

ABSTRACT

Jerry Taylor Matkins, Jr., **BUILDING BRIDGES: IMPROVING BEGINNING TEACHERS' CULTURALLY RELEVANT TEACHING PRACTICES** (Under the direction of Dr. Matthew Militello). Department of Educational Leadership, May, 2021.

Schools across the United States are becoming more diverse and the way they respond to that diversity could make all the difference in the success of future generations. The purpose of this participatory action research study was to provide beginning teachers with a better understanding of how culture plays a role in teaching and learning. This study included a community of beginning teachers over one calendar year. During that year, the beginning teachers took part in several Community Learning Exchanges (CLEs) that created mutual trust and understanding of cultures. The findings of this project support the conclusion that when teachers successfully implement culturally relevant teaching (CRT) strategies, they create common ground, understand cultural influences, and understand the importance of relationships. When CRT strategies are incorporated, an equitable learning environment is created. The policy, practice, and research implications for educational leaders can lead to beginning teachers that understand their students better.

BUILDING BRIDGES: IMPROVING BEGINNING TEACHERS'
CULTURALLY RELEVANT TEACHING PRACTICES

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by

Jerry Taylor Matkins, Jr.

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents, my beautiful daughter Baylor, my future son Reece, and my supportive wife Barksdale. This journey would not have been possible without the endless love and support from these individuals and many more. Thank you for believing in me.

To my parents, Jerry and Robin: From the day that I wanted to be an educator to the day that I decided to get my doctorate, you both have been there for me. You never questioned my motives or ability but instead asked how you could help. Thank you for always believing in me.

To my kids, Baylor and Reece: I hope that you both look back on life and know that your education is the only thing that can never be taken from you. Objects and people come and go, but knowledge is empowering. No matter the circumstances, push yourself to learn more. Thank you for my biggest achievement of becoming a father.

To my wife, Barksdale: You have walked beside me through every educational journey. When I would lose hope or motivation, you were always there to pick me up and push me forward. Thank you understanding that my life goals also come with sacrifice.

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CHAPTER 1: NAMING AND FRAMING THE FOCUS OF PRACTICE (FOP)

North Carolina's educational system is at a crossroads. The demands of educating and developing youth for a globally competitive economy are clear. As a result, federal and state mandates raised the bar on student achievement; yet, both federal and state funding remain diminished. North Carolina continues to make budget cuts. North Carolina spends \$2,000 less per pupil than the national average, and teacher pay ranks 37th out of all states. Nationally, 30% of teachers leave schools within their first 5 years of teaching, only never to return (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 2003). During 2016-2017, the percentage of North Carolina teachers that left the teaching profession was 8.7%. The percentage of beginning teacher that left the profession was 12.31%, substantially higher than the state's average for all teachers (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction [NCDPI], 2018).

There remains hope despite the lack of adequate funding and high teacher turnover rates. That hope rests in those closest to the students: the teachers. Teachers are the single most influential factor in student achievement (Goodenow, 1993; Roorda et al., 2011). But it is not that simple. The relationships forged between student and teacher set a foundation in which the student feels comfortable and willing to make mistakes (Fredriksen & Rhondes, 2004; Roorda et al., 2011). Those relationships allow a journey to take place in which both teachers and students learn from one another. Most experienced teachers understand this as it takes years to perfect. However, beginning teachers lack the experience of veteran teachers to build appropriate relationships effectively. This project explores how those relationships that are formed, allowing novice teachers to understand the importance and role of culture. Through a better understanding of their students, beginning teachers empathize with their students' culture and how that plays into their teaching and learning. This research starts by contextualizing the areas included in the

study, which is also called the Focus of Practice. This put into focus the purpose of this study. Contextualizing the focus of practice provides specific lenses for this research study including both challenges and assets. These challenges and assets are examined through three viewpoints: macro, meso, and micro. Next, I highlight the purpose statement and research questions and I provide the context in the research theory of action and the research design. Limitations of the research design round out this chapter.

Contextualizing the Focus of Practice

After the 2017-2018 school year, North Carolina reported fewer public-school students passed state exams years despite greater efforts to increase proficiency. The previous school year, overall proficiency in the areas of math, reading, and science was 59.2% while the 2017-18 school recorded a drop to 58.8%. More alarmingly, the third-grade proficiency rate in 2014 for reading was 60.2%. By 2018, it dropped to 55.9%. The effects have started to reach the high schools. Math I proficiency dropped almost seven percentage points from 2017 to 2018 while English II proficiency decreased by one percentage point. For the past 12 years, high school graduation rates have increased across the state. Unfortunately, that streak came to an end in 2018.

Demographic Shifts

For the past 2 decades, the drastic demographic changes of United States school-age children occurred. The percentage of White school-age children has decreased from 62% to 52% and the percentage of Black students decreased from 15% to 14%. In contrast, the percentage of school-age children from other demographics, particularly Hispanic, has increased. Figure 1 shows more the percentage distribution of children from 5 to 17 years old by race/ethnicity. As our nation becomes more diverse, our public school teachers demographic changes failed to keep

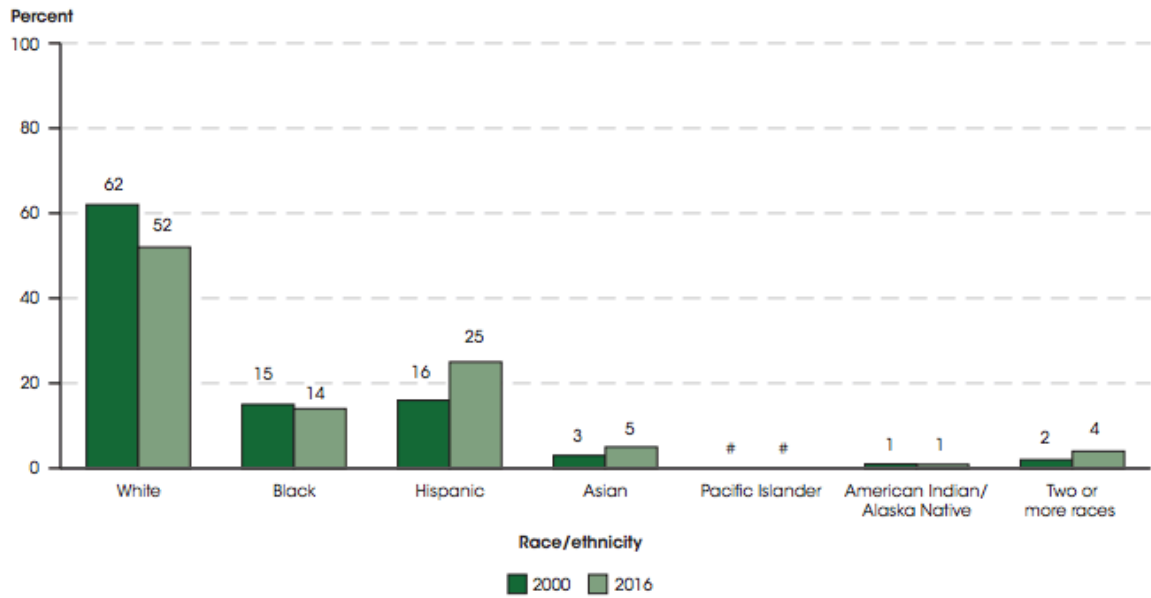


Figure 1. Distribution of school-aged students.

pace. The U.S. Department of Education reported, in 1987, approximately 87% of teachers identified as White. In 2012, White teachers compiled 82% of the work force, down 5% over the past 25 years (Aud et al., 2013). On the other hand, the number of teachers not identifying as White increased 5% the past 25 years. The number of diverse students is increasing at a rate faster than the employment of diverse teachers. With this distinct mismatch, teachers are entering culturally diverse environments with the daunting task of overcoming gaps in opportunity and academic achievement.

North Carolina public schools also experienced demographic shifts. The increased diversity of North Carolina schools present both opportunities and challenges for the educational workforce. Those opportunities include chances for schools to adapt to a changing world but only if they are ready. A sense of urgency among educators and other policy makers has increased in order to ensure equity for all students under federal mandates (Brown, 2007; Dean, 2002; Furrer et al, 2014; Gay, 2000; Johnson, 2007).

Cultural Disconnect

The current trends in teacher and student demographics present challenges for schools. There is a strong disconnect between the students' culture and the school culture which can affect student success. Minority students' culture typically does not match that of their school's (Nieto, 1996) which creates challenges for those students. Cultural disconnects create educational inequities for diverse students (Reardon, 2014). Their experiences do not align to school culture and are fewer compared to the majority (Aud et al., 2010; Reardon, 2014). The cultural inequities show in test performance, high school graduation, and college acceptance (Reardon, 2014).

The persistent achievement gap among minority students created a sense of urgency in education (Brown, 2007; Gay, 2000; Johnson, 2007; Ladson-Billings, 1995). The achievement gap refers to the disparity in academic performance amongst groups of students (Nieto, 2004). Scrutiny has been given to the gaps in performance on standardized tests. Research shows that teachers and school systems have developed lower expectations of minority students based on their socioeconomic status (Nieto, 2004). Data also supports that teachers' beliefs about student success can directly influence their students' academic success. An academic achievement gap between cultures and races has been evident throughout our school systems for decades (Storer et al., 2012). Test scores in both math and reading have increased for all students nationwide; however, the gap has increased in reading between White students and other races (NCDPI, 2018).

Achievement Gaps

There is also a disparity in the number of minority students identified with a learning disability (Donovan & Cross, 2002; Klingner et al., 2006; Maholmes & Brown, 2002). Maholmes and Brown (2002) revealed Black students were identified as cognitively impaired almost three times more than White students. They also reported that Black students more likely to be labeled as having a specific learning disability than their White counterparts. Banks (2004) cited similar evidence that involved Hispanic/Latino students. Due to the lack of understanding and exposure to mainstream culture and verbal cues, Hispanic students performed at a much lower rate academically which created achievement gaps, an increase in special education referrals, and disengagement from school (Banks, 2004).

While minority students account for the largest population in special education programs, they have been underrepresented in courses and programs designed for students that are gifted or

highly intelligent (Moore et al, 2005; Valdez, 2003). This lack of representation could be explained by teachers determining eligibility solely on a student's scores without using other methods (Baskin, 2001).

More often than not, minority students are not identified as academically gifted, which sometimes translates into many minority students becoming disengaged and as a result, many of these students never graduate (Orfield et al., 2004). In 2016, the graduation rate for White students was 88%, while Black and Hispanic students were 76% and 79% respectively (NCDPI, 2018).

Due to federal mandates, schools are forced to face their students' achievement or lack thereof. The current student achievement gaps force stakeholders to reconsider both macro and micro-level practices. Educational inequity for some groups challenges the foundation our nation was born on (Nieto, 2004). In order for societies to be successful, they must be educated. If our nation continues to ignore the disparities in education, eventually our nation suffers (Reardon, 2011). It is our nation's duty to create equal opportunities for all students (Hawley, 2007).

In order to reach and teach all students research suggests that teachers must create an inclusive, understanding, accepting, and nurturing culture within their classroom (Allen & Butler, 1996; Gay, 2010). According to Gay (2000), "Culture is at the heart of all we do in the name of education, whether that is curriculum, instruction, administration, or performance assessment" (p. 8). Gay (2010) argued, "A very different pedagogical paradigm is needed to improve the performance of underachieving students from various ethnic groups—one that teaches to and through their personal and cultural strengths, their intellectual capabilities, and their prior accomplishments" (p. 26). Gay (2010) promoted that schools use culture as way to bridge school to home.

Culturally responsive teaching takes place in individual classrooms by teachers building connections between knowledge and culture while demanding high expectations for all (Gay, 2010). A teacher that implements culturally responsive teaching pedagogy into their classroom can engage students by increasing rigor through access of prior knowledge, norms, and communication styles that students are embedded in their culture. This can be accomplished while incorporating new curriculum (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2006). In a culturally responsive classroom, learning becomes more meaningful (Au, 2001). Culturally responsive teaching is believed to work best when academic knowledge and skills are connected with prior experiences of students. In return learning becomes more meaningful, interest is peaked, and learning is fluid (Gay, 2002).

Culturally responsive teaching acknowledges that students' thoughts and behaviors are the results of their environment. Culturally responsive teaching requires teachers to address their thoughts and perceptions of other cultures head-on. It forces educators to reflect to determine their current thoughts and feelings that may be easily present or hidden. This reflection is vital for an educator before they ever change their thoughts or practices. The foundation of culturally responsive teaching includes an implementation of pedagogical methods and processes that digs deep into misconceptions of cultures. It forces the educator to ask themselves how they can become more inclusive with all students. Knowing their students' experiences and building off of them provides an opportunity for relationships to be built and connections to be made. The process of culturally responsive teaching is both a personal and professional endeavor that takes time to develop but is one that benefits all (Gay, 2013).

The most prominent characteristic of a culturally responsive teacher is a strong understanding of everyone's culture within the classroom. Once a teacher can identify a student's

background in their classroom and understand how that can affect them within the classroom, the teacher can begin to teach. So often, a teacher starts the year off with lessons, activities, and strategies that are geared to the masses. But if a teacher does not take the proper steps to assess and know the students present in his/her classroom, those strategies and lessons will only be as effective as the audience's understanding. The teacher has to be able to incorporate the abilities of the students along with their experiences into their lessons in order for them to be successful (Gay, 2000). In order to do this though, relationships are needed.

Research Project AIM

The research project AIM is to provide beginning teachers with support to increase their knowledge of effective relationships. By learning their students in context, building relationships, and implementing specific strategies in their classrooms, teachers may improve their understanding of their students and the students' cultures. In the area of psychology, the teachers address their own stereotypes of students while incorporating strategies to break down those barriers. The teachers recognize racial and gender differences and support them in order to become better citizens. Through this deeper understanding of students, the education system benefits due to high self-efficacy in all stakeholders. Figure 2 provides more details of the AIM.

The following section explores the focus of practice. Along with the focus, background information is provided along with why there is a need for this research. With every project, challenges and assets are always present and I explain those later. Most importantly, this information provides context to the reader on why this project is necessary to the development of beginning teachers for all stakeholders.

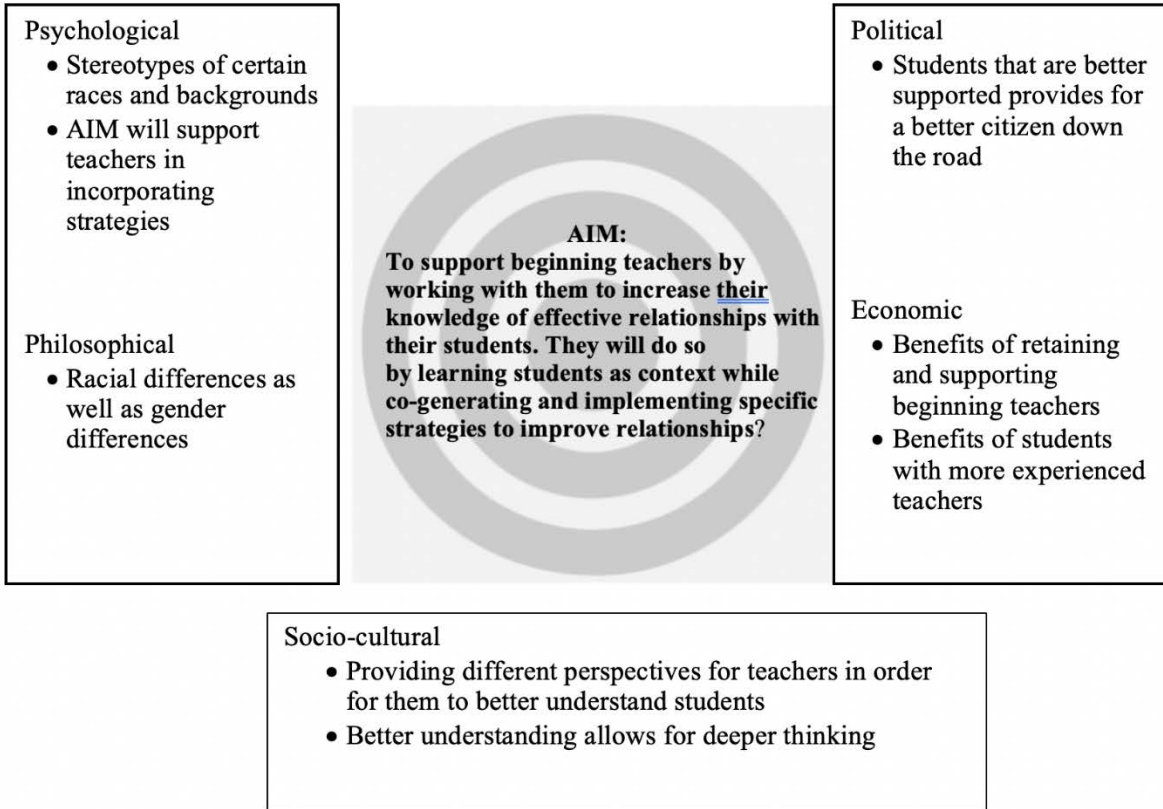


Figure 1. AIM statement.

The Focus of Practice

This study is anchored in the notion that strong relationships between students and their teachers are vital to the development and success of all students (Birch & Ladd, 1998; Hamre & Pianta, 2006). Positive and meaningful student-teacher relationships allow students to be able to grow not only socially but cognitively. Relationships and trust are built by a mutual sense of respect for one another. Once built, students work hard for teachers, and in turn, teachers are able to invest in future generations to continue our society. When teachers and students become invested in one another, the success of the team is unlimited. Students know their teacher has created an environment in which they can succeed—that the teacher recognizes and responds to any problems but push them to exceed (Gay, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 2006). These student-teacher relationships provide students with a foundation for successful adjustment to new social and academic environments (Hamre & Pianta, 2006). The need for positive student-teacher relationships must not be viewed as a secondary need but one that requires as much thought as curriculum and instruction.

The first years of teaching are crucial for the development of a teacher; experiences shape and define their future in education. Those first years are also very influential in whether teachers stay in education (Feiman-Nemser, 2001). The cost of neglecting teachers' first-year experiences could be detrimental not only to the teacher but also to the students. One way to support teachers is by assisting them with strategies for building relationships with students. Strong relationships may lead to cognitive and social improvements, ultimately preparing competitive global citizens.

In the following section, I present challenges and assets that are associated with the project. School connectedness has a significant effect on student achievement. For students to stay in school, attend school on a regular basis, and have academic success, it is vital for the

teacher to build relationships with each student. By doing so each student feels as if they have a champion in their corner to help them navigate the hurdles of life. Those personal connections ultimately increase student achievement. Positive student-teacher relationships may indeed prove to increase student engagement.

This study also provides obvious information for district and school-based administrators from which to benefit. With similar learning situations found in this project, schools can be implemented learning strategies with educators of all levels of experience in order to build continuity. Administrators model for teachers the strategies and importance of creating relationships and how they can effectively engage students in their learning process. The research project will show how utilizing an authentic setting, both teachers and administrators can see how relationship-building strategies were implemented.

The need for this research should start before teachers are hired in a school system. Traditional teacher prep schools provide individuals with a foundation to understand student relationships, but their experiences can be limited. More research and data are needed to better justify that teacher prep programs need to explore this topic (Crosnoe et al., 2004; Hamre & Pianta, 2006). With the large task of preparing the next generation of teachers to enter the workforce, teacher prep programs would benefit from data that this project produces. This research can produce practical applications for those programs and allow the opportunity to reflect. If teacher prep programs draw connections on the need for positive student-teacher relationships, then programs could be designed to educate beginning teachers on this importance through enriching experiences.

Challenges and Assets

Evidence dictates that strong relationships between students and their teachers are essential to the success of both (Hamre & Pianta, 2006). The purpose of this section is to show the reader the assets and challenges of relationship building at a macro, meso, and micro level within the educational system. The assets have the opportunity of changing the way beginning teacher support is provided throughout the nation and local districts. These challenges have the ability to affect the outcome of the project and need to be taken into consideration.

Macro Level

Macro-level refers to a national perspective. The assets at the macro level include higher standards, increase global competitiveness, and teacher efficacy. Investing in a teacher is investing in the future. The role of a teacher can make a lasting impact not only on the student but the world. By investing in teachers, the nation makes a commitment to the generations and indicates that our main priority is to develop globally minded students who can compete (Innovate America, 2004).

The challenges at the macro level include decreased enrollment in teacher prep programs and high turnover. Enrollment in teacher preparation programs at universities has taken a major drop. Since 2000, numbers have steadily decreased in bachelor's degrees in education each year while the number of master's degrees has taken a major downfall since 2010 (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). Along with low numbers of graduates with education degrees, teachers are leaving the profession at an alarming rate. Many reasons stem from low salaries, poor working conditions, and the lack of feeling appreciated (Imazeki, 2005). With the teacher shortage that is prevalent across the nation, more and more schools are having to hire teachers through an alternate route certification program or from

international programs. Unfortunately, those teachers hired are leaving at a faster rate than those that graduated from a typical teacher preparation program (Zhang & Zeller, 2016). Currently, the United States fares poorly in international comparisons of student performance in academics. Overall, the United States ranks 8th in secondary education but fall to 39th in primary education (Schwab, 2016).

Meso Level

There are many assets that North Carolina school systems experience when beginning teachers develop relationships with their students. If proper support is provided to beginning teachers, that could develop a sense of self-efficacy. Professional development that cultivate relationships would assist with classroom management and the execution of the curriculum. With self-efficacy and a firm understanding of relationships, the beginning teachers would be primed for roles as experienced educators that could enhance learning. It wouldn't just stop there. Those same beginning teachers could share their experiences with other novice teachers. This would create leadership roles in fledglings that would only increase their self-efficacy.

Education in North Carolina has numerous challenges that have presented setbacks for teachers and students. One of the major hindrances that have changed the landscape is funding. Schools and their educators are being asked to do more with less these days. Difficult decisions are made that do not always favor the teachers. According to the 2018 North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions Survey results, 33% of teachers stated that they did not have the appropriate professional development needed. On top of that, teachers have also inherited a multitude of roles within the school compared to a few decades ago. That same survey reported that 35% of teachers agreed that they had insufficient time to complete their required duties. Limited

resources and time for school systems have created many issues for teachers that cause issues down the road and have taken away from opportunities to build relationships.

Micro Level

At the school and district level, the assets allow for individuals to grow relationships. By growing their knowledge of their students' backgrounds, teachers could learn more about their students in context. They would build connections that were meaningful and purposeful. Beginning teachers could find consistency in classroom expectations and outcomes. Their self-efficacy would expand with each successful task. Not only would the teacher benefit, but as stated before, the student would also benefit. With an increase in two-way engagement between the teachers and students, both parties would foster relationships that would prove valuable.

Challenges are very similar but unique at the same time. One challenge is the inconsistency with the administrator in schools. With the constant changing of the guard comes new expectations and systems. This can enhance or frustrate beginning teachers where change is the only constant. Turnover at the top allows for more opportunity for turnover to occur down the line. Another challenge is the misconception of appropriate relationships between teachers and students. Beginning teachers often come into the profession with a strong sense of wanting to enact change but do not know how to handle things appropriately when adversity strikes. Many beginning teachers enter the classroom their first year looking for ways to make friends with their students, causing lines to become blurred and issues to arise throughout the year. Lastly, attention to beginning teachers can sometimes be limited in schools. So often, the daily struggles cause schools to neglect their beginning teachers. In return, beginning teachers do not seek the guidance that they need so as not to bother or hinder others. More often than not,

beginning teachers find themselves looking for new jobs before the first semester is even over. Figure 3 provides a detailed analysis of the challenges and assets.

