I setting to determine, from their perspective, the secrets to their sustained success. I then used the participant's own words to create a profile for each educator. According to Seidman (2019), only a small percentage of interviews result in profiles, which contain a clear beginning, middle, and end and naturally form a narrative account. None of the five participants' interviews resulted in a transcript that could stand alone as a narrative profile. Therefore, I arranged the participant's words and thoughts into the chronological order in which the experiences they relayed actually occurred. I then inserted my own thoughts and observations of the participants into the narrative to create profiles. The names and places were changed to conceal the participants' identities; however, to provide greater authenticity, their words were left intact without any major changes to grammar or syntax.

Using Conner (2021) as a frame of reference, I italicized my own words and thoughts included in the profile. Minor changes to syntax and any words to develop the details of the story were placed in brackets, but not italicized. Words that described nonverbal communication, facial expressions, other gestures, etc. were placed in parenthesis. I did so in order to enable the reader to distinguish my words from the words

or thoughts of the participants. The narratives in the form of profiles appear in the order in which the persons were interviewed.

Before each narrative, I establish who each person is and provide an italicized brief introduction. The participants' stories as they recount the experiences that shaped their teaching style, successes, failures, practices, strategies, routines, and systems that make them effective teachers comes next. There are grammatical errors because I kept their words intact. Following the narrative, I provide a final personal reflection, which is also italicized to remind you these are my words.

Lastly, these stories are included to answer the first two research questions regarding the perceptions, experiences, and practices of successful mathematics teachers who work with African American children in underperforming Title I elementary schools. These contextualized experiences, shared from the participant's perspective, are vital in determining what is needed to create an academically and socially rich environment that produces gains yearly despite the obstacles their students must traverse.

Ms. Shavon. Ms. Shavon was one of the first participants to agree to be interviewed. She had been teaching in high poverty Title I schools for her entire career and was considered an expert math teacher by her peers. For the study and was very transparent in relating her story from the initial interview. At the time of our interview, she had been teaching for 18 years, all of which have been in a Title I setting. She taught in three different counties in grades one, three, and five during her career. Most of those years were spent in third grade.

Ms. Shavon is currently a fifth-grade teacher at Sunnydale Elementary. According to the Georgia Department of Education (2018b), students should typically grow between

35 and 65 Student Growth Percentiles (SGP) yearly to maintain or improve their current rating by the eighth grade. Those with constantly higher SGPs are more likely to make significant progress. On average, Ms. Shavon usually moves about 10% of her class to a distinction of *proficient* or *distinguished* and about 50% to *developing* on the Georgia Milestones with a SGP averaging about 40%.

***Meet Ms. Shavon.** Ms. Shavon is a 6 ft. tall, medium-built African American woman who appears to be in her 40's. She is the mother of one child and lives in a neighboring county. We are both teachers in Sunnydale County, so our paths initially crossed at a Math 24 Tournament where we were coaches for one of many opposing teams. Little did I know that years later, our paths would cross again as I served as an Early Intervention Program (EIP) teacher and would get to observe her in action as she taught her math class.*

Due to the Covid 19 pandemic, I could not interview Ms. Shavon in person or observe her class, so she agreed to meet via the Zoom video conferencing tool. During the meetings, I kept my camera on with a blurred background so she could see my facial expressions and feel more comfortable during the interview while not being distracted by my surroundings. Although she was prompt for each interview and willing from the first interview to share without hesitation, she did not turn on her camera due to an unstable Internet connection. Even though I could not see visual cues, her tone of voice made me believe she was comfortable during the interview process. She spoke in a very down-to-earth, friendly, yet matter-of-fact tone while balancing the interview with her duties as a mother. In the following profile, Ms. Shavon recounted stories of her childhood

experiences, aspirations, teaching path, strategies, future plans, and advised teachers who serve similar populations.

In her own words. I pretty much grew up like my students [with] a low socioeconomic background. When you grow up, you look back on your life and you don't see, as a kid, that, I mean, man, we really struggled. But, you don't see that until you grow up, and you look back. I guess I was in a single-parent household. My mom wasn't married, but there was a male figure in my house for 14 years. Back then, they called [it] common-law marriage. I saw my daddy; my dad was part of my life, but [he] lived [in the city]. So it's not like I saw my daddy every day.

I grew up in a very small town where everybody knows everybody. My neighborhood was one of the ones, like, my friend's mom [would say], "Yeah, you can go play, but I'll come pick you up before it gets dark." You know, she was like, "you gotta be in when the streetlights go on." I think that's why, as a teacher, I [can] relate to my kids so much. When I see them, I see me.

[In school] we were on a track[ing] system [where] everybody got a promotion and retention score kind of like a grade point average (GPA). Based on your score, high, medium, or low, that's how they put you in your classroom, and they still do it now. Every year in elementary school, except for second grade, I was in the same class, pretty much, with the same kids because we were what you call the high achieving students. I'll never forget second grade. I don't know what happened to first grade, but I got put in one of the lower classes in second grade. I was smarter than everybody in that class, and I would come home complaining, "Mama, they don't know how to do this." And, you know, I'm finishing with my work early. And now I'm starting to get in trouble. I'm that

kid that finished the work early and was getting in trouble because she had nothing to do. And then my mom was like, “Well, you shouldn’t have been playing around.”

I remember saying, I cannot deal with these kids next year. I cannot be in this. I cannot be in this class again. So, in third grade, I ended up getting back with my friends who I [was] in class with kindergarten and first grade, and we, pretty much, [were] in every class together [until] we graduated.

Math was always one of my favorite subjects [in] elementary and middle school. Shavon [speaking of herself in third person] knew that math, and everybody [knew that]. But I'll never forget my junior year when I got to Ms. Mathis' class (pseudonym). Like, she just, oh, gosh, she made me feel like I was just a horrible math student because she was the type of teacher that wanted you to do things her way! If you could solve a problem, and you figure out different ways of solving it, she didn't like that. And after that, everything I took, like math-wise, I just was intimidated until I got to college. And that's when I realized then, like, I let her opinion on me. It really shaped who I was, but I had to realize like, I can't let what people say about me dictate how I really act. And so, as a teacher, even if a child can't do anything, I still try to build them up and make them think that they can be everything and do everything because I just knew how that just set me so far back as a student.

Even negative childhood experiences can be used as a catalyst to implement effective teaching strategies. In the interview, Ms. Shavon recalled another incident, this time with Ms. Champ, a high school English teacher, that affected her teaching style.

My issue with Ms. Champ (pseudonym) went outside of the classroom because she ended up being our cheerleading coach. And I quit. I quit cheerleading because I

didn't want her to be the coach. So, she kind of had it out for me because I quit cheering. And I'll never forget. It was my junior year, I think, and I really didn't like grammar, so I was just doing enough just to get by. I kind of had like low grades in grammar, but I knew I was getting to like the literature side. Now reading literature, that was my thing. "Like, can we just get past this writing and grammar? Let's get to the stories [and get] into the reading. I'm ready for that." I had a low average and Ms. Champ and my French teacher were talking. You know how teachers gossip. [Ms. Champ said,] "Yes, Shavon is gonna flunk out the basketball team because she's gonna flunk my class." It made me so mad. I knew I wasn't gonna make no B in that class, but I knew I wasn't gonna fail. I did enough just to pass. When I passed, I went by her, and I said, "Now who won't be bouncing a basketball?" and told [her] I don't appreciate you discussing my grades with nobody else. It taught me not to discuss my kids with other teachers. In fact, when people [try] to tell me about children, I always tell them [to] let me get to know them for myself. I learned to get to know my kids for myself. I'm not gonna take [anyone else's] opinions of my students. It [also] taught me to really lean towards what I had saw in teachers like Ms. Knight.

Continuing to apply her childhood experiences to the way she teaches today, Ms. Shavon remembered positive experiences from her early years in school. Ms. Shavon recalled being a student in Ms. Knight's class.

Ms. Knight was loving. You knew she liked you, and she genuinely cared about us. She was fun. Her class was fun. She made learning fun, and you could talk to her. She was approachable. She always had a smile on her face and everything. Even when you messed up, she corrected you in a way that made you feel like, although you're wrong,

she made you feel you were right anyway. It's just her spirit. (Pauses for a moment) Like she was just a genuinely nice person. We all loved her, and everybody want to be up under Miss McKnight [because] she made time [for us]. [For example,] when we were outside for recess, if we wanted to talk to her, she didn't make us go play. She sat down and she would talk to us, everybody. Everybody was trying to get her attention, but she made sure to give everybody some time. [I knew when] I got into teaching, I wanted to be like her. I want[ed] my classroom to be fun [and] engaging. And I want[ed] my kids to know that their opinion matters. Even if they ['re in] left field [and it doesn't] make sense, it matters.

[Now] growing up, I initially wanted to be a pediatrician; however, [in the] 11th or 12th grade, we had people from the community college come and talk to us about the requirements of being a doctor. They told us, "You have to go to school [for] at least 8-12 years." In my mind, I was like, "Oh, my God, that's a long time to go to school." I knew that if I wasn't going to be a doctor, I [wanted] to be a teacher. I felt like no matter what I did, my job would be helping children. Honestly, my dad talked so bad[ly] about [teaching]. [He asked] "Why would you want to be a teacher? They don't make no money." And, and when he said that, I started looking at [how] some of the teachers at my school dressed, where they lived, [and decided] I [didn't] want to be a teacher.

I graduated from high school [and went to] college. In my family, it's kind of like a big deal because none of my other cousins, but heck, to be honest, like the ones that live where we lived, didn't even graduate [high school]. My sister and I were [were] the first to go to college. So, to have me and my sister not only graduate high school, but go off to college and have successful careers is a big deal, not necessarily just for my family, but

for my neighborhood where I grew up. I've had people to tell me how proud they are of me, because I made it out. It was like, you made it out. You did something with yourself. It's kind of, it's kind of humbling and to know that people see me, and they know that, hey, it's possible to leave Smallville. You know, there's life outside of Smallville.

In college, I had a whole totally different degree [than teaching]. After hearing not only my dad, but other people too speaking negatively [about] teachers, I went to [college] undecided my first year. But like I said, I always wanted to work with kids. [I] chose career paths that even though I wouldn't be teaching children, I still would be working with kids[and] making a difference in children's lives.

When I graduated [from college] in 2000 with a degree in journalism, it was kind of hard to find a job, so I ended up working at head start. [While working at] head start, [I decided] "I don't care what nobody's saying. I know [teaching is] what I'm supposed to be doing." I went back to school in 2001, that's when 911 hit, after I heard about the TAPP program. [*The state Teacher Academy for Preparation and Pedagogy (TAPP) program allows individuals with degrees in a field other than education to teach while completing educational classes needed for certification*].

My first day of teaching was exciting. I was a little nervous because when I got hired, I got hired to teach second grade, but about 2 weeks [before I was] supposed to start, I got a call from the principal to say she was moving me to fifth grade, self-contained. I [had taken] a special education class [and] when it talk[ed] about self-contained, it [referred to] Mild Intellectual Disability (MID) and Moderate Intellectual Disability (MOID) babies in wheelchair[s]. When she told me I was going to have a fifth grade class and self-contained kids, I was thinking I was teaching kids [with disabilities].

Once I got there, I was excited, [yet a] little nervous at the same time. I talked to my auntie, and [she said], “Well, you know what, God put you in these kids’ lives for a reason. You don't know why you got moved and why you are working with these kids. You are with these children for a reason.” So, on the first day of school, I [said] alright, Lord, what [do] you want me to do with these kids?

I started teaching fifth grade at my elementary school. For 3 years, I taught all EIP kids. [*Students in the EIP are selected because of their low scores and are offered intensive intervention to bridge their specific learning gaps.*] I had the low kids. My first year, I was like, “I quit.” They were bad. My assistant principal told me, “You just have to go in there one day and just act like you lost your mind.” [Since] I was a TAPP teacher, if I wanted to, I could have left in January with no problem. After December, I was like, man, these kids not about to run me. I came back and [acted] like I lost my mind. I took them by surprise because they weren’t used to that. But what I did [was], I sat down one day, and I just had a conversation with them. What I found out was that they were bad, not because they were bad, but because they were angry. They told me [that] ever since they have been in school, they knew the teachers didn't care about them. They knew the principals didn't care nothing about them [and] nobody cared if they learned or not.

[Those] first 3 years was all about me just going so hard. They were low, and they knew they were low, but they wanted to learn. I [knew I had] to be the best I [could] be because these kids want[ed] to learn. I [gave the kids] everything that I had, but I also wanted to make it fun for them.

I'll never forget, I had one little girl [who said], "I've been struggling with reading since I was in second grade, and they still keep sending me on." So I made them a promise. I said, "Well, listen, I'm here to help you, but if y'all gonna cut up, be disrespectful, [and] be bad, then I can't help you, [and] you're not gonna learn. We're not gonna do anything." After that conversation, everything changed. They started trying, and they actually worked. [Before the end of the year test,] one of my coworkers [said], "Well, I know your kid is probably ain't gonna do good, but they've got to take this test." I [asked], "what do you mean, they're not gonna do good?" She [said], "well, we don't expect your kids to pass." What do you mean y'all don't expect them to pass? I expect them to pass." [That year] a girl in my class score[d] the highest score on the writing test, and [another] one of my students who was very good at math scored just as high as the top two [kids] in the top classes.

I [also] learned that it doesn't necessarily matter about what these kids get when they take the [end of grade] test. My assistant principal told me, "Miss Shavon, I know your kids didn't score high enough, but you move[d] those children. I [have] never seen kids grow so much. Some of these kids have grown 2 or 3 years in just this one year. I know we talk about the scores, but what we need to look at is the growth. These kids have grown a lot, so don't worry about what the score says. You have grown these kids." So, that's when I learned then not to put so much emphasis on that final score, but [on] the growth of these kids.

After that first year [with] those kids, I learned that all I had to do was sit down and have a conversation, [an] open dialogue, [with the children]. I try to do that every year with my kids. If I see some kids cutting up, and I ask, "Okay, well, what's the

problem? What's going on?" [It's] not necessarily all about academics. Children don't care how much you know until they know how much you care. At the end of the year, [that girl] came to me, and she said, "Ms. Shavon, thank you." I was like, "For what?" She [replied], "cuz I know how to read now. Thank you, cuz you helped me." And it wasn't just her. Her parents [commented that] they'd never seen her so excited about reading and school. Even when I moved and came back, every time I saw that little girl, no matter where we were, she always came up to me and gave me a hug. I see her parents even now.

When I'm teaching my kids, I'm seeing [a] younger me, and what I'm doing for those kids, what I wish somebody would have did for younger Shavon. I'm these kids. I grew up with the odds against me based on where I grew up. My neighborhood was rough, and my cousins were rough, so [we] definitely had a bad name. When people [saw me,] they automatically [thought], "Can't do nothing, rough." [My childhood experiences] make me go hard for these kids. It makes me want to give these kids the opportunity to see that [they] can be somebody, [and] there's a world outside of my neighborhood and my community. So [as] a teacher, I want to inspire my kids [to know that] it doesn't matter what people say [or] think about you, or where you come from. If it's inside of you to be somebody, who no matter what it is you want to be, you work [to] be the best that you can be.

I'm at a Title I school because of me. That's where I started in school. I feel like I'm where I'm supposed to be. I had the opportunity to go to another school, [but] when I went over there, the vibe was just a little different. I remember thinking, "I don't know if I can teach at a school like this." Years ago, I had a little girl in my class who was not

African American. I had so many problems with that little girl. [Her] parent [went] to the board, and it got to the point where my class had to be interviewed. They had to do an investigation in my class. And I [was] like, “what in the world's going on.” When the investigation was all said and done, my admin [asked me], “Why didn't you tell me this girl was [like that].” I said, “because I'm handling my discipline in class.” When they did the interview, my kids [told] how disrespectful the little girl was to me. A lot of times, I really didn't say anything because her classmates would get onto her. So, with that little girl, and I thought about if I went to a school that's full of people like [that] . . . No! All that aside, I am where I'm supposed to be. Like, I used to be these children. I feel like I'm in a Title I school because I'm a Title I kid. I know how to relate to the Title I kids because I was inside of one.

Having once been a Title I student, Ms. Shavon reflected on what her teachers had done that worked, her experiences as a novice teacher, and her ongoing discoveries about math instruction. I attentively listened as she explained how she used her wealth of knowledge and authentic relationship-building techniques to create a classroom environment that bred success. Although I could not physically observe the students because of the virtual class dynamics, as she recounted a typical year in her math class, my mind flooded with memories from the previous year of observing her in action.

[She explained that] most years, I give them a survey, and I read the answers to the questions [to] get an idea of who's in my class, what type of learner I'm dealing with, [and] what type of kid I'm dealing with. I [also use] informal observations of the kids in the class as a whole and the children and as individuals [to] see what they like and what they don't like, what style of teaching they respond to best, and what they don't respond.

Every year, it just depends on the kids; I try something different. In past years my kids in another county love[d] music, so we made raps for everything, especially in social studies and science [even in] math we made raps [and] videos. [But] when I came back to Sunnydale County, and I saw that I had some kids that liked it, but as a whole, not all of them like[d] music. Even though they were active kids, they were, they were what I call shamed-faced. So me rapping and rhyming everything didn't go over well [with] those kids because they didn't want anybody to hear them or see them. Those kids learned a lot through what we would call a lecture [and] note taking. They were more visual learners and auditory learners.

We [also use] data notebooks and [conduct] data talks where we sit down and [use the] data to [discuss] their strengths and weaknesses. I let them identify where they think they're strong and where they're weak. We talk and have conversations about what we can do to make sure those [weaknesses] are no longer weaknesses, and the areas that we are strong in, what can we do to make [sure] we don't become weak in those areas. I feel like the data notebooks [and] data talks is a great tool because if they know where they are and where they need to be, they have an idea of how to get there. [They realize], "I can't just rely on Ms. Shavon to do this; [but] I [have] to work with her too, because she's not one that has to take the weekly test or taking the STAR test. I got to know this stuff for myself."

The curriculum is a good resource [but] I usually look in the math book [and use it] as a supplement. I say that because my kids have been *below* and *well below* grade level readers. I found early on in my teaching career [that] when I tried to give them work to do out [of] the book, it took away from me working in my small group because they

were confused by what they had to do. They couldn't read and comprehend a book on their own, like, especially if it was word problems. I found it easier for me to come up with problems. Now, of course, it was still on grade level. But, I just found it was easier for me to outline it for them in a way that they can understand.

As Ms. Shavon shared, I could not help but reflect on my observations of her teaching math. She was not making this up. I recalled several instances where she began her instruction from the math book as she explained the procedures and skills the students were to master. She would then assign the students practice problems (some from the textbook and others self-developed or other sources) according to their academic level. The students also knew their class responsibilities and facilitated transitions. I could tell from how well her lessons flowed and from looking at her lesson plans that she meticulously planned for every aspect of the lesson. After sharing her thoughts about the curriculum and how she typically begins her year, she turned her attention to the daily routines and instructional practices that she found essential in helping her students grow each year academically.

Typically, I begin with number talks [a block of time where students try to solve a problem mentally in as many ways possible, then share and critique answers] for about 8-10 minutes. From there, I move into the mini-lesson and give them the learning target for the day [as well as] the standards. I let them know what our focus is, and I start by modeling some problems. Then we do guided practice together, they do the independent practice, and then from there, I determine who needs who's ready to move on or who needs more instruction one-on-one. I [use] informal observations, even when in a small group, on a daily basis to see if they not only got the answer correct, but how they've

solved the problems. [Towards the end of the lesson,] we come back together to discuss some of the problems and [either] end with our problem of the day or go over [other] problems to make sure that they understand.

Friday is what I call my test day. [That's] when they take [a] weekly test. I take a grade on what we[ve] done all week so they [can] see that, "Okay, working in a smaller group, repeat or having it remediated for me through the week; did I really master this?" Depending on [my] observations during the week and how they [did on] their test, [I] decide whether [or not] to keep them in the small groups to reteach it a different way. [If] these strategies haven't worked this week, [when we] come back together next week, we're gonna try something different. We'll try it a different way.

The biggest challenge is not having a lot of resources. By resource, I mean manipulatives, ready-to-make games, and devices. To overcome [the lack of resources], I find and make games that are reproduced, make copies, and laminate them. One year, I tried guided math. [Guided math is a small group approach to instruction. Students rotate through stations in teacher-created groups to solidify prior knowledge. In one of the stations, the teacher may choose to provide instruction on current skills, remediate, or accelerate learning based on the identified needs of the group.] That was a lot of work, but I saw the benefits of it. Because we [had] limited computers, I made a lot of games. I used the student data so they knew what their score was (high, medium, or low). When I [made] games, I leveled them high, medium, or low with a sticker so when it [was time for] the workstation, the students knew [they had] 20 minutes then to rotate. They knew when it was their day to go. For the most part, once they learn[ed] the routine, I was able to just take a step back, and it worked for them.

[Although] I saw the benefit [from] guided math, it was a lot to do. [Now] we really don't have any planning days. I [was] spending my weekend trying to do all that and, I hate to say it, but I was giving too much time away to work. I did it for one year, but I didn't do it again because I didn't have time. I had no planning time anymore. All the planning time was being spent on other stuff. [I] don't have enough time to do stuff that we need to do because we're busy doing stuff that we got to do for other [people]. Remember back in the day when you'd have planning time on your planning time, you could grade your papers on your planning time, [and] you could start on your lesson plans, revamp your lessons, or (pauses) have time to set stuff out for when your kids come back; you can actually get ready for the next subject? [Now] planning time is like, not like that because every day you're going somewhere, somebody's office to do something.

Ms. Shavon is a highly effective teacher, yet she had strong feelings about the added responsibilities and pressures placed on teachers. In addition to being a mother and fifth grade teacher, she was also the grade teacher who acted as the liaison between the principal and other grade level teachers, served on the Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) committee, and sponsored the school's Math Team. I knew from working with her that she took all her responsibilities seriously and showed pride in competently completing tasks punctually. I also knew that studies indicated that one reason teachers leave the profession was pressure. With this in mind, I asked her, "If you could change anything about the classroom or educational structure, what would you change?"

The first thing I would do (pauses) I'd change the class size. I [would] take it back to how it was when I first started teaching. The kids that are EIP [and] are being served [would] have regular education class[es], but they [would] be with peers like them; and not mixing these classrooms where you [have] all these high, medium, or low. It's unfortunate [because] even though teachers mean well, either the high are gonna suffer or low gonna suffer, but somebody is not gonna get the best education.

I [also] would advocate more for money to buy resources for teachers so that teachers [are] not spending all their money. [If they choose to, spend their money, it's] not because [it is a] you got to [spend your money] type thing, but [because they] want to. I'd even [adjust] the time that's spent on the subjects. I love math, and I get math, but I don't understand why math is 70 minutes and reading is only 45 minutes. [We] gotta do reading and writing in the 90-minute span, but we have 70 minutes for math? Well, part of the reason why they struggle in math [is] because they can't read.

If I had the power, the standardized tests would not be the end-all-be-all. The demands that are placed on teachers, if I had the power, it wouldn't. [They would] not be looming over teachers. We [would] test kids throughout the school year [so] you get a better picture of a kid versus giving them one test at the end of the school year.

Ms. Shavon, based on her experiences as a Title I student and a veteran 18-yr Title I teacher, had many ideas she believed, if implemented, would help other students and teachers. The passion in her voice as she explained her proposals for the future of education gave me a deep impression that she loved what she was doing but desired to see changes beyond the reach of a classroom teacher. As we concluded our final interview, I asked about her plans and the advice she would give other Title I teachers.

Well, hopefully, I'll see myself in admin [administration]. I see myself coming out of the classroom and working on the next level. When I first got into education, I wanted to be a principal. You know, God had me in a classroom a lot longer than I wanted to be, so then I kind of got away from that because well, I guess I'm in a classroom. I have worked for some great admin, but [I've also] worked for some who forgot what it was like to be in the classroom. [Now] I just want to be at the next level, not just making it easy for teachers, but letting teachers know that the work still [can] be done; but we just got to do it a little bit different[ly]. And then advocating for the kids a little more. I want to be in a position where I want to help teachers or maybe [to help them] realize that this is really not a field for you after all.

I hold true to the fact that students need someone (pauses to collect her words) who's going to be there for them [and] who genuinely cares about them. They've got to know that you have their best interests at heart. When I go into the classroom every day, I might not like their behavior, [but I'm] not gonna say I don't like them. I'm there for those kids to make sure that they become the best version of themselves. They can be whatever that looks like. [I] give them my all.

[Also] make it one where the kids are comfortable [and] not so serious. You know, like I tell my kids, I'm a silly person, so I can't be serious all the time. I want them to feel they're free to be themselves within range, there are limits [to] the things we say, what we say, and how we say it. Try to promote a fun, loving, and engaging atmosphere. It's not going to happen fast; the light bulb is not going to come on instantly. Those relationships are not going to be built instantly, but you just got to keep working. You just got to keep trying, and no matter what. Don't give up. You've got to try different

things to get different results. Once you realize that these kids are worthy, you see them as people [and] you teach them as, as if they are worthy.

[Although relationships are important] it's not just [about] building relationships but [making] sure that you stay abreast of academics and education changes. You gotta be open to change (brief pause) and accept constructive criticism. I can't teach in 2020 the way I taught in 2002. The children are different. So much in education has changed. There are new initiatives in education, so you have to be willing to change, not be stubborn, [or] stuck in your own way. As the times grow, teachers have to grow and evolve as well. I always tell my kids [that] I'm a lifelong learner, too. It's okay to make a mistake. Search [for] different ways to inspire or to engage students.

***Reflection.** Ms. Shavon's story was very insightful and impactful even to me as the interviewer. As she told the stories, it was as if she was reliving those experiences all over again. She would go in and out of first, second, and third person almost seamlessly. She would be the narrator, the student, or her current self at any point in the interview. She was also very meticulous in her descriptions of each situation. Often, she would make a statement and then loop back to the same statement only with added content to clarify or delve deeper into the recounted situation.*

As she told of her experiences, I couldn't help but notice her connection and dedication to the students as she repeated statements like "I am these kids," "when I see them, I see me," and "it makes me go hard for them." I also noticed her dedication to the craft of teaching. During the interview, she explained how she determines the student's needs (both academic and emotional) and how she plans her instruction and time to meet each child where they are. I could not help but wonder if this trait would emerge in other

participants and if her deep connection and dedication to both the children and the craft were key to her success as a teacher.

I wondered to what extent the culturally relevant teaching style was the bridge that allowed her students to cross over the many racial injustices perpetuated by our educational system. Some of the most apparent aspects of her teaching style included: a tangible belief that all students could learn, high expectations, student-specific assistance to reach the expectations, an authentic, reciprocated love and respect for her students, and unique ways to embed the students' cultural proclivities in her lessons. As I continued the other interviews, I wondered if any of the same themes would occur.

Ms. Keisha. Ms. Keisha was also one of the first participants to agree to be interviewed. She has spent her entire educational career serving African American students in Title I school settings and was very transparent in relating her story from the initial interview. I have provided an introduction that provides background information before her narrative.

At the time of the interviews, Ms. Keisha was a fourth-grade teacher at Sunnydale Elementary. According to the Georgia Department of Education (2018b), students should typically grow between 35 and 65 Student Growth Percentiles (SGP) yearly to maintain or improve their current rating by the eighth grade. Those with consistently higher SGPs are more likely to make significant progress. Ms. Keisha's classes usually average 61% passing the Georgia Milestones with a distinction of *proficient* or *distinguished*, while her SGP averages about 40%. At the time of our interview, she had been teaching for 18 years, all of which have been in Sunnydale County Title I schools.

Meet Ms. Keisha. Ms. Keisha is a 6 ft. tall African American woman who appears to be in her mid-40s. Ms. Keisha is the mother of one child and lives in Sunnydale County. She has taught second grade, computer lab, and fourth grade during her tenure. I first became acquainted with Ms. Keisha when she began teaching in the computer lab at Creekside Elementary, where I was an Academic Coach. Although we taught in the same school, we rarely interacted other than passing in the hall or seeing her work with the children. Even then, I could tell she was passionate about working with our student population.

It was not until she transitioned to teaching fourth grade math that I became aware of her ability to engage, educate, and elevate her students. Although her class, aesthetically speaking, did not fit the mold of what is traditionally associated with an effective teacher, the results of her craft spoke for themselves. As an academic coach, I vividly remember walking into her room, noticing materials and supplies stacked awkwardly on her desk and in various places around the room, hearing student voices at levels louder than I was accustomed to, and seeing students moving around the room. I wondered if she had issues with classroom management. However, as I began to look closely, I noticed that the students were actively engaged in their learning stations. They seem to know where to be, what to do, and how long to stay in their stations.

Over the next 2-3 years, I worked with her as a coach and then alongside her as an EIP teacher. Each year I observed her teaching math class, I could tell she was honing her skills and discovering new ways to teach and engage her students. When I reached the research phase of my study, I worked up the nerve to ask her to participate.

Due to the Covid 19 pandemic, I could not interview Ms. Keisha in person or observe her class, so she agreed to meet via the Zoom video conferencing tool. Our previous interactions made the interviews less awkward. At times, it felt as if we were discussing in the school's teacher's lounge. Although we had internet connectivity issues, she was more than willing to share her experiences educating African American students in a Title I school. In the following profile, Ms. Keisha spoke of her childhood experiences, aspirations, teaching path, strategies, future plans, and advised teachers who serve similar populations.

Ms. Keisha began by sharing experiences from her early childhood until high school. The illustrations and examples gave practical examples of how her parents and teachers impacted her from elementary through high school age. In later sections of her story, she explains just how influential those experiences were in shaping the teacher she is today.

In her own words. My mom was a math teacher, and my father was a chemistry teacher [until] he decided to leave the educational field and become a research chemist for a corporation. Education was something we didn't play with in my family. They were very intent that you [were]going to get an education and you [were] going to use it, so education was very important to me, too. As a child, I would go to school, come home for school, do any homework I had, and do any extracurricular activities. All the extracurricular stuff I did at school required that I had a certain GPA. For instance, in order to be in the beta club, you had to have at least a 3.5 average and to do the [other]

extracurricular stuff, my dad required me to be passing all my classes with “A” or “B” in order to continue to go to them.

