

ABSTRACT

Dina Edwards, *CULTIVATING EQUITY WARRIORS: EMPOWERING EDUCATORS TO ENACT CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE PEDAGOGY FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS* (Under the direction of Dr. Matthew Militello). Department of Educational Leadership, December, 2023.

The study examined how a collaborative teacher team developed common understandings of and implemented culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) to support African American students. Utilizing participatory action research (PAR) as the primary methodology, a group of educators broadened and deepened their understanding of CRP and concentrated their efforts on becoming warm demanders. Specifically, the research uncovered the challenges educators face in balancing the dual roles of building relationships and holding students to high expectations in their classrooms; teachers were strong in cultivating relationships with students and creating safe spaces for student learning, but they struggled to push students to new levels of learning and had difficulty fully implementing the “demander” role of warm demander. Throughout our work in three PAR Cycles, we found that strong, positive student-teacher relationships were critical. However, teachers hesitated to be warm demanders. To bridge the gap between warm and demanding, teachers benefited from structured observations using evidence-based observation tools and effective post-observation conversations. Culturally responsive teaching practices, combined with evidence-based observations and post-observation conversations, supported educators in creating inclusive and equitable learning environments that honor the unique experiences and perspectives of African American students. The study could be useful to teachers and school leaders who are committed to culturally responsive pedagogy but have not fully succeeded in implementing it. Further research study needs to examine the intricacies of teaching and learning to better understand how to support teachers to engage in productive struggle themselves and enact that for student learners.

CULTIVATING EQUITY WARRIORS: EMPOWERING EDUCATORS TO ENACT
CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE PEDAGOGY FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS

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DEDICATION

The dissertation is dedicated to African American students who deserve to be in classrooms where they are seen, heard, and at ease. They need to be precisely who they are, and teachers need to form strong relationships and demand the very best from the students.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
TITLE.....	i
DEDICATION	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iv
LIST OF TABLES.....	x
LIST OF FIGURES.....	xi
CHAPTER 1: NAMING AND FRAMING THE FOCUS OF PRACTICE	1
PAR Project and Study: Focus of Practice.....	4
Assets and Challenges to FoP	5
Micro Assets and Challenges.....	6
Meso Assets and Challenges.....	7
Macro Assets and Challenges.....	7
Context and Significance.....	8
Context for Study.....	8
Significance.....	10
Connection to Equity.....	11
Psychological Connection.....	11
Political Connection.....	12
Participatory Action Research Design.....	13
Purpose Statement, Research Questions, Theory of Action.....	14
Project Activities.....	15
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW.....	17

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy.....	18
Professional Learning Structures.....	27
PDSA Cycle.....	28
Professional Learning Communities (PLC).....	31
Equity-Focused Leadership.....	34
Conclusion.....	36
CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH DESIGN.....	38
Qualitative Research Process.....	39
Participatory Action Research.....	39
Activist PAR.....	40
Improvement Science.....	41
Community Learning Exchange Axioms.....	41
Role of Praxis.....	44
Research Questions.....	45
Action Research Cycles.....	45
Participants, Data Collection, and Analysis	47
Participant Choice.....	47
Professional Learning Community.....	48
Other Participants.....	48
Data Collection.....	48
Interviews.....	50
PLC Artifacts.....	50
Classroom Observations	50

Post-Observation Conversations.....	50
CLE Artifacts.....	51
Reflective Memos.....	51
Data Analysis.....	51
Study Considerations: Limitations, Validity, and Confidentiality and Ethics.....	53
Limitations.....	53
Validity.....	54
Confidentiality and Ethical Considerations.....	55
Conclusion.....	56
CHAPTER 4: PAR PRE-CYCLE.....	57
PAR Context.....	58
Co-practitioner Researchers.....	59
Teacher KG.....	61
Teacher GM.....	61
Teacher NT.....	62
Teacher GY.....	62
Teacher MP.....	62
PAR Pre-Cycle Process.....	63
Recruiting Co-practitioner Researchers.....	63
Pre-Cycle Activities.....	65
Teacher Interviews.....	65
PLC Meetings.....	66
Personal Narrative.....	66

Dynamic Mindfulness.....	66
Content Focus.....	66
PLC Meeting 1.....	67
PLC Meeting 2.....	68
PLC Meeting 3.....	69
PLC Meeting 4.....	70
Coding Process and Code Book.....	71
Emergent Category: School Should Feel Like a Caring Home.....	71
Love and Care.....	73
Student Interest.....	74
Being Seen.....	74
Reflection and Planning	75
Leadership within the PLC.....	75
Feedback.....	76
Relational Trust.....	77
As a Researcher and Plan for Cycle One.....	78
CHAPTER 5: PAR CYCLES OF INQUIRY AND FINDINGS.....	80
PAR Cycle One and Two Process.....	80
Activities for PAR Cycle One and Two.....	80
PLC Meetings.....	81
Observations and Post-observation Conversations.....	89
Community Learning Exchange.....	91
Reflective Memos.....	100

Data Collection and Analysis.....	100
PAR Cycle One: Emerging Themes.....	101
Teacher as Warm.....	104
Warm with Each Other.....	105
Warm with Students.....	106
Warm Outside of School.....	107
Teacher as Demander.....	108
Teacher Knowledge.....	109
Student Intellectual Capacity.....	110
PAR Cycle Two.....	112
Teacher Understanding and Use of Productive Struggle.....	112
Productive Struggle: What It Is and Is Not?.....	114
Teacher Concerns about Enacting Productive Struggle.....	115
Teacher Implementation: Warm vs. Demand instead of Warm to Demand.....	116
Teachers as Warm.....	116
Shifting to Becoming Demanders.....	117
Principal Role in Coaching.....	118
Principal as a Model.....	119
Principal as a Collaborator.....	120
Findings.....	121
Teachers Focus on Warm: Setting the Necessary Conditions for Culturally Responsive Classrooms	122

Forming Positive Relationships.....	125
Creating a Loving Classroom.....	126
Encouraging Language.....	127
Teachers Struggle to be Demanders.....	130
Struggling with the How.....	130
Fear of Student Trauma.....	132
CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS.....	134
Discussion.....	137
What Is a Warm Demander?.....	138
Teachers Create Warm and Caring Classrooms.....	140
Teachers Struggle to be Demanders.....	143
Productive Struggle.....	145
Experimenting with Pushing Students.....	145
Research Questions and Framework.....	147
Implications.....	152
Practice.....	152
Policy.....	154
Research.....	155
Limitations.....	156
Leadership Development.....	157
Reflective Memos as a Learning Tool.....	157
Relational Trust.....	159
New Understanding of the Observation Tool.....	160

Principal as a Warm Demander.....	161
Conclusion.....	163
REFERENCES.....	165
APPENDIX A: INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL LETTER.....	180
APPENDIX B: CITI TRAINING.....	181
APPENDIX C: SFUSD APPROVAL.....	182
APPENDIX D: INFORMED CONSENT FORM.....	186
APPENDIX E: OBSERVATION AND POST OBSERVATION PROTOCOL.....	189

LIST OF TABLES

1. Project Activities.....	46
2. Research Question, Data Collection, and Triangulation.....	49
3. Demographics of Professional Learning Community (PLC) Participants.....	60
4. Activities: PAR Pre-Cycle.....	64
5. Codebook from PAR Pre-Cycle.....	72
6. PAR Cycle One and Two Activities and Data	82
7. PAR Cycle One Emergent Themes.....	101
8. PAR Cycle Two: Emergent Themes and Categories.....	112
9. PAR Findings.....	123
10. Participatory Action Research Cycles.....	136

LIST OF FIGURES

1. Assets and Challenges for the Focus of Practice.....	9
2. PDSA Cycle.....	29
3. Plan, Do, Study, Act (PDSA) Cycle of Inquiry.....	41
4. The analysis process for determining codes, categories, and themes.....	52
5. Collective/collaborative definition with highlights from CPR members.....	82
6. Jamboard of examining attributes of cultural identity.....	85
7. Productive struggle poster one.....	92
8. Productive struggle poster two.....	93
9. Productive struggle poster three.....	94
10. Productive struggle poster four.....	95
11. Productive struggle poster five.....	96
12. Productive struggle poster six.....	97
13. Productive struggle CLE of teachers working collaboratively on posters.....	98
14. Two emerging themes with categories.....	102
15. Two findings for the PAR study.....	123
16. Results of the PAR study on teachers as warm demanders.....	133
17. Warm Demander Framework requires iterative observations and conversations.....	150

CHAPTER 1: NAMING AND FRAMING THE FOCUS OF PRACTICE

This is not a small voice you hear... This is a love initialed Black Genius. Sonia Sanchez

Given the opportunity to learn in a culturally responsive environment, African American students have much to contribute to educational spaces (Allen & Boykin, 1992; Boykin & Noguera, 2011). However, their cultural integrity and promise are often compromised to fit into school spaces that do not seem constructed for them (Boykin, 2020). Despite the premise that education is for everyone, some children have been left behind, imparting the clear message that success is for some, not all. As educators, we are responsible for addressing students' learning gaps, often created by how we have designed schooling (Ladson-Billings, 1995a). This participatory action research (PAR) study increased teacher knowledge about culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) and practices to provide better learning environments for African American students. Specifically, we wanted to examine how an elementary school collaborative team co-creates a culturally responsive learning environment for African American students.

Learners from specific backgrounds face structural challenges, notably higher dropout rates and more inadequate academic achievement ratings than their White peers (Pennington, 2000). Concurrently, many educators need more cultural capacity to teach students they consider different (King, 1991). This cultural mismatch exists in schools because the dominant school culture ignores the voices and experiences of historically marginalized children (Eubanks et al., 1997). Instead, “the classroom has to be designed around talk and task structures that allow students to define the people they see themselves becoming” (Hammond, 2015, p. 148); to do that, we need to re-examine the ways we teach so that more students can have an opportunity to learn (Boykin & Noguera, 2011; Oakes & Lipton, 1999). Thus, we need to construct classrooms to respond to African American children so that they feel heard, and their contributions are not

ignored (Delpit, 2011; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994). They would be able to exhibit their Black genius.

This study focused on how teachers can be more culturally responsive to African American learners and respond to the Gay (2010) question: Why are children of color who are successful in many areas outside of school failing in educational environments? This crucial question must be at the root of any work to dismantle the system of marginalization and create learning spaces that support African American students. Educators must lead this work because the problem lies with the system, not the students.

When looking at the root causes of the learning gap for African American students, a lack of knowledge and appreciation of culture and culturally responsive pedagogy are at the forefront (Emdin, 2016; Howard, 2010). Historically, there are cultural incongruities in education (Bonner & Adams, 2012), and individuals from marginalized backgrounds are frequently encouraged to shed their cultures and assimilate into mainstream culture (Sleeter, 2001). Code-switching, the conscious act of adopting another culture, becomes the responsibility of the students, as the school spaces have not adapted to the cultural assets of the children; however, teaching code-switching should include teaching students how to navigate multiple environments and be intentional about the language that is appropriate (Emdin, 2016).

When students are expected to abandon their culture and assimilate, the rich knowledge they bring to the classroom is not appreciated or acknowledged, and learning suffers (Duncan et al., 2008; Ladson-Billings, 2009). In addition, too many teachers are unprepared to teach kids of various ethnic backgrounds (Zeichner, 2020). Teachers too often believe they know about culturally responsive pedagogy based on superficial or incorrect knowledge from popular

culture, the media, and criticism. Alternatively, their knowledge is based on simple academic introductions to multicultural education that do not provide sufficient depth of insight.

San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD) has implemented multiple initiatives from the 1990s to the present to help African American students increase achievement proficiency. The most recent effort was a result of the African American Alliance Leadership Initiative (AAALI) in 2015 to develop district-level procedures and structures to promote higher African American student accomplishment, entitled PITCH (Professional Capacity, Instructional Guidance, Transformative Mindsets Collaborative Culture, and High-Quality Staff). Like the other initiatives before it, this top-down initiative has not fully addressed the continuing achievement and opportunity gap. Smaller-scale initiatives also attempted to address the equity gap. However, those proved to be problematic. For example, the San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD) provided some opportunities for professional development (PD) centered on culturally responsive teaching. However, the PD has been inconsistent or is presented in a *one and done* approach. In fact, teachers need multiple opportunities to hear and practice the learning if they are to change practices.

Culture is explicitly and implicitly transmitted, and students cannot effectively learn under conditions that suspend their culture (Ladson-Billings, 1995b). Teachers who grasp the contributions of other ethnic groups within a wide range of fields and have a deeper comprehension of multicultural education theory, research, and scholarship can address these shortcomings and more effectively engage African American students (Gay, 2002). Thus, we need to intentionally re-imagine the learning spaces for African American children to draw on their assets as learners.

In this chapter, I discuss the focus of the practice of the PAR study, including the assets and challenges of the FoP, the purpose of the work, and the research questions. Finally, I discuss the activities for this research project and study.

Focus of Practice

I developed the focus of practice out of the urgency to understand how to better support African American students. As the instructional leader of the school, I make daily classroom observations. From these visits, I compiled observation data that revealed patterns confirming that African American students were not as engaged as other students and that teachers were consistently asking low-level questions on the Depth of Knowledge (DOK) scale. Teachers expressed their intention of providing equitable learning opportunities for all students, but their actions within the educational spaces they created did not, in fact, support success for African American students. That lack of success was not the fault of the students but rather the education system that is failing them. Often, African American students had to assimilate into the dominant culture (Sleeter, 2001), which does not understand or make accommodations for their innate culture. Thus, students felt unheard and, in turn, became apathetic. In addition, educators' lack of culturally responsive pedagogical knowledge contributes to the problem.

Consequently, well-meaning teachers in the school were trying to create inclusive classrooms. Still, they did not have the full instructional knowledge to develop culturally responsive pedagogy that would engage African American students. Furthermore, school leaders often lack effective observation protocols and post-observation conversation guidance. One outcome of this disconnect is for teachers and students to become frustrated, further leading to disengagement.

In the PAR study, we had the opportunity to attempt something different to improve the teaching practices for African American children. Through the PAR process, we sought a common understanding of culturally responsive pedagogy—from what it looks like in the classroom to culture's role in educational spaces. We were not only participants but equity warriors—“people who, regardless of their role in a school or district, passionately lead and embrace the mission of high levels of achievement for all students, regardless of race, social class, ethnicity, culture, disability, or language proficiency” (Leverett, 2002 p. 1). We viewed ourselves as having the power to influence the teaching and learning. We recognized that knowledgeable, well-trained teachers are critical to the design of culturally responsive classrooms. Thus, we collaboratively learned culturally responsive pedagogy, gathered data, and repeated the inquiry cycle with more concrete plans in each iteration. In our transformation to become equity warriors, we hoped to develop confident teachers who feel more skilled at implementing CRP in the classroom.

Next, I discuss the analysis of the assets and challenges of the FoP. Based on preliminary classroom evidence, I developed the focus of practice: A collaborative team of educators will create a culturally responsive learning environment for African American students. Next, I discuss the assets and challenges related to the project, the significance of the project to practice, policy, and research, and the PAR connection to equity.

Assets and Challenges to FoP

Analyzing the micro, meso, and macro assets and challenges of the FoP and the study's context allowed us to determine a starting point for the study. The micro-level refers to the specific classrooms and teachers in the project. The meso level consists of the school and district levels. The macro-level encompasses state and national assets and challenges.

Micro Assets and Challenges

Teachers' excitement about the possibility of this project was abundant. The will was high, but we discovered that the skill sets of teachers did not correlate to their level of interest. The rationale indicates that professional development in culturally responsive pedagogy was limited. Consequently, most teachers did not have sufficient working knowledge of culturally relevant pedagogy. Anecdotal notes and observations supported the lack of classroom pedagogical practices. None of the classrooms I observed had created culturally responsive classrooms. In some cases, teachers had inadvertently created the opposite of a culturally responsive classroom, creating dependent learners. Teachers admitted that they often did not plan for appropriate wait or think time, or they gave students answers to questions because they did not want them to "feel bad" or embarrassed in class because they did not know the answer.

The participants had multiple assets. The teachers in the school were generally open to change. Implementing past programs had been successful, and the staff has relational trust. The pre-existing teacher collaboration time allowed for a smooth transition into FoP or PAR work. Teachers were already strong collaborators and knowledgeable about the inquiry process. They were dedicated to improvement and the need to make changes. The level of content knowledge among the teachers was strong. They had a firm grasp of the curriculum and were adept at adjusting their lessons based on student needs. They exhibited genuine love and caring for all the students. As the school leader, I have worked hard to cultivate the relational trust needed to implement a program that requires extensive co-planning. With these assets and challenges in mind, my initial focus was developing professional development opportunities for teachers to provide the foundation for creating rigorous and culturally responsive learning environments for African American students.

However, significant challenges emerged. Time constraints have plagued our school. The imperative to maximize teaching time has disrupted the teachers' willingness to add anything new to their full schedules. The challenge is to present teachers with the concept that being culturally responsive is a mindset to adopt, not one lesson to learn. "Far from being a bag of tricks, culturally responsive teaching is a pedagogical approach firmly rooted in learning theory and cognitive science. When used effectively, culturally responsive pedagogy can help students build intellectual capacity" (Hammond, 2015, p. 16).

Meso Assets and Challenges

When considering macro assets, school leaders look to their districts for opportunities and support. SFUSD provides the African American Achievement and Leadership Initiative (AAALI). This initiative, started in 2015, offers teachers, students, and family's resources. An established initiative is an asset and could be a valuable resource. However, the district's significant resources (coaches, intervention teachers, and attendance clerks) are reserved for schools with a majority of African American populations. Schools with a moderate number of African American students, such as ours, do not receive the same level of district support. We carefully considered this factor along with all our assets and challenges and determined that our school was prepared for the work ahead. Enthusiastic staff who were willing to commit to creating culturally responsive classrooms for African American students was the biggest asset.

Macro Assets and Challenges

At the state level, the California Department of Education offers culturally and linguistically responsive resources. However, these resources are not widely known or utilized at the district or school level in SFUSD. We have missed important opportunities for teachers to gain pedagogical knowledge. In addition, while the district supports culturally responsive

pedagogy, we must struggle against the political climate in the country that does not embrace culturally responsive pedagogy or discuss culture or race in general. Some states have banned any teaching of race and race theory. In addition, negative images and stories about African Americans continue to be prevalent in society. Despite these obstacles, we concluded that the work we were embarking upon had more assets than challenges, and we had confidence in our ability to conduct the study and emerge successful (see Figure 1 for a graphic synopsis of the assets and challenges of the FoP).

Context and Significance

The context of the PAR study was a public elementary school setting. In this school, African American students were not performing as well as their peers on standardized tests. Observation and interviews determined that pedagogical knowledge about culturally responsive teaching and learning was significant. We needed to more fully understand how culture plays a role in educational spaces to improve African American students' outcomes. The study was significant because it offered direction for the school and the district.

Context for Study

The study occurred at an elementary school in the San Francisco Oceanview, Merced, and Ingleside (OMI) neighborhood. The school is over 100 years old and is home to 250 students from Pre-K through 5th grade. The school's diverse student population includes 20% African American students, 35% Latinx, 30% Asian, 15% mixed race, 3% white, and 2% other. The staff is similarly diverse, with a low turnover rate of teachers in the Pre-K through 3rd grade. However, the turnover rate for the 4th and 5th grades is higher. We have a full-time social worker, a literacy coach, and a reading intervention teacher. I am the single administrator and

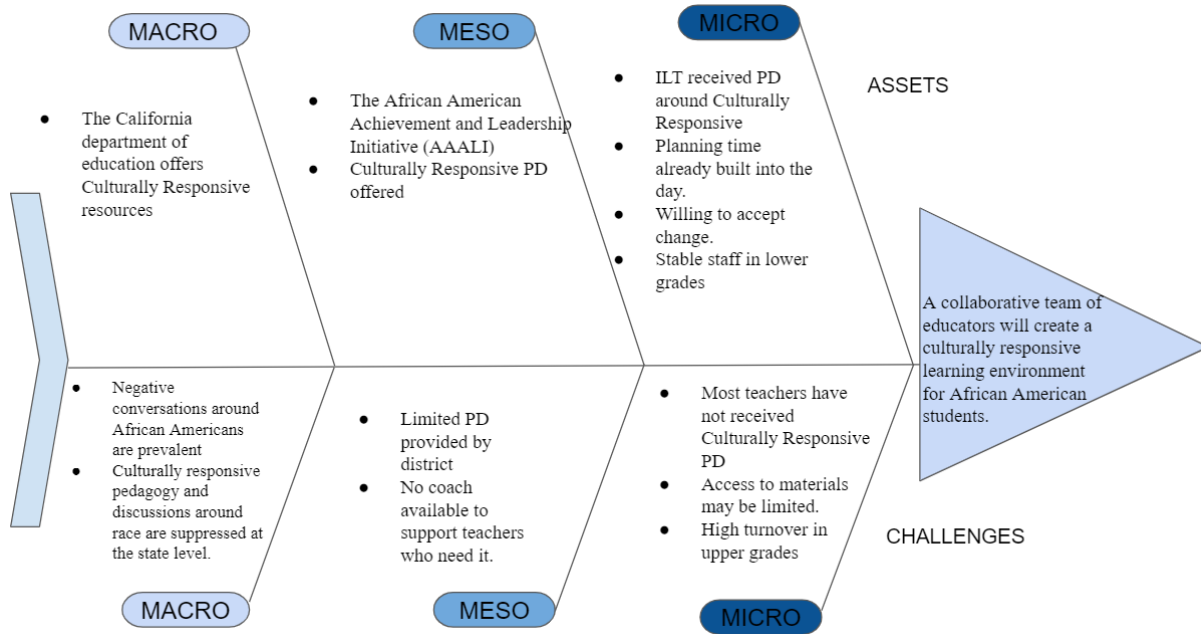


Figure 1. Assets and challenges of focus of practice.

have been at the school for twenty-five years, eight years as a teacher, five years as a coach, and twelve years as principal. The staff's need for culturally responsive pedagogical knowledge led to the focus of practice: *To create culturally responsive learning environments for African American students.*

Significance

Culture plays a significant role in our lives and must be brought into school spaces for learning to occur (Gay, 1995). Learning culturally responsive pedagogy and the impact of culture helped us understand culturally responsive classroom characteristics and how these classrooms support African American students. During this PAR project and study, I worked with a group of teachers in a professional learning community (PLC). We developed our knowledge and skills in culturally responsive pedagogy to create culturally responsive learning environments for African American students. I examined how culturally responsive teaching changes teacher practices.

The Participatory Action Research (PAR) study may be significant to the district in terms of practice, policy, and research by providing educators with a compelling reason why gaining pedagogical knowledge and using that knowledge to change educational spaces for African American students is essential. The project results are significant to school and district policy as African American student achievement remains a district-wide issue under discussion. Thus, the PLC model and protocols should inform practices in other elementary settings. As a result, while there is no explicit policy on African American achievement in our district, this project helped incorporate policy ideals such as creative instructional approaches, equity, and academic discourse into practice.

Connection to Equity

Academic success is the goal for all students in San Francisco. However, that is not currently the case. Students of color, especially African American students, lack opportunities to develop academic confidence in schools. Students' confidence in school, ability to convey their thoughts in writing, and desire to participate in class discussions benefit from establishing academic identity (Crawford & Zwiers, 2011). With this study, I hoped to change the narrative about African American students. The students have many talents to contribute to classrooms; however, they were not typically given opportunities to express their thinking or engage because the curriculum did not support their cultural experience. As a result, African American students were consistently negatively stereotyped as not academically intelligent. Steele (2010) states that:

Negative stereotypes about our identities hover in the air around us. When we are in situations where these stereotypes are relevant, we understand that we could be judged or treated in terms of them. If we are invested in what we're doing, we get worried; we try to disprove the stereotype or avoid confirming it. (p. 5)

Thus, our goal was to create academically rigorous and culturally relevant classrooms in which teachers could support African American students to develop confidence and increase academic and intellectual capacity. Psychological and political-economic frameworks support the equity challenge in the focus of practice.

Psychological Connection

Negative stereotypes about African Americans are rampant in the media. When children are bombarded with negative images, they develop deficit thinking about themselves that carries into the classroom. "By imposing on us certain conditions of life, our social identities can

strongly affect things as important as our performance in the classroom and on standardized tests” (Steele, 2010, p. 4). Compounding the problem, classrooms that are not rigorous or culturally relevant cause African American students to fall behind their peers. The focus of practice sought to address the issue by concentrating on teacher practice. When teachers acquire knowledge about culturally relevant pedagogy and utilize that knowledge to create culturally relevant classrooms, students will benefit from the transformation. Culturally responsive pedagogy, when implemented successfully, can assist students in developing intellectual capacity (Hammond, 2015).

Political Connection

At the meso level of the district, SFUSD superintendents have implemented several programs to build African American students' capacity. Former Superintendent Rojas (1999) implemented reconstitution where the entire staff at underperforming schools were fired. New staff were hired under the theory that new personnel would equal better student academic performance. Former superintendent Arlene Ackerman (2003) implemented the Dream Schools initiative, which overhauled low-performing schools. This was achieved by instituting a more rigorous curriculum, adding hours to the teaching day, and creating Saturday school. All teachers had to reapply for their jobs to signal their commitment to the revamped program. Former Superintendent Carlos Garcia's (2010) initiative was Superintendent's Zones applied in the Bayview and Mission neighborhoods. This structure allowed SFUSD to allocate resources to historically low-performing schools. The most recent initiative is PITCH, targeted at schools with the largest achievement gap for African American students.

Although largely unsuccessful, these initiatives had two things in common—they primarily served African American students and did little to build their intellectual capacity or

address academic performance. The initiatives were *top-down*, controlled, and organized by the superintendent's office. Schools were not allowed to participate or be involved in creating the initiatives. While we know that "authentic accountability may begin by asking what the community considers important and what it wants its schools to accomplish" (Militello et al., 2009, p. 27), the people closest to the problem were not consulted. Thus, while well-intentioned, the initiatives were largely unsuccessful because they did not consult the people most affected by This focus of practice, asserts that teachers closest to the work, in collaboration with the principal, can develop collective knowledge and skill in culturally responsive pedagogy and classroom practices at the school level to improve African American achievement.

Participatory Action Research Design

Participatory Action Research (PAR) is a methodology that is useful for a group of people in a common location to examine an issue of concern. Herr and Anderson (2015) cite the Kemmis and McTaggart (2005) action research description: participatory action research is a social process, a collaborative and practice process in which the participants work on themselves, and an activity in which the participants hope to change their world in terms of knowledge of practice and the social structures. Thus, a professional learning community (PLC) group focused on developing pedagogical knowledge of culturally responsive teaching. Then, the group engaged in cycles of inquiry to implement the practices they co-developed. The many iterations helped to encourage reflection and use the evidence from the cycles of inquiry to determine the next steps.

This method is activist action research because we are engaged in addressing an issue of equity in which we facilitate social change (hunter et al., 2013). In this research study, I am committed to cultivating the relationships that respond to place-based problems, learning

collectively, and developing the capacity of teachers. I recognize that action research of this type is messy, iterative, and generative, and we used each cycle of inquiry to inform future decisions about how we proceed (hunter et al., 2013).

Next, I reiterate the project's purpose and detail the research questions. Then, I articulate the theory of action behind the approach to the PAR change project and study and define a set of activities I undertook to address the FoP.

Purpose Statement, Research Questions, Theory of Action

This participatory action research study aimed to discover how teachers develop culturally responsive classrooms that support African American students. At the first stage in the research, teachers in the PLC defined rigorous and culturally responsive classrooms as environments where students have a sense of belonging, engage in academic discourse, and participate. PAR participants co-constructed lessons and mastered culturally responsive pedagogy to develop classroom practices that support culturally responsive education. The overarching question was: *To what extent does a collaborative team develop common understandings of culturally responsive practices (CRP) to support African American students?*

The sub-questions we examined were:

1. To what extent does a collaborative team develop a common understanding of culturally responsive practices (CRP)?
2. To what extent does the collaborative team identify and implement culturally responsive practices?
3. To what extent does participation in the PAR change my leadership as a school principal?

These research questions guided the participatory action research (PAR).

When considering the opportunity gap among African American students, all factors must be explored. The most urgent are the lack of cultural responsiveness, teachers who are not fully prepared to use culturally responsive practices, and the absence of a cohesive plan to address African American students' issues. The theory of action was: *If elementary educators engage in pedagogical learning, apply the learning to their teaching practice, and participate in data-driven post-observation conversations, they create equitable and rigorous learning experiences for African Americans.*

As a result of our study and the three cycles of inquiry, we became acutely aware of a critical factor for teachers. Teachers needed to fully inhabit the roles of warm demander. Although teachers had experience and were successful at creating warm and caring relationships and classrooms, they encountered hesitation and lacked the confidence to push students cognitively. Thus, they had difficulty enacting the demander role even though they could voice how important high expectations and academic push were for student learning. Based on what we learned in this study, this became the focus of our learning and the work we will continue.

Project Activities

I invited five teachers to participate in the study; I chose the participants based on purposeful sampling (Patton, 2015), which will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3. I facilitated two improvement or action research cycles. During the Pre-Cycle, we began the planning process in a professional learning community (PLC), which met regularly to refine the focus of practice and define the goals and expectations of the study. Additionally, we engaged in a community learning exchange (CLE) (Guajardo et al., 2016). Following the Pre-Cycle, we organized two action cycles that followed the plan, do, study, act (PDSA) improvement cycle steps (Bryk et al., 2015).

We concentrated on learning more about culture and culturally responsive pedagogy in order to apply this knowledge to develop a strategy for enhancing learning settings for African American students. The PLC group's regular meetings were essential as we fostered cooperation and relationship-building to solve a significant issue while promoting problem-solving and accountability. Furthermore, by choosing a PLC group, we leveraged evidence from each PAR cycle to improve culturally responsive techniques—particularly those related to becoming warm demanders. During the PAR Pre-Cycle, we used the book study model to learn about culture and culturally responsive pedagogy that helped inform our practice. During PAR Cycles One and Two, we chose classroom observations and post observation conversations to improve classroom practices.