The following section provides an overview of the purpose of the research project. The overarching research question that drives this project gives a better understanding of the direction. Finally, a brief overview of the research design is detailed along with the limitations.

Purpose Statement and Research Questions

The purpose of this participatory action research project is to discover beginning teacher's perceptions and dispositions towards cultural responsiveness by measuring their relationships with their students. The main objective is to create, implement, and fully model strategies that support beginning teachers in implementing culturally responsive strategies with their students. By implementing a series of professional development and Community Learning Exchanges, beginning teachers reflect and share their individual experiences with diverse students. In addition, the researcher can determine if the main objectives of this project have been met by the feedback and the data collected. This project has one overarching research question and three sub-research questions.

Overarching Question: How do beginning teachers come to understand the importance and role of culture in teaching and learning?

- a. To what extent do beginning teachers understand the students they serve?
- b. To what extent do beginning teachers identify and plan to integrate the elements of culturally relevant pedagogy?
- c. To what extent does implemented culturally relevant strategies with beginning teachers affect my leadership as a principal?

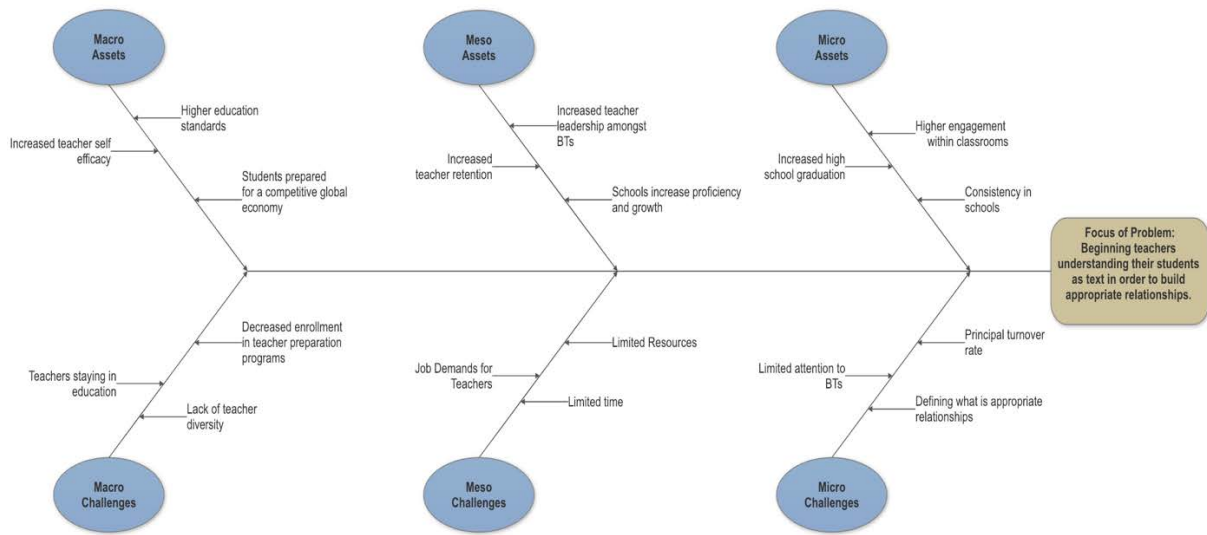


Figure 2. Challenges and assets.

Research Theory of Action

This project holds significance for many organizations and groups, but it holds a special place with the researcher. I was once a beginning teacher in an eighth-grade science classroom. I almost left the profession during my first year. I was searching for an out due to the challenges I met in the classroom. I approached my students with intent and purpose. I made sure the strategies that I utilized were research-based, the organization and progression of my standards made sense, and that my lessons were designed to hook and engage. All of this was met with resistance from students. As a White male with different experiences and a different background compared to my students, I quickly realized that I did not have a true understanding of the diverse students that sat before me each day. With the best intentions, my first year was nothing short of a disaster. Over the summer, after having a chance to catch my breath and reflect, I did some soul searching on how I could improve my craft. As the second year began, I started to realize the importance of the curriculum, but more important was building relationships and understanding the students that I serve. Over the following years, I perfected the art of relationship building with over 100 students each year. I knew their family life, their previous experiences, what they liked and what they did not like, and most importantly, what made them tick. All of that was achieved through dialogue and a better understanding of the role of a teacher in a classroom. It took some time, but I quickly began to understand that the best lesson plans could not provide for my students without a firm foundation of relationships and cultural understanding. Once relationships were forged, students started to learn.

Now as a principal in a school with similar demographics to where I taught, I observe the same scenario with beginning teachers. The diverse student population provides an enriching opportunity. But similar to their principal, the beginning teachers have a more difficult

understanding of the diversity that is present. There is a new set of diverse students with some similar and some new challenges. The goal of this project is to support beginning teachers in reflection and the utilization of culturally relevant strategies in their classrooms. Through these two opportunities, the hope is that the teachers develop a better understanding of their students through the relationships that are created.

Research Design Overview

This project's design involved three parts of participatory action research (PAR). It sought to help beginning teachers understand the cultures present in their classrooms through culturally relevant pedagogy. The first part was centered on self-reflection and understanding their preconceived notions on diversity. The second and third parts continued with the reflection but incorporated culturally relevant strategies. Altogether, each part made use of the data gathered and lessons learned in the previous part.

Part 1

Incorporating a Community Learning Exchange and its pedagogies was a major focus of the first part of this PAR project. The beginning teachers needed a foundational understanding of culture and an opportunity to self-reflect on their own experiences. We focused on creating a space for the teachers where teachers felt comfortable with sharing their ideas and thoughts with one another. It was also vital for them to understand that each one of them brought something unique and valuable to the team. The participants took part in a CLE that took them through a journey of their past experiences and allowed them to open up to others. Finally, a discussion was initiated to share. This process was overseen and facilitated by the researcher.

Part 2

The second part of this PAR project began with a review of the first part. The beginning teachers were provided a brief reminder of the context of the project. The team that participated in professional development was provided by a facilitator from East Carolina University that has a strong understanding of culturally responsive teaching. The facilitator walked the teachers through some examples and nonexamples of culturally responsive teaching strategies. Following that, the team participated in a CLE where it gave them an opportunity to reflect and share. Throughout the CLE and discussions, feedback was collected and analyzed. I also provided memos on related conversations that was held between me and teachers. All of these items were recorded.

Part 3

The final part of the PAR project centered around collaboration. It was important that the teachers understood the connections from the activities to the purpose of the project. Follow-up discussions were held with individual teachers to get input on how they thought they had grown from participating and determining how their progress had transformed their approach to the students and their teaching styles. Feedback was recorded and used to analyze the implications.

The basis of this research was to utilize the PDSA cycle to improve relationships between teachers and students. The PDSA cycle consisted of four steps—Plan, Do, Study, Act.

1. *Plan.* The researcher distributed a description of the study and consent to all of the teachers and students that participated in the study. Teachers were asked to complete the inventory at that time and return it to the researcher if they were willing to participate in the study. The researcher created questions and procedures for the focus groups, gathered materials, and created a plan for utilizing the data.

2. *Do*. This phase of the study involved a focus group of beginning teachers. They were asked to participate in CLEs along with answering questions. The questions focused on influences of culture and how it shapes what happen in the classroom.
3. *Study*. This step involved data analysis, comparing data, and determining similarities. Next, the researcher gathered the qualitative data then coded the data in order to find similarities. The qualitative data collection also included classroom observations in determining what actions occurred in classrooms with teachers that had developed relationships with their students. Follow-up questions were created to clarify and refine the analysis and were developed based on the unique responses of the participant.
4. *Act*. The final step required the researcher to work with the beginning teachers. The researcher was able to implement some professional development with the beginning teachers to help refocus or refine their relationships they had developed. After it was implemented, the researcher then developed the next phase of the study.

Study Limitations

Limitations of this study start with the selection and participation of the teachers. All of the teachers came from one school, which provided limits on their experiences with more diverse students. The project only included beginning teachers and there was only a small pool of participants. It did not take into account more experienced teachers and how they would react to similar experiences. The participants were also not representative of the demographics at the school as most were White females under the age of 30. These participants were also hired to fill teaching duties in the school for the principal which also happens to be the researcher. I evaluate

the beginning teachers multiple times throughout the year, which may lead teachers to respond to questions in a manner that pleases the evaluator.

The school setting contributed to the limitations of this study. Every school takes on the identity of the community it serves. This research was based around a rural K-8 school that is predominantly Black and Latino. Other culturally diverse populations are not represented in this research. This study also did not take high school students into account.

The researcher could also have impacted or limited the validity of the findings. Since this was a qualitative study that included CLEs and discussions conducted by the researcher, the connectedness of the researcher to the data set could impact the findings (Creswell, 2014). While there may be useful implications for a wider audience of practitioners and researchers, the conclusions drawn from this study are specific and credible. With the robust set of data, the results may not be generalizable, but it is transferable to other research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Chapter Summary

The role of a teacher has changed drastically in the past decade. With a country that has become more diverse, teachers have to understand that. In order to help prepare beginning teachers to achieve success, this participatory action research study proposes that teachers learn about their students in context by developing relationships with them and incorporating culturally relevant practices in their classroom. The three parts of this project determine its impact and outcomes.

The following chapters describe the content, context, results, and implication of this project. Chapter 2 consists of a review of existing literature as it relates to beginning teachers and support. Chapter 3 details the research design used to engage in the project and to answer the research questions. Then, Chapter 4 provides a more in-depth understanding of the context of

this project. Chapter 5 details the PAR project and the outcomes, while Chapter 6 ties the results and outlines the implications.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This chapter provides a review of the extant literature that encompasses the aim of the study. The aim of the literature review is to signify the importance beginning teachers must put on understanding their students that they serve by building relationships. The review is divided into three sections. First, I examine beginning teacher support. Specifically, I highlight the normative models as well as the empirical research. The intent is to provide a basic understanding of beginning teacher supports in addition to the models and research. Second, culturally responsive teaching is explored in regard to the conceptual underpinnings as well as the empirical research. Here I provide the role and success that culturally responsive teaching has on minority students.

This literature review is broken down into two bins. The first bin details beginning teachers and the support that they receive. Beginning teacher orientation is discussed, followed by coaching and mentoring. Ongoing professional development is then highlighted followed by evaluation and administration support. All of these areas are important to the development of a teacher. The second bin details culturally responsive teaching. Cultural disconnections are provided in order for the reader to understand the context. Then culturally responsive teaching pedagogies follow and how relationships and empathy can shape a teacher's understanding. Finally, student achievement and how that can affect efficacy in teachers and students conclude the literature review. Figure 4 is a visual representation of the three bins and how they interact with one another.

Beginning Teacher Support

The first three years of a teacher's career is considered their beginning teacher phase. The North Carolina State Board of Education mandates new teacher support for all beginning

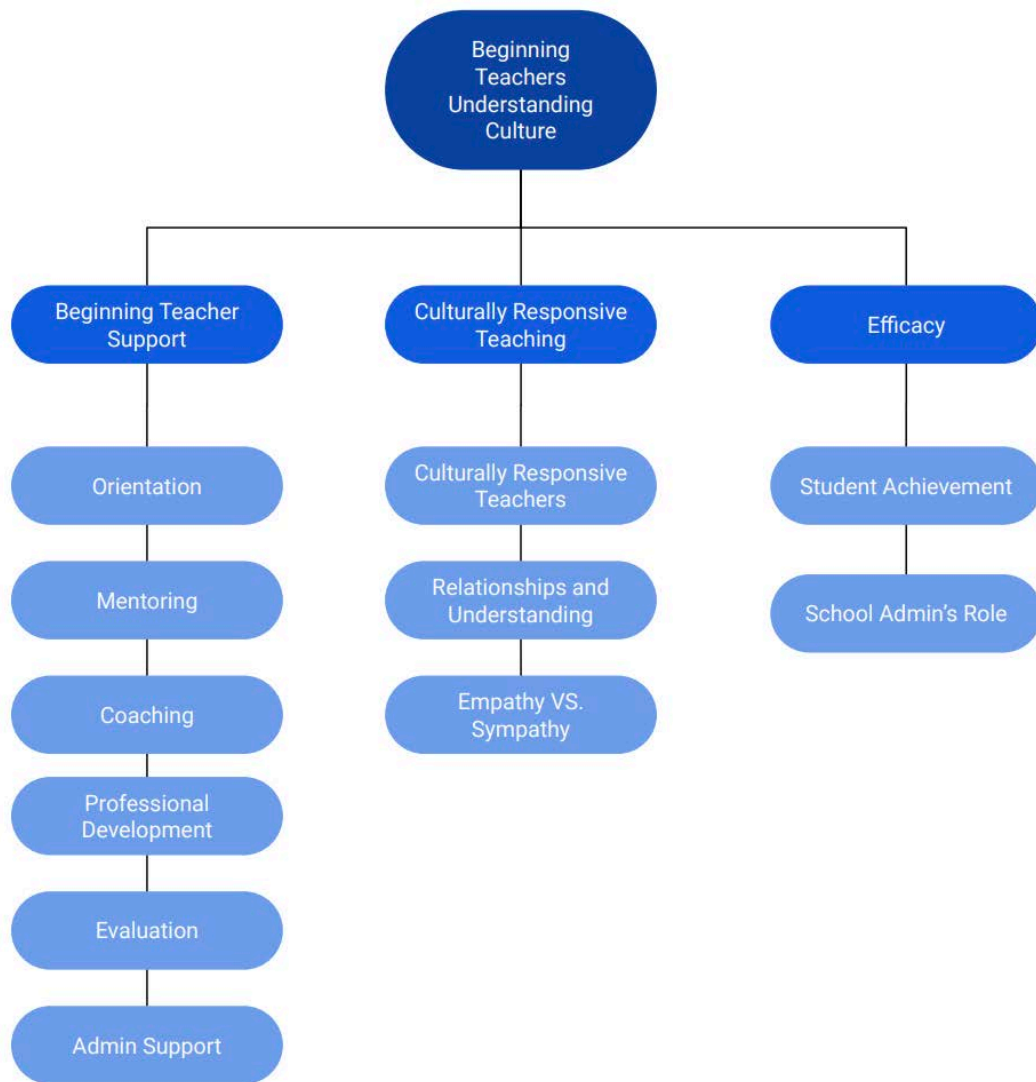


Figure 3. Literature review bins.

teachers. The support that is given must be considered as a process that assists the growth and development. The teacher induction process includes training, support, and mentoring by experienced teachers and staff (Curran & Goldrick, 2002). Bartell (2004) states “the goal of a systematically planned program of induction is to help new teachers not just survive, but to succeed and thrive” (p. 6). To improve teaching, and ultimately student learning, teachers must hone and improve their practice. The theory of action behind new teacher induction stipulates that IF new teachers are provided training, professional development and mentoring, THEN they improve their practice and thus impact student achievement. Wisdom in teaching comes from experience and support.

According to Wong (2004), induction programs must include different components designed to assist in supporting of a beginning teacher. The five components that the reader explores include orientation, mentoring, professional development, evaluation, and administrative support. Each component, if done correctly, is designed to provide the beginning teachers with an experience that will increase their knowledge. He suggests that these programs do not alienate one single component but instead uses all five in unison. This is not a one-and-done program, either. Tiered support is expected through each stage of their career.

Orientation

Potemski and Matlach (2014) discussed that a comprehensive induction program should include a beginning orientation to the district and school culture (p. 2). Orientation is nothing new to any career; however, each school system is different. A comprehensive orientation can provide a foundation and a better understanding of the expectations. During orientation, teachers should be exposed to the schools and/or district’s vision, mission, goals, policies, and procedures (Reeder, 2013). Orientation also allows for beginning teachers to network with others in similar

situations and meet their supervisors. Building connections early offers the beginning teachers the opportunity to become invested and to see that their supervisors are invested in them as well. Typically, in a low-pressure situation, the beginning teachers can ask questions, understand processes, and know who to go to if there is ever a question.

Mentoring

A crucial part of a beginning teacher induction program is mentoring (Bullough, 2012). Mentoring is simply the process of pairing up a beginning teacher with a veteran. This process has proven to be the biggest factor of success for novice teachers (Polikoff et al. 2015). A mentor is a trusted, experienced teacher that can help support the needs of the beginning teacher (Moir, 2007). Mentoring can take place in both formal and informal settings. Typically, a mentor meets with the beginning teachers on a defined basis and together they have conversations that are centered around support for the beginning teacher. It also allows for the new teacher to build an ally that they can feel comfortable with going to in order to ask questions.

Developing a supportive relationship between the mentor and the mentee is of vital importance (Simos, 2013). When beginning teachers are supported by a mentor, they implement successful classroom instructional practices, such as keeping students on task, using effective student questioning practices, adjusting classroom activities to meet students' interests, maintaining a positive classroom atmosphere, and demonstrating successful classroom management (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011, p. 201).

The accessibility of mentors has also proven to be an important piece to successful beginning teachers. Strong mentors should be selected within the same building and ideally within the same subject/grade level in order to be effective (Wood & Stanulis, 2009). Beginning

teachers need the opportunity and time to meet with their mentors on a regular basis. This allows for both parties to reflect and analyze (Wood & Stanulis, 2009).

Coaching

Beginning teachers should have the opportunity to undergo coaching from either an instructional coach, a trusted peer, or an administrator. Good coaching occurs when support is given to a teacher in order to help him/her achieve determined goals (Bloom et al., 2005). A coach assists the beginning teacher by identifying a problem area with a fresh perspective. The coach observes the teacher teaching and provides strategies and skills in order to rectify the issue. Coaching should not be confused with training, supervision, or mentoring, although effective mentors should utilize coaching skills. Silver et al. (2009) conducted a study on coaching programs with beginning teachers. After surveying beginning teachers and administrators, they found that the program was a positive addition to the induction process. The teachers and administrators determined that the coaching they received was personalized and differentiated for their individual needs (Silver et al., 2009). It should also be considered as a way to help the teacher transition from “a student of teaching to a teacher of students” (Ingersoll & Smith, 2004, p. 29). Beginning teachers who are a part of the induction process are more likely to use effective instructional strategies that assist with student achievement, have better classroom management skills, and stay within the profession longer (Brewster & Railsback, 2001).

Professional Development

Professional development is an ongoing process that teachers take part in and is key for growth (Desimone et al., 2002). Professional development during the first few years of teaching helps instill the importance of being a lifelong learner that is linked to professional growth

(Taranto, 2011). Teacher quality is also the most important factor in raising student achievement and professional development supports the growth of educators (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). Development should create a culture centered around professional growth in order for beginning teachers to be successful (Wong, 2002). Induction programs should offer a variety of professional development opportunities that cater to the needs of the teacher (Wood & Stanulis, 2009). The ultimate goal of professional development for teachers should be to build knowledge while improving student learning (Wei et al., 2009). Most importantly, high-quality professional development focuses on providing support for teachers with diverse learners (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2004). Professional development should be designed to benefit all students despite their needs (Wei et al., 2009). The goal of professional learning for teachers should be to support and improve student learning (Wei et al., 2009).

Evaluation

Observations and evaluations are required of all North Carolina beginning teachers. Evaluations correlate with state standards and assist administrators in determining identifying strengths and weaknesses (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2004; Wiebke & Bardin, 2009). Through the evaluation process, support can be identified and provided for beginning teachers. A beginning teacher undergoes four observations while teaching in North Carolina. Three observations are completed by an administrator while the fourth one is completed by a peer. During the evaluation process, administrators utilize the teacher rubric in order to align beginning teachers with North Carolina standards. The process should ideally be utilized to provide support for beginning teachers.

Administrative Support for Beginning Teachers

Administrators play a vital role in the induction process. They are responsible for providing orientation, assigning mentors, and encouraging a school climate that supports collaboration (Bickmore & Bickmore, 2010; Brewster & Railsback, 2001). As previously mentioned, mentoring is critical to supporting beginning teachers and administrators play a role in the process of building those relationships (Wiebke & Bardin, 2009). Administrators are also responsible for developing novice teachers into master teachers through constructive feedback, professional development, and opportunities to extend learning (Inman & Marlow, 2004).

If beginning teachers lack support from their principals, they tend to feel undervalued and unappreciated (Bickmore & Bickmore, 2010). Bickmore and Bickmore (2010) found that teachers need to feel valued and respected in order to be successful. Principals can facilitate that process in order to help retain teachers and keep attrition numbers low. Constant conversations and checking in with beginning teachers gauge the development of the teacher and allows for the principal to address any concerns that may arise.

Beginning teachers enter into a profession and sometimes they are not adequately prepared to face the challenges. These teachers need support from every level within a district in order for them to teach. With an ever-changing country that has become more diverse, beginning teachers require support in order to retain and build successful schools. In the next section, culturally responsive teaching is explored. Culturally responsive teaching is defined and along with its components.

Culturally Responsive Teaching

Classrooms across the nation are becoming increasingly culturally diverse (Aud et al., 2010; Mattingly & Varner, 2015). Over the past 2 decades, the United States has seen a drastic

increase in the amount of racial and ethnic diversity present (Terenzini et al., 2001). On the flip side, our teacher workforce has not caught up to the diverse student population. This mismatch can create issues for teachers as it relates to their understanding of students. Relationships and understanding cultures present in a classroom are important in order to overcome deficits with students. Layer in low levels of teacher retention and lower levels of efficacious practice, and students are left with a constant turnover of teachers that no matter their culturally awareness, never have the time to understand their audience (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003; Lankford et al., 2002; Scheopner, 2010; Siwatu, 2011). These side effects can have short- and long-term effects for not only our schools but the world's well-being. Studies have shown that diverse students are experiencing lower than average academic achievement, lower graduation rates, and even lower college applications. In response to these disconnects, our teachers need assistance in culturally responsive teaching in order to prepare and teach to all students (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

As stated previously, student populations across the nation do not look or have the same experiences that they did twenty years ago. Even though our students continue to progress with diversity, our teachers seem to remain homogeneous (Swartz, 2003). The cultural gap between these two populations is widely recognized and watched (Sleeter, 2001). Overall, the teacher workforce has been dominated by White, middle-class teachers with European values (Boykin, 1994). Nationally, there has been a decrease in diverse teachers, which further increases the likelihood that diverse students be taught by a White teacher (Banks, 1991; Zeichner & Melnick, 1996). There is nothing wrong with a particular race becoming a teacher, but differences in racial, ethnic and cultural background can cause a strong disconnect between teachers and students. Not having shared experiences and being able to relate or understand your students can

cause misconceptions. What may look like a student misbehaving may mean that that student is competing for attention. Teachers unfamiliar with students' backgrounds sometimes misinterpret cultural differences (Osher et al., 2004). These misconceptions can lead to poor self-esteem, discipline problems, and poor academic outcomes for diverse students. Figure 5 breaks down the percentage distribution of teachers in public schools by race/ethnicity dating back to the 1980s.