Elementary school was great, but it wasn’t as impactful as middle school and high school. I really learned from watching my teachers in middle and high school what type of teacher I wanted to be for my kids [by] the type of teacher they were for me. [In] middle school, I had a chorus teacher that I did not like. But, as I got older, I realized that the reason I didn’t like him is because he was telling me things that I should have known. It was just irritating, and it didn’t help that he knew my piano teacher. So, they kind of like tagged teamed on me. It really was for my best interest, but at the time, in middle school, when they were doing it, I did not see it that way. I saw it as another punishment, but as an adult, I see that they were just trying to help me reach my full potential. It was all about me, it wasn’t about what scores I made on a test, what family I grew up in, [or] what household I lived [in]. There, it was about “this is what we see Keisha being successful. We’re gonna help you get there. Even when you leave us, you’re gonna be successful.”

High School was a little bit different because I went to three different high schools. [I went] from where it was one high school in a small town to a high school where it was predominantly Black. All the schools I had been in before [Northeastern] had been pretty mixed population, so going from being in a mixed population to a predominantly Black population was a little bit of a change for me.

It sounds crazy, but my teachers at Northeastern High demanded more of me than the teachers at the schools I had been at previously. My teachers at my other schools saw that I was a smart child and [didn’t challenge me], so the work was pretty easy for me.

When I got to Northeastern High, they made sure I was going to do what I needed to do. I had a few teachers that I was a teacher pet for, and they kind of let me slide; but the majority of my teachers, they didn't. I was going to do it to the best of my ability. [For example,] during my 11th grade year, [I was placed] in a trigonometry class full of seniors, but [the teacher] took no pity on the fact that I was a junior with a class full of seniors. He was like, "You got the scores to get her'e, you got to do the work."

They had a higher standard because they were historically a Black school. They took pride in their history as a predominantly Black school and, therefore, required us to be better. The year I graduated, [some of] my classmates were the children of a city council [woman] and congresswoman [who] made demands on the school as well. Even though [the teachers at Northeastern] required more of us than other schools, they never got the recognition that other schools got. I think that why they required so much of us is because they never got the recognition that they should have gotten. [However,] they were determined that we were going to be better, even if nobody saw that we were better.

I really learned more than just a regular education at Northeastern High. I had my first protest at Northeastern because we were taught how to do a protest in our social studies class. I remember everything that happened the day we had the protest. At the time, there was a lot of violence going on in Sunnydale County, and so the school district decided to move all of our football and our basketball games to the daytime instead of at night. We didn't think it was fair because we felt like it wasn't us that was causing the violence. It was other people that weren't even in our school. So, we went out in protest about it. We had all decided that we were gonna walk out during second period and sit on the football field. We were going to make them listen to us.

A lot of the teachers knew we were planning to do it. Some of the teachers, like Dr. Sweat, my social teacher, actually let students back into the building so that they would not get in trouble. [He] turned in that all his kids were there and I don't think anybody was in his class. I don't know if they ever found out what he did. He was trying not to be proud of us, but he couldn't help but be proud of us because he's like, "Well, at least I know they're paying attention because they did everything that I've talked about that happens in a protest" and we actually got some changes made.

Dr. Sweat was this little White guy [who] actually had two doctorates. He could have went to pretty much school in Sunnydale County, but he didn't. He [was] like, "I'm gonna be here because you need me." There weren't very many Caucasian teachers at Northeastern, but the ones who was there, for the most part, really took an interest in their kids. The teachers who were there were there because that's where they want to be. Not because they had to be, [but because] they wanted to be there. They wanted to make a difference in their students' lives. Even in our worst moments, they were proud of us, and it meant a lot.

After sharing her pre-collegial experiences, Ms. Keisha continued by revealing pivotal turning points in her journey to become a teacher, lessons from her first years of teaching, and how she establishes the culture of her classroom. Each set of experiences seemed to be connected by two common threads which were high expectations and dedication to ensuring student success.

I [knew I] wanted to be a lawyer. I always knew I wanted to work with kids, so I wanted to be a juvenile defense attorney. [In college] I had a Latin politics class, and the professor gave us what she called a choice, but to me really wasn't a choice. We could

write a 50-page paper or volunteer at the Latino outreach program that went to the schools. Math and science was my thing; writing was not. So, I chose to go volunteer versus doing the writing assignment.

I got assigned to this sweet little girl from Ecuador named Maria. She was in kindergarten. When I went for my initial meeting, her teacher looked at me and said, “Well, I don’t even know why they’re making you waste your time here. Maria can’t learn. She doesn’t know anything. She doesn’t even know how to write her name [or] how to speak English.” Every time I went to visit her classroom, watching how the teacher treated the kids made me furious. If you don’t like children, why are you teaching? I just couldn’t stand the fact that it was teachers out there who didn’t really want to teach. Then I thought about it; maybe instead of trying to help them after they get into the system, if I teach, I can help them before they get into the system. I set my mind to make sure that Maria could do everything that [the teacher] claimed Maria couldn’t do. I was very proud that by the time we ended our program, not only could Maria spell her first and her last name, [but] she could [also] write her first name and her last name. So, that made me decide to go into teaching. I promise you [if] I would have never been told to go to that program, I probably would be in somewhere doing law right now..

When I became a teacher [and was looking for a job, I was told,] “Don’t go to any of the ‘B’ schools. You don’t want to go there [because] they were all poverty schools. Go to [another] school, but not [those] schools.” [However, despite their warnings, I took a job at a Title I school.] I loved my first day teaching. My kids were amazing and they took to my form of teaching very well. The first day of school, I told my principal, I did not want school desks, I wanted tables. I put my sign out that said Well University and

told my second graders that they were no longer second graders. They were all college university students and [had] to act as if they were in college. They wouldn't let other students tell them they were in second grade. Nobody could tell them they were in second grade. They were college students at Well University.

I've always felt like (pauses) you should always shoot high. If your requirements are higher than what the actual requirements are, even if your kids don't quite meet your requirements, they're gonna definitely get the requirement. So, for me, it wasn't just enough for them to think that they were in second grade. I wanted them to think about their future, and I want them to think about what they wanted it to be. I just want them to believe in themselves as much as I do. I feel like if I believe in them, they believe in themselves

My kids from even way back then we have a standing joke. I saw two of them the other day and I asked, "Okay, so what are you doing in life? And one of them said, Well, I'm not working right now. I paused, because, wait a minute, that was not the deal we made. He's like this, "But what do you mean?" I said, "The deal was that while you're in school, whatever, you asked for, I bought and when I got older, you were gonna take care of me." He's like, "Ms. Keisha, if you want, when I get some money," I (*interrupting his sentence*) was like, "That wasn't the point about the money. Somebody was supposed to be a mechanic. Somebody's supposed to be a doctor. Somebody's supposed to be a lawyer. So when my car broke down, I could take it to you, you fix it. When I was sick, I could go to the hospital, and you were gonna take care of me." He laughed at me [and] he told me, "Well Miss K, I'm going to go get a job at the barber shop." I said, "that's fine, I got a son. You can cut his hair. That's all I need you to do is follow the rules that

we set back then.” And he’s like, “Well, here’s my number. As soon as I get in my shop I’m gonna call you Miss Keisha cuz, I mean, you right, we did make that agreement.” And it just does something for me to know that they took what I said seriously. I didn’t care what job they had. I didn’t care what career they chose. I just wanted them to have a future.

[Another thing to know about my class is] I guess my class can be loud because we’re always doing something. I have a very high tolerance for loud talking, [so] I do tend to get in trouble about how loud my class is. It’s because they’re excited, having fun, [and] they’re learning. So, I think my class is, like, a little more comfortable, but down to earth class.

My kids and I understand that we are a family. I tell them on the first day of school, “this is your family. These are your brothers and your sisters, I’m mom; we are a family. The same way you get mad at your mom at home, you’re going to probably get mad at me too. The same [way] you get mad at your brothers and sisters at home, you’re probably going to get mad at your classmates. But just like any other family, we come back together and we stick together.” So, in my classroom, they know that they are respected, they matter, they have value, and that their classmates have value. [That] allows us to be able to have fun, do things together and just focus on each other, and focus on what we’re there for, to learn. I also tell my kids that “my room is a safe place.”

I go out of my way to never lie to my students. I never promised them that I could do something unless I know I can do it. That’s rule number one with my room. “I’m not gonna lie to you; please, don’t lie to me.” I think our disciplinary problems come [when] we say stuff in the heat of the moment that we know we’re not going to be able to back

up; or when we calm down, we're not going to want to do. Discipline is based on leadership [and] if you have very good leadership, then you don't have many discipline problems. They may not like it every time, but you have to have something structured in place. There has to be rules and regulations just like in the real world. I learned a long time ago to try to handle stuff within my classroom [because] I don't want to give up that power. You best believe if my kids go to the office [or] if I call parents, that was the only option I had. I just really believe that that's what cuts down on discipline, when you have things in place for your classroom.

Another thing I try to teach my kids is that you get rewarded for what you do. I know people will say, "Why are you rewarding them? That's what they're supposed to do." Yeah, that is what they're supposed to do. You go to work every day. That's what you're supposed to do, but you're rewarded by a paycheck. I mean, I just say, it's the same thing. We're rewarded by paycheck; I reward them by treats. I like to teach them things that they can use in the real world. Even my classroom jobs have real-world names, like the child that goes and delivers messages is my FedEx person. The teacher assistant [hands] out my papers. My computer technology people are my computer techs[who] handle all the things [relating to] computer use. I also have a pay system in my class. They go to work, they do the job, [and] they get paid. If they get in trouble, [they] get docked.

They [even] choose their parties because if I pick a party, and it's not something they like, I'm not going to get the results that I want. If it's something that they want, that they're trying for, they're gonna work hard to get it. They earn everything they do in my classroom [because] I found that when you just give it to them, they're not going to learn

anything. Unfortunately, in real life, nobody's going to just give you anything, you have to work for it. So, after a while, they start really wanting to come to the party. I just think we have to model for them what we want to see them do in real life.

Ms. Keisha's concern and passion for her students were evident in each of the preceding situations. In addition to those examples, I also had first-hand knowledge of her commitment and dedication to seeing students succeed. One specific instance stands out in my memory of her going the extra mile for her students and pushing them to higher levels of success. A student was having trouble understanding a math standard dealing place value. I'm not sure if it was during or after school, but I remember walking by her classroom and seeing Ms. Keisha using place value manipulatives as she worked one-on-one with the student. Since we share the same love for mathematics, I stopped in and joined in the conversation. The next week, with great excitement, Ms. Keisha explained that the student re-tested and scored significantly higher than the first attempt. With such instances in mind, I asked her to share how her passion for education and concern for her students translates into her daily math classes. The excerpts below details Ms. Keisha's response as she explained how she plans for her lessons, the daily flow of her lessons, instructional strategies, and the use of assessment data to plan for instruction.

[Before I begin teaching,] I look at the standard [to see] what they actually have to know. Once I have a good understanding of what it is they have to know, then I find games that match them. I'm pretty much a game person. I want them to learn when they're playing the game, but I want them to have fun. The biggest part of my planning is making sure the game actually covers what the standard is calling for and is actually going to reinforce that standard I've taught in a mini lesson. I actually spend time playing

the games before I teach it to them. I practice what how I'm going to play the games with them. If I play the game and don't enjoy the game or [it] doesn't really teach that standard; then I don't teach it to them [and] find something else.

Although she did not explicitly state it in the interview, I know, from working with her as an Instructional Math Coach in previous years, that she uses the standards to create a daily lesson plan for each week. The lesson plan, in turn, typically guided the work flow.

On a typical day of math instruction in my classroom, we begin with our mental math meeting. I truly believe that when kids are engaged and want to learn, that's when they really are going to learn. One of my favorite games [during mental math] is the hangman place value game because the kids get excited trying to beat me. They have to ask three questions before they can make a guess of the number. [Soon] they start asking better questions. Instead of saying, "Well, is it a zero?" they start thinking outside the box and ask, "Is the number equal to so many 10s?" They might say, "Is it less than five?" or "is it greater than 10?" They just amaze me with the questions. They start asking to try to understand, thinking, and pulling in other strategies and other skills that we've been going over to get that answer. They would tell me stuff that I hadn't even thought of.

After we have our mental math meeting, I go into stations. Most of my time is spent with the small groups. I really believe that going from concrete, hands-on material to abstract is a very good thing to help them be successful; so when I have stations, I feel I can make the most difference. It's very important to me that [each day] I see two groups, but I try to get to three. I'll usually pull my kids who are lower-level at least three to four times a week during station time, and front load them on what we're going to be

learning for that day. [That way] when I do whole group, they're not so lost and behind that they're not participating [with] the class.

I keep my kids engaged [during their station time] due to a lot of technology [and games] that I use in my room. I love technology because with technology, the kids, I mean, they [are] on their phones all the time, and they like to play games. [As for the games,] I tend to make a class set of the game so everybody can have a set if I decide to send it home for homework or when I'm playing the game to teach them how to play for the first time. [To me] a game can be anything from me setting up the game virtually on the SMART Board, having a physical board game playing with a projector, or me just having the kids come to the carpet and we play the game on the carpet.

I [also] use some of the [small group] time to teach my kids how to play the [instructional] games [so] when they get to their station; they can actually just focus on the stations [and] not interrupt me when I'm with the lower group. I have different ways of helping them learn so they can succeed at the type of activity they're good at. It is a lot of work for the games, but I don't want them to just play something that they have no clue [how to play or] what they're paying for.

Once we finish our stations and group lessons, I try to do an exit ticket. I prefer to do a quick *Kahoot* (*an online, game-based platform that allows teachers to easily choose or create learning games*) because the kids again enjoy that. If I can't do a quick Kahoots, I give [out] large index cards and have a question on the board for them to answer quickly [and] give me their card.

The Kahoot and exit tickets are quick ways to monitor student progress; however, educators have a variety of other ways and reasons to assess student mastery. After

explaining her teaching process, she began to explain in detail how she assesses the students and uses the data to inform her instruction.

Whatever standard I'm teaching, I use school city (*an online test-creation platform with vetted questions*) a lot to assess them throughout the unit. They actually end up with anywhere from two to three tests. The first test, the class takes as a whole just to see what they know [and] figure out where they are. I give them the school city test online [because] it instantly gives me their results, so I can group them that next day. Once I group them, I teach the standard. Once I have completed teaching the standard, I give them a formal test, again on school city. If they don't do well, I go back and reteach that same thing during small group time and allow them to retake the test again.

They usually tend to do better [on the retake] because I give them the option of when they take the test. I [ask], "Okay, do you think you're ready to take this re-test?" And they might not all retake the test on the same day. Some kids might retake the test two days later, some kids might retake the test three days later, and some kids might take the next week after that. However long it takes for them to get a full understanding of that strategy is what I allowed them to do. I think I'm more upset when they fail than they are, because, to me, when they fail, that means I failed them.

I [also] offer my class tutoring afterschool or the option to come during lunch or specials. A lot of them go to the afterschool program, but I like to tutor my kids myself. I know what they need [and] I know how to help them. I also give my home phone number out to my parents so if they're having problems with their homework, they can always call me for help. You know, one year, instead of sending on worksheets home for homework, I sent home games, so that they could play with their family. You do what

you have to do to get parent involvement. And when you don't get parent involvement, you become that parent. You do what you have to do to help those kids succeed.

Following that discussion, she segues into explaining a few of the challenges she faces as a Title I educator and what she does to overcome them.

One of the biggest challenges of teaching in a Title I school is getting the resources that we need. My son goes to what used to be a predominantly White school [that] was one of the first magnet schools. They've always had computer lab [and] access to whatever they needed. We struggle at our school to get any kind of technology [or] books. We got fortunate that we got a new superintendent who said, "This must end. Everything that one school has, every other school [should have]." However, it still wasn't really fair because, yeah, we got a new playground, but so to that school, and they already had a great playground. So now they got two great playgrounds. And we just had that one great playground. You see, I'm saying he's trying, but it's still going to be uneven because you can't take away from those kids. They always had, and if you give to those kids that didn't, the kids who already had are gonna feel some type of way. So, that's my biggest fear when they talk about what's going on now (*referring to the racial tensions stemming from the murder of George Floyd and other African Americans*). Yeah, you want to try to fix the system, but short of breaking the system completely down, you're not gonna be able to fix it.

[Another challenge] is [the students] not knowing the prerequisites. It is very hard to teach kids how to multiply if they don't understand adding, and it is almost impossible to teach them fractions if they don't know how to multiply. So, the biggest [academic] problem I have is them not knowing the prerequisites to what I'm teaching.

If they don't know the prerequisites, I have to teach them because there's no way of going around teaching them. It might take us a little longer to get to where we are going, which is why I have a little problem with the pacing guides that we have. The pacing guides are not set for those kids who don't know the prerequisites. The pacing is set for kids who come in knowing what they supposed to know for third grade. If I see that it's taking extremely too long, then I will go ahead and teach the new standards and pull them for small groups outside of just math class.

[In addition,] I found that this year was a lot more difficult because I changed my strategy versus the previous years that I've taught. I was not allowed to do it as I've always done, and I noticed that my students didn't get it as well. The way the school system has it focused, you do your morning meeting, and then you do your whole group, then you do your stations, and then you do your exit ticket. For me, [when] I'm teaching whole group I want them to understand what I'm teaching. It always seemed to work out better because when [they're] pre-loaded so when we do go to the whole group, they're not lost [or] left behind.

Although she faces a unique set of challenges associated with teaching at a Title I school, she has spent the entire educational career in those types of schools. Curious to know why she has devoted so much time and energy into educating mostly Title I African American students, I asked her to explain why she chooses to teach at a Title I school, what gives her inspiration to continue, and to share with other teachers the keys to her success.

I never want to leave the classroom. I don't want to be a lead teacher, an instructional coach, I definitely don't want to be an assistant principal or principal, and I

don't want to be a superintendent or assistant superintendent. I want to be teaching. I want to be with my kids. That's what I want to do 'till I can't do it anymore. That's what I love.

My philosophy [is] that every child is capable of learning; you just have to find out what's their style of learning. There's no such thing as an unteachable child; there's just different teaching strategies. There's not really much of a difference [in the child] because I can have high students that are African American and high students that are Caucasian. I can [also] have low students that are Caucasian and low students that are African American. In all honesty, yes, there is an impact of race, but I see a bigger impact in economic and financial class. Lower-class people, which tend to be African American, don't have the same advantage as upper-middle-class kids. I can't say that's 100% race-based because if you are Black and you are upper level or middle class, you have those advantages to some extent. But it really shows when you're Black and you have financial issues as well. That's when you see race play a part.

I was once offered a job at an upper-class school that was not Title I. I was very appreciative to be offered the job, but [the students] had parents who could help them with their homework. [In] my school, sometimes my parents can't help. Sometimes I might be the only one that's helping them get higher in their education. Sometimes I have to be mom because mom is at work or mom is not there or grandma only raising [them]. That's (*referring to the Title I school*) where I'm needed. I'm where I can do the most good and be most beneficial to my students.

I love my students; they are my motivations for everything I do. Just knowing that I'm making a difference in their lives [and] I'm helping to enrich their lives is my

inspiration. Being around keeps me young (laughs jovially). I [also] have a way with students that nobody else wants to be bothered with. I have a way of teaching kids that most people can't reach. The trouble kids are my babies and I love it because I can see something in there most can't see. I also appreciate the relationship that I make with my kids that goes beyond that year of the in my class.

[In my opinion,] what makes a great teacher is a love for children, education, and learning. That's one of my things about me being a teacher. I want my kids to come back and say, "Oh, hey, Miss K." I feel like you get remembered for one or two things: being the teacher that they don't like [or] the teacher that they love. I don't know if that's how everybody looks at it. But to me, that's how I see it. Most kids remember those teachers that meant something to them. And you kind of forget about the ones that didn't because they really didn't make a difference one way or the other in your whole life.

As a teacher, you have to learn to be around kids. If you don't want to be around kids, then why are you even in the profession? [Also], if you love the subject you're teaching, then that's gonna make you a better teacher. For example, in second grade, I taught all subjects. In fourth grade, I only teach math and science. I think I do amazing in math and science because those are my first love; so, teaching my students about it is something that I can really enjoy, and they see it.

[Secondly, you must] never be afraid to learn different strategies. If you're a teacher, you should always want to learn something new. How can you expect your kids to want to learn if you don't want to learn? I've learned so much [in] Professional Learning (PL) classes on how to teach math going from concrete to abstract. When I first started teaching math, I thought there's one way to teach math [and] that's it. One plus

one is two, and ain't no other way of finding it and no other way to teach it. That's it. As I progressed in teaching math, I learned math is a lot more fluent than I always thought it was. [I learned that] there's so many other strategies, and kids get different strategies. The more strategies and models you can show them, the better your kids will do and the more successful they will become. Strategies that work for some children that don't work for [other children at] all.

[Lastly,] the biggest thing about being a successful teacher is your kids will only do what you expect them to do. So, if you have high standards and high expectations for them, they will live up to it. The higher your standards are, the better. Because even if you shoot for what's above the requirement, everybody might not meet your requirements, but they're all going to meet the requirements that's already set. If you're shooting for above the requirements that are asked of you, so always have high standards for your kids and high expectations because they're only going to do what they believe what you believe in.

Reflection: *Ms. Keisha shared a wealth of information during the three interviews. As she retold important events that she experienced on her journey, she frequently moved in and out of first and second-person points of view to illustrate what happened or what she felt during that time. Through her stories, I could see how each experience influenced what she did in the classroom and provided context as to why she is an exceptional teacher.*

After listening to the audio file several times, transcribing it, and reflecting on the interviews, I developed three significant themes that connected most of the stories. Those themes included building authentic relationships with the students and parents,

incorporating personal strengths into her teaching practices, and leveraging high expectations and student interest to maximize student growth. I have included an explanation of their importance in Chapter 5.

Additionally, although I did not use it as a theme, I also saw aspects of culturally relevant teaching throughout Ms. Keisha's interactions with her students. Her explanation of how she plans and implements her daily lessons shows that she has a genuine love and concern for her students, uses aspects of the student's culture to scaffold them towards mastery, and has high expectations for her students.

The only element of culturally responsive teaching I did not directly hear or observe was raising the student's level of critical consciousness to promote community activism. During the interview, she revealed that she was involved in community activism in high school; however, the only real-world example she shared was job roles whose names mirrored job titles. The absence of the last characteristic of culturally responsive teaching sparked further questioning, detailed in Chapter 6.

Ms. Dedicated. Ms. Dedicated was the third participant to agree to be interviewed; however, I have known her the longest of all the participants. Like the other participants, she too has spent her educational career serving students in high poverty Title I settings. Ms. Dedicated is currently a third-grade teacher at Sunnydale Elementary. She has been selected teacher of the year for her local school on several occasions and is recognized within the school as a master mathematics teacher. She was very transparent in relating her story from the initial interview.

When I reached the research phase, Ms. Dedicated was the first to come to mind. From years of interaction and personal knowledge of her accomplishments as a teacher, I

knew her perspective would be invaluable to my research. Although each year brought a different set of students with unique challenges, she consistently inspired significant growth. According to the Georgia Department of Education (2018b), students should typically grow between 35 and 65 Student Growth Percentiles (SGP) yearly to maintain or improve their current rating by the eighth grade. Those with consistently higher SGPs are more likely to make significant progress. On average, approximately 60% of Ms. Dedicated's class usually pass the Georgia Milestones with a distinction of *proficient* or *distinguished*; however, her student SGP averages about 76%. I have provided an introduction that provides background information before her narrative.

Meet Ms. Dedicated. I first met Ms. Dedicated when she became a kindergarten paraprofessional at Creekside Elementary, where I served as an academic math coach. I remember meeting this 5 ft., 5 in. tall, full-figured African American woman and immediately sensing a positive aura. From her radiant smile and amiable, good-natured demeanor, I could tell she would be a great asset to our kindergarten team and school. I began working more closely with her when she moved to third grade and soon realized from observing her classroom that she brought the same zeal and enthusiasm to third grade as she had when she worked with kindergarteners.

As a math coach, I vividly remember walking into her classroom and seeing every wall covered with colorful anchor charts that the students used to refer to previous lessons. Everything, including student math books, learning station supplies, manipulatives, and other classroom necessities, had its place. The class had even posted its own mission statement and classroom expectations. Students in Ms. Dedicated's classroom sat in pods of four and even had classroom jobs and responsibilities.

At the time of our interview, she had been teaching third grade for 9 years at the same Title I school. However, due to the Covid 19 pandemic, I could not interview Ms. Dedicated in person or observe her class. We agreed to meet via the video conferencing Zoom tool in lieu of face-to-face, and I reflected on 9 years' worth of interaction and observations instead of classroom observations. During the meetings, I kept my camera on with a blurred background so she could see my facial expressions and feel more comfortable during the interview while not being distracted by my surroundings.

Ms. Dedicated was prompt for each interview and dressed in business attire; however, her desire to dress professionally did not hinder her willingness to share. Our previous interactions made each interview seem like causal conversations. In the following profile, I present Ms. Dedicated's recounted stories of her childhood experiences, highs and lows along her teaching path, effective strategies, and advised teachers who serve similar populations. I have only made minor insertions in verbiage to reflect intended meaning or adjust verb tense [denoted by brackets] for unencumbered readability.

In her own words. [As a child], we lived in what we would call the projects. My mom really loved to read; [but] it didn't have an effect on me, sorry (laughs). It kind of did the opposite. [She] was actually the first and only graduate [from] high school in her immediate family. She didn't finish college, so she stressed to us about reading and education. My mom wanted every experience for us to be engaged in learning, [and] she wanted us to have the same passion about reading that she had. We would often go to the park and picnics and have reading material like encyclopedias. I remember [us] walking through a college campus to get to the park and saying to myself, 'One day, I want to go

to this school,' not really knowing that it would become a reality and I would eventually graduate with my master's degree from there.

Even though my family was blended, [having] brothers and my stepfather, my dad was also involved. He was big on education, too, [and] would often pick me up from school. Even though he didn't graduate from high school, he was big on math and was good at it! (laughs). He said he learned enough to read and to be able to count his money, and that was it. I don't know if it's just because he was well traveled, but problems that dealt with mileage (pauses), he could tell you how long it will take to get from one place to another (laughs).

Back then, we were considered latchkey kids because we would be home by ourselves an hour before and after school, but it was no question about going to school. I was excited about going to school. I [remember I] would often pretend to play school. I played the role of a child and [the] teacher. I would have my own classroom, even though it was just me by myself, grading papers, [and] doing all of it. I [even] remember singing the pledge of allegiance to an empty apartment because I just wanted to hear my voice echo like a teacher (laughs). I still, to this day, get those first-day jitters when I'm preparing and getting everything ready for that first day [of school]. I'm actually living my dream (laughs).

My mom was very involved in school. It was important to her to be involved in what was going on in school. My teachers knew that they could depend on my mom to be at those after school meetings and school functions [because] she was just involved that way. She was even involved in Parent Teacher Organization (PTO) meetings. Oh, my God, I hated being there all the time (laughs).

Once I got to fourth grade, [it] really solidified that I wanted to become a teacher. I met an amazing teacher named Mrs. Cornsworth [who] was actually Caucasian (laughs). I don't remember many Caucasian teachers, but somehow, [with] the relationship that she built with us, (short pause) she was able to handle her class. (laughs) She had, believe it or not, seven people in her classroom that had the name 'Quita (laughs), and for her to remember our names, to me, that was important. We enjoyed her class [and] favored her over the other teachers. She added that passion, like, she was excited about [and] loved teaching. She [also] had a connection with my mom that just made me decide that, okay, one day, I want to become a teacher.

I didn't think there was bad teachers out there [until] my fifth grade year [when] I got paddled for talking too much. (laughs) My brother gave him a hard time the year before [and] he was like, "Finally, I get to paddle you." [It] was like he had finally got to get revenge on my brother. He was definitely the least favorite [teacher]. Just because you had anger or frustration about one child doesn't mean that you should take it out on another child. (short pause) So those are still lessons to learn [today].

[Another] teacher said that [with] the path my brother was heading down, he'd have a short life. (pauses) I don't think she meant it in a harmful way, but I didn't like that [she was] telling me he's gonna die (pauses). He often motivated me to continue to go on and [was] my champion in my corner, saying, "I have the street sense, but I want you to be book smart."

He ultimately [did] have a short life, [but], those words are powerful (nervous laughter). They influence me now as a teacher. Even though [I have had] good experiences, I think about those two teachers [and] remember what I want to be more of as a teacher. I

understand that the words I say to my students now are powerful. So, I guess, even if I'm correcting a student, I'm still, like, thinking on the positive (short pause). We have to be mindful of what we say to children.

Once I got to middle school, I was pretty good at math, believe it or not (laughs). [During] my seventh and eighth grade year, I was part of [an] initiative [where] we were taking pre-algebra and algebra before we got to high school (briefly pauses). That was exciting! I had really strong math skills, so by my ninth grade year, I was taking geometry. Once I got to high school, I just had that mentality [that] I couldn't stop. I haven't given up all these years [and] there's no way I'm gonna stop now.

[When I finally got to college,] I was kind of indecisive [about] what field I wanted to go into. I knew that I enjoyed and had that passion [for] working with children. [However,] I was also interested in computer programming and was naturally good at doing hair (laughs). I just felt like God just pushed me in the path that he really wanted me to go into, and he was very blunt about that (laughs). All the counselors there suggested that I take a career test. [The results showed] I was either an art teacher or a plumber, and I knew then I didn't want to be a plumber (mutual laughter). [Then] I ran into a child that just came up to me in a store one day and told me how much he loved me. I [had] never seen this child, who was actually Caucasian, [before]. The parent [said] "My child has never done that before." "It's Okay." I knew I had a good connection with my family's children, but children that I didn't know, [and] never seen before? So, I simply nodded, "Okay, okay, God, I see." I knew then that this was the path. So, I decided to go with education because [I] was most passionate about it.

I was good all through school, and then I got to college messed up (laughs). It wasn't because I couldn't do the work. I knew that I could do the work [because] I actually was doing my boyfriend's work more than mine. [After] I was unsuccessful at [state college] and [had] a near-death experience, He (glancing upwards) led me back to [a technical college]. I was challenged with it, [but] He just gave me that passion, desire, [and] determination in that path. The Holy Spirit just pushed me through.