In this study, a team of educators worked in a professional learning community to examine culturally responsive teaching practices. Throughout the study, we met regularly; I observed classes and had post-observation conversations with teachers. In the three cycles of inquiry, we used the evidence from each cycle to inform our decisions about the next steps. In this dissertation, Chapter 2 provides a comprehensive summary of previous research on the topic. Chapter 3 describes the action research methodology, which offers specific procedures to analyze information about the FoP. In Chapter 4, I explain how I established the context for the FoP and provide an overview of the Pre-Cycle; in Chapter 5, I describe the two PAR cycles of inquiry and, based on data analysis, the development of emergent themes and findings; and in Chapter 6, I conclude with implications for practice that appear from the research study.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

It is easier to build strong children than to fix broken men. Frederick Douglass

Frederick Douglass' denouncement of slavery continues to be profoundly influential because the truth in the message is even more relevant today. The *brokenness* of men, especially African American men, is prevalent and constant in American society. African Americans significantly influence American culture; however, the brokenness is at the forefront. Social media and news stations are inundated with portraits of African Americans as less capable than other races. African American children experiencing this continuous bombardment can experience adverse effects, including academic difficulties (McDade-Montez et al., 2015). African American students do not feel heard or that they matter in educational spaces, so their academic success suffers. The fault is not with the children but the system that does not recognize their greatness and ability to contribute to educational spaces. Teachers are charged with understanding and developing learning environments where students have the comfort and support to build their strength and brilliance.

Nevertheless, teachers are not immune to the influence of society. Teachers can be influenced by the negative portrayal of African Americans in American society. Teachers can perpetuate the *stereotype threat*, in which negative perceptions about certain groups—such as the false belief that African Americans are less bright than others or that women are math-challenged—may impact performance (Steele, 2010). In addition, teachers often have the will to meet the needs of school populations becoming more diverse but lack the necessary pedagogical skills (Gay, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 2002).

Society has painted the picture of African Americans as less than, but what if there was a different way to interpret the picture? Through this study, we had the opportunity to do

something innovative. If teachers could gain the pedagogical knowledge they lacked and create a culturally responsive environment for African American students, they could nurture the brilliance already within them. The focus of practice is how a collaborative team of educators creates a culturally responsive learning environment for African American students. The chapter reviews research around three topics: culturally responsive pedagogy, professional learning structures, and equity-focused leadership, all of which helped create an innovative plan to accomplish culturally responsive learning environments.

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

The percentage of culturally and linguistically diverse students is growing; however, the skills and experience needed by teachers to meet the needs of this growing population are stagnant. Teachers are not adequately prepared to meet the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students. Though the reasons for the inadequacy are vast, I focus on a lack of teacher training. Training is needed for teachers to see the value in a student's diversity and cultural heritage. The lack of training can create a cultural gap between students and teachers (Gay, 2009). Often, teachers do not understand that utilizing culture and language can motivate and engage students. Further, far too frequently, teachers and instructional frameworks are developed to favor students from White middle-class backgrounds, ignoring diverse learners' cultural and linguistic characteristics (O'Connor & Orosco, 2011). As a result, teachers are not skilled in redesigning curricula to align with the population they teach. Knowledge in culturally responsive pedagogy can bridge the gap between teacher skills and student engagement.

In this chapter, I discuss culturally responsive pedagogy and its contribution to education. I overview CRT from its beginnings and how teachers can prepare to be culturally responsive. There is a plethora of information about CRT, but for the purpose of this literature review, I

focused on the seminal works of Geneva Gay and Gloria Ladson-Billings. I discussed the newer research of Zaretta Hammond and Gholdy Muhammad. School belonging, described as a student's sense of being an essential member of the school, is linked to positive academic outcomes for youth (Kuperminc & Roche, 2012). Schools should prioritize avenues for their students to feel their importance. In this effort, schools often fail African American students.

According to educational researchers, effective learning for African American students occurs in classrooms where information is culturally relevant, critically discussed, and constructed by students (Gay, 1993; Ladson-Billings, 1994). The term culturally relevant is not new. Au and Jordan (1981) introduced the term *culturally appropriate* when they conducted observations of teachers. They found that teachers could help students achieve higher than expected levels on standardized tests by allowing them to use talk-story, a language interaction style popular among native Hawaiian children. Mohatt and Erickson (1981) were involved in related work with Native Americans. According to their analyses of teacher-student interactions and participation structures, teachers who used language interaction patterns that approximated the students' home cultural patterns were more effective in enhancing student academic performance.

The studies have several common features. Each identifies the source of student failure and subsequent achievement as the nexus of the teachers' and students' speech and language interaction patterns. Each indicates that "progress" for students is measured by academic achievement within the existing social frameworks in schools. As a result, the object of education is to "fit" students who don't fit iSAn because of their race/ethnicity, language, or social status into a system that is known as a meritocracy (Ladson-Billings, 1994). In light of the evidence that the school system fails our students of color, especially African American study,

we examined what teachers can do to create a learning environment where students thrive. Ladson-Billings synthesized the studies of others to develop a framework for how teachers can prepare for culturally relevant teaching. In my next paragraph, I discuss her work and the implications for my focus of practice (FoP).

Education serves students best when rooted in the student's culture (Au et al., 1981). Ladson-Billings (2002) synthesized her research in a framework used by teachers to prepare for culturally responsive teaching. In her work, she asserts that there are five essential elements of culturally responsive teaching. The first element is developing a knowledge base about cultural diversity. Teachers often focus on content knowledge mastery; however, developing mastery of cultural diversity is equally important, given the persistent achievement gap between African American students and their peers. Poverty is not spread equally among races; African American communities face organizational and social structures that systematically discriminate access to products, services, and opportunities (Rigby & Tredway, 2015). Teachers often have inadequate knowledge about the ethnic identities of their students. Ladson-Billings asserts that meeting the educational needs of ethnically diverse students requires explicit awareness of cultural diversity, incorporating ethnic and cultural diversity content into the curriculum, demonstrating care and community building in the classroom, engaging with ethnically diverse students, and adjusting to ethnic diversity in instruction (Ladson-Billings, 2002).

In the second element of culturally based curriculum, teachers must examine the three types of curricula—formal, social, and symbolic—and determine how to make them more culturally responsive. Curricula are often district-mandated and lack full development of cultural ideas. They avoid sensitive subjects like prejudice, historical massacres, powerlessness, and hegemony, focusing instead on the apparent successes of a few high-profile people. Another

curriculum type is a symbolic curriculum. This is the school curriculum and includes bulletin board decorations, pictures of heroes and heroines, trade books, and publicly displayed declarations of social etiquette, rules, and regulations. Culturally sensitive teachers are acutely aware of the symbolic curriculum's power as a teaching tool and employ it to help communicate critical knowledge, values, and behavior about ethnic and cultural diversity (Ladson-Billings, 2002). Further, the societal curriculum is the knowledge about ethnic groups and how they are portrayed in the mass media. The role of a culturally sensitive teacher is to acquire knowledge of the media, know what is happening in the communities of the students they serve, and address inequities through difficult conversations with students. Creating a classroom climate conducive to learning for ethnically diverse students is a third critical component of culturally responsive teaching planning. Pedagogical decisions are just as necessary, if not more important, than multicultural curriculum designs to implement culturally sensitive instruction. Ladson-Billings uses the term cultural scaffolding. Teachers should showcase students' cultures and perspectives to broaden their intellectual horizons and academic achievement. Teachers must be ethical, emotional, and intelligent with ethnically diverse students and must create a partnership with respect, honor, honesty, and resource sharing. Teachers must believe that their students can attain high achievement.

The fourth element in preparing to be culturally responsive is learning effective cross-cultural communication. Porter and Samovar (1991) explained that culture influences "what we talk about; how we talk about it; what we see, attend to, or ignore; how we think; and what we think about" (p. 21). Montagu and Watson (1979) added that communication is the "ground of meeting and the foundation of community" (p. vii). Without this community, learning is difficult

for some students. Students need to feel heard and loved. Without that sense of belonging, students often disengage.

The fifth and final element of culturally responsive teaching is cultural congruence, which involves discussing how a teacher teaches in the classroom. Teaching ethnically diverse students must be multicultural because culture is profoundly ingrained in all teaching. Matching instructional approaches to learning preferences is an effective way to operationalize this concept in education. The standards for deciding how instructional methods should be adjusted for ethnically diverse students are based on cultural characteristics. Knowing the misconceptions about learning styles is crucial to the teaching process. As Ladson-Billings says, teachers should understand that learning styles are how students engage in learning, not through their intellectual abilities (Ladson-Billings, 2001).

A plethora of CRT information advises teachers on what to include when building their CRT knowledge. Educators should continually acquire the pedagogical knowledge and skills necessary to ensure that a student's culture and language are identified, nurtured, and sustained in the classroom. Educators have, to some degree, learned about culturally and linguistically relevant or responsive pedagogy that can ensure student success. This pedagogy has shaped teaching since Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995a), and teachers must continue to construct and adjust their curriculum to be responsive and relevant to the students they are teaching.

Paris (2012) and Muhammad (2020) present a different perspective to educators, urging them to challenge and deepen their understanding. Paris (2012) asserted that the term culturally responsive should be replaced with culturally sustaining pedagogy. He believes that culturally sustaining is a term that supports the importance of our students' multiethnic and multilingual present and future. Paris further asserts that educators must assist young people in maintaining

their communities' cultural and linguistic competence while providing access to dominant cultural competence. Muhammad (2020) asserts that teachers should support literacy instruction using the four-layered model of identity, skills, intellect, and criticality. Additionally, she attests that the four goals are culturally and historically sensitive to students' needs, and current pedagogy needs to be redesigned to include the rich history of students. Next, I discuss academic discourse, academic language, and its role in my study.

Academic language or discourse is a term for the language used in educational situations, and the absence of academic language is a significant cause of low achievement among diverse students (Collier, 1995). Despite its significance, academic language development in conventional classrooms is poorly understood. Several factors cause this issue. The first factor is that research has paid inadequate attention to the relationship between subject matter learning and language development in English learners (August & Hakuta, 1997). The second factor is teachers' and researchers' poor academic language comprehension. One generally held belief is that academic language is primarily made up of content vocabulary. Vocabulary is one aspect of academic language, but for an in-depth comprehension of concepts, a student must associate key terms with other elements of English to create the meaning of complex and abstract concepts. This is particularly difficult for students whose first language is not English. Additionally, students of color, primarily African American students, struggle with academic language.

Culturally responsive teaching can bridge the gap in academic language for African American students. Eubanks et al. (1997) believe that hegemonic cultural discourse is currently prevalent in schools—how people speak about, think about, and schedule. If the goal of school reform—to educate everyone well—is to be taken seriously, schools need to move away from hegemonic discourse I and into discourse II. Discourse I represent conventional and formal

schooling and organization and includes a narrative of blaming and deficit thinking. Discourse II consists of transforming a school into one that is based on learning for everyone, in which we consider the assets of individuals, using language that reflects differences in culture and ethnicity. Without the shift in language, school structure is responsible for sustaining inequities (Eubanks et al., 1997) instead of providing culturally sustaining experiences (Paris, 2012).

Unfortunately, our schools commonly accept and utilize the dominant culture's values, norms, and beliefs that, while appearing to benefit all, ultimately benefit a minority while hindering the efforts and visions of the majority (Eubanks et al., 1997). Eubanks speaks of schools' actions to make changes. Starting with the reform efforts of the National Defense Education Act in the late 1950s, the federal government and the private sector invested heavily in supporting school curriculum reform. Curriculum reform and teacher retraining (for modern mathematics, linguistics, and *whole language* and inquiry approaches to science and social science teaching) were significant reform attempts in the 1960s. When this had failed to work by the early 1970s, the Elementary Secondary Education Act, Regional Educational Laboratories and Centers, National Science Foundation Consortia, and support from several non-profit organizations began to research and develop approaches to change. National programs were disseminated to local school districts to provide access to the up-to-date and best educational research and growth. Many attempts were made to reform school changes, but they have largely failed. Eubanks et al. (1997) suggest that any serious attempt to bring about meaningful, long-lasting school reform must begin with a Discourse II shift in the classroom, which requires teachers and leaders to ask questions that foster debate and challenge the status quo. Discourse II must be about transformational issues (Bennis, 1984). Those in schools must start to begin to

make these changes. This applies to teachers, principals, students, volunteers, and helpers. Schools must develop into and promote what we and others have called learning cultures.

Zwiers (2007) named the importance of academic vocabulary and how it may promote social stratification in schools and society. According to Bourdieu and Passeron (1990), classrooms often create environments in which certain group members take advantage of their cultural, social, and linguistic capital. The valuable collection of interactions and information shaped by family and culture is referred to as cultural capital. The term *social capital* refers to the social networks that direct and constrain a person's life path. Linguistic capital refers to a person's collection of terms and communication patterns to interact and comprehend a given situation. Bourdieu (1977) argued that the interactions between types of capital and *habitus*, or a collection of internalized behaviors and attitudes that become recognized, normal, and habitual, result in . . .practices in any region.

In his study, Zwiers determined that all students are expected to process and produce information in specific ways. Students who grow up in conventional English-speaking environments share many knowledge bases, culturally responsive contact signals, and thinking patterns found in learning circumstances and materials in United States schools. These students have benefited from much more than just linguistic skills, which will help them excel in school. In this case, mainstream middle-and upper-class English-speaking students can succeed in school because their intellectual capital tends to align with the school's.

Zwiers' study took place at a middle school (ages 12–14) in a suburban area near San Jose, California, with a total of 1,100 students, 290 of whom were designated as English learners who spoke more than 20 different languages. Approximately 120 students at the school are

classified as long-term English learners. Zwiers observed teachers over a period of time as he sought to find answers to the following questions:

- What tasks are students being asked to do?
- What are they being asked to learn?
- What types of thinking skills are being taught, used, and required?
- What language do students need to understand and accomplish learning tasks?
- What are the language teaching practices used by the teacher?
- How do students use language with each other?

The study concluded that students had moderate success, but Zwiers discovered some teacher behaviors that warranted further discussion, some helpful, some hindering.

Questioning was one of the most popular debate tactics in all three classrooms. Every instructor elicited responses from students by asking a wide range of questions, most of which fell into one of two categories: closed or open-ended. Nonverbal cues such as gestures, facial expressions, and other physical cues supplement and explain verbal communication. Several of the teachers' gestures seemed to be widely understood. After introducing a challenging term, teachers often use examples to clarify or connect the concept to a student's background knowledge or personal experience. Teachers in Zwiers' study used behaviors that seemed to undermine, rather than cultivate, academic language development in the desire to affirm student responses and avoid placing undue pressure on students.

In summary, the importance of discourse in classrooms is proven students learn through dialogue, and they have discourse patterns that support them; however, all cultural discourse patterns are not valued in classrooms. Some students who are not a part of the dominant cultural patterns experience difficulty in fully engaging in classrooms. Therefore, teachers must engage

in professional learning that supports them to fully understand culturally responsive pedagogy and adopt and adapt teaching practices that support all learners.

Professional Learning Structures

A school leader is tasked to set up structures that support teachers in developing their knowledge and skills. One of the keys to improving the quality of schools is offering professional learning structures that lead to teacher professional growth. Understanding what makes professional development successful is critical to understanding school reform. Many education reforms depend on teacher preparation and the ensuing teacher improvement to enhance student learning. Understanding what makes professional development effective is critical to understanding the success or failure of school reform (Desimone, 2011). The question then becomes, what makes professional development effective? Professional development research has generally concentrated on instructor satisfaction, attitude improvement, and dedication to innovation rather than exploring the professional development outcomes or the mechanisms that make it work. Furthermore, determining its usefulness is difficult due to the wide variety of activities that qualify as professional development (Desimone, 2011).

An increasing body of empirical research indicates that successful professional learning has essential core characteristics. These key characteristics that contribute to teacher learning provide a starting point for evaluating professional development programs and, further, provide a core conceptual structure for determining whether a particular professional development does, in fact, lead to improved student achievement (Desimone, 2011). Improvement in science can be an essential part of the teacher development plan. However, cultivating that development requires skill and determination. In this section, I discuss the components that create a successful professional development program. I discuss the PDSA cycle of learning (plan, do, study, act),

the importance of the professional learning community (PLC), and the critical need for equity-focused leadership.

PDSA Cycle

Schools can ensure school improvement through improvement science (Bryk et al., 2015). The Plan-Do-Study-Act cycle of inquiry and improvement was developed as a key component of the improvement science principles. The Improvement Guide (Langley et al., 2009), a nearly 500-page compendium of improvement science methods and processes, describes the plan-do-study-act (PDSA) cycle, (see Figure 2) a mechanism for rapid cycles of learning from experience, as the central structure of improvement science, along with three fundamental questions that drive improvement work:

1. What are we trying to accomplish?
2. How will we know that a change is an improvement?
3. What change can we make that will result in improvement?

The PDSA cycle is shorthand for testing a change by developing a plan to test the change (Plan), carrying out the test (Do), observing and learning from the consequences (Study), and determining what modifications should be made to the test (Act) (Christoff, 2018). While the PDSA cycle is rooted in improvement science, it is not new. The cycle was introduced in the 1950s by W. Edwards Deming. Deming spent his entire life dedicated to improving corporate practices. His theories stemmed from the belief that the causes of variation in the production process needed to be investigated to increase the quality of consumer products. Deming also understood that if a product, whether a car or any other item, is good and helpful to people, it would bring satisfaction to the individual who created it. As a result, the pursuit of change must extend beyond outputs and earnings to the manufacturing institution's character and virtuous



Note. (Bryk et al., 2016).

Figure 2. The Plan-Do-Study-Act Cycle.

behavior. As a generalist, Deming saw change as a never-ending method, a near-obsession, and an unavoidable requirement for any organization. Indeed, he preferred to refer to his job as "improvement management" and despised the word "absolute quality management," which implied that differences could be eliminated by some totalitarian scheme (Holt, 1995). In 1940, Joseph Schwab, who wrote extensively about the field of curriculum became involved with Robert Hutchins' reform movement at the University of Chicago, which sought to promote a "moral, intellectual, and spiritual" as well as "material" education (Holt, 1995). For Schwab, the urge to improve was a continuation of Dewey's approach of education that emphasizes the need to learn by doing. As a result, the most successful "learning scenario" does not take the shortest, most convenient path, but rather is the one that leads to habit and attitude mastery (Holt, 1995). Deming and Schwab also believed that change should be rooted in theory. Deming and Schwab had common goals for improving practice (Holt, 1995); Deming emphasized the value of both theory and context—recognizing how ends and means interact and how each alternative can have traceable consequences; change is not simply a matter of moving "best practices" or "benchmarks" from one environment to another, without regard for people or tradition (Holt, 1995).; Deming, like Schwab, understood that improving practice—what Schwab refers to as "the practical"—is a difficult task. Deming acknowledged that the practical arts are neither deductive nor procedural. There is no recipe for success; there is no such thing as Step 1, Step 2, or Step 3. Deming and Schwab assert that theory is an integral part of the change, but the theory must transfer to practice.

With knowledge of improvement science processes, leaders and teachers can enact a PDSA cycle. Keeping the three fundamental questions discussed at the beginning of this section in mind, schools can develop a cycle that can cause improvement. The first stage of the PDSA

Cycle is planning. Any group seeking change comes together, creating a strategy that identifies tasks and task owners and determining when, how, and where the strategy will be implemented; objectives and expected outcomes should be stated (Christoff, 2018). The doing stage entails following the plan and recording essential data that identifies achievements, issues, or unexpected events; however, the doing should be a small experiment on which the initiators of the plan collect and analyze evidence that may be useful in deciding on the next steps. The study phase is critical to the overall process (Christoff, 2018) because the initiators of the plan analyze the data to see how the strategy works; at this stage, the initiators can adjust the plan. Compared to those projected and previous performances, the lessons learned are reviewed and documented (Christoff, 2018). In the final phase, act means that the evidence guides the initiators to adopt, adapt, or abandon the process based on examining the previous phases' data. The next steps in the problem-solving process are detailed in this phase (Christoff, 2018). Although the word *final* is used to describe the act phase, the PDSA cycle is not, in fact, complete. The cycle continues, and iteratively, the initiators continue to refine, collect, and analyze data and use the evidence to make subsequent decisions.

In this study, I wanted to determine how school leaders and teachers could create a rigorous and culturally responsive learning environment for African American students. The implementation of PDSA cycles helped accomplish this through a lens of continuous improvement.

Professional Learning Communities (PLC)

Educators are committed to helping students learn, and they understand that the quality of the teaching in schools is the most crucial factor in whether or not students learn well. To improve teaching quality, professional learning communities (PLCs) have become a commonly

used vehicle for a successful combination of collective, job-embedded approaches to instructional improvement. Over the last decade, PLCs have gained widespread acceptance among educators, and PK–12 school leaders are increasingly looking to implement and maintain PLC-based organizational improvement systems. PLCs are interactive, networked communities where teachers collaborate to incorporate what they have learned into practice. PLCs employ systematic mutual inquiry to increase instructional quality and curricular outcomes in classrooms and schools (Woodland, 2016).

Furthermore, evidence confirms that professional learning improves teaching consistency. To improve schools, the continuous professional learning environment is the most welcoming context for professional learning (Hord, 2009). As leaders contemplate the best way to help teachers improve their practice, PLCs can effectively complement the PDSA cycle. PLC-adopted schools set aside space and time for mutual teaming, allowing teachers from different grade levels to collectively assess and solve problems of practice related to what and how students learn. Studies suggest effective PLCs can enhance teacher satisfaction and student performance (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006). PLCs can provide a conducive atmosphere for collaborative work and learning.

Educators must share a common understanding of community learning. "It's critical that... staff members understand the connection between classroom learning and learning with coworkers" (Lambert, 2003, p. 21). The chances of creating lasting change in education increase when teachers are involved in the early stages of its design. Unlike stand-alone learning events in which individual teachers participate, PLCs imply adult learning processes that are integrated into the workday and allow and expect teachers to jointly assess and find solutions to problems. Teachers can discuss, review, and change standards, instructional schedules, resources, and tests

based on shared knowledge and expertise within their teams to ensure all students succeed (Woodland, 2016). PLCs with a strong emphasis on change use the profession's most pressing issues and challenge teachers to examine their own—and each other's—practices and the impact of such practices on organizational productivity. Teachers who participate in PLCs are actively involved in their own and their colleagues' professional knowledge, presumably improving their teaching practice and, in turn, increasing student achievement (Fred et al., 2019).

Professional learning communities operate in diverse and dynamic environments (Slegers et al., 2013). As a result, Huijboom and colleagues (2020) created a multidimensional and systematic PLC concept for research on PLCs, including its characteristics, stages of growth, and factors that may influence PLC development, referred to as "steering factors" (Huijboom et al., 2021). Despite many research instruments, no complete collection of instruments has yet been found in the literature for thoroughly investigating this comprehensive and multi-dimensional PLC idea. For example, numerous questionnaires are available but do not cover all aspects of the PLC definition or explicate the different PLC characteristics (Hipp & Huffman, 2003).

This Huijboom et al. (2021) study was conducted as part of a longitudinal research project, a multi-case study investigating the development of seven PLCs in various Dutch secondary schools. The overall focus of this research project was to enhance teachers' professional learning utilizing PLCs, to gain insight into how PLCs can be fostered, and to construct various evidence-based measuring instruments that educational practitioners could use to promote and assess PLC development. This research adds to the methods for studying PLCs from a practitioner's perspective. Phrasing the measures is a first step toward creating new measurement instruments for research into PLCs representing science and practice. After the

instruments have been developed, data on the processes that contribute to creating a PLC in operation can be collected, and measures can be taken to encourage this development. Future research should concentrate on developing appropriate evaluation instruments that indicate the progress of a PLC and its steering factors, such as a questionnaire, a method of evaluating semi-structured interviews, and the structure of PLC meetings. In my work, the PLC structure was successful in developing a team of educators who gained pedagogical knowledge, applied it to their classroom practices, and discovered where there needed improvement.

Equity-Focused Leadership

As the instructional leader of a school, principals are charged with school improvement. CLRP partnership is closing the racialized achievement (opportunity) gap that has been a significant concern in education research and debates over the past half-century, particularly in the United States. According to Hallinger and Leithwood (1998), culture shapes the thinking, actions, and practices of students, teachers, administrators, parents, and other school stakeholders. Current research, however, reveals that historically oppressed pupils are still marginalized in the classroom. Schools will only become more ethnically and culturally diverse in the future, with students of color accounting for nearly half of all high school graduates by 2020 (Bransberger & Prescott, 2008). To further complicate the situation, principals have often been unqualified to lead in diverse schools and execute policies that address diversity challenges. (Young et al. 2010). As school leaders, we must create culturally responsive schools where students, especially African Americans, feel welcome, heard, and respected.

One way that school leaders can meet the complex school needs of African American students is through culturally responsive school leadership (CRSL). CRSL is liberating, anti-oppressive, and affirming and aims to uncover and institutionalize activities supporting students'

indigenous and authentic cultural practices (Khalifa et al., 2016). In their work, Khalifa et al. clearly defined each of the four most significant CRSL actions: critical self-awareness, culturally responsive curriculum and instruction, culturally responsive environments, and teacher observations and conversations.

To support students of color, leaders need to be mindful of themselves and their values, beliefs, and/or dispositions. Critical consciousness (Brown, 2004; Dantley, 2005; Gay & Kirkland, 2003; Gooden, 2005; McKenzie et al., 2008) can be developed. In establishing a critical consciousness, a good leadership preparation program should address race, culture, language, national identity, and other areas of difference. The principal's critical awareness of race and culture creates a solid foundation for establishing principles that guide practice.

The second action, ensuring culturally responsive curriculum and instruction, comes from academics who assert that most teachers are not culturally responsive and lack access to culturally responsive teacher training programs (Gay, 2010; Hayes & Juarez, 2012; Sleeter, 2001). Even when teachers come from the same cultural, racial, and socioeconomic backgrounds as their students, culturally responsive teacher education preparation—whether through school-based professional development or a university preparation program—is required (Gay, 2002, 2010; Irvine, 2002; Ware, 2006). The school leader assumes the critical role of ensuring teachers are and remain culturally responsive.

The work of ensuring shared decision-making (SDM) authority is critical, and the principal should transfer those decisions to a group of teachers and administrators. Teachers' participation in SDM leads to better decisions because teachers know students better than administrators; teachers have a direct interest in students and student achievement because they

have daily contact in the classroom; and teachers have less involvement in bureaucratic procedures than principals (Weiss, 1995).

Finally, school leaders must be instructional leaders and work directly with teachers (Grissom et al., 2021). School leaders need to refine teacher observation and feedback skills continually. Leaders need to develop their knowledge of learning theory to understand how a person acquires knowledge and how that applies to teachers' instructional practices. Through effective evidence-based observations, leaders have data-supported tools to support teacher learning (Tredway & Militello, 2023). Through observations, leaders can understand what applied learning theory looks like in action and how they can provide teachers with the most productive feedback.

Conclusion

In the literature review, I explored several key elements of this study, including professional learning structures, professional learning communities (PLCs), equity-focused leadership, culturally responsive pedagogy, and the Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) cycle. Research shows that structured professional development is crucial for educators' continued development and improvement. Additionally, teacher collaboration within these communities fosters the sharing of best practices, data analysis, and collective efforts to improve instruction. For this study, the PLC structure was instrumental in building a culture of continuous improvement in our school. The research shows that the PDSA cycle helps to ground teachers in their work and gives them a structure for their plan. This cycle ensures that teachers have the tools needed for continuous improvement.

The literature emphasized the value of leadership in advancing equitable spaces in school. Effective educational leaders provide opportunities and resources for teachers to improve

their practice. They also build a community of trust where participants feel comfortable being vulnerable to improvement. In addition, a culture of continuous improvement lends itself well to culturally responsive pedagogy. When pedagogy is increased and there is a plan for implementation, the success of the study is ensured. This literature review shows the complexity of efforts needed for school reform. The literature review process helped me to know the path I had to take to make this study successful. In the next chapter, I discuss the methodology for this study.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH DESIGN

In this Participatory Action Research (PAR) study, we explored the extent to which a collaborative team or professional learning community (PLC) could co-create culturally responsive learning environments for African American students. As a result of engaging in active learning, we, as educators, developed our capacities to construct culturally responsive classrooms by applying teaching strategies based on new pedagogical knowledge. The focus of practice was co-creating a rigorous and culturally responsive learning environment for African American students.

The study context was a small urban school in San Francisco located in the Oceanview, Merced, Ingleside (OMI) neighborhood. At the time of the study, the school served 250 ethnically diverse students: 18% African American, 20% Asian, 26% Latinx, and 4% White. This study focused on how teachers developed a culturally responsive lens to improve their instructional practices. While teachers are passionate and knowledgeable about teaching and learning, they often miss the component of deep pedagogical knowledge of culture and culturally responsive teaching. This research sought to create an environment in which educators gained knowledge about culture and culturally responsive teaching.

The theory of action was: *If elementary educators engage in pedagogical learning, apply the learning to their teaching practice, and participate in data-driven post-observation conversations, they create equitable and rigorous learning experiences for African American students.* This chapter addresses the study's qualitative methodological approach and research questions. I outline the process for selecting participants and the processes for collecting and analyzing the data. I close with a discussion of this study's limitations, validity, and ethical considerations.

Qualitative Research Process

Qualitative research methodology is the method I used for this study. According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), qualitative research transforms by changing the topics addressed, guiding data collection and analysis, and providing a call to action or change. I selected the participatory action research (PAR) design because of its focus on collaboration, which is important to me. I wanted to complete this study collaboratively with people who were just as invested as I was. Additionally, PAR was instrumental in guiding us to answer the research questions. Next, I outline the PAR process and describe how it is grounded in improvement science, activist research, community learning exchange processes, and the role of praxis. Then, I outline the research questions and action research cycles.

Participatory Action Research

The professional development workshop guided by specialists from outside the school is the dominant paradigm for professional teacher learning in practice and research, despite significant criticism and evidence that it is not useful to school participants (Hale, 2008 ; Lefstein et al., 2015). In contrast, action research is an investigation carried out by or *with* a company or community insiders, but never on or for them. PAR is a reflective activity that differs from an isolated spontaneous reflection because it is carried out purposefully and systematically. PAR usually necessitates the presence of evidence to back up assertions (Herr & Anderson 2015). In this Participatory Action Research (PAR) study, I sought to uncover those qualities of a culturally responsive classroom by those most invested in the work. When PAR is focused on an equity issue like culturally responsive practices, activist research methods support the study most effectively.

Activist PAR

PAR frequently has its roots in small-scale trials characterized by localized, face-to-face intimacy and human engagement, which is fundamental to activist research methodology.

Individuals' capabilities to learn through social action are built in such environments through every day or personal experiences, emotional dynamics, and social bonds (hunter et al., 2013).

Cahill (2007) highlights how PAR can create pedagogical spaces for new ideas and identities. In addition, new policies and ideas can emerge when participants draw on various sources of insight and inspiration, including the concepts of Brazilian educator, activist, and theorist Paulo Freire (hunter et al., 2013).

An activist researcher wants to change the world, whether by improving classroom practice with the help of students or changing community processes to ensure safer spaces for young people (hunter et al., 2013). In response to the need for school leaders to acknowledge and focus on the educational needs of marginalized kids, Gerhart et al. (2011) pointed out that having high expectations for all students, regardless of their racial and ethnic backgrounds, and striving to help them meet those expectations is the work for culturally responsive school leaders and teachers. In this work, we strived to implement the work and make a lasting, significant change for African American students.

