

# DEVELOPING TEACHERS ABILITY TO PROVIDE CULTURALLY RELEVANT PEDAGOGY

A Dissertation

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## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this study was to understand the nature of developing teachers' ability to provide Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP). This study places the teacher as the catalyst for change in African American students' experience. Based on an examination of past research, this study turned to CRP as the instructional shift needed to impact the educational experience for African American students and a professional learning community (PLC) as the vehicle for developing eight teachers' ability to provide CRP in their classrooms. The study was guided by the following research question: What is the nature of developing teachers ability to provide culturally relevant pedagogy? The artifacts analyzed for this study included an initial survey, seven PLC discussion sessions, and seven post-surveys per participant.

The findings from the data analysis revealed seven themes including: (1) Ways Teachers Were Successful From the Beginning, (2) The Benefits and Barriers, (3) Personal Self Awareness, (4) Understanding Students Experiences, (5) Relating to Students Experiences, (6) Effectiveness of the Professional Learning Community, and (7) Implementing Culturally Relevant Pedagogy. It is evident from this study that the nature of developing and providing CRP is both industrious and reciprocal. Teachers need to be guided through development on personal self-awareness work and implementation of CRP both in their pre-service training and through ongoing development.

## CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION

The history of education in America is complicated and has changed throughout the course of American history. America is supposed to play a key role in the promotion of both the economic and social well-being of the citizenry (Antikainen, 2010). Access to quality education is a key component to this well-being. Yet, American education is made of segregated access points that society grant to individuals based on race, class, and gender (Paris & Alim, 2017). Researchers vary on their definitions of education in America and on what education's purpose has been and should be. There is a progression of thought over the centuries that American education should be more than a mechanism to divide classes and more than the transmission of knowledge to build a workforce. American education rather should include cultural and social reform to meet the needs of and lay the foundation for economic and social success for all subgroups of learners (Paris & Alim, 2017). America is also a capitalist country, a fact that suggests the extreme inequalities in education, wealth, and the economy cannot be fixed (Block, 2018). Block (2018) argues that it is not only possible to eliminate poverty and inequality but that this can be done without undermining prosperity. Education in America can be inclusive, equitable and the gateway to prosperity for all members of the citizenry, but changes must be made.

Since, the admission of African Americans into the American education system, African Americans have been the have-nots, continuously denied equitable access to the system through inequitable funding, inequitable policies, and the racist structural and pedagogical design of American education (Ladson-Billings, 2009). The design of the American education system is built for the dominant White majority culture (Pitre, 2014). Rather than being inclusive, the education system is dehumanizing for marginalized groups in standards, curriculum, instruction,



assessment and professional development of its teaching force (Boston & Warren, 2017; Kohli et al., 2017). After acknowledging that the American education system was not built for and has fundamentally failed African American students, the significant next step becomes implementing meaningful mechanisms to right this wrong. Thus, the purpose of this study was to add to the body of research and to contribute to the ongoing conversation in order to right this wrong.

### **Systematic Racism as the Impediment to Educational Progress**

The underperformance of urban students and the failure of urban schools has been thoroughly studied (see, e.g., Kozol, 2005; Neckerman, 2007; Wiggan & Watson, 2016). Kailin (1994) wrote “despite increasing numbers of children of color in our schools, due to a myriad of factors associated with racial and class oppression, there are fewer “success” stories today than there were 20 years ago, with African American and Hispanic children having a greater chance of going to prison than college” (p. 169-170). After five decades of concerted research, policy and funding improvement efforts the American coined “achievement gap” remains consistent and African Americans continue to lack equitable access to the American education system (Almond, 2012; Jeynes, 2015; Pitre, 2014).

Kohli et al. (2017) stated that over the past decade in K-12 education research there have been relatively few articles published that place racism at the center of educational inequity and the lack of access that marginalized groups face within the American education system. Given how deeply ingrained and insidious race and racism are within American society, it is imperative that they be central to conversations about the educational experiences of African American children (DeCuir & Dixon, 2004). Critical race theory (CRT) becomes necessary in the research conversation on African American access to the American education system. CRT pushes back against the upheld norm in America that the White experience is the normative and “right”

experience. It grounds research in the validity of the minority experience being legitimized, prioritized and valued in standards, curriculum, instruction, assessment and teacher training (Closson, 2010; DeCuir & Dixon, 2004). Just as race and racism cannot be left out of the conversation if meaningful change is to occur, cultural capital can also not be left out. It is important to examine this conversation through the lens of Bourdieu's cultural capital theory. Cultural capital theory points to dominant class values, in American society the White middle class values, creating a form of social currency that is pervasive in all educational and societal practices. Cultural capital theory paints schools as bias institutions that do not reward sheer effort and skill but are rather pushing assimilation to satisfy bias (Bass 2014; Davis & Rizk, 2017). Currently marginalized students cannot access cultural capital in America unless they assimilate to the dominant white culture (Bass 2014; Davis & Rizk, 2017). Forced assimilation to gain equitable access to education is a racist practice and a wrong that must be righted if the system hopes to create impactful change to the academic achievement and access for African American students.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of the nature of developing teachers' ability to provide Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP), as a result of participation in Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) within a Black boarding school setting. This study is similar to past studies in that it looks at CRP, as well as a Black boarding school setting, which have been studied through past research and will be outlined in the review of literature. This study is unique in that it focuses specifically on the professional development of teachers in CRP within a Black boarding school setting. This studies places teachers at the epicenter for change. The researcher has not found studies with this specific focus in the literature.

The study investigated eight teachers who volunteered to participate in the study. These teachers were all employed at a Southern state-run public boarding school with a 95% African American student population. The teachers completed a survey before joining the PLC to establish their background, experience in the classroom and motivations for joining. The teachers collaborated in seven PLC's where the participants explored self, explored CRP and built community. During and after the PLC, the teachers reflected independently and collectively on the impact that their learnings and the CRP practices had in their classrooms. Teacher self-identity exploration is considered a best practice in anti-racism development (Kailin, 1994). The emotional work of developing teachers has also been considered a best practice in the educational community for enhancing school cultural and performance (Demerath, 2018). After each PLC meeting, the teachers completed a survey to determine the effectiveness of the PLC and plan for the next meeting. The topics of the PLC meetings were flexible and responsive to the needs and suggestions of the teachers in their explorations of CRP. Topics included information on identity, culture, power, systemic racism, systems of oppression, internalized racism, and CRP.

### **A Historical Review of The American Education System**

To understand the systemic racism that exists within the American education system, it is important to have a foundational grasp of how the American education system in its current form came to be. The foundational classist inequities gave birth to the current majoritarian system that demands assimilation.

**The structure of the system.** Education in America progressed from European roots. From the inspection of America up to the American Revolution, American colonists used the structural and pedagogical practices of the European education system. After the American

Revolution, education was centered around either the English scheme in the South, the church-state schooling in the Middle colonies or the town-school system created in New England. These three models of education were focused on class in a manner of aristocratic democracy.

Aristocratic democracy put the power in the hands of a small privileged ruling class of citizens (Falconer, 2017). From 1760 to 1830 during the rise of nationalism education became focused on national development and stability addressing the aims of the elite social aristocracy. From the 1830s to the 1870s education went through revival and reform. Foreign immigration entered as a factor; the urban population expanded adding a new type of American citizen. This is when the free public school system with its basis in taxation came to be. Public schools had a slow shifting from ecclesiastical to secular, and curriculum expanded to include natural sciences.

Boarding and private schools arose as a means for additional middle- and upper-class education. After the Civil War, high school emerged as a key part of the public-school system followed by universities. This was the last key step in democratization for secondary education (Falconer, 2017). In all of these phases of the American education system the white majoritarian population was the focus. Minority groups were not involved because they were not considered part of the citizenry.

**The purpose of the system.** The purpose of American education has progressed over time and shifted from a transmission of knowledge for the purposes of creating a workforce , to creating more informed voters, to an avenue for individual expression and social reform.

Lawrence Cremin is recognized as one of the leading historians on education research (Dyer, 1990). Based on his research of the early purposes of education in America he presented a definition of education calling it, “(d)eliberate, systematic and sustained effort to transmit or evoke knowledge, attitudes, values, skills and sensibilities as well as any learning that results

from that effort, direct or indirect, intended or unintended” (Dyer, 1990, p.238). American education started initially with the transmission of knowledge through reading and writing instruction. These two skills were valued among the social classes as a means of establishing hierarchy, noting who was educated and who was not. Education was not meant to consider minorities, the interests of students nor society but rather to transmit skills, create a workforce and make clear a distinction between classes (Dyer, 1990). During the eighteenth century, access to education was granted along lines of gender but it continued to have access distinction between white males and minority groups. White women, for example, could receive literacy instruction, but were not permitted to learn to write. Women’s studies mostly focused on religion, whereas men could learn about secular aspects of the world as well (Monaghan, 1991). Education remained a means to give access to one racial and gender group and deny it to another.

As education progressed, disagreements arose over what the purpose of education should be beyond the transmission of knowledge, and how minority groups should be included. Just prior to the twentieth century, compulsory public education was introduced in America. Public education was a means of preparing a workforce after the onset of rapid immigration (Garte, 2017). For the first half of the twentieth century education America was synonymous with workforce creation. It was John Dewey (1916) that challenge the notion that the public education of the masses should be solely focused on creating factory workers. He argued that education should connect to the learner’s goals and interests. He argued that the purpose of education should be to create a more engaged citizenry which would support true democracy in America. This became known as the rise of progressive education (Garte, 2017). In, *Miseducation of the Negro*, Woodson (1933) advances Dewey’s work further, noting that education must be relevant to the learner. Students’ backgrounds, interests, needs and schemas

that should be the drivers of the standards, curriculum, instruction and assessment. Woodson (1933) felt that children should be seen as more than passive receivers of knowledge and rather drivers of their own learning. He also felt that children's cultural background needed to be a key component in the learning process (Snyder, 2015). Woodson (1933) pointed out that if traditional education does not include culture then it does not prepare children for the world that they face outside of the classroom. Schools that do not focus on culture lag behind society and do not address the globalization or mass communication era that America has entered (Snyder, 2015). As the notion of schools being institutions to push social progress expanded so did the notion that school should be looked at as arenas to address racial injustice. Concerns arose about the differences in Black and White schools and in black students being educated by all white teachers surrounding students in a deficit mindset (Garte, 2017). It is against this backdrop and within this historical context that the specific experience of the African American within the American education system must be explored.

**The African American experience with the system.** African Americans were not granted access to the American education system at its inception. During that time, African Americans were enslaved and considered property rather a part of the citizenry (Garte, 2017). As America allowed African Americans access to the American education system, there was no strategic preparation of the system nor the teaching workforce to properly receive and meet the needs of this subgroup of students (Garte, 2017). The American education system looked at African Americans as coming into education from a place of deficit. Snyder (2015) wrote:

Negro education, Woodson charged, clung to a defunct 'machine method' based on the misguided assumption that education is merely a process of imparting information. It failed to inspire black students and did not bring their minds to harmony with their lived experiences. Theories of Negro inferiority were "drilled" into black pupils in virtually every classroom they entered. And the more education blacks received, the more "estranged from the masses" they became. (p.273)

Garte (2017) argues that the traditional American schooling system is one that lacks relevance to African American students. The system was built on European roots and does not address what is meaningful for the lives of African Americans, making them “othered” in the system. It is because of this that in the period prior to desegregation the Black schools put an emphasis on nurturing and uplifting the Black race. Those involved in the Black power movement felt that traditional American education and white America teachers placed a deficit mindset upon African American students in a manner that discouraged them from reaching their potential (Garte, 2017). This feeling led to the rise of small Afrocentric schools as well as African American boarding schools that removed the Eurocentric bias from the curriculum as options for African American students. These schools showed success both academically and social-emotionally for African American students (Bass, 2014; Delpit, 1988; Garte, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 2009).

This period of affirming the identity of African Americans within the American education system was short lived. In 1983, a Nation at Risk was released by the U.S Department of Education. A Nation at Risk shown light on data that argued America children were falling far behind children from other industrialized nations (Garte, 2017). This pushed a “back to basics” reform, moving education, particularly for African Americans, away from progressive and self-affirming education and toward rigorous attention to math and English instruction, accountability and high stakes testing. This both defined and created a gap between classes and races in America. Delpit (1995) argued that this focus not only furthered the deficit mindset for African American students but pushed a “foreign” instruction on them (Garte, 2017). Garte (2017) referenced Delpit (1995) writing:

She argued that the problem for poor students of color was that their classroom and the unstated values of their teachers reflected a White middle-class social context that was usually foreign to them. Without direction the children were lost, and rather than adapting to their needs, teachers gave these students labels of deficiency. (p.11)

In 2016, there were 7.2 million students who attended urban public schools nationally, 78% of whom were students of color. In 2016, 82% of the teaching population was white. According to accreditation agencies, teacher education programs are failing to reach diverse standards for educating students. White teachers tend to blame minority students for a lack of success according to their standards rather than acknowledging the systemic inequities that exist within American society (Bennett et. al, 2012). Since 1995, Delpit has argued for culturally relevant instruction as a better means to educate African American children and a means for being able to address the mismatch in the teacher population and the students that they education. She noted that it is important that students' culture, from values to language, be actively a part of student's instruction (Garte, 2017). Currently, there are no agreed-upon best pedagogical or structural practices to meet the needs of the African American subgroup.

### **Theoretical Approaches**

Critical Race Theory (1976) and Bourdieu's Capitals Theory (1977) assist in explaining, how the history of America education has led to the current gap in achievement for African Americans as well as provides points of analysis for the systemic racism that exists within the American education system. Both theoretical approaches will be used in the study as they are integral to providing pathways to solutions for ensuring African Americans have equitable access to the American education system.

**Critical race theory.** Critical Race Theory (CRT, 1976) is imperative in the exploration of the African American experience within the American Education system. CRT was created in the mid-1970s by Derrick Bell and Alan Freeman in response to the slow process of change to



racial reform within the American society (Taylor et. al, 2016). Taylor et al. (2016), write, “the significance of race need not be overly debated in this paper. But, as Toni Morrison argues, race is always already present in every social configuration of our lives” (p. 17). As a framework, CRT identifies racism as endemic within American society as well as a mechanism for the creation of oppression (Stovall, 2005). CRT is meaningful to academic conversations because of both the value and meaning that the American society places on whiteness (Taylor et al., 2016). “CRT becomes an important intellectual and social tool for deconstruction, reconstruction, and construction: deconstruction of oppressive structures and discourses, reconstruction of human agency, and construction of equitable and socially just relations of power” (Taylor et al., 2016, p. 17). Since the early 1970’s in legal studies, 1995 in educational research, CRT has guided the conversation on the persistence of racism and inequities for people of color within American society and has been a significant part of the discourse in the discussion of the achievement gap (Closson, 2010; DeCuir & Dixon, 2004). CRT challenges the accepted notion that the white experience is the normative one. This theory grounds the educational conversation toward the minority experience and against the current state of forced cultural assimilation (Closson, 2010; DeCuir & Dixon, 2004).

This theory is important to understanding African Americans’ experience within the American education system as it allows for race to be explored as a driving factor for oppression, while simultaneously pressing the importance of creating alternatives to the realities of racism in present society. While CRT is rooted in the legal discipline, it is interdisciplinary and incorporates legal, social science, humanities, and educational scholarship. This theoretical lens attempts to include the ideas, factual accounts and culture of people of color into the fabric of American ideology (Stovall, 2005). CRT stands on five pillars. The first is that racism is a

normal part of American society. The second pillar is that experiential knowledge through such avenues as storytelling are important forms of methodology to employ to better understand the lived experiences of the oppressed. The third pillar is that a critique must be done on liberalism because racism requires a sweeping change that liberalism currently has no mechanism to produce. The fourth pillar is that it has been whites rather than minorities that have benefitted the most from civil rights legislation (Taylor et al., 2016).

CRT's first pillar is helpful in examining the African American experience in education. It changes the narrative that the American education system is failing African Americans and instead introduces the concept that the American education system is not failing, but rather is doing what it was designed to do at its inception: exclude marginalized student groups. The concept of CRT's third pillar is that it will take a fundamental dismantling and rebuilding of the American education system for it to serve marginalized groups, particularly African American students. Researchers must therefore look for systems, structures, and pedagogical practices that completely reimagine instruction for African American students.

As a research methodology, CRT puts race and racism at the foreground, challenges the traditional paradigms that explain experiences of people of color, offers transformative solutions to racial, gender and class subordination and uses interdisciplinary knowledge to better explain the experiences of students of color (Stovall, 2005). Critical Race Methodology (1980) became the mechanism of study for CRT education focus research and puts race and racism in the foreground of all aspects of academic research. Critical Race Methodology encompasses six distinct elements. The first is the interlinking of race and racism with other forms of marginalization (Taylor et al, 2016). While race may be at the foreground, gender and class also

play large roles within the conversation surrounding oppressed people and often these groups are intertwined. The second is that there is a clear challenge to the dominant ideology.

Research must be done that exposes and deconstructs the ideas, practices and policies of “color-blind” and “race-neutral” (Stovall, 2005). The third is that there must be a commitment to social justice. Mechanism must be sought after that both eliminate racism, sexism and poverty while at the same time building in ways to empower minorities. The fourth is that experiential knowledge is valid knowledge, which validates this type of learning as a strength that draws on the lived experiences of individuals. Methods such as storytelling, family histories, biographies, scenarios, parables and narrative should be considered valid in research (Taylor et al, 2016). The fifth is that transdisciplinary perspectives, from ethnic studies, to sociology, to law, must be considered when working with this research. This methodology points to there being immense strength in the multiple perspective (Taylor et al, 2016). The sixth element is that research should aid multicultural movements in education who fight against white students’ behavior as the accepted and acceptable norm (Stovall, 2005).

CRT is making room for research targeted toward another way for minorities in education, a way that focuses on African Americans rather than placing them as an asterisk in the system not designed for them. Specifically referencing CRT in the education field, Stovall (2005) writes, “A consensus has developed among many scholars of color in education in that “the histories, cultures, and languages of students of color have been devalued, misinterpreted, or omitted from formal educational settings” (p. 95). Additionally, there is a belief by many scholars of color that there is an unwillingness on the part of those that are white to recognize their privilege and the impact that that privilege has on people of color. McIntosh (1990) notes that white people not only do not acknowledge this privilege but are in fact taught to ignore it,

because if they acknowledge it, they must be held accountable. It does not benefit the majoritized race for minoritized populations to be pushing the issues of pervasive societal racism and systemic equity in education. Thus, it is important for minority scholars to push even harder.

Closson (1990) writes:

Our society is structured with systemic racism. When we accept racism as endemic, we accept that everyone is infected with a disease to greater or lesser degrees. Whites suffer from White privilege; Blacks suffer from internalized racism. To claim to be color-blind allows the disease to spread unchecked. (p. 279)

CRT pushes to check this disease, introducing ideas surrounding multicultural education, neighborhood schools, boarding school models and culturally relevant pedagogy as various means to address the dominant culture and systematic racism in education.

**Bourdieu's cultural capitals theory.** Pierre Bourdieu's (1977) concept of cultural capital is a well-known theory in educational and sociological research and is also key to this research. Bourdieu originally introduced this concept in the 1960's and 1970's (Bass, 2014). Davies and Rizk (2017) note, "cultural capital is a core concept, coined by an important thinker, aimed at understanding persisting inequalities in schooling, a problem that has long been central to educational research" (p. 349). In Bourdieu's studies of educational stratification, he stated that culture capital is gained through the familiarity with the individual and the dominant class. Cultural advantages in turn became a form of "capital" as schools reward students for aligning their actions with that of the dominant class. Bourdieu portrayed schools as being segments of society that generated inequality by imposing the "dominant class" cultural values on all students creating a form of social currency in educational practices, manners and "know-how's" (Davies & Rizk, 2017). Davies and Rizk (2017) write, "Schools claimed to be neutral institutions, innocently rewarding sheer effort and cognitive skill in open competitions, while in reality their valuations were arbitrary, and class biased" (p. 337). Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital has

become one explanation for the disparities between schools and the perceived differences in students' performance. It also can explain why African Americans can only be successful within the American education system if they assimilate to the dominant white culture.

Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital also lends itself to the idea that advantaged classes are always going to put into place strategies for themselves to maintain their social position (Bass, 2014). One such advantage is through education. Bass (2014) notes

One way that those of a higher socioeconomic status distinguish and secure the future of their posterity is to provide their children a higher quality education. People of higher socioeconomic status know the power of knowledge and education, and thus provide it to their children. These parents are, in a sense, ensuring their future by endowing their children with human and education capital. (p. 21)

A portion of cultural capital becomes educational capital. Educational capital links to parents social, financial and educational capabilities to guide their children through the education process. It also points to parental assistance and advocacy abilities toward their children's educations. The capital that is created for a student by their parents is passed down from generation to generation. This makes the gap in academic achievement socioeconomic status generational (Bass, 2014).

Bass (2014) pushes her exploration of Bourdieu's cultural capital and in turn educational capital to make an argument for boarding schools as a proposed structural solution. Bass theorizes that the boarding school option helps to counteract the effect of generational capital by essential leveling the playing field. Boarding schools create calculated deposits into children regardless of their socio-economic status. These deposits provide students with the quality educational support that they need (Bass, 2014).

### **Question Guiding the Study**

Many structural and pedagogical suggestions have endeavored to impact the perceived gap in achievement between African American students and students of other races. This study places teacher development at the core to obtain a better educational experience for African American students. CRP allows African American students to be taken into consideration in teaching and learning and curriculum and assessment. It is important to understand how to most effectively develop teachers in CRP. As such, the following research question guided the progression of the study:

- What is the nature of developing teachers' ability to provide culturally relevant pedagogy?

## **CHAPTER II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

This section reviews the current research that holds relevance to the study and grounds in the declaration that marginalized groups have been failed by the American education system. Kohli et. al (2017), cited that over the last decade a small subfield of notable studies has emerged that point to the mechanisms of racialization that have plagued marginalized students of color within the American education system. Yet, much more research is needed in this area (Kohli et. al, 2017). “Given the powerful evidence of racism in K-12 education policy and practice, it is surprisingly that there is but a small body of research that unpacks the everyday racism of schools” (Kohli et al., 2017, pp. 191-192). In order to unpack the systemic racism within the American education system this review of literature examined the history of the education system and the African American experience within the system. It summarizes key theoretical lens, Critical Race Theory (1976) and Bourdieu’s Cultural Capital Theory (1977), to aid in the research analysis. Further, the perceived gap in achievement, and its contributing factors were unpacked. Finally, this review of literature examined the current body of work that has been done on both structural and pedagogical practices cited in research as effective in educating African American children in a racist system built, consciously or subconsciously, to oppress rather than to educate them.

### **The Perceived Gap in Achievement**

Grounded with the historical background and theoretical approaches, the unique nature and systemically racist nature of the perceived gap in academic achievement can be examined. The achievement gap has been a driving force in the deficient thinking of African American children as well as a driving focus for solutions for African Americans within the American Education system (Ladson-Billings, 2009). The black and white achievement gap within the

American education system has been a focus area for the study of sustainable solutions for the African American student population (Jeynes, 2015).

Based on the 2013 data from the National Center for Educational Statistics, the educational achievement gap is defined as follows, “the achievement gap occurs when one group of students outperforms another group, and the difference in average scores for the two group is statistically significant” (Pitre, 2015, p. 209). Young et al. (2005), affirms that students’ educational success in America is dependent upon the amount that they learn academically and their performance on mandated assessments. Research notes that students who embrace an analytical style of learning, which are the learners that process information orally or through textbooks, are most successful within the American education system. This learning style mimics the cultural style of European American children (Jeynes, 2015; Pitre, 2015; Young et al., 2005). Pitre (2015) adds that disparities in academic achievement in America are measured through test scores, grade points averages, college acceptance rates and graduation rates. All of these forms of assessment are set forth by the White majoritarian population. Since the 1960’s the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) affirms that a racial gap in achievement does exist according to the above metrics. These disparities are most notable between white and non-white students, particularly students that are classified as African American or urban (Pitre, 2014).

According to Louisiana’s 8th grade reading NAEP data from 2017, African American students were performing an average of 27 points lower on the assessment than their white counterparts. This performance gap was consistent with comparison data from 1998 which stated a 26-point gap between the two racial groups. Students who were eligible for free/reduced lunch also had a notable lower average score than their more affluent counterparts by an average of 24



points in 2017 and 20 points in 1998 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). Chloewa et. al (2012), add to these concerning statistics that, African Americans are two times more likely to drop out of the traditional school system than their white peers as well as more likely to be suspended or expelled from school (Chloewa et al., 2012). With the consistent assessment disparities between racial and socio-economic classes the question of what is not working within the system must be addressed.

There have been several initiatives on the part of the federal government to try to address and reduce this gap. These initiatives include, both Head Start and the School lunch program (Jeynes, 2015). The federal government's Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), later reauthorized as No Child Left Behind is another one of these initiatives. ESEA was specifically authorized to address this gap in academic achievement. Unfortunately, little successful change has occurred since 1965 with any federal government initiatives (Almond, 2012). "Although social scientists acknowledge that an achievement gap exists, they differ widely in their suggestions about how to bridge the gap and it remains immutably wide even to this day" (Jeynes, 2015, p. 525). After nearly five decades and despite the widespread and focused research on the achievement gap there remains no consensus among the research community on either its origins or its solution (Jeynes, 2015). It is important to understand the factors that research has linked to contributing to the gap in achievement as well as the suggestions that have been attempted to impact the gap in achievement.

### **Factors Affecting and Contributing to the Achievement Gap**

The research on the perceived gap in achievement between white majority and non-white minority students is noted to come from both in school and out of school factors (Almond, 2012; Jeynes, 2015; Pitre, 2014). The research also notes that there is an impact from contributing

factors that include but are not limited to, the education debt (Brown, 2014; Kohli et. al, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Pitre, 2014), systemic racism and color blindness (Kohli et. al, 2017), the desegregation of schools (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Pitre, 2014), as well as concepts surrounding meaningful learning, academic rigor and culturally relevant instruction (Kohli et. al, 2017; Pitre, 2014).

**General in and out of school factors.** In school factors that research has identified as having an impact on the gap in achievement include teacher quality, rigor of curriculum, student engagement, and a culture of high expectations in the school system, individual schools and by the classroom teacher (Pitre, 2014). In school factors also include poor teacher training programs, lack of appreciation for black culture and incompetent administration (Almond, 2012). Some scholars include such out of school factors as, lack of reading time at home, lack of parental involvement, student apathy, lack of adequate healthcare and lack of affordable housing (Almond, 2012). Scholars have centered a concentrated amount of research on low socio-economic status being a key contributing out of school factor. Those who support this concept believe that the simple fix to the problem is to equalize school funding across the board (Jeynes, 2015).

In recent years, researchers have narrowed down contributing factors to the achievement gap, so that they do not play into the deficit mindset rhetoric (Pitre, 2014). Out of school factors that research has narrowed in more recent years include lack of proper nutrition, parental availability and student mobility. Educational scholars have begun to discount poverty, number of parents in the home and parental participation, rejecting the notion that these factors have an impact on the perceived gap in achievement. These factors create a deficit mindset about a subset of students. This is akin to victim blaming (Pitre, 2014). These factors put the blame on

the families and communities rather than on the system that is supposed to be educating all children, in all situations and from all backgrounds.

Pitre (2014) points to the work of Linda Darling-Hammond (2010) who shifts the narrative from an achievement gap to an opportunity gap. Darling-Hammond (2010) notes that there are three factors that contribute to the gap not in achievement but in opportunity. These factors include desegregation of schools, unequal access to qualified teachers and a lack of access for students to quality curriculum materials. She notes that there are factors within the American education system that make the playing field not level and opportunity to a quality education not equal for every racial subgroup (Pitre, 2014).

**The education debt.** The idea that the achievement gap is in fact an opportunity gap lends to the thought that there is an education debt present in the American education system and that this debt is a factor in the perceived gap in achievement. It also lends to the notion that there is systematic racism within our education system. Pitre (2015) argues that there are unfair and unequal practices within the American education system that fundamentally deny minorities equal access to high quality education (Pitre, 2015). Ladson-Billings (2006) coined the concept of “education debt”. She states that the narrative cannot be that students and communities are to blame for this underachievement as the concept of the achievement gap would imply. Rather it is necessary to shift the thinking that it is the responsibility of the American education system to ensure that all its citizens can receive fair and equal education, which since the inception of the system it has not. Thus, the American education system must acknowledge and pay this debt to the marginalized groups being denied (Pitre, 2014). The work of Brown (2014) echoes this notion stating, that the dominant rhetoric of blaming students of color and their families for their

lack of academic success is unacceptable. It is necessary to blame the policies and structures that are systemically failing students of color (Kohli et. al, 2017).

It is important in teacher education courses to train teachers to dismantle systems and structures that have created oppression with the education system for minority students. Training teachers to be actively anti-racist is currently not occurring on a wide scale in our education system (Pitre, 2014). The point that is often failed to be addressed by educators at large is that the gap in achievement due to educational inequity between white and minorities students. This gap in achievement is not an accident. It is the culmination of hundreds of years of both oppressive and dehumanizing policies and legislation. These policies were deliberately created to uphold both power and privilege structures while simultaneously reducing economic and educational opportunities for minority students (Mayfield & Garrison-Wade, 2015). It is important to the discourse that educators understand the differences between the achievement gap, the opportunity gap and the education debt and understand the active role they must play in shifting the narrative about African American achievement within the American education system. This understanding should be a part of teacher development.

**The “new racism.”** The discussion on the opportunity gap and the education debt lend support to the concept of “new racism”. “New racism” has become a contributing factor cited in research for the perceived gap in achievement. Kohli et. al (2017) state that schooling in America currently is and has been driven by racialization and racism. Kohli et. al (2017) analyzed the work of Judge Robert L. Carter (1968), stating that during *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954 that racial segregation was just a symptom of the underlying disease in American society, the underlying disease being the maintenance of white superiority. *Brown versus Board* tried to make an impact on a symptom but did nothing to eradicate the disease of

racism. White superiority lives within various United States institutions, education being a notable one (Kohli et. al, 2017). Kohli et. al (2017) further stated, “From Americanization schools and Native American boarding schools that spanned the 19th and much of the 20th century, to socialization of inferiority in segregated schools serving African Americans and Mexican American, students of Color have been subjected to institutionalized condition that contradict their interest and their humanity” (Kohli et. al, 2017, p. 184). Kohli et. al (2017) argue that the overt racism from the pre-Brown v. Board era has been replaced with a more subtle racism. This type of racism lives in policies, practices and mindsets that both normalized and accept racial inequalities and maintain white privilege (Kohli et. al, 2017). It is this new racism that continues to deny African Americans access to equal education within the American education system. This new racism is a prominent factor causing African Americans to be unable to meet success in the current education system. The system must not only confront this new racism but find structural and pedagogical solutions that counteract it.

**Color blind racism.** In addition to the concept of new racism, color blind racism also emerges as a general theme that impacts the perceived gap in achievement. Many educators in America claim to be “colorblind” (Kohli et al, 2017). The concept of color blindness perpetuates racist ideologies and practices. By allowing the concept of racism to be reduced to the most extreme individuals, systematic racism becomes devalued within the conversation. This allows for the conversation of racist practices within the American education system to ignore racist practices such as; tracking, mandated majoritarian curriculum, punitive disciplinary practices, and student surveillance (Kohli et al, 2017). Kohli et al (2017) furthers this discussion writing:

Masked as equity discourse, colorblind ideology is actually a form of racism that erases the contemporary, lived and systemic oppression of communities of Color. The literature that names colorblindness as racism, as manifested in school policies such as punishment and curriculum, shifts the analyses from individualizing explanations of

inequity back to institutionally driven, systematic patterns of displacement, dehumanization, and criminalization. (p. 190)

Color blindness has been found to be perpetuated in general by white teachers in schools (Kohli et al, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 2006). When white teachers claim to be colorblind and resist the awareness of systemic racism in schools, they perpetuate systemic racism. “Being “good” at teaching content but having no structural or social analysis for inequity was a prevalent blind spot of White teachers who maintained racism in K-12 schools” (Kohli et al., 2017, p. 192). This maintenance of educators perpetuating racism in the name of being politically correct must be addressed in order to move the education of the African American subgroup forward.

**Re-segregation of schools.** Linda-Darling Hammond (2010) argues that one of the greatest factors affecting the African American students is the re-segregation of the American school system. She argues that the progress made from the Civil Right Movement allowed minority students to have access to quality schools outside of their neighborhoods, in addition to the quality schools that existed within the community. However, since the Civil Rights era these opportunities have consistently decline and been denied to students. By 2000, 71% of African American students were in majority low income schools, putting them in worse educational situations than before the Civil Rights era. This re-segregation has led to the re-segregation of high quality-well prepared teachers, high quality curriculum, and the re-segregation of materials and funds (Pitre, 2014). This unequal treatment can look different in different settings.

Pitre (2014), notes an experience where one school was segregated within the school building. The White and Asian students were place in the more rigorous and engaging courses with higher quality curriculum. African American students and other minorities were “locked out” of these opportunities, instead placed in teacher centered classes, driven by meaningless

worksheets seeking compliance rather than education. The minority students receive the message in this school that something is wrong with them and that they need to be fixed (Pitre, 2014). Seemingly, the American education system has come to a place of “containing the problem”. Students who do not fall into the ideals of the White majoritarian society are given an education as required by the law, but the education is not a quality one that would set them up for success in post-secondary school. The system thus becomes designed to devalue, dehumanize and delegitimize the African American student and perpetuate cycles of poverty. African American students need to be given equal access to quality curriculum and teachers, equal funding, and to be legitimized within the content, instruction and assessment.

**Academic rigor, meaningful learning, and cultural connections.** A contributing factor to the perceived achievement gap is a lack of relevance for African American students in the curriculum, instruction and assessment provided in the American education system (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Pitre, 2014). Learning is something that must be relevant to students. Students need opportunities to use the knowledge and skills that they are acquiring in class in real life situations. This is currently not consistently occurring for African American students (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Pitre, 2014). African Americans are denied access to quality content as well as denied a belief in their academic potential. They are given subpar content and instruction because there is a belief that they cannot achieve academically at high levels within the current educational structure (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Pitre, 2014). Students need to see themselves and their cultures in what they are learning. Students need to be able to incorporate learned knowledge into their own cultural schema. The focus should be on building on what students know and can do rather than on the deficit mindset of what students do

not know and what they cannot do (Pitre, 2014). There is a need for pedagogical shifts that better support the needs of the African American learner.

### **Suggestions to Close the Perceived Gap in Achievement**

Just as there are no agreed upon contributing factors to the achievement gap there are also no agreed upon universal solutions that provide African American equal access to the American education system (Pitre, 2014). Research, statistics, and the persistence of the perceived gap in achievement have shown that what has been done in the past has been ineffective (Young et al., 2005, Pitre, 2014, Kohli et al., 2017). It is important for this review of literature to understand what research suggestions has been attempted in the past and what aspects of research need future consideration.

**The suggestion of no child left behind and race to the top.** Policies like “No Child Left Behind” and “Race to the Top” infused more funding into systems of low performing schools (Kohli et al., 2017). These solutions address surface level funding inequity but fail to address the systemic racism. Researchers argue that while federal policies like No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top were meant to provide more access for minority students to quality education these policies have in fact done the opposite. Research studies further argue that these practices that focus on high stakes standardized testing has in fact increase racism within the American education system. Corporate driven testing practices reinforce racial hierarchies. As schools are an extension of the community, when school leaders are forced to push an agenda of testing, they are unable to focus on the needs of the students and the community overall (Kohli et. al, 2017).

**The suggestion of charter schools.** For the purposes of this review of literature charter schools will be defined as non-sectarian publicly funded choice schools that operate under the



supervision of a specified local education agency. Charter schools have been marketed as innovative alternative educational models to traditional district schools (Almond, 2011). Overall, Black families have been attracted more to charter schools over the last two decades. Almond (2011) notes, “Nationally, Black students are choosing charter schools nearly double the rate that they are choosing traditional public schools” (p.394). According to research the primary reason that parents choose to enroll their students into charter schools was with the hope of improving their student’s quality of education, which included small class sizes, better teachers, teacher familiarity and a sense of belongs. The strongest driver for Black parents specifically is a better discipline environment rather than academic drivers (Almond, 2011). There is currently mixed research by state on whether charter schools are academically performing better or traditional public schools. There is a consensus that performance is varied, and that charter school performance is not consistent (Almond, 2011). Overall Black charter schools are currently performing slightly worse overall than their traditional public-school counterpart (Almond, 2011). One group of researchers note that charter schools are in fact further pushing the re-segregation of schools as charter schools tend to have a higher population of a single minority groups and typically are built on deficit mindset thinking (Almond, 2011).

New Orleans has the largest percent of charter school market share (Almond, 2011). Researchers argue that one of the results of major charter school influxes in areas like Post-Katrina New Orleans has been the rise of “White-dominated corporate charters” and the marginalization of “Black school leaders”. Charter schools and their application of alternative certification teacher programs allows for the displacement of veteran black teachers and the installation of White teachers that are typically unable to culturally relate to the students that they

served. Many of these charter schools further punish black students for not conforming to the majoritarian white culture through punitive disciplinary practices (Kohli et. al, 2017).

**The suggestion of multicultural education.** Multicultural education has been one of the pedagogical suggestions from researchers to ensure a higher quality of education for students of color. It is also the first to open the American education system to the importance of culture (Kohli, 2017). McGee Bank & Bank (1995) were two of the original authors of the framework of multicultural education. One of the original intents of multicultural education was to combat the effects of racism on minority students. One of the guiding tenets of multicultural education is that all students can benefit from information about individuals with related economic, racial, social and cultural backgrounds (Bean-Folkes & Ellison, 2018). Multicultural education has often becoming a highlighting of heroes and holidays from diverse cultures (Kohli, 2017). Multicultural education currently is not being done in a way that legitimizes the marginalized groups (McGee Bank & Bank, 1995). Some scholars believe that multicultural education research has become a mechanism to silence the discussions of racist power structures and inequity in the education system. When multiculturalism is combined with an ideology of “color-blindness” a reaffirming of racism is the result (McGee Bank & Bank, 1995).

**The suggestion of anti-racism education.** Anti-racism education aligns the existing state curriculum that the student is receiving with the process of deconstructing the pervasive nature of racism in schools and in society. This type of education is one that helps to make education relevant for the African American learner. Many researchers argue Anti-racism education is the next evolution of Multicultural education (Asante, 1991, Gay, 2010; King, 2005; Wiggan & Watson, 2016).

In its current form multicultural education teaches children the basics of another culture with non-White heroes and important holidays. A group of researchers argue that the education needed is one that allows students to critically address the role that race, and racism play in society (Wiggin & Watson, 2016). Anti-racism education pushes back on the majoritarian white structure of the education system. Wiggin & Watson (2016) argue that, “School reify White, European, middle-class ethos. This underserved students and marginalized minorities. The idea of an “anti-racist” curriculum, however, responds to this marginalization” (p. 771). In current US high school students will graduate with a knowledge of European history and North American White cultural ethos but will be ignorant to the history and cultural ethos of minority groups. “What is masked as a standardized “American” curriculum is, more accurately, a white curriculum” (Wiggin & Watson, 2016, p. 771). Some researchers note that marginalized groups must be added into the fabric of the curriculum and instruction of the American education system for the system to begin to operate from a place of equity. This group of researchers note that Anti-Racism education alone does not accomplish this (Wiggin & Watson, 2016).

**The suggestion of African-centered education.** Dei (1996) makes the case for African-Centered education as a best practice for education African American students. It is espoused as a way to implement an Anti-Racism education. African centered education involves shifting the narrative to place Africa at the center of education for African American students (Wiggin & Watson, 2016). This form of education puts the African American perspective at the center of the curriculum rather than on the margins. Further, this type of education allows the learner to have a clear critique of the traditional White majoritarian system of education (Wiggin & Watson, 2016). This form of education allows African American students to see that their cultural and heritage are not only valued in American society but are at the center of their

learning (Wiggan & Watson). This system does not however allow for the fact that systemic racism remains ever present in every other facade of American society (Kohli et. al, 2017).

### **Structural Solutions to Address the Gap in Achievement for African Americans**

There is no agreed universally agreed upon structural best practices for African American students (Cox, 2017; Kohli et. al, 2017). In the scholarly research of structural solutions that address the education of African American students in the American education system, boarding school are expressed as a proposed structural solution from various scholars. Boarding school for African American students were first developed in the 1800 and 1900's while schools were still segregated (Bass, 2014). All black boarding schools, like Pineywoods in Mississippi became safe havens for the education of African American youth. These schools proved to be highly successful for their students, producing powerful African American leaders for decades, among them, Andrew Young, Tom Dent, Ellis Marsalis, Wynton Marsalis, and Mickey Patterson (Bass, 2014). Schools of this kind were largely eliminated during the desegregation process. Black boarding school went from numbering 80-100 schools to 4. The 4 schools that were left after the desegregation process were: The Laurinburg Institute in North Carolina, The Pine Forge Academy in Pennsylvania, Piney Woods in Mississippi and Redemption Christian Academy in New York (Bass, 2014). Charles Beady former President of Piney Woods is quoted saying, "Integration led to the feeling that because we were free to attend schools of our choice, those schools that supported us when we had no choice were no longer needed" (Bass, 2014, p. 19).