[After finishing college,] my first teaching position was in third grade in the same school I spent 5 years as a kindergarten paraprofessional. Creekside, really, is the only elementary school that I [have] ever worked at. [On] my first day [of teaching], I think I was more nervous than the children. I had the same jitters that I had [as a child] when I was preparing to come to school. It [was] full of excitement [and] anticipation just thinking about getting to know the kids.

It was a tough year. I had 28 kids that year [which is] the max that I could have. It was challenging [because] I had a lot of behavior I just felt like I couldn't get over. I couldn't loosen up [and] always had to be tight with them so that they would be successful. I just wanted to teach, and I wasn't so much concerned about building relationships with the students. I knew [how] to build a relationship with students, but I didn't make it a focus.

When they rated me [at the end of the year], I got the lowest [teacher] rating. They [said], "you're a good teacher, but you didn't get to know us." (briefly pausing to think) To me, that was very impactful because I didn't want to ever leave that kind of impression with my students. From then on, I've just worked to always build that relationship. [Now,] on the first week of school, I'm getting to know them, how they

spent [their] summer, their likes, their dislikes, [and] how they learn. I'm interested in knowing those things about them. You know, you can teach people anything, but if you can get to their hearts, then what you teach them is unfathomed.

As Ms. Dedicated talked about her student's feedback, her facial expressions and solemn voice indicated that she still felt a sense of remorse for not getting to know them that year. It also verified that she genuinely values building relationships with her students. After sharing how her parents, teachers, and first-year students impacted her and her desire to build relationships with her students, I asked her to share her current teaching practices that led to her success. She began by explaining what a typical day in her math class would look like, the instructional best practices she used, and connected it back to the relationships she builds with her students. The excerpt below details her response.

Pre Covid-19, on a typical day [in math], the students [would] come in from lunch, come right to the carpet, [and] work on number talks. In number talks, they talked about how they saw the problem using [mental] strategies. They would solve the problem verbally, and I [would] scribe for them. Sometimes, those [number talks] turned into a teachable moment [providing an opportunity] to emphasize a skill or point out someone else's strategy. [After Number Talks,] we would practice fluency skills [before moving] into our whole group minilesson [where] they had the opportunity to practice the skill focused on for that day.

[Next,] they would be allowed to get into their stations. I grouped the students by their levels and needs so that I could better work with them. [In one of the stations,] we focused on guided math [where] they get to work with the teacher [on either current or

prerequisite skills]. They looked forward to coming to that one [and] I [later] learned that they said they had the best seat in the house at the guided station (laughs heartily). I worked with that group before working with the other different stations. [Everyone] got a chance to come [to guided math] at least once a week, but my Response to Intervention (RtI) students [students identified with significant gaps in learning] saw me two or three times a week. I found, in some instances, having manipulatives [physical objects used to help understand an abstract idea] helped, [and] other [students] just needed that dialogue to talk themselves through problems. If they did a good job, I gave verbal praise and stickers to motivate and reassure them that they could do it.

I [also allowed] the students [to] have different jobs [in their stations]. However, it just seemed like there was always a need to facilitate [the learning process] in the different stations and make sure that they were on task and understand what was going on. In some cases, I let students who finished their station go on to something else because they were so much stronger, and I focused on not holding them back.

When they weren't in stations, I tried to [group] someone who was really strong in an area with [others] who weren't as strong so they could help their peers. I also tried to match kids based on their personalities and who [was] willing to work with another student so that it wouldn't seem like [that student] was being punished for not knowing. That's why I try to create an environment in which they have that autonomy to say, "I don't understand" or "help me with this particular problem." Having [that] support helped them [gain] confidence [in their ability to do the math].

[You see,] I am a teacher who often reflects on her teaching style, teaching practice, [and] her interaction with her students; (pauses) even down to the assessments

[that] we [the third grade team] use to see if they mastered a section. The struggle [, however,] was in making sure that what was in that chapter [test] aligned to the standards. There were times where some of the questions might not fit the standard we were assessing. Depending on your reasons for giving the assessment, we might have to eliminate some of the questions or have the students do all the questions for baseline data. [As a grade level,] we used those results to (re)group [the students] and reteach [the skills not mastered]. At the end of the unit, we use end-of-chapter post assessments [to see how much the students progressed during the unit].

Having given insight into what she does academically to reach her students who struggle, she turned her attention to some of the challenges she faced as an educator in a Title I setting. The following is a portion of her response.

One of our greatest challenges [in teaching African Americans in Title I students] is when students come to you, and they lack conceptualization in numbers and operations in [our] Base 10 [number system]. [It] affects the other content in math [and] impacts their ability to successfully complete math tests in third grade. Our school is primarily African American students, [and] I might have one Caucasian, Hispanic, or Latino [student] along the way. I think the Caucasian students are [typically] exposed to a lot more life experiences than the African American students. They might have more opportunities to be in formal settings or where they're in the grocery store and exchanging money, or they're ordering from a menu [in restaurants].

The difference that I see is [that] African American students [I teach] have limited experiences unless the student's parent(s) has an interest in education or a degree higher than high school. If [their] parents that are in school themselves [or] have degrees, then

those students are exposed to more. The most limited in African American groups are the students whose parents who might have dropped out of school, parents who didn't like math (brief pause) or can't relate to the math that we teach today.

I had a teacher who said, "all children can learn and will learn, but it is what you teach them [that] is going to make the difference." I try to see people as people [having a] learning experience. So, even if African American students don't have those experiences, and I see that or know that they have a certain limitation, then I need to provide them with opportunities and experiences that will give them equitability. It [all] depends on the needs of the student. It's giving them an experience that we can make authentic as possible. I can't go and bake a batch of brownies right away, but we can definitely cut out some paper and pretend. [In math,] sometimes they need to be involved in the problem solving [scenario] and act the problem out. We might have to take construction paper, make it into those brownie pieces, and think about how we're gonna fair share this.

[I remember] another time we were reading about being in a stand [and] the kids didn't have that experience. They didn't know a stand was a stadium [and] thought it meant to stand up. So, [with them] not that having the experience, it was more like, "Wait a minute, we need to go to a stadium, we need to be in a stand." (heartily laughing as she recalls the event) So, I got a ticket for every student to go to [a local college] football game. Those vocabulary words really came to life. The students were so excited when they came back. I wish everybody came, but they still learned from other students. They savored every experience they had.

[Another] challenge we face in education [is that] the turnover rate is high [for teachers], especially in a school that's predominately African American. [I] see teachers

come, but generally speaking, the good teachers mostly leave because [of] all the challenges that they face with behavior, feelings of not being supported in the classroom as a teacher, [and] low morale of the school climate. Then, we have new teachers coming in [who] don't necessarily have to have a background in education. So, while I have worked to improve and I focused on getting math training within the district, out of the district, [and] nationally to improve my craft as a math teacher; there are teachers who may concentrate in another area [or] don't have the same experience. [This results in material being] taught a different way and [the next teacher] face[s] trying to undo what has been learned, if that makes sense.

The final challenge which Ms. Dedicated mentioned in her interview, although she did not explicitly give it a name, was related to the issue of racial discrimination in education. She told of an experience she had within the school system that influenced her to remain at a Title I school. If I had to rate my views on issues within the school, I don't think I would initially put race at the top of [the need for] supplies, textbooks, or getting things that we need. [However] I know, thinking about my past experiences as an upcoming teacher, favoritism [at the district level] also played a role. That affected me when I was at the [teacher] job fair. I went up to different tables giving my resume. I promise, I felt like I had done the best resume, and whoever grabbed me as a teacher would be getting a great teacher because I was gonna work at becoming one.

I went to one school that was considered one of the better schools in our local area and gave a resume to the assistant principal. She looked at my resume and asked the question, "Do I really need to keep this?" My thought was, Yes! I'm giving you my resume because I want you to look at it. I come from a great school, and I'm ready [to

teach]. She [continued], “Because at our school, our teachers work very hard.” I was thinking, I know, I work hard [too]. She was like, “Well, we even have a key to our school and work on Saturdays.” I [responded], “Well, I do that now as a para, so that’s a plus.” [To that, she countered,] “you know, we even work on Sunday.” I [asked,] “really, on Sundays?” [The assistant principal] said, “If the need [arises,] because we’re overachievers. We have the kind of school climate that the parents will write you a dissertation as to why their child has sand in their hair.” I [responded,] “Well, the daycare that I came from was a very mixed school, so I’m okay with it. I’m okay dealing with parents who are well educated. That’s not a problem for me.” She went on [talking], “We’re overachievers. We’re not just a cut-and-paste school. We strive to be the best [and] we are the best.” At that point, [realizing that she did not want me there,] I [said], “Well, can you give my resume back and I give it to someone else? At this point, if you’re working harder, and I know that I’m working hard right now, that’s not a school that I want to work at.”

I felt that she racially judged me based on what she saw. I went to other tables and had one [school] that wanted to hire me right on the spot, but I [couldn’t start right away because] I was still doing my student teacher [practicum] at the time. [When] I returned to my home school, my principal asked, “How did the job fair go [because] you’re normally more excited than that?” I really wasn’t gonna mention it [because] I couldn’t believe that I was treated that way, [but] I just had to share. She got up out of her seat and stormed out of the room [saying], “This ends today!” The next morning, she came to me and said, “You’re gonna get a phone call from the principal. Just be expecting it.” The principal [from the school that rejected me at the job fair] called me, apologized for her

assistant principal, and said she hoped it didn't turn me from future employment with their school. I told her that "the people that you [had] representing at your table [were] a representation of your school climate, and if that [was] a representation of your school climate, then I won't ever seek employment at [your] school."

That was a moment that I won't ever forget. It was, perhaps, my only encounter [as a teacher] that I felt like I was [judged] based on the color of my skin. The same principal who called and apologized to me was on the panel in the interview with the principal who wanted to hire me. I said [to myself], "The Lord has prepared my table in the presence of my enemy." The panel of six principals asked about twenty questions, one question after the other. I thank God that I was able to answer those questions and I was hired before I could get out the door. That may be a reason why I choose to stay [at a Title I school].

Having gleaned so much from our conversations during the interview about what, how, and why she teaches as she does, I asked Ms. Dedicated to conclude the final interview by reflecting on what made her a great Title I teacher and offering advice other teachers in similar settings. In her explanation, she spoke of her dedication to reaching the students where they were, the importance of teachers who are life-long learners, and the necessity of developing relationships with students. Her response is below.

I've been working at a Title I school [for] 13 years. [From my] experience, our students need support and need teachers who are willing to go that extra mile beyond the regular nine to five, [or] for us, that 8 to 4. This is a calling, and God has placed [me] in a position to impart into students' lives [something] that will leave a lifetime impression. Someone told me that you leave your DNA on students, you leave your fingerprint on

them. The impression that you want to leave is to inspire and motivate them to be the best that they can be.

It's important for teachers to recognize and to think about what the kids come to school with and how we can best meet them where they are. [They] come to school with so many challenges and baggage that they really can't express themselves. Even as an adult, it's hard for me to say what I'm going through on a day to day. So, to get the students to be able to leave what they're experiencing outside of the classroom and come in and be ready to learn, sometimes, you have to be able to just support them where they are. [Even] when students have those extreme behaviors or challenges, [I'm] there to be of support.

Initially, when I started out, I thought that success was just attributed to our ethnicity. That [because] we came from the same ethnicity; we can relate to each other. But, as the years unfold, I think it goes a little deeper than that. It just goes back to building relationships with the students. I think about the relationships that I built with my students, even the students from this year and years past, to have students come back and say, Ms. Dedicated, I remember you, I appreciate [that] you challenged me. Those kinds of things are priceless. I've been recognized [as] Teacher of the Year [and] teacher of the month several times, but to me, that is minute [compared] to what we do day to day.

[To sum it up, I'd advise teachers to] treat each day as a new day, be persistent, patient, and practice on using [your] craft. The challenges that happened on yesterday they're gone. Look at what's in front of [you] today. [You] have to be patient enough to see the process unfold even when there's a crisis [or] challenge. [You] must also be

persistent to believe our students can learn the content that we're trying to teach or [the] character that we're trying to instill in them.

I say practice your craft because we have to continue to build and continue to work to improve ourselves as an individual. I think one part [of practicing your craft] is having classroom routines and rituals in place so [students] know [what] is going to take place. Even though the content might change, they still have a structured schedule in place [and] understand what is likely to happen. It does, [however] take a little time [and] consistency.

[Finally] build relationships with [your] students, parents, and within the community. A [Title I] school such as ours [is] in a community where nine times out of ten, we don't have the parent support [like] a private or charter school. [However, during the COVID 19 virtual year,] I had the most students involved in eLearning. I think that was in part because I made it a goal every Monday to call my students [to make] that connection [and] calling parents to let them know where [the student] was [academically] and where we're trying to go. I [also] built relationships doing things [like] movie night that was beyond just learning content knowledge. [If] I was able to contact 16 of 17 of my students, and they participated in some way [during the COVID 19 pandemic]; then this is something that should happen year long.

Reflection. *Throughout each interview, Ms. Dedicated remained very transparent about her experiences and how they contributed to the successful teacher is today. Like the other participants, Ms. Dedicated would often stop in the middle of a thought to go back and clarify something she previously said or add deeper content. She seemed to be*

very careful in choosing her words and, in many instances, supported her commentary to information she had learned from things she had researched.

As I reflected on the contents of her interview and my years of observations, I developed three primary themes. The first theme stemmed from recurring statements such as “It goes back to relationship building” or “It’s about building relationships.” It is evident that, according to her, building relationships is a key to success. A second theme I noticed was that her dedication stemmed from viewing teaching a more than a job. In the interview, she stated that it is a “calling that God placed me into” and in other places, referenced God leading her into the field. The final theme that I constructed was a result of the previous themes. Ms. Dedicated provided experiences students need for success. This is seen when she “goes the extra mile beyond the regular” 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. job to offer real-world experiences. Of the themes, the most predominant centers around building relationships with the students and parents. I explain each theme and their significance more succinctly in Chapter 5.

Ms. Ramonda. Ms. Ramonda was the fourth participant to agree to be interviewed. At the time of the interviews, she had been teaching for 12 years. I worked with her at Sunnydale while she served as a fifth-grade teacher for two years. During her tenure at Sunnydale, she was credited for the significant jump in the fifth-grade math scores on the end-of-year test that helped increase the school’s AYP by approximately 20 points. She was also very transparent while relating her story.

In a typical year, 25% of her students’ progress to scoring *proficient* or *distinguished* level on the [end of year state assessment], while her SGP averages range between 85 and 95%. In fact, during the 2019 school year, 55% of her fifth-grade

students progressed to *developing* and an additional 25% to *proficient* or *distinguished* level on the [end of year state assessment]. Subsequently, I provide additional background information before relating her narrative.

Meet Ms. Ramonda. *Ms. Ramonda is a nearly 6 ft. 2 in. African American woman who was as meticulous about her wardrobe as she was about her classroom. While teaching at Sunnydale Elementary, Ms. Ramonda wore trendy outfits that were usually business/casual attire yet could express her African American heritage or the colors of her sorority. She made sure her nails and shoes matched, and her hair was done in the latest styles. In addition to being a 13-year veteran educator, she is the mother of one son and is helping raise her niece and nephew. She has taught Pre-K, kindergarten, fourth, and fifth grade, and at the time of the interviews, Ms. Ramonda had just begun a new role as a PEC teacher at Alliance Elementary, a school in the Sunnydale School District.*

Our interviews took via the Zoom tool for video conferencing, and she had no reservations about sharing her story and point of view. I could not visit the classroom during the research phase because of her role change. However, I had the opportunity to work with her first as an Academic Math Coach and later in her class with her students as an EIP teacher. As an EIP teacher, I worked with a group of students in Ms. Ramonda's classroom for 50 minutes each day. During those periods of time, I closely observed her mannerisms, teaching style, and interactions with the students. In addition to a year's worth of observation, during the previous year, I was an Instructional Coach and had the opportunity to work with her as she planned lessons and assessments for the students. I relied on my personal experience and recollections to compose memos of my

observations. I have attached an excerpt from my memo about the classroom setting to give further insight into her classroom.

Most days, she would follow the same routine. I can still see her greeting the students and then, upon entering the classroom, slipping into her fuzzy slides. She would also allow the students to take their shoes off in the class as if they were at home. Even the most troubled child in fifth grade felt at home in the class and attempted to follow her procedures without many redirections.

The classroom lights were usually dimmed, illuminated only by the interactive panel in front of the room and a stand-alone lamp Ms. Ramonda brought from her home. Her desk was always neatly arranged and decorated with pictures of herself, her son, niece, and other family members. Student desks were in pods arranged in a u-shape. In the middle of the U, towards the front of the room, she placed a blue children's bench approximately 3 ft high and 5 ft long. She stationed her computer cart, a document camera, and a bar stool at the right end of the U-shaped pod in front of the room.

As I looked around the room, I noticed anchor charts that explained step-by-step procedures for the mathematical skills she had introduced. The charts hung from the wall as well as from the ceiling. Like the room, the charts were neatly presented with vivid colors and drawings that drew your attention to the artifact. Students could refer to the anchor charts or their math notebooks where they recorded their notes. (Field Notes, Pos. 2-6)

In the following profile, I present Ms. Ramonda's stories of how her experiences from childhood through college until the interviews have influenced her teaching style

and contributed to her effectiveness as a teacher. She tells of impactful moments in her life, effective strategies, and what she believes to be characteristics of an effective Title I teacher. I have only made minor insertions in verbiage to reflect the intended meaning or adjust verb tense [denoted by square brackets] so it does not distract the reader from the content of the profile.

In her own words. [Growing up,] it was me, an older sister, and twin sisters younger than me (pauses) all girls in the household. My mom was in the military, so an average day would change because sometimes she [would] be there, but most of the time, she wasn't there. She spent a lot of time overseas. My father was there most of the time, so he was making our meals, and [when] my mom was home, he was still the person that was doing most of the childcare to take care of [the] children. So, we were just [playing with] Barbie dolls [and] reading, not much television. TV had to be earned, and most of the time, that was on the weekend. My father was very instrumental in helping me with my reading. That was one thing that he made sure [of]. He is from Haiti, so I'm not sure why, but he just felt like reading was gonna be important for us when it comes to academics, and he was right. I think that maybe it [came] from him [having to] learn the English language.

Because my mom was in the military, when she was home, she was very structured. It was a certain way we had to make our beds. She was all about schedules, and I felt like she had to be that way because when she wasn't there, it was a lot for my dad to be there by himself with four girls. So, I think the structure, making sure we were clean, and scheduling [are] important. (Pauses) I was able and still am better able to function with a schedule. I think that's [also] crucial in the classroom.

Listening to Ms. Ramonda connect the structure her mom introduced to her as a child and the structure she established in her classroom immediately drew my mind to the times I observed her class. The floor was always clean, the anchor charts hanging on the walls were neat and colorful, math supplies were neatly placed in their designated area, and the students were expected to keep the class in that same condition. During the math lessons, she would periodically joke with the students and be personable, but there was a reason and structure to the conversations. I even noticed that students who acted out in the other teacher's classroom seemed to thrive in her structured environment. I listened as she continued to share other experiences in her formative years that influenced the teacher she is today.

[Since] my mom was in the military, I attended three different elementary schools. [In] most of them, I was the only Black child, so I sensed a lot of things that made me upset. Even in pre-K, I remember there was a big deal about there not being any dark baby dolls in the classroom in the housing area. There weren't any Black children on a lot of the posters, so it wasn't very diverse. I felt like a loner in my first two elementary schools because I was different. I was kind of left out [and] pretty much to myself a lot.

I [can still] remember something that happened in the third grade in a school where the students were mostly Caucasian. I think this is important because this is what I take into the classroom with me. The most memorable day for me [in elementary school] is when we were talking about veins and the teacher told us to look at our wrist. She pointed out that if you look, you can see the blue and the red in your wrist. Elizabeth, a student in the classroom, embarrassed me because she got up, walked to my desk, showed me her wrist, and said, "Imma let you look at mine cuz your skin's too dark

because you can't see your own." It made me feel bad, and I remember looking at a teacher like, are you gonna say something? and she didn't do anything about it. I could see my veins [because] my skin's not even that dark. So, to me that that bothered me. I think there should have been an opportunity for the teacher to say, "Okay, we all know that everybody's different," or "You don't know that Elizabeth, maybe she can see her veins;" [but] say something. You [shouldn't] want a child to feel (pauses) that horrible. A child can take that with them to the next class, the next grade, and to the next school.

This [feeling of isolation] even happened in my personal life because my mom was married to a Haitian. So, the Haitian side of the family kind of looked at us as if we were different [and] didn't accept us. They said to the other kids that we weren't all the way Haitian [because] we didn't know the language. You never want a child to feel like they're just left out. If they feel like they're left out, and they're not comfortable, and they're not being accepted, then they're just gonna be withdrawn, not pay attention. [or] participate like they would if you just make sure everyone's comfortable. So as an educator today, that's why I'm so against bullying.

After making the connection to her current teaching practices and beliefs, she resumes telling her story at her third elementary school. My third elementary school was in Florida, [and] that's when I encountered a whole bunch of Black people. So that was, um, that was a little bit different. I felt more accepted in that environment [and] had more friends, and I think it's because there was more people that were my color and like me. [However,] I also say that the instruction kinda wasn't what it should have been. (pauses to collect her thoughts) Everything they were going to learn, I had already learned. [For example,] they were doing multiplication in fourth grade, [but] I had learned that and

started with division in the third grade in Germany. So yeah, the instruction was a little bit slower, [and] I knew everything.

[Now, my middle school years] when I was around 11 or 12, I think those are my hardest years because that's when my parents split up. Those are the years where I think you kind of start discovering yourself, and I had a difficult time. I thought I was grown. You know, my mom, because of the divorce, she was always stressed out. [In addition,] that was in Florida as well, so it was still predominantly African American. I still think the instruction wasn't where it was supposed to be. I [had] friends from other places, so, as a middle schooler, I would talk to them on the phone about the things that we were doing in school, they'd say stuff like, "Oh, well, we've done that already, and we've done this." That was kind of my first taste of being in a Title I school. There was definitely a difference in instruction. My mom didn't expect anything less than an A, (pauses) being that she knew the instruction wasn't up to par. Yeah, it was okay, [but] I wouldn't want my children to go to that school system. I know that much.

High school was a little bit better for me because I was able to play sports and get involved in JROTC. [By then,] I guess I was used to being just with my mother and not with both parents. [The school] was predominantly Black as well [and] I think I missed out [on quality instruction]. A lot of the children did not pay attention, so we had a lot of behavior issues. I think the thing that kept me on top was the reading. Even when my father wasn't there, my mother continued to push the reading. I used to read all the time [, and] out of a class of, I think 89, I was number three in my class. So, yeah, high school was okay, [because] I came out on top of [my] class.

Although there were teachers in high school who did not challenge her, one high school teacher made a lasting impact on her life through the relationship she fostered. [I remember] when [I met Ms. Harrell] in ninth grade, and it was her first year teaching. She was [a] young Black [woman], so when she [started teaching] high school, I guess she felt like she had to be mean and show everybody that she meant business. She had a hard [start to the] year [because] nobody really liked her. I didn't [even] get along with her, but as the year went on, something changed. I had so many conversations with her because I felt like I had a connection with her [that] I could talk to and confide in her. Even after graduation, I told her I had to take remedial courses, even though I was top of my class in high school, and we talked about that.

When I first finished high school, I went into the nursing program in college [although] I had always wanted to be a teacher. Even when I was little, I would line my bears up, give them names and just play teacher. But I heard [teachers] say how much trouble they had to go through and how they didn't get paid enough money, so I went to nursing. Anyway, that didn't work out, [so] I felt like okay, I'm just gonna go on into education. I had people in my family that were teachers [that] I [would] go and help in their classrooms, and I just thought, okay, I want to do this. So, I changed my major back to education. And that's what it is. I don't know; it's just that's what I've always wanted to do. I think a lot of the women that I looked up were my teachers, the Black women that I encountered, and I just saw the way they did things [influenced me], and I said, okay, I think I can do this. I tried to change my mind at one point, but it just did not work out [and] I was led back to education.

When I started the actual [teacher certification] program, I was part of the first class to graduate from [a local state college] with dual certification in General Ed and Special Ed. I don't know how I keep on getting back to race, but I remember there were only three Black students and two Black professors. [The professors] were married and were known to be very, very, very hard; however, they ended up being my favorite pair of teachers. Mr. Richard (pseudonym) actually was tough as nails, but I passed all of his classes. Nothing he told us was out of a book or PowerPoint. We just had a lot of conversations [in] circle talks [that well] prepared me for the [state certification test].

After [I] graduated from college, I was hired to teach pre-K. I was so nervous when I closed the [classroom] door on the first day [of school]. As time went on, I [was] like, Oh, my God, it's so easy, they actually listen to me." I would say [that first year] was successful because my kids showed more growth than the other pre-K classes. You know, they had so many rules with pre-K, you can't say this, [and] you can't teach that, but I had a way around it. [By] the last couple days of school, my kids were writing sight words in the sandbox.

Since pre-K, I've taught fourth and fifth grade. I think I get better every year [because] I'm constantly learning and trying new strategies in my classroom. In the beginning, I wasn't as knowledgeable, but now I'm more confident. I'm [also] open to accepting anything else that needs to be added into what I wasn't doing previously. I've been through three different administrators, so I know what needs to be done from up top for me to be able to do what I need to do in the classroom. [However,] I've always been very stuck on scheduling an organization-

[This year in fifth grade,] the students' growth demonstrated through tests [really] made me proud. It showed that the things I did and the things of my colleagues have done were effective. We didn't do any [state] testing this year; but using Accelerated Reader (*a web-based program that assesses reading comprehension*) and other [local assessments] that we did throughout the year, I did see [growth] in the number of words [read per minute] and comprehension level being raised.

[To achieve that level of growth,] I have to be organized, competent in my instruction, and relatable to my students. Before I begin teaching, I look at the standards to know what the students are expected to know and the order that they need to be taught. Once I am clear on that and what they will be assessed on, I plan for each lesson. We usually start with number talks where I give the students a problem they have to solve in their heads. The problem is based on something we have already done and gives them a chance to review other skills while stretching them to think deeply about the problem. The students have to share their methods and critique other methods.

After number talks, I do a whole class minilesson on the skill we are working on [for] that day. Sunnyside School District's (SSD) math workshop schedule limited minilessons to 10 - 15 minutes, but the students I teach had a lot of learning gaps [and] needed more time for direct instruction. I always want to give the students what they need, so I talked to my principal and worked out a plan to give more time to direct instruction three days out of the week. On those three days, I used the document camera to provide at least 25-30 minutes of step-by-step instruction on the standard [and] guided practice problems with the class [as a whole]. Then I would let the [higher performing] students work independently while I worked with a group that needed more support.

[On] the other two days, we usually followed SSD's plan that included [a] 10–15-minute minilesson followed by 30 minutes in learning stations. My learning station groups were based on data from [the district progress monitoring assessment], tests that I had given, and from observing the children. They knew which station to go to because I posted a rotation schedule [along with] the names of students in each group. [Typically,] the stations [included] independent practice of current material, a review game, teacher station, and computer station where they practiced [their] fact fluency.

The teacher station is where I worked with small groups of students that had similar needs. I really try to find hands-on activities where they can use manipulatives and one-on-one guidance to get that basic understanding of the concept. This time [with the students] is very important to me. [The reason] why I do it today goes back to the first experiment I [ever] did with my pre-K class. We actually cut pumpkins open, got out all of the seeds, and we counted the seeds. Students who would never really participate with the class, students that had been having issues, [and, basically,] everybody wanted to participate in the activity. I think the hands-on activities made them interested [in the content]. So, that's something I carry with me even today. They learn more when you actually give kids something [and] let them get messy, especially in math, with all those manipulatives, when they're actually doing something kinesthetic.

[One of the biggest challenges teaching in a Title I school] I would say is [students not knowing] multiplication facts [and] lack of parental support [in helping them to learn their facts]. I teach fifth grade [and] you wouldn't think that they [would] not have [mastered] basic facts. I reached out to the parents [and] say something like, "Okay, I need you to try to get them to get these facts because it's the foundation of

everything that I'm teaching," [but] they were not cooperating. I didn't have that challenge at my other schools, so I had to be creative with stations and intentional with interventions and homework. We did our speed drills, and I had something every week [so] they could see how much they had grown with their facts. I [also] had rewards if they accomplished [learning their facts]. [Some] students would look at a partner and say, "well, you got more to me." So that was kind of like a little competition for them which encouraged them to study on their own.

Although I teach math, I think the problem stems from reading deficiencies. If they overcame the first challenge, they had to deal with solving word problems. [When] I compare my last two schools that I was assigned to [with] Sunnydale, I think the students at "Sunnydale," which will be the high poverty neighborhoods, [tended to] know that answers to the questions if it just involved the numbers. But, when it came to word problems, they didn't understand what the problem was asking for. I think it might have something to do with their reading and comprehension because at my other school; the kids performed well because they [could] understand what the question was asking for. I think [an underlining issue is] that a lot of people I know, like [even in] my family [which are] African American, don't really read to their children. They don't see it as being as important as everybody says [it is]. I know I saw a difference in my own son and niece because I didn't really read with him like I did with my niece. He has struggled with reading [while] she's an excellent reader.

[The other issue is] raising student motivation and self-esteem. I teach at a Title I school because the type of environment they are in reminds me of myself when I was in elementary school. They come with so many different struggles and barriers, but I can see

their potential [and] like seeing them grow. I think the best way I saw that last year was [while] being the Quiz Bowl coach. The Quiz Bowl team was made up of the top academic [students] who competed against other [elementary] schools. Going in, [they were] intimidated because they were [an] all Black [team], and other schools, of course, had different races. I think that a lot of the children don't think that they're good enough. They think that the other race, Caucasians, are smarter than them. When [the Quiz Bowl Team] got there and saw the [team with] Caucasian students, one of the students said, "Oh, they gonna beat us, they got a bunch of White kids." That just bothered me. I feel like I need to push them to their fullest potential [and to] stop looking at other people saying, okay, they have this color, they're smarter than me; and that's not true. I hate they feel that way. I'm not sure where they're getting that from. But when they got up there and performed, they shocked themselves and me, and they were so excited. So, being with these types of students, I think it's important for me to remind them that that can be you as well; nobody's better than you.