The improvement science principles and community learning exchange (CLE) axioms and processes mutually benefit the participants as they are involved in deep conversations about equitable classrooms with culturally responsive pedagogy. This study used data to create recurrent cycles of inquiry that answered PAR research questions while testing the theory of action.

Improvement Science

According to improvement science, fundamental knowledge from the discipline of education and a system of more profound knowledge are needed to put basic disciplinary information into practice (Langley et al., 2009). These three fundamental questions were important for the improvement science work (Lewis, 2015):

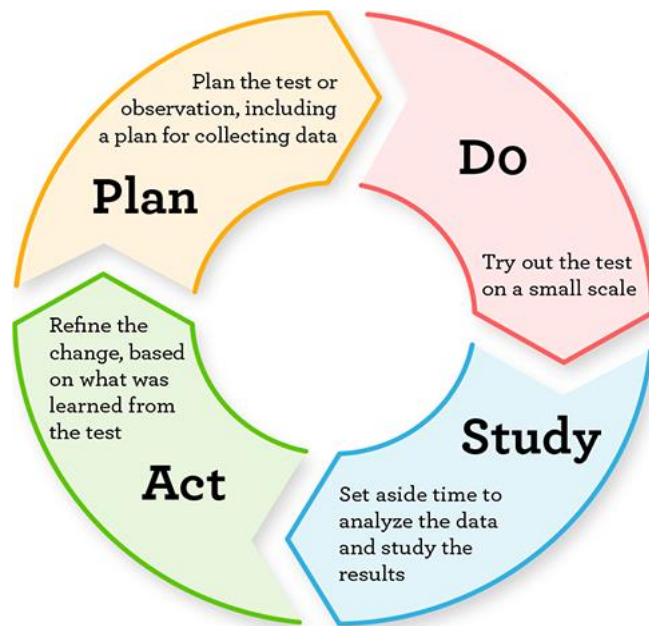
1. What are we trying to accomplish?
2. How will we know that a change is an improvement?
3. What change can we make that will result in improvement?

Bryk et al. (2015) identified the plan-do-study-act (PDSA) cycle as a key method for rapid cycles of learning from practice as the core principle of improvement science. For the purposes of this PAR, we implemented PDSA cycles to identify the characteristics of a culturally responsive classroom, attributes of culturally responsive teachers, and how we will know success (see Figure 3).

Community Learning Exchange Axioms

Community Learning Exchange (CLE) axioms and practices framed the improvement cycles as part of the PAR implementation and study. These axioms are critical to the change that we sought to make. The PAR project demonstrated the importance of the five CLE axioms in broadening the social dimensions of learning:

1. *Learning and leadership are dynamic social processes.* Everyone has something to contribute and something to learn. Through inquiries, conversations, and stories, everyone has something to add. Relationships enhance learning.
2. *Conversations are critical and central pedagogical processes.* Because social learning theory is based on relationships, a secure space in which to communicate is



Note. (Bryk et al., 2016).

Figure 3. Plan, Do, Study, Act (PDSA) Cycle of Inquiry.

3. Essential. Environments that foster vulnerable, honest talk and relationship trust are known as safe spaces.
4. *The people closest to the issues are best situated to discover answers to local concerns.* Listening to those closest to the problem gives participant groups the power and voice to shape how the problem is addressed through the CLE process. New ideas can emerge from constituent input, allowing administrators to design specialized and relevant programs.
5. *Crossing boundaries enriches the development and educational process.* Boundary crossing promotes inclusivity by forcing administrators to step outside of their comfort zones and abandon traditional approaches. Administrators can begin to transform the status quo to meet the actual problems of community members by encouraging curiosity about other perspectives and approaches.
6. *Hope and change are built on the assets and dreams of locals and their communities.* Allowing community members and constituents to participate meaningfully by suggesting and executing solutions to issues they identify and prioritize would increase their trust in any action plan. Rather than relying on external authority figures to define what should work for community members, the community empowers itself through self-actualizing. As a result, the solutions are constructed with all participants' genuine assets and strengths. This method is a shift from a deficit model of change to an ideological and relational growth mindset model (Guajardo et al., 2016).

While all axioms offer value and were utilized to some degree, the focus for this study was on how conversations are critical and central pedagogical processes and how the people closest to the issues are best situated to discover answers to local concerns.

These axioms were our grounding practices for the work we were inspired to do. Listening to the voices of those closest to the issues elicits the best solutions as they know and live the problems from the inside. In addition, we gained new insights and perspectives from our valued constituents. We realized that relational trust must be cultivated and nurtured as it is where authentic voices are heard. A safe space must be created for participants to speak their truth and know they are heard, respected, and included. Our community learning exchange helped us understand our larger community's perspective. This was vital to our work because we wanted this study to be a solution to meet the needs of those who live in and sustain the community (Guajardo et al., 2016).

Role of Praxis

I chose PAR as a methodology because participants could deeply reflect on their practices to execute what Freire calls praxis. Praxis is an iterative, reflective approach to acting. As a result, participants are engaged in an ongoing process of moving between practice and theory. Praxis is a synthesis of theory and practice in which each informs the other (Freire 1985). The opportunity to reflect on one's actions and make changes based on new insights and information learned in the process arises through the creation of reflective memos. Moreover, the PDSA cycle is an additional reflective process where participants can make plans, execute those plans, reflect on the plans, and make changes that include the voices of all constituents. Through PAR, we can use reflections to address issues and concerns of African American students, including making changes in the classroom, empowering individuals through cooperation,

positioning teachers and other educators as learners, promoting a democratic approach to teaching, and encouraging the testing of new ideas (Creswell & Guetterman, 2018).

Research Questions

The overarching question: *To what extent does a collaborative team develop a common understanding of culturally responsive practices (CRP) to support African American students?*

1. To what extent does a collaborative team develop a common understanding of culturally responsive practices (CRP)?
2. To what extent does the collaborative team identify and implement culturally responsive practices?
3. To what extent does participation in the PAR change my leadership as a school principal?

I created these research questions to engage in the PAR cycles to make lasting changes at the school. Next, I discuss the action research cycles -- when they occurred and their purpose.

Action Research Cycles

During the iterative cycles of inquiry, I determined if the theory of action translated from theory to practice. I outlined the activities and timelines for three participatory action research cycles of inquiry (see Table 1) The key participants, described in more detail in the next section, formed a professional learning community (PLC) that acted as a co-practitioner research group (Foulger, 2014). This consisted of several individuals who were “close-in” members of the study and could therefore provide consistent feedback on actions and examine evidence to make iterative decisions about subsequent actions (Guajardo et al., 2016).

Table 1

Project Activities

Research Cycle	Activities
PAR Pre-Cycle August-December 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Professional Learning Community (PLC) Meetings • Write Reflective Memos • Interviews
PAR Cycle One January-May 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community Learning Exchange • Professional Learning Community (PLC) Meetings • Reflective Memos • Conduct member checks on evidence: Pre-Cycle • Observations • Post Observation Conversations
PAR Cycle Two August-May 2023	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Professional Learning Community (PLC) Meetings • Reflective Memos • Member Checks • Observations • Post Observation Conversation

In each cycle, we used collaborative processes described by Militello et al. (2009), which highlight inquiry as a process of looking inward and acting as we question practices, the context, and the impact on classroom learning. The intention within each cycle was to engage the CPR group in improvement science processes, as noted by Bryk et al. (2015), to achieve a theory of action and measure, observe, reflect on, and revise action plans based on core understandings.

Participants, Data Collection, and Analysis

I describe the process for selecting participants in this study and detail the Co-Practitioner Researcher (CPR) group. I then detail the data collection protocols for this study and describe the data analysis processes I utilized.

Participant Choice

As the lead researcher, I engaged the participants in a professional learning community research group. The selection of teachers was an essential step in the process of this study. I selected teachers with a growth mindset who had successfully participated in collaborative work prior to the study. I looked for teachers with culturally responsive lenses who were eager to learn more about their current teaching. Culturally responsive teaching requires explicit knowledge about cultural diversity and is imperative to meeting the educational needs of ethnically diverse students (Gay, 2002). Utilizing the professional learning community (PLC), we gained knowledge and skills in culturally responsive pedagogy to construct a plan to meet the needs of African American students. In addition, we enlisted the participation of other teachers and community members to add their insights.

The specific nature of this study required purposeful sampling (Patton, 1990). I chose a group of five teachers at the school. I recruited teachers who expressed an interest in culturally responsive teaching. A purposeful sample seeks to decrease suspicions about why certain

instances were chosen for investigation, but statistical generalizations are still impossible with such a sample (Patton, 1990).

Professional Learning Community

The PLC had five teachers who were interested in and had some understanding of culturally responsive pedagogy. We built the necessary pedagogical foundation in the PLC to participate in this work and formulated a plan based on the new knowledge of best practices. I collected and analyzed data to determine the culturally responsive practices that create rigorous learning environments for African American students. Participants knew that their participation was voluntary and understood that they could withdraw for any reason without fear of retaliation. Team members gave informed consent to participate in the study (see Appendix D).

Other Participants

I asked staff members to engage in community learning exchange (CLE) protocols to solicit more information from a broader range of community members. Participants interacted in the CLE to authentically connect; hear each other's perspectives, concerns, and ideas; and prioritize objectives (Guajardo et al., 2016). The learning exchange was an opportunity for PLC participants to gain a deeper understanding of the work and helped them to broaden their minds to other ideas and use them in our work.

Data Collection

In this qualitative study, I observed people applying certain behaviors to uncover shared trends across time (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). I used these qualitative data collection sources -- PLC artifacts, classroom observations, post-observation conversations, meeting field notes, and reflective memos. We used the cyclical data from these sources to inform future inquiry cycles and discuss the next steps (see Table 2).

Table 2

Research Question, Data Collection, and Triangulation

Overarching Question: To what extent does a collaborative team develop common understandings of culturally responsive practices (PLC) for African American students?

Research Question	Data Collection	Triangulated with
1. To what extent does a collaborative team develop a common understanding of culturally responsive practices (CRP)?	Interviews PLC Artifacts Reflective Memos	Member Checks
2. To what extent does the collaborative team implement culturally relevant pedagogy to support equitable classrooms?	PLC Artifacts Classroom Observations CLE Artifacts	Member Checks Reflective Memos
3. To what extent does participation in the PAR change my leadership as a school principal?	Reflective Memos Interviews	Member Checks

Next, I provide an overview of the data collection tools used in this study and their purpose in this research. The researcher records data and engages in a layered analysis process using qualitative approaches, relying on visual and text data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). I collected qualitative data in the PAR study utilizing various methods and specialized data collection protocols. This study enlisted interviews, classroom observations, post-observation conversations, PLC artifacts, CLE artifacts, and reflective memos.

Interviews

I encouraged PLC members to share their diverse viewpoints and experiences; interviews allow for a more detailed picture of creative practices and equity (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). During check-ins with PLC team members during each cycle, I conducted informal individual interviews for the PAR study. I followed the established interview procedure.

PLC Artifacts

Artifacts such as member reflections, charts, and notes ensured that the team accurately captured participants' thoughts and feelings. The collection of these items contributed to the dialogic conversations with the participants and lead researcher (Guajardo et al., 2016).

Classroom Observations

I used observations to determine how the teachers applied what they learned. I observed the five PLC members' classrooms to assess equitable access and rigor for African American students. I used a classroom observation protocol. Observation notes included those from the PAR group and observations of classrooms and teachers. The PLC group collected notes, noticed patterns and used the information to make informed decisions about further actions (see Appendix E).

Post-Observation Conversations

The goal of the post-observation conversations was to share data to discuss and co-create a plan for improvement. I scheduled a 15-minute post-observation talk with each teacher soon after the observation. I used a set of pre-established codes in four categories to code the post-observation remarks; these codes and categories have been calibrated by previous researchers (Tredway et al., 2020). I used the post conversation protocol to support my interactions.

CLE Artifacts

I utilized the Community Learning Exchange (CLE) protocols as part of the PAR implementation and study. Participants were encouraged to share personal stories, experiences, questions, and passions at the meetings (Guajardo et al., 2016). I collected art, notes, and images during the CLE.

Reflective Memos

As the lead researcher, I used reflective memos to record the process and document the week's activities. During the research, I used the reflective memo process to pause and think about the data and the analysis as well as my interactions with the PLC group. The process helped me reflect on action, progress, and future direction (Kemmis et al., 2014). Through these memos, I had the opportunity to reflect on what I did and make informed decisions about what went well and where I need to improve.

Data Analysis

I collected, organized, reviewed, and coded multiple sources of qualitative evidence. Using the PDSA cycle of inquiry model, I collected data based on the evidence from the cycles of inquiry. I used the Saldaña (2016) process to conduct an iterative analysis that includes coding all evidence to develop categories and themes (see Figure 4).

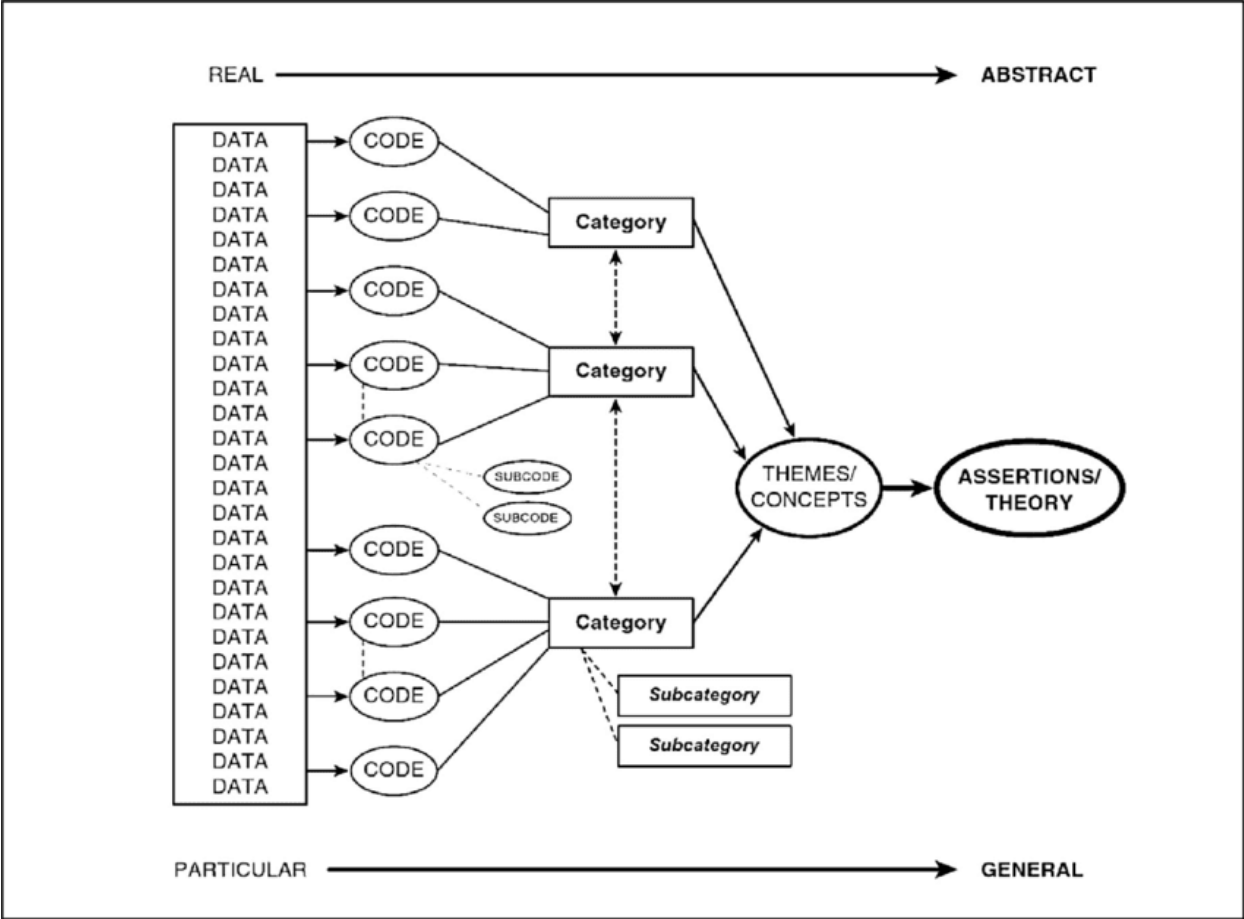


Figure 4. The analysis process for determining codes, categories, and themes.

In this section, I discussed participants, data collection, and analysis. Specifically, I discussed who participated in the research and the advantageous characteristics of those participants. I described the data collection process and the types of data I collected and how I analyzed those data. Next, I discuss the study considerations, which include limitations and validity. Lastly, I discuss the confidentiality and ethical considerations of the study.

Study Considerations: Limitations, Validity, and Confidentiality and Ethics

I considered the factors that contributed to this study's possible limitations, its validity, and the issues of confidentiality and ethics it encompassed, and examined their impact.

Limitations

In my capacity as the study's lead researcher, I was aware of limitations. For one, I was responsible for building the PLC team, and there could have been bias in the selections. To mitigate that possibility, I first determined which teachers would likely be willing to do the work and, from that group, selected those who would be the strongest participants. Moreover, I offered suggestions for the study's course of action. To ensure that other points of view were considered when conducting this study, I elicited the perspectives of the PLC and others. Frequent discussions with the PLC group during the PAR cycles of inquiry further validated our intent to consider all perspectives.

As lead researcher, I recognized my power as a school principal. Therefore, I took precautions to ensure that participants did not feel coerced into the study. Furthermore, the participants gave informed consent to confirm that they were fully informed about the study. They understood that they could terminate participation in the research for any reason without fear of retaliation.

My study was approved by the ECU Institutional Review Board (see Appendix A) and

the San Francisco Office of Research and Evaluation (see Appendix C). In addition, I completed the Institutional Review Board Collaborative Institutional CitiTraining (see Appendix B) certification in January 2021 to comply with the ethical requirements of human research.

Validity

Internal validity was critical to the study. Thus, establishing credibility, dependability, and confirmability were indications of trustworthiness (Guba & Lincoln, 1985). Working collaboratively with the team ensured that all voices were heard and validated. The primary investigator conducted checks with members of the PAR group to elicit feedback and ensure that the information collected was on target. In a qualitative interview, the researcher conducted face-to-face or telephone interviews with participants; these interviews involved unstructured and generally open-ended questions intended to elicit participants' views and opinions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 187).

This study was created as part of the work of the San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD). The study is in line with SFUSD's goals of:

- Access and equity: Make social justice a reality by ensuring every student has access to high-quality teaching and learning.
- Student achievement: Create learning environments in all SFUSD schools that foster highly engaged and joyful learners and support every student to reach their potential.
- Accountability: Keep district promises to students and families and enlist everyone in the community to join in doing so.

While the study's findings may be generalized to SFUSD's scope of work, caution should be taken when applying them to other schools or districts. The method has transferability or external validity to other SFUSD schools, but there are no particular outcomes for the schools.

Furthermore, this is just one research study involving a small group of urban schoolteachers in one district. Thus, even though the approach to the study may be duplicated in different schools or districts, the results may not be consistent across contexts. According to Creswell & Creswell (2018), the value of qualitative research is determined by the distinctive descriptions and themes created in the context of a particular place.

Confidentiality and Ethical Considerations

Next, I discuss the confidentiality and ethical considerations of the study. Choosing participants in this study was carefully considered. I selected the participants based on their commitment to culturally responsive teaching and willingness to enact change. I had individual meetings with each potential member to explain the study, their part, and any implications. Each PLC member signed a consent form before they participated in the study. I have cordial relationships with all the teachers who participated in this study. As the principal for eleven years, I have developed deep relational trust with teachers and other staff. The research focused on how school leaders and teachers can create culturally responsive classrooms for African American students. The PLC and CLE participants in the study were vulnerable and had special considerations. The school and participants were protected using pseudonyms. Data were presented without judgment on individuals or the school district. All necessary consents for the study were in place before initiating the study. Participants were required to sign consent forms approved by East Carolina University's Institutional Review Board (see Appendix C).

Additionally, participants were informed that participation was entirely voluntary and that they could leave the study at any time. Data security and the confidentiality of the participants were a priority for the study. Therefore, I maintained confidentiality through the following measures (Creswell & Creswell, 2018): Essential and personal papers and data files

were stored in a locked file cabinet; all electronic forms for data collection were kept in a password-protected file; and data and copies of reports were shared with the PLC group for transparency, improvement, and reflection.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I outlined the qualitative research design, including the participatory action research (PAR) function. The PAR research design of this study was based on the following theory of action: *If elementary educators engage in pedagogical learning, apply the learning to their teaching practice, and participate in data-driven post-observation conversations, they create equitable and rigorous learning experiences for African American students.*

I explained why participatory action research, combined with CLE methodology and protocols, was chosen as the methodology of this study and presented the overarching questions that supported my focus of practice. I discussed the method for collecting data in iterative cycles of inquiry and analyzing the data. Finally, I highlighted the study's limitations and how I kept the data private while ensuring that participants felt comfortable and informed. In Chapter 4, I discuss this study's context and the action research from the Pre-Cycle.

CHAPTER 4: PAR PRE-CYCLE

Through the participatory action research (PAR) study, I aimed to support teachers in creating culturally responsive classrooms for African American students. Accomplishing that long-term goal required a strategic plan. First, a group of educators at our school collaborated to increase our knowledge of culturally responsive teaching. As a result of the new learning, we developed a shared understanding of improving culturally responsive classroom outcomes for African American students. We wanted the development of culturally responsive classrooms to be a long-lasting solution for African American students that could impact the school and district. Using improvement science and engaging with those closest to the work, we developed a clear plan, eliciting many iterations. The desired outcome was that teachers would co-create an autonomous solution that did not require dependency on large sums of money. As a lifelong member of the neighborhood and a long-time educator at the school where the study took place, I have a deeply personal connection to the work. This school is full of brilliant students who need their brilliance cultivated until graduation.

This chapter discusses how our team acquired new pedagogical knowledge about culturally responsive teaching. I explain the PAR environment, the PAR Pre-Cycle process, emergent categories, and the plans for PAR cycle One. I describe the location and persons who contributed to the PAR and the strategies we used to build relational trust and engage in activities to broaden and deepen our learning and understanding of culturally responsive teaching. I collected and analyzed these data: field notes, reflective memos, and meeting artifacts during the PAR Pre-Cycle process. I discuss how we formed a professional learning community (PLC) as we took time to come together as a team and gather information. In this chapter, I describe how the teachers and I developed into a PLC, the activities we engaged in during the Pre-Cycle, and

the methods we used to gather data to create action steps. Then, I analyze the categories that emerged from the data analysis and how they relate to the PAR research questions. Finally, I discuss my reflections on the Pre-Cycle's effect on my role as a school leader and researcher and how these reflections guided the design of PAR Cycle One.

PAR Context

The PAR research study occurred in a small school in San Francisco. The school is over one hundred years old and is newly remodeled. Located in the Ocean View, Merced, Ingleside (OMI) neighborhood, this school is primarily residential and largely unknown even to native-born San Franciscans. Those who know the community remember that during the 1980s, the park up the street from the school was drug-infested, and the store across the street was the site of many drug deals. However, the neighborhood has changed over the years. The park is now a popular place for soccer and no longer a place for rampant drug deals. However, the past reputation of the neighborhood continues to affect the way many people view our school. In fact, the school is the hidden gem of San Francisco. We have a group of intelligent, curious students who bring great joy to the school.

Additionally, the school is diverse, with 36% Latinx, 25% Asian, 14% African American, and 12% of two or more races. I am strategic when I hire new teachers and actively try to recruit those teachers who reflect the demographics of the students they teach. As a result, the staff is a diverse group of people eager to make a difference in the community. The team has good relationships; when you walk into the school, there is a welcoming, calm, and friendly tone.

I have been an educator at this school for over twenty-five years and consider the school my second home. I started as a second-grade teacher and shifted to a first-grade teacher. After seven years of teaching, I transitioned to instructional reform facilitator (IRF) or teacher coach.

When I became a principal eleven years ago, I wanted to create a loving community that felt like a family for students and staff. We have implemented initiatives to build a school environment that addresses student growth, growth mindset, and mindfulness. While we have succeeded in co-creating a welcoming atmosphere, I have noticed a pattern of increased apathy among African American students as they matriculate to the upper grades. Upon reflection, I realized we had never intentionally incorporated culture, identity, and culturally responsive teaching into our curriculum. The PAR research explored the results of incorporating more culturally responsive practices—particularly for African American students—into classrooms. The Co-Practitioner Researchers (CPR) are a group of teachers who accompanied me to understand and implement these practices.

Co-Practitioner Researchers

As I considered the CPR team, I purposely tapped teachers who could teach culturally responsive teaching. Because change is not easy work, the teachers would need growth mindsets and commitment. Additionally, I wanted people willing to apply deep learning to improve classrooms for African American students. Furthermore, I wanted teachers across grade levels because they would be better positioned to observe student progress across grades and better determine how to support students. I invited five teachers to join the co-practitioner researcher (CPR) team; we called our format a professional learning community (PLC) because that is a more common term in our context. I interviewed each teacher to gather baseline data about their views and knowledge of culturally responsive teaching and learning. Next, I describe each PLC member (see Table 3).

Table 3

Demographics of Professional Learning Community (PLC) Participants

Teacher	Age	Gender	Race	Years of Experience in Education	Years of Experience at the School
KG	Late 20s	Female	White	3	3
NT	Late 30s	Female	Japanese	8	6
MP	Mid-70s	Female	African American	10	10
GY	Late 30s	Female	Bi-Racial White & Japanese	11	11
GM	Early 40s	Female	Bi-racial Filipino and Mexican	16	10

Teacher KG

At the start of the study, Teacher KG had been teaching for four years, including her student teaching at our school. She is a quick learner and equity-centered, based on observations and a glowing recommendation from her master teacher. She came to Sheridan to teach 4th grade. I knew the least about KG, so having the time to get to know her more deeply was important. She has always worked with children; her grandmother had a daycare in her basement, so KG gravitated to teaching. She went to Catholic school for K-8 and then attended public school. She observed the difference between public and private education during her years in public school and did not like what she saw. During college, she cemented her desire to be a teacher. She states, "I wanted to be a teacher because it was not just that kids are fun. It was more like reflecting on issues within the education system and the inequities between kids' access depending on their school (Interview, November 18, 2023)." She received her bachelor's degree from UC Santa Cruz and her teaching credential from the University of San Francisco.

Teacher GM

Teacher GM has sixteen years of teaching experience, twelve at our school. She is married and has one son in second grade. She received her BA in Liberal Studies at San Francisco State University and her MA in Curriculum and Instruction from Walden University. She has always wanted to be a teacher and comes from a teaching family. Her grandfather was the first Assistant Superintendent in San Francisco. She is a knowledgeable teacher who is thoughtful about the curriculum and exceptionally skilled at building student relationships. She has pursued culturally responsive education independently by attending several professional development sessions. She is usually an early adopter of school-wide initiatives and is part of our Instructional Leadership Team (ILT). She desires to develop her leadership skills but wants to

avoid becoming a principal. Of the PLC members, GM is the teacher I am personally closest to beyond the school setting.

Teacher NT

Teacher NT has been in education at our school for ten years and eight years. After working in finance for six years, NT came to teaching as a second career. During that time, she tutored students from disadvantaged homes and led a Girl Scout troop in her neighborhood. She realized she was spending all her free time with children. Her love of children motivated her to obtain a teaching credential from the University of San Francisco. NT is a reflective teacher who always thinks about how she is teaching and adjusts her teaching accordingly. She is cognizant of the importance of teacher-student relationships and is an Instructional Leadership Team (ILT) member.

Teacher GY

GY has been a teacher for eleven years, all at our school. She is married and has one son. She came to our school after her student teaching at a nearby school. GY was a new teacher when I was the Instructional Reform Facilitator (IRF). I spent much time in her classroom, modeling and giving her feedback. She was a quick learner and wanted to do well. She thrives on feedback and quickly implements suggestions. I have watched her become a caring, reflective teacher who takes on school and district leadership roles.

Teacher MP

MP has been a teacher for eleven years, all at our school. MP loves learning and enjoys sharing learning. She follows many traditional teaching methods but is eager to adopt more modern approaches. She was an emergency teacher in middle school but currently teaches fourth and fifth on our campus. MP is a lifelong learner and is happy to participate in this work.

PAR Pre-Cycle Process

The PAR Pre-Cycle was an opportunity to learn more about the co-practitioner researchers and gain a foundational understanding of the PAR's goal of culturally responsive classrooms for African American students. Co-practitioner researchers convened as a professional learning community (PLC) during the Pre-Cycle. I outline the events during the PLC and the evidence gathered during those sessions. For Pre-Cycle activities, see Table 4.

Recruiting Co-Practitioner Researchers

In Pre-Cycle, seven months during the 2021-2022 school year, recruiting the right teachers was a top priority. I wanted teachers committed to learning about culturally responsive teaching and creating culturally responsive teaching and learning (CRTL) environments for African American students. Early on, I provided teachers with essential information about CRTL so they could make informed decisions. During faculty meetings and individual conversations, I spoke to teachers extensively about my EdD classes and the knowledge I was acquiring. Additionally, I wanted teachers to understand my passion for this work. I explained my long-term desire to create culturally responsive learning environments for African American students to sustain the joy students had exhibited in the lower grades. The apathy became evident in the 4th and 5th grades. If we created environments that respected the culture and identities of students through culturally responsive teaching while increasing the rigor in the classroom, we could make a difference for our students. I intentionally recruited and chose teachers because I wanted teachers to be informed before they committed to the project. Therefore, when the five teachers agreed to participate, I was confident that they were teachers who were notified, excited, and committed to making a difference.

Table 4

Activities for the Pre-Cycle

Activity	November	December	January	February	March	April
Meetings with PLC		●	●	●		●
Interviews			●	●		
Member Checks		●	●	●	●	●
Reflective Memos		●			●	●

Pre-Cycle Activities

During the Pre-Cycle, I had three goals and activities in mind: to cultivate the relational trust needed to make real change, to deepen knowledge of culturally responsive teaching and learning (CRTL) through books, articles, and videos, and to develop a common definition of culturally responsive teaching and learning that we would use to create our lessons in PAR Cycle One. I wanted us, as a PLC, to know about culturally responsive teaching and deeply understand how culture, identity, and place influence CRTL—culturally responsive teaching and learning. Next, I discuss teacher interviews, PLC meetings, and how the goals were completed, and provide reflections on the process.