In spite of more diversity among students and less among teachers, teacher prep programs are falling short of the challenge. Teacher preparation programs have implemented programs designed to help beginning teachers in this area. More classroom experience in diverse settings has been an option that many programs have reviewed. Others have incorporated culturally responsive teaching into their coursework. Despite the valent attempts, teachers are still falling short (Barnes, 2006). In one study, Irvine (2003) determined that beginning teachers have negative beliefs and low expectations for their more diverse students that seem to root from their prep programs.

Culturally Responsive Teachers

In order to best serve a diverse learner, teachers need to develop a better understanding of their cultures in order to enhance their learning (Lee, 2003). Research has shown positive effects of culturally responsive teaching with minority students (Bazron et al., 2005; Brown, 2007; Gay, 2000). Some of the positive outcomes have been increased academic performance, lower discipline, and higher success post high school. Nieto (2013) defines culturally responsive teaching as:

CRT is a mindset that respects and honors students' cultures, experiences, and histories and finds ways to include them in the curriculum. It affirms identities and expands their

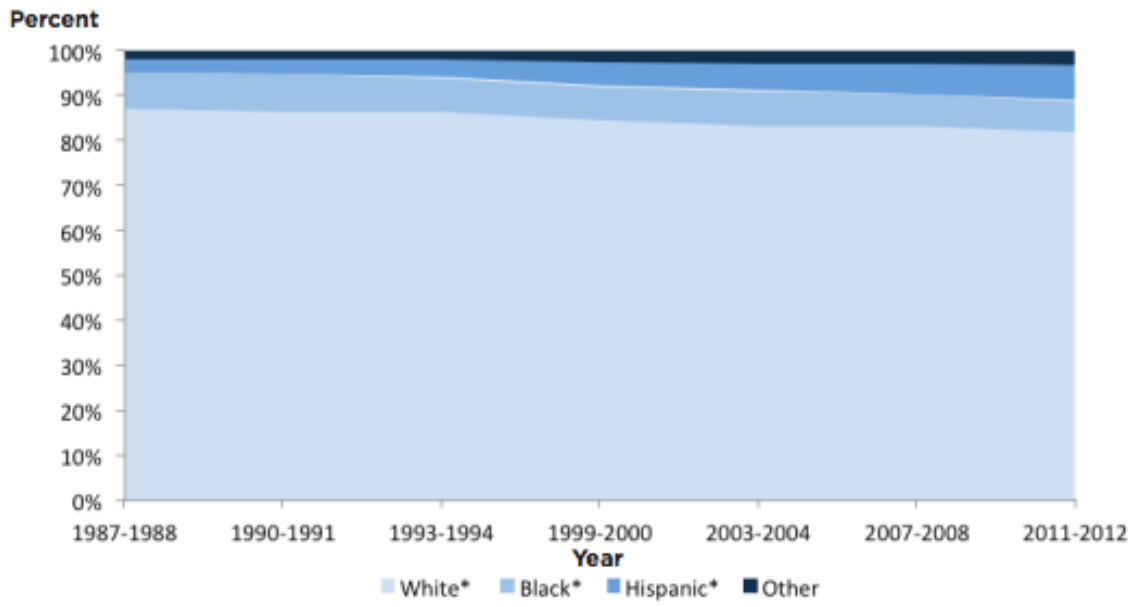


Figure 4. Percentage distribution of teachers in public schools by race/ethnicity.

world holds high expectations. It means learning about family practices and values and infusing those practices and values into the curriculum. (p. 53)

Sleeter (2012) defines culturally responsive teaching as:

These teachers get to know their students as individuals and as group members, show respect for students and their cultures (thus affirming their identity and heritage), and connect meaningful academic teaching and learning with students' prior experiences.

Some also encourage students (and their families) to become more critically aware and able to challenge inequity within and beyond school (p. 564)

Gay (2002) developed a framework of culturally responsive teaching. She defined it as “using the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively” (pp. 106–107). Gay (2002) outlines five dimensions that further define culturally responsive teaching. Those five dimensions are emancipatory, validating, comprehensive, transformative, empowering and multidimensional. Figure 6 explains the five dimensions in greater detail.

Ladson-Billings (1995) was one of the first researchers to begin the exploration on culturally responsive teaching. Ladson-Billings (2009) found that culturally relevant teaching worked to the advantage of minority students in the classroom. It took into account the whole student and their experiences. The intentional dissection of a student equips teachers with a better understanding of how to provide in an academic setting that is biased. Culturally relevant teachers are different because that utilize specialized teaching methods. They focused on the individuals and differentiated their instruction based on past experiences. Within a culturally relevant classroom, a teacher does not simply instruct to the masses but instead takes on the role of a facilitator who connected the teaching to students' cultures (Ladson-Billings, 2009). All

EMANCIPATORY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allows students freedom from mainstream truths • Open to new ideas of learning and knowing
VALIDATING	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acknowledges different cultures while affirming them • A variety of resources and materials are used to include all students
COMPREHENSIVE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focuses on the whole student
TRANSFORMATIVE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognizes and enhances the strengths of ethnically diverse students
EMPOWERING	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengthens students' self-efficacy
MULTIDIMENSIONAL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Includes curriculum content, classroom climate, student-teacher relationships, instructional strategies, and assessment results

Figure 6. Five dimensions that define culturally responsive teaching.

students learn differently, and culturally relevant teaching allows for connections to be made between family background and identity (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Villegas and Lucas (2002) found that culturally responsive teachers were able to reach all students through their teaching. Those teachers were able to do so through their understanding of cultures, high expectations for all students, removal of barriers from within the classroom, and a strong knowledge of their students (Villegas & Lucas, 2002).

Nieto (2013) found that culturally responsive teachers were also resilient. Culturally responsive teachers share many common characteristics. Some commonly displayed traits include genuine love for the students in their classrooms while also taking on several roles other roles that may be missing in their lives. Culturally responsive teachers also nothing less for their students than high success and were willing to do whatever it took to make sure it happened (Nieto, 2013). For Nieto (2013), culturally responsive teaching included critical self-reflection, a deep understanding of cultures, an expectation of high standards for all, and committing to lifelong learning. These characteristics bled into their classrooms with diverse students causing students to rise to the occasion.

Relationships and Understanding

Every classroom has the opportunity to develop a culture unique to the inhabitants. The facilitator of that culture is typically the teacher. In order for cultures to develop, relationships are forged and established. Gay (2000) characterized strong interpersonal relationships within classrooms as ones that were strengthened by patience, persistence, facilitation, validation, and empowerment. In classroom cultures that are characterized as nurturing, the students are held to high standards where failure is not an option. Benard (2003) argued that teachers that created environments of care and support had the most success in closing the achievement gap because

the students want to know that someone cares for them. Culturally responsive teachers are able to achieve that by the connections that are built (Noddings, 1992).

Ladson-Billings (1995) expanded on the importance of relationships. Relationships were not just an option but a necessity. She characterized effective teacher-student connections as:

- Teacher-student relationship is fluid, humanely equitable, extends to the interactions beyond the classroom and into the community
- Teacher demonstrates a connectedness with all students
- Teacher encourages a “community of learners”
- Teacher encourages students to learn collaboratively. Students are expected to teach each other and be responsible for each other. (p. 60)

Effective relationships are not simply about high expectations but ensuring that all understand them. Allowing students to see their worth and assisting them with well-established goals creates an environment where any student can step out and achieve success (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968). A culturally responsive teacher takes the time to communicate the need for excellence and follow through. These teachers see the possibility in their students and motivate them to reach great heights (Delpit, 1995) while not allowing them to make excuses. Kleinfeld (1975) coined a term called warm demander. A warm demander is a teacher who engages and motivates their students who in return builds confidence.

Finally, the physical environment is transformed with a culturally responsive teacher. Regardless of the setting, a culturally responsive teacher disguises a bland room into one that reflects sensitivity of all cultures by displaying them proudly. They use positive motivation in order to build successful students (Kuykendall, 2004). Inclusivity becomes the norm within those classrooms and creates an environment where all feel at home.

Empathy versus Sympathy

Empathy and sympathy are often used interchangeably. However, the difference is dramatic. Both deal with an individual's feelings in relation to another individual but from there they are different. Empathy can be defined as an emotional response, or matching of affect, between an observer and the person being observed (Feshbach, 1975; Hoffman, 2001; Stotland et al., 1978). Empathy involves being sensitive but does not involve the observer. Sympathy, on the other hand, involves a response of compassion or concern for the person being observed. Eisenberg and Strayer (1987) were able to distinguish the two. They referred to empathy as feeling with another and sympathy as feeling for another.

Empathy is a desirable trait within teachers of diverse settings (McAllister & Irvine, 2002). Without a doubt, teachers face students from different walks of life-some have had an easier route while others have experienced more challenges. Research suggests that teachers who are more effective with diverse students also display empathy within their classrooms (Gordon, 1999; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Empathic teachers have also been known to help students find their niche in schools while building relationships with teachers and peers (Cooper, 2004).

In a study of 34 teachers, McAllister and Irvine (2002) noted that teacher displaying empathy were more effective with all of their students than those that were not. The teachers of the study believed that empathy had a significant part in becoming a caring, supportive, and responsive teacher. They also reported that developing an empathetic disposition allowed them to build more positive interactions with their students the created a supportive classroom environment. Stojiljković et al. (2014) completed a qualitative study with 120 teachers to determine what comparisons could be made between self-efficacy and empathy. Through evaluations, they determined that there was a significant correlation between the two. The

teachers that displayed high self-efficacy also demonstrated high empathy. In return, those teachers that were high in both areas were able to complete more complex tasks. Goroshit and Hen (2014) conducted a study that explored the relationship between self-efficacy and empathy as well. The study aimed to examine the extent to which the two could predict the effectiveness of teachers. Their sample included 273 teachers in which they participated in a series of questionnaires. The researchers found that self-efficacy and empathy are positively and significantly interconnected.

Teacher Efficacy

Teacher efficacy is the belief in oneself to bring about desired outcomes of student engagement and learning (Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2001, p. 783). Bandura (1986) developed the concept of self-efficacy and emphasized how behavior is influenced through self-perception. Teacher efficacy is a critical component of teacher success and student success. A teacher's belief in oneself to make a difference in minority students increases the chances of actually turning belief into action. Research suggests that teachers stay in education when they believe they can teach and positively influence their students (Hoy & Miskel, 2001). Bembenutty (2006) also found that teachers with high levels of efficacy are committed to their students' education. Also, teachers that experienced higher levels of efficacy reported being more satisfied with their job (Klassen & Chiu, 2010).

Student Achievement

Several studies have been linked to teacher efficacy and student achievement. Holzberger et al. (2013) found that high teacher efficacy translated to better classroom management and high achievement scores with all types of learners. Caprara et al. (2006) surveyed over 2,000 teachers on their sense of efficacy while examining their test scores. They found that there was a positive

correlation between a high sense of efficacy and high student achievement. Holzberger et al. (2013) also found a correlation between teachers' efficacy beliefs and their instructional quality. The more efficacious the teachers are, the higher the students' perception of their teaching abilities.

Jerald (2007) stated that teachers with high efficacy plan better and be organized, more open to new ideas, and are less critical of their students work. Due to this mindset, they are more likely to achieve higher goals from themselves which translate to their students achieving more. Khan (2011) investigated teachers' efficacy and secondary students' achievement. He found that the teachers' sense of efficacy affected their expectations of student achievement. They typically tend to have high expectations of their students to perform, while teachers with a low sense of efficacy expect failure. Gibson and Dembo (1984) found that teachers with a higher sense of efficacy spent more time preparing for class and in return had positive results.

According to Tschannen-Moran and Woolfolk Hoy (2001), teacher efficacy also helps with student engagement. Pines (2002) stated that more efficacious teachers provide more meaningful work that capture their interest. The teachers are more committed to their students therefore they create lessons that captivate their audience. van Uden et al. (2013) found that teachers with high levels of efficacy rated themselves as higher in terms of student engagement. Ashton and Webb (1986) found that high self-efficacy also correlates with effective classroom management and organization strategies that properly deal with behavior situations. Teachers with high efficacy levels manage their students better and utilize different management styles (Morris-Rothschild & Brassard, 2006). Teachers' self-efficacy influence their persistence and develops resiliency (Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2001). Persistence and resiliency are

necessary to serve populations of poverty. According to Al-Alwan and Mahasneh (2014), they observed a correlation between the teachers' efficacy and students' attitudes.

School Administrators' Role

One daunting task that school leaders have to wrestle with the increasing achievement gap present in minority students (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2009). School leaders are presented with the task of creating an environment that models respect and value. Once that safe space is created, then other staff members will recognize those expectations and emulate them for others to see (Davis, 2002; Verdugo, 2002).

School leaders must also consider opportunities to break the mold and lead staff in culturally responsive practices (Boske, 2009; Davis, 2002; Verdugo, 2002). Research supports that if school leaders create buy-in with their staff, they are more conscientious about the support they give in their classroom (Boske, 2009; Davis, 2002; Verdugo, 2002). Culturally responsive leaders should also develop a strong background in curriculum and instruction in order to recognize when practices and policies do not advocate equity for all (Boske, 2009; Davis, 2002; Verdugo, 2002). School leaders have to develop a sense of responsibility and use their servant leadership to help build capacity in staff for all students to be able to learn effectively (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Gay, 2000; Glatthorn, 2000). Davis (2002) clearly stated, "if we are to begin to create school systems that can enrich the lives of poor and minority children, we must develop a philosophy of leadership that is mindful of the importance of and significance of culture" (p. 5).

Effective school leadership is also necessary for developing teacher efficacy (Gray & Ross, 2006a). Schools that had administrators that helped build teacher efficacy had greater teacher commitment, partnerships, and higher academic achievement (Gray & Ross, 2006b). Hipp (1996) found that middle school principals affected efficacy by addressing problems that

were within their scope and assisting teachers in the journey. Those partnerships showed unity was expected no matter the title of an individual. Self-efficacy can be developed early in learning (Bandura & Wessels, 1997) and administrators can affect a teacher's efficacy positively or negatively. School administrators should see this as an opportunity to develop and grow novice teachers that can positively affect the outcome of our world.

Chapter Summary

The review of literature details that beginning teachers need support in order to prepare them adequately for the profession. Furthermore, the literature also shows us that the student demographics are becoming more diverse while the people who are instructing them are not. That begs the question, how do you support novice teachers with students who are culturally different than themselves? That answer can be found by developing culturally relevant practices and understanding the learners and students as text; teachers can develop meaningful relationships that can increase self-efficacy. In return, teachers unite with their students, and student achievement increases.

Chapter 3 provides the methodology that was used in this study to answer the research questions. The chapter highlights the research design, including the participants. It also discusses the parts of the PAR process. Finally, it details how the data were collected and analyzed to determine its impact.

CHAPTER 3: ACTION RESEARCH DESIGN

The purpose of my participatory action research (PAR) project is to increase beginning teachers' knowledge of their students' backgrounds by developing an understanding of the cultural identities that make up their classrooms. My theory is that if novice teachers execute culturally responsive teaching strategies, they (a) develop a strong sense of understanding; (b) in turn, reflect on their teaching and impact; and (c) enhance the learning experience. As a team, the beginning teachers and I implemented a process for gathering information about the students we serve in order to implement culturally responsive strategies successfully. Currently, public schools have a plethora of data that pertain to proficiency or growth; however, there is very little data present that can help a teacher understand a student and adequately provide for them based on the students' background. This project sought to help eliminate those deficiencies. The team of teachers explored misconceptions of cultures along with common miscues in teaching culturally diverse students. This journey assisted in broadening each teacher's understandings and knowledge of students with different backgrounds.

In the following sections, the research design is detailed and explained why it best fits this context. I also discuss why the participants were selected and how they impacted the project. I go into more detail about the parts of the inquiry process, the data collection tools, and the data analysis methods. Finally, I address the role of the researcher and the potential limitations of this study.

Research Design

This action research project design included different approaches to enact changes in small-scale situations. The changes could be studied and implemented on a larger scale (Stringer, 2013). The project contains the participation of one school and focuses on the culture that is

present within the building. In the following sections, I describe participant selection criteria. Next, I describe the three parts of inquiry implemented in the project and the project activities. Following that, data collection and analysis are discussed, and finally, how the data were analyzed to determine the effectiveness of the project. Finally, as the researcher and the direct supervisor of the participants, I discuss my roles and ethical considerations.

Participants

Participant selection derived from a purposive sample of five beginning teachers. The teachers ranged from entering into their first year of teaching to their third year of teaching. All participants taught in a rural K-8 school in Pitt County, North Carolina. Selection of participants stemmed from the typical struggle to identify and make appropriate relationships by novice teachers.

The purposive survey sample included all female teachers, three White, one Black, and one Asian. The five beginning teachers ages ranged from 21 to 40 years old. The teachers hailed from around the world. One teacher was born and raised in Germany, and one each from North Carolina, Indiana, California, and New Jersey. Table 1 displays the demographics of the five teachers.

Inquiry Process

The participatory action research implementation lasted over a year with three different inquiry cycles. Each cycle gained deeper insight in the teachers' understanding of culturally relevant teaching along with a better understanding of students as context. Table 2 shows achievable goals the team created during each cycle. Afterwards, the team came together to review the outcomes and determine if expectations were met.

Table 1

Beginning Teacher Demographics

Teacher	Ethnicity	Grade Taught	Years of Experience
Teacher A	White	1 st Grade	2 years
Teacher B	White	3 rd Grade	1 year
Teacher C	Black	4 th Grade	2 years
Teacher D	Asian	5 th Grade	1 year
Teacher E	White	7 th Grade	1 year

Table 2

Logic Model

Goals	Activities	Timeline	Outcomes
Establish team meeting norms	Creation of a team that included beginning teachers and students	Part I Spring 2020	Participants establish a gracious space and discuss desired outcomes
Increase an understanding of teacher/student relationships and culturally responsive teacher	Activities that allow student understanding and culturally responsive teaching	Part 2 Summer 2020	Participants continue reflection and participate in CRT strategies
Implement culturally sensitive pedagogies	Activities selected by team that create a sense of inclusion for all	Part 2 & 3 Summer 2020- Fall 2020	Strategies are implemented and feedback is discussed
Use information gathered to influence practice	Feedback from participants Code data and triangulate Develop action plan	Part 1-3 Spring 2020- Fall 2020	Changes in understanding of culturally diverse students
Implement culturally responsive strategies in classrooms	Measure impact	Part 3 Fall 2020	A deeper understanding of students in their context

Part One: Spring 2020

The first part of the PAR project required developing a system of routines and procedures. As the researcher and the direct supervisor of the teachers, I obtained an informed consent form from the participating beginning teachers. The team consisted of the beginning teacher participants, the school's lead mentor, and me. Next, the team focused on the outcomes of the first inquiry cycle. It was also important for everyone to have a chance to reflect and to look inward on their interpretations of culture. The team held a Community Learning Exchange (CLE) allowing all participants voices. During the CLE, the team shared their personal journey and how that shaped their thoughts and beliefs. Since this was an opportunity for individuals to feel vulnerable, the team discussed "gracious space" in great detail. It was important that all participants understood that everyone was on the same page and experiencing similar events.

The next task determined what culturally relevant pedagogies and practices to implement. I reiterated the desire to explore students as context and culturally responsive teaching. Table 3 highlights the pedagogies utilized during our CLE meetings.

Finally, after guiding the team through the activities, we collected feedback on the participants' experiences. Several informal conversations broadened the understanding of what took place and used to plan for the next cycle

Part Two: Summer 2020

Cycle 2 of the inquiry process began with a brief review the spring activities and a heavy emphasis on the reflection process. The team reviewed important terms, CLE pedagogies, and feedback from the spring. The feedback guided our discussion, and we developed a plan for the next cycle. We determined culturally relevant teaching and importance of understanding culture in the classroom remained relevant.

Table 1

Community Learning Exchange Pedagogies

Pedagogy	Description	Purpose	Resulting Artifact	Cycle
Circle	The group gathered in a circle and a talking piece was passed around the room with each individual speaking only when in possession of the talking piece	Democratizing voice and eliciting and honoring wisdom	Notes, photos, or recordings	Part I-3 Spring 2020-Fall 2020
Journey Line	In response to a prompt, participants plot related events on a timeline based on their importance	Helping participants tell their stories	Collected Journey Lines and any analyses completed as a result	Part I Spring 2020
Story Telling	In groups, participants shared stories that were personal to them and beneficial to the group	Increase reflection and create connections	Notes and photos	Part 2 Summer 2020
World Café	At tables, small groups brainstormed around a prompt for a specified amount of time and then move to another table. A “table host” remains at each table to welcome the new group.	Helping participants co-construct understanding and knowledge	Posters from brainstorming sessions Notes from culminating meaning-making conversation	Part 3 Fall 2020

A CRT expert facilitated professional development for the team. Reflective exercises revealed the lack of diversity in many facets of education. The expert asked teachers to put themselves in the shoes of a minority as they looked at these opportunity gaps. Finally, the teachers learned a series of strategies to shift their classrooms to inclusivity.

A summer CLE occurred. The team utilized the World Café pedagogy for the CLE. Teachers answered the prompt, “think about two students-one you knew very well and one that you wish you knew better.” Once completed, the teachers described the selected students physically, socially, behaviorally, and academically traits. Teachers discussed both students and compared connections and relationships. Each group selected a “table host” to lead the discussion and reflection.

To conclude, we came back together to review what had been discussed and how the CRT strategies could be implemented in their classrooms. The group also took part in another reflection activity centered around equity. This activity utilized the closing circle pedagogy. The team reviewed a video about equity along with a unique definition. The teachers took part in a conversation sparked by questions. The last expectation of the teachers was to take one CRT pedagogy that they had learned and implement it in their classrooms until we met again. All throughout, I kept memos that I had written from the discussions and reflections. I reviewed the memos and converted the raw data to codes. From that, I was able to develop emerging themes.

Part Three: Fall 2020

The final PAR cycle explored themes from the data. In our final meeting, teachers answered two questions:

- a. How did they grow by implementing the CRT strategies in their classrooms?
- b. How can these events transform their progress as equitable teachers in the future?

We examined breakthroughs from previous learning and future desires. We reflected upon the first two meetings and changes to beginning teachers approaches for their next year of service. Through the examination of meeting notes, policy documents, and conversations with constituents, I investigated the changes to philosophies, teaching strategies, self-efficacy, and understanding.

Data Collection Tools

The research project methodology involved qualitative measures. The project design relied on collecting, coding, and analyzing data. Ultimately, we sought to gather enough evidence to support themes and guide conversations to better support beginning teachers and diverse students (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Reflective Memos

Throughout the project, I journaled my thoughts, opinions, and reflections. I wrote notes through the lens of the researcher and allowing documentation of cycles and my reflections. The memos provided a detailed account of successes and adaptations for future work. I utilized coded data from memos to draw connections, determine relationships, triangulate the data and determine alignment with the feedback from the participant team.

Meeting Notes

During each meeting, the team recorded meeting notes for data and reflection on the changes to participant perspectives. Constant reflection occurred and a transformative process ensued. We compared meeting notes to previous data to determine participants' perspectives change. Coded meeting notes led to themes.

I attended monthly beginning teacher meetings that were led by the school's lead mentor. The lead mentor facilitated similar discussions and collected meeting minutes. I compared data

to determine similarities and differences from the data collected in the inquiry cycles. We documented and added beginning teachers' feedback from the meetings. Throughout the entire process, I kept track of informal face-to-face email conversations with others that related to my research questions.