I think as an educator, it's important for me to show them successful Black people. I go ahead and do my Black History even though it's not in the curriculum. Even if it's [as simple as] letting them help me take something to my car, they be [so] happy to go and see my car (pauses). I don't know if they don't know people with nice cars, but (speaking as a student) "you got that car? I'm gonna be like you." I do stuff like [that] all the time so they can see [that] they can have a nice car [too]. If they want to see pictures of my house, sometimes on a playground, I show it to them because they say stuff like, "I want to work at Wendy's." I just want to push the kids to just want more, and I think it starts at home too. I'm not sure what their parents are. They need a lot of push and a lot

of motivation. Because they think that the Black race, I guess because they're Black, they can't have other races have. So, when I push them to be their best selves, that's what motivates me. I tell them, "That's why you've got to do something with your life. You got to work, you can go to the military, go to college, be a teacher, or something like that.

Having gleaned so much valuable information during our three interviews, closed our session by asking Ms. Ramonda to summarize the qualities of a great teacher in a Title I setting, share her plans for the future, and offer advice to first year teachers in similar settings. The following portion of this profile details her response.

[To be] a great [Title I] teacher, [you have to be] someone who is dedicated to the job and wants to see the students succeed, someone open to change and feedback, and is relatable [to the students]. I say dedicated because you have to be committed to the students' [success], regardless of what happens during the day. My philosophy is that all students deserve a chance to learn regardless of differences. So that's race, Special Ed., no matter how different they are; they should be given an opportunity. There are times when I get frustrated because of things like the workload, when students don't grasp a concept, or the lack of parent engagement; but I go back to [thinking about] how much the kids remind me of myself, [and I] remember, refocus on why I'm here. [Then I] come back the next day.

[The reason] why I say open to feedback is because you have to be dedicated to the craft. [You have to be] open to continue to learn about new things that are effective. You also have to be willing to take advice from other [knowledgeable] teachers whose students are mastering that skill. I had an incident this past year when a coworker was not teaching the standard correctly. I tried to help her to see what the standard really meant. I

even told her about how well my students performed on the [state assessment], but she would not listen and continued to teach the wrong content. At the end of the year, only a few of her students passed the [state assessment]. If she would have been open to feedback, she would have had better results.

[Lastly,] I say a successful teacher has to be relatable because it allows you to find out the best way to reach them, and it causes them to care about what you have to say. I'm relatable to the students, and they trust me. You have to get to know the students, and that requires conversations outside of classroom instruction [to] let them know that you actually care. [In] previous years, we have had conversations outside, in the classroom, on the playground, [and] in the lunchroom. I kind of got to know the kids [and] let them in a little bit [so they could] get to know me. I [especially] liked building relationships with those students everybody looked down on and like to think that they can't do certain things. [It causes them to] push through and prove that they can.

[Another way to be relatable is] to remain diverse. Whenever I'm using certain books or certain videos, I make sure I'm mixing it up and not just using one race. I find myself doing Black History more than just February, and I use different incidents in the classroom to provide certain books for the kids. Like, one time, I know we had talked about Ruby Bridges. That was something that the kids could relate to, and it showed them how she was treated, but she still wasn't scared. She still went to school every day and did what she needed to do.

I had an older teacher on my grade level last year who did not relate well with the students. I had to literally say, "calm down; they don't mean it that way." If the students said this or did that, she would just be so surprised by it, but me, because I think I am

more relatable, I'd have to explain to her, "Okay, that's not what it means," and tell her to just calm down.

I [also] think that its relation to classroom management is crucial. I don't think that a class could operate and be effective where there's constant distraction [and] no classroom management. [If] students have a certain respect for [you] because of the relationships you have built, there will be less acting out in the classroom. That same teacher had one student who would constantly act out in her class, but when she got to my room, she was a totally different child. She was a difficult child, but she just (pauses) she had so much going on in her life; she really did. [The difference was that] she cared about how I would feel about her getting in trouble and stuff. She didn't want to disappoint me.

So, to me, that's what it takes to be a great Title I schoolteacher. I don't want to sound like I'm the best teacher ever, but I think I know a lot of tricks, and I have a lot of ideas that can help teachers that are struggling. I definitely want to do I'm doing a new role this year, but [in the future] I could see myself [being an] EIP [teacher], [an] academic coach, or something that impacts a bigger group of students rather than just a classroom. Until then, I'll continue sharing what I know with teachers around me and being there for my students.

***Reflection.** Ms. Ramonda's story was authentic and relevant to the experiences of those teaching in Title I schools. I could tell that she was making connections between her past experiences and current teaching styles because as she spoke, she would make a statement and then, mid-sentence, start again with a correction or more vivid details. Her voice inflections, volume, and intensity revealed each time an emotion was triggered by*

reliving a memory. Even during the interviews, as she relayed those experiences and insights, I could recall similar instances that I could relate to as a fellow African American educator teaching in the South.

As she spoke, I jotted memos of phrases that stood out and my initial thoughts or wonderings to memorialize the moment. After reviewing the transcript and co-constructing the profile with Ms. Ramonda, I identified three themes that seemed to span the length and breadth of her narrative. The major themes included building relationships with students, developing strategic interventions for students, and dedication to inspiring students to succeed despite racial inequities or stigmas. I also noticed that they closely aligned with Ladson-Billings's culturally relevant pedagogy, characteristics of Gay's (2018) culturally responsive teaching, and Ukpokodu's (2011) findings when he studied preservice and certified math teachers. Among other things, Ladson-Billings, Gay, and Ukpokodu all concur that advocating for critical consciousness infused into the curriculum, truly caring for the students, and a deep commitment to student achievement are essential in reaching otherwise underserved students.

A final pattern worth noting that did not reach the criteria for becoming a theme is wanting more parental support. Several times during the interview, Ms. Ramonda expressed what I believe to be frustration directed towards parents and wanted them to be more accountable for helping their children at home. One example not included in the profile is when she suggested that parents at Title I schools be required to spend time at school just like the magnet schools. This pattern seemed to contradict research on culturally responsive teaching and align more with the deficit thinking paradigm as

explained by Walker (2011) and G. M. Johnson (1994). According to Walker and G. M. Johnson, deficit thinking blames the students and parents instead of reexamining the teacher's role and the systemic racism embedded within the educational system.

Interestingly, Ms. Ramonda exhibits so many qualities of culturally responsive teaching and the foundational tenets of culturally relevant pedagogy, yet, at times, displays characteristics of deficit thinking. Based on research, one might believe that teachers who demonstrate all aspects of culturally responsive/relativity would have higher success rates among African American students. Nonetheless, Ms. Ramonda has consistently high scores and maintains healthy relationships with her students. This pattern caused me to reexamine my thoughts on the role of culturally relative teaching in the classroom and caused me to wonder if there was a continuum. I discuss the three themes and this idiosyncrasy more fully in Chapter 5.

Ms. Jasmine. Ms. Jasmine was the final participant to be interviewed. I had the opportunity to work with her for 2 years. At the time of the interviews, she had been teaching in Title I school settings for 13 years. Ms. Jasmine began her career in a neighboring county and taught various grades between kindergarten and fifth before coming to Sunnydale County to teach first grade. At the time of the interviews, she was teaching first grade at SE. Ms. Jasmine was regarded by her peers as an exceptional teacher, and the results from the district-wide universal screener also corroborated the belief. According to the county-wide universal screener, by the end of the school year,

about 57% of her students are performing at or above grade level. In the subsequent section, I provide an introduction that offers background information prior to her profile.

***Meet Ms. Jasmine.** Ms. Jasmine is a mother and an educator. I encountered her when Creekside merged with Greenview to form Sunnydale Elementary, where she taught first grade. Although I never directly worked with her students, I was aware of her creative ways of reaching and teaching even the most academically and economically disadvantaged scholars.*

I remember chuckling as I passed this tall, medium-built African American woman in the hallway, followed by a long line of little students because I would get a visualization of the Mother Goose nursery rhyme. I would also see her sitting on the floor teaching groups of students in her classroom. Her bubbly, energetic personality seemed to captivate her student's attention and draw them into the lesson she had crafted.

Although I knew of Ms. Jasmine's success, I initially did not consider asking her to participate since she taught all subject areas. However, in a conversation with Ms. Shavon, I asked if she knew of any other exceptional teachers she believed would meet the qualifications and would not mind sharing their experiences. Ms. Shavon later contacted me and recommended Ms. Jasmine because they once taught on the same grade level, and she knew of her passion for teaching math.

Shortly into the conversation with Ms. Jasmine, I realized she would be the perfect fit to participate in the research. Regretfully, due to the Covid 19 pandemic, I could not interview Ms. Jasmine in person or observe her class. We agreed to meet via the Zoom tool for video conferencing instead of face-to-face. During the meetings, I kept

my camera on with a blurred background so she could see my facial expressions and feel more comfortable during the interview while not being distracted by my surroundings.

Ms. Jasmine attended each interview and was very straightforward in her responses to the interview questions. Our previous interactions made each interview less formal, and by the second or third interview, the interviews were more conversational than formal. In the following profile, I present Ms. Jasmine's stories of her childhood experiences, educational journey, strategies she has found compelling, and advised teachers who serve similar populations. I have only made minor insertions in verbiage to reflect the intended meaning or adjust verb tense [denoted by brackets] for readability.

In her own words. [Growing up,] I was a military brat [and] lived between my mom, aunt, and grandmother till about sixth grade. I went to elementary school on base [while] I lived with my aunt. [Afterwards, I lived] with my grandmother. Schooling was completely different because she lived, not necessarily [in] the hood, but not [on] the best side of town. It was just two different worlds. My [school] day was spent with a bunch of children I didn't really know. I went to a private school on the complete opposite side of town. It was a big culture shock to live [and] grow up in one neighborhood but go to school with children [like] John Bon Jovi's (the lead singer in an American rock band) daughter [and others] that had \$100,000 houses. [In addition to that,] I was the only little Black girl [among] three (African American students). I wasn't treated too much differently at school, but I knew there was a difference. [At the end of the school day,] I would go home and, [although] I knew them from church and family, I wasn't always necessarily accepted [by the neighborhood children] because I didn't go to school with

them. Now that I think about it, [those experiences] helped me to see both sides [of the spectrum] and are the reason why I advocate for my babies.

I finally moved [in completely] with my mom in the sixth grade and went to middle [and high] school off base. It wasn't until high school that I began to come out of my shell. I actually loved high school, [and] I had fun. Most of my teachers were really good, and there are some teachers that I still see now and absolutely love them to death. Ms. Mercy, [one of] my science and social studies teachers, would [allow us] to sit and talk with her after school, and we [developed] a really good relationship. I would [also] see [teachers] outside of school at different sporting events or on class trips [and] we built that connection. [As a teacher,] I [also] try to get to [my student's] games to build that relationship with them outside of school.

I did, however, have a couple [of teachers] I could have done without. [One] teacher wasn't [prejudiced] towards the [Black] girls, but [was towards] the Black boys. Oh, you could tell she didn't like them at all. Like, every little thing they did, she sent them to the office. The [other] girls [and] I never had an issue with her; but you could see that she was probably in the Daughters of the Confederate, whatever that little thing is. You could definitely see that she didn't like them at all. I mean, [if] they had two pieces of hair on the chin, they was sent to the office.

[On another occasion,] I felt like one [of my] literature teachers didn't want to be there. Nobody [ever] did anything right. Whether it was how you read, how you wrote your papers, [or] how you answered questions, everything was negative [and], there was never any praise [given]. When you came in, it was just like, "Come in and sit down, open up your books." Her desk was in the back of the room, and our desk faced the front

of the room, but I don't even know if she ever got up from her desk, and I [honestly] can't remember anything we did in there.

(Having finished recounting this memory, Ms. Jasmine then shifted to a connection to her current job) I didn't like her class at all [and] was so happy to be done with her class. I knew I never wanted to be like that [and] never wanted my students to feel like I didn't want to be there. I want them to know that I'm there for them and that I enjoy what I do. Whether they're having a good day [or] a bad day, whether they make mistakes or not; I'm here [to help] them learn from [their] mistake[s] and move on.

After making a personal connection to her past, Ms. Jasmine resumed explaining what led her to become a teacher. When I was coming to the end of high school, I really didn't know what I wanted to do. I've always been around children and was our family's [defacto] babysitter. [In fact,] watching my mom's friends' [children] was my first little job. So, my grandmother [said,] "Well, you watch kids all the time. You work well with them [and] they really listen to you. Why don't you try becoming a teacher?" [Well,] I did.

I started off at [an out-of-state college], got pregnant, [and] came back home to finish at [a local college]. While student teaching, I for real, for real, saw the difference between a Title I school and a non- Title I school. Most of my hours during college were in Title I settings. I [student taught] in first and second grade at a Title I school and third grade at the non- Title I school. Even then, I could tell I wanted it to be at the Title I school. The types of students and parents [were] different. I don't know; I felt like they needed me. I know all students need good teachers, but I felt like (paused to think) I don't know how to explain it. My connection was a little deeper [and] my relationships were a

little stronger there than they were at the [non-Title I] school. I had fun and enjoyed myself [at the non- Title I school], but I really felt like I was at home when I was Title I schools. [It was] like, we were meant to be together.

[After completing college,] I got hired to teach third grade at the Title I school where I spent most of my student hours. I [was] nervous but optimistic. It was intimidating being in there your first year because you're coming off of being in the classroom with the teacher all the time. Even with student teaching, she was just around the corner, and it wasn't all on you. But now, this is your classroom, your name, and your responsibility. So, that was the nervous part. But, this is what you've been training for; so let's make this happen, let's not fail these children, let's show them what they're capable of, and let's make this work.

I had a pretty rough class that first year, and I will never forget them. I don't know if I had any [students in the] Program for Exceptional Children (PEC), but [I do know] I had [students receiving] EIP reading and math support. [The administrative team] said they gave me EIP classes since I was a new teacher because I could have the support teachers in there. So, from that aspect, it made sense, but [did not] when they weren't in there. There were a lot of tough days, but there were a lot of good moments.

It was really hard coming out of school and working with students that were struggling so bad because of the pressure of, like, okay, these children are here, but I need to get them to [progress further to] here. [Although it was challenging], I continued on with it. The most rewarding part was watching them grow [and] seeing when that light bulb clicks. Before [having my own class], I saw the work the teachers put in, but they weren't my students. This time it was up to me. I [felt] like we're in the same boat

because it [was] their first year in third grade, but it was mine too. So, [I adopted the mindset that] I can't let them down and I can't fail them. Whether it was social skills, reading, math, [or] their self-esteem; I could see where [the students] started here, but end[ed] there. [It was] from the work that we've put in together. [There were times when] I said, "let's just step away, come back because we both need a break," [but] we made it through [the year], and they did well. [That year,] I think I only had three [students] that didn't pass the [state's criterion-referenced assessment].

[In hindsight,] I guess it kind of worked [out better over all that] I started off rough, [because] it set the tone that, okay, if I made it through that, I know I can make it. As I started working, the more I did it, the more I had to admit, "Okay, this is for me," and it became clear that that's where I needed to be. They needed me, and I needed them. They needed a voice [and] an advocate that would teach them to think beyond their surroundings [and to always] think bigger and better.

After discovering some of her past experiences that helped shape her current teaching style, I began to ask her about her daily math class. Ms. Jasmine then began to share the specifics of what she does daily to ensure her students are academically and socially successful. Her response is chronicled below.

We [usually] start each lesson with Number Talks [based on] a skill that we've already done [and] can [do] well. Because it should be done mentally, I usually tell them [to] sit on their hands or something, [so] they remember that [they are] just supposed to be applying strategies that [they] already know. I really like number talks because this is one time where they're really comfortable with being wrong. Because they know if they're wrong, somebody else is going to explain it to them [and] they'll have a chance to

see their mistake. Also, if I see them struggling on anything, it lets me know what I need to work on for small groups.

Then we go into our mini-lesson. Most of my mini-lessons are done on the smartboard either through [the curriculum's] interactive page or a smart lab we make and share within our team. (*Smart lab is a Microsoft program that enables teachers to create digital games, lessons, or digital lesson material*). [Other times] it's actually done with manipulatives. We [work] together with the manipulatives, and I'll guide them [using] the manipulatives.

After my mini-lesson and [comprehension] check, they break off into their stations. The station could be a fact fluency, [current] skill, [or] just a review station on skills that we've already done. [I] tried to learn their interests to make sure that those types of activities [were] included in the centers. [For example,] I have some that like[d] the digital and interactive activities, but others that didn't. They wanted to actually hold the cards or hold the manipulatives in their hands and do the games. And I [also] had some that liked to draw, so they liked [it] when they could use the whiteboards. They still [had] to go through the other centers, [but] whether it's the interactive or the hands-on so they would be interested, ready to learn, and excited about learning even though I'm not I'm not sitting right there with them.

[In addition to the centers,] I don't know if it counts or not, but I always (pauses to gather her words) like [to use] music, so my children usually end up liking music, too. I would try to find a lot of songs for the unit, and most of the things we did; there was a song for it. If there wasn't a song, I would try to find a short YouTube video that they could watch just to pique their interest and show them what we [were] about to do.

[Other] times I would just try to find activities outside of [the math curriculum], whether it was from the website from the [state] website, Pinterest, or something just to give them a break from their [text] book. [After the centers,] we'd come back [together], talk about our stations, [and] review our lesson.

After I teach the lesson for the week and we take a common formative assessment, I use that data [to create] my small groups for the next week. (*Common formative assessments are teacher vetted and agreed-upon tests given to the entire grade level for the purpose of individual and group analysis.*) Originally, they kind of all just went through all the stations, but then after I got more comfortable with [stations], there were specific groups and specific activities for them [that I] changed out weekly. Using the data from the previous week helped me notice [if] they still need help on [current or prerequisite skills]. [I] did more targeted instruction when I pulled my small group [based on] what skills they needed to work on. [For] the ones that understood it, I assign different things in Freckle (*an online adaptive or targeted math program*) or give them hands-on centers that could push and deepen their understanding.

This year, my [class] was a little more below level than most other groups. [However,] because their behavior was a lot better [than my] previous classes, it was easier to teach them, and they moved a little bit quicker. I think that's why I love this class so much because they were EIP, and they struggled, but they behaved. Even though they started off lower, when it [was] time [to measure] growth, they had a lot of growth throughout the year compared to the other classes in the grade.

As I listened to Ms. Jasmine explain how she strategically planned for her students' individual needs and addressed them through centers and small group sessions,

I could sense her efforts were a labor of love. I knew from experience how difficult it could be to create a plan for students with so many different learning needs. I also knew how time intensive the process could be. With this in mind, I felt compelled to ask her to share some strategies she used to conquer the time constraints and any challenges she faced. In the excerpt below, she describes some of the challenges she faced due to district requirements, burnout caused by pressure at the school level, and cultural stigmas attached to mental health.

We really, for the most part, use the [district] pacing guide as a guide, but we also look at our children. This year, we kind of fell behind because we felt like we needed to spend more time on some lessons than what the lesson plan [allotted]. To me, the pacing from the curriculum is too fast. In our community, we already know that a majority of our students are already behind. Then they wanted [us] to do a lesson a day every day, and there really isn't enough time for them to grasp it. So, we [used the math curriculum], but we had to break it down to one lesson per two days because it was too much for them. It was too much for us, too, because they were getting restless. If they're restless, [then] I know they're not paying attention [and] it's just a waste of everybody's energy. [Therefore,] if we [saw] our children weren't grasping a concept, there [was] no point in moving on because we know they [were] not going to do well on that because they didn't understand this, the prerequisite.

Once we noticed that the majority [had] it, then we moved on to the next [skill], and we pulled small groups [to work with those needing additional time to master the skill]. So, it's a combination of the pacing guide and just paying attention to where our students were, how they were doing on the assessments, and on whatever activities we

were doing throughout the week. [However, when we took longer than the time allotted,] we fell so far behind [and] we kind of had to [choose to teach the skills that] was really important. Yeah, so, we need to go ahead and tell second grade [that] not only that we had to stop [teaching new material] because of Corona (*short for COVID 19 Pandemic*), but that we were already behind as it is. (laughs) Sorry!

The second challenge she noted was the lack of administrative support. Without proper support, it can lead to teacher burnout and turnover (Sutcher et al., 2019). I've always had those classes [with students who struggle academically]. Always! (emphasizes "always" a little sarcastically, then laughs) They've always been struggling, but they've also [had] behavior[al issues] too. It's easy to teach somebody that's struggling and behaves than somebody that is struggling and misbehaves. It's like double stress, and some of these behaviors, they don't teach you about in school. [In fact,] I was ready to leave [the teaching field] when I left [a neighboring school district] because I've always had that [type of] class, and I was worn out.

That last year in [a neighboring school district], I didn't feel like I had a lot of support. [That year,] I had four of my first grade kids go to the alternative school, and [before then] I didn't even know they had alternative school for first grade. The assistant principal was like, "well, you don't have good classroom management." I [felt] like they're in the alternative school, [so] that should let you know it's not just me. "[If] they got qualified to go to [the] alternative school, that means I had to do steps that I'm supposed to be doing [to document their behavior]; otherwise, y'all [were] not gonna send them. [After that,] I was like, I have to go. Then Miss Shavon told me about Greenview, so I came, and I actually enjoyed it. It made me enjoy teaching again. Even

though I had a little rough class my second year [in Greenview Elementary], it's a lot different in Sunnydale County than in [a neighboring school district].

The administration support is what's different. [During] my first two years at Greenview, I [had] the same kind of class, but it wasn't "you, you, you, you, you" [accusations from the administrators]. [Instead,] it was "okay, we know these are some behavior [issues with your] children [this year], [and] this is what we're going to do." It was like a team thing, and to me, I felt supported. There [at a neighboring school district], they just threw me to the wolves and said, if you can't do it, you got to go. I was getting it from the students and the administration, so there was no relief. But here, okay, I know I might have a rough class [and] I might [have to] travel, but I have some support. It's a little weight off my shoulders, and I know I can make it through.

The final challenge she felt most passionate about was mental health awareness in schools. According to Parrett and Budge (2020, p. 112), about a quarter of students deal with trauma caused by factors such as experiencing life-threatening violence from a custodian or in the community, physical or sexual abuse, and others. However, in my 19 years of experience working with Title I students, I have found that students experiencing high poverty living conditions are disproportionately affected by traumatic events. Ms. Jasmine's experiences also led her to that conjecture from which she based her plea for funding and support for seeking and receiving mental health issues.

Mental health is a big issue for our communities. I'm a big advocate of mental health and people getting the help that they need; [but] I hate that it's such a stigma in our community. [I've had students who were] disrespectful [by] talking back and having to have the last word. Um, (pauses to compose her words) it's mainly just their mouthiness.

If somebody says something to correct [their] behavior, there [was] an instant attitude. Very rarely did they stop and say, okay, I did this wrong. [However,] I've also been in classrooms where I know mental things [are] going on, but parents have been in denial about getting them help. I do know it's a stigma that I see that more in our community than [in] some other communities. We're not you're not going to therapy [or] getting on medicine. I understand [some parents] don't want to put the children on medicine, but something needs to be happening because they're coming to school in situations they don't know how to handle, and they're getting in trouble because they're going about things the wrong way. So, that is a huge issue that I think leads to a good amount of our discipline problems.

I know, for our population; [we should] have more time dedicated to[wards] the social and emotional [health of our students]. A lot of our students have a hard time because of the other issues that they have going on. So, I think we could dedicate more time to that and get to the real root of some of these problems [before] we could go into the academics. Deep counseling sessions [also] need to happen on the regular for our children (giggles to soften the reality of the statement). They go through [hardships] at home, then they come to school, and you're trying to [provide] structure [for] them and teach them something that they don't know. [In addition to that,] [we're] putting them in a classroom with other kids they don't know, or they do know and don't get along with in the neighborhood. So, it's a lot for them [because] I just think that they don't know how to handle [certain] emotions.

I feel like they [should] stop taking money away from education and put it in the right places like counseling. [For example] there's no way a school like ours should just

have one counselor. [When the schools merged, they] should have [kept] Greenview's counselor and Creekside's counselor together. You guys needed y'all's [counselor,] and we know ours needed ours. Plus, there was a lot of new ones that weren't [at] either one of our schools last year, and they came over wide open [meaning they demonstrated behavior issues from the onset]. [I believe] there [really] should be two [counselors] for pre-K through second and two for third through fifth just because [of] the type of environment that we teach in. It's too much work for one person (pauses) [and] it's still too much work for two people because we have so many [students]. But I'll take two, though. [However] one is definitely not enough. Maybe one day, we'll get it together (in a wishful tone).

Although we did not meet face-to-face and she kept her camera off during the Zoom video conference, I could sense her deep love and commitment to her students. She spoke with intense excitement and concern as she described her students' strengths and areas of growth, her strategies to reach them, and her desire for their well-being. Having heard so many strategies, I asked her to tell me what made her a great teacher and give advice to a first-year Title I teacher. Her reply is recorded below.

My philosophy is [to] teach my children by any means necessary [by] making sure that I'm giving them my all, so they give me their all. [Also, it's about] meeting them on their level. It's not about me, [it] is all about them. It goes back to their relationships [and] the ability to relate to them. When I first started, it was just kind of like, *(speaking as if she were talking to the students)* I'm going to give you this information. Yes, I'm gonna try to have a relationship [with you], but I just really need you to get this information.

[Now,] it's more like, I need to get to know you so I know the best way to give you this information so you can take it and do well with it. If I can find something that connects with them, I know I can reach them, and they'll work harder. I [would] spend time at the beginning of the year when we had to sit with them at lunch just talking to them, not about school stuff, just talking to them. Every morning, I was at the door [and] they got to choose their greeting. So, we started the day, where we just had that one-on-one greeting time. So sometimes, that was their time to tell me something that happened on the way to school, or if they weren't feeling it that day, there was a time for us to talk about what we're going to do and set the tone. [In class,] when they were writing their narratives, they usually wrote about somebody in their family; so, I asked them questions about their family. So, I really think that the relationship that we built with each other helped with the classroom environment.

I'm [also] more focused on the whole child [as opposed to just their educational needs]. Before it was, okay, we got reading, we got math, science, social studies, make sure you say please and thank you, and that was it. But now, we talk about life skills as well as academic skills. I make sure [that] every day, we talk about social skills [like] respect, confidence, self-esteem, how to express [themselves] in certain situations, dealing with [their] emotions, [and] more in addition to the academics.

I think once they realize [that] yes, I'm your teacher, but I do care about you more than just being in the classroom; then they're willing to try and learn. [The] solid relationship that we build helps them trust me, and when they trust me, I think they want to learn. With the little ones, you can kind of see that they want to impress you. So, when you build that solid relationship, it's a constant, oh, let me show you what I could do.

That's exciting, too, because it means a lot when a student wants to show you how good they're doing and how well they're doing.

So that is my goal for my students. I don't care where you're coming from. I don't care where you're starting, [but] this is where we're ending. So, my goal is to make [you] understand that you might have to put in some work, but you can get up out of this and do what you want to do. The end result is going to be so good.

[To sum it up,] if I had to advise a first-year teacher, I would definitely tell them to [remember] it's not about them; it's about the children. [You must also] be understanding, flexible, [and] know that [you] have just as much to learn from the students [you] have to teach them. Mainly, just know that it's about them and not being the power figure and being in charge. It's about the children and making sure that you're putting them first in all of the decisions that you make.

[I'd also tell them] to make sure they take time to get to know each of their students because what is "fair for one" is not [necessarily fair] for the other. It's not about being equal; it's about making sure that everybody gets what they need. Not everybody's gonna need the same thing. So, [it goes] back to building a strong relationship and then not worrying about everybody having the same thing, but we're about making sure that they get what they need in order to be successful. Get to know your students, find out what they like [and] what they dislike, and cater your lessons towards that. You'll get more out of them when you take you out of it. Make it about them, give them options, and let them kind of guide you on how you plan or what activities you plan. That's why we're here anyway.

Reflection. Ms. Jasmine began the interviews somewhat self-conscious about her answers and regularly asked, “Did I answer the question right?” She was more comfortable sharing her experiences during the second and third interviews. Although she did not turn her camera on during the interviews, her peppy personality was clearly seen through her voice inflections that varied depending on the event she was retelling. She, too, vacillated through the first, second, and third point of view depending on whether she was reenacting herself speaking to her students, a coworker, or principal; or whether she was playing the role of a student in the conversation. In addition to switching points of view, she often fluctuated between the past and present. She would describe a past experience, relate it to her current teaching practices, and then pick back up where she left off in her story. I saw this as an indication of her investment in the interview.

As she told her experiences, I jotted memos of my thoughts and the initial patterns I noticed. Then, after listening to the audio files and transcribing the interviews, I began to see other patterns and themes. Four major themes connected Ms. Jasmine’s experiences and insights. Those themes included building strong relationships with students, using student interest to drive instruction, using data to plan for individual needs, and advocating for more mental health services in elementary school.

Building positive relationships with the students was most prevalent throughout each event of the four themes. It appeared to be one of Ms. Jasmine’s strongest traits and the glue that held everything else in place. Comments such as “that’s where I needed to be. They needed me, and I needed them;” “It’s not about me, it’s all about them;” and “if I can find something that connects with them, I know I can reach them” all show her

dedication to creating relationships with her students and is key to her effectiveness as a teacher. The themes and their connections are discussed in greater detail in Chapter 5.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I presented profiles of the five participants in this study. Each profile provided experiential knowledge of teachers considered exceptional math instructors and events that influenced their teaching philosophy and style. At the end of each profile, I shared my reflections on the interview process and explained major themes or patterns based on related recurring statements. Although every participant had a unique personality and style of teaching, many of the themes were common among the participants. In the next chapter, I explain each theme and examine themes noted in multiple participants.

Chapter 5

DISCUSSION OF THEMES AND ASSERTIONS

“Human beings are more alike than unlike, and what is true anywhere is true everywhere . . .” (Angelou, 1993, p. 11)

In this study I aimed to provide a positive light on effective Title I mathematics teachers and provide insight into their teaching approaches, thereby inspiring others serving in similar areas impacted by high poverty. To accomplish my goal, I interviewed five teachers from a local school district and developed themes by coding and analyzing their transcribed interviews, my reflective memos, and previous classroom observations. Chapter 3 explained my methodology, and in Chapter 4, I presented profiles in the participant’s words to amplify the participants’ voices as tales of what happened in their classrooms and other personal stories served as counter-stories to the narrative spun by the majority that portrays parents and students experiencing poverty Title I schools as deficient or apathetic towards education. In addition to amplifying their voices, it strengthened the trustworthiness of my findings and allowed the reader to draw their own conclusions and connect personally to the context and experiences shared by the participants.