Teacher Interviews

At the beginning of the Pre-Cycle, I interviewed each PLC member. The interviews aimed to learn more about each member and accumulate baseline information regarding their knowledge and use of CRTL practices. Each interview lasted about half an hour, and while each interview included different questions, three questions were vital to each:

1. When you are lesson planning, how do you know that something is equitable?
2. What do you look for when lesson planning or observing culturally responsive instruction?
3. What would you look for to determine whether a teacher knows their students, or what do you do to ensure you know your students?

These data gave me valuable information about the level of learning in the PLC group; then, I could determine how to start our learning journey. At the end of the Pre-Cycle, I met with each PLC member to ask the same questions. These data provide compelling evidence of our collective learning and a road map for PAR Cycle One.

PLC Meetings

When considering the PLC meetings, I wanted a consistent format so members could anticipate what would happen during each meeting. I used these three components in every meeting: personal narrative, dynamic mindfulness, and content focus.

Personal Narrative. PLC members need deep work in forming and sustaining relational trust. Changing practices entails forming meaningful, long-term professional learning partnerships and laying the groundwork for productive, democratic, and respectful connections (Kemmis, 2009). To help cultivate that trust, I included a personal narrative in the initial meeting and every meeting after that. The personal narrative is an activity in which PLC members learn more about each other and cultivate the trust needed for our work. With each meeting, the personal narrative is designed to encourage members to learn about each other and be vulnerable with each other (Militello et al., 2019).

Dynamic Mindfulness. Personal narratives coupled with dynamic mindfulness (DM) are essential. The DM practice has three fundamentals: Mindful ACTION reduces stress and trauma; BREATHING techniques teach emotion regulation; and CENTERING practices enhance focus and attention (<http://www.niroga.org/>). The technique helps PLC members center and focus. Once the foundation activities were completed, we could launch into the main task of gaining foundational knowledge.

Content Focus. The core component of every meeting was a content focus. I designed the content focused on engaging the PLC team in new learning. It would either build teachers' background knowledge or support them in learning new strategies to support culturally responsive student learning. We read or viewed a video to gain pedagogical knowledge of culturally responsive teaching. We depended on seminal authors who paved the way to ensure

teachers had the foundational information. We focused first on foundational authors Geneva Gay and Gloria Ladson-Billings, as we understood that modern readings about culturally responsive teaching are derivative of the works of the scholars who preceded them, scholars. Then, we moved on to two current authors, Zaretta Hammond and Gholdy Muhammad.

PLC Meeting 1. I included the three components during our first meeting. We began with dynamic mindfulness and used the Joy Harjo poem and protocol. Using this poem as an anchor, we discussed the tables in our lives and how we set a school table for children. Much like the holding space for adult learning (Drago-Severson, 2012), we modeled an adult learning space that we wanted to replicate for students. In using personal narratives, we told stories and learned things about each other we did not know. For example, GM had two tables because her parents were divorced. Through this exercise, we realized that the tables we wanted to set for our school were similar—welcoming and inclusive tables. This realization helped us to make connections with each other.

We read *Culturally Responsive Teaching* by Geneva Gay. Using a jigsaw protocol, each teacher read a section and explained the content to other members. The findings, theoretical claims, practical experiences, and personal tales of educators investigating and working with underachieving African American children informed the components of a culturally responsive teaching style (Gay, 2002). Gay asserts five components of a culturally responsive teaching lens:

- Developing a cultural diversity knowledge base
- Designing culturally relevant curricula
- Demonstrating cultural caring and building a learning community
- Cross-cultural communication
- Cultural congruity in the classroom.

This article had a significant impact on the PLC members. Teachers commented that it had much more information than they thought. They commented that this was not a reading they could do while the television was on, and they wanted to reread the article for greater understanding. However, teachers expressed that although they were excited about the work, they were afraid they had taken on more than they could handle. After this first meeting, I wrote a reflective memo. While I wanted deeper learning for my teachers, I wanted to keep the lessons manageable. As a lead researcher, I needed to find rich yet teacher-friendly texts to give to the teachers.

PLC Meeting 2. During our second meeting, we continued the same format: dynamic mindfulness, personal narrative, and content focus. The personal narrative protocol for this meeting was called *teachers matter*. During this activity, teachers spoke about their favorite experiences in school and how those experiences shaped their teaching. In this activity, we continued to build trust with each other, and we discovered that we all believed that positive relationships with teachers are pivotal for students to feel successful and enjoy school. This discovery was critical, as PLC members saw that they had common values that could help craft our culturally responsive teaching definition.

Based on the feedback from the first meeting, I chose an article that was more easily accessible. We read, *But That's Just Good Teaching! The Case for Culturally Relevant Pedagogy*, by Gloria Ladson-Billings. In this article, Ladson-Billings suggests that culturally relevant teaching is just good teaching. She provided a theoretical grounding in a study and examples of culturally responsive teaching in action.

We used another reading protocol: chunk and chew. This protocol involves reading small text sections (chunking) and discussing the text as a group (chewing). The teachers seemed more

engaged with the article when we checked in at the end of the meeting. GM stated, "I like this protocol better because you can read the entire article" (PLC meeting notes, January 24, 2022). NT said she liked the group discussion (PLC meeting notes, January 24, 2021). This article elicited lively discussion among the group. At the end of the meeting, the PLC members said they had a better understanding of culturally responsive teaching. During a member check with NT, she explained that based on the article, she decided to take a different approach with three African American students in her classroom. She invited them to lunch so that they could engage in writing reteaching; she wanted students to reach their full academic potential. NT stated, "This article made me think about innovative ways to engage students."

PLC Meeting 3. By the third meeting, teachers were developing deeper relational trust with each other. Our personal narrative was called *experiences matters*; teachers reflected on their most memorable school experience and explained how that experience influenced them as teachers. All the teacher's experiences revolved around the theme of connection. MP stated that her teachers would come for dinner at her house. NT said that her teachers saw her as a person. A theme consistently emerging at our meetings was the importance of connections, being seen, and knowing your students. For the content portion of the meeting, I decided to add a video to our repertoire of culturally relevant learning. I chose an interview with Zaretta Hammond in which she spoke about bringing cultural relevance into classroom activities. While the video was very informative, the statement, "Everything is culturally responsive. But whose culture is it responding to?" resonated most with the PLC members (PLC meeting notes, February 28, 2022).

After some discussion, I suggested that if we do not actively bring in the cultures of our students, we are telling them that the dominant culture is superior. This was an *aha moment* for us as a PLC. After this meeting, KG told me that she thinks about the books she chooses,

ensuring they are relevant to her students. In contrast, before this, she would have just used the book the curriculum suggested (Reflective memo, February 28, 2022). During this meeting, I saw the PLC members connecting with the learning and their classrooms. I felt that they were ready to move to create our culturally relevant teaching definition, but I asked if they felt that they were prepared. GY stated that she felt she knew more about the subject than she did at the beginning of PLC and thought she was ready. The other members agreed with her. I then introduced them to the topic of gracious space. Gracious space is the idea that we must feel comfortable in discomfort. We must invite that discomfort in with agreed-on guidelines of how to react when there is discomfort. We discussed that speaking about culture and race often brings up feelings that make us angry, scared, or confused, and those feelings are appropriate to the process. We collaborated on agreements for moving forward in this work:

- Willingness to say you made a mistake
- What we talk about stays in this space
- If someone shares something personal, do not ask about it after unless they bring it up
- We must be brave and say things that may be hard or uncomfortable
- Assume best intentions
- Disagreeing with someone is not being mean

PLC Meeting 4. During this meeting, the personal narrative was telling. In this activity, we discussed something that was hard and how we overcame it. Most of the teachers spoke about hard conversations and how having those conversations changed them. GY shared that she had transformed herself negatively for a relationship, and a friend brought it to her attention (PLC meeting notes, April 12, 2022). The conversations during this meeting were more personal, and I felt that PLC members were willing to be more vulnerable. In addition to the dynamic

mindfulness, our content focus was developing our collective definition of culturally responsive teaching. We discussed our desire for a short definition that could be memorized and then began the process. We used this process: Each teacher was given time to construct their own definition; then, three pairs combined their definitions to make one definition each, and, finally, we gathered the three combined definitions and chose one. Our definition was: Culturally responsive teaching responds to each student's cultural identity (characteristics, experiences, perspectives, and language) through trusting learning partnerships to empower students to develop independence and intellectual capacity. This was an exciting activity, and the teachers said they were happy to make it to this point. At the end of the meeting, KG said that she could see why many people need to implement culturally responsive teaching. Although it seemed complicated to her initially, KG said she was happy that we were taking on the challenge. The meetings were productive and meaningful, and I gathered valuable data to code.

Coding Process and Code Book

Coding has been an ongoing learning process. Reviewing *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers* helped me to start with in-vivo coding (Saldaña, 2016) or applying the words verbatim as code. As I began to code, I considered the feedback I received from coding homework assignments I completed during the semester. I found that longer sections of words ultimately provided more clarity for me. I added a column to the code book to explain the context of the code to expose emerging patterns further. In the code book example, I have these heading -- categories, codes sub code, code explanation, and source (see Table 5).

Emergent Category: School Should Feel Like a Caring Home

Through the data collection and analysis, I determined that PLC members valued deep, caring relationships with students and were intentional about developing those relationships.

Table 5

Codebook from PAR Pre-Cycle

Category	Code	Descriptor	Source: Additional Explanation
School should be like a caring home.	Student interest	I choose topics and books that I know my kids are going to be interested in because I know what they like	Interview: GY talking about how she knows her students during her one-on-one interview when she talks about how important it is to make connections with students
	Student interest	We talk about what they (students) are doing outside of school.	Interview: MP talking about how she gets to know her students. She talked about how she may know that they are on a sports team, or they will have a special visit with grandma over the weekend and she will ask about those things in school to show that she cares.
	Love and care	I want my students to feel warm and safe about school	PLC Notes: GM reflection about how she brings her table to school
	Love and care	I really want to make sure that my kids do not feel traumatized by my redirections	PLC Notes; GY talking remembering being traumatized by a teacher and having it affect how she treats her students.
	Being seen	Most memorable are probably the teachers who I felt saw me as a person	PLC Notes: NT self-reflection of her school experience. This was about a specific teacher who asked personal questions about her, such as whether she has a crush on anyone.

PLC members spoke consistently about their love and care for students. Additionally, PLC members discussed the importance of incorporating student interest into the classroom. Furthermore, they talked about students' needs to feel seen by their teachers. I concluded that deep relationships and caring are like a caring home. In analyzing the data collected throughout the Pre-Cycle, the codes of love and care, student interest, and being seen support the category. Through this analysis, I provide evidence for the codes and discuss how I could apply this knowledge to PAR Cycle One.

Love and Care

PLC members want students to feel love and care in their classrooms (n=xx instances in the data). In a conversation during a PLC meeting, GM stated that students should feel loved and cared for (PLC meeting notes, December 13, 2021) and explained that her top priority is for students to feel loved and cared for in her classroom. When discussing the characteristics of a good classroom during a PLC meeting, GY shared that students feel loved and cared for when learning is fun (GY, PLC meeting February 28, 2022). She ensures she gives extra love to students who seem to need it. MP stated that teachers came to her house for dinner when she was a child. She explained that she saw teachers at the grocery store and church when she went to school. Teachers were part of the community, so having teachers for dinner was an extension of that community (PLC meeting, February 28, 2022). GM wanted her students to feel warm and safe in school. They discussed this during the personal narrative portion of a PLC meeting (GM, PLC meeting notes, December 13, 2021). During the personal narrative portion of a PLC meeting, GM stated, "I had the BEST after-school teacher who loved me (I was her favorite) and treated me like a daughter" (GM, PLC meeting notes, February 28, 2022). KG stated that she had the same teachers and classmates throughout high school, making her feel "like more of a

community" (PLC meeting notes, February 28, 2022). PLC members not only show love and care to their students but were shown love and care when they were students, and that lived experience contributed to their belief and practice that they wanted to do the same for their students.

Student Interest

PLC members needed to value student interest to make the school feel like a caring home. Getting to know them in and outside of school and learning students' likes are ways teachers spoke about caring. KG and MP talked about the importance of knowing things about their students outside of school because students felt cared for if teachers expressed an interest in them. (KG & CO, interview, November 10, 2021). They spoke about the importance of knowing about birthday parties or a special visit to Grandma because their interest in the students' lives outside of school demonstrated that teachers were interested in the whole child, not just that child's academic levels. During a one-on-one interview, KG stated that she sometimes attends students' sports games on the weekend, which someone in a caring home would do.

In addition, GY stated in a one-on-one interview that she chose topics and books that she knows her kids are interested in because by taking the time to get to know her students, she knows what they like (GY, Interview, November 21, 2021). Teachers who attend to the whole child and use their interests to construct the curriculum feel that they are better able to improve students' academic outcome.

Being Seen

Being seen means that teachers acknowledge students for who they are, and each child feels known and accepted. Some teachers had experienced that feeling themselves as young students; all teachers wanted to base their teaching on student interests. During a personal

narrative, NT said that her most memorable experiences were with teachers she felt "saw me as a person, not just a student" (NT, PLC meeting notes, February 28, 2022). Her favorite teacher knew that NT was from Boston and gave her a card with a story from that city. She remembers a personal conversation where her teacher asked if she had a crush on anyone. While this appeared as a code, more evidence is needed, and I may gather more data in PAR Cycle One related to what it means to be seen and heard in the classroom.

Making school feel like home is a critical facet that culturally responsive teachers use so students do not feel that school is a different and strange place. The initial evidence supports the category. However, as this is the Pre-Cycle, there is more evidence to gather and analyze. In PAR Cycle One, I want to explore the code of being seen to gather more evidence to support this code.

Reflection and Planning

I am passionate about creating culturally responsive spaces for African American students. To achieve this, I needed to develop my leadership skills and the leadership potential of the PLC members. A well-functioning PLC helped to accomplish this goal by establishing and nurturing a research-based professional learning community (Hord, 2008). Leadership is successful when a cohesive plan involves the people at the center. I reflect on my role as a school leader and researcher in this study, and then I discuss planning for PAR Cycle One based on my learning from the Pre-Cycle.

Leadership within the PLC

Reflecting on my desire to grow as a leader, I continue to examine the CLE axioms. Through this work, I continue to work toward number two: *Conversations are critical and central pedagogical processes*. Social learning theory is based on relationships, so having a secure communication space is essential. Environments that foster vulnerable, honest discussions

and relational trust are known as safe spaces (Guajardo et al., 2016); in addition, if we want students to have more dialogue in the classroom, we must model protocols in professional learning meetings. As the lead, I have created that safe space for PLC members, who are therefore more willing to be vulnerable. For example, one PLC member was quiet at early meetings; however, as we built relational trust, she began to speak more and share more personal things about herself.

Through this process, I witnessed my growth as a leader. I have been more intentional about meetings and their content. I have a plan of where I want to go, but I continue to adjust and adapt based on knowing the needs of my PLC members. I listen to them and understand that their thoughts are valid. While I have grown as a leader in many ways, I will focus on feedback and relational trust and close with my reflection as a researcher.

Feedback

PLC input has been valuable. During the first meeting, the PLC members read *Preparing for Culturally Responsive Teaching* by Geneva Gay. When we debriefed at the end of the meeting, several members commented that the article was academic. GM commented that the article was dense and something she would have to read again (PLC meeting notes, December 13, 2021). NT said that she wanted to read the whole article because although hearing from others was nice, she wanted to read it herself (PLC meeting notes, December 13, 2021).

I considered their feedback when I wrote a reflective memo about the meeting. Feedback is essential for the work. To inform goal-setting and direct behavioral change, feedback must contain meaningful information that leaders perceive to be valid and reliable (Portin et al., 2009). As the lead researcher, I considered their feedback in making plans. I picked a less academic piece and a different protocol for the next meeting. At the end of the second meeting, KG said

she liked this protocol better because we could all talk about the same thing (PLC meeting notes, February 28, 2022). MP said she enjoyed the article because it was easier to understand (PLC meeting notes, February 28, 2022). Listening to and acting on that feedback also helps create relational trust and promotes a critical CLR axiom: leading and learning require dialogue.

Relational Trust

When I created the PLC for this study, I was cognizant that relational trust among the PLC members would be crucial to the study's success. Trust is a significant factor for a PLC, and leaders should take steps to build this vital capital (Hord, 2008). Although I believed that I had a good relationship with each member and that the teachers were friendly, I had the chance to deepen these connections. Thus, I worked on my relationship with the PLC.

The research was conducted during a global pandemic, which added to the challenges teachers already experience from the rigors of regular classroom life. I did not want this study to seem like "one more thing." I intended to make teachers feel respected and valued by making this work essential and groundbreaking. Thus, I provided a support system for the PLC members in their efforts to become effective, culturally responsive educators. As the lead researcher, I sought to develop a feeling of caring for the participants. I fostered this caring in many ways. First, I listened to the PLC members and adjusted accordingly. My first adjustment came when members were still worried about meeting in person. I immediately changed the meetings to online. When I analyzed the meeting notes, I noted that three members messaged me saying thank you, stating that meetings online made them feel safer (PLC reflective memo notes, January 25, 2022). Listening to their fears and making changes made members feel more comfortable and able to focus on the work. Secondly, once we were able to meet in person, I provided a meal for every meeting. As a child of Southern parents, I was taught that nothing involving people is conducted

without food. Food is caring, and after a long day of teaching, food was a good way for members to connect with me. Teachers would text me and ask what we were having. GM stated that the food was one of the best parts and was appreciated after a long day (PLC meeting notes, January 24, 2022). While the food helped teachers focus, the purpose was that they needed to feel cared for and valued. Thirdly, I conducted member checks. These were informal meetings to check in with each member, ask clarifying questions about our meetings, and understand how each member was doing. All these intentional activities strengthened my relational trust with each PLC member. In addition, I wanted to strengthen the relational trust among PLC members.

The participants' interpersonal relationships with one another were equally crucial, so I established a process to grow those relationships. The personal narrative element of our meetings helped us develop relationships and trust. I noticed that with each protocol, the PLC members became more at ease with one another. As we held more meetings, teachers became more willing to be vulnerable and opened up more. NT is shy and usually expresses her comments in the chat; however, during the third meeting, she un-muted herself and shared her thoughts with the group. During our member checks, NT expressed that she had become more comfortable sharing with the group. Another example is that the members felt overwhelmed but excited about our work. Their willingness to be vulnerable and share their emotions during our meetings showed that members' relational trust deepened.

As a Researcher and Plan for Cycle One

As a novice researcher, I used the Saldaña book to ground the work. I sought the help of colleagues to help make sense of coding. I had a writer's retreat with another doctoral candidate. We focused on two things: coding our data and creating a codebook. I reviewed the data during our retreat, including reflective memos, personal narratives, PLC meeting notes, and interviews.

Among the feedback I received was that the codes needed to be shorter, and I had to narrow the codes to keywords. My colleague and I conferred with an EdD student who graduated in 2020. We wanted to get advice and insight from someone who had recently been through this process. Her advice was to keep our dissertation questions at the forefront of everything we do, including coding. She explained that coding would be more accessible. The more I practiced coding, the more precise the data became. While coding has proven challenging, I understand the nuances of coding more and more. This new knowledge will help me progress with PAR cycle one.

For PAR Cycle One, the PLC team decided to facilitate a CLE. I continued to conduct observations and post-observation conversations with PLC members. These observations aim to help teachers improve their practice and, in turn, improve classrooms for African American students. Each teacher decided to develop a PDSA cycle plan to implement, discuss, and adjust as needed. We agreed to explore the concept of productive struggle and what that means for teachers and students.

CHAPTER 5: PAR CYCLES OF INQUIRY AND FINDINGS

In this participatory action research (PAR), I focused on creating culturally responsive classrooms for African American students in an elementary school in San Francisco. I worked with five teachers during PAR Cycles One and Two; we met regularly in a professional learning community (PLC). We co-developed an understanding of how teachers framed their instructional decisions and actions to promote academic discourse in math lessons to improve equitable access and rigor for African American students. During the study, the teachers acted as co-practitioner researchers (CPR). This chapter details the multiple activities in PAR Cycles One and Two. I analyzed the data from these activities to develop emerging themes. Based on these data, I determined findings related to how teachers interpreted their roles as warm demanders (Bondy, 2013; Delpit, 2012; Ware, 2006).

PAR Cycle One and Two Process

In this section, I describe the PAR Cycle One and PAR Cycle Two processes -- activities, data collection, and analysis. I used PAR Pre-Cycle evidence to inform our activities and data collection for PAR Cycle One and data from PAR Cycle One to inform PAR Cycle Two. Our work focused on PLC participants determining best practices for culturally responsive teaching and applying those practices to their instructional planning and implementation. I observed classroom practices and facilitated conversations about the observations with CPR members. As a result, we strengthened our understanding of culturally responsive practices.

Activities for PAR Cycle One and Two

In PAR Cycles One and Two (May 2022-May 2023), the activities included PLC meetings, a community learning exchange (CLE) for the entire staff (n – 25 participants), observations and post-observation conversations, and reflective memos.

PLC Meetings

The team met eight times between May, 2022 and May, 2023. Our primary goal in holding these meetings was to strengthen our relational trust as a group, an essential requirement for this challenging work. We formed standard routines at each meeting, including dynamic mindfulness, reviewing the meeting outcomes, participating in a personal narrative, and identifying a main content focus to further our education. These routines allowed us to make the most of the time and preserve transparency. We followed an agenda at each meeting and had a note-taker and artifact collector for data collection and analysis. In November and June, teacher PLC members participated in interviews. Next, I discuss the personal narrative and content focus of each meeting and the types of artifacts collected for evidence.

The date of our first meeting was May 16, 2022. We continued from our PAR Pre-Cycle with the ongoing goal of building relational trust with PLC members; the personal narrative titled "Good Learning" was an excellent activity to deepen relationships and trust. In this personal narrative, PLC members discussed their new knowledge pertaining to culturally responsive teaching and how it has changed their perspectives. Each member shared their thoughts, leading to a discussion about how our work in PAR has changed their teaching practices (see Table 6). Next, we revisited our collective definition of culturally responsive teaching. We reviewed the meaning of each sentence and highlighted its key components. Creating a collective definition provided opportunities for sense making, which is critical for our work (Norris, 2022). Then, to add specificity, we detailed how we understood each highlighted section and what the attribute of culturally responsive teaching looked, sounded, and felt like in the classroom (see Figure 5). We agreed on a collective meaning about what a *culturally responsive teacher* means. We ended the meeting with a check-in with each team member.

Table 6

PAR Cycle One and Two Activities and Data

Activities	Date	Data Collected
PLC Meetings (n=8)	May 16, 2022 August 10, 2022 September 26, 2022 October 24, 2022 November 2, 2022 January 30, 2023 March 20, 2023 May 29, 2023	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Personal Narrative ● Meeting Notes ● CLE Artifacts ● Agenda
Community Learning Exchange	August 11, 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Personal Narrative ● Notes ● Agenda
Observations Round 1 (n=3)	October 10, 2022 October 11, 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Selective Verbatim Observation Data ● Post-Observation Conversations
Observations Round 2 (n=3)	October 18, 2022 October 19, 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Selective Verbatim Observation Data ● Post-Observation Conversations
Observations Round 3 (n=3)	November 6, 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Selective Verbatim Observation Data ● Post-Observation Conversations
Observation Round 4 (n=3)	February 13, 2023	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Selective Verbatim Observation Data ● Post-Observation Conversations
Observation Round 5(n=3)	April 11, 2023 April 12, 2023	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Selective Verbatim Observation Data ● Post-Observation Conversations
Observation Round 6 (n=3)	May 17, 2023 May 19, 2023	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Selective Verbatim Observation Data ● Post-Observation Conversations
Participant Interviews (n=6)	November 2023 May, 23,2023	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Meeting Notes
Reflective Memos	n=10	

(collective/collaborative definition)

Culturally Responsive Teaching responds to each student's cultural identity (characteristics, experiences, perspectives, and language) through trusting learning partnerships to empower students to develop independence and intellectual capacity.

Figure 5. Collective/collaborative definition with highlights from CPR members.

The PLC group met on August 10, 2022, with the purpose of preparing the entire staff for a community learning exchange (CLE). The team reviewed a draft CLE agenda. Each activity was purposeful and would allow CLE participants to learn and reflect on their teaching practices. We planned who would facilitate each part of the CLE and the data that would be helpful. As the PLC members co-planned the CLE agenda, they reflected on their learning.

In the third meeting (September 26, 2022), PLC members responded to a personal narrative entitled culture shock; they reflected on a time when they experienced culture shock in their lives and reflected on their cultural identity. (see Figure 6 for a collective discussion of how CPR members understand cultural identity). For example, two PLC members related stories about being uncomfortable when they did not know the language or the cultural norms. Our discomfort led to a discussion about how children, especially African American children, sometimes experience culture shock when they enter a school that is not culturally responsive. Often, African American children feel that school is not a place where they can be themselves (Ladson-Billings, 1995b). We read an article about the PDSA cycle and the critical aspects of the protocol. Teachers formed pairs and discussed their PDSA plans and outcomes. We concluded the meeting with each participant discussing their feelings about the study.

In our meeting on October 24, 2022, we used a journey line of learning as the personal narrative. Each person presented a journey line, and PLC members asked questions of each other. The activity served two purposes—PLC members reflected on their learning, which is vital for continued growth, and continued to nurture trust. The main topic of our meeting was defining and understanding how teachers should and could be warm demanders (Bondy, 2008; Delpit, 2012; Ware, 2006). Teachers needed support to push students to engage in productive struggle. After several discussions and reflections, we uncovered how members were concerned

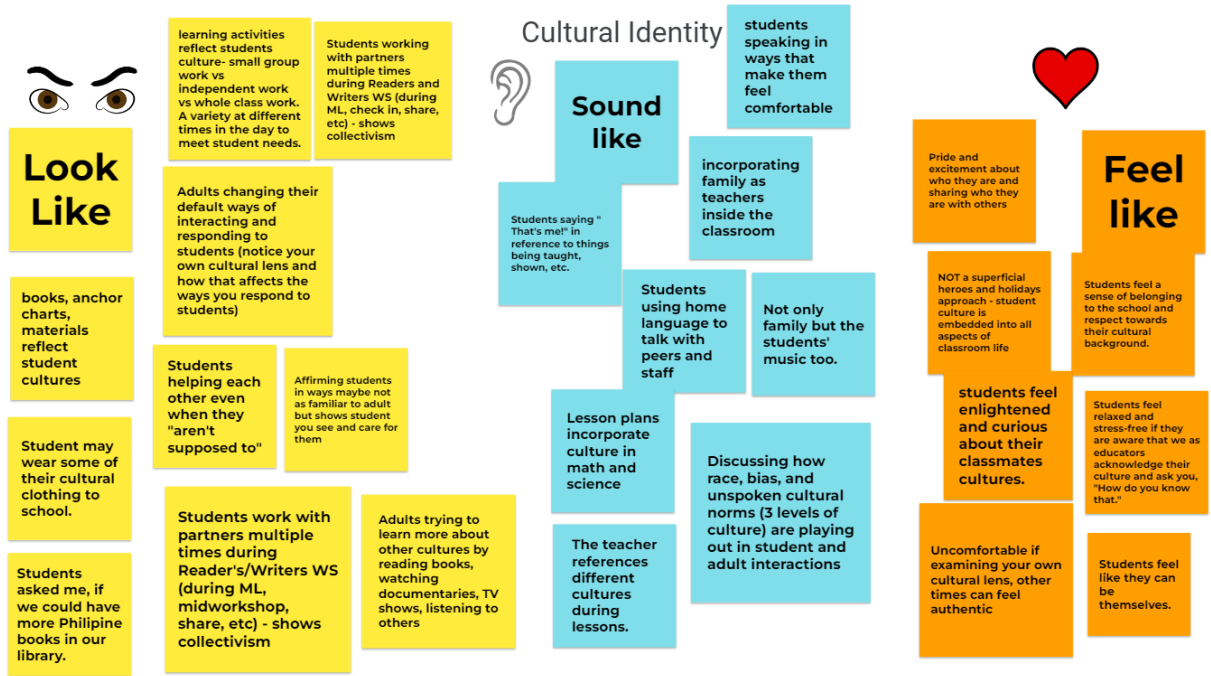


Figure 6. Jamboard of examining attributes of cultural identity.

about breaking the positive relationships that had taken so long to form with students. As in the PAR Pre-Cycle, the teachers' efforts to develop positive relationships sometimes came at the expense of cultivating academic rigor. Teachers struggled with providing an educational environment where students are pushed to learn within their zones of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). We discussed an article about the characteristics of a warm demander and ways we would incorporate them into teaching practices. Teachers realized the many responsibilities necessary for a culturally responsive classroom. KG stated that she is beginning to see the complexity of culturally responsive teaching, and other teachers agreed. Next, teachers refined their PDSA cycle plans and shared what they wanted to accomplish during the weeks of observation.

On January 30, 2023, we used the personal narrative photo voice. We revisited the article, *Preparing for Culturally Responsive Teaching* (Gay, 1995), and discussed the symbolic curriculum concept. Symbolic curriculum consists of pictures, icons, and other objects that impart knowledge, skills, morals, and values to students around the classrooms and school. Students learn what is and is not essential to the school by what they display. The PLC members shared photos they had taken of examples in the school that represented symbolic curriculum. We had multiple examples showing that we value students as a school. PLC members then revised their PDSA plans as needed, and we ended the meeting with reflections and appreciation.

On March 20, 2023, we revisited the culture shock personal narrative. We examined our culture shock stories and discussed how African American students may feel like they must behave differently because of how school differs from home. We discussed the Pre-Cycle conclusion that school should be like a loving home. KG added that students should feel good

because their homes may differ from school (PLC meeting notes, March 20, 2023). The school's job was to make students, especially African American students, feel included and comfortable.

In the April 20, 2023, meeting, we defined productive struggle and how it connects to being a warm demander. A highlight of the discussion was a statement GY made. She said that students could productively struggle with tasks that seem challenging when they know they have an adult who loves them and demonstrates that love by setting high expectations and showing them the steps to meet the challenge without wavering (PLC meeting notes, April 20, 2023). While the PLC members all agreed with her statement in principle, they acknowledged that they still needed guidance about accomplishing the complex role of being a warm demander.

In the final meeting, on May 29, 2023, we reflected on our learning and discussed how we, as a team, could expand this work to the entire school. Each participant reflected on their time in this study, and we discussed our learning. All the PLC members stated that they had learned a significant amount; nevertheless, they reflected that they remained at different levels of success in the work. Everyone concurred that it is critical to apply this work school-wide. However, members spoke of giving grace to new people. KG stated, "We must be cognizant that we have been doing this work for two years. It will take time for people to get to where we are" (PLC meeting notes, May 29, 2023). GY felt that people must be prepared to make mistakes and know they will not get it right. GM said that language is fundamental. Everyone needs to use the same language to successfully bring our work school-wide. During the final meeting, participants reflected on how far they had come and the next steps they wanted to take. I thanked them for their willingness to participate in this study.