The second generation of black boarding schools began in 1998 with the onset of the Schools of Education Evolution and Development (SEED). The first SEED school opened in Washington, DC, in 1998. The SEED schools were founded by two ivy league graduates under the premise that students perform better when their basic needs are met in a nurturing

environment. SEED's mission is to provide an intensive college preparatory education for urban students whose home situation might otherwise impede them for achieving their potential. It is important to note that SEED's first graduating class in 2004 had a 100% college acceptance rate with students gaining admission to such prestigious schools as Columbia, Duke, Stanford, Howard and Georgetown. SEED has since opened another school of this kind in Maryland (Bass, 2014). Aside from SEED, school like The Mitchell in Oregon have also surfaced as school for African American students. This school takes students from urban and suburban settings placing them in a rural setting so that they can have a second chance at education. This school was specifically created for students who were on the verge of giving up' students who had been involved in the juvenile justice system, in gangs or who were running away from home (Bass, 2014). The African American Preparatory School (TAPS), has a similar mission and structure to The Mitchell school. These institutions differ in that TAPS is an all-black boarding school. TAPS has 275 students ages 12-20. Student seek out TAPS either because they have not experienced success in a typical day school or because they felt as though they needed a culturally uplifting experience. TAPS is known for its academic rigor; 85% of TAPS graduates go on to colleges and universities (Alexander-Snow, 2010). The North Carolina School of Science and Mathematics also joins SEED and The Mitchell School as other African American boarding school options (Bass, 2014). In conjunction with these schools' African American students also have the option to attend the elite historically white boarding schools. All of these options have success metrics for African American students, but all of these options also come with challenges.

**Support of the boarding school model.** Educational capital links to parents social, financial and educational capabilities to guide their children through the education process. It

also points to parent assistance and advocacy abilities toward their children's educations. The capital that is created for a student by their parents is passed down from generation to generation. This makes socioeconomic status something that is generational (Bass, 2014). Bass (2014) uses Bourdieu's theoretical framework of capital to support boarding school options. Bass (2014) theorizes that the boarding school option helps to counteract the effect of generational capital by essential leveling the playing field. Boarding schools create calculated deposits into children regardless of their socio-economic status. These deposits provide students with the quality educational support that they need.

In addition to educational capital, boarding schools offer students access to social capital. Cox (2017) defines this as, "Access to resource-rich social ties varies by social position" (Cox, 2017, p. 48). Bass (2014) supports this notion and point to the impact of social capital on student's success. He defines social capital by claiming, "Social capital represents the social networks of friends associates, and connections that an individual can benefit from having" (Bass, 2014, p.22). These individuals benefit them by making it easier for them to obtain opportunities. Through her study of "pipeline programs" that help prepare and push low-income African American youth into elite boarding schools, Cox points to social capital as a key to success. Cox uses the Launch program as well as her research on the Better Chance and Posse Foundation to make the case for black boarding schools and black pipeline programs as keys to social capital. Cox notes that boarding school provide low income African American students the opportunity to yield higher returns based on their new exposure to higher-level social networks (Cox, 2017). Cox (2017) and Bass (2014) both note that upward mobility cannot occur for African Americans without increased deposits into their social capital.

“Cultural capital is defined as a form of value associated with culturally authorized tastes, consumption patterns, attributes, skills and awards” (Bass, 2014, p. 22). Like social capital, Bourdieu’s cultural capital helps to put people on the “right” path. Cultural capital allows for people to be in the same spaces and to have had shared experiences. Boarding schools can level the playing field through providing students with shared experiences (Bass, 2014).

In Alexander-Snow’s research article, *The Piney Woods School: An Exploration of Historically Black Boarding School Experience in Shaping Students Achievement, Cultural Esteem and Collegiate Integration*, she expanded on the definition of cultural capital, pointing out the importance of also being rich in knowledge of heritage. She uses Piney Woods school as an example of how black boarding schools specifically help their students increase their cultural capital. One of the missions of the schools is to produce graduates that are empowered and who have healthy cultural esteem and self- concepts. Students are held to high academic and social standards and are expected daily to learn about the richness of their heritage (Alexander- Snow, 2010). Alexander- Snow quotes a student from the study writing, “The Piney Woods School taught be self-pride. I think there is a whole lot we can do, and it made me realize that black people all have talents, that we are no “social misfits”. And that we should feel good about our talents. It helped me see that, and in seeing that helped me to feel good about being black” (Alexander-Snow, 2010, p. 336). Black boarding schools can fundamentally change the way that African American students view themselves in a society that continuously gives them negative stereotypes for self- identify. This unique benefit points to a notable additional form of cultural capital for students.

**Challenges to the boarding model.** While the case is made for boarding schools being a form of access to capital within the structure of the American education system, there are also challenges to the boarding school model for African Americans that deserve discussion.

“Residential schools are less common, though a highly effective alternative to traditional public schools, however, several barriers exist that must be overcome before they are more commonplace in the country” (Bass, 2014, p. 21). Boarding schools are not as common a form of education in America as they are in Europe. Many American families look down on sending their children away before colleges. It is challenging for policy makers to implement radically different ideas with consistent bureaucratic support. Another challenge comes in finances. Adding a residential component raises the cost of education a student exponentially (Bass, 2014).

Until the 1960s African American students were not admitted into the nation’s elite boarding schools. These institutions were historically places where the white elite sent their children in order to prepare them for the nation's most prestigious universities. Even upon African American students being allowed into these schools they make up a small fraction for the overall student body. Currently, only a few hundred students out of 1.6 million African Americans are enrolled in these elite boarding schools (The JBHE Foundation, 2003). African American students that attended elite predominantly white boarding schools experience a unique set of challenges. While these students are gaining educational and social capital they also begin to struggle with cultural identity. In her study, *Cohorts, “Siblings,” and Mentors: Organizational Structures and the Creation of Social Capital*, Cox (2017) notes that, “Upwardly mobile students of color in elite schools often encounter cultural norms and expectations that differ from their own, feel increasingly estranged from their families and friends back home, and feel marginalized or excluded by their more privileged peers” (p. 50). Students begin to feel



isolation and “otherness.” This can be challenging for students to adjust to and learn to navigate. Students in these situations can begin to feel that they do not fit in anywhere in manner that becomes emotional unhealthy. Cookson & Persell (1991) supports this point noting that African American students who attend elite boarding schools experience a physical, social and emotional distance from their families and peers. These students are caught between two cultures. They are no longer able to fully participate in their family and peer’s lifestyles nor are they able to be accepted fully into the upper-class culture. Cookson & Persell coin this experience as double marginalized and coins these students are “outsiders within” (Cookson & Persell, 1991).

All black boarding school tend to lose the majority cultural capital. In her study, Alexander-Snow (2010) focuses on the effects of African American students after they graduate from all black boarding schools and then go on to traditionally white colleges or universities. In a study of students who graduated from the African American Preparatory School, Alexander-Snow (2010) concluded that there was significant cultural, social and psychological relearning required by students upon entering a traditionally white college or university. As a result of their high school experience students often experience cultural isolation and social invisibility when entering predominantly white colleges or universities (Alexander-Snow, 2010). While students have a valuable high school experience that pushes them to success in a holistic manner, they also were not fully prepared for a post-high school experience.

### **Pedagogical and Instructional Aspects of Solutions to the Gap in Achievement**

Like structural suggestions there are no universally agreed upon pedagogical and instructional best practices for African American students (Aronson & Laughter, 2016). There are however consistent themes that arise in the research of providing African American students equal access to the American education system. The age of desegregation of the 1960 and 1970s

created the movement within the American education system to understand how to better educate diverse students who had historically been marginalized by the American education system (Aronson & Laughter, 2016). Terms and concepts such as culturally appropriate, culturally congruent, culturally responsive, and culturally relevant began to become a part of the discourse in education research (Aronson & Laughter, 2016). Aronson & Laughter (2016) write:

From this foundation, two primary stands, distinct from multicultural education, emerged in education research. One focused on teacher practice, as embodied in the work of Geneva Gay (1975, 1980, 2002, 2010, 2013) and *culturally relevant teaching*. The second focused on teacher posture and paradigm, as expressed in the work of Gloria-Ladson Billings (1994, 1995a, 1995b, 2006, 2014) and *culturally relevant pedagogy*.” (p.163)

In trying to understand how to teach marginalized populations and incorporate cultural in instruction as a best practice certain overarching best themes emerge in research. These themes include a feeling of belongingness, humanizing education, teaching in a culture of love, teaching intentional distribution of power, the integration of culture in curriculum and the immense impact of the classroom teacher. These themes will be explored below.

**Feelings of belongingness.** Drawing from past research, sense of belonging will be defined as, “The extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others especially teachers and other adults in the school social environment” (Boston & Warren, 2017, p. 27). Current research suggests that for African American students to perform academically they need to have a feeling of belongingness toward their learning environment (Boston & Warren, 2017). Students who are in minority groups, particularly marginalized minority groups often question their value within the mainstream academic setting (Boston & Warren, 2017). This questioning of value can lead to student’s anxiety and depression associated with education and ultimately dropping out of the academic environment (Boston & Warren, 2017). If teachers lack an understanding about their students’ unique urban

needs this can lead to students feeling disconnected all together from the school setting. The research associated with students need to belong, makes clear the significance of the teacher's role in creating an environment for and promoting African American students belonging within the educational environment (Boston & Warren, 2017). It is important to note here the impact of the teacher. It is not policy makers nor administrations that have the greatest input on students' feelings of belonging but rather the individual classroom teachers.

**Teaching in a culture of love.** A culture of love is rooted in the community cultural wealth framework and is defined as, a school culture that seeks to encourage both school personnel and families to take advantage of the resources that are already present in the lives of their students, families and communities (Bean-Folkes & Ellison, 2018). Bean-Folkes & Ellison's (2018) notion of teaching in a culture is love is rooted in an asset-based mindset toward the African American student. Bean-Folks & Ellison (2018) write, "Based on Bourdieu's (1986) work around different forms of capital- specifically economic, social and cultural capital- and Yosso's (2005) community culture wealth framework, this work demonstrates how the notion of love draws on the rich resources of Black students as its true capital" (Bean-Folkes & Ellison, 2018, p.214). Yosso's (2005) work posits that African American students come into the educational setting with six forms of wealth; aspirational, familial, linguistic, navigational, social and resistant (Bean-Folkes & Ellis, 2018). It is important that teachers have a fundamental mindset of wanting to affirm their students and create community as their aim when implementing this culture.

**Humanizing education.** Humanizing education for students calls forth three themes; agitating students politically, arousing a critical curiosity in students, and inspiring students to have a transformative self-learning experience and a socially transformative learning experience

(Camangian, 2015). The goal of this learning is to disrupt student's dehumanization, which is a key factor of students current learning. The goal is also to engage students on their own learning journey toward humanization with a clear focus on why their culture matters in their learning (Camanigan, 2015). For this type of education to work there is a need for liberator leadership by teachers in classrooms. This type of leadership pushes honesty about the historical contradictions that have created the current oppressive social conditions. This type of leadership further calls for students to discuss actions that they can take to bring about transformative systematic change (Camanigan, 2015). This type of leadership is one of empowerments on the part of teachers to students. The goal of this learning for students is to push them to be the drivers of social change. Camanigan (2015) writes, "A practice of many social movements, is that political agitation personalized social issues, triggering emotional responses, and ultimately unsettles and motivates students toward transformative self and social change" (p. 432).

**Intentional distribution of power.** Research has noted that one of the keys to African American instruction and classroom experience is the intentional distribution of power. This intentional distribution means helping Black children and their families understand concepts of power and power structures with the American society. This is in part because African Americans tend to be the people with the least amount of systematic power (Mayfield & Garrison-Wade, 2015). It is further suggested that within the context of teaching African American students about power it must be done through familial type support structures, high expectations on the part of the teachers and the creation of a warm and welcoming classroom environment (Mayfield & Garrison-Wade, 2015). In addition to teaching students about power it was also noted as important by researchers that teachers create classroom environments where

they are sharing power distribution with students, assisting to put them in the driver's seat of their own learning (Mayfield & Garrison-Wade, 2015).

**Integration of culture into curriculum.** The work of Gloria Ladson-Billings (2000) as well as Pines and Hilliard (1990), placed a clear importance on the need for African American students to interact with culturally relevant curriculum (Mayfield & Garrison-Wade, 2015).

Wiggin & Watson (2016), echo this point noting that school curriculum is something that must be addressed in addition to pedagogy. They note the need for an anti-racism education as the curricular material (Wiggin & Watson, 2016). In English for example, Bean-Folkes & Ellison (2018) note that it is through teachers and students being able to select relevant and compelling literature to study that is diverse in structure and language that students are able to actually see themselves in English classes (Bean-Folkes & Ellison, 2018). “African American students benefit from opportunities to make choices about how they learn, especially concerning the type of literature they read. It is important for students to see characters like themselves, and to read about places and people from their own cultural backgrounds and perspective” (Bean-Folkes & Ellison, 2018, p. 220).

**The impact of the teacher.** Researchers often point to teachers as being one of the key factors in students being able to have equal access to the American education system (Wiggin & Watson, 2016). There is a cultural disconnect in America between the overall teaching population and the students that they are serving. In 2015, 82% of the US teaching force was White. The racial and culture mismatch that this created between teachers and students was a source of many problems, among them students home cultures are not being validated within the American school system (Wiggin & Watson, 2016). In education programs teachers are often taught to only focus on one American narrative, the White majoritarian narrative. This is

isolating for the African American learning as they do not see their teachers valuing their culture and lived experience within their classroom setting. This focus on the majoritarian narrative ensures that minorities do not have a place in the system (Wiggin & Watson, 2016).

“Given these negative statistics, it is very easy to focus solely on the failures of teachers of African American students. Yet some teachers are highly effective in helping African American students achieve and thrive in school” (Cholewa et al., 2012, p. 251). Dee (2003) and Dillihunt & Tyler (2006) found that when teachers and students share a common culture, there is an unspoken context of understanding that contributes to academic achievement” (Wiggin & Watson, 2016, p. 769). McGrady & Reynolds (2013) found that students show academic gains when they receive high quality instruction from a culturally responsive teacher.

Research affirms that the teachers who are most successful with African American students are the teachers that both affirm the communication styles of African American students and affirm the cultural identifiers of African American students. Further research notes three themes that are effective in the teaching of African American students. These include:

1. Communalism as the process of teaching and learning as a joint effort between the student, teacher, family with embedded traditions and practices.
2. The belief that knowledge is something that is socially constructed, and that learning is focused on people.
3. The high stimulation of energetic action of the culture and the ability to address multiple concerns concurrently. (Cholewa et al., 2012)

It is perhaps most important to African American students that the teacher has established a caring relationship with them. It is through this that one of the guiding principles for instructing African Americans can be stated to be emotional connectedness. Emotional connectedness is the

sense of attachment and emotional bonding between the teacher and students and the teacher's ability to be transparent and join the classroom community. This can be achieved through listening intently to and empathizing with students, conveying a belief in student, holding students to high expectations, being able to reconnect disengaged students and consistently ensuring the individual success of each student (Chloewa et al., 2012).

Currently, teachers note that their preparation programs did not assist in them gaining a specific understanding of African American students who live in urban communities. Teachers were taught to understand and teach to the majority white population. Teachers note that they have misunderstandings about the social, psychological and cultural differences that their students possess and ultimately bring into their classrooms (Bean-Folkes & Ellison, 2018). Since it has been found through research that a cultural mismatch between teacher and student does in fact have a negative impact on students, it is important that all teachers become culturally responsive to the needs of their students (Wiggin & Watson, 2016).

### **Culturally Relevant Teaching and Pedagogy.**

“Schools cannot close opportunity/achievement gaps without culturally responsive practices. When the practices are implemented school wide, they can mitigate historically derived socioeconomic and educational disparities by empowering, rather than repressing the voices of all stakeholder” (Mayfield & Garrison-Wade, 2015, p. 15). Culturally relevant teaching is defined by using the cultural, knowledge, performance styles and prior experiences of students as frames of reference to craft and implement instruction to diverse students as a means of making the learning more relevant to their lived experiences and ultimately more effective (Gay, 2010). Culturally relevant pedagogy is defined as a pedagogy of education focused on

students learning, cultural competence and socio-political consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 1994).

The important pedagogical aspects of education referenced above as best practices in research are all presented in culturally relevant teaching and culturally relevant pedagogy. Culturally relevant pedagogy is built on the importance of student's feelings of belonging with the American education system and in students individualized classrooms (Boston & Warren, 2017). The ideals surrounding teaching in a culture of love are the foundations for teachers to be able to understand culturally relevant pedagogy and ultimately embrace culturally relevant teaching for African American students (Bean-Folkes & Ellis, 2018). Teaching frameworks like Culturally Relevant Pedagogy push teachers to affirm the very existence of the students they teach by affirming that their experiences, identity and culture have relevance in the classroom (Bean-Folkes & Ellison). Researchers note empowerment counseling groups and culturally relevant teaching as two ways to teach students about intentional distribution of power within the structure of the American school (Mayfield & Garrison-Wade, 2015).

Research also notes that students being able to access culturally relevant curriculum is a key component of culturally relevant pedagogy (Wiggin & Watson, 2016). Finally, Chloewa et al. (2012) stated that African American students need instruction to be culturally relevant and for there to be an "ethic of care" as a guiding element within the classroom setting. It is an important observation in this review of literature that culturally relevant teaching and pedagogy encompass the best practices of research. While culturally relevant teaching practices may not seem revolutionary in nature, they are radical for traditional school that, in general, fail to address the overarching influence of institutionalized racism within American education. Schools have mostly been addressing the gap in achievement through solely technical strategies, ignoring the



underlying values and beliefs of the classroom teachers. This is both naive and “culturally criminal” (Mayfield & Garrison-Wade, 2015).

**The background and philosophy of culturally relevant pedagogy .** The federal government has attempted to assist in rectifying the educational inequity that drives the perceived gap in achievement. In this conversation, little attention has been given to the need to completely dismantle the bias ideological structures that are embedded in schools program and that have become a part of educator’s systems of belief (Mayfield & Garrison-Wade, 2015).

Founded by Geneva Gay, culturally relevant teaching was the evolution from multicultural education that emerged in the 1970s. Culturally relevant practices became a marriage of multicultural education to socio political and historical context. (Mayfield & Garrison-Wade, 2015). “In culturally responsive practices the promotion of equality and differences meet the imperatives of antiracist education to suppress and eradicate racism in the environment” (Mayfield & Garrison-Wade, 2015, p. 3). Gloria Ladson-Billings is one of the most notable researchers of culturally relevant pedagogy (McCarther & Davis, 2017). Ladson-Billings (1995) set out to prove that African American students, who are growing up and being educated in urban settings, have the ability excel within the American education system if the right curriculum and teaching are available (McCarther & Davis, 2017). Ladson-Billings (2014) advocated for the focus of African American education to be on student achievement and their learning rather than on their behavior management. She advocates for the inclusion of cultural competence for African American student rather than cultural majoritarian assimilation. She puts forth the notion of helping students create a sociopolitical consciousness instead of giving students school-based tasks to solve that have no real-world connections (McCarther & Davis, 2017).

**Theories and practices of culturally relevant pedagogy.** It is important to take a deeper dive into the three tenets of culturally relevant pedagogy to understand how this pedagogy has reshape how America thinks about the education of African American students and how African American students can be better educated within the American education system.

***The first tenet of CRP- academic achievement.*** In reference to how the American education measures success of students, Borrero et al. (2018) write:

A single metric-an Academic Performance index (API) score that supposedly measures an individual's school's progress as determined by standardized testing-is being used to define academic success. Further, an individual student's score on these very same state mandated tests is being viewed as the sole identifier of academic achievement. And, for students of Color, the comparison of this metric to that of Caucasian [*sic*] students defines their supposed school failure. (p.23)

Academic achievement is the first tenet of culturally relevant pedagogy for this very reason.

Academic achievement is the metric that students on consistently measured against in every facade of the American education system. This tenet is critical because of the prevalence of deficit and dependent mindsets surrounding the capability of the African American learners.