In this chapter, I discuss themes and overarching themes I created based on the interview data. Saldaña (2021, p. 258) defined a theme as “an extended phrase or statement that identifies what a unit of data is about and/or what it means.” The themes in this study were primarily constructed based on recurring ideas found throughout the

interviews and one divergent pattern that seemed to defy or go against best practices found in the literature review. I begin by discussing the nine themes in the context of the participants' experiences while connecting them to my research goals and questions. After that, I examine the relationships between the overarching themes or assertions and their subcategories. Additionally, I wrote this chapter as if I were speaking directly to other Title I teachers because a core goal of my research was to offer other teachers in similar circumstances, valuable, practical insight into the common approaches and strategies the participants used. The findings reported in this study are mine; however, I cited literature when it was appropriate in order to position those findings in the related academic conversations.

Individual Themes

I created themes for each participant by carefully analyzing and coding each interview, looking for recurring patterns of thought, phrases, or internal or external conflicts. I then categorized codes into groups based on similitudes and finally constructed themes based on relationships that linked categories. The abridged description of the nine resulting themes, as listed in Table 5, included passionate about teaching Title I students; teaching style influenced by formative years; student interest and data-driven instruction equals student success; a co-constructed classroom culture; focused on emotional and social skills; combats racism through CRP; chooses to meet student needs; participants are lifelong learners; and displays CRP and deficit thinking viewpoints. The explanations of those themes are further discussed in the subsequent section and the expanded version of the abridged theme titles are denoted by bold italicized words to provide greater emphasis.

Theme 1: Passionate about teaching Title I students. Initially, when I set out to discover what was happening in the participants' classrooms that caused the students to thrive amid what the majority would call an educational desert, I believed that the participants would focus on the instructional practices they considered vital to their sustained success. I suspected that motivation was a factor; however, I had no clue how large of a factor it would become. Starting with the first participant's interviews, I saw a theme that would eventually connect to all five participants.

In all five participants, I noticed that their *passionate commitment to teaching students in Title I schools inspired participants to work through good and bad times*. It is no secret that students experiencing high-poverty conditions face a magnitude of challenges that students in more affluent neighborhoods do not experience or do not experience to the same degree (Carver-Thomas et al., 2020; Garcia & Weiss, 2020; Gorski, 2013). Some of these challenges include limited access to quality health services (Cooper, 2016; Walraven, 2010), nutritious fresh food (Ohri-Vachaspati et al., 2019), higher incarceration rate (Western & Muller, 2013), lower test scores (Boatwright & Midcalf, 2019), mental illness (Kromydas et al., 2021), and other systemic injustices. As a result, students not having developed the coping skills necessary to deal with the pressure often display behaviors teachers deem as insubordinate or defiant.

In addition to working with the students, teachers in Title I schools also deal with pressure from the administration and the community at large. Since the schools are judged based on their end-of-year test scores and face repercussions for not making the desired gains (Hawks, 2019; Mukhopadhyay & Greer, 2017), states, districts, and administrators often place additional pressure on teachers to produce classes that meet the

targeted standards (Claycomb & Hawley, 2000). These added pressures give rise to exponential teacher attrition rates within Urban Title I schools (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Carver-Thomas et al., 2020; Kozol, 1991; Sutcher et al., 2019).

Despite the complex realities surrounding teaching in their environment, participants in this study purposed to remain and teach effectively, some a total of 18 years, in environments where many teachers have left within a year. Whether directly asked about their source of motivation or stated indirectly through experiences with students, the participants clearly expressed that their deep connection to the students, desire to see the students succeed, and passion for teaching kept them determined to continue. Evidence of these traits was seen in all five participants.

When expressing their deep commitment to teaching Title I students, Ms. Shavon and Ms. Ramonda each made similar statements that part of their desire comes from seeing themselves in their students. During their interviews, they expressed how they grew up like the students, came from similar socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds, and rose above their meager beginnings. For example, Ms. Shavon stated,

I pretty much grew up like my students [with] a low socioeconomic background.

When you grow up, you look back on your life and you don't see, as a kid, that, I mean, man, we really struggled. But you know, you don't see that until you grow up and you look back. I guess I was in a single-parent household. My mom wasn't married, but there was a male figure in my house for 14 years. Back then, they called [it] common law marriage. I saw my daddy; my dad was part of my life, but [he] lived [the city]. So it's not like I saw my daddy every day.

I grew up in a very small town where everybody knows everybody. My neighborhood was one of the ones [where] my mom [would say], “Yeah, you can go play, but I’ll come pick you up before it gets dark. You gotta be in when the streetlights go off.” I think that’s why, as a teacher, I [can] relate to my kids so much. *When I see them, I see me* [emphasis mine].

Ms. Ramonda also saw herself in her students. In her interview, she explained that her dedication to teaching stemmed from her students reminding her of herself and wanting to see them grow in the face of hardship and frustration. The following excerpt details her rationale in her own words:

I teach at a Title I school because the type of environment they are in reminds me of myself when I was in elementary school. They come with so many different struggles and barriers, but I can see their potential [and] like seeing them grow . . . you have to be committed to the students’ [success], regardless of what happens during the day. My philosophy is that all students deserve a chance to learn regardless of differences. So that’s race, special ed., no matter how different they are; they should be given an opportunity. There are times when I get frustrated because of things like the workload, when students don’t grasp a concept, or the lack of parent engagement; but *I go back to* [thinking about] *how much the kids remind me of myself* [emphasis mine], [and I] remember, refocus on why I’m here. [Then I] come back the next day.

Ms. Keisha and Ms. Jasmine were also determined to continue teaching in Title I schools but described their connection to the students from an internal feeling of being needed. Interestingly, at times, they did not feel valued by some stakeholders, but they

were compelled to keep teaching during the good and bad times because of the student's need for what they could provide at an exceptional level. As a testament to her passion for teaching African American Title I students, Ms. Keisha was offered a job to teach at a more affluent school but declined so she could continue impacting her students. In her interview, she stated,

I was once offered a job at an upper-class school that was not Title I. I was very appreciative to be offered the job, but [the students] had parents who could help them with their homework. [In] my school, sometimes my parents can't help. Sometimes I might be the only one that's helping them get higher in their education. Sometimes I have to be mom because mom is at work or mom is not there or grandma only raising [them]. *That's* [referring to the Title I school] *where I'm needed. I'm where I can do the most good and be most beneficial* [emphasis mine] to my students . . . I [also] have a way with students that nobody else wants to be bothered with. I have a way of teaching kids that most people can't reach. The trouble kids are my babies, and I love it because I can see something in there most can't see.

Sometimes, even the most dedicated teacher is challenged and wants to give up. Ms. Jasmine has always taught Title I students, but during the interview, she shared a time when she loved teaching students but wanted to quit because of pressures from the administration. Though she changed districts, her commitment and connection to Title I students kept her teaching in a similar environment. The following excerpts tell of the experience and her connection to her students using her own words.

I [student taught] in first and second grade at a Title I school and third grade at a non-Title I school. Even then, I could tell I wanted it to be at the Title I school. The types of students and parents [were] different. I don't know; *I felt like they needed me* [emphasis mine]. I know all students need good teachers, but I felt like [paused to think] I don't know how to explain it. My connection was a little deeper [and] my relationships were a little stronger there than they were at the [non-Title I] school.

. . . I've always had those classes [with students who struggle academically]. Always! [emphasizes "always" a little sarcastically, then laughs] They've always been struggling, but they've also [had] behavior[al issues] too. It's easy to teach somebody that's struggling and behaves than somebody that is struggling and misbehaves. It's like double stress, and some of these behaviors, they don't teach you about in school. [In fact,] I was ready to leave [the teaching field] when I left [a neighboring school district] because I've always had that [type of] class, and I was worn out.

That last year in [a neighboring school district], I didn't feel like I had a lot of support. Then, Miss Shavon told me about Greenview, so I came, and I actually enjoyed it. It made me enjoy teaching again. Even though I had a little rough class my second year [in Greenview Elementary], it [was] a lot different in Sunnydale County than in [a neighboring school district] . . . I [had] the same kind of class, but it wasn't "you, you, you, you, you" [accusations from the administrators]. [Instead,] it was" okay, we know these are some behavior [issues

with your] children [this year], [and] this is what we're going to do." It was like a team thing, and to me, I felt supported.

Within the field of education, not only do teachers deal with a lack of support, but they also encounter racial injustices even in the job application process. In the fifth participant to express a deep commitment to teaching Title I students, Ms. Dedicated also spoke of a time when she considered employment at a non-Title I school but decided against teaching at that school because of racial discrimination. Rather than giving up on the field of education, she stayed committed to teaching the students she felt she was called to teach. Rather than considering it a job, she described it as her "calling" in the following excerpt.

I've been working at a Title I school [for] 13 years. [From my] experience, our students need support and need teachers who are willing to go that extra mile beyond the regular 9 to 5, [or] for us, that 8 to 4. This is a calling, and God has placed [me] in a position to impart into students' lives [something] that will leave a lifetime impression.

I went to one school that was considered one of the better schools in our local area and gave a resume to the assistant principal. She looked at my resume and asked the question, "Do I really need to keep this?" My thought was, Yes! I'm giving you my resume because I want you to look at it. I come from a great school, and I'm ready [to teach]. She [continued], "because at our school, our teachers work very hard." I was thinking, I know, I work hard [too]. She was like, "well, we even have a key to our school and work on Saturdays." I [responded], "Well, I do that now as a para, so that's a plus." [To that, she countered,] "you

know, we even work on Sunday.” I [asked,] “really, on Sundays?” [The assistant principal] said, “If the need [arises,] because we’re overachievers. We have the kind of school climate that the parents will write you a dissertation as to why their child has sand in their hair.” I [responded,] “Well, the daycare that I came from was a very mixed school, so I’m okay with it. I’m okay dealing with parents who are well educated. That’s not a problem for me.” She went on [talking], “We’re overachievers. We’re not just a cut-and-paste school. We strive to be the best [and] we are the best.” At that point, [realizing that she did not want me there,] I [said], “Well, can you give my resume back and I give it to someone else? At this point, if you’re working harder, and I know that I’m working hard right now, that’s not a school that I want to work at.”

I felt that she racially judged me based on what she saw . . . That was a moment that I won’t ever forget. It was, perhaps, my only encounter [as a teacher] that I felt like I was [judged] based on the color of my skin. The same principal who called and apologized to me was on the panel in the interview with the principal who wanted to hire me. I said [to myself], “The Lord has prepared my table in the presence of my enemy.” The panel of six principals asked about 20 questions, one question after the other. I thank God that I was able to answer those questions, and I was hired before I could get out the door. That may be a reason why I choose to stay [at a Title I school].

Though the context in which participants’ commitment was described differently in varying situations, the fact remains that their passionate commitment to teaching students in Title I schools inspired them to work through *good* and *bad* times. This theme

indicates that a common trait in these highly effective Title I educators is knowing what Michael Jr (Joiner, 2017) referred to as *the why* behind what we do in the teaching profession. Their clarity on their “*whys*” gave me insight into their internal motivation, and contributed to my understanding of what drives their decision-making related to their approaches and strategies which informs one of my research goals. In environments where attrition is so high, these teachers relied on their strong sense of connectedness to their students as a motivating factor to keep them grounded in their work.

Theme 2: Teaching style influenced by formative years. Theme 2 is closely related to the preceding theme because they both explain what Michael Jr (Joiner, 2017) expressed as “the why” behind their commitment to teaching in Title I schools. However, Theme 2 is different because it focuses on the “why” behind their teaching style. All five participants referenced past encounters and experiences when explaining how they teach their students. Based on the recurring pattern of experiences within each participant, I developed the theme entitled *participant teaching methods were influenced by their formative years*.

Within the current theme, I refer to formative years as their childhood experiences through their first 3 years of teaching. Each phase, from childhood to adolescence, from college to their initial teaching years, serves as milestones and new beginnings and can be referred to as formative or developmental. During the interviews, the participants looped back from past to present and made connections between life events and their current teaching method/style. Some events extended back to childhood experiences with their parent(s), while others referred to pivotal events in college through their first year of

teaching. To provide context to the formation of this theme, I used excerpts from three participants and summarized my findings.

When giving personal background information about herself as an individual, Ms. Jasmine recounted experiences she had during her early childhood to adolescence that she connected to her passion for advocating for her students and focusing on building relationships with her students that extend beyond the schoolhouse. In the following excerpts, she tells of two experiences as an elementary student and with a teacher that impacted her life.

[Growing up,] I was a military brat [and] lived between my mom, aunt, and grandmother till about sixth grade. I went to elementary school on base [while] I lived with my aunt. [Afterwards, I lived] with my grandmother. Schooling was completely different because she lived, not necessarily [in] the hood, but not [on] the best side of town. It was just two different worlds. My [school] day was spent with a bunch of children I didn't really know. I went to a private school on the complete opposite side of town . . . I was the only little Black girl [among] three [African American students]. I wasn't treated too much differently at school, but I knew there was a difference. [At the end of the school day,] I would go home and, [although] I knew them from church and family, I wasn't always necessarily accepted [by the neighborhood children] because I didn't go to school with them. Now that I think about it, [those experiences] helped me to see both sides [of the spectrum] and are the reason why I advocate for my babies.

I finally moved [in completely] with my mom in the sixth grade and went to middle [and high] school off base. It wasn't until high school that I began to

come out of my shell. I actually loved high school, [and] I had fun. Most of my teachers were really good, and there are some teachers that I still see now and absolutely love them to death. Ms. Mercy, [one of] my science and social studies teachers, would [allow us] to sit and talk with her after school, and we [developed] a really good relationship. I would [also] see [teachers] outside of school at different sporting events or on class trips [and] we built that connection. [As a teacher,] I [also] try to get to [my student's] games to build that relationship with them outside of school.

Later, during the interview, she shared her disappointment in not being able to develop relationships with her current students by attending their sporting events. Before teaching in Sunnydale County, Ms. Jasmine worked in a neighboring school district in which she lived. She recalled stories of how she would get the game schedules of her students who played sports and leave school in time to see them play. Other times, she would see her students and their parents in neighborhood stores or other community events and get a chance to see them in a different environment.

Although Ms. Jasmine shared that she loves teaching at Sunnydale and worked to develop relationships within the school setting, she also explained that the fact that the school is approximately 30 - 40 minutes from her home prevents her from showing up at games or meeting students in other spaces outside of school. In addition to the driving distance, she also explained how social distancing restrictions due to the COVID pandemic decreased opportunities to see the students as a whole. During the uncertainty of the first months of the COVID pandemic, games were postponed, schools operated virtually, and people were encouraged to take precautions to prevent the spread of the

virus. As a result, Ms. Jasmine had even fewer opportunities to make the added dimensions of connections she sought to develop. Although circumstances presented obstacles in executing her desires, her beliefs and actions surrounding celebrating students' accomplishments outside of academia remain undeterred.

The excerpt also highlighted Ms. Jasmine's internal commitment to building relationships with students and seemed to continue to inform her teaching practices today and align with the tenet of culturally relevant pedagogy that emphasizes celebrating the students' cultural identity. These actions and beliefs were similar to positive experiences with her high school teachers, who worked to build lasting, meaningful relationships with her as a student. In the interview, she connected her methods of celebrating student identities to her experiences with her high school teachers. Her childhood experiences of "living in two worlds" continue to inform the teacher she is and would like to become.

Another example of teaching style influenced by their formative years is in Ms. Keisha's interviews. Although Ms. Keisha related childhood experiences that informed her teaching style, her pivotal moment occurred as a college student. In the subsequent excerpt from her interview, she retells an experience she had while working with a kindergarten student. The impact was so profound that she connected it with her desire to see students learn and the high expectations for her students.

I got assigned to this sweet little girl from Ecuador named Maria. She was in kindergarten. When I went for my initial meeting, her teacher looked at me and said, "Well, I don't even know why they're making you waste your time here. Maria can't learn. She doesn't know anything. She doesn't even know how to write her name [or] how to speak English." Every time I went to visit her

classroom, watching how the teacher treated the kids made me furious. I was like, if you don't like children, why are you teaching? I just couldn't stand the fact that it was teachers out there who didn't really want to teach. Then I thought about it; maybe instead of trying to help them after they get into the system, if I teach, I can help them before they get into the system. I set my mind to make sure that Maria could do everything that [the teacher] claimed Maria couldn't do. I was very proud that by the time we ended our program, not only could Maria spell her first and her last name, [but] she could [also] write her first name and her last name. So, that made me decide to go into teaching. I promise you [if] I would have never been told to go to that program, I probably would be in somewhere doing law right now.

The remaining portions of Ms. Keisha's interviews illustrated that she has the same drive to see students succeed despite where their journey begins. Other examples of her determination to help students succeed included her explanation of how she helped students after school, gave her contact information to parents, and provided intense intervention before allowing students to retake assignments.

The final example was found in Ms. Dedicated's transcript. She not only shared childhood experiences that impacted her teaching style, but she shared examples from her first year of teaching. Throughout her three-phased interview process, Ms. Dedicated stressed the importance of building relationships with her students. She shared examples from elementary and high school teachers who have impacted her life; however, her experience as a first-year teacher struggling to implement those plans proved challenging.

In the following excerpt, Ms. Dedicated detailed her first-year experience and explained how it affected her teaching style's trajectory.

[After finishing college,] my first teaching position was in third grade in the same school I spent 5 years as a kindergarten paraprofessional It was a tough year. I had 28 kids that year [which is] the max that I could have. It was challenging [because] I had a lot of behavior [issues] I just felt like I couldn't get over. I couldn't loosen up [and] always had to be tight with them so that they would be successful. I just wanted to teach, and I wasn't so much concerned about building relationships with the students. I knew [how] to build a relationship with students, but I didn't make it a focus.

When they rated me [at the end of the year], I got the lowest [teacher] rating. They [said], "you're a good teacher, but you didn't get to know us." [briefly pausing to think] To me, that was very impactful because I didn't want to ever leave that kind of impression with my students. From then on, I've just worked to always build that relationship. [Now,] on the first week of school, I'm getting to know them, how they spent [their] summer, their likes, their dislikes, [and] how they learn. I'm interested in knowing those things about them. You know, you can teach people anything, but if you can get to their hearts, then what you teach them is unfathomable.

After completing the interviews, and as a form of member checking (Maxwell, 2013), I visited Ms. Dedicated's classroom to speak with her about her profile. During the visit, I made informal observations to see what type of classroom dynamics she had established. In those few moments, I could tell she had created similar relationships with

her current students as with the classes I remembered pre-COVID pandemic. It was refreshing to see the same dedication to building relationships she spoke of during the interview process at work in her class.

The development of the theme that the participant's teaching methods were influenced by their formative years caused me to become more explicit about the types of experiences that shaped the participants' teaching styles. As a result, of their experiences, I came to understand the term *teaching style* as the summation of prior experiences, culture, and current pedagogical knowledge. Humans constantly encounter new stimuli and choose to accept, assimilate, or reject that knowledge, usually based on prior knowledge. This pattern of selecting which styles and methods they would use was also true for my study's five participants.

The resulting theme suggests that teachers should be cognizant of their interactions and how it has affected their teaching style. Some participants used the experiences and chose to incorporate them into their own style, while others used the negative experiences to inform how they did not want to show up as a teacher. Self-reflection and awareness of past experiences, culture, and pedagogy can help teachers shape, reshape, or redesign their teaching practices. It can also help the teacher understand how their student's experiences, likes, and dislikes inform their learning experience.

Theme 3: Student Interest + Data-Driven Instruction = Student Success.

Closely behind the frequency of times the theme or code relating to strong connection occurred were the number of times conversations around combining student interest with their students' academic needs occurred. Much research has been done showing the

importance of student buy-in and responsiveness to the skills taught (Hattie, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 1995b). Hattie's (2012, 2015) meta-analysis of literature about achievement, reported that while student-centered teaching yielded a 0.36 effect size on student achievement, interventions for students with learning needs and student effort each resulted in a 0.77 effect size. Therefore, one might wonder if a combination of student-centered teaching, effective interventions, and student effort might result in an effect size of about 0.63, which is well over the 0.4 effect size Hattie (2012, 2015) reported as the minimum effective size necessary for student achievement.

Although it seems common sense that *student interest + data-driven instruction results in student success*, I observed many classrooms where student interest was either gathered as an exercise but not used or not considered. According to Pinto and Vogel (2016), teachers approached teaching math in a purely skill and procedure-driven method; and, in the process, neglected the realization of the role students played in making meaning, which resulted in the suppression of students' critical thinking skills and fostered student disengagement. This procedure-driven approach may be due to the sheer volume of novice teachers generally found in Title I schools (Carver-Thomas et al., 2020; Claycomb & Hawley, 2000; Gorski, 2013). However, I have also noticed this phenomenon in veteran teachers who were typically not considered successful.

Although student interest is vital, data driven instruction, the second component of this theme, is of equal importance. Effective math teachers of African American students in Title I schools must be proficient in using various assessment strategies to determine what the student already knows in relation to the skill being taught (Hattie, 2012; NCTM, 2014; Ukpokodu, 2011) Without an accurate depiction of the student's

baseline knowledge, it is unlikely that students will show substantial gains. In my nearly 20 years of teaching in Title I school settings, I have seen many teachers who either determine their students' interests or determine the students' academic needs; however, I have only seen a small number of math teachers who effectively marry interest with data driven instruction. During their interviews, each participant consistently referred to combining student interest with informed data decisions as vital to their success and found unique ways of accomplishing their goal of student achievement.

Ms. Dedicated, Ms. Shavon, Ms. Keisha, Ms. Jasmine, and Ms. Ramonda each attributed their success in teaching mathematics to African American Title I students to their skills in providing individualized instruction based on student assessment data. They referenced SSD's expectations for math instruction, which included a focus on a mental math strategy, direct instruction of the target skill, student learning centers, and varying types of student assessments. Despite being advocated by the district, advocating alone does not ensure student success. Through their explanations and my classroom observations, I could see just how vital student interest and knowing their student's individual needs was to my participants and the impact it had on student growth.

Ms. Shavon, Ms. Jasmine, and Ms. Dedicated indicated that they used surveys of student interests, learning styles, and personal interactions with students as a baseline to inform the types of learning activities they developed. These surveys helped the teachers match the correct balance of interest and targeted instruction. In her interview, Ms.

Shavon explained that:

Most years, I give them a survey, and I read the answers to the questions [to] get an idea of who's in my class, what type of learner I'm dealing with, [and] what

type of kid I'm dealing with. I [also use] informal observations of the kids in the class as a whole and the children and as individuals [to] see what they like and what they don't like, what style of teaching they respond to best, and what they don't respond. Every year, it just depends on the kids; I try something different.

We [also use] data notebooks and [conduct] data talks where we sit down and [use the] data to [discuss] their strengths and weaknesses. I let them identify where they think they're strong and where they're weak. We talk and have conversations about what we can do to make sure those [weaknesses] are no longer weaknesses, and the areas that we are strong in, what can we do to make [sure] we don't become weak in those areas. I feel like the data notebooks [and] data talks is a great tool because if they know where they are and where they need to be, they have an idea of how to get there.

She also described how she combined the student interest with the individual skills the students needed in the following way:

One year, I tried guided math. That was a lot of work, but I saw the benefits of it. Because we [had] limited computers, I made a lot of games. I used the student data . . . When I [made] games, I leveled them high, medium, or low with a sticker so when it [was time for] the workstation, the students knew [they had] 20 minutes then to rotate. They knew when it was their day to go. For the most part, once they learn[ed] the routine, I was able to just take a step back, and it worked for them. [Although] I saw the benefit [from] guided math, it was a lot to do.

Knowing how much her students loved music, Ms. Jasmine integrated music into her lessons when teaching her first grade class.

[I] tried to learn their interests to make sure that those types of activities [were] included in the centers. [For example,] I have some that like[d] the digital and interactive activities, but others that didn't. They wanted to actually hold the cards or hold the manipulatives in their hands and do the games. And I [also] had some that liked to draw, so they liked [it] when they could use the whiteboards. They still [had] to go through the other centers, [but] whether it's the interactive or the hands-on so they would be interested, ready to learn, and excited about learning even though I'm not I'm not sitting right there with them.

[In addition to the centers,] I don't know if it counts or not, but I [have] always (pauses to gather her words) liked music, so my children usually end up liking music, too. I would try to find a lot of songs for the unit, and most of the things we did; there was a song for it. If there wasn't a song, I would try to find a short YouTube video that they could watch just to pique their interest and show them what we [were] about to do.

In the following example, Ms. Dedicated, realizing how much her students liked hands-on activities and involvement in the lesson, used manipulatives such as arts and crafts to demonstrate a real-world scenario.

It [all] depends on the needs of the student. It's giving them an experience that we can make authentic as possible. I can't go and bake a batch of brownies right away, but we can definitely cut out some paper and pretend. [In math,] sometimes they need to be involved in the problem solving [scenario] and act the problem

out. We might have to take construction paper, make it into those brownie pieces, and think about how we're gonna fair share this.

I surmised from the participants' life experiences that the key components in achieving their balance between student interest and data driven instruction were twofold: (1) having a relationship with the students opened a channel to engage and encourage participation, and (2) analyzing student assessments revealed the most logical progression in scaffolding students to mastery. Although the activities the participants used may have seemed basic, I used them to illustrate that creating a balance of student interest and data-driven instruction does not need to be an elaborate undertaking. The teacher's knowledge of each student's learning style helped her find practical ways to engage the students. Her subject area knowledge and taking time to analyze student data provided the final piece to the puzzle. As Ms. Shavon shared, it is time intensive on the front end, but if implemented with fidelity and consistency, it should produce student success in other Title I school settings. The next theme examined surrounded classroom culture. The next theme examined surrounded classroom culture.

Theme 4: A Co-Constructed Classroom Culture The fourth theme was closely related to the preceding theme because of the role building relationships played in its construction. However, the difference between the two themes was *a reciprocal relationship between empathy, healthy relationships, and high expectations that the teachers associated with establishing and maintaining a healthy classroom environment that breeds academic success and social connections*. The development of this theme helped answer my research question querying how effective math teachers in

Title I schools create classroom environments where students succeed academically and socially.

One may infer from how I posed my research question that I expected to hear stories and explanations about what the teachers did rather than what the students did. That was the case throughout most of the data-gathering and analysis processes. A literature review resulted in studies where researchers reported that students (Stuckey, 2019) and teachers (Benford & Smith, 2021; Egan, 2008; Xenofontos, 2019) valued safe classrooms and found it to impact student achievement positively. However, the more I examined the participants' stories, along with the codes, categories, and themes I created, the more intricate I recognized them. I found what I believed to be co-constructing of the classroom culture.

All five participants demonstrated a reciprocal yet causal relationship between having empathy for the students, and building strong relationships, while still expecting them to meet targeted standards. Each participant created classroom jobs; held morning meetings focused on leadership habits, social skills, and classroom expectations; and shared enough of themselves with their students to create mutual respect. Though each participant displayed these traits differently, the results were the same. Two examples of this relationship within Ms. Ramonda and Ms. Keisha's interviews.

While explaining aspects of her classroom environment, Ms. Ramonda kept spiraling back to how she created relationships with each student. She expressed times when she shared stories of her son and niece, allowed students to help her take things to the car, and spent time talking with them during lunch or recess. Ms. Ramonda also demonstrated, both through observations and interview stories, her dedication to seeing

the students be successful academically and socially. She explains one of those interactions in the following excerpts.

A successful teacher has to be relatable because it allows you to find out the best way to reach them, and it causes them to care about what you have to say. I'm relatable to the students, and they trust me. You have to get to know the students, and that requires conversations outside of classroom instruction [to] let them know that you actually care. [In] previous years, we have had conversations outside, in the classroom, on the playground, [and] in the lunchroom. I kind of got to know the kids [and] let them in a little bit [so they could] get to know me . . . I think as an educator, it's important for me to show them successful Black people. I go ahead and do my Black History even though it's not in the curriculum. Even if it's [as simple as] letting them help me take something to my car, they be [so] happy to go and see my car (pauses). I don't know if they don't know people with nice cars, but (speaking as a student) "you got that car? I'm gonna be like you." I do stuff like [that] all the time so they can see [that] they can have a nice car [too]. If they want to see pictures of my house, sometimes on a playground, I show it to them because they say stuff like, "I want to work at Wendy's." I just want to push the kids to just want more I [especially] liked building relationships with those students everybody looked down on and like to think that they can't do certain things. [It causes them to] push through and prove that they can.

In addition to the interview, I observed Ms. Ramonda in her classroom environment. I could tell that she not only had a positive relationship with her students, but she liked order, kept an orderly classroom (material as well as student interaction),

and, through instructional techniques demonstrated in Theme 2, pushed the students to improve in mathematics as well as socially. The year I observed her math classes, pre-COVID pandemic, her students scored the highest of any fifth grade class at Sunnydale Elementary School that I was aware of for the preceding 10 years.

Ms. Keisha, though not as organized as Ms. Ramonda, also found unique ways to create a classroom culture that bred academic and social growth. In her interview, she expressed how she believed high expectations helped her students succeed while also demonstrating care and concern for their future well-being. In the excerpts that follow, she shares her views on expectations and an instance where she meets a former student who remembered

I've always felt like (pauses) you should always shoot high. If your requirements are higher than what the actual requirements are, even if your kids don't quite meet your requirements, they're gonna definitely get the requirement . . . I feel like if I believe in them, they will believe in themselves.

My kids, from even way back then, we have a standing joke. I saw two of them the other day. And I [asked], Okay, so what are you doing in life? One of them [replied], Well, I'm not working right now. I was like, wait a minute, that was not the deal we made. He [asked], "But what do you mean?" I said, "The deal was that while you're in school, whatever, you asked for, I bought and when I got older, you were gonna take care of me." He's like, "Ms. Keisha, if you want, when I get some money," I (interrupting his sentence) I was like, "That wasn't the point about the money. Somebody was supposed to be a mechanic . . . So, when my car broke down, I could take it to you, you fix it. When I was sick, I could go

to the hospital, and you were gonna take care of me.” He laughed at me [and] he told me, “Well Miss K, I’m going to go get a job at the barber shop.” I said, “that’s fine, I got a son. You can cut his hair. That’s all I need you to do is follow the rules that we set back then.” And he’s like, “Well, here’s my number. As soon as I get in my shop I’m gonna call you Miss Keisha cuz, I mean, you right, we did make that agreement.” And it just does something for me to know that they took what I said seriously. I didn’t care what job they had. I didn’t care what career they chose. I just wanted them to have a future.