Observations and Post-observation Conversations

Between our PLC meetings, I conducted an observation with each member followed by a post-observation conversation. Using selective verbatim to capture the salient points of each 15-minute observation, I coded the observations and used the data in the post-observation conversation with each PLC member to discuss observations and wonderings. As the lead researcher, I initially supported participants' efforts to draw conclusions based on the data instead of providing direct feedback. However, I discovered that direct feedback was necessary in certain circumstances. While some of our discussions centered on specific lessons, most post-observation conversations were about teachers needing a thought partner to make meaning about being a culturally responsive teacher.

For example, GM and I discussed being a warm demander in-depth (Observation notes, October 14, 2022). We discussed what a warm demander might look like and agreed that that role is difficult to master. We referred to the articles we read as a PLC, and she expressed her difficulty in being a warm demander. Taking a coaching and guiding stance, we considered why she was having trouble and how she could become an effective warm demander using the observation tool. For example, she asked only one probing question in one of her lessons. GM used the observation tool and could then see that she was not giving students enough opportunities to enter their zones of proximal development and engage in what we are terming productive struggle (Vygotsky, 1962). Teachers have a complex task: they must find the balance between pushing students to achieve their best and pushing students to a point of frustration. However, teachers who do not push at all sacrifice academic rigor. Through our conversation, GM recognized that she feared pushing would damage the student-teacher relationships she had developed. Working through this process together, we decided on strategies for GM to use in the

next lesson. Similar conversations happened with each PLC member. They were all struggling with a specific element of being a culturally responsive teacher. They cultivated relationships with students but had difficulty providing productive struggle for students in the classroom, often because they were reluctant to interrupt the trusting relationships they had developed.

The observations and post-observation conversations helped the PLC members see how they could offer more rigor; however, beyond the lessons themselves, teachers were collaboratively making meaning of culturally responsive teaching. They were reflecting not only on their teaching practices but on themselves. This reflection, according to Hammond (2015), "helps culturally responsive teachers recognize the beliefs, behaviors, and practices that get in the way of their ability to respond constructively and positively to students" (p. 53). The teachers had reached a critical point in our work. They were beginning to see the changes they needed to make, and they served each other as a sounding board to help process their learning. The observation tool gave information about lessons and an entry point for PLC members to converse effectively. In addition, the tool was an effective conversation guide, leading the teachers to more in-depth discovery outside of the lessons. These teachers needed to make meaning of everything they had learned and determine how to apply it to their teaching practice (Norris, 2022). As the lead investigator, I discovered that even with the effectiveness of the tool, I had to be aware of when to shift the conversations to the specific needs of each teacher. I realized that I needed to move from a collaborative stance to providing direct information when teachers struggled to connect meaningfully to the work (Glickman, 2002). By using the processes and protocols I learned from participation in community learning exchanges, I fostered a different way of engaging teachers.

Community Learning Exchange

To gain insight into the entire school community, the PLC hosted a CLE to share our learning and gather information from the staff (n=25 participants) about their understanding of productive struggle. After the PAR Pre-Cycle, we understood that teachers excelled at creating solid and enduring bonds with their students; however, cultivating the connections sometimes impeded learning. Often, teachers were not pushing their pupils to engage in productive struggle because their need to maintain good relationships sometimes superseded their ability to scaffold and be a warm demander. According to Boaler (2016), productive struggle encourages students to persevere through difficulties and make sense of complex concepts, leading to improved learning outcomes. This information added to the data regarding culturally responsive practices.

The PLC team met on August 10, 2022, to discuss the CLE agenda. Through discussion and data findings, we determined that the need for positive relationships was sometimes taking precedence over productive struggle and, thus, student academic growth. We discussed the purpose of a CLE, the possible outcomes, and the data we wanted to collect. I further explained that CLEs provide an invaluable platform for teachers to collaborate, share experiences, and gain insights from one another's expertise. We started with the shared conviction and understanding that social interaction is at the heart of learning (Guajardo et al., 2016). On August 11, 2022, we co-facilitated a CLE with other school staff members. PLC members aimed to gather data about what teachers knew about productive struggle, share knowledge about it, and have a common understanding of what it entails, with a plan to incorporate it into daily lessons. For the personal narrative, participants told stories about the most challenging thing they had ever learned and answered the following questions: Why was it difficult? How did you learn it? Who or what helped you learn it? They then had discussions with their table group. Their sharing led to lively

discussions. The personal narrative allowed participants to think about their struggles and how they overcame them. This activity put them in the mindset of productive struggle because they could think about it from their perspective. One teacher said that she sometimes forgets what it is like to struggle. Next, we used Hammond (2015) for discussion:

Our ultimate goal is to position dependent learners so that they will take intellectual risk and stretch into their zone of proximal development (ZPD). That is the point of rapport—building trust is designed to help dependent learners avoid the stress and anxiety that comes with feeling lost and unsupported at school. (p. 81)

As teachers, we were looking for the point at which students, through their own efforts, learned new knowledge or skills without frustration. We wanted the students to demonstrate effort or productive struggle so that they could experience agency over their learning and became more independent.

We watched a video about productive struggle (Edutopia, 2022), and CLE participants discussed their thoughts as PLC members recorded any critical comments. As a final exercise, CLE participants created a productive struggle poster that answered the following questions: What does productive struggle look, feel, and sound like? What is NOT productive struggle? What is hard, or what do you worry about with productive struggle? What are strategies/resources that will encourage productive struggle? After the groups completed their posters, they participated in a gallery walk and wrote comments about each poster. There were some commonalities between the posters. The CLE was productive, and their posters provided valuable data (see Figures 7-12 for posters of productive struggle understanding and Figure 13 for a picture of participants). All of the posters included the information that time was a concern for the teachers. When reading and coding notes from the CLE, quotes from teachers indicated

PRODUCTIVE Struggle

BY: Marseille & Kelly 4/5

- working together
- not giving up

- uncomfortable
- accomplished / proud

3: "I can't do this... YET!"
"Keep TRYING!"

- everyone's sweet spot for Struggle is different & we need to know our kids well enough to know when/how to push them

- TOO high of a struggle can lead to a shut down

- consistency in language around struggling (at home & schoolwide)

CHALLENGES:

~~Ø~~ - automatically knowing the answer
- giving up when you don't get it right away

~~I'll NEVER get this!!!~~

STRATEGIES & RESOURCES:

Class Dojo - growth mindset series

teamwork & strong class community where mistakes are WELCOMED

Complex Instruction


Being a WARM DEMANDER

Giving students space

Yes! Language around struggle is so important!


Figure 7. Productive struggle poster one.

PRODUCTIVE STRUGGLE




LOOK:

- frustration
- asking for help
- avoidance
- persistence
- fidget use



SOUND

- sighs, groans
- laughter
- conversations



FEEL

- challenging
- frustrating
- tip of your tongue sensation
- uncertainty

Productive Struggle

- giving up
- checking out

- disengagement
- destroy materials

- outbursts

What is hard/worry w/ productive struggle as a teacher?

- giving time
- knowing students' sweet spot emotionally and ZPD
- giving space

Strategies/Resources

- teaching what it is
↳ games, charts, stories

- teaching why?
- more ↑ agency in learning

- goal setting

Figure 8. Productive struggle poster two.

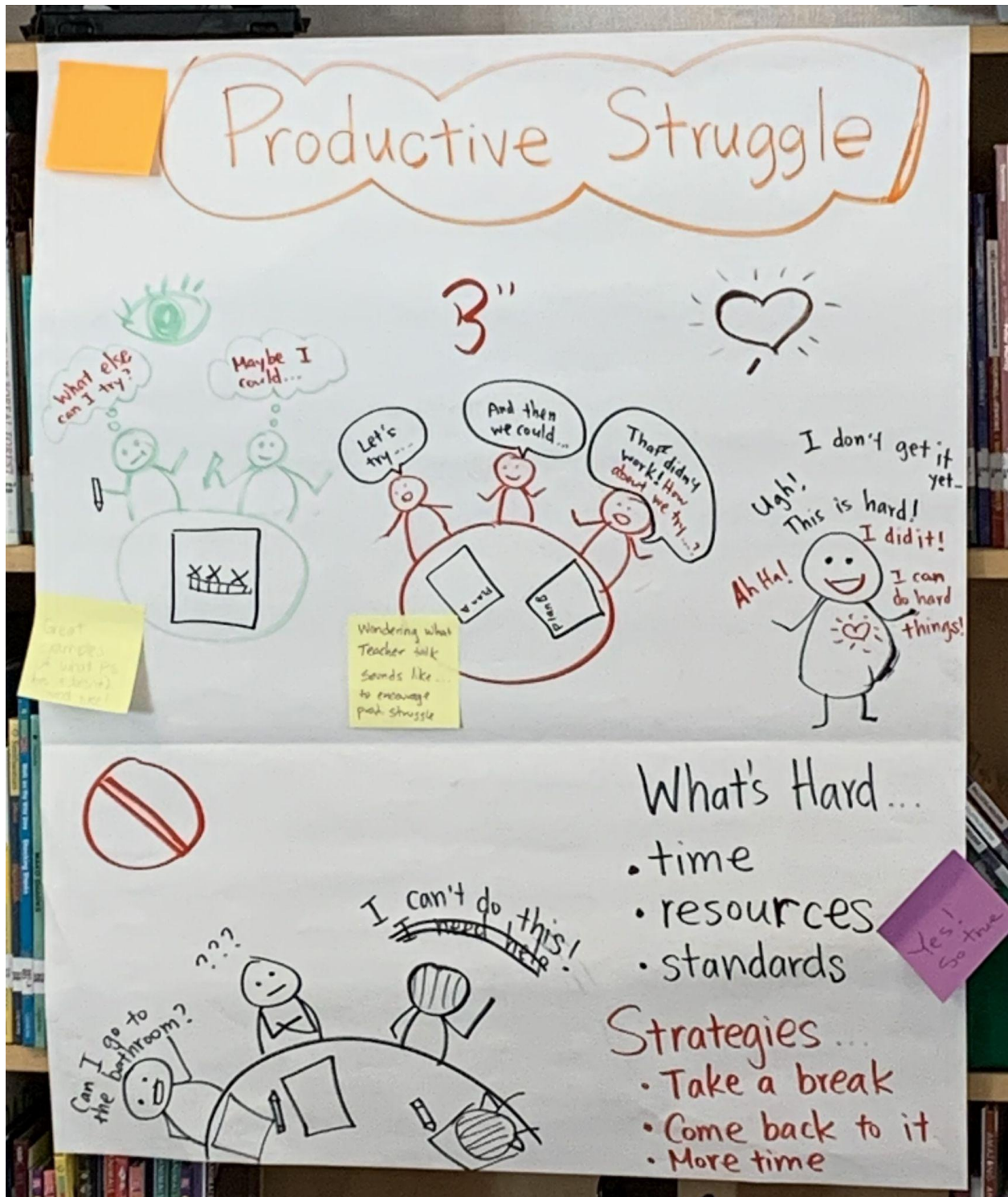


Figure 9. Productive struggle poster three.

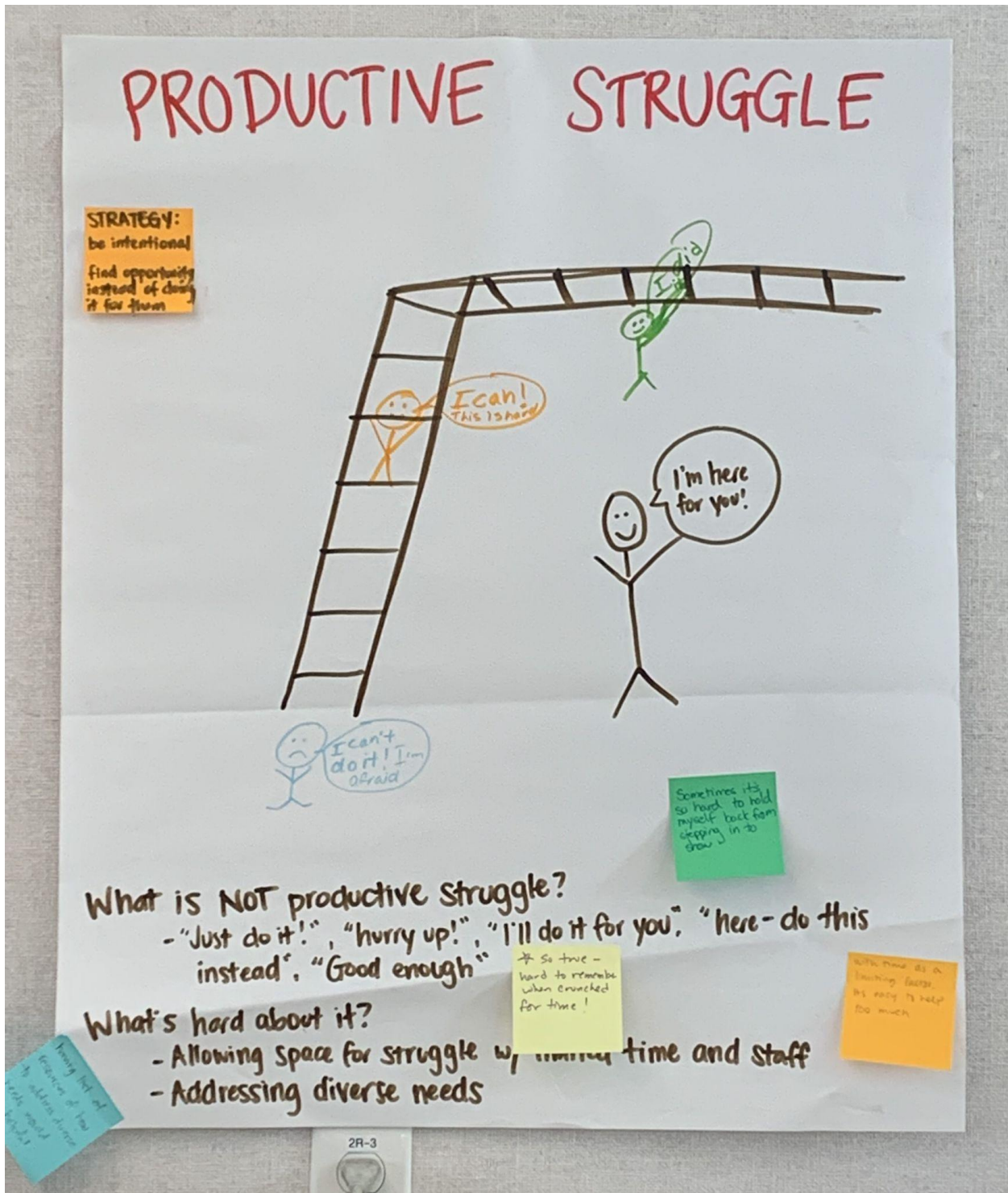


Figure 10. Productive struggle poster four.

What does it look like?

Not giving up.
 Taking a break is OK.
 Asking questions.
 Being OK with failure.
 Making mistakes is part of the process.

Taking a mental break and coming back at a later time is often very useful.

Great work listing all these diff. issues

NOT
 productive struggle
 perfectionism
 giving up easily
 not taking feedback
 not cooperating
 hyper independence

feedback is important for students building up their growth mindset

I like that you included hyper independence as an example

I like how you poster bring up a lot of SEL opportunities - self talk, perfection

What is hard?

- self defeating self - talk
- the fear that you will fail/give up
- setting yourself up for failure

Understanding the long-term process (failing ~~at~~ times while building skills) "the learning curve"

the process needing to understand that it is a process - it is what is hard + knowing that it should be

How can we help?
 Strategies/Resources

- model learning from (& accepting) mistakes

"It's hard for a lot of people"

I like how you highlighted the importance of us modeling how to learn from mistakes

four categories
 - great information
 - growth mindset

Figure 11. Productive struggle poster five.

Productive Struggle k-1



- 1) Kids engaged, unhappy at times, tears, stomping, working in groups, withdrawing, independence, smiles, proud faces
- 2) frustrated, proud, tired, sad, angry, accomplished, confident
- 3) chaotic, loud, questions, "this is hard". "I got it"



- quiet
- lecturing
- teacher giving answers
- easy for students or teachers
- giving up
- "how it's always been"
- fast



- worry about students giving up or becoming disengaged
- worry about families understanding what it looks like.
- having time for productive struggle and hitting all the standards
- management: time, materials, routines, etc.
- encouraging productive struggle through unpreferred but necessary tasks



- Growth Mindset
- Regular feedback routine
- Goal Setting
- Modeling productive struggle
- Flexible time frames
- Resource - Class Dojo videos
- Resource - checklists for goal setting
- Broadening our definition of productive struggle to see it in all contexts/situations.
- 1:1 Conferences
- Educator putting themselves into situations with productive struggle.

Figure 12. Productive struggle poster six.

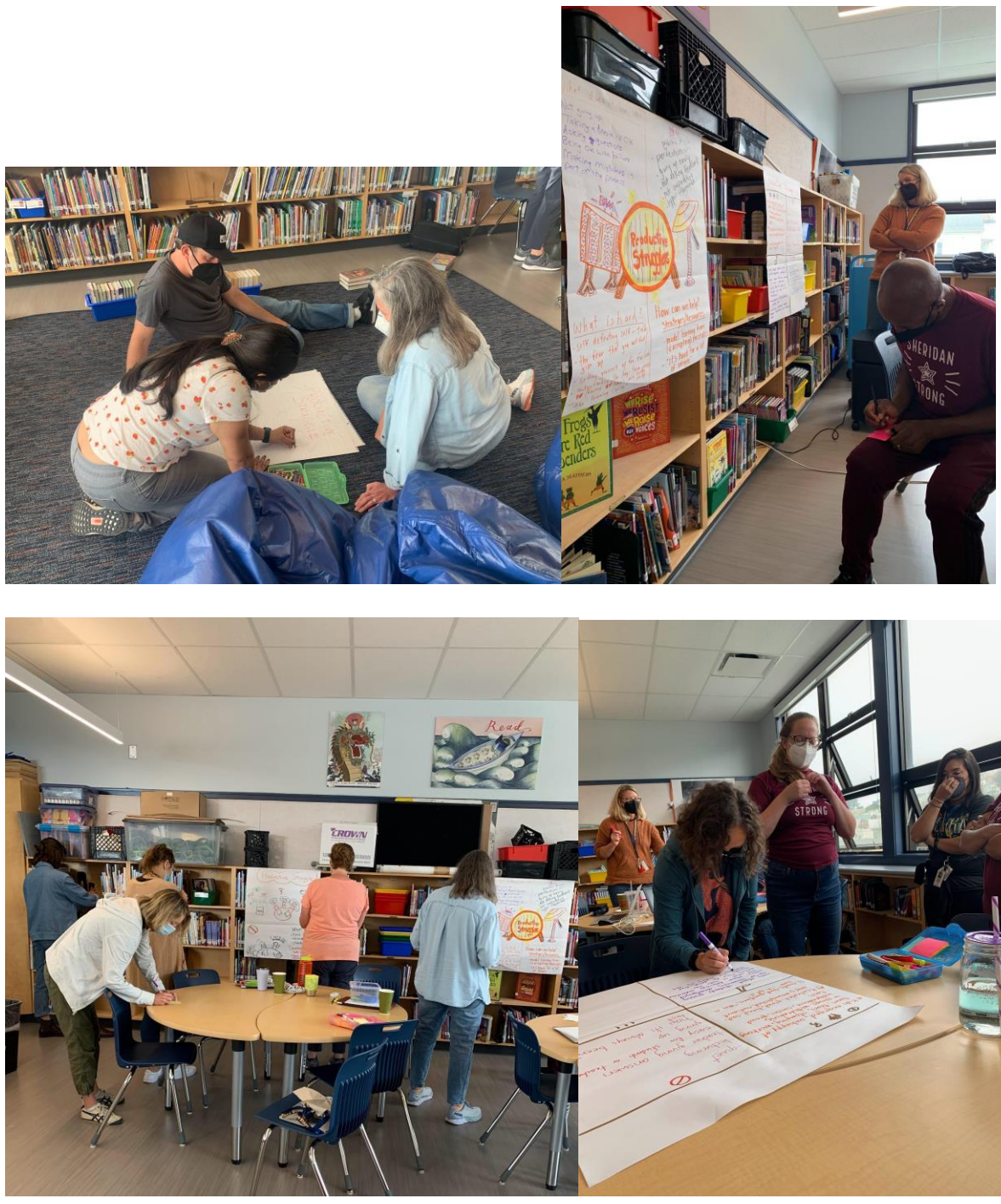


Figure 13. Productive struggle CLE of teachers working collaboratively on posters.

that they worried that giving time for students to struggle might cause them to fall behind with their pacing. Teachers had a similar understanding of what productive struggle looked like in the classroom: not giving up, being frustrated, wanting to give up, pride when you accomplish a challenging task, and positive relationships were on all the posters. Overall, teachers understood that productive struggle was necessary for a successful classroom, but they felt that outside influences—such as keeping up with district pacing guides—could impede their ability to apply it adequately.

Reflective Memos

As an additional source of data, I wrote reflective memos. McWilliams and Meehan (2017) state that "reflective memos serve as a means of documenting personal growth, capturing moments of insight, and fostering a deeper understanding of oneself and the world" (p. 123). I used reflective memos as a helpful way to promote critical analysis and self-evaluation. The memos gave me an organized way to explore ideas and contemplate my experiences as the lead researcher.

Data Collection and Analysis

I analyzed data collection sources, including selective verbatim teacher observations, post-observation conversations, PLC notes, and reflective memos. In addition, I used observation tools with predetermined codes and descriptive codes in multiple coding iterations. Multiple data sources in qualitative research provided a rich set of data that helped validate the emergent themes (Saldaña, 2016). I had the opportunity to hone coding skills, relate what I learned from the Pre-Cycle, and apply it to PAR Cycles One and Two. I rearranged, analyzed, and reworked the data sets to support emergent themes. As I added more data, patterns began to emerge. These patterns substantiated emerging themes in two cycles of inquiry and contributed to the findings

that I detail after I discuss the data from PAR Cycles One and Two. I triangulated all data with reflective memos and member checks (Saldaña, 2016).

PAR Cycle One: Emerging Themes

I observed patterns and trends as I analyzed the data by using a frequency table to visualize the distribution (Field, 2018). I concentrated on identifying a key process for teachers to developing their skills as culturally responsive teachers, particularly for African American students. That quality of teaching is termed warm demander (Bondy and Ross, 2008; Bondy, et al., 2017; Ware, 2006); both aspects—the warmth of a positive relationship and demanding meaningful effort— are necessary to provide the access and rigor students need (Boykin and Noguera, 2011). African American students are particularly vulnerable as teachers often fail to demand or press students (see Table 7 for frequency of emergent themes and categories).

The initial data showed that the teachers had strong skills in creating and sustaining relationships with students and their families and creating classroom environments in which students felt supported. However, they needed help taking on the demander role throughout PAR-Cycles One and Two. As I witnessed their difficulties, I concluded that *demand* exceeded what I consider necessary in the teaching and learning environment. We wanted our students to have rigorous tasks that did not frustrate them but provided academic growth. In general, by PAR Cycle Two some teachers were taking risks to engage the students in productive struggle; however, other teachers remained hesitant. The table shows emergent themes of teacher as warm and teacher as demander. I discuss each emergent theme with categories that substantiate each assertion. Based on the data collected and analyzed in PAR Cycle One, I developed a figure with emergent themes and categories (see Figure 14).

Table 7

PAR Cycle One Emergent Themes

Emergent Themes	Frequency	Emergent Category	Frequency
Teacher as Warm	63	Warm with each other	17
		Warm with students	35
		Warm outside of school	12
Teacher as Demander	47	Teacher knowledge	24
		Student intellectual capacity	21

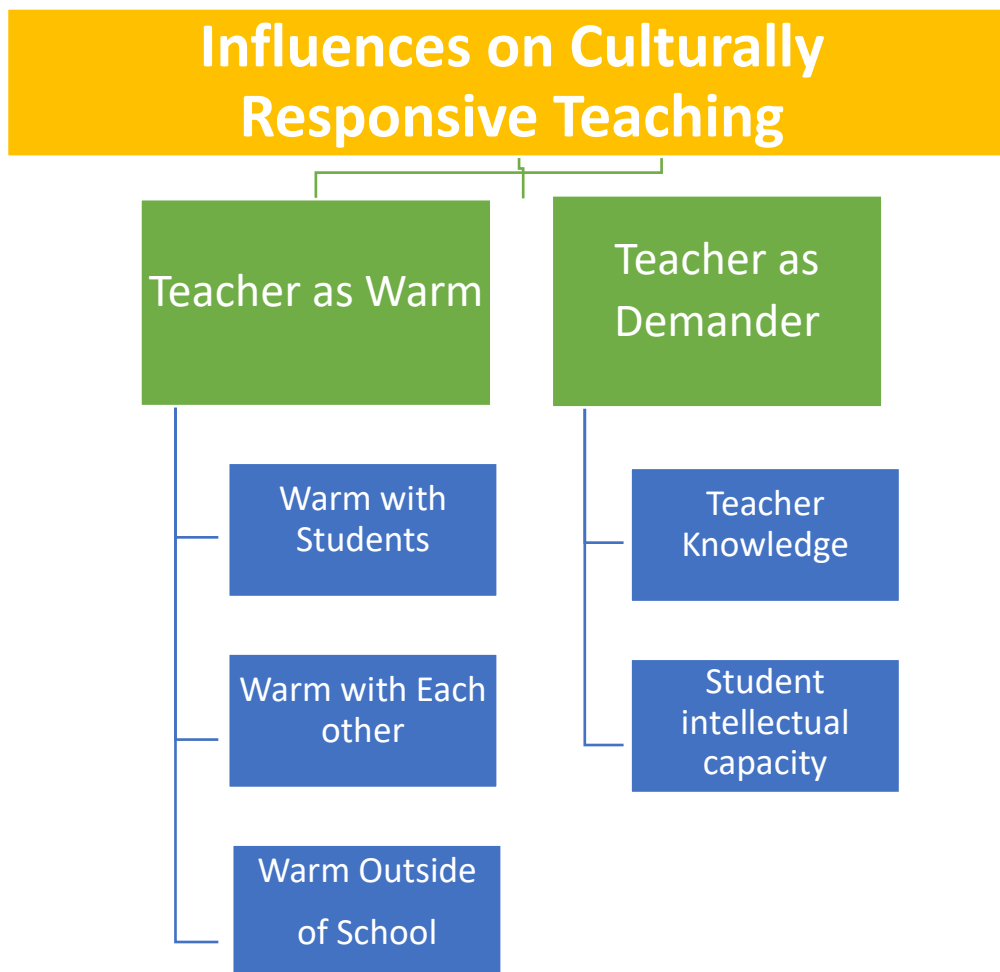


Figure 14. Two emerging themes with categories.

The PLC teachers experienced a warm environment and learned from each other; they tended to transfer their experiences and stated beliefs in supporting students to the classrooms. However, in the area of becoming a demander of students, the supporting evidence revealed that two factors were at play: their learning about how to be successful at making demands on students in the classroom and their beliefs about students' intellectual capacity.

Teacher as Warm

In order to build an environment that fosters student growth and achievement, elementary school educators must find a balance between having high expectations of their students and providing them with nurturing care. Ladson-Billings (1994) stated that "warm demanders... are characterized by their ability to demand high performance from students, to maintain high expectations, and to combine this with an affectionate, accepting, and nurturing demeanor" (p. 187). For this study, I assert that being a warm demander implies two separate skills and that teachers must pay attention to these attributes— being warm and being a demander— and be “a teacher who communicates personal warmth toward students while at the same time demands they work toward high standards” (Hammond, 2015, p. 160). Being warm for this study includes the positive, nurturing relationships teachers and students cultivate and includes how teachers maintain those relationships over time.

As stated in the Pre-Cycle, PLC members demonstrated their dispositions of caring about children by developing and maintaining positive relationships with students. In PAR Cycle One, the teachers cultivated relationships, and they translated our conversations about care for students to their classrooms. The emergent theme of teacher as warm had 61 instances in three categories: warm with each other (n=17), warm with students (n=32), and warm outside of school (n=12). I discuss how teachers are warm with each other and how this translated to their students.

Warm with Each Other

Teachers viewed themselves as warm as they interacted with each other. This category presented itself 17 times as teachers felt comfortable with each other and recognized the importance of that comfort in their work. They spoke about how I modeled support and understanding as the principal, which was important throughout the study. I knew the significance of modeling what we want to see in classrooms for teachers. Furthermore, the teachers spoke about feeling happy because they were doing the work of teaching.

These data show that teachers were not only warm, but that sharing that warmth with each other sustained them. During a post-observation conversation, GY stated that she could not imagine doing this work with people she did not feel comfortable with (post-observation conversation, September 14, 2022). During a post-observation conversation, KG said, "Thank you so much for being the amazingly supportive, available, and understanding principal you are" (post-observation conversation, October 14, 2022). GM spoke about being happy that she is a part of this work and that this group was helping her grow (PLC meeting notes, November 2, 2022). In meeting notes from almost every PLC meeting, a teacher expressed that doing the work collaboratively is vital because they support each other. GM stated that she was happy she was working with a partner she felt comfortable with because, "This work is hard, and you need people to share ideas with" (post-observation conversation, September 14, 2022). KG related that, as a newer teacher, she found collaboration important because she enjoyed working with and learning from more experienced teachers (Post-observation conversation, September 14, 2022). These data highlight that PLC members value relationships and being warm with each other. Next, I provide data that substantiates the emergent finding of warm with students.

Warm with Students

In the category of warm relationships with students (n= 32), the teachers demonstrated their abilities to develop relationships with students. Being warm with students and having positive relationships was essential to the teachers. First, teachers discussed the value of time in student relationships. Secondly, teachers talked about creating an environment in which students could be their authentic selves in the classroom. I provide examples from the data to illustrate these points. KG stated that teaching students two years in a row allowed her to build longer-term relationships with those students (PLC meeting notes, September 26, 2022). GY stated that she allowed her students to be themselves (post-observation conversation, November 11, 2022). I later asked her what she meant by students being themselves, and she explained that she wanted students to feel respected in the classroom as their authentic selves. She did not want them to modify their behaviors to meet a teacher's expectations.

During a post-observation conversation, a paradoxical issue surfaced: teachers were positing warm and demanding as opposites and not as a unit of how a teacher acts. While these are two skills, they are interdependent. As Hammond (2015) states, a teacher who is a warm demander provides concrete guidance and support for meeting the standards, particularly corrective feedback, opportunities for information processing, and culturally relevant meaning making" (p. 160). However, teachers continued to prioritize positive relationships over encouraging productive struggle. GM talked about struggling to know how much to push because she did not want her students to feel bad or ". . .have a meltdown" (post-observation conversation, October 14, 2022). These data suggest that the teacher valued a positive relationship over productive struggle and did not view these two teacher practices as interrelated.