Community Learning Exchange Pedagogies

Each cycle exhibited Community Learning Exchange (CLE) pedagogy. CLEs were built on a framework that includes five axioms (Guajardo et al., 2015). These axioms helped guide the design of this PAR project and offered solutions to address differences across cultures, experiences, ages, and backgrounds.

The first axiom states learning, and leadership are a dynamic social process. Relationships and connections create the foundation that leads to change in schools and the effort that supports them. This aligns directly with the research questions that I was exploring. In order to make this shift, a deeper understanding needs to be achieved. The second axiom is conversations are critical and central pedagogies. In order to learn from one another and grow, willingness to listen to one another must occur. Conversations provide an open invitation for all to take part and develop. The third axiom is the people closest to the issues are best situated to discover answers to local concerns. Teachers and the leaders in school hold a unique perspective and knowledge that to create effective change. It is important to note that the inclusion of individuals should not stop there. Families and students maintain an important place in the overall process. Axiom four is that crossing boundaries enriches how we learn and develop. A strategy to continue growth involves discussions with people with differing experiences. By increasing the discussion, understanding, and experiences of beginning teachers with unfamiliar cultures, newfound respect for the individuals they serve developed and a heightened sense of

intercultural sensitivity occurred. The final axiom is that hope, and change are built on assets and dreams of locals and their communities. The desire and willingness to change and make a difference in the stakeholders closest to the school will always be a driving force to continue improvement (Guajardo et al., 2015).

Guajardo et al. (2011) created the Community Learning Exchange theory of change that focuses on relationships, assets and places. The theory has been given the acronym RASPPA representing *Relationships, Assets, Stories, Places, Politic, and Action*. Developing school communities anchored in these areas create a culture centered around innovation and transformation. The first aspect of the CLE process is building *relationships*. Within an effective community, understanding and respect is key. Gracious space is a term that is used to create a setting where there is an open invitation to all to learn about one another. This action creates a climate that goes beyond the basic objectives and develops investment and trust. Identifying and building *assets* are also important to understanding and building community. Every stakeholder within a school can bring something to the table that can be transformative. Effective leaders can make use of their knowledge to create a strong team that can carry out necessary objectives. By focusing on other gifts, leaders will help them discover their talents while building capacity. *Stories* help others understand different perspectives, but they also help the individual to reflect and discover how their background has meaning for them (Guajardo et al., 2011). Stories not only play a constructive role, but they also play one of deconstruction. Through stories, individuals are challenged to examine and decode their origins and content to provide deeper reflection. The next aspect is *place*. For many, that means a physical location, but it can also represent a process. Understanding the values of a school community will better inform the stakeholders. Schools and their leaders cannot improve without an understanding of the needs of

their communities and developing a process to meet those needs (Henderson and Mapp, 2002). *Politic* is the term used to describe the behavior used to improve. This involves the relational process that is intent on improving the self, the organization, and the community. Accomplishing the public good should be an ethical foundation to guide CLEs. The last part of the change theory is *action*. In order to enact change, some type of action is needed. It is not enough for the community to listen and reflect, but a plan is needed to drive transformation. Stories should possess action that can then be put into work.

The integration of all of these elements gives shape to the CLE framework and thrusts us into change for our community. These components do not occur in order or all at once. It was important for the school community outlined in this project to review the different components, assess their current knowledge, and act on necessary steps. Action was the ultimate goal for this PAR project, but it was important to set up the relationships and create mutual understanding in order to get to that. Throughout the process, we would spiral back to ensure that we were covering all components. Figure 7 depicts that components and their integration with one another.

Journey Line.

The first CLE that was utilized first was the journey line. I asked the teachers to reflect on their past experiences and when they became aware of cultural differences. Then the teachers paired with another participant to share journey lines. During sharing, they provided a brief synopsis of the journey line. As a group, we discussed what events in our lives broadened our experiences and what events kept us sheltered. Figure 8 shows an example of a journey line.

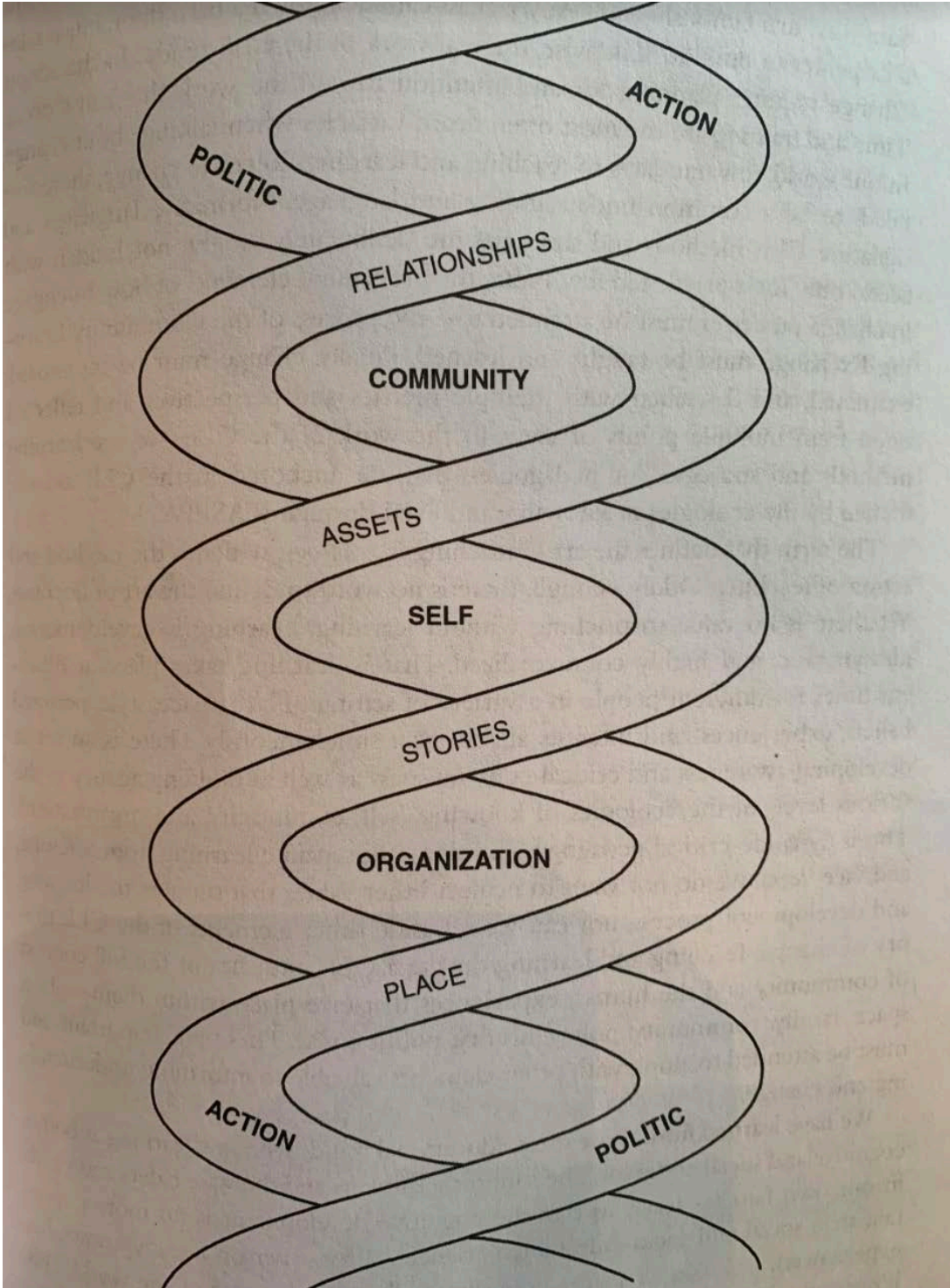


Figure 7. Components of Community Learning Exchange.

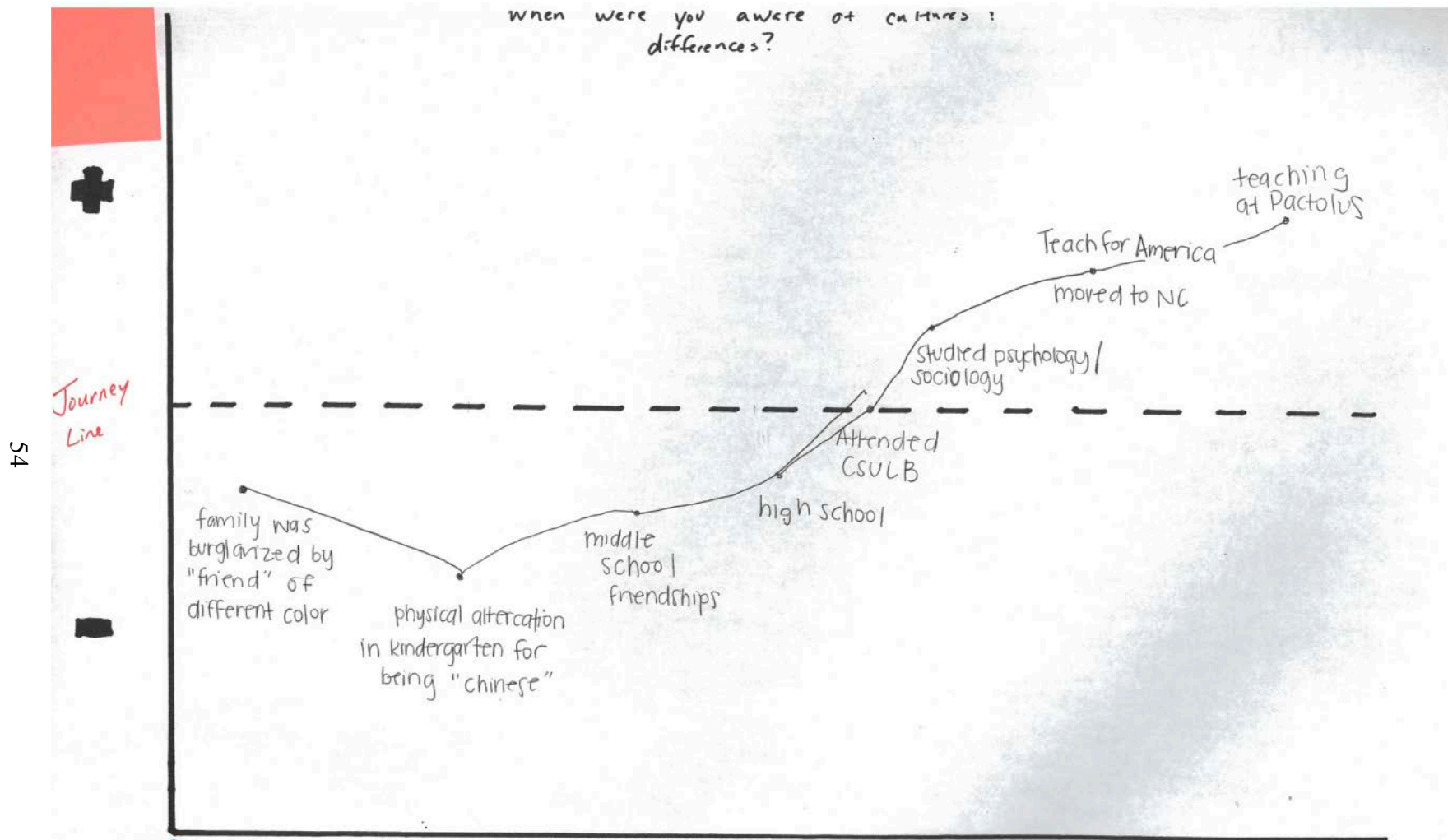


Figure 8. Journey line.

Circle

Along with the journey line, I asked each participant four questions as it related to culture. The participants provided written responses that allowing me to then code them into categories.

1. What does culture mean to you?
2. How do cultures shape us?
3. How can culture influence prior knowledge
4. How can we use different culture experiences to shape our teaching?

The teachers paired up with another teacher. They picked one question that they wanted to share and elaborate on. After they shared that one question, they then found another partner and shared with them a different question than the first one they had selected. At the end, as a group we came together and provided some take-aways from what they had heard from some of their peers.

Storytelling

The next CLE strategy I utilized was storytelling. This provided an opportunity for the participants to reflect on their memories with previous students through their stories. The teachers were all asked to draw two stick figures on each side of their paper. The task was then given to the students which asked of them to think of two students that they had come across in their teaching career. Figure 9 shows the prompt provided to the teachers.

Upon completion, teachers partnered with a peer to share and find common themes between their students in both categories. The group then reconvened, and each pair provided two sentences that summarized their comparisons. Next, the group analyzed the statements and created two overarching generalizations.



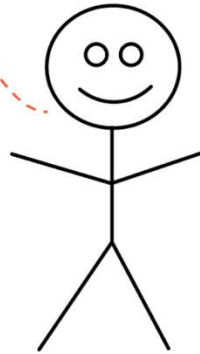
I want you to think about **TWO** students.
One you knew very well and one you wish
you had known better.

**01 Physical
Attributes**

Gender, skin color, height, hair, etc

02 Personality

What made them unique?



**03 Educational
Success**

Were they successful in your class or
not? IEP? Advanced?

04 Home Life

Socioeconomic Status? Parental
involvement? Siblings?

You will draw two stick figures,



Figure 9. Two different stories.

World Café

Our final CLE strategy involved world café. Teachers viewed a video that was recorded by the 2012 Maryland State Teacher of the Year, Josh Parker. The speaker highlighted what equity meant to him as a teacher of color teaching students of color. Participants broke into groups and established group leads at each table. The leads facilitated discussion with their partner. After five minutes, the teacher groups rotated to the next table where the discussion continued. Finally, the teachers defined equity in education using one word.

Data Collection Process and Analysis

The data collection for this PAR project included several forms of qualitative data. First, memos were written throughout the inquiry cycles helped me reflect. Some of the memos focused on work that I was performing with the teachers while other memos focused on my observations of students. The memos provided an opportunity to collect my thoughts on different cultures and racism. Memoing allowed me to stay on track, provide reminders of the progress on the project, and guidance on how to develop the next steps.

Individual journey lines provided a rich amount of data that proved useful in many capacities. The journey lines allowed exploration of the experiences that shaped the teachers. I walked alongside the teachers and received a vivid account of their experiences. Along with the journey lines, the reflection questions helped teachers expand and reflect on their experiences. This afforded me an opportunity to see the teachers' narrative. Conversations with teachers provided additional data and an opportunity to clear up misconceptions. All conversations were transcribed.

Compilation of artifacts and evidence, including memos, notes, and CLE minutes, formed the basis of the data. I utilized Saldaña's (2016) elemental method and affective methods to code

the data. Each time a general code appeared, I placed a tally mark in a data table to represent topics. After two rounds, I clustered similar codes into categories. I determined categories by reviewing data and noting the reoccurring issues mentioned by the participants. Analysis of the categories determined emerging themes. The researcher used specific descriptive words that were echoed by the participants. I sorted and counted the words included in the findings of the study (Saldaña, 2016).

We used code landscaping to help transition from the first cycle of coding to the second cycle of coding. Through code landscaping, textual and visual methods were added in developing themes. Axial coding provided an extension of the coding. Linked categories determined the code relationships. When no new information was found, I determined that saturation was achieved and no new properties or dimensions could be concluded (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). After coding and analyzing, I created assertions. Figure 10 shows the assertion process.

To ensure I answered the research questions, I reviewed the data sources. I aligned the data source to the subquestions and determined if the assertions were aligned. Table 4 links each sub-question to the data source from which information was gathered.

Role of Researcher

The researcher in this study is the principal of rural K-8 school in Pitt County, with a tenure of 3 years. The researcher has direct knowledge of all five teachers that participated in the study. The researcher received approval from the Internal Review Board (IRB) before interviewing participants and collecting data (see Appendix A) and successfully completed the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) modules to ensure ethical research conditions throughout the project. Next, the Pitt County Schools

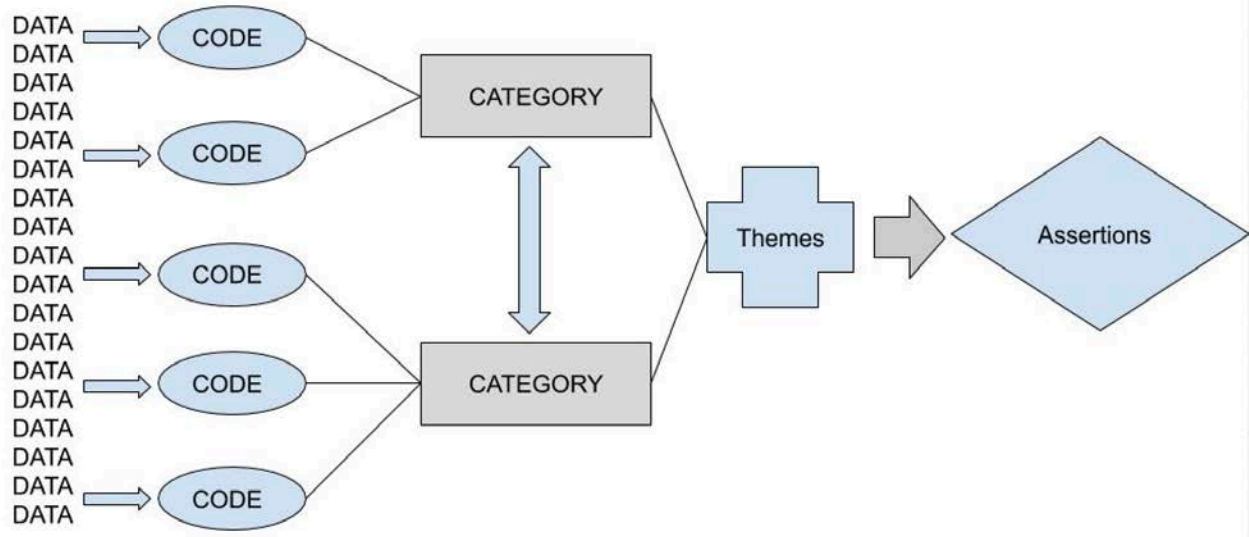


Figure 10. Codes-to-Assertion Model.

Table 4

Linking Data Collection with Research Questions

Sub-Question	Data Source
To what extent do beginning teachers understand the students they serve?	Focus Groups Documentation from CLEs Meeting notes Memos Conversation notes Journey Lines
To what extent do beginning teachers identify and play to integrate the elements of culturally relevant pedagogy?	Focus Groups Memos Conversation notes Documentation from CLEs Meeting notes
To what extent does implemented culturally relevant strategies with beginning teachers affect my leadership as a principal?	Focus Groups Memos Conversation notes Documentation from CLEs Meeting notes Observations

superintendent granted consent. The researcher met with the participants, where teachers received consent forms and project letters. As the principal of the school, the researcher informed the participants the study would not negatively impact their evaluation. The researcher distributed letters and consent forms to all students. All participants understood their right to participate or decline inclusion in the study.

I attempted to remain unbiased throughout the study. My vested interest in all of the participants and the success of this study presented subjectivity concerns. To the best of my ability, I remained unbiased during the study. I ensured confidentiality of all conversations and data collection

Chapter Summary

This chapter outlines the research methodology for the PAR project. During each part of the PAR project, the beginning teachers and I explored our understandings of culture and how we could adapt. We gathered data from the discussions and reflections to evaluate the understandings and implementation of CRT pedagogies. By analyzing the data, I created recommendations and adjustments for teachers to implement in their classrooms. In the following chapter, I explain my findings from each part. In Chapter 5, the themes are discussed, and Chapter 6 outlines the assertions that come from the themes

CHAPTER 4: CONTEXT

The foundation of this participatory action research (PAR) project was that if we are to build meaningful relationships with beginning teachers and students, we must first understand the diverse backgrounds and experiences the students bring to the classroom. Chapter 2 detailed the support, mentoring, and coaching necessary for beginning teachers in their first few years in order to experience success. That same chapter also outlined the complexity of culturally relevant teaching strategies and how they can build efficacy in all individuals. In order to understand this project and its purpose, it is especially important to explain the community in which it took place. This chapter provides an overview of the location, the school, and the groups of this project.

Place

The PAR project took place in a rural K-8 school located in eastern North Carolina. Greenville, North Carolina has roughly 95,000 citizens and is home to a four-year university called East Carolina University. The city has been categorized as one that is family-oriented and growing at a fast rate. The total population is starting to become more diverse but is still heavily dominated by two races. Around 53% of the population is White while 38% is Black. Latinx, two or more races, and Asian comprise the remaining population.

The school is located on the fringes of the Greenville city limits near the Pitt/Beaufort county border. The total student population is around 575 students ranging from ages four to fourteen. Seventy-five certified and classified staff work directly with the students. Despite a Greenville address, the student population does not reflect the population percentages in the city. On the contrary, the school has a large representation coming of minority students. Black and Latinx students each comprise 40% while White students make up 15% with the remaining 5%

are two or more races. Since a large percentage of the student population identifies as Latinx, many families are bilingual or speak Spanish as their only language.

The district recently provided resources to transition the school to a Dual Language school, allowing Spanish immersion. Students entering kindergarten will learn how to speak, read, and write in both Spanish and English. Furthermore, the school is in the process of becoming a Global School. The school implements a global education through specialized curriculum and activities incorporating diverse cultures, geographies, histories, and current issues. The global curriculum focuses on the 12 global competencies designed to build proactive global citizens to change the world.

According to the U.S. Census, roughly one-third of the population lives in the poverty range. One hundred percent of the students receive free breakfast and lunch based on USDA regulations. The median income of the school's families is much lower than the district's average. The district provides financial resources to help bridge opportunity gaps with Title I funding. The funding provides technology, materials, and additional personnel.

Historically, North Carolina guidelines place the school in the low-performing school category. The state reviews the academic performance of schools in two contexts: proficiency and growth. From 2005 to 2010, the proficiency levels for reading in grades 3 through 8 were less than 40% with math proficiency scores being less than 50%. During that same time, the growth index told a different story. Over the past 7 years, the school exceeded growth five years. Unfortunately, sub-par performance in proficiency kept the school in the low-performing status in the 2018-2019 school year achieving the school's highest proficiency rate in math, reading, and science.

Future changes to the school over the next decade make for an appropriate context for the PAR project. The PAR project aligns with its overall mission and vision. The school provides an equitable education for the students and the PAR project allows the journey to continue with a different perspective.

Political Environment

The focus of practice for the PAR project was one that was rooted in data, conversations and the current political setting of the nation. As mentioned earlier, the demographics of the school indicates diverse cultures actually make up the majority of the population. The teacher demographics do not align with the student population. White females make up a majority of the staff. The current political environment of the school and aligns with the national-level political environment. Increased discussion surround inequities occur. The staff implemented the first round of strategies and plans.

Extensive research outlines the numerous inequities in education as it pertains to race. For the most part, educational experiences for minority students have continued to be separate and unequal even years after integration in the United States took place (Saporito & Sohoni, 2007). More than half of minority students in the United States still attend schools that are primarily segregated due to boundaries and receive less funding than those of their counterparts (Powell & Scott, 2013). Schools that serve larger numbers of students of color receive fewer resources and less qualified teachers than those of schools serving mostly White students. Larger class sizes and fewer extracurricular programs exist in predominately minority schools. Finally, students of color are also more likely to be recommended for special education while White students are more likely to be recommended for academically gifted classes (Arriaza, 2003).