This excerpt shows that Ms. Keisha was passionate about education and had made a lasting connection with her former student based on high expectations that were not just academic but had social implications. I was not personally there during that conversation but observed her in the classroom, displaying that reciprocal relationship with her students while expecting mastery. On that occasion, she was working with a student and asked me to help bridge the gap between the concrete and pictorial aspect of the skill. She was working with the child because the student had done poorly on an assessment. Ms. Keisha was providing individualized, immediate feedback so the student would be ready to take the retest. When the student was ready, she took the retest and did considerably better than on her first try.

Ms. Ramonda’s and Ms. Keisha’s stories were just a few of the experiences shared during the interviews with the five participants. They, along with recurring patterns in Ms. Dedicated, Ms. Jasmine, and Ms. Shavon’s interviews, helped me to reconceptualize how I viewed classroom culture. As I reflected on my pre-COVID pandemic observation and my brief interactions with Ms. Keisha and Ms. Shavon’s

classes post COVID, in each of their classrooms, the students seemed to be just as much of steering the direction of the classroom environment as the teacher. When I went to ensure Ms. Keisha and Ms. Shavon were satisfied with their profiles and make changes, their students were busy doing their classroom jobs and monitoring their interactions while I exchanged words with their teacher. Their stories and my interactions led me to suggest that teachers in similar schools build deep relationships, never forget the “why” behind your motivation to teach, and develop an atmosphere that is co-constructive in nature.

Theme 5: Focused on Emotional and Social Skills. *The participants also focused on developing their students’ emotional well-being and social skills in addition to their mathematical skills.* Researchers of high-poverty Title I schools provided evidence that students of color living in high-poverty conditions faced increased risks of incarceration (Shaw, 2016), mental health challenges (Hosokawa & Katsura, 2018; Kromydas et al., 2021), limited access to quality health professionals (Walraven, 2010), disproportionate access to effective teachers (Burke & Schwalbach, 2021; Chapman, 2017; DeRoche, 2020; Gorski, 2013; Lewis & Diamond, 2015), higher rates of disciplinary actions than other ethnic groups (de Brey et al., 2019), and other racial injustices, especially in the South (Gamson et al., 2015). Amid the surmounting pressures the students face, some teachers expect the students to leave their troubles outside the classroom door before the enter to learn. Such teachers tend to blame the student or the student’s environment for not performing as expected and seek ways to “fix” the student (Gay, 2018; Gorski, 2013).

However, the study participants showed a strong willingness, determination, and obligation to help their students navigate their experiences while simultaneously focusing on academic achievement. It is quite understandable that elementary students just beginning to develop their sense of self, and are learning how to function in culture would have trouble adjusting to a different environment (school), that operates by normalized, discriminatory values of middle- and upper-class citizens (Carter, 2007). In Ms. Dedicated's interview, she shared her concern about the student's ability to deal with issues the encounter daily.

It's important for teachers to recognize and to think about what the kids come to school with and how we can best meet them where they are. [They] come to school with so many challenges and baggage that they really can't express themselves. Even as an adult, it's hard for me to say what I'm going through on a day-to-day basis. So, to get the students to be able to leave what they're experiencing outside of the classroom and come in and ready to learn, sometimes, you have to be able to just support them where they are. [Even] when students have those extreme behaviors or challenges, [I'm] there to be of support.

Although she used language that expressed getting "students to leave what they are experiencing outside of the classroom," from personal experience and talking with her after the interview, I must explain that she used the phrase to express getting the student prepared to become engaged in learning. However, it also illustrates how easy it is to verbalize rhetoric from the majority even when you dissent at your core.

The other participants shared instances such as morning meetings where the students learned how to express themselves and develop leadership characteristics;

through classroom jobs that mirror “real-world” jobs; and provided for the students’ basic needs. However, of the five participants, Ms. Jasmine was one of the more passionate participants in advocating for more mental health services in Title I schools. In one of the three interviews with Ms. Jasmine, she shared her concern about how Sunnydale and Greenview Elementary schools merged yet lost a school counselor position in the process. She passionately expressed her “why” behind advocacy in the following excerpts.

Mental health is a big issue for our communities. I’m a big advocate of mental health and people getting the help that they need; [but] I hate that it’s such a stigma in our community. [I’ve had students who were] disrespectful [by] talking back and having to have the last word. Um, (pauses to compose her words) it’s mainly just their mouthiness . . . [However,] I’ve also been in classrooms where I know mental things [are] going on, but parents have been in denial about getting them help. I do know it’s a stigma that I see that more in our community than [in] some other communities. We’re not you’re not going to therapy [or] getting on medicine. I understand [some parents] don’t want to put the children on medicine, but something needs to be happening because they’re coming to school in situations they don’t know how to handle, and they’re getting in trouble because they’re going about things the wrong way. So, that is a huge issue that I think leads to a good amount of our discipline problems.

I know, for our population; [we should] have more time dedicated to[wards] the social and emotional [health of our students]. A lot of our students have a hard time because of the other issues that they have going on. So, I think

we could dedicate more time to that and get to the real root of some of these problems [before] we could go into the academics. Deep counseling sessions [also] need to happen on the regular for our children (*giggles to soften the reality of the statement*). They go through [hardships] at home, then they come to school, and you're trying to [provide] structure [for] them and teach them something that they don't know. [In addition to that,] [we're] putting them in a classroom with other kids they don't know, or they do know and don't get along with in the neighborhood. So, it's a lot for them [because] I just think that they don't know how to handle [certain] emotions.

I feel like they [should] stop taking money away from education and put it in the right places like counseling. [For example] there's no way a school like ours should just have one counselor. [When the schools merged, they] should have [kept] Greenview's counselor and Creekside's counselor together. You guys needed y'all's [counselor,] and we know ours needed ours. Plus, there was a lot of new ones that weren't [at] either one of our schools last year, and they came over wide open (*meaning they demonstrated behavior issues from the onset*). [I believe] there [really] should be two [counselors] for pre-K through second and two for third through fifth just because [of] the type of environment that we teach in. It's too much work for one person (pauses) [and] it's still too much work for two people because we have so many [students]. But I'll take two, though. [However] one is definitely not enough. Maybe one day, we'll get it together (in a wishful tone).

Mental health and social skills are real concerns, especially in high-poverty schools serving students of color. Based on this recurring theme in all five participants, I would suggest that Title I teachers who read this study remember that the students are children, and to be successful, one must work to educate the whole child. Organizations such as Community in Schools (CIS) partner with schools serving our underserved populations, conduct a needs assessment, and become the liaison in connecting students to assistance and resources more easily accessed by affluent families (CIS, 2021). They provide training to the school personnel; however, a major component in their efforts remains the classroom teacher (CIS, 2021). It is up to the teacher to resist or oppose the current system and advocate for what is best for the student.

Theme 6: Combats racism through CRP. One of my research goals was to bring attention to often unspoken racial undertones and systemic injustices in the U.S. educational system. In alignment with that goal, I wanted to answer the research question centering around the differences in achievement of students of color compared to White students. A review of current literature revealed studies indicating the disparage may have stemmed from the inherent White-Supremacy foundation of the educational system (Asante, 1991; Kober & Rentner, 2020; Monardo, 2019; Pierce, 2013; Pierce, 2021), misguided belief in a *meritocracy* (Gold, 2016; Pierce, 2013; Young, 1958), deficit thinking or victim blaming (Gorski, 2013), lack of access to quality education/educators (Carver-Thomas et al., 2020; Garcia & Weiss, 2020; Gorski, 2013; Howard, 2016; Kozol, 1991; Sutcher et al., 2019), or other thought processes Eurocentric in nature (Asante, 1991). Although I was aware of other researchers' thoughts and had thoughts of my own, I wanted to know what the participants identified as contributing factors.

Throughout the participant interviews, I determined that the theme that connected several categories in data analysis was that *the participants combatted racism through aspects of culturally relevant teaching*. According to Ladson-Billings' (1997, p. 74) article *Towards a Theory of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy*, rather than asking what is wrong with African American students, one should ask "what is right with these learners." This shift in mindset Ladson-Billings proposed was, and is, contrary to how policymakers and educators view the racial discrepancies that glare us in our faces. Her study of eight successful teachers of African American students revealed the following three main principles: 1) unwavering belief that the students can learn and be successful academically, 2) students should be encouraged to celebrate their cultural heritage while learning, and 3) students should be encouraged to think critically about the world around them and solve real-world problems affecting their communities.

All five participants displayed components of the first two principles of culturally relevant teaching. Of the participants, Ms. Keisha and Ms. Dedicated offered the most poignant explanations of their belief in the intellectual capacity of their students. Ms. Keisha, describing her belief in her students' learning capabilities, stated, "every child is capable of learning. You just have to find out what's their style of learning. There's no such thing as an unteachable child; there's just different teaching strategies." While highlighting the student's ability to learn, she also emphasized the teacher's role in facilitating that learning. Her statement denoted a responsibility on both participants in the learning. The teacher must know the content and have an arsenal of strategies at his/her disposal to reach the student. On the other hand, the student had a responsibility to actively use his/her learning style to master the standard.

Ms. Dedicated's answer, however, focused on the role of the teacher in the learning process. Quoting a fellow educator, she said, "all children can learn and will learn, but it is what you teach them [that] is going to make the difference." The teacher's role is also a vital component in the teaching and learning process. The teacher must continue to guide or facilitate the learning of the mandated standards as well as social and emotional skills necessary for the students to become a well-rounded individual. Though each participant offered their own perspective of expecting and demanding student growth, their unwavering belief that their students could learn was clearly seen.

The second principle involved helping the students see themselves in the curriculum. Rather than forcing students of color to deny/ignore their culture and assimilate into the dominant society (Asante, 1991; Appiagyei, 2019; Carter, 2007), CRP-driven educators embraced all cultures. They created learning situations where all students, particularly African American students, could feel a sense of pride (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1995a, 1995b, 1997, 2014). Components of CRP's second principle were evident in varying degrees in four of the five participants; however, it became a major, recurring theme in Ms. Ramonda's interviews.

To a certain degree, Ms. Keisha demonstrated this theme when using her students' gaming culture to engage her students in learning. Realizing that her students were playing games, on social media, or engaged in some type of technology for the majority of their day, she decided to use that part of their culture as the hub of her lessons. In separate interviews, Ms. Shavon and Ms. Jasmine shared examples of how they integrated the student's musical proclivities as a funnel for learning. To be specific, Ms.

Shavon shared how she had her students learn and develop rap songs aligned with the standard they were learning.

All three preceding examples show some degree of CRP's second principle; however, as Appiagyei (2019) asserted in her dissertation about Afrocentric educational practices, the cultural identity piece goes much deeper. Of the five participants, Ms. Ramonda shared more examples of how she encourages a sense of cultural pride in her students. Some of the methods she used included incorporating books that highlight African America, deliberately highlighting African Americans who have made significant contributions to society, and allowing the students to see how successful she has become. However, of the examples shared, one consequential example stood out to me from the first time she shared it during our final interview. The following excerpt commences in the middle of a conversation where she retells a time when she took her students to a quiz bowl competition.

The Quiz Bowl team was made up of the top academic [students] who competed against other [elementary] schools. Going in, [they were] intimidated because they were [an] all Black [team], and other schools, of course, had different races. I think that a lot of the children don't think that they're good enough. They think that the other another race, Caucasians, are smarter than them. When [the Quiz Bowl Team] got there and saw the [team with] Caucasian students, one of the students said, "Oh, they gonna beat us, they got a bunch of White kids." That just bothered me. I feel like I need to push them to their fullest potential [and to] stop looking at other people saying, okay, they have this color, they're smarter than me; and that's not true. I hate they feel that way. I'm not sure where they're

getting that from. But when they got up there and performed, you know, they shocked themselves and me, and they were so excited.

So, being with these types of students, I think it's important for me to remind them that, you know, that can be you as well; nobody's better than you. I think as an educator, it's important for me to show them successful Black people . . . I just want to push the kids to just want more, and I think it starts at home too. I'm not sure what their parents are. They need a lot of push and a lot of motivation. Because they think that the Black race, I guess because they're Black, they can't have other races have. So, when I push them to be their best selves, that's what motivates me.

As Ladson-Billings asserted in her 1995a article, *But That's Just Good Teaching* until African American students see themselves, their cultures, and language as a valuable, critical part of the educational curriculum, they will never connect with learning in meaningful ways. The recent discussion of integrating critical race studies into the current educational system has brought major opposition from those who subscribe to the majority narrative. Based on the participants' experiences and the connected research, the theme suggests that teachers who desire to teach African American students in high-poverty schools effectively must consciously resist the urge to follow the status quo. They must seek innovative ways to represent all cultures and reject the Eurocentric view that has plagued national curriculums. In that way, the educator is meeting the needs of all students.

Theme 7: Chooses to meet student needs. Teachers are faced with decisions each day of their career. Although there is a set number of standards to teach within the

year, teachers must decide the best method of delivery, how to provide an entry point for all students, the best assessment to use, the learning activities, and other critical components of the lesson. All five participants in this study made similar decisions; however, one common decision caused internal and external conflict in the lives of the teachers. The *participants chose student needs when choosing between curriculum pace and student mastery.*

When developing themes, Saldaña (2021, p. 259) recommended looking for areas of trouble by asking, “What types of tension, problems, or conflicts are the participants experiencing?” As I looked for areas of conflict, district and administrative pressure to follow the county-designed curriculum became a common theme in all five participants. This became a major source of conflict because the teachers believed this expectation to be unfair to them and to the students they taught.

Typically, students in Title I schools enter the grade level performing at a lower level than expected. With a high concentration of students of color experiencing poverty, the results were magnified within Sunnydale Elementary. All five participants expressed concern that their students were performing below grade level yet, were expected to learn grade level content in the same amount of time as students in more affluent schools who do not have the set of challenges. Literature review revealed studies that correlated with the participants’ lived experiences. when comparing fourth grade students, Kids Count (2020) reported that only one out of every four Title I could read proficiently. he NAEP (2021) also found similar issues in mathematics. They reported that African American students “scored lower in mathematics compared with their performance to all other elementary tested subjects” (NAEP, 2021, p. 23).

The conflict then became whether to give in to the pressure and blindly follow the curriculum pacing guide or to choose the students' needs over possible repercussions for insubordination. Despite the potential ramifications, each of the participants chose student needs over curriculum pacing. They found creative ways to offer individualized instruction that filled in fundamental learning gaps and scaffolded them to learning grade level content. Most teachers decided to take longer than the pacing guide recommended and use their professional judgement as to which grade level standards were essential for the students to learn. From my experience working with three of the teachers as an instructional math coach, I can attest that they meticulously chose and spent more time on essential standards that students needed to be successful in the next grade. Making such decisions came with risks, but the participants were willing to make the choice and, in these cases, were eventually able to convince their principal to let them exercise their professional judgement.

An example of how the participants navigated district expectations and student learning can be found in Ms. Jasmine's interview as depicted below.

We really, for the most part, use the [district] pacing guide as a guide, but we also look at our children. This year, we kind of fell behind because we felt like we needed to spend more time on some lessons than what the lesson plan [allotted]. To me, the pacing from the curriculum is too fast. In our community, we already know that a majority of our students are already behind. Then they wanted [us] to do a lesson a day every day, and there really isn't enough time for them to grasp it. So, we [used the math curriculum], but we had to break it down to one lesson per two days because it was too much for them. It was too much for us, too,

because they were getting restless. If they're restless, [then] I know they're not paying attention [and] it's just a waste of everybody's energy. [Therefore,] if we [saw] our children weren't grasping a concept, there [was] no point in moving on because we know they [were] not going to do well on that because they didn't understand this, the prerequisite.

Once we noticed that the majority [had] it, then we moved on to the next [skill], and we pulled small groups [to work with those needing additional time to master the skill]. So, it's a combination of the pacing guide and just paying attention to where our students were, how they were doing on the assessments, and on whatever activities we were doing throughout the week.

In the next excerpt, Ms. Keisha also expressed similar views and used similar tactics to bridge the gaps between what was realistically possible and what was expected.

[Another challenge] is [the students] not knowing the prerequisites. It is very hard to teach kids how to multiply if they don't understand adding, and it is almost impossible to teach them fractions if they don't know how to multiply. So, the biggest [academic] problem I have is them not knowing the prerequisites to what I'm teaching.

If they don't know the prerequisites, I have to teach them because there's no way of going around teaching them. It might take us a little longer to get to where we are going, which is why I have a little problem with the pacing guides that we have. The pacing guides are not set for those kids who don't know the prerequisites. The pacing is set for kids who come in knowing what they supposed to know for third grade. If I see that it's taking extremely too long, then I will go

ahead and teach the new standards and pull them for small groups outside of just math class.

The participants' experiences relayed a daily challenge Title I teachers must circumnavigate to meet their students' needs and help them reach mastery of the content. Interestingly, although the teachers were concerned about the discrepancy in actual student knowledge and what was expected, they never discounted the student's ability to learn. Rather than lower the standards and only teach prerequisite skills or adopt the mindset that the students would never be able to grasp the concepts, these teachers developed ways to address both prerequisite and current content. The participants demonstrated a belief in equity in instruction. As Aguirre et al. (2013, p. 9) recommended, equity did not mean that all students received the same math instruction, but they received instruction that provided each child with "equitable access, attainment, and advancement in mathematics education."

As a result of developing this theme, I better understood research questions one and three. Their experiences working with African American students in Title I school settings helped me to recognize the complexity of what they do to help their students attain academic success. Furthermore, based on this theme, I would suggest that teachers realize the significance of their position as a teacher and consciously choose student needs in every situation. This topic may require further research on best practices, useful strategies, or deepening one's content knowledge. However, a choice must be made to ensure equitable education for our underserved students of color. After all, "intention without action is insufficient" (Gay, 2018, p. 13).

Theme 8: Participants are lifelong learners. The eighth theme I developed centered around the statements and experiences demonstrating *the participants valued being lifelong learners*. Although the foundational Eurocentric model of education has remained unchanged (Asante, 1991; Ladson-Billings, 1995a), the ways students show mastery of math content has drastically changed (Bartell et al., 2017; GaDOE, 2016). In my nearly 20 years of education, I personally witnessed a dramatic change in content expectations. When I first began teaching, each state had its own standards, which varied in mastery requirements and progression. However, they shared a commonality of being hyper-focused on the methods rather than the concept (Zimba, 2014). However, in 2010, the release of the CCSS changed the trajectory of what we expected students to do and understand (Zimba, 2014). Rather than being a mile wide and an inch deep, CCSS exposed students to fewer standards but expected them to think more critically and gain a deeper understanding of the standards (GaDOE, 2016).

The shift to a more comprehensive understanding of mathematics required teachers who remained effective to rethink their previous understandings and learn different delivery methods. Although 12 years have passed since the introduction of CCSS and 6 years since the last adopted version of the state standards, the participants in this study provided enough experiences for me to develop themes surrounding being a lifelong learner. In the following three excerpts, the participants express, in their own words, their commitment and perceived value in continuing to build on their craft.

Each participant expounded on a different aspect of being a lifelong learner and its impact on themselves, as teachers, or the students they taught. In the first excerpt, Ms. Shavon described the importance of staying current in curriculum knowledge and its

impact on student achievement. She specifically pointed out that in addition to building relationships, as educators, we must evolve to stay relevant and continue providing exceptional instruction.

[Although relationships are important] it's not just [about] building relationships but [making] sure that you stay abreast of academics and education changes. You gotta be open to change (brief pause) and accept constructive criticism. I can't teach in 2020 the way I taught in 2002. The children are different. So much in education has changed. There are new initiatives in education, so you have to be willing to change, not be stubborn, [or] stuck in your own way. As the times grow, teachers have to grow and evolve as well. I always tell my kids [that] I'm a lifelong learner, too. It's okay to make a mistake.

The following excerpt from Ms. Ramonda's third interview compares her stance on lifelong learning to a teacher who was resistant to change. Through her illustration, one can see the dangers of refusing to learn from others.

I think I get better every year [because] I'm constantly learning . . . You have to be dedicated to the craft. [You have to be] open to continue to learn about new things that are effective. You also have to be willing to take advice from other [knowledgeable] teachers whose students are mastering that skill. I had an incident this past year when a coworker was not teaching the standard correctly. I tried to help her to see what the standard really meant. I even told her about how well my students performed on the [state assessment], but she would not listen and continued to teach the wrong content. At the end of the year, only a few of

her students passed the [state assessment]. If she would have been open to feedback, she would have had better results.

Not only does being a lifelong learner entail a willingness to adapt and an openness to learning from others, it also takes the initiative on the learner's part. In the excerpt from Ms. Keisha's interview, we see her assessing her knowledge base in regard to the standards she taught and making the conscious decision to get help. As a result of her seeking more knowledge, she discovered other methods of reaching her students.

Never be afraid to learn different strategies. If you're a teacher, you should always want to learn something new. How can you expect your kids to want to learn if you don't want to learn? I've learned so much [in] Professional Learning (P.L.) classes on how to teach math going from concrete to abstract. When I first started teaching math, I thought there's one way to teach math [and] that's it. One plus one is two, and ain't no other way of finding it, and no other way to teach it. That's it. As I progressed in teaching math, I learned math is a lot more fluent than I always thought it was. [I learned that] there's so many other strategies, and kids get different strategies. The more strategies and models you can show them, the better your kids will do and the more successful they will become. Strategies that work for some children that don't work for [other children at] all.

For example, trying to teach division using partial quotients. It was horrible. It was my [during] first year teaching and I didn't realize that standard algorithm was a fifth grade standard. I had to try to teach it using partial quotients [a division strategy] and I think I was more confused than the kids were. When we tried to do area models [a strategy for multiplication], that was even worse. I was

so lost on area models. I was like, What is this? This makes no sense to me. Why are we doing it this way. I asked my math coach to help me and with some mentoring helping me to understand it, it became easier.

The final excerpt is from Ms. Dedicated. In her interview, she expounded on a professional learning class the school district offered. As a lifelong learner, Ms. Dedicated illustrates the need to seek advanced classes in addition to feedback from peers. Although feedback and correspondence with peers provide accountability and a chance to glean from other teachers' practical knowledge, being a lifelong learner also involves reading professional articles and participating in advanced classes such as college-level or district-presented courses.

I think the math endorsement was one of the most impressionable trainings that I have had because it wasn't a one-day kind of thing. It was a process. [As a third grade teacher,] I was able to collaborate with other coaches within the school district. [Additionally,] I talked to second, fourth, and fifth grade teachers about areas that needs to be improved upon and [developed ways] to help navigate where we were trying to go.

[The endorsement class also] gave me the opportunity to get professional knowledge so I could become a more effective teacher; learn different and practice effective strategies; and use those strategies help students understand. [I also learned] how to integrate culture into the classroom. I want the kids to have opportunity to bring a part of them into the classroom.

The development of this theme helped further understand the underlying framework for their success. The other themes provided insight into their practices,

expectations, motivating factors that keep the participants working through good and bad times, the role of student interest, the importance of supporting students emotionally, and the importance of choosing student needs. However, the final theme helped to add perspective to the preceding themes. From their experiences, I saw being a lifelong catalyst that keeps the participants advancing and evolving to provide sound instruction to students who need it most.

Theme 9: Participants display CRP and deficit thinking viewpoints. The final theme began as a category because it did not occur enough times in a participant's discourse to be elevated to a theme. I first noticed that effective teachers displayed traits of deficit thinking and CRP in Ms. Ramonda's interview. It was perplexing that although Ms. Ramonda had the highest test scores, developed relationships with her students, and demonstrated the CRP principle of (1) demonstrating high expectations that students can achieve high standards and (2) celebrating and encouraging student cultural identities at a deeper level than the other participants; she also made comments that sounded like they were based in deficit thinking when she spoke about student achievement and parent participation. For instance, on one occasion, she stated that the parents wouldn't cooperate with her when she asked them to help their children learn their multiplication tables. She also went on to mention that she did not have that problem when she was at her previous non-Title I school. Additional contextual information is provided later in this section.

Leading CRP researchers such as Ladson-Billings (1995b, 1997) and Gay (2018) reported that in order for African Americans and other students of color be truly successful, teachers should have high expectations, help students develop their cultural

identity, and foster a sense of community activism. Delpit (2013) and Gorski (2013) also reported similar findings and bewailed deficit-laden speech that draws attention to what is perceived to be wrong with students of color. For example, two deficit-founded myths that Gorski (2013) listed were that 1) the students do not value education and 2) their parents are ineffective and unconcerned about their child's education. Gorski (2013) and other researchers showed evidence that believing those types of myths leads caused teachers to have lower expectations for the students, become oppositional to parents. As a result of those low expectations, students performed accordingly thus reinforcing the teacher's erroneous beliefs.

Based on the literature, I suspected that I would see teachers demonstrating best practices as well as CRP principles. When Ms. Ramonda began to talk about the student's failure to learn their math facts, I understood it as being the reality with which she was presented with; however, when I heard what sounded like deficit-based references directed towards the parents, it brought to mind Saldaña's (2021) advice about looking for conflict within the data. It also caused me to reexamine my preconceived notions that effective math teachers would only espouse beliefs concurring with CRP principals. The excerpts below detail her response.

[One of the biggest challenges teaching in a Title I school] I would say is [students not knowing] multiplication facts [and] lack of parental support [in helping them to learn their facts]. I teach fifth grade [and] you wouldn't think that they [would] not have [mastered] basic facts. I reached out to the parents [and] say something like, "Okay, I need you to try to get them to get these facts because it's the foundation of everything that I'm teaching," [but] they were not

cooperating. I didn't have that challenge at my other schools, so I had to be creative with stations and intentional with interventions and homework.

Notice in the preceding excerpt, Ms. Ramonda, in frustration, said that the parents were not cooperating with her and that she did not have that trouble at her other school. She was referring to a non-Title I school she worked at in previous years. Though the facts were true, the blame being placed on the parents and indirectly on the students immediately recalled literature about deficit thinking.

As the interview continued the interview, a second comment caught my attention. She again referred to the parents in a negative light by saying "I think it starts at home, too. I don't know where the parents are." Those two comments caused me to believe that she blamed the parents more than she blamed the students. The following statement provides context to her statement.

I think as an educator, it's important for me to show them successful Black people. I go ahead and do my Black History even though it's not in the curriculum. Even if it's [as simple as] letting them help me take something to my car, they be [so] happy to go and see my car (pauses). I don't know if they don't know people with nice cars, but (*speaking as a student*) "you got that car? I'm gonna be like you." I do stuff like [that] all the time so they can see [that] they can have a nice car [too]. If they want to see pictures of my house, sometimes on a playground, I show it to them because they say stuff like, "I want to work at Wendy's." I just want to push the kids to just want more, and I think it starts at home too. I'm not sure what their parents are. They need a lot of push and a lot of motivation. Because they think that the Black race, I guess because they're Black,

they can't have other races have. So, when I push them to be their best selves, that's what motivates me

Ms. Ramonda, though an effective, caring teacher, still seemed to display traits of deficit thinking. She showed created a nurturing environment and highlighted famous African Americans but still espoused rhetoric from the master narrative. The polarity of the two concepts and beliefs in the same interview caused me to wonder if I had missed any similar comments from other participants.

As I reviewed the transcripts, this time following Saldaña's (2021) advice to look for trouble, I noticed that two other participants made statements in passing that seemed to be on the verge of what J. Pierce (2013) referred to as colorblindness. Statements such as "I don't see color" or "I see everyone as the same," according to J. Pierce is an attempt to dismiss color and act as if systemic racial injustices are a thing of the past. However, if the issue of racism is to be resolved, race must be acknowledged.

The following excerpt came from Ms. Keisha's interview, where she explained her view of the difference in test scores between Title I and non-Title I students.

My philosophy [is] that every child is capable of learning; you just have to find out what's their style of learning. There's no such thing as an unteachable child; there's just different teaching strategies. There's not really much of a difference [in the child] because I can have high students that are African American and high students that are Caucasian. I can [also] have low students that are Caucasian and low students that are African American. In all honesty, yes, there is an impact of race, but I see a bigger impact in economic and financial class. Lower-class people, which tend to be African American, don't have the same advantage as

upper-middle-class kids. I can't say that's 100% race-based because if you are Black and you are upper level or middle class, you have those advantages to some extent. But it really shows when you're Black and you have financial issues as well. That's when you see race play a part.

The transcript revealed that although she acknowledged race to a small degree, Ms. Keisha attributed the difference in scores more of a socioeconomic issue than a race issue. During the interview, the statement stood out as different, but I could understand her point of view. I coded it as race vs socioeconomic level, but it did not relate to other codes. Therefore, I left it as an outlier. However, after rethinking Ms. Ramonda's interview, I believed I was beginning to see a strong enough relationship to construct a new code.

Ms. Keisha's statement reminded me of a statement Ms. Dedicated made in her response. Upon reviewing the transcript, and looking for more trouble, I found an area of conflict between what I knew to be true about CRP and deficit thinking. In the excerpt, Ms. Dedicated explains her view of race in the educational system.

I just really try to just see people as people and as learning experience. Because my dad is multiracial, I think I can kind of always, as a teacher, bear in mind, how we treat everyone and making everyone within the classroom feel a part of a whole . . . if a topical issues ever came up in a book or in the classroom, [I'd] just help the students to just understand that it's not this person that this is something that happened, and that we work to try to, you know, work to do the greater good for you. And not just for a specific race . . . So, if I had to rate my views [about]

issues within the school, I don't think I would put race at the top. But sometimes I think about book supplies, or textbooks or, getting things that we need,

Ms. Dedicated seemed to be speaking out of a desire for love and acceptance for all students and drew on her biracial dad as a reason not to single any one race out. However, the statement that "I try to just see people as people," combined with the fact that she perceived supplies as a higher source of woe than race, caused me to see the statement in a different light. Rather than just being a passing phrase, it correlated with the statement Ms. Fleming made and prompted me to create a theme for divergent categories.