Hammond (2015) writes, “Many culturally and linguistically diverse students are “dependent learners” who don’t get adequate support to facilitate their cognitive growth. Consequently, they are not able to activate their own neuroplasticity (p. 14). Often teachers see students background and past standardized test scores and assume a deficit thinking of what students cannot do or are not ready to do before ever meeting the students. As such teachers start to contribute to the perceived gap in achievement. Teachers at times scaffold tasks for students rather than letting them attempt them and allowing them to struggle. Teachers carry most of the cognitive load in the instruction rather than temporarily releasing some of it to the students. The teacher assumes the role of leader of the classrooms allowing the student to be passive receivers waiting for knowledge rather than allowing students to practice their cognitive strategies of inquiry and

critical thinking to help lead themselves instructionally. Students are thus stuck not retaining information rather than increasing their information processing and creating long-term memory (Hammond, 2015). In order to move African American students to independent learners a shift must occur in the instructional focus. Students cannot only be taught the “low-level basics”. They must be introduced to the challenging content, allowed the productive struggle and practice the higher order thinking skills. This must occur while, reviewing of the basic conceptual understanding that students may be behind in. This requires shift in both mindset and instruction.

***The second tenet of CRP-cultural competence.*** The second tenet of culturally relevant pedagogy is students being able to develop cultural competence. Students need to know that their culture is one that is valued in the curriculum, instruction and assessment process. It is suggested that teachers learn more about their students’ cultures, backgrounds and communities and find ways to positively incorporate these cultural assets into students learning experiences (Borrero et al., 2018). This cultural understanding and exploration do take additional and focused effort on the part of the teachers. This can look like teachers creating projects that real world issues in student’s community or allowing students to code switch in classrooms to explain their points or selecting novels that better mirror students’ backgrounds.

A level of value needs also be place on this type of learning by school leaders and school systems so that it can be a valued priority for teachers. One vital aspect of crafting cultural competencies in teaching African American students on a school and systems level is in understanding cultural archetypes. There are two specific archetypes that significantly impact classroom instruction: individualism and collectivism. Roughly twenty percent of the world population functions with an individualist culture while the other eighty percent functions within

a collectivist culture (Hammond, 2015). In America we tend to practice individualism, where the individual is more important than the community. America puts an emphasis in the education system of students becoming independent, learning how to take care of themselves, developing strong self-expression skills, and being competitive with one another with the goal of being the best (Hoffman, 2000). This is in opposition to the other eighty percent of the world. Hammond writes, “Turns out our brains are wired to favor a communal view of the world. Humans have always sought to be in community with each other because it enhanced our chances of survival. We shared workloads and resources. Over time, our brains became hardwired toward working and lively conservatively” (Hammond, 2015, p. 25). It is thus not surprising that African Americans do not well within the individualist culture of the American education system. In South Africa there is a belief called *ubuntu*, that embraces the ideal of “I am because we are.” Ubuntu places the good of the whole before the good of self and teaches students that everyone must play their part in supporting the whole community (Maphalala, 2012). In Western society, the concept of ubuntu is virtually unknown and is often dismissed as simplistic and outdated African thinking (Maphalala, 2012). This is an ideological disconnect in American educational system as it pertains to African American students. There are of course exceptions to this in moments and events but as an overall practice, American children are taught philosophies such as survival of the fittest, you are born to stand out, be all that you can be and that it is more important to come in first place than to simply play the game (Hoffman, 2000). For teachers to successfully reach African American students, their classrooms must embrace the ideal of ubuntu and create collectivist rather than individualist environments for stronger cultural consciousness within classrooms.

***The third tenet of CRP-sociopolitical consciousness.*** The third tenet of culturally relevant pedagogy is the teacher being able to help students develop a level of sociopolitical consciousness. In addition to creating a level of cultural competence with their students, it is also important that teachers introduce students to their power. It is important for students to understand that power is something they inwardly possess because power is something that is created. This notion of personal power helps students develop ownership and agency over their learning. Further, students should be made to understand that they have a responsibility to be agents of change in their own communities and in the world at large. They must also understand that their thoughts, feeling and opinions are valuable (Borreo et al., 2018). It is through this building of sociopolitical consciousness that students can interact with the reasons why what they are learning is so valuable. This is the tenet that connects the learning process to the greater world at large and allows students to see themselves as important American citizens.

Borreo et al. (2018) writes

Pedagogically, this critical consciousness is imperative for teachers and students alike, as the journey towards true learning in the classroom is shared. It also builds towards classrooms practices roots in the belief that all students exhibit cultural assets that are essential to their academic success and community connectedness (p. 24).

It is important to note that sociopolitical consciousness needs be equally important to teachers and students. Students can help teachers gain a sociopolitical consciousness just as much as teachers can help students. Teacher must at times allow students to co-lead the classroom environment with them as experts. Allowing students to lead can better help educators better understand their socioeconomic and sociopolitical realities (Kokka, 2015). Kokka (2015), provides an example of this in a math classroom. She notes that teachers, especially teachers that do not share the background of their students, can assign a community tour project where students take the teacher and class into their own communities designing the tour to highlight

areas of cultural importance and community strength (Kokka, 2015). Teacher and students understanding that having a sociopolitical consciousness and taking this approach to instruction is important. It is necessary to craft empowerment through this lens.

***Ready for rigor framework.*** Hammond (2015) suggested the Ready for Rigor Framework to operationalized culturally responsive pedagogy. Hammond states, “the Ready for Rigor framework lays out four separate practices areas that are interdependent. When the tools and strategies of each area are blended together, they create the social, emotional and cognitive conditions that allow students to more actively engage and take ownership of their learning process” (2015, p. 18). The four pieces of the ready for rigor framework include: Awareness, Learning Partnerships, Information Processing and Community Building. Hollins and Spencer (1990) noted that teachers tend to judge African American students based on white virtues. Teachers need to be more aware that they are not operating in a manner that is culturally inclusive and are not responding to student home cultures, thus making them feel alienated in the classroom (Hollins and Spencer, 1990). Hammond’s solution to this is through awareness. Awareness pushes the understanding and needed knowledge of the individual teacher. It covers of the levels of culture (surface, shallow and deep), the cultural archetypes of individualism and collectivism, understanding how the brain learns and is triggered by race and culture and understanding and acknowledge socio-political context. Ladson-Billings (2003) notes that one of the major issues facing African American students is a disconnect the students and their teachers. There is a demographic and culture mismatch that makes a successful instructional experience challenging. As fewer individuals of color are going into education most African American students are taught by white middle class females (Ladson-Billings, 2003). Fundamentally, current teachers are not prepared to teach the population of students present in

America and their mindset must expand on diversity and multicultural education (Hollins, 1999). Hammond 's (2015) solution to this is through learning partnerships. Learning Partnership push the ideals surrounding students and teacher relationships. This component pushes teachers to understand their role in reducing social-emotional stress from stereotypes, balancing levels of care while at the same time pushing students, cultivating positive mindsets and student self-efficacy as well as ownership. Information Processing pushes the teacher in their instruction. This component asks the teacher to provide students with appropriate challenges that will stimulate brain growth, connect new content to culturally relevant examples, provide students with authentic learning opportunities and cognitive routines. Creating a community of learners and learning environment pushes the teacher to create the appropriate learning space for students. Teachers are asked to create a safe that is both socially and intellectually safe as well as a space that gives students voice and agency. Further, teachers are asked within this component to create a communal culture that embraces rituals, routines and social justice (Hammond, 2015). If teachers are able to work within these four components, they will be able to create spaces that support culturally relevant teaching and pedagogy and create a significant impact for the African American learner from a dependent to an independent state.

***Challenges to culturally relevant teaching and pedagogy.*** “In the literature, we also see key studies that critique how well intended practices such as “anti-bias” teaching and “culturally relevant pedagogy” can work to affirm Whiteness in the education of students of Color when divorced from a clear analysis of racism” (Kohli et. al, 2017, p. 187). One cannot lay the blame on school practitioners for not embracing culturally relevant teaching practices as the literature remain vague on specific teaching and learning practices that produce culturally relevant instruction (Mayfield & Garrison-Wade, 2015). “Foster and her colleagues (2003) noted that

despite a growing body of literature justifying culturally responsive educational practices, it is often difficult to conceptualize what culturally responsive teachers are doing in the classroom” (Cholewa et al., 2012, p. 252).

## **Summary**

Kohli, Pizarro, and Nevarez (2017) write:

*The New Racism of K-12 Schools: Centering Critical Research on Racism*, they write “While organizing efforts by movement such as Black Lives Matter and responses to the hate-filled presidential campaign of President Donald Trump are heightening public discourse of racism, in the field of education much less attention is paid to mechanisms of racial oppression. Instead, conceptualization that allude to racial difference but are disconnected from structural analyses prevail. (p. 183)

It is imperative for the American education system to find structural and pedagogical solutions that dismantle racial oppression if the system is ever to be deemed equal. Researchers note that there is a clear need for professional development for educators where they can exam their own culture and biases and be developed on culture in a manner that allows them to undergo a deep exploration on their own beliefs (Mayfield & Garrison-Wade, 2015). Further, while there is relevant literature to establish a need for culturally responsive practices in schools to increase the achievement of African American students there is little research to measure just how effective these practices are in closing the opportunity gap (Mayfield & Garrison-Wade, 2015). Several elements emerge in literature as having potential to significantly affect the education of African American students within the American education system by providing them better access. Three that emerge in this review of literature are the impact of black boarding schools, the impact of culturally relevant teaching and pedagogy, and the impact of teacher preparation in the areas of anti-racism and culture. All three of these elements are the foundation for the study.



### **CHAPTER III. METHOD OF STUDY**

This study was conducted through a qualitative exploratory study design using a case study. This design model lends itself to the relational exploration needed to understand educators' experiences teaching an African American student population within the American education system, while learning and implementing CRP (Conover & Daiute, 2017). The main guiding question for this study was: What is the nature of developing teachers ability to provide culturally relevant pedagogy?

#### **The Research Design**

The study explored how teachers develop knowledge surrounding CRP in a professional learning community and how individual teachers apply the gained knowledge to affect student learning. This topic is of significance due to the chronic lack of access to the American education system for African Americans and seeks to propose solutions. The open-ended research sought to explore emerging themes as the study progressed (Conover & Daiute, 2017). Thus, a case study was employed.

Teachers' backgrounds, belief systems and schemas have a direct impact on their instruction. Developing CRP within teachers of African American students must be grounded in the individual teacher's background, cultural experiences, and journey of becoming an educator (Ladson-Billings, 2009). In order to achieve this grounding teachers engaged in a PLC allowing them to build trust and be immersed in self-awareness, anti-racist and PLC development. In the learning community teachers were confronted with topics on internal and institutionalized racism and understanding the foundations of Gay's (2010) culturally relevant teaching and Ladson-Billings's (2009) culturally relevant pedagogy.

This case study design followed the progression of teachers at a 95% Black state-run boarding school as they participated in a researcher-led PLC. Case study design allowed the teachers experiences with the material and instructional outcomes while in the learning community to be explored. Case study research is appropriate when dealing with complex real-life activities in great depth (Noor, 2008). This design model provided the examination needed of how CRP development impacts individual teachers' schemas and how this knowledge impacts actions influencing their instruction. Case study also allows for the exploration of how and why things happen (Yin, 1993). It is a strong method to use when understanding trainings within an organization as it allows for contextual relatives within a given environment and the explorations of the differences between what was planned and what occurred (Noor, 2008). The study of the teachers experiences in the PLC aimed to understand how the learning done within the PLC was implemented in the teachers classrooms.

Further, case study allows for the in-depth investigation of a real-life phenomenon within its environmental context using multiple sources of evidence (Yin, 1993). This design model promotes the implementation of non-random sampling, interviews and observations and the identification of patterns and relationships (Ridder, 2017). Case study design can capture rich accounts of the participants lived experiences and their experiences while participating in the study (Noor, 2008). The teacher's discussions and feedback within the PLC and classroom observations and reflections were explored during the study. It is important for the purposes of this study that the participants experiences, views of knowledge, their culture and cultural context were gathered as data and analyzed. This information was transcribed, coded and used to create and analyze themes.

## **The Research Setting**

For the purpose of the study, Pride Academy served as the research site. It was purposefully selected as it was an environment that sought to serve a majority African American student population that has previously experienced historical marginalization and disenfranchisement within the American education system.

**Pride Academy.** A majority Black, state-run boarding school, Pride was founded in March of 2011, opening with its first sixth grade class of 20 students in August of 2012 and graduating its first class in May of 2019. The school followed a traditional academic day with a unique residential program that sought to create a space that eliminate the obstacles so students could achieve what the world thought was impossible. Students received free education, housing, transportation, meals, and enriching activities Sunday-Friday in an innovative residential environment. In the school's enrollment model, students who were considered "at risk" because of prior academic performance, disciplinary issues, or living situation were recruited from across the southern state. The school embraced a slow growth model, growing one grade at a time. At the time of the study, grades seven through twelve were taught at Pride Academy. The school's academic success has varied over the years with a school performance scores of 76.9 in 2013, 87.5 in 2014, 79.1 in 2015, 63.7 in 2016, 63.7 in 2017 and 58.6 in 2018.

**Student population.** The school served 180 students who were 95% African American and 99% low-socioeconomic status. The student population was made up of 90 females and 90 males. All students and parents opted into this boarding school. The student population remained consistent overtime with one-hundred percent of students being labeled "at promise." This term is used at Pride Academy in contrast to "at risk," a term that signifies a deficit mindset.

At Pride Academy the enduring belief is that every student came to campus “at promise” for becoming the best version of themselves.

As a part of the admission process, students needed to have a reason to believe that the school could help them become successful. Students tended to come from home settings in which they are homeless, living in kinship care, have a guardian that is drug or alcohol addicted, or live in a community that is plagued with poverty, drugs or gang violence. Ninety-five percent of the students at Pride were considered to have experienced at least one major life trauma before attending the school. Additionally, as a part of the admission process, students had to be able to express a personal desire to be at the school. Students were put in family units of either fifteen girls or fifteen boys upon gaining admission. They were tracked within these family units until graduation. During their time at Pride, students pushed themselves to learn what they were passionate about and pursue those passions through focused exposure both in the school and residential programs. Pride embraced college and career equally, rather than believing one-hundred percent of students must go on to four-year colleges. Rather, Pride believed in one-hundred percent of students graduating with a concrete plan to pursue their personal passions with the needed skillsets and credentials to be able to start the day after graduation.

**Faculty and staff population.** The school and residential program had nine full time administrators, nineteen full time teachers, one full time school worker, two full time administrative assistants, five part time paraprofessionals, sixty-five part time residential mentors, and three part time security guards. Prides’ teaching population identified as ninety-five percent African American and five percent Caucasian. Forty-two percent of teachers identified as males and fifty-eight percent identify as females. Fifty-three percent of teachers were fully certified, and forty-seven percent were working toward certification.

The teaching population was more orientated to the mission of the school and had a varied level of teaching experience. Forty-eight percent of teachers had five or fewer years of teaching experience, twenty-six percent of teachers had between five and ten years of experience, and twenty-six percent of teachers had more than ten years of experience. Pride placed a higher value on mission orientation than years of classroom experience. Further, Pride believed in growing teaching talent through the residential mentor program. This philosophy appealed to individuals that had a deep understanding of mission, vision, behavior and culture and were invested in learning the pedagogy. There are currently three full time teachers who had taken this pathway to the classroom. One of these teachers received the highest scores in middle school during the 2018-2019 school year.

Teachers received general professional development thirty times on average throughout the school year. Teachers had three weeks of professional development prior to the start of the school year. There was ongoing full staff, content cluster based, and trauma informed professional development that occurs monthly throughout the school year. The professional development was largely focused on state mandates, instruction, and social-emotional progression of students. Teachers also received individualized coaching centered on content and instruction from the Principal, Assistant Principal and Instructional Specialist.

**Professional learning communities.** The CRP PLC that collaborated during the study added seven additional professional development interactions to the typical teacher's experience over a seven-month period. These interactions included PLCs and observations. The content of the PLC focused on anti-racist education and CRP, areas that had not been a focus for the school in the past. In the PLC the teachers confronted identity, culture, internal and institutionalized racism, systemic racism and oppression and understanding the foundations of Gay's (2010)

culturally relevant teaching and Ladson-Billings (2009) CRP. Teachers implemented practices from the learning community into their classrooms and were rated on their practice from the group co-authored culturally relevant teaching rubric. Teachers provided feedback and suggestions for materials that assisted them in being more culturally relevant in their teaching practices. Simultaneously, teachers were asked to reflect on how the black boarding school model does or does not aid in student learning and development.

### **The Research Participants**

An important aspect in school improvement is the culture of the school environment and a key factor in the development of the school culture is the development of the teachers. This study will focus on teacher's development, rooted in their self-identity, cultures, interactions with others and their experiences with power (Demerath, 2018).

**Recruitment and informed consent.** The researcher invited all full-time teachers at the selected school site to participate in the study. The school site was purposefully selected and by virtue of the school selection, the teachers become purposefully selected. Teachers were given two weeks to decide if they wanted to self-select into the study. Interested teachers had a one-on-one meeting with the researcher to explain the particulars of the study. School administration and teachers were asked to sign informed consent forms outlining and documenting the research process. Approval was obtained from the LSU's Institutional Review Board prior to beginning the study.

**Role of the participants.** A teaching population was selected to be studied because CRP in a student's educational experience is often facilitated by the teacher. Teachers are one of the strongest vehicles for change in a student's educational experience having large impacts on student's performance and school culture (Demerath, 2018; Milner & Lomotey, 2013).

Participants were active guides in the emerging research. Participants actively engaged putting forth topics that they believed needed to be discussed to further their understanding of CRP. Participants decided which practices they believed were the most meaningful to try to implement in their classrooms and proposed best practices for teacher development within the learning community. Participants provided feedback in co-authoring a rubric to rate CRP within the classroom setting.

**Role of the researcher.** The researcher was involved in the research experience with the participants. The researcher was also for the first half of the study the Principal at Pride Academy. The researcher crafted the materials for the PLC, the initial culturally relevant observation rubric, and the participant reflection materials. For this study the researcher participated as a complete participant in the study leading the PLC. This was intentional so that the researcher could build trust relational trust and confidence with the group (Demerath, 2018). The researcher also recorded data outside of the group through the use of video tapes of the PLC. Participants were made aware during the process of informed consent that the researcher would be acting as a full participant during the study, while transcribing and analyzing the videotapes post each session.

### **Data Sources**

This section of the study design focuses on the data collection sources and the explanation of ethical considerations. The data collected in the study includes a teacher pre-survey, PLC discussions recorded through audio visuals, participant reflections, teacher post-PLC surveys, teacher scores and feedback on the culturally relevant observation rubric and anecdotal notes.

**PLC discussion.** The PLC session discussions were captured using audio- and visual-recordings. This was easily accomplished because the entire school campus was monitored using surveillance equipment. The film was transcribed and served as a source to analyze the discussion that are occurring within the PLCs to understand emerging themes as well as the strategies of learning that were most impactful.

**Participant reflection.** Participant reflections were derived from the PLC sessions. Teachers were asked to complete a post PLC reflection using the researcher created post PLC feedback form. The feedback form was developed based on the work of Ladson-Billings (2009), Gay (2010), Delpit (2012) and Jordan-Irvine (2003). In total teachers completed 7 post PLC reflections on how the PLCs impacted their learning and teaching practices. This allowed the researcher to understand the impact of the learning experiences on the teacher's understandings and actions.

**Additional Data Sources.** 1) Teacher Pre self-Assessment- done prior to session one. The self-assessment was created based on the work of the researchers Ladson-Billings (2009), Gay (2010), Lisa Delpit (2012) and Jordan- Irvine (2003). 2) Teacher observation scores and feedback on a Culturally Relevant Rubric- The researcher in partnership with the teachers co-authored a Culturally Relevant Teaching Rubric based on the work of Ladson-Billings (2009), Gay (2010), Lisa Delpit (2012) and Jordan-Irvine (2003). Teachers had three observations each using the rubric. The observation feedback was discussed during the PLC's and used as evidence of teachers applying their learnings and to better understand how effectively teachers were implementing the tenets of CRP within their classrooms.



## **Data Analysis Procedures**

The research pulled themes from the transcription of participant discussion and the teacher reflection and feedback from the surveys. These themes were discussed and used to inform best practices for teacher learning and development surrounding CRP. Discussion of the analysis by data source will now be discussed.