Proper teacher preparation positively impacts students' academic performance, no matter the race, proper teacher preparation is needed. Ronald Ferguson (1991) analyzed 900 Texas school districts and found that the teachers' expertise and knowledge as the most important determinant of student achievement. The study found, after adjusting socioeconomic status, the large disparities in achievement between Black and White students were almost entirely due to differences in the training of the teachers. A similar study found that elementary students assigned ineffective teachers with less knowledge and training for 3 consecutive years scored nearly 50 points lower on achievement tests than those with effective teachers.

Minority students are put at greater risk if their teachers are not properly trained and equipped to support them. Students in predominantly minority schools are much more likely to have teachers that are not qualified or trained. This is a situation that is prevalent across the nation and one that finds its way into many local school districts (Peske & Haycock, 2006). By focusing on the development of the teacher, we make a real difference in what students can learn and eventually making a difference on a community, state, and national level.

People

The PAR project impacted several members of the school community. The most immediate and influential impact occurred with teachers. The school's teachers share a unique and positive perspective adopting a growth mindset and hard work ethic. They are aware of the challenges and rewards present. Students comprise the second group benefiting from the project. With their distinctive backgrounds, the students and the teachers often experience a cultural divide impacting student achievement. Bridging the cultural divide benefited the students. The last individual impact was me; as the researcher and principal, my leadership skills improved. In the section, I detail the characteristics of the three groups and how they function as a whole.

Teachers

The teachers representing the school share similar demographics but provide unique perspectives and experiences. The staff consists of White females raised in North Carolina. However, vastly different experiences exist within the teaching ranks. Eight teachers from other states, one teacher grew up in Europe, and two international teachers joined the staff. The remainder shares deep North Carolina roots. About 75% of the teachers received training in a teacher preparation program while two teachers are currently going through the program. About one-half of the teachers have advanced their training earning a master's degree or are National Board certification.

The teachers range in age from early 20s to early 50s. Two distinct subgroups of teachers exist within the school. The first group of teachers classifies as the veterans at the school for seven or more years. The other group comprises of teachers at the school for 6 or fewer years. Roughly, 75 % of the teachers have been working at the school for 6 years or fewer. As indicative of the percentage, the school experienced high teacher attrition rates over the years. Teacher turnover and changes in leadership resulted in a focus on deficiencies, exacerbating difficulties in creating long-term, sustainable plans.

A common mindset of perseverance and resiliency resides within the staff. It exists before students ever enter the building. Empathy discussions provide insight to the allowing them to grow alongside their students. Table 5 has the teacher demographics.

Students

The students' ages ranged from 4 to 14. The North Carolina is the Home Language Survey, filled out by parents, provided important data for service delivery and appropriate

Table 2

Teacher Demographics

Demographics		Number of Teachers (<i>n</i> =38)	Percent
School Level	Elementary	17	44.7%
	Middle	10	26.3%
	Other (Electives, Instructional Support)	11	28.9%
Teaching Experience	0-3 years	7	18.4%
	4-10 year	17	44.7%
	11-20 years	10	26.3%
	21-30 years	4	10.5%
Race	White	33	86.8%
	Hispanic	0	0.0%
	Black	4	10.5%
	Asian	1	2.6%
Gender	Female	34	89.4%
	Male	4	10.5%

instruction. Of the 550 students, 100 of those students receive varying levels of ESL services. Furthermore, 75 students qualify for specially design instruction for special education.

The school enrolls a high transient student population. Students rarely enter kindergarten and stay until their eighth-grade year. The population tends to transfer between neighboring schools. More often than not, by the time a student attends high school, they attended two or more schools. In certain circumstances, students switch between living with their parents and other relatives causing them to move schools.

Unfortunately, many community members perceive the students' desire and motivation towards education as less than desired. Many parents work multiple jobs with odd hours resulting in limited interactions and discussion about school. Basic life needs, such as health and food, often cause a strain on the family dynamics and inhibit the focus on academics. Student conduct and discipline remain a relative concern at the school. According to surveys, teachers reported students do not understand and follow the code of conduct set forth by the school and county. It is unclear whether this is due to teaching styles, misconceptions, or other extenuating circumstances. School data shows an increase in disciplinary infractions as the student gets older.

The students also have limited exposure to extra-curricular opportunities. In order to play sports, students ride a bus to a neighboring school for practices but must provide a ride home. Together, a few of the smaller schools join forces in order to create competitive teams. Limited transportation and academic concerns prevent many students from participating. Due to the small size and limited budgets, students have limited access to curricular opportunities such as STEM and career labs. Table 6 provides more information on the demographics of the students.

As with the teachers, resiliency and perseverance are words that can also be used to describe the students. Many fulfill parental responsibilities for their younger siblings. A large

Table 3

Student Demographics

Demographics		Number of Students (<i>n</i> =570)	Percent
School Level	Elementary	392	68.7%
	Middle	178	31.3%
Race	White	69	12.1%
	Hispanic	238	41.7%
	Black	222	38.9%
	Two or More Races	41	7.1%
Gender	Female	295	51.7%
	Male	275	48.2%

percentage of students live with relatives or in single-parent households. However, many teachers cannot relate to the unique experiences of students. Despite the challenges or obstacles, the students very rarely show them in their daily interactions.

Parents

The parents encounter similar experiences as the students. Most families classify as working class. Typically, the parents move based on job needs and housing opportunities. Many of the households include extended family members, such as grandparents or aunts and uncles. Parental involvement varies across the school. The lower grade levels experience parental involvement at a much higher level compared to the middle grades. At this time, no active parent organization or volunteers exist with the school. The Spanish-speaking families require additional support due to language barriers. The school hired a full-time translator that is utilized to assist with translations and communication. The translator also serves as a community liaison to build relationships and connections with the families.

Since the school receives Title I funding, the federal government requires family engagement activities. Five times a year, the school hosts events designed to bring in families and the community to build partnerships. At the beginning of each year, the school hosts a curriculum night to provide parents with knowledge and resources to assist their children with academics. Two interactive events allow families are invited to take part in student learning activities. The well-attended events aided in forming connections between families and the school. Finally, two events educate and inform parents on how to assist with education such as helping with homework and how to help their children read.

Similarly, the parents of the community exhibit resiliency and perseverance. As working-class families, they provide opportunities for their kids as best as possible. Assistance from the school and other organizations allows for partnerships and the best opportunities for the kids.

District

The school is one of 37 schools in the Pitt County Schools district. Within the district, East Carolina University (ECU) is located in the center. ECU, originally founded as a teaching college, graduates more teachers than any other college or university in the state. The continuous source of newly trained teachers provides a great resource for the school district. However, even with strong partnerships with a teacher preparation college, Pitt County Schools remains plagued with common issues found around the nation. Schools fight to recruit, retain, and reward teachers for keeping the turnover rate low. A majority of the educators leave PCS leave for two reasons: career change or location.

Three years ago, PCS received a \$16.2 million, 5-year grant from the U.S. Department of Education to support teacher recruitment, retention, and rewards. The grant design created multiple pathways for teachers to increase responsibility and pay and retain effective, experienced teachers. Furthermore, the grant aimed to decrease teacher turnover by supporting and retaining novice teachers. The grant provided funding to train administrators on ways to incorporate supportive opportunities for their staff.

Equity and cultural awareness conversations recently began within the district. In the 2019-20 school year, conversations between district leaders and administrators occurred. The conversations centered around reflection. The district wanted to build upon and explore in-depth, but due to COVID-19, difficulties derailed the initiative.

The new PCS strategic plan includes strategies and structures to decrease the opportunity gaps for their students. Over the next decade, plans include staff training and providing equitable teaching resources for use with diverse students. Furthermore, the district plans an increased focus on recruitment and retention of teachers of color. As our county continues to expand in its diversity, the school system wants to keep up with the demand.

My Role

Though limited, my educational experience provided the opportunity to serve in a few different roles in three different schools. I began as a teacher in a low-wealth, highly diverse middle school, a very similar setting as the school that I now lead. It was through these experiences as a novice teacher that I began to appreciate the students for who they were. After completing five years of teaching, I transitioned to administration. I started off as an assistant principal and then moved to the principalship. Throughout my administrative career, I have worked with colleagues, students, and communities that shared different experiences and perspectives. With each opportunity, I continually learned the importance of listening and understanding others, serving as a foundation for my servant leadership. Families and staff feel appreciated and heard.

As an administrator, I observed two setbacks that plague education systems across the world. First, the unnerving attrition rate for teachers. The burden of fixing society's problems with little to no respect and even fewer supports leads to an exodus from the teaching profession. Second, the lack of understanding of students and providing adequate instruction for the audience present. Through my observations, I witnessed these issues controlling schools providing motivation to bridge gaps and explore options for students and the teachers are successful.

In addition to this unique perspective, my role as the principal can influence the teachers I serve. The need to build the capacity of teachers in my school is critical to sustainability. Schools cannot be led by one individual. Creating teacher leaders in the building helps carry out the mission, vision, and objectives. I have learned how to involve others by assessing their strengths and determining how they work in a system. The original intent of this project was for the teachers to understand their students, but I quickly found this project having the same effects on me as a leader. Through the years, I have been able to motivate and develop leaders at all levels of the school.

Chapter Summary

The individuals that make up this PAR project are unique. By providing a better understanding of their characteristics and traits, the storyline of this project now has a face and a meaning. The unique setting and various backgrounds are vital to understanding the project. In the next chapter, I provide a detailed account of the PAR project that took place to help reach the goal of teachers understanding their students in context.

CHAPTER 5: PAR FINDINGS

The purpose of this participatory action research (PAR) project was to assist beginning teachers in understanding culturally diverse students. This process began with self-reflection and understanding that then transformed into implementing culturally relevant teaching strategies. The aim was to develop a better understanding of culturally diverse students through relationships. During this process, I utilized Community Learning Exchanges (CLEs) for data collection. As mentioned earlier, CLEs create opportunities for reflection and understanding within a community. In order to produce an environment that the teachers could feel safe in sharing, a gracious space was created. The gracious space that is created allows strangers to learn from one another in order to achieve objectives. As individuals, each teacher possesses unique experiences that shape their thoughts and actions. The stories that were told provided deeper insight and allowed for the community to build trust. Throughout this chapter, I explain the process of establishing expectations for the CLEs and how we discovered our origins. Next, I explain the categories that were discovered from the data that was collected. Then, I turn to the implications and how they relate to the overall research questions and myself as the researcher. Finally, I explain how the findings can impact the development of the education system.

Timeline

The PAR project took place over the course of several months (January through October 2020). This time period allowed for a unique opportunity to work with beginning teachers over the course of two academic calendar years. This also presented some challenges as this took place during the COVID-19 pandemic and the height of social injustice in America.

January-February 2020

For the first part of this inquiry cycle, I met with the participants collectively to plan and organize the Community Learning Exchange. Creating mutual trust was needed in order for proper reflection to take place. The community of teachers was made up of unique backgrounds and experiences, and it was important to honor that. Providing the teachers with the opportunity to share their stories, created an environment of understanding and reflection. The group of teachers quickly adopted a mindset that was driven to find solutions for issues. We were able to complete this cycle prior to COVID-19 closures which impacted CRT implementation.

May-June 2020

Prior to the beginning of the second inquiry cycle, two unfortunate scenarios played out. When the COVID-19 pandemic broke out, it changed education drastically. On March 13, 2020, education would be upended and would not look the same for many months afterwards. Schools pivoted to virtual education for the remainder of the school year. This caused changes in instruction that had to occur.

The second scenario was the killing of George Floyd-a social injustice. Each night while turning on the television, there was another story of a brutal killing of individuals of color. These stories were playing out near and far for our community, our families, and our students to see. Conversations were being held in the home about the concern of safety and the unfair treatment due to someone's color of their skin. These events kept the need for CRT fresh in educators' minds. The beginning teachers were able to continue with the PAR process. The motivation to do more weighed heavy on their minds, but more importantly their hearts.

During the second part of the PAR project, I continued to utilize the methodology of Community Learning Exchanges (CLEs) to bring diverse voices together for equitable

discussion. This time period also included several key activities in order to reorient the beginning teachers and to set a direction going forward. During this part, I met with the beginning teachers at least once a month as a group but also followed up with individual meetings. Collectively, we participated in several activities designed to encourage dialogue about culturally relevant teaching strategies (CRT) and how to implement those strategies with reflection. As mentioned before, a local professor facilitated a discussion about implementing CRT. The teachers were able to brainstorm and create plans of action to incorporate CRT strategies. Throughout this cycle, I collected data between conversations being held during meetings and the CLE along with CRT implementation in the classroom. By documenting these occurrences through personal memos, I started to notice a shift in the beginning teachers thinking. They started to reflect on their personal stories and how they influenced their thoughts. They were also able to dig deeper into their students' stories to understand them better. After the CLE, I held informal conversations with the select teachers. In those conversations, we reflected on the CLE process and CRT strategies. We discussed how these processes and strategies would be implemented in their classrooms.

September-October 2020

The last part of this PAR project took place in the later part of the calendar year, but a different school year. This part looked at the growth and understanding of the events that had taken place. The teachers were asked to implement CRT strategies into their classrooms at the beginning of the school year. I followed up with the teachers to have conversations and reflect on that process. The continuation of COVID-19 and social injustice still affected schools. The need to adjust and adapt became more apparent.

Throughout this process, I initiated formal and informal discussions with the beginning teachers related to the topics of equity and CRT. The monthly beginning teacher meetings were a platform for this to occur. Throughout these discussions, I made notes of memos of the discussions that were held. Some of the teachers are also on the school's Global Committee. The direction of the Global Committee is to expose different perspectives from around the world along with providing teaching strategies to incorporate those diverse perspectives. While participating in those meetings, I was able to extend my conversations with certain teachers with equity.

Themes

The beginning teachers, having worked together from some time, all knew one another and spoke with one another quite often. Some of the teachers entered the teaching profession at the same time while others were peers on the same grade level. While they had already established a relationship, it was important that they felt comfortable with crossing areas that might have been unfamiliar or uncomfortable with each other. As discussed earlier, the five axioms of CLE promote learning, conversations, crossing boundaries, and encouraging hope. These relationships became the foundation of to the success of this project. The data gathered each CLE supports the premise that the five axioms were integrated and successful in promoting the deeper understanding of relationships amongst the teachers. Their responses indicate that the teachers established respect for one another and developed an understanding of different cultures while maintaining positivity. Through individual dialogue with participants, similar themes began to present themselves. Participants acknowledged their limited beginnings but had developed mutual respect for others. They also began to reflect on how their recognition of different beginnings could positively affect the students within their classrooms.

This section provides evidence of three themes that emerged through Saldaña's coding. The qualitative data that was collected and analyzed provided a clear understanding of the three themes. First, I examine the importance of finding common ground with all of the beginning teachers and how it set them up for what was going to impact their classrooms. Secondly, the data revealed how important the influence of cultures has in a classroom and how teachers react. Third, I examine the teachers' reflection on the importance of building relationships with their students. Figure 11 shows the three themes.

Common Ground

While analyzing, the coded data made clear two categories which are explored in the following sections. At the conclusion of each CLE, participants were asked to reflect and share their experiences with exposure to cultures. As shown in Table 7, their responses fell into similar beginnings, respect, interest, and positivity. First, teachers reflected and stated that they lacked the experience with cultures at a young age. Second, participants recognized that going into teaching had exposed them more varying cultures. Together, these two categories created an understanding of where they were and where they were going. Figure 12 represents the outline of this section.

Lack of Exposure

The goal of the CLE was for the participants to reflect on their personal experiences at a young age and compare them to their most recent experiences. A theme that emerged during this exercise was the ability for all of the beginning teachers to find common ground with one another. Within that theme, the teachers were able to reflect on their younger lives and stated that they lacked exposure to different backgrounds compared to their current times. Every participant was able to share that in their stories. All of them grew up in different states, different cultures,

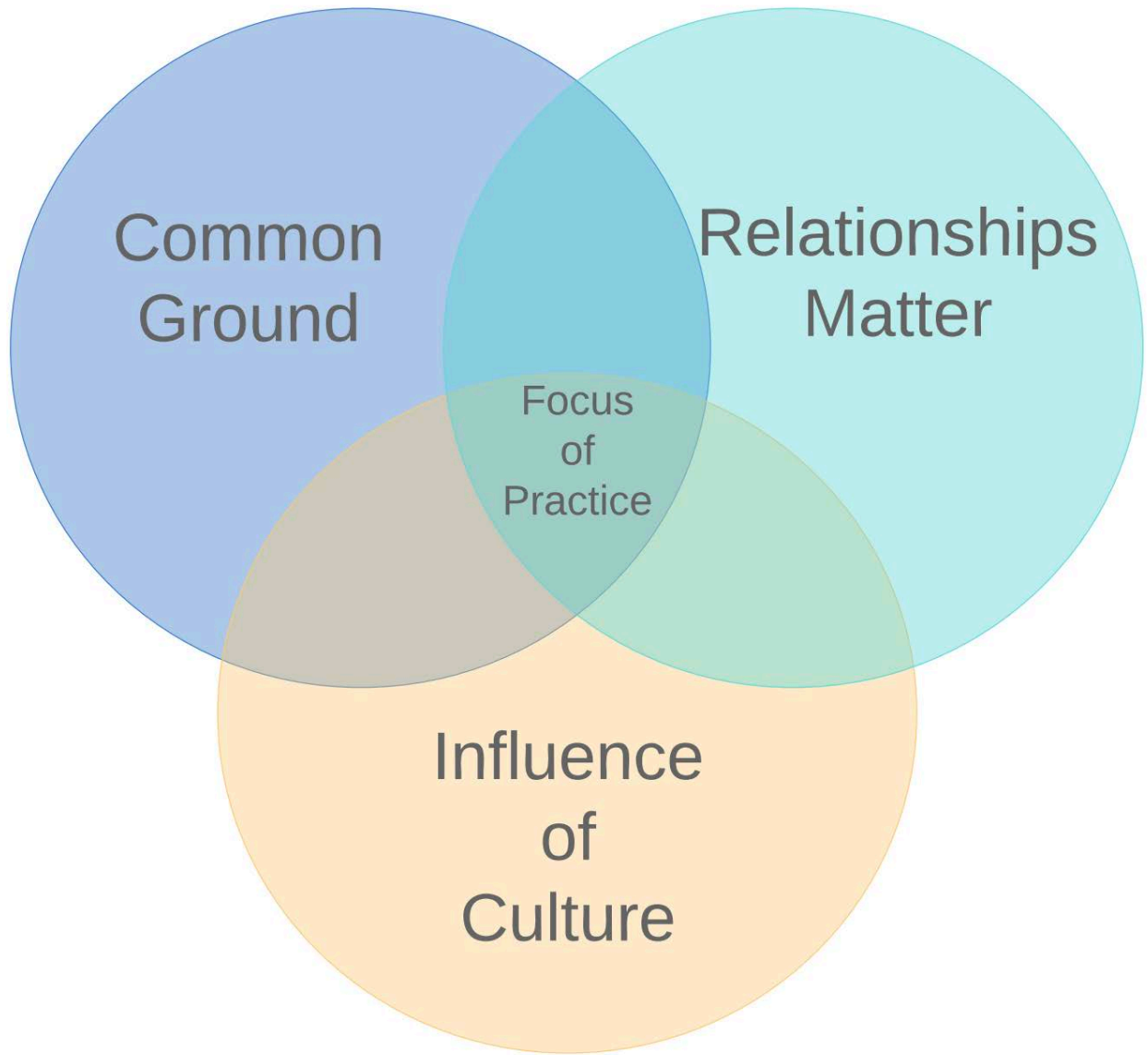


Figure 5. Three themes.

Table 4

Categories That Make Up Common Ground

Categories	Coded Responses
Similar Beginnings	Lack of Exposure-4 Experiences-7 Perspectives-6
Respect	Meaningful-4 Understanding-4 Admiration-2 Thoughtfulness-3
Interest	Learning-3 Reflective-8 Attentive-3
Positivity	Enthusiasm-5 Optimistic-5 Future-6 Hopeful-7

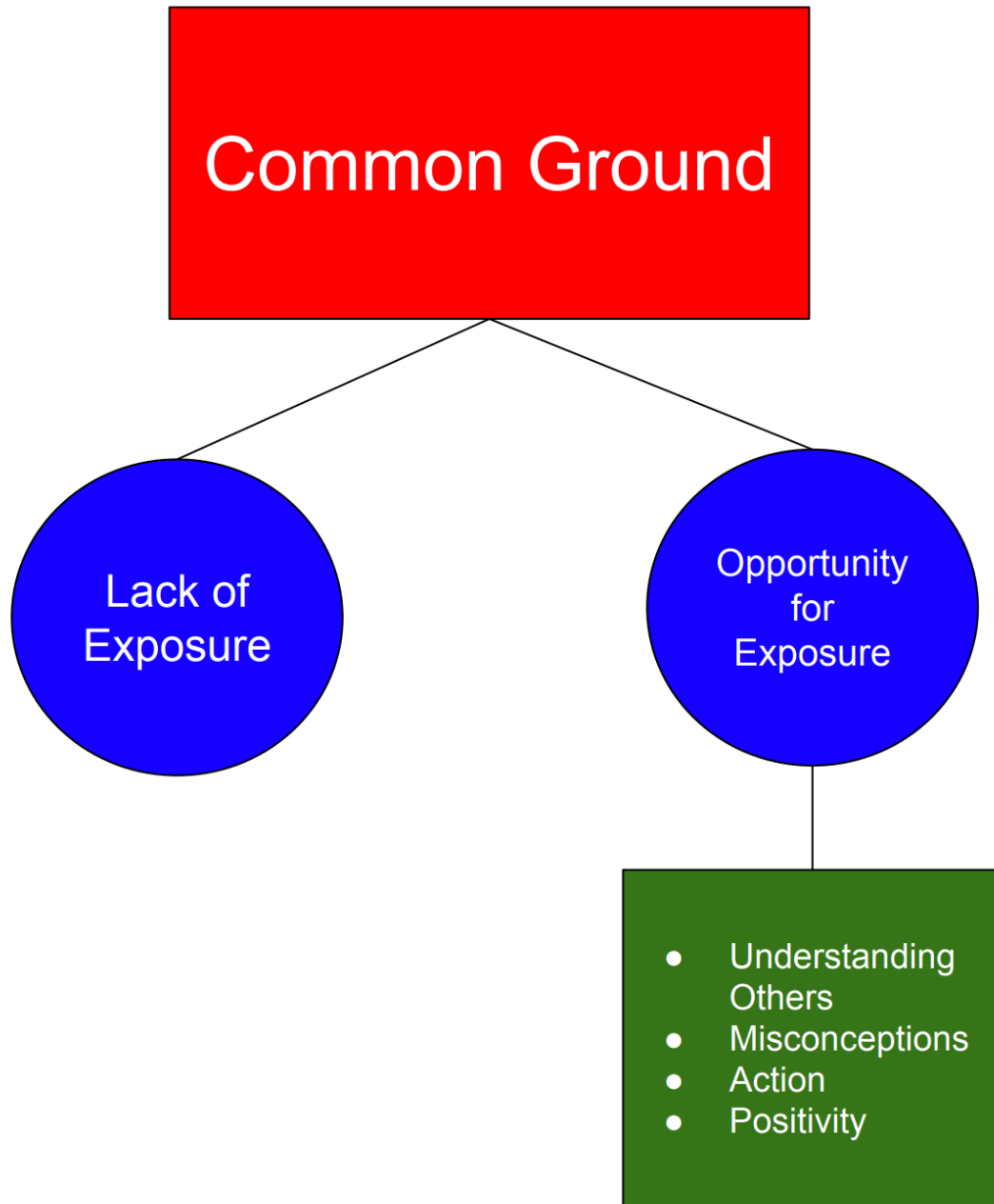


Figure 12. Common ground theme.

different settings, or different socioeconomic statuses. No matter their beginnings, all participants stated on the journey line that they lacked exposure to cultures that were different than theirs. They all marked their journey lines at the beginning as being negative when it came to exposure. Throughout my memos and conversations with the teachers, they expressed their acknowledgment of this by stating, “I lived a sheltered life” (personal communication, January 16, 2020). Another teacher stated, “I thought I knew about different people having gone to a big high school, but I didn’t” (personal communication, January 16, 2020). These sentiments carried over into the second and third parts of the PAR project as well. In our closing circle activity, a teacher mentioned that “equity” was a word that she had never really heard of before college. According to her, “my high school lacked the diversity that is present in many other locations. I had no idea of that until I left my hometown” (closing circle, May 24, 2020).