This need to be warm with students appeared during our May 16, 2022, PLC meeting. On a Jamboard, we collectively defined culturally responsive teaching. In several examples, teachers spoke about being warm to students, including by adapting their communication style for each student in a way that is comfortable for that student. Additionally, teachers valued children feeling welcomed into a peaceful, calm, and stress-free environment for learning, and appreciated authentic connections that communicate respect and trust. These data suggest that teachers considered being warm to their students as a critical part of how they approach teaching.

Warm Outside of School

Lastly, I discuss how the data presented the category of warm outside of school (n=12 instances). First, teachers spoke about feeling welcome interacting with people who were not of their culture. Secondly, teachers discussed feeling safe in new environments, such as when traveling. This category illustrates that being warm carries into teachers' lives outside school. Being warm toward colleagues was an authentic characteristic; being warm themselves and seeking it out in others is part of their identities, which corresponds to why they value and excel at it.

The teachers' positive definitions and actions of warmth may, however, explain their difficulty with being demanders. MP gave an example of this category during a PLC meeting: she explained that there were a lot of different cultures living in her neighborhood as she was growing up and she was happy that they went out of their way to make her feel welcome. She stated that she never felt uncomfortable around different people in her neighborhood and was relieved that different cultures accepted her. (PLC meeting notes November 2, 2022). GY provided another example of how teachers valued warmth outside of school. She spoke about traveling to France alone. She was afraid, but met people who embraced her, and she was happy

she found friendly people (PLC meeting notes, November 2, 2022). When KG traveled to another country, she felt safe because her friend spoke Spanish. She was grateful that her friend could help and was happy that local people were patient with her when she was trying to speak Spanish.

Examples from the categories of warm relationships with students, colleagues, and outside of the classroom support my emerging theme of warm instructors. A welcoming teacher allows students to express themselves without fear of rejection, which is essential to a student's success, but a teacher's role and goal is not only warm relationships with children and families; their responsibility is to ensure that students learn and grow, which requires teachers to understand each student's zone of proximal development and apply appropriate techniques that motivate individual students to demonstrate effort.

Teacher as Demander

Being a warm demander requires two skill sets that teachers must balance warm and demanding. While the teachers are skilled at being warm, they were still developing their skills as demanders at the point in which this particular project and study concluded. With this study's definition of demander— skill in communicating high academic and behavioral expectations coupled with the ability to push students to struggle productively to meet those expectations—I found that teachers were struggling. The teachers' fears about pushing students academically were tied to their concerns about their ability to maintain warm relationships and student behavior issues. The emergent theme of the teacher as a demander presented itself 47 times in two categories: teacher knowledge (n=24) and student intellectual capacity (n=23). First, I discuss how teachers learned about their roles as demanders and how that intersected with their actions to foster students' intellectual capacity.

Teacher Knowledge

Teacher knowledge (n=21) refers to the teacher's ability to use the knowledge acquired through the study to be a culturally responsive teacher. This study has revealed that being culturally responsive means being a demander. One goal of this study was to increase teacher knowledge that informed their practices. In the CPR group meetings, we discussed the definitions and classroom strategies for being a demander. As I conducted my observations, I looked for instances in which teachers applied their knowledge of being a demander. An example of applied teacher knowledge occurred during a post-observation conversation with GM. During the observation, she told a student she was capable and could do the work. During our conversation, GM expressed that she recalled the readings and conversations we had in PLC meetings and took being a warm demander to heart. She held the student accountable for completing the work by affirming the student's capability. At this point in the study, other participants also made changes to their practice, but the level of applied teacher practice was mixed. I had a post-observation conversation with KG in which she expressed how much this study caused her to reflect on her teaching practices. She realized that her understanding of culturally responsive teaching, explicitly being a warm demander, was surface level. She realized through this study how much she did not know. She also expressed that she was still hesitant to demand (post-observation conversation, November 11, 2023). The sentiment that being a demander is difficult was the prevalent thought for the study participants during PAR Cycle one.

Nevertheless, as we learned more during PLC meetings and had more post-observation conversations, the teachers were starting to make the connection that being a demander is important for student achievement, especially for African American students. I had a similar conversation with GY after an observation (post observation conversation November 8, 2022).

After I showed her the data, she could see that she was pushing the students more, but she was still hesitant to demand because she feared damaging the student-teacher relationship. I referred GY to the articles and videos we have used to gain knowledge about culturally responsive teaching. Revisiting the knowledge helped GY to see where she could make some changes to her practice. In both of those conversations, the data clearly reveals a skill gap. However, these examples also show that teachers were starting to apply their pedagogical knowledge to being a demander. Next, I discuss how that knowledge of being a demander translates to student intellectual capacity.

Student Intellectual Capacity

As teachers gained knowledge about supporting students academically as warm demanders, they pushed students' capacity for learning. The term "intellectual capacity" describes a person's capability to acquire knowledge and process information (Johnson and Smith, 2020). Teachers must view students' intellectual capacity as flexible, which can be enhanced through strategies and educational practices (Hammond, 2015). The attention to student intellectual capacity appeared 23 times in the data.

I witnessed teachers pushing students' intellectual capacity during observations. One teacher fostered students' intellectual capacity using the turn and talk protocol. During my observation in November, GY used turn and talk to help students identify important information they would need to complete an assignment. Because of the turn and talk, students compared ideas about key information and used that time as social interaction to gain knowledge and answer questions (McLeod, 2023). During our post-observation conversation, GY stated that turn and talk was an excellent way to give more students speaking opportunities. This is evidence of the teacher being a demander because, according to Vygotsky (1978), intersubjectivity or peer

interactions support students stretching into their zones of proximal development. "Through social interactions, students can access knowledge and perspectives beyond their individual understanding, advancing their learning and cognitive development" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 56). For example, in promoting student intellectual capacity, KG was not simply accepting an answer from a student. She pushed the cognitive load by asking the student to give an example to prove his answer. Though hard for them, teachers began to see they could push students' intellectual capacity. This evidence demonstrates that teachers valued post-observations and applied their learning to change their teaching practice. During our May 16, 2023, meeting, we added to our deeper understanding of our culturally responsive definition, and teachers added statements that could contribute to students' productive struggle and intellectual capacity. For example, one teacher wrote, "The teachers have created an environment where students feel comfortable taking risks and have given them language to talk about their learning moves (voiceovers, rephrasing what they said using that language, writing down)" (PLC meeting, May 16, 2023). This example showed that PLC members valued students' ability to push their intellectual capacity.

In PAR Cycle One, educators frequently developed warm and supportive bonds with students. They created welcoming and motivating learning atmospheres in which students felt appreciated and cared for by their teachers. However, teachers often showed reluctance to establish high expectations and demand more of their students and more for them. They seemed overly concerned that being too demanding or pushing students might strain the excellent relationships they had with students. Teachers worried about generating stress or anger in their students, perhaps destroying the positive connection they had established. However, the teachers' objective and responsibility were to develop a setting in which students felt supported but

challenged; therefore, we needed to understand how to overcome the challenge of teachers not correlating warmth and cognitive push. In PAR Cycle Two, we began to see some shifts in teachers' practice as they became culturally responsive teachers.

PAR Cycle Two

The activities for PAR Cycle Two were similar to PAR Cycle One. The topic of productive struggle was a key topic of discussion in PAR Cycle Two. I drew on the analysis of the August 2022 CLE posters to define how teachers understand productive struggle. Then I analyzed the observations and post-observation conversations from PAR Cycle Two. As a result of this cycle of inquiry, I confirmed that teachers valued being warm with students over pushing students to engage in productive struggle to reach new learning and skills. Teachers reported feeling hesitant to push students because they did not want to "make students feel bad." In post-observation conversations, I modeled being a warm demander, employing direct information instructional coaching to push teachers to take risks (see Table 8 for themes).

Teacher Understanding and Use of Productive Struggle

Productive struggle occurs when students engage in challenging work, make mistakes, and persevere to understand the subject matter better. Productive struggle, essential component of learning, supports teachers to assess students' zone of proximal development and challenge them to reach beyond their current levels of understanding (Vygotsky, 1978). By encouraging students to engage deeply with challenging problems, teachers provide opportunities for students to engage in productive struggle. Often, in collaboration with a peer, teachers challenge students to new levels of learning and support them to exhibit effort to persevere. Teachers, based on PAR Cycle One evidence from the posters, understood what productive struggle looked like, felt

Table 8

PAR Cycle Two: Themes and Categories

Themes	Frequency	Emergent Category	Frequency
Teacher Understanding of Productive Struggle	44/30%	What does it look, sound, feel like?	14/.5%
		What is it not?	11/7.5%
		What are teacher worries?	19/13%
Teacher Implementation: Warm vs. Demand instead of Warm to Demand	43/30%	Shifting to becoming demanders Teachers as warm	9/6% 34/24%
Principal Role in Coaching	59/40%	Principal as a model	32/22%
		Principal as a collaborator	27/18%

like, and sounded like. They could identify ways to push students to engage cognitively

In examining the data from PAR Cycle Two, I determined three themes based on the data: (1) Teacher understanding of productive struggle (44 instances or 30%); (2) teacher as warm demander (43 instances or 30%); and (3) principal's role in coaching teachers to become warm demanders (59 instances or 40%).

I observed CLE participants engaged in discussion about their understanding of productive struggle based on the video we watched and from their prior knowledge. Three categories emerged: What productive struggle looks, sounds, and feels like; what productive struggle is not; and what teachers are worried about in terms of enacting productive struggle. One participant expressed her understanding of productive struggle as, "...the tip-of-the-tongue feeling when you have been trying to do something and finally get it" (GY, Post-observation, April 14, 2023).

Productive Struggle: What It Is and Is Not?

As educators, we aim to apply productive struggle at appropriate levels to achieve student success. We seek a balance where we are pushing students to achieve, but not pushing them to a point of frustration that compels them to give up. The key attribute that teachers indicated was students engaging with each other to get the answer. (n=3). Teachers also indicated that students would smile, feel proud, or use phrases like "I got it" or "finally got it" (n=4). Additionally, teachers indicated that students might express frustration at times, saying phrases like "this is hard" and "I don't get it," but responded positively to a teacher's strategies in which they may say "let's try this," "that didn't work, let's try this." Teachers understand that students may become upset or discouraged, but they are willing to try various tactics, collaborate, to find the solution. This is supported by the analysis of the look, sound, and feel part of the posters.

The teachers indicated that when students become overwhelmed or frustrated, the struggle is unproductive (11 instances or 7.5% of the data). Students may destroy materials, give up, and/or throw things (n=8). One poster showed that the encouraging phrases teachers use often do help students persist; conversely, teacher phrases like "Hurry up," "I'll do it for you," and "Here, do this instead," are not productive. In one poster, a teacher stated that students struggle more effectively when they can express their ideas clearly and collaborate rather than when they suffer in silence. Additionally, the posters included further illustrations of what is not productive struggle such as perfectionism, student disengagement, and struggling when students don't know the answer right away. Similar conversations from CLE participants were heard.

Teacher Concerns about Enacting Productive Struggle

Teachers participating in the CLE expressed concerns about enacting productive struggle with students. In my analysis of the data, I found 19 instances, or 13% of the data, in which the concerns were similar to those of the PLC members. CLE participants were worried about pushing students so far that they gave up or disengaged. They wrote about the difficulties of finding the "sweet spot" for every student. One person worried about finding effective pacing to allow for productive struggle and still adhere to district standards. From the posters, I concluded that the teachers wanted students to participate in productive struggle but not to excess. Once again, the teachers seemed to struggle to be able to push students to academic success. Overall, the CLE was productive and helped me understand that the concerns of the PLC members were the concerns of all teachers. Pushing students to engage in productive struggle does not always come easily for teachers. Teachers understand that productive struggle is necessary for student success, but they hesitate to push their students into levels of discomfort. I discovered that addressing this hesitance is precisely where my role as the instructional leader was most critical.

I needed to model being a warm demander for teachers so they could shift from being warm teachers with positive relationships with students to becoming warm demanders.

Teacher Implementation: Warm vs. Demand instead of Warm to Demand

Throughout the study, teachers valued being warm with students but had not developed the capacity to push for higher levels of cognitive demand from their students. In PAR Cycle One, teacher seemed to have a fear of demanding. In PAR Cycle Two, I observed similar outcomes. Teachers treated the term warm demander in two parts instead of integrating warmth with demanding. They did not fully see the connection between the two: the very reason that teachers can be demanding is due to the positive relationships they have built with students (Simon, 2019). Warm evidence (34 instances or 24% of the total) was much more prevalent than examples of teacher implementation of demanding (n=9 or 6%).

Teachers as Warm

The finding of teachers valuing warm over demanding continued to appear in PAR Cycle Two. Teachers seem to see the elements of warm and demander as either or instead of both. During my observations and conversations, teachers were focused on being warm with students. For example, in a post-observation conversation with GY, we discussed my observation that GY allowed a student to take many breaks when the student was reluctant to participate. I suggested that this was avoidance behavior, and GY agreed but was concerned that without the breaks this student would “. . .have a meltdown.” I asked her to consider that this could sometimes be part of the learning process (GY, post-observation conversation, April 15, 2023). While GY agreed with my assessment, she could not commit to taking a firm stance and limiting breaks. She was more concerned about the students being upset than ensuring they learn. She chose to be warm.

Another example occurred during a PLC meeting when we discussed the importance of being a warm demander. KG stated that she understands the importance of being a warm demander but finds it hard to implement because she is concerned about “. . .hurt feelings or outbursts.” She would rather maintain the warm relationship she has with students. She chose to be warm (January 20, 2023). During a PLC meeting, GY also stated that she wants her students to know that she will always love them. She chose to be warm. These examples show that participants continue to value being warm over being a demander. However, through consistent coaching, some minor changes began to occur. I next discuss the shift to becoming demanders.

Shifting to Becoming Demanders

A shift began at the end of PAR Cycle One and during PAR Cycle Two. Teachers were beginning to make small shifts to becoming warm demanders. I had observed them encouraging students via instructional choices to boost their intellectual capacity (21 instances in PAR Cycle One); however, in this cycle of inquiry I was more focused on how they scaffold and push individual students. During my observations, I looked for instances where teachers were shifting to being warm demanders. In one instance, during a May 2023 observation, I witnessed GM using more wait time with her students. They allowed one student to present an answer during the extra wait time. Another time during the lesson a student had no answer and GM asked the student if they wanted some help from another student. We had discussed this strategy during a previous post-observation conversation. In our post-observation conversation, GM stated that she could see that her wait time had increased, and she was aware of its positive effect on her students.

I learned of another instance during a post-observation conversation. GY stated that she felt she has grown as a culturally responsive teacher, specifically a warm demander (May 15,

2023). She described an instance where she had pushed a student and the student had become frustrated by their inability to complete the assignment. GY worked with the student, encouraging him to persevere. Ultimately, the student completed the work and felt a sense of accomplishment. GY revealed that before this study, she would have accepted the incomplete work, but because of the study, she pushed the student, and it was successful. While this finding is small, it is significant to the study. This data show that teachers are able to shift in their thinking and practice with coaching and education. All participants began to see the importance and the rewards of being a warm demander even if they did not fully enact demanding. In our assessment of students meeting standards, we term this level of achievement, “not yet;” at this point in our work, I see that teachers are “not yet” fully enacting warmth with demanding, and I recognize my critical role. Throughout this study, I have learned that, as the instructional leader, I, too, must be a warm demander of teachers and be willing to have hard conversations with teachers to move practice. Next, I will talk about my role in coaching.

Principal Role in Coaching

As the study advanced, I, as the principal, continued to focus on my critical role. The school leader must lead in ensuring that their schools are culturally relevant. Principals can guide their schools toward this result by coaching teachers to be more culturally competent, both through mentoring and through professional learning communities (Khalifa et al., 2016; Leithwood et al., 2004). Leaders must prepare to assist teachers in having challenging conversations where they examine their preconceptions about race and culture and how they affect the classroom once they have become more culturally sensitive. The emergent theme of the principal’s role in coaching appeared 59 times in two categories: principal as a model (n=32 or 22% of the evidence) and principal as a collaborator (n=27 or 18% of the evidence).

Principal as a Model

Teachers have learned much about culturally responsive teaching for African American students throughout this study. However, they hesitate to implement the strategies necessary to push students into productive struggle. I recognized that I had to be an example for teachers as an instructional leader. I set an example for teachers in two ways: first, by being a warm demander that teachers can emulate for their students; and second, by providing direct coaching that teachers can apply to their teaching practice. An example of modeling being a warm demander appeared during a post-observation conversation. KG stated that “. . . demanding students with meltdowns is a lot of work.” (KG, post-observation conversation February 20, 2023). She stated that sometimes she lets the relationship with the student dictate what she teaches. That statement gave me an opportunity to model for the teacher. KG needed a push to make the leap to demand from her students. I reminded her that her role as the teacher is to ensure that students learn content despite behavioral or emotional issues, and that she should not eliminate the lesson if a student struggles. As the teacher, she needed to adapt the lesson to teach all students. She agreed, and we identified techniques to help her when struggling, including the option of working directly with her students to develop strategies when they struggle.

I noted another example of being a warm demander during an observation and subsequent post-observation conversation. During the observation, I noticed that GM was not providing adequate wait time for students. In our post-observation conversation, she explained that she “. . .didn't want the students to feel bad because they were sitting there, not knowing the answer” (GM, post-observation conversation, April 11-12, 2023). I asked her what would happen if she scaffolded for the student who did not know the answer. She reiterated her concern for the students' feelings. I explained that students needed that time to process information, and if they

still did not know the answer, they needed additional scaffolding. This example shows that teachers sometimes need direct coaching to change their teaching practices.

In a post-observation interaction with GY on February 16, 2023, I acted as a warm demander. She was struggling with being a warm demander. She could not surmount her belief in the importance of positive relationships with students, and she let that interfere with her students' learning. Her realization that her hesitance to be a warm demander was a hindrance to her students raised self-doubt about her efficacy as a teacher. I needed to bolster her self-esteem while continuing to push her in her instructional practice and assured her she was acting appropriately. This example shows the importance of relational trust; without our relationship, I would not have been able to push the teacher. The same is true for teachers and students; the relationship precedes the demand, but they are connected.

In another modeling example, GM spoke about a student who “. . .melts down when pushed too far,” and asked what to do about it (post-observation conversation, April 14, 2023). We discussed the best time to talk with the child, and I suggested that she wait until the student was calm and then explain why she was pushing him. I emphasized that she must let the student know that she believes in him and knows he is capable of learning. GM could adapt that method of direct coaching I modeled, principal to teacher, and transfer it to teacher to student.

Principal as a Collaborator

While the principal has to be a warm demander, the principal's role as a collaborator is equally essential. A school administrator has a crucial role in encouraging teachers to continue their professional development by encouraging healthy work attitudes and providing opportunities for collaboration (Leithwood et al., 2004). For this study, collaboration means PLC

members' ability to work together to make meaning and change practice. The principal as a collaborator appeared 21 times in this study.

An example of collaboration is our PLC sessions, which provided an excellent platform for collaboration modeling. Teachers exchanged ideas and worked together to develop their instructional knowledge. The personal narrative exercise led to a lively discussion during one meeting. Instead of refocusing the conversation on the original topic, I allowed it to continue because I saw value in the collaboration. At the end of the meeting, teachers expressed that they enjoyed the opportunity to get ideas from each other (PLC meeting notes, January 30, 2023). Personal narratives and activities acted as a catalyst for teamwork. They provided opportunities for discussion.

Additionally, I had an opportunity to model by providing space for teachers to meet together. Leaders often develop dense agendas with strict protocol. However, providing time for teachers to talk and learn from each other is valuable. During check-ins and at the end of our meetings, teachers often expressed how much they appreciated the opportunity to collaborate (PLC meeting notes, May 29, 2023). These examples prove collaboration's importance and the importance of modeling by the school leader.

Findings

African American students deserve culturally responsive classrooms with access and rigor (Boykin & Noguera, 2011). Hammond's (2015) Ready for Rigor framework has been a beacon for our work during this project and study. In this study, I investigated how teachers could work together to design culturally responsive learning environments for African American students. To determine the findings, I re-analyzed the data from two cycles of inquiry to focus on two areas—how teachers are warm and the complexities of teachers as demanders. The data

analysis I conducted supports two findings: (1) Teachers focus on warm to foster the necessary conditions for culturally responsive classrooms, and (2) although teachers are fully knowledgeable of the attributes of productive struggle, teachers are hesitant to demand and do not easily encourage productive struggle. Table 9 illustrates the findings and frequencies compiled from the evidence collected during the research study. See Figure 15 to highlight the findings and supporting categories. We used these data to understand each finding and to summarize clearly and accurately. I am aware that my role in the process was and will remain pivotal, and I discuss that role more extensively in the last chapter in which I address the research question on leadership.

Teachers Focus on Warm: Setting the Necessary Conditions for Culturally Responsive Classrooms

The first finding of this study was that the teachers focused much of their culturally responsive practice on being warm to students and creating safe and welcoming classroom environments. They discovered that being warm was a necessary condition for culturally responsive classrooms. Like a teacher in the Garcia (2021) study, who defined culturally responsive as good relationships with students and readings that represented student culture, the teachers often saw their roles as accepting the culture of the students and creating classroom spaces in which the students felt a sense of belonging. However, teachers missed a critical element of teaching if they do not fully understand that their relationships with students are foundational for imparting a cognitive push for student learning. In particular for vulnerable students, including the focal African American students in our school, the teachers need to balance warm with demanding to be effective.

Teachers, defined as those who move students beyond their current capacity or zone of proximal development, must ensure students are appropriately challenged academically to develop academically and benefit from productive struggle. Kleinfeld (1975) coined the phrase warm demander to describe educators who had high expectations of their students and were

Table 9

PAR Findings

Findings*	Frequency	Category	Frequency
Teachers Focus on Warm to Create Culturally Responsive Classrooms	78 or 59%	Encouraging language Forming Relationships Creating a caring classroom	15 or 11% 26 or 20% 37 or 28%
Teachers Struggle to be Demanders	54 or 41%	Struggling with how Fear of student trauma	29 or 22% 25 or 19%

Note. *These data reflect recoding PAR Cycle One and PAR Cycle Two data.

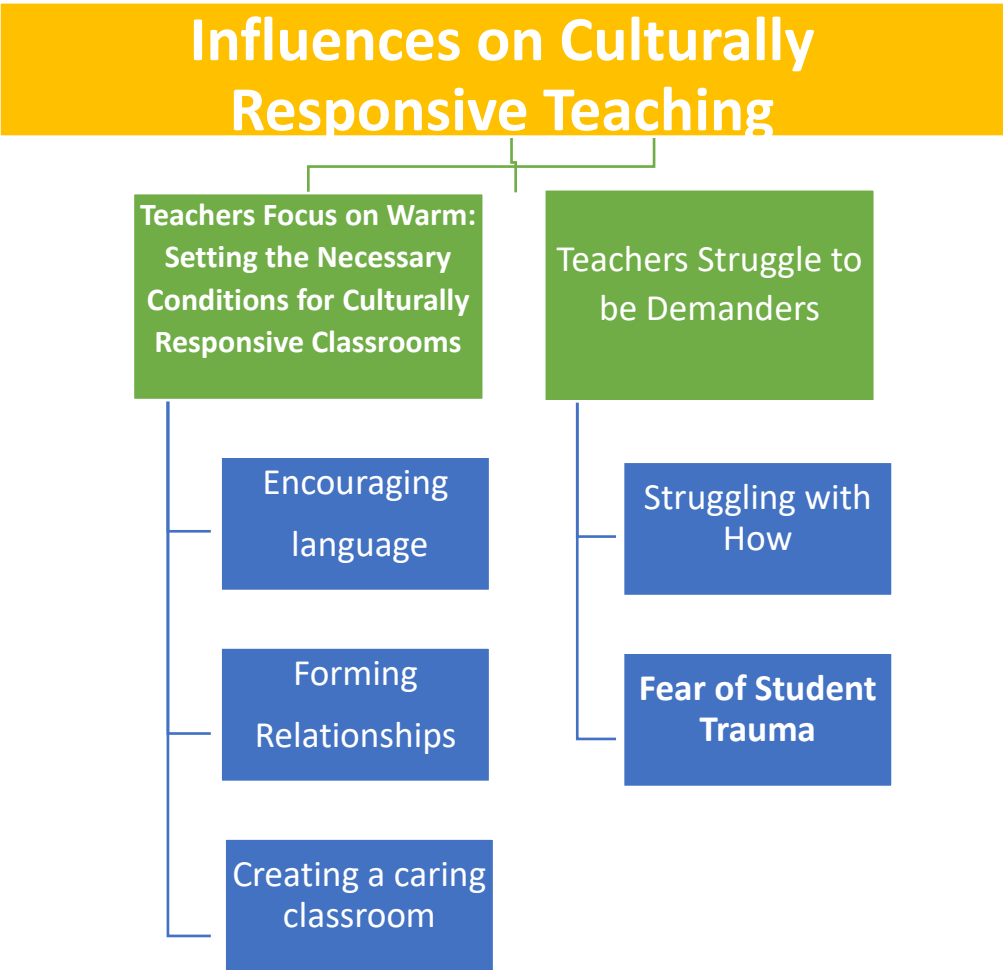


Figure 15. Two findings for the PAR study.

ready to assist them. Ladson-Billings (1994) stated that "warm demanders... are characterized by their ability to demand high performance from students, to maintain high expectations, and to combine this with an affectionate, accepting, and nurturing demeanor" (p. 187). Teachers in this study focused primarily on the warm part of a warm demander; however, to be more effective teachers, especially for our African American students, they must develop the demander element. Through the research process, I gained confidence that participants regularly allocate significant time cultivating relationships with students. The data show that teachers valued forming positive relationships (20% of the data) and wanted to create a loving classroom environment (28% of the data). However, they have only begun their journey to being more demanding by focusing on positive language and feedback in the classroom (11% of the data).

Forming Positive Relationships

Teachers who interact with their students positively naturally form positive relationships with them. For low-income African American students, caring relationships with teachers significantly influence school satisfaction (Baker, 1998). Teachers in this study valued developing relationships with their students and spent time ensuring they formed those relationships. They became familiar with students' interests and spent adequate time with students to know them better and, thus, inform their teaching. During a PLC meeting, teachers discussed relationships and teaching practices. GY talked about choosing books she believes will be highly interesting to her students. She stated, "I know the books they like because I take the time to talk to each child and find out their interests" (PLC meeting, May 29, 2023).

During another PLC meeting, teachers discussed how spending time with their students helps form positive relationships. GM stated, "When you repeatedly tell students that they are smart and can do the work, they feel good about themselves—but also about you." She stated

that interactions like this strengthen positive relationships (PLC meeting, October 24, 2022).. Taking the time to know students helps form valuable bonds. KG stated that she spends time during recess to get to know the students. She said, "I learn about their sports games and birthday parties. Recess is a good time to get to know students" (PLC meeting, October 24, 2022). She has also attended sporting events on the weekends to support her students. Further, teachers strengthen their relationships by expressing their belief in and respect for their students. These examples illustrate that forming relationships is critical to the participants, and the time they spent time cultivating those relationships contributed to creating a loving classroom.

Creating a Loving Classroom

Teachers felt that classrooms where students feel comfortable, loved, and free to be themselves, are the most successful classroom environments. Students feel a stronger sense of belonging when they feel valued in the classroom (MacLeod, 2020). Participants in this study value relationships individually and as a classroom community. They believe that creating loving classroom environments is critical to their work. Their goal is to allow students to enter school spaces where they feel comfortable, safe, and cared for.

Teachers frequently expressed the desire to create loving classroom spaces (PLC meetings, post-observation conversations, member checks). All teachers said they created a caring classroom environment by structuring learning, so students turn and talk, a classroom strategy that allows students time to talk to each other to gain and share ideas. This strategy creates a caring classroom in two ways. First, students are not pressured to know the answer immediately; they have time to think. Secondly, students have the opportunity to talk to a partner, allowing them to practice their answers and get feedback from peers. This lowers the affective filter for students, making them feel more comfortable and loved in the classroom

environment. I observed the use of the turn-and-talk strategy in GY's classroom. During our post-observation conversation, she shared that she uses this strategy because students have time to discuss their responses before talking to the whole class. "Turn and talk creates a safe space for my students to think through their answers and learn from their peers" (GY, observation, May 19, 2023). She is making sure that her students feel comfortable. She is warm with her students. During a PLC meeting, we discussed best practices, and agreed that turn and talks help create a safe classroom space (PLC meeting, March 20, 2023).

Another way that teachers created a loving classroom environment was by making students feel wanted. The teachers' own experiences as students motivated them to create those environments. All participating teachers had stories about feeling wanted in a school and wanting the same for their students. GY spoke about her favorite teacher who made her feel wanted and loved in the classroom (PLC meeting notes, October 24, 2022). GM spoke about her 1st-grade teacher, who was silly and made her feel like she belonged. She said, "I want to be that teacher! The teacher that the students feel they have fun with! I want them to be excited by how I teach and know that I love them, and they feel wanted." (PLC meeting notes, September 26, 2022).

Another example is when KG talked about creating a loving classroom environment. "Learning should be fun, and students should feel loved and cared for" (Post-observation conversation, April 14, 2023). These examples demonstrate that a focus on warmth is vital for PLC members. They are skilled and intentional in their efforts. I will next speak on the finding of encouraging language, along with the supporting evidence.

Encouraging Language

Teachers used encouraging language as an initial step to build confidence in students, an important step in productive struggle as students need to gain confidence to foster their

independence as learners. Teachers supported students to continue a thought and made the classroom a comfortable space to express frustration. Encouraging language helps teachers create a warm environment. Teachers must establish relaxed, welcoming environments conducive to learning to inspire students to learn new things (Sumiati et al., 2019). Through encouraging language, teachers in this study worked hard to create environments in which students felt comfortable and loved. Teachers expressed encouraging language by choosing positive, supportive words and praising student effort.

In PLC meetings and post-observation conversations, teachers expressed that saying encouraging words was essential to them. They wanted to ensure their words were a source of comfort and uplift. Teachers used encouraging language to reinforce their emphasis on being warm. They believed that encouraging language increased students' self-worth and their school experience. For example, KG introduced a new math strategy in her classroom, the box method. When a student became frustrated during independent practice, KG explained the problem differently and encouraged him to keep trying. She reminded him that this was the first time he had attempted this method and that “. . . it was okay if he did not know it immediately” (Observation, November 6, 2022). This language allowed the student to feel more comfortable in the classroom. In another observation, KG encouraged a student to find evidence to support the answer she gave. She explained to the student that they had just read the evidence, and she knew that she could find it in the text (observation, May 17, 2023). This language gave the student the confidence needed to find the evidence. These examples show that teachers use encouraging language to support their focus as warm teachers. In addition, encouraging language fosters students' willingness to keep putting forth effort. Although these initial attempts were gentle and encouraging, they nevertheless represented a first step toward pushing students.