**Transcribed PLC sessions and survey reflections.** The language; meaning word choice, phrases and references to the learning from the PLC by the teachers in of each data source examined in order to better understand the teacher's current depth of knowledge surrounding CRP as well as what strategies and learnings were helpful in pushing their understanding and ability. The researcher transcribed the audio-visual recordings from all PLCs and the teacher reflections sessions. After transcribing all sources, the researcher printed the transcriptions and read through the data sources and compared the transcriptions to the actual discourse three times each . The three readings allowed the researcher to highlight and filter salient information, codify that data and generate categories, themes, concepts and ultimately theories (Saldaña, 2016).

## CHAPTER IV. FINDINGS

In order to examine the Culturally Relevant Pedagogical (CRP) development of eight secondary teachers who educated African American students in a public boarding school environment in South Louisiana, a multi-case study of a professional learning community was done. The research focused on the participants' learning of, and growth and engagement with the CRP development experiences. The study examined the experiences of eight African American teachers during their participation in a professional learning community (PLC) and assessed the knowledge, skills, and practices that were most impactful on their teaching. The chapter begins with a brief description of the data collected for these findings. The discussion then moves to providing vignettes about the participants and concludes with an exploration of the seven recurring themes found during the data analysis.

### **Data Collected**

The artifacts being reviewed in these findings were the professional learning community (PLC) discussion sessions (transcribed), the teachers' Pre-PLC survey and the teachers' feedback surveys on the professional learning community.

**PLC discussions.** The data from the study include seven professional learning community sessions that each spanned between sixty minutes to one-hundred and fifty minutes. There are three-hundred and seventy-five minutes of recorded sessions from the professional learning communities that were transcribed. The average comment word count from the transcripts and surveys was one hundred and ten words per comment with a minimum of twenty words in a comment and a maximum of two hundred and twenty-six words in a comment.

**Pre-PLC survey.** Each of the participants was asked to complete a Pre-PLC survey, see Appendix A, to better understand backgrounds and motivations coming into the PLC. The survey

consisted of twelve questions. The first four questions centered on demographic information; number of years teaching, racial background, gender and identities most important to the participants. The next three questions included why participants choose to teach at a boarding school and the relationship forming they typically did with their students. The last five questions included participants understanding of culturally relevant pedagogy. The Pre-PLC surveys were used to assist in creating the first PLC experience and in describing the participants.

**Post-PLC surveys.** There were a total of seven post professional learning community surveys. These were entitled teacher Post PLC feedback questionnaires see Appendix B. The participants were given a survey at the end of each learner community. The surveys included eight questions aimed at understanding the effectiveness of the learning community, gauging participants understanding and implementation of CRP and understanding participants outstanding wonderings to assist in guiding future sessions. They survey responses were transcribed into the coding book and coded alongside the PLC transcripts.

**CRP rubric.** During the third PLC the researcher and the participants partnered to create a classroom observation rubric built around the tenets of CRP and inquiry instruction. Prior to PLC six, seven and eight participants worked with the rubric; doing a self-observation, an observation of a peer and the researcher did an observation of each of the participants. The participants commented on all three of these observation experiences during the PLC sessions. These comments were included and analyzed in the data transcriptions from the PLC's and coded into the code book.

### **Analysis of Data Sources**

Coding the data and creating themes was the method of analysis. The videos and surveys were all manually transcribed. After the transcriptions were complete, the researcher read of

each of transcribed data sources from the seven PLC sessions and surveys three times and highlighted for general emerging themes. The transcriptions were then group within a code book created by the research. The code book was created in excel, defined each of the codes, provided short and detailed descriptions, inclusion criteria, exclusion criteria, typical exemplars and atypical exemplars. The codebook had coding written into it that allowed for easier manipulation of the data sources. Subcategories were created for each code within the coding book. Mentions in the transcripts were coded and then grouped into the categories and in some instances, categories were combined. The categories were then condensed to create themes (Yin, 1993; Noor, 2008; Saldaña, 2016). This allowed the researcher to organize and reorganize codes into major and subcategories (Saldaña, 2016). The coding process allowed the researcher to make meaning of the data through linking themes and by undergoing an evocative analysis and interpretation process (Saldaña, 2016).

### **The CRP Teachers**

Understanding the background of these eight educators—who they are and where they came from—was a critical finding of the study. This section provides some demographic data on the overall participant make up and then discusses each participant individually. Each of the eight educators self-selected to participate in the professional learning community with the knowledge that it would be focused on practices of identity, culture, power, privilege, and culturally relevant pedagogy.

**Backgrounds of participants.** As previously mentioned, 100% of the teachers were African American, with 63% of the teachers being/identifying as male and 37% being/identifying as female. Ranging between 24 years old to 50 years old, 63% of the teachers were originally from the South Louisiana region and the other 37% of the teachers relocated to

the area from the Southern region of the United States. Twenty-five percent of the teachers grew up in a mid-socioeconomic status background with the remaining 75% growing up in a low-socioeconomic status background. Participants all had their Bachelors' degree, three of the participants additionally had their Masters' Degree and one participant was working on her PhD. Participants classroom experience ranged from first year teachers to a teacher with twelve years of classroom experience. All of the teachers had obtained their certification through an alternative pathway.

**Collins.** Collins was a first-year teacher who believed that race and socio-economic status were the most important identifiers to/for him. He identified as an African American male from a low socio-economic status background. He was raised by both of his parents. He started his teaching career as a residential mentor and transitioned into an English teacher and a track and field coach. He had not learned about CRP prior to the professional learning community. In PLC 6, participants engaged in conversation surrounding Culturally Relevant Curriculum. In referencing the 1619 Project, Collins noted a quote that impacted his passion for teaching African American students. During PLC 6, Collins shared, "Mine is the second one. 'The sugar that saturates the American diet has a barbaric history as the white gold that fueled slavery.' Yup that sugar one, yup." For Collins, a driving force in his work as an educator was shining light on the systemic oppression within the education system. Collins was able to attend and contribute the least to the PLCs due to being called away for other teaching duties.

**Dawson.** Dawson was a second-year teacher who believed that race, religion and family were the most important identifiers to/for him. He identified as an African American male from a low-level socio-economic status background. He was raised by his mother and grandfather. He started his teaching career as a residential mentor and then began to teach English and coach

basketball. He first learned about culturally relevant pedagogy growing up with his mother and grandfather. Dawson shared in the first professional learning community his Grandfather's message to him that he should live his life trying to be better and help others be better. He shared:

I had my Grandfather in my ear telling me to do my best, so I really had to redefine myself in college. I got through it though and had to learn to really just be myself and try to be the best person I can be, and I try to teach that. I want them to be the best people that they can be. Like in the story that we read about internalized racism- I wouldn't have walked away from talking to the other Black person because it was making the white people uncomfortable. I would have said "no ma'am I'm fine" and continued talking. (Dawson, PLC 1)

Dawson brings into each conversation a sense of servant leadership, pride toward the African American community and driving motivation to ensure betterment of himself and his students.

**James.** James was a first-year teacher who believed that race, religion and socio-economic status were the most important identifiers to/for her. She identified as an African American female from a mid-level socio-economic status background. She was raised by both of her parents. She taught science and was not involved in after school or residential activities. She had not truly been introduced to culturally relevant pedagogy until she participated in the study. James shared her drive toward culturally relevant pedagogy coming from her experiences with race in her own schooling. In PLC 1, she shared:

I came up on the Northside and by the time I started school we moved to the Westside which was mostly White. I remember cross burnings, that would happen and pretty much from K to fourth grade there were probably two of us in my grade level- myself and another black boy. It wasn't until they started integrating the schools in fourth grade that I started to see people that looked like us. That was when the confusion set in. I was starting to see more people that looked like me. I was excited to welcome them but then I started hearing, "You think you're white." "Why do you talk like that?" There was no conscious effort to get to know me. (James)

For James, the learning community space became important for her own personal and professional growth. She placed a high value for the sense of community she got from the learning community.

**Baker.** Baker was a third-year teacher who believed that race and socio-economic status were the most important identifiers to/for her. She identified as an African American female from a low-level socio-economic status background. She was raised by a single mother. She taught math and coached volleyball. She had not been introduced to culturally relevant pedagogy until she participated in the study. Baker' interest in culturally relevant pedagogy was driven by her desire to ensure that all of her students understood how to navigate the American education system as an African American student. Baker shared with the group her upbringing in PLC 2,

I didn't know what the steps were or what I needed to do but I knew I needed to take care of my mom. And from there I made little steps on how I would get there. I tell them the truth every time and I ask them when they see me- what do you think?

Baker was very committed throughout the entire PLC process to ensure opportunities for her students.

**Parker.** Parker was a ninth-year teacher who believed that faith, cultural identity and gender were the most important identifiers to/for her. She identified as an African American, Creole and Indian female from a low-level socio-economic status background . She was raised by both of her parents and is particularly close to her father who was her high school Principal. She taught English and in addition, tutored and coached volleyball. She learned about culturally relevant pedagogy initially from her parents who are both educators and learned more while pursuing her master's degree. Parker was very passionate throughout the learning

community about preparing her students for how to succeed in a world that was not built for them. During the PLC 2, Parker shared,

So, I tell my kids all the time I get that life happens but what I want my children to see is that regardless—Mommy went out and got it. Daddy went out and got it and there were many nights where I missed out on sleep because I was busting and grinding turning in papers—so I don't care that you are tired.

Parker deeply believes in teaching in a culture of love and holding her students accountable to expectations. She was consistent in wanting to ensure her students held a belief in themselves with grit instilled in them. Parker transitioned schools after PLC 4 and was not involved in the later PLCs.

**Morris.** Morris was a twelfth-year teacher who believed that race, socio-economic status and gender were the most important identifiers to/for him. He identified as an African American male from a low-level socio-economic status background. He was raised by his single mother. He taught science, was the Director of Athletics and coached football and track and field. He first learned about the concept of culturally relevant pedagogy, though not used by that name, when he did his staff introduction at the University of Phoenix. Morris was a heavy supporter of the impact of education because of what education had done for his own life. He explained to the community in PLC 2,

My tops three were socio-economic status, race and level of education. Level of education was the most meaningful for me because of my background- you know my momma didn't have a lot and I also think it is the thing that people pass judgement to me on.

Mr. Morris's education advocacy was evident in all of the PLC's.



**Richardson.** Richardson was a second-year teacher who believed that race and socio-economic were the most important identifiers to/for him. He identified as an African American male from a mid-level socio-economic status background. He was raised with both of his parents. He began his teaching career as a residential mentor. He taught social studies and coached track and field and football. He learned about culturally relevant pedagogy for the first time when he was in college from a professor. Richardson expressed his passion for the professional learning community coming through his relationship with his students. He shared,

I feel like I am closer to their age and also working on the residential side. I know them very intimately because I am legitimately with them from Sunday to Friday so legitimately, I am with them 90% of the time. And I have been with a lot of them since they started here. So I have that rapport and that relationship. (PLC 1)

Richardson had a strong relationship with a professor at his historically black university that was transformative for how he educated his African Americans students in America. He was consistently passionate about ensuring that his students had a culturally relevant experience in their learning.

**Wright.** Wright was a seventh-year teacher who believed gender, race and dialect were the most important identifiers to/for him. He identified as an African American male from a low-level socio-economic status background. He was raised by his mother. He taught social studies and in addition chaired the chess club. He learned about culturally relevant pedagogy for the first time at his historically black university. Wright was passionate about culturally relevant pedagogy partly because of the assumptions and judgements made on him in his life simply for being African American. When he explained the identities that were most important to him, he shared:

Race, Gender and Dialect. I answered being black for the thing I am most proud of and the thing that most people misjudge about me because I am associated with ignorant black people. People look at me and see a black man with dreads and judge my whole look. People make assumptions about me doing drugs and the kind of music I listen to (Wright, PLC 2).

Wright was a strong advocate, throughout the professional learning community, of breaking down assumptions, allowing students to see being Black as something positive and not allowing his students to use their situations as a crutch. Wright transitioned schools after PLC 4 and was not involved in the later PLCs.

### Themes

Seven themes emerged from the data in this study: the benefits and barriers of culturally relevant instruction; the importance of personal self-awareness; understanding students' experiences; relating to students' experiences; successful behaviors from the beginning; effectiveness of the professional learning community; and implementing culturally relevant pedagogy in the classroom. Table 1 presents the themes that emerged from the transcripts and surveys

Table 4.1. Summary of Themes

Themes	Transcripts	Survey	Total
Benefits and Barriers to Culturally Relevant Pedagogy	130	4	134
Personal Self Awareness	68	2	70
Understanding Students Experiences	36	0	36
Relating to Students Experiences	43	0	43
Successful behavior from the beginning	38	1	39
Effectiveness of the professional learning community	31	29	60
Implementing culturally relevant pedagogy in the classroom	38	1	39

Total	384	37	421
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### Successful behavior from the beginning.

A part of this professional learning community and subsequently this study was that teachers could opt into this type of learning. As such the teachers at least came in with a level of interest in this particular content. What became quickly apparent in the professional learning community was that some of the teachers had clear successes with culturally relevant pedagogy prior to the professional learning community particularly in the areas of getting to know their students and making the learning relevant to their lives. Table 2 presents the occurrences of coded discourse for this theme.

Table 4.2. Successful behaviors from the beginning

Theme	Transcripts	Survey	Total
Successful behaviors from the beginning	42	0	42

The teachers in the PLC expressed success with having the correct mindset, acknowledging their students' identity, knowing their students as people, and having a commitment teach their students' about their culture and surviving in the American education system.

The teachers in the PLC had a similar mindset centered on the importance of relationships. Although the teachers did not know the theories, concepts, and academic terminology to explain what they were doing, all of the teachers in the PLC spoke about many of the tenants of CRP. They made several mentions of how they spent time at the beginning of each year building relationships with their students and how they leveraged these relationships throughout the year. During PLC 1, Morris explained how he began the year with his students:

I do an activity—I think I shared it with you where they kind of tell me about themselves and it's not something that I share with the class except for the one question that asks what is your expectation of me and what's your goal for the class and we go around and kind of talk about that. But I try to use that activity to say like—"Oh Ms. Williamson since you want to be a doctor you need to learn x, y, z," and now I have something to

relate the lesson to. Sometimes it's challenging with the content, but you make it relate to them.

The other teachers in the learning community had similar reflections of creating intentional activities at the start of the school year to better get to know their students, their backgrounds, cultures, and experiences.

Another aspect of getting to know students that arose as important to the teachers was having their students set personal goals at the start of the year. It was important to the teachers that each student intentionally think about their future. Each teacher noted linking students' personal goals to their specific classes as a way to better help the students understand how the course was relevant in their lives.

The teachers also had several conversations on the importance of the intentionality with which teachers must continue to build and foster the relationship with their students throughout the year. Dawson noted that it is not just the beginning of the year activities for him, but in getting to know his students all year. He noted:

I try to put myself in their shoes a lot of the time and try to relate to them. For the most part when they are doing their work, I'm not talking about their work I talk about them personally. I am asking about their cousin or their brother or sister. I'm in middle school now so I have had most of their siblings. I just talk to them like a regular and we have a real talk everyone—it's random. (PLC 1)

Dawson shared this reflection and the other teacher quickly agreed with him that they prioritize making the time to get to know their students all year and make time to let their students get to know them.

Beyond getting to know students and relationship building, the teachers also noted a shared commitment to teaching their students about real life and about their roots, even if that meant not completely following the planned curriculum. There was a shared frustration for the teachers that while they all believed in the importance of teaching students about their cultures, they felt like they were

constantly fighting against the system to do so, particularly against the time needed to prepare for standardized testing. Morris reflected; we do need to be teaching real life, but it is so hard to get it in (PLC 1).

A general narrative arose from the discussions with the teachers that if you, as a teacher, are not at the point where you can demonstrate care toward your students and connect with them you are not yet ready as a teacher to focus on CRP because you are still working on connecting with your students. This would imply that as a prerequisite for CRP, teachers would need to first develop the skill of connecting with students.

### **Benefits and Barriers of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy**

As the participants learned more about Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP) in each of the professional learning communities they discussed the benefits and barriers of implementing CRP in their own classroom curriculum and instruction.

Table 4.3. Benefits and Barriers of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Themes	Transcripts	Survey	Total
Benefits	22	2	24
Barriers	108	2	110
Total	130	4	134

Overall, the theme of Benefits and Barriers of CRP had a total of 134 occurrences. The analysis of the transcripts and surveys showed 24 mentions of the benefits of implementing culturally relevant pedagogy into classrooms (See Table 3). There were over four times as many mentions of barriers and gaps with 110 mentions.

**Benefits.** The majority of mentions noted the importance of African American students being able to see themselves in the curriculum and during instruction. A clear benefit would be

“...how empowered brown and Black children could be if instruction was centered around things and people who reflect what they see every day” (Parker, PLC 1). Utilizing CRP also fosters classrooms and schools to be more inclusive of minority cultures and more actively anti-racist.

This benefit was articulately explained by Morris’s contribution:

The opportunities that we have to impact the education system if we can determine and show the effectiveness of incorporating more culturally relevant instruction is huge. I also gathered additional understanding of the biases racial undertones that impact our students and how the educational curriculum is developed. (PLC 1)

Further, CRP has direct benefits to educator growth. CRP is an important focus for preservice teachers as well as current teachers in their growth as individuals and educators. An important aspect of teaching others is first knowing who you are, having self-awareness and cultural awareness. This benefit was articulated by Dawson’s contribution:

I mean let’s be honest we are adults and we are just now talking about it and we wouldn’t be talking about it unless you had this PLC for us. I am mad that this hasn’t been a part of my knowledge and conversations before this (PLC 7).

Dawson additionally expressed the benefits of being able to learn from culturally relevant curriculums and practices that already exist. He and the other teachers noted having had very little access and exposure to culturally relevant curriculums, lessons and instructional models prior to the PLC. Dawson noted the benefit of this knowledge to his own teacher education. In his examination of a lesson plan from the 1619 Project (Citation) he stated, “This lesson plan just blew my mind- like the word plantation is a white term for slave field. It's like how did I not know that? Did y’all know that? Just that part alone blew my mind and when you think about how that word is just used all of the time here it's literally wild” (Dawson, PLC 7). Benefits were inclusive of students, teachers, schools and the overall education system.

**Barriers.** The mentions on the barriers and gaps mainly surrounded bias within the education system. The participants were passionate about the barriers being things that needed to

be changed with the education system. The barriers and gaps discussed the most were in curriculum and testing, specifically the impact of forced standardized testing that has inherent bias toward white culture.

Teachers noted the barriers and gaps of forced cultural assimilation in schools, as a reality of the current American education system. During PLC 1, Wright noted, “in order for us to be looked upon as civil citizens, we must assimilate, in order to be accepted.” In the same PLC, Wright also noted that at its core the American education system was not built for African Americans. This barrier was articulated in his contribution:

There is no way that we can excel in the current education system, period. The education system was not built for us. The country was not built for us. We can get to a certain point and we have to conform to what the current system is, or we will get blackballed or end up like Black wall street. (PLC 1)

Another barrier that was identified was the pervasive culture of whiteness in schools. Wright noted in PLC 2, “because being educated is associated with being white.” Parker followed this comment with her own. She stated, “Yup my students say all the time- Mrs. Perry you talk white. I have to constantly tell them that speech is not a color” (PLC 2). The pervasive culture of whiteness in schools led participants to discuss the barrier of having to spend time teaching African American children how to be more white in order to be successful within the school system. Code switching came up as an example of this systematic bias. In PLC 1, Morris noted that explaining concepts to students using word choice that they are accustomed to hearing in their own cultures is beneficial to the students learning. Morris stated,

I came across this recently in biology class and I was relating it to real life in the way that we were talking about it. I *code switched* on them and allowed them to write in the code-switched way on the test and they got all of the information correct. And I was like, see, you know it, you just have to write it differently to get credit on the test. (PLC 1)

Participants discussed at length their own journey in mastering code switching in order to be considered professional. They also discussed how they often spoke to their students in an African American vernacular. This allowed their students to better relate to them and understand concepts. There was a sentiment that you first had to teach the material to students in a way that they understood and then had to help them translate it into a manner that was acceptable for the culture of whiteness.