In addition to self-reflection, participants looked beyond themselves, noting a lack of exposure to other cultures in our school and our nation. This data indicates that participants not only understood how their beginnings shape their thoughts, but they also started seeing how a student’s background also shapes their thoughts and actions. For example, one teacher noted, “I know that I came from a rural, sheltered community that looked down on people from different backgrounds. I can see how our students can reflect that same experience and as a teacher I need to be aware of that” (personal communication, January 16, 2020). Similarly, another teacher spoke by saying that her students “lack of exposure to one another and their differences has caused some rift within her classroom with different demographics” (personal communication, January 16, 2020).

The graphs from the journey lines also provided a stunning visual. When completing their journey lines, all of the teachers had started their graphs in the negative depicting a lack of

exposure. It was clear that once they left to seek a post-secondary degree, their exposure to other cultures increased. The descriptions of their early beginnings utilized words such as *little town*, *small school*, *same race*, and *similar thoughts* to describe their exposure to diversity. At the conclusion of creating the journey lines, the teachers provided written reflections that backed up the visual representations.

During the storytelling event, a few teachers commented on the current status of the nation and the social injustice that has sparked them to look outside their circle. Several of my own reflections noted that participants were actively engaged and looking at the CRT expert when she talked. Two teachers made a note to discuss this topic further after they had discovered that they had a similar upbringing. The connection that they made allowed for a deeper appreciation for one another, according to the teachers. Finally, the participants indicated that this was a topic that they valued and about which they wanted to learn more. During conversations that followed the CLE, one teacher commented that one of her takeaways was that “she really needed to learn more about her students in order to properly serve them” (personal communication, January 16, 2020). Another teacher also had a similar response and recognized her beginnings by saying, “I know that I was raised differently than the students I serve and even the teachers that I work with. I believe that is why I had a difficult time my first year of teaching” (personal communication, January 16, 2020).

The storytelling activity allowed the teachers to reflect and tell stories of others in a multidimensional way. They were able to process their lack of understanding with certain students. They were also able to see how that lack of understanding also pigeonholed students into a certain profile that was not successful. All of the teachers reflected and saw that the students they knew the best were typically students that were well-liked and had a caring,

supportive home. Those students that they did not know as well typically ended up in the opposite category. Three of the students described by the teachers did not have the structure of a supportive home. After comparing the teachers to the students, it was determined that both sides were culturally different from one another. All of these comments and observations are evidence that the teachers understood where they came from and how it has influenced their beginnings as a teacher.

Opportunity for Exposure

Overwhelmingly, the participants most commonly made note about their experiences and how they translated to their exposure to cultures. While all of the participants recognized their lack of exposure to cultures at a younger age, they all commented on how teaching has continued to expose them to diverse situations. The conversations that were held with the participants both during and after the CLE allowed them to expand upon their desire to learn more about the students and cultures that represent their school. From this, a category arose as the teachers wanted the opportunity to learn more about cultures. Collectively, we discussed understanding others, recognizing our misconceptions, and developing a plan. Additionally, positivity was much more prevalent among the participants. These feelings emerged around four key codes explored below: understanding others, misconceptions, developing a plan, and positivity.

Understanding Others. Initiating and developing conversations is one of the five axioms of a CLE. Establishing this axiom within our community allowed our participants to create a safe area with one another that allowed open communications in understanding others. Not only were participants afforded the opportunity to understand their peers, but they began to take a sneak peek into their students' lives. For example, one teacher referred to conversations he had with mentor and co-teacher, saying, "it made me stop and look deep inside myself and others to see

the different vantages that we bring to the table in order to fully appreciate that person” (personal communication, January 16, 2020). Another teacher mentioned that she “really appreciated the reflection activities as it made me see a different side of education that I often took for granted (personal communication, January 16, 2020). During multiple occasions, participants cited parent-teacher conversations that result in the teacher being able to discuss matters at hand that would have been more difficult before. As one participant shared, “normally I would have approached the conversation with the parent in my mind that would have been accusatory; however, I stopped to ask myself was there something more to this situation” (personal communication, May 22, 2020). All of the participants noted this event as one that starts to push them to shift in their thinking, especially since they serve a community that is culturally different than themselves. The participants started noticing that cultural differences do not necessarily end with the color of their skin. One teacher made that evident by stating that, “after talking with one of my students’ family, I had to quickly adjust my thought process as my priorities were not necessarily that family member’s priorities at the time. We both wanted to accomplish the same goal, but we were just at different timelines” (personal communication, January 16, 2020). It is important to note that after our CLE and reflection questions, that these participants continued the self-reflection process into their daily classrooms. These follow-up conversations were held informally with no common goal except to discuss matters at hand.

Misconceptions. Another emerging part of the theme of opportunity is the recognition of misconceptions with different cultures. Before the PAR project began, I had an opportunity to observe the participants as their supervisor. I was able to observe and memo my observations on the beginning teachers in terms of their misconceptions. As beginning teachers, they had limited experience, so the misconceptions were to no fault of their own. In one particular committee

meeting, I noticed one beginning teacher detailing the behavior that a particular student was displaying in her classroom. The comments that were made by the teacher were sheltered and not well-informed. During another parent-teacher conference that I participated in, the teacher stated that the child was not attentive so therefore must not be getting the sleep that he needed. The misconception is that the student was actually playing the head of the household at night with his two younger brothers and therefore, was not able to complete the homework as the teacher desired (personal communication, January 23, 2020). In a follow-up conversation with another teacher, she had lumped all of her Hispanic students into the same category. She stated, “since most of my Hispanic students live in households that do not speak English, they struggle with the vocabulary that is needed in order to achieve proficiency on my test (personal communication, February 2, 2020).

These misconceptions that became evident helped shaped what our next steps would be in the second part of the PAR project. In order to fully understand the ones around you, misconceptions needed to be addressed with the teachers. In addition, we worked together to address misguided ideas that we had on certain cultures. Informal conversations provided the perfect platform for these to take place. Since we had already established trust and a safe space with one another, it allowed for the process to take place. In reality, it simply took more self-reflection on the participants part to make them aware of their dueling consciousness. A few individuals that felt safe commented on their misconceptions. One teacher noted this by saying, “I always thought Americans were these overweight, dirty individuals but when I came to live here, I quickly found out that that was not the case” (personal communication, June 4, 2020). Another teacher provided insight by saying, “now I know how much the media sways my

influence and thoughts about different cultures. It was something that I was not ready to address” (personal communication, February 3, 2020).

Call to Action. Recognizing cultural differences in school is important but developing a plan that can extend, appreciate and celebrate all differences takes it further. As one teacher put it, “we have such great influence on our students, we need to know how we can positively affect them while addressing their needs” (personal communication, January 16, 2020). The data quickly exposed the need for us to develop a plan that we could use in our classrooms and schools to create an inclusive environment where all cultures are celebrated and respected. A teacher expressed her desire to know what to do next by saying, “I realized that I may not have been all-inclusive before, but even more so I need to be taught the right skills going forward to fix it” (personal communication, January 16, 2020). This common desire for a group is a powerful agent of change and shifts the mindset from a “me” problem to an “us” problem. As the participants build relationships and a sense of shared purpose they rally behind a common goal. As another teacher stated, “what PD is available for us to participate in” (personal communication, January 28, 2020). Additionally, I made memos on several teachers asking me more about the students that they teach. The burning desire to know more about their backgrounds became evident in reviewing my memos. After conversing with the teachers, they would ask for support in how to approach certain topics that they know needed special attention due to the student’s differences. Lastly, one teacher stated, “this is great, but what is our plan going forward to help these students?” (personal communication, February 12, 2020). With the social injustice movement happening across the nation, the teachers knew that action needed to take place.

Positivity. Overwhelmingly, the responses from the teachers were positive as outlined in the CLEs, reflection questions, conversations, and my memos. All but one of the teachers requested more assistance on this topic. One teacher stated, “I feel like I have grown so much in this short time with this, but don’t want to stop” (personal communication, January 16, 2020). Many teachers expressed with positive emotions that they were glad this was a topic that we were going to discuss. A teacher said, “I was just excited [to] explore the thoughts and feelings of my colleagues” (personal communication, January 16, 2020). In response to that comment, another one said, “I really think that it is a game-changer that the school is wanting to invest this much into the development of not only its teachers but its community as well” (personal communication, January 25, 2020).

Summary

A common theme of CLEs is establishing a common ground. It was important for the community of teachers to come together to compare and contrast their experiences. Even with unique perspectives, a theme that was constant throughout was the similar beginnings of the teachers. They all reflected and understood that cultural diversity was something that they did not have a lot of knowledge about but understands the opportunity now. In the following section, I will explain how the influence of cultures started to become prevalent in the PAR project.

Influence of Culture

Culture influences the way an individual behaves and responds to their environment. People rely on their past experiences to shape their thoughts. Throughout the project, evidence also mounted that showed the recognition of the influence of cultures. This was intentional as it was the central topic of the project. However, through the reflection questions the notion that cultures influence our thoughts took on a life of its own. In particular, the conversations that

were held allowed for a broader understanding of others and their perspectives on culture as it relates to education. Based on coding, the emerging theme began to develop. First, the participants were able to categorize cultural influences into three additional categories. These categories were representative of topics that they face in their classrooms. Those influences are race, socioeconomic status, and language. Secondly, the participants began to tell stories of students in their classrooms in terms of culture. Third, the participants discussed their role as an educator in promoting cultural diversity. After analyzing the categories, the theme of influence of culture emerged. Figure 13 provides a graphic organizer of the theme. Table 8 illustrates the codes that were presented by the participants through their dialogue.

Cultural Importance

One apparent aspect from the learning exchange was the understanding of cultural influences in terms of demographics – race, socioeconomic status (SES), and language. These influences were areas that at least two beginning teachers had experienced while in their first years of teaching. The teachers indicated the importance of recognizing these categories in order to better understand how they shaped their students. In addition, the teachers began to reflect on their personal experiences with each on the categories and look deep inside to combat any misconceptions.

Race. Race took on a life of its own throughout the discussion with the teachers. In one of the reflection questions, participants were asked how culture shapes us. This question first started off as a reflection question meant for the teachers but quickly developed into a deeper dive into students. As mentioned earlier, the Black and Latinx students make up 80% of the total population while the demographics of the beginning teachers are reversed, with 80% being White. One teacher stated, “cultures are often shaped by the environment one grows up in, and in

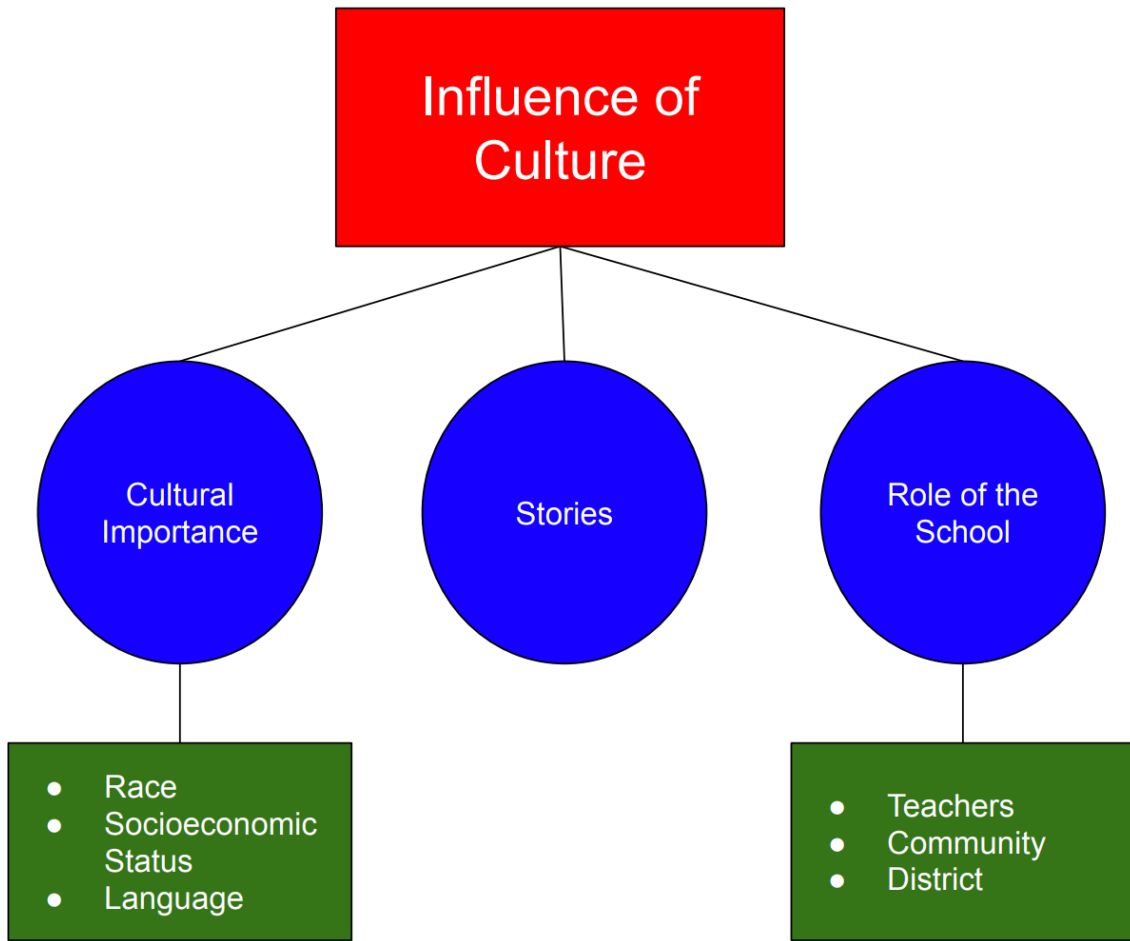


Figure 13. Influence of culture theme.

Table 5

Influence of Culture

Code	Memos	Journey Line	Storytelling	World Café	Closing Circle	Informal Discussions
Cultural Importance: Race	5	1	4	3	3	5
Cultural Importance: SES	4	1	5		2	3
Cultural Importance: Language	3		1		2	2
Stories	2	4	3	4	3	3
Role of the School: Teachers	2		2	3	2	2
Role of the School: Community	1		1	1	1	1
Role of the School: District	3		2		2	2

most cases people of the same color stick together” (personal communication, February 3, 2020). Another teacher went on to say, “I share the same skin color as some of my students, and I can see how we are similar” (personal communication, January 16, 2020). As a group, the beginning teachers agreed that certain races get glorified or deprecated based on their skin color. Some teachers noted that students of different races have even made comments that seemed to be aligned with some of the world’s bias when it reflects a certain race. All of the teachers noted how race had influenced their students, whether internally or externally.

Socioeconomic Status. Socioeconomic status can have an influence on cultural development. The teachers had different perspectives when it came to SES and reflecting on their past experiences. All of them had either grown up in a lower SES category or knew someone who did. Overwhelmingly, they reflected on how those that were born with more advantages tended to be treated differently in public. As one teacher stated, “I had a couple of friends that were born with a silver spoon in their mouth and saw the differences it made in their beginning compared to mine” (personal communication, January 16, 2020). This was also a category that allowed them to reflect on what they were observing in the classroom. With 100% of the students receiving free breakfast and lunch, the students were born into different SES categories than some were accustomed to. All of the teachers had personally witnessed how SES shaped their students and their culture. Several teachers mentioned how they had experienced a great number of students that did not have a strong financial foundation at home. They examined how those experiences correlated how the students responded and functioned compared to other students from a higher SES. Collectively, the teachers felt that this was the category that influenced students and their development.

Language. A large percentage of families are bilingual or speak Spanish to some degree. With this large percentage comes a strong influence from language development. Due to these large percentages, the beginning teachers are able to see how language shapes cultures more so than a typical school. Language is more than just a means of communication; it influences thought processes and perceptions. One teacher stated that she had seen how some of her students that were bilingual had developed empathy and understanding of diverse students. Only one of the beginning teachers discussed how her own native language helped develop her as an individual. As a young girl who grew up in Germany, her native language was German, but she learned English as well. Linguistically, it helped her develop a broader understanding of differences, but at the same time, she spoke about how others viewed her. She mentioned that some individuals thought that because of the language, she would not understand things. All of the teachers also reflected on their experiences with families that spoke a different language. They observed how their thought processes were sometimes dramatically different than ones to which they had been exposed. Several teachers also reflected on previous experiences how other languages are often viewed as inferior to English due to many misconceptions.

Stories

All participants reported throughout the CLE and during follow-up conversations with the central idea that all cultures tell the story of individuals. This was a common code occurring in data that started a shift in the thinking of the teachers. Some comments were direct by stating this comment. One teacher stated that “it’s important to listen to the stories that our students are telling as it helps us as teachers” (personal communication, January 16, 2020). Other comments were made such as “the story that each student tells is directly impacted by how they were brought up” (personal communication, January 16, 2020) and “students bring with them a history

of experiences and as teachers we have to willing to listen to those experiences to be able to serve them” (personal communication, January 16, 2020). Other comments were much more indirect but could be interpreted as stating the same thing. “It never occurred to me that what happened last night is the reason why they are acting the way they are now, “stated one beginning teacher (personal communication, January 16, 2020).

It was also important to also see how the teachers’ stories had shaped their lives as well. As a culminating activity, we discussed how the journey lines were a good place to start. After reviewing their lines, the teachers were able to reflect on their origins. The first started by looking at how they were similar. Of the five teachers, all of them had started off “sheltered” from diverse individuals. Through their early years up to high school, they remained relatively static. No matter their origins, they still shared similar beginnings.

The teachers also shared the stories that were shared with them by their elders. Stories of segregation in all walks of life were predominant. One teacher mentioned that her grandparents did not know diversity until just a few years ago. They all recognized that those stories shaped the thought processes of their parents and grandparents. One teacher shared her story of having to get her grandparents to accept her husband, who was culturally diverse.

Reflecting on stories proved to be an experience that allowed the teachers to see their lives in both directions. They were able to see their past and its influence along with the present and future. They recognized that they were writing their stories still to this day. As one teacher stated, her life’s book was pretty one-dimensional, but she wants to change that for herself and her students.

Role of the Community

Another important theme that became apparent is the role of the school when it comes to a community's culture. The participants discussed how the school should be the platform in order for cultures to be discussed and celebrated. The school plays an integral role in the development of the students which can influence the community. When asked about the role of the school, the responses fell into two categories: teachers and community. The teachers understood their role in developing cultures in their classrooms. They also stated the importance that schools had in developing the cultures that are present in their communities.

School and Teachers. All participants were quick to reflect and respond on the importance of their role with cultures. The teachers discussed the cultures that were represented in their classrooms. They recognized their importance in celebrating and understanding where they came from in order to promote positivity and productivity in their classrooms. One teacher stated, "as the adult in the classroom and as the leader, it is my responsibility to understand all of the students that I serve and that means understanding where they came from and how that has affected them" (personal communication, January 16, 2020). Another teacher noted "we won't be able to really promote our students without first understanding their identity" (personal communication, January 16, 2020). While the teachers were discussing this I made some observational notes of the teachers. I observed all of the teachers nodding their heads and several more raising their hands in unison to share their thoughts about this topic. The engagement and passion centered around this topic increased as the discussion continued. A few teachers went from slouching in their chairs to sitting on the edge of their seats with their hands raised in order to contribute to the discussion. I have also seen this play out into our school planning. Several events have been planned in the future by the teachers to celebrate diversity. Classroom

activities have also been showcased throughout the school to celebrate global awareness.

Overall, all participants placed heavy weight on their responsibility of cultural recognition in their classrooms.

Community Members. The teachers also recognized that the community that the school serves is also an important focus. Educators can agree that the community helps shape and develop the children within. The children adapt their mindsets and values that are present within their borders. The participants made several comments on how the school should not just stop its work at the doors. In order to truly influence the students, the work needs to be taken to the students' homes. One teacher stated, "the role of the school should be invited into the homes in order to adequately influence and sustain" (personal communication, January 16, 2020). This mindset also started to represent a shift in the teachers' thinking. They started to see more of a big picture when it came to culture instead of the four walls within their classroom.

District. The final shift in perception came when the teachers recognized that that district needs to play a vital role in cultural recognition as well. This natural progress from the classroom to the community to the county represented the importance that the teachers saw in understanding their students. As a teacher put it, "we no longer have majorities anymore, but instead with have a lot of minorities within our county. We need to look at a much broader scale in order to promote inclusivity" (personal communication, January 16, 2020). Another teacher echoed that sentiment, saying, "as a teacher with a different culture than my peers, I have looked for ways to feel like I am a part of a community. After looking for many years, I have a hard time finding a way to feel like I am a part of a larger group. Instead I often feel more isolated and if I feel that way, I know some of my students feel the same way" (personal communication, January 16, 2020).

Summary

Many individuals say that students come into school as a blank canvas, but this is not entirely accurate. They come with rich experiences that have been influenced by their culture. Cultural influences need to be recognized and understood by educators in order to provide for them. In the next section, I highlight the last theme that became prevalent through the data which is relationships.

Relationships Matter

An original aim of this project was that the teachers would understand the importance of relationships between educators and students. The significance of relationships quickly began to mature throughout the CLEs and the reflections. As evidence in the CLE pedagogies, the memos and conversations, the evidence confirmed that the teachers were open to exploring culturally relevant pedagogies while continuing to learn more about perceptions and understandings of other cultures. In the following sections, I explore the categories of communication, respect, and trust. Figure 14 provides a graphic organizer of this theme.