Praising student effort is another way teachers in this study focused on warmth. The teachers praised students for their efforts, tactics, and actions as they strived to achieve and attempted to master new concepts (McCarthy, 2013). Participants in this study used praise to engage students and make them feel good about themselves. In one example, GM involved her whole class in helping her praise student effort. When a student correctly answered a question, GM had her class say, "Woo Woo," to praise the student (Observation, April 12, 2023). This cheer motivated the students, resulting in high student participation.

Further evidence of encouraging language with specific praise appeared during a lesson with GY. She used encouraging language in her classroom when she read a book to the class. She asked students to look closely at the pictures and share their observations. When a student shared, she repeated what they said for clarification and said, "That was a good observation. I liked how you noticed the small parts of the picture" (Observation, April 13, 2023). Not only did she praise the student, but she gave specific examples of why she was doing so. This praise for effort gave the student confidence, as seen by his big smile. It was evident that these words of supportive language from the teacher created a warm, loving learning environment. Teachers used encouraging language to assure students felt that they were intelligent and capable, and that they believed in them. Encouraging language is essential for our African American students. Many poor and minority pupils subscribe to society's subliminal (and even overt) message that they are "less than." Many have been exposed to these teachings their entire lives (Saphier, 2017). Teachers who provide encouraging environments for their African American students help to combat those negative messages.

Teachers in this study were committed to being loving and emotionally connected with students. This focus on developing a warm relationship with students extended beyond simply

teaching and included creating a caring and welcoming classroom environment where students can feel respected, understood, and supported. By prioritizing this emotional connection, teachers hoped to improve academic learning and foster emotional well-being, enabling students to flourish in their academic and personal lives. While I concurred with the teachers on the importance of creating loving classrooms, I observed that there was a missing piece. Through encouraging language to build student confidence, teachers were engaging in the initial step to be warm demanders. However, only focusing on creating caring classroom environments does not represent best practices, and teachers still needed to advance their skills as demanders.

Teachers Struggle to be Demanders

Throughout this study, teachers' focus on warm relationships with students, they often hesitated to place academic demands on students. Although teachers in PAR Cycle Two could describe and delineate the attributes of productive struggle, they struggled with applying it to their students—. They could define it but could not fully act on their knowledge about productive struggle. Through our conversations, both with PLC members as a group and individually, teachers were able to recognize and voice their struggle with the demander part of being a warm demander. As stated before, warm demanders are teachers who hold students to high academic standards with a nurturing, firm hand. Through this research study, we uncovered that while teachers want students to achieve academically, they are hesitant to provide situations in which students experience productive struggle. Two categories, struggling with the how and fear of student trauma, emerged from the evidence collected and are described in more detail.

Struggling with the How

Teachers frequently described being unsure of themselves generally, and unsure they had the skill set to be warm demanders specifically because of their concerns about student reactions.

As we engaged in conversations in meetings and I visited classrooms, I observed that participants avoided pushing children academically. As I conducted more observations and had more conversations, I continued to have teachers express their uncertainty. They could all agree that productive struggle, high expectations, and cognitive rigor were critical, but they did not necessarily know how to enact those espoused beliefs about learning in their classrooms.

We discussed academic rigor or productive struggle during each post-observation conversation in PAR Cycle One. For example, when talking to GM during a post-observation conversation, I asked her why her wait time was short during a lesson. She revealed she had trouble knowing when and how much to push students because she did not want them “. . .to be upset or shut down” (post-observation conversation, October 20, 2022). During another post-observation conversation, GY stated, "It feels like I am failing a lot this year, and it makes me second-guess myself if I am strict enough" (post-observation conversation, November 7, 2022). During a post-observation conversation, KG stated that she was unsure if she had the skills to be a demander and stay on the district pacing schedule (post-observation conversation, November 8, 2022).

Teachers talked about being unsure of their skill sets and described their concerns about student reactions to their being warm demanders. GY contacted me to discuss her hesitation to be a demander. She said, "I give my students room to be themselves, and I am very patient, but maybe I am too patient" (reflective memo May 25, 2023). During a post-observation conversation, KG confided that she did not know how to handle a student who was emotionally distraught after being pushed beyond her abilities. She said, "How do I calm the student while keeping the classroom together?" (Post-observation conversation, November 8, 2022). These examples show that participants love and care for their students but are hesitant to push them

academically because they do not have confidence in their ability to navigate the complexities of being a warm demander.

Fear of Student Trauma

Participants were not only hesitant to be warm demanders because they lacked confidence in their skills, but they also feared causing trauma to students who they viewed as already traumatized. Our school, as do many others, has intelligent, exceptional students who have experienced excessive amounts of trauma. As a school community, we strive to be a haven from the trauma some students have experienced. Teacher participants create a loving environment but struggle to push students for fear of adding to the students' trauma. During the CLE, participants expressed concern that traumatized students experiencing productive struggle would give up if the work were too complicated (CLE, August 11, 2023).

During a PLC meeting, KG expressed concern that when she pushed students, they sometimes said she was mean, which ran counter to the positive relationships she was trying to develop (PLC meeting notes, November 2022). During that meeting, GY said, "I want to make sure that my kids do not feel traumatized by my redirections." When asked to elaborate, she said her students are fragile and she did not want to add to their trauma (PLC meeting notes, November 2, 2022). During a post-observation conversation with KG, I asked why she could push one student but not another (Post-observation conversation November 8, 2022). She revealed that one of the students had trauma, and she did not want to add to it. These examples show that participants fear causing trauma to their students, which causes them to struggle with being warm demanders.

The data demonstrate that while teachers excel at being warm, they struggle with being demanders. Through this study, we have uncovered an important understanding. Multiple books

and articles stress the importance of productive struggle; however, like many school strategies that could and should work, enacting a perceived useful practice is sometimes more complex than is evident. The teachers in this study excel at creating positive and loving classroom environments for students. Still, they are unsure of themselves as they expand their practices to include being the demander of the warm demander. When researchers talk about the black box of teaching and learning, they are referring to it as a mysterious place that we do not fully understand (Cuban, 2012). Educators strive to know why teachers do not change their instruction methods, and this study helps explain this ongoing concern. The study provides critical evidence that teachers have the knowledge and nascent skills to support students to engage in productive struggle; however, they do not yet have the full skill set or drive to push all students academically.

In this study, teachers prioritized warmth and connection as a key component of their teaching strategy, while they struggled to achieve a balance between warmth and demanding. This fact is highlighted in a striking graphic that shows that 59% of findings relate to creating a warm and encouraging classroom climate, while only 41% address the issues of establishing a more authoritative position (see Figure 16). This information emphasizes the general tendency teachers have toward fostering emotional relationships with students at the expense of academic rigor. It further illustrates the difficult balancing act teachers must navigate to balance the need for warmth with the imperative of establishing academic expectations. While the study is concluded, the work of promoting teachers to fully inhabit the role of warm demander is a continuing goal for the PLC team and all the teachers at the school.

FINDINGS: TEACHERS FOCUS ON WARM AND STRUGGLE TO BE DEMANDERS

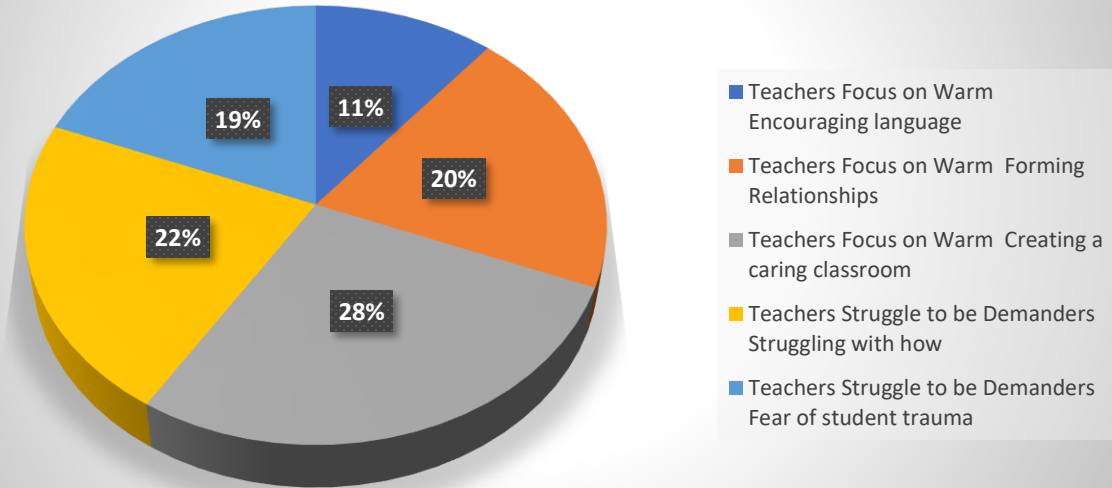


Figure 16. Results of the PAR study on teachers as warm demanders.

CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

African American students have much to offer in educational settings if given the chance to do so in a culturally responsive context (Allen & Boykin, 1992; Boykin & Noguera, 2011). However, school spaces are not equipping teachers with the culturally responsive knowledge and skills necessary to foster the genius within African American students (Hammond, 2015; Muhammad, 2020). Therefore, if we want educators to teach African American children successfully, we must prioritize the development of teachers' culturally responsive teaching knowledge, skills, and dispositions. We must ensure that teachers gain a pedagogical understanding of culturally responsive teaching techniques, put their knowledge and skills into practice, and engage in coaching conversations about their performance. Gay's (2002) research asserted that effective teachers use culturally responsive teaching to build relationships that make students feel seen, heard, and cared for. Ultimately, teachers can rely on those relationships to push students to academic excellence. The participatory action research (PAR) aimed to create culturally responsive classrooms for African American students; achieving that goal required extensive and intensive teacher professional learning. The design of this PAR project was rooted in the following theory of action: *If elementary educators engage in pedagogical learning, apply the learning to their teaching practice, and participate in data-driven post-observation conversations, they create equitable and rigorous learning experiences for African American students.*

Culturally responsive pedagogy in an elementary school is critical for creating an inclusive and equitable learning environment for African American students. A root cause analysis of the assets and challenges we faced provided a clearer picture of the process and the trajectory of the dissertation work so I could plan and adjust to make the study as successful as

possible. During the root cause analysis, our study group examined the critical challenges and assets associated with this specific context. One obstacle we faced was recruiting and supporting teachers knowledgeable about culturally responsive teaching. Recruiting teachers knowledgeable about culture was challenging because the number of teachers with adequate culturally responsive preparation is limited. An asset, however, was that teachers in the study were willing and interested in discovering how to improve their culturally responsive teaching practices.

In addition, we sought improved support from our district, San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD). The district needed to provide sufficient professional development in CRP (culturally responsive pedagogy). The assets and challenges revealed no systematic structure to help African American students. The analysis highlighted that while staff had some professional learning on culturally responsive teaching, they did not have a common understanding of what it is and what it looks like in practice. Although the district had a project to support African American learners in selected schools, the project did not specify pedagogical structures that teachers could use to enhance their practices. Thus, this study aimed to create culturally responsive classrooms for African American students, filling an existing void in SFUSD. We viewed ourselves as equity warriors who provided a pathway to specific practices. We recognized that this work had to start at the school level with educators—those closest to the issues who are best situated to discover answers to local concerns. (Guajardo et al., 2016). The participatory action research (PAR) study included three cycles of inquiry. Table 10 summarizes our activities to establish culturally responsive learning environments for African American students. The participants, a group of co-practitioner researchers (CPR), included kindergarten, first-grade, fourth grade, and fifth-grade elementary teachers.

Table 10

Participatory Action Research Cycles

Research Cycle	Time Period	Activities
Pre-PAR Cycle	November-April 2022	CPR Team Meetings Interviews Reflective Memos
PAR Cycle One	May-October 2022	CPR Team Meetings Reflective Memos CLE Observations Post-Observation Conversations
PAR Cycle Two	November-May 2023	CPR Team Meeting Reflective Memos Member Checks Observations Post-Observation Conversations

In the Pre-Cycle, through reading articles, viewing videos, and participating in discussions, we gained pedagogical knowledge about culturally responsive teaching and co-constructed a common definition of culturally responsive teaching. In PAR Cycles One and Two, we focused on teacher observations and post-observation conversations to improve teaching practices. Throughout, we utilized the Plan Do Study Act (PDSA) inquiry process (Bryk et al. 2015) and the observation and post-observation conversation processes we learned and practiced as a part of Project I⁴. In that project, we learned to use evidence-based observation tools and hold conversations with teachers in which they could make decisions about their next steps (Tredway et al., 2019). We used CLE protocols to facilitate a community learning exchange for all teachers in the school to gain insight from the larger community. We sincerely believed in the importance of cultivating relational trust and relying on the people closest to the issues as the problem-solvers. As described in Chapter 3, these activities sought to gather data aligned with the research questions.

In this chapter, I align the extant literature with the findings and address the research sub-questions. I then provide a framework that addresses this study's overarching research question. I conclude the chapter by highlighting the implications for practice, policy, and research and reflecting on my leadership development.

Discussion

I examined sources from the literature review and additional sources I consulted throughout the project to link the findings to the literature. I discuss the two findings of this study: (1) Teachers focus on warm to create culturally responsive classrooms, and (2) Although teachers are fully knowledgeable of the attributes of productive struggle, teachers are hesitant to demand and do not easily encourage productive struggle. First, I discuss the

literature regarding a key attribute of cultural responsiveness (Delpit, 2011; Hammond, 2015)—being a warm demander—which is the central focus of the findings. Then I discuss why teachers are hesitant to be warm demanders.

What Is a Warm Demander?

Bondy and Ross (2008) define warm demanders as teachers who model and insist on a culture of achievement, equity, and mutual respect. Teachers who are both warm and demanding insist that children try hard, encourage others to try hard, and expect students to give their best effort every day (Bondy and Ross, 2008, p. 143). In the original study on warm demanders (Kleinfeld, 1972), teachers who worked with Inuit (referred to in the study as Eskimo) students showed warmth through nonverbal actions—facial expressions, appropriate proximity, and touch. As they exhibited active demandingness, the teachers pushed the students from a position of concern for the student, not the subject matter. In our project and study, teachers continued to view warm and demanding as separate, not as complementary practices that are required to be combined for effective push.

In Hammond's (2015) Ready for Rigor framework, she outlines four quadrants of teacher attributes and practices necessary for culturally responsive teachers to possess and addresses the twin concepts of warm and demand. In the awareness quadrant, she urges teachers to “broaden their interpretation of culturally and linguistically diverse students’ behaviors” (Hammond, 2015, p. 17). She encourages teachers to strike a balance between care and push in the learning partnership quadrant by lowering the social-emotional stress experienced by pupils due to microaggressions. Additionally, teachers should concurrently encourage pupils to become more self-reliant learners by making learning their own. In the information processing quadrant, she addresses teachers’ need to provide appropriate challenges and scaffolding for students to engage

equitably in rigorous learning; teachers achieve this through engaging in cognitive routines that bolster student confidence. In the community of learners quadrant, she urges teachers to create an intellectually stimulating and socially safe environment that emphasizes communal learning and oral traditions. While these are the normative guidelines, the empirical literature demonstrates that teachers struggle with balance.

For example, the Garcia study (2021) of three middle school teachers revealed that teachers tended to define cultural responsiveness as warm and caring classrooms with curriculum choices that are culturally diverse. While two of the teachers in this study developed and practiced being more demanding of students' capacity for intellectual rigor, one teacher continued to believe that being warm was sufficient. The Simon (2019) study of three teachers who supported inquiry-based teaching in their classrooms, demonstrated that teacher relationships with students were pivotal in knowing how to use their knowledge and relationship with students to phrase their interactions with students. The three teachers modeled the Hammond (2015) guideline of balancing care and push and used multiple ways to motivate particular students to engage with effort and productively struggle. The Ware (2006) study builds on the work of authors such as Vasquez (1988) Fraser & Irvine and (1998), who uncovered the finding of the cultural transmission of a unique African American teaching style across generations. They found that African American teachers, regardless of age, have an innate ability to build relationships and impart high expectations for African American students. They "fuss" at their students not because they are mean but because they care and realize that education is what will elevate African American students. In response, African American students have respect and appreciate the care African American teachers have for them. Finally, Bondy et al. (2017)

recognized in their study that teachers had to maintain radical openness, humility, and self-vigilance if they wanted to become warm demanders.

As we defined the term, we discussed another aspect of warm demanding—productive struggle. Warshauer (2014) talks about productive struggle as the mental effort pupils put out to understand challenging mathematical ideas that are not yet within the range of their reasonable skills. When carefully guided toward an answer and given the proper amount of time, students who experience struggle progress their thinking and can significantly increase the depth of their understanding. However, as we discovered in our study, teachers can unknowingly thwart students' efforts. Warshauer (2014) found that teachers' desire to assist struggling students can lead to actions that lower or remove the cognitive demand, such as providing students with the answer, directing them to complete the task more simply or mechanically, or providing guidance that leads students' thought toward a solution without allowing them to make the necessary connections or understand the meaning. Next, I discuss the two facets of warm demander.

Teachers Create Warm and Caring Classrooms

As educators become more aware of the value of diversity and equity, they focus on being warm and loving when creating classrooms for African American students. As the PLC team completed each cycle, love and caring were prevalent in the data. Teachers not only saw the importance of being warm to students, but they also extended that warmth to relationships with other teachers. The evidence from the study suggests that warmth is a part of their core identities and is a key to why they chose to become educators. They placed importance on developing warm and emotional connections with their students; in so doing, they placed a high value on their ability to create and maintain a socially safe environment, but they did not always couple

that with the intellectually stimulating environment that Hammond (2015) urges in her framework.

The ethic of care has a long history in psychological and educational literature and often was paired with the emerging feminist scholarship. In Gilligan's (1982) theory of moral development, she posits that an ethic of care that relies on the importance of interpersonal relationships and moral judgment is contextual, not universal. In particular, she says that women, the largest demographic in teaching and our school, sometimes “get stuck” in what she terms the conventional level of the ethics of care—they take care of others by paying attention to others and ignoring self-care. Noddings (1984), building on the ethics of care, learned through her studies that the female moral voice seeks to avoid abstract rules. Instead, the voice seeks care and responsibility as the main activities, especially when developed in the context of interpersonal interactions. For “care reasoners,” moral judgments are connected to feelings of empathy and compassion; the primary moral obligation is to care for others, avoid harming others, and refrain from being selfish. The motivating vision of this ethic is "that everyone will be responded to and included, that no one will be left alone or hurt" (Noddings, 1984, p. 62). Teachers readily adopted these values.

In her study of authors who focus on culturally responsive pedagogy, Gay (2002) described educators' caring as a moral imperative, a social responsibility, and a pedagogical necessity (p. 109). She affirmed that patience, persistence, facilitation, validation, and student empowerment are qualities of caring interpersonal relationships (Gay, 2000). In the Ladson-Billings classic book *Dream Keepers* (1994), she described the characteristics of culturally relevant teachers. Some examples include the teacher demonstrating connectedness with all students and the teacher-student relationship being fluid and humanely equitable. These

examples support the finding that teachers focus on creating culturally responsive classrooms for African American students. White (2020) concluded that children with excellent teacher-student interactions adjust to school better and are more interested in their learning.

In addition to warmth with students, teachers valued being warm with each other. Teachers appreciated the time they spent with each other participating in the study. They spoke about the importance of having time to collaborate and the relational trust they felt. They reported that the warmth supported them to be vulnerable and share their concerns and frustrations. Ultimately, the trust and warmth teachers had with each other was the impetus for us discovering teachers' hesitance to demand, which I discuss in the subsequent finding. Bryk and Schneider's (2002) work supports the necessity of relational trust among teachers, particularly teachers engaged in change. Their research supports the importance of relational trust among teachers and principals. The deeper the trust that exists in a school, the better the school functions and relational trust is a prerequisite for improving school outcomes. Grubb (2009) terms this as an abstract resource in schools; without creating relational trust, other resources—often monetary—do not support improvement. Tredway and Militello (In press) assert that relational trust among the adults, students, and families in a school is a primary, necessary condition for school change. Relational trust among teachers is the emotional glue that makes other changes possible.

Teacher relationships and teacher-student relationships foster a supportive educational environment. Teachers need to be warm with their students and one another. Mutual warmth builds on a foundation of relational trust and reciprocal accountability that significantly impacts a school's culture and climate, a key factor that Grissom et al. (2021) highlight as critical to student success in schools: “Building productive school climate practices that encourage a school

environment marked by trust, efficacy, teamwork, engagement with data, organizational learning, and continuous improvement” (p. xiv). When teachers are kind to one another, they generate a sense of camaraderie, teamwork, and shared purpose that contributes to the goal of schooling— student learning. Warmth and trust support the end goal (Bryk et al., 2010), and teachers embody a high level of comfort. However, teachers struggled to be demanders.

Teachers Struggle to be Demanders

Even as teachers demonstrated excellence at being warm with their students, they exhibited difficulty in adopting the demander element of being a warm demander. In this study, the evidence suggests several reasons for their hesitation. Teachers reported that they needed to be more skilled in handling students who became frustrated and overwhelmed. In addition, teachers feared their demanding actions would cause additional trauma to students who have already experienced trauma.

Gay (1995) asserts that teachers generally have superficial knowledge of culturally responsive teaching. They either do not understand it or have participated in lackluster “one-and-done” professional development on culturally responsive teaching. To combat Gay’s premise, teachers in this study spent time gaining the necessary knowledge and creating a common definition to ground them in our work. In the Zwiers (2007) study, he discovered that teachers often abstained from applying undue pressure to pupils in their efforts to validate student responses. In fact, teachers frequently engaged in actions that appeared to impede rather than foster academic language development. This supports the *struggle to demand* findings in my study. The evidence from the study indicates that teachers feared adding more trauma to students if they demanded too much from them in classrooms. As they exhibited hesitation, the teachers

failed to fully understand that “a teacher stance [should] communicate both warmth and a nonnegotiable demand for student effort and mutual respect” (Bondy & Ross, 2008, p. 54).

In examining the history of how the term warm demander became used in schools, we discover a clue to teacher hesitation. Initially, the phrase did not apply to African American teachers working with African American students. Irvine and Frasier (1998) call a warm demander a no-nonsense teacher who has a structured classroom environment for students who have been abandoned or psychologically damaged. However, that the literature gradually framed the topic to reference African American teachers and students. Ware (2006) produced an empirical study examining how African American teachers took on the role. Acosta (2019) found that African American teachers in her study understood the socio-economic and political contexts of students and mitigated the schooling experiences of students by being warm demanders. Bondy et al. (2013) state that this term applies mainly to teachers in African American schools.

Because I am an African American educator and the principal, I modeled warm demands with teachers and supported them in thinking about methods to effectively push students, including an explanation to students of how and why they were pushing them. However, as primarily women from other cultural traditions, they felt hesitant to push students. Irvine and Frasier (1998) say that teachers accustomed to the traditional White teacher lens in their work, no matter their cultural identity, tend to view pushing as harsh and uncaring. In this case, the teachers were concerned that students might think they were unkind, as evidenced in the Hambacher (2016) study of pre-service teachers and their initial experiences with becoming warm demanders. I realized that the same issue they were experiencing in enacting demand with students—not being able to push—they were experiencing as teachers; they were hesitant and nervous about leaning into the push.

Productive Struggle

Another critical aspect of warm, demanding teachers is productive struggle. Productive struggle occurs when the teacher and student acknowledge that learning entails facing and overcoming obstacles. The teacher presents an expectation to the student for learning that targets the student's zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). According to Boaler et al. (2016), enabling students to work on problems they may find difficult at first requires effort but results in deeper mathematical knowledge and better problem-solving abilities. Additionally, Henningsen and Stein (2016) underline how productive struggle helps students to think critically and collectively, preparing them for difficulties they may face in the outside world. Baker et al. (2020) state that "productive struggle affords rich learning opportunities for students and teachers alike and should be viewed as an essential part of mathematics instruction that promotes learning with deep understanding" (p. 361). While these authors provide compelling arguments for the importance of productive struggle, teachers in this study struggled to push students into productive struggle. However, because of the pedagogical knowledge they have gained, they see the importance of productive struggle and are willing to experiment with improving their skills.

Experimenting with Pushing Students

Once teachers learned the concept of productive struggle, they needed to experiment with pushing students. This was difficult because they gravitated toward being warm; pushing students initially went against their beliefs about caring for students. However, once their knowledge increased about what productive struggle was and how important it is for learning, they were willing to experiment. This occurred with varying levels of success.

Through observations that used data, teachers could easily identify where they could improve their teaching practices. The post-observation conversations allowed the principal to

give teachers the push they needed to continue their warm demander journey. Participating in multiple observations was vital to the incremental changes that occurred in this study. While no teachers fully became warm demanders, they all improved their teaching practice. Teachers made minor changes to become warm demanders by gaining pedagogical knowledge around culturally responsive teaching and participating in observations and post-observation conversations.

Teachers struggled with being demanders but learned new ways to work with African American students. Reading the works of seminal authors supported teachers to understand the nuances of working with African American students. They became more aware of the importance of incorporating culture into every aspect of their teaching. Additionally, they learned the pressure and discomfort that African American students can feel when they are in spaces where they must assimilate to succeed.

Much of the practice literature directly tells teachers to be warm demanders and encourages teachers to engage students in productive struggle. In the PAR project and study and the literature on implementing warm demanding, we see inside “the black box of teaching and learning” (Cuban, 2013). The journey from espousing to enacting includes many steps and missteps, and teachers must maintain a commitment to high expectations and excellence for African American students. A warm and caring teaching stance is insufficient for student learning. The research findings demonstrate that although caring teachers are essential in teaching African American students, they must develop the expertise to be persons who hold high expectations and know how to support students to reach beyond their current levels of knowledge and skill; thus, teachers as demanders means that they do not give up and they figure out ways to provide full access and deep rigor for students – in this case, particularly African American students.

Research Questions and Framework

As a PLC team, we directed our project and study to three sub-questions that guided us to understand the overarching research question: *To what extent does a collaborative team develop common understandings of culturally responsive practices (=CRP) for African American students?* The sub-questions were:

1. To what extent does a collaborative team develop common understandings of culturally responsive practices (CRP)?
2. To what extent does the collaborative team identify and implement culturally responsive practices?
3. To what extent does participation in the PAR change my leadership as a school principal?

I discuss each question based on our research as a PLC team. The final leadership question will be discussed in the leadership section of this chapter. After our research, we better understood how to create culturally responsive classrooms for African American students, but we needed much more practice and continued attention to refine our roles as demanders.

As we participated in three cycles of inquiry, we had a goal for each cycle. Our Pre-Cycle priority was for teachers to gain knowledge of culturally responsive pedagogy. This work laid the foundation for our study. Several authors (Gay 2002; Hammond; Ladson-Billings 1995a; 1995b; 2015) assert that teachers cannot be culturally responsive if they do not have adequate pedagogical knowledge. Each teacher participated in an interview, and I asked them questions to determine their knowledge of culturally responsive teaching. Each PLC member concluded that teachers required a thorough understanding of culturally responsive teaching, recognizing that they currently had only a superficial comprehension of the subject.

Several sources substantiate this finding by asserting that most teachers did not participate in culturally sensitive teacher training programs and lack cultural competence (Gay, 2010; Hayes and Juarez, 2012; Sleeter, 2001). Learning how to be culturally responsive instructors was our first goal. We read articles from influential writers who were the forerunners of the work as the main focus of our first meetings. In particular, the work of Gay and Ladson-Billings provided our core knowledge and grounding. In reading contemporary authors Hammond (2015) and Muhammad (2020), we learned new points of view. From these perspectives—all African American researchers and practitioners—we developed a deeper understanding of what is needed in teaching African American students.

We used our new knowledge to create a common definition of culturally responsive teaching, which served as a tool to ground our work. In analyzing the definition, we looked at keywords and strengthened our understanding by defining what the keywords looked, sounded, and felt like. Our team developed a common understanding and language for discussing culturally responsive teaching. Through this process, we understood what we did well (focus on relationships) and what we needed to learn about and do better (productive struggle).

Through this process, teachers centered their understanding of culturally responsive teaching on being warm and caring. We were proud of the relationships we created with students and each other. We realized that we did have a common understanding. However, our common understanding omitted productive struggle as a support for our students, a key aspect of culturally responsive teaching that we had not included in our definitions.

We realized that we focused much of our understanding of culturally responsive teaching on understanding the term warm demander. Teachers developed warm, caring relationships and could verbally identify the practices that led to them and, through observations, could see these

practices happening regularly and. However, addressing how we implement being a demander in our practices was more challenging for us to identify.

As a team, we agreed that we wanted to create culturally responsive classrooms for African American students. We focused our work on the subsequent cycles of inquiry on understanding and enacting roles as warm demanders. Through teacher observations and post-observation conversations, we found that teachers needed more than warm relationships with students—they needed the ability and motivation to facilitate productive struggle for their students. To understand the concept of productive struggle more fully, we developed a common understanding. We identified being warm demanders as best practice but acknowledged that teachers needed help enacting the demander role. They feared pushing students too far and resisted changing. Through observations and post-observation conversations, teachers began to make small changes and discuss their hesitations. Through this process, we understood what we did well (focus on relationships) and what we were not doing well (productive struggle). We spent the remainder of our study making incremental changes with teachers through conversations in which I, as the school principal, modeled being a warm demander to the PLC participants. In addition, we decided that this level of change in our practices takes time, and we committed to continuing our PLC group and sharing our learning with other teachers.