There was also an emphasis on standardized testing and the inherent racial and cultural bias of current high stakes standard testing. Parker noted:

We give our students this information all year and then at the end they get to this test that says whether or not they learned what they needed to learn to matriculate. And then this test is nothing that they have ever read or seen before. It is biased. It is meant for this to fail. So, if we are going to teach Angie Thomas and these other people then why not test them on that. (PLC 3)

Parker's remarks on teaching Angie Thomas were a reference to teaching a more culturally relevant author and more culturally relevant literature. This is something she had tried to do in her classroom. She found teaching Angie Thomas's novels effective for her students. She was frustrated that a novel like *The Hate You Give* would not be something that the state would consider assessing students on. The teachers agreed with her that the lack of culturally relevant curriculum that was present on standardized assessment signaled its general lack of importance. There was a general feeling that you could teach your students culturally relevant curriculum but then you put them at risk of not passing assessments they needed to matriculate in the American education system. Richardson supported this idea and noted how standardized testing affects teachers ability to prioritize important learning for African American students. This barrier was articulated in Richardson contribution in the first PLC:

Even when I am breaking down World War II- we would probably spend five seconds on a Black person who played a pivotal part in the war and we just are supposed to move



right past them because it isn't tested. Me being a teacher I want to make sure to stop and explain to them who Garvey was and why it is important that they know who Garvey was but I can't really do that because I have to follow a roadmap with a lesson plan so that they can pass a standardized test. So yes, they are learning about US History, but they are not actually learning about our US History.

The teachers expressed an overall feeling that the American education system was not built for their African American students. The examples around standardized testing and code-switching standing out as two examples of this exclusion. The intentionality of this exclusion became a strong barrier for the teachers when considering the success of CRP within the American school system. The teachers in the PLC did overwhelmingly feel that CRP would be beneficial in individual classrooms to combating the systematic bias and would have lasting benefits for teachers and students.

### **The Importance of Self-Awareness Work**

During the PLC discussions, the theme of self-awareness arose, where participants conveyed that in order to be a successful teacher for African American students, an educator must have a strong sense of self-awareness. For the purposes of this study, self-awareness is made up of the subcategories: teachers need to know who they are, teachers need to have an understanding of their personal experiences, and teachers need to be able to unpack and have personal reflections (Mayfield & Garrison-Wade, 2015).

Table 4.4. Importance of Self-Awareness Work

Themes	Transcripts	Survey	Total
Know who you are	6	1	7
Understand your personal experiences	7	0	7
Unpack and have personal reflections	55	1	56
Total	68	2	70

Personal Self-Awareness appeared a total of 70 times. The analysis of the transcripts and surveys showed 7 mentions of the importance of knowing who you are, 7 mentions of understanding your personal experiences and 56 mentions of unpacking your personal experiences (See Table 4).

**Knowing who you are.** The importance of knowing who you are was a concentrated focus among the participants during the first PLC. Participants noted that you have to bring your entire self into the classroom for students each day. A part of knowing who you are is understanding your own identities and culture and considering how your identities and culture show up in your classroom. If you do not bring your authentic self in the classroom space, you will not be able to authentically connect with you students. This was articulated in Dawson’s contribution, “If you are trying to be someone that you aren't, the kids can smell it and they will point it out. It’s not even worth it” (PLC 1). Dawson took this point further, stating the importance of not just knowing but being comfortable with who you are as a part of being a successful teacher of African American students. Dawson shared:

Many of the teachers' upbringings made up a major part into why they have a strong sense of self. I always thought growing up that it (a strong sense of self ) was a vice that I had to shake but my grandfather instilled in us that you must know and feel comfortable to be able to be honest with people. (PLC 1)

**Understanding your personal experiences.** Participants noted that knowing who you are is not enough. Participants had seven mentions surrounding the need for teachers to be able to understand their personal experiences and further understand how those experiences impact how they show up in classrooms. The participants described how their own identities and experiences impacted how they show up in the classrooms. In PLC 1, Wright shared the reflections:

My mom—she was the first black cheerleader at my high school. She knew the principal and a lot of other people at my high school when we came along. Whenever me or my brother got in trouble or needed to calm down there was always a ram in the bush to help

us out to protect us. There was always a person for us, so I never had like that true black experience.

In referencing the true black experience Wright was referring African American students being typically voiceless, forced to assimilate and/or pushed out of school environments. Wright noted this experience being one in which he decided to aim to show up as the “ram in the bush” (PLC 1) for his students.

Richardson reflected on how he related to students who experienced a general dislike and disconnection with schools because he shared the same story. Richardson stated:

I never liked school. But the thing is there are certain parts of school that I am really good at. I can explain things well. I feel like I explain things extremely well and I have always been able to do that. I am also a nerd about when it comes to history. (PLC 1)

Richardson noted that this experience pushed him to make school more relatable for his students. Understanding one's personal experiences allows teachers to analyze why they show up the way they do in their classrooms and make adjustments where they are needed.

**Unpacking your personal experiences.** The teachers pushed this discussion a step further noting that it is not enough to understand but rather one must have the ability to unpack and have personal reflections. They noted the benefit of the PLC as a space that pushed them and could push other teachers to better unpack their own lived experiences. Unpacking your experience makes you actively a part of creating better learning experiences for students because you are doing the self-awareness work of becoming a better version of yourself. James reflected,

Well, I had never thought of it this way, but they have in here that you are not stuck in traffic you are traffic. And then you have to think about-well, yes, if I am out here with all of you, then I am a part of it. (PLC 2)

Richardson discussed the importance of doing the self-reflection and self-awareness work no matter how challenging it might be. He contributed, “you have to learn to be comfortable living uncomfortably, if that makes sense. And that goes into your anxieties and trying to control your

anxieties” (Philips, PLC 2). Unpacking your experiences helps individuals understand how they are all a part of the current education system and its impact on African American students. Unpacking also often pushes individuals out of their comfort zones and into places of growth.

Providing and prioritizing the space to be able to have these reflections at the school arose as an important element for teachers. James contributed,

But you all don’t know what our group has done for me—I was like I’m sure I’m not the only one in the world who struggled with this stuff but even in this how you all struggled too and just knowing not to just go with what has been fed to you and brow beaten. Like we can look into this for ourselves. (PLC 2)

James felt, since a young age, that she had to blindly accept things if they came from those in perceived authority, because she had been taught this by her father who had very deep religious convictions. The PLC was a time for her to both unpack and question. Morris expanded on James’s reflection noting that it is important to be able to have these professional learning communities to unpack because of how deeply they allow colleagues to know and understand one another. Morris contributed, “Sometimes you know when you are educated and more confident, people want to pass judgement on you thinking that you are arrogant or whatever, but you don’t know a person’s past” (PLC 2). Providing a space to unpack personal experiences has the ability to push individual teachers and it also has the ability to push school teaching communities to better understand one another and become a stronger community.

The participants’ sharing of themselves was deeply personal and showed extreme vulnerability. Knowing who you are, understanding your personal experiences and unpacking your personal experiences are all part of self-awareness, hence three categories became a part of the theme of self-awareness. The participants’ comments surrounding these themes were passionate about teachers needing to do the identity and culture work before stepping into a

classroom. They all attributed a part of their success with their students to this type of personal work.

### Understanding Students' Experiences

As the participants reflected on their own self-awareness, the theme of understanding students' experiences evolved. There were a total of 36 mentions that supported this theme, and as indicated by the table, there was only one category, which became the theme (See Table 5). Participants felt that taking the time to know the students and having a genuine desire to understand their experiences were keys to teaching African American students successfully.

Table 4.5. Understanding Students' Experiences

Theme	Transcripts	Survey	Total
Understanding Students' Experiences	36	0	36

The participants revealed that their efforts toward making time to understand their students and more specifically their students' experiences attributed to the current levels of success with their students. Participants reflected that this was not something that was told to them during their pre-service teaching but rather something that made sense. The participants discussed that it was not possible to effectively teach your students if you have not taken the time to get to know them. Dawson reflected on learnings from his first year teaching and contributed,

That is so true and you know one thing that you all really taught me last year and maybe it's you all beat it into me but I really learned that if you didn't learn anything about your students in a day then you haven't really done your job. Like you have to really know your kids. You have to learn something every day like if you want them to learn something every day you have to learn something too or you are lost. (PLC 2)

The participants shared with the PLC the methods that they used to get to know their students earlier on in the school year that had been effective for them. In PLC 1, Parker shared

her start-of-the-year journal assignment that she has students complete the moment they enter her classroom. She contributed:

So, the topic is who am I? What is important to me and why is that something of value? I do it every year and for me it gives me a basis to push them in a different direction because a lot of them will only tell you about what is important to them at this moment right now. They haven't thought about things like what it looks like to graduate high school.

In PLC 1, Morris shared that he also does an opening activity in the form of a confidential student survey. He contributed:

I do an activity. . . I think I shared it with you where they kind of tell me about themselves and it's not something that I share with the class except for the one question that asks what is your expectation of me and what's your goal for the class and we go around and kind of talk about that.

Other participants shared goal setting sessions and five-year planning sessions that they also do to model openness and combined purposes for students. James reflected, "I try to just model being open so that they feel like they can be open" (PLC 1).

The teachers discussed that the work of knowing oneself, knowing ones students and understanding students life experiences is ongoing work. It is work that a teacher must see the genuine importance of and will not work if the teacher is simply trying to check a compliance box. Dawson added to the discussion, "it's not something that can just be done in one session. It's like over time I try and talk to each kid and make sure that I have made a personal connection with them" (PLC 1). Six of the eight participants expressed multiple times that a challenge they had faced with colleagues either within or outside of the schools had been teachers writing off certain students as lost causes because they did not take the time to understand the students. Parker stated, "I think their inequalities lead to their feelings of inadequacy which in turn, leads to their eventual apathy" (PLC 2). Dawson followed up on this particular point in the third professional learning community. He contributed:

people make an opinion without even knowing people or their circumstances. Like oh he's a gang member—like do you know the gang members? Do you know anything about gangs? It's all prejudgments based on people's opinions. (PLC 2)

In PLC 3, Morris also discussed the importance of suspending judgement whether from personal biases or others' opinion about students. He expressed the impact that a teacher can have when they take a genuine interest in their students as people and are able to show compassion and flexibility. He told the story of one student explaining:

I called him to my desk one day and told him to do this, this and this to pass my class and he kind of started moving and then he started being interested. I started to learn how to handle him a little bit. I think it is important to learn students and learn what works for them rather than just thinking they have to always conform to what works for you. You have to figure out what their switch is. (Morris, PLC 3)

Each of the different teachers in their comments pushed the point that African American students grow up in a world that consistently and constantly judges them simply for being an African American child. It is imperative in the classroom with their teachers that they are safe from that judgement and that the teacher endeavors to understand their students for who they are and not who the world perceives them to be.

After spending time learning the tenets of CRP, the teachers in the PLC began to note places where they could improve their practice of getting to know their students and ensuring that students' experiences and cultures appeared in their classrooms, along with fostering classrooms that pushed their students' sociopolitical consciousness. During the latter half of the PLC sessions, the teachers started to observe one another and observe their own practice. After observing one of his colleagues in the professional learning community, Dawson shared the following about Morris's classroom:

It was just awesome to see them getting so invested. They were saying things like—we have to do something about this—my community needs to be educated on this. They have to stop smoking in my neighborhood. I was like yes do that. It was awesome to

actually see them connecting what they are doing in class to their neighborhoods and being invested. (Dawson, PLC 7)

Teachers must build and nurture ongoing relationships with students, allowing the students' experiences and cultures to be represented/reflected in the curriculum and instruction. There was a general consensus in the PLC that it is important for teachers to be able to spend time reflecting on the background and lived experiences of the students in their classrooms and through the reflections ensure that their classrooms are inclusive.

### **Relating to Students Experiences**

An interesting and important distinction that arose during the PLC conversations was the difference between teachers understanding their students' experiences and relating directly to those experiences. Four of the eight teachers in the PLC noted that their backgrounds — specifically race, culture, regionality, and socioeconomic status—directly mirrored the students that they were teaching. The other four teachers in the learning communities noted that while they related to certain aspects of their students' cultures, they did not relate to all of them, some of them specifically referencing socioeconomic status. There were 46 mentions of relating to students that were mentioned as the teacher unpacked relating to their students experiences (See Table 6). The teachers discussed at length ways that they were able to relate to their students' background and cultures, ways that they were not and the implications that relatability had on their relationships with specific students.

Table 4.6. Relating to Students Experiences

Theme	Transcripts	Survey	Total
Relating to Students' Experiences	43	0	43

Teachers noted during the PLC that being able to directly relate to their students' backgrounds and cultures did help them be more effective teachers of African American students. The teachers in the



learning community discussed the misconception that being an African American teacher automatically means being able to relate to your students, however. They also noted that not sharing your students' cultural background does not mean you cannot effectively teach African American students, but you do need to have a willingness to learn about your students' cultures and experiences. A part of learning about your students' experiences and culture is also ensuring that you are creating a classroom environment that is relatable to those experiences and cultures.

The teachers who shared a similar background to their students noted the immediate connections that they were able to make with their students and how natural it was to establish a shared understanding and establish trust with them. During the first PLC, Dawson drew everyone's attention to the connections he was able to make with certain students that had been considered discipline problems according to their school records. When asked why he thought he was effective with this group of students he stated:

Because there is a lot of stuff I try to relate with them on. For example, John—his grandmother raised him, the same as me. He and his mom's relationship is kind of shaky like mine, like, we are just very relatable. I can connect with him in a way for example that I cannot connect with Ryan. It is a matter of personally and individually learning them one by one. (Dawson, PLC 1)

Dawson's explanation on the point of relatability is one that the PLC found general agreement with. It is important that students feel there are people who they can relate to within the school setting. Morris was another teacher in the professional learning community that noted his personal background as similar to the students that he taught. He stated that while his background made him relatable to his students, he had to adopt a mindset of honesty with his students and that his mindset of honesty was a key driver in his relationships with them. During the first professional learning community, Morris contributed:

I'm honest with them. I oftentimes tell my kids that if Pride had been around when I was growing up, I would have been at Pride because I let them know how I grew up. Some of them may have grown up the same way—welfare, food stamps, you know because that's what I was raised in and I just kind of tell them the truth that education was what changed

my life. I took that part seriously because otherwise I was growing up in a place that when you turned on the lights at night roaches scattered and that's how I introduce myself to them. I start with who I am. (Morris)

Morris's contribution emphasized the PLC's consensus that it is important for teachers whose backgrounds mirror their students' experiences to share those experiences with their students. This level of honesty about the teachers' background allows students to see who teachers are as individuals. Being honest with students in this way also allows students to have mirrors into what is possible and role models that look like them.

The teachers in the PLC had an in-depth discussion on the perception often perpetuated in schools that being an African American teacher automatically means that one can relate to their African American students' experiences. Sharing a racial background with your students does not mean that you are able to directly relate to your students' experience because their experiences may have not been your specific experience. There is a difference between African Americans who grew up in the hood, in a lower socioeconomic status and African American who group up in middle- or upper-class households. Wright spoke to this when explaining how these differences can lead to contrasting views of right and wrong between students and their teachers. Wright stated:

We always get to this roadblock where kids say well, I don't know, I wasn't raised like that or that's not what my daddy told me. And I get that, but they have to get to the point of not making excuses. And more so, here they want to talk about who is in a gang and who sells drugs to make money. We always get to this point of what is right or wrong and what are you going to follow. (PLC 2)

Wright experiences growing up were different from his students in that they grew up in different levels of socio-economic status and family structure. His world views and reactions to situations differed from many of his students and he acknowledged that to them. It is his acknowledgement of these differences and willingness to talk through them and learn his students' perspectives that help make him more relatable to his students.

As the PLC progressed, the conversation of relating to students' experiences evolved into the importance of teachers ensuring that classrooms are culturally relevant for students and ensuring that students understand their cultural history. The teachers spent over forty minutes during PLC 6 discussing that our current curriculums do not allow for African American students to be able to relate to their rich culture. The teachers discussed the importance and onus on the teacher to make a conscious effort to change this. Richardson noted the best teacher he ever had often asked the class, “why are you in this class—how can I make this relate to your life?” (PLC 3). Richardson reflected on how meaningful it was to have a teacher that cared how the class related to his life and lived experiences. It is because of this teacher that he approaches his class in the same way. In PLC 7, Richardson shared a lesson that he had done with students to be able to teach economics through a cultural lens that was more relatable to them. He shared:

I actually remember after one of our sessions last year doing a full-on lesson with my kids about the Story of O. J. that was one of the best lessons I probably ever did. When I went over it again this year, but from the perspective of Jay Z—I was explaining to them that Jay Z’s money is not from rapper money like that anymore it is from his businesses. When I pulled up his wealth and income streams on a pie chart they were floored.

Richardson as well as other members of the PLC began connecting the importance of relating to students and being able to reflect their students’ experiences and cultures in the classroom while at the same time fostering their students’ understanding of their own cultures.

The PLC also highlighted the issue of curriculum, teaching, and learning being surrounded in a culture of whiteness. For the teachers, this was concerning because it meant that they had to always put in additional work to make the curriculum relatable and supportive of their African American students.

### **Effectiveness of the Professional Learning Community**

The effectiveness of the professional learning community was continuously measured throughout the study through PLC discussions and end of session surveys. I used the feedback to create the learning

materials best suited to the needs of the participants while teaching the framework of culturally relevant pedagogy, giving samples of the framework being implemented across America and allowing teachers to practice and reflect through implementing the tenets in their classrooms. The transcripts and surveys allowed for an important examination surrounding the effectiveness of the professional learning community. The teachers appreciated the space to give feedback on the PLC. They knew that their voices were valuable and that sessions were crafted based on their needs. There were 60 mentions relating to the effectiveness of the PLC (See Table 7). Thirty-four of the mentions were made during the sessions and 26 of the mentions were made in the surveys. Understanding effectiveness of the PLCs was important during the study for the participants experience and post the study to better understand what was and was not effective for participants. This guided material creation during the study and material revision post the study.

Table 4.7. Effectiveness of the Professional Learning Community

Theme	Transcripts	Survey	Total
Effectiveness of the Professional Learning Community	34	26	60

The teachers overwhelmingly found the professional learning community effective. Throughout the sessions, the teachers stated the importance of the space to be able to think through and process identity, culture, privilege, power, culturally relevant pedagogy and anti-racist education. The teachers noted appreciation for the PLC space and content, shared their growth from it and noted that the PLC was something that should be a general pre-requisite for teaching and specifically for teaching African American students.

The teachers noted how impactful the learning community had been for them both personally and professional. They noted how the professional learning community had pushed them and prompted personal levels of growth. During PLC 2, James shared with the group:

But you all don't know what our group has done for m—I was like I'm sure I'm not the only one in the world who struggled with this stuff but even in this how you all struggled too and just knowing not to just go with what has been fed to you and brow beaten. Like we can look into this for ourselves.

The teachers found the conversations in the professional learning empowering and transformative. The community allowed participants to gain knowledge, skills, community, empowerment and agency. The teachers noted the amount of personal growth as individuals and as educators that they gained. The teachers noted the importance of their learning and growth in better understanding themselves, their own cultural background and in teaching culturally relevant curriculum and instruction. In discussing the act of sharing the learning community materials, Dawson insisted, “Please, please make sure that you share this (The 1619 Project Curriculum Link) because this is it—this is what we have to teach—this is what our kids have to know. They have to understand where we came from and how we got to where we are today if there is any hope for us as a people” (PLC 6).

The teachers also noted the impact of the PLCs on their growth in both curriculum and assessments and in teaching and learning. Discussing curriculum planning, Baker noted, “the presentations and discussions were most impactful for me. I liked being able to bounce ideas and see ways to incorporate CRT into my curriculum/classroom. It got me wanting to plan my instruction around it” (Baker, PLC 7). Referring to their teaching and learning abilities, Richardson noted, “Developing my CRT skills during our sessions played a huge part in my classroom. I'm now able to see the kids themselves in my lessons” (Survey 7). It became clear that the professional learning community both provided value to the teachers as individuals and as educators and should be considered for a wider teaching audience.

The teachers expressed that the content in the learning community was not typically a part of the ongoing teacher development at most school sites. They agreed that identity work and culturally relevant pedagogy were needed in teacher development. There was a general sentiment amongst the

group as the learning community progressed that a deep knowledge, understanding and examination of oneself alongside a realistic examination of the James noted the potential impact on African American students if their teachers did not receive this type development. She noted:

What stuck with me most, after watching the videos were the racial inequalities that students may have or could experience if teachers are not trained to consider how to teach to the demographics of students in their classrooms. (Survey 3)

The teachers found value as individuals and educators in the sessions. The sessions bonded them as a group and made them want to push in their curriculum planning and instruction to make their classrooms more culturally relevant for their students. The sessions also illuminated the knowledge gap that exists for teachers who have not had this training. And in general, the teachers felt disappointed that CRP development had never been offered to them before the PLC.