Communication

Communication was not something that was explicitly mentioned throughout the CLE and conversations, but the teachers made several innuendos about the importance of communication. The communication came in the form of teacher to student and teacher to families. During the CLE, the group of teachers mentioned that the problem that they were discussing would be a good one to be brought up to families in order to get their feedback on the issue. The group continued to expand on that idea and mentioned that communicating with other staff members and local organizations would help with the issue at hand. The group then discussed how they have had opportunities open up in their classrooms where they were able to

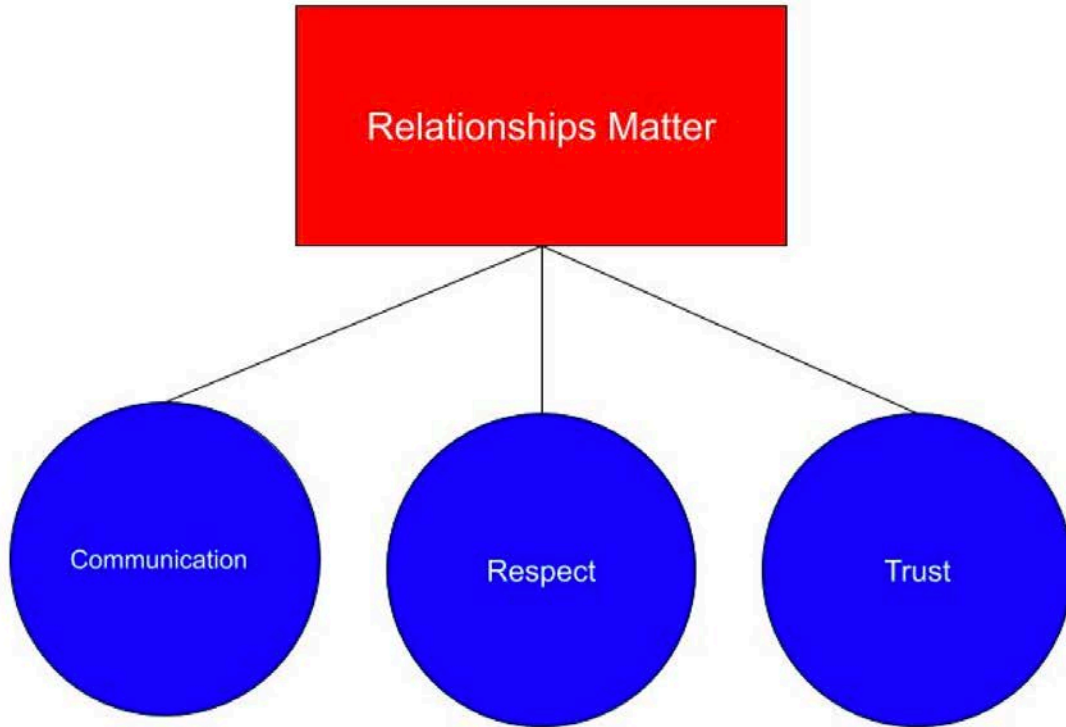


Figure 14. Relationships matter theme.

communicate with classes as a whole. The individuals mentioned that this gave them a chance to facilitate a discussion with the students about differences.

The entire CLE process is built on communication. During reflection, we also noted that we were modeling communication among a group which allowed for a better understanding of one another. We referred back to the beginning when the term gracious spaces was implemented. The teachers commented on how they wanted to follow those same steps in their classroom at the beginning of the school year. One teacher noted that the opportunities to share with one another opened up her eyes to others, and that would not have happened in a normal setting.

A few teachers discussed the need to have open communication with families within the community. They referred back to times where the school had invited families in to build partnerships to help students. All of the teachers made comments on how those events help developed working relationships with the parents. When teachers were in need, they could call on the parents because of the communication that they had already built. Additionally, memos also frequently showed the importance of communication amongst individuals and groups.

Respect

One thing that was very clear throughout was the importance of respect. All of the participants mentioned respect either directly or indirectly when it came to understanding students in context. This was especially true during the post CLE reflection questions that were devoted to exploring their understanding of cultures in the school setting. For example, we discussed the concept of differences among students and a teacher suggested that “we first have to respect ourselves and one another as adults so that we can then respect our students” (personal communication, January 16, 2020). Similar sentiments were followed up with other teachers. He said that he “asking himself if he was truly showing respect to all of his students and the

differences that they have” (personal communication, January 16, 2020). Detailed in my memo from March 15, 2020, I made note that a couple of other teachers had followed up with my assistant principal and stated that respect was something that they worked on all of their students displaying this year towards one another. A month later, civil unrest exploded across the nation with the death of George Floyd. Several teachers noted that respect was something that they were really looking into in their classroom. They felt that even though they may be showing respect, it was very important to get the input of their students as respect needs to be shown and received. Since that time, the participants met with the administration team to share their ideas of how they could show respect for others for the upcoming year. They had ideas such as events, classroom activities, and professional goals linked to respect for all. It is important to note that the participants came up with these suggestions on their own and were not sparked by discussions led by administration.

The teachers also brainstormed ideas to build mutual respect with the community. Three of the teachers mentioned that the families that they got the most response from were those families that respect was already in place. The beginning teachers reflect on the possibilities with the students if all of the adults in their lives were displaying respect.

Trust

The teachers also discussed the desire to learn more about how they can get their students to trust them more in order for the relationships to grow in their classroom. Participants seemed to find the discussions and reflections important in building trust with one another. They were allowed to cross boundaries while learning more from one another. They asked for suggestions and strategies that were similar to what they experienced so that they could do them with their students. For example, a teacher said, “this CLE was a great chance to not only learn about our

students but about one another too” (personal communication, January 16, 2020). Similarly, another teacher mentioned that she wanted to do this same CLE with her students at the beginning of the new school year so that they could drop the boundaries and gain respect of their classmates (personal communication, January 17, 2020).

Similarly, trust was discussed through the lens of the parents and community. Trust is vital to the creation of effective relationships. Two of the teachers stated that they did not feel like they had the trust of all of their parents. They recognized this is a hurdle within their classroom. One teacher gave the idea of taking the CLE and expanding it to their families. This would give families the opportunity to tell their story and for us to listen. Trust is earned through opportunities such as that. All of the teachers understood the benefits of trust when working with students and families.

Chapter Summary

This chapter described the themes and the categories that were discovered from the data analysis. The themes of finding common ground among the participants, the influence of cultures, and how relationships matter all emerged through the CLEs, discussions and memos. In the next chapter, I provide a better understanding of how this project can aid in discussions along with the implications for the future.

CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The original intent of this PAR project was for teachers to understand the role of culture in teaching and learning through culturally relevant teaching strategies. The chapter begins off with a re-analysis of the findings through the lens of the extant literature previously examined in Chapter 2. Then I provide my conclusions and an updated framework for understanding how to better serve diverse students. Next, I explore the implications of this PAR research. I also discuss how my practice as an educator has changed through this action research and what further research should be considered to improve teacher and student relationships to foster academic success. I then discuss the EdD framework used in this study and the limitations of this study. Finally, I share how this work affected my own leadership development with equity and I conclude by looking toward the future.

The original aim of this project was to support beginning teachers by helping them better understand the students that they serve by integrating culturally relevant teaching strategies. I wanted to help the teachers immerse themselves in the lives of their students to see the different perspectives. My own personal journey of becoming a beginning teacher helped me to understand why building relationships is vital to help students succeed academically and social-emotionally. My FoP aimed to improve the relationships and understanding of their students by implementing strategies into their classrooms to would help them navigate this. Through qualitative methods, the data analysis allowed me to determine what gaps existed and forced me to develop a plan to better support the students and teachers. Through the experiences of these teachers and their students, we were better able to understand the different perspectives of our students and to implement changes based on the reflections the teachers encountered. This study took place from January 2020 to October 2020.

At the core of the project was a focus on equity. Racial and ethnic diversity is present throughout the student population at the school; however, it is not prevalent in the teacher population. The majority of students experience life as a minority by society's terms, while most adults do not fall in the same category. These students are racially and ethnically diverse but are largely misrepresented by the resources, programs, and strategies that are implemented within the building.

The fishbone diagram (see Figure 3) illustrated the challenges teachers have in developing relationships with students in order to learn about them in context. The micro-challenges were principal turnover, limited attention to beginning teacher development, and defining what appropriate relationships were. The meso-challenges included limited time and resources, along with a high demand for teachers. The two major macro-concerns were teacher retention and diversity.

The setting for my project was in a rural K-8 school located in Pitt County, North Carolina. This public school is considered a Title I school where 100% of the students receive free lunch. The total enrollment is around 575 students and 70 staff members. The participants in this PAR study were all beginning teachers that ranged from their first year of teaching to their third year of teaching. The group of beginning teachers consisted of individuals that taught elementary and middle. These participants represented the various grade levels, subject areas and cultural backgrounds.

Findings and Extant Literature

This PAR project generated several key findings that I discuss in this section. I reanalyze the extant literature presented in Chapter 2 and compare my research findings to literature. I compare findings to the specific elements in the literature that I have identified, which including

beginning teacher support and student-teacher relationship facilitated through culturally responsive teaching. An evaluation of how those two elements affect teacher efficacy is presented next. Finally, I share the reasoning behind my conclusion that implementing culturally relevant teaching strategies is important in understanding the role of culture in the classroom.

The findings from my PAR project helped confirm the extant literature presented as well. In this section, I take a deeper dive into each of the three areas from my literature review: beginning teacher support, culturally responsive teaching, and teacher efficacy. In each subsection, I explain how the findings from the PAR support or do not support the assertions from other findings.

Beginning Teacher Support

In order to better understand what a teacher experiences in their first three years of teaching, this literature was an important starting place. Support for beginning teachers is not a novel topic and one that is rich in the literature from many different perspectives (Bartell, 2004; Curran & Goldrick, 2002; Wong, 2004). While there are many different components of a beginning teacher program, I am going to speak on three that were prevalent through my PAR project and corresponded with what has been found in the literature. Those three areas are coaching, professional development, and administrative support.

With good coaching, support is given to a beginning teacher in order to help them achieve goals (Bloom et al., 2005). This coaching can occur informally or formally and is a journey alongside the beginning teacher to improve and assist with student achievement (Brewster & Railsback, 2001). There was evidence throughout my PAR that the beginning teacher received coaching that made them pause and reflect on the different perspectives represented in their classrooms. This was achieved through the second part of the PAR. The

second CLE afforded me with the opportunity to present to the teachers a coaching session that allowed them to get a better understanding of their students. The social injustice that was playing out across the world helped hit home the reflections. Similarly, another important part of coaching is the opportunity for teachers to transition from “a student of teaching to a teacher of students” (Ingersoll & Smith, 2004, p. 29). Throughout this entire PAR, the teachers had to immerse themselves in the lives of their students. Not only taking on the perspective of one student but many. By the end of the PAR, the teachers were given opportunities to be the coaches to one another and other staff members.

The entire PAR project consisted of formal and informal professional development. A major development of my project was to assess the teachers’ preconceived notions of their students, then provide them with ongoing professional development centered on this topic, and then afterward to reassess their reflections afterwards. A major finding was how perspectives changed with beginning teachers after that professional development. When comparing these findings to the literature, I noticed many similarities. Wei et al. (2009) found that professional development should be designed to benefit all students while the Alliance for Excellent Education (2004) said that support should be provided for teachers with diverse learners.

The role that administrators play in developing novice teachers who become master teachers through coaching, professional development, and other opportunities should never be overlooked (Inman & Marlow, 2004). In this PAR project, I found that taking this journey with the beginning teachers toward a common goal led to shifts in their thinking along with mine. The support and understanding allowed for the teachers to grow and receive feedback that allowed for changes.

Culturally Responsive Teaching

A major premise of my PAR project was that culturally responsive teaching paired with a better understanding of students allows for meaningful relationships to be built. In addition to building purposeful connections with their students, I found that the beginning teachers looked to broaden their connections and extend them past their classrooms. While comparing these findings with the literature, I found many similarities. Ladson-Billings (1995) characterized teacher-student relationships as interactions that extended beyond the classroom and into the community. As discussed throughout, I found this was a common theme in the discussions and reflections with the teachers.

In addition to understanding that relationships are the foundation of CRT, the teachers were able to self-reflect and acknowledge their progress on the continuum. Gay (2002) outlined six dimensions that better explain culturally relevant teaching. The teachers were able to assess themselves and provide a rating scale on where they fell with each dimension. That rating scale can be found in Table 9. Teachers rated themselves from one to five based on their progress in that dimension. One was incompetent, and five were mastered. There are limitations to self-reporting. The participants may have responded based on my desired outcomes.

Finally, a key component of CRT is the understanding that empathy for students is much more productive than sympathy. Research suggests that teachers who are more effective with diverse students also display empathy within their classrooms (Gordon, 1999; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Empathic teachers have also been known to help students find their niche in schools while building relationships with teachers and peers (Cooper, 2004). In this PAR project, I found that the teachers shifted their mindset and approach with students afterward to empathy. As noted in

Table 9

Self-Rating Scales on the Six Dimensions of CRT

Dimensions	Teacher				
	A	B	C	D	E
Emancipatory	4	3	3	4	3
Validating	4	4	3	4	3
Comprehensive	3	4	3	4	4
Transformative	4	3	3	4	4
Empowering	4	3	3	4	3
Multidimensional	4	3	3	3	2

conversations and reflections, the teachers understood their students came from different backgrounds, but would not allow them to set low expectations.

Teacher Efficacy

My last literature bin examined teacher efficacy and its importance in growing novice teachers. Self-efficacy is something that can be developed early on in the teaching career (Bandura & Wessels, 1997). School leaders must be the trailblazer when it comes to incorporating culturally responsive practices in order to have that buy-in from the staff (Boske, 2009; Davis, 2002; Verdugo, 2002). Throughout this PAR project, a major goal was to reflect and implement but also model culturally responsive teaching. As the researcher and the administrator, I traveled with the beginning teachers in this journey of self-reflection and awareness. The support and understanding that was mutually shared allowed for us all to recognize when practices did not advocate equity for all.

In the following section, I make connections between my findings and how they relate to one another. This opportunity allowed me to expand on how meaningful relationships allow for a deeper understanding of the cultural context of the students.

The Trifecta That Promotes Transformation

The data that was collected from the PAR project was reviewed through the lens of the extant literature already presented. From that review, it was clear that a couple of major takeaways were evident. First, the teachers who were able to self-reflect took a deeper look to find common ground and discover their origins. These reflections forced them to look within to determine how these biases shaped their thoughts and beliefs. Secondly, these changes in perspectives and actions allowed for the teachers to better learn their students in understand the importance that culture plays in their teaching and learning. Finally, the teachers who

implemented culturally responsive strategies in their classroom allowed them to form meaningful relationships with their students. While reflection is already a part of teaching, by focusing on CRT and the students present in the community, we were able to promote more reflection and allow the teachers to share personal stories that made it more relevant to all.

It is also important to note that this better understanding of the students and CRT did not begin and end in the PAR project. These conversations started well before and extended into what was happening in the world at the time. The dramatic shift in the nation's opinion and thinking of equity acted as a huge catalyst for conversation starters. These events that were playing out in the world influenced the reformation of our thinking and approach with students. Conversations were being held on all levels of education, both formally and informally. At the same time, the beginning teachers initiated similar conversations about other topics that included relationships. It is this reason, where continued conversations and the desire to reform, that caused me to revisit and rework the initial framework that I provided. In the next section, I clarify my new framework for equitable and sustained reform in education.

Re-Informed Theory

An extensive literature review helped me to understand teacher-student relationships and the PAR process allowed me to experience the process of deepening these relationships to learn more about the students in context. Through my qualitative data collection and subsequent analysis that there are significant steps needed in order for a teacher to develop a meaningful relationship with students.

Figure 15 provides a visual of the progression needed in order for them to foster a relationship with students. In this figure, the process starts off very broad with a focus on the teacher. The adult in this situation has to take the initiative and it starts with self-awareness. A

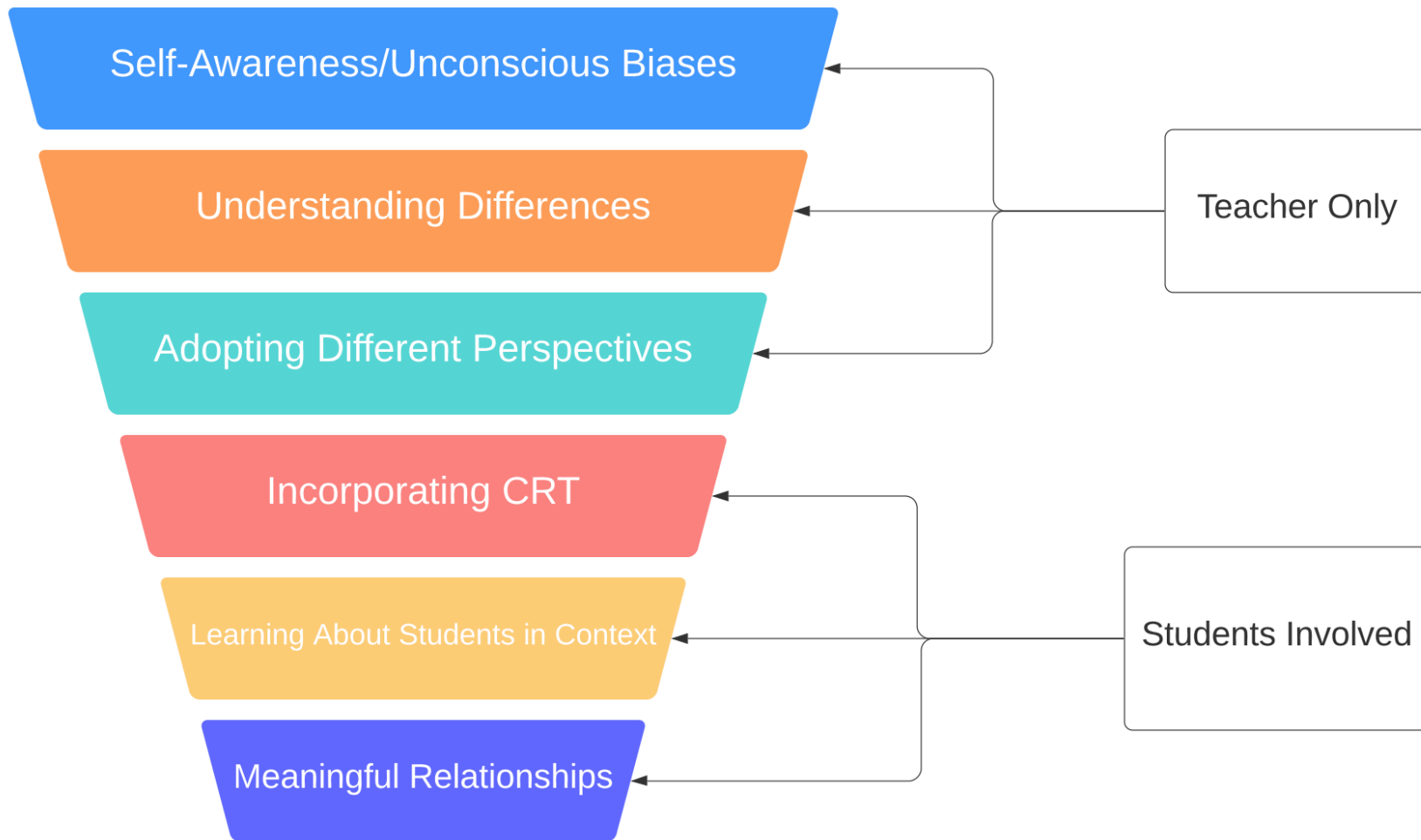


Figure 6. Progression of relationship building.

long look in the mirror is needed to identify the unconscious biases that influence the perspectives and actions of the teacher. As noted, some of these perspectives can be unconscious or unknown directly to the teacher but needs to be identified early on. This self-reflection step is important. Next, the teacher needs to identify and understand the differences that are prominent within their classroom. Those differences can be outlined based on cultures, gender, ethnicity, religion and more. Diversity is apparent in all classrooms and the teachers must understand these differences. After a deeper understanding, the teacher must be willing to look at their students through multiple lenses. Different perspectives help to broaden the understanding and the acceptance of the students within the classroom.

The final progression of relationship-building includes the students in the equation. The first part was setting the stage and building a foundation. As the figure depicts, the teacher is also narrowing and becoming more specific with their actions. It begins with implementing CRT strategies that change and shift the approach of the teacher. The teacher is no longer teaching to one subgroup but has shifted to include several subgroups that are represented in the classroom. It is intentional and provides a deep connection that makes the learning relevant to the student. This is critical in the CRT model. After incorporating CRT strategies and becoming more self-aware, the teacher is then able to learn more about the students in context. The blurred picture of the student that started at the beginning is now starting to come into focus. The academic, social, behavioral, emotional, and health needs of the student are better understood by the teacher. By the end, the teacher is able to foster a meaningful relationship that is centered on understanding and empathy. Relationships that do not hinder or limit the student and teacher but instead cultivates life-long learners in both. This visual was created based on the CLEs and the

discussions with the teachers. It became evident that relationship building begins with the teachers.

Research Questions Redux

The overarching research question for my participatory action research project was: How do beginning teachers come to understand the importance and role of culture in teaching and learning? Many beginning teachers enter the profession with very little understanding of their students. This lack of understanding affects not only the teacher but also the student. A majority of beginning teacher support programs are a one size fits all approach. These novice teachers are expected to provide rigorous instruction, provide social-emotional support, maintain a positive and nurturing environment all while dealing with 20+ students with unique backgrounds and experiences. Typically beginning teacher support does not take into account the diverse learners in a classroom and how to properly meet their needs. The PAR project utilized strategies to differentiate the needs of the novice teachers at the rural K-8 school in eastern North Carolina. Through intensive, individualized support, storytelling, CLEs and professional learning on CRT, novice teachers recognized the role of culture in their teaching.

My first subquestion was: To what extent do teachers understand the students they serve? Teachers need support in the beginning years on how to implement strategies that create connections that are meaningful while providing a level playing field for all. This was evident in the first part of my PAR project as the teachers were able to reflect and see the differences among their students but had no roadmap on how to provide equitable instruction. It was also apparent that relationships had not developed with all students early on which contributed to the lack of understanding. Their students consisted of names and random bits of information but had not developed into stories. The simple process of understanding one another and their students

was the first step. The teachers received firsthand experiences on strategies that could be implemented in their classroom to help improve relationships. The CLEs were the vehicle for the teachers to do this. Each CLE provided an opportunity for teachers to implement strategies in their classrooms to break down barriers and build up relationships. Since the teachers were able to experience these, they were able to see how they could be effective in the classroom and how to modify them.

My second subquestion was: To what extent do beginning teachers identify and plan to integrate the elements of culturally relevant pedagogy? CRT strategies allows for teachers to better understand students' cultural differences that make up students. In return, this provides an opportunity to make connections and increase the relevance in the classroom. Teacher-student relationships are important to the process but as the teachers noted, their relationships became more trusting once the connections were made through CRT. These strategies allowed for inclusion for all students of different ages, backgrounds, and cultures as the teachers were able to reflect on their progress from one year to the next. The professional development that the teachers received brought into context these CRT strategies.

My final sub-question was: To what extent does the implementation of culturally relevant strategies with beginning teachers affect my leadership as a principal? My experiences throughout this PAR project allowed me the opportunity to reflect, implement, and improve. I have learned that as the leader of a school, I need to reassess my relationships with my students, staff, and community. This reassessment has allowed me to determine if the relationships I have formed are culturally responsive and based on the needs of individuals. More importantly, I have learned how to provide equitable voices for the students and the community that I serve. This

shift in my perspective has allowed me to refocus and understand the importance of understanding the students that we serve while providing support for teachers in this endeavor.