Before listening to the participants' transcripts and intentionally looking for areas of conflict, I understood CRP techniques and mindsets founded on deficit thinking as being mutually exclusive. I expected that exceptional math teachers in Title I schools would only display characteristics associated with CRP while non-effective teachers held deficit-laden beliefs and practices. However, based on the data results and subsequent conversations with the participants, I know there to be a continuum of thought and belief. Hence the theme *participants display CRP and deficit thinking viewpoints simultaneously*.

The fact that these three teachers may have beliefs that contradict CRP did not negate the CRT principles they displayed; neither did it nullify the strong relationships, high expectations, and commitment they had to student success. It suggested that teachers were at different places on the CRP and deficit thinking continuum and are still developing as lifelong learners. Having completed identifying and explaining themes for

individual participants, I detail how I looked for relationships between the themes in the next section.

Developing the Assertions

After developing themes and seeing the relationship that connected each participant, I turned my attention to developing assertions based on the connectedness of the themes (Saldaña, 2021). I consider assertions to be my personal attempt at making the themed theoretical connect to specifics of practice. Generating assertions involved looking for relationships and patterns between individual themes and following a similar design as pattern coding. As I re-coded the data, I referred to my analysis of individual themes to reveal recurring patterns of participant motives, phrases, actions, ideas, concerns, tension, or conflict (Saldaña, 2021, p. 259). The re-coding and recategorizing of the data resulted in the following assertions: To be effective teachers of African American Title I students, patterned after my participants, a teacher would need to

- build authentic relationships with students and parents;
- give the students what they need/deserve; and
- evolve towards a total infusion of a genuine CRP way of being.

Table 6 provides a visual matrix of the assertions and themes across participants I used to develop each assertion. I use the remaining portion of this section to describe the formation of each assertion in greater detail.

A 1: Build authentic relationships with students and parents. As represented in Figure 8, I constructed the first assertion based on the theme encompassing the most recorded data. During the interviews, the participants continued to reference the importance of building relationships with their students and parents. As I looked at the

individual themes and explanations, I saw the same pattern of building relationships. Since the purpose of creating assertions is to transcend or go beyond the data, I reflected on the themes and individual transcripts to synthesize the data into one assertion that would answer my research question. The figure below gives a visual diagram of the subthemes that led to my first assertion.

Table 6

Assertions and Subthemes

Assertions/ Subtheme	Ms. Dedicated	Ms. Jasmine	Ms. Keisha	Ms. Shavon	Ms. Ramonda
Building relationships with students and parents were deemed vital to student success/					
Passionate about teaching Title I students	X	X	X	X	X
Teaching styles influenced by formative years	X	X	X	X	X
Student interests + data driven instruction = student success	X	X	X	X	X
A co-constructed classroom culture	X	X	X	X	X
Focused on emotional and social skills	X	X	X	X	X
Give the students what they need/					
Combatting racism with CRP		X	X	X	X
Choose to meet student needs	X	X	X	X	X
Effective teachers on the deficit thinking and CRP continuum/					
Participants value being lifelong learners	X	X	X	X	X
Teachers display CRP viewpoints and deficit thinking			X		X

Note. The X's in the chart denotes a central theme in the participant's interview.

Assertion 1 is based on the foundation of relationship building as being a key tenet to having a successful year. The shared underpinnings of this assertion are contained in Subthemes 1, 3, 4, and 5. Theme 1: Passionate about teaching Title I students, focuses largely on the connection between the participants in the study and their students. The participants were themselves the products of Title I schools and that experience gave them the advantage of being able to relate to what their students experienced growing up in a low socioeconomic area and attending a Title I school. Their connection with the students fueled relationships that helped them to know the preferences of their students.

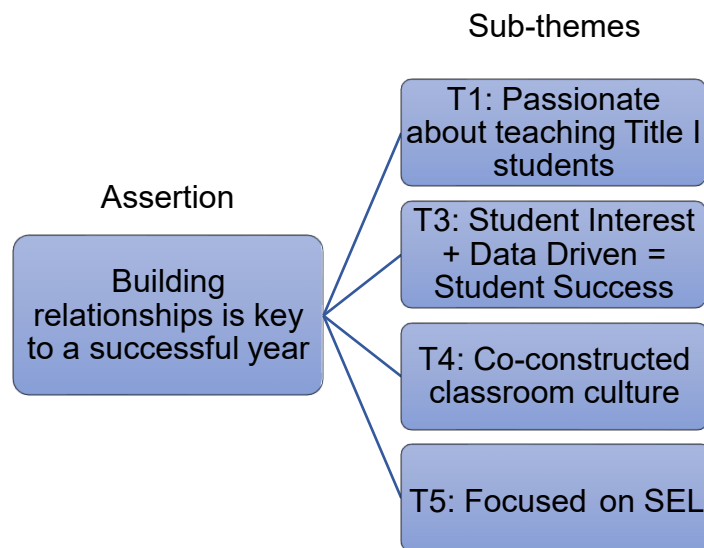


Figure 8. Assertion 1 and subthemes. The diagram depicts how the themes across the participants supported the major assertion.

The foundation of Subtheme 3: Student Interest + Data Driven = Student Success was the importance of embracing and/or acknowledging their students' culture. Embracing and celebrating student culture was especially needful for students typically marginalized by society (Gay, 2018). In Appiagyei's (2019) dissertation, she pointed out that culture-based approaches helped to maximize success by providing experiences with

which the students can identify. Through a deep connection with the students and respect for their cultural identities, the participants introduced targeted skills in a way that was natural for the students.

Subtheme 4: Co-constructed classroom culture describes an environment where the student and teacher work together to create a classroom that reflects shared norms and objectives. This subtheme is based on partnerships apparent in the classroom and directly supported by authentic relationships with the students. By purposefully seeking authentic relationships with students, not only were the participants able to present lessons in a way that celebrated their students' identity, but the students also became active participants in regulating the climate and culture of their classroom. This reciprocal relationship did not alleviate the teacher's role and responsibility for the class but gave the student a voice in their learning environment. In research by Pinto and Vogel (2016), the authors expressed a similar finding that providing a voice and causing the student to feel part of the classroom community causes students to engage more fully in the learning.

The final subtheme related to the assertion was Theme 5: Focused on emotional and social skills. I found this theme to carry the same thread of building relationships because when a teacher is invested in her students and sees them as more than just a child in a classroom, they naturally advocate for the student to receive emotional support.

After analyzing the relationship among the four themes, I decided to word my assertion as if I were advising a Title I teacher who may read this study. Based on the information in the literature and the participants' experiences, the theme suggests that ***building relationships with parents and students is key to a successful year.*** Those relationships are built from a place of embracing or acknowledging the students' culture,

getting to know the students and their parents in a way that you know how the student best learns, and focusing on seeing the student as a whole child.

A 2: Give the students what they need/deserve. Assertion 2 was based on two subthemes, namely, combatting racism and deciding to choose mastery over the pace of the curriculum. Assertion 2: *Give the students what they need/deserve* primarily because each of the subsets requires the teacher to consciously make the students and their needs, the priority. The subthemes suggest that teachers must choose to defy the racist foundation of our educational system. The teacher must also choose students' well-being over particular district demands.

In previous sections, I detailed the data surrounding the discrepancies in education, health services, disciplinary actions, test scores, and other results of systematic racism at every level of our U.S. government. The subtheme of combatting racism informed my second assertion and was based on the effective teacher's desire to combat racism in education.

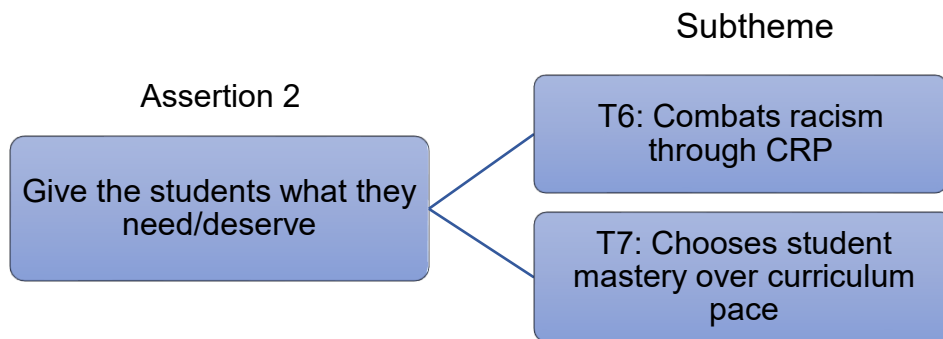


Figure 9. Assertion 2 and subthemes. The diagram depicts how the themes across the participants supported the major assertion.

Effective teachers of Title I students must stand against the system to make the learning environment one where all children feel welcome and can see themselves celebrated in the curriculum (Gay, 2018; Gorski, 2013). Asante (1991) described the educational system best when he stated that its purpose was to socialize students into the culture of the people who created it. In this case, the majority who created the educational system is European. This subtheme suggests that one way that effective teachers can stand against the racist system is to engage in some degree of culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP). CRP can be demonstrated by incorporating African American studies into the curriculum, showing a tangible belief that all students can and will learn, or by brainstorming with the students to find a need within the community that they can solve. There are countless other ways, but the point of this theme is to choose to give the students what they need by working to create a classroom that is an exception to the norm.

The second subtheme also involved choice; however, the teacher's choice involves using professional judgment to create a lesson flow that meets your students' needs. There are many demands placed on Title I teachers to provide instruction that causes their students to perform on grade level (Claycomb & Hawley, 2000); however, the demands are often unrealistic. Participants in this study specifically acknowledged that their district was asking them to teach at a pace where their students would be unable to grasp the concepts thoroughly. Because they had a robust knowledge of the standards, they chose to maintain their own pace and spend more time on essential standards. Although the participants illustrated the conflict between curriculum and achievement, the second assertion suggests that effective teachers consistently choose student success.

A 3: Evolve towards a total infusion of a genuine CRP way of being. The final assertion centered around three supporting subthemes illustrated in Figure 10. A review of the individual themes yielded a commonality that can be summed up in the word evolve. Participant experiences and literature support the assertion that an effective teacher must continually reflect on the “what” and “why” surrounding their teaching practices, remain relevant in his/her craft, and evolve towards a total infusion of a genuine culturally relevant pedagogical (CRP) way of being.

In Landsman and Chance’s (2011) book about establishing equity in diverse classrooms, Ladson-Billings explained CRP practices; however cautioned readers that it had to become a way of thinking before it could translate into a way of doing. Therefore, when I speak of evolving to a total infusion of a genuine CRP way of being, I am referring to the internalization of each tenet of CRP. In Ladson-Billings’ (1995a) article titled *But That’s Just Good Teaching*, she used practical examples from classrooms, studies, and literature to explain what CRP looks and sounds like within the educational arena. The three tenets included academic success, cultural competence, and critical competence (Ladson-Billings, 1995a). Although best practices such as high expectations, individualized instruction, critical thinking, and cooperative learning align with CRP, embracing a CRP way of being is more than just a set of actions or activities a teacher performs. It is a theoretical mindset that guides and guards one’s intentions and actions.

For example, many teachers purport high standards for their students and believe that all students can learn [academic success and cultural competence]. However, a teacher not fully evolved into a CRP mindset may develop a test question in which she substitutes a Eurocentric name with an *Afrocentric* one and thinks that action equates

with demonstrating a CRP way of being. Conversely, a teacher who has evolved further along the continuum of fully embracing a genuine CRP way of being, may consider the student's background and community norms when teaching the lessons leading up to the assessment, structure the assessment in a way that connects with the student's cultural identity, and provide targeted, scaffolded instruction to the student if success was not yet achieved on the initial assessment. According to Ladson-Billings (1995a), the teacher desires at a deeper level to empower the students to choose academic success that will cause them to be active, contributing citizens in our democracy.

The third tenet that should be fully embraced is providing scaffolds that lead the students to a critical consciousness about systems and norms designed to perpetuate inequality. Ladson-Billings (1995a) described CRP as an oppositional pedagogy, which means that, much like critical race theory, it is designed to empower those the majority have sought to marginalize. Participants in Ladson-Billings' (1995a) study infused critical thought into the curriculum and facilitated service projects to challenge or change an issue that affected them. For example, in one class the students wrote letters to the local newspapers to raise awareness about their outdated textbooks and by so doing, effected change by advocating for resources.

The participants interviewed in this study seemed to align with the first two CRP tenets to some degree. However, two of them, although they showed evidence of embracing the third tenet of CRP, continued to hold on to some aspects of deficit thinking. In developing this assertion, I examined the themes and noted the relationship among them. I used three of them as subthemes to support this assertion.

The first contributing subtheme was related to previous experiences and how they impact the participant’s teaching style and methodology. The participants referenced many instances where a teacher, parent, or life event changed the trajectory of the way they taught. Because the educational system was founded on a Eurocentric view of the world that penalizes and marginalizes those not like them (Asante, 1991; Carter, 2007), if teachers do not reflect on what they are doing and why, they can easily perpetuate the racial divide that currently exists.

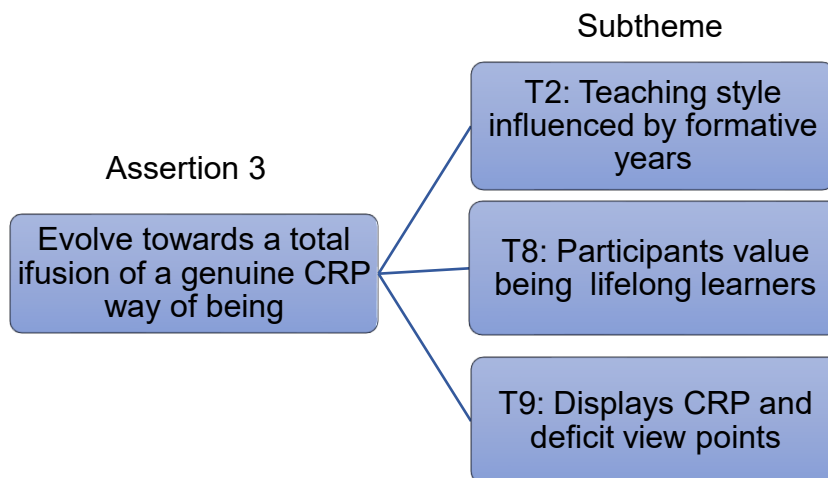


Figure 10. Assertion 3 and subthemes. The diagram depicts how the themes across the participants supported the major assertion.

According to Appiagyei (2019, p. 30), many people suffer from what was termed as “dysconscious racism” because they are oblivious to the *plight-facing* African American students due to ideas they learned while in the educational system. For example, the educational system’s creators, White men, believed in a meritocracy. Therefore, ideas like “one can pick oneself up by the bootstrap,” people “get what they deserve,” and “if a person is poor, it is because they are lazy,” are all taught as facts and blindly accepted by many in society. Meritocracy translates into the educational system as victim blaming of the Title I students who enter school grade levels behind. A teacher

who has not done the work of self-reflection and learning about things that challenge their belief systems, may unwittingly become part of the problems facing African Americans and students of color in Title I school settings.

Therefore, teachers must develop the habit of being lifelong learners. Being a lifelong learner encompasses both academic and personal life. Academically, it can help by keeping teachers abreast of the newest methods of teaching, thereby equipping him/her with the ability to have more strategies and tools from which to refer. Developing this habit is especially important in Title I schools because the research shows that typically, students enrolled in Title I schools do not have access to quality teachers (Carver-Thomas et al., 2020; Garcia & Weiss, 2020; Gorski, 2013).

The preceding implications led me to assert that effective teachers of Title I students evolve towards a more CRP way of being. When I speak of evolving, I am referencing changing, growing, or moving from one point to another. According to the research by Ladson-Billings (1995a, 1995b, 2014) and Gay (2018), CRP-based instruction is one of the best ways for African American students to get past marginalization and engage in high levels of knowledge; however, not all teachers are fully embraced all components of CRP. Some teachers, as Appiagyei (2019) indicated, are oblivious that they are completely on the deficit thinking side of the CRP – Deficit continuum. Other teachers, like the participants in this study, are closer to the CRP side of the continuum.

Of the research that I have conducted, Pinto and Vogel (2016) gave the best visual of what I consider to be the CRP – Culturally Deficit continuum. The authors began with cultural destruction and incapacity at the lowest end and continued until they reached

cultural proficiency by empowering the school culture and social structure (p. 21). They also offered descriptors for each of the five phases of cultural proficiency. Figure 11 visually illustrates how Pinto and Vogel’s (2016) hierarchy of cultural competence correlates to my CRP – Culturally Deficit continuum.

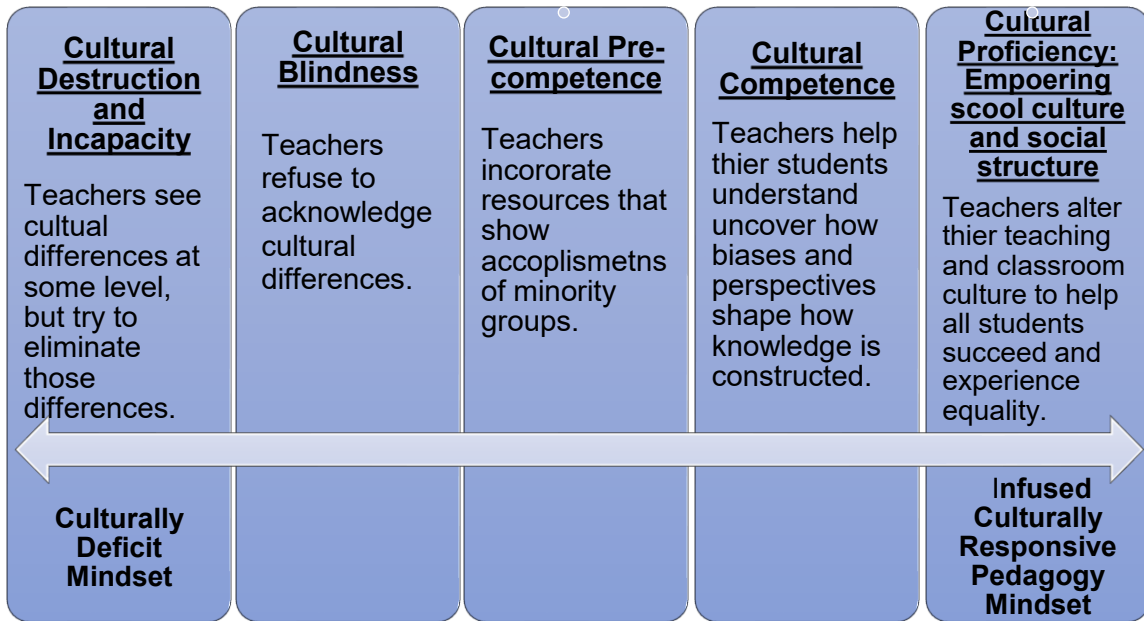


Figure 11. Correlation between Pinto and Vogel’s (2016) hierarchy of cultural competence and the CRP – Culturally Deficit continuum. Adapted from “From discipline to culturally responsive engagement: 45 classroom management strategies,” by L. E. Pinto and G. D. Vogel, p. 21. Copyright 2016 by Corwin.

Pinto and Vogel (2016, p. 21) used the term *cultural deconstruction and incapacity* to describe teachers who see cultural differences and deliberately attempt to make the student disregard their cultural norms. This explanation most closely correlates to having a culturally deficit mindset because a person who is entirely on that side of the continuum may feel strongly about their beliefs and is apt to force students to adopt their customs or norms. The authors used the example of a teacher asking a student to remove

her hijab because the school rule prohibits wearing hats in the building, as an example of cultural deconstruction and incapacity.

Another example of this type of belief, and one too frequently practiced is forbidding the use of Ebonics [African American Vernacular English], a student's native language, or the use of unconventional English on school grounds.

At the top of their hierarchy, Pinto and Vogel (2016) dubbed teachers who completely transform their classroom culture and teaching practices to ensure that all students, regardless of race or socioeconomic status, experience equality and success as culturally proficient. Their description of a culturally proficient individual correlates with one who has fully embraced all elements of CRP and has infused this way of being into their teaching practices and how they relate to their students. A teacher who has infused her CRP way of being into the classroom intentionally structures her classroom in a way that empowers the marginalized students. She does this by insisting on academic success, celebrating students' cultural identities, and helping her students to develop a critical thinking mindset that detects instances of repression and a willingness to initiate actions to bring about change.

As evident in participants in this study, even teachers who embrace some aspects of culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) may consciously or subconsciously hold on to jargon, practices, and beliefs that align with a deficit thinking mindset. Although portrayed in literature as opposites, this final assertion indicates that when it comes to the type of mindset one possesses, it is not a Black or White issue, no pun intended. Instead, there is a continuum. As one moves along the continuum toward a total infusion of a CRP way of being, one moves through or vacillates among phases of cultural blindness, pre-

competence, and competence before arriving at cultural proficiency or, what I term as a total infusion of a CRP way of being.

In short, based on the data, I am asserting that being a lifelong learner is critical to evolving towards becoming a more CRP way of being. One should continue to learn about the standards and strategies to best convey the skills; however, to be effective in teaching African American students in Title I schools, one must also develop CRP characteristics to include academic achievement, cultural consciousness, and critical consciousness. According to Bartell et al. (2017), the standards may be seen as a great equalizer. However, without proper attention placed on race, the experiences of those not the majority, and strategies of how to reach all groups of people, the vision of all students achieving the same mastery level will not come to fruition.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I explained how I used codes and categories to develop nine themes based on relationships among categories. After explaining the nine individual themes, I advanced to re-coding and comparing the individual themes to determine what patterns of recurring ideas, thoughts, beliefs, conflicts, or concerns were evident. Comparing the individual themes provided a structure that aided me in creating assertions that transcended the data. This process resulted in three assertions written as advice to a Title I teacher. The three assertions were, an effective Title I teacher of African American students, if patterned after my participants, would need to (a) build authentic relationships with students and parents; (b) *choose* to give the students what they need/deserve; and (c) evolve toward a total infusion of a genuine CRP way of being. In order to stay grounded during this process, I referred to my research questions and goals, provided participant

excerpts to support my decisions, and shared my ideas for a peer to critique. In the following chapter, I present my findings, discuss limitations, and give recommendations for future research, and implications for potential change.

Chapter 6

CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear, I rise

Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,

I am the dream and the hope of the slave.

I rise, I rise, I rise (Angelou, 1994, p. 164)

I used the final stanzas of Maya Angelou's poem, "Still I Rise," to introduce the concluding chapter of this study because it exemplified the hope that exudes from the conclusions, assertions, and implications of this study. Although many obstacles exist for students in high-poverty Title I schools while pursuing an equitable education, the assertions within this study demonstrate that this goal is attainable, provided teachers and administrators rise to the occasion and meet the unique needs of students within these settings.

Research Questions and Assertions Based on the Data

Researchers have presented undeniable evidence linking high-poverty Title I schools with low test scores (Heier, 2011; Ross, 2016), ineffective or inexperienced teachers (Carver-Thomas et al., 2020; Sutchter et al., 2019), and students with a variety of emotional needs impacted by societal ills (McCormack et al., 2017; Shaw, 2016; Turney & Goodsell, 2018). Although these correlations are prevalent in many of America's school communities stricken by poverty, this study sought to explore a counter-narrative for some students and teachers who are thriving in Title I school environments.

Unfortunately, many community leaders, citizens, and educators have regarded Title I schools as institutions that contain academically failing students, troubled youth, unconcerned parents, and ineffective teachers. As a result of these victim blaming and stereotypical beliefs, educators and administrators disproportionately enforce exclusionary disciplinary practices for students of color, especially African American males (Howard, 2016; Khalifa, 2018; Monardo, 2019).

Additionally, common explanations for the grave disparities between Title I and non-Title I schools are conjugated, such as (a) the students do not value education, (b) the students do not try hard enough, (c) the students do not have the vocabulary needed to be successful, and (d) the parents are not concerned about their children's educational journey (Gorski, 2013). These anecdotes are more palatable for lawmakers and other stakeholders to cling to rather than examining the root causes of these differences or investigating the educational system comprehensively. No matter how widespread these beliefs are, they are not the narrative for every child, parent, and teacher in high-poverty Title I schools, and my research yields a counternarrative (Chavkin, 1989; Ladson-Billings, 1995b, 2009; Khalifa, 2018; Parrett & Budge, 2020).

Despite the negative stereotypes and seemingly insurmountable odds that many math students in elementary Title I schools face, great teachers do serve in some of these environments. These exemplary educators provide high-quality educational experiences annually, resulting in high academic growth and increased social connections for their students. This study, *So, They Really can Learn Here: Profiles of Effective Elementary School Mathematics Teachers of African American Students in Middle Georgia's Title I Schools*, coupled with the work of notable change agents like Gloria Ladson-Billings,

Mahammad Khalifa, William Parrett, and Kathleen Budge celebrate the impact of exceptional teachers in Title I school settings. Studies like the ones mentioned make it clear that transformational educators exist in Title I schools and that students' academic success is possible.

This study examined the classrooms of 5 such exceptional elementary math teachers from a Title I school. The educators in this study consistently produced high academic results with their students. Therefore, by conducting the three-phased interview approach (Seidman, 2019) with each participant, I hoped to determine, from their perspective, the components necessary to create a classroom environment that encourages students to achieve academic success. I also anticipated that shining a positive light on these exceptional teachers would inspire others in similar learning environments and provide insights, strategies, and approaches that would positively impact their teaching styles. After interviewing the participants, I transcribed, analyzed, and coded their interviews looking for teaching practices, challenges they faced, and motivating factors that impacted their continued success as educators. I also wrote reflective memos on my thought processes which I memorialized using MAXQDA software and a composition notebook.

During the coding process, I went through two or three iterations of categorizing coding strategies to group codes based on their similarities. I then grouped similar categories to create 9 themes which included (a) passionate about teaching Title I students; (b) teaching style influenced by formative years; (c) student interest and data-driven instruction equals student success; (d) a co-constructed classroom culture; (e) focused on emotional and social skills; (f) combats racism through CRP; (g) chooses to

meet student needs; (h) participants are lifelong learners; and (i) displays CRP and deficit thinking viewpoints. These nine themes were the basis of my assertions.

Research assertions revisited. According to Saldaña (2021), an assertion is derived from delineating the relationship between themes. Based on observations, the researcher makes an assertion or proposition about what is happening in the data context. In this study, I considered assertions to be my attempt at relating the themed theoretical connect to the specifics of the data presented in this study.

Using categorizing strategies (Saldaña, 2021) and connecting strategies as described by Seidman (2019) and Maxwell and Miller (2008), I created profiles of the participants and used these to ground the themes and assertions in their lived experiences. Centered around the data the interviews provided, my research results yielded the following three assertions or findings to be effective, teachers of African American Title I students patterned after my participants, a teacher would need to (a) build authentic relationships with students and parents; (b) *choose* to give the students what they need/deserve; and (c) evolve toward a total infusion of a genuine CRP way of being. These assertions and their connection to the specifics of practice within this research are summarized in the subsequent sections.

Assertion 1 revisited. Analyzing the data through the categorizing and connecting coding strategies revealed that *building relationships with students and parents was key to a successful year* and played a major role in all 5 participants' teaching styles and classroom culture. Each participant spoke of ways they actively sought to build authentic relationships with their students and leveraged those relationships to foster student academic success. For example, Ms. Ramonda, (pseudonym) spoke of sitting with her

students during lunch or recess and having conversations about their interests. Similarly, Ms. Shavon, [pseudonym] and Ms. Keisha, (pseudonym) sought to build relationships through conversations and a student interest survey. They then leveraged those connections within the classroom setting to ensure that the activities and assignments were constructed in ways that allowed students to use their strengths while learning.

Assertion 2 revisited. Data analysis also revealed that the participants valued their student's lifelong success and *chose to give the students what they needed and deserved to be successful academically and socially.* Despite pressure from district administrators and their expectations to teach at an unrealistic pace; coupled with the life experiences students had not been afforded; and the Eurocentric nature of the curriculum, the participants chose to do what was in the best interest of their students. One example of this was found in Ms. Dedicated's profile. When teaching a lesson, her students had no idea that the word stand could refer to a sports stadium. Realizing that the students had not been exposed to opportunities to be in the stands at a major game, she obtained tickets for her class to attend a local college's football game. In this way, she provided connections to the learning while simultaneously providing life lessons that would forever be in the students' memories.

Another example was found in all 5 participants' interviews. Each participant chose to attend to the individual needs of their students instead of directly following the district's pacing guide for math instruction. The participants analyzed data from their classroom assessments to determine their students' strengths and weaknesses, and devised ways to meet them at their level of need while meeting the district's standards.

For example, Ms. Jasmine’s interview detailed how she used learning stations to address specific areas of weakness and provide practice or acceleration for her students.

Assertion 3 revisited. The final assertion is that teachers who desire to pattern themselves after the participants in this study should implement *evolving towards a total infusion of a genuine CRP way of being*. This assertion was based on the observation that even teachers who demonstrated parts of CRP, such as having high expectations and celebrating the students’ cultural identities, still espoused aspects of deficit thinking which focuses on perceived student deficit and blames the students for their inadequacies. Statements such as “I don’t know where the parents are,” “I just really try to just see people as people,” and “there’s not much difference [in the child] I see a bigger impact in economic and financial class” all closely aligned with J. Pierce’s (2013) definition of colorblindness. According to J. Pierce (2013), Ferlazzo (2021), and Crenshaw (2019), the notion of colorblindness directly opposes CRP beliefs. Therefore, I assert that teachers are on a continuum and must evolve towards a total infusion of CRP ways of being and action to effectively teach students of color in Title I schools.

Based on the data gathered and assertions presented, it appears that each assertion, if internalized and implemented with fidelity, would help other teachers in Title I settings become more effective. Gloria Ladson-Billings, Geneva Gay, and other researchers have long called for a more culturally responsive teaching style and provided supporting evidence on a much larger scale of the positive effects of evolving towards a total infusion of a genuine CRP way of being. The 3 assertions helped me accomplish my research goals by answering my research questions.

Research questions answered. Throughout my study, three research questions guided my thoughts and actions. Those research questions (RQ) were (a) “What are the perceptions, experiences, and practices of successful teachers who work with African American children in underperforming Elementary schools Mathematics teachers of African American students in Sunnydale County’s Title I Elementary schools?” (b) “How do these successful elementary teachers develop classroom climates where students consistently make significant gains mathematically and socially?” and (c) “What are teachers’ ideas on effectively teaching mathematics to students of color in elementary school?” In this section, I present my findings to the research questions and use poignant examples from the subthemes supporting the assertions to ground my conclusions within the confines of the research data.