### **Implementing Culturally Relevant Pedagogy**

As a part of the PLC, the teachers were asked to try to implement the tenets of CRP—achievement, culturally relevant and responsive curriculum and instruction, and socio-political consciousness—into their classrooms. The participants were asked to use a rubric that the group co-authored to measure their own effectiveness implementing CRP into their classrooms and the practice of their colleagues in the PLC. The teachers reflected on these observations during the PLCs. The teachers reflected the most on how daring they had become overtime with their CRP implementation. There were 30 mentions of participants becoming more daring (See Table 8).

Table 4.8. Implementing Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Themes	Transcripts	Survey	Total
Tried	8	0	8
Daring	30	1	31
More Connection	0	0	0

Total	38	1	39
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The teachers discussed trying new things and becoming more daring in their practice. The majority of discussion centered on ways that they were becoming more daring after the PLCs. The teachers discussed how using CRP was impactful in their curriculum planning, their teaching and ultimately in their students learning. There was further discussion on how, as teachers they became more daring which resulted in them also becoming stronger advocates for their students.

**Trying CRP in the classroom.** Participants shared pulling concepts from the professional learning communities on identity, culture, privilege and power and adding these concepts in their classrooms for their students to discover and explore. There was a particular appreciation for the 1619 Project (Hannah-Jones et al., 2019) as it gave participants a full culturally relevant curriculum to explore. Each participant shared multiple examples over the course of the PLC of examples of how they used their learning in their curriculum and instruction. For example, after the professional learning community centered on power, Parker shared:

I said to them, ‘do you think I go to school because I like it? This is business and my business is to be a better teacher for myself and for you. Everything that you do in life, you have to handle it as a business. Because if you make reckless decisions and people perceive you to be a reckless person then you can forget about it. So you have power. You control your narrative.’ (PLC 2)

Parker also noted that after her learnings from the first PLC, it was important to her to impress upon her students that they controlled their own narrative and that that in itself was power. This was not a conversation that she had previously had with her students. Yet, it was imperative for her to ensure her students understood that their destiny is not written, that they are the authors of their destiny. She noted and the other participants agreed that all too often their African American students felt powerless in their situations believing that the world had already written their destiny for them. It was worth the class time to correct this misconception. Richardson, as well as other participants, shared the impact of developing

a teachers' understanding of teaching socio-political consciousness. Specifically, Richardson explained how this learning had a great impact on his classroom practice, sharing that there were students that took to this work—in some ways almost too much—because they started to become not only aware but angry at the entire education system. An example of this follows:

I had to stop because I was creating a monster. He took half of what I said and took it the right way—the other half...I told him, ‘dude I understand that you want to follow in the footsteps of Bobby Seale and Huey Newton but you have to understand what they stood for and the importance of also going to school’ (Richardson, PLC 2).

Richardson noted that for this student, the more he learned about history and his culture, the more he began adopting ideals from the co-founders of the Black Panther Party. He also noted that this student began to feel that it was more important to leave school and become an activist rather than stay in an education system not built for him.

Building from Richardson sharing in PLC 2, other participants noted that it is important a teacher educating African American students on these concepts make time for the students to unpack the reality that in a structurally racist education system, they need to learn how to survive without losing themselves.

**Daring to try new things.** Over the course of the seven PLCs, an overall interest and excitement from the teachers grew in trying to plan culturally relevant lessons from their various curriculums. The teachers tried in their subjects to incorporate more topics that were relevant to students' lived experiences. While doing this, the teachers also noted pushing their students to better understand the elements of developing a socio-political consciousness. Teachers did note the development work on socio-political consciousness being the most challenging of the tenets to be able to incorporate in the limited time of a school day. All teachers provided instances in the final two professional learning communities where they were seeing their practice evolve and experiencing the impact of that evolution on themselves and their students. Here, Dawson described how he dared to alter a lesson:



I really wanted to push them in their descriptive writing, and I wanted them to push on narrative and since they weren't connecting with Alice and Wonderland the way it is told- I let them tell their own version. They struggle sometimes to write because they don't know how to relate (Dawson, PLC 6).

English largely has a scripted curriculum, Dawson dared to add activities that were more relevant to his students and chose to diverge from the scripted curriculum. There was agreement from all participants that these practices could be seen after the professional learning communities in their curriculum planning and instruction in ways that were not present before. Dawson reflected on a lesson he observed in Morris's classroom noting that you could see in the curriculum adjustments that he made on the pollution unit stating that students were more engaged and invested in the lesson because he made it more relevant to their lived experience. Dawson noted:

It was just awesome to see them getting so invested. They were saying things like- we have to do something about this- my community needs to be educated on this. They have to stop smoking in my neighborhood. I was like yes do that. It was awesome to actually see them connecting what they are doing in class to their neighborhoods and being invested. (PLC 7).

Dawson was impressed by how Morris had re-written a unit on the environment to directly relate to the environmental issues in the students communities. There was a notable difference in student engagement and understanding when the topic material was relatable to them.

Participants additionally noted that the professional learning communities made them feel more daring and less isolated as education professionals and advocates. There was a general sentiment that the professional learning communities help them to better find their voices and be less afraid to use it. Participants shared things that they had long felt about education in America that they finally felt comfortable and validated to share during the learning community. It was empowering for the teachers to have a space to be able to voice their frustrations with the American education system and come up with solutions that could be impactful for African American students.

All participants noted in their discussions and surveys that the professional learning community was the catalyst for them trying to implement culturally relevant pedagogy in their classrooms and that the implementation had an impact on themselves as individuals and on their students. Participants noted that there was a further impact from having a cohort to try and grow in these practices together and observe another implementing these practices. It was again clear in these mentions that all participants felt that this was the type of development all teachers of African American students should undergo.

### **Summary**

This chapter presented a summary of the participants' discussion from the professional learning communities as analyzed from the transcripts and the post professional learning community surveys. This chapter presented seven themes that emerged in answering the research question: (1) Ways Teachers were Successful from the Beginning (2) The Benefits and Barriers, (3) Personal Self Awareness, (4) Understanding Students Experiences, (5) Relating to Students Experiences, (6) Effectiveness of the Professional Learning Community, and (7) Implementing Culturally Relevant Pedagogy.

## **CHAPTER V. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

The American education experience has been described throughout history as a segregated, racist, and classist system that has systematically oppressed minority groups since its inception (Conover & Daiute, 2017; Paris & Alim, 2017). As noted in the review of literature, African Americans, in particular, have been continuously denied equitable education opportunities, expected to assimilate to white culture, and deemed as being lesser than their white counterparts based on a perceived gap in their achievement (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Therefore, the research undertaken in this study aimed to address this societal injustice.

Turning to previous research on CRP, this qualitative exploratory study focused on teacher professional development in order to better serve African American students (Mayfield & Garrison-Wade, 2015). This study found the teacher at the epicenter of creating systematic change within the educational experience of the African American students. Specifically, the research explored the experiences of the teachers in the PLC, the impact of CRP training on their instruction, and sought to understand the nature of developing teachers' ability to provide CRP. And from the findings, it was evident that the nature of developing and providing CRP was both industrious and reciprocal. CRP teacher development is industrious in that teachers have to be willing to give of themselves and give of their time doing personal self-awareness work, shifting their view of self to agents of change and embracing being curriculum writers. And the work is reciprocal because teachers develop in this work with their students and with their colleagues in the PLC. Further the study revealed that teachers need to be able to develop in this work over-time through multiple pre-service and ongoing PD experiences which is understood through the effectiveness of the PLC and unpacking the teachers' implementation of CRP.

## **The Industrious Nature of Providing CRP**

Gloria Ladson-Billings (2009) notes throughout her body of work that since their admission into the American education system, African Americans have been subjected to inequitable policies and funding, unjust treatment, been subjected to racist structural and pedagogical design and have been denied inequitable funding. CRP development highlights these systemic understandings, pushes individuals to better understand themselves and better understand their students within this content. CRP development is a taxing development of mindsets and skills.

**Self-awareness work.** It became evident in the study that the teachers had to undertake self-awareness work as they developed their ability to provide CRP. The teachers in the study all came in with a level of willingness and a mindset to learn and grow both personally and professionally. They had to spend time unpacking who they were and grappling with their own mindsets and biases. Additionally, the teachers had to deepen their understandings of systematic racism and its role in education and be able to unpack these understanding before effectively teaching CRP. Throughout the PLC the teachers evolved in their own self-awareness work as they explored ideas, theories, and concepts such as identity, culture, the culture of whiteness and assimilation in education, and Bourdieu's (1977) Cultural Capital theory.

***Developing self-awareness of identity and culture.*** The teachers in the PLC noted self-awareness work as essential to developing CRP which aligns with the prior research that found that teachers self-identity exploration is considered a best practice in anti-racism development and in turn in enhancing school culture and performance (Demerath, 2018; Kailin, 1994). It is imperative that teachers know who they are, know who they bring into the classroom daily, know who their students are and know who their students bring into the classroom each day. The

teachers in the PLC spent time in each of the sessions and after the sessions doing this self-awareness work. There was a general consensus that this work is such that you have a willingness to grow, stretch and address deep rooted beliefs and mindsets. The teachers in the PLC felt that teachers need to be able to unpack and grapple with who they are prior to working with African American students. Richardson shared, “You have to learn to be comfortable living uncomfortably if that makes sense” (PLC 2). There was general sentiment from the teachers that prior to coming into a classroom teacher should be pushed to get comfortable with being uncomfortable. Wright shared

I explained to them that the only way a lobster can grow is through stress, anxiety, and pressure. That is the only way it can shed its shell. It is vulnerable and exposed at that time, but it also learns a lot. I try to live that way for myself. I try to not look at being uncomfortable as a negative thing but something more that you have to have it.” (PLC 2)

In deepening their self-awareness work, the teachers found that developing their own cultural competencies was deeply beneficial. And this is similar to previous research by both Gay (2010) and Ladson-Billings (2009) who also found that there has to be a willingness to support and nurture cultural competence in the classroom. Teachers cannot instruct on culture competence without doing the self-awareness work to develop culture competence.

There was also a feeling of resentment among the teachers as they discussed how often they have been made to feel like they did not personally belong within the American society and within the American education system. The teachers shared how they had at times felt like when they tried to bring in and support culture in learning it was in general not accepted. Richardson shared

So whenever we have something where it is all Black people, doing all black things that make a difference for black people that's when they have a problem. So even I teach this until I am blue in the face and it really baffles me. Why are you offended that I am not praising you? (PLC 6)

The teachers had general sharing's that not only do African American students not feel like they belong in American classrooms but there is often a negative portrayal of African Americans in the curriculum. Richardson shared

Even from slavery until now, even in 2019 in America and Africa it always shows black people walking around with our hands out. Like even in Africa so much of it is 1960's Jim Crow America. Like why are you always trying to put us at the bottom no matter where we are. (PLC 6)

As the teachers explored the second tenet of CRP through their personal self-awareness work and the creation of a culture of belonging, the teachers all expressed similar calls to action of wanting to be agents of change for their students' learning experiences. Parker shared, "The one thing that stuck out with me the most is how empowered brown and black children could be if instruction was centered around things and people who reflect what they see every day" (Survey 1). This work is industrious and requires honesty in a community that teachers feel comfortable, a willingness to learning to learn and a conviction toward personal growth in order to become a better teaching professional.

***Developing self-awareness of systemic racism in education.*** In every PLC the topic of systemic racism was a vital part of the conversation. An understanding of systemic racism and its role in education became an important part of teacher personal self-awareness work. This finding furthers the current body of research. There has been a small subfield of studies that

have dared to point to mechanisms of racism as the root cause of marginalizing students of color within the American education system. While the need for more research has been noted, the studies point to African American students' educational success not being built into the structure of American education (Kohli et. Al, 2017). Race and racism are deeply ingrained in all aspects of the American society and as such are central to the conversation on the educational experiences of African American children (DeCuir & Dixon, 2004). This was a key learning for the teachers in the study as they developed in their own self-awareness work. The teachers in the study had to grapple with the history of American education and of their own experiences in the education system.

As discussion progressed on systemic racism and teachers' awareness deepened, there was a general agreement among the teachers that they had not been teaching in a way that they overall believed was best for their African American students. They had rather been teaching in a way to produce academic results within the current system. During the PLC 1, Wright contributed:

There is no way that we can excel in the current education system period. The education system was not built for us. The country was not built for us. We can get to a certain point and we have to conform to what the current system is, or we will get blackballed or end up like black wall street.

While Wright was the first to give voice to this sentiment it was a general agreement felt by all of the teachers that the system that they were educating students in was not built for them nor the students that they were educating. The teachers in the PLC shared a sense of urgency to address the current state of educational inequity. Throughout the PLC conversations arose that the current way that we have been educating African Americans students has not been working and as African Americans educators the participants strongly felt that they could not continue to allow students to pass through their classrooms not pushing for better. In the third PLC, Parker

contributed, “What concerns me is that we are in an ever-evolving cycle. If we don’t share with our children and we don’t have open dialogue they will pass that to their children and look at where we are now.” In the same PLC, Richardson followed up with a sentiment that teachers are taught to teach in a way that embraces a culture of whiteness even if they know that it is not right for the African American students they are educating. Richardson stated, “But even in reading this book it's like this is what we are taught to do. This is how we are taught to teach. And the way that we are taught to teach and are teaching is dead wrong” (PLC 3). A mindset formed among the teachers throughout the PLC that as educators of African American students it was important to understand systematic racism in education while developing self-awareness, question the current systems and structures and play a role as active advocates in addressing systemic racism in education for themselves as educators and for their students.

A part of the discussion on systemic racism included Bourdieu’s (1977) Cultural Capital theory. This theory addresses educational stratification and was another important understanding in developing teachers’ mindsets surrounding self-awareness work and CRP development. This theory states that culture capital is gained in society through the familiarity with “dominant class.” The cultural advantage gained through this familiarity avails students rewards in schools when they align their actions with that of the “dominant class.” This imposes the “dominant class” cultural values on all students. This creates a form of social currency in educational practices, manners and “know-how’s.” This currency in turn creates a significant structural disadvantage for minority students (Davies & Rizk, 2017). While unjust, this the creation of cultural capital is not a foreign phenomenon. Advantaged classes are always going to put into place strategies for themselves to maintain their social position (Bass, 2014).



This learning caused teachers in the PLC to have general reflections on the purpose behind teaching that supports this gaining of cultural capital and their part in feeding into the culture of whiteness and assimilation. The teachers reflected on what teaching in this way does to students and to themselves as educators in both the short and long term. There was a conclusion among the group that even if you teach your students to act white and assimilate to succeed in the system, African Americans will still always be looked at as lesser than and you will have additionally taught your students to believe that they are. Dawson voice this contributing:

We pretty much allow the white man to set the rules about how we spend our money, our worth, where we live. There is a lot that according to the white man we are not good enough for, but they will sure indeed take that money from you. You get out of the hood but really also only so far in the eyes of White people (PLC 7).

This learning allowed the teachers in the PLC to step back and consider how they wanted to contribute to society. During this conversation the teachers grappled with larger structures in American society and concluded again that they were pouring into a society not built for African Americans. They also grappled with their own successes and what they had to sacrifice to become successful by American standards. Parker questioned, “And if we do mirror it that way then we become too empowered and become what they fear. Right? So, when that happens, we don’t become an anomaly anymore we then become the precedent that is set for everybody else” (PLC 1). There was a general reflection that there was a lack of desire in American society for African American to elevate. Richardson contributed:

But then it’s like think about it when you go from the basics of what they were learning to really learning- people in power aren’t going to like that. Like Mrs. Perry said though if you are from a certain area and went to college people are like genuinely surprised- like oh wow that’s what’s up. And all of a sudden there is a whole different expectation and a whole different standard. (PLC 1)

It was both jarring and empowering for the teachers to spend time discussing their learnings of Bourdieu's Cultural Capital theory and ultimately there was a conclusion that change will not come through the systems because the system is in fact not broken. The system is rather not built to support the advancement of African Americans. This advancement must rather occur within individual classrooms.

***Developing as agents of change.*** During the PLC experience, the teachers came to understand that the system itself is not changing, at least in not our lifetime. Throughout the PLC the teachers became increasingly urgent to be change agents for their students which fueled their drive in their CRP development. The teachers reported this being one of the first times they had seen themselves as agent of change and been given clear skills to implement change. They noted that it was an important to their drive and motivation. This study found that one of the ways the PLC development was effective was through the development of the change agent mindset. This expanded on current research. Researchers often point to teachers as being one of the key factors in students being able to have equal access to the American education system (Wiggan & Watson, 2016). The CRP PLCs provided a way to develop teachers to see themselves as key factors to ensuring students have equal access.

***Developing as curriculum writers.*** Equally as important as understanding instructional practices was teachers understanding to implement and create elements of culturally relevant curriculum. Students must be able to access culturally relevant curriculums (Wiggan & Watson). Currently high school students graduate with a knowledge of European history and North American White cultural ethos but based on just schools will be ignorant to the history and cultural ethos of minority groups. The American curriculum is effectively the white curriculum (Wiggan & Watson, 2016). It is imperative for students to be able to see themselves in the

curriculum that they are learning. Students need to be able to read literacy that is inclusive of their culture (Bean-Folkes & Ellison, 2018). African Centered and Anti-Racist curriculums assist in allowing for a form of education that puts the African American perspective at the center of the curriculum rather than on the margins. During PLC 6 the teachers review the 1619 Project, a culturally relevant curriculum that reframes US history from the perspective of African Americans. The teachers were highly engaged with this curriculum noting that they had never seen anything like it before. Dawson shared, “Please, please make sure that you share this because this is it- this is what we have to teach- this is what our kids have to know. They have to understand where we came from and how we got to where we are today if there is any hope for us as a people” (Dawson, PLC 6).

Some teachers in the learning community had spent more time considering how curriculum and assessment needed to look different when working within the CRP framework. In the first PLC Wright shared, “I tell them look this is what the state says I need to teach you and this is what you need to learn but I am also going to teach you this right here what they are never going to say what it really is because you need to learn it for life” (Wright, PLC 1). Parker followed up, sharing, “It is but then that means rewriting and redoing and revamping everything (PLC 1). The other teachers agreed with this and shared how they had been adjusting and revamping in their own classrooms. Dawson shared about his observation of Morris’s classroom, “I just loved that everyone is so actively engaged in Mark’s class and invested in a problem that is happening in their actual neighborhoods that is an amazing job making it relevant for them (Baker on Morris’s class, PLC 7). Dawson additionally contributed

I really wanted to push them in their descriptive writing, and I wanted them to push on narrative and since they weren’t connecting with Alice and Wonderland the way it is told- I let them tell their own version. They struggle sometimes to write because they don’t know how to relate (PLC 6).

Dawson expanded on the idea of curriculum creation and implementation stating the importance of even the test being revamped, “I think that everyone should take both tests and see how they do. We all have to take the white America test so why don’t we even it out” (Dawson, PLC 1). It became clear for the teachers throughout the PLCs that no matter where they were in their process of learning and implementing CRP strategies there is a need for ongoing development work for the teachers to be able to be effective.

After these conversations the teachers began to see themselves and their classrooms as a place to fight for the liberation of education for African American students. It was through the learnings, analysis, discussion and unpacking in the PLC’s that the teachers were able to grow in their own personal self-awareness and articulate the importance of this work for all teachers if they are to better educate their African American students. One cannot educate their African American students well without having an awareness of self, of other cultures and of societal structures. Having PLCs prior to teachers service and during is deeply important to this work.

### **The Reciprocal Nature of Providing CRP**

For many years now, CRP has been recommended as a means for addressing the many serious inequities that have historically plagued the American education system (Kohli et. al, 2017, Ladson-Billings, 2009). However, this simply is not accomplished through the purchase of a book or the reading of an article. In fact, the ability to provide CRP is dependent on much more than what any typical professional development or workshop commonly offers. This is because the nature of developing the ability to provide CRP is that of a reciprocal relationship.

***Developing a sense of belonging.*** Furthering on the work of Ladson-Billings (2009) and Gay (2010), the teachers explored their own cultures, and other cultures including their students cultures during the PLCs as well as explored practices of teaching culture competence. One

element that stood out for the teachers as they developed culture competence and reflected on how the CRP PLC was effective was the importance of creating a feeling of belongingness to their classrooms being key to African Americans students' success. Research has determined that key to students' academic success is their feeling of belonging in the classrooms in which they learn. Teachers are able to impact this feeling of belongingness through creating classroom environments that are accepting of students and that prioritize their culture (Ladson-Billings, 2009, Boston & Warren, 2017). My findings affirmed this research; throughout all of the PLCs, teachers discussed creating a classroom culture of belonging. The teachers also discussed how the feeling of belongingness is related to the ability to support and nurture students' cultures (Ladson-Billings, 2009, Boston & Warren, 2017). When students do not feel like they belong or are valued, they can experience anxiety, depression and experience higher rates of giving up and dropping out (Boston and Warren, 2017). Teachers have the ability to have a direct impact on ensuring that their African American students feel like they belong in their American classrooms.