This PAR project provides a small glimpse into one method of getting teachers to understand the role of culture centered around implementing CRT strategies in a classroom. In a bigger picture, the findings bring light to the importance of getting to know the student and building relationships that are built on a foundation of understanding the students. As a result of these findings, I provided a new framework that depicts the ways in which teachers and leaders interested in creating self-efficacy can implement a process together within the school to have meaningful relationships that result in self-reflection, incorporating CRT strategies, and continued development in understanding. In the next section, I explain the implications of this study.

Implications

The results of this PAR project are specific to this context but there are other implications that may be drawn for practitioners, policymakers, and researchers. In the subsequent sections, I explore the implications for both practices and policies within the education system. After that, I share with researchers some other potential areas to further this research. Finally, I discuss the implications for the ECU doctoral framework.

Practice

Educators believe that when they are teaching, they are utilizing strategies and considering all of the students represented in their classrooms. We think we understand diversity and how to serve those students best, but we rarely take time to learn about the students in context. By learning more about the students, we were able to know more about the stories of our students, but more than that, we were able to understand better each other's stories. This led to

changes in our teaching practices, but also in practices related to equity of all. Teacher leaders are more likely to implement CRT strategies in their classrooms while also implementing changes on a school level. Teachers and administrators should continue to seek understanding of their students and community when thinking about how to serve their students best.

One of the beginning teachers stated in our last CLE, “Taking a deep dive into our own unconscious biases are extremely important if we are ever going to understand our students and meet them where they are” (CLE, October 22, 2020). An important next step is to utilize platforms such as CLEs in schools in order to ensure that we are hearing more voices and reflecting during the process. The opportunity for teachers of all experience levels to hear from their colleagues allows for a deeper appreciation for others. This connection with peers would allow for teachers to then extend that connection to the students that they serve. By creating a school that has a deeper appreciation and understanding from the top down would allow for additional growth to be pursued.

Schools across all educational settings can utilize the findings of this PAR project to embrace a process of empathetic collaboration to enact change. It is simply not enough to self-reflect and to learn about differences rather that is only part of the change process. Instead, it is important that schools come together to share personal experiences, implement strategies, and collaborate with the community. In addition, schools should regularly explore opportunities to invite their families in, listen to their experiences and share conversations in order to better understand the community in context.

Schools could also utilize this framework to also explore other problems of practice within their community. School leaders can learn a lot about how their community reacts to different situations based on cultural differences. By utilizing this framework, schools are

honoring the diverse communities that they serve and developing trust through understanding that would likely lead to additional conversations and opportunities to support as additional areas of concern develop.

Policy

This PAR project caused no direct changes to formal policies already in place; however, educational systems should consider a process to ensure that formal training is implemented with beginning teachers to assist with culturally responsive training. This process can be adapting to the beginning teacher induction program. Professional development can be initiated at the beginning of the school year and continuous development can be provided as the school continues. This hands-on experience and learning help create a support system that helps retain beginning teachers by building collaborative groups.

School leaders can lead by example by performing the same process with staff members in order for them to better understand and provide equity for all. School leaders can engage in similar steps to learn about all staff members in context and learn their stories. This deeper understanding and respect for one another affords the school opportunities to be more open. School leaders can also perform this process with their communities to engage more constituents. By schools opening their doors and listening, families become more responsive and engaged in their child's education. This benefits not only the families but the schools as they build a partnership that can last for years.

Research

This study was limited in the fact that it took place only at one K-8 school. In order to broaden the scope, future research opportunities might include different or larger contexts. Secondary education settings were not taken into consideration and the way that students' stories

develop the older they get could play a serious factor in understanding their stories. Additionally, lengthening the research's implementation could prove to provide some viable knowledge. Since this project took place over 10-12 months, it was limited in capturing how this process could affect beginning teachers and students over the year. Numerous follow-up studies could measure the retention rate of teachers and the academic success of students.

The framework that I provided along with the process was originally designed for an educational setting but could easily also be adapted for non-educational settings. The process is something that business leaders could utilize to build understanding, respect, and harmony within their employees. In any situation where you have a diverse group of individuals coming together to achieve a common goal, this process could be incorporated to provide an equal voice for all and to promote inclusivity.

This PAR project was a qualitative study that did not utilize quantifiable units. I encourage educational leaders and researchers to utilize more qualitative points of data when it comes to learning how to provide more equitable opportunities for students. We often hear that students are not just test scores but so much more. The stories that they tell cannot be measure with numbers or variables. Instead, researchers are encouraged to utilize qualitative coding in order to create a full picture based on the voices of the students.

There are large bodies of research centered around culturally responsive teaching, understanding diversity, and the importance of knowing the child's story; however, research that analyzes the impact on the teacher regarding these three topics is scarce. The academic world would benefit from the continued development of the impact on not only the students but the teachers as well. As the single most impactful factor in a child's education, the teacher's perspective needs closer analysis. Researchers could then examine how the practices that are put

in place with teachers compared to those who receive no additional support. The research could take many different avenues and could benefit leaders, teachers, students, and communities.

School Leaders

A number of areas of implications resonate with school leaders, particularly those who are facing similar circumstances. The first area that started to develop and make itself clear to me was the time needed for teachers to collaborate on a common goal. Professional development time is needed for teachers to communicate and reflect. Valuable communication allows individuals and schools to transmit information, helps with understanding, and encourages thinking. This can encompass everything from cultural activities to learning more about the community they serve. Allowing teachers to share information and resources on the different struggles they face allows for a smoother transition for both teachers and students.

Another area that could help school leaders is developing a school culture that is conducive to learning. The importance of culture is known to all who find themselves a part of an organization, but sometimes it is hard to create a positive one. This project has the opportunity for school leaders to implement change through safe spaces. It is essential for leaders to evaluate how the combination of perspectives and ideologies can affect their school.

Finally, this PAR project can contribute to the way leaders collect and analyze data to make decisions to improve. By seeking out the voices of their stakeholders, leaders are taking an active approach and creating buy-in. Those voices are critical to understanding what is being experienced and provide opportunities for leaders to make adjustments. This process breaks out of the typical climate survey and creates authentic data without boundaries. From personal experience, I have found this to be much more useful.

Summary

This PAR study provided several implications for practice, policy, and research. Readers should be able to gather that understanding the student in context is vital in providing for the student. However, in order to do so, leaders and teachers should do so by taking a reflective approach and incorporating effective strategies to include all. In the next section, I explore how this PAR project has influenced my leadership practices.

My Leadership Development

The original research questions included a reflective approach of how this project has altered my leadership practices. An unwritten goal of this project was to create reflective practitioners within the beginning teachers; however, this process triggered openings for me to perform reflections based on my past and current experiences. As a result of this project and the frequent conversations held throughout, I began to view myself as a reflective leader. From beginning to end, I looked for and acted upon opportunities to provide a deeper look within oneself for both myself and my teachers. I advocated for teachers to pause and determine how past, current, and future experiences can affect their views. Not only for my teachers, but this process also forced me as a leader to take an intentional look at my own practices when it comes to providing for my staff and students.

The reflective process is a natural part of teacher preparation programs. So often individuals studying for careers in education are asked to reflect on their lesson plans and their instruction. Once they go on to teaching careers, we often forget about this vital part of growing as educators. Even more so, school leaders forget this process and fail to reflect on their effectiveness. This project thrust me into a situation that caused me to reflect on my cultural responsiveness with my community and staff. Since becoming an active participant, I now

advocate more for diverse opportunities and the inclusion of equity across all domains. I seek to elicit more feedback from my constituents and explore opportunities to empower them to address issues of concern. I reflect on my actions and interactions to determine what personal motivations govern my behavior. I have found ways to incorporate these opportunities with my staff and students as well. Together, we try to understand the elements that contribute to our behaviors. Doing so, this is the first step toward challenging and changing our behaviors.

Similarly, I was better equipped to understand the assets and capabilities that my students and staff bring to the school. This endeavor gave me the chance to understand the cultures that represent my school by getting to know my students and staff. By walking in their stories, I was able to listen and share common themes. I was able to understand what and whom they care about the most. This consistent engagement in real conversations and dialogue with my community has afforded me the opportunity to strategize and address concerns on a more personalized level.

As a White male in the United States, I rarely feel the discomfort that most of the minorities in my school face daily. During and after this PAR project, I found myself in more situations where I was not the dominant one but instead was part of a minority. This recognition of what it feels like forced me to pause and ask questions. How often do my students and staff members feel like this in our school? Why are they feeling like this and how can we help them? Inclusivity meant something more to me afterward and became something that I am driven to do with minorities.

Over the years, educational systems have historically fostered the achievement of a small section of the school population by establishing standards and values that are insensitive to many cultures. By having limited cultural scope, schools have promoted biases in curriculum

development and instructional strategies. These limitations have been detrimental to students from diverse backgrounds. This process revealed to me that I could change certain things within my scope to benefit the needs of my students. The benefits of walking teachers through reforming practices to become more inclusive is priceless. The need for change has become more apparent over the years. By questioning traditional strategies and becoming culturally responsive, we are working towards change in education.

Finally, my role as a school leader provided me broader viewpoint than most others. During each stage of the project, I observed the teachers undergo a change that may have been subtle to some but was life-altering to me. After reflecting and reviewing my memos, the one word that seemed to be prevalent everywhere was appreciation. Appreciation was most obvious with the newfound understanding of diverse backgrounds within my students and staff. But appreciation could be used to describe more than diversity. I observed the teachers let go of boundaries and obstacles. I watched them share fears, concerns, and joyous occasions with one another. They were humbled by admitted misconceptions and downfalls. One thing that was evident through it all was that the teachers understood the enormous responsibility that laid before them. They never shied away from it or used excuses to skirt around what mattered the most-the students and provided the very best education for them.

This project has influenced me with the decisions I will make in the future. As the school obtains global school recognition, I will adopt this same framework with international teachers. I will need to assist the school in understanding and appreciating different cultures through our unique curriculum as well. A deep reflection of oneself will be needed in order to appreciate those from different backgrounds.

Conclusion

The intention of this PAR project was to equip beginning teachers with skills and strategies to better understand their students in context. In this last section, I show the correlation of my research questions the findings.

(a) Common Ground

Throughout the entire PAR process, the evidence supports the claim that implementing specific strategies with teachers and students improves relationships. The teachers expressed their concern at the beginning that they did not feel like they truly understood all of their students. They recognized the barriers and the misconceptions when it came to understanding their stories better. Throughout the process, reflection activities allowed the teachers to feel more confident and empowered to implement new strategies in their classrooms. In between the CLEs, the teachers continued conversations with one another and me to touch base on their progress and how their thinking had shifted. As a result, the teachers feel more assured about their relationships with the students. Thus, the data collected from this PAR project provides enough evidence to claim that: *specific and intentional strategies implemented within a classroom can create meaningful relationships for teachers and students.*

(b) Culturally Relevant Strategies

As part of the PAR project, teachers received training on implementing culturally relevant teaching strategies. The trainings provided minor shifts in instruction but a deeper understanding of how this could positively affect their students. This process dramatically changed and tested the understanding of cultural significance with the teachers. Conversations were held to connect the benefits of CRT strategies to that of the success of the students. In addition, the self-reflection process proved to have a big impact on the development of

instruction in the classroom. Therefore, the data collected from this PAR project provides enough evidence to claim that: *understanding and building relationships with students drives the use of culturally relevant teaching strategies in the classroom.*

(c) Transforming my leadership

This entire process allowed me the opportunity to grow and develop alongside my teachers. Whether I was reflecting or implementing changes, I saw my role as an influencer transform. Throughout this process, I grew more reflective and I paid more attention to the stories the people around me carried. I listened more to better understand how their experiences have influenced their stories. Increasingly, I looked for ways to include more diverse opportunities in the school for both staff and students. I ensured that my approach to individuals was responsive and understanding of their difference. Therefore, the data collected from this PAR project provides enough evidence to claim that: *participation and reflection transformed my leadership as a principal.*

Summary

This project was originally intended to investigate how relationships between teachers and students can influence their success. The focus aim was to improve those relationships through culturally relevant teaching strategies by creating opportunities for teachers to better understand their students better. It was my intention as the researcher to walk the teachers through these processes and support. I was able to document and analyze this process through the experience of the beginning teachers present at my school. Seeing this transition through the eyes of my teachers helped me understand the current deficiencies and how I, as their principal, can improve my support to have a positively impact on my school. As a result, I was able to take the

findings of this project and develop systems and structures that could be implemented by teachers in any setting no matter their experience level.

During the time of this study, several changes took place with the teachers that were either a direct or indirect result of this research. The biggest overall change was the use of conversations in classrooms. Small changes in the ways that the teachers handled students started to become evident. The teachers were taking the time to learn more about their stories and what made them unique. This understanding allowed the teachers to better appreciate what the students were able to bring to the classroom. Detailed in my discussions with the teachers, they were able to highlight and share important stories which caused them to shift their understanding.

As a result of the Community Learning Exchanges (CLE), the teachers started implemented similar things into their classrooms. The teachers with older students were able to incorporate the journey line into their beginning of year activities as it related to experiences. It also personally shaped the way that I approach events with my staff. I now understand how important it is to build relationships with my staff and do so in a way that is inclusive. Listening and understanding their personal stories is the foundation of the CLEs. Going into future school years, I have started to incorporate small changes in my approach to reflect the things that I experienced.

Throughout this study, I investigate this problematic issue as it related to my staff and students. Additionally, this project also shaped me as a learner and as a leader. It allowed me to understand that change is complex and one that does not happen overnight. In order to enact change in a school, no matter the size, one must first have buy-in from one's stakeholders. Trust and understanding are necessary in order for a school to make changes. By listening and

responding effectively, I grew as a leader in the way that I worked with my families, students, and staff. Everyone has something unique that they bring to the table. It is my responsibility to listen and reflect.

This project started by trying to influence a small population of individuals within a school. The notion that strong relationships fostered growth was the premise of this project. I quickly learned that this project was not just meant to be looked at through a small lens. By the end of this project, I not only understood the implications that it has within my school but every educational setting and any organization that deals with people. Voices are not only important in education, but it is important to every setting to maximize efficiency. Leaders in all arenas must recognize that all stakeholders are the recipients of all decisions. The importance of understanding those voices when building relationships was my ultimate take away as the key researcher of this project and the leader of a school.

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APPENDIX A: INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL LETTER



EAST CAROLINA UNIVERSITY
University & Medical Center Institutional Review Board
4N-64 Brody Medical Sciences Building· Mail Stop 682
600 Moye Boulevard · Greenville, NC 27834
Office **252-744-2914** · Fax **252-744-2284**
rede.ecu.edu/umcirb/

Notification of Initial Approval: Expedited

From: Social/Behavioral IRB
To: [Jerry Matkins](#)
CC: [Matthew Militello](#)
Date: 12/20/2019
Re: [UMCIRB 19-002343](#)
Increasing Beginning Teachers' Understanding of Racially Diverse Students

I am pleased to inform you that your Expedited Application was approved. Approval of the study and any consent form(s) occurred on 12/20/2019. The research study is eligible for review under expedited category # 6, 7. The Chairperson (or designee) deemed this study no more than minimal risk.

Changes to this approved research may not be initiated without UMCIRB review except when necessary to eliminate an apparent immediate hazard to the participant. All unanticipated problems involving risks to participants and others must be promptly reported to the UMCIRB. The investigator must submit a Final Report application to the UMCIRB prior to the Expected End Date provided in the IRB application. If the study is not completed by this date, an Amendment will need to be submitted to extend the Expected End Date. The Investigator must adhere to all reporting requirements for this study.

Approved consent documents with the IRB approval date stamped on the document should be used to consent participants (consent documents with the IRB approval date stamp are found under the Documents tab in the study workspace).

The approval includes the following items:

Name	Description
Adult consent form	Consent Forms
Jerry Taylor Matkins Jr' Proposal Defense Protocol	Study Protocol or Grant Application Interview/Focus Group Scripts/Questions

For research studies where a waiver of HIPAA Authorization has been approved, each of the waiver criteria in 45 CFR 164.512(i)(2)(ii) has been met. Additionally, the elements of PHI to be collected as described in items 1 and 2 of the Application for Waiver of Authorization have been determined to be the minimal necessary for the specified research.

The Chairperson (or designee) does not have a potential for conflict of interest on this study.

APPENDIX B: COUNTY APPROVAL LETTER



Pitt County Schools

Educational Programs and Services

Celebrating Every Child, Challenging Every Learner

December 5, 2019

Matthew Militello, Ed.D
College of Education
East Carolina University
Greenville, NC 27834

Dear Dr. Militello,

Jerry T. Matkins, Jr. has submitted his request to conduct research in Pitt County Schools as part of course work. I have reviewed Mr. Matkins' research proposal and will approve it pending the university's IRB approval.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Steve Lassiter".

Steve Lassiter, Ed.D.
Assistant Superintendent of Educational Programs and Services
Pitt County Schools

APPENDIX C: TEACHER INFORMED CONSENT

[Date]

Dear Classroom Teacher,

I am currently working on my Doctor of Education at East Carolina University. As part of a course assignment, I have developed an action research project to be conducted over a 2-year period at XXX School. I am asking if you would be willing to participate in my study. This project must be submitted and approved by ECU’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) before it can be implemented; your permission to allow yourself to be a part of this project is a requirement of the IRB review process. I am required to provide the IRB with a copy of your permission before the IRB will review and/or approve the project.

Please note that as your direct supervisor, your decision to participate in this research project will not affect your current job status. If you decide not to participate, no repercussions will be held against you.

Please review the **attached** action research project and sign the bottom of this form if the inclusion of your classroom in this action research project titled, *(project title here)* meets with your approval.

Sincerely,

Taylor Matkins
Principal of Pactolus School

Teacher’s Signature and Date:

I have received and reviewed a copy of Taylor Matkins’ proposed action research project, and I give my permission for him to include my classroom in his action research project at Pactolus School.

Signature

Date

APPENDIX D: CIRCLE PROTOCOL

The circle protocol allows for individuals to make connections, collaborate, and understand one another. This process involves invited individuals to change their relationship with a wider community and in result develop strong relationships, trust, and the ability to work together. Each and every individual has an equal voice.

Theoretical Underpinnings

- Create safety and trust
- Honor voice and hold stories sacred
- Share power among people
- Support honest dialogue about important issues
- Foster new relationships

Outcome

- Democratizing voice
- Bringing reflection
- Eliciting and honoring collective wisdom

Process for Opening a Circle

- Gather in a circle
- A talking piece is determined that is meaningful
- Welcome people and offer a reading of text to set the tone
- Individuals introduce themselves
 - Reflections are made
- Introduce the talking piece and explain norms/protocols
 - Only the individual with the talking piece is allowed to talk
 - The talking piece is passed to the left of the speaker each time until everyone has a chance to speak

Process for Closing a Circle

- Remind individuals of their role and significance of the circle and its components
- A closing prompt is given centered around reflections of the process
- Invite one individual to close

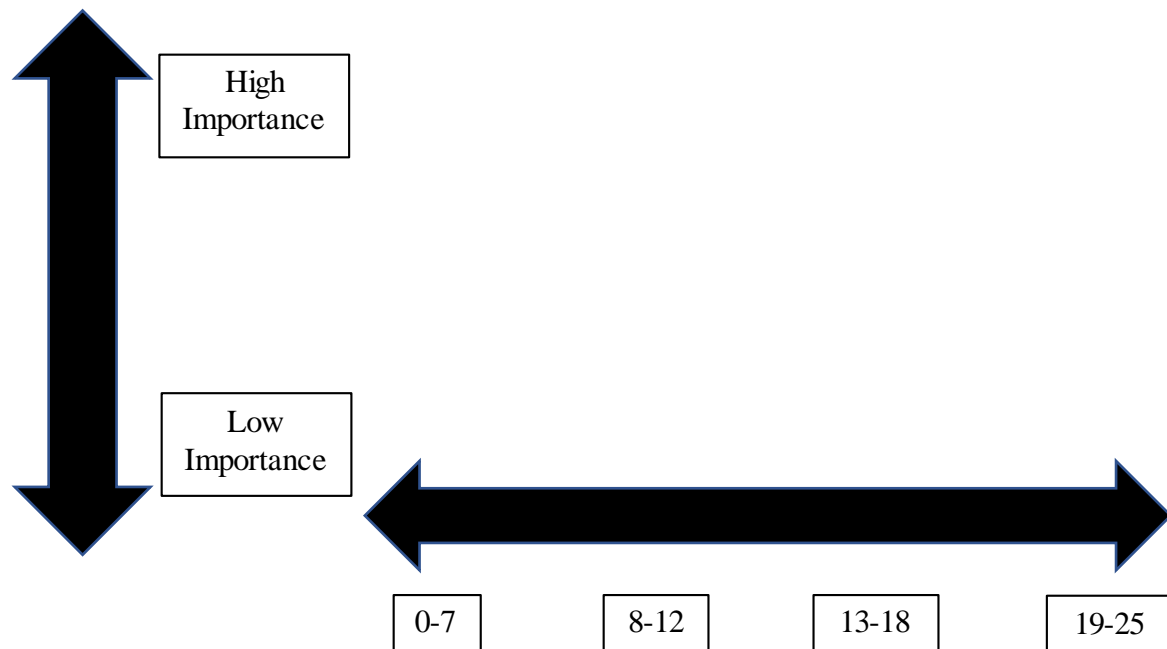
APPENDIX E: JOURNEY LINE PROTOCOL

The journey line protocol allows the individuals to tell their stories by giving them a voice. The protocol creates a short visual representation that helps tell a story.

Process for a Journey Line

- Individuals are asked to think about the times in their life, from birth to present.
- They are then charted on a line in intervals
- Individuals are then given a prompt and are asked to determine their importance in their lives
- Next, the individuals plot their experiences on the graph
- They must then pick one story from their Journey Line and record a longer story about it
- After reviewing, one sentence is captured that reflects their story and journey: I am the story of _____

The Journey Lines and the stories can be shared with one another to introduce others into their lives.



APPENDIX F: WORLD CAFÉ PROTOCOL

The world café protocol allows for individuals to have a voice while drawing on diverse perspectives. Through this process, everyone is treated as equals.

Theoretical Underpinnings

- Provides opportunities to synthesize, deconstruct, or build ideas
- Individuals' movement promotes constructive learning principles

Outcome

- An interactive process in which individuals co-construct understanding and knowledge through experiences

Process/Implementation

- Facilitators are determined and their role is provided
- Three progressive rounds of conversation (8-12 minutes each) take place
- The topic of each table is explored more
- Individuals write, doodle, and draw key ideas from each table
- After each round, the host stays at the table and the other individuals travel to the next table
- Table hosts welcome new guests and briefly share information about the initial conversation
- Eventually, after several rounds, themes are linked based on ideas and questions
- Finally, a conversation including the entire group is held to identify patterns and determine possibilities of new meanings.

World Café Etiquette

- Focus on what matters
- Contribute to your thinking
- Speak your mind
- Listen to understand
- Link and connect ideas
- Listen together for insights and deeper questions
- Play, Doodle, Draw—writing on the paper is important

APPENDIX G: CLE AGENDA

Pactolus School

BT Meeting

January 16, 2020

Anticipated Outcomes		
Reflect our personal experiences	Broaden our understanding of others	Examine how we can make an impact as educators
Working Agreements		
Seek first to understand, then to be understood	Be present and active	Gracious Space

AGENDA
Introduction-10 minutes
Journey Line-15 minutes
Reflection-15 minutes
Sharing-25 minutes