Research question 1 answered. RQ 1 was answered by analyzing one-on-one virtual interviews, and the previous member checked observations. Though some participants made deficit thinking-based statements, as indicated in Assertion 3, all the participants found a way to put the students’ needs first and enact strategies to promote their academic and social success (Assertion 2). For example, although Ms. Ramonda built strong relationships with the students, motivated them to achieve significant growth in mathematics, and encouraged them to believe they were not subordinate to other people, she still held deficit-based opinions toward their parents. Despite her indignation towards what she believed to be a lack of parental concern, she purposed to “be intentional with intervention and homework” so her students could get what they needed to be successful from her. She as described it as her motivation to keep teaching.

The participants also shared experiences to which fellow educators could relate and stories of how they overcame obstacles to ensure student achievement. Of the numerous examples found within the interviews, the stories relating to insufficient learning materials and the effects of stigmas placed on their schools by those in the majority resounded through 4 of 5 participant interviews. One of the most salient examples is Ms. Keisha's description of how other schools in more economically advantaged neighborhoods have adequate supplies due to funding and parental funding raised by the Parent Teacher Association. However, at Sunnydale, the school in which she teaches, teachers lack up-to-date technology and adequate learning materials. Although she recognizes the issue, she used creative ways, such as copying and laminating math games for her stations, to provide the learning activities s her students needed.

Lastly, in answering RQ 1, I noted that the participants offered practical teaching techniques to help others see increased success in their classrooms. Many techniques such as establishing authentic relationships, setting high academic expectations and providing the scaffolds necessary for the students to achieve them, and leveraging the student voice within the classroom corresponded with Hattie's (2012) research on instructional best practices and CRP teaching practices (Ladson-Billings, 1995b). These and other perceptions, experiences, and practices are detailed in Chapter 4 through their individual profiles.

Research question 2 answered. In answering the question about the participants' classroom climates, the interviews, corroborated by data from previous observations, provided various techniques to foster a sense of community and academic rigor. Every

participant spent a significant portion of their interviews highlighting the importance of relationship building and high standards. Each participant's interviews revealed a central theme underscoring the importance of developing relationships with the students and parents. However, they each had a unique way of building that sense of community.

One example is in Ms. Keisha and Ms. Ramonda's classroom environments. Although both participants created climates conducive to equity and instruction, their management styles were opposite. Both teachers intentionally developed authentic relationships with their students, had student-led jobs in the classroom, did not tolerate bullying or put-downs, and attended student extra-curricular activities. However, to the casual observer, Ms. Ramonda's class may seem more structured with every item in its appropriate place, while Ms. Keisha openly admits that her class is typically noisy due to her game-based teaching style. In each class, student learning and comradery were evident yet displayed differently. Other examples of these relationship-building strategies were presented throughout the profiles in Chapter 4 and resulted in themes detailed as themes in Chapter 5.

Research question 3 answered. The third research question that the assertions helped answer was about the participants' ideas on effectively teaching mathematics to students of color in Title I elementary schools. This research question was answered through the participants' explanations of effective practices they used with their students. The teachers shared practices such as combining data-driven individualized instruction with student interests, using concrete manipulatives to help the students master the skill, acknowledging student emotional needs, and remaining current in effective strategies.

One such example is in Ms. Jasmine’s interview. She shared how she used the standards to develop assessments that would indicate her student’s level of knowledge. She then used the information to develop learning stations during her math instructional time. She included (a) a station where she works with the students using learning manipulatives, (b) a learning station where students can play instructional games to review previous skills, (c) a section for individual practice, and (d) a fact practice using technology or hand-held flash cards. She designed each station to access one of the four main learning styles: visual, auditory, reading and writing, and kinesthetic. These and other strategies are introduced through the profiles in Chapter 4, detailed as themes in the first part of Chapter 5, and encapsulated as assertions presented at the conclusion of Chapter 5.

Implications of Study

A primary goal of this study was to provide compelling stories of Title I math teachers to counter the wide-ranging negative perceptions associated with those schools and show that students “really can learn” there. I conducted this study on a small scale, thereby encumbering it with certain inherent limitations. However, the implications of the results are far-reaching and imply the need for individual, educational, and societal reform in how we view Title I schools.

According to ESEA 1965, the purpose of Title I funds was to provide needed capital to schools and districts serving low-income populations (Gamson et al., 2015; Osborne, 1965). The money was to be appropriated for paying teachers, providing educational resources, and ultimately equalizing education in America (Guthrie, 1968). However, nearly 60 years after the passing of ESEA, the distinction of Title I funding has

taken on a totally different connotation than Pres. L. B. Johnson championed it to be. Instead of being thought of as a catalyst to equalize the physical and academic differences caused, in part, by economic disparities (Ebony, 1966; Gamson et al., 2015; Guthrie, 1968), it is now associated with terms such as low-scoring, high-poverty, inner-city or urban schools (Gorski, 2013).

Negative perceptions of schools serving economically disadvantaged students are not uncommon because socialized indicators are the same throughout the nation. As evidence of the nationwide association of Title I schools with negative statistics, I spoke to Dr. Williams, a colleague in a northern state over 820 miles away, concerning the nature of my research topic. When I shared that I was studying Title I schools, without having prior knowledge of the schools or district, she immediately began to share exact details about the climate, culture, and scores of the schools involved in this study. It was startling to realize how a fellow educator in another state could identify school dynamics with such accuracy just by its funding source. Even more remarkable, none of these characteristics evoke a sense of urgency among legislators and other stakeholders to fund initiatives that would provide the same quality education in schools in more affluent neighborhoods.

In many ways, rather than being a positive indicator, the use of qualifiers like “Title I,” “urban,” “inner-city,” and “high-poverty” schools have been associated with “at-risk,” “failing,” schools with Black and Brown students. Those qualifiers, in conjunction with the majority’s attitude towards the disenfranchised minorities and the resurgence of school choice vouchers, have changed the initial presentation of Title I to a

way to marginalize specific communities further (Chapman, 2017; Johnson, 2006; Phipps, 2021; Smith, 2019; Whitehurst, Joo, Reeves, & Rodrigue, 2017).

When reviewing the literature, books such as Ladson-Billings' (2009) *The Dreamkeepers*, Parrett and Budge's (2020) *Turning High Poverty Schools into High Performing Schools*, Khalifa's (2018) *Culturally Responsive School Leadership*, and Gorski's (2013) *Reaching and Teaching Students in Poverty* all acknowledged the negative perceptions and myths associated with Title I schools. However, rather than blaming the students and parents for their reality or accepting the dominant narrative, they emphasized examples of successful Title I teachers, students, and schools. They also urged for systemic change at all levels. This study's assertions and implications echo their concerns and advocacy for change.

During my conversation with Dr. Williams, after pointing out the irony of her mysteriously portraying teachers and students at Sunnydale, we mused over the idea that we, as a society, must decide how to restore value to all districts and schools, so students are not counted out before they enter. The question, however, remained, "How could such a feat be accomplished?" After reflecting on the assertions and conclusions yielded by the data, I came to the realization that it must start with dedicated individuals such as educators and educational leaders abandoning instructional practices that "perpetuate underachievement and inequity" (Parrett & Budge, 2020, p. 161) and embracing pedagogies and strategies that honor all cultural identities. Just as the schools portrayed in Ladson-Billings' (2009), Parrett and Budge's (2020), and Khalifa's (2018) works, I presume that academic and social gains would accelerate, parents and community members would feel more involved, and their perceptions towards those "bad" schools

would change (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Furthermore, the school and family level change would impact educational policy changes that are much needed.

Interestingly, *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* by Ruby Payne ([c. 1990]) spread like wildfire through districts across the United States, but I had not heard of CRP before this study. Could the reason be that CRP challenges the White supremacist foundation of the United States educational system? Recent outrage and state laws attempting to ban Afrocentric ideas from being taught give credence to the thought or assumption that the majority does not want teachers exposed to the principles espoused by CRP thought as these are seen as leftists and an assault on America's values. Those who speak out against the Eurocentric slant are marginalized and vilified by those in authority.

This study's research results hinge on assertion three – that educators move towards a more CRP way of being. To initiate change at the ground level, a major implication of this study is that a job-embedded CRP-based course is developed, offering pedagogy and practical techniques, applications, and suggestions. Teachers and instructional leaders, especially in Title I schools, should be offered the opportunity or required to attend such courses to aid them in their quest to provide the best equitable learning experience for their students.

Three foundational CRP principles included in the course should be (a) the teacher's commitment to student achievement, (b) the perseverance of the student's cultural competence, and (c) involvement in the cultural critique of social injustices beginning with those found within their communities (Campbell, 2021; Ladson-Billings, 1995b, 2014). Although there is no way to create a "cookie cutter" that will work in all

districts, certain foundational best practices would be included. Within the current body of literature, Parrett and Budge's (2020) and Khalifa's (2018) approaches to systematic change most resemble the implication I am suggesting.

Parrett and Budge (2020) created a framework of core values, strategies, and recommendations based on a study of 12 high-poverty, high-performing schools. Their framework was designed to get teachers and administrators to reflect on current practices in light of best practices, research about equity and inequality, and a collective sense of teacher/leader efficacy. Their framework closely aligned with the first two CRP principles, which are, commitment to higher student achievement and preserving the students' cultural identity. However, their research cited evidence that race did not significantly influence poverty and included limited strategies for embracing student culture or critical activism.

In her study of a Detroit school principal who led his school from being a high-poverty, low-performing school to a high-performing one, Khalifa (2018), included many suggestions similar to those of Parrett and Budge (2020). However, she included more examples and means of how to honor students' cultural identities. She also provided practical examples of classes engaged in critical discussions and community action. As part of the recommendations based on the story's implications, I propose the courses include a combination of Khalifa's (2018) and Parrett and Budge's (2020) approaches to individual and schoolwide reform.

Individual reform. Hattie (2012) stated that a collective sense of teacher efficacy is key to student success. However, in Title I schools, statistics reveal that most students are not taught by teachers trained in their subject area (Carver-Thomas et al., 2020;

Gorski, 2013). In addition, some veteran teachers are unwitting participants in further marginalizing their students (Khalifa, 2018; Parrett & Budge, 2020). My research suggests that teachers would benefit from CRP-based courses because of the attention placed on high academic expectations for teachers and students and its focus on maintaining student cultural identities.

Research indicates that the majority of teachers are White women (NCES, 2019). Some knowingly discriminate against or have low expectations for students in Title I settings; however, the vast majority may be oblivious that their beliefs and practices negatively impact the students they teach. Implementing such courses would also cause some African American educators to reexamine their beliefs and practices. Being educated in a socializing school system (Asante, 1991) often causes the oppressed to champion the oppressor's views (Brooks, 2012). Rather than empathizing and building an authentic relationship with their students, they may hold as truth the same myths that the majority rehearses (Gorski, 2013) and engage heavily in exclusionary practices (Khalifa, 2018).

Although it may cause temporary discomfort, requiring (or strongly recommending) teachers to take courses based on CRP principles would cause participants to look within and see where they have contributed directly or indirectly to the existing opportunity gap between African American Title I students and the White majority. Participants may go through stages similar to grief, beginning with denial and anger; however, it is part of the process of evolving toward a more CRP way of being. Based on the data results, my assumption is that teachers desiring to become more effective would readily take on the challenge of redefining themselves. However,

teachers cannot take on the task alone. The administrator or leader must also evolve if we, as a society, are to restore value and worth to the areas that need it most.

Administrators as reform leaders. In her book culturally responsive school leaders, Khalifa (2018) documented a school that made significant gains because the principal embraced the CRP model. Based on the findings of this study, I also recommend that administrators and district personnel participate in the training. Although teachers have the greatest impact on student academic success, the principals and supervisors also play a vital role in what happens in the classrooms. The building leaders set the tone for the school, and their leadership style can make teaching using CRP principles straightforward or difficult.

Building principals are also tasked with managerial roles such as hiring, ensuring the accuracy of the master schedule, and designating what grade level teachers serve. Based on my assertions and Khalifa's (2018) and Parrett and Budge's (2020) work with developing leaders, the results suggest that if principals attend the training, they would be more likely to include staff development and exercises on becoming more culturally aware of students' needs. Such activities would deepen their work in the course and ensure all staff members were going in the same direction.

In addition to the participant experiences and the research findings, I have personal experience working for an administrator who embraced concepts of CRP. Although the district representatives required certain things from our school, she often met with us and expressed that she was willing to take the heat, if necessary, so that we could do what was in the best interest of our students. Working in an environment with a supportive leader who saw students' needs and embraced CRP made the workload

bearable. Although we still had needy students and a heavy lift to ensure student growth, as Jasmine commented in her interview, “having a supportive principal enables one to be and do for their students.” A strong emphasis on cultural awareness and supporting students’ unique identities would lead to more authentic relationships with students and their parents, who influence decisions about education.

Educational policy reform. As a further implication, this study asserts that requiring, or suggesting, that teachers and teacher leaders, especially in Title I schools, participate in CRP-based courses is in students’ best interest. However, I realize that it would not come without opposition. Across the nation, people who affirm the Eurocentric stance of the majority have called for and, in 15 states, passed legislation such as the Protect Students First Act of 2022 (PSFA). The PSFA, and others like it, banned educators within K-12 schools from discussing “divisive” or “controversial” teachings that cause White people to feel discomfort (Brunold-Conesa, 2022). Although not explicitly named in the law, the terms “divisive” and “controversial” refer to CRT and elements of CRP beliefs.

In my local state, the PSFA’s verbiage invoked feelings of uncertainty and fear in some of the marginalized communities of educators. One section of the law forbade teaching or expressing views that show America’s history in a negative light, requiring educators to complete such courses as part of conferring a degree, and provided a way for parents to voice their concerns if they feel the law was violated. However, in a later section, the law stated that it did not prevent teachers from discussing topics such as slavery, nor did it prohibit discussion of “divisive” or “controversial” topics in an academic manner (Protect Students First Act, 2022). The uncertainty incited by such acts

has caused some educators and districts to revise their curriculum and, in some cases, their diversity training, so they would be less likely to violate the newly adopted law. A tangible effect of the law was found in Schwartz's (2022) EdWeekly article. Schwartz (2022) reported that a group of Tennessee parents challenged their local school district's use of the book *Ruby Bridges* in their school's curriculum. They used a law like PSFA to voice their feelings of discomfort.

Obstacles such as, personal discomfort, recently passed laws, and the general consortium of the majority to preserve the status quo are real concerns. However, my question in the form of a rebuttal is twofold "Protect whose students first?" and "Protect students from what?" Instead of protecting and providing equity for all students, the act seems to be in response to protecting the White students from being exposed to viewpoints that could cause them to question and rethink values, concepts, and beliefs passed down for generations. The same values that endeavor to preserve their way of life and keep the majority in power and in control.

If we, as educators, believe that ALL students, even in Title I schools, can learn and deserve to be in an environment where they are celebrated, then courses suggested based on this study's implications should be considered, despite the danger of negative repercussions. We must find ways to expose teachers and administrators to job-embedded courses with CRP framework and celebrate their implementation efforts in classrooms. This study and others like Khalifa (2018), Gay (2018), and Gorski (2013) suggest that the goal should be challenging and restructuring systems that prevent the closing of the immense opportunity gap currently existing between students of color and other ethnicities. Sure, there are real obstacles, and it will require educators and educator

leaders to examine their beliefs and teaching styles and evolve towards a more CRP way of being, but it is worth the risk involved.

In summary, the implications of the results yielded by this study are massive. Altering society's negative perceptions about students and teachers in Title I schools is no small feat. However, data from this and other scholarly research suggest that it is a task worth endeavoring. I suggest beginning at the individual teacher and administrative levels to accomplish this lofty goal. Educators in Title I schools and abroad should engage in job-based professional learning founded on CRP principles. I believe the resulting change in academic achievement and social climate within Title I schools would alter parent and community perceptions. In return, it would spark an educational reform that embraces cultural inclusivity. The ultimate goal of restoring dignity and value to our marginalized communities would be accomplished by invoking individual, social, and educational reform. Though the goals and implications were far-reaching, this study had some limitations.

Limitations of the Present Study

Although the findings and conclusions are valid and grounded in the participants' experiences and other scholarly research, there were inherent limitations to this study's validity or trustworthiness (Maxwell, 2013). These limitations primarily centered on the participant demographics, data collection process, and data analysis. I discuss these limitations in the subsequent paragraphs.

Participant demographic limitations. The first limitation was associated with the number of participants and their locations. Unlike quantitative studies, where random sampling is the norm, purposeful criterion sampling to obtain a concentrated group of

participants is necessary for qualitative studies (Miles et al., 2014; Patton, 2002).

Through purposeful criterion sampling, the researcher is assured that the phenomenon being studied is present within the research. Although I used a purposeful approach, the five participants selected were all African American women who taught in the same school.

I chose the district based on it meeting the criteria, and its proximity to my home decreased the cost and time associated with the initially planned interview and observation process. However, due to a lack of response and or willingness from teachers at other Title I schools, to participate in this study, my options were decidedly limited, and I graciously accepted my co-workers' offers to participate. Having the participants at the same site was beneficial because I had already established a working relationship with them. I also had more than three years of experience working with and observing three of the five participants.

The limitations, however, are based on what gave the study its strength. Since the teachers were from the same school and school district, many of their math instructional practices were similar. Also, the fact that they were all African American women may have contributed to their similar backgrounds and experiences concerning racial discrimination. Participants from varying school districts and ethnicities may have yielded broader scope of experiences and practices during the data collection process.

Data collection process limitations. The data collected yielded the study's second limitation. Before the COVID pandemic, I anticipated scheduling classroom observations between Seidman's (2019) recommended three-phased interviews. The observations' purpose was to provide an extra layer of data to be analyzed in addition to

the interviews. I anticipated the classroom observations would offer insights into the classroom's day-to-day operations. The COVID pandemic eliminated any opportunity to observe participants in their classroom environment during the interview process. Students received their assignments through a virtual learning management system; however, they were not required to meet at the same time for whole group instruction. As a result, I relied on fact-checked prior observations of the participants.

In addition to observational limitations, the interviews themselves had certain limitations. I generated my interview questions based on this study's research questions and goals and adapted interview questions from other scholarly researchers. Due to the COVID pandemic, I could not meet face-to-face with the participants. Instead, I conducted meetings through *Zoom*, [a video conferencing tool]. Although I practiced how I would ask questions, I was still a novice in the world of online interviewing. A more experienced interviewer may have asked additional questions that generated other codes and themes during the data analysis process.

Data analysis limitations. The final limitations relate to the data analysis process. I spent countless hours reading Saldaña's (2021) coding manual and applying its suggestions to reviewing audio and written transcripts, coding and recoding, generating themes, and developing assertions grounded in the data. I also used Seidman's (2019) connecting strategies to determine relationships between themes and had other educators critique my thoughts. Within the dissertation, I provided reflective memos and other diagrams to remain transparent to the reader. However, my ability to code all relevant information effectively and efficiently was a limitation. A more experienced researcher

may have coded additional data sets and developed other themes and assertions based on the same data.

All qualitative and quantitative studies are subject to validity limitations based on the study's scope. In this section, I have described the limitations to validity and how I addressed them. The limitations consisted of the participant demographics, data collection process, and how I analyzed the data. As Maxwell (2013) suggested, I attempted to address validity threats by remaining meticulous and transparent throughout the presentation of my study. Though certain limitations applied to this study, the results have far-reaching implications for teachers in Title I settings.

Recommendations for Future Research

The limitations surrounding this study are centered around the participants' demographics, data collection process, and data analysis, which has led me to develop the following recommendations for future research. The teachers in this study were from the same geographical location and may have had similar experiences. Therefore, I recommend that this study be replicated and extended to include participants from varying districts and Title I schools to address the participants' demographic and data collection limitations. The data gathered from the participants' experiences also provided common practices among them; however, other best practices may be discovered if participants from varying groups and ethnicities were included in the population sample. The study should also include face-to-face interviews and classroom observations. Since most states are relaxing their social distancing regulations, conducting the in-person objectives that this study was unable to perform is now feasible. The additional data may strengthen and add more reliability to the assertions and findings within this study.

A second opportunity for future research is related to the observational limitations and could extend the research. In this study, I interviewed teachers of Title I students to determine common practices and motives that impacted their ability to reach their student population successfully. In future research, I may also add another layer by conducting a case study centering on how the students interpret their teacher's practices. Although other researchers, such as Stuckey (2019), have surveyed student views about their classroom's climate, I have not found a study that combines student and teacher perceptions in successful elementary Title I math classrooms. Such a study would amplify the teacher and student's voice and add a different perspective that may coincide with or divert from the teacher's perceptions.

The final recommendation I share is indirectly related to the participants included in the study. During the data gathering process, two participants referenced the positive or negative effects of administrators on their teaching competence. Khalifa (2018) and Parrett and Budge (2020) reported the importance of the principal's role in establishing a culture of cultural responsiveness. However, very few schools they studied were elementary schools with large percentages of African American students. Although most students of color experience some degree of being marginalized, statistics and studies on poverty (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021d), disciplinary actions (Gorski, 2013; Taylor et al., 2016), incarceration (GA Department of Corrections, 2021); all indicate that African Americans experience the effects of racial marginalization at a greater degree. A study focusing on the role of administrators in successful Title I elementary schools with high populations would add a needed dimension to the current body of research.

In this section, I discussed my recommendations for future research based on the strengths and limitations of my study. Although I only shared three, the research topics generated from this one study are incalculable. More studies surrounding this topic are needed. Title I students deserve teachers and administrators who value them as individuals and are committed to their educational success. Future studies may provide other practical ways to accomplish the research goal of inspiring teachers in Title I settings to continue to provide a quality educational experience to their students.

Final Thoughts

Throughout this study, I attempted to provide undeniable evidence that even within the most underserved communities, students can still thrive academically and socially. Ladson-Billings' (2009) work, *The Dreamkeepers*, detailing accounts of successful teachers in similar settings as included in this study, add credence to the stories, analysis, themes, and assertions developed. Despite the negative connotations attached to Title I, inner city or urban school districts, students are worthy of receiving a quality educational experience that will combat the systemic racial injustices within society and the educational system. Many social ills must be addressed to restore the sense of value and worth to these marginalized students in Title I schools.

As suggested in the implication section, this can be accomplished if teachers and school leaders become more culturally responsive in their teaching styles and communications with students and parents, and resources are distributed in a more equitable manner. Title I funds were initially meant to aid in closing the achievement gaps between children in poverty and those who are not in poverty (Ebony, 1966; Gamson et al., 2015; Guthrie, 1968); yet, this is rarely seen. As recently as the NAEP

(2021) data on long-term trends, African Americans still scored disproportionately lower than other races. Although there are real gaps, these practices indicated by the participants have shown that with enough support, resources, and a CRP mindset, students can overcome, just as the students in this study and Ladson-Billings' (2009) work.

The question remains, are we as educators, leaders in society, and citizens of the United States willing to take on the challenge of conducting intense self-reflection and evolving more towards a culturally responsive pedagogical way of being and doing? I hope that reading the experiences of effective Title I math teachers and the research advocating for more equitable educational experiences will cause teachers in similar settings and the general public to take on the challenges presented in this study.

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Appendix A

Valdosta State University IRB Approval Letter



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

PROTOCOL EXEMPTION REPORT

PROTOCOL NUMBER: 03385-2016

INVESTIGATOR: Mr. Terrell Brown

PROJECT TITLE: *So, They Really Can Learn Here: Portraits of Effective Elementary Teachers of African American Students on Middle Georgia's Title-1 Schools.*

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD DETERMINATION:

This research protocol is **exempt** from Institutional Review Board (IRB) oversight under Exemption **Category 2**. You may begin your study 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) before continuing your research.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS:

- *Research data records must be maintained in a secure manner for a minimum of 3 years following completion of research.*
- *When audio/videotaping the Consent Statement must be part of the recording and transcript.*

If this box is checked, please submit any documents you revise to the IRB Administrator at irb@valdosta.edu to ensure an updated record of your exemption.

Elizabeth W. O'phie *09/30/2016*
Elizabeth W. O'phie, IRB Administrator Date

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

Revised: 06.02.16

Appendix B

Sunnydale School District IRB Approval Letter



September 16, 2016

Terrell Brown



Dear Mr. Brown:

We are pleased to inform you that the Research Committee reviewed your proposal and approved it, provided you follow Policy ICC and your steps as outlined in the Appendix documents of your proposal, you may move forward with your research.

Congratulations as you approach the successful completion of all of your wonderful works!

Sincerely,



Assistant Superintendent of Student Affairs

Appendix C

Research Question Prompts

Research Questions:

1. How do successful elementary math teachers of African American students in Anywhere County's Title I schools explain or account for differential performance of students of color and White students?
2. How do successful elementary math teachers of African American students in Anywhere County's Title I schools develop classroom climates where the students consistently make significant gains mathematically and socially?
3. What are the perceptions of successful elementary math teachers of African American students in Anywhere County's Title I schools of the effects of culturally relevant teaching on their classroom environment?
4. What are teachers' ideas on how to teach mathematics more effectively to students of color in elementary school?

In order to develop my research questions, I will ask semi-structured open-ended questions. Due to the nature of open-ended questions, there is no possible way to know all the questions that may arise; however, I have listed possible discussion prompts below.

Interview 1

I want to ask you first about some of your history in regards to Education. So if you could begin by telling me as much as possible about your experiences.

- Tell me about yourself.
 - How long have you been teaching?
 - If you don't mind my asking, what is your age?
 - How long have you been teaching at this school?
- Describe an average day in your house growing up.
- What was your elementary school experience like for you growing up?
- What was your middle school experience like for you growing up?
- How would you characterize your high school experience while growing up?
- What was your most memorable day of school (either elementary, middle or high)?
- Who were your favorite teachers?
 - What qualities did you most admire?

- Who were your least favorite teachers?
 - What qualities did you find to be most distasteful?
- What kind of student were you?
- How did you become a teacher?
 - What was your college path to becoming a teacher like?
 - What do you remember about experiences you had while in your college program?
- Think back to your first few days as a teacher. How would you characterize your first day of teaching?
- “If you could think of a word to describe yourself as a first year teacher, what would it be? Can you explain why?” (Perrymond, 2011)
- What were some of the most memorable events during your first year (few years) teaching?
- What kind of things, if any, in your childhood or school experiences impact how you teach your African American students mathematics (Perrymond, 2011)?
- How do you think your role as a teacher today compares with your role at the beginning of your teaching career (Perrymond, 2011)?
- In the news recently, we have heard much about race tensions in the United States. Do you recall any experiences in school while growing up?
- What would be the most remarkable challenge, if any, have you faced as a teacher involving race relations in education?

Interview 2:

- What does a typical day in math look like for the students?
 - What practices have you put in place to ensure your students experience success? (What are some things you have done to get and keep students engaged in learning?) (Perrymond, 2011)
- When and how do you assess your students to know they have learned the mathematics you have taught (Perrymond, 2011)?
 - How is a student who needs intervention supported to learn a concept or skill in your mathematics class (Perrymond, 2011)?
 - How would you compare the average student in your classroom to the average student at this grade level during your educational experience?
- Tell me about a mathematics lesson that you taught this year or in previous years that you felt was one of your best (Perrymond, 2011).
 - What do you think made this lesson so memorable (Perrymond, 2011)?
 - What impact, if any, did it have on your teaching?
- Tell me about a math lesson that you taught this year or in previous years that you felt was one of your worst.
 - What disappointed you the most about the lesson?

- What impact, if any, did it have on your teaching style?
- What part of the academic year is most challenging to you as a mathematics teacher, and how do you meet the challenge (Perrymond, 2011)?
- How do you prepare for the math lesson? Take me through the preparation of a typical math lesson.
 - What are some of the things you think about while planning for the lesson?
 - What role do you think the mathematics curriculum has played in the success you have experienced in teaching African American students math (Perrymond, 2011)?
- How would you describe the culture (atmosphere) in your classroom (Perrymond, 2011)?
 - What are essential elements that make a class go smoothly?
 - What is your teaching philosophy (Perrymond, 2011)?
 - How would your students describe you (Perrymond, 2011)?
 - How involved are the parents or guardians of your African American students in the learning of mathematics (Perrymond, 2011)?
- What kind of issues related to discipline have you seen with African American students in your classroom (Perrymond, 2011)?
- What guides your disciplining decisions or actions regarding African American students? Do they differ from practices to discipline other students (Perrymond, 2011)?
- How would you describe the differences between the academic grades of students of color and White students?
- Explain how you address the needs of students of color in your math class?
 - What are some of your instructional strategies that you feel facilitated the academic success of African American students in your mathematics class (Perrymond, 2011)?

Interview 3:

- Where does your daily motivation come from to do your job (Perrymond, 2011)?
- How do you explain the significance of your work? Why teach at a Title I school (Perrymond, 2011)?
- What is something you have done or experienced in your educational career that you are most proud?
- What makes a great teacher?
 - To what do you most attribute your success in teaching African American mathematics (Perrymond, 2011)?
 - What has changed about you as a result of your success in teaching mathematics to a subgroup typically described as low performing

- (Perrymond, 2011)?
 - What you believe is most significant in the teaching of mathematics to African American students (Perrymond, 2011)?
- What is your the biggest challenge when it comes to teaching math to your students of color? How did you overcome them (Perrymond, 2011)?
- The issue of race in the education system is one that many times goes unspoken. Think back to a time in your educational career where racial issues affected you. Describe what happened. What was that like for you?
 - What, if anything, did you do about the situation?
 - How would you describe your role in regards to the issue of race in our current educational system?
 - How, if so, has this influenced your teaching philosophy or style?
 - What role do you play when racial issues arise in your classroom?
- What are your views on standardized tests?
 - What do you feel are the biggest contributors to the difference between standardized test scores of students in high poverty neighborhoods vs. students in more affluent neighborhoods?
- Where do you see yourself going in the future in regards to education (Perrymond, 2011)?
- Imagine you had to the power to make any changes classroom structure. Explain what changes you would make?
- Imagine you had to the power to make any changes to our educational system, explain what changes you would make.
- Knowing what you know now, what advice about equity, would you give yourself as a first year teacher?
 - What lessons have you learned from your success in teaching African American students mathematics successfully that you could share with other teachers of African American students (Perrymond, 2011)?
- Is there anything else you would like to add?

Reference

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