***Developing a sense of power.*** An understanding of power dynamics within the American education system and within the classroom rose as a needed learning for teachers during their teacher pre-service. The teachers also had discussion surrounding, an understanding of how to create an intentional distribution of power within the classroom being an important learning that should be included as a part of a teachers preservice. Research has noted that one of the keys to African American success in instruction and classroom experience is understanding power within the education system and implementing an intentional distribution of power in the classroom (Mayfield & Garrison-Wade, 2015). Implementing an intentional distribution of power should also include teaching concepts of power and power structures with the American society to African American students and their families (Mayfield & Garrison-Wade, 2015).

As discussed earlier, teacher discussed the importance of having pre-service development that explored personal self-awareness work. The teacher also discussed at length the importance of developing openness and rapport with students. It is important for example when discussing challenging topics such as power dynamics within systems with students and families, the teachers noted a need for preservice development specifically, surrounding modeling openness and building strong relationships with students to be able to have these levels of socio-political conversations. Richardson shared:

So I have that rapport and that relationship where they start to be open about certain stuff. Even in my class like when we talk about code switching- I know you have to assimilate in this America, but this is me all the time. Can I have a very intelligent conversation yes, but I am still me. (Richardson, PLC 1)

In the same PLC, James added:

Then they start being open more than I want them to be often at times- then I have to ask myself how did we get here...but then I know where they are, I know what they are experiencing, and as much as I can- I try and help. And if nothing else I am a listening ear. How did I get there? I don't know—they just want to share. (PLC 1)

The other teachers agreed with Richardson and James that modeling openness and self-growth is a key component to classroom culture to be able to have conversations about power dynamics. Dawson also stressed the importance of this learning for African American students to better understand how systems are structured to work against them and help better shape mindsets. He shared, “it bothers me how much our students are even aware of government programs being an option and to some of them an expectation. It bothers me because that’s a mindset that has been created. It just bothers me” (PLC 6). There was an overall consensus of learning to model openness being important for pre-service teachers of African American students.

Research has noted that it is important for teachers to model equitable distributions of power within classrooms (Mayfield & Garrison-Wade, 2015). The teachers in the PLC noted that modeling distributed power distribution between teachers and students is both a mindset and a

skillset, both of which are important for a teacher to be able to learn and practice during pre-service training. The teachers reflect on the times that it was important that they allowed the students to lead in conversations and in the classroom. Parker shared, “And I try to remind them that if they are or they aren’t- how are they going to be that particular change in their own lives. How are you going to influence change in your environment” (PLC 2)? Baker furthered on this point in a later PLC, noting that the goal should be to ensure that students are active stakeholders in their classroom and hence in their learning. She contributed, “the thing that stuck with me the most when we saw the video and the children were actually able to verbalize as stakeholders in their own education why it’s important for them to succeed” (Baker, Survey 3). After a visit to Morris’s classroom Dawson shared how Morris had set up curriculum and systems in his classroom that prompted an intention distribution of power between the teacher and the students:

I loved how structured Coach Perry’s class is. The students come in and immediately know what to do and start working. I also love that the projects he puts in front of them relate to them-like they were talking about air pollution when I was in there and how air pollution affects them and their neighborhood and coming up with solutions to impact air pollution. (PLC 6)

In the same PLC, Baker shared how she had seen the same type of distributed power through creating a family culture in Mr. Morris’s class and noted her observations of the same in Mrs. Jamess class. Baker contributed:

I did Mrs. James. She did an amazing job allowing students to see themselves within the curriculum. I actually saw Mr. Morris and Mrs. James- for both of them I really loved how family centered their classes are. The kids literally call them Mom and Dad. (Baker, PLC 6)

Research has noted that it is important for teachers to learn to make their instruction and curriculum apply to their students lived experiences in order for it to become a part of students’ schema (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Pitre, 2014). The teachers noted that being able to use CRP strategies in both curriculum and instruction helped them to create ways to better

empower and engage the students in their classrooms. Dawson shared, “Something I do differently is that I allow the students to fully be themselves and be proud of who they are. We can correct education and build confidence at the same time” (Dawson, Survey 7).

***Developing a sense of collectiveness.*** In their exploration of teaching and learning strategies the teachers discussed at length ensuring student choice, voice and collaboration within their classrooms and taking a more collectivist approach rather than individualist approach to their classrooms. It is important for African American students to be educated in a learning environment of collectivism (Hammond, 2015). Research has found that it is important that African American students have a choice in learning tasks and be allowed to work collaboratively (Bean-Folkes & Ellison, 2018). In researching and reflecting on instructional strategies within the PLC, Baker shared an impactful learning, stating, “making a relatable connection to the students stuck with me the most. In order to get through to them, whether it be a content lesson or a life lesson, they are more inclined to understand and listen when they can relate” (Baker, Survey 2). Baker noted a change in her students' understanding when she shifted her instruction to ensure she was making a relatable connection to the concepts and the students lived experiences at the start of each lesson. Parker also shared that ensuring relatability in the lesson instruction being a key skill to CRP. She shared, “that being relatable is important in the classroom. Showing students they matter, and they can control their narrative” (Parker, Survey 2). Dawson also emphasized the importance of getting to know their students in the process of teaching of instructing in CRP. Dawson shared, “you really have to get to know them as individuals and also know how they learned, how to engage with them and how to relate to them (Dawson, PLC 6).



## **Professional Development for Inservice and Preservice Teachers**

Throughout the study, it became clear that teachers needed CRP development in a community of colleagues. The teachers were adamant throughout the PLCs that it was imperative for their ability to provide CRP that they be given development experiences both during their in-service careers and during their preservice training.

*Professional Development for Inservice Teachers.* While teacher pre-service development is an important component of developing CRP, ongoing teacher development is just as important. Research has been done on African American students' lack of perceived success in the American education system being tied to poor teacher training, a lack of appreciation for the culture of African American students and a lack of understanding and emphasis of the impact of a student's culture by administration (Almond, 2012). The study furthered this research, the PLC allows all of these things to be addressed through ongoing CRP development. Studies have shown that students show academic gains when they receive high quality instruction from a culturally responsive teacher (McGrady & Reynolds, 2013). Having the ability to educate through CRP is a reciprocal process that is ever-evolving. It is not a month long or yearlong experience but rather a new way of approaching one's teaching practice and as such requires continuous revisiting and a mutual relationship between teachers and their colleagues and teachers and their students.

Teachers in the PLC noted with appreciation the importance of the PLC being an experience that spanned over two academic years and noted the importance for themselves to find ways to continue learning and growing in CRP. The teachers expressed frustration that CRP had not been a part of their teacher journeys in this way previously. Dawson contributed, "I mean let's be honest we are adults and we are just now talking about it and we wouldn't be talking

about it unless you had this PLC for us. I am mad that this hasn't been a part of my knowledge and conversations before this" (Dawson, PLC 7). The other teachers in the PLC agreed with Dawson sentiment. Richardson, further stated, "Like they really do not have anything for black teachers like that isn't even kind of a thought (Richardson, PLC 7). The work of the PLC allowed the teachers to feel that there was educator development work that was being specifically targeted toward the students that they served.

The need for ongoing development was discussed at length, specifically in teaching and learning practices and in curriculum and assessment creation. As CRP is a newer field of educational study, practices are still being researched and materials are still being created. As such, the field requires ongoing development to remain current. The teachers also noted the importance of having a community of practitioners to work with as they learned CRP strategies and incorporated them into their classrooms. Baker added, "The presentations and discussions were most impactful for me. I liked being able to bounce ideas and see ways to incorporate CRT into my curriculum/classroom. It got me wanting to plan my instruction around it" (Baker, Survey 7).

Another aspect that emerged during the PLC discussion was a need for ongoing CRP work for administrators if CRP development is to be effective at specific schools. It is key to the success of CRP in teachers classrooms to have administrative buy in and support. CRP requires time from curriculum and instruction that may not ultimately lead to raised scores on standardized assessments. Morris shared, "it's just hard to get those kinds of conversations in with so much other stuff (PLC 1). Richardson also shared, "It's just a lot we keep testing these kids no matter their performance on these tests and it's like we care more about the score than them actually learning" (PLC 6). This puts administrators in a position where they have to also

be educated and developed in CRP and have to apply a set of values. Administrators have for the most part made decisions to address the achievement gap through solely technical strategies rather than leaning into CRP and prioritizing addressing the values and beliefs of classroom teachers (Mayfield & Garrison-Wade, 2015). This notion of not addressing teachers values and beliefs is ineffective and criminal to minority cultures (Mayfield & Garrison-Wade, 2015). Woodson proposed that traditional education must include culture, or it will ultimately not prepare students for the real world. Further, schools that do not put a focus on culture tend to tag behind globally as students lack a global perspective (Snyder, 2015).

***Professional development for preservice teachers.*** The teachers in the PLC voiced that preservice programs allowing teachers to do personal self-awareness work and modeling leaning into discomfort would benefit teachers of African American students when they are developing in CRP. The study found that personal-self-awareness work is something that should begin during teacher preservice and should ongoing development for teachers throughout their careers. Further, the study found that learning about topics like power dynamics and being able to instruct in them and create a classroom culture and classroom systems for distributed power in the classroom should not be things that teachers must learn on their own. The teacher strongly felt that these elements should be include in teacher pre-service training for teachers to be help them be successful with their African American students.

There has never been a strategic preparation of the teaching workforce to properly receive and meet the needs of African American students (Garte, 2017). According to accreditation agencies, teacher education programs are failing to reach diverse standards for educating students (Bennett et. al, 2012). The teachers discussion in the PLC agreed with this research. In past studies teachers have noted that their preparation program prepared them to

teach White students, not minority students (Bean-Folkes & Ellison, 2018; Wiggan & Watson, 2016). Research has noted that, in education programs teachers are often taught to only focus on one American narrative, the White narrative. The problem for poor African American students becomes that their teachers' values reflect a white middle class social context that is foreign to the students. The teacher then labels the student with a deficiency that is based in cultural norms (Garte, 2017). It is no longer enough to be good in general pedagogy. It is important for teachers to have structural and social analysis skills to understand and address inequities that are daily realities for their students and to prevent blind spots in maintaining racism in K-12 schools (Kohli et al., 2017). There was a general reflection from teachers that there was a lack of pre-service development as it related to specifically educating African American students. The teachers noted how detrimental this was for them as educators and posed how further detrimental it is to educators that share no culture backgrounds with their students. There was a conclusion at the end of the PLC that pre-service development is essential to a teacher's implementation of CRP.

### **The Effectiveness of the PLC Structure**

The teachers shared that role of the PLC became one that was essential to their development. The learnings and the ability to have a community to learn, reflect, grow and try new things in was impactful for the teachers in the PLC. The teachers reflected that engaging in the PLC helped them to grow as individuals and as educators. Morris shared, "This development added much more knowledge that improved me" (Morris, PLC 7). Richardson shared, "I love that I always think I know everything and every time I am in our group, I learn something new" (Richardson, Survey 7). The teachers discussed how the PLC helped them to improve their classroom practice and made their classrooms more culturally relevant for their students. Baker

noted, “my CRT experience has definitely made me actively seek to include my students in the curriculum” (Baker, Survey 7). Richardson shared, “developing my CRP skills during our sessions played a huge part in my classroom. I’m now able to see the kids themselves in my lessons” (Richardson, Survey 7).

The teachers also stated the importance of the community of colleagues in the PLC to their growth. Morris shared, “the opportunity to learn the views of others regarding my approach to CRT was very helpful for me. I want to continue to learn the work of others in CRT” (Morris, Survey 7). Dawson contributed, “allowing the peer to peer learning and classroom observations was one of the most impactful experiences for me” (Dawson, Survey 7). As the teachers reflected on their own experiences throughout the PLC progress, they noted the importance of both pre-service development and ongoing development for teachers that teach African American students. They felt that CRP development within a community of colleagues was essential for teachers to be effective in educating their African American students.

### **Limitations and Implications for Future Research**

This research does have limitations that are important to note. As research has noted, there is a need for professional development for educators where they can spend time examining and unpacking their own biases and be developed on culture in curriculum and instruction in a manner that allows them to undergo a deep exploration on their own beliefs (Mayfield & Garrison-Wade, 2015). This research attempted to expand on the conversation. The research is limited to participants who signed up for the study and CRP PLC. The participants who signed up for the study were individuals that had some level of interest in CRP prior to the study. There was a general acknowledgement in the PLC that CRP challenges many deep-rooted mindsets, beliefs and societal norms and calls for deep self-awareness work, an openness to learning and

growth and stretching one's pedagogy from the known to the unknown. The participants shared a like-mindedness in this way. The findings excluded the viewpoint of individuals who lack a general interest in CRP. There is a likelihood that additional work would need to be done on self-awareness, culture and bias for individuals who are less familiar or who have a lesser interest in CRP.

All of the participants also racially identified as African American. While the study provides important foundations of learnings from the perspective of African American teachers, it does not include white teacher perspectives, nor any other minority teacher perspective. Future research might examine the perspective of other racial groups of teachers. White teachers need a particular focus since they make up the majority of the teaching force nationally. Background diversity should be expanded to include more participant diversity respective to regionality, socio-economics, classroom experience and pre-service program. Within the suggestion of having more diverse groups, there should be a consideration of allowing racial groups within the PLCs to have specific racial affinity group time. The participants noted the importance of comfort and shared experiences within the teachers PLC's. Having shared background and experiences allows for more immediate comfort, trust building and openness.

Further research additionally needs to be done on the impact of the boarding school structure. For the more part aside from having additional time with students to build relationships and have shared experiences the teachers in the study did not note the structural aspect of a boarding school environment being central to the development and implementation of CRP practices.

## **Conclusion**

Educating teachers on CRP is both important and urgent. This study was created on the researched premise that the American education system is failing African American students because it is not designed for them. The American education system is riddled with systemic oppression that actively keeps African American students from achieving the same levels of success within the system as their white counterparts. Assuming there is a true desire to change, systems are slow to change and requires a lens beyond just the education sector. Yet, the education system is currently failing to provide an equitable education experience for millions of African American students. This study places the onus on schools and specifically teachers to change the educationally experience of African American students.

Schools and teachers need support in understanding pedagogy and structures that they can use to better impact their African American students. The teachers in the study noted an eagerness and urgency to create this impact. “The opportunities that we have to impact the education system if we can determine and show the effectiveness of incorporating more culturally relevant instruction is huge” (Morris, PLC 2). “Like what people are not realizing is that when the baby boomers die our legacy is near the cusp of going extinct and being forgotten with them (Richardson, PLC 6). During and after the PLC the teachers in the study had a sense of urgency that this work is both important and urgent for their students and future generations.

Beginning the study, I believed the boarding school structure would be an important structural component to be able to effectively serve African American students because of the possibility of calculated deposits. I additionally believed that the boarding school structure would be important to teacher ability to provide CRP as it allows for more time for relationship building with students and more time for curriculum and instruction. Interestingly, the boarding

school structure was scarcely discussed by the teachers as key to being able to deliver CRP or as a factor of structural success for their African American students. The boarding school model provides for additional time but appears not needed in being able to develop and implement teachers ability to provide CRP.

Very few studies in the current body of research on the African American students' educational experience link systemic racism with the current gap in achievement of African Americans. The current work on CRP teacher development is similarly a small body of work. This study is a part of widening and boarding this field of research. The findings from the sample of teachers in the study indicates that there is a need for teachers of African Americans teachers to receive both pre-service and ongoing training on CRP to better serve African American students. It is notable in the study that only African American teachers opted in. It was mentioned several times in the PLC that CRP development is something needed for any teacher who is educating African American students. A question arises from this study of what additionally needs to be done to ensure teachers from other racial backgrounds, particularly white teachers understand and find value in CRP as a means for improving their students education experiences. As further research is done on developing teacher's ability to provide CRP and the impact of CRP on students, it will be key to diversify the pool of teacher receiving this training as well as include administrators in the training. A shared understanding of the importance, buy-in and a willingness to devote time to CRP came up throughout the PLC to the success of this work. While CRP development may not be the only answer to solving the equity gap for African American, it is a step in the right direction.



## **APPENDIX A. CRP PLC PRE-SURVEY**

Teacher Name:

1. How many years have you been a teacher?
2. What racial background do you identify with?
3. What gender background do you identity with?
4. Which three of your identities are most important to you (ie Race, Socio-economic status, Gender, Religion, Sexual Orientation)?
5. Why did you decide to teach at Thrive Academy?
6. Do you do things with your students before or after school during the residential time?
7. do you get to know your students? How do you maintain relationships with your students?
8. When did you learn about culturally relevant instruction?
9. How was culturally relevant instruction introduced to you?
10. In reference to culturally relevant instruction which statement best describes you? (I know I know it, I know I can do it, I know I can critique it)
11. What are some things that you do to make your classroom culturally relevant?
12. One a scale of 1-10 how culturally relevant do you believe your class is today?

## **APPENDIX B. CRP TEACHER POST PLC FEEDBACK QUESTIONNAIRE**

Teacher Name:

1. What was the focus of the PLC today?
2. What stuck with you the most from this PLC?
3. On a scale of 1-10 how helpful was the professional learning community today?
4. On a scale of 1-10 how much would you agree with the statement: This professional development added to my knowledge about culturally relevant instruction?
5. On a scale of 1-10 how much knowledge do you believe stuck today?
6. What would you like to explore further in the next PLC?
7. Where would you say you currently fall with culturally relevant instruction: I know I know it, I know I can do it, I know I can critique it?

Additional Questions during Session 4-7:

1. What are areas you felt you excelled in on the rubric?
1. What are areas that you felt need to be the focus for improvement from the rubric?

## APPENDIX C. IRB FORM



### ACTION ON EXEMPTION APPROVAL REQUEST

**TO:** London Moore  
Curriculum and Instruction

**FROM:** Dennis Landin  
Chair, Institutional Review Board

Institutional Review Board  
Dr. Dennis Landin, Chair  
130 David Boyd Hall  
Baton Rouge, LA 70803  
P: 225.578.8692  
F: 225.578.5983  
[irb@lsu.edu](mailto:irb@lsu.edu)  
[lsu.edu/research](http://lsu.edu/research)

**DATE:** March 1, 2019

**RE:** IRB# E11556

**TITLE:** Developing teachers ability to provide culturally relevant pedagogy within a boarding school setting

**New Protocol/Modification/Continuation:** New Protocol

**Review Date:** 3/1/2019

**Approved** X **Disapproved** \_\_\_\_\_

**Approval Date:** 3/1/2019 **Approval Expiration Date:** 2/28/2022

**Exemption Category/Paragraph:** 2c

**Signed Consent Waived?:** No

**Re-review frequency:** (three years unless otherwise stated)

**LSU Proposal Number** (if applicable):

**By:** Dennis Landin, Chairman 

### PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: PLEASE READ THE FOLLOWING –

#### Continuing approval is **CONDITIONAL** on:

1. Adherence to the approved protocol, familiarity with, and adherence to the ethical standards of the Belmont Report, and LSU's Assurance of Compliance with DHHS regulations for the protection of human subjects\*
2. Prior approval of a change in protocol, including revision of the consent documents or an increase in the number of subjects over that approved.
3. Obtaining renewed approval (or submittal of a termination report), prior to the approval expiration date, upon request by the IRB office (irrespective of when the project actually begins); notification of project termination.
4. Retention of documentation of informed consent and study records for at least 3 years after the study ends.
5. Continuing attention to the physical and psychological well-being and informed consent of the individual participants, including notification of new information that might affect consent.
6. A prompt report to the IRB of any adverse event affecting a participant potentially arising from the study.
7. Notification of the IRB of a serious compliance failure.
8. **SPECIAL NOTE: When emailing more than one recipient, make sure you use bcc. Approvals will automatically be closed by the IRB on the expiration date unless the PI requests a continuation.**

\* All investigators and support staff have access to copies of the Belmont Report, LSU's Assurance with DHHS, DHHS (45 CFR 46) and FDA regulations governing use of human subjects, and other relevant documents in print in this office or on our World Wide Web site at <http://www.lsu.edu/irb>

## WORKS CITED

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## VITA

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