As we targeted warm demander as an appropriate focus for teachers working with African American students, I became more aware of the process and the degree of support from the administrator necessary for teachers to continue their productive struggle to become demanders. The framework captures what we recognize as the steps to becoming a warm demander as one aspect of culturally responsive teaching and learning (see Figure 17). However, as we understood from our efforts, the process is cyclical, and teachers needed multiple observations and

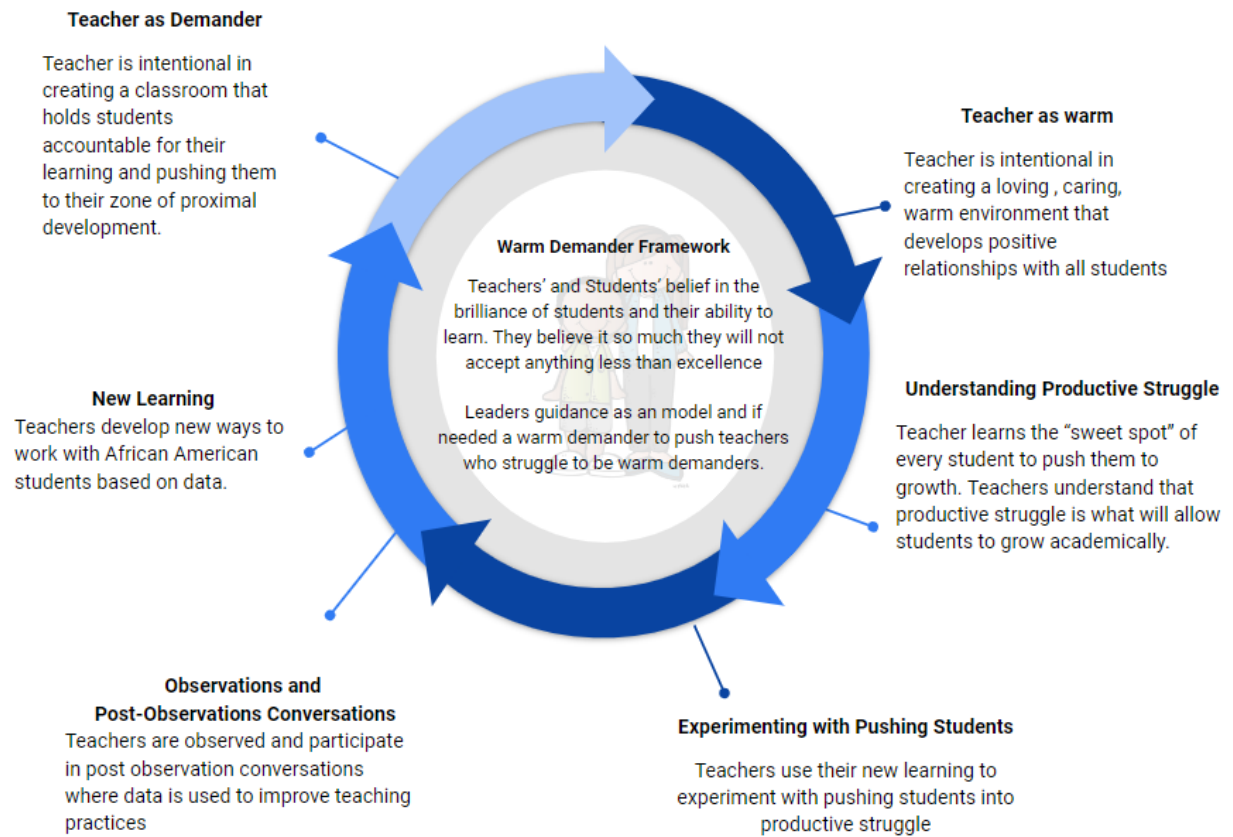


Figure 17. Supporting teachers to be warm demanders requires iterative observations and conversations and school leader modeling.

conversations to engage iteratively to implement productive struggle and be warm and demanding simultaneously. Teachers created warm learning environments where students felt safe, secure, and cared for. Students only respond well to their teachers pushing them if they have developed warm relationships with each other. However, the journey from warm to demanding is complex and, in this study, the trial-and-error nature of the teachers' attempts to become demanders includes understanding productive struggle, experimenting with pushing students, observations, and post-observation conversations to analyze their reactions and hesitations, learning new ways to work with African American learners, and then becoming warm demanders. As of the study's conclusion, no teacher in the study reached the end goal. However, they better understood their challenges as teachers, and I better understood my role in supporting teachers.

In the project and study, we uncovered that becoming a culturally responsive teacher is complex. One critical aspect of culturally responsive teaching we focused on for the study was defining, experimenting with, and becoming warm demanders. Teachers must commit to holding students accountable for their learning while showing love and care. The PLC team chose to work on becoming warm demanders, and they are committed to doing the necessary work.

Teachers realized that they needed to rely on something other than warm as the primary student interaction. Instead, they need to support students to lean into their zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). Setting high standards for pupils is a critical component of the "teacher as demander." However, setting the standard is not equivalent to supporting individual students to reach that goal. Teachers must challenge students to realize their full potential, provide appropriate scaffolding, and shift the cognitive load to students.

Implications

The PAR study has implications for practice, policy, and research. In this section, I provide suggestions for enhancing present educational practices, guiding state and federal educational policy and advancing this study's findings through further research.

Practice

The PAR study identified relational trust, pedagogical knowledge, and observations with tools and post-observation conversations as critical to creating culturally responsive classrooms for African American students. As instructional leaders, principals are the leaders who set the tone and culture of the school. Additionally, principals determine and provide professional development for teachers. If principals want their teachers to be receptive to learning new instructional strategies, they must provide environments where teachers can develop a learning spirit. That spirit develops through relational trust. Participants in the study expressed that their ability to be vulnerable and learn without ridicule helped them take risks in the classroom. Relational trust is essential between teachers and crucial between teachers and the principal.

One suggestion for all practice-based contexts is adopting the personal narrative as a meeting protocol. Personal narratives are used as vehicles for PLC members to understand each other at a deeper, more personal level. I strategically and thoughtfully chose personal narratives that were the most productive for our learning topics. For example, PLC members spoke about their best teacher experience as children and how that influenced their teaching practices. Through this activity, teachers could learn more about one another and the reasons behind their existing methods of instruction. Using personal narratives as ritual and routine supports a community spirit of mutual learning and creates an atmosphere of support (Militello et al., 2019).

Teachers must understand cultural responsiveness in classrooms with African American students in all schools. PLC participants were drawn to this study partly because they lacked practical experience with culturally responsive instruction. Au et al. (1981) confirm that education serves students best when rooted in the student's own culture. By structuring our interactions with support from articles and videos, teachers realized that their knowledge of culturally responsive teaching was at a surface level. This knowledge revealed the importance of how productive struggle enables teachers to be stronger teachers for their students. As a result of this study, teachers were more open to reflecting on their teaching practices and making changes that constituted continuous improvement (Yurkofsky et al., 2020). Thus, a strong recommendation for practice contexts is to incrementally increase the learning to ensure that a foundation of learning is built for a particular area of improvement.

Observations with observation tools and post-observation conversations are equally critical for successful classrooms because these common tools provide a basis for evidence-based observations and dialogue among teachers. For example, I used an observation tool to record the amount of wait time teachers were giving a student, and whether they were carrying the cognitive load by giving the answers to questions instead of pushing the students into productive struggle. Secondly, the post-observation conversations were successful because they were collaborative. We followed the CLE axiom that conversations are critical and central pedagogical processes, and I modeled that with teachers. Based on the data from the observations, teachers could examine and note their successes and areas of improvement and were more likely to develop their improvement plans because conversations were collaborative. Thus, based on these processes, I recommend that school districts prepare school leaders to engage a variety of tools for observations and post-observation conversations.

Policy

Culturally responsive teaching addresses the persistent achievement gaps among students from diverse backgrounds. Studies have consistently shown that implementing culturally relevant practices can improve academic outcomes for historically marginalized groups (Gay, 2010). Culturally responsive teaching is a method of education that acknowledges and values the various cultural experiences and backgrounds of the children in the classroom. It aims to establish a welcoming learning atmosphere where students' identities are valued and incorporated into the curriculum. Although the value of culturally responsive teaching is widely acknowledged, urgent policy reform is required to support its inclusion in teacher preparation programs and school districts. Teachers and principals need access to professional development opportunities to learn pedagogy and how to implement it.

Key policy reforms should be considered to incorporate culturally responsive teaching into teacher credential programs. Teacher credential programs should integrate courses and training on culturally responsive teaching. This should encompass theoretical knowledge and practical strategies that prospective teachers can implement in the classroom. A key component of teacher preparation programs should be hands-on experience with culturally responsive instruction in various classroom contexts. Student teachers should be able to visit and interact in culturally responsive classrooms.

At the district level, school districts should schedule frequent training sessions and workshops specifically focusing on culturally responsive teaching. These sessions should be open to all teachers, regardless of their expertise, and should promote involvement. Districts should have adequate resources, such as books, courses, and instructional materials, to support teachers in effectively implementing culturally responsive teaching methods.

For principals to be effective coaches of teachers in culturally responsive teaching, they need policy reforms that encompass opportunities for principals to receive training on culturally responsive coaching techniques. Additionally, principals need training in conducting classroom observations and giving constructive feedback during post-observation conversations.

Research

The concept of being a warm demander, or a teacher who balances kindness and high standards, is significant because teachers who balance care and push produce productive educational environments for African American students. The study's most significant finding is that teachers—particularly teachers from other cultural backgrounds—struggle with the demander conditions of being a warm demander. The warm demander approach calls for building relationships with students and concurrently establishing and keeping high academic standards.

The advantages of warmth are well known, but the complex problems associated with the demander role frequently are not. Teachers who want to strike a balance between high standards and warmth may need help with doing so. Further study into the psychological, cultural, and contextual elements contributing to these difficulties is crucial to offering educators efficient support systems. Ultimately, a better understanding of teachers' difficulties as warm demanders will improve student achievement. Schools can develop classrooms where academic success and emotional support meld naturally by recognizing and addressing the challenges educators experience while navigating the demander role. More research is necessary to examine why otherwise competent teachers struggle with being warm demanders when they understand it is best practice.

In addition to teachers' difficulties being warm demanders, principals need the expertise to be warm demanders. Effective school leaders need the ability to coach and, if needed, push their teachers to help them develop their warm demander stance. More research is needed to discover the best methods to support principals with being warm demanders. This stance, substantiated by Khalifa et al. (2016), states that although there is limited literature on the role principals must play in developing their teachers into cultural responsiveness, they consider this one of the most important aspects of culturally responsive teachers.

Limitations

As discussed in Chapter 3, the study involved one small Pre-K through 5th-grade school. Only five teachers were involved in the study, and though we had salient findings, the study is small in scale. In addition, as the lead researcher and principal of the school, I was in a position of authority over the PLC participants. Consequently, I took care to make sure my position did not influence the participants. I made sure they were fully informed and signed consent forms without any feelings of coercion. By PAR Cycle One, two participants dropped out of the study. One 5th-grade teacher decided she no longer wanted to participate in the study, and the 3rd-grade teacher began maternity leave and therefore only participated in the Pre-Cycle. The findings of this study would be hard to generalize because of its small size. However, the usefulness to participants as a standard of the study's validity is important in small context-based qualitative studies (Hale, 2008), and the participants found the project and study useful in improving their teaching. We could gradually scale our efforts to all teachers through our faculty meetings and professional learning and use the CLE processes to engage more teachers.

As recommended in the practice implications, many processes we used in the study could be replicated in other schools or used as a model for professional learning in a district. Small,

networked communities of practice working on local issues and using data to make improvements are important for all school reform efforts (Bryk et al., 2015; Russell et al., 2017).

Leadership Development

My leadership question for this study was: *To what extent does participation in the PAR change my leadership as a school principal?* I was eager to become a transformational leader when I began this study. I learned so much about education in the EdD program that I became both furious and determined. Leverett (2002) states that “equity warriors are people who, regardless of their role in a school or district, passionately lead and embrace the mission of high levels of achievement for all students, regardless of race, social class, ethnicity, culture, disability or language proficiency” (p. 1). This statement was and is compelling to me. I was eager to take on the journey of developing my leadership skills as an equity warrior. As the cycles of inquiry began, my leadership took on many forms and iterations. While I have transformed my leadership in many ways, I found that the most impactful resources were reflective memos as a learning tool, relational trust, a new understanding of the observation tool, and the realization that principals must be warm demanders.

Reflective Memos as a Learning Tool

I see myself as a reflective person, but taking time to write my reflections shifted and changed my learning; I knew I needed to be reflective but having a formal process and time provided that shift in my learning. Reflective memos allowed me to see my growth as a leader and helped me gather my thoughts and put them in one place to see the changes. At the start of this study, my memos were hopeful and idealistic. I wanted to change schools, districts, and states to ensure they provided culturally responsive classrooms for African American students. As an activist researcher, I wanted to change the world (hunter et al., 2013). In one early memo, I

spoke about how excited I was to begin and wanted to make real changes in my school. As I attended more EdD classes, I began to think about the study's ability to be more far-reaching than the school context. Reading books like *The Wolf at the Schoolhouse Door* and *Whistling Vivaldi* opened my eyes to how schools, districts, and states actively block student achievement for African American children.

Looking through my reflective memos, I saw how my study could change my district and beyond. These books also made me more aware of how pervasive racism is in this country. In one memo, I wrote, “The more I learn, I wax and wane between hopeful and livid” (Reflective memo, April 13, 2022). Increasing my pedagogical knowledge was causing me to feel that discomfort in the pit of my stomach that motivated me to want to make a change.

Yet, as the study continued, I began to doubt myself and my ability to lead a team through this change process. In another memo, I wrote about wondering if I made the correct decision to be in this program. However, that was short-lived. Listening to the PLC members and adjusting the meetings to meet their needs brought us back to the same page. As I wrote in my Pre-Cycle, the work became more manageable after I realized the importance of listening and responding accordingly. The relational trust between all members increased, and we were making progress. As the study continued, my memos seemed similar after each meeting. That changed after I had a conversation with one teacher. She explained her moment of clarity when she understood what being culturally responsive meant. She spoke about pushing a child and the child crying but did not give up. She spoke about how she pushed but supported the student, and the student was successful. This was her moment of clarity, but it also gave me an ah-ha moment. This teacher told me she could make this connection because I pushed her. I realized that principals needed to be warm demanders. According to scholars, critical self-reflection or antiracist reflection helps

leaders develop personally by exposing presumptions and values ingrained in them due to their cultural backgrounds (Capper et al., 2006; M. et al., 2020). Thus, critical reflection, important to culturally responsive leadership, is foundational and precedes leadership actions (Khalifa et al. 2016).

Relational Trust

The study strengthened my capacity for developing trusting relationships with teachers. For a team to be successful, all participants must depend on each other and feel empowered by their efforts. That is also true for principals. Teachers expect principals to be aware of their situation and concerned for their physical and psychological well-being. In other words, the principal is expected to show some type of benevolence where they view the staff not as mere workers but as real individuals with wants and needs (Bryk and Schneider, 2002). Goddard et al. (2000) investigated collective teacher efficacy, which connects to relational trust, and discovered that it significantly affected student achievement. Misaligned relational trust will thwart the profound teaching and learning needed to attain culturally responsive classrooms for African American students. Knowing the fragility of trust, I have carefully constructed a safe school where teachers can explore complex tasks without fear of retribution. They can be vulnerable and, in turn, expand their growth in culturally responsive teaching.

As a co-practitioner researcher in this study, I have deepened my relational trust with PLC members and increased teacher efficacy. Many teachers interact with each other outside of school, and I wondered if the teacher's ability to develop deeper relationships already existed in our school. I learned that it did not. This work was instrumental in bringing our team closer. Teachers' relationships foster empathy and advance a sense of purpose through the sharing of personal stories (Yidaki, 2013). I understood the significance of personal narratives and was,

therefore, strategic in the ones chosen. Knowing the PLC members had thus far developed relationships, I decided on personal narratives to build on their already formed relationships. The topics I ultimately decided to implement allowed us as PLC members to be vulnerable in a way we had not before. Talking about cultural differences through food and how we "set a table" gave teachers opportunities to get to know each other in new and exciting ways. For example, during one of the personal narratives, we talked about being in an environment different from our own and how the experience made us feel. We learned that KG has been to Costa Rica, where her friend's Latinx ethnicity led everyone to assume she spoke Spanish as well. During one of our PLC meetings, personal narratives helped teachers understand how their students may feel in a new classroom. These personal narratives helped teachers relax and be open to exploring difficult work because they felt comfortable expressing their views and thoughts in a safe space.

New Understanding of the Observation Tool

As the lead researcher in the study, I altered how I organized and facilitated post-observation conversations. I shifted from being a knowledge provider to a knowledge facilitator because of the observational tools I used. The observation tool I used granted me something to ground the post-observation conversations I had with teachers. Before this study, post-observation conversations consisted of me outlining the next steps and the teacher listening. This tool has made conversations with teachers richer and more meaningful. Because I have evidence during the conversations, teachers can often see the gaps themselves. For example, during a conversation I had with KG, she realized that she needed to give more wait time for her students to answer the questions. When I asked her why she thought this was happening, she said she felt pressure to complete lessons and stay on the district timeline. She stated, "It is hard to get everything in during the day" (Post conversation notes, September 2022). Because I had

evidence to share instead of my opinion, we could have a conversation about priorities and which was more critical, wait time for students or district timelines. In another post-observation conversation, GY could see that she was carrying most of the cognitive load for her students. She was doing most of the talking (post-observation conversation, September 2022). Because of the evidence presented to her, she could see the data, and we could plan where she would incorporate more opportunities for students to talk. These examples show that the tool, combined with effective post-observation conversations, was successful in helping teachers identify areas of improvement. Furthermore, I could have more effective conversations centered on the evidence.

Principal as a Warm Demander

I am developing my skills as a warm demander because of this study. I have discovered that if real teacher change is going to happen, I must model being a warm demander and push teachers. The reflections I wrote after meetings with teachers or the dissertation coach made me realize I need to be a warm teacher demander. If teachers are to become effective warm demanders, I must push them to the same high standards they need to hold for their students. Evidence of this came during a post-observation conversation I had with GM. During the meeting, I gave her direct feedback that she was excellent at being warm but needed to practice being a demander. A few weeks later, she came to me after school to talk. She explained that she was distraught when she left our post-observation conversation. She said she felt I did not think she was a good teacher. However, she took my words to heart and tried being a warm demander in her classroom. She told me of a situation where a student was struggling, but she was confident she could succeed in the work. She pushed the student, and the student started crying, saying she could not do it. GM then encouraged the student to keep trying. She stated, "I told her,

I know you can do it. I believe in you." The girl persevered and completed the work. She also had a big smile on her face because she succeeded. GM said that this was a pivotal moment for her. She understood how important it was to push students and that, in the end, the student was fine and was proud of her accomplishments. She told me that she understood that I thought she was a good teacher; she just needed to work on the demander part of being a warm demander. This realization was a pivotal moment for me as well. That conversation solidified my thoughts that an effective leader must be a warm demander. Through the activities and relational trust I had built, GM changed her teaching practices for the better. I will continue to work on being a warm demander because I, too, am hesitant sometimes. The relational trust I have formed with my teachers could break if I push too far. However, I also understand that leadership is a lifelong process, and there will always be room for improvement.

While excited about my study, I questioned my ability to facilitate participants effectively. In one of my first memos, I wrote, "I am starting to doubt myself. CRT is so complex, and I wonder if I will be able to make any real impact. I know I am on the right path, but I feel the pressure." This sentiment arose after a PLC meeting when participants expressed that the chosen text was too "academic" for them. I wrote, "The reading I selected seemed easy compared to what I have been reading for my program, but I must remember that these are teachers, not doctoral candidates. This comparison made me reflect on my leadership and adjust accordingly. This study has been a transformative roller coaster journey, and I am glad I took the ride" (Reflective memo, May 16, 2022).

I knew I would learn a lot by participating in this study. However, I did not know that I would be transformed. It seems so simple, yet the teacher telling me she could change her teacher practice because I pushed her to do so was a transformative moment for me. At that

moment, I realized that leaders had to be warm demanders. We had to be culturally responsive to our teachers, pushing their thinking. I had thought, just as teachers did, that if I had a good relationship with my teachers, they would become warm demanders naturally and, therefore, culturally responsive. I now realize that school leaders are responsible for ensuring their teachers are culturally responsive (Khalifa, 2011).

I see the benefits of pushing. This stance was further confirmed when another teacher came by to thank me for an email I had written her. She struggled to be a warm, demanding teacher, and I gave her some examples of her being a good teacher and some suggestions for improvement. She wanted to thank me and said that my response was the perfect mix of warm demands. She said, “You did what you want us to do for the children for me.” This was a transformational moment for me because I am, by nature, not a confrontational person, and being a warm demander was not easy for me. I was brought back to this moment when I read my reflective memo about this topic. The memo reminded me how important relational trust is. I know I would not have been able to push these teachers in the way I did if I did not have relationships with them. Just as teachers need to have relationships with their students, principals need to have relationships with teachers.

Conclusion

I have undergone a dramatic development in my quest toward being a more effective leader, one that incorporates many facets of strong educational leadership. The emergence of relational trust as an essential component highlights the importance of creating genuine connections with teachers and students. I've learned that trust is key to being an effective school leader.

Simultaneously, my newfound understanding of observation tools has revolutionized how I conduct classroom observations. This insight has enabled me to move beyond a mere evaluator, transitioning into a mentor and facilitator who continuously empowers teachers to refine their pedagogical approaches. Embracing the role of a warm demander principal has been pivotal in enhancing my leadership efficacy. This approach blends unwavering support with high expectations, inspiring teachers to take the leap to become warm demanders. This balance creates an environment where individuals feel valued and motivated to meet the expectations I have for them.

Furthermore, becoming a reflective principal has fortified my commitment to ongoing growth and development. Embracing self-reflection as a regular practice has enriched my decision-making, allowing me to navigate complexities with a clearer perspective and an open mind. This journey of reflection has cultivated humility and a willingness to learn from every experience, fostering an atmosphere where growth is encouraged and celebrated.

As I move forward on this transformative leadership path, the fusion of relational trust, adept use of observation tools, the warm demander stance, and a commitment to reflection will continue to guide my actions. This holistic approach has shaped me as a more effective leader and motivated me to continue this work after completing the study.

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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 Exempt Certification

From: Social/Behavioral IRB
To: [Dina Edwards](#)
CC: [Matthew Militello](#)
Date: 10/12/2021
Re: [UMCIRB 21-001659](#)
Building Strong Children

I am pleased to inform you that your research submission has been certified as exempt on 10/12/2021. This study is eligible for Exempt Certification under category # 1 & 2ab.

It is your responsibility to ensure that this research is conducted in the manner reported in your application and/or protocol, as well as being consistent with the ethical principles of the Belmont Report and your profession.

This research study does not require any additional interaction with the UMCIRB unless there are proposed changes to this study. Any change, prior to implementing that change, must be submitted to the UMCIRB for review and approval. The UMCIRB will determine if the change impacts the eligibility of the research for exempt status. If more substantive review is required, you will be notified within five business days.

Document	Description
Community Learning Exchange (0.01)	Interview/Focus Group Scripts/Questions
Consent Form (0.01)	Consent Forms
Dissertation Proposal (0.01)	Study Protocol or Grant Application
Interview Protocol (0.01)	Interview/Focus Group Scripts/Questions
Observation tool (0.01)	Additional Items
Post observation protocol (0.01)	Additional Items
Recruitment Script (0.01)	Recruitment Documents/Scripts
Survey Protocol (0.01)	Surveys and Questionnaires

For research studies where a waiver or alteration of HIPAA Authorization has been approved, the IRB states that each of the waiver criteria in 45 CFR 164.512(i)(1)(i)(A) and (2)(i) through (v) have 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: CITI TRAINING



Completion Date 27-Dec-2020
Expiration Date 27-Dec-2023
Record ID 40028200

This is to certify that:

Dina Edwards

Has completed the following CITI Program course:

Not valid for renewal of certification through CME.

Human Research

(Curriculum Group)

Group 2.Social / Behavioral Research Investigators and Key Personnel

(Course Learner Group)

1 - Basic Course

(Stage)

Under requirements set by:

East Carolina University

CITI
Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative

Verify at www.citiprogram.org/verify/?wb82fc468-e228-4705-b1e8-b37aab6d3ca4-40028200

APPENDIX C: SFUSD APPROVAL



SFUSD SAN FRANCISCO
PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Research, Planning, & Assessment Division • Research, Evaluation, & Analytics Department
555 Franklin Street, Second Floor, San Francisco CA 94102 • Telephone (415) 241-6156 • Fax (415) 241-6035

November 19, 2021

Dina Edwards
Sheridan Elementary School
431 Capitol Avenue
San Francisco CA 94112

Dear Ms. Edwards:

Thank you for your request for San Francisco Unified School District's permission to conduct your research titled, *Building strong children: The journey of how teachers create culturally responsive environments for African American students*.

Our office has reviewed your request and approved it for one year. Note that this approval is at a central District office level and requires the approval of other collaborating individuals at the school site(s) whose work may be affected by your research. District approval does not obligate any school site, staff, student, or other individual to participate in your study. ***Please present a copy of this approval letter when you request data or invite individuals to participate in the research. Be sure to communicate to them clearly that participation is always optional.*** On the next page, Table 1 lists all approved research personnel who may be involved with conducting the study.

In keeping with the District's commitment to professional development and to ensure that all research is actionable and useful, it is critical that you share your work with the district and school community that assisted you in the course of your study. ***Please provide updates according to the schedule detailed in your application***, reprinted as Table 2 on the next page, so we know your study is on track.

Please note that this approval grants permission only to conduct the research, and not to share or publish the results beyond the SFUSD community. When your study is complete, ***please submit reports of findings to <https://bit.ly/SFUSDresreportreview> for our office to review***. We ask that you allow at least one month prior to submitting the draft for wider publication or presentation, so that all the appropriate district staff have enough time to review the manuscript.

Good luck with your research. I am your primary RPA contact for supporting the study, so please feel free to contact me if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Norma Ming". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Norma Ming
Manager of Research and Evaluation
Research, Planning, and Assessment Department

Table 1. Approved research personnel

Names of approved research personnel	Completed research ethics training	Clearance for direct student contact / site visits
Dina Edwards	Valid from 12/27/20 to 12/27/23	N/A

Table 2. Partnership and communication table

Stage of research	Involving which SFUSD staff/site/department, if any?	Involving which external audience(s), if any?	Date(s)
Initial project ideas	none	ECU professors	6/24/2020
Study design	none	ECU professors & IRB	6/24/2021
Research approval	RPA	N/A	Allow ≥2 mos.
Recruitment & data collection	Primary data teachers	N/A	9-2021 – 2/2022
	Secondary data* RPA	N/A	
Updates on interim progress & findings	School PLC: preliminary findings/ cycle 1/ cycle 2/cycle 3	N/A	12/21
			12/21
Internal presentation	School Staff Meeting; C5 school leaders	N/A	07/2023
Drafts of reports prior to submission	RPA, Sheridan staff Cohort 5 Leaders	N/A	05/2023
Executive summary	RPA, Sheridan staff Cohort 5 Leaders	N/A	05/2023
Formal report	RPA, Sheridan staff Cohort 5 Leaders	Final Defense 3/2023	05/2023
Submission for public circulation	N/A		05/2023

APPENDIX D: INFORMED CONSENT FORM



Informed Consent to Participate in Research

Information to consider before taking part in research that has no more than minimal risk.

Title of Research Study: Building strong children: The journey of how an elementary school collaborative team co-create a culturally responsive learning environment for African American students.

Principal Investigator: Dina Edwards

Institution, Department or Division: East Carolina University, Department of Educational Leadership

Address: 431 Capitol Ave. San Francisco CA, 94112

Telephone #:415-469-4743

Researchers at East Carolina University (ECU) and San Francisco Unified School District study issues related to society, health problems, environmental problems, behavior problems and the human condition. To do this, we need the help of volunteers who are willing to take part in research.

Why am I being invited to take part in this research?

The purpose of this research is to examine how a professional learning community at an elementary school will develop the pedagogical knowledge and skills, collegial relationships, and trust to create culturally responsive learning environments for African American students.

You are being invited to take part in this research You are being invited to take part in this research because you have demonstrated interest in working in a collaborative team and you've shown efforts in supporting African American students. **The decision to take part in this research is yours to make.**

By doing this research, we hope to learn *How does an elementary school collaborative team co-create a rigorous and culturally responsive learning environment for African American students?*

If you volunteer to take part in this research, you will be one of about 25 people to do so.

Are there reasons I should not take part in this research?

The research carries some minimal risk. Some of the risks might come in the form of discomfort or concerns about privacy with regard to judgment by colleagues.

What other choices do I have if I do not take part in this research?

You can choose not to participate.

Where is the research going to take place and how long will it last?

The research will be conducted at *Sheridan Elementary School in San Francisco, CA*. You will need to come to *Sheridan Elementary school to the library or other appropriate room* 18 times during the study. The total amount of time you will be asked to volunteer for this study is **18 hours** over the next **18 months**

What will I be asked to do?

You will be asked to do:

- Collaborate with colleagues
- Share your culturally responsive experiences
- Read materials connected to Academic Conversation and Culturally Linguistically Relevant Pedagogy ● Participate in improvement science that involves plan-do-study-act cycles
- Plan and Implement strategies in your classroom based on PLC action plans
- Reflect on your PLC experience by journaling, writing memos, or providing PLC feedback. ● The primary investigator will observe and conduct post-observation meetings with you.
- A survey regarding distributed leadership

What might I experience if I take part in the research?

We don't know of any risks (the chance of harm) associated with this research. Any risks that may occur with this research are no more than what you would experience in everyday life. We don't know if you will benefit from taking part in this study. There may not be any personal benefit to you, but the information gained by doing this research may help others in the future.

Will I be paid for taking part in this research?

We **will not** be able to pay you for the time you volunteer while being in this study.

Will it cost me to take part in this research?

It will not cost you any money to be part of the research.

Who will know that I took part in this research and learn personal information about me?

ECU and the people and organizations listed below may know that you took part in this research and may see information about you that is normally kept private. With your permission, these people may use your private information to do this research:

- Any agency of the federal, state, or local government that regulates human research. This includes the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), the North Carolina Department of Health, and the Office for Human Research Protections.
- The University & Medical Center Institutional Review Board (UMCIRB) and its staff have responsibility for overseeing your welfare during this research and may need to see research records that identify you.
- SFUSD Research and Planning Achievement Department

How will you keep the information you collect about me secure? How long will you keep it?

The information in the study will be:

- kept confidential to the full extent allowed by law.
- Confidentiality will be maintained throughout the data collection and data analysis process.
- Consent forms and data from surveys, interviews, and focus groups will be maintained in a secure, locked location and will be stored for a minimum of three years after completion of the study.
 - Physical data stored in a locked secure office
 - Electronic data stored on Pirate Drive
- No reference will be made in oral or written reports that could link you to the study.

What if I decide I don't want to continue in this research?

APPENDIX E: OBSERVATION AND POST OBSERVATION PROTOCOL

After a researcher conducts classroom observation, the researcher facilitates a 15-minute post-observation conversation with the teacher. The researcher takes notes on the observation and then codes the post-observation notes using a set of pre-established codes and open coding.

Date of Post-Observation Conversation:

Teacher Identification Code:

Brief Description of Lesson Focus

TIME	Notes of Conversation	Coding

